

Senate Enquiry into Media Diversity in Australia

December 2020

**The Health impacts resulting from lack of media
diversity in Australia**

**Submission from
Emeritus Professor of Medicine, David Shearman**

About the Author

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Summary

This is a health submission. It considers how the lack of media diversity in Australia has resulted in inadequate presentation to the public of the scientific and medical facts in two key areas of national health. These are the increasing impact on health of climate change which is now regarded as the greatest health challenge of this century and the health impacts of Australia's rapidly deteriorating natural environment.

The salient issue is that the major media organisation misreports or manipulates climate and environmental science for ideological reasons and it supports uncritically the actions of federal and state government policies which are seriously harming the health of the national and international community. The minority news media has been insufficient to present the essential facts and is also being further diminished by current policies.

A simple measurement of deleterious health impacts is required with which to assess the performance of both media and government. To this end I will first concentrate on the deaths which are disregarded by government policies and their media supporters and then proceed to the issue of lack of diversity and its impact, particularly in relation to the predominant source of news in Australia. Finally, there are some suggestions for reform.

I am not categorising my submission into sections (a) to (j) for my text cuts across several and is best understood as a single entity.

Introduction

Of countless submissions I have made to parliament over 30 years, I see this one as the most important. Let me explain from my perspective of both human and planetary health both of which are based on science.

Essentially, we face a complex issue whereby the activities of humanity threaten to irreversibly harm the future of a living planet and the health and survival of all species that live on it. Over the past 30 years our governance systems have failed to act on proven scientific evidence and the majority of electors have failed to understand the gravity of the issue. Neither major political party has a policy commensurate with the size of the problem which demands net zero emissions by 2030. The latest report from UNEP indicates we are currently on course for a 3°C rise this century.¹

Those currently in government received no information about this complex issue when they were at school and likewise those who received university education. Their learning processes have been confined to the media and information received from their own colleagues and advisors and a diminishing band of independently minded bureaucrats.

¹ UNEP, UNEP DTU Partnership. Emissions Gap Report 2020. United Nations Environment Programme, 2020
<https://www.unenvironment.org/emissions-gap-report-2020>

The endpoint of this brief introduction is to indicate that diversity of the media is essential for the functioning of a democratic system which would allow decisions to be made on issues such as human survival whether it is in relation to the dangers of drugs or heat stroke in increasing heat waves. Not that this is the only rationale for the media, but it is an important need to have the scientific facts presented. Concentration of the media has resulted in a loss of this responsibility by infiltration of content with the views of owners and an overwhelming profit motive so whatever sells content carries sway.

Furthermore, at this time of media degeneration, humanity is attracted into a social media scrum of mumbo jumbo where Uncle Joe's or big brother Donald's opinion is apparently of equal veracity to that of Dr Fauci's which leads to the question as to whether the average reader can decide what is true, the answer being they cannot. Facebook has a record of misrepresenting science.²

These considerations lead to the conclusion that our democracy cannot function successfully under present conditions and the consequences are visible in several countries, not least the United States.

The deaths from climate change

The thousands of deaths each year from the sequelae of climate change are particularly distressing to doctors and health workers because they are preventable and because they will continue to rise every year unless effective climate change and energy policies are introduced. They are an indictment of the government and much of the media which supports government inaction directly and contests the science with false claims.

These deaths arise;-

- from air pollution caused by burning fossil fuels consequent from delay in transition to clean energy
- in all countries due to Australia's greenhouse gas production
- in Australia from extreme weather events as a consequence of global climate change

Air pollution - Australia

² McInerney, M. A rousing call for global action against facebook and digital platforms that spread lies. Croakey, 2020
<https://www.croakey.org/a-rousing-call-for-global-action-against-facebook-and-digital-platforms-that-spread-lies/>

Deaths arise from air pollution caused by burning coal and petrol in Australia and the world. This is the strongest indictment of government for there are means of stopping it now – clean forms of energy and electric vehicles.

The “Lethal Power” report³, indicates that air pollution from coal-burning power stations causes 800 premature deaths each year and asthma symptoms in 15,000 children and young adults. This is a devastating reminder of the malfeasance of governments over the past ten years⁴ by frequently ignoring its own air quality standards and World Health Organization (WHO) standards.

