

18 January 2021

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications

**SUBMISSION: Media Diversity in Australia**

Like all democratic systems, Australia's democracy depends on equal access to fact-based information and informed, independent public debate. Thank you for conducting this critically important Inquiry.

ClimActs, CLIMARTE and LIVE are community-based groups, concerned with the climate crisis and the corporate, media and political tactics which exacerbate this existential threat. We have grown increasingly concerned about News Corp's perfidious distortion of facts and the grave threats its misreporting poses to Australians, as well as to the global community. Since April 2019, ClimActs has engaged in a performative campaign to shine a light on News Corp's ongoing egregious breaches of truth and trust.

This submission contends that:

- Australia's concentrations of media ownership are anti-competitive, which is enabling misleading and deceptive content to be disseminated by media outlets;
- Misleading and deceptive content disseminated by media outlets is harmful to individuals, local communities and is dangerously degrading Australia's democracy;
- Such conduct:
  - Fails to deliver news and information services that are of "acceptable quality"; and
  - Is inconsistent with the Federal Government's role to protect the welfare of Australians.
- The Australian Federal Government's role properly extends to:
  - Ensuring that anti-competitive concentrations of media ownership are not permitted to persist, or to occur in the future;
  - Protecting consumers of news and information services from false and misleading claims; and
  - Ensuring that Australia's media outlets deliver news and information services that are of "acceptable quality", which requires that those news and information services are well-regulated, informed and accountable.



***Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state.***

**Noam Chomsky<sup>1</sup>**

### **Global Lawless Culture**

In July 2011, the *News International* phone-hacking scandal broke to international outrage. Under substantial public pressure, the UK government commissioned Lord Justice Leveson to lead an Inquiry into the “culture, practices and ethics of the press in its relations with the public, with the police, with politicians, and as to the police and politicians, the conduct of each.” During nearly nine months, the Inquiry heard evidence from 337 witnesses appearing in person, as well as statements from nearly 300 others (individuals or groups).<sup>2</sup>

Whilst the Leveson Inquiry’s evidence speaks for itself, Nick Davies’ subsequent book [\*Hack Attack: How the truth caught up with Rupert Murdoch\*](#) (2014) more fully documents the culture of abuse and contempt behind the hacking scandal, as well as the hostility those responsible for it hold towards any questioning of their activities.<sup>3</sup> Davies warned: “*The story of the phone-hacking scandal happens to have unfolded in the United Kingdom, but it could have happened anywhere in the world. News Corp itself has spent years playing the power game in Australia and the United States and China, and anywhere else where its commerce has led it. Those other countries have suffered comparable abuse by News Corp and by other similar forces.*”<sup>4</sup>

Numerous other exposés by investigative reporters and media academics have reached more or less the same conclusions—such as, *The Monthly’s* article covering News Corp’s dysfunctional hierarchy—[The endless reign of Rupert Murdoch](#) (July 2018)<sup>5</sup> and the *New York Times* feature on News Corp’s rogue culture—[Planet Fox: How Rupert Murdoch’s Empire of Influence Remade The World](#) (April 2019) which showed just how influential and dangerous News Corp’s globally organised “unabashedly nationalist, far-right and hugely profitable political propaganda machine” has become.<sup>6</sup>

Given the depth and breadth of research already done by so many dedicated investigative reporters and media academics over many years, it is reasonable to suggest that for a long time it has been common knowledge that News Corp outlets in particular regularly breach the APC’s long established [standards of practice](#) in ways that are harmful to individuals, as well as to their communities.

### **Monopolistic Media Control**

In [Paper Emperors: The Rise of Australia’s Newspaper Empires](#) (2019), Sally Young recounts the history of newspaper owners that were “hidden behind elaborate company structures, shadowy trusts and proxy shareholders”. Owned and controlled by “powerful mining magnates, secret bankrupts and failed land boomers, *Underbelly*-style gangsters, bankers and corporate titans”, history shows the point and purpose of Australia’s commercial media was to conceal information and manipulate public discourse for personal gain.<sup>7</sup>

As Young's research shows, Rupert Murdoch's father Keith "understood better than any other journalist of his generation, that political influence was at the heart of owning and running a newspaper. In private, he talked about "training" the public through his journalism."<sup>8</sup>

Given that "moulding public opinion" appears to have always been News Corp's main purpose, it should not come as a surprise that in response to the question "of all the things in your business empire, what gives you most pleasure?", Rupert Murdoch said [in 2007]: "[being involved with the editor of a paper in a day-to-day campaign...trying to influence people](#)".<sup>9</sup>

Despite the above-mentioned phone-hacking scandal, and the recognition that Australia's media ownership was one of the [highest in the world](#),<sup>10</sup> in 2016 News Corp was granted permission to purchase [APN's Australian regional media](#).<sup>11</sup> Acquiring APN gave News Corp a [virtual monopoly of Queensland's newspapers](#)<sup>12</sup>, and with [more than 170 papers](#) nationally<sup>13</sup> (as well as many other [media assets](#)<sup>14</sup>), it had well and truly consolidated its monopoly power over what so-called 'news' is consumed in Australia.

