



Summary of Digital Platforms Inquiry Journalists Forum

On 15 August 2018, the ACCC held a forum for current and former journalists in Sydney. The purpose of the forum was to provide creators of news and journalistic content an opportunity to communicate with ACCC Commissioners about their views on the impact of digital platforms on journalism in Australia.

In attendance were ACCC Chair Rod Sims, Deputy Chair Delia Rickard, Commissioner Roger Featherston, as well as General Manager of the Digital Platforms Inquiry Kate Reader. The forum was facilitated by ACCC General Manager of Strategic Communications Elise Davidson. The forum agenda is **Attachment A**.

The following is a summary of the issues discussed at the stakeholder forum.

Impact digital platforms have had on journalism in Australia

Stakeholders discussed a range of benefits and detriments associated with the impact of digital platforms on journalism.

Some stakeholders discussed the positive impacts, including increased plurality of views and the use of digital platforms and social media as a news gathering tool. It was also suggested that digital platforms allowed for more honest communication between readers and journalists about readers' interests.

However, other stakeholders maintained there was a causal link between the decline in journalistic employment (including beat reporters) and the transfer of advertising revenue from legacy media to digital platforms. Some stakeholders also suggested that new digital journalistic offerings are not alternatives to legacy media or a substitute for the decline in large scale print journalism. In this regard, some stakeholders expressed frustration at the inability of content creators to adequately monetise original works on digital platforms.

Market power

A number of stakeholders expressed the view that regulatory imbalances between broadcasters, publishers and digital platforms entrench the market power of digital platforms. Particular reference was made to uneven playing fields in advertising and verification of audiences, defamation law and copyright infringement.

Some stakeholders expressed frustration that the factors and variables search engines used to rank information and prioritise stories changed without consultation, impacting referrals and the ability of businesses to plan growth. In addition, some suggested the scale of digital platforms, combined with vertical integration of various companies, made negotiations between journalistic content creators and digital platforms uneven. Issues in relation to 'First click free' policies and Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) were discussed in this context.

Some suggested digital platforms had become skilled in leveraging dominance in one market to exercise unjustified power in another market.

Some stakeholders expressed frustration at a perceived lack of transparency with regard to digital platforms returns for publishers. Some also suggested that digital platforms had led to the demise of journalism as a career path as revenue from advertising for legacy media shifted online.

Impact on newsrooms

Stakeholders indicated there was a range of positive and negative impacts on newsrooms associated with the rise of digital platforms. Some stakeholders expressed the view that the potential reach of digital platforms made the dissemination of news easier. However, other stakeholders suggested that platforms made point of origin differentiation more difficult with some organisations losing direct contact with readers.

The requirement to repurpose all original content individually, to display on different digital platforms, was discussed in the context of impacting the quality of original content.

Some stakeholders suggested that chasing an online audience over pursuing quality investigative journalism was negatively impacting the role of journalism as the 'fourth estate'. While the benefits of a broader audience brought by digital platforms was noted by some, concerns were also expressed by some stakeholders that the quality of content being disseminated more broadly was reduced.

The impact of a contracting journalism industry on new graduates was also noted, with some stakeholders addressing the job prospects of recent graduates. Long intern periods and a necessity to work without payment to build a body of published work were discussed in this context.

Some stakeholders also outlined several concerns regarding the opaque nature of news aggregation listings. In this regard, some expressed frustration that the factors and variables search engines used to rank information and prioritise stories changed without consultation and, in their view, impacted referrals.

Impact on news quality

Stakeholders expressed varied views on the impact of digital platforms on news quality.

Some stakeholders outlined several concerns regarding the conduct of digital platforms with regard to the distribution of content. Fake news was discussed in this context. It was further suggested by some stakeholders that digital platforms should be responsible and have legal liability for the content on their platforms. Some stakeholders also suggested the tension between digital platforms acting as publishers in some instances but not in others reinforced the ability of fake news to proliferate.

However, some stakeholders drew attention to the positive impacts of the internet and digital platforms on journalism. Particular reference was made to the plurality of views consumers can now get on demand and others noted that technological advances have lowered barriers to entry for individuals wishing to publish news and journalistic content. Australia's concentrated media market, and the cost of printing as a barrier to new players before the rise of digital platforms, were discussed in this context.

Using digital platforms for your job

Stakeholders discussed a range of benefits and detriments associated with the use of digital platforms. Some stakeholders suggested that, in some newsrooms, chasing greater

distribution through digital platforms and social media was now a key performance indicator as opposed to public benefit. Some also expressed frustration that original content was not prioritised in rankings and questioned the impact of relying on digital platforms for distribution given the 'unpredictable' nature of the relationship.

However, some stakeholders drew attention to the positive impacts of the internet and digital platforms in connecting journalists with readers and as a news and information gathering tool.

Where to from here?

Some stakeholders expressed the view that there had been some successes with a philanthropy model in the United States to address issues with funding journalism, which could be useful to consider in Australia. Others suggested that overseas business models do not translate in Australia due to a lack of scale.

A number of stakeholders suggested that a better resourced public broadcaster was necessary as a sustainable online journalism model was developing and others suggested that funding by the Australian Government could assist continuing quality journalism.

Some suggested that greater regulation and enforcement of existing laws were needed to ensure media companies could continue to supply news and journalism. In this context, some expressed frustration that some digital platform ranking and indexing formulas changed without notice, leading to a detrimental impact for businesses who relied on consistency for growth. International approaches to regulation of algorithm changes were discussed in this context as some stakeholders saw regulation in this area as necessary. Others suggested that these issues could be addressed by pursuing action under the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010*.

Attachment A: Journalists forum agenda

ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry

6.00pm – 8.00pm | Wednesday 15 August 2018 | Sydney

Aerial UTS Function Centre, 235 Jones Street, Ultimo

Agenda

Agenda item
<p>Impact digital platforms have had on journalism in Australia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What have been the fundamental changes to journalism in Australia since the increase in popularity of digital platforms?• What impacts, positive and negative, are digital platforms having on journalists and journalism in Australia?• Have platforms, overall, been a positive or negative for journalists and journalism in Australia?
<p>Impact on newsrooms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are digital platforms exercising market power in commercial dealings with creators of journalistic content?• Are digital platforms impacting the availability of jobs in journalism in Australia? Or are the jobs simply shifting away from traditional to more modern media?• What impact is the competitive effect of digital platforms having on newsrooms and what flow-on effects is this having to jobs and the types of news covered?
<p>Impact on news quality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are digital platforms impacting the choice and diversity of voices in Australian journalism? If so, what are the long-term impacts of this?• What are the positive and negative impacts that digital platforms are having on the choice and quality of news?• How significant an issue is 'fake news' or misleading information and how does this impact your job and journalism in Australia more broadly?
<p>Using digital platforms for your job</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• As a journalist how do you use digital platforms?• Have digital platforms added value to how you go about your job (i.e. making it easier to connect with the public)?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages for journalists using digital platforms to publish or distribute their content?

Where to from here?

- Is government intervention needed to support quality journalism in Australia? If so, what initiatives or measures could government (or others) consider to support the provision of quality journalism in Australia?
- What is your view on the future of journalism in Australia in a digital marketplace?
- Do you think alternative distribution channels will develop beyond digital platforms (i.e. social media and search) for news and journalism in future?
- What changes, if any, would you like to see in relation to the interaction between digital platforms and journalism?