

# Examining audience perspectives on local newspaper futures

Journalism  
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–19  
© The Author(s) 2022  
Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/14648849221134008  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/jou](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jou)  


**Kristy Hess** 

Deakin University Faculty of Arts and Education, Burwood, VI, Australia

**Lisa Waller**

School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne, VI, Australia

**Jerry Lai**

Deakin University, Burwood, VI, Australia

## Abstract

When it comes to examining innovation and small-town newspapers, audience expectations and perspectives have received less focus than newsroom practices and processes. This article presents the findings of Australia's most comprehensive national survey of local newspaper audiences ( $n = 4116$ ), which engaged with readers of more than 170 independently owned, small-town newspapers across the nation. The survey was underpinned by a 'geo-social' methodology, which provides a multidimensional framework for understanding the 'place' of newspapers in the digital age within their specific geographic context, in this case rural Australia. It used ordinal, nominal and qualitative questions to explore respondents' experiences, histories, expectations and perspectives related to their local newspaper. Respondents were asked about their preferences for reading and receiving local news, what their newspaper can do better, and the policy debates and interventions shaping the sector. Results indicate a continued desire for the printed product, a passion for localness in terms of both production and content, and a greater say for local news audiences on the policies shaping the future of news in non-metropolitan settings.

## Keywords

Local journalism, local newspaper futures, audience survey, media innovation, media policy

---

### Corresponding author:

Kristy Hess, Deakin University Faculty of Arts and Education, Burwood, VI 3125, Australia.

Email: [kristy.hess@deakin.edu.au](mailto:kristy.hess@deakin.edu.au)

## Introduction

The arrival of big tech players has generated new and ambitious ideas to shape the future of news in a digital world. Technology has become synonymous with a ‘re-imagining’ of journalism itself (Belair-Gagnon and Steinke, 2020; Doherty and Viller, 2020). For example, in 2021, Google announced it was launching its latest initiative, an artificial intelligence (AI) academy for journalists working in small newsrooms and for small publishers. In partnership with the London School of Economics, the project trains media professionals to develop a ‘practical understanding of the opportunities and challenges offered by AI technologies and a co-created action plan to guide the development of AI projects in news organisations’ (Beckett, 2021). As critical cultural scholars, we are not resistant to technological change, but in thinking about the future of local news it is important not to overlook a different (often taken for granted) form of ‘A.I.’ – what could be termed ‘audience intelligence’. Audience intelligence comes not only from mining audience metrics that quantify peoples’ habits and preferences for stories as they appear in their news feed. It also requires listening to their real experiences, histories, expectations and perspectives to develop – in Google’s words above – a ‘co-created plan’ for the future. This paper explores the findings of Australia’s largest survey of local newspaper readers as part of a national study funded by the Australian Research Council, the Australian Government’s main research funding agency. The 3-year project explores the value of media innovation and its relationship to the civic future of local newspapers, beginning with understanding audience views before engaging media proprietors, editors, journalists, startups and policymakers. We argue scholars are often busy examining what audiences *do* with media without taking time to also seek their views on current solutions and policy interventions or explore their expectations of what local journalism should be. As some scholars have observed, little is known about what audiences expect from journalism – ‘the opinions of citizens themselves have been remarkably absent (Karlsson and Clerwall, 2019: 1184 in Reidl and Eberl, 2020).

In this study, our focus is on the audiences of more than 170 independently owned newspapers – many operating in small towns and cities for more than a century. Their shift into the digital space has been a rocky and uneven one, with some closing their doors permanently during COVID-19, while others have gone on to thrive (Hess et al., 2022). Like many other countries, securing local-news provisions has been identified as a national priority in Australia. Here, there have been several policy initiatives designed to provide financial support to the sector, which we will discuss shortly. However, resolving the ‘crisis’ is largely discussed within and across competing bubbles of power from industry to policymakers, scholars and tech conglomerates. Insight from those outside these spaces – such as the willing news audience – tend to be an afterthought in these high-level conversations.

This paper draws on the concept of geo-social journalism to provide a framework for understanding small commercial news outlets that serve particular geographic territories and how they are changing as media technologies evolve (Hess, 2013; Hess and Waller,

2017). Geo-social has also been used to explore how such news outlets connect with audiences via the notion of ‘sense of place’ (Hess, 2013). From the vantage point of specific publications and their regions – in this context rural and regional Australia – it is also possible to look beyond geographic coordinates alone to understand the physical, social and economic relations such newspapers construct in wider social space. Taking a geo-social approach, therefore, offers a lens for theorising the place of rural newspapers in social flows and ‘as nodes in the global media network’ (Hess, 2013). We have established elsewhere that a key challenge is to maintain and further develop specialised knowledge of matters ‘local’.

It is therefore an appropriate model for designing a national audience survey with the aim of exploring what people we describe as the ‘willing’ audience do, think, imagine and value about their local newspaper and media futures. Conducted in 2020, the survey of newspaper audiences ( $n = 4116$ ) was designed along geo-social axes by exploring informed change or decisions across social, cultural, environmental, technological, political and/or economic spectrums that enhance news organizations’ resilience and relevance to the populations and environments that sustain them. While the survey was designed to inform an Australian news futures agenda, the approach taken here can be used to interrogate the same factors in other place-based contexts.

