

REGIONAL NEWS MEDIA





MONICA ATTARD is the Co-Director of the Centre for Media Transition (CMT), Professor of Journalism Practice and recently head of journalism at UTS. She spent 28 years at the ABC, working across radio and television and was the ABC's Russia correspondent from 1989 to 1994 and 2003 to 2005. She is the author of *Russia, Which Way Paradise?*



GARY DICKSON is a Research Fellow at the CMT and the Head of Research at the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, where his research focuses on mapping news production around Australia. He has contributed research to the Alliance for Journalists Freedom, Our Watch and Index on Censorship.



AYESHA JEHANGIR is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the CMT. She has a PhD in peace journalism (2021) and her current research focuses on mainstream and digital media narratives of war, conflict and peace, and representation in media. She previously worked as a journalist in Afghanistan, Australia, Germany, and Pakistan.



NICK NEWLING is a Research Assistant at the centre, working on CMT's Regional News Media project. He is currently studying a Bachelor of Communications in Journalism and Social & Political Sciences at UTS. Nick has been a regular contributor to Central News, reporting on health, and all levels of politics.

CONTRIBUTORS:

- Travis Radford researched the early phases of the water case study in this report.
- Fleur Connick and Khaled Al Kawaldeh were Guardian Australia journalists and UTS graduates placed in regional New South Wales and Queensland under this program of research.
- Katie Pollock sub-edited this report. We thank her for her efforts.

Written and Researched: Monica Attard, Gary Dickson, Ayesha Jehangir and Nick Newling

Layout and Design: Rosa Alice

Data visualisations: Gary Dickson and Nick Newling

Images: Adobestock, Unsplash, Gary Dickson, Zachary Edmonds and Fleur Connick

See cmt.uts.edu.au for more about our research.

CONTENTS

01 FIRST THINGS FIRST	5
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	10
02 SURVEY SAYS	13
03 CRACKING THE CODE	29
04 DAM REPORTING	35
Bridge over troubled water.....	69
05 LINES IN THE SAND	75
06 CASE STUDIES: New England times	103
New local App Company.....	107
Gilgandra Papers.....	112
Star News Group.....	116
The Multilingual News Network.....	120
07 LOCAL AND VOCAL	102
Guardian Australia Rural Network.....	103
Denniliquin.....	130
Townsville.....	138
CONCLUSION	143
REFERENCES	144



Suggested citation: Attard, M., Dickson, G., Jehangir, A., and Newling, N. 2023. *Regional News Media*. Centre for Media Transition, University of Technology Sydney, Australia, cmt.uts.edu.au. DOI: 10.5281/10035674

This research was funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF) and approved by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee, project ETH21-5787-22-2. Our thanks to the VFFF for their generous support. Thanks also to Professor Derek Wilding, Co-Director of Centre for Media Transition for his vision, advice, and assistance.

This work is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of this licence visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

01 CHAPTER



MONICA ATTARD

FIRST THINGS FIRST

In this, our second year of research into how the challenges experienced by regional media are impacting the amount of rural and regional news received by all Australians, particularly those in metro markets, we again wish to thank the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation for its support. This project began from a conversation with a member of the Fairfax family who lives in regional New South Wales. She wondered why, when she read, watched or listened to mainstream news, there was an obvious lack of news from rural and regional Australia. When government is making policy that impacts rural and regional Australia, she asked what community voices were being heard, given the state of regional media and the lack of regional news in metro outlets (Attard et al., 2022). The aim of our research this year has been to shed light on the importance of regional media in identifying, researching, reporting and ultimately impacting policy discussion and determination.

Much is known about how news media can influence political behaviour, particularly during election campaigns. However, finding a way to measure the influence of news media on how and when policy is made is difficult, though it is possible to evidence how news media shapes and impacts the visibility of an issue (Grossman, 2022) and in turn shape opinions which may lead to particular policy outcomes. Opinion shaping is only one of the factors broadly identified by Grossman as impacting policymaking. He concludes, news media might “influence citizens by priming or framing certain issues, but these effects are likely to be limited” (Grossman, 2022). For the effect to have significant impact on policymaking, other factors must be present and accounted for, amongst them the news values of a particular media organisation, the

historical elements determining the visibility and perceived importance of the issue that is subject to policymaking, and timing, which takes into account how loaded the news media cycle is at any particular point as well as where in the political cycle the issue is raised for discussion.

Early discussions on the relationship between news media and the formation of policy focused on the idea that one of the roles of news media was to act as a point of liaison between government and citizens. However, in the 1990s, discussion of the media–policy link turned to how the news media liaison role was operationalised. This era of research investigated the ‘agenda setting role’ played by news media, which in turn served to influence policymaking. By the late 90s and early 2000s, an indirect link between media coverage and its effects on policy was established in some instances.

Some have concluded that the role of media in the policymaking or policy change process is as a ‘conduit’ (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Iyengar, 1997), where news media acts as an informer rather than in a more activist role as a partaker. Its role as a conduit is centred around objectively disseminating information and divergent core beliefs of multiple policy participants in public policy debates.

Others see the role of media as that of a ‘contributor’ (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). In this scenario, when news media share core beliefs with advocacy coalitions, they are more likely to play a contributory role in the policy process, which may include an intent to influence political decisions, shape public opinion and create pressure for policy change by raising public awareness of issues and providing a platform



for advocacy groups and interest groups to voice their concerns (Shanahan et al., 2008; Koch–Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010). The News media's role in this scenario is dependent on an ability to influence stakeholders through its coverage of the issue, which in turns depends on how it frames narratives on the issue subject to policymaking.

Several empirical methodologies such as frame analysis and discourse analysis have been used to study narratives in the coverage of various policy issues. Media and policy researchers have applied the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (McBeth et al., 2012; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2013) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the policy narratives in media coverage. NPF holds that narratives are powerful and central to policymaking because they can shape public perceptions, frame policy debates, and influence policy outcomes.

According to Jones et.al. (2014), there are two distinctions within a narrative — form, which refers to the structure and organisation of the story, and content, which refers to the actual events and actions that occur within the story, as well as the themes and messages conveyed by these events (also see: Jones & McBeth, 2010). While the two concepts are closely related, they are distinct in their focus and purpose. Jones et.al. (2014, p.5) explain that narrative form includes

key elements such as plot, character (e.g., heroes, victims and villains), point of view, setting (policy domains and level of government), and moral of a story (such as in the form of policy problems and/or solutions). All these elements allow the audience to follow and comprehend the story. They can also shape the audience's experience of the story, influencing their emotional response and interpretation of the content. Narrative content, on the other hand, is the substance of the story that gives it meaning and significance. It encompasses the characters, plot, setting, and themes, etc., but is concerned with specific events and actions that occur within the story to convey the story's message, moral, or world view to the audience — in other words, how the story is framed.

Overall, the NPF identifies key elements of policy narratives and examines how these elements are constructed and communicated to different audiences by various policy actors across various contexts. We have deployed the NPF in this report to examine the news media-policy nexus across two significant policy areas.

In our first report (2021–2022), in which we tracked the outward flow of information from regional Australia to metro markets over two time periods, we found a less than satisfactory state of affairs. If evidence was needed that the

associations, loose or otherwise between regional newspapers and metro news media had been impacted by the financial distress facing both, it was in the figures we published. Metro media is unable to be in every town or region across the country and has traditionally relied on corporate association, including formal agreements, or good relations with regional media that at its height had the ability to investigate and report. However, our research did not find significant evidence that regional newsrooms had the capacity to perform entrepreneurial journalism emanating from their own sources and research. The information flow to metro markets increased in times of trouble — flood, fire and pestilence — but otherwise abated, leaving the social and economic issues which often make or break small communities in the balance.

We also spoke with editors of legacy media to investigate how they viewed regional news, what prominence they gave it beyond cyclical stories of natural disaster, and whether they recognised the importance of giving voice to regional issues, if for no other reason than to factor these voices into the public policy debates that often take place on the pages of metro newspapers, and on the airwaves of the metro-based broadcasters. Whilst the will was there, the coffers were empty; the significant revenue declines experienced by mainstream media left editors content or with no other choice than to narrowly cater to the interests of their metro markets.

Yet issues originating in regional Australia can have significant impact on metro populations. This year we examine two such issues. The first is water policy, which has been highly contested. In this study, we have applied NPF methodology to track the influence of regional journalism on the development of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (MDBP or 'the Plan') and the information flows from regional to metro media, at two inflection points — the release of the Guide to the Basin

Plan in 2010 and its passage into law in 2012. The Basin Plan, developed to improve the health of the system and to increase the availability of water for the environment whilst minimising the impact on irrigators and town users — is rarely out of the news. Indeed, in August 2023 Federal Minister for the Environment and Water Tanya Plibersek brokered yet another deal to rewrite the Plan to allow for a wide scale resumption of controversial water buybacks. The deal will also see deadlines for big water saving infrastructure projects extended. Water from the Murray-Darling Basin has created productive farmlands and is reported to contribute \$22 billion every year to the Australian economy. Crossing four states and one territory and spanning 77,000 kilometres of connected rivers, the Basin supports more than 7,000 irrigated agricultural businesses, not to mention the maintenance of traditional Indigenous practices by First Nations people (Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water, access 2023).

We identified the sources of the stories produced at both a regional and metro level to identify the varying interests and angles being pursued by journalists, and the points of influence to test whether and how journalism, both regional and metro influenced the making of the policy. A significant question in our research was whether the reporting on water originated regionally and if so, what impact it had on metro coverage. Our results are in Chapter 4 and indicates a disconnect between the concerns of regional media and what is in metro news media.

The second policy of national significance we examined is the alcohol bans in the Northern Territory which have influenced and tested relations between the Indigenous communities, government and the broader Australian population over the course of two decades. Using the NPF to determine the source of news media coverage of this contentious issue

MUCH IS KNOWN ABOUT HOW NEWS MEDIA CAN INFLUENCE POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR...HOWEVER, WE DON'T KNOW A LOT ABOUT HOW NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE...CAN INFLUENCE POLICY-MAKING, OR EVEN POLICY-CHANGE.



which led to government-imposed bans, we examined three main inflection points: the Northern Territory Intervention enacted by the Howard Government in August 2007, the enactment of Stronger Futures legislation in the Northern Territory in 2012, and new alcohol restrictions imposed in Alice Springs in January 2023. In our examination of news media coverage of the events leading to policy change, we found a significant proportion of stories that created concern about the social problems caused by alcohol consumption were instigated regionally, with these issues then flowing through to metro audiences. However, as regional reportage of the issues began to appear in metro news media, a change of journalistic framing appears to have occurred; whilst regional media tended to give prominence to concerns over the infringement of Indigenous rights and cultural autonomy, metro media tended to support government policy concerning intervention. Similarly, regional media coverage tended to focus on the effectiveness and appropriateness of interventions. The results of this research can be found in Chapter 5.

With hope springing eternal, we have also spent time over the past year with new media enterprises. As floods ravaged northern New South Wales, Simon Mumford found an audience for a news app which focused on Lismore. His NSW Local App Company is expanding, but not without challenges. Similarly, in the New England region, a new digital newspaper has appeared. The New England Times has set itself the task of making the region feel proud of its economic contribution to New South Wales and digging deep on behalf of its audience into corruption and other poor behaviour. Star News Group is no newcomer, but in buying up distressed assets from Australian Community Media, it has found itself starting from scratch, rebuilding skeletons into viable publications. Lucie Peart in Gilgandra, New South Wales may have begun at The Gilgandra Weekly as a rookie reporter with no newspaper experience, but she has since assumed ownership of the publication and brick by brick she is building a regional newspaper empire of her own. And finally, the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council (NEMBC) is now in its third year of life, bringing news and information to culturally and linguistically diverse groups via social media and the web. You can read these case studies in Chapter 6.

As part of this three-year research program, we have been able to fund the appointment of UTS journalism graduates to one-year regional postings to report for Guardian Australia's The Rural Network. Natasha May, a UTS Master of Advanced Journalism graduate was the first student appointed under the program. She went to Gilgandra and in our first report, she wrote a reflection of the challenges of reporting on such a large tract of regional Australia. In the past year, two more UTS journalism students went regional. Fleur Connick, who undertook a Bachelor of Communication (Journalism) at UTS went to Deniliquin in New South Wales, and Khaled Al Kawaldeh, who completed a Master of Advanced Journalism at UTS, went to Townsville in Queensland. We congratulate all three for their reporting and Fleur Connick for winning a Walkley Award for her reporting out of Deniliquin. In a series of stories on the impact of poor water quality in the Murray-Darling River, Fleur reported on the likely cause of massive fish kills. Her investigation found the kills were likely linked to sewage leaks upstream from Echuca (Guardian Australia, 8 November 2022). A follow-up story reported that two widely reported mass fish deaths in Menindee were the result of oxygen levels in the lower Darling River falling below the levels needed for fish to survive (Guardian Australia, 23 February 2023). She kept digging and, in an investigation published a month after this story, Fleur reported that the water testing conducted to determine the cause of the fish kills by the New South Wales Environmental Protection Authority was flawed (Guardian Australia, 19 April 2023). Both Fleur and Khaled have

reflected on their year of reporting for The Guardian Australia Rural Network in Chapter 7. And in Chapter 7 we also examine the reach and impact of the network this year.

