Written by Andrea Carson, Lecturer, Media and Politics, School of Social and Political Sciences; Honorary Research Fellow, Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

Public interest reporting is often equated with watchdog or investigative reporting. But it can include other factual stories that serve the public interest.Shutterstock

Public interest journalism could be considered the antithesis of media's darker side, which includes fake news, propaganda, censorship and voyeurism.

The outcomes of public interest reporting can expose corruption, launch royal commissions, remove improper politicians from office, and jail wrongdoers.

Think of recent stories like ABC Four Corners’ exposure of the treatment of young people at Don Dale Detention Centre; The Sydney Morning Herald's revelatory stories on now-convicted MP Eddie Obeid ; or The Newcastle Herald’s exposure of child sex abuse by priests. All of these led to public hearings. Then there was last week's collaboration between Fairfax Media and the ABC , revealing the extent of Chinese money and influence in Australian politics.

For these reasons, this form of reporting headlines the Senate select committee's Future of Public Interest Journalism inquiry. The closing date for public submissions is June 15.

Yet, public interest journalism is not universally defined. One common understanding among media practitioners and academics is that it refers to a journalist pursuing information that the public has a right to know.

Often implied in this definition is that, if it were not for the reporter, undisclosed information affecting the public that governments, companies and other powerful interests hold would remain hidden.

In this way, public interest reporting is often equated with watchdog or investigative reporting. But it can include other factual stories that serve the public interest, whether by providing a platform for debate or informing the electorate.

This is not stories that are simply “interesting to the public” (read here: stories about the Kardashians) – that is, entertaining, but with no civic value. These profit-oriented stories have filled certain tabloids and glossy magazines for years. Today they serve as clickbait to attract eyeballs and advertisers in the digital space, and are often found under traditional media banners.

The former editor of Britain’s Guardian newspaper, Alan Rusbridger, uses the analogy of a public figure such as a cricketer to make the point that not all revelations or “truths” are worth pursuing, and particularly not in the name of the “public interest”. Rusbridger suggests the “quality” of the target and its relationship to the public interest differentiate a story from mere smear or exposure journalism. He says :

What’s the public interest in a cricketer having a love romp in a hotel room … But if elected representatives are arguing a case in Parliament but not revealing that they are being paid to do so, then that strikes at the heart of democracy. That’s public interest; this is an easy distinction.

From this example, it is clear that context matters. As author of Understanding Journalism , Lynette Sheridan Burns reminds us that other social concerns might need to be weighed up alongside public interest storytelling. These might include an individual’s right to privacy, legal considerations, and the potential for other harms such as national security risks.

Through the liberal democratic lens of understanding the role of news media, diverse and plural voices are generally seen as enriching public discourse. This provides a range of perspectives to contest ideas and inform citizens. Ultimately, it informs their electoral choices.

Herein lies a key motivation for calling the 2017 inquiry hearings. With thousands of editorial jo bs cut
in the past five years at Australia’s major news media outlets – Fairfax Media, ABC, News Corp, Channel Ten – and the closure of many regional bureaus and mastheads, there is real concern

about the state of public interest journalism.

Put simply, are there enough trained journalists to provide independent journalism that matters? Are Australia's regions as well served with diverse and independent reporting as the major cities? These questions speak to the first and fourth of the inquiry's six terms of reference .

The other questions for the committee broadly relate to the viral spread of misinformation, and to safeguards against market power in the media landscape in the name of public interest journalism.

Interestingly, rather than directly tackle what the government’s proposed removal of media competition safeguards might mean for Australian audiences' interests, the committee is directed to examine the market impacts of new players. That is, what impact social media and search engines have on the "Australian media landscape".

The complete absence of "audience" and an emphasis on "markets" in the terms of reference could be seen as a win for the persistent lobbying of Australia's most powerful commercial media companies.

In a rare display of unified power , 25 heads of Australia's major commercial media outlets met the prime minister in Canberra last month to urge the parliament to pass media reforms. To improve their commercial viability, media companies are seeking to scrap the 75% reach provision (preventing 100% market share) and two-out-of-three ownership rule.

Notwithstanding new international entrants into Australian markets such as Buzzfeed, The Guardian and Daily Mail, such law changes, I have previously argued , would likely result in concentrating proprietorial power of the biggest media operators in Australia's most dominant news media markets: radio, television and print.

The committee's inquiries into "fake news, propaganda, and public disinformation" are important

issues to consider, but we should remember that these concerns have existed alongside public interest journalism for more than a century.

From the sensationalist, fear-mongering “yellow journalism” of the penny press in the late 1800s, to the media propaganda arising out of the world wars of the 20th century, there is nothing new about fake news and disinformation. What is unprecedented, however, is its speed and global spread in the digital sphere.

Inaccurate reporting, whether deliberately fake or just sloppy, has consequences for news media’s capacity to serve a well-informed citizenry that underpins a healthy democracy. For example, a recent US Pew Research study found 88% of Americans believe fake news confuses the public about basic facts.

These are problems for all to tackle – search engines, internet service providers, commercial media outlets, public broadcasters and social media. As is occurring overseas , this might involve media outlets and others working together to provide news literacy tools to help the public recognise fact from fiction. Any successful approach must address sources, messengers and audiences of fake news, not just target Facebook and Google.

When the committee reports in December, let’s hope it offers ways to strengthen public interest journalism by placing Australian audiences’ interests ahead of all others.

Andrea Carson was previously a journalist at the ABC and Fairfax Media.

Authors: Andrea Carson, Lecturer, Media and Politics, School of Social and Political Sciences; Honorary Research Fellow, Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

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