SUMMARY OF SUBMISSIONS into

THE PEOPLE’S COMMISSION ON PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND MEDIA

Summary and analysis of workshops and submissions

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on behalf of ActionStation and the Better Public Media Trust

 

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## Introduction

This report provides a summary and analysis of the workshops and submissions undertaken as part of The People’s Commission on Public Broadcasting and Media, facilitated by ActionStation and the Better Public Media Trust (formerly known as the Coalition for Better Broadcasting).

Two types of data were used to compile this report:

1. Notes from 7 workshops run in 6 cities in February and March 2017 (Wellington, Dunedin, Tauranga, Christchurch, Nelson and Auckland), which were attended by 332 people and had presentations from 24 experts;
2. 208 written submissions made via email or via the website [www.makeourmediabetter.org.nz](https://exchange.canterbury.ac.nz/owa/redir.aspx?C=Y1-r24uv0sj9HTBpdUVQr5rEMsqRPXvunnR3owud5UBz_L3hBHrUCA..&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.makeourmediabetter.org.nz)

To compile this report, this data was then sorted and analysed to pull out key themes across all the submissions, both online and offline.

### What were the findings?

In the workshops and submissions, three key themes people’s visions, concerns and recommendations for broadcasting and media in Aotearoa New Zealand emerged. These were:

**INDEPENDENCE**

*Robust and autonomous broadcasting and media that effectively holds power to account and supports healthy democratic debate.*

**INVESTMENT**

*Sufficient and sustainable public funding that is not vulnerable to political or commercial demands.*

**INCLUSIVENESS**

*Diverse content, perspectives and ideas connected to communities in a range of accessible formats and platforms.*

Following the structure of many of the workshops, this report considers:

* *Why* each of these themes was valued by participants in workshops and submissions;
* *Why not* or key challenges New Zealand’s current broadcasting and media environment faces;
* Key recommendations volunteered by participants.

It is important to note that while the workshops and submissions did include many fantastic ideas, inevitably there are those that are not heard. In particular, there was a relative absence of recommendations for the integration of social media and community media into our media environment, which could be taken into account in the developing proposals and wider recommendations.

**Independence**

*Robust and autonomous broadcasting and media that effectively holds power to account and supports healthy democratic debate.*

## Why?

### Holding power to account

Participants emphasised the critical role an independent media plays in holding the powerful to account in democracies – whether elected politicians, officials, business leaders or other authorities. They suggested that the fourth estate needs to ‘speak truth to power’ and defend against manipulation.

*“Providing unbiased and balanced reporting is vital to a functioning democracy. It should hold those in power to account.”*

Nic, Wellington

*“If you look around the world democracy is fragile. We need to protect it. It is vital that we have an independent media that will hold our Government and our politicians to account.”*

Edgar, Wellington

### Robust investigation and analysis

In both the workshops and submissions, there was a desire for hard-hitting journalism and commentary that is informative, balanced, transparent, ethical and respected for its integrity. There was also a call for greater emphasis to be given to what citizens *need*, rather than what they *want*, often summarised by the argument ‘more vegetables, less candy.’

*“Time the public were treated like adults with a varied, interesting, informative fare. Less McDonald’s. More vegetables.”*

Anonymous, online submission

*“Journalism should be well-researched and questioning comment, not for entertainment - the public is being short changed otherwise, in ways which damage democracy.”*

Janet, Auckland

### Platform for democratic debate

Participants also described broadcasting as a participatory space that provides an interface between politicians and people, and encourages and supports constructive democratic debate. It was suggested that the role of the media should be less of ‘what to think,’ but rather ‘how to think’.

*“A strong media allows for healthy debate and promotes an engaged electorate that participates in making our country and our communities stronger.”*

Gina, Auckland

## Why not? Challenges for independence

### Deregulation and concentration of ownership

Concentration of media ownership associated with a lack of regulation was identified as a key challenge for media independence. The majority of New Zealand news content is produced by a handful of companies, with a small number of voices dominating coverage. New Zealand is ranked with Hungary and Turkey for media pluralism. As of October 2016, *all* the major New Zealand media companies, except those in public ownership, are in the hands of financial institutions.

