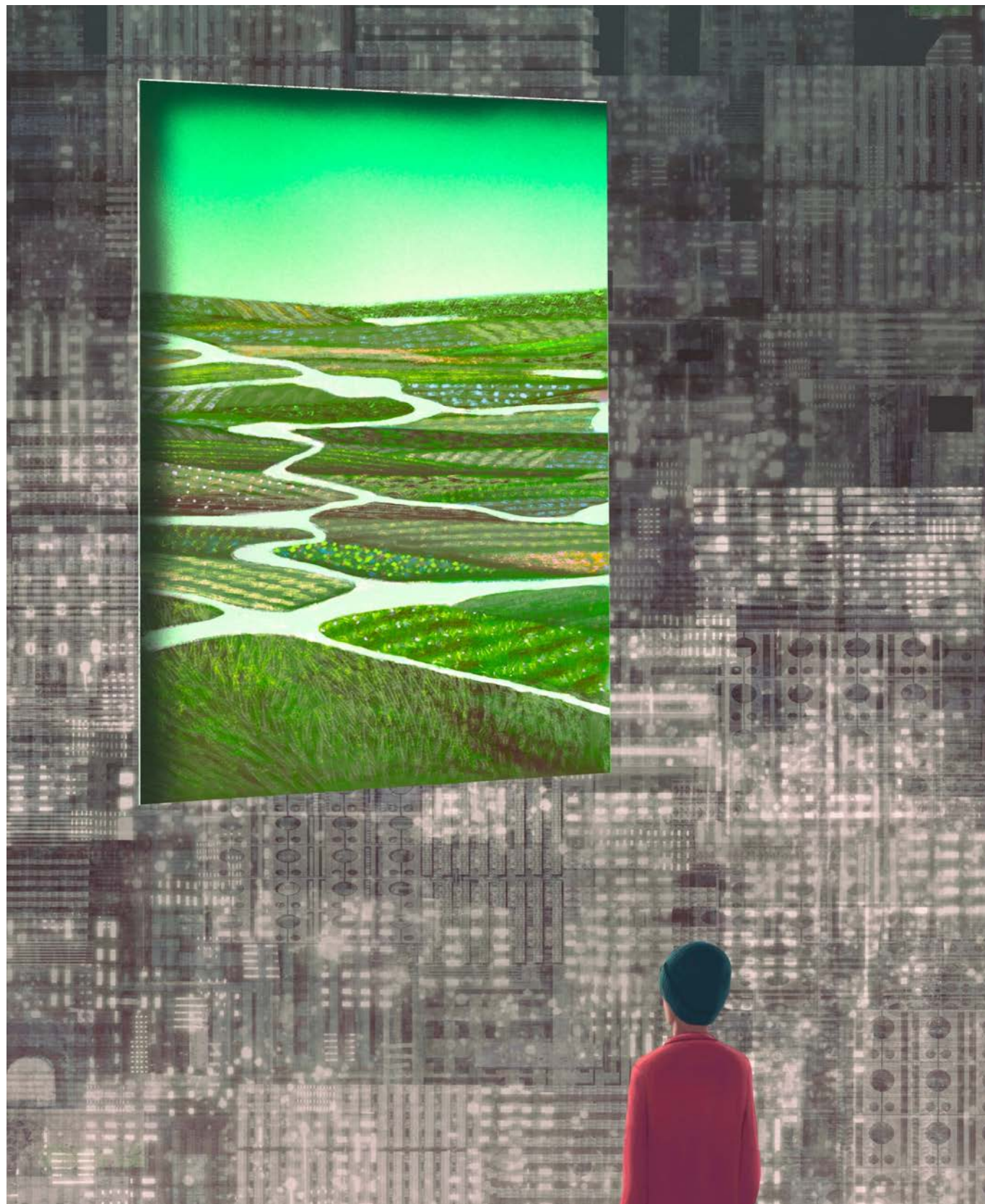


# REGIONAL NEWS MEDIA





# THE BEGINNING...

In April 2021, Centre for Media Transition (CMT) was approached by a member of the Fairfax family. She lives in regional New South Wales and wondered why the significant issues her region faced were rarely, if ever, reported by mainstream media. It seemed a reasonable question given that where she lives is a large and heavily populated region of the state. Part of the answer undoubtedly lay in the fact that without significant regional media presence, feeding stories to mainstream media via publication in local newspapers, the chance of mainstream media even knowing what was going on in regional areas is diminished. Part of the answer lay also in the financial strictures due to strained business models since the advent of digital technology, which have had the effect of strangling mainstream media's capacity to provide broad, penetrative coverage of a country that has a vast footprint and disparate population centres.

From this conversation, grew the idea for an experiment. What if we had the funding to research how well or poorly embedded regional news is in metro offerings and whether the obstacles to mainstream coverage of regional Australia might be overcome or mitigated? Could this lead to a prototype or series of prototypes for what a sustainable

and affordable business model might look like for a media organisation wanting to report on regional Australia and in doing so, bring it to the table of national discourse?

The Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF) decided it was worth investing in such an experiment. With the VFFF, CMT searched for a media partner and decided we would invite Guardian Australia to take part. Guardian Australia and CMT have worked entirely independently, in dual verticals. The only overlap in our respective endeavours has been to jointly appoint graduates of the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) journalism program to one-year positions in regional locations in New South Wales and Queensland to report for Guardian Australia over the life of this three-year project. The first of these UTS students and graduates were placed in Gilgandra (New South Wales) and Townsville in north Queensland. A third has been sent to Deniliquin in New South Wales. In all locations, the reporters are based at independently owned and operated newspapers and spend a small amount of time reporting for the local publications in return for office space.

The funding we are receiving from the VFFF is unqualified and enshrines CMT's academic independence.





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- Natasha May is a Guardian Australia journalist and the first UTS graduate to be placed in regional New South Wales under this program of research.
- Prue Clarke, Journalist, worked on the initial version of the survey conducted for this report.

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# INTRODUCTION

MONICA ATTARD

As regional media experiences its most severe threat of the past 10 years, the population of regional centres is, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) exploding, growing by 70,900 people in the period from June 2020 to June 2021 (ABS, 2022a). Through the second half of 2021, there was another surge of people moving to regional locations, with Australia's two largest cities experiencing population declines as people fled Covid-19 lockdowns and soaring infection rates or chased work. This massive growth phase in regional areas occurred as Australia closed its borders. As much as the pandemic was a confronting health issue, it also signposted new ways of working. With Australians no longer tethered to their offices, anecdotally as well as statistically, it appeared that urban dwellers were decamping to regional Australia.

The statistics are sobering. Regional New South Wales grew by 26,800 people. Regional Victoria grew by 15,700 and regional Queensland by 24,100. In contrast, Melbourne's population declined by 60,500 people and Sydney's by 5,200. ABS Director of Demography Beidar Cho notes: "This is the first time since 1981 that Australia's regional population grew more than

the capital cities, due to changing migration patterns during the pandemic." The ABS data shows that the nation's two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne, lost residents to regional centres and coastal locations, with many leaving for other states. In New South Wales, more people moved to Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst and Tamworth than to other locations.

Undoubtedly, for many in regional Australia the population drift is good news: it means new businesses and a social uplift that may make a material difference to communities, if appropriate infrastructure to support the population increase follows. For others, the news may be less welcome, with infrastructure under pressure and local governments more prone to making urgent, perhaps even rash decisions with diminished oversight, given the contraction of local news media in the period of the pandemic. Regional communities we have spoken to have also questioned whether the increased pressures their regions are facing are being adequately reported by metro-based media, unused to reporting beyond its geographical confines and often accused of being uninterested in regional affairs.

There have been five government enquiries into the

state of regional media in Australia over the past five years. The findings highlighted what the Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) had been documenting for three years. PIJI is an open-source database of news publishers built from industry and regulatory sources and public submissions. It cites journalism outlets which can be called 'hyper-local', in that these outlets publish journalism on councils, courts, and community events within a specific and limited geographic area. In its submission to the 2022 House of Representatives Inquiry into Regional Newspapers (The Future of Regional Newspapers in a Digital World), PIJI noted:

"The map has recorded more than 400 changes in three years, two thirds of which are market contractions – a sharp acceleration from previous ACCC [Australian Competition and Consumer Commission] data that showed 106 news closures over a 10-year period (2008 – 18). PIJI research prior to Covid-19 had also suggested declines in coverage of local government" (PIJI, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated closures (Dickson, 2020a): Australian Community Media (ACM) which publishes 107 local news titles across regional and rural areas, suspended most of its non-daily papers during 2020 when the pandemic hit. ACM has since returned most of its suspended mastheads to print or digital publication, with some on reduced publishing schedules. ACM has warned that 20 to 30 percent of its titles are under threat due to the 'pandemic, a shift of readers and advertising revenues to digital platforms and rising cost of production and distribution' (ACM, 2022). News Corp similarly closed or converted to digital, dozens of local and regional print titles due to declining revenue during the pandemic. It has since announced it will create 50 hyperlocal news websites and has launched 26 since January 2019 (Dickson, 2022a):

most are small operations, with some in major regional areas such as Wollongong and Newcastle and others subsumed into metro titles such as The Daily Telegraph and The Courier Mail. Covid-19 has presented regional Australia with somewhat of a movable landscape of closures, contractions, suspensions, re-openings and green shoot publications.

Local media is vital to the communities within which it operates. It serves as a point of social cohesion (Bowd, 2007; Park et al., 2022a), delivering a sense of place, belonging, and information with local newspapers and their associated websites acting as a top source of local news (Park et al., 2022a). Studies have found that local news adds to the social capital of a community (Richards, 2013), specifically by giving locals a sense of their place regionally and in a broader national context and by providing a local forum for debate in addition to providing a watchdog role over local government and coverage of local courts and police (Hess & Waller, 2020). Without well-funded local news media that has the capacity to perform public interest journalism, much is lost and remains hidden from scrutiny.

There is another important point to consider: when local newspapers contract or disappear and issues such as health, education and the environment, amongst others, are left unreported or under reported, they remain hidden not only from regional audiences but from metro-based media and its audiences. Without the financial ability to have 'boots on the ground' in every corner of a vast landscape such as Australia, metro-based media have historically relied on newswire services such as AAP and local publications with an ability to break big stories. With the flow disrupted, there is an impact on social cohesion at a local community level and at a national level.

**LOCAL MEDIA IS VITAL TO THE COMMUNITIES WITHIN WHICH IT OPERATES. IT SERVES AS A POINT OF SOCIAL COHESION.**

Contractions in local media, particularly of publications producing public interest journalism, along with the diminished capacity of metro media to provide regional coverage, can leave regional communities with only their partisan elected officials or local councils disseminating information (Simons & Dickson, 2019), rather than media able to perform a watchdog role. The contractions at the height of the pandemic were particularly notable because they came at a time when regional communities most needed localised information, particularly public health related information. In this period, social media consumption of news and information grew as a primary source for Australians (Park et al., 2021), even growing in the 75-plus age bracket from three percent to 10 percent between 2020 and 2021. Information was clearly important.

Our study tests whether the diminution of local and regional media locks local and regional news and information into those confined geographic locations, permitting only a narrow focus on hyperlocal issues, and whether this limits the news available to metro outlets. These problems would seem to narrow the possibility of achieving one of the higher aims of public interest journalism – information dissemination to promote social cohesion.

In the first stage of our enquiry, we have undertaken three surveys of the flow of regional news to metro audiences to test

## WITHOUT WELL FUNDED LOCAL NEWS MEDIA THAT HAS THE CAPACITY TO PERFORM PUBLIC INTEREST JOURNALISM MUCH IS LOST...

media interest in regional news and the degree to which metro news audiences are receiving news from regional areas. The first survey in November 2021 served as a pilot to inform project design. The second survey was conducted between 14 March and 20 March 2022, one week after intense media focus on the unprecedented floods in northern New South Wales and southern Queensland. The third survey was conducted in early May 2022 to capture the extent of coverage of regional issues in the 2022 federal election campaign. The findings are reported in Chapter 2. We analyse the impact of Guardian Australia's Rural Network in New South Wales, established under this project which, at a glance, is attracting readers in every capital city and in regional towns within and outside the state, as well as from abroad. Stories from the network have been shared on social media platforms by decision makers and opinion leaders.

Whilst PIJI has tracked market growth in the form of green shoot local publications, most are digital publications for financial reasons. However, the digital lean of the green shoot offerings has not been without challenge. Print remains the preferred medium in regional areas, in part because of established buying and consumption habits where the demographic mix remains skewed towards a generally older age group. The positive news is that regional Australians are switching from desktop computers to smartphones to access news at a faster rate than their metro

counterparts. Since 2016, the number of regional news consumers accessing news on mobiles has grown from 26 percent to 44 percent. At the same time, usage of personal computers has dropped from 55 percent to 36 percent (Fisher & Park, 2019).

We highlight a handful of green shoot publications in this report. Region Media has been in operation since 2016, created by two digital disruptors and expanding annually. The company has found financial success using search engine optimisation (SEO) and branded journalism within a wider mix of traditional public interest journalism. IndyNR is a web-only publication, emerging from the closure of The Richmond River Express, a News Corp paper in northern New South Wales, and a publication which followed it, The Richmond River Independent, also felled by a hit on advertising revenue thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic. And News.Net, which has a commercial framework, with anticipated revenue to come solely from advertising, employing about 200 journalists covering international, national and regional issues across 1,300 locations in Australia. At the time of this report's publication, News.Net has been suspended.

There has also been a significant investment and upscaling of regional offerings from both News Corp and the ABC – using vastly different models of expansion and based on different editorial drivers: News Corp utilizing local news first editorial drivers and the ABC using local news to local audience and then local news to national audience editorial drivers. In both cases, the flow through of regional news and information to metro audiences is notable. We look at how the editorial drivers operate, and what their impact is on content inclusion in strictly metro publications and outlets.

Finally, this report is the first of three which the Centre for Media Transition will produce within the VFFF-funded project. The research and analysis has been produced by myself, Gary Dickson (research fellow and Research and Projects Manager, PIJI), Dr Ayesha Jehangir (CMT post-doctoral fellow) and our research assistant Travis Radford. Alexia Giacomazzi assisted with

the survey work which forms the basis of this report, tracking the flow of regional news and information to metro audiences. There are also reports from Dr Chrisanthi Giotis (University of South Australia and former CMT post-doctoral fellow), who conceived the Frame Reflection Interviews many years ago and has applied them to different reporting settings, including a very successful project in which CMT sent journalism students to regional locations for embedded internships, funded by the VFFF. Our research assistant Travis Radford was one of these interns, at The Barrier Truth in Broken Hill. You will also find a significant reflection by the first UTS graduate to be appointed to a reporting position for Guardian Australia under this program. Natasha May, a Master of Advanced Journalism graduate from UTS, was posted to Gilgandra in the Orana region of New South Wales, about six hours from Sydney on the inland route from Melbourne to Brisbane.

This report contains the following three chapters:

### Chapter One.

- Current state of play in regional media
- Mapping coverage across New South Wales
- Financial interventions

### Chapter Two.

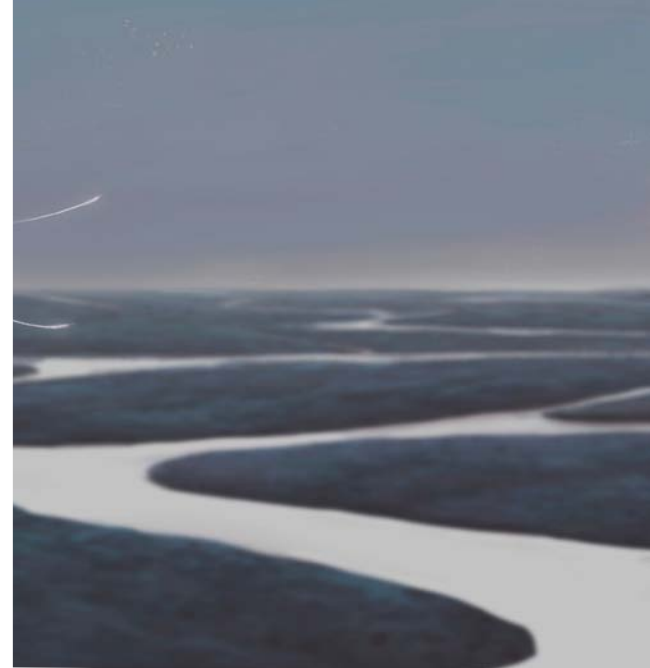
- The flow of regional news to metro outlets
- Editor viewpoints
- Freelancer challenges
- Guardian Australia Rural Network
- The view from Gilgandra, New South Wales.

### Chapter Three.

- Case studies: Region Media, IndyNR and News.Net
- Reflections from regional media consumers
- Broken Hill-Wilcannia: a study in fact checking mainstream reporters.







# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*We highlight 10 points from our research that illustrate the current state of play in metro news media's relationship with regional New South Wales. They represent useful points of direction for our future work in this project, as well as guidance for metro news media.*

**1** We found mixed levels of coverage of regional Australia in metro media, with some outlets having high local coverage (The Daily Telegraph), some moderate (Guardian Australia, The Sydney Morning Herald), and some low (The Australian, news.com.au, The New Daily). Among broadcast outlets, we found higher coverage of the regions in Nine News than either Network Seven or the ABC.

**2** In a survey conducted during March 2022, the highest levels of coverage were in northern New South Wales, the lowest along the Murray River, and only The Daily Telegraph published from all parts of the state.

**3** The largest subjects of coverage after disasters were court and crime stories, local government stories, federal and state government stories, property, national sport and primary industries. Very few stories concerned arts and culture, food and drink, science and social coverage, and no stories identified were about Indigenous issues in regional New South Wales.

**4** Coverage was overwhelmingly classified as responsive, meaning that it was initiated by an event outside the newsroom rather than the outlet's own effort.

**5** Fewer than ten percent of homepage stories on any given day were coded as regional. Some outlets have dedicated homepage sections for a small number of regional stories, and it is rare for stories to appear outside of these containers. It is uncommon for regional stories to be shared by metro news outlets on social media, though when they are shared, this is more likely to occur on Twitter than Facebook.

**6** In a second survey conducted in the lead-up to the 2022 federal election, we found that even responsive election coverage was heavily skewed toward metro areas and national issues. Overall, regional electorates received very little coverage, possibly a reflection of localised political commitments and thus of less interest to metro editors.

**7** The lack of entrepreneurial coverage of regional communities – stories that originate with a journalist rather than external events – during the 2022 election campaign may indicate a marginalisation of local issues, resourcing challenges, or that models premised on local-to-national editorial drivers are less efficient during election campaigns.

**8** Despite the difficulties facing regional media, journalists are searching for, and in some cases finding, new ways to build sustainable businesses to cover regional Australia using variations of the traditional advertising-supported model. These include one model which has revenue flowing from SEO, and branded journalism.

**9** In research interviews conducted with regional audiences we found strong agreement that representation in media is essential, but regional audiences feel that metro outlets often do not meet community expectations because they sensationalise, misinterpret and misrepresent the facts on the ground. The use of an incorrect claim about the life expectancy of Wilcannia's Aboriginal population by metro media, highlights the important role of local media as fact checkers.

**10** Editors uniformly cited the difficulty of finding freelancers and recruiting journalists to regional locations, whilst freelancers referenced the unsustainability of the pursuit. Even though metro outlets have different editorial priorities, interviewees all recognised the importance of regional coverage despite these challenges.

# 01 CHAPTER

GARY DICKSON AND TRAVIS RADFORD

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

*This section provides an overview of journalism production across Australia which includes PJI's data on print and digital publications, followed by a specific discussion of journalism in regional New South Wales.*

This report uses two geographic structures from the ABS to identify and analyse regional areas: the Remoteness Areas Structure (ABS, 2016a) and Statistical Area Level 4 (ABS, 2021). The remoteness classification is used in this report to separate metro areas from regional areas in a broad sense, while Statistical Area 4 is used to identify different regions of New South Wales.

The Remoteness Structure divides local government areas (LGAs) into one of five remoteness areas (Major City, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote, Very Remote) according to their relative access to services. This report uses the Major City designation to identify metro areas, and the other four designations for regional.

Some caveats apply to the presentation of this data within this framework. This means that some regional cities, such as Newcastle or the Central Coast, are classified as metro. Though the Australian Capital Territory does not have any LGAs, the Remoteness Structure categorises the entire territory as a Major City and there is no part of the Australian Capital Territory which is considered regional. Conversely, neither

Tasmania nor the Northern Territory contain any metro areas: Hobart is classified as Inner Regional, and Darwin is Outer Regional.

Statistical Area 4 has been used to identify subregions of New South Wales. For the purpose of consistency with the Remoteness Structure, three categories have been identified: Greater Sydney, being the metro area of the state capital city; regional cities, being statistical areas outside of Greater Sydney which contain LGAs, the majority of which are classified as Major City on the Remoteness Structure (Newcastle, Central Coast, Illawarra); and regional areas, being Capital Region, Central West, Coffs Harbour-Grafton, Far West and Orana, Hunter Valley excluding Newcastle, Mid North Coast, Murray, New England and North West, Richmond-Tweed, Riverina, and Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven.

Two outliers have been identified in this approach: the Municipality of Kiama is classified as Inner Regional but is within the regional city statistical area of Illawarra, and Maitland City Council is a major city on the Remoteness Structure but within the otherwise regional statistical area of the Hunter Valley.





## OVERVIEW

Multiple government inquiries have investigated the current and future state of journalism in Australia, with particular focusses on public interest journalism and journalism in rural and regional areas. These inquiries, such as the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Future of Public Interest Journalism (2016-17), the 2019 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Digital Platforms Inquiry, and the House of Representatives Inquiry into Regional Newspapers (2022), have consistently found that journalism production in Australia is in decline due to falling advertising revenue, increasing competition for subscribers with international media available online and shrinking audiences for news content. These problems are particularly acute in the traditional print sector and for regional and local news producers (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts, 2022), which impacts both local communities and the flow of news from these regions to metro editors and audiences.

The risks for public interest journalism are significant: the ACCC (2019) found that commercial media businesses struggle to realise the full value of their product because it is difficult to prevent consumers who do not subscribe from accessing journalism regardless, and because journalism that provides the

greatest benefit to the public is also the most likely to be under-produced.

There is some evidence to suggest this may be occurring: a 2019 survey of local government media managers found that more than 50 percent of all respondents believed there had been either some or significant declines in local news over the previous five years (Simons & Dickson, 2019).

Declines were more significant in metro areas (68 percent) than regional (45 percent). Almost a third of respondents said that no journalists regularly attend meetings of local government (32 percent), and 10 percent have no regular contact with journalists at all (Simons & Dickson, 2019).

A separate 2019 study found that falling resources meant that regional editors were unable to maintain sufficient depth of coverage and that not only regular crime and court coverage, but also investigative journalism, were out of reach (Simons et al., 2019). Interviews with reporters, lawyers and judges in the Victorian County Court concluded that the 'journal of record' function of newspapers in covering courts has been eroded, with suburban magistrates' courts uncovered by news media, and higher courts only thinly covered (Simons & Bosland, 2020). The ACCC similarly found that 26 percent fewer articles on local government, 40 percent fewer on local courts, 30

percent fewer on health and 42 percent fewer articles on science were published between 2005-6 and 2018 (ACCC, 2019).

In the 10 years to 2018, 106 local and regional newspapers closed – 15 percent of the total number of publications operating in Australia (ACCC, 2019). The three years since 2019 have been far more volatile: a further 79 newspapers closed between January 2019 and June 2022. If we include digital, radio and television news, the number climbs to 92 outlets shuttered, and the overwhelming majority (83) of these have closed since the beginning of Covid-19 in Australia. At the same time however, at least 121 news publications and stations have opened, 109 of which began since the outbreak of the pandemic (Dickson, 2020a). This could suggest that the news market is recovering, however it should be noted that this measure – the number of operating titles – does not consider the productive capacity of each; and the replacement of a newspaper of five journalists with a website of one journalist still represents an overall loss.

The creation of news deserts from the turmoil has also garnered much attention. In 2019 the ACCC found in its Digital Platforms Inquiry that there were 21 LGAs without a print newspaper, with 16 of those in regional areas (ACCC, 2019). The ACCC has not stated which LGAs it says are without coverage.

In 2022, the federal Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (DITRDC) submitted a list of 26 areas without local print or digital news producers to the House Inquiry into Regional Newspapers. However, the Department's list contains many unincorporated and uninhabited territories.

The Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) also maintains a list (PIJI, 2022). As of 30 June 2022, PIJI's list contains 30 LGAs without print or digital news coverage.

It is important to note that all of these estimates – from the ACCC, DITRDC and PIJI – only consider print and digital publishing. Adding radio and television news coverage, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, would be expected to significantly reduce the number of LGAs in these lists.

There are reasons to be optimistic, however. Some small-medium publishers who submitted to the House Inquiry into Regional Newspapers reported that revenue received through the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code had made a 'significant difference' to their financial position, covering as much as 30 percent of editorial wages.

In the final report of its Digital Platforms Inquiry, the ACCC estimated that there were 435 regional and community newspapers operating in Australia in 2017-18 (ACCC, 2019). This number appears to be limited to print publications outside of metro areas and does not include digital-only publications in the same areas. The DITRDC submitted a list of local news producers to the House Inquiry in March 2022 (DITRDC, 2022). Its list suggested 929 news publishers of local and community scale across metro and regional areas, including both print and digital formats. A cursory examination suggests that this list is likely to be outdated, as it includes many former APN News & Media titles closed by News Corp in 2020 (Meade, 2020) and suburban titles progressively closed by Fairfax Media over the decade prior to its 2018 acquisition by Nine (Westbrook, 2018).

**...FALLING RESOURCES MEANT REGIONAL EDITORS WERE UNABLE TO MAINTAIN SUFFICIENT DEPTH OF COVERAGE, BUT ALSO INVESTGATIVE JOURNALISM WAS OUT OF REACH.**





## WHAT AVAILABLE NEWS DATA says about Australian news markets

This section provides an overview of the current size and scale of the market with a particular focus on the difference between the states and territories, and between metro and regional areas.

The most recent public data at the time of writing this report (July 2022) is dated 30 June 2022. It is limited to print and digital news producers and does not capture the radio and television broadcast sectors. The dataset does not include every news producer but is limited to news outlets which produce core news content according to PIJI's definition: those which record or investigate issues of public significance to Australians; issues relevant to engaging Australians in public debate and in informing democratic decision

making; or content which relates to community and local events. Lifestyle, entertainment and arts news are therefore outside this data, as are trade publications unless they have a focus on policy or other public affairs.

The following tables, prepared by CMT based on data from PIJI, are limited to news publications which have either print or digital as their primary format, and each outlet is recorded only once: though it is highly likely that a newspaper also has a website, if it has a print product then it is only recorded as a print outlet.

Although none of the datasets discussed here include radio or television news broadcasters, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), the regulatory agency for broadcast communications, has provided data which says that there are 276 commercial radio, 69 commercial television and 366 community

broadcasting service licenses across the country (ACMA, 2022). This does not include narrowcasting services, a type of niche service often transmitting to small groups or areas and which may carry racing content or services for tourists, language or religious programming. There is no indication how many broadcast license holders are news producers. The effect of content quotas will be studied in a future report.

Finally, we caution that this unit of analysis – the number of outlets in a place or owned by a particular company – offers little insight into the journalism productive capacity of different regions. A newspaper with a single journalist on a weekly publishing schedule looks the same in these tables as a newspaper with a dozen staff and thrice-weekly editions, despite clear differences in the overall output of these two papers.

## DISTRIBUTION OF PRINT and digital news outlets

Every news outlet in the data is recorded as having a particular scale, according to an assessment of its primary news coverage. The five scale options in ascending order are:

- Community, outlets which typically have a coverage area of a single small town and primary cover local human interest and events. These outlets are commonly produced by a group of volunteers or a local community centre.
- Local, outlets which cover a town or city and, sometimes, broader geographic region such as the Murray Valley, a whole LGA. These outlets typically report on a mix of community stories, local government, crime, business and sport. Most print newspapers fall into this category.
- City-wide, outlets which provide broad coverage across an entire metro area. These outlets are a mixture of stories relevant to a whole city, with occasional local coverage, particularly on crime. Daily newspapers such as The Courier Mail or The Sydney Morning Herald fall into this category. These outlets are referred to as metro scale in PIJI's data, but have been renamed here to avoid confusion.

- State/territory, outlets which cover an entire state or territory broadly while not providing significant or consistent local coverage.
- National, outlets focused on federal politics and policy, industrial, economics and business coverage, or broad social issue coverage.

This dataset suggests that there are 790 print and digital news outlets of any size and scale around Australia, operated by 370 news businesses and groups of companies. News companies are

discussed further in a later section. The overwhelming majority of these outlets (84 percent) are categorised as local, followed by community scale outlets: national, city-wide and state/territory are the least common. Despite significant digitisation of the industry, including a large shift to web-only publishing particularly among News Corp titles in 2020 (Meade, 2020), most publications retain a print edition.

