



31 August 2023

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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To Committee members,

RE: VTHC SUBMISSION TO THE MURDOCH MEDIA INQUIRY BILL 2023

The Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications' Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill 2023.

VTHC was founded in 1856 and is the peak body for trade unions in Victoria. VTHC represents over 41 affiliate unions and more than 500,000 workers in the state. VTHC has been at the forefront exposing the Murdoch media empire for its anti-worker and anti-union propaganda, supporting the establishment of Australians for a Murdoch Royal Commission. The Murdoch media empire has eroded our democracy and the social fabric of Australia for decades.

Murdoch media outlets have consistently undermined journalistic integrity, publishing articles that were found to contain misinformation and prejudice. This year, 6 of the 7 adjudications of breached journalistic standards to the Australian Press Council were about articles published by Murdoch media news outlets.¹ The most recent adjudications found Murdoch media outlets contributed to prejudice against transgender people, stereotyped Muslim women, and blamed Indigenous parents for the disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous youth. Last year 15 of the 16 adjudications were about articles published by Murdoch media outlets.² The hundreds of community complaints that lead to these adjudications show how the Murdoch media empire consistently harm marginalised and underrepresented communities in Victoria.

The Murdoch media empire also uses these harmful perspectives to mainstream the talking points of the Far Right and inflate the popularity of rightwing politicians, the Murdoch media empire actively seeks to skew election coverage at every election. Dr Denis Muller, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Advancing Journalism at the University of Melbourne, describes News Corp as "dangerous for our democracy."³

¹ https://presscouncil.org.au/document-search? button_filter=adjudications

² Ibid.

³ Gillespie, E. (2020), 'News Corp slammed for "unbalanced" reporting on Victorian Premier as poll shows majority supports him', SBS News, accessed:

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Dr Muller has criticised News Corp's "extreme coverage" of elections, "playing into the hands" of those who wish to sow division, including rigging bots on Twitter to vote against Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews in an online poll and dog-whistling to far-right conspiracy theorists on the circumstances of Andrews getting injured at a holiday house on the Mornington Peninsula.⁴ The dissemination of Far Right talking points through the Murdoch media monopoly has the effect of normalising dangerous extremist conspiracy theories and undermining Australian democracy through the spread of fake news.

Murdoch media outlets also demonstrated contempt for cultural diversity and democracy when they helped create a racist moral panic about African gangs in 2018 ahead of the Victorian state election. This fabricated panic hurt culturally diverse Victorians and gave a huge platform to racist perspectives within mainstream political debate. The Herald Sun has published 324 articles on 'African gangs', stirring race-based prejudice during an election campaign. The Race Discrimination Commissioner at the time, Tim Soutphommasane, said: "Unfortunately we are seeing right now the return of race politics and the fueling of racial fear and anxiety...And if we're not careful about this, we risk doing some serious damage to our racial harmony."⁵ The motivations behind this narrative were cynical. Multicultural communities in Victoria were put in the line of fire so that right-wing parties could score political points. Monash University professor of criminology Rebecca Wickes, one of the co-authors of *Place, Race and Politics*, says the issue "dropped off the radar" after the Liberal Party lost the poll. "It shows this was basically a moral panic, with politicians and the media feeding the narrative and cross-promoting."⁶

Murdoch media outlets have more recently targeted the transgender community, fueling far-right moral panics and prejudice. This includes publishing four articles that consistently depicted gender-affirming healthcare in a negative light and invalidate the healthcare needs of transgender people.⁷ It also includes continuously and frequently publishing harmful anti-trans editorials by prominent commentators. This has contributed to the endangerment of the lives of trans people in Australia, as well as the Far Right's attacks on trans rights worldwide. Platforming the anti-trans conspiracies of the Far Right has a material impact on the physical safety and mental health of trans people in Australia.