In Chapter 2 we have revisited a number of mainstream media organisations whose output on regional issues we examined in our first report. The media outlets surveyed were The Daily Telegraph, The Sydney Morning Herald, Guardian Australia, Seven News, ABC Television News and Nine News Radio. We have documented which stories and in what volume they have reported rural and regional issues to their metro audiences and what prominence these stories were given, across two time periods: October 17–October 23, 2022 (Survey 3 of the overall project) and April 17–April 23, 2023 (Survey 4). The first survey coincided with major flooding across east-coast states, particularly along the Murray River in Victoria and New South Wales which is reflected in the results: there was an increased level of attention to disaster coverage and focus on the affected region in the southwest of the New South Wales. Consistent with the methodology we have used throughout the life of this project so far, we will repeat the surveys in our final year of research to enable us to distinguish any change of pattern in coverage.

This report contains the following chapters:

- 01** First Things First...
- 02** Survey Says
- 03** Cracking the Code
- 04** Dam Reporting
- 05** Lines in the Sand
- 06** Case Studies
- 07** Local and Vocal





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Our research finds a declining level of coverage of rural and regional Australia in metro media in the 2022–23 study period compared to 2021–22. Each surveyed metro outlet published or broadcast fewer regional stories from fewer local government areas.

2 In our analysis of coverage of water management and bans on alcohol there was no evidence of narrative movement from regional news ecosystems to metro news ecosystems.

3 We found coverage of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan tended to reflect the assumed audiences of the titles: the local newspapers focus on local issues; metro and national media tend to focus on state– and national–scale issues.

4 There was very little entrepreneurial reporting by regional media uncovering new facts about the Plan which might attract editors from outside the local ecosystem. Rather, each analysed local outlet responded to developments from local policy actors. Metro titles relied on state and federal governments and business groups as sources.

5 Regional news editors in South Australia reported that politicians travelling to the regions to speak on regional water issues sidelined local journalists in favour of those with larger platforms, despite established local journalists having a stronger understanding of regional issues. They also believe that their communities are more broadly underserved by the current pool of fly-in-fly-out journalists from metro news outlets. This may indicate that the calibre of information informing public policy is of a lower order than might be expected if local journalistic enterprise was factored into broader discussion.

6 In research of media coverage of successive legislated alcohol bans imposed on Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, CMT found regional media played a significant role as an independent voice interrogating policy decisions and their impact on local populations.

7 Over the course of coverage of alcohol bans, there were shifts in the range of ideas and perspectives used in media reportage. Regional media slowly incorporated more Indigenous voices that were resistant to government policies formed without genuine consultation with local communities. Metro media continued to use more conservative Indigenous voices explicitly in favour of alcohol bans and other restrictions.

8 There have been significant changes to the regional media landscape in the period 2022–23, with acquisitions by the Today News Group in Queensland and South Australia, and the establishment of a consortium of regional entrepreneurs strengthening news coverage in central west New South Wales. However, these and other start-ups indicate that diminished government advertising is having an adverse impact on their ability to sustain their businesses.

9 Digital start-up editors say previous research pertaining to the reluctance of regional communities to consume media digitally is no longer relevant, and that government policy and grant making which favours print media needs to be reconsidered.

10 Our analysis of the Guardian Australia Rural Network has found an expansion of the regional issues and geographical areas covered and facilitated conversations with rural and regional communities which have contributed to the journalism process. However, we found an unclear impact on policy making by the network.

02 CHAPTER

GARY DICKSON

SURVEY SAYS

Across the life of this research project, we regularly sample Sydney-based print, digital, radio and television media outlets in order to quantify the amount of regional news reaching metropolitan audiences. This chapter reports the second round of results.

This survey informs the research project's goal of understanding the investment by major metro news companies in regional stories. Within these regularly conducted surveys, we are seeking to answer the following research questions:

- How many stories from regional areas are published/broadcast to metro news audiences?
- What are the subjects of these stories?
- Are there differences in coverage of different kinds of regional areas?

These research questions have been refined since the first report. A research question relating to the prominence of regional stories in metro media was addressed in Year 1.

Survey period

Two survey periods were included in the first year's report, in March 2022 (S1) and May 2022 (S2). Two further survey periods inform the results below:

- The third survey period (S3) was the seven consecutive

days between Monday 17 October–Sunday 23 October 2022. In this period a total of 463 items were coded across six news outlets, of which 257 concerned a regional issue or place.

- The fourth survey period (S4) was the seven consecutive days between Monday 17 April–Sunday 23 April 2023. In this period a total of 436 items were coded across six news outlets, of which 147 concerned a regional issue or place.

The third survey period coincided with major flooding across east–coast states, particularly along the Murray River in Victoria and New South Wales. This is reflected in the results which clearly show an increased level of attention to disaster coverage and focus on the affected region in southwest New South Wales.

The overall structure of the data collection remained consistent, with the same coding rules applicable.

Comparisons are repeatedly made to the first survey period, rather than the second. The May 2022 period (S2) was deliberately timed to capture coverage of the federal election. The data collected for that period was not expected to be (and wasn't) representative of more ordinary coverage, as it showed an increased level of reporting on the federal government and on promises made at individual community levels in the course of campaigning.



Sample

Six news outlets are included in the results for survey periods 3 and 4. The study captures outlets across three of the largest metropolitan media companies (News Corporation Australia, Nine Entertainment Co, Seven West Media); a medium-sized digital news company (Guardian Media Group) and a public broadcaster (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). The

number of outlets sampled has been reduced for this sample, with the removal of The Australian, news.com.au and the New Daily. These outlets were removed due to findings from the first year that many of these outlets provide very little, if any, regional news to their audiences.

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

Outlet	Format	Ownership	S3	S4
Daily Telegraph	Digital print	News Corp Australia	✓	✓
Sydney Morning Herald	Digital print	Nine Entertainment Co	✓	✓
Guardian Australia	Digital	Guardian Media Group	✓	✓
Seven News Sydney	Television	Seven West Media	✓	✓
ABC News Sydney	Television	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	✓	✓
Nine News Radio Sydney	Radio	Nine Entertainment Co	✓	✓

TABLE 1 | OUTLETS INCLUDED IN SURVEY PERIODS 3 AND 4.

The outlets in Table 1 were sampled in the study.

Print has been excluded from consideration for this study; the digital mastheads of Sydney's two major metropolitan daily newspapers 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, as audiences move online in greater number. These titles are referred to as 'digital print' to distinguish them from the digital-only news outlet in the sample, Guardian Australia.

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 was tracked using a combination of RSS feeds, sitemaps, Factiva and manual searching, and coded. Only news 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.

Only stories about regional issues, places or people are included within the reported results. Stories located in Sydney or with no clear local geography have been excluded. With this method, the total output of publishers is more thoroughly assessed for regional stories than the output of broadcasters. With digital content we can easily assess all output on any given day and are confident in identifying all regional stories; whereas with broadcast we are only coding the stories that make it to air in select bulletins while not sampling those that may appear in other bulletins or only on web. This imbalance should be considered against the results presented: while we can be confident that we are assessing all digital print regional content in the period, we therefore 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 computationally generated, covering traffic conditions, fuel prices, weather, court listings and business liquidations, localised to different areas around the state. These articles were not coded and have not been included in the discussion.

	S1	S3	S1-S3 diff		S4	S1-S4 diff	
			Net	%		Net	%
Daily Telegraph	123	118	-5	-4	90	-33	-27
Sydney Morning Herald	29	35	+6	+21	27	-2	-7
Guardian Australia	27	27	0	-	11	-16	-59
Seven News Sydney	11	19	+8	+73	5	-6	-55
ABC News Sydney	7	19	+12	+171	6	-1	-14
Nine News Radio Sydney	18	39	+21	+117	8	-10	-55
	215	257	+42	+20	147	-68	-32

TABLE 2 | THE NUMBER OF ARTICLES CODED FOR SURVEY PERIODS 1, 3 AND 4; AND THE ABSOLUTE AND PERCENT VARIANCE BETWEEN THE FIRST AND LATER SURVEY PERIODS.



Survey results

We found significant shifts in the total number of articles about regional Australia that were published in the third survey period as compared to the initial survey in March 2022, with the results varying by outlet. Both The Daily Telegraph and Guardian Australia saw relatively stable coverage over the period, with a small 4 per cent reduction at the Telegraph. All other outlets recorded increases.

In the fourth survey period there was a decline in coverage of regional issues at every outlet. In some cases, these shifts were considerable: Guardian Australia, Seven News Sydney and Nine News Radio Sydney (2GB) each published fewer than half as many articles as in the previous period.

Every observation should be understood with the caveat that many of these shifts, though high in percentage terms, represent a relatively small overall change in the number of articles published or broadcast. An increase from seven to 19 articles is a large 171 per cent growth; but only represents 12 additional stories over the course of a week. These shifts in percentage terms are unreliable due to the small sample size at most outlets.

Overall, we found that coverage of regional New South Wales in these metro media outlets fell considerably in October 2022 and again in April 2023 when compared to the March 2022 period, and the geographic footprint across the state and the number of subjects coded against articles all fell from October to April; though the latter was consistent in period 4 with period 1.

THIRD SURVEY PERIOD: 17–23 OCTOBER, 2022

Flood-adjusted coverage

The first survey period (S1) corresponded with significant flooding, particularly in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. In the first report, we noted that these events affected the subjects and geographic concentration of news coverage and foreshadowed that future survey periods should provide a better indication of normal production.

The third survey period (S3) again corresponded with significant flooding, initially in north-central Victoria, followed by flooding across New South Wales later in the week. These events have again impacted the sample and provide an opportunity for comparison

of flood-related and other coverage across the two periods, rather than an indication of normal production as initially expected.

Almost all outlets sampled showed large increases in the amount of coverage of the floods, with only The Daily Telegraph decreasing its coverage. The largest increases in absolute terms were at Nine News Radio Sydney, Seven News Sydney and Guardian Australia; ABC News Sydney and The Sydney Morning Herald showed only very small increases, while coverage at The Daily Telegraph significantly declined: from the highest overall coverage in the first sample period to the lowest in the third. Flood coverage constituted the majority of all regional reporting at Guardian Australia, Seven and Nine Radio.

The total number of regional news articles identified in S3 is greater than in S1. Controlling for the impact of this growth, we found that the overall proportion of flood coverage against other coverage also increased in the third survey period (Table 4), shifting from 25 per cent to 31 per cent in October. Guardian Australia, Seven News Sydney and Nine News Radio all increased their flood coverage between these two periods, The Sydney Morning Herald remained stable, and The Daily Telegraph and ABC News Sydney decreased.

Coverage by day

Like the first survey period, we found no consistent pattern of coverage across all outlets during the week. The Daily Telegraph's peak was Monday

	Flood coverage				Other coverage			
	S1	S3	Net	% Diff	S1	S3	Net	% Diff
Daily Telegraph	19	6	-13	-68	104	112	+8	+8
Sydney Morning Herald	9	11	+2	+22	20	24	+4	+20
Guardian Australia	11	21	+10	+91	16	6	-10	-63
Seven News Sydney	1	14	+13	+1300	10	5	-5	-50
ABC News Sydney	5	9	+4	+80	2	10	+8	+400
Nine News Radio Sydney	8	25	+17	+213	12	14	+2	+17
	53	86	+33	+62	162	171	+9	+6

TABLE 3 | NET AND PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN FLOOD AND OTHER COVERAGE BETWEEN SURVEY PERIODS

	Survey 1			Survey 3		
	Flood	Other	% FI	Flood	Other	% FI
Daily Telegraph	19	104	15	6	112	5
Sydney Morning Herald	9	20	31	11	24	31
Guardian Australia	11	16	41	21	6	78
Seven News Sydney	1	10	9	14	5	74
ABC News Sydney	5	2	71	9	10	47
Nine News Radio Sydney	8	12	40	25	14	64
	53	162	25	86	171	50

TABLE 4 | PERCENTAGE OF ALL REGIONAL NEWS STORIES THAT WERE FLOOD-RELATED, BY SURVEY PERIOD.



