



The Wilderness Society Submission: Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill

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Committee Secretary
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About the Wilderness Society

The Wilderness Society is an independent, community-based, not-for-profit environmental advocacy organisation. Our vision is to transform Australia into a society that protects, respects and connects with the natural world that sustains us. We are committed to protecting, promoting and restoring wilderness across the continent for the survival and ongoing evolution of life on Earth. From community activism to national campaigns, we seek to give nature a voice to support the life that supports us all. We are powered by more than 150,000 supporters from all walks of life.

Introductory Comments

The Wilderness Society welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the [Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill 2023](#). We understand that the bill will “establish a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the current state of media diversity and conduct of media outlets operating in Australia, in particular the Murdoch media empire, and their impact on Australian democracy”.

As such, our aim here is to contribute to the remit of the bill, noting that submissions into the substance of “the Murdoch media empire” are to be made to the Commission of Inquiry in due course once it has been constituted (assuming that it will be).

We note that the bill’s proposed terms of reference for the Commission of Inquiry are as follows:

- (a) whether the existing system of media regulation in Australia is fit-for-purpose;
- (b) the concentration of media ownership in Australia;



- (c) the impact of Australia’s media ownership laws on media concentration in Australia;
- (d) the relationship between the media and government in Australia and whether fear of retribution in the press has hampered the creation of public policy;
- (e) the need for a single, independent media regulator to harmonise news media standards and oversee an effective process for remedying complaints;
- (f) the efficacy of current legal frameworks and mechanisms for managing misinformation and disinformation in the media;
- (g) the culture, ethics and practices of media outlets operating in Australia;
- (h) the targeting of marginalised communities by the media including people of colour, people with disabilities, the LGBTQIA+ community and people on income support;
- (i) the impact on democracy of the “Foxification” of some media outlets operating in Australia, including undermining trust in public institutions and public interest journalism;
- (j) the impact of the political influence of major media outlets operating in Australia;
- (k) the impact of online global platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter on the media industry and sharing of news in Australia;
- (l) the barriers faced by small, independent and community news outlets in Australia;
- (m) the role of government in supporting a viable and diverse public interest journalism sector in Australia;
- (n) any matter reasonably incidental to a matter mentioned in the above paragraphs.

We believe that this Commission of Inquiry is a rare point in time for society on this continent to identify, hear about, understand and contribute to this debate around media conduct and what the opportunities for reform and improvement this bill and inquiry could be.

Therefore we believe it is essential that the Terms of Reference properly set the remit of the Commission so that this inquiry is not a wasted opportunity nor that it omits important aspects of contemporary media operation.

We believe that the proposed Terms of Reference are lacking in a number of ways. Below, we have proposed some additional Terms of Reference to the remit of the Commission that we believe would make the inquiry more robust, effective, meaningful and ultimately successful.

1) Climate Science Denial

Former Labor Australian prime minister, Kevin Rudd, has been instrumental in the genesis of this bill and inquiry. Both Rudd and former Liberal prime minister Malcolm Turnbull have put climate science denial at the top of their list of criticisms of Rupert Murdoch and his media outlets^{1, 2}.

¹ Rudd and Turnbull unleash on Murdoch at writers’ festival -

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/rudd-and-turnbull-unleash-on-murdoch-at-writers-festival-20220307-p5a2jp.html>

² The Guardian: Kevin Rudd and Malcolm Turnbull - Australia’s ambition on climate change is held back by a toxic mix of rightwing politics, media and vested interests – Kevin Rudd -

<https://kevinrudd.com/archive/2021-04-21-the-guardian-kevin-rudd-and-malcolm-turnbull-australias-ambition-on-climate-change-is-held-back-by-a-toxic-mix-of-rightwing-politics-media-and-vested-interests>



Yet climate science denial is not explicitly dealt with by the Terms of Reference.

