

Australian Journalism Review  
Volume 42 Number 1

© 2020 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr\\_00019\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr_00019_1)  
Received 21 February 2020; Accepted 8 May 2020

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# Charting the media innovations landscape for regional and rural newspapers

## ABSTRACT

*This article charts a scholarly framework for understanding media innovation in Australia's non-metropolitan news environments. We adopt a geo-social methodology to explore strategies for the betterment of small country newspapers and the societies they serve in the digital era. In doing so, we do not discount the importance of digitization, but contend that a narrow 'digital first' focus is eclipsing other important aspects of local news and generating blind spots around existing and evolving power relationships that might impede or foster innovation. We advocate for a six-dimensional approach to shaping innovation for rural news organizations – one that is relational because it foregrounds the connections between digital, social, cultural, political, economic and environmental concerns. Here, the central question is not how country newsrooms can innovate in the interests of their own viability but rather how they can build resilience and relevance in the interests of the populations and environments that sustain them.*

## KEYWORDS

local news  
media innovation  
local journalism  
news sustainability  
business models  
public interest  
journalism

1. The 'Media Innovation and the civic future of Australia's Country Press' project (LP180100813, 2019–22) is being conducted by researchers at Deakin University and RMIT University in partnership with the Country Press Association of Australia and funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage scheme.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, News Corporation Australia's executive chairman Michael Miller declared more staff cuts were planned to deal with the tough conditions across the news media marketplace (Meade 2019). First to go would be those journalists lacking digital skills. Job losses would not be voluntary but rather based on an assessment of 'the skills' needed in a digital newsroom. Miller told journalists:

We'll see some skills come into the company and unfortunately some people who have been here a while will be leaving. It's acknowledging the business and the consumers are changing and the business needs to change with that [...] we probably need some new skills journalistically into the business and we are increasingly bringing in audio, video, social.

(Miller cited in Meade 2019)

Miller's comments highlight the wider 'digital first' movement across industry and policy arenas that is often positioned as the panacea to news sustainability. It requires journalists to adapt to social media, tweet stories, engage with Facebook, source video and refresh digital news headlines around the clock to fit a 24-hour news cycle. There is now an accepted mantra: become digital or die. This technologically determinist approach has also been adopted by those with the political influence needed to shape subsidies designed to support ailing parts of the sector (see Australian Government 2018a).

This article outlines a scholarly approach for understanding media innovation in Australia's non-metropolitan news environments. This is important at a time of immense uncertainty – especially in the midst of COVID-19, which has led to the temporary closure of dozens of local/suburban newspapers. We adopt a geo-social methodology to explore a six-dimensional approach to shaping innovation for non-metropolitan journalism, one that considers the relations between digital, social, cultural, political, economic and environmental concerns. While we appreciate the need to position and understand news in the changing digital landscape, we suggest a 'digital first' focus is overshadowing other important aspects of local news and generating blind spots around existing and evolving power relationships that might impede or foster innovation. The central question for us is how regional and rural news organizations can innovate for the betterment of society and the local 'communities' they serve.

Our emphasis is on the future of country newspapers, given we are conducting the first major research project to assess the civic future and sustainability of independently owned news outlets in rural and regional Australia.<sup>1</sup> Country newspapers are considered to play a vital role in lubricating the wheels of democracy by providing a forum for public discussion of civic affairs, conducting public interest journalism, developing a sense of community in rural Australia and contributing to social capital (Hess 2015; Richards 2013; Bowd 2011). Alongside more than 160 regional and rural newspapers owned by Anthony Catalano after the 2018 merger between Fairfax Media and the Nine Entertainment Co., Australia has 130 independently owned country mastheads, and they are experiencing mixed fortunes (Hess 2016). These newspapers face many of the same challenges that metropolitan and regional print and online news businesses are tackling throughout the world,

in addition to some issues and advantages that are unique to the geographies, policy settings and cultural contexts of rural life in Australia. For example, for most country mastheads, the print product remains at the forefront of their business. There is also a more intimate relationship with their audiences due to the scales of place, population and media ecology.

