

**Presentation to PHAA Conference, Cairns
By Melissa Sweet, on behalf of the Croakey News team
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#AUSTPH2018

Public Interest Journalism

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of these lands, and paying my respects to your Elders, past present and future. I also acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues at this conference and your contributions to public health – *and* to public interest journalism.

Today, I am speaking about public interest journalism: what it is – and what it is not; why it should be considered a determinant of health; the crisis in public interest journalism; and how the public health sector can contribute to public interest journalism – and thus a healthier future for all.

Public interest journalism is a health issue



Design by Mitchell Ward



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Public Interest Journalism

What is public interest journalism?

The Ethical Journalism Network draws a distinction between journalism of interest to the public **versus** journalism that is in the public interest; it says:

“The public interest is in having a safe, healthy and fully-functioning society. In a democracy, journalism plays a central role in that. It gives people the information they need to take part in the democratic process. That is why there is a public service ethic at the heart of all serious journalism.”

Public interest journalism is about holding power to account, whether that be the power of governments, of corporations, or of the medical industrial complex – or indeed of public health advocates.

It is also about amplifying the voices of those who are not well served by the current distribution of power.

It is important to distinguish between public interest journalism – which is a multidisciplinary practice – and the media, which refers to organisations driven by corporate and ideological agendas, as we see all too often in Australia and elsewhere.

Public interest journalism has played a critical role in many public health advances – uncovering malfeasance in many industries, from tobacco to asbestos and fossil fuels.

Most recently, look at The Guardian’s [transparency project](#) uncovering the links between corporate lobbyists and the Canberra corridors of power, and its series on [deaths in custody](#).

Public interest journalism also has a critical role in challenging the deficit discourse that permeates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, and in identifying and addressing racism.

Yet public interest journalism is rarely, if ever, named in models outlining the social determinants of health.

However, if you read between the lines of documents such as the final report from the [2008 Commission on Social Determinants of Health](#), the role of public interest journalism can be clearly inferred as an important determinant of health.

The report notes that health equity is affected by global economic and social systems, states that action on the social determinants of health must involve the whole of government, civil society and local communities, business, global fora, and international agencies.

Further, it says that policies and programmes must embrace all key sectors of society – not just the health sector.

And one of the three principles underpinning the Commission’s recommendations is: “tackle the inequitable distribution of power, money and resources.” This is core business for public interest journalism.

Why is public interest journalism in crisis?

However, the capacity of public interest journalism to contribute to planetary health and to healthier people, societies, and systems of governance is under attack.

Quite simply, public interest journalism is in crisis, in Australia and globally.

The key reasons are:

- ONE: The global collapse of the business model that used to support public interest journalism.

In Australia, it's estimated that newspaper advertising revenue dropped 40 per cent in just five years, and that mainstream media companies laid off about one quarter of their journalists between 2012 and 2017. The loss of journalistic talent and experience has led to significant gaps in reporting, and little capacity for training the next generation.

- TWO: The rise of authoritarianism – what ABC journalist Peter Greste recently referred to as “the war on journalism”. Perhaps some of you have seen footage from the US of journalists fleeing from public meetings for their own safety, after President Trump made inflammatory comments about journalists being “the enemy of the people”. Around the world, journalism is under attack.

- THREE: The power of corporate platforms such as Facebook and Google and their amplification of fake news and mistrust in institutions, including of public interest media organisations – from the New York Times to the ABC.

In addition to these global challenges, Australia faces some particular problems:

- Cuts to publicly funded media: the ABC and SBS operate in a hostile political environment. The recent fracas at the ABC is just the latest reminder.
- We also see the increasing concentration of corporate ownership, which will only be intensified if the ACCC allows the Nine takeover of Fairfax. We've been warned that this will likely result in Peter Costello, Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Stokes in charge of most Australian media. As one longtime editor, Bruce Guthrie, wrote: “it's a scary thought that so much of the Fourth Estate could be overseen by just three men. And each with a decidedly conservative view of the world too. Not much diversity there.”
- We also have a wider policy environment making it more difficult – and dangerous – for whistle-blowers, public interest advocates and

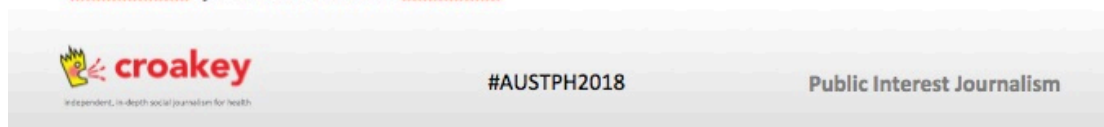
journalists to scrutinise power. For example, changes to national security legislation have significantly undermined press freedom – and it’s worth noting that these national security changes have been passed with bipartisan support.

- Our policy environment is unsupportive of non profit journalism – unlike places like the United States, where it has been flowering. In the US, much excellent health journalism is undertaken by organisations like ProPublica and the Centre for Investigative Reporting.

Senate inquiry recommendations

1. Adequately fund public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS.
2. Guarantee future funding for community broadcasting.
3. Embed digital media literacy in the Australian curriculum.
4. Extend deductible gift recipient status to not-for-profit news media organisations who engage in public interest journalism.
5. Ask Treasury to do modelling on extending tax deductibility to all Australians who subscribe to news media outlets engaging in public interest journalism.
6. Ask the Australian Law Reform Commission to conduct an audit of current laws that hinder journalists’ ability to report on national security and border protection issues.
7. Review defamation laws.

Summarised by Professor Matthew Ricketson.



In February this year, a Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism made some useful recommendations. Thus far they have sunk without trace and there is little political interest in pursuing them.

However, they provide a useful resource for civil society, including the public health sector, in advocating for change.

If you haven’t [read the report](#), please do!

How can you help?

- Support policy and law reform to enable PIJ to flourish.
- Incorporate PIJ into public health frameworks - eg models of SDOH, HiAP, HIA, and health literacy - research, teaching and practice.
- Contribute to new models for public interest journalism, including the emerging not for profit sector.

#PIJ – it's your business too.



Times of crisis are also times for reinvention and transformation. There is a great opportunity for the public health sector to be part of this reinvention and transformation, to make PIJ your business too.

On that note, I'd like to acknowledge the PHAA and many of the organisations and individuals participating in this conference for your support and engagement with our work at Croakey.

- See our series on [public interest journalism](#).

#PIJ - it's your business too.