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Free TV's not dying. It's part of our democratic infrastructure.

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There's a phrase that's gained traction in recent years: "my truth". I understand the appeal – individual experience is powerful and valid. But when our democracy depends on shared facts, personal truths alone aren't enough to hold society together.

For every "truth", there's now a counter-"truth". Ukraine started the war with Russia. Vaccines contain microchips. The 2020 election was stolen. In a world where algorithms curate our reality and echo chambers amplify our biases, what should we believe?

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2024 Democracy Index, just 6.6 per cent of the world's population lives in a full democracy. Australia remains one of them – but that status isn't guaranteed. While Australians still broadly support democratic institutions, according to the Lowy Institute's 2025 polling, we only need to look to the other side of the Pacific to see how quickly democratic norms can fragment when reliable information becomes just another opinion.

This is precisely why we need an urgent conversation about commercial television's future. Twenty million Australians still watch free television every week. That's not a dying medium – that's democratic infrastructure.

When emergency services coordinate bushfire evacuations through television broadcasts, or when federal election coverage helps millions make informed voting choices, commercial television isn't just serving shareholders – it's serving democracy.

Recent policy decisions have recognised this special role and the public goods delivered by free universal television services.

The prominence regime enacted last year ensures Australians can easily find Free TV services on connected TVs. The government has promised the News Bargaining Incentive to ensure digital platforms pay when they use our news content. These are welcome and important policy developments. But we need to go further.

Free TV broadcasters spend \$1.62 billion on Australian content annually, with over \$400 million dedicated to news. We produce 46 local news bulletins every weeknight across capital cities and regional centres, delivering around 75 per cent Australian programming – far exceeding the mandated 55 per cent requirement.

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This isn't just about entertainment. Nine, Seven, Ten, WIN and Imparja don't just provide content – they filter out countless subjective, emotional “truths” to deliver something more valuable: verified facts. Their newsrooms apply professional standards, legal oversight and editorial accountability that can't be replicated by social media algorithms.

The stakes couldn't be higher. The University of Canberra's 2025 *Digital News Report* reveals that social media has overtaken online platforms as one of our main news sources, with one in four people now primarily relying on it. Young Australians increasingly get news from TikTok and Instagram – platforms designed for engagement, not accuracy.

Research from the UK's media regulator Ofcom shows people who rely primarily on social media for news are “less likely to correctly identify important factual information, have less trust in institutions and are more polarised in their views”.

Yet, overall, television remains our most popular news source, with ACMA research showing 50 per cent of Australian adults are most likely to access Free TV for news and OzTAM data showing that more than 9.5 million Australians every week watch one of our news bulletins. And TV viewing dominates the lounge room – nearly 70 per cent of household viewing on the main television set is free-to-air TV, either broadcast or through the free streaming apps every Free TV broadcaster offers.

Common experiences

Commercial television creates something increasingly rare: shared national experiences that transcend digital divides. When millions gather to watch the AFL Grand Final, the Matildas, or State of Origin, free television builds the social cohesion that democracy requires.

This “co-viewing” creates “co-hesion”. In our fragmented world, Free TV remains the glue that creates common experiences and strengthens communities. It's the difference between a nation of isolated individuals consuming personalised content and a society that still shares moments, stories and verified truths.

Australia needs to follow Britain's lead. The UK is conducting a comprehensive review of public service broadcasting, recognising the critical functions both commercial and publicly funded free television provides: trusted news, local programming, cultural content reflecting national diversity, and "mass reach moments" that create shared experiences.

Here's what Australia needs:

Remove the outdated Commercial Broadcast Tax. While global streaming platforms use government-funded NBN infrastructure free of charge, broadcasters pay \$50 million annually on top of significant Australian content investments and regulatory compliance costs.

Support regional television urgently. Like telecommunications black spot funding, we need targeted support where the economics of delivering free television services are becoming unsustainable under pressure from global streaming advertising competition.

Extend production offsets to news. If we support Australian drama and documentaries, why not the journalism that keeps democracy functioning?

Implement the News Bargaining Incentive. It's past time to ensure that when digital platforms profit from our news content, that value is recognised and fairly compensated.

This isn't nostalgia for a bygone era or corporate welfare. It's about preserving the democratic infrastructure that keeps our society cohesive and informed.

In a world where "my truth" increasingly threatens our shared reality, we need institutions that still believe in *the* truth – fact-checked, professionally curated, and accessible to all Australians regardless of their postcode or bank balance.

Twenty million Australians depend on Free TV for that truth and connection every week. Our policymakers must recognise what is at stake here: that it's worth protecting, because democracy and our Australian sense of community depend on it.

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