In March, as communities were coming to grips with the deadly impacts of COVID-19, News Corp and Nine seemingly suddenly announced the [closure of trusted national newswire service Australian Associated Press](#) (AAP est. 1935, ironically by Keith Murdoch).<sup>15</sup> The AAP provides services for around 400 media outlets across Australia (including the ABC and SBS), and is a major employer of public interest journalists and photographers. At the time of its announcement, News Corp said it intended to simply establish its own newswire service to serve its own publications. However, when AAP was saved—thanks to intervention from the ACCC and independent funders keen to preserve media diversity, public interest journalism and informed democracy—News Corp announced that it would set up in competition by itself getting into the wholesale news business. News Corp's aim is presumably to [kill off independent news](#) that supports its much smaller public interest focussed competitors while exerting even greater influence over Australians' access to news and information for commercial and political purposes.<sup>16</sup>

Soon after announcing its intention to close the AAP, News Corp advised that it would be ['suspending' 60 of its community newspapers](#), as well as announcing plans to close or suspend printing operations of more than [100 suburban and community titles](#).<sup>17</sup>

As a result, many Australian communities were left without any local news. As hundreds of its employees were losing their jobs and security, News Corp claimed that: "COVID-19 did not create this crisis [reduced advertising revenue], but it brought it to a head" and blamed "international platforms" (Google and Facebook) who, "unlike us", have "no commitment to local communities".<sup>18</sup> However, all things considered—including the cannibalising impact on newspapers of News Corp's own investments in digital [online advertising platforms](#)<sup>19</sup>—this sounded more than a little cynical.

Either way Australia's media structure is blatantly anti-democratic and dysfunctional. To protect individuals and Australia's democracy, News Corp must be outright forbidden from operating a wholesale newswire service, and its monopolistic concentration of ownership should be curtailed. It goes without saying that all media outlets should be held to account if they fail to comply with the APC's [standards of practice](#)

## Dark Money

As the above-mentioned [Paper Emperors: the rise of Australia's newspaper empires](#) (2019)<sup>20</sup> by Sally Young documents, News Corp (founded as News Limited, 1922) was “[secretly established by a mining company](#) owned by the most powerful industrialists of the day, and it was created for the express purpose of disseminating anti-union, pro-mining ‘propaganda’.”<sup>21</sup>

Rupert Murdoch’s close ties to heavy industry front groups and hard line, anti-science think tanks—including Australia’s leading climate sceptic lobby group, the [Institute of Public Affairs](#)<sup>22</sup>—have long been known. In fact, along with GJ Coles (Coles group) and Harold Darling (BHP) among other powerful business men, Rupert’s father Keith co-founded the IPA.<sup>23</sup> Whilst it has always been secretive about its funding, it appears that particularly great efforts have been made to conceal the fact that the IPA is now [largely funded by mining magnate Gina Rinehart](#).<sup>24</sup>

During the 1970s, the fossil fuel industry’s own scientists were warning of the deadly consequences of its products. Meanwhile—in close collaboration with a global network of similarly structured industry front groups—the IPA continues aggressively driving [campaigns to mislead and deceive on climate facts while promoting misinformation](#).<sup>25</sup> As a so-called ‘Approved Research Institute’, the IPA enjoys ‘[Deductible Gift Recipient](#)’ (charitable) status which means that donors with special interests receive tax deductions for covertly advancing policies that will make them even richer and hence more powerful.<sup>26</sup>

The public got a rare insight into IPA machinations when it held a black-tie gala event at Victoria’s National Gallery of Victoria to celebrate its 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, which happened to fall on the eve of the bitterly contested 2013 Federal election. Rupert Murdoch delivered the keynote [speech](#)<sup>27</sup> to esteemed guests, including Gina Rinehart and the then Cardinal George Pell (who in the face of legal challenges for child sex offences News Corp commentators continued to vigorously champion). Murdoch slammed the Gillard government for “wasting money and resources” after it had announced [an independent inquiry into Australia's print and online media](#) in response to the above-mentioned *UK News International* hacking scandal.

Another prominent guest speaker at the event was the then Opposition leader Tony Abbott whose speech directly addressed the IPA’s apparent tireless lobbying efforts, saying: “So ladies and gentlemen that is a big yes to many of the 75 specific policies you [IPA Executive Director, John Roskam] urged upon me.”<sup>28</sup>

As we now know, at the top of the IPA’s policy wish list was scrapping all climate protection laws (secured through the Clean Energy Future legislation 2011, including the carbon price and a strengthened Renewable Energy Target) and dismantling all independent agencies established to promote zero emission energy alternatives to dirty and dangerous fossil fuels (ie Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC), Climate Change Authority, the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA), and the Carbon Farming Initiative, more on this later).

The IPA has long pushed for a fire-sale of Australia’s independent news broadcasters, the ABC and SBS to industry friendly commercial media owners.<sup>29</sup> If such a policy would be implemented, the stripping of Australia’s natural assets while destroying its unique flora and fauna would be made much easier.

## **Code of Silence**

Whilst long suspected, a new report—[‘Consequences of information suppression in ecological and conservation sciences’](#)<sup>30</sup>—has revealed [‘shocking detail’](#) about how scientists in government, industry and universities are being silenced and prohibited from communicating evidence on critical environment issues including the impacts of mining, logging and land clearing, the climate and biodiversity crisis.<sup>31</sup> Cases of harassment and fears about being misrepresented in the media were cited as key reasons why scientists refrain from making a contribution to public discussions about their area of expertise.

Given its long record of defending harmful industries against scrutiny, it is reasonable to argue that News Corp has played a major role in entrenching the ‘code of silence’ culture around scientific evidence that reveals grave ecological problems. In some way or another, the consequences of this will ultimately be felt by all Australians.