The Murdoch media has played a central, if not leading role, in those parts of the media that continue to deny, undermine and denigrate climate science. This assertion is supported by a compelling body of evidence. This is an indelible trait of Murdoch-owned media outlets in Australia as well as in the US, UK and in other jurisdictions as well. A few examples of this body of evidence include:

- 'Climate denial' to 'climate delay': Rupert Murdoch's News Corp pivots media narrative in Australia | Here & Now - <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2021/11/09/climate-change-tabloids-murdoch>
- Murdoch's Climate Denial Has Australian Politics In Its Grip - <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/05/australia-election-murdoch-media-climate-change-scott-morrison>
- Rupert Murdoch Has Known We've Been in a Climate Emergency Since 2006, Documents Show - <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7byqw/rupert-murdoch-climate-change-fox-news-news-corp>
- Murdoch's Sky News Australia misled viewers on climate change - <https://qz.com/the-murdoch-media-empire-has-been-lying-in-australia-as-1850394622>

These extremely popular news networks have continuously employed strategies to undermine climate science and action by framing the crisis as a left wing political agenda, catering to its conservative viewership. Rather than engaging with scientific evidence, these networks project the issue through a political lens. This tactic is seen in messages that portray climate change as a vehicle for a radical government agenda, suggest climate action would harm the economy, and label concern about the crisis as hysteria³. These messages, along with false arguments and attacks on climate advocates, not only contribute to disinformation and hinder meaningful discourse on urgent climate issues, but pose a direct threat to public health and safety.

Framing the climate crisis as a political construct rather than a scientifically supported reality downplays the contemporary and future threats of global heating. Failing to address climate change seriously endangers lives and livelihoods by undermining efforts to mitigate its severe impacts on public health and safety caused by more frequent and intense extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and environmental disruptions.

The proposed terms of reference could already cover the issue of climate misinformation. For example, proposed ToR (d) ("fear of retribution"), (g) ("ethics") and (j) ("political influence"). However, none of the proposed ToR properly, explicitly and centrally deals with the fact that the Murdoch media has been responsible for sustained, prolonged and multi-platform climate science denial over many years.

We believe that for this Commission to be taken seriously, for the sake of its integrity and for the important civic role this commission could play, that the role of climate science denial must be dealt with through an explicit term of reference. We believe the Commission risks lacking credibility without formally dealing with this matter, given it has been so central to the initiation of

³ Fisher, A. (2019). *Foxic: Fox News Network's Dangerous Climate Denial 2019*. [online] Public Citizen. <https://www.citizen.org/article/foxic-fox-news-networks-dangerous-climate-denial-2019/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=52dbcd4f-2756-4284-973a-7fe06c039cd5>.



the bill and proposed Commission of Inquiry itself and is such a hallmark of the Murdoch media and criticisms of it.

We have proposed the wording of such a term of reference as follows:

(x) The role of Murdoch-owned media outlets in the denial and denigration of climate science

2) Reform Defamation Laws

Defamation laws have inflicted damage on independent journalism and the open exchange of ideas. Wielded by well-funded media giants such as NewsCorp, these laws in their current shape undermine the fundamental principles of free press and perpetuate the imbalance of power in the media landscape.

The inquiry must address this imbalance as current regulations skew heavily to the government's media allies, deterring critical and investigative reporting and silencing important community voices and diversity in the media, as this article suggests:

- [Rupert Murdoch media inquiry misses the real bogeys](#), MichaelWestMedia

3) Corruption and Whistle-blower Witness Protection

Many of the allegations, rumours and conjecture that relate to the conduct of media outlets owned by Murdoch media relate to corrupt conduct. We would like to stress that we are not alleging corrupt conduct by Murdoch-owned media outlets. However, such allegations do exist in the public domain, for example:

- [Murdoch 'empire' breeds corruption, climate denialism and political extremism: Rudd](#), 7NEWS
- [Kevin Rudd takes aim at Murdoch press, government 'corruption'](#), The Canberra Times
- [The Complicated Corruptions of Rupert Murdoch and The Wall Street Journal](#), Center for American Progress

These allegations go beyond media reporting and include a significant body of grey and academic literature as well. For example:

- State Crime and Immorality: The Corrupting Influence of the Powerful, my Monaghan, Mark, Prideaux & Simon Prideaux
- Dial M for Murdoch: News Corporation and the Corruption of Britain, by Martin Hickman and Tom Watson
- [Democracy Corrupted](#), SpringerLink
- The Murdoch Media Empire and the Spectacle of Scandal, Douglas Kellner, University of California, Los Angeles

There have also been some high-profile and serious scandals that have been fundamentally about corrupt media conduct by Murdoch owned media. These include the deliberate misreporting by Fox News of what it said were faulty voting machines during the last US election. The machines, made



by Dominion, were not faulty and it came to light that Fox journalists knew what they were reporting was false. This led to the largest defamation fine in US history⁴.

