

## AUSTRALIA

# Media concentration and deteriorating conditions for investigative journalism

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### Introduction

In the decade that has passed since the last Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) country report for Australia, the conditions for media pluralism and media freedom have changed in some important ways. In the 2011 report, the general context of Australian media was framed in the title of the chapter in terms of being “committed to investigative journalism” (Josephi, 2011). Although that aspirational goal has not changed, the optimistic *conditions* of its attainment have altered in terms of key political, economic, cultural, and technological dimensions. Yet, despite these deteriorating conditions, Australia’s media remain moderately robust, and enjoy a relatively free press. However, the industry itself has become further deregulated and more concentrated. The same powerful voices have an unhealthy influence over the big picture agenda, shaping public opinion around key debates including topics such as climate change, education, and health (Dwyer & Koskie, 2019).

While Australia is a democratic country with a mostly independent news media, it has no explicit constitutional guarantee of free speech or freedom of the press, and no statutory bill of rights. Its journalists do not constitutionally enjoy any special rights beyond those of ordinary citizens. The High Court of Australia considered there to be implied freedom of political communication in the constitution, but it is narrow in scope. Some legal principles, including aspects of the common law, help to protect free speech, but there is nothing clearly similar to the First Amendment of the US Constitution (Wilding & Dwyer, 2019; see also Australian Law Reform Commission, 2016). Politically, Australia is considered a mature liberal democracy.

**Freedom in the World 2021:** status “free” (Score: 97/100, down from 98 in 2019).

One point was deducted in 2020 in the “Civil liberties: Freedom of expression and belief” category, “due to contempt of court charges being levied against journalists who reported on a major criminal case and police raids against media outlets as part of an investigation into government leaks”. (Freedom House, 2021)

**Liberal Democracy Index 2020:** Australia is placed high in the Top 10–20% bracket – rank 20 of measured countries, down from 7 in 2016 (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2017, 2021).

**Freedom of Expression Index 2018:** rank 29 of measured countries, down from 13 in 2016 (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2017, 2019).

**2020 World Press Freedom Index:** rank 26 of 180 countries, with a score of 20.21, alongside nations such as Singapore, Benin, and Djibouti. The organisation notes that “investigative journalism is in danger” with the score dropping five positions from the previous year (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

The structural problem with media pluralism in Australia will require more strategic regulatory intervention to avoid further damage to democratic institutions. Following the removal in 2017 of the so-called two-out-of-three rule for maintaining pluralism, Nine Entertainment – a company known more for its tabloid style than for independent journalism – took over a major independent media company, Fairfax Media (Dwyer & Koskie, 2019; see also Carson, 2018). The take-over was widely anticipated when the federal government repealed these anti-concentration laws. The bulk of Australia’s newspaper and online news sector is now controlled by News Corp and Nine Entertainment Co.

Independent journalism received another hit in 2020 when the only news agency, Australian Associated Press, announced it would be closing mid-year. The two main shareholders – also the largest groups by market capitalisation – News Corp and Nine Entertainment Co, made this announcement citing Internet giants stealing their content, and thus rendering the wire business insufficiently profitable. However, a consortium led by a former News Corp executive has since announced that they will oversee a pared-back version of the company.

Sections of the media – including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and their flagship television public affairs programme, *Four Corners*, and parts of the “Radio National” network – and a fragmented independent press are still able to criticise and hold governments to account. But their voices are increasingly marginalised and muted in the mainstream media fray.

Reporters Without Borders (2020) notes the extraordinary situation of Australian Federal Police (AFP) raids on the home of a political journalist for News Corp and on journalists working for the national public service media organisation, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). It observes that

these were “flagrant violations of the confidentiality of journalists’ sources and public interest journalism” (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

The raids arose from the publication of two stories. The first was on the home of Annika Smethurst, a journalist with News Corp, related to an article from April 2018 on government plans to give the intelligence agency Australian Signals Directorate additional powers to spy on citizens. The second raid on the headquarters of the public service broadcaster ABC in Sydney was over articles written two years earlier by two ABC journalists in relation to allegations of unlawful killings by Australian special forces in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2013 (Wilding & Dwyer, 2019).

These incidents surprised many in Australia who saw them as important and legitimate instances of investigative journalism, not as a threat to national security, as they were described by police and other governmental authorities. In an article titled “Media freedom in Australia faces an increasingly gloomy future” for the Nieman Reports, the author suggested, “Australia offers the world a sobering example of how a liberal democracy can incrementally surrender media freedom and how hard it can be to fight back when the public is increasingly disengaged and distrusting of media” (Dickson, 2020).

A nationwide campaign by all major media groups broke new ground in efforts to defend media freedom in Australia. Major newspapers including *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Age*, and the *Herald Sun* ran covers on 21 October 2019 featuring blacked-out text representing the obstacles faced by journalists in this country (Wilding & Dwyer, 2019).

### *Media freedom debates*

Articles on government secrecy and harsh media laws featured in the print and online editions of Australia’s newspapers. In parallel, broadcasters ran advertisements with a similar theme. “When government keeps the truth from you, what are they covering up?” was the question with which they introduced their protest.

This campaign was orchestrated by Australia’s Right to Know (ARTK), an industry group that has been active for over a decade and regularly makes submissions to government reviews, arguing for law reform and changes to policy that might assist in newsgathering (ARTK, 2019). However, the AFP raids in June 2019 triggered a coordinated and unprecedented attack on the federal government (Wilding & Dwyer, 2019).

No evidence was found in either case of how these journalists’ actions might have endangered anyone or compromised national security. Indeed, the AFP was found to have acted illegally in one of the cases, but the High Court still allowed them to keep the evidence they obtained and did not restrict them from using it for other cases in the future (Karp, 2020).

Australia's defamation laws are regarded by many as no longer fit for purpose, and this has led to the drafting of new laws arising from a review by state and federal attorneys general. For decades, defamation laws in Australia have made it relatively easy to bring and win suits, leading Sydney to be called the "defamation capital of the world".

A patchwork of statutory and common law restrictions on speech operates against this relatively weak protection of speech. Defamation law (both statutory and common law) rivals national security legislation in limiting public interest journalism. Australia has no effective threshold test for "serious harm" such as exists in the UK, while the defences to defamation are notoriously difficult to apply – even in cases of important, public interest journalism. Defamation reform, improvement to freedom of information laws, and an overhaul of other restrictions, such as the use of court suppression orders, are part of ARTK's current campaign. But national security laws which criminalise journalism are undoubtedly at the forefront of the current action (Wilding & Dwyer, 2019).

So, many of these laws fail to provide adequate safeguards for journalists. And while it's important to understand that in the mid-2000s Australia really did need improved laws to protect its citizens against terrorism – and the AFP was subsequently able to prevent numerous large-scale terror plots – successive Australian governments have added to the pool of security legislation in wave after wave of legislative amendments. It's the cumulative effect of these waves of "reform" that the industry is now reacting against (Gelbner, 2007; see also Wilding & Dwyer, 2019).

After the AFP raids, the attorney general announced that any decision to prosecute journalists cannot be taken without his consent (Worthington, 2019). However, this has not addressed the concerns raised by many about government intrusion on media freedoms. Both commercial and publicly funded media organisations continue to lobby for the need to have a legal framework which allows them to do journalistic work unhindered. The various laws that allow access to journalists' confidential information, or which preclude access to information about government activities, have compromised a core requirement of Australian journalism: that confidences given in the course of journalistic work will be protected (CMT, 2019). In this regard, one prominent journalist recently noted, "A real reason why we do not have a charter or bill of rights are the ceaseless and frantic campaigns against them by News Corp" (Marr, 2019).

