

Outdated or innovative? Examining news practices that have stood the test of time at one of Australia's longest-serving local newspapers

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Abstract

Researchers studying media innovation and local news tend to emphasise the 'here and now', focusing on digital advances as the pathway towards more efficient journalism and viable businesses. This paper argues for the importance of examining media practices that have been preserved and valued over time. It advocates for a temporal reflexivity lens to help inform media innovation strategies and policies for the local news sector in the future. We conduct a fine-grained exploration of one of Australia's oldest family-owned local newspapers, *The Buloke Times* in the state of Victoria, identifying three main areas of the business that have stood the test of time: respect for tradition and reputations, 'embeddedness' in place, and fostering company loyalty and collaboration. Ultimately, we suggest that an appreciation of tradition and continuation may play an important role in understanding the future of digital news in small-town communities.

Keywords

local news, temporal reflexivity, innovation, media history, news practices, news tradition, family owned newspapers

Introduction

Australia's local news outlets play an important role in the small rural communities they serve by ensuring an informed citizenry and fostering connections among people and places (Freeman and Hutchins, 2016; Hess and Waller, 2017; Meeks 2020; Wenzel, 2019). The local news sector has, however, struggled with financial viability in the wake of the digital disruption that has transformed the media industry globally (Alfani, 2020; Franklin, 2006; Williams, 2006). Much of the academic scholarship on local journalism has centred on this discourse of decline, with researchers either lamenting the deterioration of local news, exploring where traditional local news providers have closed down, probing new business models and government intervention or investigating new

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start-ups that have emerged to replace the old (see Abernathy, 2018; Harte et al., 2018; Hess and Waller, 2020; PIJI, 2020). Less attention has been focused on understanding the contexts in which traditional news outlets – notably the long-serving local newspaper masthead – continue to survive or even thrive in the digital era.

This paper begins to address this gap by exploring instances in which local newspapers have survived over time. Specifically, the article conducts a fine-grained exploration of one of Australia's oldest local newspapers *The Buloke Times* in regional Victoria, a family-owned enterprise that has been in operation for more than 146 years. According to audited print circulation and digital subscription data (AMAA, 2021), this family-owned masthead increased its paying audience between 2015 and 2020. The research is part of a broader Australian Research Council study examining media innovation for Australian small-town newspapers within the Country Press Australia network – the association representing about 200 independently owned local newspapers across the nation. Here, our primary research objective is to identify and critically engage with aspects of *The Buloke Times* that have been preserved over time and which may inform media innovation strategies and policies for the local media sector in the future. We adopt a temporal reflexivity lens that positions history as a vital consideration in journalism studies more broadly (Carlson and Lewis, 2019; Zelizer, 2018). Temporal reflexivity prompts news workers to be reflexive and to examine their own past practices. We suggest it also demands researchers themselves confront a bias when studying innovation that tends to emphasise the 'here and now', faster, more efficient journalism in a digital world (see Eldridge et al., 2019). In the sections that follow, this paper will first discuss the importance of history and temporality as an often-overlooked factor in shaping digital journalism for the future, before providing an overview of *The Buloke Times*. Ultimately, we suggest that an appreciation of tradition and continuation may play an important role in understanding the future of digital news in small-town communities.

Studying history in the context of innovation and local journalism

It is important to acknowledge that historicising journalism is not a new or narrow pursuit – Australian scholarship has long explored, among other phenomena, the history of the practice (see Anderson and Trembath, 2011), historic figures in the field (see Martin, 2020; van Heekeren, 2010) and general media traditions (see Madsen, 2014). In fact, Griffen-Foley (2019: 13) contends there has been a 'blossoming' of research into Australia's media history since the 1980s. Nonetheless, when it comes to local newspapers, Matthews and Hodgson (2021) suggest there are still many lessons for scholars to learn in the digital age from history. They argue that we need to 'bring 'thinking through history' to the contemporary predicament facing the local and regional newspaper' and highlight that, although a discourse of decline has hung over the local press for almost a century, many mastheads have found ways to survive the test of time (Matthews and Hodgson, 2021: 125, 127). Much research into the history of the local press in Australia can be attributed to, among others, Rod Kirkpatrick, whose work has documented the rise of local newspapers since the 1800s. Kirkpatrick (1996) describes Australia's emerging newspaper industry as not much more than a scramble littered with failures, with numerous newspapers lasting only several months or a few years. However, Kirkpatrick argues that, of those newspapers that managed to avoid what he describes as the high 'infant mortality rate', many went on to serve their communities for long periods of time (Kirkpatrick, 1996: 177). They did this, he contends, through persistence and commitment. They rose to the challenge of competition from a new masthead in the region by increasing the frequency of their publication, enlarging it or upgrading their

printing equipment, and they provided a consistent voice to their communities via long-serving editors or proprietors (Kirkpatrick, 1995, 1996).