This identifies an important government strategy to downplay the importance of climate change and air pollution. Over many years the words “health externalities” have remained unused in the costing of fossil fuels in the vocabulary of both major parties. The cost of death and illness, which can be measured, is passed to the taxpayer, and not carried by the producer. Increasing the cost of energy to include deaths and thousands of illnesses would be electorally damaging.⁵

Air pollution - global

“Ambient air pollution accounts for an estimated 4.2 million deaths per year due to stroke, heart disease, lung cancer and chronic respiratory diseases. Around 91% of the world’s population live in places where air quality levels exceed WHO limits. While ambient air pollution affects developed and developing countries alike, low- and middle-income countries experience the highest burden, with the greatest toll in the WHO Western Pacific and South-East Asia regions”.⁶

Global deaths from climate change - WHO⁷

Measuring the health effects from climate change can only be very approximate. Nevertheless, a WHO assessment, taking into account only a subset of the possible health impacts, and assuming continued economic growth and health progress, concluded that climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050;

³ Farrow A., Anhäuser A., Myllyvirta L. Lethal Power: How burning coal is killing people in Australia. Greenpeace Australia Pacific, 2020

<https://www.greenpeace.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/GPAP-Lethal-Power-full-report.pdf>

⁴ Shearman D. Clean air is a human right our government chooses to ignore. Independent Australia, 2020

<https://independentaustralia.net/politics/politics-display/clean-air-is-a-human-right-our-government-chooses-to-ignore,14248>

⁵ Shearman D. LobbyLand. The politics of fossil fuels – the pits! John Menadue Pearls and Irritations, 2020

<https://johnmenadue.com/lobby-land-the-politics-of-fossil-fuels-the-pits/>

⁶ Ambient air pollution. Air quality and health World Health Organization

<https://www.who.int/teams/environment-climate-change-and-health/air-quality-and-health/ambient-air-pollution>

⁷ Climate change and health. World Health Organization, 2018

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

38,000 due to heat exposure in elderly people, 48,000 due to diarrhoea, 60,000 due to malaria, and 95,000 due to childhood undernutrition.

Globally, the number of reported weather-related natural disasters has more than tripled since the 1960s. Every year, these disasters result in over 60,000 deaths, mainly in developing countries.

Australia carries proportional responsibility for about 5 per cent of these deaths, this figure being our percentage of global greenhouse emissions.

2020 report of The *Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change – deaths⁸

This comprehensive report was released in December 2020. “Comprehensive” because it “presents 43 indicators across five sections: climate change impacts, exposures, and vulnerabilities; adaptation, planning, and resilience for health; mitigation actions and health co-benefits; economics and finance; and public and political engagement. This report represents the findings and consensus of the 35 leading academic institutions and United Nations (UN) agencies that make up The Lancet Countdown, and draws on the expertise of climate scientists, geographers, engineers, experts in energy, food, and transport, economists, social, and political scientists, data scientists, public health professionals, and doctors”.

Its introduction indicates “A changing climate threatens to undermine the past 50 years of gains in public health, disrupting the wellbeing of communities and the foundations on which health systems are built. (The 2019 report of The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: ensuring that the health of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate. *Lancet*. 2019; 394: 1836-1878) The effects of climate change are pervasive and impact the food, air, water, and shelter that society depends on, extending across every region of the world and every income group. These effects act to exacerbate existing inequities, with vulnerable populations within and between countries affected more frequently and with a more lasting impact.” (IPCC 2014: climate change 2014: impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability. Part A: global and sectorial aspects (In: Field CB Barros VR Dokken DJ Contribution of working group II to the fifth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY2014).

*I would encourage every parliamentarian to read this report for it sets out scientifically the future of Australia under current policy scenarios.

Currently, death from heat stroke is the greatest of the climate change health impacts in Australia so I will summarise this data for the Committee in the context of world deaths from this cause.

⁸ Watts, N., Amann, M., Arnell, N., Ayeb-Karlsson, S., Beagley, J., Belesova, K., et al. The 2020 report of The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: responding to converging crises. *The Lancet*, 2020
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32290-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32290-X/fulltext)

The Lancet report details the increasing year by year deaths from other extreme weather events like wildfires, flood and drought and more recently infectious diseases.

Heat related deaths – World

There is a physiological limit to human survival in high temperatures.⁹

There were 298,000 deaths in 2018 and were considerable in developed countries e.g. 104.000 in Europe.

