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# QUALITY JOURNALISM DEMANDS QUALITY JOBS

SUBMISSION OF THE MEDIA, ENTERTAINMENT AND ARTS ALLIANCE TO THE NEWS MAP  
CONSULTATION

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**BUILT ON INTEGRITY, POWERED BY CREATIVITY**

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## Introduction

MEAA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communication, and the Arts (DITRDCA) regarding the development of the News Media Assistance Program.

MEAA is the largest and most established union and industry advocate for workers in the creative and cultural industries, with a history going back more than 110 years. This submission is directed at the media sector, where MEAA has more than 5,000 members. Our members in these industry areas include journalists and media workers.

Public interest journalism is critical for a well-functioning democracy. It can expose corruption, uphold transparency of government, inform the community, and contribute to public debate.<sup>1</sup> However, over the last few decades, the commercial business model for news journalism has collapsed in Australia. No statistic captures the enormity of this problem more than the decline in newspaper publishing employees. IBISWorld reports that the number of Australian newspaper employees has declined from 23,472 in 2010-11 to 12,531 in 2023.<sup>2</sup> This collapse has resulted in unprecedented workload pressures on journalists, undermining their capacity to produce public interest journalism. Yet despite the close connection between the working conditions of journalists and the production of public interest journalism, little attention has been paid to the relationship. Indeed, the News MAP consultation paper provided by DITRDCA fails to discuss the employment conditions for Australia's news media workers in any real detail. This is an oversight that MEAA's submission seeks to address.

MEAA believes that public interest journalism can only be produced if journalists have sustainable jobs and adequate resources. That means paying journalists and media workers commensurate to the work that communities need them to do, staffing and resourcing newsrooms at levels to ensure quality news can be produced, and ensuring that newsrooms reflect the diversity of Australia and are equipped to ensure staff can work in an inclusive and safe environment.

It is important to note that, despite the commercial pressures facing the newspaper industry in Australia, news engagement in Australia remains high – with 96% of Australians aged 14+ consuming news each month over the 12 months to June 2023.<sup>3</sup> This indicates that Australians continue to recognise the enduring value of news media. However, we also know that media literacy<sup>4</sup> and trust

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<sup>1</sup> Sweet et al (2020) 'Converging crises: public interest journalism, the pandemic and public health', *Public Health Research and Practice*, p 1, <https://www.phrp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PHRP3042029.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> This category includes workers engaged in publishing (creating and disseminating) newspapers (except internet). IBISWorld (2023) *Newspaper Publishing in Australia - Market Size, Industry Analysis, Trends and Forecasts (2024-2029)*, <https://www.ibisworld.com/au/industry/newspaper-publishing/169/>; MEAA (2018) *MEAA submission to the ACCC inquiry into digital platforms*, <https://www.meaa.org/mediaroom/meaa-submission-to-the-accq-inquiry-into-digital-platforms/>

<sup>3</sup> Ray Morgan (2023) *Total News Readership*, <https://www.roymorgan.com/findings/9308-thinknewsbrands-readership-june2023>

<sup>4</sup> Australian Media Literacy Alliance (2021) *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs'* [https://medialiteracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/FINAL\\_Australian\\_adult\\_media\\_literacy\\_report\\_20212.pdf](https://medialiteracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/FINAL_Australian_adult_media_literacy_report_20212.pdf)

in the media<sup>5</sup> are currently at worrying lows, requiring industry and government action to remedy this contradictory situation.

Consequent to these findings, MEAA makes the following key recommendations:

**Recommendation 1: News MAP fund research to investigate the impact of the declining media landscape on the working conditions of journalists. This research should investigate journalist's experiences of job insecurity, burnout, stress, overwork, underpayment, and lack of professional development, as well as its overall consequences for public interest journalism.**

**Recommendation 2: News MAP fund a benchmarking project investigating the necessary per capita ratio of journalists to population and location (for example, per LGA) that would support effective public interest journalism.**

**Recommendation 3: News MAP fund a review of the National Curriculum to assess its effectiveness at improving media literacy, explore options to resource students with regular, structured access to news media, and equip students with the skills to identify and analyse disinformation and misinformation.**

**Recommendation 4: Government explore programs to encourage Australians to build a healthy culture of engagement with news media, including demand-side incentives to subscribe and pay for quality news media through the use of subsidies, vouchers or tax deductibility.**

