

23 December 2021

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By email: info@nzonair.govt.nz

Tēnā koe Cameron,

Public interest journalism and COVID-19 (our reference OIA: 2021/16)

The McGuinness Institute strongly supports public interest journalism provided it is independent of government. In 2010, the Institute established a project that focused solely on civics: *Project CivicsNZ: Building the social capital of New Zealand citizens*. This led to a number of workshops and reports being published (for more information, see [here](#)). Please treat this correspondence as a request under the Official Information Act 1982.

Background

We noted that the government established a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF Fund), and that this includes some funding for journalism (see, for example, Cabinet paper 28 January 2021, titled 'Investing in Sustainable Journalism: Draw down of tagged contingency', found [here](#)).

The Cabinet paper notes:

- '[T]he impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated the decline of traditional commercial media models.' [Para 4]
- 'The number of journalists in New Zealand has also dropped by nearly 50 percent between Census 2006 and 2018.' [Para 8]
- 'In April 2020 the Cabinet Business Committee (CBC) agreed to implement a \$50.0 million initial media sector support package to address immediate cashflow issues caused by the sharp decline in revenue over the initial response period.' [Para 6]
- 'The paper seek[s] agreement to draw down \$55.0 million over three years from the tagged contingency set aside by Cabinet for broadcasting initiatives. This funding will be administered by New Zealand on Air to support the production of public interest journalistic content that is relevant to and valued by New Zealanders'. [Para 7]
- 'This fund will provide targeted support in the short to medium-term, while longer-term work is progressed to support the sector to transition to more sustainable business models.' [Para 9]
- 'In order to achieve the fund's broad outcome above, the following principles will inform the detailed design of the fund. The fund will: (1) retain quality journalism, (2) ensure a diversity of topics, perspectives and analysis from and within a range of different media organisations, (3) support the provision of relevant public interest journalism at a national, regional, and local level, (4) ensure continued production of content featuring local stories and perspectives, and (5) reach diverse audiences across a range of platforms (for example, digital, television, radio and print media with an online presence)'. [Para 29]
- 'A Local Democracy Reporting pilot (LDR), launched in 2019 'is currently funded until December 2021. While LDR has been a success, it has served its purpose as a pilot programme and has informed the development of the larger scale IISJ [investing in sustainable journalism]'. [Para 44]

This has led to the establishment of the Public Interest Journalism Fund (the PIJF). The PIJF is managed by NZ on Air, in collaboration with Te Māngai Pāho. According to NZ on Air, the three pillars of the PIJF are:

1. 'Project funding – for tightly defined projects delivered to a deadline, similar to those funded via the NZ Media Fund Factual stream
2. Role-based funding – supporting newsrooms for the employment of reporters, clearly tied to content outcomes
3. Industry development funding – including cross-industry cadetships, and targeted upskilling initiatives.' Found [here](#).

Given the purpose, size and potential risks that may exist when government finances the fourth estate (in particular specific journalists), we would like to learn more about the checks and balances that have been put in place and whether the proposed benefits have eventuated and/or whether existing (or new) risks have been increased (or identified). This seems particularly important given this is a new initiative and the next general election will be held no later than 13 January 2024 (within two years). As a non-partisan think tank, we prefer to raise these types of issues outside of the normal electoral cycle.

We are hoping you can answer the following questions:

Public Interest Journalism Fund (PIJF)

Question 1: Was a risk assessment completed to identify risks to Aotearoa New Zealand's current democracy? If yes, can you please provide a copy?

Question 2: What checks and balances have been put in place to prevent actual or perceived influence by the Crown and wider government? Note: This is to counter the risks identified in Question 1.

Question 3: How is the PIJF designed to help create new commercial media models?

Question 4: More broadly, does a vision for a new commercial media model exist?

Note: The Cabinet paper implies the PIJF is to help the industry given the decline of traditional commercial media models. It seems that without that clarity, it would be difficult to fund appropriately or to measure success.

Question 5: Was the PIJF created and supported only by the Crown, or was a vote taken by the House in support of this initiative? Note: For example, if the House was invited to discuss and support the creation of the PIJF, this would, in our view, lead to a better democratic platform and ideally the discussion might lead to a better designed system.

