

**Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration
Inquiry into ‘Administration of the referendum into an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Voice’**

**Joint submission by
Professor Shane Hearn, Chief Executive, First Nations Media Australia**

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About the submitters

Professor Shane Hearn is Chief Executive of **First Nations Media Australia (FNMA)**, the peak body for the First Nations media and communications industry. FNMA’s purpose is empowering Australia’s First Nations people through our culturally connected media industry. As of January 2023, FNMA’s membership includes 36 organisations and 40 individuals who work in or alongside the community-controlled media industry as broadcasters, freelance journalists, photographers, filmmakers, and allies (See Appendix 1). First Nations Media Australia supports and amplifies the First Nations media sector and its objectives. Our activities include resource and policy development, skills development, networking events and meetings, content-sharing, promotion, regular communications, annual awards, research activities and representation.

Professor Kerry McCallum is Director of the **News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC)** at the University of Canberra. The News and Media Research Centre advances public understanding of the changing media environment. N&MRC is Australia’s nationally recognised research centre for the study of news media industries, audiences and public discourse. At a time of epistemic crisis for the media industries, we research and advocate for a media system that builds trust, inclusivity and diversity, to defend and repair the social fabric. Professor McCallum is the co-author of 'The Dynamics of News and Indigenous Policy in Australia' (Intellect, 2017), and is Chief investigator on the ARC-funded project Amplifying Indigenous News. **Associate Professor David Nolan** is an Executive Member of the News and Media Research Centre and is Lead Investigator of the ARC-funded project ‘Amplifying Indigenous News’ (<https://amplifyingindigenousnews.org/>), in partnership with First Nations Media Australia and IndigenousX.

This submission addresses Term of Reference b. of the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration Inquiry into ‘Administration of the referendum to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice’, with particular reference to:

- b. “the detection, mitigation, and obstruction of potential dissemination of misinformation and disinformation, including via social media or technology platforms”.



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NOTE: This submission is made jointly by First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) and the News and Media Research Centre. Some FNMA members may make individual submissions in which case this submission should not be taken to replace those submissions.

The committee should note that this submission only addresses point b. of the terms of reference, via “the detection, mitigation, and obstruction of potential dissemination of misinformation and disinformation, including via social media or technology platforms”.

Summary and recommendation

This submission traces the history and contribution of First Nations media in Australia to challenging mainstream media’s ‘deficit’ representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, amplifying and broadening the range and relevance of voices in policy debates. First Nations Media Australia, the peak body for Indigenous media is demonstrating its capacity as a principal actor in communicating Indigenous perspectives about the Voice to the wider community and providing a forum for debate and discussion among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Importantly, First Nations media represent a significant avenue and solution for countering the potential misinformation and disinformation in other commercial and community media, as well as online and social media platforms, regarding the referendum on the Voice to Parliament. On this reporting, we call on the committee to:

- a) Recognise the important work being done by First Nations media in informing and amplifying the voices of Indigenous Australians in the lead-up to the election;
- b) Support initiatives being led by the sector which stand as vital mechanisms to mitigate the risks posed by mis- and disinformation in the lead-up to the Voice referendum.

Background: Information disorder

In an environment that Wardle and Derakhshan have referred to as ‘information disorder’, the communication of mis- and disinformation is a well-documented and serious problem that represents a serious threat to democratic processes.¹ In this environment, the circulation of false and misleading information may occur through the concerted attempts of interested actors to manipulate the information environment to generate, or by the rapid circulation by social media users of unverified rumours and false information. Popular social media networks can make it difficult for users to judge the credibility of information they receive. Furthermore, because social media business models have tended to promote content that produces engagement and attracts user endorsement, rather than prioritising verification, there is a real risk that media users may base their decision-making on false or misleading information. The problem of ‘information disorder’ has also been exacerbated by an increased tendency by mainstream media outlets to present partisan and sensational

¹ Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, ‘Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking’, Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>



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content that provokes emotional responses in their audience, and to amplify rumour and disinformation that generates attention and clicks.