Breaking this data down by the news outlet's state or territory of operation (Table 2) suggests

Outlet	Community	Local	City-wide	State	National	Total
Print	55	499	8	3	8	573
Digital	4	165	4	5	39	217
Total	59	664	12	8	47	790

**TABLE 1 | PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS ACCORDING TO THE SCALE OF THEIR COVERAGE, AT 30 JUNE 2022.**

	Community		Local		City-wide		State		Subtotal		Total
	Print	Web	Print	Web	Print	Web	Print	Web	Print	Web	Print / web
ACT	-	-	3	3	-	-	-	-	3	3	6
NSW	3	-	170	69	2	1	1	1	176	71	247
NT	-	-	4	1	-	-	-	-	4	1	5
QLD	3	1	77	47	1	1	1	1	82	50	132
SA	-	-	29	16	1	-	-	1	30	17	47
TAS	3	-	22	3	-	-	-	1	25	4	29
VIC	28	2	140	24	3	-	1	1	172	27	199
WA	18	1	54	2	1	2	-	-	73	5	78
Total	55	4	499	165	8	4	3	5	565	178	743

**TABLE 2 | PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS ACCORDING TO THE SCALE OF THEIR COVERAGE AND THEIR STATE OR TERRITORY OF OPERATION EXCLUDING NATIONAL, AT 30 JUNE 2022.**

significant differences in news density around the country. New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have high numbers of news outlets, followed by Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. Across all, local outlets greatly outnumber all other scales. National scale outlets have been excluded from this table as their coverage geography is greater than the state or territory level.

## LOCAL PRINT and digital news outlets

This section limits the data to only capture local scale print and digital news outlets. PJI estimates that in June 2022 there were 348 local print newspapers in regional areas, and an additional 84 primarily digital local news outlets, for a total of 432 regional news publications. A further 232 print and digital local outlets operate in metro areas, for 664 total local news publications. (Dickson, 2022b).

Table 3 provides both estimated populations and the number of local print and digital outlets against each state and territory. It suggests a relatively consistent correlation between state or territory's proportion of the total population and total number of local news outlets, with New South Wales and Tasmania slightly overperforming at the expense of Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria. Among digital publishers in particular, New South Wales and Queensland exceed others, with a 9 and 10 percentage point gap respectively between their shares of the population and of web outlets. Victoria, on the other hand, has a far lower share of web outlets than its population would suggest, but slightly overperforms in its print sector.

Tables 4 and 5 categorise outlets according to whether they primarily operate in metro or regional/rural areas. It uses the ABS Remoteness Structure to make this distinction (ABS, 2016).

Presenting the data this way suggests that a significant

	Population		Outlets, print		Outlets, web		Outlets, Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
ACT	431611	2	3	1	3	2	6	1
NSW	8188651	32	170	35	69	41	239	36
NT	245909	1	4	1	1	1	5	1
QLD	5221233	20	77	15	47	30	124	19
SA	1773396	7	29	6	16	10	45	7
TAS	541315	2	22	4	3	2	25	4
VIC	6649066	26	140	28	24	14	164	25
WA	2682257	10	54	11	2	1	56	8
Total	25738142	100	499	100	165	100	664	100

TABLE 3 | ESTIMATED RESIDENT POPULATION BY STATE OR TERRITORY AND LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS ACCORDING TO THEIR STATE

	Metropolitan		Regional / rural		Total
	n	%	n	%	
ACT	6	100	-	-	6
NSW	81	34	158	66	239
NT	-	-	5	100	5
QLD	51	41	73	59	124
SA	12	26	33	74	45
TAS	-	-	25	100	25
VIC	55	34	109	66	164
WA	26	46	30	54	56
Total	231	35	433	65	664

TABLE 4 | LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS ACCORDING TO THEIR LOCATION AND THEIR STATE OR TERRITORY OF OPERATION, AT 30 JUNE 2022

	Metropolitan				Regional / rural				Total
	Print	%	Web	%	Print	%	Web	%	
ACT	3	50	3	50	-	-	-	-	6
NSW	47	20	34	14	124	52	34	14	239
NT	-	-	-	-	4	80	1	20	5
QLD	27	21	24	20	50	40	23	19	124
SA	6	13	6	13	23	51	10	22	45
TAS	-	-	-	-	22	88	3	12	25
VIC	43	26	12	7	97	59	12	7	164
WA	24	43	2	4	30	54	-	-	56
Total	150	22	81	12	350	52	83	13	664

TABLE 5 | LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS ACCORDING TO THEIR FORMAT AND THEIR LOCATION AND THEIR STATE OR TERRITORY OF OPERATION, AT 30 JUNE 2022.

	Major city		Inner regional		Outer regional		Remote		Very remote		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
ACT	6	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
NSW	81	34	108	45	42	18	7	3	1	1	239
NT	-	-	-	-	2	40	1	20	2	40	5
QLD	51	41	44	35	23	19	1	1	5	4	124
SA	12	27	14	31	13	29	5	11	1	2	45
TAS	-	-	14	56	8	32	2	8	1	4	25
VIC	55	34	78	48	30	18	-	-	1	1	164
WA	26	46	10	18	14	25	4	7	2	4	56
Total	231	35	268	40	132	20	20	3	13	2	664

TABLE 6 | LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS ACCORDING TO THEIR REMOTENESS AND THEIR STATE OR TERRITORY OF OPERATION, AT 30 JUNE 2022.

	Major city		Inner regional		Outer regional		Remote		Very remote		Total
	Print	Web	Print	Web	Print	Web	Print	Web	Print	Web	
ACT	3	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
NSW	47	34	78	30	38	4	6	1	1	-	239
NT	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	2	-	5
QLD	27	24	34	10	12	11	-	1	4	1	124
SA	6	6	10	4	10	3	3	2	-	1	45
TAS	-	-	11	3	8	-	2	-	1	-	25
VIC	43	12	68	10	28	2	-	-	1	-	164
WA	24	2	10	-	14	-	4	-	2	-	56
Total	150	81	211	57	111	21	16	4	11	2	664

TABLE 7 | LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS ACCORDING TO THEIR REMOTENESS AND THEIR STATE OR TERRITORY OF OPERATION, AT 30 JUNE 2022.

	Population		Outlets, print		Outlets, web		Outlets, Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Major city	18571710	72	150	30	81	49	231	35
Inner regional	4608023	18	211	42	57	34	268	40
Outer regional	2066689	8	111	22	21	13	132	20
Remote	290931	1	16	3	4	2	20	3
Very remote	200789	1	11	2	2	1	13	2
Total	25738142	100	498	100	167	100	664	100

TABLE 8 | ESTIMATED RESIDENT POPULATION AND LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS ACCORDING TO THEIR REMOTENESS; POPULATION DATA AT 30 JUNE 2021 AND NEWS OUTLET DATA AT 30 JUNE 2022.

majority – just short of two thirds – of the local print and digital news outlets in Australia are in regional and rural areas. This is true in all states and territories except the Australian Capital Territory (see above). In all cases, the total number of titles still in print either outnumbers or is on par with those which are digital-only. This would seem to suggest that despite significant shifts to web publishing, which greatly accelerated in the first few months of 2020 due to Covid-19, most publishers still see the value of retaining a print product.

Tables 6, 7 and 8 break this data down further across all remoteness areas, finding that the number of publications in Inner Regional areas – a category which includes regional cities Albury (New South Wales), Toowoomba (Queensland), Victor Harbor (South Australia) and Bunbury (Western Australia) – exceeds the number in metro areas. The number of local publications does not appear to be significantly tied to local populations, as Inner Regional areas contain 40 percent of local print and digital publications, while housing only 18 percent of the population (4,608,023). Around 72 percent (18,571,710) of Australia's population live in Major Cities, and 35 percent of print and digital local publications are based there.

This table also suggests that news digitisation is occurring at a faster rate in metro areas than regional ones: nationally, major cities contain 35 percent of all publications; but almost half (49 percent) of digital-only local outlets, and only 30 percent of print. Every category of regional area, on the other hand, has a greater number of publications with a print edition than publications without one.







## NEWS BUSINESSES

### NEWS BUSINESS presence across Australia

There are 370 news businesses in the print and digital news sector across the country operating titles at any scale. Of those companies, 280 operate at least one print or digital title with a primarily local editorial focus. These companies may also operate national, state/territory or city-wide publications as well, but only their local outlets are considered for the following tables.

Table 9 provides an overview of major and some medium-sized news businesses operating local print and digital news outlets. All publishers operating at least four separate titles have been

	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Total
News Corp Australia	1	35	1	41	10	3	16	-	107
Australian Community Media	1	75	1	5	11	2	8	4	107
Seven West Media	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	30	30
Star News Group	-	-	-	-	-	-	19	-	19
Today News Group	-	-	-	12	-	-	-	-	12
McPherson Media Group	-	3	-	-	-	-	8	-	11
Times News Group	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	6
Font Publishing	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	6
Herald Publishing Company	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	5
North East Media	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	-	5
McCullough Trust	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	-	5
Yeates Media	-	-	-	-	-	1	4	-	5
Hyperlocal News	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	-	5
Wilkie Watson Publications	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Roundbox Media	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Papers & Publications	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	4
Myall Coast Communications	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Examiner Newspapers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	4
Elliott Newspaper Group	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	4
NSW Local App Company	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Subtotal	2	129	2	61	25	12	79	43	354
All other publishers	4	110	3	63	20	13	84	13	312
Total	6	239	5	124	45	25	163	56	664

**TABLE 9 | LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLET OWNERSHIP BY STATE, DATA AT 30 JUNE 2022.**

included. This floor has been set for the sake of space, not because this is a meaningful limit. Though attempts have been made to group together publications with common ownership, there may be companies missing from this table if each outlet is published by a separately incorporated business. This category of 20 publishers collectively operates more than half of all local print and digital titles in Australia (354). Most states also have a relatively equal balance of publishers inside and outside of this group. There are two major exceptions. Queensland has many smaller publishers outside of this group and the single largest publisher, News Corp, accounts for around a third of all titles. In Western Australia, which has a more heavily concentrated market, Seven West Media alone publishes more than half of all local titles in the state.

### NEWS BUSINESSES in metro and regional areas

The overwhelming majority of local news businesses own just one publication (81 percent; 228), while at the high end two companies (News Corp Australia and Australian Community Media) together account for 32 percent of all local titles (214). Their footprints are different: News Corp has a much larger presence in Queensland and Victoria, while two thirds of Australian Community Media's titles are in New South Wales alone, and

the company has a small presence in Western Australia, unlike News Corp.

Seven West Media operates 30 local scale titles across metro Perth and regional Western Australia and is the dominant company in those media markets. Two smaller print news businesses also operate around Perth: Herald Publishing Company in Fremantle, Melville, Cockburn and the city centre, and Examiner Newspapers covers Armadale, Canning, Gosnells and Serpentine Jarrahdale.

# Local outlets operated	1	2	3	4	5	6+	Total
# News businesses	228	23	9	7	5	8	280

**TABLE 10 | NEWS BUSINESSES BY THE NUMBER OF LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS THEY OPERATE, DATA AT 30 JUNE 2022.**

Star News Group publishes 19 titles in Victoria, most of which cover suburban Melbourne. Star has interests in the Today News Group, which operates 12 print outlets across regional Queensland, and in three titles in South Australia (The Border Watch [Bordertown], South Eastern Times [Millicent] and The Pennant [Penola]) published by TBW Today.

The following tables separate major news companies (maj.) from medium and small news companies (oth.). Though this report looks at multiple major news companies, only those with print and digital outlets of local scale (Australian Community Media, News Corp Australia and Seven West Media) are included within the major group in this section.

Table 11 shows the metro and regional/rural breakdowns of major news companies and small-medium news companies on a state and territory basis, and Table 12 breaks the regional/rural categories down into remoteness categories.

Looking at investment in regional areas more closely (Table 12), it can be seen that while major news companies are most heavily invested in the major cities, they retain a sizable presence in Inner Regional and Outer Regional areas as well: overall, around 35 percent of outlets in these regions are operated by major news companies.

This differs across states, however. The large investment in regional New South Wales by Australian Community Media and News Corp Australia means that major print and digital outlets outnumber independent publications in Inner Regional areas and track slightly above average at 38 percent in Outer Regional areas. In Queensland, these two major companies operate 27 percent and 43 percent of outlets in Inner Regional and Outer Regional areas, respectively. Major news outlets also outnumber independent news outlets in both Outer Regional and remote South Australia.

Conversely, the independent regional publishing sector in Victoria is far stronger, making up 86 percent of outlets in Inner Regional areas and 93 percent in Outer Regional areas. Independent publishers also far outnumber major publishers in Tasmania: 75 percent of publishers across all categories are small-medium publishers. Here, Font Publishing dominates, operating six titles across the Derwent Valley, King Island, Sorell, Tasman, Glamorgan-Spring Bay and Northern Midlands councils, as well as two statewide publications.

The dominance of Seven West Media in Western Australia is not limited to Inner Regional areas. The breakdown also shows that major news outlets have at least parity with independents in every category of region, and outnumber them in Inner Regional, Outer Regional and Remote areas.

	Metropolitan				Regional / rural				Total
	Maj.	%	Oth.	%	Maj.	%	Oth.	%	
ACT	2	33	4	66	-	-	-	-	6
NSW	38	47	43	53	72	46	86	54	239
NT	-	-	-	-	2	40	3	60	5
QLD	22	43	29	57	24	33	49	67	124
SA	6	50	6	50	15	46	18	54	45
TAS	-	-	-	-	5	20	20	80	25
VIC	11	20	44	80	13	12	96	88	164
WA	13	50	13	50	21	70	9	30	56
Total	92	40	139	60	152	35	281	65	664

**TABLE 11 | LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS PUBLISHED BY MAJOR (MAJ.) AND OTHER (OTH.) NEWS COMPANIES ACCORDING TO THEIR LOCATION AND THEIR STATE OR TERRITORY OF OPERATION, AT 30 JUNE 2022.**

	Major city		Inner regional		Outer regional		Remote		Very remote		Total
	Maj.	Oth.	Maj.	Oth.	Maj.	Oth.	Maj.	Oth.	Maj.	Oth.	
ACT	2	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
NSW	38	43	56	52	16	26	-	7	-	1	239
NT	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	2	5
QLD	22	29	12	32	10	13	1	-	1	4	124
SA	6	6	4	10	8	5	3	2	-	1	45
TAS	-	-	4	10	1	7	-	2	-	1	25
VIC	11	44	11	67	2	28	-	-	-	1	164
WA	13	13	8	2	9	5	3	1	1	1	56
Total	92	139	95	173	47	85	8	12	2	11	664

**TABLE 12 | LOCAL PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS PUBLISHED BY MAJOR (MAJ.) AND OTHER (OTH.) NEWS COMPANIES ACCORDING TO THEIR REMOTENESS AND THEIR STATE OR TERRITORY OF OPERATION, AT 30 JUNE 2022.**

## METROPOLITAN NEWS COMPANIES operating in regional New South Wales

This section presents a snapshot of the regional New South Wales footprints of the following nine medium to large news companies that operate in both regional and metro news markets across the state:

- ABC News
- Australian Associated Press (AAP)
- Australian Community Media (ACM)
- Guardian Australia
- News Corp Australia (including Sky News)
- NBN News
- 7Regional (formerly Prime7)
- Southern Cross Austereo (SCA)
- WIN News\*

This selection of news companies operating across both regional and metro markets aligns with the objective of this section to understand the newsgathering capacity of organisations that have a demonstrated or potential capacity to include regional stories in their metro news products.

\*WIN does not have a presence in any metro news markets in New South Wales but was chosen for its extensive regional footprint in the state, including the regional city of Wollongong.

## ABC NEWS

The ABC has one of the most significant media presences outside of Greater Sydney, with a network of 13 regional bureaus (Gosford, Wollongong, Newcastle, Bega, Coffs Harbour, Dubbo, Lismore, Muswellbrook, Orange, Port Macquarie, Tamworth, Wagga Wagga and Broken Hill) (ABC, 2021). The broadcaster has also operated one additional trial mini bureau on the south coast of New South Wales since 2021 (ABC, 2021a). The ABC says it plans to transform all these bureaus into multi-platform production hubs by 2025. These hubs produce radio, TV, and digital content (ABC, 2020), including for regional location social media

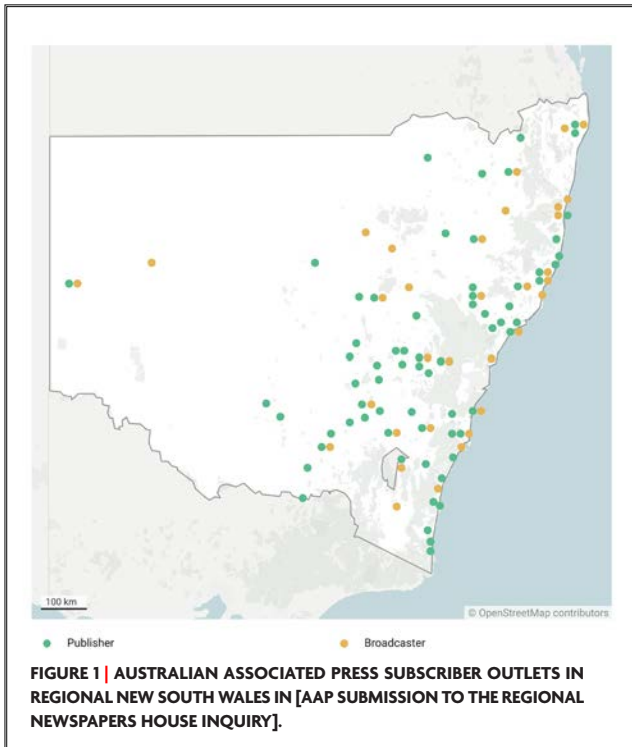
pages and website tabs, as well as six regional location e-newsletters (Newcastle, Illawarra, Western Plains, Southeast New South Wales, North Coast, and Broken Hill). The ABC employs 550 regional content makers across Australia (ABC, 2021a) and 51.9 percent of its total staff are in New South Wales (ABC, 2021).

In 2021, The ABC added 55 journalists across regional Australia, of which 24 were in new locations, including the new trial mini bureau opened in Batemans Bay (ABC, 2022), with the remainder in existing locations, including in Dubbo and Wagga Wagga. This came as part of a larger expansion into regional Australia after a content-sharing agreement was signed with Meta and Google under the News Media Bargaining Code (ABC, 2021a). According to ABC's regional head, Hugh Martin, the increase in reporters will help the ABC cover regional and rural areas that were normally not covered. However, the ABC told the Senate Inquiry into media diversity that it wasn't established to deliver hyperlocal news and cannot compensate for the loss of local newspapers (Meade, 2021).

The ABC also maintains a suite of specialist regional programs and products above the local level, across radio, TV and digital. In radio, the ABC has six multi-region Rural Reports in New South Wales (Gippsland and Goulburn Murray; Goulburn Murray and Riverina; South East, Riverina, Central West and Western Plains; Mid and North Coast; Broken Hill; and Upper Hunter, New England and North West), a statewide Country Hour program for New South Wales and four national regional programs (A Big Country, Australia Wide, Country Breakfast and Countrywide). In TV, the ABC produces three national regional programs - Landline, Back Roads, and a weekly news and current affairs program, News Regional. For a digital audience the public broadcaster has regional national social media pages and a website tab all under the name, ABC Rural, as well as two regional national e-newsletters, Rural News and Rural Roundup.



## AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATED PRESS (AAP)



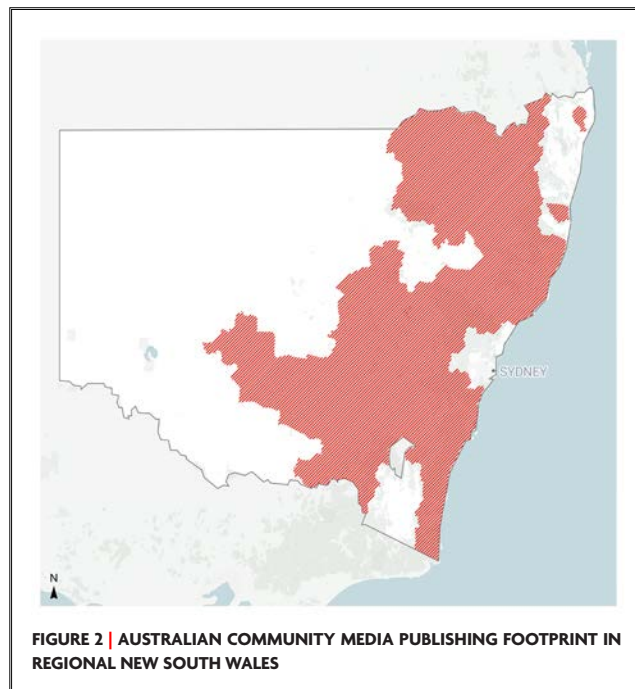
The nation's oldest continuing newswire, AAP, provides stories and images to 123 local news outlets in regional New South Wales (AAP, 2022). The ABC Online, Guardian Australia, Seven News Digital and Nine Entertainment Co (Shepherd, 2022) are among the national brands that also subscribe to AAP.

In March 2020, majority shareholders Nine and News Corp ended their association with the service, effectively forcing its closure (McGuirk, 2020). It was purchased by a group of social impact investors in August 2020 and relaunched as a not-for-profit enterprise (Wahlquist, 2020).

AAP has a rural and regional desk launched with funding from the Jibb Foundation, the family foundation of John B. Fairfax and his wife and sons (Ward, 2021). It is staffed by a full-time journalist in Orange, tasked with covering issues affecting regional Australia and

providing geographically balanced coverage on a range of issues (Ward, 2021a). AAP also has a network of regional freelance journalists and photographers for specialist and specific geographical reporting (AAP, 2022). In 2022, the newswire received \$250,000 from the Meta Australian News Fund, managed by The Walkley Foundation, to run week-long 'news-gathering missions' in regional communities, to help journalists find and report stories to national audiences (The Walkley Foundation, 2022).

## AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY MEDIA (ACM)



Australian Community Media is a major news publisher in regional New South Wales, with 68 titles in regional New South Wales (ACM, n.d.). ACM says it employs 600 journalists across regional Australia (Kendall, 2022).

In addition to its print and digital mastheads, the publisher also produces daily audio news briefings for two regional locations, Albury-Wodonga and the Illawarra (Tomlinson, 2021), and an Australia-wide 'Voice of Real Australia' podcast and newsletter series, that

tells character-driven stories from the regions. ACM launched a national news bulletin, The Echidna, to cover the 2022 federal election, but with a focus on regional Australia (Mumbrella, 2022). The free newsletter, sent to subscribers every weekday morning, has continued post-election.

ACM was the former regional publishing division of Fairfax Media, sold to current owners Antony Catalano and Alex Waislitz by Nine in 2019 (Meade, 2019). Catalano has reportedly also previously sought to acquire News Corp's regional and community titles (Blackiston, 2020) as well as Prime Media (Ward, 2021b). Since 2020, ACM has had a printing agreement with News Corp Australia and Nine, which allows the three companies to share a printing network (Mason, 2020).

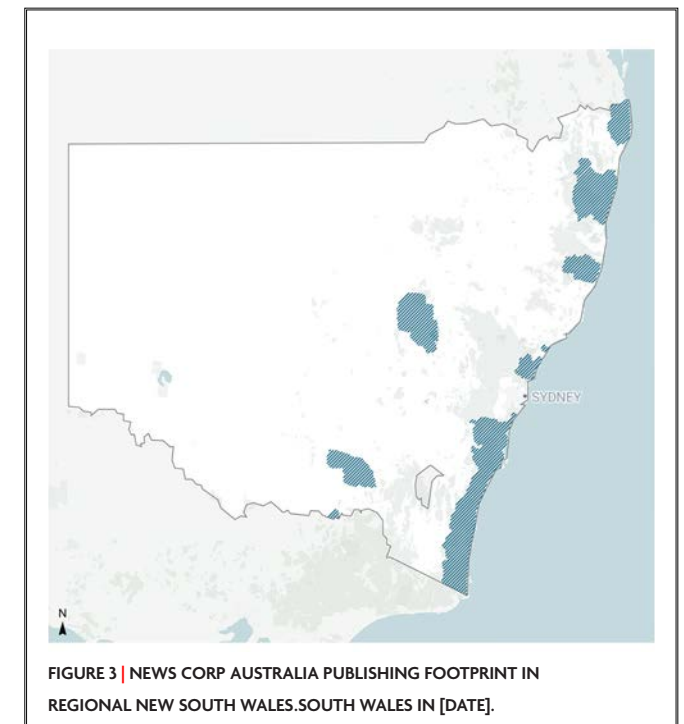
Prior to its 2019 sale by Nine, ACM had a reported 170 regional newspapers in its stable (Duke, 2019). By December 2021, 138 of these were left, of which 86 were suspended during the Covid-19 pandemic (Davies & Meade, 2021a). ACM later received \$10.46 million – the largest single grant – from the Public Interest Journalism Fund (Crawford, 2021) and has since returned more than 100 suspended publications (Kendall, 2022). However, some remain on reduced publishing schedules, as digital only, or indefinitely inactive (Davies & Meade, 2021b). ACM says that of the 50 mastheads that have not returned to print, more than 20 retained a digital presence and 20 more were free titles in areas already covered by an ACM title (Kendall, 2022). In late 2021, the publisher reduced the publishing schedules of a further nine papers (Gorman, 2021). ACM launched five new titles during the pandemic: three metro and two regional. Two of the metro titles (The Northern Beaches Review and Inner West Review) (Dickson, 2022c) and one of the regional titles (Northern Rivers Review) have since closed.

## GUARDIAN AUSTRALIA

Guardian Australia launched The Rural Network in New South Wales in 2021, with a similar objective to the ABC, to cover local stories that resonate with national and international audiences (Taylor, 2021). The network was

funded by a philanthropic grant to Guardian Australia and CMT from the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation. The network employs several full-time editorial staff; a Rural and Regional Editor, charged with forming a network of regional contributors; and two reporters placed at regional news organisations for one-year. The first journalist in these reporter roles was based at The Gilgandra Weekly, (New South Wales) and in 2022, two more were appointed: to the Burdekin Local News in Ayr (Queensland) and the Deniliquin Pastoral Times (New South Wales). These positions report to the Rural and Regional Editor four days a week and to the local publication editor for the remaining day. The rural network also comprises a Facebook group with approximately 4000 members and a free fortnightly email newsletter.

## NEWS CORP AUSTRALIA



News Corp's regional and community titles are grouped within a division known as the Regional and Community Network, which employs about 300 journalists.



Newslocal is the New South Wales sub-division of this network and covers 15 regional locations (Newcastle, Wollongong, Blue Mountains, Albury, Ballina, Bowral, Byron Shire, Coffs Harbour, Dubbo, Grafton, Lismore, Port Macquarie, South Coast, Tweed Heads and Wagga Wagga). The hyperlocals are published in a digital-only format under regional location tabs on The Daily Telegraph website, as is the case with several hyperlocals on the website of The Courier Mail in Queensland, with regional subscribers also gaining access to metro news content from their relevant state masthead.

In 2020, News Corp announced 50 new hyperlocal titles over the next three years across the country (Rigby, 2020), of which 26 have already been launched (Dickson, 2022a). All hyperlocal titles appear to be staffed by single journalists living within the local communities. This hyperlocal model is a departure from News Corp's strategy prior to 2018, when all local community news was published in weekly free newspapers, some of which had their own distinct paywall-free websites. The network also produces 'regional editions' of The Daily Telegraph for Tweed and Northern New South Wales, Central Coast and Newcastle, and Coffs Coast (NRM, 2021). The editions include a mix of local and state-based news.

News Corp's 24-hour news channel, Sky News, launched the free to air Sky News Regional channel in 2021 in select SCA and WIN TV markets including in parts of regional New South Wales, replacing Sky News on WIN. The rebranding to Sky News Regional coincided with the launch of Sky News Breakfast, a live weekday

breakfast program exclusive to the new channel, including regional weather coverage and interviews with key newsmakers from regional, as well as local and international markets.

Along with Sky News' other programs, viewers also now have access to Paul Murray Live Our Town, a monthly program about different regional towns, that launched in 2019 (Sky News, 2021). The channel doesn't appear to otherwise have any dedicated regional current affairs news program, such as the one-hour nightly Sky News Across Australia bulletin, which was discontinued in 2021 (Perry, 2021).

In April 2020, the Regional and Community Network suspended 60 of its local and regional print titles due to declining revenue during the pandemic (Meade, 2020b). A month later, 112 local and regional newspapers were permanently discontinued in print form, with 36 titles closed completely and the remaining 76 becoming digital-only (Meade, 2020a). This came shortly after negotiations with ACM to acquire the collapsed titles (Samios, 2020a), resulting in a reported 500 to 1,000 redundancies (Rigby, 2020). In 2021, at least 20 of the network's local websites were subsumed into The Courier Mail and The Daily Telegraph websites. The move was characterised as a technological upgrade with zero jobs lost (Meade, 2021b) and one which delivered an increase in page views (Ward, 2021c). However, from August 2021, two titles – Mackay's Daily Mercury and the Sunshine Coast Daily – had weekly print editions reinstated on a trial basis and 20 new journalists were announced for regional communities (Ward, 2021c).

