



Media innovation
**and the civic future of
Australia's country press**

FINAL REPORT



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future of
Australia's
country press**

AN AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL LINKAGE PROJECT

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of Australia's country press**

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For more information visit www.localnewsinnovation.org

Cover image

On the job: Shepparton News photo journalist, Holly Daniel, documents the scene in the aftermath of a 120-hectare grassfire at Dookie, in Victoria. Photo courtesy of McPherson Media Group

All images supplied by Country Press Australia member mastheads

Graphic design by Andrea Dunstan



CONTENTS

	6
	7
	9
	13
	15
	19
	25
	29
	35
	43
	47
	51
	55
	59
	65
	66
	68
	70
	74

PREFACE

When I was a child growing up in regional Australia, I had my photograph published in the local newspaper as the winner of an ice-cream cake because it was my birthday. It wasn't front page news (I featured on the kids' colour-in page!), but my parents proudly tore out the section and placed it in the photo album they began when I was born.

Without being too self-indulgent, the point I make here is that, for millions of Australians, local news matters. As a research team, we have been reminded of just how important local news is – especially in rural and regional areas – for democratic, social, economic, historic, cultural, symbolic and emotional reasons. If people see themselves as being 'local' or connected to somewhere, chances are they have reached for (or searched online for) the local masthead to maintain that sense of place. That said, if people reach out for the local paper and it just doesn't 'feel local', then the connection is lost. Game over.

This research project began just before the pandemic loomed large over us. As nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns began in March 2020, more than 200 local and suburban mastheads across Australia either permanently or temporarily closed, or shifted to digital-only platforms. In early 2021, conglomerate News Corp made the decision to stop sending printed newspapers to areas of regional Queensland as part of a major cost-cutting program. Many independently-owned newspapers hung on (it wasn't easy) and today they continue to serve as the voice of their communities as many of them have for more than a century.

Independent news providers, of course, are not immune to challenges or criticism. Sometimes they are accused of being too parochial, not culturally diverse enough in coverage, or lapdogs for those in power. These are valid concerns and are issues that we must continue to address. Right now, however, the focus is on preserving public interest journalism in local communities for future generations. Extensive evidence overseas and through this study and other Australian research, suggest that quality, respected local news is essential to the democratic health and social fabric of communities. It has been clear from our study, however, that there are many factors that, when combined, threaten quality news and information flow in regional and rural Australia.

Countries across the globe are mapping increasing news deserts and gaps as outlets struggle to be commercially competitive in a world dominated by Big Tech like Google and Meta. Big Tech has disrupted the advertising model that has largely sustained journalism. As a society, we are faced with existential questions about what we want and expect from local news providers, from who produces it to how it is disseminated and shared. The end goal of this research is to ensure that quality local information that binds us, informs us, challenges us and advocates for the common good thrives in non-metropolitan Australia. We hope this report creates a blueprint for how to achieve this in the digital era and guarantees regional voices are heard in discussions about the future of independent news in this country.

My thanks to the entire research team for their work during the life of the project, but especially to Angela Blakston and Alison McAdam who have committed 100% to helping fulfil the aims and objectives we set out to achieve. Thanks also to Andrea Dunstan for designing this final report under immense pressure and to our statistical 'whizz' Jerry Lai who appeared like an angel at the beginning of the project. Lastly, a heartfelt thank you to the Country Press Australia network of news providers. We are grateful for your appreciation and respect for the independent academic research process. Your commitment to this project has been unwavering for the past three years, much like your passion and dedication to the communities you serve.

Professor Kristy Hess

Project Lead Investigator
Deakin University

PREFACE

When you are staring into the abyss, it tends to concentrate the mind. Particularly, when you are being pushed ever so remorselessly by forces beyond.

And so it was, not many years ago, that for the many Australian publishers in regional and country towns – if you believed the 'experts' – print was dead. Gone and forgotten.

Even the 'experts' in metro-land media sounded the death knell, and indeed some have begun to reap what they sowed from back then.

But this is today, and today, independent print publishers all over Australia have fought back and gradually have convinced the doubters, and particularly their communities, that they not only remain viable and relevant, but indeed are a crucial part of those regional and rural towns.

They have done this, are doing this, through partnerships, hard work and a simple philosophy: deliver local news for local people and be a champion for your community.

Through Country Press Australia (CPA), these same publishers have long partnered with Deakin University for training but, in the past three years, specifically to research what the future looks like for – and the relevance of – community journalism.

Thanks to significant Australian Research Council (ARC) funding, this project has enabled regional and rural publishers to better understand how communities see them, and need them. It will assist them to respond accordingly.

Yes, publishers have had to change and adapt but the need for diversification also has helped them, and their communities, understand that print remains a core, relevant and much-needed product.

Indeed, in regional and rural communities, and among the political class, it is now understood that this is a test of democracy. That without the interaction and the journalism provided by independent newspaper publishers, communities suffer in terms of their well-being.

The tabling of this CPA-Deakin research project, therefore, is a highly significant event. It is a beginning, not an end; a launching pad if you like for what will be the new model of community-based journalism, where publishing in regional and rural communities is very much still a business but also a critical part of their fabric.

Crucially, too, this research report now provides an academically-tested framework from which policymakers can better understand the importance of community journalism, and act accordingly.

Bruce Morgan

Executive Officer (2015-23)

Country Press Australia,

Project Partner Investigator

Ploughing ahead: Many local news producers have determinedly pushed on in servicing their communities, despite numerous challenges over a number of years. (Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Australian Research Council Linkage project provides a comprehensive assessment of media innovation and the civic value of rural, regional and suburban news in Australia, as well as the opportunities and challenges shaping its sustainability in a digital world (LP180100813). The project is led by Deakin University with support of RMIT and in partnership with Country Press Australia – a not-for-profit association serving the interests of more than 200 small and independently owned news providers across rural, regional and suburban Australia. These news outlets serve towns and cities with populations as little as 1000, such as Allora in Queensland, to larger regional areas such as Shepparton in Victoria (population 68,000).

The importance of our research became especially clear when, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (and this project), dozens of rural, regional and suburban mastheads closed in response to the unprecedented crisis. At the same time, the term ‘essential service’ became part of the everyday lexicon as governments assessed what vital parts of society were exempt from lockdowns. A key finding of this research project is that rural and regional audiences view their local newspaper as an ‘essential service’. We also found that, while digital innovation is an appealing and, in the media’s parlance, a ‘sexy’ solution to supporting the future of local news, there are in fact systemic issues that need addressing first, in particular, existing relationships between media and forms of government support.

Many of the newspapers that closed their doors during the pandemic (some temporarily) were owned by bigger conglomerates – notably, Australian Community Media and News Corp Australia. However, small news producers who we interviewed across Australia remained steadfast. Some told us they simply could not let down their communities amid a global health crisis and would operate ‘on the smell of an oily rag’ if necessary. This report offers steps and solutions to ensure their sustainability into the future.

This three-year project has involved extensive audience engagement via national surveys, seven focus groups involving news producers and staff (editors, journalists, advertising managers) and interviews with start-ups and long-serving news proprietors. A PhD project has examined the underlying factors in the sustainability of several Australian local news mastheads that have defied the perceived crisis in journalism. A survey of editors’ use of and attitudes towards metrics and analytics was also conducted. There has been extensive engagement with academic literature, policy documents, reports about the news media sector in Australia and internationally. Our research has reinforced the important and various roles that audiences expect a local news provider to play within the communities they serve. Journalists working in ‘local’ environments are expected to hold people in power to account, to help residents engage in democratic processes, to provide them with a voice and a legitimate platform to advocate for community change (Williams et al., 2015; Schultz, 1998; Firmstone & Coleman, 2014). A well-resourced local

news outlet is also expected to act as a social connector, or the ‘social glue’ (Olsen, 2021, p. 814; Hess, 2015; Fisher et al., 2021) that helps people connect with one another and the places where they live and work. Journalists and editors play the role of cultural ambassador or civic custodian, helping to construct a community’s identity by highlighting its traditions and distinct geographies (Hess, 2015; Buchanan, 2009). Further, local news outlets are acknowledged for serving as community recordkeeper, and for creating and collating a valuable archive of historic material that documents everyday activities of people in their communities (Allen & Sieczkiewicz, 2010). Of course, this all takes time and resources to do effectively.

This research report is specific to the Australian context; we have sought examples from overseas and engaged with international peers, but we do not claim this study solves the challenges facing all local news outlets across the globe. Rather, we suggest that small, independently owned local news outlets are experiencing mixed fortunes depending on the context in which they operate. They are shaped by geographic factors as well as wider social, cultural and economic forces and relationships to power in a digital world (Hess, 2013). The research project also adopts a constructionist approach in developing recommendations for a way forward. This is more complex than simply presenting ‘evidence’ via our survey findings, analysis and qualitative data. A constructionist approach relies on shared knowledge creation between researchers and the subjects of inquiry. In this case, it has involved extensive engagement with news providers and audiences, broader literature, scholarly theories and concepts. It is this rich knowledge that makes academic partnerships with industry important and distinctive from consultancy research.

A changing policy environment

Securing the future of quality and reliable news and information platforms in non-metropolitan areas is in the national interest. There have been four Senate inquiries examining aspects of rural and regional news since 2016, as well as a Digital Platforms Inquiry, conducted by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and a parliamentary inquiry into the future of local newspapers. Simply put, it is now widely understood that local news matters to our democracy, but it has struggled and requires support. The Albanese Labor Government came to office in 2022 with a policy to spend \$29 million supporting local news and community broadcasting. The funding package provides \$15 million to help outlets meet newsprint price increases. This includes \$10 million for regional newspaper publishers and \$5 million for independent suburban, First Nations and multicultural newspaper publishers (see Bennet, Rae & Hess, 2023). Action was taken to implement this policy in August 2022.¹ Alongside this, the former Coalition Government had already pledged about \$60 million to support news organisations since 2018. The impact of COVID-19 prompted the government to announce the Public Interest News

¹<https://minister.infrastructure.gov.au/rowland/media-release/grants-support-regional-and-local-newspapers-now-open>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gathering program, which in 2020–21 funded 107 regional publishers and broadcasters with the explicit aim of supporting ‘the continued provision of quality news and information to communities across regional and remote Australia’. This followed the introduction of a Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package, which awarded \$17.6 million to local news and education providers, mostly to support the hiring of cadet journalists, training and for digital infrastructure and equipment. There was also tax fee relief for commercial television and radio broadcasts. Most significantly perhaps, the government acted on recommendations in the Digital Platforms Inquiry to introduce the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code, which aimed to counteract the global tech behemoths’ hoovering up of the news media’s advertising revenue. The code created a mechanism to force social media companies to pay news providers for content that appeared on their sites.

Given these considerable short-term government incentives and subsidy schemes to support the sector, it is vital that key change-makers identify and explore the array of factors that both enable and challenge news sustainability in the digital era. This will ensure taxpayer funds are targeted most effectively to support public interest journalism for the long-term.

OVERALL FINDINGS

Audiences value rural and regional news but want more of the ‘local’

Our research found audiences demand and are passionate about local news. They want more original content about the towns, cities and suburbs where they live or with which they have a sense of connection. They are acutely aware of and resistant to news that is ‘local in name only’ – this is, publications with lots of syndicated content, reproduced media releases, plenty of advertisements from multi-national companies and some government advertising. Our research suggests the shift to digital is a slow, cultural transition that cannot and should not be rapidly enforced in the interests of information equality, and that attitudes, needs and experiences of older readers (those aged 50+) should not be overlooked in policy discussions about local news in a digital world. We also found:

- Audiences are five times as likely to go directly to a local news website for their local news than to Google or Facebook and almost 10 times more likely to go to a local newspaper website over a local council website for news and information.
- Audiences would like to see their local newspapers do more to help facilitate conversations between people about issues. They want more investigative stories, along with information about social events and stories about people’s achievements/successes.

- Audiences are not in favour of their newspaper subscriptions being made tax deductible.
- Audiences overwhelmingly indicate any additional funding for local news should be directed to employing more local journalists to report news, rather than increasing digital innovation products and services.
- Audiences think newspapers who receive any form of government funding should be held accountable for providing public interest journalism in the communities they serve.

Print is not dead

Our research findings challenge the notion that ‘print is dead’ in Australia’s rural and regional media. Our research with audiences and news producers, and our review of international literature provides evidence of a continued appreciation – even passion – for the newspaper in many small towns and cities. The views and experiences of willing news audiences (and those who do not consider themselves local news readers), tell us the printed product is considered an essential service to communities. We argue there is a need to explore the nuances and contexts in which local information is best shared and disseminated. Components such as frequency of publication, free and accessible distribution, quality of content, connection to the material product (from the ‘feel’ of a newspaper to habit and comfort), the digital divide and audience demographics suggest print’s value should be considered in any strategies aimed at preserving and sustaining local news.

Well intended but misdirected government support

Our research suggests government policies and advertising spending is the single most influential factor in providing baseline surety to the long-term sustainability of small, independently owned news outlets in rural, regional and suburban Australia. Subsidies have been vital in supporting news outlets during the past five years, but existing taxpayer funds supporting media probably have been misdirected in two main ways. These include:

1: *Government spending on public notices and awareness campaigns*

In 2020-21, the Federal Government along with states South Australia, Queensland and Victoria collectively spent more than \$450 million on advertising to keep Australians informed about their policies, programs and public awareness/prevention campaigns as well as public notice advertisements, such as tenders and recruitment. This is a substantial sum of money that provides important revenue for media platforms. However, over the past 10 years this government advertising spend has shifted towards social media giants and metropolitan news outlets with larger digital reach at the expense of small rural and regional outlets serving niche geographic markets in print and digital formats. This has

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

happened across all levels of government (local, state, national) and amid concern about the impact of social media on the quality of public discourse as well as the importance of providing reliable news and information channels serving as the public record. There too remains a digital divide for parts of rural and regional Australia, which continue to struggle with poor-quality internet and where some older citizens experience problems with digital access either because they do not have or are not comfortable with using technology. The role of this type of government advertising is a powerful lever that remains largely under-examined in terms of its value for news media providers that invest in public interest journalism.

We argue there is a need for greater transparency and more thoughtful, informed government advertising frameworks to ensure this taxpayer spend offers value for money and effectively reaches Australia's rural and remote communities. Our research suggests public notice spending has been used as a lever of control, with some local councils withdrawing advertising from local newspapers because of concerns about negative council coverage, while other government departments choose to control public messaging via their own websites and publications.

State government legislation around the dissemination of public notices, meanwhile, is highly uneven, with the Victorian government the only state government to directly acknowledge the impact its public notice expenditure has on the bottom line for local news businesses. Since late 2022, it has committed to placing a page of public awareness campaign advertising every week in all rural and regional newspapers across the state. A parliamentary inquiry into regional newspapers has since recommended 20% of all Federal Government advertising expenditure be directed to rural and regional news outlets. Governments need to more thoughtfully assess what media channels serve as quality, reliable information sources for citizens across rural and regional Australia and align public messaging accordingly. An assessment of advertising strategies across all tiers of government is essential to ensure funds are well directed and avoid issues of unfair advantage in the marketplace, given the powerful role this revenue source provides for rural information outlets.

2: A digital 'shiny things' bias

Our research found there has been a bias toward digital innovation in how subsidies and policy initiatives have operated, with a focus on 'new shiny things' (Posetti, 2018; Eldridge et al., 2018) at the expense of supporting initiatives that may be most beneficial to rural and regional audiences. We suggest that any model of media innovation should lean in to its societal benefits and ask whether innovation is always the right or necessary solution. Data in our research revealed many instances of news producers receiving funds for digital equipment, such as drones, when what they really needed were upgrades to print infrastructure to meet audience demand. There was a strong undercurrent throughout the research of an over-emphasis on digital metrics and digital reach as an assessment tool to determine government economic support.

Further, the distribution of funding in Australia, for example, (both under the \$60 million suite of support packages and deals made via the mandatory bargaining code) is highly uneven. The extent to which it can support news outlets in small-town communities serving geographies under 10,000 is questionable, with the biggest rewards going to larger media conglomerates with a local focus. The mandatory bargaining code, meanwhile, has meant many small players are spending valuable time meeting digital story quotas rather than focusing on their core business, and for little revenue return. Our research suggests deals made as a result of the code represent between 0-20% of revenue for CPA news providers (the larger the enterprise the more beneficial) and do not provide surety to the long-term business model. There is also a lack of transparency as to how public or mandatory bargaining code funds are spent.

There too has been inadequate support for small-town news providers with lower turnover and for start-ups, especially in news deserts or areas that may be on the periphery of news zones. These start-ups play a vital role in rejuvenating quality news and information in Australia and ensuring diversity of information in non-metropolitan areas.

Appreciating place-based public interest journalism

Local is a slippery concept that has cultural meaning depending on one's place in the world or connection to a geographic place or locale. Defining 'local' can be tricky for policymakers when determining how to adequately assess whether a news outlet is providing quality and reliable news to its community. Any future investigations into media diversity and policies for 'local' news should recognise the importance of place-based public interest journalism in rural and regional areas as a first-tier level of local reporting. This involves encouraging news providers to more clearly outline their geographic territory – the area in which they provide a reliable form of public record and quality source of regular civic, social and political information (see Magasic, Hess & Freeman, 2023). An emphasis on 'place-based reporting' is important because it shifts focus away from a reliance on digital metrics that recognise and favour the stretching of geographic 'reach' over information quality for niche audiences. Local television licensing arrangements, for example, include 'local' geographic areas that can stretch over 800km in diameter, while government advertising agencies also appear to preference news outlets with wide online audiences. This focus on strong digital reach (ie: the ability to reach a larger audience online and across geographies) can encourage practices such as generating news that produces 'click bait' that may not be in the interests of democratic reporting and probably of little value to small-town news audiences. Our research suggests there are 'goldilocks' zones in which a small news outlet can feasibly serve audiences with place-based public interest journalism. These news zones tend to cover areas between a 50-100km radius. Most importantly, such zones highlight towns and districts, which are on the periphery of a local news outlet's geographic reach, and which may be more susceptible to

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

receiving poor quality news coverage and may risk becoming news gaps. Zones enable a clearer distinction between types of local media coverage (place-based or tokenistic) and offer opportunities for how other news organisations such as the ABC could best support rural and regional areas by helping support and amplify place-based journalism.

Diversification

Many newsrooms have begun to diversify their operations to focus on and draw attention to the strong connection they have to their regions. Across the globe, local news businesses have been experimenting with forms of revenue raising outside the norm, such as adding e-commerce, event organising, in-house marketing firms, sports club ownership, commercial printing or merchandise production to their business structure (see: Macnamara, 2010; Radcliffe & Ali, 2017; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018; Nel, 2010). In Australia, these approaches have included initiatives such as lifestyle publications, commercial printing, merchandise manufacturing (from cookbooks to tea towels that feature images of historic newspaper front pages) and online information apps and business directories. Leveraging a rich connection to history has also been important. In many cases, it is the local newspaper that creates, collates and keeps the main historical record of the people and activities that make up that community. Reporting the everyday events and today's issues and archiving them for future reference means the newspaper fills the important role of community library. Scholars and industry consultants have suggested this historic content could provide a valuable revenue stream in the digital era, with one report identifying 'potentially huge' business opportunities in media archives that include thousands of photos and historical accounts of important events that stretch back decades or even centuries (KPMG, 2007, p. 4, cited in MacNamara, 2010). Furthermore, there may be opportunities to develop AI initiatives in this space to help collate and archive history, creating commercial opportunities.

Need for collaboration and tackling a perception problem

The importance of working together was a rich theme to emerge from the research and there is a need for small news providers within the Country Press Australia network to enhance collaborative efforts across regional, state and national levels. This is highlighted in five main ways:

- 1) Working collectively to highlight, discuss and advance issues and opportunities for rural and regional Australia through shared investigative, solutions and constructive journalism initiatives.
- 2) The need for a national rural news producers' community of practice to build relationships, reduce isolation and share problems and opportunities.
- 3) Coordination to help streamline national and federal advertising across all news providers in the network, especially government public awareness campaigns and big retailers, such as supermarkets and retail.
- 4) A parliamentary inquiry has recommended Australia's local sector adopt a BBC-style model of collaboration, which has been touted as a potential solution to supporting the local news crisis in Australia. Our research found some reluctance among news producers to this model, but there is benefit in examining the contexts in which the nation's public broadcaster can best support local news needs, especially in fragile areas of the local ecology.
- 5) Collaboration with other news organisations to promote regional journalism careers and enhance public attitudes and perceptions about rural and regional careers more generally. A key challenge for Australia's local news media is the recruitment of talent, especially in smaller rural areas. Our research suggests there is a need to shift the focus towards improving perceptions of regional media professions, beyond that of a 'starting ground' or 'stepping stone' to a big city career. This is often the narrative of journalism educators to students. We suggest targeted incentives to encourage more experienced journalists into the regions, given small newsrooms in rural areas have struggled to attract and retain cadet journalists, despite significant government support to help cover the cost of salaries. Tree-change and sea-change trends that have occurred during the pandemic may also have the potential to bring experienced journalists to country areas.

Challenges of mapping sustainability

Our ongoing PhD research has been examining in detail some of the factors that influence the sustainability of news outlets that have maintained or increased their paying audience (across print and digital platforms) over a five-year period, and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to acknowledge that some of the factors that broader research and commentary suggest may influence news sustainability – such as demographics (i.e.: older populations), environment and experiences of natural disasters – are not consistent across each site. The average age of populations at each case study location in the PhD research varied considerably (from 42 to 53) and the geographies in which they were located ranged from mountainous to flat, dry farmland, from small island to regional cities. There was also no consistency in the frequency or occurrence of natural disasters affecting these locations, suggesting that their sustainability was not dependent on their role as an emergency information provider during times of disaster. This PhD research also suggests that, while mapping as a methodology is a useful visualisation tool for policymakers and wider audiences, it requires qualitative data to contextualise and explore nuances within the local news ecology. Rather than simply mapping where news media is located or not, there are broader factors such as reach, resourcing and visibility in place that must be considered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1:** Future subsidies should be directed towards Australia's rural and regional news media outlets providing 'place-based public interest journalism' and these subsidies should avoid a digital innovation bias.
- 2:** Governments recognise their advertising expenditure (public notices, public awareness messaging etc) is a significant long-term lever to support the sustainability of public interest journalism in rural and regional Australia.
- 3:** Review advertising frameworks and legislation for disseminating campaign and non-campaign advertising across all tiers of government to ensure information reaches and is absorbed by diverse rural and regional geographies.
- 4:** Government adopt a parliamentary inquiry recommendation that 20% of all federal government advertising spend is directed to rural and regional news outlets to support their long-term sustainability.
- 5:** Increase transparency around all government-directed support and advertising for news outlets to ensure taxpayer value for money and accountability. This could involve establishing an Australian Local Media Advisory Council, incorporating regional media entities and stakeholders to oversee, evaluate and assess a register of local news provisions. In the interests of public accountability, the council would assess requests for, and the impact of, subsidies supporting local news and ensure outlets benefiting from any government support are indeed, providing public interest journalism.
- 6:** Establish a national workforce incentive scheme to attract experienced journalists to rural and regional areas. The scheme would pay eligible journalists an annual top-up to ensure their salaries are above standard metropolitan award rates and could include relocation bursaries.
- 7:** Run a collaborative marketing campaign between all rural and regional news providers in Australia and government to recruit journalists and improve perceptions of careers outside of metropolitan areas.
- 8:** Country Press Australia (CPA) should establish a more collaborative ethos across states and territories to improve its identity and practice as a national network. CPA should also invest in finding experienced personnel to connect members effectively and to promote the network nationally. This would include introducing a virtual community of practice for experienced news workers, sourcing national advertising opportunities and increasing the sharing of infrastructure.
- 9:** Regional and rural news providers should look for opportunities to develop collaborative advocacy and solutions-style reporting campaigns around important rural and regional issues that are experienced across communities.
- 10:** Country Press Australia should explore the licensing or development of a user interface that enables greater public engagement and conversation on their digital homepage for all members. This would reduce reliance on social media and ensure discussion can be appropriately facilitated by news professionals with suitable ethical and legal training.
- 11:** Further research needs to be conducted on how news producers and communities view the impact of and value of automation and artificial intelligence in rural and regional news. The potential of AI in helping to archive photography and news stories for the public record and commercial re-sale is noted.
- 12:** Further research needs to be done with audiences in other countries and contexts where print circulation is stable. This would refine identified factors influencing readership demand.
- 13:** News outlets more clearly stipulate their geographic boundaries in which place-based journalism can be feasibly provided to support policymakers in assessing news diversity, quality and reliability in rural and regional Australia.
- 14:** We recommend independently-owned news providers consider the potential benefits of collaborating with the country's main public broadcaster, the ABC, to improve quality reporting in rural and regional areas at greatest risk of declining news services.
- 15:** Examine the effectiveness of the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory bargaining code in supporting independently-owned news outlets that serve small towns. Future government assistance should be reassessed to be more targeted for those who do not benefit.
- 16:** That government provide seed funding for start-ups instigated by individuals with journalism credentials and/or experience. This should apply particularly in areas identified as potential news gaps or news peripheries.
- 17:** That governments prioritise geography over digital reach and digital metrics in determining advertising spend in rural and regional communities.
- 18:** That news outlets rethink 'digital' reach and consider strategies that focus primarily on 'reaching' a clearly defined geographic area that connects well with local audiences and those with a sense of connection to the area.
- 19:** Create a nationally funded research project and consider producing a publication to examine and recognise Australia's continuing family dynasties in Australia and their contribution to rural and regional communities and democracy.
- 20:** To generate alternative revenue streams, newsrooms should consider leveraging their connection to 'place' and 'history' in diversification strategies.
- 21:** We recommend all local newsrooms consider monetising the community information they produce and collate as a way of diversifying their business revenue streams. This could include online services and business directories.
- 22:** That a typology be developed outlining differences and distinctions between 'local' news provisions in Australia to inform policymakers and provide clarity about where and how public interest journalism is produced, circulated for intended audiences and the forms of support that may be required.