### **POLICY DIRECTIONS SHAPING LOCAL NEWS IN AUSTRALIA**

There have been two national media policy interventions in recent years that have sought to define the problems besetting the country newspaper sector, and generate solutions. The first was the Federal Government's innovation fund for rural and regional publishers that followed a series of Senate inquiries into public broadcasting and public interest journalism between 2015 and 2018 (see Australian Government 2018b). The AUD 48 million, three-year Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund (Australian Government 2018a) was developed as a short-term initiative under tight time constraints and in an intense political environment – without rigorous research on the specific news needs of diverse rural and regional communities, or any systematic assessment of the health of rural news outlets (Hess and Waller 2018; Hess, Waller and Ricketson 2014). Its core objective – offered largely to pave the way for broader media reform (Hess and Waller 2018) – has been to support ' [...] the continuation, development, growth and innovation of Australian journalism that investigates and explains public policy and issues of public significance, engages citizens in public debate, and informs democratic decision-making' (Australian Government 2018a: n.pag.). It suggests a technological determinist approach to innovation (see, e.g., Zelizer 2019; Ricketson 2017) by providing support for equipment, software, training and some funds to employ cadet journalists. Within the sector, key concerns include that the package has a short lifespan (2018–21) and that rules about eligibility have excluded some important players. For example, small independent proprietors with turnovers of less than AUD 150,000 were ineligible for funding support even though they are considered a particularly endangered species within the local news ecology. The second intervention was the 2018 Australian Consumer and Competition Commission (ACCC) inquiry into the impact of digital platforms, including Google and Facebook, on Australian news and society (Australian Government 2018b). As part of its investigation, it commissioned two researchers from the United Kingdom to produce a report that examined international approaches to public funding of the production of journalism across nine northern hemisphere countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and France (Foster and Bunting 2019). The ACCC has subsequently proposed another three-year policy package to replace the Innovation Fund. This time, the key priority has been the journalism workforce, with the recommendation of AUD 50 million funding to support the employment of more reporters for small newsrooms, especially in the bush. The aim is to bolster 'civic journalism', including court reporting and local government coverage.

What emerges then are two dominant paradigms in contemporary policy and public discussion about non-metropolitan news: the technologically determinist view along the lines that 'what is needed are more drones, software and digital natives' (represented by the current AUD 48 million, three-year Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund) and what we dub the AUD 50 million 'reporters to the rescue' solution (advocated by the ACCC's

2. Journals examined include *Australian Journalism Review*, *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism Studies*, *The Journal of Media Innovations*, *Journal of Communication and Media Culture & Society*.

final report and reflecting the Public Interest Journalism Initiative; see Simons (2019) that argues employing more journalists can stop the erosion of local government and court reporting, which are widely accepted as the most important civic forms of local journalism in the city and beyond. We contend that while technological advances and know-how and investing in a strong, civically focused journalism workforce are crucial, there are also imperatives to embrace other forms of innovation and investment that can enhance the sustainability of commercial, non-metropolitan print and online news outlets (including but not limited to court and council rounds).

Beyond immediate policy debates, discussion of media innovation in Australia tends to be the domain of industry think-tanks and foundations. There are some notable exceptions, including Dowd’s 2016 study of innovation and changing approaches to data methods, along with Bruns’ (2014) innovation framework, which we will return to soon. The Walkley Foundation fund to support innovations in journalism provides a good example of an industry-based initiative. This relatively small funding scheme emphasizes the value of collaborative reporting, as well as supporting start-ups that serve a political niche group, a broad audience base and new student-led publications (Park 2017).

### JOURNALISM STUDIES AND INNOVATION: AN INTERNATIONAL SNAPSHOT

‘Innovation’ is a broad concept that is generally defined as the introduction of something new or a change made to an existing product, idea or field (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). It is difficult to pinpoint a specific definition of innovation, but in the sections that follow, we draw loosely upon Bruns (2014) and Westlund and Lewis’ (2014) definition that positions media innovation as that which refers to change in media industries and technologies, but also the media practices carried out by professionals through to audiences. We extend this idea to highlight that innovation is not always necessarily ‘new’, but it represents a considered change implemented ‘for the better’.

A keyword search of the word ‘innovation’ in some of the world’s leading journalism and media and communication journals indicates that the Australian ‘digital first’ approach in policy and industry circles also resonates with wider academic scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Researchers tend to focus on technological advancements for ‘big’ media or new start-up ventures (see, e.g., Morlandstø 2019) with an emphasis on innovation *within* the newsroom. Scholars have examined the use of technology to improve co-production of stories and to utilize big data and social media tools to their advantage (see Carlson and Usher 2016; Kung 2015; Lewis and Usher 2013; Boyles 2016; Zhang 2019; Lehtisaari et al. 2018). Garcia-Aviles (2019) argues that content production, internal organization, distribution and commercialization are key drivers of change in the media industry, while the introduction of fact-checking software has been described as an innovation to reinforce the integrity, values and ideals of the journalistic profession and the quest for objectivity and truth (see Graves et al. 2017).