*“… there are very few entities that own most of the NZ media. This is a recipe for the erosion of democracy, and should be a huge concern to Kiwis.”*

Nelson, Whanganui

Participants were also concerned that some media, including blogging and social media, is not regulated, and can therefore be a site for deliberately inflammatory and divisive content.

### Commercial pressures

Participants were highly concerned that commercial pressures are driving a growth of sensationalist and personality-driven news at the expense of in-depth investigative journalism. The imperative to ‘sell’ news was suggested to be prioritising ‘infotainment’, shallow analysis and ‘shock and horror’ stories that do not adequately reflect society and could create harmful social division.

*“Citizens have a right to access to unbiased, intelligent, well-informed journalism and analysis- something that commercial radio and TV with their mix of shock-jock presenters, blatant political bias, endless commercial breaks, ten-second attention-span items, and soothing, blancmange 'infotainment' singularly fail to provide.”*

Graham, Christchurch

There was also unease that the growing commercialism of the media environment is contributing to bias within the content of journalism.

*“News media from corporate channels is always affected by the need to maintain the corporate values underpinning the company as a whole. This may not be deliberate but it takes place via the culture that arises within corporate structures, in which agreement with particular corporate values is rewarded and therefore disagreement is discouraged.”*

Anonymous, online submission

### Reliance on government for funding, appointments and access

There was a strong perception among participants that political influence is implicitly being exerted on the content of journalism via threats to restrict or withdraw funding, selection of key appointments and limited access to politicians.

*“Any involvement that comes with either commercial or political interests has the potential to erode the veracity and reliability of news reporting.”*

Anonymous, online submission

Participants also suggested PR and communications staff associated with government increasingly outnumber and out-resource journalists, making holding the government to account more challenging.

## INDEPENDENCE – Key recommendations

In both the workshops and online submissions, four key recommendations were proposed by participants to ensure the independence of New Zealand’s public broadcasting and media:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Restrict foreign and cross-media ownership To counter the concentration of media ownership, participants suggested legislation is needed to limit foreign and cross-media ownership. It was argued that it is critical to get the ‘structure right’ New Zealand’s broadcasting and media, before focusing on the specifics of particular media organisations. |
| 2 | Revised media governance structures To prevent political or corporate interference, many participants argued media governance structures should be reconsidered. Suggestions included:   * A Commissioner for Media; * Elected representatives rather than politically-appointed (similar to DHB); * A move away from a board model towards trustee model. |
| 3 | Dedicated public-service broadcasting across multiple mediums There was considerable support among participants for public-service broadcasting. While details of proposals varied, there was widespread agreement that this broadcasting needs to be separate from commercial motive by not having a requirement to provide a financial dividend. There was also a strong preference among participants for advertising and commercial content to be restricted or eliminated on public broadcasters.  To ensure the accessibility and availability of public broadcasting, many participants argued that public service broadcasting should be available in multiple formats, including television, radio, written (hard-copy and online) and other forms of new media. |
| 4 | A charter for public broadcasting A further proposal was for a Charter of objectives for any organisations receiving public money, to ensure its accountability to the public and the inclusiveness of its content. |

**INVESTMENT**

*Sufficient and stable funding and support that is not vulnerable to political or commercial demands.*

## Why?

### Sufficient funding for media in a variety of platforms

Participants acknowledged that quality journalism is resource and time heavy, and most suggested that broadcasting needs greater financial support in New Zealand, particularly from the government. In several workshops and submissions, broadcasting was described as a public utility, like roads or police.

*“I expect my taxes to cover services like a good public broadcasting service, and well-trained journalists with an integrity ethic and an awareness of their duty (and the courage) to keep the public informed. Such basic services are the hallmark of a thriving democracy, and we whittle them away at our peril.”*

Joshua, Auckland

To ensure its accessibility and relevancy to all New Zealanders, some participants also argued that public financial support should cover a diverse range of platforms and mediums, including written, audio and video.