More recently, Willis (2021) has explored traditions in Australia's local newspapers, specifically how local mastheads have contributed to community identity in the past. Using historic case studies from rural New South Wales, he charts the growth and changes of local newspapers, their owner-editors, and how they promoted parochialism. These mastheads were the essence of localism, 'a cultural form that promoted local identity and place' through storytelling (Willis, 2021: p197). Richardson (2014) meanwhile charts the evolution of Australia's suburban newspapers, suggesting this sector has played an important historical role but has been mostly overlooked in industry and academic debates. He suggests family ownership in this sector should be credited for producing proprietors who understand their 'serious responsibilities – to honour competition and tradition as the foundation of the local news business' (Richardson 2014: 85). Our broader research indicates that there remains less than 10 long-running family news dynasties among the independently-owned press in Australia – that is where one family has remained at the helm of the masthead for more than a century (see Kirkpatrick, 2010; Tilbrook, 2012). Their perspectives on media innovation are under-examined in scholarship. In the UK meanwhile, O'Hara (2021) suggests local newspapers that are family-run tend to take a longer-term view and often adopt strategies that have more than just a financial goal (see also: Picard and van Weezel, 2008). The extent to which they take risks and try 'new things', however, is contested (see, for example, Aris and Bughin, 2009; Oakley, 2013 in O'Hara, 2021).

It is important to highlight that when it comes to contemporary research on the innovation strategies and future of local news in Australia, there is arguably a growing disconnect between the past and present. Instead, there is a 'here and now' focus that has also permeated into scholarship on news and innovation at the local level (see Hess and Waller, 2020 for full discussion). Wagemans and Witsche (2019) draw on De Maeyer (2016) to argue there is a vital need to ask when, where, and by whom innovation should occur, but do not engage with the importance of the past in their work. Hess and Waller (2020) contend there is an intensely digital focus in discussions about local news innovation. They argue innovation can involve change but may also improve on what already works and, importantly – in the context of news media – should be considered a social good that ultimately makes society 'better'. Zelizer, meanwhile, urges scholars to examine journalism across time, rather than focusing solely on the 'now' to find better ways of planning for the future (Zelizer, 2021:1215).

Towards temporal reflexivity

To address this challenge, this paper turns to Carlson and Lewis (2019) who advocate for a temporal reflexive approach to the study and practice of news and journalism, and which we suggest provides important scaffolding for understanding local news. Temporal reflexivity demands a shift from a focus on the present, which permeates much journalism scholarship. Timeliness, for example, has long been considered a key news value (see Galtung and Ruge, 1965) but, as these core values have been renegotiated over the years, it could now be argued that timeliness has morphed to mean being 'first' and 'fast' with the news (Usher, 2018) and journalism practice itself covers the here and now, reports the latest happenings, and is a record of current affairs (Franciscato, 2005; Sheller, 2015; Usher, 2018). Zelizer (2018) argues for journalism scholars to position temporality at the foreground of their studies to better understand news but, importantly, she warns against a narrow temporal focus that gets fixated on 'now-ness' (Sheller, 2015, p24, cited in Zelizer, 2018). She urges researchers to move beyond considering time simply and exclusively as

speed and laments that in recent times, speed has become a ‘stand-in’ for time (2018, p113). These discussions suggest there is a need for a more nuanced approach that takes full advantage of multiple temporalities that allow researchers to not just look at the here and now but to also look forward, sideways, and backward (see Barnhurst, 2011; Schudson, 1986; Zelizer, 1993).

