

SAVVY COMMS

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OPINION: THE FIGHT FOR CHOICE IN AUSTRALIAN MEDIA

Last month, the Australian media company AAP Newswire announced it would close after 85 years in business. The company cited growth in free online content as the primary factor in its downfall and Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese was quick to label the closure as another blow to democracy.

Whilst the shutdown of the organisation cuts another painful wedge in the media industry with the loss of around 500 jobs, Australia's concentration of media ownership, despite the loss of the AAP, actually remains more or less the same.

AAP was jointly owned by News Corp, Nine and Seven West Media—companies that are part of the extremely small number of firms that make up the Australian media landscape—one of the most concentrated in the world.

Newspaper ownership in Australia is particularly narrow and falls within the top five countries that have one owner with more than 50 per cent ownership of the daily newspaper market. In the UK, which is often criticised for its lowbrow tabloid culture, citizens have a much wider range of newspapers to choose from (12 daily newspapers and 11 Sunday-only weekly newspapers, excluding tabloids) and the US newspaper market is also broader than Australia's (the top 10 circulation newspapers in the US have nine separate owners).

Newspapers generally though have seen a decline in Australia. In 1903 there were 17 different owners of a total of 21 daily newspapers across Australia. There are now only 10 state-wide or metropolitan newspapers, nine of which are owned by News Australia and Fairfax Media.

Unsurprisingly, it's online where these media

juggernauts are less secure. Guardian Australia (owned by the British Guardian Media Group) for example has seen strong growth in Australia and has grown its paying supporter base by 33,000 by its first Australian members report. Other players making a mark online include BuzzFeed (owned by NBC Universal), CNN.com (Time Warner), Huffington Post (owned by AOL) and BBC News Online.

In addition to these, social networks are also top contenders for news, with Facebook and YouTube predictably in the top two spots as social media news sources. Trust in these sites is much lower however, with 24 per cent of people trusting the news they read on social media compared to 55 per cent of people trusting other sources.

Despite the entrance of these players in the media space, the concentration of media ownership in Australia is worrying, and has been the subject of two recent inquiries. The Senate committee Inquiry in the Future of Public Interest Journalism considered how the government could support the media sector and put forward recommendations such as tax deductibility of news subscriptions and deductible gift recipient status for non-for-profit news media organisations.

The second inquiry conducted by the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission investigated the impact of

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Google and Facebook on the supply of news and its impact on creators, advertisers and consumers.

These inquiries are a step in the right direction but as ABC's news director said after the recent Australia Federal Police raid on the national broadcaster, "Compared to many other western democracies it is recognised that Australia's access to information is nowhere near the standard it should be".