### *Local news in Australia*

Within weeks of the nationwide COVID-19 shutdown, more than 200 local and suburban newspapers across Australia temporarily closed their doors or shifted to digital-only platforms. The sector was crippled by a rapid decline in media-advertising spend as Australian businesses cut back on all but essential costs to survive the pandemic. It followed more than a decade of cuts, layoffs and closures across rural and regional newsrooms, altering the capacity of these print newspaper and local television outlets to serve their communities (Zion et al., 2020). In the 10-year period from 2008 to 2018, 106 local and regional newspaper titles (many suburban) closed across the country, leaving 21 local government areas without coverage from a single local newspaper (in either print or online formats), including 16 local government areas in regional Australia. There have been several Australian Senate inquiries and policy schemes introduced in recent years, including substantial subsidies for local-news providers. Caveats have been imposed on some funding for industry – such as a preference to support ‘digital-first’ initiatives and assisting commercial enterprises with a track record of providing local news rather than start-ups (Hess et al., 2022). At the centre of these interventions has been the core belief – shared by scholars and regulators around the world – that the rise of social media platforms Google and Facebook has led to the collapse of the traditional business model supporting public interest journalism (Bell, 2018). In Australia, this led to the world-first introduction of a mandatory bargaining code in 2021, designed to force big tech to pay news producers fair compensation for sharing the news these news producers create. While mainly larger Australian news groups or providers have secured deals under the arrangement, many smaller and independent news proprietors, are still to negotiate recompense.

## *A critical approach to local news innovation*

Our audience-centred approach addresses a gap in scholarship on media innovation that tends to focus on technological advancements for large media corporations, mainstream media and new start-up ventures or with an emphasis on innovation that is devised and practised *within* and/or across newsrooms. Given the emphasis on ‘big media’ or start-ups especially, there has also been less attention paid to innovation and its relationship to established local media, such as newspapers (see e.g.: [Morlandstø, 2017](#)).

Elsewhere, we have reviewed local news innovation scholarship and outlined a critical approach to the study of innovation ([Hess and Waller, 2020](#)). This involves a shift beyond what makes newsrooms ‘better’, ‘bigger’, ‘faster’, and more ‘digitally oriented’, which has tended to see academics, industry and philanthropic organizations apply an overly celebratory lens to innovation, largely in response to the discourse of crisis ([Creech and Nadler, 2017](#): 182). Instead, we seek to position media innovation as serving a social or merit good (see [Hess and Waller, 2020](#); [Ali, 2016](#)) in that it creates benefits for communities and society that go beyond individual audience gratifications and business value of media operations ([Olsen, 2021](#)). In positioning media innovation as a social or merit good, we are committed to analysing innovation from the perspective of how it makes society ‘better’ and in considering change, we also emphasise a need to assess the value (or not) of the status quo and remind ourselves that ‘new’ innovation might not always be necessary. Supporting this view, [Trappel \(2015\)](#) highlights the importance of context and broader policy considerations in shaping innovation, which we argue is important, especially at a time when policy has played a major role in directing and defining innovative projects for rural newspapers ([Australian Government, 2018](#)).

## *The ‘audience turn’*

The practices and perspectives of audiences have become an increasing focus of scholarship as part of a broader ‘audience turn’ in journalism studies (see especially [Costera Meijer, 2020](#)). [Costera Meijer \(2020\)](#) argues that as discussions about the future of news media intensify, audience and news users have shifted from being perceived as a threat to serving a pivotal role in understanding the very survival of journalism. While the rise of online audience metrics has generated a ‘quantified audience’ ([Anderson, 2011](#)), enabling the study of movement and habits of audiences in digital spaces, it is the perspectives and expectations that audiences have of journalism itself that is often overlooked in scholarship on media innovation. [Costera Meijer](#) argues that although the question of how to *reach* audiences continues to dominate, news organisations do appear to be more open and sensitive towards finding out how to be of *service* to audiences, ‘... how to provide them with a quality experience that will enlighten them with reliable information considered worthwhile’ (2020:2338). That said, an ‘engaged’ audience is often considered an outcome of innovation, rather than innovation being a process where audiences are encouraged to be involved in the thinking and imagining of what journalism might or should be. [Riedl and Eberl \(2020\)](#) argue the importance of industry moving

beyond metrics and their own conceptions of who the imagined audience is to consider the nuances, even inconsistencies, with audiences' news expectations.

Regarding local journalism, there has been some attention paid to understanding how engaged or willing audiences perceive it (Ross et al., 2021; Poindexter et al., 2006) but less when it comes to their views on the solutions, theories and policy interventions designed to secure the future of news. Further, our review of the literature provides little evidence of scholars and industry giving voice and taking seriously the ideas of audiences regarding shaping an innovations agenda at the local level, one that considers the interplay of economics, politics, the environment, digital, social and cultural concerns. There are several notable exceptions however, with Broersma and Singer (2020) indicating (through the perspective of journalists) that local audiences appear to be mainly interested in solution-oriented stories and prefer specific topics such as nature and local history. Meanwhile, Schröder (2019) highlights an audience desire to be informed and a demand for news that is 'relevant'.

### *An innovation bias towards the young?*

The shift towards digital news has placed a younger audience front and centre of innovation and the future business models to sustain local news, with claims that young people's preferences and changing media use provide a window to the future of news (Costera Meijer, 2020). Sambrook and Nielsen (2016), for example, contend that television news providers who wish to reach younger audiences need to adapt to the changing digital environment and remain relevant. Young journalists, meanwhile, are positioned as 'change agents' in pushing the boundaries of journalism. Broersma and Singer (2020) highlight how newsroom innovation is caught between tradition and innovation – journalism students who will work in newsrooms of the future see value in engaging audiences (especially younger audiences) but define change predominately in terms of technology rather than more substantive cultural transformation.