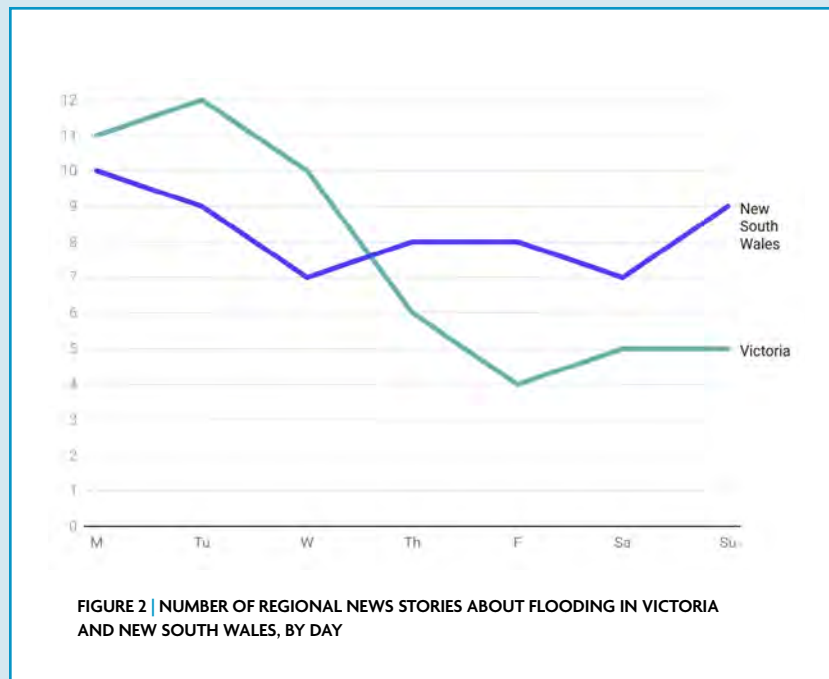
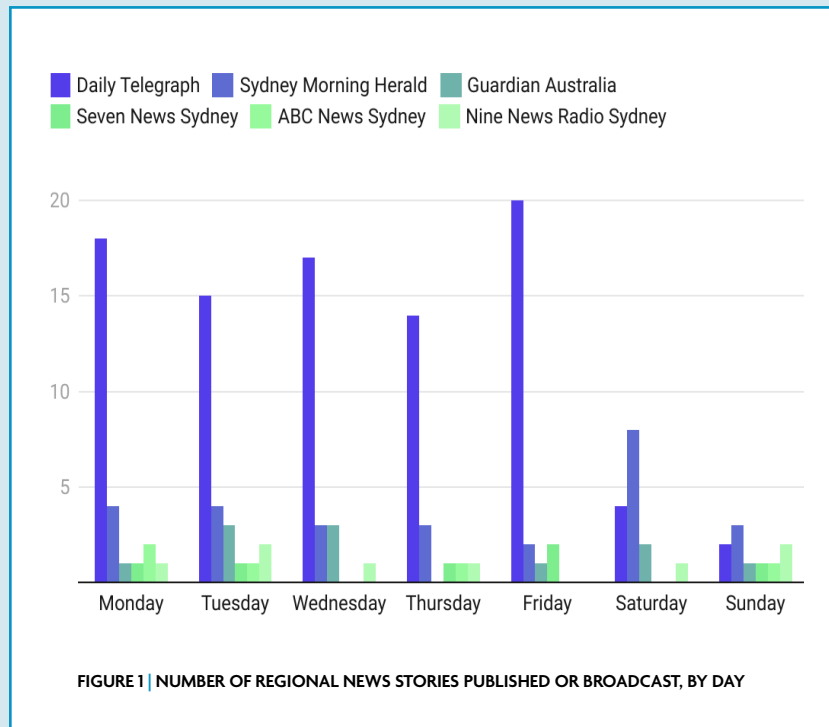
and fell consistently through to the weekend, where it recorded almost no coverage at its digital hyperlocal news sites. Most outlets stayed much more consistent in their output each day.

When the sample began on 17 October, Victorian towns such as Shepparton and Rochester were already flooded, and Echuca on the Murray River was waiting for the river to peak. The likelihood of floods increased in New South Wales as the week went on, with storm warnings issued for New South Wales and Queensland on Thursday followed by evacuation warnings to towns including Narrabri, Moree, Gunnedah on Friday and Lismore on Saturday. This shift in the geography of the disaster is evident in the coverage: though the total number of stories about flood events decreased from midweek, this change was mostly due to decreasing coverage about Victoria, with New South Wales remaining comparatively stable across the week.

Localism

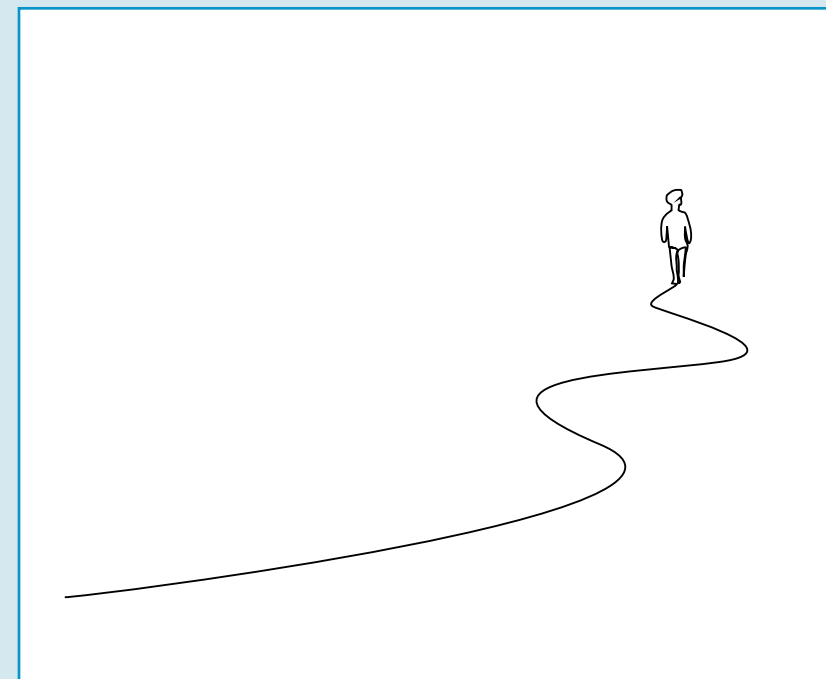
The following sections focus on local news stories about regional areas in metro outlets. Where an item is not place-based and instead represents an issue that affects regional areas across the state or country, it is not included in these results.

Localism is determined using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) remoteness and statistical area 4 frameworks, which we used in Year 1 (Attard et al., 2022). There is a grey area between a local story and general regional story where it is about a statewide or national trend but uses



Statistical area 4	TEL	SMH	GUA	SEV	ABC	2GB	Total
Capital Region	6	1	0	1	2	0	10
Central West	2	4	0	1	0	7	14
Coffs Harbour	10	2	0	1	0	0	13
Far West	5	4	1	1	0	1	12
Hunter Valley	7	4	0	0	0	4	15
Mid North Coast	14	0	0	0	0	0	14
Murray	0	1	1	6	5	16	29
New England	1	3	1	4	0	7	16
Richmond-Tweed	33	5	1	2	3	7	51
Riverina	0	2	3	0	0	4	9
Southern Highlands	5	0	0	0	0	0	5
Sub. regional	83	26	7	16	10	46	188
Central Coast	14	2	1	0	2	0	19
Illawarra	8	0	0	0	1	1	10
Newcastle	8	3	0	1	0	0	12
Sub. regional city	30	5	1	1	3	1	41
Total	113	31	8	17	13	47	229

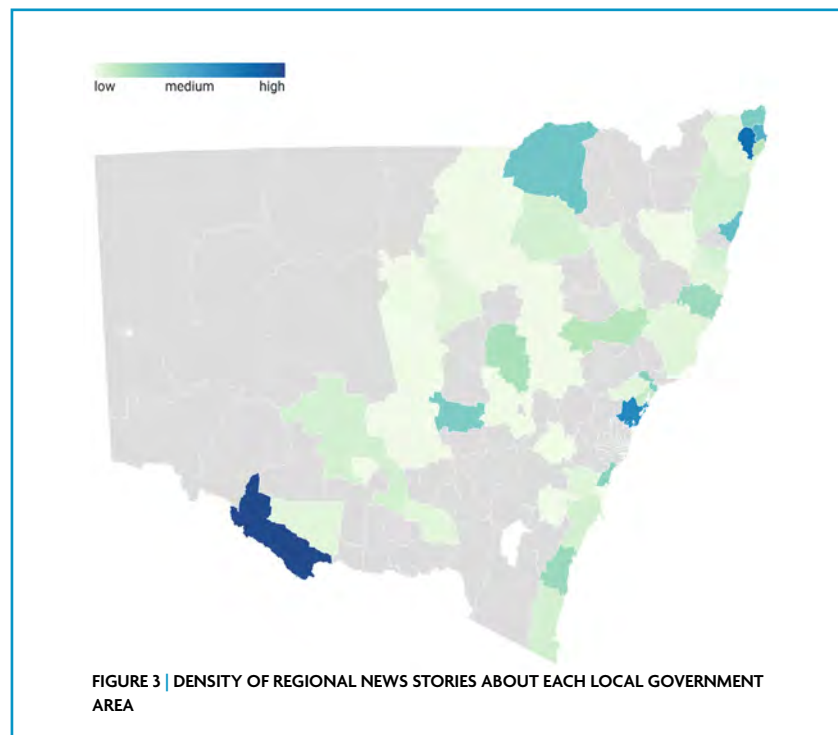
TABLE 5 | NUMBER OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES ABOUT EACH STATISTICAL AREA, BY OUTLET



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.

We found that no outlet provided coverage of the entire state in the S3. The Sydney Morning Herald and The Daily Telegraph had the widest geographic coverage, followed by Nine News Radio Sydney and Seven News Sydney, Guardian Australia and ABC News Sydney.

Similar to the first survey, we found that the Richmond-Tweed statistical area, which includes the local government areas (LGA) of Ballina, Byron, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Tweed, received the highest level of attention overall. In March 2022, we predicted that the high level of coverage in this region was likely abnormal and driven by flooding taking place at the time. This appears to have been partly true: Richmond-Tweed accounted for 22 per cent of all regional stories in the October 2022 period, down from 35 per cent in March 2022. At the same time, disaster-related coverage in Richmond-Tweed dropped considerably further: in October 2022 accounted for 16 per cent of stories in the region, down from 62 per cent in March. Removing flooding stories from the sample, 27 per cent (43 of



and Gunnedah) 88 per cent) regions. In the Riverina this coverage was centred particularly around Deniliquin, which sits on the Edward River; and in New England on Moree in the Moree Plains local government area, both of which experienced rising waters in the survey period.

Beyond natural disaster stories, the highest focuses for coverage were Richmond-Tweed (43 stories), the Central Coast (19 stories), Mid North Coast including Kempsey, Mid-Coast, Nambucca Valley and Port Macquarie (14 stories), Hunter Valley excluding Newcastle (13 stories) and Coffs Harbour-Grafton (13 stories). No non-flooding stories were published or broadcast about the Murray region, and very few about the Riverina (1 story), New England and North West (4 stories) and Southern Highlands including Shoalhaven and Wingecarribee, (5 stories).

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. Like all others, this table only includes stories that have some connection to a regional area.

Thirty-three unique subjects were identified in survey period 3, a small increase from the first survey period (28 subjects).

Natural disasters were the largest focus of coverage (77 stories), followed by court reporting (74 stories) and the two related topics of violent crime and non-violent crime (39 stories each). Combining both violent and non-violent crime into a single topic would make it the highest subject of coverage (78 stories).

Floods were reported across all outlets. Either disasters or the closely related topic of weather were the highest subject of coverage at all outlets except The Daily Telegraph: flooding was a much lower proportion of coverage with five per cent of the total compared to a combined average of 58 per cent across other outlets.

Indeed, The Daily Telegraph was the source of most stories about court and crime, publishing 68 of the 74 court reports (92 per cent) coded across the week. It also published all stories in the sample about arts and culture, local government, immigration, local, national and international sport, and most (>50 per cent) stories about business, community events, the environment, infrastructure, motoring and property.

No other title was as prolific in regional coverage as The Daily Telegraph. The Sydney Morning Herald and Guardian Australia each produced slightly fewer than half of the stories about primary industries and only The Sydney Morning Herald published about state sport leagues. Seven News Sydney broadcast a single court report and stories about the economy, health and infrastructure and the public broadcaster had a greater distribution of stories across topics. Nine News

Subject	TEL	SMH	GUA	SEV	ABC	2GB	Total
Accidental injury	8	3	1	1	2	5	20
Arts and culture	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
Business, other	7	1	0	0	1	1	10
Business, primary industries	1	7	7	0	1	0	16
Climate change	1	1	2	0	1	0	3
Comm. Event	2	0	1	1	0	0	3
Comm. Individual	3	2	0	0	0	4	9
Court report	68	3	0	1	2	0	74
Crime, non-violent	39	0	0	0	0	0	39
Crime, violent	33	2	0	0	1	3	39
Disasters	11	9	21	15	9	25	77
Economy	0	3	0	1	2	2	8
Environment	4	1	1	0	0	1	6
Food and drink	1	3	0	0	1	2	7
Government, federal	3	2	0	0	0	2	7
Government, local	16	0	0	0	0	0	16
Government, state	3	0	1	0	1	1	6
Health	2	1	2	1	0	2	7
Immigration	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Indigenous	2	1	0	0	1	0	4
Industrial relations	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Infrastructure and planning	12	2	1	2	1	0	17
Motoring	4	1	0	0	0	0	5
Other	0	2	0	0	2	2	6
Property	9	0	0	0	0	1	10
Religion	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Social	1	2	0	0	0	4	7
Sport, international	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Sport, local	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
Sport, national	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Sport, state	0	8	0	0	0	0	8
Technology	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Weather	1	11	6	13	6	4	36
Total	244	69	44	35	32	59	455

TABLE 8 | SUBJECT OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES, BY OUTLET



Radio was also reasonably broad, with reports about government, health, crime, and the environment, as well as broadcasting most of the stories about social issues.

We found no stories about education or science in this period, nor about topics that are understandably more likely to be reported as national-scale issues such as defence and national security, foreign policy, or the media.

FOURTH SURVEY PERIOD: 17–23 APRIL, 2023

General observations

There was a significant fall in the number of items identified for coding from period 3 to period 4. Overall, around a third fewer stories were published in the sampled week in April 2023 than in the October 2022 sample. Even after removing all flood stories (86 stories) from the third period total, the fourth period saw fewer articles: 171 to 147. The range of subjects coded in the fourth period was far lower, as was the geographic distribution of stories.