### Stable and sustainable backing

In both workshops and online submissions, participants argued that public broadcasting requires stable financial support that is not vulnerable to party politics, as well as being resilient in times of crisis.

*“Unless journalists know that they have a safe platform to bring controversial issues into the public arena, they will 'play safe' in order to protect their own positions. Journalists need to be supported to question the established positions and seek the truth behind the events of the day, and should not need to fear producing stories that challenge politicians.”*

Anonymous, online submission

### Support for journalists and other media content producers

Besides financial investment, it was also suggested public broadcasting needs mechanisms and networks in place to train and support journalists and other content providers (written, audio and video), especially across generations and those under-represented in our media (women, Māori and other minorities).

## Why not? Challenges for investment

### Fragmented, market-driven funding

Participants also argued that other sources of funding are becoming more fragmented and market-driven, with the broadcasters “increasingly competing for scraps” (online submission). These included:

* Falling advertising budgets, especially with Google and Facebook “eating up” online advertising budgets;
* A finite and shrinking pool of charities to support local broadcasters;
* (Unreliable) reliance on crowdfunding and high net-worth individuals; and
* A shift in investment away from broad-based media towards web-based or niche media, or to other fields, such as book or events companies.

### Government austerity

The ‘sinking lid’ of government funding was identified by most participants as a key challenge for public broadcasting in New Zealand. While RNZ was highly valued by many of participants, many were concerned that the freeze on its funding is negatively affecting the quality of its coverage.

There was also unease among participants that scarce public funding for broadcasting is going to sources that have primarily commercial interests.

*“Public funding shouldn't go to private media. Period. Public funding could go to creating material that is then sold to private media, but corporate welfare? No.”*

Anonymous, online submission

The generally-held public view was against funding public service content on private media, which differed from submissions by many experts who work, or have worked, within private media groups - Paula Penfold, Cate Brett, Alison Mau and others advocated for greater public funding to private media as a way to ensure public service media is available.

### Flawed measures of success

Ratings measures were considered by participants a further challenge for investment in public broadcasting. Participants argued that the over-emphasis on “outdated viewing statistics” or “internet clicks” by politicians and officials is creating a skewed perception of the success of public broadcasting. Ratings were challenged by participants as being unreliable, treating viewers as consumers rather than citizens, and not taking into account the public interest effect the content has on the community.

*“Current 'public service broadcasting' on TV is a shining, glowing example of what happens when services are driven only by dollars: uneducated guesswork as to what we want and what we shall have at the cheapest possible cost.”*

Richard, Whakatane

## INVESTMENT – Key recommendations

In both the workshops and online submissions, four key recommendations were suggested by participants for investment in New Zealand’s public broadcasting and media:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Ring-fenced, inflation-linked funding for public service broadcasting Many participants advocated for government funding for public broadcasting to be ring-fenced and inflation-linked to ensure that it was stable and not vulnerable to political priorities. These arguments included removing the funding freeze on RNZ, but also extended to any alternative public broadcasting platforms that might be developed. |
| 2 | Extend contestable funding sources To support the wider ‘ecology’ of media, especially community providers, many participants argued that more publicly-owned contestable funding needs to be available. Greater public provision through taxes was considered a key source of these funds, but many participants were also open to private sources being able to contribute (e.g. philanthropy or crowdfunding).  NZ on Air was considered a useful starting point by many participants, but they tended to suggest it needs to extend to other types of media (including written).  It was emphasised by some participants that public contestable funding should not be solely for ‘high-brow’ content, as this might exclude some sectors of society from public broadcasting. |
| 3 | Pursue new sources of revenue While many participants argued that public broadcasting should be paid directly through our taxes, like other public utilities, others also suggested new sources of funding for public broadcasting should be pursued. These included:   * A tax on Google, Facebook and other related providers; * A levy, such as on communication devices or internet; or * A licence fee.   While most participants appeared willing to pay for quality journalism, some also cautioned that public broadcasting must be free in order to ensure all New Zealanders are able access it. |
| 4 | More holistic evaluation of media Participants were also in favour of shifting away from ratings towards more holistic measures to evaluate content. These included:   * Investment according to the priorities of communities; * Greater use of qualitative measures, such as how much a programme was liked; * Recognition of the public-service value of media for specific communities within New Zealand, no matter how small; * Measures that reflect the diverse ways that New Zealanders engage with media, including those of different ages and ethnicities. |