With the catchcry 'engaging younger audiences' being somewhat synonymous with news innovation, there is a risk that the knowledge and experiences of the existing and established audience base (which tends to be older in smaller rural and regional settings) is overlooked, considered backward or outdated in discussions about innovation. While there is scholarship about ageing news audiences at the local level, this tends to focus largely on the role of a newspaper in generating social connection, combating loneliness (Fisher et al., 2021) or improving digital literacy (Barnes, 2015). This is certainly important to an innovations agenda, but there are other dimensions of audience intelligence we seek to tap into here.

### *Research questions and approach*

This article draws on and is informed by literature around audiences, innovation and local news as well as policy interventions and solutions. It addresses the following questions:

**RQ1.** How do local newspaper audiences want to read or access their local newspaper?

**RQ2.** What do audiences think and say about policy debates and interventions shaping the future of local news in Australia?

**RQ3.** What can newspapers and local journalism do better and how might their future be reimagined through the eyes of audiences?

The national research we conducted produced Australia's largest audience survey of independent local newspapers ( $n = 4198$ ). Specifically we examined readers of newspapers that are part of Country Press Australia, the nation's peak body for independently owned regional newspaper outlets. To complement our geo-social approach, we developed survey questions that would elicit audience insights into digital, cultural, social, political, economic and environmental factors relevant to the future of independently owned and operated Australian country newspapers. For example, scholarship on mediated social capital (Hess and Waller, 2017), the community-building role of news (Poindexter et al., 2006) and connecting people with each other informed questions around the cultural and social dynamics while questions around current policies and the democratic role of journalism, the business of news and audiences' digital practices were also included. Sample questions included: 'How would you like to access news supplied by your newspaper?'; 'If there was funding to improve your newspaper how would you like it to be spent?'; How important are the following roles of a local newspaper (community hub, watchdog of powerful people and organisations, historical record, local advocate); and 'How could news coverage be improved?'. Participants were also asked to consider the role of the journalist in local settings. It is important to note that audiences were not asked specifically for 'innovative' ideas for local newspapers. Rather they were informed at the beginning of the survey that their insights on what their local newspaper meant to them, what it does well and what it can do better would provide a valuable contribution to how industry and governments reimagine how local newspapers can best serve their communities for the long term.

The digital survey was developed using the software program Qualtrics and promoted across the CPA network. Newspapers involved in the association helped to distribute the survey via their news platforms during November 2020. In print, prominently placed advertisements carried information about the survey for potential participants, including a Qualtrics-generated QR Code to access the survey online. Online, the survey was promoted via homepage advertisements, carrying similar information as for the print advertisements, with the addition of a link that took people directly to the survey. The survey comprised a range of questions, including Likert scale, multiple choice and qualitative questions, designed to gauge insight into audience views. The results below draw on responses that inform our three central research questions and are presented via a mix of descriptive and thematic analysis of qualitative questions.

### Sample

Of the participants who responded to our survey, 61% were female and 38% male (1% preferred not to say). The mean age of survey respondents across Australia was 61–62

years of age ( $SD = 17.3$ ), with 83% being born in Australia. This indicates it was mostly older Australian-born audiences who wanted to have a say on the future of local newspapers – highlighting a desire of older readers to be actively involved in the news innovation process. Six per cent of respondents were aged 18–35. Of those born in Australia, 1% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. There was a wide spread in the number of years respondents had lived in their local areas ( $M = 21.5$ ,  $SD = 17.3$ ), with 36% stating between 0 and 10 years, 22% between 11 and 20 years, 15% between 21 and 30 years, 11% between 31 and 40 years, and 26% for more than 40 years. It is important to highlight that ‘the willing audience’ of local newspaper readers who comprised the sample differs markedly from the general Australian population (see [Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016](#)). For example, the median age for regional Australia is 41, younger than survey participants. The findings, therefore, are not generalisable and must be interpreted accordingly.

## Results

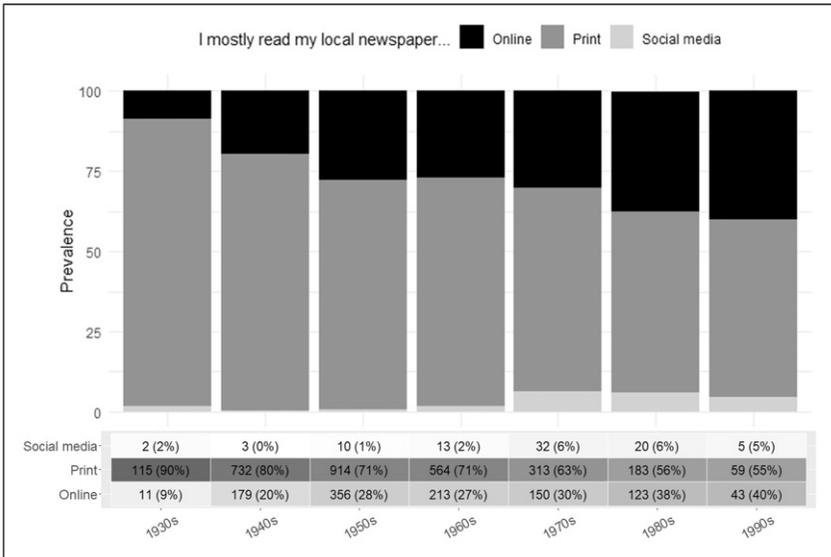
### RQ1. How do local newspaper audiences want to read or access their local newspaper?

