

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

Ashlen Campbell

The banging of drums, ringing chants and a scarlet Australian flag. In Melbourne's CBD, few people spare the image a second glance; some, like me, are slightly annoyed at the tram delay, but it's just another Saturday. Another Saturday, another anti-vaxxer protest.

This far into the pandemic, with many of us counting our third, fourth or even fifth round of coronavirus vaccination, the continued anti-vaxxer fervour may seem pointless. But for those involved, the battle still rages, fuelled by an ever-present stream of conspiratorial and far-right messaging delivered via social media, radio, and even some television programs.

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the ABC and after years of debate regarding how much funding, if any, the ABC and public media as a whole deserves in Australia, the next steps for public media will be crucial in securing the future of our very democracy.

We may roll our eyes, but the weekly Saturday crusade is just one of many arguments for the necessity of publicly funded free media, and a dark glimpse into a world where all media pursues profit over prestige.

But to understand why, we must understand the position publicly funded media inhabits within our society, and how it interacts with and influences the very fabric of our democracy.

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

You may have seen these interactions described as a media ecosystem. This is because the many types of media we are exposed to interact in myriad ways, competing with and complementing one another. In any ecosystem, a change in environmental conditions or the introduction of a new circumstance can affect its balance — some groups may suffer, while others grow more dominant. Understanding the forces that drive ecological change will help us to understand the delicate balance of our media landscape. Enter the peppered moth.

In the early 1800s, Britain's peppered moth was known for the mottled white colouring that allowed it to camouflage on lichen-encrusted tree trunks. Sometimes a darker specimen would be found, but those were a novelty few and far between. However, as the century progressed, those dark morphs became increasingly common, until they dominated the population and the original pale colour grew rare. It was not some random occurrence, but a response to the world around them; the 19th century saw Britain change as the industrial revolution took hold, and as coal-fired powerplants spewed soot into the atmosphere, it killed lichen and darkened the trees that were once a refuge for the moth. This left them vulnerable to predators, and fewer and fewer pale moths survived to reproductive age. By contrast, the occasional black moth was primed to camouflage on the newly darkened tree trunks, and passed their genes on until the whole population shifted to a darker shade.

The only way for the peppered moth population to survive the changing world was to change with it.

When the coronavirus pandemic caused global lockdowns, we all had to find ways to cope with the sudden upheaval of our way of life. It was difficult not to be glued to our screens all day, watching the constant updates on a once-in-a-lifetime event that was spanning the globe, but most of us were able to find some time removed in new hobbies like bread baking or bird watching. For

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

some, however, it was difficult to tear away from the community provided by social media, and the answers it promised.

While traditional media serves the public with a range of news and information that has been vetted according to codes of conduct and ethical guidelines before being presented in the same manner to everyone, social media platforms seek to tailor the user experience to keep them on the site for as long as possible. If a user engages with a certain brand of content, Facebook's algorithm will show more of that content on their feed, and recommend related groups. During the pandemic, these algorithms served as a radicalising force toward those who sought to make sense of the chaos around them.

A *Guardian* investigation at this time found that simply following an anti-lockdown group soon led to recommendations of increasingly conspiracy-oriented groups and posts.¹ Facebook's algorithm did this by identifying which subjects a user is most likely to engage with, before serving them up with more and more of that information. This model was promoting conspiracy theories well before the pandemic, but with the onset of the lockdowns people who would have otherwise never engaged with such content got pulled 'down the rabbit hole'; the more strongly people felt about a subject, the more they wanted to engage with it, and the more social media sites stood to gain. In a time of chaos when vulnerable people were trying to make sense of the world around them, these radicalising algorithms took their hand and led them from mild vaccine hesitancy all the way to utter conviction that the world is run by a shadow cabal of child-kidnappers. Many became unrecognisable to their families, as we all became far too familiar with phrases like 'QAnon' and 'New World Order'.

Many of these conspiracy circles were inexorably tied with extremist far-right ideology. The scarlet Australian flag being flown at the Saturday anti-vax protests is the Australian Merchant Navy flag. The

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

protestors often fly it upside down, a practice inspired by alt-right groups in Canada, who fly their own nation's ensign in this way.

But even as traditional media was reporting on this new phenomenon of online conspiracies, it soon became evident that not all traditional media was interested in maintaining that integrity.

In 2021, the Sky News YouTube channel was temporarily banned after posting clips from its television programs promoting conspiracy theories such as 'The Great Reset'.² This conspiracy was initially popularised on social media, centred around the idea that members of the World Economic Forum and political 'elite' had orchestrated the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns to achieve their own goals. Sky News promoted this conspiracy theory on their *Sky After Dark* and *Sky News Outsiders* programs, where commentators went so far as to describe the World Economic Forum as 'a hardcore leftist eco-horror show complete with quasi fascism'.

