



Transgender Victoria;  
Transgender Victoria - Drummond Street Services Office  
100 Drummond Street, Wurundjeri country  
Carlton VIC 3053  
Transgender Victoria - Victorian Pride Centre Office  
79-81 Fitzroy Street, Boonwurrung country  
St Kilda VIC 3182

## **Transgender Victoria submission to the Senate Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill 2023**

**31 August 2023**

**Trans and Gender diverse people are a microcosm of Aust society - except for poor mental health exacerbated by negative media coverage.**

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

Transgender Victoria operates across lands belonging to the Wurundjeri, Boonwurrung, Taungurong, Dja Deja Wurrung, and Wathaurong peoples of the Kulin. Transgender Victoria pays its respects to Elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledges that sovereignty has never been ceded.

**Transgender Victoria (TGV) is the leading body supporting the trans and gender diverse (TGD) community in Victoria.** Transgender Victoria (TGV) works to achieve justice, equity and inclusive service provision for trans and gender diverse (TGD) people, their partners, families and friends. The TGD community includes those whose gender identity or expression is different from that which was assigned at birth or is expected of them by society. This includes those who identify as: trans; transgender; transsexual; genderqueer; non-binary; cross-dressers; Sistergirls, Brotherboys, and other culturally-specific identities; as well as a variety of other gender labels.<sup>1</sup> Trans and gender diverse people are diverse across all measures of diversity such as of education, socio-economic status, cultural back ground and as such represent a microcosm of Australian society and as such we expect to be treated as normal Australians by all parts of society. There are important differences TGD people have to the broader community and they are that we experience high levels of discrimination, abuse and prejudice and that as a consequence we have high rates of mental health and suicidality.

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<sup>1</sup> 2023 LGBTIQ+ TGV Glossary: [TGV website](#)

**TGV expects that the media should accord us dignity as people but accord us more respect and consideration and avoid contributing further to the marginalisation that we experience.**

Accordingly, TGV supports this bill to set up a Commission with the powers to delve deeply into issues of media diversity, regulation, ethics and conduct in Australia to deliver a report to the Parliament on how best to regulate the news media sector to protect Australia's democracy. Our rationale is detailed below.

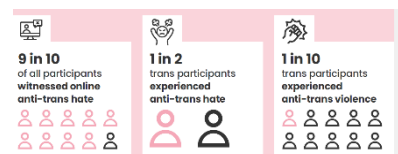
TGV supports the bill because we do not experience dignity from the media in general and instead it is a major contributor to the discrimination, abuse and prejudice that leads to mental health outcomes where over 80% of TGD people suffer from anxiety and/or depression and nearly 50% attempt suicide at some stage in their lives<sup>2</sup>. The media contributes to these appalling mental health statistics by the overwhelming negative impact of the media in Australia on trans and gender diverse Victorians and Australians. TGV formed its view about the media as a result of the experience of its staff, the board, members and volunteers, and feedback from the transgender community, their partners, families and friends which overwhelmingly indicates inaccurate and unfairly negative reporting of issues concerning trans and gender diverse people interfere with trans and gender diverse children, adolescents and adult's health, well-being, education and livelihoods.

**Negative reporting contributes to prejudice and stigma about trans and gender diverse people.**

TGV has expended much effort correcting wrong information and impressions gained from this negative reporting in the media. The press and the papers associated with News limited are the ones most likely to provide negative reports. Repeated complaints to the Press Council over many years have failed to change this intolerable situation and TGV believes that an effective regulator is required to change this situation.

Also informing TGV's position is the recent survey "Fuelling Hate: Abuse, Harassment, Vilification and Violence Against Trans People In Australia"<sup>3</sup>. This survey of around 1000 TGD Australians found that hate towards TGD people was very prevalent:

- 95% had been seen trans hate in some form in the last year
- that 85% said trans hate was significantly more than in 2020
- that 68% said trans hate had worsened in the last 2 months
- and 49% said that they had been personally subjected to trans hate in the last 12 months.



The survey found that an increase in online anti-trans hate since 2020, corresponding with disinformation promoted by politicians and media outlets. The role of the media is discussed on page 11 of the report.