Given what is at stake, it is reasonable to question: Why Australia’s laws—such as, our anti-monopoly laws and/or our consumer rights protections—are not working to effectively limit News Corp’s capacities to largely own and control the so-called ‘news’ for commercial and political purposes?

It is worth noting here the wholesale absence of News Corp reporting on the IPA’s (as well as other aligned right-wing industry front groups) undue influence in Australian public life. For instance, most Australians would likely be unaware that entrenched socially and ecologically extractive industries are getting tax deductions for advancing their financial interests no matter how dangerously degrading they are to our vital ecosystems as well as threatening to our democracy.

## **“Game of Mates”**

Australians should be able to trust the media to report facts and to interrogate what economists Dr Cameron K Murray and Paul Frijters research reveals is in fact a deeply unfair [‘Game of Mates’](#) (aka ‘Crony Capitalism’). It is corrupt and degrading to have a system that tolerates ‘political donations’ and ‘consultancies’, and the [‘revolving door’](#) offering lucrative industry appointments and other ‘favours’ for government decision-makers willing to aid and abet socially exploitative and extractive industries.<sup>32</sup>

Not only is this compromising our environment and our economy but, as Murray and Frijters work shows, by significantly increasing costs, it’s robbing ordinary Australians of roughly half of our wealth.<sup>33</sup>

## **Gaslighting Australia**

In 2007, “former Country Young Liberal of the Year, Howard government ministerial speechwriter and aspiring federal candidate”—and subsequent author of [High & Dry: John Howard, climate change and the selling of Australia’s future](#)—Guy Pearse revealed that Australia’s self-proclaimed *Greenhouse Mafia* were effectively drafting Australia’s climate, environment and energy policies in order to maximise their profits.<sup>34</sup> A glance at the Morrison government’s [National COVID-19 Commission](#)<sup>35</sup> (the NCC, and its ‘gas-fired recovery taskforce’) suggests that such conflicts of interest may now run even deeper.

According to a [Melbourne University policy brief](#), “several features of the NCC are of concern, including: a lack of any legislative underpinning and clear, independent appointment process typically expected of publicly-funded bodies; opaque operations; little legal clarity whether it can form ‘part of’ cabinet and rely on cabinet confidentiality; and the absence of a duty to publicly disclose conflicts of interest.”<sup>36</sup> As has been the subject of questioning during the [Senate Select Committee on Covid-19](#), at least five members of the manufacturing task force advising the commission have direct financial or commercial interests in the development of infrastructure for gas.<sup>37</sup> And given that economies with higher levels of education/training, diversity and complexity are more [resilient](#),<sup>38</sup> the commission’s particular fondness for [gas development](#) to steer Australia out of economic ruin does seem illogical.<sup>39</sup>

This is not to suggest that Australia does not have a gas problem that needs solving. As the [ACCC’s Inquiry](#) into gas supply arrangements<sup>40</sup> shows, for many years Australian consumers have been paying [significantly higher prices](#) than the equivalent export price of our gas (LNG); an extremely unfair situation that the Coalition government has wilfully ignored.<sup>41</sup> Yet, contrary to expert advice and basic logic, the Morrison government is now rolling out announcements that in order to save our economy public money is going to have to fund [new greenhouse gas intense gas projects](#) because the private sector won’t.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to this market intervention, the so-called free-market driven Morrison government is seeking to force through changes to the mandates of both clean energy agencies (the aforementioned [Arena and CEFC](#)) so that they can be used as vehicles for further publicly funding fossil fuel infrastructure.<sup>43</sup>

Surely, if there was any chance of carbon capture and storage (CCS) being effective and economical, as well as safe (escaping plumes of CO<sub>2</sub> are deadly) then the commercial sector (rather than taxpayers) would have driven its development decades ago. In reality, CCS is a model example of ‘predatory delay’<sup>44</sup>.

In short, apparently designed by its political donors, the Coalition government’s COVID recovery plan is to use taxpayers’ money to prop up costly, experimental, inefficient and ecocidal so-called “low emission” technologies that will turbocharge the climate and biodiversity emergency.

We ask, would any Federal leaders wilfully ignore independent experts (in energy, technology, science, health, engineering, economics) to instead adopt harmful-industry-friendly measures using taxpayers money if Australia had a fully accountable [Federal Independent Commission Against Corruption](#) (ICAC)?<sup>45</sup> And would we be hearing more informed and robust public debate about enormously consequential decisions if Australia’s media was more diverse and accountable?

Australia’s monopolistic media structure is a testament to our opaque system of political influence; to the seemingly limitless power afforded those who are willing to exchange favours, to reward their mates. It is the media’s job to expose and interrogate corruption in all its forms. Wherever any taxpayers’ money or assets are involved, there should never be any clauses that disallow the public from seeing the full terms and conditions of the ‘deals’ being arranged on their behalf with their wealth.

This, in turn, reinforces the need for media regulators capable of effectively holding the media to account for not only failing to do its job but for playing an active role in helping to conceal important public interest information, and/or for spreading falsehoods.