As in the first and third periods, daily output was inconsistent across outlets, but some general observations can be made. The Daily Telegraph has high output on weekdays which drops significantly on weekends, while other outlets tend to remain more consistent. The Sydney Morning Herald's peak in the fourth sample period was Saturday, where it doubled the output of any other day. ABC News Sydney, Seven

News Sydney, Guardian Australia and Nine News Radio all recorded entire days where they did not publish or broadcast a single story from regional New South Wales during the sample period; in October 2022, every outlet produced at least one story on each day, though this was heavily influenced by flood coverage.

Localism

Each story was coded against up to four local government areas and allocated to ABS statistical areas accordingly. We found a far narrower geographic distribution of stories in S4 than in previous periods, concentrated particularly in coastal LGAs. As in the previous period, no publication covered every statistical area; and all were further from achieving this than in S3. The Daily Telegraph was closest, missing the Murray region (as in October) but also the Central West. A single story was published from the Riverina, unlike the previous period.

The Sydney Morning Herald published stories from an equivalent number of areas (11 stories), with some differences: the Illawarra, Mid North Coast and Southern Highlands received coverage while Central Coast, Far West and Murray regions did not.

The geographic footprints of other news outlets all fell:

- Guardian Australia's footprint dropped from six areas to five. Murray and Riverina were not covered, while the Capital Region was.

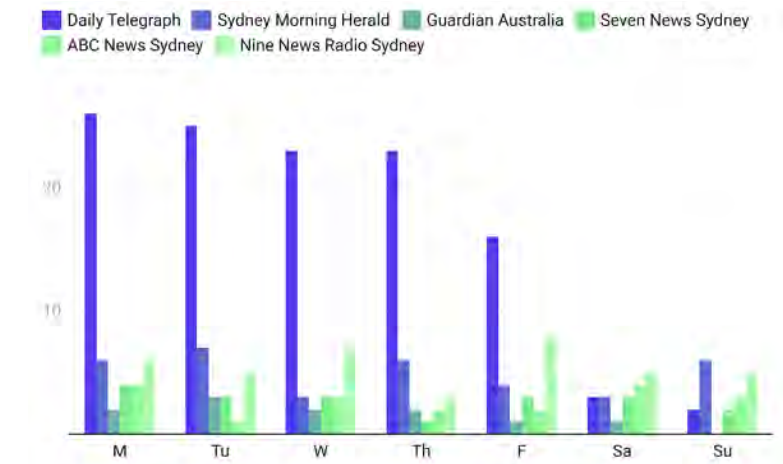


FIGURE 4 | NUMBER OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES PUBLISHED OR BROADCAST, BY DAY.

Statistical area 4	TEL	SMH	GUA	SEV	ABC	2GB	Total
Capital Region	8	3	2	0	0	0	13
Central West	0	2	0	1	0	0	3
Coffs Harbour	8	2	0	0	0	0	10
Far West	6	0	3	1	0	0	10
Hunter Valley	6	2	2	1	3	2	16
Mid North Coast	9	1	0	0	1	0	11
Murray	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
New England	3	2	1	0	0	1	7
Richmond-Tweed	28	4	1	0	1	1	35
Riverina	1	5	0	0	0	0	6
Southern Highlands	7	2	0	0	0	0	9
Sub. regional	76	23	9	3	5	5	121
Central Coast	5	0	0	1	0	0	6
Illawarra	11	4	0	0	0	1	16
Newcastle	6	5	0	1	0	2	14
Sub. regional city	22	9	0	2	0	3	36
Total	98	32	9	5	5	8	157

TABLE 9 | NUMBER OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES ABOUT EACH STATISTICAL AREA, BY OUTLET.

Subject	TEL	SMH	GUA	SEV	ABC	2GB	Total
Accidental injury	14	2	0	1	1	2	20
Arts and culture	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Business, other	1	0	1	0	0	0	5
Business, primary industries	3	2	1	1	0	2	9
Climate change	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Comm. Event	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Comm. Individual	1	3	0	0	0	0	4
Court report	40	0	0	0	0	0	40
Court, other	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Crime, non-violent	25	1	0	1	0	0	27
Crime, violent	32	2	2	1	2	2	41
Disasters	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Economy	0	0	1	1	1	0	3
Education	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Environment	0	2	4	0	0	0	6
Government, federal	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Government, local	7	0	1	0	0	0	8
Government, state	2	2	5	0	0	2	11
Health	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
Indigenous	0	2	2	0	0	1	5
Infrastructure and planning	6	0	2	0	0	0	9
Motoring	17	0	0	0	0	0	17
Other	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Property	3	5	2	0	0	0	10
Sport, local	11	0	0	0	0	0	11
Sport, national	1	8	0	0	0	0	12
Sport, state	0	2	0	0	0	3	2
Technology	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Total	174	34	24	6	6	12	256

TABLE 10 | SUBJECT OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES, BY OUTLET.

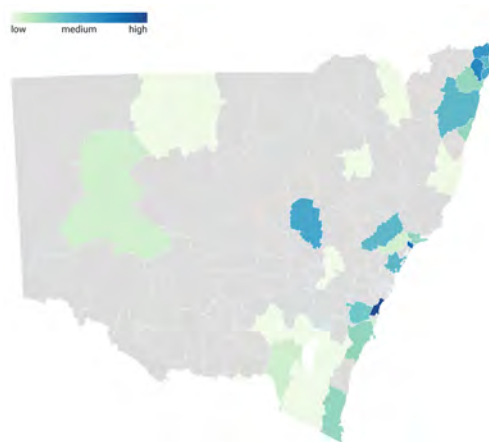


FIGURE 5 | DENSITY OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES ABOUT EACH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

- Seven News Sydney fell from eight to five. Murray, New England, Richmond–Tweed, Capital Region and Coffs Harbour did not receive coverage, while the Hunter Valley and Central Coast did.
- Nine News Radio Sydney fell from eight to six, dropping Central West, Far West and Riverina while adding Newcastle.
- The ABC News Sydney only covered three regions: Hunter Valley, Mid North Coast and Richmond–Tweed, down from five.

The Richmond–Tweed region of northern New South Wales remained a hotspot of coverage, particularly due to The Daily Telegraph, which published 80 per cent of all stories from the region. As found in the October period, Richmond–Tweed appears to be an ongoing area of high levels of coverage, even without a major news event such as a disaster. This is consistent with greater media resourcing in this region: the ABC has a dedicated local radio newsroom in Lismore, and News Corp owns three legacy titles in the region: the Ballina Shire Advocate, the Northern Star (Lismore) and Tweed Daily News. The New England area recorded a large fall, from 16 stories to seven; a drop of more than 50 per cent.

Without floods to generate coverage, the Murray region (Albury, Balranald, Berrigan, Federation, Hay, Murray River and Wentworth local government areas) was almost entirely absent in this sample: Nine News Radio Sydney published a single story from Albury, down from 29 stories across all outlets in the October period. In our study of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan described

in Chapter 4, we also found very low levels of reporting from this region. Similarly, coverage of the Central West region, which includes the particularly heavily flood-affected town of Forbes, fell significantly in the second period: an almost 80 per cent decline from 14 stories across the week to three.

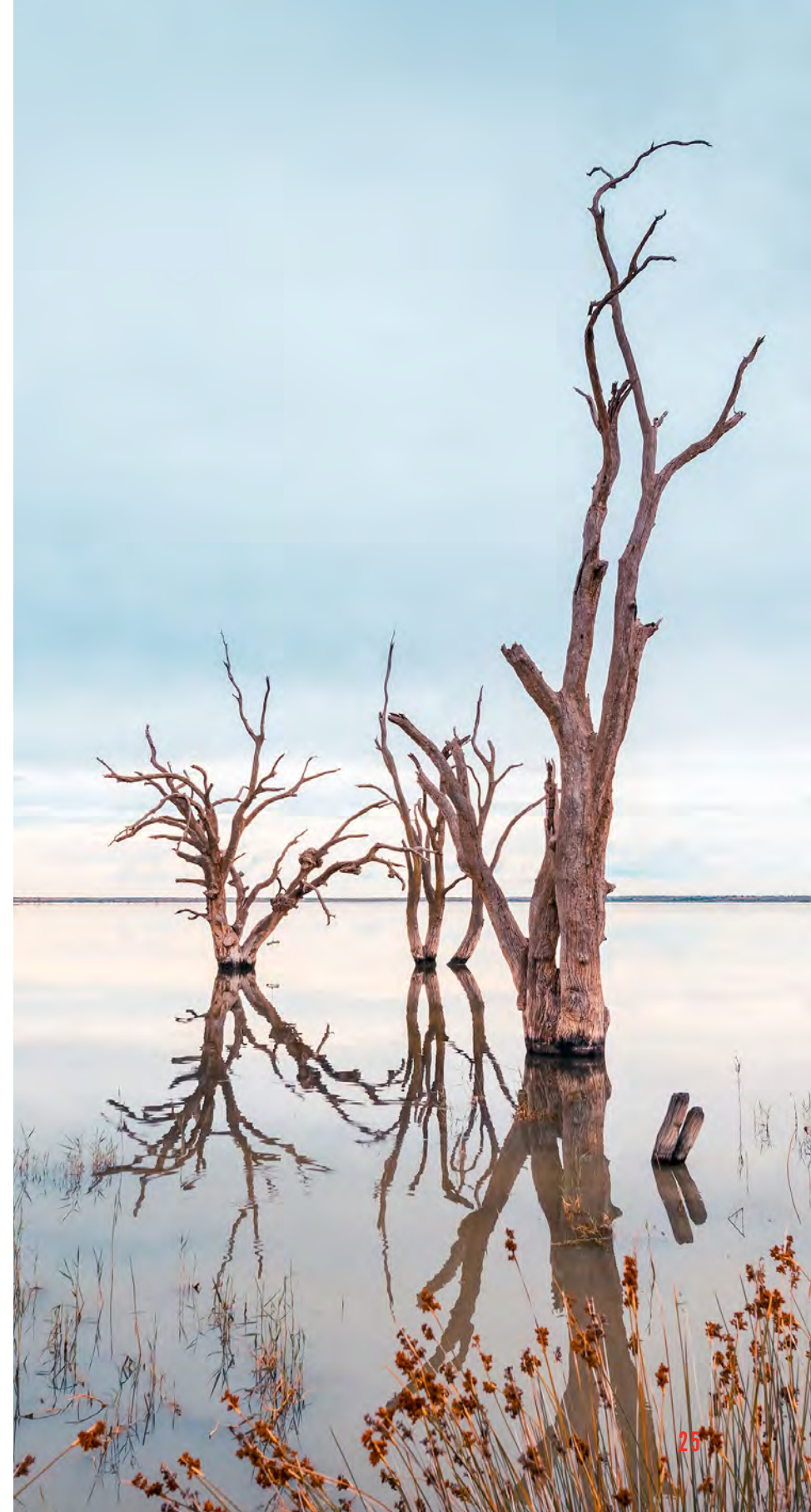
Only small shifts were recorded in most other regions.

Even as coverage of many statistical areas stayed relatively stable across the period, the number of local government areas that were covered dropped significantly: from 50 in October 2022 (54 per cent of regional LGAs in New South Wales) to 33 in April (35 per cent). This is particularly evident in local government areas in the Central West, Murray, Riverina and New England regions, all of which saw fewer LGAs included, while there were increases particularly around Snowy-Monaro and Capital region.

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. Like all others, this table only includes stories that have some connection to a regional area.

A total of 28 unique subjects were coded in the fourth survey period (S4), a small decrease from the third



period but the same number (though not the same subjects) as the first period. Most reductions in subject coverage were disproportionate to the overall reduction in the number of stories sampled due to the influence of flooding in the first period: the greatest disproportionate decrease was in coverage of disasters, with only a single story recorded, down from 77. This had the effect of lifting the overall proportion of many subjects, even as the numbers fell in absolute terms: some small increases (non-violent crime lifted from 15 per cent of all stories to 18 per cent), some large (violent crime lifted from 15 per cent to 25 per cent).

As in previous survey periods, crime was the single largest category of coverage. Though every outlet produced at least one story about violent crime, the majority of crime stories (78 per cent violent, 93 per cent non-violent) were produced by The Daily Telegraph, as were stories about the related category of accidental injuries and deaths. Local sport and motoring stories were also entirely produced by the newspaper.

The Sydney Morning Herald and Guardian Australia covered a broad set of topics, particularly on traditional 'hard news' subjects such as crime, business and the economy, governments at different levels, as well as sport and technology.