The growing economic impact is increasing with a worldwide potential of 302 billion work hours lost in 2019, which is 103 billion hours more than that lost in 2000.

Heat related deaths have been detailed for vulnerable people ie. those over the age of 65 though many deaths also occur in other groups e.g. children and unprotected workers.

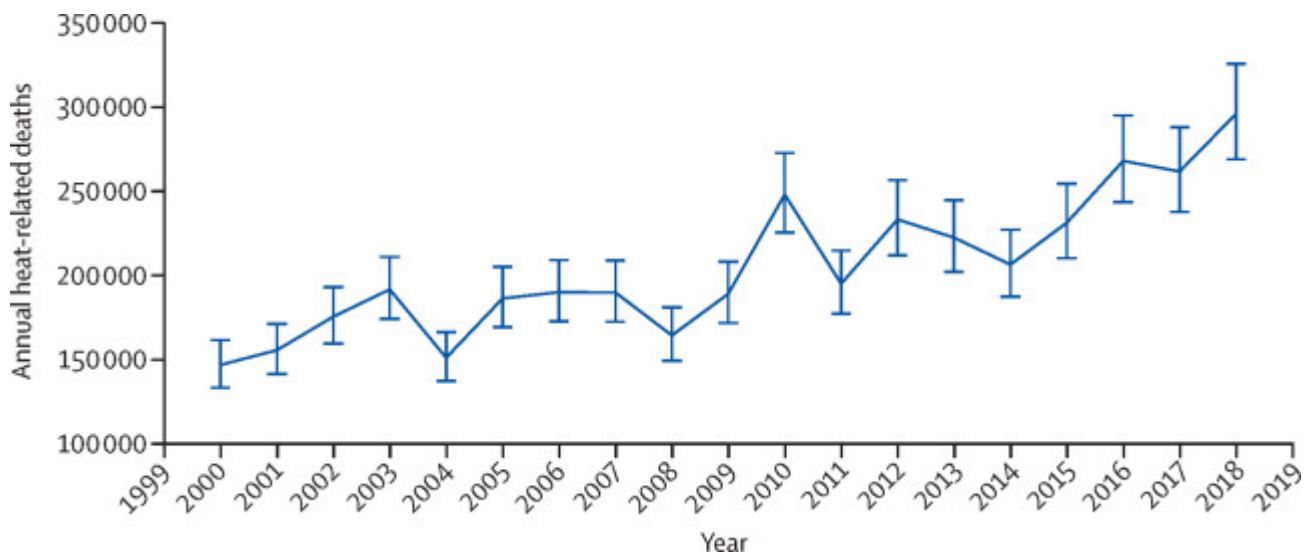


Figure 2: Global heat-related mortality for populations older than 65 years
(Lancet Countdown 2020)

Unlike deaths from COVID-19 in 2020 which now amount to 1.5m and will be controlled by vaccination, they will continue and indeed accelerate year by year with amelioration only when greenhouse emissions are controlled.

Heat related deaths- Australia

⁹ Shearman D. Health Check: how can extreme heat lead to death? The Conversation, 2018
<https://theconversation.com/health-check-how-can-extreme-heat-lead-to-death-91480>

In contrast to many other countries reported in the Lancet Countdown, there is a dearth of figures from Australia. However, one study estimates 2% of deaths in Australia between 2006 and 2017 were due to heat.¹⁰

Using the techniques detailed in the above paper, deaths in Australia from heat were 36,765 between January 2006 and October 2017.¹¹

A recent assessment from the Climate Council¹² has shown that the number of heatwave days is increasing, heat waves are occurring more frequently, the duration of the longest early heatwave is increasing, the first heatwave of the season is occurring earlier and the hottest day of the heatwave is becoming hotter.

Clearly in Australia there are other deaths due to climate change, bushfires and the resulting smoke, mental illness and suicide in droughts and other severe weather events, thunderstorm asthma etc that are not well recorded on an annual basis.

Taking into account my brief summary of deaths due to climate change as a measure of thousands of others who will suffer from ill health and resulting economic loss, we must try to understand some of the human beliefs and ideology which underpin this growing catastrophe.