Innovative moves: The ball might be in the court of media innovation at present, but research suggests a need to move beyond a digital-centric approach. (Photo: Victorian Country Press Association award winner for 2022.)

Media innovation

SUMMARY

Innovation is a 'buzz' word in discussions about the future of news and journalism in Australia and internationally. There has been a digital focus to innovation that has been spread throughout the sector by industry, policymakers and academics. This chapter provides an overview of how innovation has been understood and applied across the Country Press Australia network. The perceived value of innovations in AI and automation is also discussed. Overwhelmingly, news producers view innovation as new ideas that may have been adopted elsewhere but they have not tried before, and these ideas often focus on ways to improve local content. Our findings suggest a need to move from a digital-centric approach to innovation to instead consider more broadly how and when innovation benefits a community and instances where it may, in fact, be unnecessary. We recommend against future subsidies that support digital innovation only, and instead argue for more direct and targeted support in areas of local news that need it most – notably, to fund journalism positions and to support initiatives in locations identified as being in potential news gaps.



INTRODUCTION

Innovation is a broad concept generally defined as the introduction of something new, or a change made to an existing product, idea or field (Schumpeter, 1934). Scholars have examined the use of technology to improve the co-production of stories, and to utilise big data and social media tools for news gathering purposes (see e.g.: Boyles, 2016; Carlson & Usher, 2016; Kung, 2015; Lehtisaari et al., 2018; Lewis & Usher, 2013; Zhang, 2019). It is important to highlight, however, that academics, industry, policy and philanthropic organisations tend to apply an overly celebratory lens to innovation as a solution to the perceived crisis in journalism (see e.g.: Creech & Nadler, 2017), and an 'innovate or perish' narrative is often widely accepted without critique (Eldridge, 2017). This 'digital-first' agenda has arguably been reinforced by the powerful elite – from politicians to major media conglomerates and, not surprisingly, tech giants such as Google and Meta. The first round of major subsidies to support local news – the three-year Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund (Australian Government 2018) – was influenced by this crisis discourse. It provided support for equipment, software, training and some funding to employ cadet journalists. For example, eligible grant projects needed to have 'innovative and transformative outcomes' and could not be 'business-as-usual with little or no change' (ACMA, 2018, p.11). The guidelines also indicated 'digital projects', 'new sources of revenue' and activities 'that harness technologies' would be preferable (ACMA, 2018, p.11). This funding led to a considerable number of local news proprietors purchasing drones, software and infrastructure for news apps, websites and computer hardware. Most publishers, however, in our

interviews and focus groups felt this type of investment, especially drones, would not have a lasting impact on the sustainability of their news outlets.

The digital focus of government subsidies meant there was an air of discontent among many publishers at the beginning of our study. While grateful for any financial support, they were miffed that there was a clear digital bias towards innovation, and that applications were too time-consuming to complete and favoured those publishers with grant-writing experience. Importantly, our research indicates concern about the lack of appreciation for the printed product (such as upgrades of print infrastructure). Some comments from news producers include:

"There's always equipment to update and I'd love to update that plate maker and put in the two-colour press and do all sorts of things."

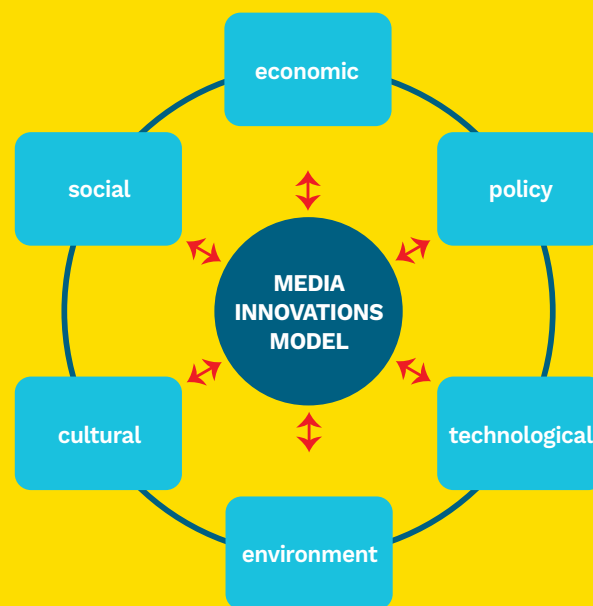
(Victorian news proprietor, 2021)

This issue was somewhat remedied with the introduction of the one-off Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program in 2022 (RLNP), which aimed to help print publishers absorb newsprint price increases. Under this measure, the Federal Government announced that 208 independent regional, suburban and First Nations print publishers would share \$15 million to cover printing costs, purchase or lease assets and equipment, and/or acquire technology.

A new approach to innovation

We developed a six-dimensional approach to understanding local news innovation – one that is relational because it foregrounds the connections between digital, social, cultural, political, economic and environmental concerns (see diagram).

Here, the central question is not only how rural and regional newsrooms can innovate in the interests of their own viability, but how they can build resilience and relevance in the interests of the populations and environments that sustain them. Wagemans and Witsche (2019) 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 Witsche (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 should innovation occur?



Innovation in practice

We gained insight into how innovation is understood and adopted across the Country Press Australia network, and highlight below some of the novel digital innovations taking place.

- A Queensland news proprietor has boosted engagement by offering an audio version of news stories uploaded to the newspaper's website. The technology works on a subscription basis through a Canadian AI audio provider, called Ad Auris. On the news site, a reader can click on a news story and listen to the audio version, which is computer-generated. Users of the system can choose the tone and accent of the voice reading the news. The innovation has potential to improve access to local news.
- Many news proprietors are using template automation to enable clients to request and pay for advertisements via the online site, upload death notices and photographs, and create online business directories.
- A New South Wales proprietor has boosted reader engagement and physical reach with a news app, developed by the New Zealand licensing publishing platform, LIMA (Local Independent Media Application). With LIMA, a proprietor buys a publishing licence that covers a particular geographic region. The app is then customised and built using LIMA's design templates.
- Some news outlets have erected large digital advertising billboards in shopping plazas that feature a digital version of the newspaper for passers-by to read.
- The introduction of blogs, video and podcasts on key community topics.

A focus on content

It should be highlighted, however, that innovation was overwhelmingly discussed in terms of new ideas for content and diversification of revenue streams. Some of these innovations may be the re-introduction of old ideas or content that once appeared frequently in early newspapers. Examples include:

- Involving community leaders to share a favourite recipe each week, encouraging community members to cook recipes and share experiences and reviews of their produce.
- Increasing stories about individuals with unique hobbies, and involving clubs and associations to nominate individuals to be profiled in the newspaper (e.g., vintage car or rare plants clubs).
- Inviting school children to buddy up with older residents to share their stories and their favourite memories of the local area.

A future innovation that was in demand among news producers – but had not been adopted by anyone in the network during our research – was the need for a community engagement interface that could be integrated into news websites. This would enable audiences to easily comment, vote on and share ideas about the community on a newspaper's website, rather than on sites such as Facebook. Our research indicates that some local councils and government organisations have already adopted this type of innovation using platforms, such as www.Delib.net.

"I was thinking, we used to have the town square back in the old days where everyone got their information from, and then we moved to newspapers, but I've sort of wondered, how do we get that town square back online? We just need to find a way to create a space where young people, businesses, everyone can come together, and engage with the news that we provide."

(Queensland news editor)

News automation and AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies use 'the training of a machine to learn from data, recognise patterns and make subsequent judgments, with little to no human intervention' (see Le Quéré & Maurice Jakesch, 2022). Many large newsrooms have integrated AI across their processes, such as applications like the Reuters Tracer, which monitors social media for breaking news. Our research indicates automation and AI innovations were not a major focus of smaller independent newsrooms in Australia. This aligns with international scholarship suggesting that small local newsrooms have not experimented as readily with AI (Gulyas, 2021), largely due to resource constraints and caution over what has both value in terms of cost savings and benefits to a community. While AI and automation were not the central focus of our innovations research, our qualitative findings align closely with an Associated Press report (2022), examining AI and automation in US local media. These include:

- There is a significant gap between large and smaller news organisations in terms of how widely AI and automation are used. In Australia, bigger players in the CPA network (those with five or more publications) are in a stronger position to experiment.
- A desire to engage in automation and AI for aspects of the business that can reduce production costs, uploading of advertising content and contributed content (especially sports results and weather) was noted, as well as software supporting collation of local businesses and service providers for online directories.
- Some concern with the overall benefit of shifting human work to machines, especially about maintaining perceptions of being local, indicating the need for more research to consider differences between human versus machine-led information gathering in rural and regional communities.

A review of the international literature highlights that there are some examples of news automation at the local level that have been implemented with some success. In Argentina, for example, local newspaper *Diario Huarpe* has used the expertise of technology company United Robots to automate match-report writing based on sports data. It now uses AI and Natural Language Generation (NLG) to produce automated text reports, images, graphics and maps for its newsroom clients on a range of topics (Reuters Institute, 2022).

Le Quéré and Maurice Jakesch (2022) highlight that some forms of AI that help mine data for large data journalism projects are labour intensive but have value if involving larger-scale collaborative efforts between news companies. This could be of benefit to smaller news providers in Australia if they were to partner within the Country Press Australia network or with outside news organisations, such as the ABC.

We issue caution, however, about the international trend of supporting the use of 'parachute AI journalism', which involves mining online data to mass-produce and distribute local stories, often without involving the local journalists or communities (Aubin & Jakesch, 2022). A key finding from this project is the importance of place-based news gathering as being central to the very legitimacy and future sustainability of small news outlets.

At the time of publication, some news outlets in the network had begun experimenting with the value of Open AI language tool ChatGPT. News providers have already seen strong potential in drawing on AI to help curate advertorial and real

estate copy. An important consideration for policymakers will be determining 'original' news content for future diversity frameworks and the perceived quality of AI-generated content among local audiences.

Start-ups

For digital start-ups, innovation was difficult because the focus tended to be on building audience and advertising. For example, some start-ups have experimented with funding models, such as moving to a membership model rather than a subscription-based one, or a shift in platforms, especially towards the use of apps. The key and constant challenge, however, was to find reliable revenue streams to support the employment of more journalists and produce quality content that appealed to niche local audiences. Our research indicates that start-ups themselves are an 'innovation' in that they are new and exist to serve a societal benefit. Yet consistently, start-ups have regularly missed out on any form of government support during the past five years. The significance of this was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic when some new players entered the local news landscape to fill a gap left by ACM and News Corp (both of which had shut down many of their local operations across the eastern seaboard of Australia). Yet when the bigger publishers qualified for subsidies and the start-ups did not, it created an unfair marketplace, impacting media diversity in rural areas.



"Pursuing digital opportunities shouldn't mean abandoning a profitable print product. It's about meeting readers where they are, building brand affinity, collecting data and exploring options for revenue diversification."

Brendan McDonald

Brendan McDonald is the business development manager for Pagemasters Publish.



*Just-right conditions:
A 'goldilocks zone' for
policymaking is needed for
mapping a local news outlet's
feasible geographic reach.
(Photo courtesy of
Country Press Australia
member masthead.)*

Exploring the 'Goldilocks Zone' and local limits

SUMMARY

News outlets in rural and regional Australia, optimistic about their future in the digital world, have a clear and simple focus – their commitment to the 'local'. However, policymakers find it tricky to define 'local' when determining how to adequately assess whether a news outlet is providing quality, reliable news to its community. This chapter drills down into components of a 'local' approach that have provided some news businesses with continuing economic sustainability. Being a local news producer involves maintaining a physical presence in the geographic regions they serve and knowing that their geographic boundaries and limits best enable them to resource and provide local news. We argue the need for clarity and practicality about a news outlet's geographic reach by introducing the idea of 'goldilocks zones' for policymaking. The importance of acknowledging place-based public interest journalism is also discussed.



INTRODUCTION

Local news outlets are sometimes referred to as the 'parish pump' because they are concerned with matters of importance for small communities, reporting everything from the local football scores to details about a volunteer group's annual general meeting. It seems a disparaging descriptor for news that focuses on the local scale as it can be seen as synonymous with being parochial and close-minded. Yet our survey research and engagement with news producers consistently indicates that a focus on the niche is considered most valuable to audiences and to the business model supporting small-town news providers.

A cultural approach has shaped our conceptualisation of what it means to be 'local' in discussions with news producers and audiences about the news. **We contend that, for a news outlet to be considered 'local' in its most genuine sense, it must show evidence of having a consistent physical presence in a particular geographic place, and it must serve as a rich source of knowledge and information for those living and working in, or otherwise connected to, that place. Importantly, it requires a news outlet to maintain a prolonged and continual presence in that place.** This can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, such as retaining a physical newsroom in a town or small city and by having staff 'on the ground'.

We have argued elsewhere that in a digital world, there is a need to reintroduce the importance of geography in discussions about sustaining local news (Hess, 2013; Hess & Waller, 2014; see also Schmitz Weiss, 2014). This comes at a time when there is wide debate on the relevance of territory and boundaries. Our geo-social framework (Hess, 2013) provides scope to examine news with a solid link to geographic territory while acknowledging the wider social space in which Australia's local news providers play a role, both in their position in certain social flows and as nodes in wider global media networks. The feeling of being local, or the desire to tap into the local, can be shared among people, but it almost always relates to some attachment to physical territory – its social, cultural and natural dimensions (Hess & Waller, 2015).

Findings from this ARC project reinforce the contention that geography still matters. Physical borders may be less important for transmitting and disseminating news, but geography remains king for content. Our broad research indicates three distinguishing factors about the 'local' that help assess news outlets' commitment to local civic, political and social affairs in the digital era: presence in geographic place; an acute sense of boundaries and limits; and commitment to the niche through resistance to expansion on a large scale.

Presence in geographic place

In the interviews for this study, journalists and those working for small mastheads – from advertising, editorial and management – all highlighted the value of ‘local knowledge’ and connections to their media-related practices and sustainability. We refer to ‘presence in place’ as both a clear and consistent physical presence in place (through human resources and infrastructure such as masthead office) but also in making their presence felt, through community leadership and the sharing and reporting of information.

All independent news providers in our research had at least one journalist or editor based in the geographic area they defined as their ‘local’ community and most had a clearly identifiable office open to members of the public. Those in bigger newsrooms also told us that a good deal of newsgathering can be done via phone, email, or video conferencing, but it was important journalists were known to be physically present in the locale. This forged a strong reputation and respect. At the very least, they had to have local knowledge, which came from spending time in place.

“There’s now so many people that I see, and I stop and I chat with them and that was all because I took the time to meet them face-to-face. I feel like it’s on a more personal level rather than over the phone or email.”

(NSW journalist)

“You want to know what’s the secret of a local paper? You must have local people. (Competitors) knew if they came into town, they wouldn’t have had the connections. Whereas if you work with local people, it works. It is the key. To me, that’s always the key – local people with strong interests in their community. Over the 30 years, we’ve had about three or four others set up against us, started other newspapers ... they’ve all failed because, I think, we have local people. And we’ve had continuity of staff. Everybody gets to know us.”

(Victorian news proprietor)

Many news workers said taking leadership on behalf of a community – ‘having this presence felt’ – was also important to success, as was advocating for change at a policy level for a community or to raise awareness about issues beyond their geographic region. The editor of a relatively new local news start-up in regional Victoria said their presence through leadership in the community during the pandemic had made a difference to people’s well-being and mental health as evidenced via letters to the editor and calls to the office.

We ran a ‘(local) heroes during the pandemic’ series just to get everyone’s spirits up ... and it helped people move away from the Black Dog. Some people were feeling like they wanted to give up and they literally wrote to us and thanked us for our content. That’s because we were here, we hung on for our community and it makes a difference to the community.”

(Victorian news proprietor)



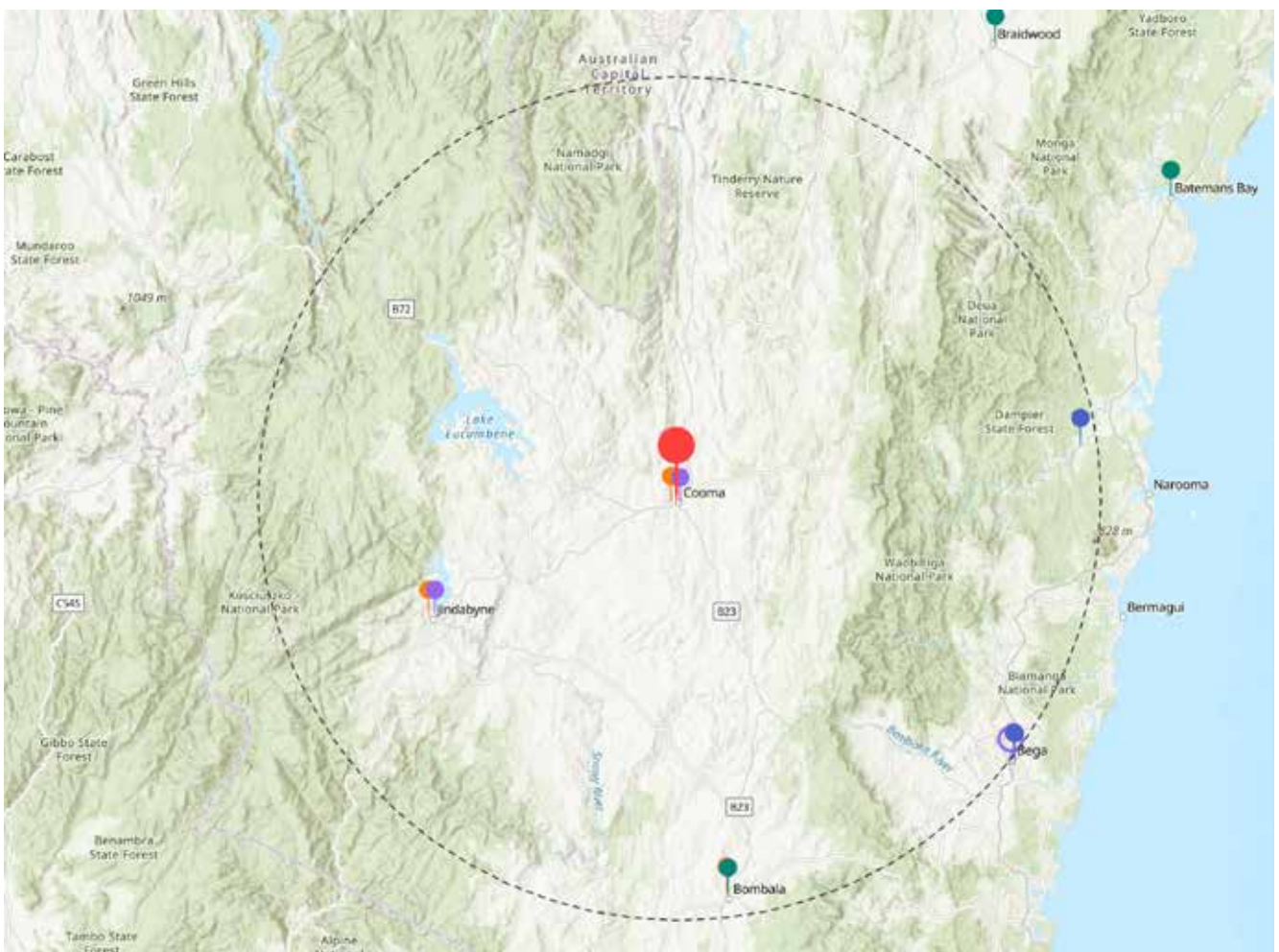
Word cloud generated from audience response to national survey about what matters to them. Courtesy of Deakin masters’ student Samantha Leersen.

Knowing limits and boundaries

For news outlets to serve their communities effectively, our research points to the need to consider much smaller geographic zones in which to identify place-based providers of public-interest journalism and assess their ability to provide adequate journalistic resources on a day-to-day level. Our mapping work and responses from news providers lead us to suggest that in rural and regional Australia there is a need to more clearly determine news zones to understand the reasonable geographic reach that a news outlet can serve in a way that provides reliable, original and quality information to audiences. A news zone is understood as the space in which journalists concentrate on sourcing news or help to contextualise and understand the impact of broader affairs for audiences with a connection to this zone (Gutsche & Hess, 2018, p54). We suggest there is a need to map what we term 'goldilocks zones' in work on media diversity and assessments about local news provisions, an idea borrowed from astronomy and astrophysics, but which has not been applied to media and journalism. In the fairy tale *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, Goldilocks is looking for certain conditions to be 'just right'. Astronomers use the term 'goldilocks zone' to describe clearly defined areas of our galaxy where conditions and resources are 'just right' for life to develop (see e.g., La Bella, 2015). In journalism scholarship, Usher (2021) uses the term 'Goldilocks' to describe *newspapers* in the US (metropolitan

and regional) that share a financial dilemma because of their size - they are not big enough to have a national audience, but they aren't small or specialised enough to have a niche audience. We, however, borrow from the scientific application of the 'goldilocks' zone to explore the ideal conditions for quality and original place-based reporting to occur and be supported in an Australian context.