## BROADCAST NEWS COMPANIES

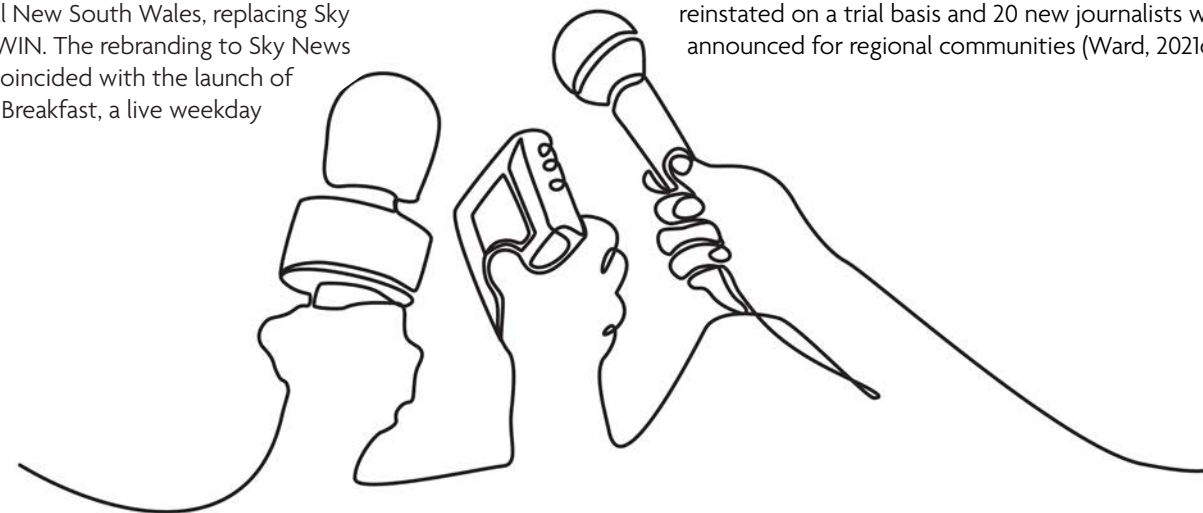
### NBN NEWS

NBN News is a Newcastle-based regional television news company, predominantly serving New South Wales. The broadcaster, which has been owned by Nine's parent company Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd since 2007, produces a one-hour nightly news bulletin for the Hunter, Central Coast, Northwest, Mid North and Northern Rivers regions of New South Wales, and the Gold Coast in Queensland, with local news, weather and sport segments. NBN also publishes both television and digital news stories to its own distinct website, rather than to Nine's.

### 7 REGIONAL (FORMERLY PRIME7)

7 Regional is the regional broadcast news arm of Seven West Media. The company's regional New South Wales-based bulletins have been broadcast under the name 7 News Local, since July 25, 2022, months after the previous owner and operator, Prime Television, was acquired by long-time affiliate Seven, in December 2021. Seven produces five 30-minute week night news bulletins for the Albury-Wodonga, Central West, North Coast, Northwest and Wagga regions of New South Wales, which are supplemented throughout the day with Seven's national news and entertainment programming. In a joint submission to the Senate Inquiry into media diversity in late 2020, Prime said it produced approximately 700 local news and weather updates each week. The broadcaster also publishes digital news stories from these regions to its website, which has similarly been rebranded from Prime 7 to 7 Regional.

According to Seven, Prime's acquisition, which was completed in January 2022, will allow the broadcaster to reach 90 percent of Australia's population every month, increase revenue and reduce costs, and provide advertisers with access to metro and regional audiences (Knox, 2021). For further information, see Chapter 3. A previous merger in 2019 was rejected by







Prime shareholders (Boyd et al., 2021), however, Seven is reportedly more profitable and less indebted than during the last attempted merger (Rigby, 2021).

## SOUTHERN CROSS AUSTEREO (SCA)

Southern Cross Austereo of the Southern Cross Media Group is a radio, television and digital news company with 69 total regional journalists across Australia, of which 58 are full-time (Davies and Meade, 2021b).

SCA's radio brands, Hit and Triple M, operate in eight regional locations: the Central West, Coffs Coast, Dubbo, Albury-Wodonga, Riverina, Mid North Coast, Newcastle and Central Coast. Triple M lists nine regional radio stations and Hit lists seven (both have two radio stations in the Riverina region; Riverina and Riverina MIA). Hit and Triple M also both produce digital news stories for their websites and on-demand audio news for LiSTNR, a free audio news and entertainment app and website launched in 2021. LiSTNR posts multi-daily regional news updates for five regions – the Central West, Central Coast, Hunter, Riverina and Mid North Coast; weekly regional event and community information podcasts for ten regions – Albury-Wodonga, Coffs Coast, Dubbo, Central Coast, Goulburn Valley, Griffith, Mid North Coast, Central West, Newcastle and Riverina; and weekly sports podcasts for three regions – Newcastle, Riverina and Albury-Wodonga.

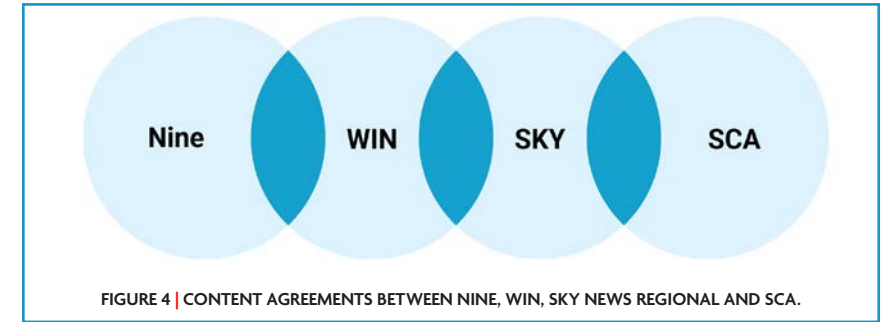
SCA produces two 30-minute local news bulletins: Nightly News 7 Tasmania and Spencer Gulf Nightly News, a week nightly bulletin for South Australia's Spencer Gulf and Broken Hill in New South Wales, which is also broadcast under Seven's branding. SCA says a team of 12 people produce 130 local news updates each weekday for 16 regional markets across Australia (Davies and Meade, 2021b), equating to 175 minutes of content from Monday to Friday including 80 local news updates each week for Spencer Gulf and Broken Hill (Prime Media Group et al., Submission No 39). The news updates replaced additional regional news bulletins produced by SCA's previous affiliate partner, Nine, until 2021 (Davies and Meade, 2021b).

SCA lists 10 TV stations outside Sydney, in Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie, Newcastle, Central Coast, Wollongong, Griffith, Orange, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga, Broken Hill and Albury.

In March 2022, SCA revealed intentions to sell its regional TV assets, saying it had received unsolicited approaches from several parties, most likely Ten and Seven West Media (Ward, 2021), however, SCA later announced it would be retaining its TV assets (Kelly, 2022).

SCA also broadcasts other channels, namely Sky News Regional in the state's north and south, Ten in Southern New South Wales, Seven, Nine and Ten in Broken Hill, and Seven and Ten in Remote Central and Eastern New South Wales.

In 2020, SCA cut 19 local breakfast shows at Hit stations across the country and announced 38 job losses (Martin, 2020), leaving all Hit stations outside major cities to broadcast a statewide show, except for Newcastle and the Gold Coast (Blackiston, 2020b). Mid-morning timeslots were returned to local programming. All Triple M stations, including those outside major cities, have retained local breakfast shows.

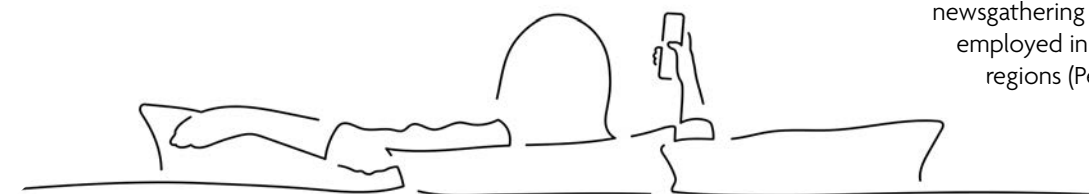


## WIN NEWS

WIN News is a Wollongong-based regional television news company. The broadcaster produces two half-hour week-nightly news bulletins for New South Wales, one for Wollongong, Illawarra and the South Coast and one for the western areas of southern New South Wales, including Orange, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga and Griffith. The border region of Albury-Wodonga is served by the broadcaster's statewide Victoria bulletin. WIN also produces three more bulletins for Canberra, Queensland and Tasmania, and a 30 minute week daily national news bulletin, WIN All Australian News, with local news stories from every WIN News market. Unlike many

of its competitors, WIN doesn't have an online video on-demand platform or publish any standalone digital news stories, outside news updates on its social media pages.

Since its launch in 1962, WIN has grown into the country's largest regional commercial television network, broadcasting into 29 markets across Australia, except the Northern Territory. However, in 2019 WIN closed five newsrooms – in the New South Wales towns of Orange, Dubbo, Albury, and Wagga Wagga and one in Queensland – due to rising costs and increased competition (Knox, 2019). Later in June 2021, WIN cut four local TV bulletins across regional Victoria and five across regional Queensland, replacing them with three new statewide TV bulletins, for Victoria, Queensland and the western areas of Southern New South Wales, which broadcast to several new areas, including Orange, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga and Griffith. WIN says this has led to additional newsgathering staff being employed in these expanded regions (Perry, 2021b).



## SMALL-MEDIUM NEWS COMPANIES in regional New South Wales

Of the 277 small and medium news businesses with local print and digital outlets around the country, 94 have news titles in New South Wales. Two thirds of these businesses (62) operate in regional areas. The majority of these regional businesses (53) publish only a single title. Of those small publishers operating more than one title in New South Wales (11), most operate within a small geographic area.

The following small publishers operate more than one title in regional New South Wales:

- Wilkie Watson Publications (dark blue) operates four news outlets along the edges of the South West Slopes and Riverina: the Tumbarumba Times, Tumut and Adelong Times, Gundagai Independent and Temora Independent.
- The Phoenix Brand of newspapers is published by two companies and operates primarily in the Hilltops and Central West regions west of Sydney. Roundbox Media is based in Young and publishes newspapers in Griffith, Hawkesbury, Yass and Young. Word & Pixel Perfection is based in Cowra and publishes titles in Cowra, Forbes and Parkes. The Phoenix brand has previously also published titles in Mudgee and Katoomba, but as of 2022 these have closed.
- Myall Coast Communications has a larger geographic footprint across the Mid North Coast and publishes the News of the Area brand localised to the Coffs Coast, Myall Coast, Nambucca Valley and Port Stephens.
- McPherson Media Group is predominantly a north central Victorian business, but also partly owns two Riverina papers – the Deniliquin Pastoral Times and Southern Riverina News in Finley – as well as the Free Press in nearby Corowa.
- Stadtic Media operates at the intersection of the South West Slopes, Hilltops, and Southern Tablelands regions, publishing the Cootamundra Times, Twin Town Times in Harden, and Yass Valley Times.

- Outback Press publishes three papers on the edges of the Orana and Hunter regions: the Coolah District Diary, Dunedoo District Diary and Merriwa District Diary.
- North Western Courier is based in Narrabri and publishes the Courier and Gunnedah Times, both in the North West Slopes region.
- Gilgandra Newspapers publishes the Gilgandra Weekly and Nyngan Weekly in the Orana region.
- There are also several news apps built on the Local Independent Media Application (LIMA), a platform developed by the New Zealand-based iApp Network. The NSW Local App Company operates four local news apps in the Hunter, Orange, Lismore and Port Macquarie. Separately, the Western Plains App covers the large area from Coonamble to Nyngan, Lake Cargelligo, Grenfell, to Bathurst, Gulgong and Coonabarabran, and is operated by Coonamble Times publisher Locolee.

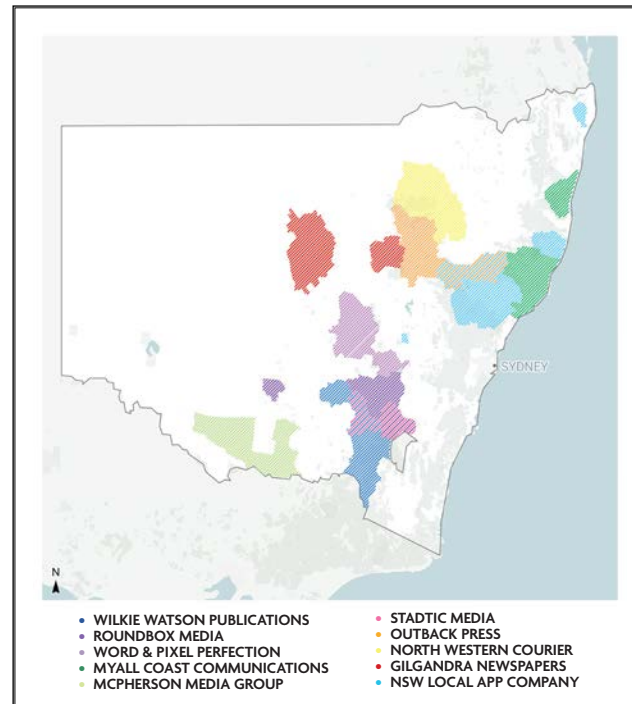


FIGURE 5 | THE PUBLISHING FOOTPRINTS OF SMALL-MEDIUM NEWS COMPANIES IN REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES.

# COVERAGE MAPPING

Coverage of television broadcast and print/digital news companies is mapped separately because coverage is measured differently between the two categories. Television broadcast coverage areas reflect the broadcast licences held by news companies and reveal which regional areas receive the broadcaster's news programming. This is not equivalent to the news company having journalists stationed across the entire licence area, or indeed even producing local news

content for the entire licence area. The same can be said of print and digital news outlets, however as their coverage areas are much smaller and often anchored by the presence of a physical bureau, it is likely a more reliable representation of the news company's news production capability. We have not sought to reproduce radio licence areas because the overlapping licence areas are often too small and therefore too complex to represent visually.

FIGURE 6 | AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY MEDIA AND NEWS CORP PUBLISHING FOOTPRINTS IN REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES.

ACM  
NEWSCORP

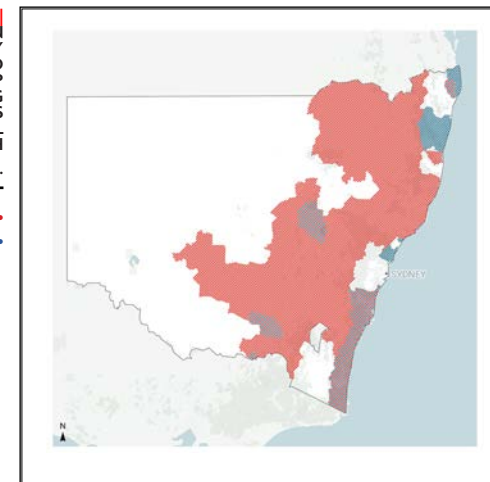


FIGURE 7 | COMMERCIAL TELEVISION BROADCAST LICENSE AREA FOOTPRINTS IN REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES.

NORTHERN NSW  
SOUTHERN NSW  
GRIFFITH / MURRUMBIDGEE IRRIGATION AREA  
REGIONAL VICTORIA  
MILDURA / SUNRAYSIA  
BROKEN HILL  
REMOTE CENTRAL AND EASTERN AUSTRALIA





# INTERVENING FOR CHANGE

Ongoing concerns about the sustainability of regional news businesses in particular have led to multiple government and private sector interventions in recent years.

Some options, available and studied but not implemented, include a tax rebate linked to expenditure on journalists' salaries, modelled on an existing scheme in Canada (Government of Canada, 2021), and increasing philanthropic giving through expanded access to deductible gift recipient status and recognising journalism as a charitable purpose (Dickson, 2021).

## REGIONAL AND SMALL Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package

Three separate programs totalling \$60.4m made up the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and

Innovation Package, which was administered between 2018 and 2020.

The Innovation Fund was the central component of the package, accounting for \$50 million of the total \$60.4 million to be distributed over the three years from 2018. According to the DITRDC, the stated purpose of the Innovation Fund was to 'support regional and

small publishers to transition to and compete more successfully in the evolving media environment.' Types of eligible projects included purchasing or upgrading equipment and software, development of apps, business activities to drive revenue and readership, and training, with funding allocated by way of a competitive grants program controlled by the ACMA.

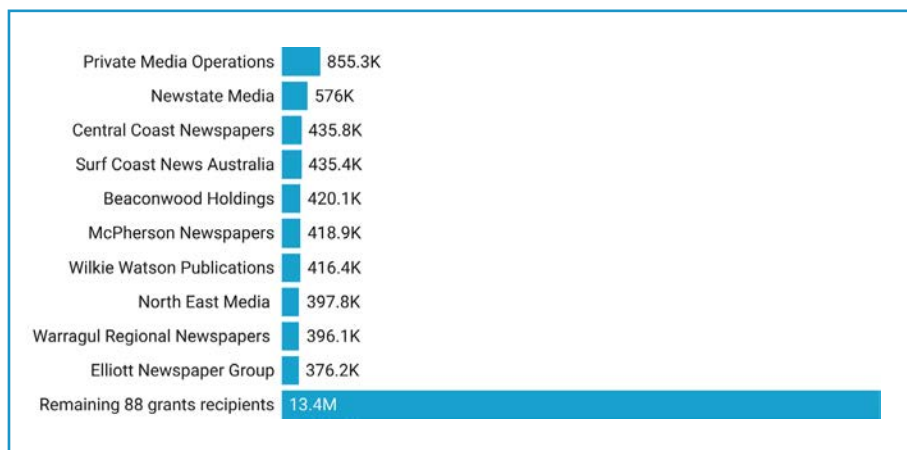


FIGURE 8 | TOP TEN RECIPIENTS OF FUNDING THROUGH THE REGIONAL AND SMALL PUBLISHERS JOBS AND INNOVATION PACKAGE

These grants were capped at \$1 million per year for publishers that met eligibility criteria, including having an annual turnover of \$300,000 to \$30 million. At least two thirds of the fund was reserved for regional publishers and a quarter for small publishers in metro areas. \$18.2 million in grants were awarded to 98 regional and metro applicants across the three rounds from 2018 to 2020 (ACMA, n.d.).

The Fund was criticised by industry for its politicised eligibility (Taylor, 2017), onerous application and acquittal requirements and awarding only a small proportion of the available funding in its first year (ACCC, 2019). Its focus on equipment and software was also criticised, and has been described as a technological determinist approach to innovation which does not reflect the needs of regional and rural media (Hess & Waller, 2020b).

The other \$10.4 million in the package was allocated to two training programs: the Regional Journalism Scholarships Program, which funded placements for students from regional and rural areas; and the Regional and Small Publishers Cadetships Program, which provided financial assistance to publishers who took on cadets for at least 12 months. Country Press Australia (CPA) has criticised the cadetships fund for only distributing \$1.8 million of the allocated \$8 million (CPA, 2022).

In 2022 the DITRDC said that only \$21.5 million of the total package was distributed. Approximately \$36.6 million in unallocated grant funding was redirected into the

Public Interest News Gathering (PING) program after Covid-19 began to impact the industry in early 2020.

## COVID-19 interventions

The federal government intervened to mitigate the financial impact of Covid-19 on the news media sector. The commercial broadcasting tax imposed on commercial radio and television broadcasters was suspended for 12 months and the final round of the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Fund distributed \$5 million in grants across 41 publishers.

**ONGOING CONCERNS ABOUT THE SUSTAINABILITY OF REGIONAL NEWS...HAVE LED TO MULTIPLE GOVT AND PRIVATE SECTOR INTERVENTIONS**



## PUBLIC INTEREST NEWS Gathering (PING)

On 29 June 2020, the federal government announced \$50m for regional and rural media under the PING program. This demand-driven funding had three key objectives: to rescue regional media that had seen a sharp decline in advertising revenues in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic; to sustain and expand public interest journalism in regional and rural communities; and to retain journalists' jobs. Managed by the DITRDC, the funding was available to television and radio broadcasters and publishers in regional and rural Australia to support a wide range of activities, including production and revenue, training, and equipment purchase.

Of the \$50 million, \$13.4 million was new money and the rest was repurposed, unallocated funds

from the government's Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package. A huge chunk from the PING program was set aside for television (\$20 million), \$18 million for publishing, and \$12 million for radio (Davies & Meade, 2021b). An additional \$5 million earmarked for the AAP was later added, boosting the fund to \$55 million (Mason, 2020b).

Unlike the Innovation Fund, the PING program was reserved entirely for regional businesses, had no annual turnover requirement for applicants, no grant ceilings, and grants could be used to pay staff salaries.

Figure 8 is a list of the funding disbursement to the top 10 and other recipients. Of the \$55 million announced for the program, \$1.8 million is not within this chart; it is unclear whether or how this money has been allocated.

## CRITICISMS

Generally, the PING program had less stringent eligibility criteria, which has been a subject of much criticism, including for putting independent start-ups at a disadvantage, and for limiting the involvement of small businesses – a consensus also evident from submissions made to the House Inquiry into regional newspapers. Although the program was designed to support the continuation of public interest journalism in regional and rural Australia through the Covid-19 pandemic, it was criticised by the journalists' union for being 'too little, too late and extremely flawed in terms of who benefited' (MEAA, 2022a).

CPA also claimed the fund favoured 'powerful voices ... and media conglomerates' over 'regional and small publishers', due to the lack of a turnover cap for grant applicants (CPA, 2021). Other grant recipients criticised the government for favouring large media organisations such as Australian Community Media (ACM) over smaller ones. ACM received almost two-thirds of the PING program granted to regional publishers. While funding was fully distributed to 107 regional media organisations in late 2020, 87 per cent of the entire allocation was secured by 10 media organisations. For the earlier regional package, the top 10 received 26 per cent of the total funds disbursed.

One of the main aims of this multimillion-dollar government grant was to protect local journalists from being sacked and newsrooms being closed. However, it was soon revealed that not all grant recipients were abiding by the restrictions on shedding staff or closing regional bureaus. This raised questions about the government's ability and willingness to retrieve grant funding from recipients who had received funding yet continued to scale down their organisations. A number of media organisations, including some of the top-10 grant recipients, reportedly reduced their regional services within months of receiving the funds (Davies & Meade, 2021b). Grant agreements may have prevented the recoupment of funds, and even if requirements had been enforced, only 10 per cent was withheld to ensure performance.

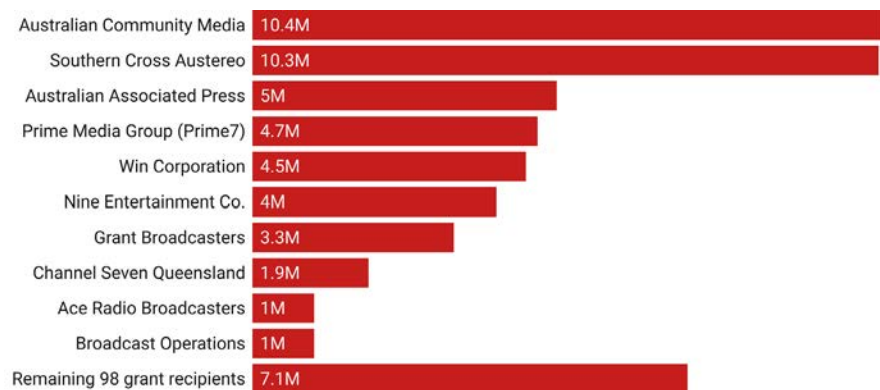


FIGURE 9 | TOP 10 RECIPIENTS OF FUNDING THROUGH THE PUBLIC INTEREST NEWS GATHERING PROGRAM.

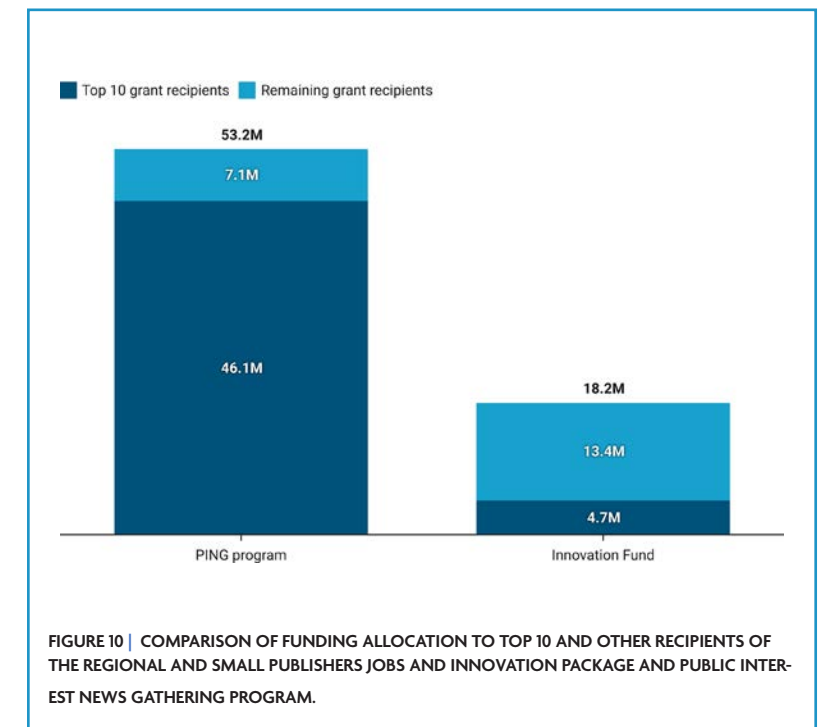


FIGURE 10 | COMPARISON OF FUNDING ALLOCATION TO TOP 10 AND OTHER RECIPIENTS OF THE REGIONAL AND SMALL PUBLISHERS JOBS AND INNOVATION PACKAGE AND PUBLIC INTEREST NEWS GATHERING PROGRAM.







## THE JOURNALIST FUND

The Journalist Fund was announced in 2022 in the federal government's Media Policy Statement and picks up the training and digital upskilling focus from the earlier Jobs and Innovation Package. It follows calls from CPA to either reinstate the cadetships program or add cadet journalists to the federal government's broader \$1.3 billion apprenticeships funding scheme. The federal government allocated \$10 million to support regional media organisations to hire new cadet journalists (\$8 million) and upskill existing journalists (\$2 million) over a two-year period. The fund is intended to assist regional news businesses in the transition to digital business models and cover the cost of training.

At the time of writing, applications for the first funding round had closed and so far, no independent assessment of the program had been undertaken.

## NEWS MEDIA Bargaining Code

The Digital Platforms and News Media Mandatory Bargaining Code is a 2021 law that would require digital platforms, if designated by the Treasurer, to negotiate commercial agreements with news media businesses for the use of their content. At the time of writing, no platform has been designated as the two companies most likely to be subject to the law, Google parent

company Alphabet and Facebook parent Meta, have entered into multiple commercial agreements with news publishers (The Treasury, 2022).

Deals made outside the Code are estimated to have an overall annual value of more than \$200 million, with the majority of this going to News Corp Australia, Nine Entertainment Co and Seven West Media (Sims, 2022). Other companies to have finalised deals with the platforms include the ABC, Guardian Australia, ACM and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), as well as smaller publishers such as The Conversation, Times News Group and Junkee Media.

CPA collectively negotiated commercial agreements with both platforms on behalf of its membership, the value of which have not been disclosed. CPA says that most of its membership is covered by these deals and one regional publisher submitted to the House Inquiry (HRSCCA, 2022) that the agreements would cover 25 to 30 percent of their editorial staff salaries (McPherson Media Group, 2022). The ACCC also granted Commercial Radio Australia authorisation to collectively bargain on behalf of its broadcast members whilst Minderoo, the philanthropic vehicle of billionaire Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest, has collectively bargained on behalf of a group of independent outlets, including regional media outlets such as the Naracoorte Community News (Samios, 2022).

There has also been some criticism of the terms of these CPA deals, which are said to impose a high

content output burden on participants that may exceed the value of the deal for some businesses (see Submissions No. 10, 12 and 23 to The Future of Regional Newspapers in a Digital World: Inquiry into Australia's Regional Newspapers), and to entirely exclude the salary costs associated with owner-operator publishers (Nicholls, 2022), preventing the smallest part of the market from benefitting.

Though the Code is dormant, and its eligibility requirements are not binding on commercial deals, the law's requirement that a company be able to prove it earned \$150,000 in revenue in the previous year has also been criticised for limiting the ability of hyperlocal publishers to engage the platforms on commercial terms (Murry Bridge News, 2022). The House of Representatives recommended halving this threshold in order to capture more news businesses.

The future of deals with Meta may be in doubt as the company was reported to be 'shifting resources' away from news (Toonkel & Hagey, 2022), with one news media outlet reporting in July 2022 that Meta will not renew its agreements with US news companies (Fischer, 2022). At the time of writing this report, CMT had no further information as to whether Meta will renew its agreements with Australian news media.

## REGIONAL AND LOCAL NEWSPAPER Publishers Program 2022

In early 2022, newsprint supplier Norske Skog informed customers that due to increasing energy and freight costs, the price of its paper would be increasing. ACM submitted to the House Inquiry that this increase would be 30 percent, calling it "the single biggest threat to the viability of [its] publishing business" after Covid-19 (ACM, 2022). Other reporting put the increase as high as 80 percent for some publishers (Bonyhady, 2022).

On 1 August 2022, the Albanese government announced \$15 million in grants to support regional publishers under the Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program. The program is demand-driven and overseen by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, which acknowledges the continuing decline in the quantity and quality of news in regional areas. The program aims to support print publishers in alleviating the increasing costs of newsprint, so they can continue producing core news content for local communities across Australia.

The grant money will be released under two streams, with Stream 1 providing \$10 million to regional print publishers, and Stream 2 providing \$5 million for independent suburban, Indigenous, and multicultural print publishers.