Given the emphasis on large corporations, mainstream media and start-up ventures, there has been less attention paid to innovation within established local media such as newspapers (see Morlandstø 2019). International research on local news has focused on a range of areas, from the application of digital technology to the value of public subsidies for innovation,

and increasing partnerships and collaboration between old foes in local and local-national settings (Jenkins and Graves 2019; see also Lowrey et al. 2019 for discussion on big philanthropic interests; the role and work of journalists, Morlandstø 2019; and engaging audiences in the news-making process, Blum-Ross et al. 2013; Konieczna et al. 2017). As a point of distinction from literature on 'big media', local newspaper studies investigate the commercial and professional considerations of innovation alongside a newspaper's role in fostering local identity, building social capital and promoting democratic ideals (see Ihlebæk et al. 2013; Ijäs 2014; Morlandstø 2019). This is important here given our emphasis on society and context. In the United States, the Poynter Institute has developed a multi-dimensional approach to innovation by providing an arena for local media outlets to share strategies – from new ways of doing journalism to enhancing business models (Poynter Institute 2018). A study of news mobile and web publishing among local newspapers in the United States, meanwhile, indicates innovation is lagging, especially in regard to mobile optimization, where there is significant untapped advertising potential (Heckman and Wihby 2019). They suggest that a lack of mobile innovation 'constrains the potential news audience, leading to a vicious cycle where consumers may turn toward other optimized media apps and platforms such as Facebook' (Heckman and Wihby 2019: 325). While this work is largely digital in focus, it highlights the importance of broader issues of power and competition around digital networks and platformization, which we are eager to advance here, given that so much scholarship considers journalism innovation as being shaped around the interests of existing social media platforms, such as Facebook.

### **INNOVATION DISCOURSES: CRISIS AND CELEBRATION**

Discussions of media innovation in Australia, especially within policy circles, have been framed in the ubiquitous discourse of 'the crisis' facing news and journalism. Regional and rural newsrooms have indeed been disrupted and downsized, with the recent ACCC report indicating at least sixteen local government areas in regional Australia are now deprived of local news reporting (ACCC 2019). That said, we must guard against reacting to a blanket 'crisis' in developing an innovations agenda for rural newspapers. Scholars including Trappel (2015) and Zelizer (2015) warn that when there is a 'crisis', there is also a perception that one just needs to supply a sufficient amount of innovation for a fix. Rather, we must consider the reasons technologies and change occur in the first place and take the opportunity to 'consider contingent and differentiated futures of journalism [...] that encompass technological, political, economic, social, occupational, moral and legal circumstances' (Trappel 2015: 15).

In order to assess how specific news outlets deal with uncertainty at their core (Zelizer 2015), we adopt a critical lens to study media innovation. An important point raised by American researchers Creech and Nadler (2017) is that academics, industry and philanthropic organizations tend to apply an overly celebratory lens to innovation, largely in response to the discourse of crisis. Their review of the innovation discourses employed by United States think-tanks and not-for-profit institutions researching the future of journalism – including the Knight Foundation, Tow Centre for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, Harvard's Neiman Foundation and the Shorenstein Centre – indicates an overriding positive focus on innovation. They warn 'this

discourse marginalizes normative concerns about journalism's democratic purposes and rests on an entrepreneurial logic dictating digital journalism's broader public virtues' (Creech and Nadler 2017: 182). In adopting a critical approach to innovation, we must not only consider change, therefore, but assess the value (or not) of the status quo and remind ourselves that innovation might not always be necessary (Seelos and Mair 2012). An examination of factors including existing power structures, journalism norms and the very human desire for news, information and connection is necessary if we are to fully understand the contours shaping country newspapers in the digital age. While relevant, talk of 'crisis', 'more journalists for council reporting', 'digital first' and a 'celebration of innovation' will not resolve the difficult issues related to advertising, distribution and circulation, or the cultural and social positioning of news, which are important aspects of the digital disruption to country newspapers.