We use the term to describe the geographic zones that enable local news providers to feasibly provide place-based resources and print distribution costs in a way that provides news in a meaningful, credible and reliable way for audiences. We suggest a local news provider in rural and regional Australia serving a geographic radius of no more than 100km (or an hour's drive by car, depending on terrain) around a newsroom's central operations is the *limit* for a small-town news provider's ability to serve a locality's news needs on a day-to-day basis. This, we suggest, is the zone in which news producers can feasibly pay for reporters to travel to 'cover' news, be present in place and acquire adequate local knowledge and professional relationships in a region. We suggest the optimum range within this zone is within a 50km radius. These boundaries can shrink, dependant on factors such as limitations on newsroom resourcing, digital connectivity, terrain, population density and how an audience itself perceives 'localness'.

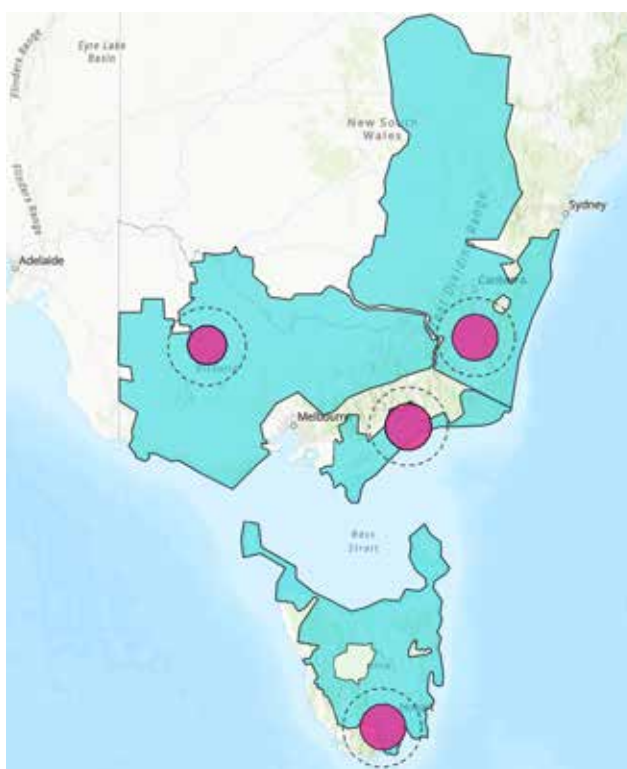


Depiction of a 'goldilocks zone' – maximum 100km radius around a masthead (red marker). The other markers on the map show the location of other mastheads, radio stations and community social media pages in the zone, indicating a news ecology (McAdam, 2023).

A 100km radius is significantly smaller than current television licensing arrangements, for example, which can stretch up to 800km in distance. Within these vast geographic zones, licence holders are required to produce at least five news bulletins a week and have a 'minimum level of material of local significance' (Australian Government, 2017). Local news producers in this ARC study say that quality news comes from maintaining strong relationships with audiences, news sources and advertising clients, which depends on in-person contact, visibility and local knowledge. Providing physical resources then, can be difficult to sustain across larger distances, with some news producers highlighting that driving more than one hour to a job can be too costly and time consuming. This means that areas on the periphery of a 100km radius are difficult to cover unless content is supplied to a news provider or sources are contacted via digital communication channels.

Of course, we do not discount the role digital technology can play in helping to source news at both the centre and peripheries of these zones, especially in generating contributed content from dedicated volunteers or 'stringers'. However, given all news providers in our research highlight the importance of presence in place as a way of building legitimacy, such a zone should be considered in any mapping that measures information reliability and quality, along with an assessment on where local journalists are physically 'based'. Perhaps most importantly, such zones point to areas on the periphery of a news outlet's boundaries where news coverage may be more limited. In future national work on media diversity, small-town news outlets within such 'goldilocks zones' might represent a Tier 1 or primary type of place-based reporting to recognise and appreciate the significance of serving niche geographic audiences. This may also lead to more clearly defined expectations and roles of other media outlets, which may offer a more 'regional' or outwards focus to their work.

It is also important to note that local news producers align their 'imagined community' boundaries with the edges of towns, cities, suburbs, local government boundaries and topographical features, such as coastline, mountain ranges and rivers. There are instances of local government areas that serve larger land masses being home to several mastheads, and areas where one news provider covers two or more local government areas. Local government boundaries, however, are an important element in shaping how local news providers devote resources to local political coverage.



This map shows four commercial television licences (depicted in blue) that spread across areas of New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. For comparison, the map also shows our suggested 'goldilocks' zones (shown as pink circles) that have a 50km radius, as well as the outer limits of these zones (100km radius circles, shown as dashed circles).



Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.

Focus on the niche

The wealth of literature about finding sustainable business models for local news indicates scholars and industry experts are most concerned with making it work economically. International literature and our research suggest that local news outlets are resistant to massification, which is modern cultures' tendency to 'integrate people in huge, homogenous masses in which their autonomous individuality is drowned' (Mannheim, 2001, p. 196 as cited in Tyulenev, 2014, p. 34). Subculture theory can help us to understand the intersection between hyperlocal culture and economics in terms of scale. Rieder (2013) observed that some large media companies have tried and failed at establishing hyperlocal 'franchises' (i.e.: Patch in the US). They have experienced frustration because the economies of scale do not work in the world of local and hyperlocal news (Rieder, 2013).

Major media players have endured a tumultuous experiment with local news, and there appears to be little evidence of success in attempts by media companies to roll out hyperlocal sites nationally (Barnett & Townend, 2014), without human resources being committed to the 'places' they serve. The distinctive selling points of local news – original local identity and unique local content (Kim et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021) – are difficult to maintain amid a business model that requires replication across sites and spreads fewer resources farther and wider. In fact, some scholars have described local news as 'an alternative to the massification of communication' (see Jorge & Batista, 2022).

Our interview data from sustainable rural, regional and suburban news operations in Australia suggests local news providers base their businesses on pragmatic profit and growth goals. They all spoke of the need to break even and most indicated they were making a profit, but they said they did not expect to 'make a fortune' (Victorian news proprietor). Businesses were instead described as 'solid' (Victorian news manager) and 'meeting budget' (NSW news proprietor).

"The reason we have survived is ... you're never going to make a fortune here. You've got a reasonable income and we do run on the smell of an oily rag. Having reasonable goals and being prepared to work, to contribute towards that, I think, enables us just to squeak through."

(Victorian news proprietor)

Those interviewed highlighted an acute sensibility about audience needs and expectations. It was important to show a community that the benefits of having a local news provider were not just about serving their own interests. Some news owners appeared to measure their level of success not just on economic profit but on how well they were serving their communities:

"As long as we're covering costs and breaking even, we will remain. We provide jobs and news, which I think is very important for our community."

(Victorian news proprietor)

"I think some papers put profit ahead of what they're actually producing. I think (those media) people don't realise the importance of the newspaper itself, to the readership, to the people of the community. We've managed to keep our costs to a minimum. We're prepared to go that extra yard to do this thing. And we get the reciprocal ... support from the community, because they can see what we're doing."

(Victorian news proprietor)

There are, of course, members of the Country Press network who increasingly own dozens of mastheads under their news banners (including former Australian Community Media-owned titles) and are continuing to purchase news outlets that are being sold across rural, regional and suburban Australia. Under this model, several long-serving proprietors have opted to become shareholders in dozens of other small mastheads across Australia, ensuring each news provider has 'locally based' investors to serve as the 'face' of news. To reduce costs, they have experimented cautiously with the boundaries of the 'niche' by outsourcing 'backstage' newsroom operations offshore, such as graphic design and accounting. Here the focus is on outsourcing human resources that do not detract from a news outlet's local presence or visibility in a community or commitment to public interest journalism. Paul Thomas, who owns Star News Group as well as an interest in *SA Today* and other smaller mastheads, said presence in community was a key ingredient to business success – from ensuring a local news office to journalistic resources. He also saw little value in using syndicated content, a model adopted by bigger companies, such as News Corp and Australian Community Media. He said:

"It's important to get the balance right, but you'll know if you've gone too far (offshore, centralisation) as, if people don't feel like it's a local paper, they won't buy it. It's all about being as local as you can because that's what matters to people."



Crowd pleaser: Local news audiences clearly favour accessing their local mastheads online as the first hub for information on their communities. (Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.)

What audiences want

SUMMARY

Our research project undertook two major surveys: a comprehensive national survey of suburban, regional and rural news readers; and a geographically targeted survey of people who identified as non-local news readers, recruited through the social media site Facebook. Both surveys were conducted in order to compare perceptions and attitudes to local news of what we perceived as two markedly different demographics, and to answer our key research questions around how to sustain and innovate Australia's local news media. In our survey of almost 4200 local news readers, respondents were asked about their preferences for reading and receiving local news, what their local news provider could do better, and the policy debates and interventions shaping the sector. Our findings indicate that there is a passion for localness in terms of both production and content, and a resistance to paying for news. Audiences also highlighted a demand for more social, community and investigative stories and they indicated government funds supporting local news should be directed towards journalism salaries. Alongside this, young readers indicate a particularly strong demand for more coverage of local events and an appetite for the newspaper to play a greater role in their social life. Meanwhile, our survey of social media users found that those who do not identify as local newspaper readers were open to the possibility of engaging more with a newspaper if it were free to access and offered more local content.



INTRODUCTION

The rise of online audience metrics has generated a 'quantified audience' (Anderson, 2011), enabling the study of movement and habits of audiences in digital space. However, it is the perspectives and expectations that audiences have of journalism itself that are often overlooked in scholarship on local media futures (Hess et al, 2021). Our extensive audience survey work of both willing news readers and those who identified as 'non-readers' highlights a clear political, civic and social value of local news to residents in both contexts and insights into what good journalism looks like for regional and rural Australians.

Of the 4198 rural, regional and suburban local news readers who responded to our first survey, 61% were female and 38% male (1% preferred not to say). The mean age of survey respondents across Australia was 60-61 years (standard deviation 14.2), with 79% being born in Australia. 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, with 36% stating between 0 and 10 years and 26% for more than 40 years ($M = 21.5$, $SD = 17.3$). Key findings from this survey included:

- There is continued strong demand (and passion) for the printed product in rural and regional Australia, which we will discuss in the next chapter of this report.
- 94% of respondents say they should be invited to have a say about government policies and decisions affecting the future of local newspapers.
- Audiences indicate they are five times as likely to go directly to a local news website for their local news than Google or Facebook, and almost 10 times as likely to go to the local newspaper website over a local council website for their local news and information (see graph below). Surprisingly, just 5% of younger audiences say they mostly use social media to find out about local news.

- While some media lobbyists and academics in Australia and internationally have called for newspaper subscriptions to be made tax deductible, again surprisingly, 71% of respondents are not in favour of such initiatives.
- Audiences want more investigative reporting and stories that help people feel connected to community, such as information about social events.
- Audiences overwhelmingly indicate any additional funding for local news should be directed to employing more local journalists to report news (71%), over increasing digital connectivity (13%) and digital innovation products (17%).
- While audiences are passionate supporters of their local news providers, many respondents saw the need for local news providers to be held more accountable for their content. For example, if local news outlets were to receive significant government subsidies or support, 85% of respondents favour the establishment of an independent watchdog to ensure those outlets adequately serve their communities.

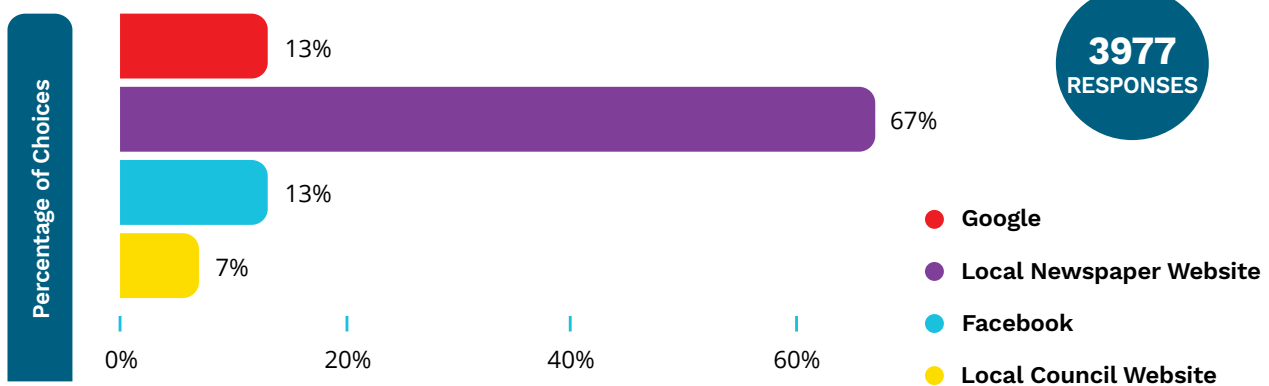
Overall, we discovered just how passionate local news audiences are about their local news providers. There is a strong view that people who read and engage with this news should be consulted and involved in ideas and solutions to support its future. Our findings suggest that local audiences are loyal and develop life-long patterns of engaging with local news outlets in areas where they live and work or have a sense of connection.

In analysing the responses to digital news engagement, survey participants indicated that in the big wide world of the web, the local newspaper stands out as a beacon for local news, and they would go searching for their local masthead online as the first hub for such information. This is a significant finding, given there has been much focus on the role of the likes of Facebook as a central point for digital news and information, and the Federal Government's introduction of a mandatory bargaining code that forces tech giants, such as Meta and Google, to pay news producers for content

that appears on their platforms (Australian Communication and Media Authority, 2021). For example, many local news proprietors have indicated they are dependent on Facebook for traffic. However, our findings suggest a need for further examination of these audience practices.

More than 30% of respondents had experienced a natural disaster (fire, flood, cyclone) within their community in the past two years and wanted local news providers to do more to inform people on where to go and what to do in an emergency and help a community pull together to make sense of disaster. This was a clear priority over investing in digital software and technology to improve coverage during a natural disaster or correcting misinformation. Importantly, somewhat belying a 'culture of free' that exists among local news readers – where people believe content should be readily available without cost to audiences – respondents overwhelmingly supported the idea that news should be collaboratively funded and supported by industry, government, audiences and volunteers. Audiences indicated that employing more journalists should be given priority over investing in digital technology and innovations. And if government funds are to be directed towards supporting local news providers, there is also an expectation among audiences that news outlets themselves are monitored for their accountability to communities.

When I want to find local information and news online, I would FIRST go to:



Young readers differ on news needs

Our survey of local news readers captured perspectives from 277 participants, aged 35 and below. (This represented 6.6% of the total number of survey participants.) The news needs of this demographic diverged somewhat from that of older generations, highlighting the differing stages of life and generational influences. In line with the key overall finding of the audience's preference for print, more than half (57%) of younger readers said they preferred to read a physical copy of the newspaper.

Comments and suggestions offered by younger readers point to a particularly strong demand for more coverage of local events and an appetite for the newspaper to play a greater role in their social life. As shown here:

"Engage the community by sharing activities, recreations, groups, events etc. I never know what there is to do or how to get involved."

(Male reader, 21, Victoria)

Or with this comment:

"I think they should add entertainment and a sports section that could attract younger audiences."

(Male reader, 20, Victoria)

Improving news about local politics and council affairs was a priority among younger readers. In addition, they suggested that council should do more to help distribute the newspaper to citizens, and the local newspaper should include information of general interest that appears on the council website:

"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 in a bulk mail-out." *(Female reader, 22, Victoria)*

Views from this group of readers show how home ownership and mobility shape news needs in local areas. For example, some underlined the importance of covering the rental market in the real estate section, and when it came to recycling the paper, this demographic tended to use it for art and craft activities and for moving house. Research indicates that when audience members purchase a home or have a young family, they are more likely to engage with their local newspaper (Shaker 2016). Suggestions from survey respondents who are parents included introducing children's activity pages to make reading the newspaper a shared experience:

"A page for the kids. My kids would absolutely love a puzzle or something to do while I read the paper."

(Female reader, 27, Victoria)

Other innovative ideas from younger readers included publicly celebrating family events for paid subscribers:

While the survey results overwhelmingly point to the dominance of readers aged over 55, perspectives from younger people are a reminder for local news providers of their core responsibility to reflect and cater for the full spectrum of the communities they serve, across age, culture, education, gender and race. Some participants felt their newspaper was more concerned with issues and news relevant to older community members at the expense of younger people.

For example, a 35-year-old female reader from Victoria commented:

"Inclusion of a kids' page, with cartoons, puzzles & birthday shoutout when parents sign up."

(Female reader, 37, Queensland)

"Less about senior citizens; it's like they think that's all who read it."

Surveying non-readers


Meanwhile, our survey of 407 Facebook users across rural and regional Australia who do not engage with their local news, found there was a strong subsection of individuals who express a desire to engage with local news but perceive barriers to doing so. These barriers include cost, accessibility and perceived quality of content. We labelled this subsection as a 'latent' audience – potential news consumers who remain hidden from industry and scholarly view until changing conditions and circumstances lead to their manifestation.

Key findings include:

- The main reason participants identified as non-readers of newspapers was because they did not know there was a local newspaper in their area (38%); (this was despite the target locations for the survey overlapping with at least three or four Country Press mastheads). They also cited issues around cost and access and because they considered available news to lack relevance or be of poor quality. However, less than 1% said they did not engage with the newspaper because they were uninterested in local affairs, highlighting an underlying appetite for such information.

- Most respondents indicated that there was potential for them to read local newspapers regularly in the future (only 3% said there was nothing that could be done to make them interested). Participants identified the following ways that would engage them most: more stories that encourage people to pull together as a community; more social information about people and happenings in the community; local news producers doing more to facilitate conversations in the community. Only 1% indicated that more use of multimedia would be appealing.
- If motivated to go looking for local news and information, participants said they would currently first visit Google (34.5%), ahead of a council website (34%), then Facebook (21%) and lastly a local newspaper website (10%).

Overall, our Facebook survey highlighted that social media users who identify as non-local newspaper readers have indicated there is an opportunity to turn a page in their relationship with such products. Far from being apathetic about the local political and social issues relevant to their areas, they indicate they are strongly connected and interested in these issues, as noted especially from the survey's qualitative responses. Our survey reveals that while there are definite barriers to greater local-news engagement with this cohort, there are also strong indicators – and hope – that there is still very much an audience here for local news.



Quiet pleasures: Audiences continue to want a physical copy of a local newspaper to read, and they are passionate about it. (Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.)

CHAPTER 4

Print still matters

SUMMARY

This chapter challenges the myth that 'print is dead' when it comes to Australia's rural and regional news providers. Our research with audiences, news producers and a review of international literature provides evidence of a continued appreciation (and passion) for newspapers in many small towns and cities. Many see the printed paper as an essential service. We argue for the need to explore the nuances and contexts in which local information is best shared and disseminated. Factors such as frequency of publication, free and accessible distribution, quality of content, cultural desire and connection to the material product, the digital divide and audience demographics suggest that the value of print should be considered in strategies to sustain local news. We suggest the transition to digital for many regional communities remains a slow cultural change and that the printed product continues to be important for the democratic flow of information and for social connection.



INTRODUCTION

News companies across the globe have placed increasing emphasis on a 'digital-first' approach to news, with some adopting this as a cost-cutting measure and others viewing digital technologies as central to media innovation. This comes amid a 'death and doom' narrative about the future of the newspaper (Chyi et al., 2012; McIntyre, 2009; Meyer, 2004; Garden, 2010). Our research, however, has found that there is a continued cultural and democratic importance to the printed product in Australian towns and small cities – a finding supported by growing international research and industry commentary. In other words, print still matters – audiences continue to want a physical copy of a local newspaper to read, and they are passionate about it.

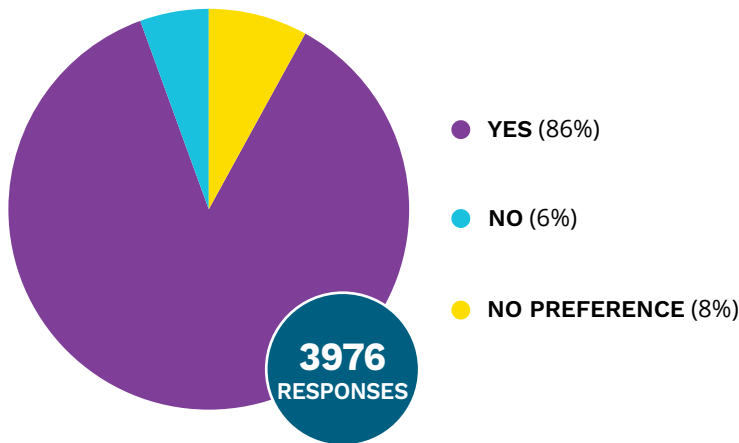
Therefore, we suggest caution about assuming the death of print as *fait accompli*, especially when relying solely on evidence from audited circulation data that maps declines in local newspaper sales in Australia and overseas. For example, the Audited Media Association of Australia now only captures less than 20% of newspapers within the Country Press Association and only those that impose a cover charge. On average, these newspapers experienced a decline in paid circulation by about 8% in 2021-2022, but it is highly uneven. Many other newspapers in the network are distributed free, making the value of circulation figures as a measure of print health difficult to gauge. Consider the Star News Group, one of the biggest independent groups in the CPA network, which has more than 20 local news

publications in rural, regional and suburban locations. Almost all newspapers under this news enterprise are distributed free and the company has moved from home delivery to a successful 'strategic drop off' approach to print distribution, with newspapers available free in popular community locations such as supermarkets, real estate agents, convenience stores and sports clubs. There is a need to explore the contexts in which print continues to survive, if not thrive. US scholar Damian Radcliffe (2017) urges industry and scholars to avoid generalising the experience of the newspaper industry and start using a narrative that takes a more nuanced approach to local newspapers (Radcliffe 2017). Of course, our assessment does not mean we discount the importance of a digital presence. We see strong evidence of newspapers across the network building their cross-platform readership. Their approach is akin to the concept of 'ambidextrous' journalism (Jenkins & Neilsen 2020, p. 473), experimenting with alternative commercial strategies, while also exploiting traditional business models and existing editorial resources. However, factors such as frequency of publication, free distribution, quality of content, desire for the material product, brand distinction, sense of connection, the digital divide and audience demographics must be considered.

Attitudes and perceptions to print

Our major audience survey of willing news readers asked if they considered their 'printed' local newspaper to be an essential service, to which 86% responded 'Yes', 6% said 'No' and 8% expressed 'No preference' (see pie chart).

Do you consider a print copy of your local newspaper an essential service for your community?



Interestingly, readers' perception on the essentiality of a local newspaper to a community was not dependent on age. Audiences had a strong loyalty to their local newspaper with 52% of respondents indicating they had read the same local newspaper between 11-30+ years, compared with 38% between 1 and 10 years. While there was a clear pattern showing declining use of printed newspapers among respondents born in each decade up to the 1990s, overall Country Press readers were 2.6 times as likely to read their local paper in print rather than digital format (see table).

I mostly read my local newspaper...

Decade of Birth	I mostly read my local newspaper...		
	Online	Print	Social Media
1990s	40%	55%	5%
1980s	38%	56%	6%
1970s	30%	63%	6%
1960s	27%	71%	2%
1950s	28%	71%	1%
1940s	20%	80%	0%
1930s	9%	90%	2%

When it comes to viewing news online, audiences also preferred to read a digital news site that has the look and layout of a printed newspaper (59%).

Findings from our survey of non-newspaper readers via Facebook also showed a partiality for print. 64.5% of respondents consider a printed copy of a local newspaper an essential service to their communities. Further, 48%, or just under half, state that if they ever did read local news, they prefer to do so in print, compared with online (33%) or via social media (13%).