Like the populations of peppered moth changing to match the sooty world around them, commercial channels like Sky News are increasingly shifting toward far-right ideologies as they follow the market demands. While Sky News' more right-wing programming caters to a smaller audience, it is an extreme audience, and a loyal one. Sky News, identifying the potential for a consistent, stable viewer base and therefore consistent, stable revenue, continued to reinforce these ideologies. Keeping in line with their audience, they also display a distinct political bias, consistently hosting guests from right-wing political parties far more frequently than left-leaning politicians.

Commercial media compromising its integrity in pursuit of profit is not an unfamiliar trend, and not restricted to Australia; in many nations, while public media reported on the harmful side effects of tobacco, commercial media ran privately funded campaigns to sabotage regulation. While public media reported on the reality of

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

climate change, commercial media sowed doubt of its existence. And while public media reported the science of coronavirus in the face of growing anti-vaxxer rhetoric, commercial media leaned in, spreading distrust and doubt that infected viewers as prolifically as the virus itself.

Even in less extreme cases, in our day to day, we see commercial media prioritising advertising revenue over serving the viewer. Programs like *A Current Affair* frequently feature 'news' segments that are in fact thinly veiled advertisements. The need to appeal to advertisers erodes the integrity of commercial media so much that in some instances the viewer may be left questioning whether they have gained anything at all from the program they have just watched.

The standards upheld by publicly funded media are all the more evident when you look at the other platforms from which Australians get their information. The popular social media app TikTok has recently been advertised on television with the slogan 'TikTok, now you know', positioning itself as an educational platform. And TikTok has been a great platform for educators — it is not uncommon to come across a qualified scientist discussing complex concepts or recent research on the 'For You' page, but TikTok's poor moderation means that you could scroll away from that science snippet only to land on a video about zombies rising in morgues across China. And while that may seem outlandish, the app's impressionable young adult userbase was inclined to believe it.

But most did not, which is why even though over a quarter of Australians use social media for news, there is significant distrust for it; in fact, the 2022 *Digital News Report Australia* found that two thirds of Australians surveyed had encountered misinformation in the week prior to participation. And as right-wing news continues to reinforce misinformation, that distrust is starting to bleed through to commercial media.

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

The survey found that while subscriptions to news services had increased, news as a whole is the least popular digital media service people are willing to pay for. Despite this, many Australians reported feeling a responsibility to stay updated on news. This puts publicly funded, impartial, free and reliable media in a position of great appeal.

As the waters of truth in media become increasingly muddied by conflicting interests, the public loses trust in the media. Every year, the Edelman Australia Trust Barometer gauges Australia's trust in various institutions. This year it reported that Australian media is the only institution that is distrusted by the majority of the population, with a trust score of 43%, a fall of 8 points since last year.³

This is not unprecedented. In the past, following periods of great upset, such as world wars or pandemic lockdowns, public trust in media and government institutions typically decreases. To answer the question of whether there is a place for publicly funded media in such a time, we can look to the responses of the past, and to the most lauded example of publicly funded media. In Britain, after the World War I and influenza pandemic, trust in the media and government was at an all-time low. To regain that trust, an impartial broadcaster designed to inform and serve the public interest was required, and so the BBC was founded. If the creation of publicly funded media organisations was once a necessity in a pandemic-stricken world, then at the very least the continued presence of one is vital as history repeats today. At a time like this, when so much of our way of life has again changed, we need to renew and reinforce our support of impartial, publicly funded media that operates with the goal of trustworthiness.

In nature, specialists are those organisms highly adapted to a single source of sustenance, and if that source becomes less accessible, they must quickly adapt or die. Commercial media depends on the ratings to appeal to advertisers and remain funded.

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

The ABC is what one might consider a generalist, obtaining its funding from a variety of sources, which allows it to remain consistent in its messaging and values even as the world goes through undulating periods of chaos. The ABC and other publicly funded media, not being reliant on advertising revenue, do not need to cater to demand and can instead focus on pursuing a values-based model for content.

It is true, of course, that not all commercial programs responded to the demand for conspiracy; in fact, most maintained a typically measured approach to the pandemic, and so the argument could be made, if commercial media can contain a breadth of alignments, is there a need for impartial sources free of commercial interest?

If a species goes extinct, all of the processes and interactions for which it played a crucial role will suddenly cease to exist. The ecosystem will be thrown out of balance, and if the species was an important enough player, its absence can result in a cascading effect that causes other species to diminish or grow out of control.

It is worth noting that the USA's funding for public media is far less than Australia's, about \$4.62 Australian dollars per person compared to Australia's \$35.78 per person.

