

The Demise of Civic Journalism: Australia's Xenophon-Turnbull Deal

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Featured image: Senator Nick Xenophon (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

It was never spectacular, but the Australian media scape is set to become duller, more contained, and more controlled with changes to the Broadcasting Services Act. In an environment strewn with the corpses of papers and outlets strapped for cash, calls for reforming the media market have been heard across the spectrum.

The foggy deception being perpetrated by the Turnbull government, assisted by the calculating antics of South Australian senator Nick Xenophon, is that diversity will be shored up by such measures as the \$60 million “innovation” fund for small publishers while scrapping the so-called two-out-of-three rule for TV, radio and press ownership. Such dissembling language is straight out of the spin doctor’s covert manual: place innovation in the title, and you might get across the message.

As Chris Graham of *New Matilda* scornfully put it,

“The Turnbull government is going to spend \$60 million of your taxes buying a Senator’s vote to pass bad legislation designed to advantage some of the most powerful media corporations in the world.”[1]

Paul Budde of *Independent Australia* was similarly excoriating.[2]

“To increase power of the incumbent players through media reforms might not necessarily have an enormous effect on the everyday media diversity, but it will allow organisations such as the Murdoch press to wield even greater power over Australian politics than is already the case.”

As the statement from Senator Xenophon’s site reads,

“Grants would be allocated, for example, to programs and initiatives such as the purchasing or upgrading of equipment and software, development of apps, business activities to drive revenue and readership, and training, all of which will assist in extending civic and regional journalism.”[3]

The communications minister Mitch Fifield went so far as to deem the fund “a shot in the arm” for media organisations, granting them “a fighting chance”.

The aim here, claims the good senator, is to throw down the gauntlet to the revenue

pinchers such as Facebook and Google while generating a decent number of recruits through journalism cadetships. Google, claimed Xenophon in August, “are hoovering up billions of dollars or revenue along with Facebook and that is killing media in this country.”[4]

Google Australia managing director Jason Pellegrino had a very different take: you only had to go no further than the consumer.

“The people to blame are you and I as news consumers, because we are choosing to change the behaviour and patterns of (how) we are consuming news.”

Xenophon’s patchwork fund hardly alleviates the consequences that will follow from scrapping of the rules on ownership. Having chanted the anti-Google line that its behaviour is distinctly anti-democratic, his agreement with the government will shine a bright green light for cash-heavy media tycoons keen on owning types of media (radio, television, papers) without limits. The line between commercial viability and canned journalism run by unelected puppet masters becomes all too real, while the truly independent outlets will be left to their social Darwinian fate.

Labor senator Sam Dastyari saw the Turnbull-Xenophon agreement has having one notable target, and not necessarily the social media giants who had punctured the media market with such effect.

“They are doing in the Guardian. You have thrown them under the bus.”[5]

The measure is odd in a few respects, most notably because regional papers were hardly consulted on the measure. This, it seemed, was a hobby horse run by the senator through the stables of government policy. In the end, the horse made it to the finishing line.

The very idea of linking government grants to the cause of journalism constitutes a form of purchasing allegiance and backing. How this advances the cause of civic journalism, as opposed to killing it by submission, is unclear. The temptation for bias – the picking of what is deemed appropriately civic, and what is not, is all too apparent.

The package supposedly incorporates an “independence test” by which the applicant publisher can’t be affiliated with any political party, union, superannuation fund, financial institution, non-government organisation or policy lobby group. Further independence is supposedly ensured by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), which will administer the fund.

The decision about which organisation to fund is already implied by the scale of revenue. The cut-off point, for starters, is an annual turnover of not less than \$300,000 in revenue. The other end of the scale is a ceiling of \$30 million, which, for any media outlet, would be impressive.

This media non-reform package also comes on the heels of another dispiriting masquerade: an attempt to import a further layering of supposed transparency measures on the ABC and SBS, a position long championed by senator Pauline Hanson. This reactionary reflex, claimed

the fuming crossbench Senator Jacqui Lambie, was “the worst lot of crap I have seen”, the sort of feculence designed to punish the public broadcaster for being “one step ahead when it comes to iView and their social media platforms.”[6]

Between the giants of Google and Facebook, and a government happy to sing before the tycoons, a small publishing outlet is best going it alone in an already cut throat environment, relying on the old fashioned, albeit ruthless good sense, of the reader. Have trust that the copy will pull you through, or perish trying to do so.

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Notes

[1] <https://newmatilda.com/2017/09/17/big-media-bad-policy-turnbulls-60m-media-bailout-wont-fix-journalism/>

[2] <https://independentaustralia.net/business/business-display/coalition-xenophon-deal-scrap-media-diversity-along-with-ownership-control,10730#.Wb8pwLZJOho.facebook>

[3] <https://nick.nxtmps.org.au/media/releases/full-list-of-media-reform-measures-negotiated-by-nxt/>

[4] <http://www.news.com.au/technology/online/nick-xenophon-googles-stated-advertising-revenue-a-load-of-bs/news-story/2b94980e5e2300058909b2ea9e18533b>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/sep/13/turnbull-government-secures-deal-to-scrap-media-ownership-controls>

[6] <http://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2017/09/14/jacqui-lambie-abc-one-nation-media/>

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