Both our audience surveys were distributed in digital format, but it was evident from the survey responses and comments that the printed newspaper was considered especially vital for older audiences. It is important to note that the average age of respondents to our national survey of news readers was 60-61 years (standard deviation 14.2). This demographic will continue to represent a large portion of local news readership for many years to come. Several other Australian and international studies show older residents continue to have an affinity with traditional news sources, especially local press (Barnes, 2015; Nossek et al., 2015; Park et al., 2020). Barnes (2015), for example, argues older Australians continue to rely on 'traditional' media for their news and information needs more than any other information source. The reasons for this include a lack of digital literacy, as well as other exclusion issues, such as access and cost. Recent research, for example, also suggests the digital divide continues to hinder rural Australia (Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2021) and even if there is a desire for digital news, it is not always possible to access readily. 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."

(Female reader, 71)

And this:

“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.”

(Female reader, 76)

News producers who took part in interviews and focus groups said there was a continuing cultural demand for a printed news product. Print was also viewed as a point of distinction for many local news producers in a digital world. Some participants drew attention to the impact that the ‘print is dead’ myth had on optimism and growth. As one New South Wales editor said:

“We are playing [print] down. Everyone keeps telling us it’s going to die ... that print is dead. It’s not. It’s as fierce as what it ever was, and I think we should be selling that point up instead of keep saying it’s dead.”

One editor, reflected general sentiment across the focus groups, highlighting the ‘death’ of print had been a long-running prophesy that had failed to eventuate.

“I, myself, was sort of predicting 20 years ago that print was just completely going to fall off a cliff and here we are 20 years later. I know COVID obviously did hit a lot of regional papers, but I think it’s incredible how we have remained a trusted news source and print is still right up there.”

Print still the primary revenue raiser

During our research, print advertising was still representing the major portion of overall revenue for Country Press Australia newspapers (up to 95% in some instances). We discovered there was a continued demand among local advertisers for the printed product, such as real estate agents and retail. This is also reflected in international literature about local newspapers – the printed product remains the primary revenue driver for many small-town news outlets in countries such as the UK and US (Nielsen, 2015; Chyi & Tenenboim, 2019; Thurman, 2018). 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 local news outlets still generating 90% of revenue from the printed product. Meanwhile, a Swedish study found local news outlets that have print and website products have more chance of being profitable than online-only hyperlocal websites (Leckner et al., 2019). Some other countries have also experienced increases in paid newspaper readership, especially weekly publications, such as in Denmark (Copenhagen Post, 2022).

An editor in South Australia offered this remark:

“It would be silly to all try and go digital because it just wouldn’t work. The newspaper still pays 95% of our bills. The advertising revenue comes from newspaper sales, not from online sales ... we certainly can’t afford to ignore the value of the printed product. I think it will be here for a long, long time.”



Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.

Materiality and culture

Continued demand for newspapers can also be attributed to cultural and habitual factors, such as routine and ritual (Boczkowski et al., 2020). While other news platforms may be able to develop a position in people's everyday lives that mimic the routine of consuming a newspaper, the printed product's materiality could be a unique feature that other platforms cannot replace. Boczkowski et al. (2020) describe the newspaper as media artifact and suggest its embodiment allows for an aesthetic experience that includes sight, smell and touch. This could be a feature that newspapers can take advantage of when considering print as a sustainable business model – promote the physical experience of reading a newspaper. However, Boczkowski et al. (2020) do warn that this feature may be of more value in some countries, such as those with a strong culture of nostalgia, than others. Qualitative responses highlighted this sense of connection with print. 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.”

American scholar Nick Mathews (2021) suggests that while print may be less relevant, it continues to be meaningful to audiences culturally. There too are studies that have found that unlike digital – with its endless links and fragmented information – the print product is considered to give a sense of ownership, security, sense of connection and reliability to audiences (Gutsche & Hess, 2018). Mathews (2021) further highlights the importance of touch as a sense-making media practice.

News producers in our research said the cultural value of the newspaper was in its connection to history, appeal to an ageing demographic, and a chance for audiences to engage in a ritualistic practice and just 'be' and dwell with media in a fast-pasted digital world. Consider this comment from a news editor:

“Society was going faster, faster, faster ... I think the ritual of reading the paper is important to people to stop from being 'on'.”

Interview and focus group participants said the challenge for the printed product was not in terms of audience demand but rising costs of paper and distribution as well as a lack of available printing infrastructure that came, in part, from a fear of investing in an apparently dying medium. For instance, one of the world's biggest paper suppliers, Norwegian-owned Norske Skog, announced rises in paper costs in 2022 (forecast to be close to 40%) as it battled to keep its only Australian paper mill running and profitable (Samios, 2022), which placed further strain on the local news industry. In September 2022, the Federal Government announced a separate \$15 million funding package to help news outlets cover printing costs, purchase or lease of assets and equipment such as paper and technology relating to the printed publication (Federal Government, 2022). This is an important step, considering the value of the printed product has been somewhat overlooked in earlier innovation grant rounds. As one editor who was expanding operations said, Federal Government innovations grants demanded a digital focus when that was not where support was needed most. She said:

“We need a new building and we need a Web Press. That's what we need to expand and to provide some certainty ... if we were applying for our grant now, knowing what I know now, which you never do, that's where we would've been going.”

Sustainability

Of those respondents who had moved from print to digital, 35% indicated that part of their decision to go digital was due to environmental concerns (for instance, reducing paper). Audiences recycle their local papers in various and creative ways. By far, the most popular is through kerbside recycling (73%). Using papers to light fires (23%), followed by cleaning windows (18%) and wrapping food scraps (18%) were also identified as popular uses.

Given our findings indicate the importance of print, it is necessary then to acknowledge the need for local newspapers to develop and promote more environmentally sustainable practices at a time when corporate culture is increasingly adopting a digital-only mandate to save costs

and for its perceived environmental benefits. Hardware giant Bunnings and Coles supermarkets, for example, ended their 'old-world' weekly paper catalogue to reflect changing audience practices (Greenblat, 2022).

For example, major media companies have embraced the circular economy by establishing a partnership with REDcycle to recycle the plastic wrap used for home-delivery publications. For instance, News Corp, Nine, Seven West Media and Are media highlight that two thirds of all their printed products are now recycled (Robinson, 2022).



Andrew Manuel

Commentary

“Newspapers are dead” is a phrase I hear all the time. And we’ll come to that in a minute. But, first, jump on to Google Earth and type in Cleve, South Australia. “What’s going on there?” you would be entitled to ask.

And, granted, it is just a tiny agricultural town on the Eyre Peninsula, a six-hour drive from South Australia’s capital, Adelaide, and it could make the typical urban latte sipper feel more than a little lost and isolated. But to Cleve’s 738 local residents – no rounding there – it’s home. A clean, tidy town with manicured lawns, some of the friendliest people you will meet and a vibrant shopping district. Vast agricultural riches above the ground and untapped mineral riches below make up a sizeable chunk of the Eyre Peninsula’s wealth.

It was back in 1910 when Cleve’s local newspaper, the *Eyre Peninsula Tribune*, was founded. Sadly, for the 738 residents, it closed 109 years later. Better than a Bradman average you might say, and it did take the seismic jolt of a global pandemic and a massive downturn in business confidence to break the humble weekly journal. And anyway, aren’t newspapers dead? Wrong.

I concede, we have to get to grips with the times. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and more are readily available around the globe, even in Cleve. And then there’s regional television and radio and, of course, there’s Aunty as well. But for the District Council of Cleve, those services simply were not cutting it after the closure of the *Tribune*. Cleve wanted a newspaper or, more accurately, what it wanted was a local news service. Cleve wanted someone to champion its people, to grieve with them when their beloved passed on, or to celebrate with them nine months after one of those notorious power blackouts. It wanted to know if its council was delivering on its promises and local crime was under control.

Do you have any newspaper clippings of you or yours on your fridge at home? Maybe a photo doing the long jump at the school sports day or holding up a shield when your team won the netball grand final? Well, that’s where I come in. After a few meetings with local Eyre Peninsula councils desperate to support someone to start up a local newspaper, we were chosen to fill the void. Enter the *Eyre Peninsula Advocate* newspaper – first edition September 30, 2021 – a 56-plus page paper with an associated news website. The fridge clippings began again.

It came with obvious differences to its predecessor, shifting from a hyper-local focus to a regional newspaper covering a lot more ground and carrying a \$3 cover price. The *Tribune* covered four councils; the *Advocate* covers eight. The very first edition sold into 50 per cent of households in the region. The news was back and the community responded with circulation increasing to 3500 paid weekly sales. The newspaper supports four journalists, a handful of photographers and contributors, and a sales team. Cleve’s local newspaper is just like Lazarus, it came back from the dead – just Google it. And Cleve replicates all of regional Australia which deserves to have a local news service.

While I paint a quaint picture of a newspaper revival, let me also say there is so much more to do before we can really call it that. The newspaper industry is constantly cutting its cloth to suit due to revenue losses to digital platforms and other channels. More needs to be done to make sure there’s still any cloth left to cut in the future. In the past four years there has been intense lobbying of federal and state governments, which are now acknowledging the importance of public interest journalism. And not just for the cities, but the regions as well.

There have been four federal government inquiries into regional newspapers. There have even been some actions rather than merely hot wind coming out of these. But there still needs to be more action. Government advertising is crucial to a newspaper’s survival. This is happening perfectly in Victoria, where the Andrews’ Government is putting its money where its mouth is. It understands the importance of communicating effectively and that one of the most trusted advertising mediums is the local newspaper. And don’t forget the vitally important partnerships that can be formed at local government levels, just like the District Council of Cleve. New revenue is coming from digital platform partnerships but we’re only at the beginning of those hopefully long and enduring relationships. Doesn’t sound at all like newspapers are dead to me.

Andrew Manuel
Country Press Australia President



*Shaky foundations: The spread of local, state and federal government advertising is highly uneven and requires urgent attention, research suggests.
(Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.)*

Rethinking Government support

SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on the role that government funding plays in supporting public interest journalism in rural and regional Australia. Specifically, we focus on an under-examined area that has long-supported the business model sustaining news outlets – government advertising expenditure. All three tiers of government – local, state and national – have an obligation to inform the public and an important aspect of this is the publication of public notices – from tenders, jobs and planning notices through to awareness campaigns that promote policies, projects and programs, such as bushfire preparedness. Where and how such messaging is directed, its value to taxpayers and its relationship to the sustainability of news outlets that serve as a reliable public record for communities has been largely unexplored. We suggest this is a key form of revenue that has helped to underpin the business model for many local news outlets, but it is highly uneven and requires urgent attention.



INTRODUCTION

The relationship between news media and government has long been a contentious one. Journalism is revered for holding power to account and serving as a watchdog across Australia's three tiers of government. We have one of the most concentrated news industries in the developed world (Finkelstein & Ricketson, 2012, p. 58-60; Reporters without borders, 2022) and our democratic society celebrates a 'free' and independent press to inform Australians about political affairs. Allegations of political 'interference', especially regarding Australia's publicly funded broadcaster the ABC, are taken seriously in Australia, a democracy that expects clear boundaries between the media's role to perform its deliberative function and that of political power.

Of course, the reality is that government and news media are interdependent. Governments need media platforms to help disseminate important public messages and election pledges, and to generate and gauge public opinion. Conversely, media depend on politics as a central news source. At the local level, small-town news outlets have at times been criticised for being lapdogs rather than watchdogs to those in power due to their over-reliance on press releases from councils and close relationships with community leaders (Nord, 2006). Media owners too (local through to global) have been scrutinised for actively working to influence policy agendas to suit their own political interests (Tiffen, 2014).

In this chapter, we suggest the interdependence between local media and government is especially complex when it comes to examining the role that public expenditure plays in underpinning the sustainability of public interest journalism in rural and regional Australia. Our research indicates the decline of government funding – in the form of public notice advertising spend – has been a major contributing factor to the broken business model challenging rural and regional news. We suggest this under-examined area is important to news sustainability in the digital era.

A taboo topic?

This is a complex discussion as the word 'advertising' itself is often met with apprehension among journalists; there has long been an idealised separation of the newsroom from the advertising that supports it. Scholarly discussions around government advertising, for example, have tended to emphasise its ability to tarnish independent journalism. Some scholars and commentators, for example, have been highly critical of government advertising spending during election campaigns – the more government revenue a media outlet receives, the less likely they are to report criticisms of the practice (see especially Young, 2007; New Daily, 2022). There is little appreciation among scholars, the media industry and general public of the importance for hundreds of years – literally – of various forms of indirect government support of the media. In New South Wales in 1825, for instance, the legislation setting up the postal office enabled newspapers to be delivered at a discounted rate. And in the United States, in 1863, the magazine industry lobbied the government for support and the government created 'second class mail', which saved magazine publishers two thirds of the standard price for delivery. Postal subsidies played a vital role in the American magazine industry becoming one of the best in the world (Finkelstein & Ricketson, 2012, p. 437-52). When the lexicon shifts to the term 'government subsidies' to support journalism, the idea of government intervention is more palatable given the dire situation of so many Australian local newsrooms (Finkelstein and Ricketson, 2012, pp. 328-30). There appears to be a growing appreciation for forms of government support even though current subsidies have been described as too short-term, ad hoc (see Parliamentary Inquiry, 2022) at times misdirected or leading to unfair competition.

Forms of government support

It is important then, to distinguish between forms of government support that are directed towards rural and regional news media in Australia. These can be summarised as follows.

Federal Government funding for media operations (medium term)

– relates to funding allocated to Australia's public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS. The ABC and SBS currently share \$4.2 billion in funding as part of an existing three-year arrangement. The ABC is a key provider of news in rural and regional Australia, especially in emergency broadcasting. Most recently, under the Albanese Labor government, operational funding for the ABC has been changed from a three-year to a five-year funding agreement to move it beyond the federal electoral cycle.

Federal Government grants/subsidies (short-term)

– grants and subsidies totalling about \$60 million have been put on the table largely in support of small news providers since 2017. They are one-off, short-term initiatives designed to target specific areas of the news business but have been highlighted through senate and parliamentary inquiries for their failure to provide long-term surety to the business model sustaining news.

Federal, state and local government public campaign and functional notices (consistent, long-term)

– these notices are announcements that give citizens information about government-related activities that affect various aspects of everyday life, from budgets and public hearings to notices of government contracts and road closures. They are described in state and federal government advertising strategies as 'campaign' (think bushfire safety, health advice, road safety) and 'non-campaign' (recruitments, public notices, tenders) and 'complex non-campaign' (supporting continuing programs or initiatives).

Political election spending (cyclic, consistent)

– a form of advertising revenue that is distinct from the government advertising spend, above. It relates to monies allocated for the purposes of promoting political parties and candidates during election campaigns.

Importance of government notices as a reliable support for local news

For local news outlets in Australia, government advertising – through public notice expenditure – is a powerful and reliable form of government revenue for local newspapers. We refer to them, in fact, as a 'silent' subsidy (Hess, 2015) because they have long provided sustenance for local newsrooms, possibly since the late 19th century. Media owners and editors in our qualitative research consistently highlighted the importance of this revenue and the decline of this spending over the past decade especially. Alongside real estate and retail, government advertising was one of the key forms of income for their operations and provided surety to their business model.

We have traced federal and state government public notice advertising over the past decade and have highlighted – on average – a significant decline in this spend across the Country Press Australia network. (See graphs for federal and state advertising expenditure. Figures for local council advertising expenditure within the Country Press network are unavailable as this is usually negotiated individually between local councils and mastheads.) Advertising spend as a whole has risen among state and federal tiers, but this funding has been directed increasingly towards social media to appeal to a broader digital audience, without full consideration of the platforms and mediums that rural and regional Australians depend upon for local information.

An uneven landscape

Perhaps most importantly, there remains a serious structural imbalance in how different states and territories allocate government advertising revenue to media platforms. There is no assurance that they are adequately reaching smaller communities with poor digital connectivity.

Our research has uncovered examples of uneven distribution of government funding, where state, federal and local government investment is directed to larger news outlets with a bigger digital reach, potentially leaving smaller news outlets and the printed medium at a disadvantage. This is problematic when, in this report, we have outlined the continued importance of print for rural and regional audiences. Key challenges highlighted by news producers and proprietors regarding government advertising support include:

- A lack of appreciation among government media buyers of the value of the printed product serving small communities or small news websites.
- A city-centric approach to distribution of public notices. As one proprietor noted, 'media buyers are young, trendy inner-city types more interested in TikTok than supporting rural news providers of journalism'.
- Inconsistencies across states and territories in attitudes and relationships between local councils, state government and federal governments and local news providers. At times, news producers reported councils redirected funds away from a local masthead for what they saw as 'unfavourable' reporting. Instead, councils direct ratepayers to their own websites or they set up their own newsletters.
- Members of parliament and councillors offer media releases as news content to smaller, under-resourced newspapers. The money they save on advertising in local media is then spent on larger news media outlets with greater digital reach.

Comments about these issues include:

"I think the government's advised by people who are just city-centric and have no idea what happens outside of Sydney. It's just like they're in their own little social media bubble."

(NSW newspaper editor)

"With state and federal money, I think they owe it to the communities. In South Australia here, 30% of the South Australian population live in the regional market, yet there's a total imbalance of where the communication goes. I've seen too many campaigns where they're promoting ... like bushfire safety and preparedness or something. And it goes in the Adelaide Advertiser and online and is very, very city-centric media, and we get a scrap."

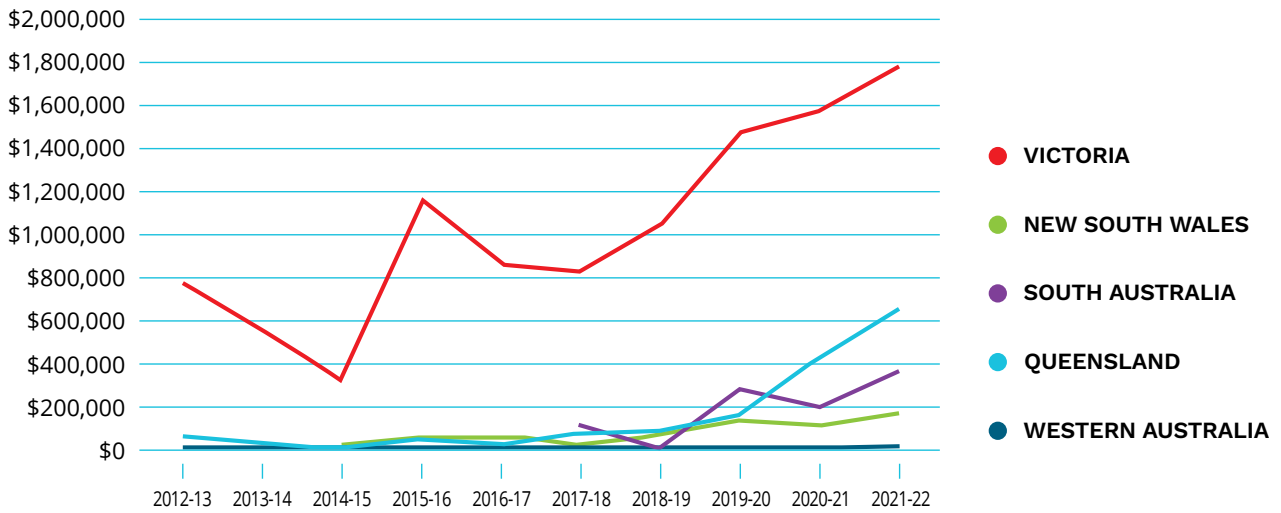
(SA news producer)

"The electoral commission did not use any independent newspaper, they did all their advertising with ACM (large local media group Australian Community Media). We've got no ACM competitors here, but we've still got nothing to promote what's happening. (Residents) don't even know where to vote, they don't know how or where to go; they missed out ... It's very frustrating and it's really disappointing. Once again, small independent papers, all locally owned papers, are not getting the same opportunities."

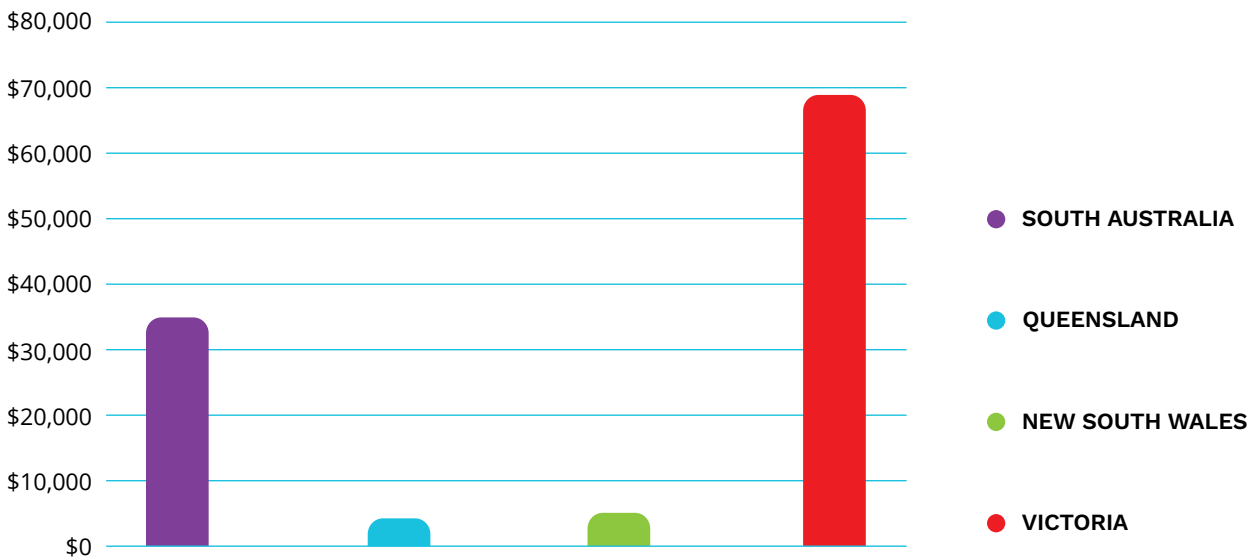
(NSW news producer)

"There's a great example where changes to the recreational fishing zone were put in place by the state government up here and they didn't advertise in the local paper. Now, that's crazy because the local paper is completely surrounded by the recreational fishing zone boundaries. And instead, they were advertising on social media and in the state-based paper and on bus stops ... there's actually not a bloody bus stop anywhere up there! How are local people who fish in these zones every day going to get this information? The people who buy the ads obviously aren't aware of how successful regional newspapers are in getting messages across." *(QLD news producer)*

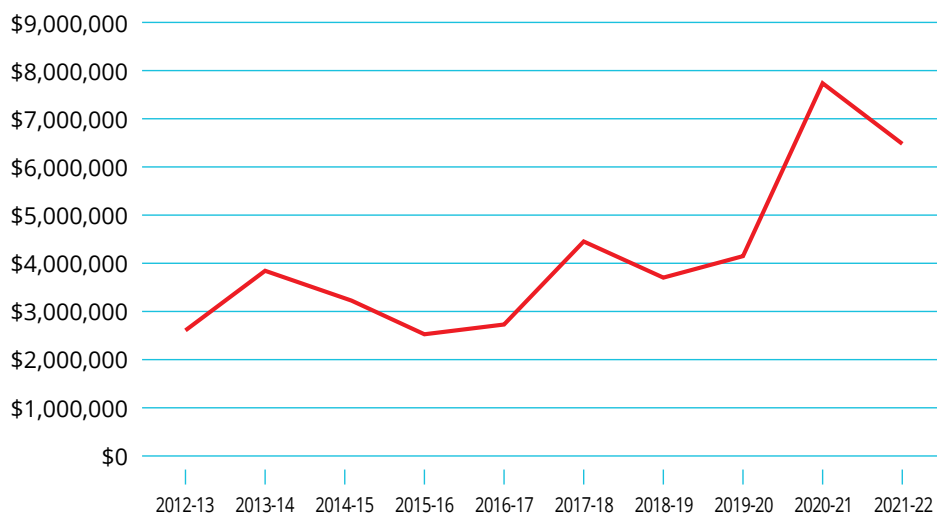
Federal Government annual advertising spend directed to Country Press Australia members



Average State Government advertising spend per CPA masthead 2021/22



Victorian Government annual advertising spend directed to Country Press Australia members



State and federal snapshot

It is perhaps no surprise that there are more independently owned mastheads in Victoria than any other state in Australia. The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring departments and agencies spend at least 15% of their campaign advertising expenditure in rural and regional media (Victorian Government, 2020). During the pandemic, the Victorian Government announced a \$4.5 million advertising support package for struggling local mastheads (Andrews, 2020) and then in 2022 pledged to commit what is equivalent to a page of weekly advertising spend in every local newspaper in the state, in an effort to provide surety to the business model for rural and regional news. Meanwhile, in South Australia, the situation is far less clear. In 2019, the then Marshall Liberal government announced changes to legislation that provided freedom for states and local governments to publish information on their own websites, removing their requirement to report public notices in local newspapers (Government of South Australia, 2020). In New South Wales, legislation has already been passed enabling governments to bypass local mastheads for public notice dissemination. The argument is that governments should not be required to publish in newspapers (or their digital sites) in this fast-paced and changing digital world. As a result, this funding appears to be increasingly redirected from small-town news outlets to larger metropolitan or national conglomerates, and bigger regional publications that can show digital reach. Social media and governments' own media departments and social channels are also favoured. In Queensland and Tasmania, government advertising policies are general and appear to be non-prescriptive, while Western Australia is auditing government advertising spend to ensure it is well directed and offers taxpayers 'value for money' (Western Australian Government, 2022.)

