



Senator Jonathon Duniam
Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600.

10 January 2018

Dear Senator Duniam,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Communications Legislation Amendment (Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund) Bill 2017.

Deakin University believes this Inquiry, in examining a bill to support small rural and regional publishers, is addressing a particularly important issue for the nation. Journalism conducted in rural and regional areas is of vital importance to any democratic society. Journalism in these parts of Australia is under threat at present due to a business model that has been overtaken by the digital media landscape, resulting in major job redundancies throughout the sector.

This submission has been prepared by Professor Matthew Ricketson, Dr Kristy Hess and Dr Julie Freeman from Deakin University's School of Communication and Creative Arts. Their research on rural and regional and local news has been published in leading academic publications throughout the world and they have received funding from university, government, not-for-profit and philanthropic agencies to examine community, civic and hyperlocal news spaces in Australia and overseas. With support of philanthropic foundations, Deakin University created a research group in 2016 to focus intently on regional media in Australia.

I commend this submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee.

Yours sincerely

Professor Jane den Hollander AO
Vice-Chancellor



Submission

Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Communications Legislation Amendment (Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund) Bill 2017

Deakin University is pleased to contribute to the Senate Environment and Communications Committee's Inquiry into the Communications Legislation Amendment (Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund) Bill 2017.

As a university with a core commitment to regional Australia, Deakin University is keenly interested in ensuring citizens living and working in regional and rural areas are informed and able to engage in public debate. Deakin University made a submission in June 2017 to the Senate Select Committee into the Future of Public Interest Journalism, in which the University put the position that public interest journalism is under threat, especially in rural and regional Australia.¹

The comments in this submission focus on the proposed \$60 million Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package, developed in 2017 during Parliamentary negotiations on the reform of Australia's media laws and includes:

- a \$50 million Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund
- a Regional and Small Publishers Cadetship Program, which will support 200 cadetships
- 60 regional journalism scholarships.

As publishers in rural and regional Australia struggle to create a new business model in the digital media landscape, assistance is needed to ensure they continue to employ well-trained and educated journalists. Deakin University has a longstanding record of training and educating cadet journalists to work in rural and regional publications. Additionally, amid the rapidly changing digital media landscape, there are risks of ill-informed rural and regional communities, which can create debilitating democratic deficits. To inform evidence-based policy, Deakin University restates its recommendation to the Senate Select Committee into the Future of Public Interest Journalism that further research is urgently required to assess how Australian rural and regional communities could be better served for local news.

The Bill only covers the funding for publishers/content providers from the broader regional innovation package, and sets out the eligibility criteria for applications. The Bill does not currently include any provisions as part of the cadetship program or the journalism scholarships that were also part of the broader package. It is not clear from the Bill or Explanatory Memorandum how the cadetships or the scholarships will be organised and managed.

The Bill essentially gives the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) administrative powers (including selection, agreements and annual reporting) over the grant application process, but also

¹https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Future_of_Public_Interest_Journalism/Public_Interest_Journalism/Submissions

includes a provision that the Minister may establish an advisory committee. The ACMA's remit includes regulation of broadcast and online media but not print-based media, which historically has been the province of the self-regulatory body, the Australian Press Council (APC). Rural and regional publishers have been part of the APC's remit.

Membership of the committee would be at the Minister's discretion, but the Explanatory Memorandum suggests it should include a representative from each of the Australian Press Council, the Country Press Association (CPA) and the Walkley Foundation, all of whom have significant experience in the news media field. Membership of the advisory committee would be enhanced by including representatives from the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the primary body representing journalists in Australia, and from academia. Journalism schools in universities are represented by the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA).

Deakin University's journalism program was the first and is still the only program in Australia to offer a unit tailored to the specific issues arising in local and community journalism. Deakin University also has a longstanding association with the Country Press Association. The Community Journalism Program run jointly by the University and the association is Australia's largest journalism education initiative between industry and the university sector; it trains and educates practicing regional journalists across the country.

The three-year course provides journalists with a solid grounding in the particular challenges of local journalism in a digital world, instilling an importance of local knowledge and practices unique to the sector. Journalists with university qualifications in journalism are able to fast-track through the program which continues to complement their learning by providing them with real-time guidance and feedback on their role and expectations as a local journalist. It also encourages them to be reflective about their experiences in the workplace. Deakin provides an innovative learning platform for journalists to receive information, engage and network with others and liaise with experienced journalists and academic staff.

Deakin University Advice to Senators

Deakin University welcomes the federal government's proposed funding package. Support for small and rural and regional publishers in the rapidly changing digital media environment is crucial to ensure the continuation of quality civic journalism for Australians living in regional, rural and remote areas. As noted above, the University considers the proposed advisory committee would be strengthened by the inclusion of representatives of journalists and journalism schools. The University looks forward to further advice on the operation of the cadetship and scholarship components of the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package.