In fact, research from Victoria University found extremist far-right groups used media narratives around Safe Schools and so-called African gangs to recruit for their ideology.⁸ The research found empirical evidence that violent extremists latch on to and are "emboldened" by news stories that lend credibility to their ideas. In the research, Mario Peucker, Debra Smith and Muhammad Iqbal write:

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/article/news-corp-slammed-for-unbalanced-reporting-on-victorian-premier-as-poll-shows-majority-supports-him/632rawal6>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mealey, R. (2018), 'What's dangerous is the lack of perspective on so-called African crime, says the Race Discrimination Commissioner', ABC News, accessed: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-28/lack-of-perspective-on-so-called-african-crime/10044156>

⁶ Vedelago, C. and Millar, R. (2021), 'One election later, the lessons from Melbourne's 'African gang' panic', The Age, accessed: <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/one-election-later-the-lessons-from-melbourne-s-african-gang-panic-20211118-p59a4u.html>

⁷ <https://presscouncil.org.au/document/1834-complainant>

⁸ <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2019/08/10/murdoch-media-fuels-far-right-recruitment#hrd>

“Many of these groups seem to have seized the opportunity when a public debate unfolded, first in 2016 around the implementation of the anti-bullying program Safe Schools...and second in 2017 when the public debate on legalising same-sex marriage in Australia climaxed.”⁹

Extremist groups online share mainstream news coverage and columns that appeal to their ideologies – the more mainstream news aligns with their views, the more they are emboldened in their extreme views. A study by CRIS found that on right-wing social media platform, Gab, the two by far most frequently shared were Sky News (3,131 posts) and The Daily Mail (1,851).¹⁰ On Gab, almost all of the partisan media articles shared affirmatively were from Murdoch outlets, most prominently Sky News, The Herald Sun and The Australian. The Murdoch media empire, in publishing inflammatory columns and biased reporting, financially benefits from the Far Right prolifically sharing Murdoch media articles in social media groups by increasing online traffic to Murdoch-owned outlets. Not only is the Murdoch media empire intent on scoring political points for right-wing parties, it also reaps financial rewards from feeding and echoing the talking points of far-right conspiracy groups on social media.

Not only does the Murdoch media empire promote dangerous and hateful ideology, it has also set out to destroy media diversity in Australia with dire consequences for our democracy and social cohesion. According to the Herfindahl-Hirschman index (HHI), which assesses the concentration of the media market of different countries, Australia had the most concentrated newspaper industry out of any country studied in 2011, with the only exceptions of China and Egypt.¹¹ At the time, Murdoch controlled 57% of the newspaper market by circulation.¹² Because the Murdoch media empire has monopolised the Australian media landscape, it is alarmingly easy for its directors and owners to push their own ideological agenda with extreme reach and effectiveness. The lack of critical and diverse perspectives on important political issues, means voters in Australia are presented with a skewed perspective of what is happening in their communities, overwhelmingly favouring the views of the right.

This also has significant implications for access to reliable news in the regions. After shutting down or merging more than 20 regional newspapers with its capital city mastheads, worsening the news deserts experienced in the regions, Murdoch media struck a deal with regional broadcaster Win. The Murdoch media empire launched the free-to-air regional network Sky News on Win, running right-wing media programs to a potential audience of eight million across the country. This massive audience, now without the reporting of local journalists, are instead exposed to the misinformation spread by far-right pundits like who have made a career of spreading deeply racist, homophobic and transphobic misinformation and pedaled far-right conspiracy theory talking points throughout their careers. The Murdoch media empire’s tactics to dominate media consumption has eroded regional communities’ access to local news reporting in print and promoted far-right bias and misinformation on regional television.

⁹ <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2019/08/10/murdoch-media-fuels-far-right-recruitment#hrd>

¹⁰ Peucker, M. (2022), ‘How far-right online spaces use mainstream media to spread their ideology’, The Conversation, accessed: <https://theconversation.com/how-far-right-online-spaces-use-mainstream-media-to-spread-their-ideology-189066>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2020/nov/13/australia-newspaper-ownership-is-among-the-most-concentrated-in-the-world>

¹² Ibid.

The Murdoch media empire has deliberately sought to divide working people and dominate the news media landscape with hateful narratives to the detriment of many underrepresented communities. A royal commission is necessary to investigation of the Murdoch media empire's market domination and harmful reporting and its negative impact on Australia's democracy.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with Politics and Research Lead, Ted Sussex,

Sincerely,

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Secretary

Ref: LH:JK