**Recommendation 5: MEAA Recommends News MAP fund \$250 million for a new round of the Public Interest News Gathering program for regional and remote media that is assessed on the basis of need and, as per Recommendation 7, is predicated on recipients signing on to an enforceable code of minimum standards for employment and protection at work.**

**Recommendation 6: Commercially produced Public Interest Journalism requires systematic, long-term support to ensure its viability and to promote a diverse media landscape. MEAA recommends News MAP investigate fiscal mechanisms that will ensure the long-term viability of public interest journalism.**

**Recommendation 7: Media organisations who receive government support must be required to sign an enforceable code requiring recipients to ensure fair pay and conditions, including fair provisions for freelancers, and to promote diversity and inclusion in newsrooms.**

## The Collapse of Commercial Journalism

The business model that supported traditional news media in Australia has largely collapsed. This shift began with the diversion of classified advertising revenue away from print media associated with the emergence of the Internet. More recently, the rise of digital platforms has directed a significant portion of remaining advertising revenue away from traditional news outlets. As a

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<sup>5</sup> Edelman Australia (2023) 'Edelman Trust Barometer Report'  
<https://www.edelman.com.au/sites/g/files/aatuss381/files/2023-02/2023%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Report%20-%20AUS%2002-2023.pdf>

measure of this impact, the ACCC estimates that Google and Facebook now attract nearly two-thirds of all online advertising revenue in Australia.<sup>6</sup> The result has been that between 2018 and 2023 revenues for newspaper publishing in Australia declined at an estimated annualised rate of 4.4%.<sup>7</sup> This decline is projected to continue through the next five-year period.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of the revenue crisis on regional journalism has been particularly profound. Regional newspapers, especially in print form, have been enduring a steady decline according to every benchmark – revenue, circulation, subscriptions, job numbers and local content – for well over a decade. Reductions in staff, cuts to publication frequency, the merging of regional newsrooms, suspensions of print publications and outright masthead closures have been the order of the day.<sup>9</sup> As a result of these pressures on local news providers, information deficits are forming in many regional areas, some of which now have no local news provider. A recent study undertaken by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) found that out of a total of 540 Local Government Areas surveyed, 29 – or 5.4% – lacked any local print or digital news publisher.<sup>10</sup>

The problem is not just limited to local news reporting. All levels of media, including metro and national media providers, have been impacted by the decline of the commercial business model.<sup>11</sup> In addition, large newspapers face challenges of their own: for example, larger papers are increasingly facing competition from global news providers. This is expected to constrain the capacity of the industry to generate revenue in the coming years.<sup>12</sup>

## Impact on Journalists

As a result of these business pressures, thousands of jobs have been lost. For example, in 2010-11, IBISWorld reported that Australian newspapers had 23,472 employees. That number is now reported as 12,531.<sup>13</sup> The loss of thousands of journalists, sub-editors, photographers, and other newspaper workers poses a significant challenge to news coverage and quality of reporting. Those continuing in the workforce face exacerbated workplace pressures, undermining the conditions in which journalism is produced. Multiple surveys of journalists conducted by MEAA have found that, as

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<sup>6</sup> ACCC (2019) *Digital platforms inquiry*, p 40,

<https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> IBISWorld (2023) *Newspaper Publishing in Australia - Market Size, Industry Analysis, Trends and Forecasts (2024-2029)*; ACCC (2019) *Digital platforms inquiry*, p 1

<sup>8</sup> IBISWorld (2023) *Newspaper Publishing in Australia - Market Size, Industry Analysis, Trends and Forecasts (2024-2029)*

<sup>9</sup> Public Interest Journalism Initiative (2023) *Australian News Data Report*, <https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2312-AND-Report-Dec-2023.pdf> p 14

<sup>10</sup> Monash University (2023) *Socio-economic determinants of Public Interest Journalism in Australia*, [https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SoDa\\_PJI\\_report4.pdf](https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SoDa_PJI_report4.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Public Interest Journalism Initiative & The Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas (2020) *Submission to the Mandatory news bargaining code concepts paper*, p 5, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Public%20Interest%20Journalism%20Initiative%20and%20Judith%20Neilson%20Institute%20for%20Journalism%20and%20Ideas.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> IBISWorld (2023) *Newspaper Publishing in Australia - Market Size, Industry Analysis, Trends and Forecasts (2024-2029)*

<sup>13</sup> The ABS distinguishes between conventional newspaper publishing and internet publishing. IBISWorld (2023) *Newspaper Publishing in Australia - Market Size, Industry Analysis, Trends and Forecasts (2024-2029)*

newsrooms get smaller due to redundancies and attrition, the workload rises sharply for those that remain. For example, almost three out of four regional journalists say their workload is high to very high.<sup>14</sup> This leads to regular, and often excessive, hours of overtime, public interest stories being missed, or levels of journalistic scrutiny being compromised.