In the UK, the Milly Dowler scandal exposed a web of corrupt activities between the police and Murdoch media journalists that involved the hacking of murder victims Milly Dowler's mobile phone and which led to the closure of the News of the World newspaper in the wake of the scandal⁵. It was subsequently found that Murdoch media journalists had hacked the phones of hundreds of private individuals⁶.

Unless there is a specific term of reference that covers this fundamentally serious and important aspect of media conduct, there is a risk that it won't be properly addressed or that individuals won't provide relevant evidence. As one of the proposed terms of reference already refers to "intimidation", we believe it is important that a term of reference invites whistleblowers and, at the same time, makes explicit that individuals who come forward with appropriate evidence are insulated from retribution.

4) Taxation and Murdoch-owned Media

In the first instance, the tax affairs of 'the Murdoch media' could seem out of scope of this inquiry. However, many of the proposed Terms of Reference proposed by the bill and by the Wilderness Society relate to matters that are implicitly or explicitly related to media corporation revenues and tax affairs, such as

- "media ownership laws on media concentration"
- "the relationship between the media and government"
- "the culture, ethics and practices of media outlets operating in Australia"

There has been much published about the tax affairs of the Murdoch media, not least the purported low rate of tax that it pays in Australia. Some examples include:

- [Rupert Murdoch's empire receives \\$882m tax rebate from Australia](#) | Rupert Murdoch | The Guardian
- [Tax dodging News Corp continues to rip Australia off](#), Crikey
- [Is News Corp still paying zero tax?](#), AFR
- [Rupert Murdoch's US empire siphons \\$4.5b from Australian business virtually tax-free](#), SMH
- [Media companies linked to the Murdochs pay the least tax](#), AFR

We believe that a term of reference that shines a light on these matters as part of the inquiry could be important for public transparency and could help provide important context and information that relates to the other terms of reference.

⁴Analysis: Fox News's \$787.5 Million Settlement Is the Cost of Airing a Lie - The New York Times - <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/18/technology/fox-news-dominion-settlement.html#:~:text=But%20the%20%24787.5%20million%20settlement,high%2Dprofile%20acknowledgment%20of%20informational>

⁵ Missing Milly Dowler's voicemail was hacked by News of the World | UK news | The Guardian - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/jul/04/milly-dowler-voicemail-hacked-news-of-world>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Weeting



5) The Monetisation of News and the Impacts of ‘Sensationalism for Clicks.’

The current principles of journalistic integrity and the growing emphasis on profitability through click-driven models need to be examined by the inquiry. Delving into this area is not only timely but also essential, as it probes the very foundations of media's motivations and its repercussions on the quality, accuracy, and societal impact of information or disinformation.

In the current climate, audience engagement is more often than not equated with financial viability. There exists a tension between the stories that genuinely serve the public interest and those that cater to sensationalism in order to generate clicks, views and revenue. It is time to reestablish what role journalistic organisations play in a public discourse that has become increasingly divided.

The resurgence of populism, conspiracy theories and anti-science rhetoric of the past decade has been shepherded by mass media's changing business model that has sacrificed journalism for clicks and revenue. No clearer example of this shift in priorities is the NewsCorp owned Herald Sun's strategy to attract more paywall crossings by providing reporters with bonuses linked to page views, leading to an increased emphasis on clickbait⁷. The reliance on monetising 'views' utilises exploitative and sensationalist content creation, thereby compromising journalistic integrity and nuance.

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⁷ Gettler, L. (2019). Cash for clicks: the Herald Sun model can't be the future of journalism. [online] The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/cash-for-clicks-the-herald-sun-model-cant-be-the-future-of-journalism-119638>