

‘What is the difference between public broadcast journalism and commercial broadcast journalism, and what impact does this difference have on democracy in the current Australian context?’

Public Service Broadcasting has changed the face and shape of democracy British author Anthony Smith said the BBC had “Probably been the greatest of the instruments of social democracy of the century”

With the loss of many regional news outlets, catastrophic bushfires, and the COVID-19 pandemic all happening over the last, almost, two years, the need for service journalism has never been more clear.

Journalism is held to be ‘The Fourth Estate’ both in its explicit capacity of advocacy and implicit ability to frame political issues.

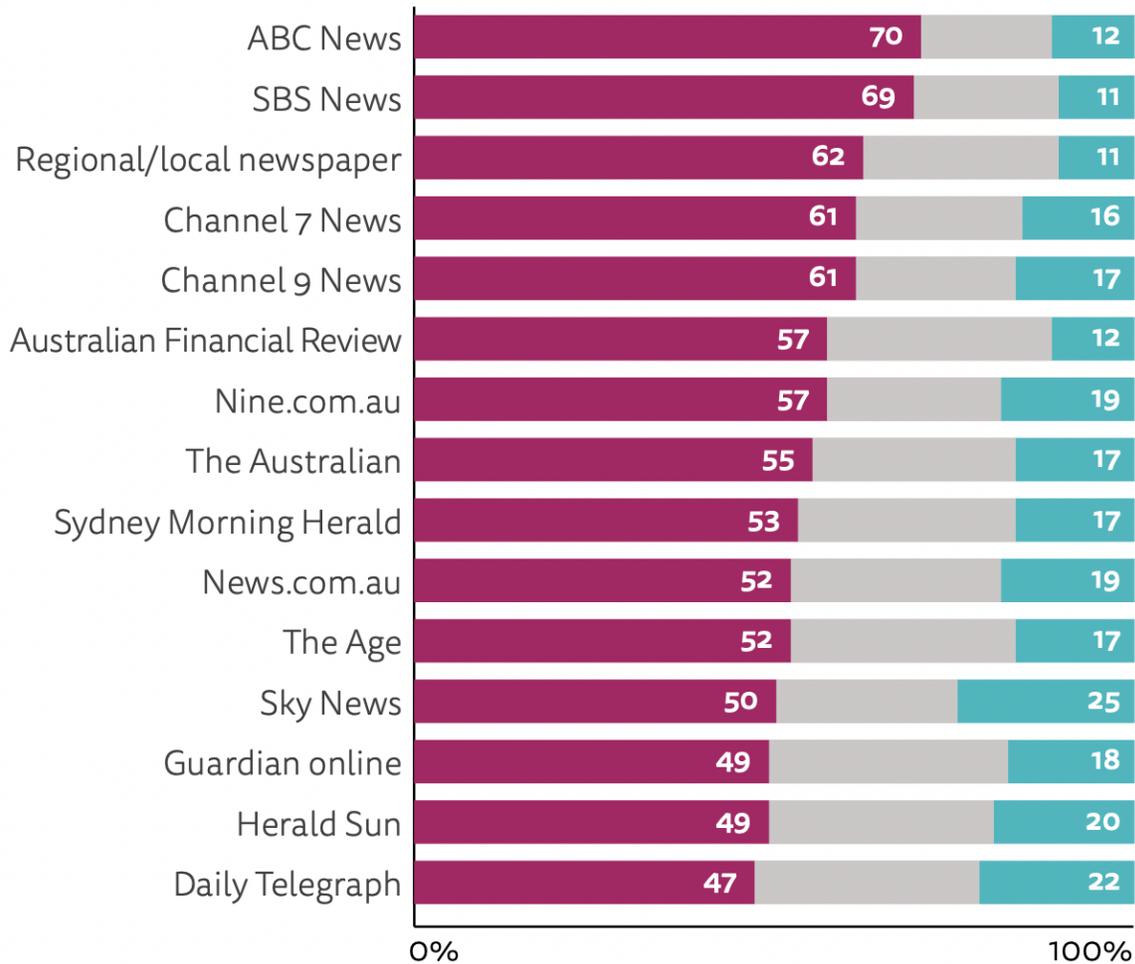
Though it is not formally recognized as a part of a political system, it wields significant indirect social influence by exposing transgressions of public trust.

With recent examples highlighting such transgressions as The Guardian’s extended coverage of Robodebt, and more historic examples such as Four Corners airing footage of systematic physical and verbal abuse of young Indigenous children and teenagers in the Northern Territory at Don Dale Youth Detention Centre prompting Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to announce a Royal Commission into the abuse.