These problems are paradigmatic in the case of freelance journalism. In the past, freelancing used to be considered a form of work that relied on a certain level of privilege and economic independence. Today, however, freelancing is synonymous with insecurity and exploitation. There is a significant and growing share of journalism being completed by freelance journalists.<sup>15</sup> As freelancers are sole traders and are excluded from the protections of employment law, they work without the protection of minimum wages, superannuation, or the capacity to demand timely pay for completed work. Freelance workers are subject to insecure and unpredictable piece-work incomes, a lack of protection of public liability and professional indemnity protections and a lack of opportunities for ongoing training or upskilling.<sup>16</sup>

A race to the bottom has encouraged bad actors in the media industry to hollow out and de-unionise their workplaces by restructuring the workforce and replacing permanent employees with casual employees. Cost-cutting measures taken by media outlets have led to employers replacing permanent work with freelancers – many of whom are the same people. Indeed, another persistent myth about freelancers is that they tend to be primarily early-career or end-of-career workers who require flexibility either to enter the industry or to transition out of it. The 2023 MEAA Freelance journalists, photographers and media workers survey shows, however, that many freelancers have extensive experience, with over half of respondents having worked in the media industry for 20 years or more, and most are freelancing for major media outlets.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst it is difficult to ascertain the number of freelancers working in the media industry, MEAA's own membership statistics suggest a 30% rate of freelance work out of journalism. Media outlets – especially those who receive taxpayer-funded subsidies – should be forced to be transparent about the number of workers they engage who are now working as freelancers.

The 2023 MEAA Freelance journalists, photographers and media workers survey also revealed that 72% of freelancers listed fair minimum rates and conditions as their most important issue in the industry. The survey showed that only 24.5% of freelancers derive their entire income from freelancing, which many indicated is due to difficulties in the industry, rather than preference. Low rates of pay in the industry remain a significant problem, with 55% of respondents making less than the median Australian income from their freelance work. The lack of fair minimum rates and conditions has come to a crisis in which freelancers cannot maintain a sustainable career in the industry and are struggling to make ends meet. Rates are not only low but are going backwards in

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<sup>14</sup> MEAA (2022) *Rescuing Regional Journalism*, <https://www.meaa.org/download/rescuing-regional-journalism-special-report-for-the-walkley-regional-journalism-summit/>

<sup>15</sup> Stanford (2021) *The Future of Work in Journalism*, p 24, [https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Future\\_of\\_Journalism\\_FINAL.pdf](https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Future_of_Journalism_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Stanford (2021) *The Future of Work in Journalism*, p 25

<sup>17</sup> MEAA (2023) *'Fair go for Freelancers'* MEAA survey of freelancers

real terms, with 63% of respondents noting that their pay has remained stagnant, or even decreased over the course of their careers – making it impossible for freelance workers to keep up with the cost of living.

Many freelancers highlight the critical role that they play in delivering quality journalism to the public. Not only do freelancers plug holes as permanent staff roles are cut, but they also bring expertise and diversity to the industry. However, due to poor pay and conditions, the work of freelancers is becoming less and less sustainable. Respondents highlighted the impact that secure minimum rates and conditions would have; not just on their individual circumstances, but also on their ability to deliver quality journalism.

Media Diversity Australia reporting<sup>18</sup> and MEAA industry mapping shows that staffing within media outlets does not reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Australian population. This lack of diversity is worst among senior newsroom positions, among those with editorial oversight or direction responsibilities.

MEAA analysis of member pay data across several major news outlets in the last 2 years demonstrates that among journalists in non-executive positions, culturally diverse journalists are paid \$15,019<sup>19</sup> less on average than their non-diverse colleagues.

In a recent survey of MEAA members, journalists who identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or people of colour outlined workplace inequality and poor cultural safety standards as having a negative impact on their ability to succeed as a journalist. 71% of respondents in these demographics said that discrimination, racism, sexism and/or ableism makes the workplace unsafe and 64% said that pathways into senior positions aren't obvious or possible.