The initial application round was open for three weeks before closing on 19 August 2022. It is short term, with grant agreements only expected to run for six months after execution.

The program is part of a broader \$29 million package to support and sustain regional and rural media providers. The broader package also includes \$12 million that will be spent to assist community broadcasting and a commitment to develop a News Media Assistance Program that will eventually inform news media policy interventions in Australia and formulate measures to support public interest journalism and media diversity.

## PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS

In addition to these interventions to support and sustain regional and rural media, other initiatives have also been taken by digital platforms such as Facebook and Google. Amongst them are Facebook's Australian News Fund (\$15 million) and the Google News Initiative. One of the authors of this report, Monica Attard, chaired the Meta public Interest Journalism Fund disbursement.

**NMBC: DEALS MADE OUTSIDE THE CODE ARE ESTIMATED TO HAVE AN OVERALL ANNUAL VALUE OF MORE THAN 200 MILLION DOLLARS**

# 02 CHAPTER

GARY DICKSON



## SURVEY SAYS

*In this section we analyse the results of two surveys conducted to quantify the amount of regional news published or broadcast by metro media.*

**A**t regular intervals for the duration of this project the research team will sample print, digital, radio and television news content. The purpose of these surveys is to understand the current ecosystem of regional news coverage in metro media and the extent to which metro news audiences are receiving news from regional areas.

This survey will inform the research project's overall goal of assessing the investment of major metro news companies in regional stories. We are seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. What stories from regional areas are published/broadcast to metro news audiences?
  - What are the subjects of such stories?
  - Are there differences in coverage of different kinds of regional areas?
2. What prominence is given to regional news stories?
3. What are the pathways by which news stories from regional areas reach metro news audiences?

The third research question, seeking to understand the pathways by which regional news stories reach metro audiences, is not addressed in these preliminary results. It will be answered in future iterations of the survey (beginning in 2023) by assessing the origination of a limited sample of coded items.

### SURVEY PERIOD

Two survey periods inform the results below:

- The first survey period (S1) was the seven consecutive days between Monday 14 March and Sunday 20 March, 2022. In this period a total of 1231 items were coded across 10 news outlets.
- The second survey period (S2) was the seven consecutive days between Monday 2 May and Sunday 8 May, 2022. In this period a total of 1136 items were coded across six news outlets.

The first survey period in March 2022 was affected by flooding occurring in New South Wales and southeast Queensland, and particularly the major flooding in the Richmond-Tweed region at the end of February into early March. The sample window was delayed twice to not





be taken during active flooding, however, there is still an evident high level of coverage in that region on issues relating to the disaster and recovery. These results should be understood in that context and future survey periods should provide a better indication of 'normal' coverage in comparison.

The second period, though outside the normal biannual schedule for these surveys, was intended to opportunistically capture the reporting period leading up to the federal election on 21 May 2022. It is discussed separately from other results.

## SAMPLE

Taking a relevance sampling approach (Krippendorff, 2019) and consistent with this project's primary focus on major metro news companies, we have identified a set of outlets across digital, radio and television (Table 13) for study. This study captures outlets across each of the largest metro media companies (News Corporation Australia, Nine Entertainment Co, Seven West Media); newer digital entrants (Guardian Australia, The New Daily) and a public broadcaster (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation). This subset is not all the news producers in metro Sydney, but it represents a large proportion of readership and viewership across platforms.

A test survey was conducted by each of the four coders in the weeks prior to the first survey period and informed adjustments to the coding sheet.

Not all outlets from the first sample were included in the second. Initial results suggested that two outlets (The New Daily and news.com.au) are not significant producers of regional news and they were excluded on that basis; while the third (Seven News Sydney) was left out due to limited resources for this additional scope study. We anticipate that these outlets will be restored in future periods.

The outlets in table 13 were sampled in the study.

Print has been excluded from consideration for this study; the digital mastheads of Sydney's two major metro daily newspapers and the national broadsheet are included instead. We consider that the digital product is likely to contain a greater sample of story output and be accessed by a larger audience than a print newspaper. These titles are referred to as 'digital print' to distinguish them from digital-only news outlets.

Only a subset of the total content published by each outlet was coded each day, reflecting the specific interest of this project in stories about regional New South Wales.

- For digital print and digital outlets, coders first identified sections of the website that contained news from across New South Wales. Output to these sections were tracked using a combination of RSS feeds, sitemaps, Factiva and manual searching. Within the content posted to that section, coders assessed every article for whether it was about a regional place, person or issue, which was then coded. Only reported stories were coded, not opinion or analysis pieces.
- For radio and television outlets, coders assessed either the nightly news bulletin

(television) or a selection of news bulletins at regular intervals throughout the day (radio) totalling 30 minutes. Talkback segments on radio broadcasts were not included in the assessment. Due to an error, ABC Radio Sydney data was not available for this survey.

We note that the sample from digital outlets is inconsistent with the sample from broadcast. In digital we can assess all output on any given day and consider regional stories separately to their prominence. This is not the design of the broadcast samples where we are only coding the smaller number of stories that make it to

Outlet	Format	Ownership	S1	S2
The Sydney Morning Herald	Digital print	Nine Entertainment Co	x	x
The Daily Telegraph	Digital print	News Corp Australia	x	x
The Australian	Digital print	News Corp Australia	x	x
Guardian Australia	Digital	Guardian Media Group	x	x
news.com.au	Digital	News Corp Australia	x	-
The New Daily	Digital	New Daily Pty Ltd	x	-
Nine News Sydney	Television	Nine Entertainment Co	x	x
Seven News Sydney	Television	Seven West Media	x	-
ABC News Sydney	Television	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	x	x
Nine News Radio Sydney	Radio	Nine Entertainment Co	x	x
ABC Radio Sydney	Radio	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	x	x

TABLE 13 | OUTLETS SAMPLED IN SURVEY ONE (S1) AND SURVEY TWO (S2).



air in select bulletins; in effect, only assessing those regional stories that have already attained prominence, while not sampling those that may appear in other bulletins or only on web.

This imbalance is justifiable as the research is interested in the audience's experiences of regional news content, and our samples are intended to capture digital print audiences, radio audiences and television audiences separately. However, this imbalance should be considered: while we can be confident that we are assessing all digital print regional content in the period, we cannot say the same for broadcast.

One final caveat applies to the sample. Every day The Daily Telegraph publishes more than 100 stories that are not written by a journalist but are instead computer generated, covering traffic conditions, fuel prices, weather, court listings and business liquidations, localised to different areas around the state. Across the first survey period we coded 702 total articles of this kind at The Daily Telegraph, or over four times

more than its reported stories. These articles have not been included in the discussion.

### FIRST SURVEY RESULTS

Overall, the first survey returned mixed amounts of regional news across the sampled outlets. Some, particularly The Daily Telegraph, had high levels of coverage from regional areas, reflecting the significant investment that News Corp has made in digital hyperlocal titles around New South Wales. The Daily Telegraph published an average of 25 stories from regional areas each weekday; more than some other outlets published across the entire week.

Though no outlet compared to the quantity of output of The Daily Telegraph, both The Sydney Morning Herald and Guardian Australia, which is not a print title in Australia but coming from the same tradition, each had moderate levels of coverage.

Results were far lower for the two digital native publications in the data: at The New Daily and

news.com.au, there was very little coverage of regional issues on most days.

Among broadcast outlets, there was a greater number of regional items identified at both Nine News Sydney (25) and Nine News Radio Sydney (21) than at either Seven News Sydney (14) or ABC News Sydney (16), despite the latter two companies having a larger regional presence through the recent acquisition of Prime Media and their own network of regional bureaus, respectively.

There is no pattern in output across different days of the week that is consistent to all news outlets, except that most outlets ran fewer stories on weekends (though this too is not universally true: Saturday was the third-highest day at both The Sydney Morning Herald and Guardian Australia, and second, off a much lower base, for ABC News Sydney). The Australian, news.com.au and The New Daily appear to not publish on either Saturday, Sunday or both. These have been marked with a nil value rather than a zero so as to draw a distinction between

days with no regional stories published and days with no stories published at all.

### LOCALISM

The following sections focus on local news stories about regional areas in metro outlets. Where an item is not place-based and instead represents an issue that affects regional areas across the state or country it is not included in these results.

Localism is determined using the Remoteness and Statistical Area 4 structures. There is a grey area between a local story and general regional story where it is about a statewide or national

trend but uses local examples as illustration, or conversely, uses national statistics to support a local experience. Examples here would be a story about regional rental markets broadly that is supplemented by an interview from somebody in one town, as compared to a story about a localised Covid-19 outbreak with discussion of statewide and national trends. Coders assessed whether the story was primarily local or general regional on balance, but there is room for subjectivity in this decision.

The study found that coverage at The Daily Telegraph in particular was highly localised: only four stories (3 percent) were not coded

to a particular LGA. Two of these were aggregations of information relevant to every LGA (covering NAPLAN results and local sporting leagues operating during Covid-19), and two were coverage of the state's Little Athletics competition.

Commercial broadcast outlets all ranked highly in localism as well (79 percent at Seven News Sydney, 85 percent at Nine News Radio Sydney, and 89 percent at Nine News Sydney), though it must be noted that far fewer stories were identified overall for each of these outlets.

Around 55 percent of articles published by The Sydney Morning Herald (30 of 55) were coded as specific to a particular place.

Outlet	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	Total
The Sydney Morning Herald	6	7	10	12	7	9	4	55
The Daily Telegraph	27	24	28	26	25	6	7	143
The Australian	12	5	8	10	3	1	-	39
Guardian Australia	13	7	6	9	6	8	5	54
news.com.au	2	2	7	3	5	1	-	20
The New Daily	9	2	3	1	2	-	-	17
Nine News Sydney	2	4	6	2	4	3	4	25
Seven News Sydney	3	0	4	0	7	2	2	14
ABC News Sydney	2	2	0	1	6	4	1	16
Nine News Radio Sydney	4	1	4	2	5	3	2	21
Total	80	54	76	66	66	37	25	404

TABLE 14 | NUMBER OF STORIES ABOUT REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES IDENTIFIED AND CODED FOR EACH OUTLET IN SURVEY PERIOD ONE.



Statistical area 4	SMH	TEL	AUS	GUA	NWS	TND	NIN	SEV	ABC	2GB	Total
Capital Region	3	7	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
Central West	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
Coffs Harbour	0	23	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23
Far West	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	0	1	12
Hunter Valley	2	4	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	10
Mid North Coast	0	11	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	12
Murray	0	2	0	0	1	2	1	1	0	0	7
New England	3	2	1	5	1	1	1	1	0	3	18
Richmond-Tweed	10	40	4	13	5	4	10	3	6	6	101
Riverina	2	8	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	1	16
Sthn Highlands	0	11	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	13
<b>Sub. regional</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>228</b>
Central Coast	2	13	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	19
Illawarra	6	10	2	1	0	0	3	1	1	6	30
Newcastle	1	5	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	8
<b>Sub. regional city</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>285</b>

TABLE 15 | NUMBER OF STORIES ABOUT REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES IDENTIFIED AND CODED FOR EACH OUTLET IN SURVEY PERIOD ONE.

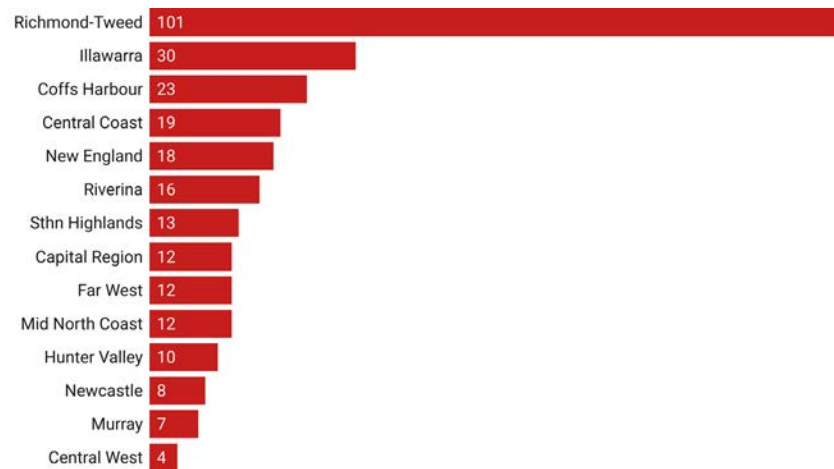


FIGURE 11 | REGION CHART

The Australian, likely reflecting its editorial focus on nationally significant issues, had very few specifically place-based stories across the week: just over a quarter of stories coded were isolated to a particular town or area, as compared to (for example) economic coverage of primary industries and commodities prices. This was also partially true for the three digital outlets - Guardian Australia, news.com.au and The New Daily, as well as ABC Radio Sydney, where just under half of all stories were coded as general regional stories not specific to any one place.

## COVERAGE BY REGION

Unsurprisingly, across all outlets, coverage was heavily weighted toward the Richmond-Tweed statistical area which includes the heavily flood-affected LGAs of Ballina, Byron, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Tweed. This region represented a quarter of all regional coverage for Seven News Sydney at the low end, and almost all coverage at the high end for the ABC (though, again, off a very low base). Other outlets were all clustered between 30 and 50 percent of total regional coverage in this statistical area.

Other results are mixed.

The Daily Telegraph was the only outlet found to have published stories from every statistical area. This included 23 stories from the Coffs Harbour-Grafton region, which also includes the Clarence Valley local government, while no other outlet published or broadcast any item from there. The Daily Telegraph has dedicated drop downs for both Coffs Harbour and Grafton, a history of local newspaper publishing there (the Daily Examiner and Coffs Coast Advocate) and regularly covers local sport, government and crime across all three LGAs.

This was similar in the Mid North Coast region (Kempsey, Mid Coast, Nambucca Valley, Port Macquarie), though stablemate news.com.au was also found to have published one story here: a story about a

shark attack near Port Macquarie which was also published by The Daily Telegraph.

Most outlets published or broadcast at least one item from the Riverina in this period. An outbreak of Japanese encephalitis in Wagga Wagga was covered by each of these and was the only story for broadcast outlets in the sample. The Sydney Morning Herald, The Daily Telegraph and Guardian Australia additionally covered property news, a car crash, and changes to the National Broadband Network.

Major regional cities received less coverage than we might have expected, given the proximity of these places to Greater Sydney, as well as their population density and significant local economies. In general, these cities received a third to half as much coverage collectively as regional and remote areas. Guardian Australia published one article each about the Central Coast and Illawarra in this period, representing less than 10 percent of their otherwise moderately high localised coverage. Two outlets, news.com.au and The New Daily, were not found to have published any articles.

Overall, it can be seen that the only news outlet consistently providing a spread of local news from across the state to a metro audience is The Daily Telegraph. The Sydney Morning Herald and Guardian Australia also cover diverse parts of the state, but in the week that

we surveyed their total output was lower and more geographically limited than The Daily Telegraph. This possibly reflects the varying editorial priorities of the latter two media houses.

As ever, these results should be read with the caveat that significant flooding in the north of the state (and around Broken Hill) almost certainly shifted reporting resources and attention to that region, which certainly explains the high levels of coverage in Richmond-Tweed and may also explain the limited coverage footprints elsewhere in the state. With this in mind, these results may also suggest that The Daily Telegraph is better equipped than other outlets to pivot to cover a major disaster without reducing coverage of other areas. Comparative results from future survey periods should indicate the extent to which resources were shifted in this period across all outlets.

## SUBJECTS

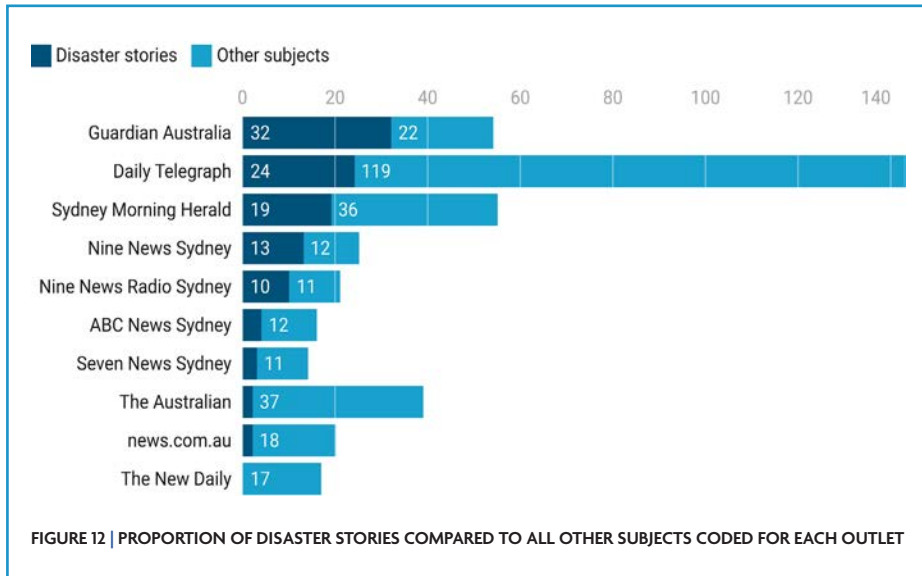
Each item coded was recorded against up to three subjects, representing the topic of the story. As each item could be coded to multiple subjects, the total number of subjects exceeds the total number of stories. Where no stories were recorded against a subject, that line has been removed from the tables in this section for improved formatting.

The full list of subjects follows, with subjects with zero stories

marked with an asterisk.

- Accidentally injury and death
- Arts and culture
- Business, primary industries
- Business, other
- Climate change
- Community event
- Community individual
- Court, other
- Court report
- Crime, violent
- Crime, non-violent
- Disasters
- Economy
- Education
- Environment
- Food and drink
- Government, local
- Government, state,
- Government, federal
- Health
- Indigenous\*
- Infrastructure and planning
- Motoring
- Other
- Property
- Religion\*
- Science
- Sport, local or community
- Sport, state leagues\*
- Sport, national leagues
- Sport, international\*
- Social
- Technology
- Weather

The largest single category of coverage was Disasters, representing 27 percent (107 of 404) of all identified stories. For The Sydney Morning Herald, Guardian Australia, Nine News Sydney, ABC News Sydney and Nine News Radio Sydney, this was also the biggest subject of coverage over the week.



In a related finding, only a small number of outlets explicitly identified climate change during the reporting of the floods during this week, though it is possible that the story had largely shifted from the disaster itself to recovery, as well as policy and funding responses from the state and federal government during the sample week, and as such climate change was less relevant in that context than during the active event.

Other subjects follow a similar pattern to other objects of analysis, in that The Daily Telegraph as the most prolific publisher of regional stories is also the most diverse across different subjects.

The Daily Telegraph's coverage heavily focusses on crime, with 45 stories published in this period from courts; 18 stories were coded

as violent crime, 23 as non-violent crime, and 22 as accidental injury and death. It should be noted that these are not all mutually exclusive categories, and a court report in particular is also likely to have been coded for the nature of the alleged criminal incident. Even so, this represents a significant focus by the paper on local crime and court stories. We also observed high levels of coverage of local government, particularly in Wollongong, Central Coast and Coffs Harbour.

Other outlets were far less likely to report on crime or from regional courts, with only small amounts of coverage at The Sydney Morning Herald, Guardian Australia and Nine News Sydney.

Topics covered by Guardian Australia included domestic violence; endangered wildlife; primary industry; and arts and culture. The weekend

featured more cultural items than during the week, with stories on artisanal trade, community events and Australian history. Sports coverage was slim in rural and regional areas. The sports section of Guardian Australia's homepage is predominately international.

Consistent with expectations, The Australian was found to primarily focus on regional news as it relates to primary industries, the economy, infrastructure and the federal government. As previously

discussed, these topics tend to be general regional rather than localised. Broadcast outlets had a greater focus on health and national sport than other outlets but very little focus on the economy or business as it affects regional areas. Across all outlets, health stories tended to be primarily about Covid-19.

By contrast, across all outlets the survey found low coverage of local subjects such as community events and arts and culture. We also found little coverage of public affairs

issues including the environment, the economy, and science; which may suggest that despite their importance to regional communities these issues tend to be framed with a state or national focus and therefore fall outside the sample.

Although we observed no Indigenous stories from regional New South Wales across any outlet during the sample week, it should be noted that in this period a not guilty verdict was returned for police officer Zachary Rolfe in the death of Kumanjaya Walker in Yuendumu, Northern Territory (Mackay, 2022). As the death and subsequent trial occurred outside New South Wales these stories are not included in this sample, but anecdotally we observe that this story was heavily reported, and it seems likely that editors shifted other resources toward covering this case. Other local stories about Indigenous issues were identified in both Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Finally, coders were asked to assess whether the item was entrepreneurial, meaning that the story appears to be initiated by the news outlet's own effort; or responsive, meaning that it is coverage of something outside the company, such as an event or document. At all outlets, we found that local regional stories were overwhelmingly responsive (96 percent) during the sample week.

Subject	SMH	TEL	AUS	GUA	NWS	TND	NIN	SEV	ABC	2GB	Total
Accidental injury	1	22	0	1	6	3	3	0	0	3	39
Arts and culture	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Business, primary	1	1	3	5	0	0	0	2	0	0	12
Business, other	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Climate change	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	3	0	7
Comm. event	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Comm. individual	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
Court, other	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Court report	4	45	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	54
Crime, violent	3	18	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	25
Crime, non	0	23	0	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	28
Disasters	19	24	2	32	2	0	13	3	4	10	112
Economy	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
Education	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	11
Environment	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	5
Food and drink	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Govt, local	0	21	0	3	0	0	2	3	0	0	29
Govt, state,	0	10	2	4	6	0	0	0	0	0	22
Govt, federal	6	7	5	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	22
Health	0	7	0	0	3	2	3	3	0	1	19
Infrastructure	1	6	3	3	0	0	1	0	0	2	16
Motoring	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Other	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	5
Property	0	9	3	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	17
Science	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Social	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Sport, local	0	4	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	6
Sport, national	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	5	15

TABLE 16 | NUMBER OF STORIES ABOUT EACH SUBJECT CODED FOR EACH OUTLET.





	SMH	TEL	AUS	GUA	NWS	TND	NIN	SEV	ABC	2GB	Total
Entrepreneurial	2	5	1	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	12
Responsive	28	133	9	25	12	8	21	11	7	18	272
Unsure	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	30	139	10	28	12	8	22	11	7	18	285

TABLE 17 | ENTREPRENEURIAL AND RESPONSIVE COVERAGE CODED FOR EACH OUTLET



FIGURE 13 | OVERALL ENTREPRENEURIAL AND RESPONSIVE COVERAGE CODED FOR EACH OUTLET

## Prominence

Coders separately examined the prominence of each regional article through two measures: position on homepages and shares by these outlets on social media.

Homepages of each digital print and digital outlet were screenshot at three intervals – 6am, 12pm and 6pm – each day of the sample week, and the total number of stories and total number of regional stories were counted for each. Coders based outside metro Sydney were served additional algorithmically curated local stories from their region on the homepage, however, these were not included in the regional or total count. Items that were not news stories – such as opinion pieces, crosswords, advertorials – were also not included.

We found that most news outlets have dedicated sections on the

homepage for regional stories, and that it is rare for stories to appear outside of these containers. This tended to mean that the number of regional stories and position of those stories on a homepage was consistent day-to-day.

Guardian Australia launched state-based sections on their homepage on the first day of the survey period. Announcing the change, Editor Lenore Taylor explained (Taylor, 2022) that the homepage previously had limited opportunities to give prominence to state-based stories, where they can be superseded by national stories. These new containers can contain local regional stories in addition to a section dedicated to the VFFF-funded Rural Network.

Those outlets without dedicated sections were the same outlets that had very low levels of regional content output overall: news.com.au and The New Daily. Both were

found to have no regional articles on the homepage at different points across the week. The Australian similarly did not have a dedicated regional section on its homepage and had low levels of homepage prominence.

Regional stories across all outlets tended to be less regularly updated on the homepage than we anticipated. A story from The Weekend Australian Magazine, for example, remained on the site's homepage for most of the week; this was also true for regional property stories at The Daily Telegraph.

Overall, we found that fewer than 10 percent of stories on any given day were coded as regional, and that most regional stories did not feature on the homepage that would be seen by a metro-based audience.

Coders also counted the number of times that coded local regional items were shared by the primary Facebook

and Twitter accounts of each outlet across the sample week. Primary accounts were defined as the account that represents the overall outlet being sampled, not a sub-account dedicated to regional news (such as The Coffs Coast Advocate, run by The Daily Telegraph), nor an account representing a broader news brand (such as ABC News, rather than ABC Sydney). Repeat shares of the same item were counted separately.

In general, we found that social sharing of regional news stories was low, with a slightly higher chance of being shared on Twitter than on Facebook at some outlets. Despite having low local regional content output overall, Seven News Sydney was found to repeatedly share some of its regional bulletins on both platforms, providing it with greater prominence.







## Second survey results

A second survey was conducted during the leadup to the 2022 Federal Election. For this survey, a smaller number of outlets were assessed, and articles sampled were limited to coverage of federal politics. This sample included

stories about public affairs issues such as campaign events, policy announcements, funding commitments and leader debates, as well as topics such as gaffes. It does not include liveblog coverage. Though this survey was still focused on representation of regional issues in metro media, we found that regional electorates received very

little coverage. Of 427 reported articles coded across all outlets in this period, only 85 were specific to New South Wales, and under half of these (32) were localised to regional Australia.

We are cautious about drawing conclusions about the nature of coverage of regional Australia from this small dataset. In general, however, localised coverage of regional electorates in metro media was thin, but we also found few electoral commitments by candidates that would have facilitated increased responsive election coverage of regional issues.

Likely reflecting their electoral competitiveness, the seats of Gilmore (centred around Kiama and Shoalhaven on the south coast)

Outlet	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	Total
The Sydney Morning Herald	17	19	16	23	21	15	22	133
The Daily Telegraph	32	23	22	26	36	5	17	161
The Australian	11	1	0	0	13	3	0	28
Guardian Australia	10	7	5	13	15	8	7	65
Nine News Sydney	3	1	2	5	4	2	6	23
ABC News Sydney	3	2	2	5	2	1	2	17
Total	76	53	47	72	91	34	54	427

TABLE 18 | NUMBER OF STORIES ABOUT REGIONAL NSW IDENTIFIED AND CODED FOR EACH OUTLET IN SURVEY PERIOD TWO.

and Hunter (Hunter Valley) received the most attention. It is important to note that Gilmore was viewed as an unlikely win for Labor at the 2019 election and would likely return to the Coalition, but was retained by Labor with 50.2 percent two-party preferred. The retirement of Labor's member and large number of Independent candidates was seen to create an opportunity for the Nationals in Hunter. Labor retained the seat with 54 percent two-party preferred, a one percent swing toward them. Consistent with other results, we found that The Daily Telegraph provided more localised coverage than other sampled outlets in these areas.

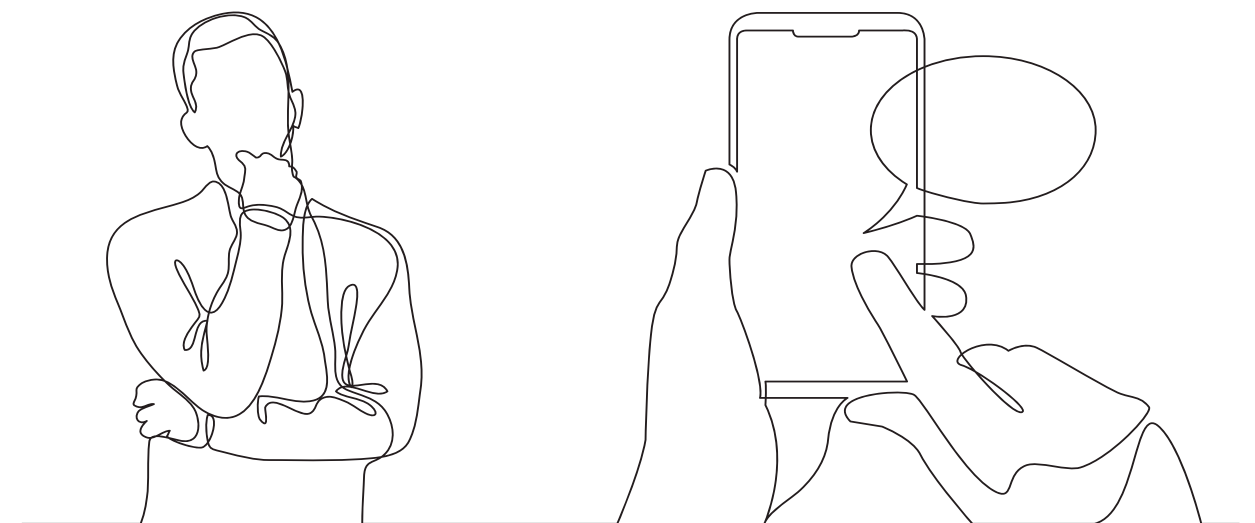
In Gilmore, The Daily Telegraph covered a Coalition pledge for a gas plant in Bomaderry (Schmidt, 2022a) and telecommunications infrastructure upgrades (Schmidt, 2022b). The Sydney Morning Herald reported on a Coalition plan to base new military helicopters in the electorate (Wright, 2022). No other outlet that we sampled covered this area during the sample week.