### **Woeful Reporting**

It would likely be an impossible task to count all of the occasions where News Corp has spread falsehoods and failed to correct the record. Back in 2011 Robert Manne's *Quarterly Essay "Bad News: Rupert Murdoch's Australian and the Shaping of a Nation"*<sup>46</sup> described how aggressively and strategically News Corp misreports on science and sustainable technology. Similar observations were made by the Union of Concerned Scientists' report, "[Is News Corp. Failing Science?](#)" (2012)<sup>47</sup>, and "[Big Australian Media reject climate science](#)" (2011-2012)<sup>48</sup> by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at University of Technology Sydney, noting that Australia "emits more greenhouse gas per capita than any other country in the OECD [and] may have the highest concentration of [climate change] scepticism in its media in the world."<sup>49</sup>

We are not suggesting that News Corp outlets never factually report on climate and environment issues but, as the reports cited above show, for every fact-based piece there appear to be between eight and ten pieces that undermine scientific facts and sustainable technology reporting while championing harmful industries. Meanwhile, News Corp's apparent penchant for hosting populist, anti-science commentators ensures that issues of significant public interest are treated like ammunition for divisive culture wars against anyone advocating for a more fair and clean society. Ironically, it is environment and social justice advocates referring to facts and evidence who are accused of starting the so-called 'culture wars'.

### **Contempt for Australia's Media Standards of Practice**

This submission contains many examples demonstrating News Corp's disregard for facts, as well as for the [journalist code of ethics](#)<sup>50</sup>. The ongoing championing of climate deniers and populists—even after they have been found [guilty of breaching Australia's racial vilification laws](#)<sup>51</sup>—makes a mockery of the APC's [standards of practice](#).

It appears that for a long time News Corp has been actively and publicly [undermining the APC's authority and independence](#).<sup>52</sup> For instance, in response to community complaints about its ongoing publication of falsehoods, News Corp (which due to its sheer size is the APC's largest funder) has threatened to withdraw its membership.

This in no way suggests that staff at the APC are not capable and caring. The problems are systemic. The fact that the APC has been placed in the highly compromising position of being financially dependent on membership fees from the powerful media giants it is tasked with regulating suggests that it has been set up to fail to actually be effective. Logically this poses serious threats to consumers of news and information services as well as to the health of Australia's democracy.

### **Costs of Misreporting – A Snapshot**

News Corp is cited as a key force in preventing former ALP Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his Government's proposed Super Profits tax, which was modelled on Norway's phenomenally successful sovereign wealth fund.<sup>53</sup>

Established in 1990 to manage petroleum revenues from North Sea oil fields, the fund is now the largest in the world. Further to this, valued at more than [\\$US1 trillion](#), Norway's fund has a determined strategy to divest from fossil fuel investments.<sup>54</sup>

Meanwhile, unimaginable material wealth has been generated for private mining interests and their enablers from extracting finite resources from Australia. It would be interesting to put a financial value on News Corp's role in preventing our nation from enjoying a fair and reasonable share of the benefits.

Viewed another way, since Australia's mining industry is [86 per cent foreign owned](#), the pillaging of our common natural assets is filling the pockets of a few, and mainly they are offshore investors, who are funding covert, aggressive lobbying campaigns that actively undermine Australia's actual 'common wealth'.<sup>55</sup>

So, considering the unfathomable cost to our nation, we think it is only fair that Australians know how much News Corp pocketed from the [reported \\$22 million](#) campaign to kill Australia's proposed Super Profits Tax, and to dump our Prime Minister for daring to propose such a reasonable and proven policy to manage the depletion of our finite resources, along with all of the associated adverse consequences.<sup>56</sup>

Another example of media meddling was News Corp's propaganda campaign to oust the socially and environmentally progressive Gillard minority ALP Government. It was quite apparent that Murdoch did not respect Prime Minister Julia Gillard, and responded to the 2010 federal election result by summoning his Australian editors and senior journalists to his home in California to ensure they would [campaign strongly against her Government](#).<sup>57</sup>

As referred to earlier, it was the Gillard Government's Clean Energy Act 2011 (drafted by the [Multiparty Climate Change Committee](#)<sup>58</sup>, which was a Greens Party condition of support for Gillard) that News Corp was determined to kill.

Operating from mid 2012 to mid 2014—as a complementary suite of 18 bills informed by experts—Australia's Clean Energy laws were arguably the world's most effective climate and environment protection laws at the time. Not only did Australia's emissions come down significantly and quickly but tens of thousands of new more sustainable jobs were created, and local economies benefited from hundreds of millions of dollars in new investment in the clean energy sector.

More recently, presumably for daring to propose the National Energy Guarantee (NEG), former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's leadership of the Coalition was savaged and ultimately destroyed by News Corp outlets whose commentators warned Liberals in hysteric tones to ["stand against Turnbull's global warming idiocy"](#).<sup>59</sup> This was ironic given the NEG policy was in fact an [absurdly weak and inadequate plan](#) presenting dangerously insufficient climate and energy policies as a solution to the growing need for greater energy security and reliability, while ensuring that entrenched fossil fuel interests would continue to be generously protected by Australian taxpayers.<sup>60</sup>



In his subsequent book, *A Bigger Picture* (published April 2020), Turnbull claims that [News Corp operates like a political party](#), collaborating closely with right-wing politicians using “privileged access” to influence policies and elections, and to attack politicians who will not be easily manipulated.<sup>61</sup> Turnbull’s words echo those of Kevin Rudd’s, who claims that Rupert Murdoch is “the greatest cancer on democracy”. Rudd’s view is that: “Murdoch is not just a news organisation. Murdoch [operates as a political party](#), acting in pursuit of clearly defined commercial interests, in addition to his far-right ideological world view.”<sup>62</sup> In a CNN Business interview Rudd went even further, arguing that Murdoch uses [“mafia”-like intimidation tactics against dissenting voices](#).<sup>63</sup>

Following unprecedented fires that devastated more than [18.6 million hectares](#), an untold number of ancient, [sacred Aboriginal sites](#)<sup>64</sup> and burnt [more than 1.25 billion animals](#) to death,<sup>65</sup> as well as destroying the natural habitats of survivors, it is reasonable to question whether Australia’s Summer of 2019-20 would have been so catastrophic had our nation’s hard-won Clean Energy package not been killed arguably as direct result of News Corp’s meddling.