Carlson and Lewis (2019) have taken up this call by suggesting a temporal reflexivity lens for journalism studies. They argue history holds answers to present questions. At its core, temporal reflexivity allows scholars to draw on ‘lessons of the past to adapt to changes in the present and future’ (Carlson and Lewis, 2019: 644). They contend temporal reflexivity fosters critical judgment about whether some phenomenon is indeed a break from what came before, a continuation of what has existed, or a middle-ground mutation. Our main focus here is on practices that have continued across time (Eldridge et al., 2019), especially in instances where long-serving local newspapers have also experienced a rise in circulation and maintained viability. In the context of our research, a temporal reflexivity approach has also meant designing research that encourages practitioners to be reflexive of their own past practices, to challenge assumptions and move beyond the ‘here and now’ when it comes to shaping a media innovations agenda for the longer term.

Research approach

We chose *The Buloke Times* as an in-depth case study for this research after analysing circulation data from the Audited Media Association of Australia (AMAA) as part of a broader Australian Research Council project on independently owned local newspapers. Our aim was to identify mastheads that experienced increases in print and digital sales over a 5-year period (2015–2020). Circulation figures and readership statistics tend to be the two main yardsticks used to measure newspaper success (Chyi and Tenenboim, 2017). Audited circulation counts the number of newspapers that have been paid for in a certain period, while readership estimates the audience for a publication by adding ‘secondary readers’ to the tally – those who have read a copy of the newspaper without purchasing it (Levine et al., 2003; Pamco, 2020). We opted to use circulation figures because the AMAA provides regular, credible, comparable and accessible data on approximately 140 mastheads across the country. This approach follows other scholars in the field, such as Meeks (2020), who have relied on audited circulation figures to provide parameters for their case studies. Our data collection identified five independent news mastheads that had increased or maintained their paying audience during our timeframe: *The Monaro Post* in New South Wales (+56.3%), the *Phillip Island and San Remo Advertiser* (+18.5%), *The Buloke Times* (+4.46%) and the *Bairnsdale Advertiser* (+1.99%) all in Victoria and the *Huon Valley News* in Tasmania (−0.18%). Here, *The Buloke Times* was selected for a detailed historical project because it was the oldest within this shortlist, had been owned by the one family since its launch in 1875 (Kirkpatrick, 2010), and it had two generations of that family still working in the business.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with three current and long-serving news workers at *The Buloke Times* to understand those news-related practices they identified as being preserved for their value to the organisation across time. A semi-structured interview approach was adopted, given it suits informants who have a good knowledge of the topic, which applies to the news workers who participated in this study (Flick, 2009). These interviews were conducted in-person at the masthead site. Participants included co-owners David Letts and Shane O’Shea and current editor – and past owner – Robin Letts. A thematic analysis of this interview data was conducted to identify key synergies before drawing on other historical documents and academic literature to verify or provide additional context to the themes identified (Bryman, 2008; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). We also examined available historical editions of the newspapers (using the

Trove database). Trove has archived editions of the paper from 1915 to 1918 and content from one front page per month during this timeframe (36 editions) was coded into categories identified during the interview stage. The sections that follow will provide a brief history of the newspaper before unpacking the key themes of respect for tradition and reputations, 'embeddedness' in place, and fostering company loyalty and collaboration.

A brief history of *The Buloke Times*

The Buloke Times is based in the town of Donald (population of approximately 1500 people) and serves the eastern Wimmera district, a vast area of mostly dryland farming in the Australian state of Victoria. The paper was founded as *The Donald Times* in 1875 by journalist Godfrey Morgan, who had left England for Australia in 1852 before working at numerous Australian news titles including *The Argus* in Melbourne and *The Maryborough District Advertiser* and *The Ararat Advertiser* in western Victoria (*The Bulletin*, 1887). He was described in 1876 in the neighbouring *St Arnaud Mercury* as 'a most remarkable man' (cited in Kirkpatrick, 2010: 224) and later as someone with 'a resolute spirit and a nimble brain' (*Donald Birchip Times*, cited in Kirkpatrick, 2010: 224). He completed all news tasks himself, with a 'sense of duty that impelled him to work by the rule that 'the paper must come out' (*The Donald Birchip Times*, 1975 cited in Kirkpatrick, 2010: 224). Godfrey Morgan was the managing editor until his death in 1891 (Buloke Times, 2021). His wife Mary then took over the business and, for the next 30-odd years – while her sons grew, came and went and the First World War raged – Mary was the constant, the steady hand at the helm.