The broadcasters were also spread across topics, though had a far lower output overall. Each broadcast at least one story about injury and crime. Of



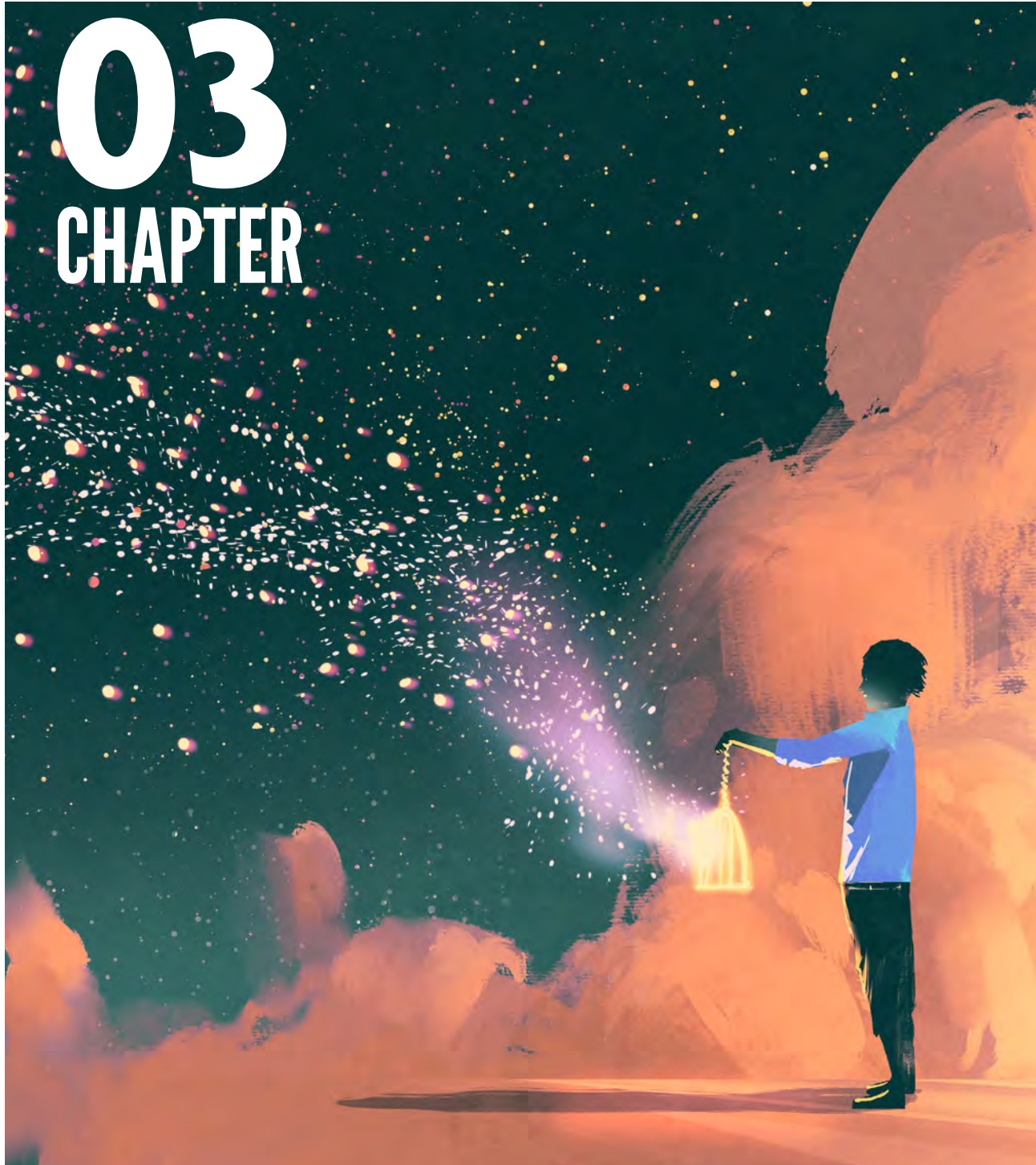
the three broadcasters, only Nine News Radio Sydney reported on the state government and on state sport as it related to regional Australia.

We found no stories about religion, food and drink, science, social issues, international sport or weather in this period, nor about national-scale issues such as foreign policy, or industrial relations and immigration.

Summary

This study suggests a declining level of coverage of rural and regional Australia in the sampled metro media in the study periods in 2023 as compared to periods in 2022. Each outlet individually published or broadcast fewer stories in April 2023 as compared to March 2022 and across fewer local government areas. There was an increase in the number of unique subjects of coverage in late 2022, which returned to a previous level in 2023. Temporary increases in coverage caused by natural disasters in both periods do not fully account for this decline, which persists even after excluding flood-related stories. There was a significant focus on crime stories, particularly at The Daily Telegraph. National-scale issues and their impact on regional Australia, such as foreign policy, industrial relations and immigration, received very little attention.

03 CHAPTER



CRACKING THE CODE

Our methodology

This study explores the interplay between regional and metro media coverage of policy issues by examining whether news coverage had any influence on the policy change process, and if so, to what degree. In so doing, we also aim to explore if flows of information between regional and metro media exist in the reporting of two significant policy issues.

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) developed by Shanahan, Jones and McBeth (2018), informs the methodology of our study in the following two chapters. Developed with the aim of determining whether the media functions as a conduit or a contributor in the process of policy change, the NPF pinpoints essential components within policy narratives. It investigates the ways in which these components are devised and conveyed to audiences by different policy stakeholders, including the media, in different contexts.

The NPF offers a valuable lens through which to illuminate the disparities between regional and metro news reporting regarding the two selected policy issues in Australia. By examining the narrative elements, framing techniques, and language patterns present in both regional and metropolitan media coverage, the NPF can uncover how these outlets construct and convey policy-related stories differently. Regional media plays a pivotal role in the broader media ecosystem, as it often serves as a primary source of information for local communities. This importance stems from its unique ability to capture localised perspectives, concerns, and nuances that might be outside the reach and target of metro media. Regional outlets can contribute rich contextual information to the

policy discussions, while metro media offer broader reach and influence. Interdependency between them could create deeper understanding of major policy issues and shape the policy change process in Australia.

In our study, we apply the NPF to (1) analyse the policy narrative — in terms of both emergence and framing — in regional and metro media coverage of two contentious and ongoing issues in Australia, namely alcohol-related restrictions in NT and Alice Springs (2007, 2012 and 2023) and the Murray–Darling Basin (2010 and 2012); and (2) identify pathways of information between regional and metro media. We analyse media coverage of each issue separately in the next two chapters.

In analysing coverage of the two issues by regional and metro media, we aim to identify the epicentre of policy narratives, that is, asking where the narrative first emerged and whether there were any pathways of information between regional and metro media in their coverage of related policies. In other words, whether narratives from regional media were picked by metro media and vice-versa. In so doing, we also ask whether these narratives had any influence on the policymaking process.

Research questions

According to Shanahan et al. (2008), policy narratives almost always contain frames that develop problem definitions based on the inclusion of some evidence and omission of other information to bolster a particular policy outcome. Policy narratives can also contain other narrative strategies and elements, which may not constitute an explicit media frame, but as Shanahan et al. (2011) argue, “are believed to be critically



...tied to individuals' beliefs, their policy outcome preferences, and their interest group alignment" (p. 374).

In exploring whether the metro and regional news media played the role of a policy change conduit or of contributor in the coverage of the two issues, we seek to find answers to two primary research questions:

RQ1: How much attention did metro and regional media give to policy on the two issues, and how was it framed?

RQ2: Did regional media coverage influence metro media coverage of the issue, or did policy narratives originate in metro media and then spread to regional media coverage?

Sampling and data collection

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select a range of media sources that reported on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (the plan) in 2010 and 2012, and alcohol-related restrictions under the NT Intervention in 2007 and 2012, and in Alice Springs in 2023. The data collection process involved collecting and compiling news articles on the two issues through the Factiva, ProQuest and Gale information and research databases using relevant keywords (see Chapters 4 and 5 for more details). Information and content from both licensed and free national and global sources are aggregated

in these databases. Media stories were then organised chronologically in the codebook to enable the analysis of the development of the policy narrative over time and framing strategies used in the coverage.

We developed a reduced version of the NPF codebook to guide the coding of narrative form and content in each story in the corpus. The idiosyncrasies in the process of selecting regional and metro news outlets and sampling of media stories on the plan and alcohol bans are explained in the respective chapters ahead.

The codebook

The codebook included 10 codes, of which four were identifying codes — date of publication, headline, author and outlet — and six analysed the narrative elements and strategies in the selected media stories — setting, characters, moral of the story, plot, causal mechanisms, and the dominant frame (explained ahead in this section).

Setting

Setting refers to the specific context of the narrative and is concerned with the policy domains and level of government(s) involved in the policy process. We catalogued the setting as: local, state and/or national.

Characters

According to Shanahan et al. (2013, 2018), a minimum of one character (e.g., hero, villain or victim) in the media text is a prerequisite to the NPF approach. Some of the characters that have been identified in media-policy research include profit-driven corporations and local governments (as villains); individuals, communities, and even abstract objects such as the environment (as victims); and advocacy groups and in some cases Federal Government entities (as heroes).

Rupinsky et al. (2022) discuss the significance of a character in a story, arguing that "advocates can strategically link certain characters to a policy problem to divert attention and action" (p. 106). The identification of a character is thus relevant to our research as we explore characters, both as actors and sources of policy narrative and change, in the media coverage.

This is not to say that a narrative analysis cannot be carried out if one of the two elements is missing. For instance, Clemons et al. (2012), Rad (2012) and Knox (2013) have applied the NPF to their research where not a single character was identified.

We catalogued the characters as: hero, villain, victim, ally, opponent or beneficiary.

Moral of the story

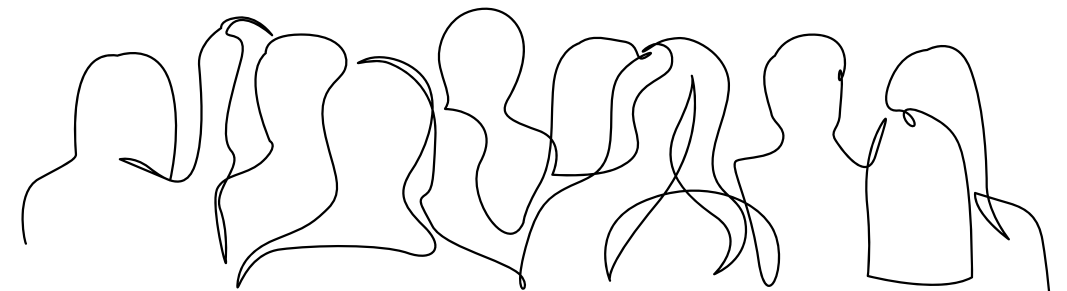
As a narrative element, the moral of the story is concerned with policy references in the media coverage. These could appear as a general or a specific mention of a policy need, problem and/or a solution. Though some researchers assert that the policy reference(s) in the story must be in the form of a solution (Shanahan et al., 2013), others have argued that the specification of policy solutions is not a necessary condition for the application of NPF (Pierce et al., 2014).

We catalogued the moral of the story as one of the following: intermediary, reference, criticism, solution or other.

Plot

The plot is the element that links characters to each other, organises action, draws attention to particular narrative elements and highlights the moral or policy solution. Plots were catalogued against seven categories:

- 1 *Story of decline*: the plot describes how in the beginning things were good, but got worse, and are now so bad that something must be done.
- 2 *Story of improvement*: the plot describes how in the beginning things were bad, but became better, usually due to the actions of the hero or solution.
- 3 *Stymied progress*: the plot describes how things were terrible, got better due to a hero, but are getting worse because someone/something is interfering with the hero's work.
- 4 *Change is only an illusion*: the plot describes how everyone always thought things were getting worse (or better), but they were wrong, and things are actually going in the opposite direction.
- 5 *Helplessness and control*: the plot describes a situation as bad, and that it has always been believed the situation must be acceptable because it was unchangeable, but describes how change can occur.
- 6 *Conspiracy*: the plot describes a story moving from fate to control, and that a small group knew how to fix the policy problem all along, but didn't.
- 7 *Blame the victim*: the plot describes a story moving from fate towards control and locates the blame for the policy problem with those suffering from it.





Causal mechanisms

Policy narratives can be studied by examining the variation in policy narratives or the variation in their effect. In this study, we do a bit of both.

We analyse dominant frames used in the coverage of policy and policy-related issues in both cases. Subsequently, we assess the impact of media coverage by scrutinising the causal mechanisms (Stone, 2012) that link media exposure to alterations in public policy. Causal mechanisms are defined as the underlying processes that provide a logical explanation for why a particular policy decision was made (McBeth et al., 2012; Shanahan et al., 2013; Shanahan et al., 2014), and play a central role in the public's understanding and problem-solving abilities.

In most instances, causal mechanisms are strategically embedded in narratives (Stone, 2012). However, scholars such as Shanahan suggest that a narrative should include a clear and compelling causal mechanism that is grounded in evidence and logic. An example to illustrate the importance of a causal mechanism in narrative strategies can be a policymaker who wants to introduce a new law that would increase funding for public schools. The policymaker could use a narrative strategy in their communication to explain why this policy is necessary.

We catalogued causal mechanisms as one of the following:

- 1 *Mechanical cause*: does the story associate intended consequences by unguided actions with a policy problem? For example, a bad policy might have emerged from an unthinking or uninformed bureaucracy.
- 2 *Intentional cause*: does the story associate intended consequences by purposeful actions with a policy problem? For example, government introducing boat turn-backs intending to discourage asylum seekers from travelling to Australia by boat.
- 3 *Accidental cause*: does the story associate unintended consequences by unguided actions with a policy problem? This refers to unexpected challenges, for example, a politician who supported the minimum wage increase might use this accidental cause in their narrative to explain why the policy didn't yield the desired outcomes.

- 4 *Inadvertent cause*: does the story associate unintended consequences by purposeful actions with a policy problem? For example, government spending to improve infrastructure may inadvertently cause inflation.