This cultural homogeneity is inevitably reflected in editorial choices and decreases media representation among large parts of the community. One journalist reported that “my colleague, who is also a person of colour [and I were] told [we] focus too much on stories impacting Indigenous and migrant communities (despite covering a wide variety of stories). I was also told they did not appeal to our audience... Both my colleague and I have moved on, and no one covers these stories now.” Another said “I left one workplace after a series of layoffs [which] eliminated all but one person of colour from the staff. At my next full-time post, I was the only person of colour with an editor title on the masthead... When I was made redundant, there were no people of colour left on the masthead. When there are no people of colour making editorial decisions in a full-time capacity, the product is diminished, and minority communities are underserved.”

Publicly funded and philanthropic grants for dedicated culturally diverse positions have aided an increase in diversity in media workplaces, however without commitment to cultural safety measures and workplace equality, the industry remains unsafe and unsustainable for journalists and fails the community.

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<sup>18</sup> Media Diversity Australia (2022) *Who Gets to Tell Australian Stories? 2.0*, [https://www.mediadiversityaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Who-Gets-to-Tell-Australian-Stories\\_2.0\\_FINAL\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.mediadiversityaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Who-Gets-to-Tell-Australian-Stories_2.0_FINAL_pdf.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> MEAA member surveys prior to Enterprise Bargaining at the ABC, AAP, Nine Publishing and Guardian Australia, 2022-2024

## Impact on Public Interest Journalism

Industrial and workplace pressures have a clear impact on journalists' capacity to work in the public interest. 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 and develop.<sup>20</sup>

Several specific responses add to this picture, with one journalist reporting that “we struggle to find people to cover local breaking news some days”. Another spoke of “fewer people doing rounds mean[ing] fewer breaking stories”, while a third spoke of a culture of “promotion by attrition and reliance on cadets”.<sup>21</sup> MEAA is also aware that the declining state of newsrooms in the regions – including poor resourcing, support, and limited avenues for future development – are driving employee churn. The outlook is bleak, with 54% of journalists saying that they can't see themselves working in regional journalism in five years.<sup>22</sup> This has a detrimental impact on public interest journalism, as journalists are not able to stay in a region for a sustained period of time.

The declining working conditions of journalists have clear implications for the quality and coverage of news. One respondent, for example, stated that “important but unpopular topics do not get covered”. Another spoke of there being “more stories that we do not do because of commercial pressures”.<sup>23</sup> Survey results add to this picture, with one-in-three regional journalists rating their media outlet's ability to provide public interest journalism to their community as poor or very poor.<sup>24</sup> In sum, the decline of conditions of work has undermined journalist's ability to produce quality news reporting and maintain coverage of issues of importance. In this sense, there is a clear relationship between the conditions of journalists as workers and the delivery of quality public interest journalism.

**Recommendation 1: News MAP fund research to investigate the impact of the declining media landscape on the working conditions of journalists. This research should investigate journalist's experiences of job insecurity, burnout, stress, overwork, underpayment and lack of professional development, as well as its overall consequences for public interest journalism.**

**Recommendation 2: News MAP fund a benchmarking project investigating the necessary per capita ratio of journalists to population and location (for example, per LGA) that would support effective public interest journalism.**

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<sup>20</sup> Survey of MEAA members working in the media, 2023-24

<sup>21</sup> Survey of MEAA members working in the media, 2023-24

<sup>22</sup> MEAA (2022) *Rescuing Regional Journalism*, p 10, <https://www.meaa.org/mediaroom/urgent-action-needed-to-arrest-decline-of-regional-journalism-more-mergers-not-the-answer/>

<sup>23</sup> Survey of MEAA members working in the media, 2023-24

<sup>24</sup> MEAA (2022) *Rescuing Regional Journalism*, p 10, <https://www.meaa.org/mediaroom/urgent-action-needed-to-arrest-decline-of-regional-journalism-more-mergers-not-the-answer/>

## Impact on the Public

The decline of news media in Australia has led to a concentration of media ownership and the creation of so-called ‘media deserts’ where regions are serviced by only one or no local media outlets.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the ways in which Australians access their news has been completely upended by the rise of social media corporations whose platforms aggregate and curate what news products users are shown.