In the following sections, we set out a six-dimensional framework for media innovation in Australia's country press. We first provide a brief overview of scholarly approaches to the study of media innovation and highlight the models and matrixes on which we build our relational framework. We will also outline the dominant blind spots in the literature that require attention, including the role of the audience and news organizations' relationship to society.

## **TOWARDS A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO LOCAL NEWS INNOVATION**

There have been increasing calls for scholars not to succumb to technological determinism because it confuses communication technology with social change or even social progress (see Trappel 2015; Zelizer 2019). Wemple (2016) highlights there have been many approaches to digital innovation that have failed, generating a list of 'media-innovation don'ts' from assuming the iPad will save the world, to news workers falling in love with their own digital rhetoric. Our approach to media innovation begins by fusing and extending existing models and frameworks, especially the work of Axel Bruns (2014), Oscar Westlund and Seth Lewis (2014) and Josef Trappel (2015). These scholars have strived to establish a more holistic approach to media innovation, offering different, yet complementary ideas that promote a stronger interplay between journalism, technology, social, cultural and economic factors. Bruns (2014), for example, highlights the importance of understanding audience practices as integral to media innovation and reflecting a desire for social change. Westlund and Lewis (2014) build on Bruns' work but point to broader dimensions of innovation, including the social, cultural and socio-technical. They propose an 'agents of media innovations' model and a '4A matrix' for thinking about media innovation, involving: (1) *actors*: studying the perceptions and behaviours of, and communication and cooperation among, all the organizational actors potentially involved in innovation across editorial, technological and business elements alike; (2) *actants*: acknowledging and analysing how technological actants offer both enabling and disabling affordances in the salient case of innovation; (3) *audiences*: analysing the variety of relationships that might exist between actors and audiences, mediated by different types of actants; and (4) *activities*: analysing both pro-active and reactive strategies towards innovation largely across and within a media organization.

While their research offers one of the most comprehensive assessments of news innovation and provides a useful way of thinking about innovation here, their model preferences a greater understanding of innovation across human actors and departments *within* a news organization, such as the role of information technology specialists and the full range of journalistic, business and technological actors *in* news media organizations. We have identified the need for a more outward facing approach, one that acknowledges wider social relations, politics and power. Trappel (2015), for example, highlights the importance of context and broader policy considerations in shaping innovation, which is important, especially at a time when policy has played a major role in directing and defining innovative projects for rural newspapers as part of the Small Newspaper Publishers' fund (Australian Government 2018a).

Wagemans and Witschge (2019) assess the value of the European Union-funded innovation action project designed to develop a technological tool for journalism. They highlight that innovation is not uniform and should, therefore, be examined as a process that occurs at various moments, in various places and involving various people. This is encouraging because it provides scope to acknowledge that innovation does not look the same across metropolitan and local newsrooms and encourages researchers to appreciate the power of context. Wagemans and Witschge (2019) draw on De Maeyer (2016) to argue for the need to ask – for each new media production or technological development process that we research – when, where and by whom innovation should occur? Trappel (2015) challenges Australian scholar Stuart Cunningham who suggests that 'innovation is not only the creation of new ideas but involves the application of those ideas for realized or potential economic, social or public benefit' (Cunningham 2013: 4). In this way, social or public benefit is understood as a side-effect of innovation, which is a lens we wish to avoid. Innovation should make things better: better for the purpose, better for the environment, better for social and democratic coherence or better with respect to any other relevant value. Something new and successful that does not correspond to any relevant social value does not really qualify as innovation (see also Cunningham's detailed work on innovation in public service media, 2015). All of the models we draw on above are helpful to our thinking, but there are still gaps that need to be considered in devising a comprehensive framework for Australian rural news innovation.