Question 6: Is there a regular public report on the PIJF, and if yes, is this required to be tabled in the House? If a report has or is to be prepared, please provide a soft copy or link.

Note: If the report is required to be tabled in the House, we understand members (or if sent to a committee, committee members) would be able to ask questions of the author/s. In our view, this would be a better democratic process. Please note we are aware of the following statement on NZ on Air's website (see [here](#)) but do not consider this a comprehensive report on the PIJF.

Question 7: We note that the number of journalists in receipt of funding from PIJF has been reported on your website as at 24 September 2021 (see [here](#)). Can we obtain a comprehensive list as at 1 December 2021?

Questions 8: Has any politician been given the names of these journalists? Note: We note that only the names of organisations are provided (see [here](#)). Our view is that either none or all members of parliament should be provided with the names as well as the organisations (e.g. equal access to information).

Question 9: Do the journalists know they are funded directly by government to deliver public interest content?

Question 10: Have there been any reviews of the content of articles written by journalists funded to provide public interest content? If yes, can you please provide a copy? Furthermore, has research been undertaken to compare the content of funded public interest journalists with non-funded journalism?

Question 11: Has there been consideration of the journalists being required to state in their articles that they are funded to provide ‘public interest’ journalism?

Note: Our view is that this would enable readers to know these journalists (and their articles) are being funded especially for public interest and therefore have a higher level of responsibility to report in a public interest manner. This would enable and invite readers to make complaints if they thought an article was biased or not in the public interest.

Question 12: What requirements are placed on the journalists who receive funding through the PIJF to ensure they explore and publish stories in a non-partisan manner, and how is that content monitored to ensure it meets the desired purpose?

Question 13: The statement on the NZ on Air website, dated 24 September 2021 (see [here](#)) states that the ‘performance of the funded roles is measured on content outputs’. How is this measure monitored and reported?

Question 14: Given that two rounds of funding have already progressed, has a report been written on the performance measures? If yes, can you please provide a copy?

Question 15: Can you clarify the relationship between COVID-19 and the establishment of the PIJF?

Note: Given that COVID-19 is ‘the dominant story’ in the news and the government’s response to COVID-19 has and will continue to be the key electoral issue, linking the two, in our view, creates an unnecessary political risk. This is particularly the case given that the problem the PIJF is trying to solve was amplified by COVID-19 – not generated by COVID-19. Our view is that any investment in journalism should be ring-fenced and managed by the House (not by the Crown); in other words, a non-partisan view should be sought, heard, acted upon, and independently reviewed.

Local Democracy Reporting (LDR) pilot

Question 16: Given it is December 2021, on what basis is the LDR pilot continuing: Does it continue to exist in its own right, or does it no longer exist (as absorbed by the PIJF)?

Question 17: Can we obtain a copy of the report/s on the LDR pilot? Note: We are interested to know how it was funded, how it worked, how it has been assessed and by whom?

Other government funding of public interest journalism

Question 18: Does NZ on Air have a policy regarding the naming of journalists funded especially for the purpose of generating public interest content? If yes, can you please provide a copy?

Question 19: Are there any other situations where the government directly funds specific journalists? If yes, please advise the name of the fund (or other means), how much is funded, and what funds have been provided to what journalists?

Question 20: Are you aware of any additional funding provided to journalists or media organisations that relate directly to COVID-19? If yes, please provide details.

Statistics

Question 21: The statement on the NZ on Air website, dated 24 September 2021 (see [here](#)) states that ‘Statistics NZ figures show that the number of journalists halved between 2006 and 2018.’ Can you please provide the source for this data and ideally the number of journalists in:

1. 2006,
2. 2018,
3. 2019,
4. 2020, and
5. 2021?

We are pleased to learn that NZ On Air is hosting the Public Interest Journalism Fund 2022 Summit in mid January. Although we have registered, it is unlikely we will be able to attend as we have other commitments. Given this, we would like to share a booklet on the *Proceedings of the Civics and Media Project: A report of three workshops held in 2015*. It can be found [here](#). The challenges we face today were apparent in 2015 and we think the three workshops exposed the challenges and proposed some excellent solutions.

If you have any questions about this OIA request, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Wishing you all the best for 2022,



Wendy McGuinness
Chief Executive