In 1919, her eldest son William bought the paper from his mother and called on his nephew Godfrey Letts to join the business as managing editor (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Nephew Godfrey, known as Goff, had been working at the *Kalgoorlie Miner* in Western Australia and arrived in Donald to start his new job with a bag of clothes, a bicycle, and a rifle (Kirk, 2012). Goff went on to buy the paper from his uncle in 1924 and served as an editor for a remarkable 66 years (Kirk, 2012). A teetotaler and devout Anglican, he was 'admired for his professional integrity' (Kirk, 2012). Kirkpatrick (2010) contends that for Goff, editorial writing was a pleasure not a task and he wrote more than 5000 columns by the time his paper had celebrated its centenary. Goff wrote his last editorial from his hospital bed. He died in 1987, but the family connection and commitment to the masthead carries on.

Goff's son Robin, who had been working at the paper for most of his life and been managing it since 1970, took on the role of editor after Goff's death (Buloke Times, 2021). At the time of our interviews, Robin remained as editor and, at 91-years-of age, continued to attend the newsroom every day to write stories and check pages before publication (Robin Letts, 2021, interview with author). He continues his father's editorial writing tradition, with the help of his two surviving brothers. While Robin remains as editor, the paper's ownership is now in the hands of his son David, the great-great grandson of the founder Godfrey Morgan. David runs the press and shares ownership with Shane O'Shea, who started at the newspaper as a compositor's apprentice in 1972 and now writes stories and lays out pages for publication.

Respect for traditions and reputations

The interviews with long-serving news workers reveal how the current editorial direction of *The Buloke Times* is heavily influenced by an ethos of preserving 'proud tradition'. This aligns with pilot research conducted by O'Hara (2021) in the UK, who found that for independent,

family-owned organisations, respecting the heritage of the company is of key importance and such mastheads often describe certain traditions and values as a unique selling point for their organisations (O'Hara, 2021). *The Buloke Times* also regularly reinforces and celebrates the newspaper's historicity by continuing to mark milestone moments publicly with its readers. For example, the masthead's 145th anniversary in 2020 was reported on the front page of the paper and celebrated by inviting the community to the newsroom to share a giant birthday cake (*The Buloke Times*, 2020a, 2020b).

A key traditional value Robin Letts continues to uphold is the type of content the newspaper should publish. Like his father, he argues all content should be focused exclusively on 'good' news that benefits, celebrates and reinforces community at the expense of reporting criminal and salacious acts. While the newspaper reports local government affairs (in 1971, Goff Letts was presented by the then State Governor with an illuminated address for having reported council matters for 50 years), it avoids covering courts. Robin explains:

[Dad] would report everything else around the place, particularly if it was good news, but he didn't go to court to report that. Because he just said, as far as he was concerned, in a close community like this and everybody knows everybody else, if you go to court and you're found guilty, well then you get a penalty and the ledger is squared and if you go and you are found not guilty of the same thing, your ledger is also squared. We have followed it through. (Robin Letts, 2021, interview with author)

The late Goff Letts in his centenary editorial, for example, wrote that 'it has been part of the newspaper's policy that there be no undue searching after the unworthily sensational and that as little pain or embarrassment be engendered as circumstances relating to public interests will permit' (as cited in Kirkpatrick, 2010: 226). Even before Goff's time, the newspaper stated its aim was 'to promote the community as a whole' (*The Donald Times*, 1918a: 4). This family tradition to avoid covering court or 'bad' news, challenges the democratic and normative ideals of 'good' journalism reporting. Journalism is lauded for its important Fourth Estate function and serving as a powerful watchdog within the communities it serves (McNair, 2016). *The Buloke Times*, however, is mindful of the especially powerful role a local paper plays in shaming those for wrongdoing (Hess and Waller, 2017). Those currently at the helm of the paper, meanwhile, argue that generating a positive perception of the community is a strategy for success. As Robin indicates:

