



# FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

2022 REPORT



**ALLIANCE** *for*  
**JOURNALISTS'**  
**FREEDOM**

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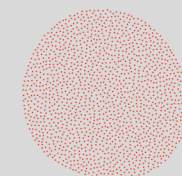
Government



Big Tech



Media



Public



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## What's the problem?

- The public is losing trust in democratic institutions.
- There seems to be increasing levels of media polarisation.
- Big tech has altered much about how audiences engage with the media and information.
- There is a blurring definition of journalism.
- Australia's legislative landscape doesn't carve out a space for the function of journalism – a fundamental pillar of any democracy.

## This means:

- The integrity of our public information systems is being corroded.
- We are increasingly fragmented, less trusting and contemptuous of those who have different opinions – democracy is undermined as a result.
- This has implications for national security, economies and social cohesion, in an era of challenging international relations.
- All-in-all, it's bad for us all and we need to work together to fix it.

**"We need solutions that address these connected issues – they're not only problems for the media industry, they're also problems for Government, the tech sector and the public. In the increasingly challenging times we face, it's critical we address this collaboratively."  
– Peter Greste, AJF Chair**

## What's needed?

AJF has spoken to many of the world's best minds on media, and distilled multiple interviews and pieces of research to come up with recommendations:

SOLUTION	WHO ACTIONS IT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry to listen to audiences and implement changes that connect their journalism better to the <i>communities</i> they represent</li> </ul>	Media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiatives that support a larger breadth and depth of content types and formats across platforms, <i>to counter silos</i></li> </ul>	Media + Big Tech
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media x Government x Big Tech Roundtables to continue to address these interdisciplinary challenges</li> </ul>	Media + Big Tech + Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry <i>commitment to craft and improvement of standards</i>, likely via a Voluntary Certification Program as well as broader initiatives that raise quality of journalism</li> </ul>	Media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A <i>Media Freedom Act</i></li> </ul>	Government



# INTRODUCTION

For two years, the Alliance for Journalists' Freedom (AJF) has spoken to global media experts about the future role – and reality – of journalism in our democracies.

A lot has happened over that time:

- the introduction of regulatory measures to mitigate big tech's power over the media industry;
- increased social polarisation;
- the rise of cancel culture and contemptuousness for differing viewpoints;
- increased attacks against (and incarcerations of) journalists;
- the blurring of what journalism even is in the information landscape;
- increasing tensions in national security environments;
- continued disruption to media's traditional financial models;
- further introduction of subscriber models;
- the rise of 'niche' mastheads;
- Elon Musk buying Twitter;
- Meta's mass layoffs and move away from news; and
- cut-backs in media staff due to a possible recession.

We're experiencing a time where democracies around the world are threatened, and the media is in a state of uncertainty.



**The connection between the health of journalism and that of our democracies, is inalienable** – if we don't have a 'free' and 'healthy' press, we don't have an informed public who are able to trust the various institutions that make up their civic life. Without that, we don't have democracy.

**What constitutes a free and healthy press, however, is a meaty question.**

In order to preserve and strengthen democracies, we need systems of information and communication that have integrity. In part this means we need to look to the future of journalism, and plot the path ahead.

This report identifies problems and makes recommendations to enable media, lawmakers, big tech and politicians to work together (and independently) to shape industry, interdisciplinary collaborations and legislative environments in a way that best serves our democratic landscape.

# WHERE WE ARE NOW: POLARISATION

*"The greatest danger to the stability of democratic life is... not when disagreements become interminable, but when they become incommensurable... The United States is becoming a nation of aliens, unknown and unknowable to each other, with no common narrative to bind them." - Waleed Aly and Scott Stephens, Hosts of The Minefield, ABC*

Even in Australia, the gap between 'left' and 'right' is growing<sup>2</sup>, and the rise of cancel culture and contemptuousness for those who hold different opinions means the rift in the middle continues to widen.

This has two effects most relevant to media:

1. To speak to their audiences and remain profitable, some media outlets exacerbate this polarisation (consider the ABC and The Australian's ongoing combat in Australia, or Fox and CNN's in the US).
2. Positions of compromise and empathy are what makes a democracy function. Polarisation eliminates the ability for our society to find the middle-ground that best reflects the views of all. If there are only two sides and they're not talking with each other – or not even recognising one another as legitimate perspectives – we don't have a democracy at all.