Respondents were asked a series of questions (ordinal, nominal and qualitative) about their preferences for reading and receiving local news, such as ‘I prefer to read my local newspaper in: print/digital/other’, ‘I would prefer to read a digital news site that has the look of a printed newspaper; YES, NO, No Preference’ as well as open-ended questions as to how to make local news ‘better’. A key finding that emerged across these questions was a demand for the printed newspaper. 71% ( $n = 2937$ ) of participants said they prefer to read their local paper in print than online. Qualitative responses, meanwhile, which prompted participants to consider how to make the newspaper ‘better’ ( $n = 2855$ ) were entered into NVivo and open-coded by the researchers with the aid of a research assistant, with ‘print’ emerging as a dominant theme from the analysis. For example, comments included ‘Long may the print edition go, as I know that most people love it’ (female reader, 66); and ‘bring back printed papers due to largely elderly population and it [this demographic] is increasing’ (male reader, 73).

Many participants voiced strong resistance to the idea of their newspaper being made available in digital format only. They offered comments such as:

There is always room for improvement, but if this newspaper went digital, I would not be interested (male reader, 80).

A clear pattern showing declining use of printed newspapers can be seen among those survey respondents born in each decade up to the 1990s ([Figure 1](#)); this inverted association between age and preference was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(12) = 192.02$ ,  $p < .001$ . Those born in the 1930s and 1940s mostly prefer print (80%–90%) compared with those audiences aged 20–30 (55%). Taking these differences into account, participants overall are still 2.6 times as likely to read their local paper in print as digital format.



**Figure 1.** Prevalence of readers’ method for accessing local news (in percentage points) in print, online or social media, across seven age brackets, represented by decade of birth (horizontal axis).

It is also important to note that while more than half (57%) of younger readers said they read a physical copy of the newspaper, they did have a stronger preference for digital editions than older age groups (Figure 1).

The survey asked audiences if they considered their ‘printed’ local newspaper to be an essential service, ( $n = 3437$ ) to which 86% responded ‘Yes’, 6% said ‘No’ and 8% expressed ‘No preference’. Readers’ perception on the essentiality of a printed local newspaper to a community was not dependent on age (represented by the almost identical age distribution shown in Table 1). Readers’ preferred method for accessing local news, however, has a statistically significant impact on their opinion regarding the essentiality of a printed local newspaper,  $\chi^2 (2) = 577.15, p < .001$ .

Some newspaper readers offered comments at the end of the survey that indicated the importance of government and industry working together to ensure a printed product for rural and regional areas, such as this comment from a 76-year-old woman from the state of Victoria:

The printed newspaper is essential for older readers in the district, many of whom have limited or no internet access, are on pensions so cannot afford the technology, and are feeling disregarded and disenfranchised in today’s digital age. Print media MUST continue.

Comments from survey participants also demonstrate community understanding of and strong support for the printed version of the newspaper in meeting not only the news

**Table I.** Readers' opinion on the essentiality of a printed local newspaper to a community across age brackets, and readers' preferred method for accessing local news.

Do you consider a print copy of your local newspaper an essential service for your community?		
	Yes <i>N</i> = 3402	No / No Preference <i>N</i> = 532
Decade of Birth:	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
1930s	118 4%	6 1%
1940s	793 23%	91 17%
1950s	1082 32%	165 31%
1960s	659 19%	110 21%
1970s	408 12%	80 15%
1980s	258 8%	60 11%
1990s	84 3%	20 4%

I mostly read my local newspaper:		
	<i>N</i> = 3437	<i>N</i> = 539
Online	706 21%	369 69%
Print	2671 78%	147 27%
Social Media	60 2%	23 4%

needs of older citizens, but their social needs as well. Consider this remark from a 71-year-old female reader:

My husband who loves to keep up with the local news does not feel comfortable reading the paper online. So, he misses out on that knowledge of connection to our local news and events. As you age, I feel it is very important to keep informed about your local area via the local paper.

Qualitative responses highlighted the importance of social connection that comes through reading the printed newspaper as opposed to the digital edition.

A 64-year-old woman from Victoria wrote:

Print, it's essentially perfect. There is nothing as satisfying as flicking through the paper with a cuppa in bed ... and it's easy to pass on to others and to refer back to articles and events. The printed form is a friend; the online version is not.

When it comes to viewing news online, 53% (*n* = 2140) of local-news audiences would also prefer to read a digital news site that has the look and layout of a printed newspaper, while

29% stated that they had no preference. In response to a question about giving audience members the skills to move online to read the newspaper, 68% ( $n = 2743$ ) of survey participants thought free training should be provided to help readers without digital skills to transition to the paper's online site, of which 57% ( $n = 1562$ ) indicated this training should be collectively funded rather than be the responsibility of individual bodies.