I think somehow or other, it probably all gets back to the fact that the sort of news we look for is different from the sort of news that you get from the radio, television, and even the daily papers. And as far as I can make out, and I'm sure this is right, probably getting on towards 90 per cent of what is now news on radio (and) on television is death, destruction and political hatred. So, we look for every bit of good news that we can find. And every now and again, probably the toughest news would come in a footy report. (Robin Letts, 2021, interview with author)

The interview participants all believed that following and upholding 'good' news values (especially those that foster and reinforced a sense of community) helped the masthead establish respect and legitimacy. Co-owner Shane O'Shea contends:

The Letts' influence, that's provided steadiness and guidance because the editor's values have been passed on through the whole lot. We've tried to maintain that and I don't think you can go far wrong sticking with those. We will have a difference of opinion from time to time, but when you come back to those tried and trusted values, I think that's what makes the newspaper such a respected part of the community, and why it's such an honour to work here. (Shane O'Shea, 2021, interview with author)

Community investment and embeddedness in place

Kirkpatrick (2010: 226) highlights that, in 1988, the main newspaper office in Donald was truly the nerve centre of the district, ‘for example, in the [football league] the paper’s advertising manager was the league secretary, the office secretary was league treasurer ... the business manager had been a shire councillor for 28 years’. This level of community involvement was also evident 100 years earlier when *The Bulletin* (1887: 14) reported the owner Godfrey Morgan was ‘also the founder of the Donald Progress Association, secretary of the Jockey Club, member of the Board of Advice in education matters, and other things too numerous to mention’. For *The Buloke Times* in 2022, the importance of being embedded and physically present in place (O’Hara, 2021) continues for the newspaper, an approach that resonates with broader international studies on successful local news enterprises (Gulyas and Baines, 2020; Reader and Hatcher, 2021). As well as ensuring staff are not only place-based, the leadership team also insists staff are active in community committees and events. As Robin contends, ‘everyone in this building (the newsroom) is part of the community, very much so’ (Robin Letts, 2021, interview with author). Shane, for example, is involved in the local bowls club, has been recognised for his long service to the district football league (McKinstry, 2020) and is the secretary of the Community Bank Donald and District. He suggests it is this embeddedness that helps him and other newsroom workers empathise with and understand their readers, and better report what matters to them, ‘we live in the community, we know what it’s like’ (Shane O’Shea, 2021, interview with author).

Scholarship highlights that, while the embedded approach appears successful, there is concern that family-owned papers may be more susceptible to conflicts of interest due to owners’ social ties and must be sure to ensure they do not use the platform to promote pecuniary or political interests (Picard and van Weezel, 2008; Reader and Hatcher, 2021). However, Sneed and Riffe (1987: 3, 99) suggest the concept of conflict of interest is best approached at a local level as there are ‘real world events’ and ‘exceptional circumstances’ that make community involvement by a newspaper proprietor acceptable in some places and less so in others. They argue ultimately it is the readers who decide if a proprietor is acting in a ‘socially acceptable’ manner (Sneed and Riffe, 1987: 4), and that decision can be based on the needs of each community. For example, a town might need ‘community boosters’ who publish ‘good-news papers accentuating positive aspects of the community’ because the area requires development and progress, or, on the other hand, a community might need ‘fiery libertarians’ whose outspokenness can help tackle government corruption and mismanagement (Sneed and Riffe, 1987: 101). Reader and Hatcher (2021) also note that, while ‘objective’ distance reporting is perhaps most widely celebrated in the journalism academy, most of the new visions of journalism embrace ideas of connection, encouraging reporters to be engaged, enthusiastic members of the communities they cover.

The Buloke Times maintains a newspaper office in the centre of town and its own printing facilities, which are seen as crucial to the business’ reputation – *The Buloke Times* has continued to print on-site throughout its 147-year association with the Donald region. There was a shared understanding among the interview participants that retaining this aspect of the business was as important now as it had been throughout the mastheads’ history. They spoke of how it enhanced the masthead’s localness, provided them with control over their product, and allowed them a secondary income stream that also benefited the community because it kept printing services in the town. Keeping all levels of newspaper production in-house is counter to the wave of centralisation that has washed over the local news sector in the past 20 years (Martin and Martins, 2018; Sjovaag, 2014), and is viewed as a point of distinction by its owners. In some instances, local newspaper offices that once occupied the main street have shut their doors or relocated (Gutsche and Hess, 2018). According to Bowd (2009: 50), outsourcing resourcing of a paper such as this can

'loosen the ties between newspaper and community' and potentially have a negative impact on a paper's perceived localness in the eyes of readers.