In a policy submission in 2019, researchers Johan Lidberg from Monash University and Denis Muller from the University of Melbourne contrasted the approach in Australia with that in the other members of the "Five Eyes" security community (the US, the UK, Canada, and New Zealand):

The key question that needs to be posed is why Australia is the only country among the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing community [with the US, UK, Canada, and New Zealand], and indeed among mature liberal democratic

countries, that see a need to equip its security and intelligence agencies with powers that extend to issuing and executing search warrants against individual journalists and media organisations justified by hunting down public interest whistleblowers in the name of national security? (Lidberg & Muller, 2019)

As many continue to ask questions such as these, the campaign in some form is likely to continue until the Australian Parliament takes action to address some of the most restrictive aspects of the laws that damage media freedom (Wilding & Dwyer, 2019).

In February 2020, ABC's appeal to the Federal court's decision that the search warrant was not legitimately issued was dismissed. Justice Wendy Abraham ruled that the protection of journalistic sources was not absolute, noting that "an informant cannot be promised or guaranteed anonymity (unless it covered an intention to potentially breach a court order)" (Wootton, 2020). The judge rejected ABC's argument that the AFP's warrant was a threat to the ability of journalists to provide protection for their sources and a potential breach of the implied constitutional right to free political communication. The ABC, for its part, argued, unsuccessfully, that the breadth of the warrant was "legally unreasonable" by allowing the seizure by the AFP of a broad array of material related to subjects such as the Australian Army, the Department of Defence, or even ABC (Wootton, 2020). On hearing the judgement, ABC's Director of News was quoted as saying that the decision "should send a chill down all our citizens' spines". He added:

Fundamentally the court ruled that the AFP have the right to enter a news-room and fossick around in confidential files, and to take information about the way it undertakes its journalism with its sources [...] this is not the way a free and fair democracy works. (Wootton, 2020)

Although there is a further avenue of appeal to Australia's High Court, ABC has announced that it would not pursue it, which many were no doubt disappointed to hear.

In April 2020, the journalist Annika Smethurst and her employer News Corp, who was subjected to the AFP raids in June 2019, won a High Court case. The case challenged the legality of the raid which was attempting to locate the source of leaked classified materials. However, in an ambiguous result, while the court quashed the raid warrant, it did not order the police to destroy the material seized, thus exposing the journalist to a future prosecution (Karp, 2020).

### *Recent developments in industry regulation*

Since the 2011 MDM, some characteristics of Australian media remain largely unaltered. For example, the regulatory body ACMA (Australian Communications and Media Authority) deals with electronic media, and "its main briefs

are [to continue] to ensure that quality communication services are available, and that license conditions, codes and standards are complied with” (Josephi, 2011: 52). Self-regulation through the Australian Press Council and Australian Journalists Association still handles media complaints, with limited capacity to react to complaints.

However, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), following the release of their ground-breaking *Digital Platforms Inquiry* report in July 2019, now figure far more prominently in the Australian media regulatory landscape.

The ACCC’s overarching finding from their *Digital Platforms Inquiry* was that “the dominance [and market power] of the leading digital platforms and their impact across Australia’s economy, media and society must be addressed with significant, holistic reform” (Sandberg, 2019: para. 1; see also ACCC, 2019a, 2019b). Other key recommendations, as summarised by Varghese (2019), included,

- requiring designated digital platforms to recognise the need for value sharing and monetisation of content and to each provide the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) and the ACCC with codes to address the imbalance in the bargaining relationship between these platforms and news media businesses and
- addressing the regulatory imbalance that exists between news media businesses and digital platforms, by harmonising the media regulatory framework.

More specifically, in terms of news media, the ACCC recommended,

- introducing measures to encourage philanthropic funding of public interest journalism in Australia;
- ACMA monitor the digital platforms’ efforts to identify reliable and trustworthy news;
- requiring the digital platforms to draft and implement an industry code for handling complaints about deliberately misleading and harmful news stories;
- and requiring the digital platforms to comply with a mandatory code to “share revenue” to fairly compensate news media business for their content.

The ACCC continues to investigate how the dynamic commercial ad tech aspects of platforms can be made more transparent to all stakeholders. They have undertaken an investigation into a potential revenue-sharing model between digital platforms and tradition news media business, as a basis for a mandatory bargaining code (ACCC, 2020).

~ AUSTRALIA ~  
 MEDIA CONCENTRATION AND DETERIORATING CONDITIONS FOR  
 INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

**Table 1** ACCC mandatory bargaining code proposal (concepts paper)

Focus	Affected services	Approaches
<p>The code is intended to cover content that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• produced by a professional journalist or published by a professional news media business;</li> <li>• mediated by a standard setting organisation, code of conduct, or established internal set of journalistic standards;</li> <li>• and conforming to a to-be-decided definition of relevant news content.</li> </ul>	<p>Initially, only two digital platform service providers will be targeted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the broad range of digital media services provided by Alphabet Inc, including Google News, Android TV, and Google’s ad tech intermediary services;</li> <li>• and the range of media and platforms provided by Facebook, including Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook News.</li> </ul> <p>The code will be extended to other digital platform service providers if they are found to be leveraging an imbalance of power.</p>	<p>The proposal considers a range of approaches the code could employ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bargaining dispute resolution;</li> <li>• a collection of principles and methodologies to guide negotiations;</li> <li>• third party guidelines;</li> <li>• time-limited negotiations;</li> <li>• information disclosure requirements;</li> <li>• mediation;</li> <li>• third party arbitration;</li> <li>• collective bargaining for media organisations or collective boycotts;</li> <li>• collective licensing or fee setting;</li> <li>• establishing factors to determine the value of media content and the services provided by digital platforms;</li> <li>• data sharing;</li> <li>• and algorithmic selection or prioritisation.</li> </ul>

Source: ACCC, 2020

After several last-minute changes to appease a hostile Google and Facebook (the latter platform having taken the unprecedented step of making news and other informational sites unavailable to Australian users for one week), laws establishing the code were passed by the Parliament in March 2021 (Federal Register of Legislation, 2021). Many commentators considered the monetary compensation to news publishers as a temporary fix that only further entrenched the existing concentrated media power in the country.

## *Covid-19*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a succession of business closures in 2020 as a result of falling advertising and revenue. This impacted quite heavily on media businesses in Australia and accelerated structural decline in the newspaper sector.

The advocacy group Public Interest Journalism Initiative has documented 200 news “contractions” in the sector (meaning title, masthead, or newsroom closures, the end of a print edition, a move to digital-only, or a merger) since January 2019 (Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2020).

In May 2020, News Corp announced it would cease printing 112 community and regional newspapers, transitioning 76 titles to digital-only and closing 36 of their titles completely (Mason, 2020a). A number of commentators noted that Covid-19 had accelerated a plan initiated by News Corp in 2018 to transition its print publishing operations to digital-only. The company announced it would retain 375 jobs in its regional and community sector – a sector that was previously employing some 1,200–1,300 jobs.

In the context of these job loses, lobbying has intensified by regional media businesses to remove the few remaining anti-concentration ownership limits, including the one television licence and two radio licences, to market rules. Further deregulation of the “voices test” is being called for. This requires a minimum of four separate voices (or distinct media groups) in any regional market. New media such as online news sites, streaming services, or social media are not currently included in these limits (Mason, 2020a).

Recognising these extraordinary times for the sector, the government introduced a series of measures to assist the media sector. Firstly, commercial television and radio broadcasters received a 100 per cent rebate on their Commercial Broadcasting Tax for 12 months (2020–2021). This was expected to provide the commercial broadcasting sector with AUD 41 million in tax relief for the use of the broadcasting spectrum. The rebate was specifically intended to offset the sharp downturn in advertising revenue, which significantly impacted the operating revenues of commercial broadcasters.

Secondly, an existing fund – the Public Interest News Gathering Program (PING) of AUD 50 million received AUD 13.4 million of new money, as well as repurposed unallocated funds from the government’s Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package. This was intended to further support public interest journalism delivered by commercial television, newspaper, and radio businesses in regional Australia, which have been particularly hard hit by the downturn in advertising. In addition to the PING Fund, the government brought forward the release of AUD 5 million from its Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund. The Innovation Fund is independently administered by the Australian Communications and Media Authority.