The nexus of beliefs common to News Corp, the US and Australian governments

Societies in the USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand were formed by colonisation (conquest) of indigenous people and their land by the British as part of the creation of the British Empire. Their rationale was to acquire land and resources for enrichment of Britain though the naked truth was hidden in altruisms such as the civilisation of natives and Christianity. In effect this was war with the killing of countless indigenous peoples and enslaving many more. These were tribal peoples who fought between themselves but collectively had accrued enough knowledge and wisdom to manage their land and food resources over thousands of years without harm. Now after 200-300 years of plunder of our acquired environment, our Anglophone society is beginning to recognise that the deterioration of this environment is imperilling our own future and we are compelled to recognise successful indigenous stewardship of the land over thousands of years.

Essentially our economic model, based on “progress”, relies upon the consumption of the natural environment. This brings jobs and wealth based on the never-ending needs of this consumption. The checks in the original ideas of capitalism of John Hume and Adam Smith

¹⁰ Longden, T. Heat Kills. We need consistency in the way we measure these deaths. The Conversation, 2020
<https://theconversation.com/heat-kills-we-need-consistency-in-the-way-we-measure-these-deaths-120500>

¹¹ Longden, T., Quilty, S., Haywood, P., Hunter A., Gruen, R. Heat-related mortality: an urgent need to recognise and record. Planetary Health, The Lancet 2020 (Volume 4, Issue 5, E171)
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30100-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30100-5/fulltext)

¹² Dangerous Summer: Escalating bushfire, heat and drought risk. Climate Council of Australia, 2019
https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/report-dangerous-summer_V5.pdf

have been overwhelmed to cause unlimited environmental damage by a few, often facilitated by ignorant governments.

News Corp has a worldwide reach in virtually every aspect of the media, but its greater influence is in the Anglophone societies of the US and Australia with less but significant influence in Canada and New Zealand.

In the US, News Corp interests have been consistently active in promoting the policies and activities of Donald Trump whose psychopathic and narcissistic personality has directed his election intent for an economic recovery regardless of the health consequences of COVID. He demanded some states “Liberate”- i.e. relax social distancing measures to aid economic activity¹³; he refused to wear a mask and he held rallies against medical advice. As a result, deaths from Covid in the US now approach 300,000. His psychological status has been analysed by many psychiatrists in the book “Dangerous case of Donald Trump; 24 psychiatrists and mental health experts examine a President”¹⁴ which discusses his responsibility for needless deaths and suffering from his climate change and COVID policies.¹⁵

Of even more concern is the attitude of the Republican Party which in the election represented nearly half of US electors. This party has gone along with this carnage. It illustrates the power, influence and dangers of near monopoly media which can brainwash the populace with repetitive misinformation. There has been a high level of mutual support between Trump and the Murdoch media over the past 4 years.

News Corp media in Australia

In an interview¹⁶ referring to Murdoch media in the US, Malcolm Turnbull sounded the alarm over conspiracy theories and the “sort of propaganda approach of so much media, particularly that owned by Murdoch”. And he frets over the influence of Donald Trump’s lies on our public discourse.

“Instead of the community having shared facts and obviously competing opinions about those facts, you’ve got people living in a parallel universe,” Mr Turnbull said.

“It has done enormous damage in America. America’s more divided certainly than at any time in my lifetime”.

¹³ Breuninger K. Trump demands states ‘LIBERATE’ after he issues new coronavirus guidelines and protests pop up. CNBC, 2020

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/17/coronavirus-trump-demands-states-liberate-amid-protests.html>

¹⁴ Lee, B. The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump. 2017

https://www.amazon.com.au/Dangerous-Case-Donald-Trump-Psychiatrists/dp/1250179459#reader_B07NL1NHCR

¹⁵ Shearman, D. Trump’s ‘Shock and Awe’ attack on human health and the environment. Croakey, 2020

<https://www.croakey.org/trumps-shock-and-awe-attack-on-human-health-and-the-environment/>

¹⁶ Black, E. Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull on climate change, Trump and the Murdoch media. The Big Picture, The New Daily

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/politics/2020/11/27/malcolm-turnbull-big-picture-interview/>

"And this is one of the issues we've got to hang a lantern on, here in Australia, and have an open discussion about it, because this increasingly partisan, sort of propaganda approach of so much media, particularly that owned by Murdoch, is I think very corrosive of our democracy. I really do."