A Reuters survey conducted in 2021 showed that the ABC was still the most trusted source of news in Australia with SBS following closely behind.

BRAND TRUST SCORES

Trust Neither Don't trust



Trust = % scored 6-10 on 10-point scale. Don't trust = 0-4, Neither = 5. Those that haven't heard of each brand were excluded. Only the above brands were included in the survey so should not be treated as a list of the most trusted brands.

Public service broadcasters provide vital services as emergency broadcasters, as well as breaking major public interest stories.

In this role they may upset the government of the day or businesses, however, that is the role of The Fourth Estate and a vital part of our democratic process.

The journalist raids of 2018 on ABC offices and the home of journalist Annika Smethurst over the release of the Afghan files and the formation of the Right To Know coalition, an alliance of

Australian media organisations pushing for stronger protections for press freedom, shows the shared space these methods of journalistic production co-exist within.

This becomes increasingly complicated as unlike other Western democracies, where rights to free speech encompass a free press, press freedom is neither recognised nor protected under Australian law.

This is where commercial media can provide another pillar of support when the pressures of unwarranted scrutiny attempt to collapse around a media outlet's investigation.

While commercial media has a long and proud history of providing investigative journalism, Australia's first investigative unit was created by The Age in 1967, the nature of commercial journalism has shown its restrictions over time.

The advertising funded model of journalism is broken and commercial media are struggling to provide public interest journalism.

Bill Brinbauer, Democracy's Watchdog Founder and CEO said that commercial journalism needs to operate in a different sphere and that'd necessarily impact the type of story they will tell.

"Commercial has to govern by rating. And so, they are generally going towards stories that attract the biggest ratings, and of the most popular in terms of Audience numbers," Mr Birnbauer said

The evolving media landscape has driven commercial media outlets to source alternative means of income as classifieds and advertising migrate to digital platforms to maximise reach.

The introduction and subsequent softening of some paywalls led to the closure of local news outlets, in 2020 NewsCorp stopped printing 112 newspapers, including 36 which closed and 76 which became stand-alone digital mastheads.

The risk of news deserts comes from a lack of accessible information to the public and even a lack of diversity in news able to be accessed.

Commercial outlets don't have the gold financial shields that they once had to battle governments and commercial organisations.

CEO of Democracy's watchdog Bill Brinbauer says valiant efforts have been put up, like Nick Mckenzie, turning his print stories into 60 minutes.

"That's not to say that there aren't commercial outlets that do serious and quite groundbreaking investigative journalism," Mr Birnbauer said.

"Nick might be a one off,"

Government-funded broadcasters are potentially at the mercy of the government the day and how far into their three year funding cycle they are.

Potentially facing pressure by governments, where-as commercial media can face pressure from business, meaning democracy requires both kinds of journalism.

And where commercial journalism falls short, like the outlets forced to go digital or fold altogether in the Leader family of papers, The ABC and SBS can provide the short fall for most communities.

It is worth noting that immediately after the public service broadcasters on the Reuters chart are regional and local broadcasters, third most trusted sources in the country.

Kristy Hess, an associate professor of Communication at Deakin University, Australia, researches the media practices and the sustainability of local news as well as the relationship between journalism, placemaking, and social order in digital settings says the ABC is not charted to protect rural areas.

“I believe that the ABC is uniquely placed as a public broadcaster and has a responsibility to meet the news needs of rural and regional areas, especially in areas identified as news deserts or where reporting of local government is non-existent.” Ms Hess said.

In order to provide the necessary services to fill the gaps in local and rural journalism, if the ABC is going to do it, then more funding is imperative.

After the 2020 bush fires a survey by market research and planning agency Ruby Cha Cha found that the ABC was the most used and most trusted broadcast network during the bushfire crisis.

When digital services and telecommunications failed, ABC Local Radio was the only way to access timely information.

The researchers asked participants the question ‘what if there was no ABC?’

Answers included:

“Without it we would have died.”, “We would lose the voice that cares the most.”, “Without the ABC there would be a level of disquiet, bordering on social unrest.”, “It would be a strategic nightmare – we would lack the most important information to help us in a time of need.”

A Cambridge study also found that in terms of civic participation and levels of trust, public media perform better than commercial media, and furthermore, encourage the raising of media standards more generally.

“I also believe the ABC can play a social role in connecting people within communities,” Ms Hess said.