

Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet

Response to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

March, 2024

The Local and Independent News Association (LINA) welcomes the opportunity to submit comments on the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry and thanks the Commonwealth for accepting late comments on this topic. This submission explores mechanisms to better target future responses to the needs of particular populations in responding to crisis. LINA was established in 2021 and volunteers its support to addressing future responses, drawing on learnings from the COVID-19 response.

LINA represents 64 digital news publishers, producing 106 mastheads in all States and Territories across Australia. LINA members are locally owned and operated news publishers, creating high-quality public interest news content that meets professional Editorial Standards, by and for a defined community. LINA membership is open to all digital news publishers who meet our membership requirements, however, most member services are tailored to capacity building for small publishers, with most LINA members having an annual income of less than \$350k and operating with fewer than five staff.

LINA sees these news businesses as the 'green shoots' of the news industry, observing the expansion of digital newsrooms in the wake of newsroom contractions/closures. This change reflects an audience shift to digital news consumption over decades and the weakening of business models sustained by advertising and user-fees on a global scale. LINA's role is to support hyperlocal and independent digital news publishers, including the development of complementary revenue streams to ensure the sustainability of essential local news services.

While many businesses, including news businesses, struggled to maintain operations throughout the COVID-19 response, LINA observed an expansion of local news publishers through the pandemic period. Several of our member publishers began operating as a direct response to the lack of locally relevant information available to their communities, in both regional and metropolitan areas. Much of the media coverage relating to COVID-19 was national or state-wide news, leaving a significant gap of information relevant to populations within specific local government areas, and/or to people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Manly Observer and Brunswick Voice are two examples of newsrooms that formed in 2020 in direct response to a lack of relevant information to locked-down communities, and to the introduction of paywalls from other media sources at a time when access to health information was critical. These news sources are free to access, produced by professional journalists operating to industry editorial standards and responsive to the information needs expressed by people living in their geographic area. The publishers and journalists are embedded in their local communities, so they are also very well placed to immediately address mis and disinformation as and where it emerges.

"Audiences are five times as likely to go directly to a local news website for their local news than to Google or Facebook and almost 10 times more likely to go to a local newspaper website over a local council website for news and information." - Kirsty Hess, Media Innovation and the Civity Future of Australia's Country Press, Deakin University, 2023

Local and independent media has a key role to play in the distribution of essential health information to communities. Strong connections to place, people and multicultural communities make local and independent media some of the most trusted news sources in Australia. LINA encourages the government to ensure local and independent publishers are included in media alerts, briefings and public health messaging processes moving forward to ensure tailored information is reaching relevant groups. LINA can provide contact details for its members and also act as a conduit for information to publishers serving particular audiences, including health policy (Croakey Health Media), First Nations communities (National Indigenous Radio Service), multicultural communities (Neos Kosmos, Chinese Herald, Hyperlocal News, Region Media), regional audiences and those operating at a hyperlocal level within key 5km radius zones. LINA encourages the government to make use of industry associations and networks to ensure grassroots media is included and engaged in public health messaging and resourced to support broader health-related campaigns in the future.

LINA thanks the Government for its consideration of this matter and welcomes further conversation at any time.

Sincerely,



Claire Stuchbery
Executive Director