

Tuesday, 15 October 2024



Questions on Notice

To the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society,

On the 30th of September, MEAA appeared online at a hearing of the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society. At this hearing, MEAA was asked to respond to several questions on notice. Our responses are detailed in the sections below.

On the regulation of news media content

As MEAA Media Section President Karen Percy highlighted in her response, there already exist regulatory arrangements for news outlets that govern the types of materials they can publish. For example, *The Broadcasting Services Act 1992* regulates many aspects of the industry, including local content requirements and advertising. In addition, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) regulates communications and the media. Complaints can be submitted through ACMA about a wide range of issues in relation to broadcast media and radio including on the accuracy and neutrality of news, the disclosure of commercial arrangements in factual programs, distressing content, and the classification of programs. In addition, news organisations comply with codes of ethics, one example being MEAA's own Journalist Code of Ethics. Other commercial and non-commercial codes exist, including the *ABC Code of Practice*, *SBS Code of Practice*, and the Australian Press Council's *Statement of Principles*. These organisations each deal with adherence to the code via complaints processes and other regulatory mechanisms.

Often overlooked in relation to this problem is how industrial and workplace pressures have undermined journalists' capacity to maintain quality public interest journalism and meet their ethical obligations. A survey of MEAA members found that when staffing levels are reduced, important aspects of the journalistic process are undermined. Overall, 78% of respondents reported that reduced staffing levels resulted in less time to apply appropriate scrutiny; 73% reported that deadline pressure resulted in less time given to each story; 72% reported work being published with less editing oversight; 82% reported less time for fact-checking, speaking to sources, and research; while 78% reported an impact on their ability to mentor.

In addition, the pressures associated with publishing via social media means that the integrity of journalists work can be undermined out of corporate desperation in seeking revenue wherever news media outlets can find it. The ecosphere is such that revenue comes from clicks, keeping people online for as long as possible, and in extreme cases it comes from fomenting outrage and division. In addition, competitiveness in the industry means that 'clickbait' headlines – once frowned upon by quality news producers – are now more common. These declining working conditions have clear implications on the quality and coverage of news and must be addressed through sustainable and significant sources of funding that are directed towards public interest journalism.

The criteria and method of distribution of funding for news media

There are reports that the Government is considering a 'levy' approach to fund news media. This raises questions about the method and criteria for the potential distribution of funds arising from such a levy. MEAA contends that there are several key factors that should be considered in the selection of recipients for funding, and in the distribution of those funds.

First, in considering what kind of organisations should have access to such funds, MEAA believes that three factors must be weighed. The first factor is that the outlet in question delivers on public interest journalism. The second is diversity in the production of news media, to ensure that all segments of society are served by the distribution of such funds. Last, such a funding body must weigh market share in the delivery of such funds.

MEAA believes that funding should be tied to the remuneration of those employed in the production of public interest journalism. Journalists and news media workers are doing the interviews, writing the stories, taking the photographs, running the video, editing and processing the stories for publication and broadcast, and liaising with the public. These activities need to be the central focus of funding. One such proposed model comes from *The Australia Institute's* Richard Deniss, who has suggested a rebate based on a proportion of editorial salaries. This would tie funding to the production of public interest journalism – rather than to revenue (or some other measure).

It's not necessary, in our view, to dictate or prescribe a journalist. It is preferable to look at the act of journalism and how that is carried out. This is in part because the media industry has changed dramatically in recent years. Journalists used to work for big, well-resourced media companies, however, this isn't the case anymore. There are more smaller agencies or freelancers than ever before.

Furthermore, to count as 'public interest journalism', the act of journalism must be carried out in accordance with a code of ethics or code of conduct, acting in tandem with a complaints and regulatory framework. For our members, this will be the MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics. The MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics has been established since the 1940s, and was defined by journalists, for journalists. This Code of Ethics is embedded into membership of MEAA's media section. This membership is subject to a verification process that checks if the applicant is a genuine journalist (for example, by considering examples of the applicant's work). Other journalists will also have systems and processes within their organisations.

Importance of holding social media companies to account for the proliferation of mis- and disinformation

MEAA believes that it is critical that social media companies are held to account for the proliferation of mis- and disinformation on their platforms. It is clear that the move away from news has seen a direct and obvious increase in viral clickbait, including misinformation and disinformation, on the platform. Therefore, MEAA considers it critical that social media platforms are held responsible for the general deprioritisation of news that has been associated with this spread.

The impact of social media companies on news and debate in Australia

Journalists rely on social media platforms to source and distribute news. This has fundamentally impacted the nature of journalism and changed resourcing demands. News organisations now need to post on a variety of platforms, all requiring different formatting and processes. This has led to an intensification of work, and increased pressure to turnover the production of content.

Sudden changes to the algorithms of social media platforms can have devastating consequences on the reach that news organisations can achieve on these websites. These algorithms are unpredictable and inconsistent, creating uncertainty and instability – further destabilising the media industry.

The reliance on social media for distribution has also impacted the stability of journalists' work. While organisations do make specialist hires for specific platforms, those positions are often short-term in an industry already rife with insecure work.

For small media organisations, particularly in regional and rural Australia, social media platforms have historically offered an inexpensive option to publish material. In turn, these media organisations have become dependent on platforms for distribution.

Algorithmic transparency

MEAA views our submission as a way of identifying or pointing to the need to find solutions for the consequences of these changes. Some of the answers to that question are beyond our expertise because they require technical knowledge of experts. We also recognise the legitimate business issues all businesses face with their intellectual property (IP). We raise the issue in order to flag a topic for more refined and further thinking.

Must Carry Provisions

In MEAA's submission to the inquiry, we recommended that the Government consider introducing a 'must carry' provision to prevent social media companies from removing all news content from their platforms. Such a provision would prevent retaliation against news publishers for asserting their rights.

This possible pathway has been raised by Communications Minister, Michelle Rowland, as well as the Assistant Treasurer, Stephen Jones. Both have flagged that the Treasury and ACCC are currently assessing how such a system could work, including whether it would be compatible with the News Media Bargaining Code. Again, some of the answers to that question are not within our expertise because they require technical knowledge of experts, and as such we leave it to competent government and other bodies to consider.

Having said this, MEAA notes that 'must-carry' provisions have been written into law in several countries. For example, in Australia, the US, and a number of other countries, must-carry provisions have been written into law for local language and/or content requirements on communication platforms.

Another option would be to directly tax digital platforms so as to remove the financial incentive for such platforms to block the carriage of news in retaliation for being designated under the Code. MEAA understands that this system is also being considered by the Government.