Mr Turnbull later describes the trend as "one of the big issues of our time" – a fight to reconcile freedom of speech with the "reality that we're drowning in lies".

"This is where Murdoch is so culpable, because Fox News has been the great enabler of it," he said.

Indeed, there is wealth of evidence that the role of Murdoch in Australia is damaging. I raise the situation of climate change inaction and indeed damage to existing environmental protection in the US¹⁷ in this submission to Parliament in Australia because the Australian government has displayed a more sophisticated Trumpism on climate change and environmental issues in general. Nevertheless, the consequences are an indictment of the Morrison government. I note Malcolm Turnbull has stated that there has been Trumpification of the Liberal party.¹⁸

Others are more qualified to speak than I am on the comprehensive impact of News Corp in Australia.

Kevin Rudd has said "The truth is Murdoch has become a cancer, an arrogant cancer on our democracy."¹⁹ The words of Malcolm Turnbull have been quoted in earlier sections of this submission.

Personal Observations on News Corp media

Over several decades News Corp has exerted increasing influence on public and governance in relation to the environment and climate change. This has resulted in a diminution in the perceived importance of the environment as a consideration when developments are being considered. Both government and News Corp media have pushed overtly and covertly a position of climate change denial accompanied with misinterpreting or fudging climate change facts, data on greenhouse emissions and health consequences. Similarly the accuracy of reporting on coal is unacceptable.²⁰

¹⁷ Shearman, D. Trump's 'Shock and Awe' attack on human health and the environment. Croakey, 2020

<https://www.croakey.org/trumps-shock-and-awe-attack-on-human-health-and-the-environment/>

¹⁸ Black, E. Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull on climate change, Trump and the Murdoch media. The Big Picture, The New Daily

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/politics/2020/11/27/malcolm-turnbull-big-picture-interview/>

¹⁹ Kelly, C. 'A Cancer': Kevin Rudd call for Royal Commission into 'Murdoch monopoly'. The New Daily, 2020

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/politics/2020/10/11/kevin-rudd-murdoch-royal-commission/>

²⁰ Vorrath, S. Murdoch and the nationals join forces against NSW and "renewable energy stuff". Renew Economy, 2020

<https://reneweconomy.com.au/murdoch-and-the-nationals-join-forces-against-nsw-and-renewable-energy-stuff-53596/>

In the 2019 bushfires in Australia, News Corp media and social media asserted on many occasions that the cause was mainly arson as a way of deflecting the responsibility from climate change. This was proven wrong.^{21, 22}

News Corp media and the Wilpena Tourist resort SA

The Australian environment and tourism report 1990²³ details the approval of the Wilpena Station Tourist Facility Act 1990, by the Bannan Government with a hotel of 120 bedrooms (four star), 30 bungalows, dormitories and over 300 camping sites. A golf course and tennis courts were under discussion.

On behalf of the Conservation Council of SA (I was President) I opposed the decision. I made a lengthy submission to the SA Parliament and gave public evidence. The decision was also opposed by the former Governor of SA the late Sir Mark Oliphant.

Our opposition was based on scientific grounds;-

- The ecology of the area was unique and fragile - it was a semi-arid region and subject to high temperatures. Extensive native vegetation would have to be cleared.
- The population numbers attracted would degrade the fragile area.
- The large water resources required had never been proven and any water usage would threaten the system of springs which sustained this oasis of vegetation in this arid region.
- In addition, and importantly the Adnyamathanha People who had special cultural claims to the area had not been properly consulted.

The Australian newspaper strongly supported the development and failed to explain both sides of the issue in a balanced way. Statements based on the above science by Oliphant and Shearman opposing the development resulted in us being called “environmental vandals” in a prominent article; an apology was not forthcoming until legal proceedings were issued. In the 30 years since this episode, I have found many experts are treated in this way which is inhibitory to scientific facts being presented.

²¹ Nguyen, K., Bogle, A. Fires misinformation being spread through social media. ABC News 2020

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-08/fires-misinformation-being-spread-through-social-media/11846434>

²² Nguyen, K., Brunero, T., Thomas, S., Keane, D., Mills, N. The truth about Australia’s fires – arsonists aren’t responsible for many this season. ABC News, 2020

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-11/australias-fires-reveal-arson-not-a-major-cause/11855022>

²³ The Australian Environment and Tourism Report. Commonwealth of Australia, 1992 (Part 3, Chapter 5, Paragraph 5.11)
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Completed_inquiries/pre1996/ausenvirontourism/index

The choice of the words *environmental vandals* illustrates a warped view of the world when protection has become vandalism because it prevents development. My experience over the intervening 30 years is that the Murdoch media considers that all development should be supported whether it relates to the natural environment or to the harm that results from damage to climate, water, or land - the human life support systems. This view is extreme and a significant threat to human survival.