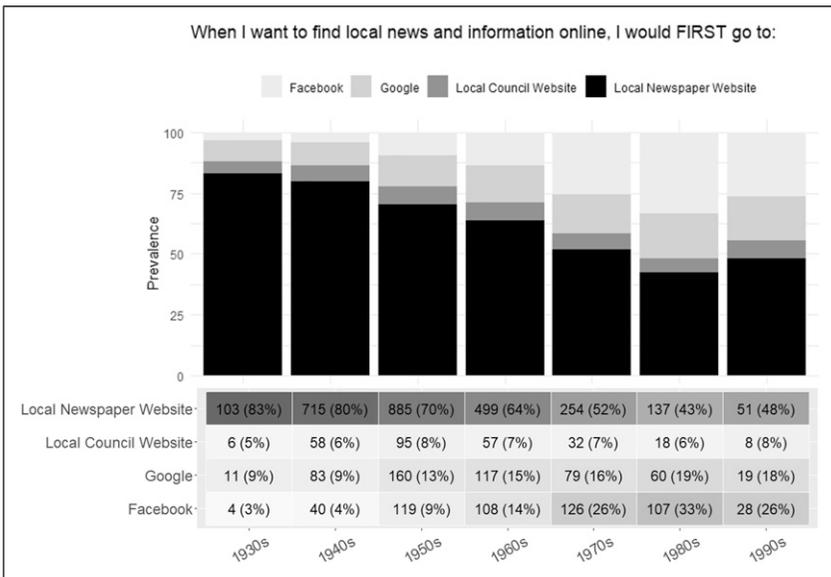
The survey found that if participants were to engage with local news online, 67% of the  $n = 4022$  respondents will go first to their local newspaper's website if they want to access news and information relevant to their local area, ahead of Facebook (13%), Google (13%) and local council websites (7%). These four online sites were chosen largely to gauge the significance of the social media conglomerates to existing readers, especially given debate about the mandatory bargaining code and their suggested influence on local news practices. The results show Country Press Australia newspaper audiences are five times as likely to go directly to a local news website than Google, Facebook or a local council website in the first instance. Local council websites were included in our survey given that an increasing number of municipalities are creating their own publications and/or directing content to their websites in direct competition to local newspapers (Hess et al., 2022). Further analysis revealed a statistically significant association between readers' preferred method and platform for accessing local news,  $\chi^2(6) = 105.46, p < .001$ . Participants who preferred to access local news whether online or in print tended to also view the local newspaper website as their primary source of information.

In addition to the readers' preferred digital channels for navigating local news, age, as represented by the decade of birth, also played a role in readers' preferred platform for navigating local news and information,  $\chi^2(18) = 352.23, p < .001$  (see Figure 2).

**RQ2.** What do audiences think and say about policy debates and interventions shaping the future of local news in Australia?

A geo-social methodology homed in on the relationship between media and politics to move beyond the journalistic field alone and examine local news's relationships within wider spaces of power. As highlighted earlier, securing the future of local media has become a national priority, evidenced by three recent parliamentary inquiries into the future of news and rural/regional communication and a suite of subsidies to support public interest journalism in rural and regional areas (Hess et al., 2022). A 'top down' approach to shaping policies around the future of local journalism appears to have been adopted, with politicians and industry rarely engaging everyday audiences to help evaluate the effectiveness of measures to support news media.

Survey participants were asked whether their voting preferences would be affected by political campaign promises related to the future of their local newspaper; whether as audience members and citizens they should have a greater say in government decisions shaping the sector; and if they were in favour of specific policy solutions that have been recommended through parliamentary inquiries or research findings. The results show that local-news audiences believe they have much to actively contribute to charting the innovations agenda/course to news sustainability in regional and rural Australia.



**Figure 2.** Prevalence of the four digital spaces for navigating local news (in percentage, vertical axis) across the seven age brackets (horizontal axis), as represented by the decade of birth.

Our survey found that 94% ( $n = 3752$ ) of respondents strongly believe they should be invited have a say about government policies and decisions affecting the future of local papers. Policies affecting the future of local newspapers would also influence how 61% ( $n = 2439$ ) of respondents would vote in the next federal election. While some media lobbyists and academics in Australia and overseas have called for governments to provide an indirect subsidy to support newspaper readership through taxation systems (see e.g.: Lindgren et al., 2020), audiences were overwhelmingly against this idea, with 71% ( $n = 837$  of 1179 subscribed readers) answering ‘No’ when asked if they should be able to claim a tax deduction for their newspaper subscriptions. Demonstrating the power of the audience to contribute to policy discussion, including how all levels of government might play a role, some survey participants proposed alternatives on how to fund and support local news. For example, a 60-year-old woman from Victoria wrote: ‘There should be free subscriptions (online or print) for all residents, funded by council rates.’ Another respondent offered a different set of priorities for government subsidies rather than supporting subscriptions:

As a former [local newspaper editor], I believe that financial assistance through tax breaks for publishing costs and wage support for journalists/compositors employed by the paper would be more beneficial (female reader, 72).

Demographics, e.g., age, years residing in the local area, has little impact on readers' opinion on (1) whether they should have a say about government policies and decisions affecting the future of local newspapers or (2) whether policies that affect the future of local newspapers influence their votes. Readers' preferred method for accessing local news (i.e., online, print, social media), however, tended to make a difference on their opinion in these matters. For example, many readers who prefer to access news and information in print (78% of  $n = 3715$ ) believe that the audience should have a say about the future of local news. For those who shared the opposite opinion, the majority tended to access new information online (69% of  $n = 222$ ).

A recent 'one-off' innovations fund, established by the Federal Government in 2018, required local news proprietors to pitch for support for digital innovation (computer and software upgrades and equipment etc) and/or funds for the employment of trainee journalists (see [Australian Government, 2018](#)). Survey respondents indicated that any additional funding (i.e., government subsidies/grants) that came the way of local news outlets should be directed to employing more local journalists to report news (71% of  $n = 4012$ ), over increasing digital connectivity (13%) and digital innovation products (17%).