### **A GEO-SOCIAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF INNOVATION IN AUSTRALIA'S COUNTRY PRESS**

A geo-social methodology is used here to guide our multi-dimensional approach to innovation because it is especially useful for tracing the contours of local news media, both within and outside its geographic settings (Hess 2013; Hess and Waller 2017). This approach allows us to leverage the richness of geographic study for local news, which is sensitive to ideas of space, place and environment. The 'social' in geo-social, meanwhile, provides scope to recognize the wider social and digital flows, movements and nodes of power in which news media outlets are connected, such as their relationship to everyday society, social media juggernauts and policy-makers. Given its sensitivities to wider social space, this framework draws heavily upon Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical toolkit, including concepts related to fields, practices and forms of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic). It also provides scope to capture the everyday audience with a connection to local news (both

within and outside geographic space). The practices and perspectives of audiences have become an increasing focus of academic scholarship on innovation and the broader 'audience turn' in journalism studies (see Costera Meijer 2013). Despite this, Spyridou et al. (2013) highlight that digital innovations are seen first and foremost to empower journalists to do their jobs better, rather than move to a stage of growing socio-technological potential or consider how audiences themselves define innovation (Harlow 2018). While newsrooms must consider what audiences say and do in relation to local news when shaping their innovation strategies, it is also important to engage them in re-imagining what journalism might be, or do better, for the towns and cities it serves – even re-imagine the place, and how people live and work. Bourdieu's conceptual framework is especially useful for examining dimensions of power and for explaining why things stay the same. Related ideas around place-making and the social imaginary can also provide a useful counterbalance in rethinking journalism's relationship to societal innovation.

In designing the parameters and developing the research questions that guide our wider research project, we applied a geo-social methodology to our qualitative analysis of the policy documents discussed in this article, as well as the literature discussed earlier, which has enabled us to identify synergies and gaps around innovation. The result is a six-dimensional framework that accommodates the relations between social, digital, cultural, political, economic and environmental factors that shape media innovation. These are not set categories; rather they are dimensions that sensitize us to the issues and opportunities for innovation.

### **1. Policy, politics and power**

Given the major policy interventions in regional and rural news media discussed earlier and the urgent need for broader understanding of innovation to inform future directions, issues related to politics, policy and power form the first dimension within the model. Furthermore, while much industry research on media innovation focuses on commercial success, Trappel (2015) reminds journalism scholars of the importance of following our own research agenda, which is normative in nature and directs us to examine issues of power. Taking this approach means thinking about innovation in terms of social good rather than simply improving business outcomes. In this dimension, we are, therefore, committed to analysing media innovation from the perspective of the democratic public sphere in order to consider improvements or deteriorations related to the democratic conduct of public life and values such as freedom, equality, diversity and participation.

Every relevant inquiry in recent years (from the Senate's 2016 exploration of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to local content, to the ACCC report in 2019) has taken a keen interest in the health and sustainability of public interest journalism in regional and rural Australia. There is a need to consider how public interest journalism can influence innovation and, beyond this, whether policy-makers and country newspapers might be able to leverage knowledge generated through the other dimensions to stem the decline in the amount of local news coverage of civic affairs, including local government and court reporting.

A Bourdieusian framework emphasizes that powerful social actors, including politicians and media proprietors, are highly influential in the field and, therefore, have much authority and control in shaping innovation. We are



interested to explore how they might subconsciously reinforce existing power structures and industry practices or intentionally light the runway for new approaches and market entrants. An analysis of the challenges and opportunities presented to country newspapers through the Federal Government's first round of the Innovation Fund will also provide insights of benefit to policy-makers tasked with finding ways to support and enhance the provision of quality and reliable sources of news and information so that country audiences can participate fully in public and policy discussion of the issues that shape their lives and futures.

## **2. Digital**

There is no doubt that country newspapers have been undergoing digital transformations that affect many aspects of their operations, but the continuing relevance and importance of the printed newspaper should not be underestimated. This factor sets country mastheads apart from many of their national and metropolitan cousins for which print is no longer the main game. Journalism scholars, immersed in the increasing scholarship around platformization, could be forgiven for missing this crucial point as print is fast becoming redundant in much international research on media innovation. The digital dimension of our media innovations model explicitly includes the role of print and provides space to critically examine how journalists adapt to existing power structures in platforms such as Google, Facebook and Twitter. There is a need to assess alternative digital platforms to build legitimacy in digital spaces without being dependent on social media juggernauts to foster community conversations. Our digital focus also draws inspiration from Duffy and Ang (2019), who have undertaken one of the few studies to date on how journalism itself impacts on digitization and suggest that news platforms continue to serve as socially important and recognized spaces.

The geo-social methodology that underpins our innovation model provides the theoretical tools for critiquing the concept of 'digital first' through considerations of the unevenness around digital technology infrastructures and digital inequalities. Uneven digital experience and access for parts of the news industry and non-metropolitan audiences continue to be crucial factors for the innovation approaches adopted at the policy level. Setting aside the technologically determinist view of media innovation allows industry, government and researchers to focus on providing relevant locally made and sourced news and information for people living beyond the city, so they can connect and discuss issues of public importance on platforms other than Facebook and Google.