Thirdly, in recognition of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on production of Australian screen content, the government suspended Australian programming obligations for the remainder of 2020. These programming requirements relate specifically to Australian drama, Australian documentary, and Children’s and Preschool programme quota obligations on commercial television broadcasting licensees until the end of 2020. The government also announced the suspension of the licence condition requiring minimum levels of expenditure by subscription television broadcasting licensees on new eligible drama programmes until the end of 2020.

### *Leading news media sample*

Data provided in this chapter is based on publicly available websites such as the Australian government’s, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission’s, and the Australian Communications and Media Authority’s sites. These figures are supplemented by selected interviews with editorial managers and senior journalists from major Australian news organisations.

## Indicators

### *Dimension: Freedom / Information (F)*

(F1) Geographic distribution of news media availability 2 POINTS

Due to Australia’s geography and population distribution, regional areas are less well-served than the metropolitan centres, where all media are available. Regional newspapers have significantly contracted, and this accelerated with Covid-19.

IN 2011  
2 POINTS

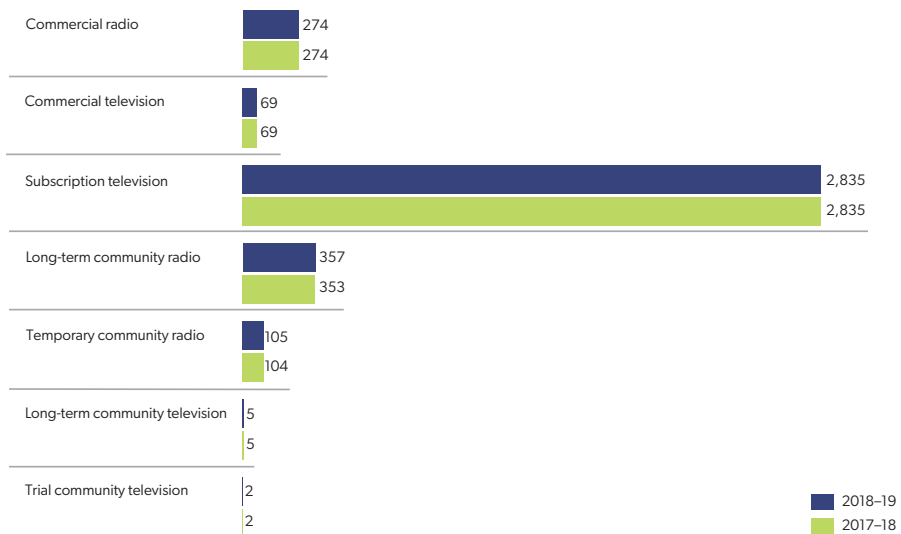
Geography and demographics are important factors affecting Australia’s media. As the world’s sixth-largest country, Australia compares in size to the contiguous United States. This large landmass only has a population of 25.4 million people (ABS, 2019), which is concentrated in its state and territory capitals, with approximately 90 per cent of Australians living in urban centres.

In a country the size of Australia – 21.5 times the size of Germany and 186 times the size of Switzerland – and with a population density of close to three persons per square kilometre, it is no surprise that there are regional divides. Actually, concerning geographical challenges for news media, the country is largely unchanged in comparison with its depiction in the 2011 MDM edition. Large parts of Australia are unpopulated or have so few people living in them that infrastructure – in particular broadband and mobile telephony coverage –

has always been a problem for regional areas and has been hotly fought over politically (Joseph, 2011). Broadband provision is problematic in regional and remote areas.

Access to radio is put at 99 per cent, and the availability map for 2007 shows that most of Australia is serviced by one to five stations, and up to twelve in the metropolitan centres (ACMA, 2009). As seen in Figure 1, there are 274 commercial radio broadcasting licences in Australia, including 150 FM licences and 106 AM licences, with the largest concentrations of commercial radio licences in the major capital cities. Most regional centres are served by two licensees, typically with one AM and one FM service. There are 69 commercial television broadcasting licences (ACMA, 2020).

**Figure 1** Number of broadcasting licences in Australia



Source: Graph from ACMA, 2020: 29

Through the public broadcaster, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 44 regional local radio services are available on AM or FM radio, with 43 available via streaming throughout Australia, and four national broadcast networks: the national talk network, Radio National; the national news network, News Radio; the national youth network, Triple J; and the national classic music network, ABC Classic. Other digital services include Double J, ABC Classic 2, ABC Jazz, ABC Country, ABC Grandstand, Triple J Unearthed, and ABC Kids Listen (ABC, 2019). Via shortwave, satellite, and online, Radio Australia broadcasts in the Asia-Pacific region.

The second public broadcaster, Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), whose brief it is to broadcast to Australia's various migrant ethnic groups (Ang, 2008), broadcasts in 68 languages to all capital cities and key regional centres on a mix of FM and AM frequencies (see also Josephi, 2011). SBS radio provides Australian and international news, homeland news, and a mixture of current affairs, interviews, community information, sport, and music (ACMA, 2008).

In terms of television, the public broadcasters ABC and SBS – as well as three major commercial networks Seven, Nine, and Ten – are the main providers of free-to-air television. All these broadcasters offer on-demand versions of their brands.

The country is divided into 28 distinct commercial television licence areas. According to the broadcast planning, Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney should have three commercial television licence operators, and the Seven, Nine, and Ten networks operate in each of these cities. There are also three licensees operating in Canberra and Hobart, and two in Darwin. In regional areas, the majority of broadcasting is provided variously by the NBN, Prime, Seven Queensland, Southern Cross Broadcasting, and WIN networks (ACMA, 2008).

As noted above, there have been closures of regional news bureaus, and the availability of local news in the regions of Australia “has sharply declined over the last five years and is likely to decline further”, according to a recent report on regional news (CMT, 2019). More recently, the Centre for Media Transition has reported: “Between 2008 and 2018, 106 local and regional newspaper titles closed across Australia. These closures have left 21 local government areas without coverage from a single local newspaper (either print or online), including 16 LGAs in regional Australia” (CMT, 2020). This has given rise to dozens of communities becoming news deserts.

(F2) Patterns of news media use (consumption of news) 2 POINTS

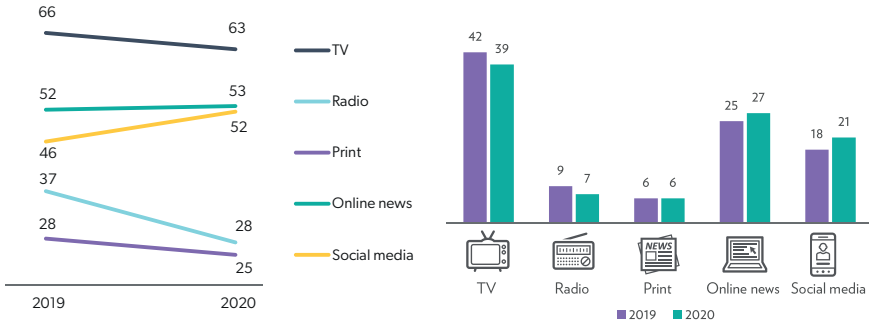
The Australian citizen is well supplied with news from different sources. However, the print media sector, already highly concentrated, is also in structural decline.

IN 2011  
3 POINTS

News information is amply available in Australia from a wide variety of sources. As Figure 2 shows, instead of traditional news sources, consumers are turning to online and social media for news (Fisher et al., 2020). TV is the most-used general source of news by Australians (63%), but its popularity has declined. News consumption through traditional news media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, and radio) has fallen. Print is the least-mentioned main source of news

(6%). On the other hand, using social media for news has increased from 46 per cent in 2019 to 52 per cent in 2020. Online news has remained stable at 53 per cent.