Unsurprisingly, one of the recommendations of the survey was to

<sup>2</sup> 2020 [Private Lives 3](#) A national survey of the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society Adam O. Hill, Adam Bourne, Ruth McNair, Marina Carman and Anthony Lyons

<sup>3</sup> 2023 "[Fuelling Hate: Abuse, Harassment, Vilification and Violence Against Trans People In Australia](#)" Trans Justice Project and Victorian Pride Lobby August 2023

“Strengthen media regulations to ensure greater accountability for news outlets that promote anti-trans disinformation”

The experience of TGV and the results of the survey are backed up by research into the media reporting of trans and gender diverse issues which indicates that media reporting of issues involving trans and gender diverse individuals is overwhelmingly negative (90% of reports are negative)<sup>4</sup>, including sensationalism, alarmist headlines, misleading information and the exclusion of transgender voices.

This sensationalist and negative reporting has immediate real world consequences for TGD people as evidenced by the increase in calls to Switchboard’s Qlife and Rainbow Door help lines by TGD people in distress specifically because of the media reports. These help lines specifically support LGBTIQ+ people with mental health emergencies<sup>5</sup> and with navigation of access to appropriate supports.<sup>6</sup>

An egregious example of sensationalism is the reporting of Mayang Prasetyo’s killing with the News Limited Courier Mail’s front-page stories “Monster Chef and the She Male” and “Ladyboy and the butcher” with a picture of Mayang in a bikini<sup>7</sup>. Subsequent press council complaint ruled the article offensive but the only outcome was the publication of an article by the Australian Transgender Support Association Queensland.<sup>8</sup> The article and the complaints by transgender advocates received considerable publicity Australia wide with lots of commentary in Victoria. At the time TGV had a lot of adverse comments from members family and friends and the coverage caused considerable angst for parents who were wondering whether their teenage and young adult transgender girls and women were safe despite Mayang’s killing having nothing to do with her transgender identity.



Figure : Courier Mail front pages published in [Mumbrella](#) Oct 7 2014

Despite the ruling by the Press Council against the Courier Mail the reporting of the killing of Mhelody Bruno by the Daily Telegraph emphasised at the time (2020) and still emphasises today (online as at 30 August 2023)<sup>9</sup> her gender identity as a transgender woman. A complaint to the Press Council ruled repeated references to the victim's gender identity could have led readers to believe it was a factor in her death and 'could contribute to substantial prejudice against transgender people'. “The Council has repeatedly stated over a long period that publications should exercise great care to not place unwarranted emphasis on characteristics of individuals such as gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, nationality, country of origin, marital status, disability, illness, or age.” “Given the victim’s transgender status was not a contributing factor to her manslaughter, the Council considers the

<sup>4</sup> 2021 “[Transgender People In The Australian Press “Bombarded By Outright Harassment”](#)”, Sydney Corpus Lab online June 9 2021

<sup>5</sup> 2023 Switchboard Victoria Qlife help line 2023 Switchboard Victoria Rainbow door service <https://www.switchboard.org.au/rainbow-door> accessed 31 August 2023 accessed 31 August 2023 <https://www.switchboard.org.au/qlife>

<sup>6</sup> 2023 Switchboard Victoria Rainbow door service <https://www.switchboard.org.au/rainbow-door> accessed 31 August 2023

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<sup>7</sup> 2014 “[“Mayang Prasetyo killing: 'disrespectful' Courier-Mail coverage sparks inquiry”](#) The Guardian Oct 8 2014”

<sup>8</sup> 2014 “[“Press Council Confirms Complaint Courier Mail Male Front Page”](#) Mumbrella Oct 7 2014

<sup>9</sup> 2023 [Daily Telegraph online search for “Mehloody Bruno”](#) accessed 30 August 2023



**Man returns to court accused of killing Filipino woman**

A Wagga man accused of choking a transgender woman to death one week before she was reportedly set to fly home has fronted court. [READ MORE HERE.](#)

*Figure Daily Telegraph website search on "Mhelody Bruno" 30 August 2023*

publication failed to take reasonable steps to ensure that factual material is presented with reasonable fairness in the absence of a public interest justification."<sup>10</sup>

These examples are just 2 where a person's transgender status has been included as a sensational hook for a story to the detriment of the transgender person, their families and friends and the transgender community as a whole. TGV notes that it is likely not a coincidence that both of these two examples relate to a transgender woman of colour. Trans women of colour are one of the groups within the TGD community most likely to experience discrimination, prejudice and abuse and this reporting is just a further example of abuse, sadly after two illegal killings. The concept of intersectionality (or compounded discrimination) explains that having multiple intersecting identities has not just an additive effect on the incidence of discrimination, prejudice and abuse but has a multiplicative or compounded effect. Note that even the Press Council states that this type of publication fuels prejudice against transgender people.