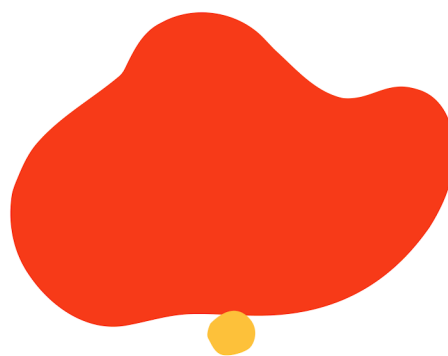
The Conversation's investigative report<sup>3</sup> into democratic decline directly links polarisation with digital media use. There are complex variables in this study, but overall the geographical distribution of detrimental outcomes for democracy as a result of digital media and ensuing polarisation, are significant:

According to the study<sup>4</sup>,

**Digital media is currently 10x more detrimental to democracy, with respect to polarization, than it is beneficial to it.**

# WHERE WE ARE NOW: BIG TECH'S INFLUENCE

*"I think we have to be increasingly critical of the power the platforms wield and the ways in which they have attempted to set the agenda for journalism... they have a role... but that needs to be at a much greater distance from the practice of journalism than it currently is." - Dr Julie Posetti, Global Director of Research at the International Centre for Journalists, Washington*



- Big tech has reshaped the media industry and forever changed journalism's financial models.
- ACCC's News Media Bargaining Code has stabilised legacy media's finances for now, but it hasn't addressed the core of the problem or adequately planned for the future.
- Algorithms increase polarisation and guide the number and type of eyes media mastheads are able to get 'on' their work. Catering to these algorithms shapes the journalism mastheads create (often resulting in clickbait).
- Meta appears to be attempting to move away from its involvement with news.
- After Elon Musk's purchase of the company, many of the teams who sought to maintain the integrity of information and the safety of the platform have gone.
- The public's main mechanism for engaging with journalism currently depends on – and is designed by – the whim of tech platforms who have very different interests.
- These platforms aren't the appropriate conduit through which to deliver the function of journalism in a democracy, but they're here to stay, so there must be improved collaboration on how the two industries interact.

*(With respect to Media's relationship with Big Tech)*

*"...Media organisations - even those of the highest quality - are undermining their conviction. In the past two decades the media have almost entirely outsourced the distribution of content to social media platforms, which as we have seen are quite prepared to sacrifice the conditions of democratic life on the altar of profitability." - Waleed Aly and Scott Stephens, Hosts of The Minefield, ABC*

# WHERE WE ARE NOW: WHAT IS JOURNALISM?

*"It's up to journalists to decide whether or not they want to fulfil their function... do they see a value in truth? The thing that will bring down journalism won't be publishers or governments, it will be journalists themselves, losing their ticker." - Dr Simon Longstaff AO, Executive Director, The Ethics Centre*<sup>7</sup>



Anyone can have an online platform. In some ways this could be considered the 'democratisation of the internet', but **distinguishing journalism from other online information is essential**, otherwise its potency and role in democracy is blurred and undermined.

There are important considerations here:

- **Who** should be doing the defining? Governments are **not the appropriate body** in a democracy, and neither are tech platforms.
- **How** do we ensure we don't stifle innovation? **Any definition needs to be nimble enough** to account for a rapidly changing industry and broader digital environment.
- **How can we communicate this** effectively to the public? Any definition must be clear enough that the public has a non-partisan map by which to guide their engagement with information.

**According to Pew Research<sup>8</sup>, young adults are now just as likely to trust information they receive on social media, as they are to trust in traditional news sources. Their trust in the former is inclining, whilst trust in the latter is on the decline.**

# WHERE WE ARE NOW: LEGISLATION AND REGULATION



The interplay between governments, security agencies and media is a complex landscape. Depending on which democracy someone might find themselves in, the convergence of the three will be different.

**Australia is the only Five Eyes country with no laws that positively enshrine the role of the media in legislation.** There is only an implied constitutional right of political communication along with narrow public interest defences in defamation law. By 'positively enshrine', we mean laws that require a Judge or Court to consider the public interest element of any piece of journalism as much as they consider any other laws – whether they be national security laws or defamation laws as two examples – as part of any judgement.