Respondents also expressed the view that the newspapers should be held accountable to funders and audiences, especially if they were to receive significant government subsidies or other sources of financial support to provide news and information. For example, 85% ( $n = 3478$ ) of respondents favour the establishment of an independent watchdog to ensure papers adequately serve their communities' informational needs. Consider this comment:

I believe that community publishers have an obligation to their communities to assure these qualities, in all respects and at all times, and that any external funding – whether from government, industry or private donors – should be conditional on proof of delivery (male reader, 70).

RQ3: What can newspapers and local journalism do better and how might their future be reimagined through the eyes of audiences?

In the months leading up to this survey, Australia was amid negotiating a mandatory bargaining code, enabling news providers to bargain individually or collectively with digital platforms over news content shared on these platforms. A focus on innovation for much of the past decade has been on how to engage audiences via social media and to leverage social media as a signpost or share news and information produced by mainstream providers ([Eldridge et al., 2019](#)).

Audiences were asked a series of questions about what they would like to see more (and less) of in the future. These questions were designed to seek new and fresh ideas to inform industry and academic work in establishing a media innovations agenda for Australia's rural, regional and suburban newspapers, such as what they valued most about the local newspaper and the styles of local journalism they considered most important for the future.

Larger media companies in Australia have introduced business models that centralise and outsource production functions, including printing, advertising and news production, to rationalise costs and make local news more profitable. However, the survey results show that Country Press Australia audiences see their newspaper's future in the delivery of local news as being produced within their community and which serves their specific news and information needs. As a female reader, 37, commented:

I like the local stories. I like to see what is happening in my area, from social events, performances, to classes for myself and for my mother. I like to see stories of local people, and ways I can get involved in my community.

The survey suggests this passion for 'localness' begins with who produces the news, with audiences indicating they strongly agree (58%,  $n = 2309$ ) or agree (37% = 1473) that local knowledge is vital for journalists working on local newspapers. This finding supports the argument we have made elsewhere, that journalists working at the local level need to have a practical know-how and understanding of a locality which in turn generates legitimacy (Hess and Waller, 2017).

However, participants expressed mixed views about the role of journalism they expect into the future. In response to a question that asked participants to choose what they would like their newspaper to do more of, 46% chose 'facilitate conversations between everyday people about issues', with 17% wanting more 'news about council politics'.

Audiences also had clear ideas about the types of stories they would like to see more of in their newspaper. When asked to nominate their top three of the 11 categories, 'Investigative news stories' was No. 1 for 67% ( $n = 2672$ ) of respondents, 'Information about events' came in second with 60% ( $n = 2376$ ) and 47% ( $n = 1858$ ) was 'people's achievements and successes'. See Table 2.

Respondents used the comments space in the survey to discuss this topic further such as 'get our events and festivals section up again' (female, 70) and 'social event notifications are so important to keep all residents connected' (female, 68). A 67-year-old female reader said:

There needs to be more timely notice of events going on around the districts. Sometimes events are only reported on after they have occurred and when nobody even knew they were on.

Audiences were also asked to consider the role they expected of their local newspaper. Serving as a community hub was considered most important (59% of  $n = 3551$ ), followed by the watchdog role on powerful people/organisations (18.7%), local advocate (17.9%) and historical record (4.4%). Comments and suggestions offered by readers aged 35 and below, who comprised 6.6% of the total number of survey participants, point to a particularly strong demand for the 'community hub' role. For example, a 21-year-old male suggested his paper should 'engage the community by sharing activities, recreations, groups, events etc', while another in his

**Table 2.** Readers' preference for the types of articles they would like to see more of in a local newspaper. Respondents were instructed to select up to three options.

**I would like to see more of the following in my local newspaper:**

	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>N</i> = 3986
Investigative news stories	2672	67%	
Information about events	2376	60%	
People's achievements/successes	1858	47%	
Comment pieces/letters to the editor	1178	30%	
Council stories	1088	27%	
Culturally diverse stories	940	24%	
Court stories	444	11%	
Obituaries/anniversary milestones	402	10%	
Sport stories	368	9%	
Real estate	232	6%	
Weather stories	127	3%	

early 20 s said: 'I think they should add entertainment and a sports section that could attract younger audiences'.

In addition, some participants suggested establishing collaborations with local government, especially in areas where there was no longer a 'free' local paper. Ideas for this ranged from council distributing the newspaper to citizens in a digital format, and local newspapers including useful information from council websites. For example, a 22-year-old woman from Victoria wrote:

I know in the past every household would receive the local newspaper delivered to their property. It would be great if there could be a collaboration with local council and this could be delivered to homeowners'/residents' email addresses.

