

Submission: to the Senate Committee enquiry into the future of public interest journalism.

From: Tim Lloyd, print media journalist (with The Advertiser, Adelaide) and Federal Councillor of the MEAA.

Summary:

This private individual submission argues that the future credibility of journalism rests with management by its peers in the same way as most Australian professions.

Overview of the problem.

The decline in journalism in Australia is directly related to the decline in the conventional media, particularly print media, where much of the high quality journalism takes place. The conventional media is in decline because of the fragmentation of advertising revenues, the media's main source of income.

These are large forces because for the first time three or four major new players, Google, Facebook, Apple and Amazon, have now taken the major share of all new advertising, both worldwide and in Australia.

Since they pay little tax and employ very few people here, there is no consequent replacement of journalism, either locally or

internationally. A big slice of Australia's economy is being raked off by them.

There are mechanisms that would help undo that. Changes to Australian copyright laws to better protect both writers and publishers would help prevent all journalists' copy being siphoned off into a proliferation of new media news aggregation services. At present, news photographs, video and artwork are well protected but the written word is not.

Changes to the tax regime in Australia for these multinational new media players would be useful for Australia as a whole rather than conventional news content providers. However, a blanket charge for these operators to carry Australian news other than their own content might be practicable.

While helpful, none of these moves would in themselves stop the problem since the flexibility of new electronic media and its sheer popularity with users mean that they will continue to wipe out the conventional media services.

News content providers

The massive change in digital media in the past decade means there has been a fragmentation of journalism, a rapid loss of about 2500 employed journalists, and the rise of poor quality and deliberately "fake" news.

There is no doubt we have fewer journalists and worse access to news, and since both underpin a proper democratic society the downside is far more dangerous than just the loss of employment in the industry.

Assuming this decline continues, the single major action that would protect public interest journalism is to better ensure the credibility of journalists.

Anyone can now be a reporter because we all have access to a means of publishing news and information. Even two decades ago that was both technically difficult and the audiences were relatively small. Now it is easy, and the audience potentially very large.

In the past, standards in journalism were protected by two major forces:

1. On one hand, the news media companies were the main gatekeepers for quality news. They trained and employed journalists, graded them according to their performance, and carefully moderated their reports in a multi-level editing system. If a defamatory article was written and published, the media company, not the journalist, was usually sued. Overseeing bodies such as the Australian Press Council monitored overall performance and handled complaints by the traditional media.

The news media has been fragmenting so these traditional gatekeepers are no longer effective. News media is being powered by Twitter, Facebook, blogs and news websites that have none of the structures of the traditional radio, television and news publishing media. They also have none of the oversight of a Press Council, ACMA or similar bodies. The result is very poor quality alongside very high quality reporting.

2. The other force was the journalists' union, historically the Australian Journalists Association, and now part of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance. The media section of this organisation has its own ethics code, ethics committees and works with its associated body, the Walkley Foundation, to promote high quality journalism among its peers. Just as the media companies where its members work are shrinking, the MEAA has been steadily losing membership.

These two forces have been profoundly challenged. With fragmentation of the media on such a massive scale, and the proliferation of poor or deliberately misleading reporting, a new way has to be found to seek out quality.

There are many industries in Australia where quality is controlled by the peers of the practitioners, usually under some kind of licence from government. Medicine, engineering, architecture, teaching and accounting are just some of the examples. Journalism should work in the same way.

The MEAA is the obvious candidate for this role. While the media section is also a union, it has always strived for professional standards. Its Walkley Foundation has set high standards in this regard.

Until now, the competence of journalists has been left, for better or worse, to be judged by the media proprietors. As their role in journalism declines, it would be timely to instead require journalists'™ peers to determine both who is a journalist, and who is not meeting the professional standards of journalism.

Otherwise, the present confusion over citizen journalists, fake news journalists, and plagiarising journalists can only be controlled by heavy-handed regulatory oversight.

The MEAA is ideally placed to run its own system of peer recognition, where journalist members are endorsed. It might even be possible to add a system of Fellows and Distinguished practitioners so that the Laurie Oakes of this world are accorded their proper authority.

This would ensure that reporters in the far flung and fragmented new media that confronts us could easily show their readers their competence or be challenged to reveal their lack.

As a gatekeeper for journalism, the MEAA and the Walkley Foundation already play considerable roles, and this would serve to formalise it.

In addition, the Walkley Foundation, now with tax deductible organisation status, is one of few organisations well-placed to coordinate funding for independent and investigative journalism in a future where commercial resources for these investigations become much more restrained. As the conventional media world shrinks, this will become a new force of immense importance in the media.