In Hunter, coverage predictably focused on climate change and the future of coal for the region. The Australian, The Daily Telegraph and Guardian Australia all reported on the issues, which were framed as dividing local communities, as well as the Labor candidate from his own party, and the two major party candidates

from each other (see for example: Varga, 2022; Morrow & Bharadwaj, 2022; Butler, J., 2022). A Hunter candidate debate held during the survey week prompted much of the coverage.

As with the first survey, we found that election stories were overwhelmingly responsive (86 percent) to outside events. With the expectation that election coverage will be responsive, we also compiled a list of 62 localised major party commitments made by candidates across New South Wales during the sample week in order to identify further opportunities for coverage.

We found that other opportunities for responsive coverage in Gilmore and Hunter were available. In Gilmore, Labor made two pledges during the week: for power pole fireproofing in South Durras (Phillips, 2022a) and \$8 million funding for a new radiation therapy centre in Moruya (Phillips, 2022b). There was also no coverage of the Coalition's announcement of funding for the Gerringong Surf Club (Constance, 2022). In Hunter, two other responsive story opportunities were identified, neither of which related to coal: the Nationals candidate pledged funding for the Hunter Regional Livestock Exchange in Singleton (Thomson,







2022) while the Labor candidate announced an upgrade of the Cessnock Goannas' home ground (Repacholi, 2022). Each of these issues were covered by the local ACM outlets (either the Bay Post, Singleton Argus or Cessnock Advertiser), and independent local The Beagle covered announcements in South Durras and Moruya.

Most of the funding pledges identified in Gilmore and Hunter are very localised and may not have attracted the eye of editors for primarily metro audiences, which may partly explain the low levels of coverage of these regional electorates. However, the proposed South Coast radiation therapy centre is arguably a significant health story that could be of interest to metro audiences. One possible example of a regional

issue with statewide and national relevance was in the seat of Parkes, where the National Party announced upgrades to water infrastructure: new pumping stations in Nyngan, Cobar and Hermidale (Coulton, 2022a), levee rehabilitation in Warren (Coulton, 2022b), and funding for Central Darling Shire Council to undertake flood mapping of the Darling River (Coulton, 2022c). These stories, following closely from major flooding events across New South Wales, would undoubtedly be significant beyond their local areas.

Overall, this exercise in assessing the sample against election commitments does not suggest that significant further opportunities for responsive coverage were available for metro editors. There may, however, be value in increasing entrepreneurial

coverage of regional communities, so as to better understand the electoral priorities of regional Australians.

Separate to the survey, during field interviews conducted in Broken Hill and Wilcannia (discussed further in Chapter 3), eight people were asked if the national federal election coverage resonated with their priorities and concerns.

Broken Hill is one of the main towns in the sweeping Parkes electorate that covers almost half of New South Wales, and an outlier in a safe National Party seat, which has delivered a two-party-preferred result favouring Labor in the past two elections. "We're outnumbered ... so we don't have a voice in federal government," said Robin Sellick, the Barrier Truth newspaper's advertising manager



and acting co-editor. Others said they felt the same about the campaign. "When it comes to [campaign coverage] we miss out on a lot of what is important in this area," said Broken Hill Mayor Tom Kennedy, who identified infrastructure, staffing, healthcare and education as priorities for his regional city. Given this, he said the 'focus on cutting carbon dioxide production' didn't resonate as much locally.

Two Broken Hillites also singled out housing affordability and cost of living as estranging them from the election campaign (though rental availability was highlighted by other interviewees as an issue and is discussed further in the Chapter

3 case study). While Sydney is ranked the second-least affordable city in the world behind Hong Kong (Duncan, 2022), the median house sale price in Broken Hill is just \$160,000. "The issues that are probably there for people that live in the city just don't exist in the bush. We're not time poor. We're not paying tolls. We're not getting up at six o'clock to get into an 8:30, 9 o'clock job because we spent two hours in traffic," said Broken Hill business owner Peter Nash. Most people interviewed said they already felt little to no connection with Sydney, with Wilcannia News Journalist Chris Elliott suggesting this may have been amplified by the focus on the teal independents running in predominantly metro

seats. "They represent a very specific area of the electorate ... they didn't resonate with anyone here," she said.

Local ABC Bureau Chief Andrew Schmidt shed some light on this reported marginalisation of local issues during the election campaign. He said he typically got a local story featured in ABC's Sydney TV news bulletin every six to seven weeks but that "over the last few weeks with the federal election, your chances of getting a window at seven o'clock are pretty slim". This would suggest that similar to other sampled outlets and at least in relation to Broken Hill, the ABC puts fewer regional stories to metro audiences during election periods.

**BARRIER TRUTH: "WE'RE OUTNUMBERED... SO WE DON'T HAVE A VOICE IN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT"**



# AROUND TOWN

MONICA ATTARD

How the editorial gatekeepers in newsrooms around the country determine what their audience wants used to depend on personal judgment, as much as events driving the content. What the editor of the day thought was a 'good story' made it into a paper or a bulletin. Now it depends as much on audience as it does on the editor's judgment or the news agenda. Metrics, personal judgment and what reportage is available are the determinants of what appears in newspapers and what is broadcast. The number of clicks a story gets might indicate an audience is interested or uninterested in the subject matter. Similarly, an unusual or unexpected story might rouse audiences to click through, creating a new avenue of audience expectation as well as a new audience for experimental editors. However, whether a media outlet has an available source of reporting is increasingly of importance to editors as traditional non-proprietary sources such as AAP have undergone changes – from bust to reinvention.

In this section, we speak with four editors about the editorial drivers of their regional content and the relationship, where applicable, of their regional reporting to the wider offering of the media company

for which they work. John McGourty leads News Corp's Community and Regional division, chosen for the network's significant footprint across New South Wales and the model used to sustain it. Australian Associated Press's Lisa Davies speaks about the changes to AAP's reportage in the wake of its 2020 rescue. Hugh Martin, ABC Head of Regional, Rural and Emergency, describes the national broadcaster's regional remit and editorial drivers, while Prime Seven Director of News, Paul Patrick, speaks about the hope that Seven's 2021/22 acquisition of Prime will permit greater coverage of regional issues.

## NEWS CORP – Regional and Community Network

After News Corp closed 36 regional and community mastheads across the country as Covid-19 hit, and shifted 76 titles to digital-only access, it simultaneously began hatching a new method of delivering news to regional communities. Prior to 2020, News Corp published community local news in free weekly newspapers. The content was also free online. This however was unsustainable and even prior to

Covid-19 the company was in search of a new, scalable business model to fund local journalism into the future. News Corp began researching whether local communities wanted to and would access local news digitally and if so, how it could be delivered via the metro mastheads in a financially viable way. In 2022, News Corp' Regional and Community Network consists of 111 mastheads, of which eight are regional print and digital titles, 13 are digital-only titles and the remaining 90 are digital-only community titles of which 25 are new greenfield titles launched in the past four years.

Inside the Regional and Community Network there are four community teams. NewsLocal is the brand name for the community division in New South Wales. In Queensland the division is called Quest, in South Australia it is called Messenger and in Victoria, it is called Leader. Also, inside the Regional and Community Network are the Queensland regional digital-only mastheads (formerly APN).

An initiative known as HyperLocal News was trialed pre-Covid-19 in 2018, in the Sutherland Shire in Sydney's southern suburbs, as a subscription-based drop down

on The Daily Telegraph masthead. Over a period of three months, NewsLocal tested engagement both via social media distribution and directly from The Daily Telegraph site. It decided there was an audience for hyperlocal news, promoted via social media and published at a designated time of day when audience was deemed to peak.

By 2019, News Corp had launched a series of digital-only mastheads in Wollongong, Canberra, the Blue Mountains, Wagga Wagga and Newcastle. The engagement figures were good for these hyperlocal digital publications, according to News Corp, covering local community events and news. The strategy seemed to be working. Indeed, there are now 35 local drop downs available for those with a subscription to The Daily Telegraph, offering the ability to plug in a post code to see local news prioritised. As John McGourty says, News Corp was "pleasantly surprised by how successful the division became". The reality was, as News Corp reasoned, free news is readily available but relevant content for a particular geography can't be free and audiences recognised this. It was a question of finding a financially sustainable mode of

delivery, a dilemma faced by all news media houses.

Having discovered the strategy was workable in New South Wales, News Corp ventured next to South Australia, launching the Upper Spencer Gulf News, and Queensland, where it launched the Redlands Community News. In Victoria it launched seven regional hyperlocals on a drop down on The Herald Sun (Albury Wodonga, Ballarat, Bass Coast, Bendigo, Goulburn Valley, Mildura and Warrnambool), four more in South Australia at the Advertiser, (Adelaide Hills, Port Lincoln, Barossa, Clare and Gawler, and Mount Gambier) and two in Tasmania's Mercury (Launceston and Burnie).

In Queensland, the digital footprint had become extensive by June of 2020 during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, when News Corp had decided to stop publishing community mastheads in print and move them to digital publications. As a result, for example, subscribers to the Sunshine Coast Daily also receive a subscription to The Courier Mail in a model repeated across the state. Some standalone publications remain: The Cairns Post offers its

**...FREE NEWS IS READILY AVAILABLE BUT RELEVANT CONTENT FOR A PARTICULAR GEOGRAPHY CAN'T BE FREE AND AUDIENCES RECOGNISED THIS.**





subscribers access to similar hyperlocal publications or stories in Cape York, Cassowary Coast, Port Douglas, Whitsunday, Bowan and Townsville. In the Northern Territory, the Alice Springs-based Centralian Advocate became a hyperlocal drop down in the NT News, alongside a new section for Palmerston.

Across its community mastheads, News Corp is publishing an average of 7000 stories per month, with approximately 10 million page views in the same period and more than 70 percent of traffic coming from search and social media. According to McGourty, growth is good in some places and better in others. Averaged out from inception to maturity, the audience for this hyper local content appears to be growing, which accords with a finding in the 2022 Digital News Report: Australia. A significant 67 percent of respondents, when asked what type of news interests them, chose local news about their region, town or city (Park et al., 2022a).

News Corp's Regional and Community Network currently employs about 300 journalists, according to McGourty, and while the number of journalists has declined in some regions, it has increased in others. Staffing however, remains a perennial problem in these publications, as it does for most community

and regional publications. The journalists employed by the Regional and Community Network tend to be young and local, although in some regional locations recruitment of local journalists can be difficult. With experience and ability, those employed by the network often move on to the company's metro publications. Conversely, young journalists employed at the metro publications tend not to want to move to regional locations.

The Regional and Community Network offering for subscribers of News Corp's state-based mastheads is access to regional news, on demand. However, without a major news event in a particular geographic region known to a wider audience, or personal interest in a regional area, there is a question to be asked about the degree of regional news and information flowing to metro audiences this model offers. McGourty points out that all content published by a reporter for the network is published on the state/metro website such that all content is available to all subscribers and is amplified via social media to local and metro readers. CMT does not have information indicating how many metro subscribers access the regional sites or masthead drop downs or how many regional subscribers access the metro sites, other than incidentally. McGourty

says readers who subscribe for local news, both regional and metro, stay because of the breadth of content their subscription gives them across News Corp. Figures provided on the company's News Regional Media website for prospective advertisers states its regional mastheads reach two out of three locals in key regional areas across Australia. A national survey conducted by the University of Canberra found that nine percent of respondents read each of The Daily Telegraph and Herald Sun, seven percent the Courier Mail and five percent The Advertiser (Park et al., 2022a). Our survey of regional news appearing in metro publications indicates The Daily Telegraph published an average of 25 stories from regional areas each weekday; more than some other outlets we surveyed had published across the entire week.

There is collaboration between the metro publications and the community and regional mastheads on stories of major interest or on issues-based campaigns. McGourty says the editorial leaders of the Regional and Community Network attend twice-daily conferences with the metro/state editorial leaders to ensure a constant flow of ideas between the teams. As such, he says the best stories are supported and amplified by the state/metro teams and there is no duplication of resources. Where the model

appears to work most effectively is when there is a major news event such as the floods in 2022 in Northern New South Wales and Southeast Queensland. On this story, News Corp was able to deploy 76 community, regional and metro journalists from across the stable to cover the floods, providing news reports, photography and videos of the devastating natural event.

As the University of Canberra Digital News Report; Australia 2022 (Park et al., 2022a) shows, more Australian media consumers are willing to pay for news. The decline in digital subscriptions observed as Covid-19 gripped Australia has reversed, with 18 percent of news consumers indicating they had paid for online news in the previous year. That's a five percent increase. The Digital News Report showed that almost one-third of Gen Y news consumers now pay for news, a 12 percent rise on the previous year, and there was a concomitant increase of 13 percent in the number of people who were willing to pay for more than one news service. That's good news for News Corp's hyperlocal strategy as well as another provider of regional news, AAP, which stands to benefit via greater interest in and subscription to the publications of its clients, as well as a new subscription-based website and paid app it offers directly to a consumer-facing market.



## Australian Associated Press (AAP)

Australian Associated Press is largely a news wholesaler, one of about 100 newswires in the world, 80 of which are government owned (Hardaker & Wilkins, 2020). Established in 1935 by Rupert Murdoch's father, Keith Murdoch, its charter declared the service would provide "the most accurate and most searching information of all the world's activities and thought without any tendency toward or opportunity for the exercise of political partisanship or bias" (Forde, 2020). For decades AAP provided news outlets with what journalists and editors agree is straight down the line, non-partisan reporting of stories that its clients had little or no ability to cover, including rural and regional issues, courts, politics and sport. Similarly, AAP has traditionally offered its

national reportage to regional outlets. The wire is certainly well known to working journalists whose outlets either used AAP copy in their newspapers or built on it for their audiences. Indeed, the chances are high that a significant amount of the news Australians have read over the past eight decades has come from AAP.

However, in March 2020, as Covid-19 hit Australia, its then major shareholders – News Corp and Nine (formerly Fairfax Media) – decided to dissolve the ownership agreement. After Nine Entertainment merged with Fairfax Media, it stated clearly it intended to divest itself of regional titles, lessening the need for the kind of copy it took from AAP: along with News Corp, Nine was contributing \$10m a year to AAP's operational budget. News Corp was planning to launch NCA Wire, thereby intending to do AAP's job itself. Both stated AAP, which had two years earlier cut its staff by 10 percent, had become financially unsustainable given the number of free online outlets offering news. AAP was slated to be closed down and 600 staff were set to lose their jobs. Some of AAP's smaller shareholders, among them ACM, were shocked, their businesses to one extent or another reliant on AAP. Then a saviour appeared in the form of a consortium of philanthropists, led by former News Corp CEO Peter Tonagh, which bought AAP for a reported price of \$1 (Samios, 2020b). Redundancies

followed as the consortium of new investors divvied up their \$10m donation to keep the organisation afloat by streamlining its services, reducing the number of staff and restructuring it as a not-for-profit company with deductible gift recipient status.

Since then, AAP has received an initial \$5m in funding from the federal government, followed by a further \$15m including from the PING program. More recently, it received a philanthropic grant from Jibb for a rural and regional desk to be based in Orange in the New South Wales central west, as well as support for a trainee journalist from rural or regional Australia. Support continues to flow to AAP with the announcement of a \$2.7m grant from the Victorian government to help it support its regional clients in the state.

However, the 'new' AAP is different to the previous model. It still supplies media outlets around the country with news reportage that is unviable for its clients to produce themselves. But AAP's focus is now issue-based and uses philanthropically funded specialist desks to produce deeper coverage. Whilst AAP still provides strong local court coverage, council reportage is not a feature.

"We are concentrating on issues for regional Australia on a national and state-based level," says Lisa Davies, CEO of AAP. In New South Wales, AAP has appointed Stephanie

Gardiner, based in Orange in the Riverina as its Chief Regional Reporter. Gardiner leads one of AAP's six new specialist reporting desks – regional news, arts, agriculture, environment, refugee/immigration and future economics – each with a dedicated full-time reporter and with access to photographers, foreign wire and third-party content.

"So, whilst she may report on issues specific to New South Wales, we are also encouraging her to report nationally significant state-based news or national news," says Davies, making Gardiner's editorial brief local to national. Davies says in its regional beat, Gardiner has regular meetings with AAP's deputy editor and editor about "where we want her to concentrate. She went to federal budget and did stories on funding for regional infrastructure and things like that." Davies says clients wanting stories specific to their location are more likely to commission them from their own reporters or freelancers. Davies adds that "AAP is designed to do the baseline coverage for national and state-based stories so that local markets can be the experts in their patch."

"I think it's pretty well understood that we're not going to, we can't physically do hyperlocal stories," says Davies, noting that if something of significance happens in a regional location that has relevance to people elsewhere, it will be covered. She adds that quirky stories from regional New South Wales which often appear in metro media are also often produced but the overall editorial emphasis is now bigger and broader. "Policy impacts in regional Australia [are] often forgotten in the mainstream media. So, I think we definitely try to fill that gap with news that is relevant to everyone, not just relevant to the city slickers."

Davies believes that AAP's ability to post a reporter in a geographic area with a travel budget that allows that reporter to move around is an ability some metro media no longer have, though not for lack of interest in regional Australia. It's a question of cost. In fact, she

says interest from metro markets in regional New South Wales is strong but the days of spending money to fly journalists into a regional location to cover a story that is not major are long gone. The benefit of AAP to its mid-tier clients is that, as Davies says, "it gives them the breadth and depth of content that they need". The same benefit applies to one of AAP's biggest clients, Seven West Media.

"The West Australian takes a lot of text copy from us, and I think they do, probably because they're using us for everything that they don't want to do themselves. They're unashamedly West Australian cheerleaders, the rest of the country they leave to us," she says.

Interaction between the specialist desks allows particularly local stories to gain a national reporting perspective. "One of our specialists' desks is future economics and its run out of Canberra. But this deals with all the stuff that greatly impacts our transition to renewables which is not going to be led by the regions," says Davies. But working together the regional and future economics desk can produce stories that, for the purposes of AAP's regional clients are in fact regional stories.

**"...INTEREST FROM METRO MARKETS IN REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES IS STRONG BUT THE DAYS OF SPENDING MONEY TO FLY JOURNALISTS INTO A REGIONAL LOCATION TO COVER A STORY THAT IS NOT MAJOR ARE LONG GONE"**





## ABC – rural and regional

The ABC has a presence in 58 locations across Australia, including 50 regional locations, with 550 content makers working regionally. They produce text, audio and video stories for all ABC programs and platforms.

The Covid-19-inspired demographic drift from the city to regional areas has caught politicians and, it seems media, by surprise. Hugh Martin, ABC Head of Regional, Rural and Emergency, says more journalists may want to work in regional locations, once Covid-19 shakes out the cobwebs. He thinks Covid-19 has put a break on how politicians and media think about

regional issues but he's hopeful that "as we emerge [from Covid-19] with a leadership that looks around the country and says we need a proper population policy, we need to understand what is encouraging people to leave the capital cities, what support infrastructure we can put into place to enable businesses to grow and communities to thrive ... we're a little bit of that canary in the coalmine. When the economy starts to move, our recruitment [to regional locations] will improve." While policymakers need to catch up, he says ABC regional reporting has been examining the problem closely. However, keeping audiences – even journalists – interested in the issues surrounding population shifts is a challenge. "What we struggle to do is create

momentum around stories for change, or for solutions to be visible or to become more engaged with. And keeping audiences interested in those stories is a challenge. Keeping journalists interested in those stories can sometimes be a challenge!" he says. One important regional story he cites as an example of this difficulty is the Inland Rail story. "It's out of sight, out of mind for most coastal and capital city audiences. But it's a huge investment in regional infrastructure for decades to come. And it appears that it's not being scrutinized in a close enough way. We covered it, the Guardian's been doing a good job of covering bits of it, as well as Nine papers, but it's not a very sexy story. As important as it is, just keeping those kinds of

things visible is a challenge." Reporting this and similar stories of importance to regional communities places them front of mind for politicians, says Martin. Regional journalists, he says, need to take advantage of the good relationships they have developed with local MPs by virtue of being located in the same place.

For Martin, regional reporting comes down to understanding what the local issues are and why they're important for others to hear about in a local, state or national context.

"So, we have a two-pronged approach from a regional content and journalism point of view – we might do a local-for-national story. And we do a local-for-local story. And the difference between the two is a local [for] national story is set in a local community or an area that can travel to a national audience or to a big state audience via one of the many program opportunities.

"But [a] local for local story isn't intended to do that. We need to make sure that we've covered the most important story for a local community today, whether it starts on Breakfast, and is turned into a social post or a digital article, and then is commented on social media or however, we get that virtuous circle going. If it's the story that parents are going to be talking about [at] school pick-up or people will be discussing in the supermarkets, that's the important local story."

The ABC has often said of its regional coverage that it cannot be and does not wish to be the journal of record, the local newspaper that covers all local happenings. However, its local audience does take priority in what it chooses to cover. As a result, as Martin points out, 'local for national' stories tend to be feature stories, when they are not the major story of the day. They may take two or three days to produce. Sometimes, by what Martin calls happy accident, 'local for local' stories gain metro traction. What counts for ABC Regional, he says, is that audiences engage, whether they are in Dubbo, or a politician in Canberra. The challenge is "trying to convince reporters that a story that reaches 5,000 people in a small area that matters to those 5,000 people is as important as a story

that gets 150,000 people because it's been talked about in Parliament in Canberra. The two things never reconcile in a journalist's mind because the numbers are all that matter." Success, for the ABC, is the impact of a story on the audience the story is intended to reach, he says.

Getting regional stories in the ABC's metro programming is complex. There are the stories the main city editor's note and commission, and there are stories pitched by regional journalists. The latter are circulated to state and national programs for selection.

"We've been getting quite good success understanding what it is that programs are looking for, what type of style they want to work in, being able to make those stylistic and turnaround issues reliably consistent. And delivering, you know, interesting, engaging stories on different platforms," says Martin. Many of the pitched stories revolve around the news cycle, floods, Covid-19, federal and state elections. This accords with an observation made in Chapter 3 by journalists working as freelancers in regional locations. However, ABC Regional is also attempting to develop rural reporting as a genre. This reporting has traditionally been industry focused, assuming primary producers are the audience. The ABC is attempting to move the reporting to suit a new audience – consumers, both metro and regional based.

"We are still able to tell the important stories from the industry point of view. But then also being aware that there's a huge metro audience in each of our capital cities that want to know where the food's coming from, how organic food has been produced (organically) or ethical animal husbandry considerations ... as well as big economics. But understanding that if we can broaden an audience for rural producers, then everybody benefits, the audience themselves, as well as the industry," says Martin. Healthcare in regional communities, and in particular Indigenous health priorities is also a focus, along with the impact of climate change on agricultural production and data technology in remote Australia.

Interest in these issues is high. Martin estimates that 25 to 30 percent of the content of the ABC's national programs now report regional issues. "And that's across

the board. It's gone up a lot in the last few years. And that I think has been a testament to a lot of hard work by a lot of people. But just that acknowledgement that the quality of journalism coming out of regional ABC now is as good as anything in any other part of the ABC has taken us a long time to get to that point." Though light and shade is important in journalism, it has taken time and training, says Martin, to get regional reporting to move away from the quirky stories of dangerous animals and oddball characters to the serious issues of national importance.

Social cohesion is a part of the ABC's remit. Martin thinks ABC journalism should be a powerful tool in ensuring Australia sees itself not merely as a collection of capital cities but as a country with a very large regional population.

"We have a third of the population living outside of our capital cities and over the next few years that may increase. All the more reason for there to be a healthy, competent, sustained regional media. It's about expressing what the value and the richness of regional life and living is to capital city audiences," says Martin.

He believes the city-regional divide is breaking down, particularly in New South Wales and Victoria. However, new problems are taking their toll. "We can certainly look around and see some of the problems about misinformation and ideological fracturing and divides in society as a result of poor media. And I just hope that we can avoid that getting any worse in regional Australia." He says the well-known quip by former prime minister Paul Keating that "if you're not living in Sydney, you're camping out" probably still resonates with some metro editors, which is why for Martin, who is based in Ballarat, Victoria, keeping regional news front and centre for metro audiences is critical. Fifty-five new ABC Regional positions, of which 24 are new reporting positions in new locations, might help.



## 7 REGIONAL

Prime Seven Director of News Paul Patrick shares Martin's view that regional communities need a seat at the national table. However, he believes stories which are important to regional communities still take too long to filter into metro markets. The completion of Seven West's acquisition of Prime, rating as the country's most popular television regional broadcaster, in January 2022 might help change that. In the parent company's own words, the acquisition "unlocks premium and integrated revenue potential of a combined metro and regional audience base across broadcast and digital platforms" (Seven West Media, 2021).

In journalism terms, as Patrick puts it: "I think back to the drought, I think back to the mice plague, they take too long to filter into the metro market. There has to be a cataclysmic situation before Sydney really takes interest. And I can understand that to some degree because the Sydney market is a totally different market

to the Tamworth market or the Dubbo market. So, what interests people in Blacktown certainly isn't going to interest the people of Dubbo to a degree. You have to cater for your own markets. Now, I think having a seat at the table of Seven will provide them with some more insights into what's going on more quickly. And earlier."

Prime's footprint is certainly large. Its main markets are northern New South Wales and central and southern New South Wales: "So, if you drew a kind of an arc from the northeast, and you came down, you'll hit Taree. And then you go around Newcastle and Sydney and Wollongong and Canberra and come back down to Wagga Wagga. That's our footprint. And

then of course, WA, we are the only market regional player in WA," says Patrick. It gives Seven a regional footprint in Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia that it didn't previously have. The scope for getting stories from these regions into metro bulletins would be significant, particularly as the acquisition makes producing news cheaper for Prime and provides the opportunity to expand its footprint.

"When you're an affiliate, which was what Prime was, the cost of setting up news was prohibitively expensive, because, for every dollar you earned in advertising, you had to give a sizable chunk of it back to your affiliate partner. So essentially for every dollar you spent, you

actually had to sell \$2 to make it work. And growth was never going to happen in that marketplace. News was a loss leader, essentially. But you have to have news, because without news, then you've got no local presence, therefore your advertising revenue is diluted. But I'm a realist to understand that it is not something that companies are just going to throw money at willy-nilly," he says.

Yet, Patrick says Prime's new position within Seven West won't necessarily increase regional news presence in metro bulletins. There is the aforementioned market differentiation which, in the world of commercial television is a driving editorial factor. There is also a belief at Prime that getting to a



metro bulletin isn't what regional communities need or even want.

"Because you can make a noise, you're still making a noise. It just doesn't have to be seen in Sydney for it to be a story. I don't think communities feel let down about that. People want their stories told; they want power held to account at whatever level it is. So, if you are running stories that matter to your local community, it doesn't necessarily need a national audience, you can make people squirm and make people do things just by squeezing them locally," says Patrick.

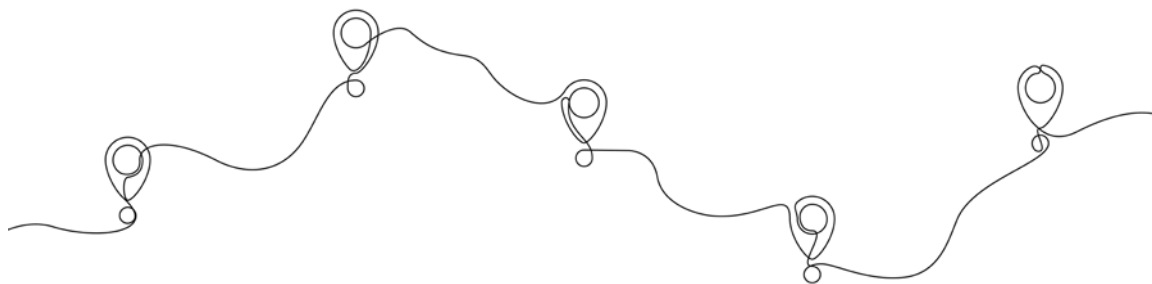
"I think you only need to look at the floods up in Lismore to see how pressure can be brought to bear. Now, that was a combination of local and national media attention. And that ... forced change quite quickly. The national media inevitably disappears. So, it's up to the locals to keep the pressure on. That's where I think it's really important for local media, and we actually don't need national media at that point," says Patrick.

Where Prime may influence what Seven West's metro audiences see from regional New South Wales will come in the form of features. For example, the problems caused by Covid-19 in aged care facilities in the regions was vastly different to those in metro areas. However, given the care facilities are owned by the

same city-based companies, are there not lessons to be learned, stories to be told to metro audiences?

"That's a good angle. It's a hard one to tell. It's a hard one for young, inexperienced journalists to get their head around too. I mean we have a high attrition rate. Because people move to the bush, they do the time and then they move away," says Patrick. Recruitment, as for News Corp and the ABC, also appears to be issue for Prime, and Patrick doesn't believe the acquisition by Seven West will change that: "If you're an ambitious journalist, you've historically wanted to live in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth. Those are the metro markets and that's what people want to aim for," he says, adding that this isn't a bad thing: young journalists are better off, in the long run, making the inevitable mistakes in front of a smaller regional audience than a large metro audience. Nonetheless, Patrick says the acquisition will add to Prime's firepower: "I think that if you're looking at backgrounders, and if you're looking at stories that might take a little bit more digging, I think that the acquisition will allow us to do that better. Because we'll be able to have a freer flowing exchange of ideas – that's outside the daily news agenda." In fact, the conversations between Patrick and "the guys at Seven are exponentially more [in number] than I used to have, and that's a good thing". Servicing the broadcaster's five local bulletins, however, still comes first.