### *Discussion/conclusion*

In advancing their innovation agendas across the globe, media companies have placed increasing emphasis on a 'digital-first' approach to news, with some moving wholly to online delivery as a cost-cutting measure and others viewing digital technologies as central to media innovation (see [Belair-Gagnon and Steinke, 2020](#) for discussion of the technologically centric approach to journalism innovation). The survey was conducted during a period of COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia, when many local newspapers suspended production or moved to online-only offerings to survive the accompanying economic downturn. While the survey was distributed in digital format only – suggesting

those who took part had at least some internet access – the results provide resounding evidence of a continued strong demand for the printed newspaper across rural and regional Australia, driven by the cultural and social appeal of a physical newspaper. Our previous research has highlighted – among others (see [Jenkins and Nielsen, 2020](#)) – how people develop a sense of place and familiarity by engaging with objects of news such as the printed newspaper and there is growing research that highlights the continued importance of print for news readers (see [Matthews, 2021](#)). Scholars such as [Jenkins and Nielsen \(2020\)](#) in their study of local newspaper managers, editors and reporters in the Global North, indicate there is a place for print – with many newspapers still generating 90% of revenue from the printed product. They suggest the challenge for newspapers is to balance preservation of a legacy editorial and commercial product with the evolution of new, digitally native editorial and commercial products. A limitation of this survey, then, was its circulation in digital format only. In being reflexive about our own research practices, our rationale for this approach was primarily to save costs, especially given this study was funded by the Australian Research Council where budget feasibility is a key consideration. However, we received dozens of personal calls and feedback from participants and members of the public who were unhappy with the way the survey was conducted. For example, several people said the choice of digital survey suggested we were implying from the outset that print had no future. There is no doubt that the cost of print is a concerning issue for news proprietors across the globe – in fact the Australian Government generated a round of subsidies to help counter a rise in paper costs in 2022. Nonetheless, the popularity of the printed product should create pause for thought among global scholarship in this space and the creeping bias towards innovation equating to the digital and the need to balance continuity with change ([Eldridge et al., 2019](#)).

A geo-social framework encourages exploration of the various factors (beyond the digital alone) and their relationship to media futures, guiding survey questions that are sensitive to the various roles, expectations and values local newspapers might play in certain geographies – in this case rural Australia - and across social, cultural, political and environmental dimensions. Such an approach encourages researchers to widen exploration beyond normative ideas of journalism and/or the focus on the business models supporting news that arguably tend to dominate discussions of audiences and innovation. There is no doubt the vast geographic distances between rural towns and cities and their distance to metropolitan areas are a distinctive factor for local news providers in Australia, compared with other countries such as the United Kingdom and parts of Europe. This distance may be a factor as to why the willing newspaper audiences are so passionate about their local newspaper and points to future comparative studies with countries with large landmasses such as Russia, Canada, China, the United States and Brazil.

While the average age of survey respondents was 60+ (one in three older Australians aged over 65 live in rural and regional areas of Australia), it is important to note that this demographic of ‘willing readers’ will continue for some time and we are mindful of not succumbing to a younger-reader bias when exploring media innovation from an audience perspective. [Barnes \(2015\)](#) has highlighted that the design and usability of news websites can be a barrier for engagement among older audiences and has argued that news organisations need to ensure online offerings are perceived as relevant and usable for this demographic.

In line with the findings from other research on news audiences in Australia and throughout the world, younger readers lead the shift towards reading news online (Thurman and Fletcher, 2019). That said, in digital space existing readers still considered the local newspaper website to be their first port of call when accessing local news, ahead of Google, Facebook and the local council website. It is important to note, nonetheless, that there was a clear appetite for digital news to be presented with the ‘look’ of a printed newspaper among older and younger readers. While media innovation scholars tend to define change in terms of technology rather than cultural transformation, our findings suggest a need to blend traditional, ritualistic practices with digital innovation. This was also highlighted by participants’ demand for information that helped people to socially connect with others and generate ‘community’. Poindexter et al. (2006) for example, highlighted that local news audiences expect the press to be a good neighbour rather than a watchdog, that is ‘caring about the community, reporting on interesting people and groups.’ (Poindexter et al., 2006:77). Researchers such as Ross et al., for example, highlight news companies need to foster an interdependent relationship with audiences where they receive something of ‘value’ in return for committing to a brand (Ross et al., 2021) and this cultural and social connection appears to be especially paramount.

Responses demonstrate local news is considered an essential service for regional communities, suggesting that an innovations agenda should consider ways of bolstering its effectiveness as an essential service and there is indeed support for government intervention to secure its future. Our survey also indicated there was a strong desire for newspapers to be held accountable for information they provided the public if they received government support to operate. There has been growing concern in Australia, for example, among scholars that there is a lack of transparency as to how subsidies are allocated and the impact of this funding (see e.g.: Fisher et al., 2021). Future research may examine best-practice approaches to measuring accountability of regional press.

There is of course the argument that understanding media innovation involves the creating of something previously unknown, of which we cannot possibly expect ordinary users to imagine. At its heart, innovation, we contend, should be about making news better and gauging audience perspectives and insights is an essential component of what should be a multi-perspectival conversation that also involves news proprietors, journalists, editors, the academy and policymakers. If community and social connection is considered especially paramount among audiences, for example, then arguably there is a need to explore new ideas and innovations that might best pursue such an agenda. If not to reach and inform the needs of people, what then is journalism for?

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper is supported by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant LP180100813. We would like to acknowledge the support of research fellow Angela Blakston in compiling this article.