First Nations media

In this environment, our submission emphasises the critical role that the First Nations Media sector is uniquely positioned to play in mitigating the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation surrounding the Voice referendum. First Nations media organisations are the primary providers of First Nations news and current affairs to their communities and are the key providers of mainstream news and current affairs to their communities in forms that are appropriate and relevant. First Nations media is the preferred channel for receiving news and government information as it connects with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences in ways that resonates in their local setting by producing and broadcasting culturally appropriate content in local First Nations languages. No other media outlet provides news services in Indigenous languages.

First Nations media emerged in response to the failure of mainstream media to adequately reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in news and public discourse. First Nations communities were first granted community broadcast licences in the 1970s and 1980s as a policy response to calls for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have their voices heard in media outlets².

This imbalance in participation still permeates Australia's media landscape, but **First Nations broadcasting and media plays a vital role in providing balanced and culturally appropriate reporting. First Nations Media promotes awareness and understanding among non-Indigenous Australians, participates in the truth-telling process, encourages participation in democratic processes and promotes reconciliation.** First Nations news reporting *is* public interest journalism.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community media sector (radio, TV, print and online) are a critical component contributing to diversity within the Australian media landscape, ensuring that First Nations voices are heard. First Nations, community and publicly owned media are less likely to be influenced by commercial interests. First Nations media organisations offer an important perspective to the national dialogue, including the views of people unlikely to share their stories with non-Indigenous news networks.

Challenging mainstream media representation

Reporting on First Nations matters by mainstream media is often problematic because it takes a deficit approach that casts First Nations people and cultures negatively in terms of social problems and challenges. The often derogatory and over-simplistic representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in mainstream media is frequently sponsored by political actors, and negatively impacts perceptions within First Nations communities and the broader Australian population. Forty-six percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

² Molnar, H. & Meadows, M. (2001) *Songlines to Satellites - Indigenous Communication in Australia, the South Pacific and Canada*, Annandale NSW: Pluto Press



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people and 44% of the general community believe that media portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is usually negative.³ This skewed, negative and often sensationalist representation of Indigenous Australia has been exacerbated by the digital environment, which can contribute to an increasingly misleading and toxic representations of Indigenous people and issues.

First Nations media services counter this lack of balance outlets when reporting on matters relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While they do report challenges and negative stories, they also take pride in reporting successes and, in doing so, showcase examples of good news within First Nations communities. Seventy-seven per cent of surveyed listeners indicated their primary reason for listening to First Nations radio was to hear positive stories on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁴ The result is high levels of audience engagement.

First Nations News Initiative

FNMA's First Nations News Initiative, which in 2022 was supported and researched by the News & Media Research Centre's *Amplifying Indigenous News* project, promotes the establishment of functioning newsrooms within First Nations media organisations, builds capacity for emerging First Nations journalists and shares First Nations perspectives on matters and events not adequately represented in the media landscape. In doing so, it contributes both cultural and geographic diversity to news reporting in Australia, elevating First Nations voices and employment outcomes. In addition to providing valuable training and support to First Nations journalists working within the community-controlled media sector, the First Nations News Initiative has also contributed to the amplification of Indigenous voices in the mainstream media sector.

First Nations media and the Voice referendum

First Nations media have an important role to play in communication of information around the Voice debate, and are well placed to play a vital role in providing Indigenous people with a means for accessing reliable information about the referendum, as well as support the amplification of Indigenous perspectives in the national debate.

For example, in early 2023, FNMA's First Nations News Initiative worked with Birpai journalist Jack Latimore, Indigenous affairs reporter at *The Age*, to produce a project providing a platform for a diverse range of Indigenous perspectives surrounding the Voice referendum to be heard through mainstream media.⁵ In addition to providing valuable industry experience for First Nations reporters, this project drew on their capacity to amplify First Nations voices and perspectives in the national debate.

³ Reconciliation Australia, *Reconciliation Barometer*, November 2020

⁴ McNair yellowSquares, *Indigenous Communications and Media Survey*, 2016,
<https://www.firstnationsmedia.org.au/projects/indigenous-communications-and-media-survey-2016>

⁵ J. Latimore and C. Fitzsimons, 'Raising Indigenous voices on a Voice to parliament', January 20, 2023.
<https://www.theage.com.au/national/raising-indigenous-voices-on-a-voice-to-parliament-20221213-p5c604.html>



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Although some have questioned the impartiality of First Nations media regarding reporting on the Voice referendum, the First Nations sector's news creators must adhere to their station's editorial standards, and the Community radio or Community TV Codes of Practice, as registered with the ACMA under the *Broadcasting Services Act*, which ensures journalistic compliance and rigour.