It is clear to MEAA that the decline in media in Australia, the enclosure of the Internet by social media corporations and the decline in media literacy and trust in journalism are inextricably linked. This situation has created an environment where misinformation and disinformation have been able to flourish, which is having serious, negative consequences on our democratic norms and institutions including the ability for journalists to do their job in a safe and professional manner.<sup>26</sup>

We note the references in the Consultation Paper to recommendations made to government in 2017 and 2019 calling for greater investment in, and coordination of, media literacy and digital awareness education through the Australian Curriculum and other community education programs. MEAA strongly endorses the need for a serious approach to media literacy education in Australia. We believe that developing the skills for citizens of all ages to critically engage with news media and learn how to discern media produced by journalists from content created with malicious or disorienting intent is crucial in building a healthy democratic society.

MEAA also believes that government has a role to play in encouraging Australians to build a healthy culture of engagement with news media. Government should explore programs that encourage citizens to engage with media outlets – especially local media outlets – via advertising campaigns or mechanisms such as government-funded vouchers or by making subscriptions to media outlets tax deductible. These options would have the advantage of encouraging the consumption of news by the public, which – as the Department’s consultation paper details – generates key public goods including a more engaged and informed public.

**Recommendation 3: News MAP fund a review of the National Curriculum to assess its effectiveness at improving media literacy, explore options to resource students with regular, structured access to news media, and equip students with the skills to identify and analyse disinformation and misinformation.**

**Recommendation 4: Government explore programs to encourage Australians to build a healthy culture of engagement with news media, including demand-side incentives to subscribe and pay for quality news media through the use of subsidies, vouchers or tax deductibility.**

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<sup>25</sup> Public Interest Journalism Initiative (2023) *December News Data Report*, <https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2312-AND-Report-Dec-2023.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> MEAA (2022) *Report into the State of Press Freedom in Australia*, <https://www.meaa.org/download/2022-press-freedom-report/>

## Government Responses

Government support for commercial news media is critical to safeguard the production of public interest journalism. One obvious and direct way that the government can support the sector is through press subsidies.<sup>27</sup> These have been explored through the government's Public Interest News Gathering Program (PING) and the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation (released as part of the Broadcast and Content Reform Package). MEAA welcomes initiatives like these but argues that they ought to be expanded both in size and scope.

### Public Interest News Gathering Program (PING)

MEAA welcomed the Morrison Government's 2020 commitment of \$50 million in grants (later extended by \$10 million) through its Public Interest News Gathering program to assist in the production of public interest journalism in regional and remote Australia.

MEAA endorses the government's focus on the PING program requiring "to demonstrate how they regularly produce public interest journalism with an Australian perspective, with a commitment to accuracy, accessibility and relevance to a broad audience." However, we believe that this focus was not met due to the program lacking the power to ensure the grant funding was directed to the hiring and retention of journalists.

The MEAA commissioned Future of Work in Journalism report recommended that a fund totalling expenditures of \$250 million per annum be established across Australian news media news platforms to sustain the production of public interest journalism.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, the report also contended that:

*"Subsidies for journalism and news production should include a mechanism for regionally targeting support for journalism in smaller and regional communities, which have been especially damaged by the centralisation of ownership and production. Many regional towns have virtually no remaining journalism capacity. Therefore, the operation of a journalism foundation should include a targeted dimension to ensure a healthy share of resources flow to regional media."*

In advocating for a new and enlarged round of the PING, we would like to see a number of changes made that will improve the effectiveness of the program and ensure the funding meets its goal of producing quality public interest journalism.

In their Independent evaluation of RASPJI and PING<sup>29</sup>, ACIL-Allen noted that "the PING funding formula provided funding proportional to organisation size (by revenue) rather than an assessed level of need." Whilst it's clear that this was a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and was

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<sup>27</sup> Ots and Picard (2018) 'Press Subsidies', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.861>

<sup>28</sup> Stanford (2021) *The Future of Work in Journalism*, p 33

<sup>29</sup> ACIL-Allen (2022) 'Independent evaluation of RASPJI and PING' [https://acilallen.com.au/uploads/projects/663/ACILAllen\\_RASPJIandPING\\_2022.pdf](https://acilallen.com.au/uploads/projects/663/ACILAllen_RASPJIandPING_2022.pdf)

therefore framed as an emergency response, ACIL-Allen went on to note that it was a “missed opportunity” to target support to those most in need.