## ORCID iD

Kristy Hess  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3027-7492>

## References

- Ali C (2016) The merits of merit goods: local journalism and public policy in a time of austerity. *Journal of Information Policy* 6: 105–128.
- Anderson CW (2011) Between creative and quantified audiences: web metrics and changing patterns of newswork in local US newsrooms. *Journalism* 12(5): 550–566.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2016) *Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census*. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features22016> (accessed 30 May 2022).
- Australian Government. (2018) *Innovation Fund a Boost for Regional and Small Publishers*. <https://www.mitchfield.com/2018/12/innovation-fund-a-boost-for-regional-and-small-publishers/> (accessed 20 June 2022).
- Barnes R (2015) Digital news and silver surfers an examination of older Australians engagement with news online. *Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy* 3(3): 1–16.
- Beckett C (2021) *Introducing the AI Academy for Small Newsrooms*. London School of Economics blog. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2021/07/06/introducing-the-ai-academy-for-small-newsrooms/> (accessed 17 May 2022).
- Belair-Gagnon V and Steinke AJ (2020) Capturing digital news innovation research in organizations, 1990–2018. *Journalism Studies* 21(12): 1724–1743.
- Bell E (2018) The dependent press: how silicon valley threatens independent journalism. In: Moore M and Tambini D (eds), *Digital Dominance: The Power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 241–261.
- Broersma M and Singer J (2020) Caught between innovation and tradition: young journalists as normative change agents in the journalistic field. *Journalism Practice* 15(6): 821–838.
- Costera Meijer I (2020) Understanding the audience turn in journalism: from quality discourse to innovation discourse as anchoring practices 1995–2020. *Journalism Studies* 21(16): 2326–2342.
- Creech B and Nadler AM (2017) Post-industrial fog: reconsidering innovation in visions of journalism's future. *Journalism* 19(2): 182–189.
- Doherty S and Viller S (2020) Prototyping interaction: designing technology for communication. In: Filimowicz M and Veronika T (eds), *Reimagining Communication: Experience*. New York: Routledge, pp. 80–96.
- Eldridge S, Hess K, Tandoc C, et al. (2019) Navigating the scholarly terrain: introducing the digital journalism studies compass. *Digital Journalism* 7(3): 386–403.

- Fisher C, Park S, Lee JY, et al. (2021) Older people's news dependency and social connectedness. *Media International Australia* 181(1): 183–196.
- Hess K. (2013) Breaking boundaries: recasting the “local” newspaper as “geo-social” news in a digital landscape. *Digital Journalism* 1(1): 48–63. DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2012.714933](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2012.714933).
- Hess K and Waller L (2017) *Local Journalism in a Digital World*. London: Palgrave.
- Hess K and Waller L (2020) Charting the media innovations landscape for regional and rural newspapers. *Australian Journalism Review* 42: 59–75.
- Hess K, McAdam A, Blakston A, et al. (2022) *Submission to Inquiry into the future of Regional Newspapers in Australia*. <https://www.localnewsinnovation.org/> (Accessed 7 June 2022).
- Jenkins J and Kleis Nielsen R (2020) Proximity, public service and popularity: a comparative study of how local journalists view quality news. *Journalism Studies* 21(2): 236–253.
- Karlsson M and Clerwall C (2019) Cornerstones in journalism: according to citizens. *Journalism Studies* 20(8): 1184–1199.
- Lindgren A, Corbett J and Hodson K (2020) Mapping change in Canada's local news landscape. *Digital Journalism* 8(6): 758–779.
- Matthews N (2021) Print Imprint: the connection between the physical newspaper and the self. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. DOI: [10.1177/019685992111052899](https://doi.org/10.1177/019685992111052899).
- Morlandstø L (2017) Innovation and value creation in local media. *The Journal of Media Innovations* 5(1): 30.
- Olsen RK. (2021) The value of local news in the digital realm – introducing the integrated value creation model. *Digital Journalism* 9(6): 810–834.
- Poindexter PM, Heider D and McCombs M (2006) Watchdog or good neighbour? The public expectations of local news. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 11(1): 77–88.
- Riedl A and Eberl JM (2020) *Audience Expectations of Journalism: What's Politics Got to Do With It?* Journalism. DOI: [10.1177/1464884920976422](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920976422).
- Ross A, Lester L and Konkes C (2021) *Audience Perspectives on Paying for Local News: A Regional Qualitative Case Study*. Journalism Studies. DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2021.1916985](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1916985).
- Sambrook R and Nielsen R (2016) *What Is Happening to Television News?* Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/what-happening-television-news> (accessed 17 May 2022).
- Schröder KC (2019) *What do News Readers Really Want to Read About? How Relevance Works for News Audiences*. Digital News Report. Available at: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/publications/2019/news-readers-really-want-read-relevance-works-news-audiences/> (accessed 17 May 2022).
- Thurman N and Fletcher R (2019) Has digital distribution rejuvenated readership? Revisiting the age demographics of newspaper consumption. *Journalism Studies* 20(4): 542–562.
- Trappel J (2015) What to study when studying media and communication innovation? Research design for the digital age. *The Journal of Media Innovations* 2(1): 7–22.
- Zion L, Sherwood M, O'Donnell P, et al. (2020) Media in the news: how Australia's media beat covered two major journalism change events. *Journalism Practice*: 1–19. DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2021.1910983](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1910983).

---

### **Author Biographies**

Kristy Hess, Deakin University, Australia ORCID: 0000-000-2-6877-4526 [Kristy.hess@deakin.edu.au](mailto:Kristy.hess@deakin.edu.au)

Kristy Hess is a Professor of Communication at Deakin University, Australia

Lisa Waller, RMIT University, Australia ORCID: 0000-0002-2689-8010 [Lisa.waller@rmit.edu.au](mailto:Lisa.waller@rmit.edu.au)

Professor Lisa Waller is Associate Dean, Communication at RMIT University.

Jerry Lai, Deakin University, Australia ORCID 0000-0001-7017-9008 [Jerry.lai@deakin.edu.au](mailto:Jerry.lai@deakin.edu.au)

Dr Jerry Lai is a digital research analyst at Deakin University and Intersect Australia.