**INCLUSIVENESS**

*Diverse content, perspectives and ideas connected to communities in a range of accessible formats and platforms.*

## Why?

### Social understanding

For participants, a key value of public broadcasting is to support a democratic society in which we offer and respect difference. At the Christchurch Workshop, this role was summarised as providing context for ‘who we are’, ‘where we are’ and ‘why we are here’ by ‘reflecting our stories back to each other’.

Participants emphasised that public broadcasting needs to include the voices of all segments of New Zealand. As such, it was argued public broadcasting should reflect biculturalism and honour te Tiriti, but also support multiculturalism to flourish.

### Connection to communities

Public broadcasting was also considered by participants to be an important site for citizens to ‘see and share their own stories.’ Participants noted this coverage needs to be fully nuanced and grounded in the priorities of communities – not just their successes or ‘culture’, but also hard-hitting coverage of their lives.

*“The needs of our diverse people need to be taken into account so that our media reflects the views and experiences of people from many different cultural backgrounds, ages, genders, sexualities, religions and world-views.”*

Gina, Auckland

### Accessibility

Many participants stressed that public broadcasting must be available on multiple platforms, formats and mediums to ensure easy and affordable access for all New Zealanders, including in disaster situations.

*“We need a public service television channel, which will provide news, documentary and New Zealand stories, for all cultures and all ages, drawing on different languages. We might have subtitles for some programmes”*

Celine, Cambridge

Many participants were also in favour of greater collaboration and sharing of content among media providers to enable quality content to be accessed by different audiences in different ways and at different times.

## Why not? Challenges for inclusiveness

### Reliance on the market to provide broadcasting and media

Participants noted that by international standards New Zealand is exceptional in its limited state funding for public broadcasting to correct market failure.

Besides previously discussed issues of editorial independence, there was concern among some participants that the market-driven media is increasingly ‘narrowcasting’, rather than ‘broadcasting’. Participants noted a trend towards targeting news towards particular populations, which could contribute to fragmentation and polarisation of democratic debate.

### Centralisation

For participants, a further source of unease was that New Zealand’s media coverage is becoming dominated by Auckland and Wellington “media bubbles” that talk to themselves at the expense of local content and investment.

*“The regions so often get ignored, particularly with television. The blame seems to be 'lack of resources'. But the regions are the backbone of the country and deserve better coverage.”*

Anonymous, online submission

*“There are few very reporters covering local government which is of great concern in many communities because councils spend large sums of ratepayer money and make so many decisions affecting peoples’ everyday lives.”*

Vicki, Christchurch

### Marginalised voices

Many participants were also concerned that minority voices and dialogues are being marginalised within New Zealand’s media, with those populations becoming increasingly disillusioned and disconnected with the mainstream media. Key marginalised groups identified were:

* Māori, Pasifika, Asian and other minorities;
* Children and young people; and
* People active in subject areas, such as arts and science, and minority sports.

A point raised by several participants was that language requirements are not sufficient measures for inclusiveness on their own, as many who identify with a culture do not necessarily speak the language.