**Figure 2** Australian survey of media use (per cent)



[Q3] Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? Please select all that apply.

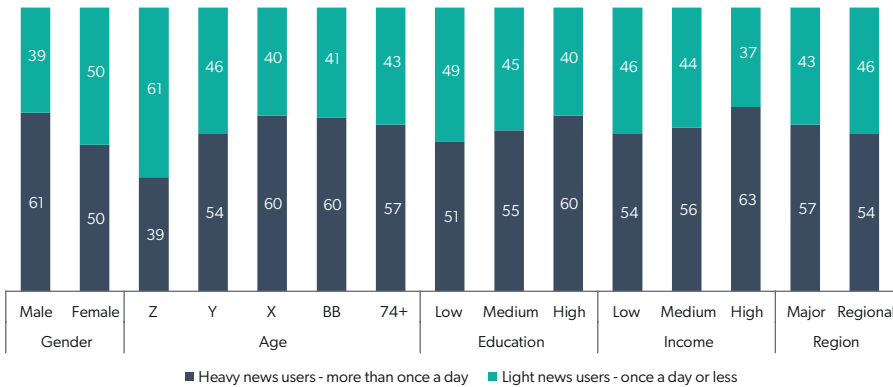
[Q4] You say you've used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is your MAIN source of news?

\*Social media: Blogs (0.2%) were included in 2019

Source: Graphs from Fisher et al., 2020: 50

The *Digital News Report: Australia 2020* indicates that men continue to be heavier consumers of news than women (for heavy users, 61% compared with 50%). Gen Z are the lightest news consumers (39%) (Fisher et al., 2020) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3** Demographics of media use (per cent)



Source: Graph from Fisher et al., 2020: 48

(F3) Diversity of news sources

1 POINT

The Australian newspaper industry (print and online) is highly concentrated, impacting the availability of diverse news voices.

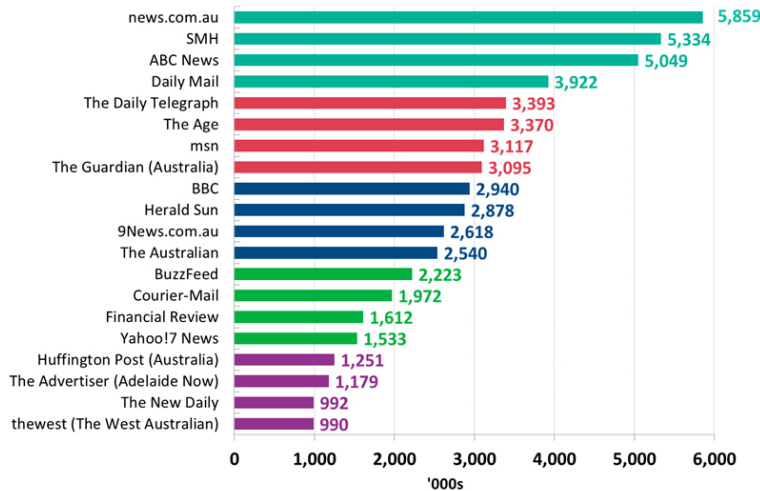
IN 2011  
 2 POINTS

For Australians, as part of the English-speaking community, the Internet potentially offers a wide array of news sources, but this has not abated continuous declines in regional and local reporting.

As a result of deregulation, Australia’s media is dominated by two large commercial media corporations (Nine Entertainment Co Ltd and News Corp) and there are no longer any larger scale independent media voices. It might be asked – as the newspaper sector is in historic structural decline with fewer people reading newspapers and especially younger cohorts being less interested in these legacy mastheads – why does that matter?

There are at least three reasons to be concerned about this dominance regarding diversity in news sources (Media Pluralism Project, 2019). First, News Corp Australia and Nine Entertainment dominate not only legacy media, but also online news media, as they own many of the most visited online sites (see Figure 4). The exceptions (such as *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*) only reinforce the point, as they are often established legacy media from other countries.

Figure 4 Most visited news websites among Australians



Comments: Visitation in an average four weeks over twelve months, April 2017–March 2018. n = 50,014 Australians aged 14+.

Source: Graph from Roy Morgan, 2018b

Second, the removal of cross-media laws, which prevented co-ownership of television, radio, and newspapers, will likely intensify this dominance. Contrary to earlier expectations of more diversity online, the convergence of digital media has resulted in news media being reused across platforms. The search engines and aggregators online and on mobile phones only exacerbate this dominance in their algorithms, which give preference to established media (Athey et al., 2017).

And third, the agenda for the rest of the media tends to be set by these major brands, as they control the bulk of the journalistic resources.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is still an important part of the Australian media ecosystem. However, its ability to undertake the best quality investigative journalism is severely threatened because funding has been slashed year after year. In June 2020, a new round of staff cuts hit all areas, but particularly news and production. It was reported that the broadcaster needed to meet a shortfall of AUD 84 million, after having its funding reduced in real terms for several years (BBC, 2020).

If it is in a position where it is less likely to be critical of the government for fear of further budget cuts, the effect is that it is less likely to play a watchdog role, holding politicians to account for their actions. These cuts come in spite of ABC's status as the most trusted news source for Australians (Roy Morgan, 2018a) and after decades of sustained pressure from increasingly dominating news organisations like News Corp and the now further expanded Nine Entertainment Company.

Industry change is having a significant impact on magazines in Australia, who in recent years have fallen on tough times with the migration of audiences to the Internet. There have been large-scale job losses after the closure of titles in the sector, particularly as a result of a recent buyout of the Seven West Media-owned Pacific Magazines by its closest rival Bauer, which is the dominant player in the sector in Australia. The sale of Pacific Magazines for AUD 40 million to German company Bauer Media was accompanied by the announcement that Bauer had suspended a number of print editions of magazines, including *Harper's Bazaar*, *Elle*, *OK!*, and *NW*, as well as making 70 staff redundant and standing down as many more (Mason, 2020b).

Social media platforms could help provide diversity of news sources, but their actual performance does not seem promising. They rather distribute and amplify existing news stories amongst like-minded networked groups (Media Pluralism Project, 2019). Furthermore, these platforms are often regarded as responsible for amplifying the worst kinds of speech (Sunstein, 2018), while they also provide a means for algorithmic news manipulation, as witnessed in the Cambridge Analytica scandal and other incidents by extremist groups. So, while audiences are increasingly discovering their news on social media platforms, the contribution of those sources to news diversity is a more nuanced story (Andi et al., 2020).

(F4) Internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy 1 POINT  
IN 2011  
1 POINT  
There are no written rules for newsroom democracy in the Australian media.

Australia did not see much change regarding newsroom democracy in the last ten years. As in the 2011 MDM survey, interviewees did not refer to any written newsroom rules regarding the rights of journalists, nor are there newsroom councils in the selected media outlets.

However, in the various media companies, the Australian journalists union does have “house committees” of journalists meeting regularly to discuss industrial matters and professional and ethical issues. Most interviewees pointed to the news conferences – usually held twice daily in the print media and once daily in the broadcast media – as a forum for discussion and consultation. While all agreed that Australian newsrooms follow a hierarchical structure in which the editor is the boss, several mentioned that some editors work in more collegiate ways than others, depending on the journalist’s seniority and how much direction they need (Josephi, 2011).

(F5) Company rules against *internal* influence on newsroom/editorial staff 1 POINT  
IN 2011  
1 POINT

Media proprietors have long been dominant figures, also in newsroom decisions.