Character-policy relationship

Where present, we also noted the relationship between the character presented in the story and the policy solution presented in the narrative. We catalogued:

- 1 *Proponent-beneficiary presence*: Whether an actor identified as benefiting from a proposed solution is in the narrative?
- 2 *Proponent-beneficiary type*: Who is identified as benefiting from the proposed solution?
- 3 *Opponent-beneficiary presence*: Is an actor identified as benefiting from an opposed solution in the narrative?
- 4 *Opponent-beneficiary type*: Who is identified as benefiting from the opposed solution?
- 5 *Proponent-cost presence*: Is an actor identified as bearing the cost of a proposed solution in the narrative?
- 6 *Proponent-cost type*: Who is identified as bearing the cost of the proposed solution?

For the next two chapters, we analysed 778 stories from 13 regional and metro news outlets across five key policy moments in different years. We did not conduct a statistical analysis of our results as our approach was primarily qualitative and designed to explicitly identify setting, characters, policy references and framing strategies in each story.



04 CHAPTER



GARY DICKSON

DAM REPORTING!

The purpose of this study is to examine how narratives about water policy are built in both regional and metro publications across two states and time periods, and any similarities and differences between them. It also looks at whether there is any evidence of issues or framing that were first reported in regional local media and then subsequently appeared in metro national media, or vice versa.

Corpus

Seven titles across three geographic areas and two time periods were assessed for this study.

National	South Australia	New South Wales
Australian Broadcasting Corporation	The Advertiser	The Daily Telegraph
The Australian	The Murray Valley Standard	The Deniliquin Pastoral Times
		The Sydney Morning Herald

Two policy events in the development of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan (MDBP or the plan) were focussed on:

- 1 The release of the Guide to the proposed Plan by the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) on 11 October, 2010.
- 2 The final Murray–Darling Basin Plan sign-off by the then federal Water Minister Tony Burke on 22 November, 2012.

Three months were coded for each sample period, representing the month in which the policy event occurred, and the two

subsequent months of coverage. These periods are October 2010–December 2010 (P1) and November 2012–January 2013 (P2).

The publications were selected to represent a broad cross-section of print and digital media. The titles include predominantly national media (Australian Broadcasting Corporation and The Australian), metro media (The Advertiser, The Daily Telegraph and The Sydney Morning Herald) and regional local media (Deniliquin Pastoral Times and Murray Valley Standard).

The selected publications publish across two states, with The Advertiser and The Murray Valley Standard being South Australian titles and The Sydney Morning Herald, The Daily Telegraph and The Deniliquin Pastoral Times being from New South Wales. Analysing media from a mix of states within the study was desirable due to this particular policy issue being heavily influenced by state-level considerations.

Finally, multiple news media businesses and types of businesses are represented in this group: major commercial companies News Corp Australia (The Advertiser, The Australian, The Daily Telegraph) and former Fairfax Media (The Sydney Morning Herald, Murray Valley Standard), an independent regional commercial newspaper company McPherson Media Group (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times), and one of the two national public broadcasters (ABC).



The corpus was primarily assembled through the following Factiva search term:

“Murray Darling Basin Authority” OR “Murray-Darling Basin Authority” OR “Murray Darling Basin Plan” OR “Murray-Darling Basin Plan”) AND wc>100.

This search term, referring explicitly to either the policy instrument or the primary authority designing that instrument, was chosen because the NPF methodology requires that a news article be specifically and directly about the relevant policy. Other articles about related events, such as water releases and adjustments to allocations, rainfall, infrastructure upgrades and environmental effects, were identified during preliminary reading; however, these issues were not directly about the relevant policy instrument and as such were excluded. Where an article explicitly linked a related event to the policy instrument, such as the announcement of a study of native fish populations as part of the implementation of the MDBP, it was included.

A minimum word count was imposed as it is highly unlikely that an article of fewer than 100 words will develop a narrative sufficient to be meaningfully assessed for this study. Articles

that fell below this threshold were assessed during preliminary reading and tended to be very short, factual statements, such as measurements of dam levels or flow released by the MDBA.

Most titles were accessed through Factiva, though some were not available. Physical archives of The Deniliquin Pastoral Times in P1 were accessed from the State Library of Victoria, with relevant articles photographed for further assessment and coding. The Pastoral Times was available in Factiva for P2. The Daily Telegraph in P1 was accessed through ProQuest, via the State Library of Victoria and the same search parameters were able to be applied. The Daily Telegraph was available in Factiva in P2. The Murray Valley Standard in both P1 and P2 was accessed through Gale. Search within articles was not available for this title in either period, therefore it was manually assessed for relevance.

To ensure consistency with publications accessed using the search term, articles in publications that were accessed manually were only included if one of the search terms appeared and if they were of sufficient word count. This manual approach did not result in any articles that were relevant to the study being excluded.

In most cases, every available article was coded from each publication across the period. The exception was ABC in P1, which published almost three times as many articles (159 stories) as the next-most prolific publisher, The Deniliquin Pastoral Times (54 stories), even after excluding radio transcripts. In order to address this imbalance, only every third article from the ABC in P1 was assessed for coding, resulting in 50 stories in the sample.

Every available article across all outlets was assessed for coding in P2.

Only news articles were coded. Editorials, opinion pieces, letters to the editor and transcripts were not coded. A total of 319 articles were coded for this study split across the seven publications and two years.

Background to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan

At its most basic, the MDBP sets the amount of water that will be available to the environment each

year in order to ensure the health of the Murray-Darling Basin system. This water is available for the environment due to a progressive reduction in the amount of water used for economic and social purposes across the basin states (Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia) and the Australian Capital Territory across the period of the Plan’s implementation.

The Plan was developed by the MDBA for the Federal Government and with the participation of the basin states and territory. It was signed into law in 2012 and its many elements will be implemented until 2027, though at the time of writing this timeline is under review (Foley & Sakka, 2023).

The Plan was developed under the authority of the federal Water Act 2007, despite the Constitution providing the states with control over water policy. The Howard Government developed the Act to meet Australia’s commitment under the international Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, relying on its constitutional authority to enter into treaties to resolve its lack

of authority on water. This approach required that the Act meets the water needs of the environment first, with economic and social water needs to be addressed only after that. This prioritisation of the environment has been a controversial element of the Plan, as will be discussed.

The amount of water required by the environment must be determined by the ‘best available scientific knowledge’. The water consequently available for other purposes is known as the ‘environmentally sustainable level of take’ (ESLT), meaning the amount of water that can be removed from a water resource without compromising it or its dependencies in the ecosystem. The actual amount of water removed from the system in a given year is determined by the ‘sustainable diversion limit’ (SDL), which places a cap on water use for economic and social purposes in accordance with the ESLT. These limits are set individually in 109 different water areas across the basin.

The stated goal of the Plan is to ‘recover’ 3,200 gigalitres of water for the environment by 2027.

In practice, meeting the environmental needs identified in the MDBP has meant significant cuts to the economic and social uses of water that had developed across a century in which the environment received short shrift. Cuts to water use have been achieved in multiple ways, with the most broadly popular being investment in more efficient water infrastructure, and the most controversial being ‘buybacks’: the Federal Government purchasing water licences from irrigators,

Publication	P1	P2	Total
The Advertiser	23	11	34
The Australian	27	17	44
Australian Broadcasting Corporation	50	37	87
The Daily Telegraph	13	6	19
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	54	28	82
The Murray Valley Standard	5	7	12
The Sydney Morning Herald	38	3	41
Total	210	109	319

TABLE 11 | PUBLICATIONS ANALYSED

effectively buying their right to a certain volume of water and transferring that water back to the environment.

The Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan (the guide) was released by the MDBA on 11 October, 2010, following months of speculation about its contents and a delay so that it was not released during the caretaker period ahead of the 2010 federal election. The Guide was the first indication that the public received about the likely structure of the Plan, including the proposed volume of water that would be returned to the environment and, as a consequence of that, the reduction in available water for economic and social purposes.

The Plan was signed off by the then federal Water Minister Tony Burke on 22 November, 2012.

Key findings

As discussed in the methodology section that introduced this chapter, this study took a Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach in order to analyse the way that key issues were represented at particular inflection points in the development of the MDBP.

This study found that coverage of the MDBP when it was first presented to the public was broadly negative, with a heavy focus on the potential social and economic impact on regional communities and little attention to the potential benefits for the environment. The tone of the coverage was broadly similar across all outlets, with a stronger emphasis on the 'existential' threat of the MDBP in New South Wales than in South Australia. The environmental issue was rarely raised but was more common at the end of the river system in South Australia — where the more significant environmental benefit would be observed — than in New South Wales.

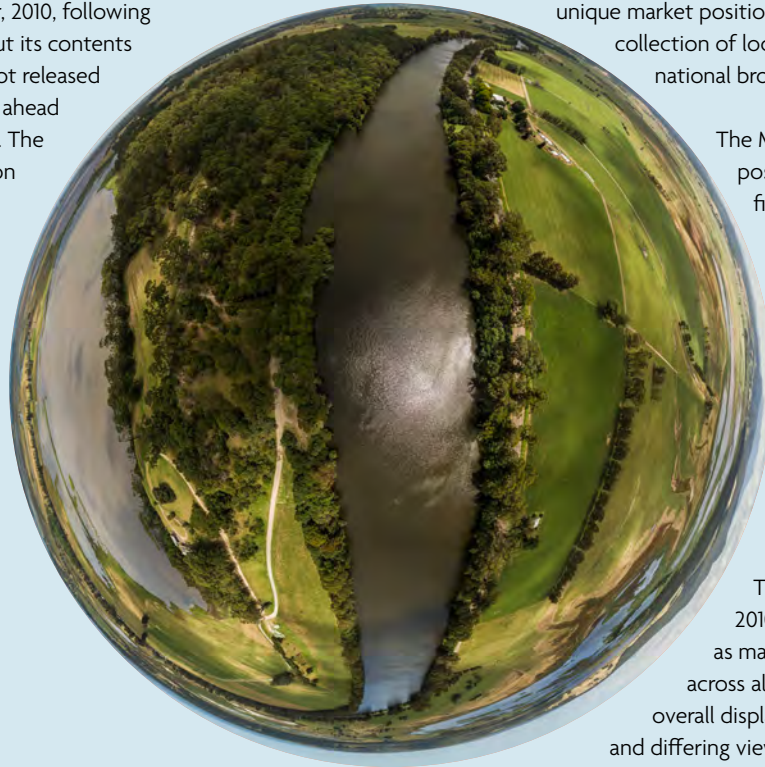
This coverage tended to reflect the assumed audiences of the titles: the local newspapers focussed on local issues; metro and national media tended to focus on state- and national-scale issues. ABC sat across these positions, reflecting its unique market position as simultaneously a collection of local radio stations and a national broadcaster.

The MDBA was frequently positioned as a villainous figure for developing the Plan, and the federal government, federal opposition and representatives of agricultural peak bodies as *hero* figures for being ready to amend it. Regional communities were positioned as victims by most outlets.

The first sample period, in 2010, contained almost twice as many articles as the second across all geographic sites, and overall displayed more open conflict and differing viewpoints across different news outlets, with one openly campaigning for one side of the issue, as will be discussed. By contrast, coverage in the 2012–13 period was comparatively objective, with almost perfunctory reporting on the passage of the final Plan through parliament with the support of the federal opposition, some of the crossbench, and backing from the state and territory governments. As such, much of the discussion here concerns P1, with contrasts made to P2 where appropriate.

Setting

The setting is a narrative element that describes the policy domains and levels of government involved in the policymaking process. Each article can contain any combination of settings, including all three at once.



CMT found almost two thirds of stories in P1 included national policy settings and half included local, while very few — only 16 per cent — addressed a state-level setting. By P2, narratives had shifted considerably away from the local level and toward levels of government directly involved in the water policymaking process: state and federal.

These findings reflect the narratives present during the periods of coverage. After the release of the Guide in P1, most media included an element of the potential impact of the Plan on local regional communities, which usually presented the Plan as disastrous for these communities, with an increasing focus on the federal government's response to the Plan over the months. In P2, CMT observed a significant drop in this coverage of victims, which correlates to a fall in local stories, as narratives instead centred around the final state-federal negotiations to bring the Plan into law.

Unsurprisingly, the highest levels of local coverage were at the two local newspapers, The Deniliquin Pastoral Times and The Murray Valley Standard. The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, which covered the MDBP issue heavily, ran most of its coverage through a local setting, even where the news might be predominantly national. In some cases, such as a story about the federal government announcing a parliamentary inquiry into the impact of the Plan, stories were framed first as a local issue: community organisation and pressure led to the 'region win[ning] round 1' in the Plan's ongoing development (Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 22 October 2010).

The Sydney-based metropolitan news outlets used stereotypical pastoral imagery and placed individuals at the centre of narratives concerning the local policy setting, as in the following examples from The Daily Telegraph:

In a lush green wheat paddock in the Riverina, great-grandfather Bill Morshead spoke about what it took for his family to build up

a business that has come through the generations, developed using their bare hands.

They carted water kilometres from the river to their property in buckets to keep crops alive and used horse-drawn carts to plough the land (The Daily Telegraph, 16 October 2010).