Participants also spoke about a lack of diversity in newsrooms:

*“I want to see people who reflect the demographics of NZ, I am NOT seeing that now in any way and it’s embarrassingly obvious.”*

Pikiora, Marton

## INCLUSIVENESS – Key recommendations

Four key recommendations to ensure that New Zealand’s public broadcasting and media is inclusive were proposed by participants in both the workshops and online submissions:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Regulation to ensure adequate coverage of marginalised voices To ensure inclusive and diverse media coverage, many participants were in favour of formal quotas, allocations or a regular review of content for broadcasters receiving public funding. It was suggested that a public watchdog agency could oversee its implementation, such as the Broadcasting Standards Authority.  Participants identified some key communities that require this support: Māori, Pasifika and other ethnic minorities; children and young people; local and regional coverage; domestic or community-created content; and productions from non-US sources. |
| 2 | Multi-media platforms and formats So that public broadcasting is accessible, many participants argued that public broadcasting needed to be ‘broad-based’ and therefore available across multiple mediums and platforms to cater to the requirements of different age groups and communities. |
| 3 | Collaborative approaches To share limited resources and prevent fragmentation, many participants were also in favour of a centralised, freely available media ‘commons’ or ‘hub’ that aggregated publicly-funded content in a searchable format.  There was also support among participants for greater collaboration between the media and other institutions in New Zealand to support the sharing of knowledge and to connect broadcasting with a wide range of communities. The institutions participants suggested included:   * Primary and secondary schools; * Universities and other tertiary institutions (both staff and students); * Public libraries. |
| 4 | Media education and training Many participants emphasised that good investigative journalism and broadcasting already exists in New Zealand, but that it needs better support through training and investment for both paid and amateur journalists and operators.  A complementary suggestion was to support the citizens’ critical engagement with the media by providing greater media literacy and education in schools. |

*“Non-partisan public broadcasting is essential to a nation's democracy. New Zealand’s dismantling of in-depth and investigative journalism in favour of glorified chat shows and tabloid-style reporting seems to be an attempt to relegate citizens to passive spectators in the political sphere. This style of reporting regularly fails to hold politicians and corporations to account, and merely provides them with a voice-piece for their own agendas”*

Callum, Invercargill

*“As a democratic country we should have, as a necessary public good, a secured (not constantly fighting to preserve its resources and its very existence), publicly funded, impartial and diverse public broadcaster. Without it, we risk excluding and alienating parts of our ever more diverse population. Without quality (time consuming, relatively expensive) journalism by people who live in our communities and care about things that are relevant to our communities, we will become ever more ignorant of the real issues that face our communities and ways to address them. If we continue to be informed mainly by privately owned media, we risk becoming trapped in a self-affirming loop of fake news, unsubstantiated social media feed (formerly known as gossip) and biased mass-market news feeds.”*

Catherine, Auckland

*“It is essential to have at least one public, non-commercial, government funded, independent broadcaster that can provide high quality journalism to inform people so they can develop their own points of view. This is essential for a working democracy.”*

Esther, Takaka

*“Unbiased media coverage of news politics and major issues facing the world and New Zealand in particular is essential to inform the public. Biased news is nothing more than PR for whoever interest is best served.”*

Steve, Wanaka

*“The quality of democracy depends on properly funded journalism, particularly in public broadcasting. RNZ provides an excellent service despite its miserable budget. A similarly run, publicly funded television service would provide news balance and the potential for quality programming. I, like many other kiwis, would be prepared to pay a licence fee to fund quality public broadcasting.”*

Dale, Porirua

*“With the unstoppable decline of the traditional media business models that funded quality journalism, and what has culminated in the blow to democratic process that has been the Trump campaign, aided by 'no responsibility' social tech platforms, resulting in fake news and algorithm-driven echo chambers -- never has it been more important for the state to fund properly an independent, high-quality, media. Right now, museums (and public broadcasters) are pretty much the only institutions left that people can still trust for the kind of authoritative, high-quality information, facts and content that increasingly, private media companies can/will no longer support.”*

Melissa, Auckland

*“Unbiased public service broadcasting is vital to a healthy democratic society. I believe this issue is pivotal to the social health of New Zealand.”*

Stephen, Christchurch