This is a complex question. Much depends on the ownership structure of the media company, and several have statements on the independence of the editorial board. All the same, there was mention of a culture of upward referral, with journalistic training and investigation being done with permission from management: “Intervention is subtle – but it exists. Sometimes it is self-imposed”. Historically, Australia has been known for its hands-on media owners, notably Rupert Murdoch and the late Kerry Packer (see Josephi, 2011). While Murdoch publicly maintains that he does not interfere with the decisions of his editors (Chessell, 2010), there is a great deal of evidence that indicates intervention by the Murdoch family (Guthrie, 2010; Milovanovic, 2010). The allocation of only one point is to emphasise that, while some media companies have statements of editorial independence, others show evidence of owners exerting influence on their media companies.

(F6) Company rules against *external* influence on newsroom/editorial staff 3 POINTS

IN 2011  
3 POINTS

The strong position of Australian media proprietors protects the newsroom from external influence.

While concerns persist about internal influence on the newsroom, the strong position of media proprietors conversely protects their media companies from external influence. Throughout Australia's history, rather than any influence of politics on the media, it is the influence of media owners and editors on politics which has been evidenced (Griffen-Foley, 2003; Josephi, 2011). "As the editor I make the final decision on editorial matters [...]. We have strict rules around editorial independence", said an editor in a university-sponsored news organisation.

However, advertisers also have shown a clear ability to exert influence over media outlets, including when an advertiser (brand) wishes to dissociate itself from a particular show or media celebrity (and controversial comments or opinions). According to a columnist, "Advertisers attempt to intervene from time to time. Occasionally there are boycotts". This has generally been viewed as a positive sanction against, for example, the harmful speech of radio shock jocks (Hayes, 2019).

(F7) Procedures of news selection and news processing 1 POINT

IN 2011  
1 POINT

Although no formal rules on how to select and process news exist, informal rules are followed in the news selection and processing.

With the rise of online news platforms, there has been an observable trend to content sharing within major branded news networks.

Interviewees mentioned the importance of the daily news conferences. However, within the overall zeitgeist of newsroom closures and funding restrictions, there are considerable logistical challenges in putting together news bulletins for a country of the size of Australia, which covers several time-zones.

(F8) Rules and practices on internal gender equality 1 POINT

After decades of reforms and changed policies, women remain less paid, less promoted, and harassed.

While policies exist to promote gender equality in hiring and promotion, this has not resulted in substantial advancement across the board. As in other countries



(Zipkin, 2017), some online news outlets have managed more progress in this regard: “Our CEO is female as is the Chair of our Board and our director of Finance. And most of the senior editorial posts, apart from mine, are occupied by women”, explained a digital native editor. However, traditional media organisations have not seen such visible shifts in this regard. A recent report of senior roles in Australian television news and current affairs programmes has found “Under-representation in both gender and cultural diversity means that Australian television networks are not functioning at their optimal capacity” (Arvanitakis et al., 2020).

Looking over the Australian mediascape reveals more female faces, but crucial concerns in relation to pay, promotion, discrimination, and harassment remain. A survey by the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) found a near-unanimous acknowledgment of gender-based pay discrepancy (MEAA, 2019), and women are substantially missing from higher levels of media management (MEAA, 2019; North, 2013). Further, nearly half of female respondents had experienced harassment or bullying in the office (48%) or online (41%). While there are government initiatives to address some of these concerns (NSW, 2018), significant work will be needed to improve the position of women in media.

## (F9) Gender equality in media content

1 POINT

Women in sports has seen greater coverage than ever, but there is room to expand how and how much the media is covering women and their concerns.

According to the interviews, there is an explicit attempt to be inclusive of voices, but the challenges are complex. “It is company policy that we approach all people or institutions on stories that involve them. We are encouraged to quote widely if we can. Not all parties are willing to go on the record”, explained a senior columnist.

Representations of women have improved in recent times, though not across the board. In particular, women’s sports has expanded coverage and occupies a more prominent position than in the past (Toffoletti & Palmer, 2019), though it still receives far less attention than men’s sports. Conversely, women in positions of power continue to be viewed with an alternative lens, with a pervasive focus on their fashion choices in lieu of their decisions and work (Jansens, 2019), and women from minority communities often go unseen or misrepresented (Ryan, 2016). With women showing an increasing willingness to pay for their news (Fisher et al., 2020), increasing their representation in the news could prove valuable for struggling media organisations.

(F10) Misinformation and digital platforms  
(alias social media)

1 POINT

Misinformation is spreading aggressively on social media, and its impacts are reverberating in current crises.

Australian media professionals see a specific and crucial role for journalists in combating misinformation: “Our whole business is built on fighting misinformation”, described an online editor. “There is training on how to detect misinformation. But logic and experience provide more effective screens. Internal fact checkers are too expensive for most media organisations. This must be done by the journalist”, illustrated a senior columnist.

Misinformation has long been associated with the digital platforms (Clark, 2009), but its prevalence and effect has been growing (Flintham et al., 2018). While misinformation online had the spotlight during the 2016 US election campaign (Guess et.al, 2018), the recent pandemic has revealed the extent to which this misinformation presents a recognisable danger to the public (Nyilasy, 2020). Calls are growing for a strategy and campaign to combat it, but progress has been elusive (Wenzel, 2019).

(F11) Protection of journalists against (online) harassment 1 POINT

Online harassment has become a mainstay of being a journalist online. Despite its implications for journalists, little has been done to stem the tide.

While women appear to be targeted disproportionately for harassment online (MEAA, 2019), journalists broadly report aggression appearing in their social media, news commenting, and even e-mail (Koskie, 2018; Wolfgang, 2018). While some journalists and editors have expressed a desire to engage with the audience, the hostility presents a difficult obstacle (Anderson et al., 2014). Nevertheless, news organisations’ initiatives to protect journalists – and their own reputations – have seen inconsistent results (Domingo, 2014; Løvlie et al., 2017). Meanwhile, journalists and news organisations are struggling to balance protections for their journalists, as well as their readers and sources, from hostility, while upholding their historic support for freedom of speech (Koskie, 2018).

## *Dimension: Equality / Interest mediation (E)*

(E1) Media ownership concentration national level 1 POINT

Australia has a high media ownership concentration on a national level for offline media, which tends to be repeated online.

IN 2011  
1 POINT

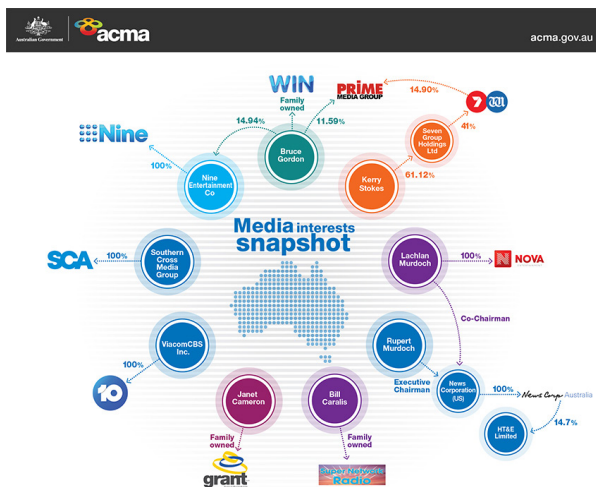
The removal of the cross-media rules in 2017 facilitated the take-over of Fairfax Media by Nine Entertainment in a AUD 4 billion deal, which subsumed the separate identities of the famous independent news mastheads, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, and *The Australian Financial Review*:

On 7 December 2018, the merger of Nine and Fairfax Media Limited was completed. At September 2019, Nine commenced purchasing the remainder of the shares (that it did not acquire via the Fairfax merger) to fully own Macquarie Media and increase its cross-media ownership by adding radio. (ACMA, 2020: 36)

Overall, the company has two radio licences and a newspaper in Melbourne, and two radio licences and a newspaper in Sydney, the two most populated cities of the country.

Concentration will very likely increase, as a tie-up between the Seven TV network and News Corp, for example, can already be anticipated. Because of the economics of digital media, the concentration in legacy media is duplicated offline. Legacy brands such as News Corp Australia and now Nine Entertainment run the most-popular online news sites (Media Pluralism Project, 2019).