**...PEOPLE WANT THEIR STORIES TOLD; THEY WANT TO HOLD POWER TO ACCOUNT...**



This section focusses on the experiences of regional freelance journalists in pitching local stories to metro newsrooms, in the context of editors attempting to cover regional stories for metro outlets complaining of recruiting difficulties in regional locations, including in finding freelancers to pitch and report. Interviews were conducted with two New South Wales-based regional freelancers; one active in Newcastle and the other previously active in Orange, and two New South Wales-based regional editors for news companies with a metro presence; ABC Broken Hill Bureau Chief Andrew Schmidt, and Guardian Australia's Rural and Regional Editor Gabrielle Chan, to better understand this context.

CMT searched for months, with considerable help from regionally

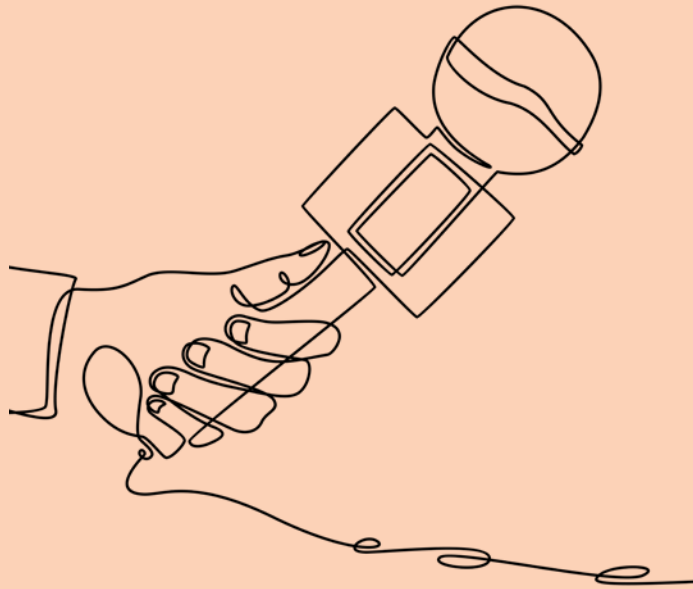
connected media stakeholders, for freelancers located in regional New South Wales who contributed to metro outlets and were not associated with Guardian Australia's Rural Network. We found very few and as Guardian Australia's Rural editor Gabrielle Chan explains below, she is also experiencing a tight freelance market. This in and of itself is interesting to us as researchers and prompted us to seek out editors and journalists to answer the following question:

### **Where are all the freelance regional journalists?**

Around 5,000 editorial positions have been lost in the past decade according to estimates by the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA, 2022b), with evidence that a growing number of

journalists being made redundant in the face of the media industry's contraction and restructure, are seeking freelance careers (Zion et al., 2018). Given the intensity of the contraction during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in rural and regional communities (Dickson, 2020b), Chan assumed:

"... there would be a whole lot of journalists out in rural and regional areas, as I was, looking for work or trying to piece together freelance work or very sort of keen to write. And what I've found is that those people for very simple, obvious reasons, like having to pay their mortgage or their rent, and feed themselves, they are not sitting and waiting for the odd commission every so often. So, they've either transitioned into a communications role, or they're working for a local



paper themselves ... and so it's made it hard to find people who are ready to go, and particularly so with stories that are really timely in the news cycle."

As a result of the difficulty of finding freelancers to work for the network, Chan and May, between them, have written 73 percent of the stories published by the network according to CMT analysis, to 30 June 2022.

In Broken Hill, the ABC's Andrew Schmidt tells a similar story to Chan. He said the small size of his newsroom – eight full-time and two casual editorial staff – meant he was always on the lookout for freelancers. "They're like gold nuggets," he said, recalling only five freelancers who had worked for his bureau in the past 19 years.

"If someone rings me up and says, 'this family has moved to town ... and her background is a journalist', I'd be on the phone with her in five minutes and say 'look, we don't have a full-time job here, however, would you be interested in casual work?'"

Chan said she had 32 New South Wales-based regional freelancers on her books, most of whom were based in Northern New South Wales. In CMT's March survey

(Chapter 2), we also found that the highest levels of coverage were in Northern New South Wales. Chan said fewer than 10 of her pool of 32 freelancers wrote regularly for the Rural Network. "We didn't want to be the kind of old-fashioned metro version of covering rural Australia where you send someone in from Newtown to do two days in a town and do a hot take on what the story was," she said, but added that due to a low number of pitches, especially for hard news topics, she was having to devote significant time to finding stories and people to write them. "Other times we have to do it remotely over the phone," she said, "Natasha [May] has done a lot of those." Chan noted that while the Rural Network is only a year old, she hopes that eventually, 50 percent of all stories will be written by freelancers as "people are now starting to see it as a place to publish things that wouldn't get a run because of the metro focus of most media outlets."

Stephanie Gardiner's experience speaks to the difficulties of working as a freelance regional journalist. Prior to becoming AAP's Regional Correspondent, she freelanced for a year in Orange, New South Wales, commencing in mid- to late-2018. "It became quickly apparent that it was not going to be sustainable [as a freelancer]. The pay is so low ... I was getting work maybe once every couple of weeks, if that, maybe once a month," she said, with most commissions coming from contacts she had made while working in her previous role at The Sydney Morning Herald.

Freelance journalist Nicola Heath said she also relied on her contacts in Sydney, where she had freelanced for five years prior to moving to Newcastle in 2016. "It will be very hard for a freelancer starting out now, I think. And if you were in regional Australia as a freelancer, you could only do it as an established journalist," she said, like herself and Gardiner who had contacts at metro news companies prior to moving regionally.

Heath continues to supplement her freelance income with a casual role at the ABC but said "the best money to be made is in content marketing". A 2020 survey (O'Donnell & Josephi, 2021) of 32 freelancers across both metro and regional Australia found this to be

common, with most journalists surveyed reporting employment and income uncertainty and taking on additional work both outside and within journalism. This appears to indicate that rates of pay for freelance contributions are so low that it is financially unviable for freelancers to survive doing journalism alone. Freelance payment rates vary across industry; it was recently reported that freelance contributors to Guardian Australia had signed a petition calling for a fair minimum rate, superannuation payment and timely settlement of invoices (Madden, 2021).

Whilst Heath has taken up casual work at the ABC, Gardiner took up teaching to supplement her income, before leaving her freelance career behind entirely in 2019. Teaching offered "more reliable and better pay," she said. "I need[ed] more security and more kind of predictable income."

Cape York Weekly Publisher Matt Nicholls said in an email to CPA, which he posted to Twitter in February 2022 (Nicholls, 2022) that his editorial staff also have other employment outside of the

journalism industry. He said this suits both his needs and those of his Queensland newspaper's editorial staff. Indeed, Nicholls noted that many of the freelancers he uses have full-time positions in the mining industry or government agencies and can only freelance for five to six hours per week.

## ARE metro editors INTERESTED?

Both Gardiner and Heath recalled pitching local feature stories to metro news companies that they believed had national significance – Heath a story about offshore drilling near Newcastle and Gardiner a story about renewable energy in West Wyalong, New South Wales. Both journalists said they intentionally gave the local stories a national focus to appeal to metro audiences and editors, but neither were commissioned. "After a while, I just gave up [on pitching]," said Gardiner, who observed that her 'out of the box' ideas, or entrepreneurial stories originated by the journalist, were at odds with the stories she was commissioned to write, which were mostly 'offshoots' of reported news stories

like drought and bushfires. Gardiner observed that there appeared to be no desire to commission localised entrepreneurial stories, with metro editors preferring follow-ups of stories already in the news cycle, Gardiner believed due to resourcing issues in 2018/19.

Unlike Gardiner, Heath had successfully pitched stories to metro outlets but not about local news events. Heath said that other than sometimes using local sources in her freelance work, she found it "more expedient ... to write about things that aren't local".

The struggles of these journalists suggest that experienced freelance reporters who are in regional New South Wales tend to pitch stories to metro editors they already know and cannot support themselves with freelance reporting alone. The production of national or iterative news stories by freelance reporters based in regional locations may reflect the economic constraints faced by metro newsrooms, but even where resources are available to expend on freelancers, they appear not to be 'sitting and waiting for the odd commission'.

**STEPHANIE GARDINER: "THE PAY IS SO LOW...I WAS GETTING WORK MAYBE ONCE EVERY COUPLE OF WEEKS, IF THAT, MAYBE ONCE A MONTH"**



# A RURAL NETWORK

The Guardian Australia Rural Network, which launched in September 2021, includes freelancers across New South Wales and a journalist employed directly by Guardian Australia but placed in a regional newsroom, contributing to both publications. This research and the Rural Network are both funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation. Guardian Australia's network is edited by Gabrielle Chan (2021), and its first journalist, UTS journalism graduate Natasha May, was placed at The Gilgandra Weekly (Taylor, 2021). In the next section, May discusses her time reporting for both outlets. From its founding to 30 June 2022, 159 news stories and features were published to The Rural Network section on the Guardian Australia's website, plus a smaller number of opinion and analysis pieces, podcasts and video interviews.

Primary industries were the largest category of coverage (36 stories), followed closely by infrastructure (35) and health (35). Across these subjects, frequent stories included those on agricultural prices, mobile coverage and shortages of medical staff. The Inland Rail project linking freight terminals in Melbourne and Brisbane received repeated attention: both an initial investigation (Chan et al., 2022) and six follow-up stories over the following three months, particularly in the town of Narrabri. Policy responsibilities of the federal government feature frequently (31), followed by state governments (11), and local governments last (8). Court, crime and sport stories are absent, whereas stories about the environment and climate change are common.

In launching the project, both Chan and Guardian Australia editor Lenore Taylor said that the network is not a substitute for local news: "We can't be on every main street" (Chan, 2021; Taylor, 2021). Rather, the network draws from local perspectives in rural Australia to illustrate issues at the national scale: the regional-to-national model.

This model can easily be seen in coverage. Of the 84 national-scale stories published to 30 June 2022, 61 featured a local perspective. These were overwhelmingly in New South Wales (48), followed by Queensland (8) and Victoria (5). Across the state, these stories were primarily found in New England, Far West and Orana, the Central West and Capital Region, reflecting the location of the first regional reporter and perhaps the difficulty of finding freelance journalists to write from



indications that the network is finding some success.

According to an interim report provided by the Guardian Australia, as of 30 June 2022 the Rural Network had received 5.36m page views across 1.8m unique browsers. The top story was the initial Inland Rail investigation (200,000 page views), followed by local stories: a Gilgandra postal worker who uncovered identity fraud (May, 2022a) (158,000 page views), and a longform piece about social tensions over wind turbine construction in Nundle, New South Wales (Plevey, 2021) (131,000 page views). The fourth story by page views was of the regional-to-national model: a woman whose telehealth experience at the hospital in Cobar (New South Wales) speaks to the phenomenon of Australian-trained doctors treating regional patients from locations overseas (130,000 page views) (Marer, 2022).

Social media sharing is another possible indicator of impact. According to a report provided to the CMT by Guardian Australia, its Rural Network content is shared on social media by key opinion leaders. In terms of policy impact, major issues covered by the network received political attention during the federal election campaign. We are not asserting that Guardian Australia's coverage directly resulted in this political attention, however, Labor committed to a 'rethink' of the Inland Rail project if it won government (Moore, 2022), while the Coalition promised \$106m to disaster-proof telecommunications infrastructure (Schmidt, 2022).

the regions. Unlike other regional news coverage, very few stories were from the coast: only one was tagged for each of the Illawarra and Mid North Coast regions, and two for Coffs Harbour.

More than half of all stories were reported by May (98), and Chan had reported 18 stories at the time of writing; 29 other bylines were observed on reported stories in this period – mostly freelancers, with some Guardian journalists from other beats, among them Michael Burge (9). Tamworth based freelancer Tom Plevey (12) is also a frequent contributor, however, most others were authors of only one or two articles. While May's work tended to be responsive to external events and focused on traditionally hard news issues, including agriculture, flooding and infrastructure, the freelancers tended to provide longer form, entrepreneurial pieces, often on weekends and on social issues relating to community life and individuals or arts and culture. Chan also acknowledges this skew towards feature stories among freelancers in Chapter 3. Health was a frequent topic for both groups of authors.

A full impact assessment of the Rural Network will be conducted in future reports. However, there are early

**THE NETWORK DRAWS FROM LOCAL PERSPECTIVES IN RURAL AUSTRALIA TO ILLUSTRATE ISSUES AT THE NATIONAL SCALE: THE REGIONAL-TO-NATIONAL MODEL**



# GONE GIL

NATASHA MAY

Calling people up as a reporter for the Guardian, interview subjects often assume: “So are you based in Melbourne or Sydney?” When I tell them the Guardian’s main office is in Sydney but as a rural reporter, I’m based in Gilgandra, I feel the tone of the conversation shift. “Oh, I know Gil,” they’ll say.

In my journalism studies I had learnt to seek as many perspectives as possible. Living rurally in Gilgandra truly enhanced my understanding of what that means and how often the perspectives of regional communities are ignored in mainstream media. This was never more obvious than the first week I moved to Gilgandra when ‘Freedom Day for New South Wales’ was the big news story (9News, 2021). While ‘Freedom Day’ rang true for greater Sydney when its lockdown restrictions were lifted for the first time in three months, the first story I wrote from Gilgandra was how, for many regional towns, the new statewide rules actually imposed greater restrictions (May, 2021). While the new Freedom Day rules brought greater liberty for Sydney, for many regional communities like Gilgandra, which had already been out of lockdown for weeks, the new rules simply meant that overnight,

businesses lost the ability to serve the unvaccinated. While I don’t always use Gilgandra as a case study in reporting, there is no doubt that it is extremely valuable for a reporter writing about rural issues to be living regionally in order to understand the communities you are writing about.

Guardian Rural Network stories are characterised by their relevance to regional communities across the country. In the spectrum of media coverage of regional issues, Guardian’s national coverage sits at the opposite end to the local coverage of a newspaper like The Gilgandra Weekly. In the middle, there is the state-based agriculture news of The Land (New South Wales) and The Weekly Times (Vic), as well as the district-based coverage of the ABC with bureaus in regional centres like ABC Central West (Orange) and ABC Western Plains (Dubbo).

Local newspapers, like The Gilgandra Weekly, are often of a very practical nature for the community. The Gilgandra Weekly will publish details about the time and place of community events, local sporting results, as well as relevant, practical advice, like how

to de-bog tractors at harvest time. The community also sees itself directly reflected in the pages of the paper, in pictures taken at that week’s community event, perhaps the local agricultural show, as well as articles about special individual achievements, like a high school student making a state sporting team.

Guardian Australia’s rural coverage doesn’t attempt to replicate the role local newspapers like The Gilgandra Weekly play in rural communities. Rather, it focuses on framing national debate to highlight broader-scale issues facing those communities. It might be relevant to look at the difference between my reporting for The Gilgandra Weekly and Guardian Australia on the issue of aged care. For The Gilgandra Weekly, I wrote about how a government grant for the aged care unit within the local multipurpose service hospital will be used to make the facility more homely instead of hospital-like for the residents (Gilgandra Weekly, 2022). Whereas my coverage for Guardian Australia has been about the financial unviability of private aged care homes in regional areas which has led to closures and made

these areas more reliant on aged care beds within the state-based multipurpose service hospitals (May, 2022b).

The more typical Guardian Australia Rural Network article I write would be about issues that all regional populations are facing such as healthcare, telecommunications, and housing. If the article came about because of a new set of statistics released, I would often use the town/area at the top of the list as the case study. As such, Guardian’s Rural Network has aimed to represent the experiences of people living in regional areas across the country. Not frequently but where appropriate, I will use Gilgandra as a case study. An example is the article I wrote on the announcement of the federal taskforce to investigate the wave of regional bank closures (May, 2021b). While the federal government issued a media release announcing the taskforce, I was able to better understand the issue looking at the banking landscape in Gilgandra. Even though the local NAB branch wasn’t formally shut, it had been closed all week with a sign directing customers to online banking options, or a 45-minute drive to

Dubbo. When I spoke to Mick Wilson, who works in the front office of The Gilgandra Weekly (two doors down from NAB) he said he’d long been forced to do his banking online because the branch was never open. Although the bank in its statement said it was responding to customer preference for online services, I was able to nuance my reporting by understanding the chicken and the egg situation on the ground. While the banks claimed that they were moving online in response to customer demand, regional customers like Wilson said it was the bank’s behaviour forcing them online.

I also wrote about localised news if it had wider resonance across the regional landscape. For example, I wrote about the outback Queensland town of Quilpie, where the local council was offering free land to those willing to build houses upon it, which represented an innovative response to the housing shortage facing all regional communities (May, 2021c). Reporting on the political limbo of the Dungowan Dam is a local issue in Tamworth but it spoke to the issue of water security that

**...IT IS EXTREMELY VALUABLE FOR A REPORTER WRITING ABOUT RURAL ISSUES TO BE LIVING REGIONALLY IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE COMMUNITIES...**





most regional communities face, as well as the transition to a Labor government after nine years of Coalition leadership (May, 2022c). I have also written a more hyperlocal story about Gilgandra when Emily Middleton, the sole journalist at The Gilgandra Weekly, was a victim of identity fraud – and in the course of reporting, I discovered that regional communities are generally more at risk of being scammed (May, 2022d). The story was picked up by several different ABC outlets and was cited on The Drum, ABC Radio Dubbo and Perth, as well as RN Drive. Emily’s phone did not stop ringing with requests for interviews.

The Inland Rail became a particular focus for Rural Network coverage, with an interactive investigative

feature about the project, because it represented almost perfectly the editorial markers of the Rural Network. It is a project which affects a wide range of regional communities across state borders, from Queensland to Victoria. Although the Inland Rail had been covered by other media outlets before, they were often state-based reporters focusing on one area; for example, The Age published a series of articles on Euroa, but didn’t report on the impact along the whole alignment. Guardian Australia interviewed people all along the alignment and found commonalities that transformed what had previously only been reported as local stories in hyperlocal publications, into one of national significance. Up and down the line, people had

significant concerns, which went beyond the individuals whose farms were being cut in two. There were wider impacts such as increased risks of flooding. Guardian Australia was able to put these concerns, presented as issues of national significance, to federal politicians. Not only were a number of email enquiries sent to then-deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce’s office and the Inland Rail chief executives, we secured in-person interviews. When Gabrielle Chan, author of two books on regional Australia, came to Gilgandra to take part in the interviews, the local member for Parkes, Mark Coulton, sat down with her for an interview and answered questions directly about the project. Adrian Lyons, the New South Wales Farmers chair of the Inland Rail taskforce, told us



during the reporting of this story that he would put us in contact with stakeholders, because he could see how invested we had become in investigating the project in depth.

The publication of Guardian’s Inland Rail investigation was a clear example of how what had previously been a marginal issue was placed on the national agenda, bringing it to the attention of a wider metro audience. The main interactive feature garnered over 200,000 page views within the first 24 hours of publication, becoming the most read piece on Guardian Australia’s site on January 25, 2022. The Inland Rail is a news media perennial; the project has been long drawn out and debated. As such, it can be hard to garner attention within the fast pace of the 24-hour news cycle. Guardian Australia’s story wasn’t attached to any particular development within the infrastructure project. We also published an opinion piece by Cameron Simpkins, a former project director on the Inland Rail project, on the need to properly build the railway. Simpkins was subsequently interviewed on ABC Radio Riverina and ABC Country Hour, three days after

our feature, with the ABC acknowledging the Guardian’s coverage as the impetus for its reporting.

After the initial Inland Rail interactive feature was published, it allowed us to report on the local developments that followed. We wrote a feature revealing that the Narrabri Shire Council’s general manager and mayor had overturned previously held concerns among the wider council and its floodplain risk management committee regarding the Inland Rail route. The ACM-owned local paper, The Northern Daily Leader, had previously covered opposition to the route, but the coverage in Guardian Australia appears to have lifted the profile of the issue, at least according to locals. In the aftermath of the publication of the first article about Narrabri, significant momentum developed around the community’s push for an alternative route. I continued to report on the town as the local National Party branch, the Chamber of Commerce and the newly elected Council officially passed motions opposing the current rail route. The local National Party branch’s opposition saw Barnaby Joyce pay the town a personal visit specifically to address the matter. It was



very gratifying to hear local engineer Jim Purcell, who instigated the pressure, say, “It’s obvious as hell ... your reporting lifted the profile. Can you imagine there’s this wonderful pin hole in north-western New South Wales that the managing director of ARTC [Australian Rail Track Corporation], Inland Rail CEO, flooding specialists, three community consultation people plus the deputy prime minister and local member all coming for the meeting. The Guardian’s got some new followers in Narrabri after all this.”

This impact of our reporting was reaffirmed when I reported from a Narrabri Shire Council meeting which passed a motion on the Inland Rail. The general public and media had been barred from proceedings and I found myself in the council foyer waiting with the locals, many of whom expressed their frustration that their local paper was unable to be more critical of the council or the Inland Rail project. However, I understand from being at The Gilgandra Weekly that local papers

are constrained in their coverage of council matters because they need to maintain an amicable relationship to get access to council news as well as its advertising, the latter critical to keeping the paper operating. The watchdog role is complex, but this story served as an example of the limitations of local papers.

The Inland Rail project also reflected broader political and social dynamics across regional Australia. It was a repeated theme how divided rural communities can become on new infrastructure developments. Some members of the community will see the development as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for economic revitalisation. Others view developments as inappropriate for the community, because they may damage the environment and tourism. There is also the sense that when it comes to developments like the Inland Rail and renewable energy projects, it is the metro populations who benefit most from them rather than the rural communities they inconvenience.

Seeing the difference my reporting has made to rural communities has undoubtedly been the most rewarding part of the role. After I wrote about the reactive nature of the SES to flooding in the far west of the state (May, 2021d), Justin McClure, a Tilpa community leader who I interviewed, texted me to say: “Thank you. We have woken them up. Nothing would have happened over the Christmas break. They [the SES] are on their toes now.” Other impacts were on a more personal level. As a case study for the extended delays of PCR Covid-19 testing in rural areas, I wrote about Pam Goldsmith (May, 2022e), who had been denied access to visit her sick husband, Jim, in Coonamble’s multipurpose service hospital for over a week because her PCR test results had not been returned. The story came about because Pam and Jim’s daughter, Kim, is a member of the Guardian Australia rural reporting network Facebook group and I reached out to her after she mentioned her parents’ situation in a comment (in response to a question I asked the group about testing delays). After my media enquiry was made with the Western New South Wales local health district, Goldsmith was told she’d be allowed to visit her husband Jim and an apology was issued.

Similarly, one of our most powerful case studies for reporting on rural telecommunications – Will Picker – who broke his back on his farm and with no mobile phone reception was forced to crawl for one kilometre, came about when I responded to his partner’s comment in the group, responding to a discussion about rural telecommunications. The Facebook group is a valuable way for regional Australians to speak to each other and to metro media: Guardian Australia’s rural reporting network has been able to gather news and case studies from across regional New South Wales despite not having multiple regional bureaus.

The local grapevine is important too. Gilgandra local Karen McBurnie told me about the Inland Rail’s new flood mitigation works. Many people also use the Rural Network’s email address to share their stories, showing that many in regional New South Wales are starting to trust the Rural Network to tell their stories. While Rural Network stories are mostly in response to the most pressing issues in rural communities, editorial requests are occasionally

made by head office. I write these stories with a metro audience in mind. For example, head office requested an article about farmers being affected by electricity prices and the hacks they use for on-farm generation. This story would have been less interesting to people living regionally because they are aware of these methods. For city-folk, the hacks would be novel.

In Gilgandra, many of the locals are grateful to see their region covered in mainstream media; many were touched to see Gilgandra reflected in our coverage of the Dawn Service at Armatree. Dolly Talbott, a traditional owner who featured in the story about the Liverpool Plains buyback of land earmarked for the Shenhua coal mine, told me of her disappointment that other media outlets were ignoring the fact that Indigenous people still didn’t have their sacred places protected despite the good news for farmers.

Living in Gilgandra has made me more attuned to and interested in the connections between metro and regional populations. If you eat food or wear clothes, you

are connected to the agricultural areas producing those products, whether you realise it or not. I have reported on the floods which have directly washed away crops (May, 2022f), and destroyed the railway lines which carry them (May, 2022g), as well as the subsequent food insecurity, bringing Australia to a point where the price of lettuce is making national headlines.

Diminishing media investment in regional reporting underscores the divide between city and bush. Issues directly impacting city folk get ignored and inequalities impacting a very large proportion of the Australian population who happen not to live within cooee of Macquarie Street are not clocked. I know this from the reactions of other Guardian reporters who tell me they are often shocked when they hear the issues we flag at news conferences. My friends tell me they are not aware of the inequalities between city and country. By raising the profile of regional issues and informing city slickers about the people who live beyond the ‘sandstone curtain’ (at least in New South Wales), the winner is social cohesion.

**BY RAISING THE PROFILE OF REGIONAL ISSUES AND INFORMING CITY SLICKERS ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE BEYOND THE ‘SANDSTONE CURTAIN’...THE WINNER IS SOCIAL COHESION**



# 03 CHAPTER



**CASE STUDY 1 - MONICA ATTARD**  
**CASE STUDY 2 & 3 - AYESHA JEHANGIR**

## CASE STUDIES

**A**ccording to PJI, a total of 107 new local, regional and remote online and print news outlets were launched between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2022 by independent or small-medium sized enterprise publishers. Of these, 16 have closed since they launched (Dickson, 2022b).

While the emergence of so many green-shoot publications is heartening, there are issues that need to be addressed. There appears to be a mix of not-for-profit, sponsored and for-profit models. There are questions surrounding the sponsored models which may be seen by their consumers as too dependent on funders. As the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia highlighted in its submission (JERAA, 2022) to the 2022 House Inquiry: “One of the issues associated with hybrid and non-standard news production models is that audiences with limited information literacy might not be able to critically consider the information that is being provided, and the business or political agendas that may inform it.” Further, they can often

appear to be publications that act as community cheerleaders, highlighting positives rather than critically analysing issues and reporting the challenges. Despite the appearance of new publications, news deserts can very quickly appear in the absence of genuine public interest journalism.

We are highlighting three outlets chosen because they are committed to the coverage of regional issues, are a mix of recently emerged and emerging enterprises, and represent different funding models. At the time of publication, one of them -News.Net - has suspended the publication launch.

### CASE STUDY 1: Region Media

In 2016, two businessmen with backgrounds in IT spied an opportunity. It was, as they saw it, an opportunity to disrupt in a city where ACM owned The Canberra Times and the News Corp national broadsheet The Australian dominated. When Tim White and Michael McGoogan acquired a long running web-based Canberra discussion board, regional media was struggling to

find business models able to sustain its journalism and was increasingly being aggregated around a handful of large owners. Independent producers of news in regional Australia often had ‘good editorial ideas’ they thought, but the gulf between editorial ideas and ways to pay for it was huge.

“Those two things are absolutely entwined,” according to Genevieve Jacobs, Group Editor of the small conglomeration of titles Region Media Group now runs. Without a sustainable business model, there can be no regional journalism and like most, if not all, media outlets, Region Media wants people to trust its journalism and the business model that sustains it. It is also focused on getting its audience to go directly to its two major and free websites – Riot Act and About Regional and, for Mandarin speakers, to an ancillary Riot Act China platform, thus bypassing social media. “The point that we worked from is that if people don’t trust what we provide at the front end, they won’t park their money with us in the back end. So, we’ve got to do a robust, decent, good job of the content we create,” says Jacobs. The money being parked at



the back end isn't for subscriptions. There is no subscriber paywall. "We are supported wholly by advertisers," says Jacobs.

The business model is relatively simple – and to date, successful, supporting the bulk of content on all the sites, which includes news reporting of courts, politics and local issues.

Advertisers falls into two categories. The first is Region Media's major commercial partners with whom the group's journalists work to create stories that editors believe are a good fit for their sites. These stories are written mostly by Region Media's business writers, in collaboration with commercial partners. In addition to this 'content by design', major partners also receive banner displays and other advertising content such as videos. Jacobs says her journalists often push back on story suggestions from advertisers and a robust editorial process is deployed to ensure journalistic integrity, based on standards developed in-house.

"If we've got a major client who is a stakeholder in a news story, I will often talk to them. They don't have any control over that story. It's really important to make it absolutely abundantly clear to them that they don't have any referral rights. They can't make any complaints. It's not part of their commercial deal," says Jacobs. Nor says Jacobs would she want Region Media to have business partners who are unhappy to have the light of journalistic scrutiny applied to their activities.

This integrated content model is supplemented by what Region Media likens to the old Fairfax 'rivers of gold' – the printed advertising pages of the newspapers in which people searched for goods and service, the ad revenue funding much of the stable's journalism. In the digital era, this has been overtaken by SEO technology, a development that oddly assisted killing off the printed 'rivers of gold'. Region Media actively searches for front-facing service data, businesses that have a minimum of a four out of five Google star rating, inviting them to enter contracts for relatively inexpensive content based around search engine traffic. Given Region Media's search ranking, it banks on businesses seeing some benefit in being mentioned in what becomes 'branded' journalism. "People

know with their search engine behaviour that if you're in Canberra, and you do that search, you'll find ad, ad, ad and then the Riot Act. And so, it's a very strong learned behaviour in this geography," she says. It is akin to readers in small communities checking their local paper for a service that has the paper's endorsement.