Recent modelling by The Australia Institute—based on official figures from Australia’s Department of Environment—shows that national greenhouse gas emissions fell substantially during the period that the carbon price was in place (in the form of an Emission Trading Scheme between 2012 and 2014), and immediately began climbing again as soon as the price on pollution was removed. Comparing actual emissions for 2020, researchers argue that current emissions would be 25 million tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>-e lower if the price on carbon had remained and that total emissions from 2015 to 2020 would have been 72 million tonnes lower.<sup>66</sup>

Further to this, the report’s findings show that between 2016 and 2019 Australia’s electricity prices rose significantly as a result of ongoing failures to establish sound climate and energy policies necessary for energy operators and investors to embark on new electricity generation capacities.<sup>67</sup> So, rescinding the Clean Energy Act has not only severely harmed Australia’s environment and set back our transition to a zero emissions economy, it has imposed major costs on all electricity consumers.

Meanwhile, having failed to kill them outright, some key components of the Clean Energy Act were just handicapped in deliberately constraining ways (such as aforementioned agencies [ARENA](#), the [CEFC whose mandates are now being even more seriously compromised](#)<sup>68</sup>, as well as the [Carbon Farming Initiative](#)). So, there is a strong case to argue that Australia’s emissions trajectory would have fallen even further had our full suite of complementary climate laws remained as designed. And that, as a result, key components of Australia’s environment may be in stages of relative repair and regeneration. For instance, had the Carbon Farming Initiative been properly realised, soils in many rural areas would likely be significantly more healthy, capable of holding more water and nutrients, more resilient to droughts and exponentially more effective at [drawing down](#) excess carbon from the atmosphere.<sup>69</sup>

While an environment capable of supporting life is effectively priceless, News Corp’s profiteering from industry campaigns aimed at killing environment protection measures is quantifiable. For instance, as was reported more than a decade ago, News Corp outlets have long published [advertising-driven special reports](#) spruiking the fossil fuel industry.<sup>70</sup>

Just imagine the jobs, economy and purpose that even a fraction of the public funds from having realised a fair and reasonable Super Profits Tax combined with the Clean Energy Act could have brought to assist vulnerable rural communities on the front line of local resource conflicts, as well as increasingly horrific and compounding impacts from climate breakdown.

Unequivocal evidence of the quick success of the Clean Energy Act is arguably the reason why Australia's political discourse is now so fever-pitch-reactionary-crazy. For, denying the climate emergency in the 21st century is one thing. Denying the mountain of evidence that the solutions to address the climate crisis do not create many more sustainable new jobs, better health and prosperity for local economies in ways that benefit all people and nature has demanded another ratcheting up of polluter propaganda.

The extent of News Corp's disinformation regarding Australia's terrifying Summer of 2019-2020 has been the subject of widespread domestic and global condemnation, and prompted numerous [local](#)<sup>71</sup> and [international](#)<sup>72</sup> 'fact checks'. In what appeared to be attempts to distract from the role of anthropogenic global warming, prominent News Corp commentators [aggressively denied scientific facts](#)<sup>73</sup> while making incorrect claims about land clearing and so-called 'politically motivated arsonists' which—using the hashtag [#ArsonEmergency](#)<sup>74</sup>—were suspiciously quickly [spread by bots and trolls on social media](#).<sup>75</sup>

News Corp's coverage of Australia's fire crisis was so blatant that Rupert Murdoch's son James Murdoch and his wife Kathryn were prompted to publicly call out Fox News and News Corp for '[ongoing climate denial](#)' on the international stage.<sup>76</sup> James subsequently resigned from News Corp's board of directors citing: "disagreements over certain editorial content published by the company's news outlets and certain other strategic decisions."<sup>77</sup>

However, arguably the strongest condemnation came from within News Corp's own ranks, in the form of a [leaked internal email](#), which was widely reported and deserves to be included here in full.<sup>78</sup> Ms Townsend's email was reported to have been [removed from News Corp employee inboxes](#) within an hour of it being sent.<sup>79</sup>

12:01 (19 minutes ago)

**Townsend, Emily** <[emily.townsend@news.com.au](mailto:emily.townsend@news.com.au)>  
to #NewsAllStaff, DL-Editorial-AllStaff, DL-Advertising, DL-DL, #DL-All, Michael, Damian, Stacey, Lou, Neil, Ruth, Dominic, Campbell,  
Ian, Nicholas, Richard, Neil, Julian, Mark, Siobhan, Paul

Hi Michael,

Thank you for your email regarding fundraising and other support initiatives in relation to the devastating fires.

Unfortunately however, this does not offset the impact News Corp reporting has had over the last few weeks. I have been severely impacted by the coverage of News Corp publications in relation to the fires, in particular the misinformation campaign that has tried to divert attention away from the real issue which is climate change to rather focus on arson (including misrepresenting facts).