**Figure 5** Media interests snapshot, Australian Communications and Media Authority



Source: ACMA, 2021

Current at 9 December 2020

As Figure 5 shows in an infographic from the Australian Communications and Media Authority, a handful of corporations and interconnected family interests control much of Australia’s media.

(E2) Media ownership concentration regional (local) level 1 POINT

Australia’s demographic distribution and resulting economy of scale have led to a high media ownership concentration on a regional level. IN 2011  
1 POINT

It was announced in 2019 (not long after the merger between Fairfax Media and Nine Entertainment Co was completed) that Nine Entertainment Co sold their regional media arm, Australian Community Media (ACM), to a private equity group lead by Anthony Catalano, the former head of the Fairfax Media lifestyle division, which included the Domain real estate brand. ACM includes around 170 titles such as *The Newcastle Herald*, *The Illawarra Mercury*, *The Canberra Times*, and *The (Launceston) Examiner*.

On the face of this deal, with a new owner, some may have expected some welcome diversification in the newspaper sector. However, ACM is part of the highly commercialised news media sector in Australia. In April 2020, the group announced that it was “suspending the printing of newspapers at four of its printing sites, halting the production of most of its non-daily newspapers. ACM has about 160 titles” (Muller, 2020).

In an attempt to assist in their survival, this former regional arm of Fairfax Media has been cut right back in terms of journalistic resources in the last few years: “It’s reasonable to assume even more of this kind of cost-cutting at a time when local journalism is in a very precarious situation from the challenges of a reconfigured global media, including from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter” (Media Pluralism Project, 2019). Since the beginning of the digital disruption, many companies have experimented with alternative revenue models, such as subscription. However, as with all media groups, Covid-19 has more suddenly impacted this group, and it is likely more titles will be paused, closed, or moved to digital only.

Media pluralism was tested when Seven West Media, a major national broadcaster, merged with regional broadcaster, Prime, in 2019. At the time, there were concerns expressed about media concentration and a reduction of media voices in Western Australia. Both the media regulator, the ACMA, and the competition regulator examined the transaction under broadcasting legislation, but cleared it to proceed in late 2019 (ACMA, 2019).

(E3) Diversity of news formats

2 POINTS

News and information formats are under pressure.

IN 2011  
2 POINTS

When the Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (Broadcasting Reform) Act 2017 (Broadcasting Reform Act) commenced in October 2017, it “reformed the existing regulatory framework for the provision of ‘material of local significance’ (that is, local content) by commercial television broadcasting licensees in regional areas” (ACMA, 2020: 33):

The Broadcasting Reform Act introduced:

- additional local content obligations for commercial television broadcasting licences already covered by local content rules in the more populous regional licence areas in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and Tasmania (collectively referred to as “aggregated” licence areas)
- new local content obligations for commercial television broadcasting licences in the remaining “non-aggregated” regional licence areas in South Australia, Western Australia, and western parts of New South Wales and Queensland.

(ACMA, 2020: 33)

These requirements were under strain prior to Covid-19, and now their long-term sustainability is in doubt.

Similar obligations apply to regional commercial radio licensees who are also required to broadcast prescribed amounts of material of local significance (local content) each year. In their annual Communications Report, the ACMA report that for the period 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019, it did not receive any complaints about compliance with local content obligations (ACMA, 2020).

(E4) Minority/Alternative media

3 POINTS

Australia offers an abundance of broadcast and print media in languages other than English.

IN 2011  
3 POINTS

Regarding the presence of minority and alternative media, there is no major change in the last decade, and the Australian media system performs fairly well, as noted by Josephi (2011) in the last MDM survey. Australia’s second public broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), is unique in that its radio and television services are broadcast in more languages than on any other network in the world. The television programmes on its first channel in non-English languages – comprising over half their schedule – have SBS-produced English-

language subtitles. SBS's charter is "to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society" (SBS, 2010).

SBS television broadcasts in 23 languages, and SBS radio broadcasts in 68 languages – both include news programmes. One of SBS's digital channels is almost entirely devoted to news programmes taken from stations around the world.

Australia's multiculturalism is equally reflected in the print sector. In New South Wales, papers are available in 30 different languages, including seven in Arabic, five in Chinese, four in Korean and Turkish, and three Afghan and Iranian papers. The other states do not offer quite the same spread. Victoria offers papers in 17 different languages, with six in Chinese, and four each in Greek and Indian. Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia only have four, three, and two papers, respectively, in non-English languages. The frequency of publication varies from bi-weekly to weekly – (the most common form) to fortnightly, and in some cases, monthly (Joseph, 2011).

### (E5) Affordable public and private news media

3 POINTS

Media are readily affordable in Australia but there is still a reluctance by some demographics to pay for news.

IN 2011  
3 POINTS

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) mean equivalised disposable household income (EDHI) in 2017–2018 was AUD 1,062 per week. After adjusting to 2017–2018 dollars, this has not changed significantly from 2015–2016 (AUD 1,046 per week).

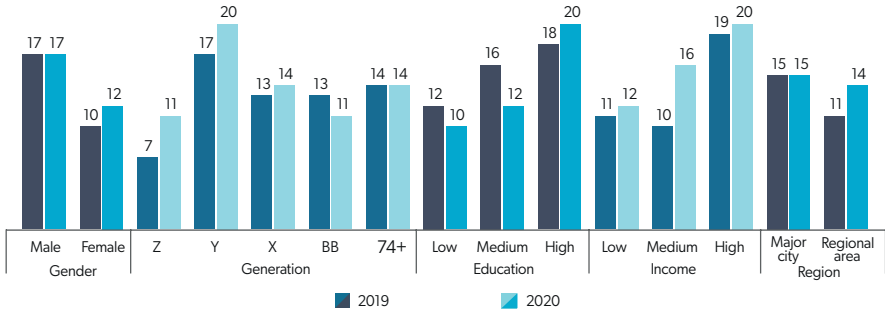
As a business model, the shift from advertising to subscription-based provision is a clear trend, and has arguably been accelerated by Covid-19.

The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report: Australia 2020* notes the following headline trends in the Australian market for subscription news (Fisher et al., 2020):

- the number of ongoing news subscribers has doubled since 2016;
- consumers most interested in politics are most likely to pay for online news (28%);
- those valuing independence in journalism are more willing to pay (18%);
- those who prefer news that shares their viewpoint are more likely to pay for news (25%), compared with those who prefer impartial news (14%);
- and news consumers are not so concerned about paywalls.

However, overall, Australians remain relatively unwilling to pay for online news (14%), despite the trend to the steady emergence of subscription as the way to pay, if they choose to. The *Digital News Report: Australia 2020* found that willingness to pay for news appears to be closely related to interest in politics as well as interest in and access to news (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6** Paying for news by demographics (per cent)



[Q7a] Have you paid for ONLINE news content, or accessed a paid for ONLINE news service in the last year? (This could be a digital subscription, combined digital/print subscription, a donation, or one off payment for an article or app or e-edition)

Source: Graph from Fisher et al., 2020: 86

## (E6) Content monitoring instruments

2 POINTS

IN 2011

2 POINTS

Australia has a number of monitoring instruments, but largely of a self-regulatory or co-regulatory nature.

In the monitoring landscape of Australia, the same institutions continue to play a central role after one decade. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has the task of regulating the content of broadcasting, radio communications, online gambling, and telecommunications. It monitors transgressions regarding compliance with licence conditions, codes, and standards.

In 2015, the Enhancing Online Safety Act established the eSafety Commissioner, who is supported by the ACMA and has powers relating to cyberbullying, image-based abuse, and illegal and harmful online content.