It was at the federal level that many independent news producers in our study indicated support was especially lacking. The Federal Government's Recruitment Advertising policy guide encourages use of online recruitment over print media, and since this advertising policy was introduced in 2009, the government has increased use of online media and social networking sites to target jobseekers. It is important to note that the Albanese Government has indicated plans to reduce overall advertising spend across the board in an effort to reduce costs (AdNews, 2022). At the same time, there is an appetite to explore new avenues to support local media through short-term subsidies, even though government advertising provides an existing long-term funding mechanism to support local media.

Data from the Federal Government's Department of Finance indicated that the biggest year on record for taxpayer-funded advertising was 2021-2022, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The then government spent \$239.6 million on public campaigns, ranging from COVID-19 vaccination to defence force recruitment, emissions reduction and super reform. The department highlights that this figure includes \$17.6 million on ethnic media and \$6.5 million on indigenous media but there is no breakdown of rural and regional masthead expenditure (Department of Finance, 2022).

A note on terminology

In mainstream media, any conversation about federal government advertising spend quickly shifts towards politicisation of taxpayer-funded advertising and misuse of funds for political gain. Our review of government advertising strategies across state and federal levels suggests the need to redirect discourse around public notice expenditure away from the term 'campaign' advertising. For example, all forms of government refer to public awareness notices (ie: road safety) and public notices (ie: tenders, recruitment) as campaign and non-campaign spend. This we suggest, is a 'loaded' term with connotations to 'election campaign' spending, which can be aligned with partisan bias. Rather, we suggest advertising strategies adopt terms such as 'public awareness/promotion spending' and 'functional public notice spending' – terms borrowed from the Victorian Government that may better describe the type of advertising discussed here. These terms also separate it from the cyclical, and sometimes controversial, election campaign spending. This would help improve taxpayer perceptions and understanding about the nature, intent and target of this form of advertising.

Need for transparency

The flow of advertising revenue from governments to media channels warrants much greater scrutiny. In an era troubled by misinformation and disinformation, there should be a commitment to disseminate public notices via reliable media channels that serve as a form of public record for communities in the interests of democracy itself. This is exemplified by information providers who invest in public interest journalism. We suggest that the flow of government advertising revenue across local, state and national levels should be more thoroughly scrutinised. Our audience survey research highlighted readers' belief that if their local masthead receives any form of government support, it should be accountable for providing quality civic information. This requires establishing transparency to ensure governments can both support institutions entrusted with providing quality discourse and ensure important public messages are reaching all corners of government boundaries at local, state and national levels.





Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.

Future directions

Governments recognise the value of independent news outlets in this country as evidenced by their providing more than \$60 million in subsidies during the past five years. The question remains: how to best direct available taxpayer dollars to support the sector for the future? Drawing on some of our research, the 2022 inquiry into regional newspapers recommended the government introduce a 20% spending mandate on government advertising in rural and regional newspapers (Parliamentary Inquiry, 2022).

There has been little attention paid, however, to the benefits that such a major and existing channel of government funding can have on news outlets' sustainability, especially those that provide public interest journalism and reach audiences in small rural and regional towns. Nor has there been attention directed to the potential disadvantages of those media outlets that are not considered appropriate channels to disseminate such messaging, or to its impact on media diversity.

It is important to acknowledge that there were many local councils praised by news producers for respecting journalistic independence and working with news organisations to ensure

the flow of information between government and ratepayers via an independent platform. Many councils did publish public notices in CPA-affiliated newspapers and continued to answer 'tough' questions without threatening to withdraw support. There were, for example, attempts by one local council in South Australia to support the establishment of an independent news provider in the region and there have been other reports of local mayors highlighting the importance of a local news outlet for a rural and regional community.

Finally, there has been the argument in other countries such, as the US, that it is not the role of government to 'keep dying media alive' (Cowan and Westphal, 2010). In Australia, the Federal Government has taken a different strategy and sees a clear need for intervention to support rural and regional journalism. At the heart of the issue is this: on one hand, tiers of government have slowly removed a form of life support for rural and regional news outlets, and on the other, they lament the decline of public discourse on social media. And this begins with overcoming difficulties with the lexicon around government support for public interest journalism – subsidies are tolerated, 'advertising' is seen by many as taboo.



Michael Wright

Commentary

My wife, Rochelle, and I live in Medowie and restarted *Myall Coast News of the Area* in 2014, off the back of Fairfax closing it. It was deemed not to be viable (but) we have made this paper a success for the people of Tea Gardens, Hawkes Nest, Bulahdelah and the surrounding area. In addition, we launched *Port Stephens News of the Area* six years ago to give people and business an alternative to the *Examiner*, ran by Australian Community Media (ACM).

In the face of challenging economic times and in particular the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on businesses, *News of the Area* has remained in print throughout (when ACM papers did not).

Now, dozens of ACM papers are asking New South Wales Premier Dominic Perrottet and opposition leader Chris Minns to support regional newspapers in two key ways if successful at the upcoming state election.

The first is to guarantee that no less than one full page of NSW government advertising will be booked each week in every local paper in the state.

The second is to reverse the 2020 regulatory change allowing local councils to bury public notices about their decisions on their websites rather than openly advertise them in the local paper.

What I don't agree with, and what I want to distance myself from, is the doom and gloom of the ACM headlines and inferences that seem to be speaking on behalf of all community newspapers. Their headlines say that dark days are ahead for communities across NSW.

I agree with the ACM push, however, for councils to be mandated to publish public notices in local newspapers, in the interest of transparency.

I have seen the ACM front pages and what I do 100 percent agree with is the push to the government to reverse the 2020 regulatory change.

With the media landscape of Australia rapidly changing there is an ever-increasing opportunity for independent publishers to make their mark in regional communities.

I feel the long-term future of rural, community and regional newspapers is in the hands of local independent publishers because they seem to be able to operate at a lower cost base.

Michael Wright

News of the Area proprietor

Parts of this story were originally published on the Port Stephens News of the Area website.

Targeted approach: Local news producers should better leverage the unique nature of print and digital mediums, while government and big advertisers should develop a social-responsibility focus, research suggests.

(Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.)



The challenge of digital reach

SUMMARY

Australia has led the world in its attempts to rein in the power of Big Tech, by introducing a mandatory bargaining code that forces sites Google and Facebook to pay news producers for content that appears on their platforms. However, the extent to which rural and regional news outlets have benefited from these negotiations is highly uneven. This points to a strong undercurrent that has emerged across our three-year research project – an overreliance on digital metrics and reach as assessment tools to determine whether economic support is warranted. We suggest news producers adopt a more strategic focus by leveraging the unique characteristics of both print and digital mediums and for governments and big advertisers to adopt a social-responsibility approach to supporting small-town news providers in the interests of democracy.



INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Australia took centre stage in the battle between traditional and new media titans that reverberated across the globe. The Federal Government announced its News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining code, designed to force Meta (Facebook) and Google to compensate news providers for content shared on the tech giants' platforms (Australian Government, 2021). Under the deal, to qualify for funding, news providers are required to meet quotas of digital content that they upload to Google and Facebook's platforms. Specifics are commercial in confidence, but our research suggests that deals resulting from the code have represented between 0% and 20% of revenue for rural and regional independent news publishers. Country Press Australia is to be praised for its efforts in lobbying for collective bargaining on behalf of the network (demonstrating the power of collaboration) but, simply put, the gains are bigger for those who own more news outlets and serve larger populations with a broader digital reach, and so the outworking of the code is uneven and inequitable, with some media outlets, such as *The Conversation*, being excluded from deals, despite persistent efforts to engage Meta (Sims, 2022). Those news providers who operate just one news outlet, for example, are in a weaker position compared with larger regional and metropolitan owners (Hess & Waller, 2022), although there has been some evidence of small newsrooms 'gaming' the system to meet quotas imposed by big tech for funding, raising questions about the quality and integrity of the arrangement.

Some small-town mastheads opted to not enter negotiations with the tech giants because they were wary of the process and possible negative outcomes. The two main reasons for this were, firstly, doubts that the need to hire more staff to meet story-count demands would render the arrangement unprofitable and, secondly, concerns about the potential to damage their own product by selling their news content to a different publisher. Comments from news producers include:

"We don't think that's going to be a benefit for us. It's going to be more of a benefit for Google. So, there's no real benefit for us to signing up apart from we get a tiny cut now. And then Google's grip on local news grows, because Google's good at global news, but local news they're not. So that's why they're investing in it now." (News producer, Tasmania)

"I think it's going to be (companies like) ACM that's going to benefit from that, being a multimillion-dollar company compared to a little independent paper like us."

(News producer, NSW)

Our research suggests the mandatory bargaining code is a short-term solution to systemic issues facing independent rural and regional news outlets. For instance, one masthead has entered an arrangement with Google to provide the tech giant with local news content. While this contract is confidential, it does require the newsroom to upload a certain number of stories each day or week for Google to use. In return, the masthead receives payment, which equates to a five-figure sum annually. The arrangement has meant some changes in the newsroom schedule to meet the story count and uploading requirements. However, this masthead has developed efficiencies to make the arrangement worthwhile, for example, by splitting a single sports story into several articles to meet story-count requirements for Google. This insight suggests this small newsroom is manipulating its local content to fit the requirements in order to ensure an extra revenue stream, which should allow them to inject more money back into the business. However, in the interest of ensuring resources are directed to quality news and information for the region, we suggest this relationship is problematic.

Taking the 'clickbait'?

If we imagine digital space to be like the night sky, companies such as Google shine bright (like the planet Venus) as a recognised global information source. By comparison, small, independent local news websites flicker like tiny stars that are most visible to just a small niche audience. The rise of the digital has lured local news providers to the prospect of shining brightly to a much broader audience and advertising base (Hess & Waller, 2022). The theory was that the closer a news outlet was situated to 'planets' like Google and Facebook, the more they would stand out in the communications universe. In our view, however, the lure of this global appeal has been a honey trap.

There is a paradox underlying local journalism; it is meant to serve the discrete interests of people who identify on some social level with a given locality. Yet the twin lures of rationalisation and reach have produced big media players that own the bulk of Australian local media, publishing somewhat generic and sensational content that tends to be less relevant to local audiences and advertisers (Hess & Waller, 2022). Superficially appealing practices like 'clickbait'—where teasing headlines are used to persuade readers to click through to the story by omitting key information (Hurst, 2016)—have failed to provide the surety and loyalty local news providers need for a reliable business model.

We have previously suggested the key to a sustainable future for local news outlets lies not in massification—expansion to reach a much broader audience—but in cultivating their market power in localness (Hess & Waller, 2015). From this standpoint, having knowledge and experience of what makes a place and the people within its bounds 'tick' is required to build a news outlet's legitimacy as an authoritative public

voice, and to meet local audiences' specific information needs in the digital age.

Determining news quality based simply on digital reach immediately places news outlets serving small towns at a disadvantage among powerful state and national advertisers. A news outlet serving a population of 5000 cannot compete with a much bigger regional, state or national news site, which can reach one-million digital views daily on certain stories with national or global appeal. Yet it is counterproductive to suggest a local community is better served by a bigger newspaper for its day-to-day local news and information. If this were the case, there would be none of the multiple signs of poorly or under-served news needs in many Australian regional and rural communities (ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry final report, 2019).

An especially concerning practice, many news producers highlighted, was how state and federal government media buyers were increasingly demanding that these news producers demonstrate their digital reach. This suggested that outlets that could present stronger and broader digital reach were prioritised for advertising campaigns. As a news proprietor in South Australia said:

"I think a lot of the government media buyers are a young trendy, inner-city kind of demographic and that's fine; there's nothing wrong with that. They're well educated. They're probably on cutting edge of technology. So, it makes sense for them to be market-leading when there are new trends. Like, hey TikTok's growing now, how can we get that market for instance? So, they direct the money away from the non-sexy platforms like local newspapers. But the message on how important local news is to a community is not getting through."

The demand for digital reach, especially among institutions that represent democracy and must circulate messages and information to its citizens, is even more problematic if issues of digital connectivity and inequality are not included in advertising strategies. In this report we have highlighted that remote areas of Australia have 'significantly lower internet and broadband penetration' (Park, 2017). It should be noted that Australia's digital divide means that almost three-million people are without quality internet access and our research highlights that older residents, especially, still prefer a printed newspaper (Parke, 2022) Therefore, we suggest a shift away from digital reach as a way of gauging where advertising dollars should be spent and move instead towards *social responsibility* advertising. This form of advertising is encouraged to support quality news provisions in small geographic areas in print and digital platforms rather than relying on metrics that preference large-scale digital reach.



Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.

Metrics

Digital analytics tools track the habits and preferences of online news consumers by collecting, measuring and analysing data (Zamith, 2018). This data – the metrics – can be used to build a picture of a digital audience. The uptake of these types of tools followed the introduction of news websites (Sjovaag & Owren, 2021). A local news outlet would launch a website with an analytical tool attached to it. However, the value of these metrics to local newsrooms in Australia has not been fully explored.

Our research involved surveying 83 news producers in the Country Press network about their use and perception of online analytical tools. It found that 72% were using analytics to gather information about their online audience. They reported collecting data on audience engagement, notably the number of clicks on individual stories and how much time users spent reading each story on their website and social media pages. These metrics were then used to inform editorial decision making for story selection and placement. Survey participants also reported analytics being used to provide data to potential advertisers. Some (13%) said it was a quick and easy way to understand the audience, but nearly two in three indicated they valued both analytics *and* traditional methods of understanding the audience, such as connection to community organisations. Analytics were seen by these respondents as simply ‘another tool in the kit’. Almost a quarter (24%) said they valued traditional methods *more* than digital analytics.

This aligns with research suggesting that ‘strong identification and familiarity with local processes and people may discourage metrics use’ (Arenberg et al., 2018, p. 135). The close-knit nature of communities, and the proximity of journalists to news makers and subjects of news, may steer small news organisations away from the use of digital analytics tools. So, too, can the resources required to work with the metrics. Focusing on online audience analytics can put even more strain on local newsrooms, and decisions have to be made about the most efficient use of staff. Of those survey respondents who did not use analytics, the most common reasons given were that they did not have the skills, staff, time or budget to do so.

The use of analytics to aid editorial decision-making has long divided newsroom workers – some have lamented computer automation taking the place of editorial news sense and

judgement, while others suggest decisions can now be based on statistics instead of ‘guessing’ what readers want (Miller, 2011). There is consensus however that ‘clickbait’ strategies for news are, overall, detrimental as they can tarnish a masthead’s credibility and reputation for public interest journalism. Exploring analytics to understand a digital audience can indeed be beneficial, but we urge caution about relying on metrics alone to assess a local news outlet’s impact in a community.

Smarter use of mediums

We recommend local news outlets develop clearer strategies about the types of content that are best suited to each distinct platform – print, digital and hybrid print/digital – to maximise value for both niche audiences and digital reach. For example, an increasing number of rural and regional news websites have created online business directory pages to begin positioning their local websites as a compendium for all varieties of local news and information – a one-stop-shop for all things local. Businesses and services pay a fee to be listed on these comprehensive directories. This is an example of a considered approach to website content, one that deliberately targets a local online audience with niche non-news content. It creates a valuable portal of local information that a local audience would want to use, and local advertisers would want to be part of.

Other ways content can be enriched by a digital presence to further entice a local online audience include online puzzles, breaking news and information, accessibility to podcasts/ audio, photographic galleries, and real-time conversations. These elements can also help create a transition to the digital, which can take time among rural and regional audiences.

Strategies to target a broader digital audience – reaching beyond the local – include developing real estate and online tourism guides that showcase local restaurants and accommodation to a national, even global, audience. Further, the creation of online market pages that showcase distributable local products to a global audience can also be leveraged for broader digital reach, especially when promoted in partnership with other news outlets across the Country Press Australia network.



*Hot off the press: While local news providers are staying loyal to their core business – journalism – more are experimenting with alternative revenue streams that capitalise on their material and cultural assets.
(Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.)*

Diversification

SUMMARY

While the production of news, and the newspaper in particular, remains the core focus of many local mastheads, our research suggests there is increased attention being paid to other business models with a focus on diversification, in order to build alternative revenue streams. These approaches include lifestyle publications, commercial printing and merchandise manufacturing (from cookbooks to tea towels). This represents a shift towards commercialising local news producers' powerful placemaking role in the communities they serve, embracing non-news content and products.



INTRODUCTION

Put simply, media business diversification means having multiple revenue streams, not just income from one source (see: Radcliff & Ali, 2017; Olsen et al., 2021). The concept of multiple revenue streams is not new for many local news outlets. For example, most have moved into the digital space and erected or experimented with a paywall, adding an alternative revenue stream and therefore diversifying their business. However, diversification can also mean growth into different markets within the same industry or expansion into a new industry (Amit & Licnat, 1988). Across the globe, local news businesses have been experimenting with forms of revenue raising outside the norm, such as adding e-commerce, event organising, in-house marketing firms, sports club ownership, commercial printing or merchandise production to their business structure (see: Macnamara, 2010; Radcliffe & Ali, 2017; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018; Nel, 2010). While the list of alternative revenue streams and possibilities are varied, there is consensus that local media companies need to be simultaneously pursuing multiple business strategies, and should consider capitalising on the products of the past while exploring innovations that may help sustain them in the future (Abernathy, 2014; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020).

This strategy of looking for alternative business models and revenue streams – either inside or outside the media industry – has been suggested as having more potential for longer-term sustainability than measures such as cost-cutting, especially if the model is productive and creative, such as developing a new product (Bruggemann et al., 2012). Multiple revenue streams provide a greater opportunity for sustainability because one funding source can cover any shortfalls incurred by the loss of part, or

all, of another source until new funding mechanisms are found (Kurpuius et al., 2010). In our research, one member of a Victorian family newspaper dynasty put it this way:

“I think you've got to diversify to continue to grow ... because I don't think you can just be good at one thing. You need to have multiple things happening. If it's investing in real estate or investing in livestock or something like that, you need to. Otherwise, I think, you end up going backwards and you just disappear.”

Our research revealed that diversification strategies tended to be ones that capitalised on assets and attributes the mastheads already possessed – notably their relationship to locality and 'place'. There has been little research into how local news outlets leverage their relationship to 'place' from a cultural economy perspective. Our research shows that some local news outlets are capitalising on their placemaking role by producing cultural publications that focus on unique aspects of the community. These include industry and lifestyle magazines, tourist publications, cookbooks or even tea towels. In this way, news producers are further monetising their existing historic content and picture archives, and harnessing new ways to use equipment that was originally purchased to produce news.

Commercialising connection to place

A local news outlet can help construct its region's identity – how a community sees itself. This can be achieved by communicating the cultural values of the community, or in other words, reinforcing the local customs, traditions and routines of a place (Buchanan, 2009). The building of a 'collective community identity' can also be aided by a local news outlet when it promotes the region's defining features, such as its unique geography (Gutsche & Hess, 2019). For example, on a national level, Uluru and the Great Barrier Reef are consistently used by the media as symbols to represent Australia (Sinclair, 2000). Other symbols, such as a landmark building, a dominant industry practised in the region, or a main tourist attraction could also be used to help build a place's identity (Mueller & Schade, 2012).

One New South Wales masthead has expanded its range of non-news publications to include multiple magazine titles, each highlighting a different element of the community and its culture. These include a magazine that focuses on one of the region's main industries (agriculture), another is based on the area's main tourist activity (snow sports) and another highlights the lifestyle available in part of the region. These subjects – farming, skiing and coastal living – are some of the key things that define the broad area this masthead covers. These lifestyle publications have a wider reach, and therefore expanded potential for revenue streams, than the place-based public interest journalism these proprietors would usually provide. Owners at this masthead stated that they saw growth in this area of the business.

Other mastheads are also capitalising on their power to shape the way the region is perceived as a tourist destination. For example, a masthead in Tasmania is producing a yearly tourist magazine that has a 30,000-edition print run and expanded its reach across the state during the COVID-19 pandemic. There too are examples of cookbooks (see this chapter's case study) and monthly arts publications that provide the only full list of entertainment and events in the region.

This business diversification represents a shift away from pure news reporting and newspapers, towards more niche content and varied platforms. It should be noted here that although they are different platforms – magazines and books – these new publications were all print-based, not digitally focused, suggesting that the printed form is still a vehicle for new and innovative financial ventures.

Revenue from history

Our research indicates mastheads are also taking advantage of history and tradition in efforts to diversify their business revenue streams and aid their future sustainability. Selling photographs, both contemporary and historic, that have been published in the newspaper has long been a practice of most newsrooms. How this is done varies, however. Our research revealed instances of newsrooms that display boxes full of old black and white photos in the office for the public to buy, and newsrooms that have a dedicated 'photo sales' desk where staff digitally print images. But what does seem to be consistent is the continued demand for the type of historic material a local newspaper offers.

"You'll have people that want copies of the (football) grand finals from 20, 30 years ago. They want to know who was in the team. They might have their 100th reunion sort of thing, and they want to have who was in the team of that year. So, certainly, the history is there. And ... in 100 years' time people will be interested in what's happening now."

In many cases, it is the local newspaper that creates, collates and keeps the main historical record of the people and activities that make up that community. Reporting the everyday events and issues of today and archiving them for future reference, means the newspaper fills the role of important community library – producing and holding the written and pictorial history of their place (Allen & Sieczkiewicz, 2010). Scholars and industry consultants have suggested this historic content could provide a valuable revenue stream in the digital era, with one report identifying 'potentially huge' business opportunities in media archives that include thousands of photos and historical accounts of important events that stretch back decades or even centuries (KPMG, 2007, p. 4, cited in Macnamara, 2010). This diversification of revenue streams has been described as 'archive re-use and repurposing' (Macnamara, 2010).

Some newsrooms have found innovative ways to re-use and repurpose their archive content. One masthead is using its historic content to help it meet the requirements of its agreement with Google to provide a certain amount of local news content for a fee. To help it reach the weekly story quota, news producers at this masthead are mining the newspaper's archives and repurposing old content. In Queensland, there is a masthead creating merchandise such as tea-towels emblazoned with old newspaper content.