It is also worth noting that the USA's commercial right-wing media hosts, such as those on Fox News, endorse far more extreme commentators, including until recently Alex Jones, who was sued for defamation after claiming the Sandy Hook shooting was a hoax, and has long been known to promote extremist ideologies to his dedicated audience.

It is worth noting both of these facts because they are related. By maintaining its impartiality and integrity, publicly funded media sets a competitive standard for commercial media. In the USA, where there is less funding for public media and therefore

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

reduced competition, companies like Fox News are not forced to compete as intensely and can afford to drop the standard, leading to an increasingly biased media landscape.

Biased media such as this serves to embolden fringe groups, and the social consequences of this have been palpable; from the threat to public health wrought by mass vaccine rejection to the storming of the Capitol in the USA.

These events are not only symptomatic of the decreasing quality of American news media, they are evidence that a lack of publicly funded media impacts the quality of democracy itself.

A report by Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, titled *Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries*, gathered data on public media funding, regulation and audience shares in 33 countries and analysed correlations with democratic health. They found that high levels of secure funding for public media systems as well as protection of public media's independence are consistently, positively correlated with healthy democracies.⁴

The report found that countries with good funding for public media had a more educated populace with stronger democratic processes, and the percentage of viewership did not affect this number — that is, the very presence of public media serves to strengthen a democracy.

The Thompson's gazelle is faster than any predator on the African savannah, except for the cheetah. Unfortunately for the gazelle, the cheetah is also its main adversary. This is no coincidence — as the two species evolved, the constant pressure of predation gave rise to increasingly fast gazelles, just as the threat of starvation ensured that only those cheetahs fast enough to catch a gazelle would survive to reproduce. In the theory of natural selection, the constant evolutionary arms race seen here is part of what's known as the 'Red Queen Hypothesis'.

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

This hypothesis states that species are pitted against ever-evolving opponents and must constantly adapt and change in order to survive.

In this way, publicly funded media and commercial media behave in much the same way as the gazelle and the cheetah. The publicly funded media of Australia not only provides impartial information grounded in fact, but a competitive standard to hold commercial media accountable and prevent a descent into extreme opinion based reporting. Australia's former prime minister Kevin Rudd has warned that Sky News seeks to model itself after America's right-wing Fox News, and it may yet succeed if Australia's publicly funded media becomes diminished.

Just as an ecosystem needs diversity, so does media. A large portion of popular commercial news media in Australia falls under the banner of the Murdoch family's News Corporation, and this lack of overhead diversity further threatens the democratic, informative ideal of our nation's media. A monopolised media landscape would mean a narrowing of perspectives, as well as giving those in control of the media free rein to determine how stories are told. Publicly funded media provides not only a crucial diversity of sources, but an ever-important diversity of voices.

Flip to any commercial Australian channel and you are likely to land on one of an innumerable amount of reality shows with a cast of predominantly white contestants, not at all reflective of Australia's true cultural diversity. Any other genre, be it anything from drama to fantasy to documentary, is likely to have been made overseas.

It is written into the ABC's charter that, as a government-funded body, a certain proportion of programming must represent the Australian populace and Australian art.

Commercial media is for-profit, and as such is only going to pursue the most profitable programs. That also means that only the most profitable voices are heard. The voices of those who

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

seek only to stir up controversy and division, the voices who shirk controversy at all costs, and the voices who want to sell a product.

This leaves little to no chances taken on local projects, up-and-coming artists, or the creative endeavours of those from marginalised communities.

This is where publicly funded media far outshines its commercial counterparts. As Mark Scott, former Managing Director of the ABC, described in his 2009 speech to the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association: 'The ABC has been the cradle of many nationally beloved and even internationally acclaimed names — they have always been willing to take a chance on those people and ideas the commercial executives wouldn't give the time of day.'⁵

Publicly funded media is uniquely positioned to push the envelope and drive change because it is not beholden to commercial interests; where commercial media must draw an audience in order to please the stakeholders, publicly funded media is free to represent and challenge the audience with no demands from funding sources except that it adhere to its charter and maintain its integrity.

There was a point when it seemed streaming platforms might render both publicly funded and commercial media redundant, as people started to tune in to a wider range of programs for a small cost, but by remaining a consistent force, the ABC has weathered even that. Now, as content is spread thin by a growing number of streaming platforms, viewers are required to pay monthly premiums for multiple subscriptions even as the cost of living rises. Once again, free public media like the ABC provides a worthwhile alternative.

Mark Scott describes the ABC as 'Australia's town square'. In a time of increasing division among different factions of society, a town square such as the ABC provides a common ground, new perspectives, and a chance for reconciliation. Publicly funded free

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

media is paid for by and accessible to all, and is therefore a place that everyone can inhabit equally; a place that, within itself, reflects the balance it brings to the wider media ecosystem.

