

The Senate inquiry into the future of public interest journalism began as a gleam in the media-trained eye of Labor senator Sam Dastyari. It ended on February 5, 11 days after he left parliament, his political reputation in tatters over his conduct in relation to Chinese donors to the Labor Party.

This suggests the [inquiry's recommendations](#) are unlikely to get much traction, but the very real issues it was investigating remain unresolved. How did quality media get into such a pickle and what can be done about it?

The three main developments that fed into the inquiry were: proposed changes to media ownership restrictions; the collapse of the business model that has for years sustained print media's profitability; and the rise of "fake news" and its influence in the 2016 Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump.

The government had made two previous attempts to change the media ownership laws created in a pre-internet age. But the effect of the changes, which were finally [passed in 2017](#), has largely been to protect existing mainstream media companies while failing to encourage new entrants into a [highly concentrated market](#).

Meanwhile, [according the journalists' union](#), the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the collapse of the business model has prompted mainstream media companies to lay off around 25% of journalists between 2012 and 2017.

Media companies have cut costs but have been powerless to stem the flood of advertising revenue to global behemoths Google and Facebook. Google's market capitalisation is about half Australia's gross domestic product, the Senate report notes.

The business model problem remains. As a result, the loss of journalistic talent and experience has led to significant gaps in reporting, especially in courts, state parliaments and local and regional reporting, according to the [Civic Impact of Journalism research project](#).

Bad politics shouldn't sink good ideas for public interest journalism

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Lack of resources has also made news organisations increasingly vulnerable to “fake news”. Indeed, it was the growing alarm about “fake news”, coupled with yet another round of redundancies at Fairfax Media, that provided Dastyari with the public and political impetus to begin his inquiry.

In addition to Dastyari, the inquiry lost two of its most knowledgeable members – Greens senator Scott Ludlam, who resigned from parliament over his dual citizenship, and Nick Xenophon, who resigned to contest a seat in next month's South Australian election.

The Coalition government was always unlikely to pay much heed to a Labor-chaired inquiry, but in its 149-page report the senators have grappled with important public policy issues. Their eight recommendations are:

1.

Adequately fund public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS.

2.

Guarantee future funding for community broadcasting.

3.

Embed digital media literacy in the Australian curriculum.

4.

Extend deductible gift recipient status to not-for-profit news media organisations who engage in public interest journalism.

5.

Ask Treasury to do modelling on extending tax deductibility to all Australians who subscribe to news media outlets engaging in public interest journalism.

6.

Ask the Australian Law Reform Commission to conduct an audit of current laws that hinder journalists' ability to report on national security and border protection issues.

7.

Review defamation laws.

8.

Expand legal protections for whistleblowers and other confidential sources for journalists.

These ideas are all worthy of further debate. The final three recommendations all tackle crucial press freedom issues. The call for adequate funding for the ABC and SBS follows sharp cuts under the past two Coalition governments. The community broadcasting sector has also been treated with disdain.

Teaching children the value of public interest journalism, and how to distinguish it from what the public is interested in, would be a good first step to developing a generation of more savvy media consumers.

The middle two recommendations tackle the vital question of how to pay for quality journalism. One recommendation supports not-for-profit outlets while the other would potentially benefit media outlets that rely on subscriptions. The latest in a long line of industry hopes for finding a sustainable business model is to build subscription numbers.

The senators rejected submissions from numerous people and organisations recommending some form of direct subsidy from government, either for existing media companies or to encourage new entrants.

There are clearly issues here of potential government interference in editorial independence, but the senators overlooked three points. First, many other countries around the world already provide direct subsidies, as is detailed in chapter five of their report. Second, there is evidence

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that editorial independence can be safeguarded. Finally, there is a long history in Australia of directly subsidising the news media industry, as outlined in both this report and the [Finkelstein media inquiry](#) in 2012.

The [Public Interest Journalism Foundation has suggested](#) the government extend the model of the Australia Council and set up an independent body to fund journalism. This also seems a good idea.

Whatever happens to these recommendations, the clock is ticking. If public interest journalism continues to be starved of resources, journalists' ability to unearth maladministration or corruption will be winnowed even further. Of course we won't see it, because journalists won't have been able to tell us.

As Bob Woodward of The Washington Post observed:

The central dilemma in journalism is that you don't know what you don't know.

Imagine a world where we didn't know about the Watergate scandal that Woodward was first to uncover.

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