"We actually went right back to grassroots because we are quite an historical paper. We have started putting out a range of tea towels— believe it or not! — with all the old adverts on them because people love them, and they buy them purely because of nostalgia. They look back and think, 'That's the year I was born'. So we helped our income along last year with that. We are about to do another one with all our stuff from 1936." (Parliamentary Inquiry, 2022)

Revenue from equipment

News enterprises that own printing press and/or multimedia equipment – assets that have been purchased for the production of news content – are now being adopted for alternative revenue streams.

Commercial printing opportunities have been a feature of many local news businesses since their inception. While some newsrooms without their own press offer design services to clients wanting business cards, leaflets, catalogues, brochures, posters or books and then outsource the printing, those news outlets that have retained their own printing equipment offer a full service. By some accounts, revenue from this model has waxed and waned over the past few decades, due partly to the affordability of home desk-top printers and then a reduction in demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, when events and activities that traditionally required printed material to support them (such as the local football league weekly record) were shut down. However, our research suggests those with their own printing press see value in this revenue stream, so much so that they continue to upgrade equipment. For example, one news owner recently spent about \$300,000 on a second-hand five-colour press.

The combination of commercial printing and newspaper production ensures presses keep rolling, with client work fitting into the press schedule around the regular newspaper runs. While this is a traditional revenue stream for mastheads that have retained their printing presses, some are innovating in this space by experimenting with different bindings, widths, papers and folding options, ensuring they offer a range of services to clients. Commercial printing clients mentioned by participants in our research ranged from local sporting groups to national public companies.

There are also mastheads providing digital services to clients, such as website design and video production. Some of these business diversifications have been possible through the allocation of government grants, which were used by some mastheads to purchase video and audio production equipment. While revenues from these online diversifications did not appear to be significant, they do represent a move into a new direction, with one masthead suggesting that they will be considered a 'media company down the track' rather than a news business.

Case study: Phillip Island cookbook

The *Phillip Island and San Remo Advertiser* has diversified into the non-news market in recent years by launching a cookbook and tourist magazine.

The new tourist magazine, which highlights Victoria's South Gippsland region, was an initiative of the masthead's editor, Eleanor McKay, who once worked for a tourist publication in the area that had recently closed down.

"The magazine where I used to work had folded and it had this little niche and I kept saying ... there's just this gap sitting there and if we don't take it, someone else will," McKay said.

That 'gap' included a market of new advertisers who typically did not spend money in the newspaper, such as restaurants, as well as an audience who tended to overlook the newspaper, such as tourists.

"The idea with that magazine was that, because we're such a holiday area that the holiday makers aren't as likely to pick up the paper, but they would pick up something about the island because they're here on holidays and they want to know where to go and what to do," McKay said.

The cookbook, titled *Over The Bridge*, had similar financial imperatives, but also additional motives that may benefit the masthead in different ways in the future.

The high-quality, hardcover publication was the brainchild of one of the masthead's journalists who had grown up on the island but had also worked away in other newsrooms for more than a decade.

"I could just see that Phillip Island undersells itself a bit too; it's always a bit of a poor man's holiday destination," she said.

"(The cookbook is) about just loving (the island) back, seeing how beautiful it is and loving it back and respecting it a bit. To me, it's a bit of an homage to the island."

The cookbook also provided the masthead with an opportunity to present itself in a different light, manager Jane O'Garey said.

"We're just hoping to be more out there ... make the younger generation more aware that we're here and we're a bit more modern. We're not just an old-fashioned newspaper," she said.

"So, we're thinking it's worth putting money in, a bit of investment into trying to do these different things, to build a bigger profile. We wanted to make it look cool."



On the horizon: Research suggests a need for government and industry reflection on how best to attract and retain media professionals in Australia's rural and regional areas.
(Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.)



Recruitment and staffing

SUMMARY

Vital government support via direct one-off subsidies has helped to fund salaries of cadet journalists in rural and regional newsrooms across Australia and support education and training. A key challenge, however, for Australia's rural and regional news outlets remains the recruitment of talent, especially in rural areas. Our research suggests there is a need to shift the focus towards improving perceptions of regional media professions beyond that of a 'starting ground' or 'stepping stone' to a big city journalism career. We propose a solution could be to provide more targeted incentives to encourage experienced journalists who might be more willing to live and invest in rural places for a longer period and be able to take journalism leadership. This is important as it has been difficult for local news producers, especially, to attract and keep cadets for extended periods. The role of government-funded institutions in competing for media and communications staff in the regions is also highlighted.



INTRODUCTION

One of the identified challenges facing the long-term sustainability and resilience of the local news sector is the issue of staff recruitment and retention. There has, of course, been severe contractions in the Australian media landscape that have led to job losses in metropolitan, regional and rural newsrooms during the past decade, but this distribution of redundancies has been uneven (Zion et al., 2016). A 2020 Australian study involving a survey of more than 300 regional journalists working in print, television, radio and online news media found that 'regional journalists viewed themselves as underpaid and overworked due to a lack of resources' (Fisher et al., 2020, p. 20).

Recent innovation funds established by the Australian Government (2017-2018) have recognised the need to support costs to recruit cadet journalists and have provided scope for local newsrooms to help pay cadet salaries. For example, the Communications Department announced in 2022 a \$10 million journalist fund over two years to support eligible regional media organisations to hire cadet journalists and to upskill existing journalists. About \$8 million of this total was dedicated to hiring cadets, with the remaining \$2 million dedicated to training (Federal Government, 2022). Under the deal, each cadet would be supported by a \$150,000 funding package, which includes the cadet's salary, superannuation, hiring costs, travel costs, and training over two years. The Government will contribute 70% of each cadetship package, up to \$105,000. News producers who receive grants will contribute the

remaining 30%. Cadets are to be employed for at least 24 months. According to our national survey, local news audiences also overwhelmingly indicated that additional funding for local news should be directed to employing more local journalists to report news (71%), over increasing digital connectivity (13%) and digital innovation products (17%). The Public Interest Journalism Initiative, meanwhile, has suggested a tax rebate scheme for news organisations that support public interest journalism, specifically incentives for 'core news activities'. Such a proposal would apply to news organisations with an annual revenue benchmark of \$150,000 (PIJI, 2020), aligning with similar conditions applying to news organisations in dealings over the mandatory bargaining code. This does not, however, provide scope to support news enterprises in small rural areas operated by just one or two individuals, relying largely on advertising revenue to pay their salaries.

For many newsrooms, however, the issue now is not lack of funding and subsidy schemes to support recruitment of journalists, but rather difficulties finding willing media professionals to work in rural and regional communities. An inability to attract metropolitan university graduates to accept cadetships more than 100 kilometres from a capital or large regional city was considered especially problematic. This is also a challenge experienced in other advanced liberal democracies such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. For example, a study of independent newspapers in the United States found the issue of staff

recruitment a huge impediment to news sustainability and quality of coverage and have called for a global approach to examine this issue (Walsh and Martin, 2021). This comes despite US newspaper editors indicating workplace culture and community engagement were two of the main reasons local journalists chose to stay in their jobs. One rural Australian news editor in conversation with our research team said current support schemes were “like having the stables all set up to train a Melbourne Cup winner, but there were no horses in sight”.

Participants in focus groups along the eastern seaboard of Australia expressed frustration at being unable to recruit staff, especially university graduates with an interest in journalism. Consider these comments from news workers:

“It is a massive problem ... it is probably one of the biggest issues that we face, in regional towns, per se, for all organisations, I think. Unless you are near a bigger centre or something.”

“For me right now ... I’m desperate for help. I just need somebody else who is going to share the load ... I need the time to attend court; to sit at a council meeting, that kind of thing. So, I would really just love to have more people.”

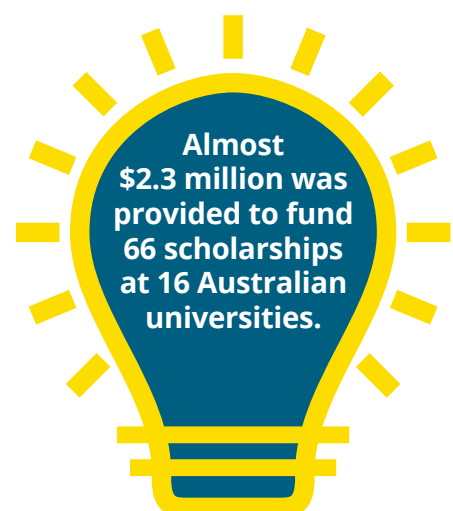
The shortage of staff meant that some newsrooms were recruiting metropolitan graduates and enabling them to live and work at a considerable distance from the locality they served – a strategy we suggest is of major concern. As we have highlighted in Chapter 2, the success of local newspapers often depends on their commitment to and perception of being local so setting precedents that enable new full-time cadets to permanently work from a distance to cover day-to-day reporting can jeopardise this relationship. Of course, there is value in providing journalism and reporting support at a distance from a community for one-off projects and initiatives, but by and large a local presence should be expected of rural and regional journalists whose salaries are bolstered with government support. Our research found that the shortage of staff was attributed to several key impediments – negative and/or inferior perceptions of rural and regional careers; the overall stability of the sector; competition and pay.

A perception problem

Many staff interviewed highlighted there was a perception problem about careers in media in rural and regional areas – a challenge experienced by other sectors such as healthcare and education. Some researchers and commentators have described this urban/rural professional divide as ‘geographical narcissism’, ‘urban-splaining’ and ‘geographical judgement’, as journalist Gabrielle Chan puts it in her book *Rusted Off* (see also Baker and Hess, 2019). Internationally, rural careers in medicine can be perceived negatively due to issues such as living in too close a proximity to patients and lack of anonymity, lack of resources and mixed perceptions about rural communities being ‘tight knit’ (Charter, Scully & Laidlaw, 2021). Our research suggests some of these perceptions may ring true for journalism. Editors said there was a perception that there were no jobs in journalism and employment was precarious. University and journalism educators were also highlighted for their role in arguably (albeit unintentionally) contributing to poor perceptions of regional careers, by referring to regional journalism jobs as ‘stepping stones’ or places in which to simply start a career, rather than celebrate the regions as providing fulfilling long-term career opportunities. Consider this comment:

“... I don’t think it helps that lecturers tell the students that journalism is dead and regional journalism is out the window. I don’t think that is helping us at all. I think they look at us and think that we’re about to fall over.”

Recent innovation grants have also allocated significant resources to universities to offer scholarships to those willing to work in rural newsrooms at the completion of their degree and there is yet to be an assessment on the effectiveness of this program on recruitment. Almost \$2.3 million was provided to fund 66 scholarships at 16 Australian universities (Federal Government, 2018). Our own experience as recipients of funding at Deakin University has created some concerns as there is limited capacity to mandate that scholarship recipients do indeed work in rural newsrooms at the completion of their courses. Some news workers in our research instead highlighted support for more targeted, place-based education and training and internships.





One rural Australian news editor in conversation with our research team said current support schemes were “like having the stables all set up to train a Melbourne Cup winner, but there were no horses in sight”.

Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.

Competition and pay

Another key staffing challenge was the ability to keep less experienced staff for longer than two years, especially university graduates. Some regional and rural editors had begun recruiting from high schools, providing work experience for year 11 and 12 students and cadetships, preferring staff with existing local knowledge. Others were negotiating with metropolitan-based professionals to work from home, away from local areas, and commute occasionally to the towns and cities they serve. Hess and Gulyas (2023) warn against such practices to fill staff shortages because of its threat to perceptions on credibility and legitimacy if key reporters do not call the main towns they serve on a day-to-day basis ‘home’. In our research, those editors closer to a capital city had less of an issue attracting staff.

News producers also highlighted that there was increasing competition among local organisations to recruit from a limited pool. In some situations, the local newspaper was often considered the ‘training’ ground for which other organisations benefited from such investment. Public broadcaster the ABC and local government were highlighted especially, because they were publicly funded institutions that could provide better pay.

One Queensland editor said there were several former journalists who worked at her newspaper who were now employed by the local council’s media and communications department getting “... all the perks that come with the job of working 9 to 5 – it doesn’t mean it should be that way.”

We suggest an increased focus on recruiting experienced journalists to the regions, instead of targeting mostly cadets, similar to the Federal Government’s workforce incentive program, which aims to improve access to quality medical nursing and allied health services in regional, rural and remote areas. The Government also offers incentives to encourage doctors to work in these areas and supports existing medical practices.



Wanda Dunnet

Commentary

I believe that rural and regional journalism is a place of learning like no other workplace in the media industry. For me it's a sense of engagement, of valuing, and being valued by, the community. It's providing the vehicle for your community to feel that they have an outlet and are supported, where successes are recognised and acknowledged. It is an authority in the region.

The local masthead is the voice of the area and when you work for it you get to know your community and the spectrum of issues that interest and concern them. It gives the opportunity for immersion and engagement on every level. Local readers appreciate their masthead and the journalists who make it possible. We are recognised at events, even going shopping, people will stop and say, 'I thought you might like to put something in the paper about...' or when we take photos people comment, 'Oh, I'm going to be in the paper'. That relevance and recognition is very gratifying. Covering cultural and social events is the most rewarding aspect of the job for me.

Rural and regional journalists have the opportunity to make their mark. Professionally and personally, the role provides the capability to engage and report, to get to the heart of matters. The responsibility of keeping council and politicians to account is basic to reporting in a democracy. Used wisely, it's a powerful tool. We can affect change in our communities.

One of the most satisfying outcomes in which I was involved was when we campaigned for a railing to be installed on the pedestrian bridge on the busy Newell Highway across the Namoi River. On the face of it a simple, structural improvement, but one which had a profound impact on the wellbeing of our community. Our elderly, and children, can now cross with confidence knowing there is a protective fence between them and the road trains that frequent the busy highway.

Working on a regional publication means you are adept at all levels of journalism, from reporting on the local show to covering local politics. The ability to sense a news story, develop questioning techniques, take initiative, pull together facts, report with sensitivity and accuracy knowing who the audience is, places journalists at the core of their craft. In very few other media environments do journalists have such an opportunity to have their material published across all topics, social, agriculture, commerce, sport – all the issues that matter to the readership of their newspaper. I get to do everything, from writing stories, taking photos, helping with layout, and being involved in advertising features. I know the importance of the narrative and the way it's presented. The detail, consistency of design, layout and style identifies our product and the community regard *The Courier* as their paper. The pride they take in having their own paper resonates with our staff, making us all feel valued.

The role of a rural and regional journalist builds initiative, responsibility, skills and a sense of worth. It is immensely gratifying. For anyone passionate about journalism and writing, there is no better place to work!

Wanda Dunnet

Wanda Dunnet is the manager and co-proprietor, with her husband, Ian, of *The North Western Courier* in Narrabri, New South Wales.

Power of collaboration

SUMMARY

While local news producers take pride in and are celebrated for working within and for their communities, our research highlights the potential to enhance collaborative efforts to strengthen the Country Press Australia network across regional, state and national levels. The importance of working together was a rich theme to emerge from our research, and we assessed early attitudes to a BBC-style model of collaboration, highlighted in a 2022 parliamentary inquiry as a potential solution to ensuring the ongoing sustainability of local news in Australia.



INTRODUCTION

The power and importance of collective, coordinated responses to the COVID-19 pandemic – from the healthcare sector through to politics, neighbourhoods and schools – have been celebrated across Australia. In the local news industry, collaborative approaches to news are increasingly being trialled in other parts of the world to alleviate a well-documented crisis. Initiatives have focused largely on data journalism, solutions and investigative journalism projects. Of particular interest to Australian policymakers has been the BBC Local Democracy Reporting project, which funds journalists in the United Kingdom to be based in local newsrooms and provide local government reporting, as well as data journalism initiatives. A key aspect of the BBC model is the creation of up to 150 journalist positions, called local democracy reporters. Their primary purpose is to fill a gap in reporting on local governments and regional public institutions (Johnston, 2020, p. 5). Local democracy reporters are funded by the BBC but are employed and managed by some of the local newspapers, online and/or broadcast outlets, which have signed on as partners (Johnston, 2020). Although local democracy reporters work in a newsroom run by a partner news outlet, the content they produce is made available to all partners to the scheme through a news hub (BBC, 2022).

In our research, collaboration was discussed in three ways: firstly, there was a sense of urgency among members to strengthen collaborative efforts within the Country Press network to enhance the profile of Country Press Australia, to promote and advocate for regional issues, and to generate advertising for the network as a whole; secondly,

a need for a collaborative approach towards the funding of local news; and thirdly, local news providers' attitudes towards the BBC model, given it was recommended as a suitable model during a Parliamentary Inquiry undertaken during the time our fieldwork with news producers was conducted (2022).

Collaborative approach to funding

More recently, scholars have advocated for a communal news work model, proposed by Olsen, Pickard and Westlund (2020), which involves a range of stakeholders contributing to the costs of producing public interest journalism at the local level in different ways – from audience subscriptions and business diversification, through to direct and indirect government subsidies and 'donations' from Big Tech. They suggest local news should be a shared responsibility for 'all of society' (Olsen et al., 2020, p. 674). This attitude aligned with results from our major local news audience survey, which indicated local news providers should be collaboratively funded by a range of relevant stakeholders (industry, government, advertisers, audiences) to ensure their future (59%), compared with government subsidies alone (30%), supporters and sponsors (10%), and volunteers (2%). In addition, some survey participants suggested that local councils should make more of a collaborative effort to help distribute a printed newspaper to citizens. In return, the local newspaper could include information of general interest that appears on the council website.

"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 residents' email addresses in a bulk mailout."

(Male reader, 20, Victoria)

In our focus groups and interviews with news producers, almost all participants were supportive of government subsidies to support local news but highlighted the need for more structured long-term support, such as via regular government advertising spend, rather than one-off funding grants, which were time-consuming to apply for and many local news producers lacked grant writing experience.

BBC model

As highlighted, a Parliamentary Inquiry in 2022 recommended:

"... that the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications work with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Special Broadcasting Service to facilitate partnerships with small regional publishers and broadcasters, modelled on the BBC Local News Partnerships program."

Our preliminary research found a one-size-fits-all collaborative approach, such as that adopted by the BBC, is unlikely to be embraced among local news producers, and that more work is needed to develop an understanding of an appropriate framework that may be tailored to best meet the needs of different local news outlets (Hess & Ross, 2022). Both local news producers and some journalism scholars are concerned that collaborative approaches to news could generate unfair competition within the sector (e.g. Barnett & Greenslade, 2020; Jenkins, 2021; Johnston, 2020). We identified several potential roadblocks that emerged from discussions with news producers about the BBC model, which could create potential challenges to any collaborative approach involving the ABC. A key concern, for example, was the desire for local news outlets to be seen as central to local government reporting and civic issues in their communities. They felt that involving the public broadcaster would damage their reputation – in that they were capable and wanted to provide this aspect of public interest journalism – but sometimes lacked resources to do so. Others had concerns about ABC bureaus operating in areas where there was already a local news producer and having higher staffing ratios to produce the news.

Ultimately, we argue any involvement of the ABC in supporting local journalism must adopt a nuanced approach to best support the information needs of rural

Audience collaboration

A finding from the PhD research was that all newspapers that had been sustainable over time relied heavily on collaborating with audiences to produce content. News producers suggested this content was not just a bonus to have on hand but had become a necessary feature of their newspaper production. This shift had arisen after cost-cutting measures at some of the mastheads left fewer editorial staff, including journalists and/or photographers, to cover the region's events and issues. Now content provided by residents was filling those gaps, with journalists and editors working to improve the readability of content for audiences. News producers indicated they relied on the community for this material, saying: "Without them, we wouldn't have half the content" (Victorian co-owner), and it was "the only way we can do it" (Victorian editor). In most cases, the content provided to the newsrooms came from community groups, such as sporting clubs, charity organisations, or institutions such as the local primary school or library. Interview participants indicated the content was usually information relating to events, meetings, matches etc. Overall, these were generally described as columns or reports, rather than journalistic stories.

and regional Australia. News producers in our research did indicate areas where collaboration could be beneficial such as the ABC's role in amplifying 'bigger' stories beyond the local public sphere. An editor from Victoria, for example, argued the ABC's state and national reputation could and should be leveraged to support her town.

Similarly, several news producers highlighted that they already had arrangements with the ABC to talk about local events and news coming up in their newspapers that could be leveraged in instances where a story was 'too big' to tackle alone, especially investigative stories. Internationally, another model of collaboration that may have benefit is data-driven. American scholar Jan Lauren Boyles has unpacked the benefit of a data-journalism approach to community news in the US (a model also explored in Canada), yet notes it is resource intensive and can be difficult without additional staffing, expertise or infrastructure (Boyles, 2020). The BBC program includes a shared data unit, which is used to develop data journalism skills among local news reporters. These skills are also used to launch large-scale data investigations that aim to produce vital public interest journalism for its local democracy reporters (Johnston, 2020).

"I'm only small; if there's a story that I think is of regional significance or bigger than I can handle, I always call the ABC and offer to work with them."



Country Press network

Jenkins and Graves (2019) identify three ideal models of collaboration in producing content: a *co-op model*, in which smaller news outlets join forces to cover non-competing topics; a *contractor model*, in which organisations with specific expertise contract to produce a short-term investigation; and a *coordinating model*, in which a non-profit (such as a public broadcaster) manages competing outlets engaged in shared data-driven investigations. Feedback from Country Press news producers suggest the association is well placed to advance a co-op model across its network and that this is under-appreciated. There was, for example, strong enthusiasm for expanding the network to involve what could be best described as a 'community of practice' for journalists and editors, enabling the regular sharing of information, training and camaraderie, outside of annual conference events and conducted virtually. Some editors and journalists stated that they sometimes felt isolated in their jobs and regular connection with other news producers would improve wellbeing and confidence. As researchers, it was evident that the focus groups themselves were a welcome network activity to talk with others in the industry.

An editor said there needed to be:

"... more sharing like a forum like this today. Perhaps we should all be getting together and chucking in ideas to help each other. And whether Country Press Australia can be the sort of the convener of that, that might be a way forward, and I guess the other thing I'd say would be advocacy."

Many highlighted the role of Country Press Australia in also promoting the importance of local news providers across Australia collectively, especially among policymakers and national advertisers, and in identifying common issues for journalists to advocate on behalf of their community, such as improvements for roads, infrastructure, healthcare and social justice issues. Where similar issues existed, news providers should unite to activate change on behalf of a shared common good. As one editor in New South Wales highlighted:

"... we each know our own community so well and serve our own communities so well. But I think what we haven't taken advantage of is the collaborative effect. My approach would be, is to go back to these government agencies and funded bodies who have forgotten how to advertise, because they want it to be easy for them, they don't want to deal with multiple bookings in multiple little papers. [CPA] is our industry association. Maybe it needs to get up on its hind legs a little bit more and actually back the industry."

Australian Community Media – a major Australian news conglomerate which owns more than 140 news outlets (many of which are based in regional areas) – has shown the strength of collaboration through its campaigns, such as its 'Heartbeat of the Regions'. Smaller independent news outlets should similarly use the power of collaboration to showcase regional achievements and reflect views of rural and regional Australia, especially small-towns and cities.



Lucie Peart

Commentary

Support, collaboration and cooperation will be key to the future success of regional independent news publishers in Australia. Regional publishers work tirelessly 50-odd weeks of the year to produce community newspapers. We are small-to-medium businesses with little to no profit margin. What we lack in staff numbers, we make up for in passion and commitment to our communities. We don't operate traditional corporate structures. Many businesses are family-run, some fourth or fifth generation. Some, like me, are the first generation of younger people taking on ownership of publications.

We have all heard the doom and gloom rhetoric of the industry. The truth is, it's hard out here in publishing – yes, but we are not dead or dying (or even thinking about it!). Our readerships value us, they rely on us to tell the important stories of our communities, not just for today, but for history as well. These newspapers provide an insight into the issues and strengths of regional areas – which are the backbone of our country's economy.