Publicly funded media does not just represent the public, it serves the public. We saw this most profoundly during the 2019–2020 bushfires when the ABC's live broadcasts were a vital source in helping people to understand the current situation and make life-saving decisions. Publicly funded media is for the public, which means that everyone matters, and while News Corp media engaged in a smear campaign to paint the ABC's coverage as disorganised and inaccurate, the ABC stayed the course for the sake of the people it serves.

Commercial news is increasingly becoming centralised, focusing its reporting on the global, nationwide and state-wide issues. As small, independent newspapers struggle to maintain a foothold, there grows a dearth in local reporting; rural Australia in particular is underserved. But publicly funded media seeks to bridge this gap, and since it is not dependent on large profit margins, it is able to branch out into smaller divisions that serve specific regions and communities. This provides Australians with information relevant to them and their daily lives, which further serves to prevent the alienation of rural communities. The presence of local radio has been especially vital during natural disasters when phones, television and internet are down.

We are currently entering our third La Niña event in as many years in eastern Australia. As climate change continues to increase the severity and frequency of natural disasters, we will be increasingly reliant on accurate, timely emergency broadcasting. In anticipation of this, the ABC devised an emergency broadcasting policy over a decade ago that ensures there will always be reliable broadcasting of emergency warnings and disaster coverage. Public investment in this kind of media is akin to public investment in healthcare: as

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

individuals, it may not be something many of us need right now, but it could one day save our lives.

Publicly funded media like the ABC represents the nation, its myriad backgrounds, perspectives and lifestyles, and in doing so forms an integral part of the nation's identity.

The popular show *You Can't Ask That* is perhaps the clearest example of this. The idea of allowing viewers to anonymously ask questions to a member of marginalised communities is a risk-laden concept, and one that a network less secure than the ABC would shy away from. But public media can afford to take that risk, and it paid off, granting a voice to people who are often silenced, and providing us all with an opportunity to learn from and empathise with one another. The program celebrates our society's diversity in a model so popular it has been adopted all over the world.

Other programs like *Catalyst* shine a spotlight on Australian scientists, delivering measured, factual documentaries during an era of misinformation and disinformation when so many other platforms rely on sensationalism.

Identity is formed early in life, and so it is crucial that the young people of Australia have access to media that allows them to feel seen. It is thanks to publicly funded media that shows like *Bluey* can exist and proliferate even beyond our borders, coming to represent Australia internationally. The sincerity of such a program simply could not exist in commercial media, which would never see the financial value in supporting a creation for creativity's sake. By broadcasting a show designed for families to sit down and enjoy together, the ABC appeals to universal human values of community and connection, allowing our nation to reach out to others through its art.

It is one thing to say that publicly funded free media is a necessity, but the popularity and success of the ABC's programs proves something else: that now more than ever, publicly funded media is

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

wanted. We want to be informed without being marketed to, we want reporting that is relevant and free of thinly veiled advertising segments, we want our media to tell us about people, not products.

Australia is in a time of great change, from the bushfires to the pandemic to floods, to a sweeping transition in government. It is a time when the nation has seen hardship and has watched as other nations manage hardship of their own. It is at a time like this that we must ask ourselves what our next steps will be. Who will we be going forward? And we are going forward- every day there seems to arise a new "new normal", and we must decide what progress means. A nation's media is its identity, its intelligence and its voice. To say that there is no place for publicly funded media is to surrender that identity, insult that intelligence, and forfeit that voice.

Endnotes

- 1 Wong, J.C., 'Down the rabbit hole: How QAnon conspiracies thrive on Facebook', *The Guardian*, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/25/qanon-facebook-conspiracy-theories-algorithm>
- 2 'The "Great Reset" Conspiracy in Australia', Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/the-great-reset-conspiracy-in-australia/
- 3 'Trust Barometer 2022 Australia', edelman.com.au, 2022. <https://www.edelman.com.au/trust-barometer-2022-australia>
- 4 Neff, T., Pickard, V. 'Funding democracy: Public media and democratic health in 33 countries', *Sage Journals*, 2021. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/19401612211060255>
- 5 Scott, M., 'Why public broadcasting matters more than ever', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2009. <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/why-public-broadcasting-matters-more-than-ever-20090910-fi47.html>

What is the role of publicly funded free media in Australia?

About the author

Ashlen Campbell is 24 years old and has a degree in zoology from The University of Melbourne. Together with her love of science, she has a love for writing and regularly combines these two passions through science communication. Since graduating, Ashlen has worked in research, surveying native pollinator populations and helping to monitor the health of freshwater systems. She has also worked in science communication for education companies, The University of Melbourne, and her own social media.