

La Trobe University Submission - Professor Lawrie Zion and Professor Andrea Carson, Melbourne.

March 2023

We commend the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) on undertaking the task of developing a new framework for measuring media diversity in Australia. We thank ACMA for providing opportunities to respond to the framework through recent roundtables and the January 2023 Consultation paper.

As way of background, Professor Lawrie Zion and Professor Andrea Carson are La Trobe University academics in the department of Politics, Media and Communication and both have extensive past experience working as professional journalists.

Lawrie Zion is Associate Dean, Research and Industry Engagement of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Professor of Journalism. He also led the recently completed ARC-funded research project, New Beats (2014-2022), which investigated the aftermath of job loss for journalists whose roles were made redundant. Andrea Carson is a professor of Political Communication and political scientist. She examines the media's role in democracies, journalism and political communication with special interests in investigative journalism (high quality news) and mis and disinformation (low quality information and fake news). She is also a member of Public Interest Journalism Initiative's (PIJI) research advisory group – which has separately made a submission to respond to this consultation paper.

We support ACMA's commitment to build a robust evidence-base framework to monitor levels of diversity across Australia's news media landscape, which may be used to provide evidence for policy interventions and inform longer-term considerations on media reform. ACMA's paper on media diversity and localism raises important questions about news infrastructure in the digital era including in Table 1 of the December 2020 framework document: **How many journalists contribute to the production of local news**. It is this specific question that we focus on in our submission.

In making this submission, we draw on our research experience about the news media industry with particular attention to research we have collectively undertaken with colleagues that examines questions of: what is a journalist¹, what does the future newsroom look like²; the decline of local

¹ Young, Sally., & Carson, Andrea. (2016). What is a Journalist? The view from employers as revealed by their job vacancy advertisements. *Journalism Studies*, 1-21.

² Carson, Andrea & Muller, Denis (2017), 'The Future Newsroom', Facebook URL: https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/2517726/20913_FNReport_Sept2017_Web-Final.pdf (pp 1-30).

journalism and role of hyperlocal journalism³; what is investigative journalism⁴; what is quality health reporting⁵; how to mitigate the effects of fake news,⁶ and atypical work in the digital media economy.⁷

Availability of Journalists - How many journalists contribute to the production of local news?

In Australia, methodological issues around determining what constitutes a journalism job have long been critical to evaluations of the size of the journalist workforce⁸. Attempts to measure the dimensions of this workforce have become even more challenging in the digital era, partly because of shifting employment patterns, but also because the question of ‘what is journalism’ has become more complex. Labour market statistics, traditionally intended to serve as barometers of the health of the profession⁹ are an increasingly unreliable indicator of how journalism is practiced and by whom. This includes occupational data relating to journalism collected as part of the five-yearly census¹⁰. As we demonstrate in our research, this problem is also evident in measurement exercises in Canada, the US, and the UK¹¹.

In investigating the re-employment and post-redundancy work patterns of journalists who have been made redundant in Australia in the 2010s, the New Beats project found that the boundaries between journalism and other forms of work that draw on journalism skill sets had become increasingly blurred, raising new questions about the complexities of creating a threshold definition of who is a journalist.¹²

Atypical and non-newsroom-centric work arrangements clearly need to be considered when analysing the capacities of journalists and journalism to inform citizens and contribute to public debate. At the same time, the tendency in the digital economy to move between journalism and other forms of work, both sequentially and simultaneously, make it difficult to assess how and to what extent those who identify in some way as practicing journalism are actually servicing information needs.

While no single method appears to provide all the useful answers, a conclusion from the New Beats project surveys is that capturing and analysing how the increasing precarisation and fragmentation of professional journalism plays out at a granular level could inform the kinds of questions posed in occupational surveys relating to information provision. This approach complements other attempts to

³ Simons, Margaret, **Carson, Andrea**, Muller, Denis & Jennifer, Martin (2020), ‘The emerging deficit: changing local journalism and its impact on communities in Australia’ in Gulyas, D & Baines, D (eds.), *The Routledge companion to local media and journalism*, Routledge, pp. 379-388.

⁴ Carson, Andrea. 2019. *Investigative Journalism, Democracy and the Digital Age*. 1st ed. Routledge.

⁵ Lawler, Nicholas, **Andrea Carson**, Tim Gravelle, and Andrew Brett. 2021. “A Media Biopsy: Examining the Quality of Cancer Reporting in Australia, 1997 and 2017.” *Health Communication* 36 (10): 1216–21.

⁶ **Carson, Andrea**, Gibbons, Andrew., Martin, Aaron. & Justin Phillips (2022). ‘Does Third-Party Fact-Checking Increase Trust in News Stories? An Australian Case Study Using the “Sports Rorts” Affair’, *Digital Journalism*, pp. 1–22.

⁷ **Zion, Lawrie.**, Marjoribanks, Timothy., & O’Donnell, Penny. (2022). Who is a journalist now? Recognising atypical journalism work in the digital media economy. *Media International Australia*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X221134207>

⁸ See, for instance, Hanusch, Folker, (2013), ‘Journalists in times of change: evidence from a new survey of Australia’s journalistic workforce. *Australian Journalism Review* 35(1): 29–42.

⁹ Pew Research Center (2019) State of the News Media Methodology. 27 July. Available at <https://www.journalism.org/2019/07/23/state-of-the-news-media-methodology/>

¹⁰ O’Regan T and Young C (2019) Journalism by Numbers: Trajectories of Growth and Decline of Journalists in the Australian Census 1961–2016. *Media International Australia* 172(1): 13–32.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X19862935>.

¹¹ **Zion, L.**, Marjoribanks, T., & O’Donnell, P. (2022). Who is a journalist now? Recognising atypical journalism work in the digital media economy. *Media International Australia*,
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X221134207>

¹² **Zion, L.**, Marjoribanks, T., & O’Donnell, P. (2022). Who is a journalist now? Recognising atypical journalism work in the digital media economy. *Media International Australia*,
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assess reporting capacities such as the Australian Newsroom Mapping Project (Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2021), which surveys news production availability in Australian newsrooms as a way of providing insights into the health of public interest journalism. In reference to ACMA's questions 7-9 in its consultation paper we suggest a count of journalists that goes beyond just a 'count of journalists working at professional news outlets in Australia, by source, locality and employment status (sample) (ACMA 2020, p. 39)'. We recommend:

To futureproof the framework and to better capture data about the overall availability of journalists to contribute to local, we recommend caution on too narrow a definition.

In relation to Q9 in ACMA's consultation paper and in terms of ABS restrictions, we recommend a collaborative partnership with the ABS that leads to a broader ABS definition of 'what is a journalist' building on academic research. We suggest:

Greater coordination and collaboration with official data providers such as the ABS. To that end, we recommend the ABS definitions of what is a journalist be reviewed and broadened.

Finally, in answer to Questions 1 and 2 in ACMA's consultation paper, we think the framework is a useful tool in measuring and tracking the health of local news in Australia, with capacity for some refinements as per our recommendations above. We congratulate ACMA on its work in this area and also commend PIJI on the work it has done to quantify and visualise the Australian news market and support its future endeavours. We welcome the funds government has made available to PIJI to continue its work, and future funding to journalism researchers to capture and analyse this important data about the Australian media eco-system.

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