Jacobs says there is a strong stream of enquiry from small businesses in the Canberra region for branded content, which accounts for one in 10 of its published articles. Although not uncommon, branded content has a bad name in journalism. There are issues around transparency, trust, and objectivity which plague the practice. While it is often used to supplement revenue, Region Media uses branded content as its revenue base. Genevieve Jacobs says it can be done ethically. For starters, these 400-word articles are visibly 'branded content' with disclaimers at the bottom of each.

"So, if you're looking for a mortgage broker, for example, what qualifications you need to look for, what they should be able to tell you, what the service will and won't provide. And then we provide no more than five listings in the article for whatever that business might be. And the people who are participating in that certainly know that if they turn into dodgy Bob, we chuck them, which we do. But the behaviour that this relies on is that people are searching on the internet for services," says Jacobs. The journalistic integrity of the pieces written by reporters for small

business is preserved in part, says Jacobs, by permitting comments on each piece, which serve as a mechanism to weed out the 'dodgy Bobs' and in the process, encourage good business behaviour. Genuine reviews, including criticism is permitted, whilst personal vilification, racism and sexism are not.

"You are not paying for a positive stream of comments, you are paying for the search engine traffic, the endorsement of being a good business," says Jacobs. Strong understanding of how to manage search engine traffic helps to ensure bottom-line revenue; businesses are usually given a number at the bottom of the article which goes through to the business but also tracks it as an enquiry that comes via Region Media.

There's a downside too: it's clearly difficult to write interesting things about plumbing, or perhaps even dentistry.

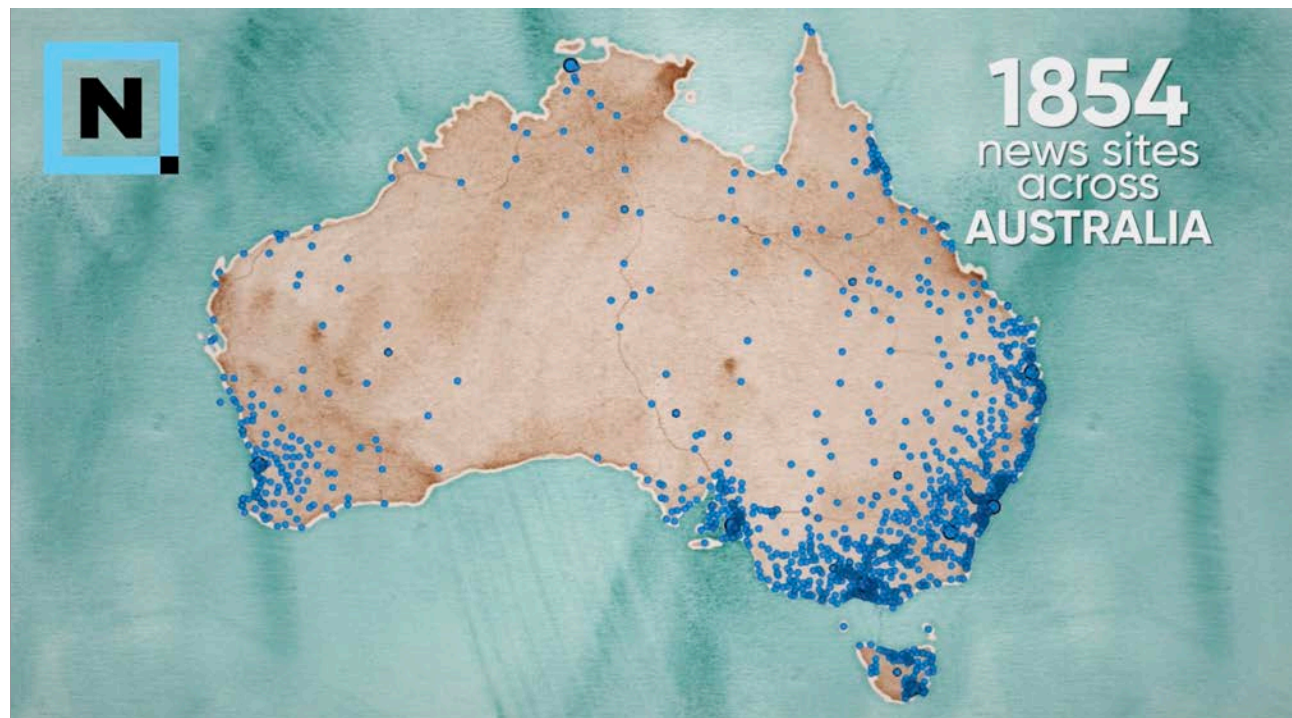
"Sometimes people will want to give us a lot of money for the advertising. But we know that it's just going to be a really hard fit for content creation. And because we are very dedicated to robust result reporting, we don't want to sit in front of them with a spreadsheet that says three people read this article. We want to point people towards the things that will give people the most bang for their buck." Between the two forms of advertising, Region Media has guaranteed recurring monthly revenue to support its news

reporting.

It has eliminated its reliance on social media referrals too. While Region Media has an aggregated social media following of around 300,000, it says it wants its audience to know the websites, not just its Facebook page or Twitter profile. Further, it doesn't want to be vulnerable to algorithmic changes by the social media platforms. "There's definitely something going on with Facebook in terms of news and feature stories and how they're presented. Someone's tinkering with the levers. We can see that with stories, which would sometimes do really well, not doing so well. Others skyrocketing. So, we were constantly prone to that sort of that sort of tinkering," says Jacobs. Facebook's decision to turn off news sites at the height of the debate over the introduction of the News Media Bargaining Code in 2021 cemented the company's determination not to be reliant on social media. Social media strategy is important says Jacobs, but it should never be relied upon.

To date, Region Media's sites attracts between 650,000 and 700,00 readers per month, equivalent it says to the digital traffic on the ACM-owned Canberra Times. It has recently opened an office in Wagga Wagga in the New South Wales Riverina, and appointed a business manager, editor, senior journalist, and an intern. It has raised external capital to run Wagga Wagga as a proof-of-concept for other locations. The central west of New South Wales is firmly within its sights.





## ‘Freedom to fail’

With the extensive digitisation of news media over the last decade, many news media start-ups have attempted to solve what they see as problems with journalism in novel ways. In particular, venture-backed news start-ups, also called for-profit start-ups, have witnessed a significant rise (Wagemans et al, 2016). Mostly funded by venture capitalists or wealthy entrepreneurs, venture-backed start-ups allow companies to focus on innovation and experimentation.

However, despite significant investment and enthusiasm from funders, new ventures do not always go as planned and the uncertainty around the success of news start-ups remains a major concern, especially if they either fail to secure additional venture funding, do not meet expectations for continued growth, miscalculate the scale and revenue-streams of the project or, as Tassinari (2015) argues, investors lose interest or aren’t ‘patient enough’. In any case, the sustainability of news start-ups is vulnerable for multiple reasons that could be beyond stakeholder control.

Additionally, more and more news start-ups now identify themselves as tech companies (Usher, 2017), amongst them Vice, Vox Media and BuzzFeed. While most investors are still interested in the content, their bigger interest lies in gaining a distinct technological advantage over competitors, taking the costs higher than one might expect.

According to PIJI data, 24 print and online news start-ups that were launched in Australia after 1 January 2019 closed within the first couple of years. Most of these were based in regional or rural areas. Additionally, seven news companies operating seven outlets that were also launched after 1 January 2019 also closed before 30 September 2022. Overall, PIJI figures reveal that among news outlets that were launched before 1 January 2019, a total of 113 had to shut down during this time. At the same time, digital publishers were faced with their own set of challenges, especially those heavily reliant on social media for traffic and digital advertising revenue in an advertising market already dominated by Facebook and Google (Mason, 2019). One of the most prominent cases was that of BuzzFeed - an American media, news and entertainment company - which

ceased to operate in Australia in 2020, six years after it was launched. The company cited economic and strategic reasons behind the closure. With each closure, the gap between news and the public is widened, but at the same time, leaving more room for new and innovative ideas.

Amidst the burgeoning journalism start-up ideas, one ambitious example is News.Net – a venture that began with big aspirations and seemingly great potential for regional and rural journalism in Australia. However, by October 2022, before officially launching, it seemed to have hit a stumbling block attempting to gain technological advantage. In May 2022, as News.Net was hiring journalists and other staff, soft launching a holding site which carried international and national news and preparing the technical infrastructure to launch across regional Australia, we spoke with its then global editor-in-chief Tony Gillies. Gillies had been the long-time editor-in-chief of AAP.

Gillies was brought in to create an editorial framework around a concept which was the brainchild of Queensland media executive Michael Norris, who was leading a consortium of wealthy investors. Gillies explained to CMT in May 2022 that the venture’s vision

was centred around ‘giving back to the community’. He saw it as the start of building a new relationship with audiences who have been ‘deprived of trusted media that is free from commercial bias or political agenda’. Gillies said News.Net aimed to earn and retain public trust by keeping all content free, and through a politically agnostic editorial policy leaning neither right nor left.

## The Vision

News.Net had planned to roll out to 1,300 ‘markets’ in all states and territories in metro and regional Australia through a network of 200 journalists, producers, and editors. According to Gillies, markets were identified geographically, with each made up of several towns – in some cases as many as 20 – becoming what Gillies labelled a cluster, with journalists to be assigned to each. According to the plan, each market would have its own URL, although with the same international and national content. The URLs for each site would be different so users could find localised content depending on the region from which they accessed the website, he said. Understandably, this would have required powerful geo-targeting technology that would identify thousands of electronic devices in local

areas, and therefore, contributing to costs, already high with such a large number of hired journalists. For Gillies, this was an experimental but innovative idea, as 1,300 individual websites meant that people would be able to access news exclusive to their location as well as the broader state, national and international offerings.

The News.Net vision, said Gillies, was to foster context-based reportage. “It is not just about focusing on daily news, but also investigating issues others are not paying much attention to and then finding a way forward to look for solutions,” he said in May 2022.

## Business model

The initial investment was roughly \$30 million, according to Gillies, with an estimated annual running cost of about \$20 million, relying significantly on revenue from advertising – an opportunity he said had been missed by many media companies which have retreated from regional markets. However, despite the heavy reliance on advertising, he said the network’s many websites would not be polluted by clickbait stories, sponsored or branded content, or opinion. “The idea is to create a safe environment, for brands and for the audience,” he added.

**...THE SUSTAINABILITY OF NEWS START UPS IS VULNERABLE FOR MULTIPLE REASONS THAT COULD BE BEYOND STAKEHOLDER CONTROLS...**





## Commitment to regional news

In a promotional video on the holding site, News.Net promised substantial coverage of regional and rural Australia. One of the drivers for this push into regional markets was evidence of population decentralisation from metro to regional locations over the past two years. However, for Gillies, there was another driving factor: Australian communities, he lamented, that once used news media as their guardians and advocates had effectively lost their voice with metro coverage limited to either music festivals, farming, mouse plagues, or natural catastrophes.

Gillies said in reality there are many other issues affecting local communities which 'really need to be ventilated'. He gave as an example the 1700-kilometer Inland Rail project

that goes through New South Wales to Queensland and is estimated to be completed by 2027 – a project which was the subject of recent reporting by Guardian Australia, and which is detailed in a reflection in this report by Guardian Australia's former Gilgandra-based reporter, Natasha May.

"The project directly impacts not only the traffic on the roads, but also [potentially] affects the land and how it is being utilised. At the same time, it also opens the opportunity for solar energy projects along the rail tracks ... but it does not seem to get the airtime that it really requires," said Gillies.

To counter the challenge of hiring and retaining journalists in regional locations, particularly with what was planned as being as expansive an undertaking as News.Net, Gillies had designed what he called a 'pragmatic' solution, based on

his extensive experience in managing regional reporting at AAP. Instead of sending young, inexperienced journalists to regional areas, particularly when they are not connected to a community, he would have experienced journalists 'who know what they are doing' cover regional areas with journalism that is executed remotely – a practice many industries have become accustomed to during the pandemic. "We understand that even though they might be writing about regional Australia, they may well have to be clustered into metro areas because that way you can attract talent by creating a critical mass so you can provide generational improvement in the long term."

At the time of publication, the launch of News.Net was suspended whilst work continues to be performed on the business plan and the technological challenges.

**AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES, HE LAMENTED, THAT ONCE USED NEWS MEDIA AS THEIR GUARDIANS AND ADVOCATES HAD EFFECTIVELY LOST THEIR VOICE...**





## Case Study 3: IndyNR

As many large news organisations closed or contracted their businesses in regional and rural areas during the pandemic, Susanna Freymark, founder of IndyNR – an independent regional news platform that covers the Kyogle and Richmond Valley of New South Wales – had bigger plans.

Freymark, who had been working as an editor at News Corp's Richmond River Express Examiner since December 2015, lost her job in June 2020 after the 150-year-old newspaper was shut down, leaving her and the community devastated and without a paper.

Wanting to continue to provide news to her community, she started the Richmond River Independent. She formed the Richmond River Independent Community Association, a body of six local community advisors, which owned the publication and provided financial oversight. Unfortunately, within a year-and-a-half, Covid-19 swallowed the Richmond River Independent too, as advertising revenues plummeted, making it financially unsustainable.

That's when Freymark came up with the idea for a web-based newspaper. She launched IndyNR in 2021.

"I didn't need designers. I didn't need a printer. It was something I could do myself," says Freymark, who now runs the entire website – from sourcing and researching news to writing the stories and publishing them.

Her daily target is a modest four stories, and so far, she says she is succeeding with enthusiastic support from the community. Since February 2022, readership has soared from 18,000 to nearly 40,000 readers a month in June 2022. Freymark is hopeful readership will increase once she launches the IndyNR's app, which she hopes will attract younger readers.

## Working for glory

Freymark wears many hats when she works from her home every day. In addition to being the founder, she is also a reporter, editor, fact checker, social media coordinator, cameraperson and website manager – a one-person army. This is largely due to budget restraints, she says. However, for stories that require specialist knowledge, such as agricultural stories or those that come from or rely on statistics, she occasionally seeks help from a locally based sub-editor, who also worked for NewsCorp on the Express Examiner and, like Freymark, is passionate about telling regional stories.

"He mostly works for free, but when I have money, I pay him."

Besides the sub-editor, IndyNR has a gardening and environment writer, who when needed has written for the website for free. However, after recently receiving a grant from the Walkley-Facebook Fund, Freymark has started paying this contributor \$100 for each story produced.

There is also a humour columnist who writes for the website weekly, and another who writes the weekend quiz, along with a woman from the Country Women's Association of New South Wales, who sends a recipe every week – all for free. "They are in there for the glory," says Freymark.

However, she agrees that running a news website and its Facebook page – which now has over 10,000 followers – as a one-person band is not a sustainable business model. She says she has not taken a day off in the past year and does not think she'll be able to in the foreseeable future.

## Business model

Freymark is very clear about and committed to IndyNR's business model. Registered as a company, the news site predominantly runs on advertising revenue. By keeping production costs low, largely as a result of performing most of the roles and keeping IndyNR web-only, she has been able to keep access to the site free. She says that charging readers to access news, especially in regional communities, doesn't sit well with her.

"I find it really difficult to go and spend [money] on news. It is in the country. You might spend hours with someone telling you their story, you package it, you write it up. I do not want to then say if you want to read your story, you have to pay for it. The main thing is for the news to be free."

The limitations of this approach for newsgathering are self-evident when only stories that Freymark is able to access at no cost make it to the site. IndyNR's major advertisers are the local RSL club, local pubs and eateries, and other small businesses. However, some of them were forced to close during Covid-19 lockdowns. This meant finding other ways to generate revenue. So, in 2021, she applied for an injection of funds through the Walkley-Facebook Fund and received the aforementioned grant of \$92,000.

As a result, Freymark has been able to afford to buy a fire suit for bush fire reporting, a new computer, and a new iPhone for better quality videos. Freymark says she is also using \$10,000 from this grant to turn the website into an app which she hopes will be ready by September 2022. Another \$10,000 is being spent to produce a documentary film on 20 'local heroes', who she said helped hundreds of people escape their homes during the New South Wales floods between February

and April 2022. Once completed, she hopes to sell the film to either ABC, SBS or National Geographic, to generate more revenue for IndyNR.

The Walkley-Facebook grant doesn't permit her to pay herself a salary, but Freymark can use funds to advertise the website on Facebook to alert local businesses that IndyNR is open to taking their advertising.

"I wanted to create a way to continue being the voice for my local community through journalism. I put everything into it. My goal is to hit \$1,000 a week [through advertising revenue] to just pay me enough to keep doing what I'm doing."

Like many times before, last month she was again behind the \$4,000 monthly income target she had set. For extra cash, she proofreads for the Koori Mail, a self-funded fortnightly national Indigenous newspaper, based in Lismore in northern New South Wales.

## Future of local journalism

With so many newspaper closures in the past few years, Freymark says she is fighting hard to keep communities' stories alive throughout the year, not just when there are floods or bushfires.

"People want news about their communities. They want to share their stories, they want to see stories about themselves or say I know that family or I know that place. I can see that through their comments when I put up a story online. Some tell me when they find me somewhere out in the community," she says.

For Freymark, the success of regional media lies in putting community voices and their stories out to a national audience.

**RUNNING A NEWS WEBSITE AND ITS FACEBOOK PAGE - WHICH NOW HAS OVER 10,000 FOLLOWERS - AS A ONE-PERSON BAND- IS NOT A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODEL**



# ON NOTICE!

CHRISANTHI GIOTIS

“Why would anyone want to live in regional areas when all that is reported are the problems? Why does city news media see us so differently to the way we see ourselves?”

These were some of the questions posed, repeatedly, to UTS journalism students when they interviewed regional audiences about local and metro journalism in, and on, their communities. And they were just a few of the many changes regional audiences wanted to see when it came to metro reporting of regional issues.

This section discusses the findings of research interviews conducted by student journalists in seven regional communities spanning New South Wales, from Byron Bay to Broken Hill. The students volunteered to take on the extra responsibility of university-approved audience

research while undertaking paid, month-long internships in local publications made possible thanks to a grant from the VFFF. Regional sustainability is one of the VFFF's areas of interest and given its media background the foundation was keen to introduce students to regional newspapers with the idea that some may be enticed to consider these as their first employment option, post-university.

Once deployed, the students asked their local publications for help contacting ordinary members of the community to discuss what was important to them and what they considered best practice reporting, both by local and metro media. As researchers we wanted to garner information and data about regional news audiences' hopes and frustrations and we wanted to do this through the specific method of a Frame Reflection Interview

(FRI), where audiences are asked to comment on pieces of journalism particularly relevant to their lives. Previous trials have shown FRIs are useful for journalists looking to improve coverage of specific beats (Giotis, 2021; Giotis & Hall 2021). The students were able to ask about the type of reportage most appreciated by their audiences, what pitfalls they should avoid, and discuss ongoing issues in the community. As city students, they were also able to ask about what problems regional audiences observed when metro reporters attempted to cover issues in their area.

Participation was voluntary and as the research went through the university ethics process, students who chose to complete the FRIs came on board as co-researchers with no pressure placed on them to complete the task. We were aiming for four interviews over the four weeks; some students managed

four, others only one. In total 21 qualitative interviews made it into the research project. Interviewees were granted anonymity as the interviews were conducted for research purposes rather than journalism production.

The rich insights provided by the interviewees proved, once again, how important journalism in regional areas is for fostering a sense of local community. In summary, the findings are:

- Journalism can and does play a role when it comes to attracting people to live in regional Australia – and conversely, not attracting them.
- Quality investigative reporting is appreciated, even though regional audiences feel that there is less of it – and they know it's a question of resources.
- Impartiality was highlighted as a key indicator of quality.
- Interviewees spoke of the need for what they termed 'productive' journalism, which offered solutions and not just doom and gloom.
- When it came to discussing the sparse reporting by metro outlets, the feeling of discontent was palpable and spoke to a continuing issue of the country/city divide, particularly in relation to what some interviewees labelled 'stereotyped reporting'.
- Interviewees suggested metro journalists need to work harder at keeping an open mind, appreciating the diversity within regional Australia and getting to know the regions, perhaps through working with local journalists.

The FRI is a semi-structured qualitative research interview that can take anywhere from 20 minutes

to over an hour. Students found participants in various ways; for some this involved the simple word-of-mouth process of the bush telegraph, others introduced themselves and their research through being profiled in the local paper where they were interned, whilst others posted on Facebook.

The participants were asked about their media consumption and then asked to watch three pieces of video journalism and comment on the best and worst aspects of the reporting in each piece. The three pieces of journalism were not common across the interviews but rather tailored to that area to deal with local issues. However, in each region, the three stories chosen were designed to highlight the same three categories of news. Academic literature on local news in Australia has consistently highlighted the community-building role of journalism in regional Australia (Bowd, 2011; Richards, 2014; Hess, 2015) so the first story was one which could be viewed as contributing to community connection. For example, in Quirindi in northern New South Wales, this was a story about a young Aboriginal student winning a music scholarship to play the cello, while in Byron Bay it was a story about a local gin distillery that had converted to selling hand sanitiser at cost price during the pandemic, and in Broken Hill it was the story of a local mother starting a petition to create a border bubble. The second story in each case was chosen to highlight the fourth-estate role of journalism as a process to place government decisions under the spotlight; this included stories about education, hospitals and controversies about local council management. The third category of news was metro reporting of local issues. These stories varied significantly, from stories of mine approvals to beach erosion to Covid-19-inspired regional tourism booms, but all were produced by, and reported in, metro news organisations. In the final questions, community members were asked about what stories and issues

**“WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO LIVE IN REGIONAL AREAS WHEN ALL THAT IS REPORTED ARE THE PROBLEMS?”**





they would like to see more of, and what advice they would give to young journalists wanting to do the best job possible.

Included in the results below are the four interviews conducted in Broken Hill, four in Byron Bay and surrounds, four in Quirindi, four in Tumut and Adelong, three in Lismore, one in the Clarence Valley, and one in the Southern Highlands. In Quirindi, in two cases, couples were interviewed together as one interview, resulting in a slight over-representation; the 21 interviews were conducted with 23 interviewees in total. Interviewees represented the gamut of media experience from former newspaper editors and filmmakers to public-facing health service workers who dealt constantly with media requests, to self-employed developers and farmers, and retirees who had never been interviewed by a journalist.

The FRIs gave both the community member and the student the chance to think deeply about how reportage happens, and how, and why, it might be done differently.

## MAKING THE COMMUNITY HUM and FACTCHECKING

The vast majority of the 23 interviewees were unequivocal when it came to the belief that good quality reporting was important for their everyday lives. For some it was a question of information – as put by one interviewee, you need to know where the potholes are. For others it was a question of community connection: quality local news ‘makes the community hum’ said one who, like others, ascribed local news with the function of social cohesion. In Broken Hill, one respondent spoke philosophically about the way everyday community events bind groups together and so ‘it’s fundamental that a news service is there to underpin social cohesion’.

“I think it unites the town and actually brings it together and gives us a bit of focus to the district,” an interviewee in Quirindi said. “And you’ve got to be educated about what’s going on. In your district as well as the country and the rest of the world really, but you’ve got to really know what’s going on, on your back door or you might as well yeah, live under a blanket, mightn’t ya?”

For many, discussion of community connection came out specifically when talking about ‘feel-good’ stories. One interviewee said she appreciated ‘cup of tea’ journalism where profiles of local community members inform you about the incredible work being done by neighbours both inside and outside the community – in one case as far afield as the Antarctic. However, the community-building role is not limited to this type of journalism: any and all journalism was seen as helping to strengthen the fabric of the community simply by giving the town a voice.

Respondents felt it was important to see their regional communities represented not only positively but in fact, represented at all. Several interviewees spoke about the way regional communities can feel forgotten and how local news helps to stop this feeling of isolation. In Lismore, where one of our students was based with the Indigenous publication, Koori Mail, respondents

talked about the importance of seeing stories of Aboriginal progress and even more basically, seeing Aboriginal names and language used correctly.

While many respondents spoke about the fact that they wanted to see more positive stories, some of those same respondents qualified that answer by arguing it was equally important for the community to know what problems exist – a view of journalism very much aligned with traditional hard news. Furthermore, interviewees from Tumut, Broken Hill and Byron Bay all spoke about the importance of a local paper to make sure rumour and gossip is checked and corrected and while local social media sites were used by almost all respondents to gather local information, they were not considered a replacement for fact-checked news.

Local news was also credited with helping community members understand different points of view on controversial topics, a point which speaks to the issues of trust and impartiality, discussed below.

## ON TRUST and IMPARTIALITY

The FRIs did not specifically ask questions about trust. However, given the extensive discussions of the community role of local news, it is perhaps not surprising that trust was an issue repeatedly raised.

In Tumut, one interviewee believed that the community would be ‘less

trusting’ without the local paper and linked this to hearing diverse perspectives.

“That is why local news is so important,” she said. “So, we can agree to disagree. We can trust each other ... But if I don’t know what you’re thinking and you don’t know what I’m thinking, it’s going to be very difficult to not assume things and jump to the wrong conclusions.”

Interviewees also discussed this issue in terms of the extra trust they felt towards their own local journalists and thus the fact they were more likely to speak honestly and openly with them. One described how locals were likely to be more ‘wary’ of the motives of an outside journalist and another specifically contrasted the experience of being interviewed by a non-local journalist and how they were more ‘uptight’. In Broken Hill, one interviewee said this lack of trust meant outside reporters may not get the full story from locals. Others described how they didn’t trust metro reporters to understand the context of regional issues because those city reporters hadn’t walked in their shoes.

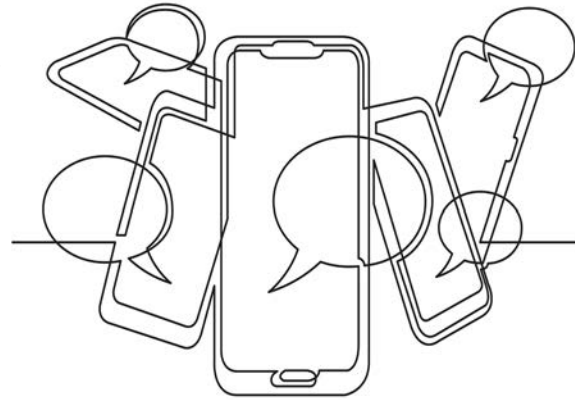
On the flip side, this trust can be over-extended with one interviewee describing how a local journalist in Broken Hill acted as the ‘Pied Piper of Hamelin’. Trust is also easily lost and hard-won back: one respondent told of a community member who refused to be interviewed because they had been

misquoted 15 years ago. Recent research has highlighted that bias, and one-sided reporting erodes trust (Wenzel, 2020; Park et al., 2021). In 10 of the FRIs the issue of impartiality was raised, with respondents praising journalists for creating stories with ‘both sides’ and using ‘diverse voices’ or, alternatively, criticising stories for failing to do that. In one case, two interviewees called out a piece of journalism for only presenting one side of the argument when they knew there were other opinions on the matter. Both interviewees said they didn’t have strong opinions themselves, but they didn’t appreciate the one-sided presentation, and it eroded their trust in journalism. One interviewee brought the conversation back to community progress, arguing, as an environmentalist, he doesn’t just want to hear a story solely in favour of an environmental solution, he wants to know the flip side, the arguments against it and why it isn’t happening because only then can the issue advance.

**THIS LACK OF TRUST MEANT OUTSIDE REPORTERS MAY NOT GET THE FULL STORY FROM LOCALS**

## INFORMATION and the fourth estate

These research interviews took place in the context of major events in regional Australia. The drought and fish kills in western New South Wales, the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires on the east coast and the Covid-19 pandemic – all of which had wrought major changes, including the death-knell or temporary cessation of a raft of local country papers. These issues were still strongly etched in people's everyday consciousness. Interviewees spoke about the importance of their local paper in seeing the community come through crises. In one case an interviewee, speaking about the 2019-2020 bushfires, specifically contrasted the supportive and useful information in the local paper to 'nasty' and politicised comments on the local Facebook page.



The catastrophic 2022 floods in Northern New South Wales had yet to happen but both fire and flood were mentioned by interviewees to highlight the importance of timely, reliable information. Moreover, in a somewhat prescient statement, one interviewee in Byron Bay spoke scathingly about the lack of metro news attention to the frequent flooding events in Murwillumbah, Lismore and Mullumbimby. This criticism came up in the context of what she saw as sensationalist reporting of beach flooding and erosion in Byron which she saw as getting attention because of journalistic bias towards 'Brand Byron'.

"So yeah, it pissed me off. Why did they sensationalise that, and there was no cure. There was no support. It was just sensationalism. And yet, all the little towns up here, like Murwillumbah, Lismore, Mullumbimby they're all on rivers. They all flood constantly. It's just part of the makeup. When they flood, no-one cares. You know when something bad happens to them? It's probably

covered locally, but I doubt if it hits Sydney."

Given the wealth of research internationally highlighting the importance of local watchdog journalism for the proper functioning of democratic societies (Ali, 2016; Nielsen, 2015) and Australian research pointing to the decline of local fourth-estate reporting (O'Shea, 2019), it is hardly a surprise that our respondents were unanimous in describing the importance of investigative and research-based reporting and almost unanimous in their belief that there needed to be more of it. Mimicking case-study research of a regional town in Denmark, which found that a large number of stories about local politics produced by the local paper never appear anywhere else (Nielsen, 2016), one of our respondents said that 'if a journalist doesn't put something in a paper about a government decision we might never find out.'