It is MEAA’s view that, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic emergency context, a program assessed on the basis of need – i.e. needing support to hire and retain journalists in order to deliver public interest journalism – would be more effective in delivering support to regional and remote newsrooms.

MEAA’s own analysis of the PING in 2021 revealed that:

- the program was significantly under-funded, comprising only \$13.4 million in ‘new’ money,
- the vast majority of funds went to major media companies - \$40 million of the available \$50 million grants to struggling regional publications were often in the order of \$10,000,
- the worst affected media sector, newspaper publishing, received a minor share of the overall funding - \$18 million versus \$32 million for television and radio broadcasters.

We note that claims also arose since the program was distributed, that a range of PING grant recipients did not abide by the grant requirement that applicants maintain “existing levels of journalism production and distribution during the grant period”. For example, the Guardian reported in 2021 that “Australian Community Media was awarded more than \$10m by the federal government to continue publishing its stable of more than 100 regional newspapers through the pandemic, but even before the grant deed was signed it was closing or scaling back titles.”<sup>30</sup>

It is MEAA’s strong view that funds raised through either the News Bargaining Code or distributed under an enhanced PING program must be conditioned upon those funds being directed to the employment of journalists and allied workers and tied to the production of news content.

Any future round of PING grants must also incorporate an enforceable mechanism that ensures minimum standards for employment and protection at work, including protecting pay and conditions for freelance journalists, as discussed in more detail below.

**Recommendation 5: MEAA Recommends News MAP fund \$250 million for a new round of the Public Interest News Gathering program for regional and remote media that is assessed on the basis of need and, as per Recommendation 7, is predicated on recipients signing on to an enforceable code of minimum standards for employment and protection at work.**

### **Broadening press subsidies**

Existing press subsidies such as PING tend to focus on a specific sub-section of the press industry to provide support. Although these existing measures are well-needed, they are too ad hoc, short-term, and limited in scope. We need responses that address the problem of market failure in a systematic way to ensure the long-term viability of commercially produced public interest journalism in Australia.

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<sup>30</sup> Davies and Meade (2021) ‘Australian Community Media awarded more than \$10m in Covid grants while scaling back newspapers’, *Guardian Australia*, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/dec/03/australian-community-media-awarded-more-than-10m-in-covid-grants-while-scaling-back-newspapers>

MEAA notes that the consultation paper proposes a range of such measures including grants to address this issue. To maintain journalistic independence, such grants should be awarded by arms-length bodies based on merit and the quality of the application. In this sense, the function of such a grants body could mirror that currently used for funding arts and culture in Australia, as well as academic and technical research.<sup>31</sup>

Another option explored by the consultation paper was tax reductions and exceptions. However, MEAA notes research that suggests such options are a weaker alternative than direct press subsidies.<sup>32</sup>

**Recommendation 6: Commercially produced Public Interest Journalism requires systematic, long-term support to ensure its viability and to promote a diverse media landscape. MEAA recommends News MAP investigate additional fiscal mechanisms that will ensure the long-term viability of public interest journalism.**

As government increasingly becomes a direct funder of media organisations, it is imperative that the funding it provides goes to organisations that are going to pay their journalists and media workers – including freelancers – a fair wage commensurate to the work that they do. This will ensure that newsrooms are staffed and resourced at levels that will guarantee quality news can be produced and that staff can work in an inclusive and safe environment. In other words, government money must be directed to the provision of good jobs, because working conditions are central to the quality and coverage of public interest journalism. An important further qualification is that such money should not be directed towards the replacement of journalists’ jobs by generative AI.

MEAA survey data shows widespread support for such a policy amongst the media workforce. In our 2023 survey of freelance journalists, 99% of respondents agreed that media outlets that receive public funds should commit to fair pay and conditions for journalists, and upholding quality, ethical journalism.<sup>33</sup>

**Recommendation 7: Media organisations who receive government support must be required to sign an enforceable code requiring recipients to ensure fair pay and conditions, including fair provisions for freelancers, and to promote diversity and inclusion in newsrooms.**

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<sup>31</sup> Stanford (2021) *The Future of Work in Journalism*, p 32

<sup>32</sup> Bennett, Rae & Hess (2023) *Supporting Media Diversity: Nordic Lessons*, p 7, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Supporting-Media-Diversity-Nordic-Lessons-WEB.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> MEAA survey of freelance journalists, 2023