The Australian Press Council is the self-regulatory body of the print media. It was established in 1976 with two main aims: to help preserve the traditional freedom of the press within Australia and to ensure that the free press acts responsibly and ethically and provides accurate and balanced reporting (Australian Press Council, 2020). While it only deals with complaints received, it does play an active role in promoting freedom of speech and access to information, and in ensuring high journalistic and editorial standards. Its adjudications are

available on its website (see Josephi, 2011), and publishers involved in complaints must publish adjudications which involve their own journalists.

(E7) Code of ethics at the national level 2 POINTS

The journalists' code of ethics is well-known in the print industry but needs to be updated to better suit new online environments.

IN 2011  
2 POINTS

There is agreement at high and low levels as to the importance of the codes to the practices of journalism, but also agreement that further standards need to be applied: "90% of our editorial staff are MEAA members and we take the code very seriously, alongside our own internal rules and policies and procedures", explained an online editor. "It is an important code. But journalists must also apply their own ethical standards", added a senior columnist.

As explained by Josephi (2011) in the previous Australian MDM report, the country has a journalistic code of ethics which was first adopted in 1944 (Lloyd, 1985: 228) and has been revised since. It was drafted by the Australian Journalists' Union, and for many years, it was Australia's only journalistic code of ethics. Concise in nature and upheld by the union to which a high proportion of Australian journalists used to belong, it is well known to journalists and in newsrooms. Interviewees both in the previous edition and now confirm that the Australian journalists' code of ethics continue to have a deep professional penetration.

Over the past two decades, more and more media companies added their own in-house codes of conduct to the Australian Journalists' Union – now Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance – code, but in recent years, the trend is to defer to the Australian Press Council's Statement of General Principles, Standards and Advisory Notes for providing ethical guidance for journalists and editors in traditional and new media contexts, specifically in relation to the adjudication of complaints (Australian Press Council, 2020).

(E8) Level of self-regulation 2 POINTS

While the self-regulatory system is far from perfect, a fair attempt is made to implement it.

IN 2011  
2 POINTS

The main self-regulatory body concerned with the print media is the Australian Press Council. The regulatory body for the broadcast (and some aspects of online) media is the Australian Communications and Media Authority, which is described as a system of co-regulation due to a collaborative system between



the industry which prepares codes of practice, which are then formally registered with the regulator. There is no national ombudsperson for the media.

The Australian Press Council has a mediated settlement process that can consist of publishing an apology, correction, clarification, or follow-up material. Several papers now have a correction or “mea culpa” column (see Josephi, 2011).

Some of the print media houses have their own internal codes of conduct or editorial ethics policy available on their websites.

## (E9) Participation

2 POINTS

Though there is an ongoing level of interaction between journalists and the public, there is no formal participation mechanism in the news process.

IN 2011  
2 POINTS

This participation occurs both onsite and on social media platforms – and many Australian news organisations allow onsite commenting, including the public broadcaster ABC.

In the traditional print media, the “Letters to the editor” had been the customary feedback tool. Most Australian newspapers still devote a page to “Letters to the editor”, which also contains columns of brief emails from readers, under the page heading of “Commentary”. Now, however, there are much more direct forms of feedback available to the public, creating new challenges for news organisations. While some news organisations have managed to turn their onsite commenting features into a profitable and attractive addition to their offerings, others have had to turn them off completely due to the challenges presented by hostility and poor-quality comments as well as the cost of moderation (Huang, 2016). Nevertheless, the feedback from comments and social media has had an impact on journalists and news organisations (Bruns, 2012; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019).

The degree of public participation is now as high as it has ever been. Some investigative stories are accompanied by an online forum where the public could send in comments and tips, and the response is overwhelming and often unmanageable. Many programmes now have a “Twitter backchannel” for the audience to send in their opinions or to ask questions. But it would be wrong to affirm that this greater interaction between journalists and the public leads to actual participation in the news process.

As it was already the case in 2011, the public broadcasters ABC and SBS have high-profile programmes, *Q&A* and *Insight*, which are built on audience participation. Audiences are not only in the studio, but can also e-mail questions and participate via Twitter, with a feed of tweets running at the bottom of the screen (see Josephi, 2011). However, these programmes are very formulaic and opinion is relatively closely controlled.

The ABC website offers a live blog with analysis and opinion, and a fact-check site, run in partnership with RMIT university, which monitors important claims including those suggested by the audiences (ABC, 2020).

The availability of a comments section at the end of online news sites varies considerably, as does the moderation style in terms of intervention.

(E10) Rules and practices on internal pluralism

1 POINT

There is evidence of internal diversity but little of internal pluralism.

IN 2011  
1 POINT

Australian print media have a degree of internal diversity through their opinion pages. These opinion pieces are either written by regular columnists who may or may not be staff on the paper, or by invited columnists such as politicians or other public figures or academic experts.

Some papers permit their journalists to work within a broader framework than others, just as some papers will have not only the journalist's by-line but also their photo (see Josephi, 2011). With Australia's news landscape dominated by two dominant commercial media players, News Corporation and Nine Entertainment, there are clearly limitations on genuine internal pluralism. In Australia, News Corporation dominates commercial news journalism in a way that has few, if any, parallels among democratic countries. In response to this situation, the Australian Senate has instigated an inquiry into media diversity (Australian Senate, 2020).

*Dimension: Control / Watchdog (C)*

(C1) Supervising the watchdog "control of the controllers"

2 POINTS

IN 2011  
3 POINTS

Australia has a number of independent observers of the news media.

Australia has several agencies with a brief to monitor and control the performance and role of the news media, including the ACMA, ACCC, and the Australian Press Council. These bodies adjudicate and produce reports of various kinds on a frequent basis under a variety of legal frameworks and self or co-regulatory codes of practice.

One continual source of "inside stories" on the media as well as politics, business, and environment is the web publication *crickey.com.au*. Most of its pages are available to subscribers only, with an annual subscription costing AUD 199.

Arguably, the best-known programme is *Media Watch* on ABC Television, which has been shown for around 30 years. It has a weekly 15–20-minute programme slot right after ABC’s major investigative television programme *Four Corners*, on Monday nights at 21:15 o’clock. *Media Watch* comments on inaccurate and sloppy journalism, bias, and unethical conduct such as plagiarism. The programme has had profile presenters, either famous journalists with years of experience or media lawyers. The programme has been responsible for consistently producing major stories on media corruption and malpractice. Often, these journalistic watchdogs seem more effective than the watchdogs themselves and are responsible for triggering more formal judicial investigations, including royal commissions.

Other more recent and smaller, independent publications undertake the watchdog role to varying degrees, including *The Monthly*, *The Saturday Paper*, *The New Daily*, and the local edition of *The Guardian*.

(C2) Independence of the news media from powerholders

2 POINTS  
IN 2011  
2 POINTS

Legal instruments to guarantee greater independence from powerholders are relatively new. However, defamation law continues to be used as another pathway by the rich and powerful to silence critics.

The funding of the public broadcaster ABC has been savagely cut in recent years, and its previous position of independence has thus been undermined. As mentioned above, in June 2020 there were another round of savage funding cuts.

It is a similar scenario for the Special Broadcast Service, although it is able to derive 20 per cent of its revenue from advertising. However, with both public broadcasters, the selection procedure for their boards is not independent from government (see Josephi, 2011). The process of selection of board members has also been shown to be one of stacking these boards with political allies by successive governments.

Many see defamation law as another means used by the rich and powerful to deter criticisms. The law is indeed designed to protect people’s reputations from unfair attack, but it can also be used to protect powerful people from unwanted scrutiny (Josephi, 2011). A new nationally harmonised defamation law, including with a bolstered public interest defence, has recently been introduced.

## (C3) Transparency of data on leading news media

1 POINT

Data on media are rarely a topic of debate.

