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INQUIRY INTO THE REGULATION OF AUSTRALIA'S BROADCASTING SERVICES

SUBMISSION

From:

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The main reason for my submission is to emphasise the opinion held by most people I have contact with in the wider community that, despite much orchestrated publicity to the contrary by vested interests, any further reduction in the diversity of control and ownership of Australia's media constitutes a serious threat to our freedom of information.

In time, the Federal Government is expected by many observers to move to allow the interests of Mr Kerry Packer to own and control the Fairfax Group of newspapers (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Financial Review* and *The Age*) and associated media, without divesting any of his current extensive media and non-media interests. Likewise, the Government is expected to move to allow Mr Rupert Murdoch to own and control the Channel Seven television network, without any divestment.

Until now, as in every other civilised country, the Cross-Media Rules, which the government may try to abolish, have presented media proprietors (such as Mr Packer and Mr Murdoch) from the unlimited acquisition of important media assets and the building of media empires which, by their nature, would severely restrict freedom of information and the proper functioning of democracy. The recent emergence of new media technologies has not helped, and in fact has exacerbated the fundamental problem in Australia's media of a very high concentration of ownership.

If Mr Packer were to be allowed to take over Fairfax, as he surely intends to do if he can, then the Fairfax newspapers would be impotent to seriously report on or examine any of Mr Packer's many media and non media interests. Mr Packer is stated to be the wealthiest person in Australia, who owns the monopoly casino in Melbourne as well other extensive business concerns.

Between them the Murdoch and Packer families would own and or control virtually all the serious commercial media in Australia - all the newspapers (except for *The Canberra Times*), the vast majority of magazines, the print distribution networks, AAP news agency, film studios, telephone and Internet companies, pay television, as well as other significant media and non-media business interests. The danger of such a monopoly to democratic government, to open commercial endeavour, and even to the diverse cultural richness of Australia is considerable.

Further, it is not unlikely, based on past experience, that the two resulting media empires would arrange their news policies and employment practices in such a way as to preclude any serious criticism of each other's affairs (as already happens within their own media enterprises). Certain areas of government or opposition policy and practice could also become "off limits" to new coverage and the public interest would seriously be endangered.

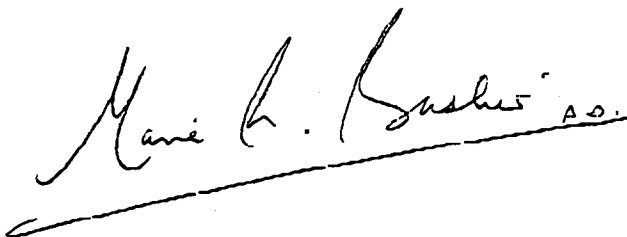
The question of abolishing the Cross-Media Rules represents a potentially threatening and irreversible development.

Despite much sophistry from the major media players, including the now "Packer-friendly" senior management of John Fairfax, competition in the media and the best interests of the community will not be serviced by reducing the diversity of media ownership and stands to engender further mistrust in government.

The agreed media owners' proposal to allow foreign competition into Australia while also removing the Cross-Media Rules, appears to be a manoeuvre to achieve the desired outcome of these media moguls.

New foreign media owners (apart from Mr Murdoch) are reluctant to become involved in Australia, largely because the media market is already "spoken for", and any extra financial rewards are not enticing. In addition, some foreign media owners have commented on the untrustworthiness of government interaction in past negotiations which reflects poorly on our nation.

In conclusion, I strongly urge the inquiry to keep in mind the civil, social, and democratic roles of a free media when conducting deliberations on the future directions for the regulation of Australia's broadcasting media.


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