Fostering loyalty through shared ownership and collaboration

The interview participants all indicated that regularly promoting staff and giving them a sense of ownership of the paper, by creating business partnership agreements, had been a continuing business strategy to retain and build human resources within the newspaper group for much of the 20th century. When Goff bought the paper in 1924 from his uncle, he did so in a partnership with the publication's then foreman Charles Chessells (Kirkpatrick, 2010). This partnership lasted 52 years until 1970, when Chessells suffered a serious illness. The replacement partnership comprised Goff, two family members, *and* two additional workers who had each been at the paper for more than a decade. Today, the co-owner with David Letts is Shane O'Shea, who (as stated previously) has been working at the paper for 50 years. Interview participants said this level of staff loyalty and continuity in leadership resulted in a steady, reliable product that its readers know and trust (Shane O'Shea, 2021, interview with author). These readers have not had to watch their local paper be overhauled by a new 'outsider' or radically changed by a new editor – *The Buloke Times* has had only two editors, father and son Goff and Robin, in over 100 years. This aligns with Kirkpatrick's (1996) assessment in the 1990s that providing a consistent voice through long-serving staff and proprietors can aid survival.

When reflecting on the benefits of rewarding long-serving staff members, interview participants commonly mentioned 'loyalty'. Much academic scholarship, for example, is focused on reader loyalty and trust, whereas less attention is paid to the commitment newsrooms give to their journalists and staff. While Robin and David both have generations of family history linked to the newspaper, Shane too describes a loyalty that comes from being a part of the business for an extended period of time. These factors appear to have fostered an understanding among these newspaper leaders that payment for their time and effort does not always come in monetary form. Hess and Waller (2017) highlight that a key problem when it comes to local journalism sustainability is that it is not designed to be 'massified'. An example of this occurred in 2020 when other local mastheads in Australia were closing or shuttering due to the COVID-19 crisis. Robin blamed these closures on outside owners pulling out because they were invested primarily in a product, rather than viewing their investment in terms of 'community'. At *The Buloke Times*, 'it's not all about profit here ... there's a whole different feeling about trying to do a local newspaper' (Robin Letts, 2021, interview with author).

The value of independent, community ownership is undergoing a resurgence in academic scholarship (see Achtenhagen et al., 2018; Jenkins and Neilsen, 2020). It is a pivot in research focus that follows the industry's changing economic environment, which has seen a swing away from large corporate buyups, back towards private and independent ownership (Picard and van Weezel, 2008). Researchers in the field often compare business ownership models, pitting large against small or corporate against independent (see Jones, 1999; Picard and van Weezel, 2008; Pusey and McCutcheon, 2011). Amid this debate, it is suggested the family ownership model should be valued for its trustworthiness, for its personal investment in communities and for tending to have longer-term aims rather than a short-term profit-and-loss focus (see Garfrerick, 2010; Jones, 1999). It is worth noting here that not all family-owned mastheads are small, rural-based enterprises – in Australia two of the largest media holdings are those owned by multiple generations of the Murdoch and Packer families. Picard and van Weezel (2008) argue there are challenges with all ownership models and independently owned newspapers should not be seen as a panacea. They warn that family-owned newspapers can be dependent on the financial and social values of the

family and can face internal pressures and risks. There can also be succession issues caused by a lack of suitable or interested offspring – an issue the Letts family concede is a challenge for the future of *The Buloke Times*. It is hoped that the paper's dual ownership model however – where former apprentice Shane has long been a partner in the business – may mitigate some of these risks. Employee ownership, or 'insider ownership', can empower and motivate workers, promote editorial independence and produce better staff relations within the newspaper (Pierce and Furo, 1990; Rosen et al., 2005 cited in Picard and van Weezel, 2008).