My experience as an academic writing climate change referenced articles

In general, the media in Australia fails to provide a forum for scientific explanation. The majority of the media (News Corp) are impaired by their climate and economic ideology. Right of reply conferred by the media in response to referenced scientific facts rarely provides comment based on science. Instead, one is subjected to industry or political opinion stating that the author is a 'fear monger', 'chicken little', 'alarmist', 'radical lefty', all permitted by editors as right of reply to articles which attempt to explain the science for the average reader. The "zero-tolerance" approach to climate change deniers and sceptics by the Conversation²⁴ is highly commended as a significant and courageous step forward.²⁵

Consequences of current policies

These are alarming and encompass Australia's standing internationally with our failure to transition quickly to a low carbon economy and cooperate on international targets. And we suffer the shame of international Prime Ministerial statements that we are performing well when successive independent studies indicate we are not, for example our very low rating in the most recent study of 57 countries.²⁶ But the most concerning events have related to government dismissal of climate change in the post COVID recovery period with even more fossil fuel development and a failure to strengthen environmental protection. Yet Australia above all others has the expertise, appropriate climate, and wealth to lead on a green economy.

The decisions of this government have also been destructive to the most used and educative of the non-Murdoch media, the ABC. At a time when the ABC is vital to Australia's voice and image overseas, and at a time when emergency, scientific and medical information is needed in rural and regional areas, the ABC has suffered progressive budgetary cuts because of its independent voice. I reflect that authoritarianism's first step is often the suppression of independent media.

²⁴ Muller, D. Media 'impartiality' on climate change is ethically misguided and downright dangerous. The Conversation, 2020

<https://theconversation.com/media-impartiality-on-climate-change-is-ethically-misguided-and-downright-dangerous-130778>

²⁵ Shearman D. LobbyLand. The politics of fossil fuels – the pits! John Menadue Pearls and Irritations, 2020

<https://johnmenadue.com/lobby-land-the-politics-of-fossil-fuels-the-pits/>

²⁶ The Climate Change Performance Index 2021. New Climate Institute 2020

<https://newclimate.org/2020/12/07/the-climate-change-performance-index-2021/>

Australia is in a parlous state without media sources of correct information. Presently in my observation this torch is carried only by Guardian media, The Canberra Times and their community media, and several small enterprises Crikey, Pearls, Independent Australia and a few others. Nine media has good reporters but is selective in accepting factual presentations by independent experts particularly the AFR; one is not sure of the degree of editorial independence allowed.

Reforms

Reforms are urgent. Trust in the media is low. A national media of good standing is essential both to explain the increasing complexity of the issues that beset us and to rebuff the increasing flood of misinformation provided on social media. This is damning to the management of all health issues not just those resulting from climate change. For example, the distribution of QAnon information by social media has harmed many public campaigns to control COVID-19.

Reversal of the loss of media diversity will be difficult in present circumstances but is an essential part of reform to the media.

The following could be considered by the present parliament.

The ABC must be strengthened. Clearly it is not a priority of the existing government, but it is in the national interest for the reasons I have stated previously.

The Press Council must be reformed and strengthened for at present it does not appear to have any scientific, technological, or medical representation. These are areas where many complaints need redressing and the current membership and performance of the Council preclude many potential complaints which could serve to improve the standards of the media. For example, it is distressing that the News media continues to support columnists who dispute the existence of climate change using false information.

Much of the small truly independent media exists on voluntary donation from readers. If this media conforms to certain standards it could be given tax deductible status. The required standards should be incorporated into Constitutions which have to be adhered to retain status.

Government grant support for developing newsletters to expand to daily news, for example, those such as the Voice of Real Australia newsletter which covers rural and regional interests.

Proposed levies on Google and Facebook should be shared proportionally with many small media outlets in addition to News Corp, Channel 9 media, ABC and SBS.