

Senate Environment and Communications References Committee – Media Diversity in Australia Inquiry

APC Opening Statement

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to attend today.

The Press Council has made a submission to this inquiry, and I won't repeat its content now. Rather, I'd like to make some more general observations, based in part on issues raised in earlier hearings of this inquiry.

It's essential in a democracy that the Press is free to make available to the Australian people a wide diversity of views and opinions, to hold Government, business and community leaders accountable, to protect the public's right to know, and to be a trusted source of news in a world of competing sources of information, and in some cases, misinformation.

Meeting this objective requires high standards of editorial and journalistic practices. More than ever people need to be able to access reliable and accurate news. News that is relevant to them whether they live in the city, in regional or rural areas.

Publisher members of the Press Council commit to be bound by high media standards, and to an independent complaints handling system.

At this critical juncture, there's a heightened need for independent self-regulation of the media, as consumers of news need to be assured that complaints about breaches are assessed independently of Government and Publishers. The Press Council meets this need and will continue to do so, by evolving, exploring partnerships and embracing opportunities and challenges.

The Press Council has a diversity of Publisher members - around 30.

Publisher members include community, rural and Indigenous Publishers, a number of online-only publications, as well as the very large publishing groups.

Under this self-regulatory system, the costs of the Press Council are met by Publisher members. There are, however, strong safeguards embedded in the Press Council Constitution to enhance the financial security of the Press Council and ensure its independence from *all* constituent/Publisher members, whether large or small.

These include the fact that a constituent member has to give four years' notice of resignation from the Press Council and is required to meet its financial obligations to the Press Council for three years following its notice of resignation. This change, which was introduced in 2012, ensures that a large Publisher cannot threaten the Press Council by immediate cessation of funding.

The Constitution requires a majority of Press Council members to be independent of Publisher members. Public members are drawn from varying walks of life and have not had previous connections (or any recent and significant connections) with the media. In addition, the Press Council has independent journalist members who have no current links with Publishers.

Critically, Publisher members do not sit on Adjudication Panels. The Press Council's Adjudication Panels are tasked to decide whether there has been a breach of the Press Council's Standards of Practice. They typically comprise 5 members drawn from public members and independent journalists.

By drawing on a range of independent community members and journalists, Adjudication Panels provide a level of diversity and experience not always achieved by other bodies or models that are similarly tasked to consider breaches of standards.

The Press Council sets binding Standards of Practice. They are contained in its General Principles, a statement of Privacy Principles and two specific Standards governing the coverage of suicide and contacting patients in hospitals.

The Press Council also develops Advisory Guidelines on a range of important issues following community and stakeholder consultation.

The Press Council accepts complaints from Primary Complainants (where they consider they have been personally affected by a possible breach of Council standards) and from Secondary Complainants (who, while not directly affected, are able to raise concerns that particular articles may have breached Council standards).

In the case of Primary Complainants, Press Council staff are able in many cases to negotiate a suitable remedy with the Publication that meets the concerns of Complainants. For example, this may be a correction in the Publication, right of reply or an apology by the Publication. In this way a complainant has access to a free, independent and impartial service to address their concerns and this can be a far better alternative than costly litigation.

While the Press Council does not have the power to levy financial penalties, its Adjudications must be published by Publications (in a prominent position within their Publications) and adverse findings are not enjoyed by either journalists or the Publication. The value of a published Adjudication that upholds or partially upholds a complaint cannot be overstated from a Complainant's perspective. A combination of published Adjudications and comprehensive Standards of Practice and Advisory Guidelines drive higher journalistic standards.

Looking ahead

While the Press Council plays an integral part in maintaining high journalist standards and public confidence in the media, there are areas where it could do better. The complaints handling system, while robust, is too slow for the modern world. One of my priorities as the new CEO is to make it faster.

The Press Council is committed to further increasing the diversity of its Council and Adjudication Panel membership. It is currently in the process of a recruitment drive (for public and independent journalist members) – which has this factor - as well as others - very much in mind.

Most importantly there is a need for all stakeholders, including the Press Council, to address emerging issues in the media environment. These include dealing with convergence, where similar content on different platforms can be subject to different regulatory regimes, and the emergence of digital platforms, which have disrupted the traditional revenue model of Publishers and which disseminate stories through their own channels that are not part of any established regulatory system.

The Press Council looks forward to continuing to engage with existing and emerging stakeholders, and to contribute to the discourse on media diversity in a cross-platform media environment.