The metro-centric view that printed newspapers are irrelevant and that everybody wants to read news online, is also another myth that hinders the government's understanding of how they can properly support regional publishers. Regional areas don't enjoy widespread internet or mobile phone coverage. We drive long distances for health services, and food shopping. Popping out to the shops can encompass a whole day's adventure.

During COVID lockdowns, newspapers continued to thrive regionally in print, because people were able to buy something that supported local businesses and allowed them to retain their sense of connection with the community.

Current economic pressures and the effects of the pandemic are inflicting trying times on all businesses, which is why collaboration is key to our future. Through the Country Press Australia network, which has over 190 member mastheads, and the associated state bodies, our members are uniting in purpose.

Regional publishers can often feel isolated in business, the Country Press associations provide a place to share ideas and support each other for the greater good. The board members give their time on a volunteer basis. They make trips to parliament houses to meet with government ministers. They organise conferences, awards and events and represent members on the Australian Press Council.

We are organising, supporting each other, and providing a voice for publishers at all-government levels. Through this collaboration, Country Press Australia has also negotiated world-first funding deals with big tech companies. Federal and state grant programs have been announced and delivered, as a direct result of Country Press lobbying. These funding avenues are supporting regional publishers to step into the digital landscape and support the future journalists of our industry through cadetship funding.

One voice in the bush can so easily be overlooked or ignored. When 200 voices can be raised in collaboration and unity, that is where publishers will find their issues and the border issues of regional Australia brought to the forefront.

Lucie Peart

President, Country Press NSW Inc.

Publisher – The Gilgandra Weekly, The Nyngan Weekly, Narromine Star and Warren Star

Turning pages of history

SUMMARY

There are at least 10 independent local-news dynasties in the Country Press Australia network where one family has remained at the helm for more than a century. And there are about a dozen more that are inter-generational. Some have family members that will continue the bloodline for years to come, and others are the last of their era. There has been little research into the contribution these businesses could make to our understanding of local news sustainability until now. In this chapter, we highlight experiences and views about the future of local news media from those who continue at the helm of family dynasties. These families value history and tradition, the fostering of company loyalty and building a sense of ownership among both community and key personnel.



INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Australian news dynasties – media companies run by multiple generations of the same family – scholars have generally taken a political economy approach, with a particular focus on the big players, such as Murdoch, Packer and Fairfax, in probing how and to what extent they have influenced or shaped news production in the past few decades (Archer & Clinton, 2018; Griffen-Folley, 2014; Hanretty, 2014; Humprecht, 2019). This is understandable, given their scale and reach. At the local-news level, the moves of the likes of Murdoch have also been well documented, with scholarly attention often focused on the impact consolidation and centralisation of news production and cost-cutting measures – made for the benefit of shareholders – have had on the quality and quantity of local content (Bowd, 2021; Davies & Meade, 2021).

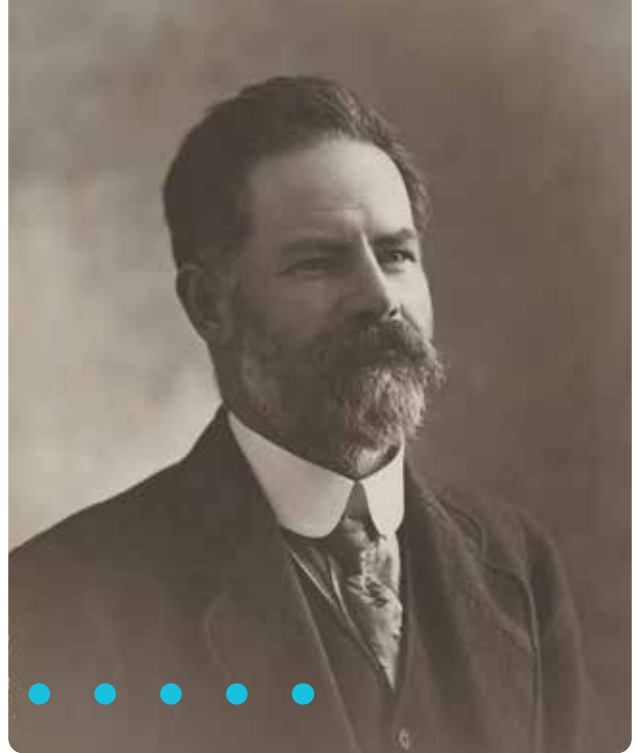
Comparatively, scholars have given light attention to the role of smaller news dynasties, those businesses, usually servicing local news, whose scale and resources are dwarfed by the moguls, but who have nonetheless remained somewhat financially viable for multiple generations, are firmly embedded in the communities they serve and have ridden the raft of changes in news media in recent decades.

In Australia, there are at least 10 independent local-news dynasties in the Country Press Australia network; that is, where one family has remained at the helm for more than a century (see Kirkpatrick 2010; McAdam & Hess 2022; Tilbrook, 2012). Up until recently, journalism research has largely taken

a historical perspective in charting the family narratives of these dynasties. Media historians, from Kirkpatrick (1996) to Tilbrook (2012), have been commissioned to document the history of local newspapers in certain states of Australia, notably Victoria and South Australia. Speaking to the unique place these smaller dynasties hold, Kirkpatrick (1999) argues that, while family businesses are common in any industry, it is rare to make it to the dynasty stage. Jaffe and Lane (2004) state that it is more often the case that, for instance, the core business folds, is sold or family members inherit their own fortunes and go their own ways.

Kirkpatrick states that Australian dynastic titles often have editors/proprietors who are persistent in difficulties, show commitment to their mastheads and communities, and pursue moderate editorial policies that satisfy ‘most readers, most of the time’ (1999). They see a rival as an opportunity to lift their game, such as in boosting the frequency of their titles or pursuing better printing presses. And families also provide economies of scale: an editor/proprietor and other family members often work long hours, buoyed by a commitment to family and duty and, in most cases, financial incentive (Kirkpatrick, 1999).

Our research joins others (see Matthews & Hodgson, 2021) in moving the focus beyond a purely historical lens in examining independent local-news dynasties to consider their value in a digital world. We found there were several characteristics and qualities of dynastic news businesses that were helping to drive their sustainability. Some of these were not unique to long-running family ownership – such as entrenchment in place, understanding news boundaries and sensing business limits – and as such have already been discussed in previous chapters of this report. However, there were factors that were especially important for dynastic news providers and could provide valuable insights into news business longevity. These included respect for tradition and reputations, and the fostering of company loyalty and a sense of ownership.



Harry Samuel Taylor, who purchased the Renmark Pioneer in 1903.

Respect for tradition

Our research shows that there are certain values – professional, social and cultural – that have been passed down through generations among the families running local news outlets. At one Victorian dynastic newspaper, this includes preserving the proud tradition of the type of content they know their audience wants and needs, which at this masthead is ‘good’ news content that benefits, celebrates and reinforces community and with an ‘expert’ local focus. Some news producers here – family members who own and run the publication – believe that following and upholding ‘good’ news values (especially those that foster and reinforce a sense of community) help the masthead establish respect and legitimacy.

This was a common theme among the dynastic mastheads – the rich history and connection to place they had developed and maintained was valued among the community, and as such was able to be used as a unique selling point (O’Hara, 2019, 2021). Also, these long-running family news outlets tended to own their own assets and have low or no debt, a business advantage that allowed them to be nimble and make quick decisions based on years of experience.

The benefits of having years of family knowledge and investment in a news business can come at a cost to individuals though, with family members consistently mentioning the amount of extra time they contribute to the business and the obligation they feel to keeping things running for future generations. The phrase ‘ink in my veins’ was used by several members of family dynasties that we spoke to, and many of them had spent their childhoods doing odd jobs at the newspaper office before heading away to study and/or work elsewhere, then returning to the family business. While some were lured back by the opportunity, some also felt the weight of family tradition and an expectation from elders to maintain the legacy.

“My father would be disappointed if neither of us were interested. It would be disappointing if none of the kids followed the family.”

(Victorian advertising manager, fifth generation)

“We’ve got skin in the game. If we stuff this up, we don’t have anything else to turn to. This needs to work for us. So that is a reason that we get out of bed every morning. That’s why you do your 60, 70, 80 hours per week; it’s just to make sure that we’re not letting the next family member down, essentially.”

(South Australian owner, fourth generation)

While these mastheads did not have to contend with outside business pressure from shareholders or boards, they did face unique concerns that require careful juggling, such as internal pressures, family rifts and succession issues. One South Australian family news owner outlined how he dealt with these potential risks:

“It comes down to the one thing: respect and making sure that each individual family member has their own responsibility, their own departments to manage and make sure that the crossover is minimal. But communication’s also essential too, and that drives that respect, as well.”

Fostering company loyalty

Longevity, tradition and heritage can garner respect from the community, as this chapter has already mentioned, and it can also build a sense of loyalty within the news business, one that can boost staff retention and commitment. For example, one Victorian masthead that has been owned by the same family for almost 150 years, has also had a long tradition of regularly promoting staff and giving them a sense of ownership of the paper, by creating business partnership agreements. As well as a family owner who is fifth generation, this masthead currently has a co-owner who started working at the newspaper as a compositor's apprentice in 1972. He speaks of a loyalty to the business and a shared sense of ownership, as well as having pride in the newspaper and its traditions:

"... 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."

(Victorian co-owner)

Another fourth-generation news owner suggests loyalty from staff can be gained through a collaborative work environment: "... sitting next to them, problem solving with them, celebrating with them, going through the lows with them and mentoring them". He says they develop a sense of ownership that cannot be matched in larger corporate workplaces:

"If you want the staff respect, you've got to earn their respect. And once you've got it, then you've got that loyal following. But when you achieve success as a family, it's different than the corporate environment that I've come from previously. It's more satisfying, to be honest. And we treat our staff a little bit ... it's very cliché, but they're very much a part of this vision, as well. And I think that's really difficult to replicate in a corporate environment."

(South Australian owner, fourth generation)

Balancing trends with tradition

The dynastic family members had developed a keen sensibility about what new innovations and ideas had merit, in terms of helping to sustain the business, and what were instead passing trends or fads that should be avoided. This was a knowledge gained by experience over time and reflexive practice (Carlson & Lewis, 2019). News producers spoke of the futility of continually 'chasing the new trend' (South Australia news producer). All family dynasties were adapting and diversifying in the digital era, while retaining aspects of the business that continue to work (i.e.: a printed product).

Our research suggests the core factors these media organisations were founded on – a culture of entrepreneurialism and community values – are the very factors sustaining and growing them as the industry changes. We argue that these very qualities could play an important role in underpinning the future of digital news in country areas, and that history and tradition are worth preserving, celebrating, and learning from.

It is also important to acknowledge that of the family dynasties listed here, most of the current proprietors are men. However, we note a growing number of women entering proprietor roles across the network and that in most family histories, wives of newsmen have played a significant part of the country news history. As Kirkpatrick (2010) notes, female editors were as rare as 'hens' teeth' but that the domination of female students studying journalism at universities has led to a 'feminisation' of journalism. We note the need for further research highlighting the significance of women in the rural press of Australia, beyond the scope of this project.



CENTURY-OLD FAMILY DYNASTIES

These snapshots outline the brief histories of families running mastheads today who have been doing so consistently for 100 years or more.

ELLIOTT NEWSPAPER GROUP

Lanyon family

The *Sunraysia Daily* had been part of a complex and competitive newspaper ecology in Mildura when Charles Lanyon began working there in 1920 as an accountant (*Sunraysia Daily*, 2023 webpage). He worked closely with owner R.D. Elliott and secured a controlling interest in the company when R.D. Elliott died in 1950. At this time, The Elliott Newspaper Group had a chain of newspapers and 175 permanent employees (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Charles obtained 100% ownership in 1969 on the passing of Mrs Hilda Elliott. Charles continued as chairman until he died in 1988. Charles' son, William 'Bill', who had been the company secretary since 1960, took over from his father when he died, and Bill handed the reigns to his eldest son, Ross, in 2008. After Bill passed away in 2013, the family split the newspaper ownership, with Bill Lanyon's family retaining the papers in North West Victoria along the Murray River, and Bill's sister, Dorothy, and her family taking over the newspapers in Midland Victoria and Gippsland.

STAR NEWS GROUP

Thomas family

Albert Thomas had worked in newspapers and started and owned mastheads of his own before launching the *Berwick Shire News* and *Pakenham and Cranbourne Gazette* in 1909. His son, Herbert, left school at the age of 12 to help produce the paper. Herb worked hard at the paper – by all accounts, he dedicated his life to it (Kirkpatrick, 2010) – and he became proprietor when Albert died in 1948. Herb's son, Ian, entered the business in 1951. When Herb died in 1979, Ian took over. Ian retired in 1999 and Paul (Ian's only son) became the managing director in 2000.

BULOKE TIMES

Letts family

The *Buloke Times* was founded as the *Donald Times* in 1875 by journalist Godfrey Morgan. He was described in 1876 in the neighbouring *St Arnaud Mercury* as 'a most remarkable man' (cited in Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 224) and ran the newspaper, completing most tasks himself, until his death in 1891 (*Buloke Times*, 2021). When his son, William, took over, William recruited his nephew, Goff Letts, who had been working at the *Kalgoorlie Miner* in Western Australia. Goff bought the paper in 1924 and edited it for 66 years (Kirkpatrick, 2012). He wrote his last editorial from his hospital bed. Goff's son, Robin, took over and is the editor now, aged in his nineties. Robin's son, David, is now the co-owner with former compositor's apprentice, Shane O'Shea.

MCPHERSON MEDIA GROUP

McPherson family

The McPherson family became the owners of the *Shepparton News* in 1888 when Colin McPherson bought it. He ran it for 12 years but had poor health and when he died in 1901, none of his nine children were old enough to take over, so the paper was leased out to three employees. His widow and a son, Malcolm, took over when the lease ran out in 1909, with Malcolm's brother, Roy, joining too in 1914 after a brief apprenticeship at the *Essendon Gazette*. Malcolm died in World War II, leaving the running of the paper to Roy (another brother, Douglas, joined the *News* in 1918 and was a compositor there for most of the rest of his life). Roy managed the company for 46 years, including through two world wars, fierce competition and the Great Depression. When he died, aged 67, in 1960, his son Don, who had been assistant manager since 1953, took over. Don retired in 1985 and handed the reigns to his three sons Ross, Chris and Paul. Ross remains executive chairman and two of his children, Ella and Campbell, the fifth generation, are directors of the company.

NORTH EAST MEDIA GROUP

Higgins family

After starting as an apprentice at the *Wangaratta Chronicle* aged 12, W. T. Higgins purchased the competition newspaper *Wangaratta Despatch* in 1921, aged just 25. He later achieved his goal in purchasing the *Wangaratta Chronicle* in 1936. After running the papers for almost 30 years he died, and son Bill inherited the business. The Elliott Provincial Newspaper Group bought a 50% controlling interest in the *Wangaratta Chronicle* in 1949, and in 1982 agreed to sell the shareholding back to Hartley and Maureen Higgins. North East Media expanded, acquiring several regional newspapers in North East Victoria and South East New South Wales, and is now managed by Edward Higgins.

YEATES MEDIA

Yeates family

The Yeates family became involved in the *Bairnsdale Advertiser* when James Yeates accepted the position of foreman in 1881. He then took over the business in 1897. His son, Allan, took over the reins in 1937 when James retired. Allan died at his desk 20 years later and his nephew, Don, who was running the *Huon Valley News* in Tasmania at the time, was asked to move to Bairnsdale to lead the business. Don's son, Bob, is now the managing director, and two of his children work in the business.

CENTURY-OLD FAMILY DYNASTIES

LEADER NEWS

Robinson family

The Robinson family is the longest-serving newspaper in South Australia under the same family name. *The Barossa Leader* was started by William Kirkby Robinson and his wife Agnes in 1918, calling the newspaper *The Leader* because he wanted his newspaper 'to lead all others'. In the 1980s, *The Leader* was believed to be the first known newspaper in Australia to adopt Apple Macintosh computers as a PC-based typesetting system. The business has moved into the fourth generation with brothers Peter, Darren and Adam Robinson working in the business. The family purchased a second newspaper in 2021, *The Southern Argus*.

THE NORTH WESTERN COURIER

Dunnet family

The Dunnet family have been owners of *The North Western Courier* at Narrabri, New South Wales, since 1920. John Shearer Dunnet ran the newspaper until he died in 1927 whereupon the paper was owned by his wife, Maryann, and upon her death in 1945, their sons John Rhodes and Bruce Dunnet. *The Courier* was subsequently passed on to John Rhodes and Myra Dunnet's sons, John and Ian Dunnet, who ran the newspaper until 2007 when Ian Dunnet and his wife, Wanda, bought the paper on John's retirement. They have expanded the business with the creation of three new mastheads in north western New South Wales, including the *Gunnedah Times* in 2020.

TAYLOR GROUP MEDIA

Taylor family

Harry Samuel Taylor purchased the *Renmark Pioneer* newspaper in South Australia in 1903. The paper has remained in the Taylor family since, passed on to William Gilmore Taylor and his wife, Latittia, who expanded the company by purchasing two more mastheads. Sons Darnley (who had a passion for sports writing), and Paul were next, while current owner Ben Taylor (Darnley's son) continues the family legacy as managing director of Taylor Group Media, while also diversifying the business into various horticultural pursuits.

WARRAGUL GAZETTE

Hopkins family

George Foster Hopkins is credited for starting up to 16 Victorian and New South Wales country newspapers from the early 20th century, such as the *Myrtleford Mail* in 1911 and the *Koowearup Sun* in 1918 (Kirkpatrick, 2010). His son, Keith, was a teenager when he joined his father in the business as the Depression began to set in. George and Keith launched the *Leongatha Echo* in 1934. It was later sold when Keith purchased the *Warragul Gazette* in 1951 from Vincent Gannon. Keith appointed Tas Vertigan as the first, 'non-family' editor in 1957 to focus on managing the business and building advertising revenue. He established the *Gazette* business as K.S. Hopkins and Sons Pty Ltd in 1960, with sons Brian, Drew and Philip each having an interest. Brian joined the *Warragul Gazette* staff in 1969 and followed in his father's managerial footsteps. He was at the helm when the *Gazette* celebrated its 100 years of publication in 1998. Brian, now retired, and his brothers, remain directors of the paper today. His stepson, Andrew Schreyer, runs the business. The newspaper is now titled *The Warragul and Drouin Gazette* and owned by another family company, Warragul Regional Newspapers Pty Ltd. The editor is Yvette Brand.

WIMMERA MALLEE NEWS

Ward family

The Ward family has focused largely on operating newspapers around the Wimmera district since the late 19th century. George William Ward was a printer working for the *Argus* before becoming foreman printer at the *Horsham Times* in 1883. When he died in 1920 his widow, Agnes, found that none of her sons wanted to take over the newspaper. She eventually persuaded her son, John (Jack), (who was a banker in Melbourne and had limited news experience) to take on the role. The business was subjected to a restructure and merger of two papers to become the *Wimmera Mail Times* in 1959, in the first acquisition of Rupert Murdoch. Jack's son, Ian, continued to work as a photographer at the paper while his brother, Frank, took over ownership of the *Warracknabeal Herald* in 1967. When Frank (who suffered from diabetes) began to lose his sight, sons Geoffrey and David stepped in around 1981. David officially assumed the role of manager and editor of the *Herald* when Frank died in 1991. The Ward family then expanded their mastheads to include the *Dimboola Banner* and later the *Rainbow Argus*. At the start of COVID, David with his son, Andrew, and daughter, Jessica, then saw an opportunity to relaunch the *Horsham Times* with the closure of the *Wimmera Mail Times* for some months. The *Horsham Times* continues to publish from its Darlot Street premises, in Horsham, Victoria.



Paul Thomas

Commentary

Being the fourth generation involved in the family news media business has provided privileges, opportunities, challenges and at times pressure.

Our company, now known as Star News Group, was established by my great grandfather Albert, a journalist, in 1909, when he commenced the *Berwick Shire News* and *Pakenham and Cranbourne Gazette*.

Albert's son, Herbert, and his grandson, Ian, also joined the business along with Herbert's wife, Florrie, and Ian's wife, Dorothy, at different stages. The newspaper was an essential part of the fabric of the local community. Each generation engrossed themselves into the community, joining and participating in many vital organisations, including Rotary, Scouts, church, sporting organisations, historical society and the local show society.

Owning and running a newspaper in a local town came with many expectations from the community. Everything you did and wrote about was scrutinised. But it also meant that you had the privilege of being able to provide a voice for the community, lobby for improved services and hold the powerful to account.

As the fourth generation, I had the privilege of growing up being surrounded by a family with a passion and commitment to their local area and learnt the importance of running a local newspaper as an essential pillar of our democratic process. While the commercial outcome has always been a vital component, it was always engrained in me that our work for the improvement of society, for educating the community and providing that vital voice through balanced, professional reporting was vitally important. My parents always said that if we got to the end of an election and were criticised by both major parties then we had done a good job.

I joined the business at a time when newspapers were at their peak, just prior to the digital media revolution. This provided a great deal of competition but also opportunities. Large media business, Fairfax, Rural Press and News Corp were buying family-owned

newspapers all over Australia. For them, their focus was completely commercial. Fairfax and News Corp were being run by Sydney or New York-based boards with eyes on the financial statements. The heart and soul of the newspapers were of little concern.

As the digital revolution developed, the purely financial model of the larger organisations was exposed to the point that independent family-based operations have now primarily become the main publishers across regional Australia.

A family-owned business has the advantage of commitment by people with a hands-on approach, that cares about communities and sees success beyond the balance sheet. They are committed to journalism and committed financially.

Being the fourth generation has provided pressure. When three generations have succeeded you do worry more about failure but at the same time feel incredible pride in an amazing legacy and being the custodian of mastheads that generations have grown up with – generations of locals where births, deaths and marriages have featured across the pages in the paper.

Victoria's generational publishers have generally held firm over the years and have not succumbed to the large dollars being offered by the large organisations. Families such as the McPhersons, Ellens, Higgins, Lanyons, Giles, Hopkins, Adams, Wards and others. This has also created an amazing comradery across the industry and across the generations.

Paul Thomas

Managing director of the Star News Group

The research team



Lead investigator Kristy Hess is a Professor (Communication) at Deakin University. Her research focuses on the future of local media and its relationship to community, democracy and social order in the digital sphere.



Chief Investigator Matthew Ricketson is Professor of Communication at Deakin University. He is an expert on the challenges and opportunities facing the Australian news media industry.



Chief investigator Lisa Waller is a Professor of Digital Communication at RMIT's School of Media and Communication. She is an expert on Australian journalism and media policy.



Partner Investigator Bruce Morgan has been Executive Director of Country Press Australia and has more than 45 years' experience in the newspaper industry.



Angela Blakston is the Associate Research Fellow at Deakin University for this project. She has more than 20 years of news-industry experience.



Alison McAdam is a Lecturer in Communication at Deakin University. She is a PhD candidate, attached to this project.



Ancillary contributor: Dr Jerry Lai facilitated the design and analysis of both of our national surveys.

Acknowledgements: Dr Chris Scanlon and Samantha Leersen also contributed to this report.

RESEARCH APPROACH

INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Up to 40 semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) with Australian news editors and proprietors were conducted, along with up to 12 interpretive focus groups, involving editors, journalists and advertising managers, who represent Australia's Country Press network.