The Press Council's repeated adjudications directs the media not to place unwarranted emphasis on characteristics of individuals. **The need to repeatedly adjudicate in this way indicates the Press Council is ineffective as a regulator and allows the media to cause significant harm.**



*Figure Collation of Stories from The Australian published by ABC online Media Watch 3 of the 45 articles which were subject of a Press Council complaint by Dr Telfer (RCH)*

Another News Limited publication "The Australian" is a leader in misinformation about trans and gender diverse people in the Australian media. Given that it is the only widely distributed paper nationwide and that many of its stories, opinions and positions are appropriated by other News Limited publications, it has a profound on public sentiment about trans and gender diverse people across Australia. One example of the incorrect reporting affecting trans and gender people is the 45 articles published in 2019 and 2020 focussed on the work of Dr Michelle Telfer (then Head of the Victorian Royal Children's Hospital Gender Clinic). Dr

Telfer complained to the Press Council about these which caused distress to transgender children and their families. Dr Telfer is world authority on trans and gender diverse children and has published world's best practice guidelines for their treatment. She noted that "the newspaper is inferring that clinicians like me are harming children, that it's experimental, that the care is novel and that they're potentially mentally ill and they're not really trans." The Press Council ruled that the articles breached 3 key principles, to ensuring accuracy, to ensure fairness and balance and to avoid substantial distress or prejudice to the complainant and noted that "as to offence, distress and prejudice affecting gender diverse persons and their families, the Council recognises that such a series of articles is likely to have such an effect, even a substantial one particularly given the lack of material published from the specialist part of the medical profession which was supportive of affirmative gender treatment"<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> 2023 [Press Council Adjudication 1837](#) 7 June 2023

<sup>11</sup> 2021 [Press Council adjudication 1799](#) Sep 3 2021

Despite these findings against The Australian, the paper continued to publish a series of further 19 articles on its “gender issues page” with sensational headlines, biased and prejudicial reporting<sup>12</sup>. The Australian Professional Association of Transgender Health (Australia’s peak body for professionals involved in the health, rights and well-being of trans, including gender diverse and non-binary (TGDNB) people) published a public statement on articles in the Australian stating that “Our organisation is concerned that the recent reporting in The Australian newspaper regarding health care provided to TGDNB children and adolescents is biased, emotive and is not based on fact. The reporting ignores available scientific evidence which strongly endorses supporting TGDNB children through social and medical transition to improve their mental health outcomes.”<sup>13</sup>



**Transgender Victoria submits that there is ample evidence of biased disinformation being published in the Australia media about one of Australia’s most marginalised communities and that these publications contribute to the discrimination, prejudice and abuse that leads to trans and gender diverse people having the worst mental health of any group in Australia. There is ample evidence that the current regulation of the press media by the Australian Press Council is ineffective.**

TGV therefore recommends that the Senate proceeds with this bill with urgency to set up a Commission with the powers to delve deeply into issues of media diversity, regulation, ethics and conduct in Australia to deliver a report to the Parliament on how best to regulate the news media sector to protect Australia’s democracy.

TGV believes TGD Australians deserve to thrive and the current media climate which



continues to deny our existence on the one hand and claims we pose a threat to the operation of society on the other while peddling disinformation about us and our rights and methods of affirming our gender needs to stop not just for our sakes but for the sake of the broad Australian community.

<sup>12</sup> 2019 [Transgender Agenda](#) Media Watch August 19 2019

<sup>13</sup> 2108 [“Public Statement in Response to Media Reporting”](#) Australian Professional Association for Transgender Health 1 August 2018.