I find it unconscionable to continue working for this company, knowing I am contributing to the spread of climate change denial and lies. The reporting I have witnessed in The Australian, The Daily Telegraph and Herald Sun is not only irresponsible, but dangerous and damaging to our communities and beautiful planet that needs us more than ever now to acknowledge the destruction we have caused and start doing something about it.

News Corp's decision to take this approach in such a devastating time for our country, communities and environment is a step too far for any of us stakeholders to ignore and continue with our daily tasks without thinking for a minute about what we are contributing to.

Anxiety and disappointment are the feelings that have been occupying me over the last 24 hours, to the point where I am finding it incredibly difficult to focus on my work and do my job.

I hope this email will get you as a leader of this organisation to think about the big picture and the impact of our publications.

Sincerely,  
Emily

**EMILY TOWNSEND**  
Commercial Finance Manager - Corporate Functions  
2 Holt Street Surry Hills NSW 2010  
T +61 2 9288 3557  
E [emily.townsend@news.com.au](mailto:emily.townsend@news.com.au) W [NewsCorpAustralia.com](http://NewsCorpAustralia.com)

As alluded to above, across the media landscape that shapes Australian news consumers' understandings, it is not just what is misreported but what is not reported at all. Major scientific and technological advances in sustainable closed loop production systems, combined with greater understandings in [finance and economics](#),<sup>80</sup> have effectively enabled us to deliver basic needs (food, water, energy, shelter, health care, knowledge) and a reasonable life to all local communities, including on a global scale. Locally for instance, esteemed economics Professor Ross Garnaut, among many other globally recognised sustainable technology experts, argues that our nation has the capacity to become ["the superpower of the post-carbon world"](#).<sup>81</sup> But that is not the information that News Corp disseminates, presumably because private capital extracts the most profits when it owns and controls assets across the economy.

So, instead of advancing towards a progressive and more fair economy capable of addressing 21st century problems, Australia's is redirecting valuable public funds towards mopping up after increasingly [costly climate disasters](#).<sup>82</sup> natural disasters fuelled by entrenched industries that continue to be subsidised by Australian taxpayers in return for effectively destroying our 'common wealth'. Again, this is ['gaslighting'](#) (ironically named manipulation tactic) on a grand scale.

Further to this, particularly following the horrific Christchurch massacre, observers are also increasingly concerned by the polarising and aggressive tone of News Corp platforms which appear to be fuelling the rise of 'white terrorism'.<sup>83</sup>

Currently, with the world in the grips of the coronavirus pandemic, News Corp platforms are again engaging in anti-science, racist, polarising and self-serving misinformation and commentary. In response to its coronavirus coverage, a group of 74 journalism professors and journalists in the US have written an [open letter](#) to Rupert and Lachlan Murdoch warning that Fox News is a "danger to public health".<sup>84</sup>

Meanwhile, News Corp outlets loudly echoed [claims by the Trump Administration](#) that the so-called "Chinese Virus" originated in a lab in Wuhan without actually providing any of the alleged evidence.<sup>85</sup> And this was after Trump's own Department of Homeland Security had warned that white terrorists would seek to take advantage of the pandemic.<sup>86</sup>

As the above-mentioned media historian Sally Young shows, News Corp outlets have a long history of ["betraying their readers"](#).<sup>87</sup> Motivated by commercial interests to maintain advertising revenues, News Corp commentators have attempted to downplay the seriousness of the global health crisis, and to brand those taking measures to avoid global economies from collapsing as 'panic pushers' engaging in 'Marxism'.

So, we ask, why are Australia's decision makers and media regulators not holding media outlets to account for unacceptable reporting that betrays consumers (and everyone else) and ensures Australia's economy remains heavily polluting, vulnerable and backwards?

## Anti-democratic Election Coverage

Healthy, robust democracies, in which citizens are capable of making genuinely informed decisions about their representation in parliament, depend on truthful reporting.

As noted above, News Corp outlets are renowned for aggressively campaigning for and against particular leaders. For instance, ten months before the deeply divisive 1975 election following 'The Dismissal', Murdoch issued a "confidential instruction to editors of newspapers he controls to ["kill Whitlam"](#)".<sup>88</sup>

News Corp's coverage of Australia's Federal election 2019 was again highly misleading, deceptive and polarising. Crikey's feature '*News Corp v Labor: 24 hours in the election news cycle*'<sup>89</sup> (covering just Monday 13 May 2019) aptly shows the highly coordinated and strategic nature of News Corp's attacks on the ALP. News Corp was shown to have grossly abused its powerful platforms (across Australia's entire media landscape) and subsequent analysis by [MediaWatch and The New Daily](#) show it "reached extreme levels in this [2019] election".<sup>90</sup>

Aided by [\\$165 million in donations](#),<sup>91</sup> the Federal Liberal party ran aggressive, baseless scare campaigns to effectively confuse Australians about the ALP's so-called plans to introduce [death taxes](#)<sup>92</sup> (it had none), [tax retirement](#)<sup>93</sup> (the plan would only remove tax refunds from retirees who paid no tax on the earnings in the first place), ["tax your ute"](#)<sup>94</sup> (outright false), and impacts of [negative gearing](#)<sup>95</sup> (claims based on myths) to name a few.