Currently:

- There have been more than 90 pieces of national security legislation introduced in Australia since 9/11.<sup>9</sup>
- Some of these laws – with no existing legislative protections for the function of journalism in place – have the potential to criminalise normal journalistic practice.
- This means journalists in Australia risk their offices and homes being raided, and even jail time.
- Crucially, it also exposes journalists' sources.
- According to AJF's Press Freedom Tracker<sup>10</sup>, the number of press freedom incidents (which include 'physical attack', 'court & imprisonment', 'police action', 'government & regulatory' and 'other') have increased exponentially and consistently in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region since 2018. **The regional percentage of 'government and regulatory' measures that stifle press freedom sits at more than 30% of the overall incidents.** This indicates a significant and steady rise in government intervention into the function of journalism in a democracy.
- When it comes to threading the needle between genuine national security matters and the public interest, AJF does not see these two as elements that need to be 'balanced' – **press freedom is a part of national security.**<sup>11</sup>
- **Otherwise, our democracy's national security laws risk damaging the society they're seeking to protect in the first place.**



# WHY IT MATTERS

*"The systems of information and communication that allow democracy to function are being corroded. To fix this, we need to find solutions that restore this system's integrity and rebuild trust with the public. The future of journalism is essential to this." – Peter Greste, AJF Chair*

1

The integrity of our public information systems is being corroded

2

This creates an increasingly polarised, misinformed and disinformed public

3

This pattern undermines democratic societies – making us fragmented, less trusting and contemptuous of those who have different opinions

4

This has implications for national security, economies and social cohesion

# THE FUTURE: WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

To fix this corrosion and address the democratic challenges outlined, we need to plot a pathway outlining where the media industry is headed. This is why we asked global experts to discuss the areas they consider to be most important for the future:

*"Audiences need to understand where money is coming from and flowing to."*  
– **Zara Seidler, Co-Founder, The Daily Aus, Australia**

## BUILD TRUST

*"[The industry needs] investment in audience-centric work... people are most likely to trust an organisation that goes into an honest and authentic dialogue with them and wants to better understand how best to serve their needs.*

– **Anita Zielina, Director of strategic initiatives at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at City University of New York, USA & Austria**

*"It has to be a two-way dialogue... it's this idea of bringing it right back to your community level... what does that community need to survive and thrive? ...journalism is the first pillar in that piece but there's more to it – events, where to go, places to eat and drink and hang out with one another...that's your community building piece... and when you put those those two things side by side... that's where we're already seeing success..."* – **Farhan Mohamed, Overstory Media Group, Canada**

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*"We are living in a world where there are more and more attacks against press freedom... collaboration is clearly bringing protection, it doesn't make sense to kill one journalist if you have 79 other reporters ready to take-over."*

– **Laurent Richard, Founder, Forbidden Stories (The Pegasus Project), France**

*"Solutions journalism is an antidote because it's not about the question of who's to blame for the mess we're in... it's more constructive, more forward looking...it's not about 'good news'... It's about what people, institutions, governments and businesses... are doing that is working to solve problems – with evidence – what's working about it and what's not working about it. It's rigorous journalism."* – **Tina Rosenberg, Founder of the Solutions Journalism Network, author and columnist at the New York Times, USA**

## INNOVATE YOUR PRACTICE

*"Look within your own newsroom and see who is already successfully pushing [innovation] forward... how do you make sure that work is documented and they're held up as an example to their peers as someone who is pushing the profession forward?"* – **Phoebe Connelly, Director of Next Generation Audience Development at the Washington Post, USA**

## MANAGE BIG TECH

*"The public can trust us, they can trust the method even if they don't know who we are... Transparency oriented journalism builds trust.*

*"When we talk about algorithms and algorithmic governance of our world, this is the way forward – you have to meet the technology with your own technology and build the rigour into it."* – **Nabiha Syed, CEO, The Markup, USA**

# THE FUTURE: WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

*"You're going to be exposed to transitions, new technologies, new business models...redefining your business models on an annual basis and rethinking the way you produce and deliver journalism [is essential]."* – **Anita Zielina, Director of strategic initiatives at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at City University of New York, USA & Austria**

*[On not choosing the path of clickbait] "Things that are valuable are still valued by audiences, and that is what emerges as a good business model..."* – **Gaven Morris, CEO of Bastion Transform and former Director of News at ABC, Australia**

*"We don't have [legislation] in favour of the right of the public to know the news, and the right for journalists to engage in investigative journalism.*

*"When it comes to a privacy right... it will be a legal block on journalists reporting on private misconduct on public figures.*

*"Heaven help us if the privacy laws in Australia had been in place before the 'me too' movement. I can guarantee you the 'me too' movement wouldn't have happened at all in this country. We barely had one because of our defamation laws, but if we had a privacy law as well, stifling reporting... we wouldn't have any kind of the reporting or reforms we are seeing now."*

– **Larina Alick, Editorial Counsel for Nine Publishing and Australian Community Media, Australia**

*"If we look back 20 years, Australia didn't have any counter-terrorism law. Now we have more than anywhere else in the world. There's no sign of that slowing down. As I said, we don't have the rights framework tempering that... the impact on journalism could go a couple of different ways: we could see journalists being prosecuted... we could see something in the middle – some sort of understanding that 'we could prosecute you, but we're not going to'. I don't think that's great for the rule of law. If we have laws, they should mean what they say."* – **Dr Rebecca Ananian-Welsh, University of Queensland School of Law Lecturer, Australia**