Interestingly, in these interviews, fourth-estate reporting was not seen as separate to community building but as part of it.

Interviewees also worried about the ability of local news organisations to do investigative reporting because of limited resources. In one interview the fact that local papers were often staffed by young journalists, or alternatively, journalists who had never worked anywhere else was seen as a barrier to news reporting in that there was a lack of knowledge about how to tackle difficult investigations. In another case, in a different town, a respondent said there had been an issue about missing government data which was raised with the local paper but when the paper seemed unable to run the story, locals went to the ABC and 'turned it into a national story, purely because it was the only way to get answers out of council and New South Wales Health'.

## METRO NEWS: sensationalist and stereotyping BUT needed

"I think that often they have a particular line, an image of the area, and they're looking for confirmatory bias. Well, for example, they have an image that you know, Byron is a rich tourist trap, which I mean, I'm not saying this is untrue. But then they're looking to add to that story. Right. That's the angle they came at. So they find stuff that matches that. They've got a story that Mullumbimby is irresponsible, uneducated hippies. And again, there's some truth to any stereotype, but they'll come looking for a story that backs that up. I tend to think that the journalists come here already with an idea of what they're expecting to see."

When asked to describe metro reporting of regional issues, the negative words came thick and fast from our interviewees. These included: disrespectful, patronising, distorted, sensationalist, stereotyping. The feeling of stereotyping was stronger in the iconic regional towns of Broken Hill and Byron Bay, which aligns with research in the United States on geographic bias exhibited by parachute journalists (Lundstrom, 2002). However, a certain stereotyping and disregard was felt across the board. Most respondents felt that in metro reporting there was a focus on deficit, where positive developments were reported as 'one-offs' and negative events were seen as the norm.

However, there were differences from region to region. In Byron Bay, one respondent argued that stereotyping was more likely to occur in 'fluffy' pieces while metro 'stories addressing power' were more likely to be accurate. In other regions, respondents just wanted to be included: in Quirindi, respondents felt a report by a metro news organisation about the possibility of a new coal mine in the area was more focused on the impact in India than on the impact locally and pointed out that not one local had been interviewed despite the fact that locally, the debate over whether land should be used for mining or for agriculture was of vital importance.

While locals were not afraid to criticise metro reporting, they were also generous in their praise for the quality of the production values in metro reports and highly appreciative of stories they felt had been done well. They talked about the need to have regions seen as places of importance, and to keep the spotlight on key issues – for example to report on the bushfire recovery, not just the crisis. They also hoped with more reporting there would come a greater appreciation for the huge diversity in regional Australia, including the fact that two neighbouring towns can have very different perspectives on issues, and that difference of perspective exists within towns too, which is often forgotten by fly-in journalists. In one case, a

metro report was criticised by two interviewees for relying heavily on the perspective of a person described by one as 'loving a good spotlight' and the other as a 'real scare monger'. Both interviewees pointed out that there were several other people with similar positions and authority who could also have been interviewed which would have resulted in a more rounded report. A piece of advice offered to one of our student journalists was simply to ask the interviewee 'do you think you're in the majority' with that perspective, or ask what other perspectives there were.

**WHEN ASKED TO DESCRIBE METRO REPORTING OF REGIONAL ISSUES, THE NEGATIVE WORDS CAME THICK AND FAST... DISRESPECTFUL, PATRONISING, DISTORTED...**



## REPORT PRODUCTIVELY – our survival depends on it

For both metro and regional reporters, the message from our interviewees was that they wanted to see what they termed ‘productive’ reportage of their area. In more than one case, it was moving to listen to the emotion displayed by respondents when shown positive stories. And these strong reactions are not unreasonable when positive reporting is seen as crucial to the very survival of regional towns.

Respondents talked about how stereotypes of deficit and second-rate services made it harder to attract professionals like doctors and teachers and made young people want to move away. Interviewees said positive stories of what’s happening in the community ‘shouldn’t be bumped for traffic accidents’ because people needed to feel good about their area. In one case a respondent linked negative coverage of the area to the difficulty the town was facing in attracting a maths teacher to the school. They wanted metro reports to acknowledge the bushfire recovery and not just the crisis. Another

respondent stated bluntly: “Negative stories push people away, positive stuff brings people here.”

The response from our interviewees again links to the existing literature, such as that of Bowd (2011), who conducted research in four regional Australian locations. She found from her focus groups that regional consumers, particularly community leaders, liked the fact they had a sense of personal connection with their local media, particularly as this meant that media was less likely to sensationalise. When asking news consumers to assess the news media’s performance across five criteria (scrutiny, negativity, relevance, keeping people up-to-date, and explaining events), The Digital News Report 2019 found as follows: “There is little difference between cities and regions, except for negativity. News consumers in regional areas are more likely to think the news is often too negative compared to those in major cities” (Fisher et al., 2019). In Broken Hill, as Travis Radford writes in the following section, interviewees identified sensationalised reporting of a local health story as damaging to the willingness of people to seek emergency care.

**“THERE IS LITTLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CITIES AND REGIONS, EXCEPT FOR NEGATIVITY.”**



## BRIDGING the City-Country DIVIDE

“Well, I’m a realist you know. What you guys are doing here, you do here. What you’re doing there, you do there; it would just be good if on the biggest issues, to bring that divide together ... ultimately, the environment, water, all that basic stuff that we live in, affects everyone.

“It’s actually quite uplifting to have you come in and ask – having a training journalist that asks these sort of questions because ultimately it will be the way – that influence – that you have in the way that you report, that will actually make the changes.”

Throughout the FRIs, multiple interviewees referenced a continuing city-country divide. However, the international travel restrictions caused by Covid-19 also had an upside for regional communities

with more people heading into regional Australia both for tourism and to live. At the same time those new arrivals showed even more clearly to locals how misrepresented they are in the metro imagination, because those travellers talked of their pleasant surprise at finding nice shops and services.

Ultimately, despite their criticisms, our interviewees wanted metro media to engage with their issues and bridge the city-country divide. They want metro media to see the productivity, creativity and innovation that exists and to report regional diversity. They want more positive stories but they also want city journalists to use their resources and skill to help highlight problems, and even more importantly, to highlight potential solutions – before they become crises.

The interviews highlighted another potential divide: when they do

venture out of the metropolis, city reporters can’t adopt the attitude that they are doing regional people a favour in doing so – a feeling picked up by one of our interviewees who said ‘the news presenters think they’re doing such a big deal talking about this, that comes across’. Another respondent advised reporters to ‘take the time to do the anxiety reducing pre-work’ and give regional audiences the time and background information to help build up trust, which will result in fuller, more accurate stories. This is important for all Australians, for as articulated by one interviewee, ‘every action over there, reaches over here and vice versa’.

*Thank you to the student journalists who conducted these interviews: Philippa Clark, Patrick Fordham, Ricky Kirby, Bevin Liu, Jack Mahony, William Owens and Travis Radford.*

# A MILLION MILES FROM SYDNEY

## A CASE STUDY FROM THE THE FAR WEST

TRAVIS RADFORD

### WHY Broken Hill?

Broken Hill was selected for its distance from the state capital and seat of government, Sydney, metro media's limited presence, and past coverage of Broken Hill, and the town's inherent national significance. Broken Hill is one of the westernmost towns in New South Wales, over 1000 kilometres northwest of the state capital, or according to one interviewee, 'a million miles from Sydney' which is only the fourth nearest capital city, after Melbourne, Canberra, and Adelaide, with which Broken Hill shares a time zone and some of its state radio and TV bulletins. Only two metro news companies are in Broken Hill, ABC and Southern Cross Austereo (SCA). However, there have been many stories from the town and region that have captured national and global media attention over the past several years, including the death of a Broken Hill teenager from an infected toenail, drought, mass fish deaths and water theft affecting the Darling Baaka River (The Darling River is called the Baaka by the Barkindji people (Gooch, 2019a)), and in nearby Wilcannia, the largest per capita Covid-19 outbreak in the country. The town was also chosen for its national significance: economically, for its mining, agricultural and emerging renewable energy sectors; culturally, for its art and entertainment

sectors; and historically, as Australia's first heritage-listed city.

A sample of 12 people living in Far Western New South Wales were interviewed; 11 living in Broken Hill, and the remaining one living in Wilcannia. This study combines four interviews conducted in 2021 with Broken Hillites with no connection to media or government, using the FRI paradigm, with eight remaining interviews conducted in 2022, which intentionally sought out people with connections to local civic institutions, including local media (four), government (two), business (one) and the arts (one). The latter batch of interviewees are identified by name and profession and were also asked to name local stories of national significance (one joint interview with two people, acting co-editors of the Barrier Truth, is treated as one in data tables, while quotes have been attributed to individual interviewees) while the former batch are anonymised in accordance with the FRI study's research ethics (detailed overview of the 2021 study and methodology in Chapter 3) and excluded from data relating to local stories of national significance. Both batches of interviewees were asked about their perception of local and metro media coverage and are all included in that discussion. The following questions were put to interviewees (the questions

were adjusted to the Wilcannia interviewee's place of residence) with responses reflected in the data and/or discussion following each question.

#### ***Are there local stories of national significance in Broken Hill and the Far West?***

National significance is a subjective judgement made by interviewees on whether current local issues or events they identified had sufficient merit to warrant metro media coverage. All 2022 interviewees identified at least one local story of national significance (see Table 19).

#### ***How do you perceive metro media coverage of Broken Hill and the Far West?***

As indicated in Table 20, CMT asked the interviewees how they perceive the tone of local stories they identified as of national significance, whether positive or negative. Most people identified significant local stories they wanted covered by metro media, even if the stories were perceived by the interviewee as negative. "They still put us on the radar ... those fish kills are negative ... but it was positive for us because it highlighted the issue," said Broken Hill Mayor Tom Kennedy, referring to the death of up to one million fish in the Darling Baaka River in 2019 (Carman & Tomevska, 2019), which received national and global media attention. All people who mentioned the fish kills were pleased the issue was covered beyond Broken Hill and the

Far West, but others complained metro media's scrutiny of the river's management came too long after local coverage. "It took an enormous amount of dead fish ... to make a good photo," said one Broken Hillite.

Aside from highlighting an issue, Mayor Kennedy praised 'out of town media' for creating a 'positivity and excitement', which he saw as crucial for the success of local mining and renewable energy projects. "A lot of these companies probably looked at Broken Hill because of the excitement generated by one project, and so ... it really is causing more and more people to take notice of Broken Hill," said Mayor Kennedy. But local business owner Peter Nash

said there needed to be more coverage of how the local mining and renewable energy projects will affect Broken Hill's housing stock, to attract metro property developers and avoid a 'housing crisis'.

However, others highlighted negative features of metro coverage. One Broken Hillite said they were concerned the portrayal of the death of Broken Hill teenager, Alex Braes, from an infected toenail as a 'crisis in the rural health system', could lead to fewer locals presenting to the emergency room in the town's only hospital. "The good things are seen as one-off diamonds in the rough, and the bad things are seen a spate

Stories identified	1 – 2	3 – 4	5 – 6	Total
Interviewees	3	2	2	7

**TABLE 19 | LOCAL STORIES OF NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE IDENTIFIED BY 2022 INTERVIEWEES**

Subject	Positive	Negative	Total
Community Event	1	-	1
Arts and Culture	1	-	1
Environment	-	2	2
Local business and economy	5	1	6
Housing	-	2	2
Health	-	2	2
Total	7	7	14

**TABLE 19 | THE TONE IN WHICH THE 2022 INTERVIEWEES VIEWED THE STORIES THEY IDENTIFIED IN TABLE 18, AS WELL AS THE CORRESPONDING SUBJECTS OF THESE STORIES.**





of things,” they said, contrasting the media coverage of a Wilcannia school teacher who won a prestigious teaching award with that of Alex Braes’ death. Wilcannia News Journalist Chris Elliott similarly criticised the media coverage of a negative news event in Wilcannia for its local impacts. In 2021, the predominantly Aboriginal town experienced the largest per capita Covid-19 outbreak in Australia, with 20 percent of the population infected with the virus (Siebert et al., 2021). “The more the government did, the more the people wanted, the more the media pushed to have more delivered here ... maybe somebody missed out,” Elliott said of unused services and medical supplies allocated to Wilcannia by the state government. She blamed the overallocation on a ‘gross overreaction’ by metro media, and criticised social media for causing distress and division.

Other interviewees however hailed social media as a tool to tell their side of the story to a metro audience, or to counter metro media coverage. “We’ve had a lot of tourism in Broken Hill around some significant events [Mundi Mundi Bash]. We’ve also got a lot of film and production happening in the region [Mad Max Furiosa] ... and I think these are the aspects that might not necessarily be reaching our counterparts in the city,” said Shae Nevill of Regional Development Australia Broken Hill, who uses social media to expose the positive aspects of living in the region to metro

audiences. She said she was competing with negative metro coverage as well as famous movies filmed near Broken Hill that portrayed the town as ‘tumbleweeds rolling across a barren land’. However, social media has also been used to promote local issues, with a viral video of two local men at the scene of the fish deaths posted to the Facebook page of a sheep station near Broken Hill in 2019 (Tolarno Station, 2019), which has been viewed 6.8 million times to date, and has been broadcast by numerous TV news outlets.

Andrew Schmidt said the local ABC also uses social media and gave the example of a photo of Chris Hemsworth in the town for the filming of *Mad Max Furiosa*, which was originally posted to ABC Broken Hill’s social media accounts and subsequently shared across the ABC social media network, which Schmidt said happens about three times a month. “Stories of a local nature can go statewide, Australia wide ... so that I think is one of the great things about the ABC,” he said, estimating local stories also make the ABC website’s front page every three to four weeks and the Sydney TV bulletin every six to seven weeks, as occurred with the Mundi Mundi Bash, a local festival he said represented a ‘uniqueness’ that appeals to a national audience. Schmidt said the ABC was often the first metro news company on the scene of big local stories of national significance but that ‘we only lead because we’re here’.



Interviewees expressed an almost unanimous desire for significant local stories to receive metro coverage, albeit in a less sensational and more balanced way. But they also reported feeling disconnected from metro issues (as discussed in our survey analysis in Chapter 2) and metro areas, especially Sydney. “The majority of people here, if they have to travel for health reasons, children to boarding schools, family, the great majority travel into South Australia,” said Schmidt, who noted much of

Broken Hill’s state news is broadcast out of Adelaide, which may partly explain why interviewees felt little connection with Sydney.

#### **How do you perceive local media coverage of Broken Hill and the Far West?**

The two traditional roles of local news are its watchdog role, that holds local institutions to account, and as a builder and maintainer of community identity and cohesion (Park et al., 2022b). Participants overwhelmingly referenced and

praised the second role, including the Barrier Truth’s (BT) management. “We’re very much part of the culture ... part of the identity of the town, so it’s an integral piece of the community,” said the paper’s advertising manager and acting co-editor, Robin Sellick. However, another interviewee said there was ‘a flip side of local media being so well loved ... and trusted’. They recalled being the face of a new initiative by their employer that was subject to critical reporting by ABC: “[The journalist] was like the Pied Piper of Hamelin,” the

**“THE MORE THE GOVERNMENT DID, THE MORE THE PEOPLE WANTED, THE MORE THE MEDIA PUSHED TO HAVE MORE DELIVERED HERE... MAYBE SOMEBODY MISSED OUT”**



Broken Hillite said of the influence the journalist had over the community, “I was nearly run out of town with pitchforks.” Another interviewee complained the community-oriented disposition of local media came at the expense of investigative journalism. “When the first woman mayor was voted in in Broken Hill, the headline that day [in the BT] was [about] a problem with the future of the cake decorator society.” Almost a third of local government media managers surveyed in 2019 reported no journalists at local government meetings, indicating a broader pattern of council affairs going unscrutinised, across both metro and regional areas (Simons & Dickson, 2019).

In small communities like nearby Wilcannia, local media plays another role – advocates for change, a role especially prevalent among regional print journalists working for independent news outlets (Fisher et al., 2020), like the Wilcannia News. One of its journalists, Chris Elliott, said: “We don’t have a chamber of commerce ... or a ratepayer’s association ... we have fallen below that critical mass that keeps a town functioning on that type of lobbying level.” Wilcannia has also been without elected councillors for more than a decade (Gooch, 2019b). Chris said she has acted as a direct line to government for disgruntled locals, “They could complain to the local people. But when we lobbied to the gentleman at the desk in Sydney, it really helped get action.”

The two local media organisations most participants engaged with were the local ABC and BT. Local ABC coverage of the region was described by several interviewees as being more constructive and balanced than metro,



and in some cases other local, coverage. Peter Nash said, “they’re always trying to pump things up, not deflate them.” And Chris Elliott, who was critical of external media’s portrayal of Wilcannia, said she liked the local ABC because “they’ll report the good news as well as the other news”. ABC’s Andrew Schmidt said, “most stories we put out of here are positive” and cited Wilcannia’s Covid-19 outbreak as an example of “a negative story [that] became a positive story of community involvement”. Another interviewee observed the local ABC’s popularity was because it had transcended its ‘leftist’ national brand association (Gooch, 2019b), as it was staffed by ‘local people that locals know’.

The BT newspaper received substantially more critical feedback than the local ABC, with numerous interviewees reporting a reduction in the quality of its reporting in recent years. Some couched their criticisms in the fact that the once-daily newspaper (excluding Sundays) was suspended and nearly shuttered in 2020 because of economic pressures during the Covid-19 pandemic (Chenery & McGregor, 2020). The BT has since returned on a reduced publishing schedule after a groundswell of community support (Chenery & McGregor, 2020) and nearly \$35,000 from the federal government’s PING program (Crawford, 2021) discussed further in the report section on market support in Chapter 2. But despite these criticisms, interviewees said they didn’t want to lose the BT. “In a community of this size and bigger you need to have a local newspaper, because a local newspaper will cover a lot of things that we can’t cover,” said Schmidt, alluding to the ABC’s warning to a Senate Inquiry in 2021 that it wasn’t established to cover hyperlocal news (Meade, 2021a). Citizen journalists on social media are also similarly ill-equipped to fill the news void created by the loss of a local newspaper, according to a 2021 study of a regional Australian town (Magasic & Hess, 2021).

The 2022 Digital News Report echoes these overall findings, with all age groups nominating local news as their top type of news, and the ABC, and regional and local papers rated the first and third most trusted sources, respectively, ahead of major commercial companies (Park et al., 2022a).

## WHO’S WHO IN MEDIA: Broken Hill and Wilcannia

As well as the outlets discussed here, there are also the Super Radio Network’s two Broken Hill radio stations, 2BH and Hill FM, as well as Broken Hill’s community radio station, 2Dry FM. As previously mentioned, SCA has a television station based in Broken Hill which files local stories for SCA and Seven’s Spencer Gulf Nightly News television bulletin.

### Barrier Truth

The Barrier Truth (BT), formerly the Barrier Daily Truth, is Broken Hill’s only newspaper. The independent masthead is owned by the local trade union council and is published twice weekly. The paper employs five journalists; four full-time and one part-time but were hiring for more ‘correspondents’ to cover specific beats, such as local council, as well as three more editorial positions, one of which was editor. Since December 2021, General Manager Jenelle Bussell, and Advertising Manager Robin Sellick, have been forced to share the role

of editor, though neither have a background in journalism. “Staffing is our biggest challenge, and we can’t compete wage-wise with what the cities can offer ... or ABC,” said Bussell. Without a full staff, the pair said they didn’t have time to fully perform their own roles and couldn’t spare the staff to report on current affairs in nearby towns. They said other challenges included digitisation, the cost of maintaining their printing press, and a rise in the cost of newsprint, which is

other work responsibilities. “There’s only four of us left now. Our ages range from mid 60s to mid 80s,” said Elliott. Difficulty finding new volunteers meant the paper was reduced from a weekly to monthly publishing schedule this year. “Formatting and putting it together is not a problem. It’s getting the information. It’s covering the local events,” said Elliott. “We’re going to get through this year. What will happen next year, I really don’t know.”

### ABC Broken Hill

ABC’s multimedia news bureau covering the Far West produces radio, digital and TV news for the local community and wider ABC network. The bureau is run by a team of eight full-time and two casual editorial staff. Locally produced radio programs air until 11am daily, with non-local programs broadcast by ABC South Australia, which also administers the bureau. Andrew Schmidt said the biggest challenges have been Covid-19 lockdowns and rain events because they have prevented travel to other towns in the Far West region, which he said usually accounts for around 30 percent of the bureau’s stories. Schmidt also identified internet connectivity issues as prohibiting live broadcasts from other towns, like Wilcannia, despite Schmidt’s expressed desire to do so.



discussed further in Chapter 1.

### Wilcannia News

Wilcannia News is Wilcannia’s only newspaper, and one of only two news organisations in the town, the other being Wilcannia River Radio, which Chris Elliott said has a collaborative relationship with the paper. The Wilcannia News is run by unpaid volunteers who juggle





## FACT-CHECKING THE NEWS: when metro media gets it wrong

Another role of local media emerged anecdotally: as a fact-checker of metro media. Two examples were raised, one involving the BT addressing a misleading claim that aired on a commercial metro TV bulletin, and the other involving the Wilcannia News seeking to stop the spread of decades-old misinformation relating to the town's Aboriginal population.

In January 2021, the BT published an article (Radford, 2021), written by the author of this section while completing an internship at the Barrier Truth, which was funded by VFFF and administered by the CMT. The author addressed a claim made by a commercial TV news company in their Sydney bulletin, that the drought had broken in New South Wales. It wouldn't be until more than a year later that the New South Wales government announced the whole state was drought-free (Woodburn, 2022). "They were showing certain parts of certain rivers and showing everything flowing and people out here were just like, '[You've] got to be fucking kidding me,'" said one local. "They seem to get away with it and there's no repercussions. But there's repercussions on the community they're reporting on," said another person living in Broken Hill.

Rather than a one-off inaccuracy, Chris Elliott said she has been trying for years to stop media from citing an inaccurate claim that the life expectancy for Aboriginal males is 36.7 years and 42.5 years for Aboriginal females in Wilcannia. This claim has been republished by at least 14 Australian and two global news organisations, including The Sydney Morning Herald (Fellner, 2021), ABC (Williams, 2017), news.com.au (Smith, 2019), and The Washington Post (Miller, 2021), as recently as 2021 in some outlets. An Aboriginal person living in Wilcannia is even reported in one of the articles (Fellner, 2021) to be grateful to be alive, having passed the age in the incorrect claim. Beyond the media, the claim has also been referenced in academia (McCausland & Vivian, 2009), by politicians (Butler, R., 2021), and even in legal documents submitted to a 2013 proceeding before the High court of Australia (2013).

"Wilcannia News is the only one that has ever tried to go back to the source document," Elliott said, referring to a 2016 article she wrote for the Wilcannia News, investigating the claim. The article, seen by CMT, stated the incorrect claim was first used in a local health district report published more than 20 years ago, in 2000. However, the health district report is now unavailable; CMT has searched in local and national archives, libraries and local health organisations for the report and original calculations used to arrive at the claim and has also reached out to some people who

cited the report, all to no avail.

CMT has however obtained internal briefs from July 2015, which were drafted for the Far West Local Health District (LHD) by a senior health professional within the LHD, who says they accessed a paper copy of the original calculations at the Broken Hill University Department of Rural Health and found the claim was incorrect. "The original data calculations were of mean age at death by sex and Aboriginal status over the period 1981-1998 ... in the final Wilcannia Transitional Plan in 2000, however, the wording was altered from mean age at death to life expectancy," the brief says. The brief also notes the claim cannot be updated as "guidelines preclude the release of 'age-related death' data at this geographic level." UTS Professor of Biostatistics, Andrew Hayen explained this was due to the unreliability of health statistics derived from such small populations, like the remote outback town of Wilcannia's Aboriginal population, which is fewer than 500 (ABS, 2016b). Hayen says that even a health statistic based on a larger population

should not be used for more than five years, as a rule of thumb. CMT found the claim republished by news outlets as recently as 2021 (Miller, 2021).

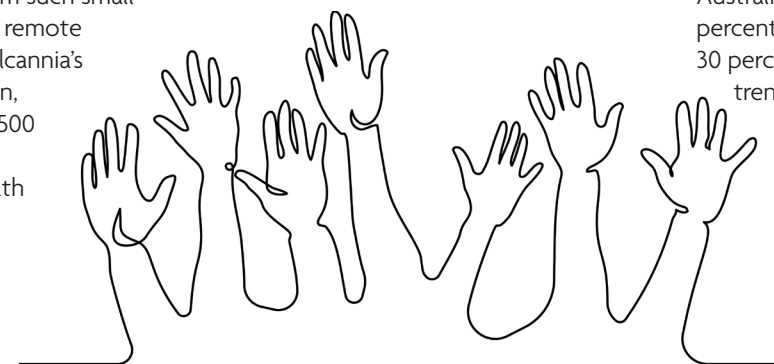
The lowest geographic level of life expectancy data available for Aboriginal people in New South Wales is by remoteness. Wilcannia is classified as 'remote and very remote,' which in 2015-17, yielded a life expectancy at birth of 65.9 years for Aboriginal males and 69.6 years for Aboriginal females (ABS, 2018). While the lowest geographical level of life expectancy available for all people in New South Wales is by local government area (LGA), Wilcannia is in the Central Darling Shire LGA, which had a life expectancy at birth in 2019 of 81.9 years for all persons (Centre for Epidemiology and Evidence, n.d.).

CMT does not suggest that any

news outlets which republished the claim knew it was inaccurate or too old to be used. However, had journalists contacted local health authorities to check the veracity and currency of the statistic, as CMT did, they might have been told that the claim was inaccurate.

Elliott says she sees fact-checking as part of the role of the Wilcannia News. "And that was the approach the editorial committee took during [Wilcannia's] Covid-19 [outbreak]," when CMT recorded a large spike in the incorrect claim's usage in online news articles.

When people's direct experiences conflict with media narratives, like in these examples, research finds their trust in the media is disrupted (Couldry, 2002). Moreover, an Australian study found fact-checking false claims drives down trust even further (Carson et al., 2022). This comes as trust in Australian news has fallen to 41 percent and distrust has risen to 30 percent, continuing a long-term trend (Park et al., 2022).



**"WHEN PEOPLE'S DIRECT EXPERIENCES CONFLICT WITH MEDIA NARRATIVES...RESEARCH FINDS THEIR TRUST IN MEDIA IS DISRUPTED"**



# CONCLUSION

Whilst in the first year of our research we have focused on New South Wales, mapping regional media and the flow of regional news into mainstream markets. In the second year we intend to broaden our horizons to incorporate one or more regional communities outside of the state and the impact on social cohesion of the flows of regional news we detect. We will examine the content of the news produced locally and by mainstream media, and the pathways between them. This will include assessment of how issues are framed by both and the impact this has on the local communities which are the subject of this reporting. In addition, the quantitative surveys contained in this first report will be repeated at regular intervals throughout the second year to allow us to continue to measure the amount of local and regional news which makes its way to metro news consumers.

At the end of our 2nd year of research, Guardian Australia will also have had two years to bed down its Rural Network and we will have accumulated enough data to examine whether this experiment can be considered an editorial success, producing sufficiently important and interesting public interest journalism

which has transcended its regional origins and impacted the national discourse.

Finally, we will produce an international comparison of regional reporting within comparable markets. This will act as a precursor to our final report, which will examine various business models and associations that may support greater regional news and issues-related representation in mainstream publications and broadcast outlets.

As regional population bases continue to grow in the post Covid environment, media policy adjustments may be appropriate and useful. To this end, we will examine the structural influences on news production, including the regulation of broadcasting and local content obligations.

We will also examine what factors influence regional news production, both at a local level and at a mainstream media level, including the business decisions of local media outlets and larger city-based organisations.





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# ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR MEDIA TRANSITION

The Centre for Media Transition (CMT) is an applied research unit based at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

Launched in 2017, the CMT is an interdisciplinary initiative of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Law. It sits at the intersection of media, journalism, technology, ethics, regulation and business. Working with industry, academia, government and others, the CMT aims to:

- Understand media transition and digital disruption, with a view to recommending legal reform and other measures that promote the public interest;
- Assist news media to adapt for a digital environment, including by identifying potentially sustainable business models;
- Develop suitable ethical and regulatory frameworks for a fast-changing digital ecosystem;

- Foster quality journalism, thereby enhancing democracy in Australia and the region;

- Develop a diverse media environment that embraces local/regional, international and transnational issues and debate;

- Combat misinformation and protect digital privacy; and

- Articulate contemporary formulations of the public interest informed by established and enduring principles such as accountability and the public's right to know.

The CMT's published works include reports on digital defamation, trust in news media, the state of regional news and news media innovation. Current projects include work on industry self-regulation, privacy, news verification, foreign reporting and press freedom.

The CMT has consulted for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the Australian Communications and Media Authority. We are also the home of the Asia-Pacific bureau of First Draft News, which combats misinformation.

The Centre regularly hosts public events, conferences and forums. You can sign up to our regular newsletter at [bit.ly/2IXvs6D](http://bit.ly/2IXvs6D). Details of events and the CMT's work can be found on our website at [cmt.uts.edu.au](http://cmt.uts.edu.au)