Publication	Local	Local %	State	State %	National	Nat. %
The Advertiser	8	35	7	30	16	70
The Australian	10	37	4	15	21	78
ABC	25	50	6	12	23	46
The Daily Telegraph	5	39	3	23	10	77
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	42	78	10	19	32	59
The Murray Valley Standard	4	80	1	20	1	20
The Sydney Morning Herald	7	18	2	5	33	87
Total	101	48	33	16	136	65

TABLE 12 | NARRATIVE SETTINGS DURING PERIOD 1, OCTOBER 2010 - DECEMBER 2010.

Publication	Local	Local %	State	State %	National	Nat. %
The Advertiser	2	18	3	27	9	82
The Australian	4	24	4	24	15	88
ABC	9	24	13	35	24	65
The Daily Telegraph	0	0	1	17	5	83
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	15	54	4	14	19	68
The Murray Valley Standard	3	43	3	43	6	86
The Sydney Morning Herald	0	0	1	3	2	67
Total	33	30	29	27	80	73

TABLE 13 | NARRATIVE SETTINGS DURING PERIOD 2, NOVEMBER 2012 - JANUARY 2013.



And from The Sydney Morning Herald:

The Wards’ farm presents as a pastoral idyll. Bees buzz around masses of sweet white blossoms and tiny green fruit forming beneath the petals carry hopes of a fabulous February crop (SMH, 9 October 2010).

This imagery was not apparent at Adelaide’s The Advertiser, despite that title producing a higher number of stories in the local domain than either of the other metro papers. Even a feature story about the potential impact of the Plan on irrigators that was reported from multiple towns dependent on the river between Shepparton, Victoria and Renmark, South Australia, did not use this imagery (The Advertiser, 16 October 2010).

The Australian similarly used evocative imagery in its local reporting, but from an environmental perspective. Its first story in P1 was located in Lake Alexandrina at the mouth of the Murray in South Australia, a major environmental beneficiary of the Plan, and described the land as “singing”:

Professor Bell yesterday watched the waters flow into Lake Alexandrina at a pace she has not seen in years, bringing back the wildlife that depends on a healthy Murray-Darling Basin.

“The sound of the frogs is deafening,” the anthropologist said. “There are species of birds here we haven’t seen in years” (The Australian, 4 October 2010).

The Australian was not found to use agricultural imagery in its reporting, even after regional communities’ backlash to the Plan changed the macro narrative across all sampled outlets.

The two local newspapers and the ABC also did not use these descriptors in their stories.

By P2, the local setting was greatly reduced at all outlets. The Deniliquin Pastoral Times and Standard predictably retained the highest levels of local coverage, while both The Sydney Morning Herald and The Daily Telegraph were not found to produce any local stories about the Plan in this period.

The state setting was the least common across both samples, though it increased in the 2012–13 period. This finding was in spite of state governments being constitutionally empowered to manage water issues, and consequently, significant political actors in any water policy. The MDBP was developed under a federal act of parliament, but state governments retain a strong political influence over this process, yet were not a strong presence in either sample period. State-setting stories were more frequently about a policy action that would

affect a very wide region, such as basin communities, or the representations made by a state-level actor, such as the NSW Irrigators’ Council.

National coverage was highest in both periods, and was predictably focussed on the actions of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority, an independent federal agency, the federal government, and an act of the federal parliament.

In P2, The Daily Telegraph did not produce any original news reporting on the passage of the MDBP. All six stories identified were produced by the Australian Associated Press. Each of these was about the federal government with the exception of a story about the Victorian Water Minister expressing concern about the Plan (The Daily Telegraph, 22 November 2012).

Characters

Characters in a narrative are those who act or are acted upon. They can be individuals, formal or informal organisations, or other identifiable groups. Things without agency can also be characters: animals, concepts such as drought, the environment, or the Murray River itself. Characters are usually identifiable by the role they play in a narrative. Six types of characters were coded for:

- *Hero* characters are those who take action in order to achieve or oppose a policy solution. They will often attempt to alleviate the harm being caused to a victim

character, or to create a beneficiary character.

- *Villain* characters are those who cause a problem that needs to be addressed through policy, and/or those who harm the victim.
- *Victim* characters are harmed by the villain, the policy solution, or any policy action or inaction.
- *Beneficiary* characters benefit from a proposed policy solution.
- *Ally* characters are aligned with the hero.
- *Opponent* characters are aligned with the villain.

CMT found that the first three character types tend to be at the centre of the narrative, while the *ally* and *opponent* characters tend to be on the periphery. The *beneficiary* character may normally be a central character, but due to the scope of conflict — discussed later — this character tended to be marginalised in narratives around the MDBP.

Overall, most outlets in P1 included a *hero* character in almost every narrative and a *victim* character in around half of all narratives, while *beneficiary*, *ally* and *opponent* characters were identified at different rates. *Villain* characters had a large spread: some outlets almost always included a *villain*, while others almost never did.





identified villains at a high rate (70 per cent of stories), and, with the ABC and (to a lesser extent) The Murray Valley Standard, continued identifying *victims* in P2, while other titles shifted focus heavily toward *hero*-centric coverage.

Hero

Hero characters are those who take action in order to achieve or oppose a policy solution. *Heroes* can be those individuals or organisations with explicit policymaking functions, such as the MDBA, or they can be those without an official role — a person or collective that is lobbying for or against a particular policy can be the one taking action in a narrative.

Across all outlets in P1, the most common *hero* characters were business peak bodies (28 stories), the MDBA (20 stories), the federal government (21 stories), the federal opposition (16 stories), community advocates (15 stories), local government (12 stories) and irrigators (10 stories).

By P2, the most common *hero* characters were the federal government (32 stories), federal opposition (23 stories), a state government (16 stories) and business peak bodies (11 stories). Irrigators and the MDBA almost entirely dropped out of the narrative; both were *heroes* in only two stories each. No stories were identified with community advocates in the *hero* position. This shift reflects the changing setting away from local and toward state and national issues as the MDBP entered its final stages before being signed into law.

Peak bodies were strongly positioned as *heroes* in P1 across most outlets; though not at either South Australia-based newspaper. Peak bodies, in this case, overwhelmingly refers to those representing agricultural interests: the NSW Irrigators' Council received the most attention, particularly in The

Deniliquin Pastoral Times, but the Ricegrowers' Association of Australia and the National Farmers' Federation were also present.

Peak bodies were the highest category of *hero* at the ABC and were drawn from across Queensland and New South Wales. The majority were agricultural interests opposing the Plan's proposed cuts: the National Irrigators' Council, NSW Irrigators' Council, Ricegrowers' Association, AUSVEG, St George Cotton Growers' Association and Cotton Australia were all given space to push back against the Guide.

"Cuts of this magnitude would cost thousands of jobs, would put upward pressure on food prices, and would threaten the viability of farms that have been in families for generations", [National Irrigators' Council chief executive Danny O'Brien] said (ABC, 7 October 2010).

The ABC also presented non-irrigator peak bodies as *heroes*, such as the Leeton Business Chamber. The Murray Darling Association, representing local governments across the Basin, was given space to advertise an unofficial community consultation it was holding on the Plan. Comments from the general manager suggested that the Association was more open to the Plan than other interests.

Broken Hill would want to know that their water security is being addressed ... and we also want to make sure that there is no stupidity when it comes to the discussion about Menindee Lakes being shut down. That is not an option that will be entertained at all (ABC, 19 October 2010).

This consultation was attended by an ABC journalist who reported on a 'disappointing turnout' the following day (ABC, 20 October 2010).

MOST OUTLETS INCLUDED A HERO IN THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF STORIES – BETWEEN 74 PER CENT AT THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD AND 100 PER CENT OF ALL STORIES AT THE MURRAY VALLEY STANDARD

Publication	Hero	Hero %	Vill.	Vill. %	Vict.	Vict. %
The Advertiser	19	83	11	48	14	61
The Australian	25	93	14	52	14	52
ABC	46	92	25	50	26	52
The Daily Telegraph	5	39	11	85	11	85
Deniliquin Pastoral Times	49	90	38	70	34	63
The Murray Valley Standard	5	100	0	0	2	40
The Sydney Morning Herald	28	74	20	53	22	58
Total	177	84	119	57	123	59

TABLE 14 | CENTRAL CHARACTERS DURING PERIOD 1, OCTOBER 2010 - DECEMBER 2010.

Central characters

The three central character types are *hero*, *villain* and *victim*.

Most outlets included a *hero* in the overwhelming majority of stories – between 74 per cent at The Sydney Morning Herald and 100 per cent of all stories at The Murray Valley Standard.

The Daily Telegraph was an outlier on this, identifying a *hero* in only five stories in P1 — 39 per cent of those sampled, or almost half the rate of The Sydney Morning Herald, and well below the average of 84 per cent. The Daily Telegraph focussed its 2010 narratives around *villain* and *victim* characters (85 percent each). Its News Corp stablemate in Adelaide, The Advertiser, on the other hand, had a below-average rate of *villain* usage (48 per cent) and a hero rate right at the average (84 per cent).

The Deniliquin Pastoral Times similarly

Publication	Hero	Hero %	Vill.	Vill. %	Vict.	Vict. %
The Advertiser	10	91	2	18	2	18
The Australian	15	88	5	29	6	35
ABC	36	97	12	32	18	49
The Daily Telegraph	6	100	1	17	0	0
Deniliquin Pastoral Times	26	93	17	61	16	57
The Murray Valley Standard	7	100	2	29	3	43
The Sydney Morning Herald	3	100	1	33	0	0
Total	103	94	40	37	45	41

TABLE 15 | CENTRAL CHARACTERS DURING PERIOD 2, NOVEMBER 2012 - JANUARY 2013.



The Daily Telegraph used *heroes* in less than half of its sampled stories in P1, and no category was invoked more than once. Similar to other outlets, an agricultural peak body was given the *hero* role in a Daily Telegraph article undermining the claims of the MDBA:

However, the National Farmers' Federation claimed yesterday that the actual amount of water available for food production in NSW could be cut by up to 89 per cent in some areas (The Daily Telegraph, 14 October 2010).

The MDBA was presented as both *hero* and *villain* across 2010. It was the *hero* in 60 per cent of stories at The Murray Valley Standard and 47 per cent at The Advertiser. The Daily Telegraph and The Deniliquin Pastoral Times never framed the MDBA in that way. The two South Australian newspapers each presented the MDBA as a *hero* more often than as a *villain*, while the reverse was true for every other title.

The macro narrative of the two South Australian publications can be seen in the lead of the first article coded from The Advertiser, published before the Guide was released:

Upstream states are already positioning themselves to challenge the key report of the new Murray-Darling Basin Authority which is expected to announce

tomorrow significant cuts in water extractions from the Murray (The Advertiser, 7 October 2010).

Positioning “upstream” water users — meaning, in this case, irrigators from Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland — as pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of South Australia was a common rhetorical strategy in coverage. It was also expressed by South Australian journalists and editors interviewed for this report (see page 69). Margaret Simons, identified this phenomenon in her 2020 Quarterly Essay on the Plan:

In the Murray-Darling Basin, the authorities joke, everyone downstream is a wastrel, and everyone upstream is a thief. Only I, the person drawing water in this spot, for these crops, in this way, truly understands the value of the water and how to use it (Simons, 2020).

Presenting the MDBA's actions as potentially saving the river was common amongst the South Australian titles. The Advertiser published a positive reflection in its coverage after the Guide was released:

Coorong fisherman Garry Hera-Singh says there is hope for the Lower Lakes for the first time in a quarter of a century (The Advertiser, 9 October 2010).

Not all coverage of the MDBA in The Advertiser was positive, and concerns about the scope of the cuts were also raised. In some cases, the paper simultaneously presented the MDBA as a *hero* (as the MDBP would create a *beneficiary* in the environment) and as a *villain* (as the MDBP would create a *victim* in regional communities).

The plan has been welcomed by environmentalists and Lower Lakes residents, but many upstream fear the worst, amid warnings of job losses and industry closures (The Advertiser, 16 October 2010).

As noted, The Australian also saw value in the Plan's potential to help the “singing land”, but its coverage was more critical than not. ABC's coverage was similarly skewed: while the MDBA was a *hero* in 11 per cent of sampled stories, it was a *villain* in 76 per cent.

The federal government was frequently presented as a *hero*, not because it was taking a policy action itself, but because it was presented as ‘standing up for’ regional communities against the MDBA, as in this example from The Daily Telegraph:

The Gillard Government has demanded the Murray-Darling Basin Authority take into consideration the impact cuts to water allocations have on rural towns and communities before making sweeping recommendations (The Daily Telegraph, 26 October 2010).

Or this from The Sydney Morning Herald:

The Water Minister, Tony Burke, has demanded the independent Murray-Darling Basin Authority accept new legal advice that he says proves the 2007 Water

Act allows full consideration of the social and economic impacts of water reform (SMH, 26 October 2010).

These stories, which came in the weeks following the release of the Guide do not present the government as a policymaker, but as a champion of rural interests against policymakers.

This was also true at The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, though there was a clearer shift in the position of the federal government within its coverage in P1 than at other outlets. At first, Water Minister Tony Burke was presented as a figure likely to be sympathetic to irrigator interests, and the most likely political ally against the MDBA's plan.

Murray Irrigation acting chairman Mark Robertson said he came away from a meeting with federal Water Minister Tony Burke last week confident the basin plan would be approached in a “sensible way” (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 26 October 2010).