Meanwhile voters were bombarded by 'fake ads'. In February 2020, the political donation register revealed that mining magnate Clive Palmer spent more than [\\$84 million](#) to ensure the polluter friendly Coalition would be returned to power.<sup>96</sup> The return of the Coalition government would [advance Mr Palmer's coal interests in Queensland](#).<sup>97</sup> And it appears that other sources of 'dark money' were mobilised behind a general, forceful [Put Labor Last](#) campaign.<sup>98</sup>

Rather than investigate the Government's claims, News Corp's coverage reinforced the flood of campaign falsehoods.

On the Monday following the election weekend, News Corp's *Sunshine Coast Daily* ran with the headline "Anna, you're next", featuring a photo of Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk in gun crosshairs. Yet, for what could reasonably be understood to be an incitement to violence, News Corp suffered little to no consequences.<sup>99</sup>

Why is News Corp not being held to account for its role in enabling the spread of misinformation and dangerously polarising views, and for failing to properly interrogate with facts and evidence those seeking to influence Australia's elections and wider public debate, as well as for failing to properly report on the threats to Australia's democracy from an electoral system that enables the richest and most powerful to effectively buy election contests for personal gain?

## **Denigrating Journalism and Trust**

In terms of denigrating public trust in the media, and the journalistic profession generally, News Corp has led the pack. Not just through its long history of criminal behaviour, power abuse, and misleading and deceptive reporting (a mere snapshot of which is above) but through its well documented, common use of aggressive tactics to confuse, intimidate and bully people into giving stories no matter how private and/or personally tragic.

We believe that News Corp's apparent eagerness to report what consenting adults do in their private lives should raise more questions. Coercive or at least undue influence aside, it is reasonable to infer it is a cynical tactic to distract people from the multitude of ways in which the ultra-rich are dismantling whatever constraints democratic systems have managed to put in place to limit concentrated wealth and power. Either way, we ask in whose interests it is to have people with difficulties determining the difference between important public interest information and tabloid gossip, while unapologetically putting a hard right spin<sup>100</sup> on everything, effectively in control of Australia's so-called 'news' media outlets, and now seeking to control wholesale news content as well?

## **'Correcting the Record' and Supporting Factual Reporting**

False reporting is rampant, and a major problem for the health of our democracy. When forced to acknowledge falsehoods, News Corp's corrections are inadequate, as well as arguably deliberately difficult to find. As a disincentive to poor, biased and/or deceptive coverage, we suggest front-page and/or news headline acknowledgments for false and/or misleading reporting, along with significant fines for such breaches of the APC's [standards of practice](#).

Further to this, prior to publication, it should be a requirement that all opinion pieces (and/or live to air commentary) published and/or hosted by media claiming to provide 'news' services be properly, independently 'fact checked', and for that process to be fully transparent.

As Modern Monetary Theory shows, since Australia's Federal government has complete control over its own [fiat currency](#)<sup>101</sup>—and we are clearly at the far opposite end of inflationary economic pressure—funding programs to protect consumers, as well as to safeguard our democratic systems, is not a problem. Meanwhile, based on the current level of misleading and deceptive reporting—were perpetrators financially penalised for breaches of the APC's [standards of practice](#)—there would likely be more than enough funds raised to support a broad range of complementary programs to effectively hold the media to account, as well as to enforce integrity. If delivered in partnership models with independent fact checkers, such as [RMIT ABC Fact Check](#)<sup>102</sup>—along with other programs aimed at restoring fact-based, accountable reporting—trustworthy journalism that Australians deserve and can depend on could be assured.

Either way, it is farcical to have the APC directly financially dependent on those it exists to hold to account on behalf of the Australian community. To be effective, the APC must be truly independent from those whom it is their job to regulate.

Holding Australia's commercial media to account for ongoing breaches of the APC's [standards of practice](#) is obviously a massive task. So, as a start we suggest the simple exercise of holding News Corp to the same journalistic standards as the ABC and SBS for as long as it takes to get a clearer picture around the ethics and compliance of Australia's media giant.

In order to protect consumers, as well as to safeguard our democratic systems, Australia needs regulators capable of effectively holding the media to account for spreading falsehoods and misinformation, and the capacities to impose commensurate penalties for such breaches.

### **Tax avoidance, Reparations and 'Fair Pay for Fair Work'**

Based in Sixth Avenue in New York City, News Corp is valued at \$16.3 billion<sup>103</sup> (in May 2020). In recent years News Corp has [siphoned off \\$4.5 billion of cash and shares](#) from its Australian businesses "virtually tax free".<sup>104</sup>

Of course, News Corp should pay its fair share of taxes. So, we suggest News Corp's accounts be properly investigated and money identified as having been unfairly gained from tax dodging be returned as a matter of urgency.

Meanwhile, to address apparent dysfunctional obsessions with money while ensuring that only people dedicated to the important role of providing public interest information that meets the APC's [standards of practice](#) are responsible for delivering news services in Australia, we suggest capping all owners and executive salary packages to \$500,000 per annum.

Further to this, we would argue that there are more than enough grounds to justify reparation payments by News Corp to compensate the Australian public for its long history of egregious breaches of the APC's [standards of practice](#), recognising that they are in effect betrayals of consumer and public trust that have resulted in severe damages to our ecosystems as well as to our social fabric.

