



Roundtable Summary – News Media & the Information Environment

Date: Wednesday 26 June 2024

Hosts: Ms Robyn Kruk AO, Panel Chair, and Professor Catherine Bennett, Panel Member, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Participants: News media, media peak bodies, and media and communications experts.

Purpose of this roundtable

- Australian news media played a significant role during the COVID-19 in sharing relevant information and explaining complex health topics and government directives.
- This roundtable encouraged participants to share their thoughts on what the Australian Government did well and suggestions on how to better support the sector to sustainably deliver reliable information during future public health emergencies.

What we heard at the roundtable

We need to ensure that we still have trusted and independent sources of information for the next pandemic, including a strong network of community-responsive media outlets.

Context

- The Australian Government must consider the broader information environment to understand how it affects access to trusted, sustainable, and reliable information during a pandemic that is critical for social cohesion.
- When COVID-19 occurred, the media landscape was already changing – significant decline in newsrooms, ongoing concerns about media diversity, ‘news deserts’ resulting in a lack of regional and local news, and expansion of digital platforms.
- Job Keeper and sector-specific programs helped keep some media outlets afloat.
- Journalists were recognised as essential workers, but not the rest of the full complement needed for production, including technicians and repairs. Working across borders also posed practical limits on providing news services.
- Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an absence of reliable information and a lot of uncertainty. Then there was a sudden influx or ‘firehose’ of information that was complex and changing quickly.
- Media outlets saw themselves playing a key role helping the public filter information to find what was relevant to them, and to help them make sense of what was happening.
- We heard how the media explained the government response and what it meant for people’s daily lives. The media heard what their audience needed, sought clarifying

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- information from the government and other sources and then communicated that through their various channels.
- In the initial stages of the pandemic when little was known and there was significant uncertainty, the media initially focused their efforts on describing, and where possible, explaining what was happening. This shifted over time as the pandemic continued and more was known about the virus, the media shifted to focusing more on holding governments to account for their decisions
- Local and independent news organisations and community broadcasters provided locally relevant and trusted messaging, and in many cases filled information vacuums.
- There were examples of impactful communications to First Nations people and other culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Some media organisations platformed journalists and experts with languages other than English and with links to culturally diverse communities.
- Near to real-time translations (of government resources and media conferences) were valuable and meant information was available quickly, in multiple languages. This reduced the risk of misinformation. There are opportunities in the future to use new technology such as artificial intelligence, to speed up translations and enhance information flow.
- Important work goes on behind the scenes in sense-making and information equity that meets the needs of the entire diverse Australian population.

Challenges

- Addressing misinformation and disinformation in the context of increasing conspiracy theories and polarisation was paramount during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on social media, and a more comprehensive approach is needed in future. Efforts by media to identify and address misinformation by fact checking were especially important. Australia would benefit in the future by having a more comprehensive approach to addressing misinformation and disinformation in a timely way as current work across government departments is disjointed. AI might provide some solutions but will also make the disinformation landscape more challenging.
- Media organisations that tailored information improved relevancy and credibility for specific audiences, including First Nations people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. However, these services were often under-resourced and struggled to find diverse experts.
- Some media organisations struggled to find the balance between representing a range of views on measures including masks, lockdowns and vaccination and the potential undermining of the measures. The media navigated this by prioritising measured reporting and bringing in experts to comment on complex topics.
- Some organisations faced challenges finding qualified experts to inform the public on health and science issues. The already small pool was reduced as experts advising government were often constrained by privacy provisions and it was not always possible to find experts whose profiles reflected the diversity of their audiences.

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- Later in the pandemic, a media backlash meant that journalists, news crews and publicly known experts were targeted physically and online, resulting in unsafe working conditions. In part, this was attributed to the polarisation and partisanship of public discourse about COVID-19.
- Sectoral support was vital during the COVID-19 pandemic and could be improved in the future. Government assistance was required to address operational challenges for those working in cross-border communities and definitions of essential workers. There were also challenges arising because of inconsistent staff eligibility for programs including Job Keeper.