An innovations model, developed by the research team, (Hess, 2013) was used in the interviews and focus groups to identify obstacles and investigate ways to overcome them, as well as to uncover new ideas for journalism, advertising, audience engagement and cross-collaboration. The research extended the interpretive focus-group approach (Redman-Maclaren et al, 2014), which generates a participatory method for interpreting secondary data and developing new primary data. Interpretive focus groups are facilitated with groups of people who have similar characteristics, brought together for their specific knowledge or experience to analyse data generated by others with the end goal of co-generating new knowledge (Redman-Maclaren et al, 2014). Equally, semi-structured interviews with individual proprietors provided greater scope to ask probing, open-ended questions and solicit responses that might be more candid than if in a focus-group setting (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Key questions that proprietors, editors and journalists were asked included: What is your assessment of the state of Australia's rural and regional news sector? How would you improve or innovate Australia's local news sector to make it sustainable and thrive? In what ways might government support the sector to improve sustainability? The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify common themes across both interviews and focus groups.

LOCAL NEWS AUDIENCE SURVEY

Our first national survey was designed to position the audience as central in shaping a media innovations agenda for regional and rural newspapers. This required venturing beyond what audiences do with news (such as studying demographics, habits and news-engagement behaviours alone) to explore what they think and imagine innovation in the sector to be, and what they value about their local news provider. Asking audiences to think about the future of the media also presents an opportunity to road-test existing theories and approaches to academic scholarship that shape understandings of local journalism.

A geo-social methodology provided a multi-dimensional framework for understanding the 'place' of newspapers in the digital age within their specific geographic contexts (Hess and Waller 2020a). This approach offers scope to consider digital, cultural, social, political, economic and environmental factors relevant to the future of local newspapers. The digital survey was developed using the software program Qualtrics and promoted across the Country Press Australia network. More than 100 news providers 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, sliding scale, multiple choice and qualitative questions, designed to gauge insight into audience views. (For example, what do audiences think their local news provider does well or might improve on? How should a local news service be funded and how should this money be spent?) As an incentive, participants were offered the chance to go into a draw to win one of 10 iPads. The survey produced Australia's most comprehensive insight into rural and regional news audiences (N = 4198). Data was divided into the geo-social dimensions that provided the framework for the survey and subsequent findings.



Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.

NON-LOCAL NEWS AUDIENCE SURVEY

Our second national survey was designed to seek the views of non-local newspaper readers to both counter and complement our previous national survey of local newspaper readers, the findings of which were released in the first half of 2021. Again, a geo-social methodology provided a multi-dimensional framework for understanding the 'place' of newspapers in the digital age within their specific geographic contexts (Hess & Waller, 2020). The approach offers scope to consider digital, cultural, social, political, economic and environmental factors relevant to the future of local newspapers. This digital survey was developed using the software program Qualtrics and distributed via paid promotion on Facebook. The survey's distribution reach covered four target regions, chosen as they contain the most concentrated clusters of Country Press Australia members within a 100-kilometre radius. The survey comprised a range of questions, including Likert scale, multiple choice and qualitative questions, designed to gauge insight into respondents' views. Sample questions (some of which were designed to mirror questions in our first audience survey in 2020) included: 'Who should make money from news produced by journalists at a local newspaper?'; 'I do NOT read a local newspaper because ...'; 'What would make you visit a local news digital site more regularly?'; 'Do you consider a printed copy of a local newspaper an essential service for your community?'. An advertisement was placed on Facebook for a period of 31 days over July and August 2021, promoting the survey. As an incentive, participants were offered the chance to go into a draw to win one of two iPads. The survey gained 407 responses. To ensure the survey was homing in on non-local newspaper readers, our first question asked: 'Do you read or have a subscription to a local newspaper, its website or app?' From this, 79% said 'no' and 21 % said 'yes'. At this point, respondents who answered "yes" were exited from the survey. Those 79% (n = 320) then completed the survey. Upon analysis, data was divided into the geo-social dimensions that provided the framework for the survey and findings presented accordingly. Where appropriate, we also compared results with our previous survey of local newspaper readers in Australia (N = 4198).

MAPPING

The PhD component of this research project adopted two types of mapping methods to gather data. The first was digital cartographic mapping, where online tools including Google Maps, ArcGIS Online and ArcGIS Storymap were used to create maps that pinpointed the locations of the CPA member mastheads. These maps were then developed to give researchers the ability to home in on certain masthead sites and layer relevant information over their geographic locations, such as the demographics of the area, natural disaster incidents and the location of other local news sources in the region. Digital cartographic mapping has been used as a method in local news studies, however these mostly explore changes in news ecologies at a national level, and rarely advance to layered information for specific sites (see: Abernathy, 2020; Cardiff University, 2019; Pijl, 2022). The second type of mapping used as a method in this project was cognitive mapping. This method is valued for its ability to help participants decode information relevant to their everyday environment (Downs & Stea 1973, in Kitchin, 1994, p.1). A cognitive mapping exercise was conducted as part of semi-structured interviews with some news proprietors in this research project. It involved lines representing revenue streams being drawn from the source of the income to the local news outlet. This method was employed to explore the varied revenue streams that fund local news production, specifically the distance that these lines stretched across states, the nation and the globe. Cognitive mapping has been used in journalism studies (see: Gutsche, 2014), but rarely in research investigating Australia's local news landscape.

LOCAL NEWSROOM ANALYTICS SURVEY

Our survey of analytics use, conducted in December 2022, was designed to understand to what extent local news editors use analytics within their newsrooms. In doing so, we aimed to gauge how efficient news producers perceive these digital tools to be in providing audience insights and maintaining or improving news production flows. Again, a geo-social methodology was employed, and this survey was developed using the software program Qualtrics and distributed via email to all editors within the Country Press Australia network. The survey comprised a range of questions, including multiple choice and qualitative responses. (For example, to what extent do news producers think analytics data improves engagement with audiences? Or, how much do news producers value analytics data over more traditional ways of understanding their audiences?) Data from survey responses (N = 83) was divided into the geo-social dimensions that provided the framework for the survey and subsequent findings.

PUBLICATIONS AND PROJECT ENGAGEMENT

PUBLICATIONS

Hess, K. & Waller, L. (2020). 'Local journalism in Australia: Policy debates', in Agnes Gulyas and David Baines (Eds) *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, Routledge: London.

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Gulyas, A. & Hess, K. (2023), Guest editor, special issue 'Disrupting and resettling the local' in *Digital Journalism*, (in press).

Hess, K. & McAdam, A. (2023), 'Exploring news gaps through degradation, cultivation and renewal'. Invitation to contribute chapter to *Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism*.

Hess, K. & Gulyas, A. (2023), 'Media deregulation', in *Encyclopaedia of Political Communication*, Edward Elgar Publishing, A Nai (ed).



Photo courtesy of Country Press Australia member masthead.



ENGAGEMENT

The research team has appeared in more than 300 news stories and podcasts across Australia about the future of local news, including ABC, Crikey, *The Financial Review*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Conversation* and news outlets across the Country Press Australia network and Australian Community Media.

May 2019

Invited to academic roundtable with representatives of the Department of Communication and the Arts to discuss the future of news and public interest journalism.

September 2019

Presents their innovations model for local news at the Future of Journalism conference in Cardiff, Wales.

September 2019

Invited to Karlstad University, Sweden and OsloMet University, Norway to discuss research on local and digital journalism.

October 2019

Invited to an academic workshop with the Australian Communication and Media Authority to discuss measuring the availability of local news.

November 2019

Deakin University and Country Press Australia are represented at a symposium hosted by the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts to discuss on the choice and quality of news and journalism in Wagga, New South Wales.

June 2020

The research team and the Country Press Australia produce submissions to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's concepts paper and draft new mandatory code to address bargaining power imbalances between Australia's news media businesses and Google and Facebook.

November 2020

Invited to author a policy briefing paper on the future of local news for the Alfred Deakin Institute.

November 2020

Launches Australia's first national survey on local news innovation, receiving more than 4000 responses.

December 2020

Forwards a submission to the Senate Inquiry into media diversity, independence and reliability in Australia.

December 2020

Hosts a local news innovation panel at the JERAA (Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia) conference.

May 2021

National survey report on Australian local news audiences is launched.

September 2021

Presents at the Futures of Journalism conference, Cardiff, about the national survey.

September 2021

Presented at the Australian Media Traditions conference (online) on the history of local news and its relationship sustainability.

October 2021

Invited to present as witnesses at the Senate Inquiry into Media Diversity.

November 2021

Expert panellist for a global online workshop on local media policy, hosted by the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism, University of Columbia.

December 2021

National survey report on Australian non-local news readers is launched.

January 2022

Forwards a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the provision of newspapers (Print and Digital) in regional and remote Australia.

March 2022

Invited to present at the Walkley Foundation regional journalism summit, Tamworth (held online).

May 2022

Judges for the Queensland Country Press Association awards for excellence in local journalism.

October 2022

Presents on the topic of "*The Myths Clouding Local Newspaper Futures*" at the New South Wales Country Press Association conference.

November 2022

Presents on the topic of "*The Future of Local Newspapers*" at the Victorian Country Press Association conference.

November 2022

Judges for the Victorian Country Press Association awards for excellence in local journalism.

December 2022

Presents at Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia conference in Perth.

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COUNTRY PRESS AUSTRALIA MASTHEADS

(as supplied by CPA)

STATE	TOWN	NEWSPAPER	NEWSPAPER GROUP
VIC	Alexandra	Alexandra Eildon Marysville Standard	Alexandra Newspapers Pty Ltd
VIC	Ararat	Ararat Advocate	West Vic News
VIC	Bacchus Marsh	Moorabool News	Independent
VIC	Bairnsdale	Bairnsdale Advertiser	Yeates Media
VIC	Bairnsdale	East Gippsland News NOW	Yeates Media
VIC	Ballarat	Ballarat Times & Golden Plains Times	Times News Group
VIC	Beaufort	Beaufort Pyrenees Advocate	Independent
VIC	Beechworth	Beechworth Ovens & Murray Advertiser	North East Media Pty Ltd
VIC	Benalla	Benalla Ensign	McPherson Media Group
VIC	Bendigo	Bendigo Times	Times News Group
VIC	Berwick	Berwick Star News	Star News Group
VIC	Brimbank	Brimbank & Northwest Star Weekly	Star Weekly Group
VIC	Camperdown	Camperdown Chronicle	Western District Newspapers
VIC	Casterton	Casterton News	Spectator Group
VIC	Castlemaine	Castlemaine Mail	Ellen Newspaper Group
VIC	Cobden	Cobden Timboon Coast Times	Western District Newspapers
VIC	Cobram	Cobram Courier	McPherson Media Group
VIC	Colac	Colac Herald	Independent
VIC	Corryong	Corryong Courier	Independent
VIC	Cranbourne	Cranbourne News	Star News Group
VIC	Dandenong	Dandenong Journal	Star News Group
VIC	Dimboola	Dimboola Banner	Wimmera Mallee Newspapers
VIC	Donald	Donald Buloke Times	Independent
VIC	Echuca	Riverine Herald	McPherson Media Group
VIC	Edenhope	Kowree Advocate	Independent
VIC	Euroa	Euroa Gazette	North East Media Pty Ltd
VIC	Ferntree Gully	Ferntree Gully Belgrave Star Mail	Mail News Group
VIC	Foster	Foster Mirror	Independent
VIC	Geelong	Geelong Times	Times News Group
VIC	Geelong	Geelong Indy	Star News Group
VIC	Hamilton	Hamilton Spectator	Spectator Group
VIC	Healesville	Mountain View Star News	Mail News Group
VIC	Heathcote	Mclvor Times	Independent
VIC	Hopetoun	Hopetoun Courier	Independent
VIC	Horsham	Horsham Times	Wimmera Mallee Newspapers
VIC	Horsham	Horsham Weekly Advertiser	Independent
VIC	Kerang	Gannawarra Times	Elliott Newspaper Group
VIC	Endeavour Hills	The Journal	Star News Group
VIC	Kilmore	North Central Review	North Central Review/Alexander Newspapers
VIC	Kyabram	Kyabram Free Press	McPherson Media Group
VIC	Kyneton	Midland Express	Ellen Newspaper Group
VIC	Lakes Entrance	Lakes Post	East Gippsland Newspapers/James Yeates & Sons
VIC	Wendouree	The Local (Central Highlands)	Independent

STATE	TOWN	NEWSPAPER	NEWSPAPER GROUP
VIC	Boort	Loddon Herald	Muso's Media
VIC	Maldon	Tarrangower Times	Independent
VIC	Mansfield	Mansfield Courier	North East Media Pty Ltd
VIC	Maribyrnong	Maribyrnong & Hobsons Bay Star Weekly	Star Weekly Group
VIC	Maryborough	Maryborough Advertiser	Hopkins Group
VIC	Melton	Melton & Moorabool Star Weekly	Star Weekly Group
VIC	Mildura	Mildura Weekly	Independent
VIC	Mortlake	Mortlake Dispatch	Western District Newspapers
VIC	Morwell	Latrobe Valley Express	Ellen Newspaper Group
VIC	Lilydale	Lilydale Star Mail	Mail News Group
VIC	Mount Evelyn	Mount Evelyn Star Mail	Mail News Group
VIC	Myrtleford	Myrtleford Times /Alpine Observer	North East Media Pty Ltd
VIC	Nhill	Nhill Free Press & Kaniva Times	Independent
VIC	Hume/Whittlesea	Northern Star Weekly	Star Weekly Group
VIC	Numurkah	Numurkah Leader	Independent
VIC	Ocean Grove	Ocean grove Voice	Star News Group
VIC	Orbost	Snowy River Mail	East Gippsland Newspapers/James Yeates & Sons
VIC	Ouyen	North West Express	Mallee Printers
VIC	Pakenham	Pakenham Berwick Gazette	Star News Group
VIC	Officer	Officer News	Star News Group
VIC	Phillip Island	Phillip Island Advertiser	Independent
VIC	Portland	Portland Observer	Spectator Group
VIC	Rainbow	Rainbow Jeparit Argus	Wimmera Mallee Newspapers
VIC	Ranges-Dandenong	Ranges Trader Star Mail	Mail News Group
VIC	Robinvale	Robinvale Sentinel	Independent
VIC	Rochester	Capaspe News	McPherson Media Group
VIC	Sale	Sale Gippsland Times & Maffra Spectator	Ellen Newspaper Group
VIC	Sea Lake	Sea Lake & Wycheproof Times	Mallee Printers
VIC	Seymour	Seymour Telegraph	McPherson Media Group
VIC	Shepparton	Shepparton News	McPherson Media Group
VIC	Shepparton	Shepparton Adviser	Independent
VIC	Sunbury/Macedon	Sunbury & Macedon Ranges Star Weekly	Star Weekly Group
VIC	Mildura	Sunraysia Daily	Elliott Newspaper Group
VIC	St Arnaud	St Arnaud North Central News	Independent
VIC	Swan Hill	Swan Hill Guardian	Elliott Newspaper Group
VIC	Terang	Terang Express	Western District Newspapers
VIC	Surf Coast	Surf Coast Times	Times News Group
VIC	Upper Yarra	Upper Yarra Star Mail	Mail News Group
VIC	Wangaratta	Wangaratta Chronicle	North East Media Pty Ltd
VIC	Warracknabeal	Warracknabeal Herald	Wimmera Mallee Newspapers
VIC	Warragul	Warragul & Drouin Gazette	Hopkins Group
VIC	Whittlesea	Whittlesea Review	North Central Review/Alexander Newspapers
VIC	Woodside	Bridge-Yarram District	Independent

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(as supplied by CPA)

STATE	TOWN	NEWSPAPER	NEWSPAPER GROUP
VIC	Wonthaggi	South Gippsland Sentinel Times	Giles Newspaper Group
VIC	Wyndham	Wyndham Star Weekly	Star Weekly Group
VIC	Yarrawonga	Yarrawonga Chronicle	McPherson Media Group
VIC	Yea	Yea Chronicle	North Central Review/Alexander Newspapers
NSW	Walcha	Apsley Advocate	Independent
NSW	Barham	Barham Bridge	Independent
NSW	Broken Hill	Barrier Daily Truth	Independent
NSW	Kiama	The Bugle	Independent
NSW	Canberra	Canberra Weekly	New State Media
NSW	Coffs Coast	News of the Area	Myall Coast Communications
NSW	Condobolin	Condobolin Argus	Independent
NSW	Coonamble	Coonamble Times	Independent
NSW	Coonabarabran	Coonabarabran Times	Independent
NSW	Corowa	Corowa Free Press	McPherson Media Group
NSW	Deniliquin	Deniliquin Pastoral Times	McPherson Media Group
NSW	Dubbo	Dubbo Photo News	Independent
NSW	Finley	Finley Southern Riverina News	McPherson Media Group
NSW	Gilgandra	Gilgandra Weekly	Independent
NSW	Gunnedah	Gunnedah Times	North Western Courier Pty Ltd
NSW	Guyra	Guyra Gazette	Independent
NSW	Hay	Hay Riverine Grazier	Independent
NSW	Singleton	Hunter River Times	Independent
NSW	Manning	Manning Community News	Independent
NSW	Manilla	Manilla Express	Independent
NSW	Molong	Molong Express	Independent
NSW	Cooma	Monaro Post	Independent
NSW	Narrabri	Narrabri Courier	North Western Courier Pty Ltd
NSW	Narrandera	Narrandera Argus	Independent
NSW	Narromine	Narromine Star	PPNS News Media
NSW	Newcastle	Newcastle Weekly	Pepper Publishing
NSW	Nyngan	Nyngan Weekly	Independent
NSW	Orange	Orange City Life	Panscott Media
NSW	Mittagong	Southern Highlands Express	Espresso Media
NSW	Tumut	Tumut & Adelong Times	Independent
NSW	Walgett	Walgett Spectator	Independent
NSW	Warren	Warren Weekly	Independent
NSW	Wellington	Wellington District Leader	Independent
NSW	West Wyalong	West Wyalong Advocate	Independent
NSW	Bourke	Western Herald	Independent
QLD	Allora	Allora Advertiser	Our News Pty Ltd
QLD	Blackall	Barcoo Independent	Blackall Newspaper Group

STATE	TOWN	NEWSPAPER	NEWSPAPER GROUP
QLD	Beaudesert	Beaudesert Bulletin	Scenic Rim Media
QLD	Bundaberg	Bundaberg Today	Today News Group
QLD	Ayr	Burdekin Local News	Independent
QLD	Cairns	Cairns Local News	Independent
QLD	Canungra	Canungra Times	Scenic Rim Media
QLD	Weipa	Cape York Weekly	Cape York Weekly
QLD	Clifton	Clifton Courier	Our News Pty Ltd
QLD	Tin Can Bay	Cooloola Bay Bulletin	Bay Publishing
QLD	Coolum	Coolum & North Shore Advertiser	Independent
QLD	Rockhampton	CQ Today	Today News Group
QLD	Warwick/Stanthorpe	Daily Journal	Small Newspaper Group
QLD	Eatons Hill	Eatons Echo	Mac Group Publications Pty Ltd
QLD	Emerald	Emerald Regional News	Independent
QLD	Emerald	Emerald Today	Today News Group
QLD	Everton Park/Stafford	Everton Echo	Mac Group Publications Pty Ltd
QLD	Boonah/Ipswich	Fassifern Guardian	Boonah Newspaper Co
QLD	Gladstone	Gladstone Today	Today News Group
QLD	Beewah/Maleny	Glasshouse Country & Maleny News	Independent
QLD	Gympie	Gympie Today	Independent
QLD	Hervey Bay	Hervey Bay Advertiser	13 Management Pty Ltd
QLD	Highfields	High Country Herald	Independent
QLD	Arana Hills/Grovely	Hills Echo	Mac Group Publications Pty Ltd
QLD	Maleny/Montville	Hinterland Times	Independent
QLD	Ipswich	Ipswich News Today	Today News Group
QLD	Ipswich	Ipswich Tribune	Boonah Newspaper Co
QLD	Kilcoy	Kilcoy Sentinel	Somerset Media Pty Ltd
QLD	Ipswich	Local Ipswich News	Shoppers Guide Trading trust
QLD	Gatton, Lockyer Valley	Lockyer & Somerset Independent	Valetta Media Pty Ltd
QLD	Park Ridge/Logan West	Logan West News (Park Ridge News)	Independent
QLD	Longreach	Longreach Leader Today	Today News Group
QLD	Inglewood	MacIntyre Gazette	Independent
QLD	Mackay/Whitsunday	Mackay & Whitsunday Life	Core Publishing
QLD	Maranoa	Maranoa Today	South Burnett Today Pty Ltd
QLD	Mareeba/Atherton	Mareeba Express	Independent
QLD	Maryborough	Maryborough Sun	Independent
QLD	Rosewood	Morerton Border News	Boonah Newspaper Co
QLD	Logan City	MyCity Logan	MyCity Media
QLD	New Farm	My Village News - Newfarm	Independent
QLD	Ascot	My Village News - Ascot	Independent
QLD	Sunshine Coast	My Weekly Preview	20/20 Publishing Pty Ltd
QLD	Noosa	Noosa Today	Star News Group
QLD	Oakey	Oakey Champion	Our News Pty Ltd
QLD	Westbrook, Camboya	On Our Selection News	Our News Pty Ltd

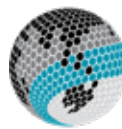
COUNTRY PRESS AUSTRALIA MASTHEADS

(as supplied by CPA)

STATE	TOWN	NEWSPAPER	NEWSPAPER GROUP
QLD	Pittsworth	Pittsworth Sentinel	Our News Pty Ltd
QLD	Central Qld & Wide Bay	Queensland Farmer Today - Central Qld & Wide Bay	South Burnett Today Pty Ltd
QLD	Southern Qld	Queensland Farmer Today - Sthn Qld	South Burnett Today Pty Ltd
QLD	Rainbow Beach	Rainbow Beach & Cooloola Coast News	Independent
QLD	Kingaroy	South Burnett Today	South Burnett Today Pty Ltd
QLD	Stanthorpe	Stanthorpe Today	Star News Group
QLD	Caloundra/Maroochydore	Sunny Coast Times	Independent
QLD	Tamborine	Tamborine Bulletin	Town Cryer Media
QLD	Warwick	Warwick Today	Star News Group
QLD	Dalby	Western Downs Town & Country	DTS Group
QLD	Tully	Wet Tropic Times	Independent
QLD	Airlie Beach/Proserpine	Whitsunday News	Independent
SA	Adelaide East	Adelaide East Herald	Taylor Group Newspapers
SA	Adelaide Hills	Adelaide Hills Herald	Taylor Group Newspapers
SA	Mt Gambier	Border Watch	TBW Today
SA	Angaston	Barossa Valley Leader	Leader Newspapers Pty Ltd
SA	Pinnaroo	Border Times	Taylor Group Newspapers
SA	Gawler	Bunyip Gawler	Taylor Group Newspapers
SA	Cleve & Ceduna	Eyre Peninsula Advocate	Papers & Publication
SA	Victor Harbor	Fleurieu Sun	Papers & Publication
SA	Mt Barker	Mt Barker Courier	F Teare Morston Pty Ltd
SA	Renmark	Murray Pioneer	Taylor Group Newspapers
SA	Penola	Penola Penant	TBW Today
SA	Balaklava	Plains Producer	Papers & Publication
SA	Strathalbyn	Southern Argus	Leader Newspapers Pty Ltd
SA	Millicent	South Eastern Times	TBW Today
SA	Balaklava	Two Wells Echo	Papers & Publication
SA	Kadina	Yorke Peninsula Times	Independent
TAS	Franklin	Huon Valley News	Yeates Media
TAS	Kingston	Kingborough Chronicle	Yeates Media
TAS	Smithton	Circular Head Chronicle	Independent
TAS	Kingston	Meander Valley Gazette	Independent
WA	Collie	Collie River Valley Bulletin	Collie Community Publishers



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