The paper has also fostered the tradition of developing a strong sense of community ownership through the collaboration of content. For *The Buloke Times*, the use of supplied content is not a practice that emerged with the citizen journalism and participatory journalism movements of the early 21st century (Wall, 2015), instead it has been a feature of the newspaper for more than a century with evidence of small reports from local groups such as the Red Cross featuring in historic editions (*The Donald Times*, 1918b). The newspaper was also making regular call-outs for residents to submit content (see *The Donald Times*, 1916), including letters from loved ones who were fighting in the trenches of the First World War. The masthead's website has since digitised this approach with a 'Submit A Story' button that encourages readers to contribute content and story ideas online (Buloke Times, 2022). While this practice appears to have spanned the ages, the value of this relationship has been highlighted most strongly in recent times. Co-owner David said, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and social-distancing restrictions prevented many regular activities and events from being held, *The Buloke Times* struggled to find enough editorial content to fill its pages (David Letts, 2021, interview with author). The editor decided to ask the community for help – directly and pleadingly – spelling out the grave nature of the situation for the paper:

I wrote an editorial sort of saying that, well ... it was almost a panic piece saying that because of what's happened we would invite our readers, anyone who has a story and maybe a photograph with it, to send it in and the odds are that we will use it. And the response was unbelievable, it was just incredible. (Robin Letts, 2021, interview with author)

Alongside this reader-supplied content, there is often content contributed by local groups and organisations too, such as schools and sporting clubs. These 'press releases' are, more often than not, published word for word. While this practice has been criticised because it often lacks scrutiny and balance (Boumans, 2018; Reich, 2010), *The Buloke Times'* approach adopts transparency by clearly tagging the source of the content – it does not make any attempt to hide the source or pass it off as a news story. In fact, the editor has found an added benefit of publishing supplied content produced by various members of the community: 'I think it gives so many different angles to what goes on around the place' (Robin Letts, 2021, interview with author).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a temporal reflexivity lens proves helpful in exploring the future of local newspapers and in shaping a media innovations agenda for their sustainability. Such an approach confronts tensions when it comes to exploring continuity and change in the local media landscape. We argue there is value in learning the practices and policies that continue across generations. We cannot ignore Zelizer's (2021) warning that, if journalism has an 'unmindful relationship with time', it will have fewer tools to draw on when faced with hardship. Temporal reflexivity demands that we understand the past, assess its value and learn from it. The past and tradition, therefore, may teach us as much about the importance of reliability, routine and sense of belonging over a need for speed when it comes to an innovations agenda for the future.

This paper adopted *The Buloke Times* – one of Australia’s longest-serving newspapers – as a case study to explore past news-related practices that continue in the digital age. There are notable continuations around approaches to reputation management – in terms of preserving family values and practices such as editorials, as well as the idea of fostering a positive community reputation and acknowledging the newspaper’s role in damaging individual reputations through court coverage. The newspaper too works to build staff loyalty which it highlights as a key business strategy that has been developed over time. *The Buloke Times* is imprinted (metaphorically speaking) with the news blood of the Letts family and the company has looked to the future by promoting shared ownership among other staff. There is no doubt the masthead faces challenges ahead – it currently does not have the capacity to hire new full-time staff to build future loyalty and ownership pathways, even though this is a key dimension of its success to date. While media policies have, for example, looked at solutions and grant subsidies to enhance digital upskilling, the lessons of the past indicate that support for human capital is a vital component when it comes to shaping innovation and subsidy strategies for the future.

While our exploration has found that applying a temporal reflexivity lens reveals factors that have stood the test of time, it is also important to note other research highlighting how start-up newspapers in regional Australia are adopting some of the practices and principles identified here, such as a focus on ‘positive’ news, a reliance on volunteers to contribute content and a willingness to put its ‘community service’ role ahead of large economic gains (Barnes et al., 2022). Whether this is the result of a deliberate reflection on what has worked in the past or not, it suggests that what is ‘old’ can indeed be ‘new’ again.

A limitation of this research is the use of a single case study. Future research could expand this approach by adopting multiple case studies for comparison, and provide more detailed historical accounts of the very future of the family local news dynasty in Australia, which was beyond the scope of this paper. Instances of newspapers that have departed from long-standing media traditions and forged entirely new pathways would also complement a temporal reflexivity approach. Nonetheless, the importance of looking back, we suggest, is a necessary intervention. It raises questions for scholars, industry and policymakers as to whether innovation is best focused on developing the digital or learning from (and improving) some of the traditional values and practices that have proven the test of time.

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