IN 2011  
1 POINT

There is little transparency of data on the country's leading news media, and little has changed in the last decade. Therefore, the scenario is pretty similar to the one Josephi (2011) pictured in the previous MDM edition. While information is available on the Internet, for example on the media companies' websites, it takes a dedicated citizen to piece together the full picture of the media in Australia. Although bodies such as the ACMA authority publish annual reports, these hardly ever come onto the radar of the general public. The government and their regulators, universities, or the main media union may offer information on specialised aspects of the media, but this rarely amounts to a coherent or comprehensive picture of the Australian media. Commercial media are themselves highly positional and therefore not a reliable source of information. It must be assumed that the average Australian citizen has little or no knowledge of the political economy of the Australian (news) media.

## (C4) Journalism professionalism

2 POINTS

Most journalists receive professional training.

IN 2011  
2 POINTS

Australian media professionals suggest that training and development are made available on a piecemeal basis.

Since the 1990s, Australia has offered journalism degrees at all but two of its 39 tertiary institutions (Koivisto & Thomas, 2008: 95). The educational level of Australian journalists has changed significantly over this period. Whereas in 1992 only 35 per cent of journalists held a degree, the figure was 80 percent in 2010 (Josephi, 2011), and Hanusch (2016) found similar results six years later. Interestingly, the percentage of those who held an undergraduate degree in journalism had hardly changed, from 33 to 35 per cent, which shows the industry is happy to employ people with degrees other than journalism (see Josephi, 2011). However, many journalists hold a post-graduate degree in journalism. Internships are still being offered by the major media companies, but their numbers had already decreased in 2011 as a casualty of expenditure cuts, and there is no sign of recovery in the last decade. Investigative journalism is a subject or topic in some university journalism courses (Josephi & Richards, 2011).

(C5) Journalists' job security

1 POINT

It is difficult to provide job security for journalists in this time of change.

IN 2011  
1 POINT

Job security has arisen as an area of substantial concern even before the economic impacts of Covid-19 became apparent. The Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism (2018) raised this as an area of growing risk for the nation. According to a columnist at a major commercial news organisation:

Journalism today is woefully under resourced. There is too little time and not enough people to deliver news in a comprehensive way and journalists are stretched. Too many errors are made [...] In pursuit of cost savings many middle layer journalists have been replaced by younger and cheaper workers. A few bigger brand name journalists have been retained to create the veneer of the product. I believe this has taken place across most media companies.

While there are redundancy clauses and long periods of notice in the case of dismissal based on the time served, the MEAA acknowledges this is a difficult period of structural decline for the industry. Josephi (2011) had already pointed out an increasing use of casuals and freelancers at the time of the previous MDM edition, and this has barely changed since then. The union attempts to enforce that, if a journalist has been a casual for more than six months and has worked a regular pattern of shifts, they have the right to become a regular member of staff. Yet in a time of structural decline, media organisations are reluctant to take on permanent staff.

With the broader downturn in the media, there has been an acceleration of job insecurity, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The MEAA has advised its members to be careful to not sign unlawful contracts during the Covid-19 period. They advise: "Any waiver that asks an employee to indemnify their employer for any damages that may arise from Covid should not be signed" (MEAA, 2020).

(C6) Practice of access to information

1 POINT

The law provides access to public information, but practical problems persist.

IN 2011  
1 POINT

According to interviews, the freedom of information laws are important for Australian journalists and an area of focused training for new recruits. However, access to government and court documents is still inconsistent.

The Freedom of Information legislation in Australia was seen as such a hurdle to journalistic work that in 2007, nine major media companies, the two public broadcasters, and the MEAA formed the "Right to Know" coalition to

address concerns about free speech in Australia (Right to Know, 2010). This coalition set out to work with the Commonwealth and State governments to establish new policy and best practice to improve Australian’s relatively poor world ranking for freedom of speech which, in 2010, led to sweeping changes in the Freedom of Information legislation, making it easier for Australians to get information about the federal government (see Josephi, 2011). Reform of Freedom of Information legislation has led to changes, but the results are inconsistent, with marked advancement in some areas and persistent challenges in others (Lidberg, 2016).

Interviews suggested that, while the freedom of information laws are easy to engage with, attempts are often “not particularly successful”.

(C7) The watchdog and the news media’s mission statement 3 POINTS

In 2011  
3 POINTS

Australia’s media sees itself as a watchdog.

The watchdog role is widely seen as the media’s most important task, and one survey of Australian journalists found investigating government claims to be very important by 90 per cent of the journalists (Josephi & Richards, 2011).

Some media companies whose editorial policy is available on the Internet, such as the *West Australian*, commit themselves expressly to their role as fourth estate (West Australian, 2009). However, in practice, this role has been somewhat muted in recent years, especially in mainstream commercial media. While journalists perceive this role as being of elevated importance in the face of increasing misinformation (Schapals, 2018), recent raids on ABC and News Corporation illustrate the extent to which this role is also under attack (Sarre, 2020). Further, Australia’s increasingly consolidated and contracted news media is finding it more difficult to report on scandals (O’Shea, 2019).

(C8) Professional training 1 POINT

In 2011  
1 POINT

Some mid-career training is on offer.

Concerning professional training, Australia has seen no major change in the last decade and, as Josephi (2011) found in the previous report, is far from ideal. Some media companies offer training for mid-career journalists, for example, to equip print journalists for multitasking, such as how to add audio and video to their online reporting. Larger media organisations generally provide instruction in media law, narrative writing, hostile environment reporting, bushfire

training, and trauma training. But these courses are more poorly resourced than they have ever been.

The MEAA also provides continuous training, in particular directed towards facilitating the transition to online journalism, or on journalism ethics, which the union sees as the core to journalistic professionalism. Interviews suggest that younger staff are not as committed to, or do not receive the training for, investigative journalism – as was the case some years ago.

### (C9) Watchdog function and financial resources

2 POINTS

Commitment to investigative journalism is the Australian media's way to brand themselves.

IN 2011  
3 POINTS

Increasingly, the resources being invested into serious investigative journalism are under threat in Australia, and there are few locations in the media where the practice is undertaken.

Public service media remain committed to investigative journalism even with their resources being spread more thinly. As already noted by Josephi (2011) a decade ago, ABC always had a strong investigative brief, and has a dedicated investigative unit; however, it is now having serious limitations placed on its functioning due to funding cuts. ABC's *Four Corners* programme, a weekly 45-minute report on television, is Australia's best known investigative programme. Its investigations have caused royal commissions and state premiers to step down. But other segments on ABC television, such as its nationwide 7.30 programme, contain diminishing investigative elements, as do a number of ABC radio programmes.

SBS shows investigative programmes on international topics often bought from other providers, and the impact of funding restraints are evident. The commercial television stations, too, have current affairs programmes, such as Nine's *60 Minutes* (based on an American format) which contain investigative elements, though they are typically cast with an entertainment priority and by the programmes' emphasis on the human-interest angle.

## Conclusions

The conditions for investigative journalism in Australia have deteriorated in recent years. This can be seen in the example of AFP raids on journalists in an attempt to discover their sources on so-called matters of "national security". This situation means that it is becoming more difficult – and often dangerous – for journalists to do their work. These developments have happened against

the backdrop of the removal of anti-concentration cross-media rules, which has facilitated a further reduction in media pluralism, most notably with the merger of Australia's main independent news organisation, Fairfax Media, with Nine Entertainment Co. This organisation, valued at around AUD 4 billion, together with News Corp, now own the bulk of the Australian media, dominating traditional and online news outlets.

The market failure of advertising-supported news media business models, and the rise of social media platforms as key sources of news for many people, are testament to the significant changes underway. At the same time, the place of the public broadcasters ABC and SBS has become more precarious with ongoing cuts to their budgets, forcing them to lay off employees and cut programmes. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 has been responsible for accelerating structural decline in the production of news media for traditional and new media platforms, which may well have ongoing, and as yet unforeseeable, impacts.

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