### **'Fit and Proper'**

If we are to apply [ASIC's "fit and proper" standard](#)<sup>105</sup>, we would expect all owners of media outlets operating in Australia to:

- [be] competent (as demonstrated by the person's knowledge, skills and experience);
- [have] the attributes of good character, diligence, honesty, integrity and judgement;
- not [be] disqualified by law from performing their role; and
- either [have] no conflict of interest in performing their role...or any conflict that exists will not create a material risk that the person will fail to properly perform their role.

**Note:** these criteria are consistent with the criteria set out for responsible persons of ADIs in Prudential Standard APS 520 Fit and Proper.

As such, we contend that News Corp is not a "fit and proper" news provider, and that Australia's media outlets are long overdue for proper regulation based on the application of well established "fit and proper" standards.

## Conclusion

As we have discovered, avenues through which individuals and civil society can hold entrenched, systematic media power abuse to account are extremely limited. It would be naïve and foolish not to recognise that this ideally serves the status quo power structures that are responsible for dangerously degrading Australia's natural assets as well as our democracy.

Due to the perfidious nature of News Corp's reporting across its many platforms, we acknowledge that this is a broad complaint. However, just as consumers of goods and services are protected from misleading and deceptive claims, and have a right to expect "[acceptable quality](#)", so too should all consumers of news and information services. In regularly breaching the APC's [standards of practice](#), we contend that News Corp fails to meet standards consistent with the ACCC's interpretation of "[acceptable quality](#)" and are thus in breach of consumer rights. Expressed another way, without major changes to its mode of operating, we contend that News Corp is not a "[fit and proper](#)" media company.

In making our submission, we recognise that News Corp is not the only news and information service that spreads [disinformation, misinformation and/or malinformation](#)<sup>106</sup> in Australia. But it seems to be by far the largest and worst offender.

And of course we are not suggesting that everyone who works at News Corp is untrustworthy although we think it would be helpful if more were to adhere to the long established [journalist codes of ethics](#), as well as to properly interrogate and challenge their company's role in disseminating misleading and deceptive information (as the aforementioned Ms Townsend courageously did) that propagates a worldview that is unfair and unsustainable. Australia needs legally binding media standards of practice.

For, having started in 1922 with the "[express purpose of disseminating propaganda](#)",<sup>107</sup> it appears that News Corp is now a full-fledged, ultra-polarising propaganda machine aggressively fuelling far right-wing populism<sup>108</sup>. As such, News Corp is a direct threat to Australia's democracy among others where it dominates the media landscape, most notably the US and the UK. Even worse, News Corp's misleading and deceptive reporting on the climate emergency makes it a threat to all life on Earth.

It goes without saying that all those using print or digital platforms to spread disinformation in order to manipulate public debates for personal gain should be properly held to account and penalised. For, as human history has tragically shown time and again, unrestrained propaganda ideally feeds dysfunctional political systems that lead to dangerous socio-dynamics that enable the most power craving and cruel to exploit people and nature ruthlessly and seemingly without limits.

Effectively addressing current critical and converging societal problems—deepening [inequity](#) within and between nations<sup>109</sup> as well as compounding ecological crisis such as climate breakdown and mass extinction to name a few—demands globally cooperative, democratically organised societies based on facts, fairness, and justice that are fundamental to the United Nations' universal human rights enshrined more than 70 years ago. It cannot be done with a media landscape largely controlled by dysfunctional, profits-obsessed and seemingly unaccountable media operators.

Just as we cannot effectively address the climate emergency without stopping emissions, we cannot effectively address denialism without stopping polluter propaganda. And just as opinions are not the same as facts, ‘advertorial’<sup>110</sup> should never be confused with responsible reporting.

In this context, it is fitting to use the words of a brave young climate activist and [Nobel Peace Prize nominee](#)<sup>111</sup> (in both 2019 and 2020) Greta Thunberg—who is regularly and aggressively bullied by News Corp commentators—in asking “[where are the adults?](#)”<sup>112</sup> Why are Australia’s media outlets not being held to account and penalised for breaches of the APC’s [standards of practice and of basic consumer rights](#)?

As shown in previous [reviews](#)<sup>113</sup>, as well as by basic common sense, Australia’s blatantly antidemocratic media structure is manipulating important public debates in ways that ultimately fail nearly all Australians.

In addition to an adequately resourced and fully accountable ICAC, Australia urgently needs regulatory agencies with the capacity to hold owners and operators of media outlets to a “fit and proper” standard, as established by the APC’s [standards of practice](#). We suggest that imposing significant financial penalties, along with a publicly available record of breaches, for outlets that consistently fail to uphold the APC’s [standards of practice](#) would be a reasonable start.

In submitting this complaint, we note with great enthusiasm that Kevin Rudd’s [national petition](#) to establish a [#MurdochRoyalCommission](#) into the damage the Murdoch media is doing to our country was met with such ecstatic enthusiasm that it [crashed the Australian federal government’s website](#). And we applaud former Coalition PM Malcolm Turnbull for supporting Mr Rudd’s efforts to [call out News Corp’s appalling media power abuse](#).

In closing, we thank the Senate Committee for conducting this critical Inquiry and gratefully acknowledge the huge amounts of dedicated work by media historians, academics, public interest journalists, legal experts and concerned citizens whose admirable and collective efforts have informed this submission as well as the general wider debate about Australia’s anti-democratic media industry.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Deborah Hart". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Deborah Hart, on behalf of

[ClimActs](#) – [climacts.org.au](#)

[CLIMARTE](#) – [climarte.org](#)

[LIVE](#) – [live.org.au](#)



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