FNMA is also working with the National Indigenous Australians Agency on a civic education program. The project will provide factual information to First Nations communities, and by extension the broader public, about the design principles of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, the referendum process, and the Australian Constitution. It will also provide neutral and objective information about the affirmative and negative positions on the Voice to Parliament. The activity seeks to maximise inclusion of First Nations Media Australia members, other broadcasters and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences in Voice Referendum information provision. The project will support members and community stakeholders to access quality, culturally appropriate approved products developed by the organisation.

Concluding remarks

While the terms of reference of this inquiry appear to emphasise technological solutions to the problem of 'information disorder' through investigating processes of detection and obstruction of mis- and disinformation, this submission has emphasised the vitally important role that can be played by the First Nations media as a reliable and trusted source of information that both informs and amplifies the diverse voices and perspectives of First Nations people. First Nations media represent a significant avenue and solution for countering the potential misinformation and disinformation in other commercial and community media, as well as online and social media platforms, regarding the referendum on the Voice to Parliament. We call on the committee to recognise and support this important work.



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Appendix 1: The First Nations media sector

The scope of the First Nations media sector includes:

- **Television:** National free-to-air (NITV); satellite delivered narrowcast (ICTV) TV services; local narrowcast TV services (Goolarri TV at Broome, ICTV in Alice Springs and Broome and Larrakia TV at Darwin). The ICTV satellite TV service reaches 371,846 smartcards nation-wide, not including terrestrial services in Alice Springs and Broome.
- **Video & film production:** Production of culture and language-based content for broadcast & online distribution.
- **Print and Online:** A national newspaper (Koori Mail) alongside a strong web presence of journalistic sites such as IndigenousX, National Indigenous Times.
- First Nations media organisations have a strong **social media** following and publish content online daily.
- **Radio:** Over 230 radio broadcast sites coordinated by 35 licensed, community-owned, not-for-profit organisations. These radio services reach around 320,000 First Nations people, including around 100,000 very hard to reach people in remote Indigenous communities, or approximately 48% of the First Nations population. Radio services are prevented from providing a primary radio service to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples due to a lack of funding and spectrum availability. Established stations broadcast live shows, plus interviews, radio documentaries, news, emergency information, community events, government, and other messaging within community broadcasting guidelines through these platforms:
 - 157 stations broadcasting on FM.
 - 4 stations broadcasting on AM.
 - 13 broadcasting via VAST satellite, in addition to FM services.
 - 5 metropolitan services broadcasting via DAB+, in addition to FM services in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Darwin.
 - Almost all offer online streaming via a dedicated station website.
 - Many offer on-demand content either through the station's own website, or Soundcloud or podcast sites.
 - 26 stations can be streamed via the indigiTUBE website and app. Some stations also have their own application or use the TuneIn or iHeartRadio apps to reach audiences.
- These channels offer a wide range of programming, including news and current affairs reporting from a First Nations perspective, in over 25 Indigenous languages nationally, including the first language of many people in remote communities.



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The sector reaches significant audience share with 91% of people in remote First Nations communities being regular listeners to radio services and watching ICTV at least once per month.⁶ In the remote context, First Nations media is the most reliable and ubiquitous radio and media service available to audiences. First Nations broadcasting returns an average \$2.87 in social outcomes for every \$1 invested, with many organisations returning a rate much higher than this nearly 3:1 average ratio.⁷ The communications sector provides enabling services to support opportunities and outcomes in service sectors, such as health and education, and promotes inclusiveness and participation.⁸

⁶ McNair Ingenuity Research and Indigenous Remote Communications Association, *Remote Indigenous Communication and Media Survey*. Report prepared for Indigenous Remote Communications Association, 2016.

⁷ Social Ventures Australia, *More Than Radio – a community asset: Social Return on Investment Analyses of Indigenous Broadcasting Services*, 2017.

⁸ Department of Communications and the Arts, *The Communications Sector: recent trends and developments*, Bureau of Communications Research, Commonwealth Government, Canberra, October 2016.



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