## **3. Economic**

Innovation is widely understood as vital to the economic sustainability of legacy media organizations throughout the world due to the collapse of their formerly lucrative advertising models and significant declines in circulation. In the past 25 years, legacy media have tried to stem their economic losses through measures, such as integrated newsrooms, staff redundancies, centralizing production and changing the kinds of news and information they provide and when and how they distribute it. Advertising then is the obvious place to start any discussion about the economic dimension of media innovation. There is not enough space here to provide a full discussion of the extensive literature on this important topic. However, we are particularly concerned with

understanding the traditional and new sources of revenue for local news media and ways to make better connections between advertisers and audiences. There are many aspects to this topic. For example, research on mobile optimization (see Heckman and Wihby 2019) highlights the need to overcome the ‘clunkiness’ that often occurs when advertising on a local newspaper’s website gets converted to mobile phone formats. We have identified elsewhere (see Hess 2019) that local government advertising has served as a type of silent subsidy for the press, but this valuable revenue stream is now being redirected towards competitors, including Facebook and Google. When it comes to paywalls, meanwhile, there is a need to examine how best to help local audiences to transition to digital formats and/or assess the continued value of print in differentiating the ongoing relevance and importance of country newspapers.

Much of the industry, policy and academic attention to the economic dimension of media innovation has been narrowed on these internal workings of the media business and the economic impact of the changing market and especially the entrance of digital platforms including Google and Facebook. Bruns (2014: 14) has described this as ‘innovations in the media, by the media’ and, along with other scholars including Westlund and Lewis (2014, so do we. In terms of the economic dimension of our innovations model, moving away from such a media-centric view presents a starting point for considering how country newspapers can adapt to address parallel changes in media and society involving economic dynamics. For example, legacy media outlets are just one enterprise in country towns grappling with competition from businesses located outside their geographic boundaries. From the kitchenware shop to the local tax agent, online businesses introduce another level of challenge on top of traditional factors, including the impacts of rural commodity prices and weather patterns on local economies. This raises questions about how country newspapers might collaborate with other local businesses and even use their own newspaper networks and associations across the country to compete better in their wider geo-social space.

#### **4. Social**

The social dimension of the media innovations model builds upon our existing work that examines the role of local news outlets in connecting people with each other, establishing social order and building social capital in the local places they serve (Hess and Waller 2017). A focus on the role of local news in facilitating the way people gather and interact within and around places is a key focus here. For example, we draw on the idea of mediated social capital to consider how the country press connects people via forms of bonding, bridging and linking social capital, from reinforcing notions of community to connecting people in public conversations or events and linking them to those in positions of power (Hess 2015). Drawing on broader sociological studies, there is also a need to explore the norms and values that guide the subfield of local journalism and its relationship to mainstream news, from notions of the journalist as ‘objective bystander’ to ‘community champion’.

The innovations model is relational by design, and the social dimension aligns most closely with the cultural aspect, given it is the cultural dimension that helps in examining the meaning-making functions of journalism. This points us in the direction of exploring how notions of community and collectivity are reinforced or challenged through local news media, which will be discussed in the next section.

In highlighting the relational underpinnings of the model, there is also scope here to consider how alternative platforms might be used to foster relations among audiences outside the realm of sites such as Facebook. In particular, we are keen to explore how the country press might serve as a preferred social node in digital space for those connected to the towns and cities they serve. Of course, in taking a critical approach, there is also a need to acknowledge the anti-social practices and behaviours that may be fostered by and through engagement with the country press, especially around issues of inequality and marginalization. The very acknowledgement of 'anti-social' practices suggests that who we turn to in order to identify and negotiate socially acceptable or unacceptable media practices in a given context speaks to issues of media legitimacy in digital spaces (Gutsche and Hess 2018). This is important because our innovations approach aims to consider not only how local newspapers might innovate within the newsroom but also how this innovation can enhance society in the process.

