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The Chair,
Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Canberra ACT 2600
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Dear Senator Dastyari and Colleagues,

Re: Submission to Select Committee on Future of Public Interest Journalism: Public Health and Public Interest Journalism

I am a professor of public health and Director of the Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity at Flinders University whose specialist area of research is the social determinants of health. I am recognised and quoted internationally for my research and expertise in this area. One of the crucial social determinants in our society is the freedom and independence of the press. In this submission I make the case that a strong public interest journalism sector is vital to enabling healthy people, communities, societies and democracies. It is also critical to maintaining an effective and cost-effective health care system.

Speaking truth to power is vital to public health

From 2005-2008 I served as a Commissioner (appointed by the Director General of the World Health Organisation) on the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (2008). The report of this Commission noted that a maldistribution of power, money and resources is driving inequities in health status. In our recommendations we said that civil society must be able to “organise and act in a manner that promotes and realizes the political and social rights affecting health equity” (CSDH, 2008, p.18). Public interest journalism is vital to realising this right. Since our Commission reported, the distribution of wealth has become more unequal threatening our health and social cohesion (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Public interest journalism is vital to pointing out these inequities, determining why they exist and calling for their reduction.

Public health is threatened by the excessive concentration of ownership of the mainstream press and the industry's diminishing journalistic capacity

The Australian media is one of the most concentrated in the world (Dwyer and Muller, 2016). Print and electronic media are dominated by two owners in Australia posing a threat to democracy. In 1923 there were 21 separate owners of 26 capital city newspapers. Now all major papers are owned by News Corporation or Fairfax, both of which have shed large numbers of journalists in recent years. I note that the Public Interest Journalism Foundation estimates that about 3000 journalistic jobs in Australian mainstream media have been lost in the last five years, and the Foundation's view that public interest journalism is now in crisis in this country. Public health does not have the resources to compete with commercial interests in these papers. While the influence of these papers is diminishing as a result of the internet and electronic communication, these media owners are still able to exert a huge influence on public debates on vital public health issues. Examples include debates on the control of tobacco, introduction of a sugar tax and food labelling. In the main stream press these issues are labelled as initiatives of the "nanny state" and the very real public health benefits they offer are overlooked.

Carbon and climate change increase need for public interest journalism

The impacts of climate change have been highlighted as the major risk to human health for the rest of this century (McMichael, 2017). The debate concerning the scientific evidence on climate change and the likely health impacts has been beset with fake news and the intervention of think tanks and other groups who are clearly financed by commercial interest. These groups have muddied the waters for the layperson in terms of the available scientific information. While scientific knowledge is always evolving, many global agencies stress the need to follow the precautionary principle in our policy making. We can take action and avoid the human health and environment disasters that evidence now suggests are likely. Public interest journalism has a vital role to play in bringing the science to the debate and explaining the importance of precautionary action as well as highlighting solutions for policymakers, communities and other groups. It is also able to present the policy options without commercial interest.

The debate over a carbon tax was beset by the power of the carbon-dependent industries using their wealth to place campaign advertisement in the main stream media to greatly influence the debate. In this sort of situation public good journalism is vital to provide balance. We owe it to democratic decision making to ensure that it survives and thrives. In the case of climate change it is likely vital to the survival of the human species.

Health care debates need public interest balance

The form of health care provision available in Australia is a highly political issue. One of the reasons for increases in the cost of care is the increasing commercialisation of health care. The health care industry employs lobbyists to argue the case for increased provision and cost of care. It has been public interest journalism sites that have argued for the importance of Medicare to providing universal health care and publicly provided and funded health care free at the point of use. Examples are the Pearls and Irritations Blog: <http://johnmenadue.com/john-menadue-the-unfairness-and-waste-of-private-health-insurance-and-the-threat-to-medicare/>
<http://johnmenadue.com/john-thompson-privatising-medicare-by-stealth/>
<http://johnmenadue.com/ian-webster-standing-up-for-medicare/>

and Croakey.org:

<https://croakey.org/increasing-medicare-rebates-in-the-bush-will-not-reduce-patient-out-of-pocket-costs-heres-why/>

<https://croakey.org/private-health-insurance-incentives-widening-the-health-gap/>

<https://croakey.org/health-funding-a-dogs-breakfast-says-andrew-podger/>

The contributions to these news sites are often written by former senior public servants or academics with a depth of knowledge on health care systems and services and present perspectives not seen in the mainstream media. These perspectives on health care funding are vital because they are able to counter the powerful lobbyists from commercial interests that have a main interest in making profits from health care rather than in designing a system which meets people's needs.

Our ABC

The Australian Broadcasting Commission has a fine history of conducting public interest broadcasting that has been in the interests of the health of the Australian population. Examples are the work of Four Corners as exemplified by its investigation in to Don Dale (<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2016/07/25/4504895.htm>) youth detention centre. High imprisonment rates contribute to the low life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and facilities such as Don Dale do nothing to prevent this. It was only because of the ability of the ABC to conduct such sound public interest journalism that we now have a Royal Commission investigating this outrageous breach of human rights. A further example is Radio National Background Briefing which this year examined the need for more kidney transplants, the South Australian Oakden nursing home scandal and the cluster of young doctors taking their own lives in response to work pressures (<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/>).

It is healthy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voices to be heard

Research by a team at the University of Melbourne (Simons, 2017) identified 150 Indigenous-controlled news sources including a flourishing network of new and social media outlets. They variously serve particular communities, and are issues or personality based. They are distributing breaking news and original content. Hearing Indigenous voices is important to our national goal of Closing the Gap as it helps overcome the colonial mentality of the mainstream media. A great example is IndigenousX which has formed a partnership with Guardian Australia and has used social media really effectively to promote health issues especially highlighting racism as a social determinant of health.

Public funding of public interest journalism would be in the interests of public health

Given the importance of public interest journalism to public health, there is a strong case for it to be funded through the public purse. This includes maintaining restoring and extending strong funding for the ABC but also extending the funding to other forms of public interest journalism. Other Countries including France and Norway directly fund for-profit media companies (Schweizer et al, 2014) and yet still maintain media diversity and freedom of expression.

It would also make sense for Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status to be granted for donations supporting not-for-profit, public interest journalism.

Thank you for considering my submission. I'm happy to provide further information if required.

Yours sincerely

Fran Baum AO
FASSA, LMPHAA, FAPHA

References

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