LEGISLATE

*"It will come down to trusted brands"*

– **Zillah Watson, Consultant on VR and immersive content, UK**



RAISE  
STANDARDS

*"What media tend to fall into, in free societies, is a narrative that says 'politicians should be distrusted'... that became attractive to young journalists coming in because it said 'I am here on a moral mission... this man or woman is here to obfuscate the truth and indeed at times to lie about it'... that [approach to journalism] was wrong. They [people in public life] do sometimes obfuscate, they do sometimes lie... but so do we. We [journalists] have to be conscious that we are not looking to reveal lies constantly, we are trying to illuminate what people in public affairs do."*

– **John Lloyd, Founder, Reuters Institute at Oxford, UK**

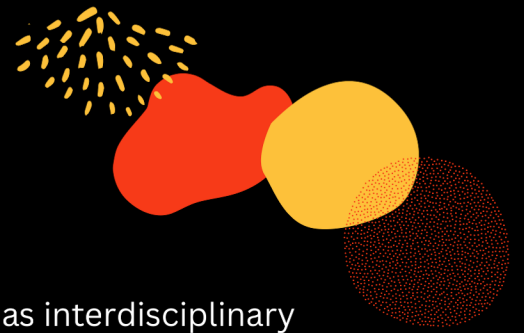
*[On a Voluntary Certification Scheme]*

*"This initiative is for those who say: 'We want to commit to the excellence of our craft'. The model is so obvious it's all around us... say in the Royal College of Surgeons..."*

*"If, as a journalist at the top of your game or wanting to get there, you're willing to be recognised for excellence and you're willing to do the work – including being judged by your peers on this question – there should be a way to know that."*

– **Dr Simon Longstaff AO, Executive Director, The Ethics Centre, Australia**

# RECOMMENDATIONS



We need to work together to:

- address and reduce polarisation;
- increase media diversity and collaboration, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration;
- re-imagine the way big tech coexists with the media, and how new developments might benefit it;
- accept a definition of journalism, raise standards and improve trust; and
- thread the needle between government legislation and journalism's role.

If industry, Government, and big tech work together collaboratively, the Alliance for Journalists' Freedom believes we will see significant and positive change not only to the media industry, but also to public trust in democratic institutions.

This work is critical for all of us.

## How do we do this?

- **A Media Freedom Act:** The Alliance for Journalists' Freedom has been advocating for a Media Freedom Act (MFA) since AFP raids on media in Australia in 2019. An MFA would act as a shield against the security legislation, which we need to give judges more power to protect the public's right to know. The MFA is outlined in AJF's White Paper.<sup>12</sup>
- Industry commitment to craft and improvement of standards via a **Voluntary Certification Program**. This program would act similarly to the AICD course, or an admission to the Royal College of Surgeons. It would serve as a way of distinguishing journalists and their work from the rest of the flooded information landscape.<sup>13</sup>
- **Media x Government x Tech Roundtables:** These challenges affect all democratic institutions. They need to talk together and work together to address them. They also need to better understand each other.
- **Media diversity initiatives** such as introducing increased competition regulations to counter information silos and increase growth of new mastheads in the media landscape.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alan Soon	Kellie Riordan
Anita Zielina	Larina Alick
Claire Wardle	Laurent Richard
Farhan Mohamed	Nabiha Syed
Gaven Morris	Phoebe Connelly
Genevieve Bell	Piers Grove
Greg Hywood	Timothy Karr
Hugh Riminton	Tina Rosenberg
Ian Macrae	Raju Narisetti
Jim Kennedy	Rebecca Ananian-Welsh
John Cook	Simon Longstaff AO
John Lloyd	Ulrik Haagerup
Julie Posetti	Zara Seidler
Kellie McBride	Zillah Watson

This report was written and compiled by AJF Director Olivia Pirie-Griffiths. All interviews with experts were conducted by AJF Director Peter Wilkinson. We acknowledge and thank the Jibb Foundation for enabling us to work on this project as a result of their generous contribution.

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## Special notes:

- The quotes on pages 10 and 11 are taken from the Future of Journalism interview series – <https://www.youtube.com/@allianceforjournalistsfree4063>
- Details on evidence of the economic implications of decreasing press freedom mentioned can be found here <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-08-04/what-press-freedom-crackdowns-from-u-s-to-china-to-turkey-mean-for-investors>