### **5. Cultural**

The cultural view of journalism's power to create and maintain community has been a key idea in much of the scholarship about the news media at the community level and is central to our research on country newspapers (Hess and Waller 2017). The cultural view also directs attention towards media audiences, the value of their everyday experience of country newspapers and their power to shape media futures. For example, Carey (1989) advises to look beyond the obvious realms of politics and economics to the cultural because advances in communication can expand people's powers to learn and exchange ideas and experience. Raetzsch (2015) has followed this approach and argues that studying people's media-related practices offers a way to conceptualize innovation as the gradual transposition of cultural schemas to new resources. One way of examining the cultural dimension of local news is to consider its role in place-making, including country newspapers' authority in promoting, affirming and contesting local cultures, traditions and 'imagined' boundaries (Hess 2015). The ritualistic component of news also warrants examination here in terms of how certain news outlets are considered the implied centre (or not) in which rites of passage take place (such as the importance of announcing births, deaths, marriages, achievements and milestones). More broadly, it is also important to highlight the role of the *civic* within this dimension of innovation, given our broader project aims to assess the civic value of the country press. The boundaries between the civic and political are often blurred and difficult to distinguish. However, it is important that we do so here and position the civic as a cultural dimension of news – one that sits at the intersection of the political and social (Dahlgren 2003). Drawing on Dahlgren (2003), the civic is understood as the prerequisite for the political, 'a reservoir of the pre-or-non-political potentiality that becomes actualized at particular moments when politics arises' (2003: 154).

### **6. Environmental**

Within journalism, global environmental challenges, and especially climate change, are increasingly important on news agendas. In terms of journalism studies, not only is there a growing body of international scholarship on the news media and the environment but also mounting concern over how we

operate as academics with potentially large carbon footprints due to international work travel. It is therefore somewhat surprising that journalism scholars with an interest in innovation have not forged the link between media sustainability and environmental sustainability. The geo-social methodology that guides the development of our innovations model is sensitive to the physical environment and its relationship to news. This means we can take account of how country newspapers respond to climate change as businesses and how local journalists shape public understanding and debate on environmental issues (from assessing the role and influence of climate change sceptics to advocates on environmental action). We are also interested in exploring innovation through the ways different country news organizations respond to particular natural resources, weather conditions and events, as well as how specific landscapes shape the way news is produced. For example, there are still digital blackspots in some rural areas that prevent people from accessing the internet and mobile services, so legacy media remain the most accessible formats in those places for now.

Wide scientific consensus and people's lived experience of climate change-related events, including drought, fire and flood, have prompted even the most ideologically resistant sectors of society to mobilize on climate change. The news media is in no way immune from its impact, and so our innovation framework lays down the environmental dimension from the start. We encourage not only a broader social awareness of environmental issues of great relevance to local audiences but also how local newspapers can prepare and position themselves to serve their audiences in times of natural disasters and environmental crises, such as the 2019–20 extreme bushfire season in Australia.

### **CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD**

The six dimensions of innovation discussed here encompass much media and journalism territory – from news production and audience reception to government policy and the environment – reflecting the multifarious and competing demands on small, non-metropolitan newspaper enterprises in the digital age. Our guiding aim for negotiating this complexity is to develop the innovation framework as a tool that can be used for generating insights relevant to the Country Press Australia network, for the news industry more broadly, as well as policy-makers and other academics with a stake in the future of non-metropolitan journalism in Australia and beyond. Independent newspaper proprietors, for example, have indicated that they are particularly receptive to new ways of 'seeing' local journalism in order to build a sustainable, long-term future, but there is a challenge ahead to operationalize such a conceptual framework. While our six-dimensional model may have implications and/or benefits on an international scale, it has been developed by Australian researchers for the Australian context, and its use in national research and policy arenas is our central aim. We are optimistic that taking a fresh conceptual approach to media innovation can generate rich empirical findings and inform the rural news sector for the betterment of society. Ultimately, we aim to shift the agenda away from the technological determinism and 'reporters to the rescue' models, that now hold sway, towards a more nuanced approach fine-tuned to the sets of relevant relations and environments in which life – and news – takes place.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Angela Blakston of Deakin University for her invaluable assistance in the preparation of this article. This research is funded with support of an Australian Research Council Linkage grant (LP180100813) and Country Press Australia.

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### SUGGESTED CITATION

Hess, Kristy and Waller, Lisa (2020), 'Charting the media innovations landscape for regional and rural newspapers', *Australian Journalism Review*, 42:1, pp. 59–75, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr\\_00019\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr_00019_1)

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