The Minister promised to hand-deliver to Prime Minister Julia Gillard a letter written by a schoolgirl in Deniliquin, Emily Mildred, after he met with her in the town.

“As I was reading it [Burke] said he agreed with everything I had said,” [Emily] said.

Emily said she left the brief meeting with Mr Burke with some encouragement that he may do the right thing for rural communities (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 2 November 2010).

That sentiment shifted around the middle of the 2010 sample, however, as will be described in the next section.

POSITIONING "UPSTREAM" WATER USERS –MEANING, IN THIS CASE, IRRIGATORS FROM VICTORIA, NEW SOUTH WALES AND QUEENSLAND – AS PURSUING THEIR OWN SELF INTEREST AT THE EXPENSE OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA WAS A COMMON RHETORICAL STRATEGY IN COVERAGE.



The Murray Group of Concerned Communities was a group representing agricultural interests and regional towns and cities that organised in opposition to the Plan. The Murray Group successfully positioned itself in the media as the voice of regional New South Wales, calling people to action, and was regularly positioned as a *hero* in The Deniliquin Pastoral Times and, rarely, in metro and national media.

In P2 The Deniliquin Pastoral Times' characters were often out of step with other sampled media. It was the only outlet where the federal opposition was presented as a *hero* more often than the federal government. It was the only title to present irrigators as *heroes* in this period, and alongside the ABC it continued to publish the concerns that agricultural peak bodies had about the Plan.

Villain

Villain characters are positioned within policy narratives as those that are causing a problem that must be solved with policy or they can be any actor that is causing harm to a *victim*.

In the context of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, which was broadly opposed in media policy narratives during P1, this meant that the *villain* was frequently the Murray-Darling Basin Authority: through its policy actions (developing the Plan), it was harming regional Australia. The MDBA was positioned as the *villain* in 70 stories across all outlets during P1 and was the most frequent *villain* at all outlets. The next most common *villain* were policy and legislative instruments (20 stories) that reflect back on the agency: the MDBP itself as a product of the MDBA, and the Water Act 2007 as its binding legislation. The only other notable *villain* in this period was the federal government (16 stories).

Villains were far less common in P2, appearing in 37 per cent of stories, down from 57 per cent. The most common *villains* were the federal government (23 stories) and South Australian government (9 stories). The MDBA was a *villain* in only four stories, again reflecting how the agency had significantly fallen out of the narrative by 2012–13.

In P1, the perceived inadequacy of the Guide was a frequent line of criticism levelled at the MDBA, as in this example from The Daily Telegraph:

NSW Farmers' Association water spokesman John Ward said social impacts of the plan had been 'grossly underestimated' by the Federal Government and Murray-Darling Basin Authority (The Daily Telegraph, 18 October 2010).

The MDBA was accused of insufficiently considering the potential broader impact of water cuts for regional Australian towns, of not taking into account previous water efficiency measures in determining the level of cuts, and was criticised for not releasing the underlying modelling alongside the Guide.

The Deniliquin Pastoral Times presented the MDBA as a *villain* 20 times in its coverage in P1, the most of any sampled outlet. Much of this occurred in the week immediately following the release of the Guide. The MDBA was most often criticised for the "damage" that its draft plan would do to regional Australia if implemented, and was sometimes framed in existential terms by those quoted by the paper:

Clearly the MDBA has produced a report which will do untold damage to the national interest by destroying industries, decimating regional jobs, de-populating rural and regional towns, and driving up the costs of food for all Australians (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 12 October 2010).

Over the course of P1, the Deniliquin Pastoral Times shifted its focus from the MDBA to the federal government as its main *villain*. In the second half of the sample period, four stories involved the government as a central character; in three of these as a *villain*, once as *hero*.

This narrative shift occurred around three issues:

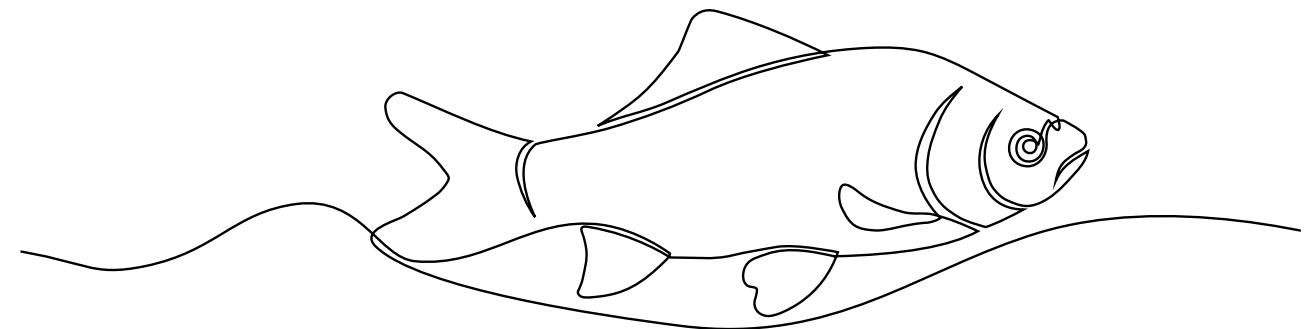
- 1 The federal Water Minister announcing an unpopular new round of water buybacks;
- 2 The interpretation of the Water Act 2007; and
- 3 The federal opposition embarking on a tour of the Basin.

In reporting on the first issue, Murray Group chair Bruce Simpson is given extensive opportunity for comment. He is quoted in The Deniliquin Pastoral Times as saying:

The timing of this announcement demonstrates our communities will continue to be treated with absolute contempt ... [Tony Burke] continues to announce tenders that have no structure and they continue to undermine rural communities (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 23 November 2010).

The second and third issues are related to each other, and to an issue discussed in more detail later: the question of the 'triple bottom line'. As previously described, the Water Act 2007 requires that the Plan meets the water needs of the environment before considering economic and social water use. The wording of the Act is ambiguous, however, and cutting irrigator water use was very unpopular, which led to a public discussion about whether the environment should be prioritised at all. Some opponents of the Plan argued that it should balance environmental, economic and social needs against each other — the so-called triple bottom line approach, which, if adopted, would seem to mitigate the cuts faced by irrigators.

Water Minister Tony Burke was initially dismissive of this argument. Outside the sample period, in September 2010, he is quoted in The Sydney Morning Herald as saying that:





The legislative framework ... gave priority to ensuring sufficient water for the environment, and there was no reason to undermine that. “The question is how do you, within that framework, provide the best possible focus for sustainable food production and the sustainability of regional towns” (SMH, 14 September 2010).

In October 2010, following the release of the Plan and public backlash, the Water Minister appeared to reverse his position, apparently endorsing a triple bottom line approach. This coincides with the period in which he was positioned as a *hero*. Following an October meeting with the Minister, a report in The Deniliquin Pastoral Times quoted Murray Irrigation Acting Chair Mark Robertson:

He said during the meeting, Mr Burke made it clear the basin plan would only work if it had three priorities — a healthy river, strong production and strong communities. “The Minister wants to get all three without compromising any” (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 26 October 2010).

These statements put the Minister in conflict with the MDBA, which viewed and publicly stated that its obligation under the Act is to prioritise environmental need. In response,

Burke requested legal advice from the Australian Government Solicitor on how to interpret the Act.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported the outcome of that advice — which was again considered to be ambiguous — and speculated on the reasoning:

A leading constitutional lawyer says the government is misinterpreting “new” legal advice that has been seized on by the Water Minister, Tony Burke, to reassure angry farmers he can give social and economic factors equal weighting with environmental imperatives when formulating a new water plan for the Murray-Darling Basin (SMH, 27 October 2010).

Regardless of whether this was the intent, it did not work. The Deniliquin Pastoral Times quoted local agricultural interests as aligning themselves to the MDBA’s interpretation of the Act rather than the Minister’s.

Mr Burke, addressing Murray-Darling Basin councils in Canberra on Monday, said he believed the Act covered the triple bottom line — environment, social and economic. Local irrigator and community groups, however, say the Act is flawed and it is too heavily

weighted toward the environment (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 26 November 2010).

In stating that the Act is too heavily weighted toward the environment, local irrigator groups were suggesting that the triple bottom line is not possible without amendment, in contrast to Tony Burke’s position.

At the same time, during a meeting of Nationals parliamentarians held in Deniliquin, then New South Wales Senator Barnaby Joyce took up the triple bottom line issue.

[Senator Joyce said] it had become glaringly obvious that [the Water Act] doesn’t do enough to reach the balance [between economic, social and environmental needs] and that it must be changed (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 7 December 2010).

Joyce also called for regional communities to travel to Canberra to protest to the government, and presented the triple bottom line issue as something essential that could only be achieved by the opposition through the parliament. It was these two points — a lack of confidence in his interpretation, and the federal opposition adopting it as an issue — that appear to have caused a diminished view of Minister Burke toward the end of this period.

This conflict with the government over the interpretation of the Act led to the resignation of Mike Taylor, chair of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. ABC reported that:

Mr Taylor said he had written to Water Minister Tony Burke about new advice the Authority has received about balancing the three areas. He says the advice received by the authority confirms it “cannot compromise the minimum level of water required to restore the system’s environment on social or economic

grounds”. Mr Taylor also says balancing the requirements of the Water Act against the social and economic impact on communities will be “a significant challenge” (ABC, 7 December 2010).

The Deniliquin Pastoral Times framed his resignation through comments from the Murray Group and Southern Riverina Irrigators, reporting that they:

... have called for the Federal Government to reconsider the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan following this week’s resignation of [Mike Taylor] (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 10 December 2010).

In a sharp turnaround from October, and perhaps mistakenly based on ABC reporting, Taylor was presented by those groups as:

... a voice of reason, trying to find a way to address social and economic issues under the Water Act (ABC, 10 December 2010).

This sharp pivot from the government as a *hero* to a *villain*, and the head of the MDBA from a *villain* to a *hero*, is not evident in other titles.

Victim

Portrayals of *victim* characters saw moderate to heavy use across most outlets in the first period, and moderate to low use across outlets in the second.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the largest category of victims identified by far were regional Australians as a generic group.

THIS CONFLICT WITH THE GOVERNMENT OVER THE INTERPRETATION OF THE ACT LED TO THE RESIGNATION OF MIKE TAYLOR, CHAIR OF THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN AUTHORITY



There were 62 stories across regional, metro and national outlets that presented regional Australians in this way; 50 per cent of stories that included a *victim* character, and 30 per cent of stories sampled from P1. The second highest category was irrigators, a very similar character type that was coded when the story focussed more on the economic impact of the policy problem than on the broader social problem. These two groups were *victims* in a combined 100 stories: 81 per cent of any story with a victim and almost half of all stories sampled in the period.

Consistent with these broader results, more than half of all stories published by The Deniliquin Pastoral Times included a victim. Most of these were regional people (31 stories, 82 per cent), with smaller focusses on irrigators (3 stories, 9 per cent).

... the impending MDBP has the potential to devastate Deniliquin and other regional communities (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 8 October 2010).

Towns such as Deniliquin, Finley, Wakool, Coleambally and Leeton ... would struggle to survive the impact of the projected permanent reductions in water allocations (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 12 October 2010).

As in these examples, The Deniliquin Pastoral Times tended to present regional people as broad-based victims: the MDBP would devastate entire towns, regions and large-scale agricultural businesses. In this, it was consistent with the presentation of the villain Murray-Darling Basin Authority and its plan in existential terms: the MDBP was not just a threat to a single individual, but to all of Deniliquin and the rural New South Wales way of life.

There was an example of The Deniliquin Pastoral Times using individuals as evidence of its broader narrative, however. One of the few stories that identified a different type of *victim* — in this case, a non-primary industry business — focussed on a farming machinery dealer whose business might not survive the Plan. However, even in that story, the business owner expressed his own victimhood as a likely consequence of a broader economic downturn:

... if this plan goes ahead, even in a good season, all small farms will be unviable without water. That then affects

everyone — food stores, clothing stores, schools, cafes (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 30 November 2010).

The presentation of regional people as *victims* of the MDBP abated somewhat around the end of the sample period, particularly after the federal opposition began to tour the regions and promise reform. This was also concurrent with a rise in narrative plots that centred on the agency of regional people to affect the development of the Plan.

The Daily Telegraph included *victims* in most of its coverage (85 per cent) in 2010. Like others, it also tended to focus on regional people in the broader sense, but sometimes profiled individual farmers as *victims* in P1. The Morshead family from Griffith were profiled twice in two days:

As he looked down to his great grandsons Harry, 3, and one-year-old James, he says there will be nothing left for them at their property on the outskirts of Griffith under water cuts proposed in the MDBP.

Little three year-old Harry Morshead wants to be a farmer when he grows up. And just a week ago his father Chris thought Harry and his youngest son James, 1, would follow in his footsteps (The Daily Telegraph, 16 October 2010).

ABC did not present any individuals as *victims* in the sampled articles, instead focussing entirely on broad groups. This was often due to the statements of the subjects of the story, such as when the General Manager of Hay Council stated that his local government area was being 'neglected' in the consultation process.

The only other notable *victim* character in P1 was the environment, a general tag for both an undefined concept of the environment as well as specific locales or features: Lake Alexandrina; the Coorong Wetlands, river red gum forests in Barmah-Millewa, the Murray-Darling system as a whole. Only 11 stories identified the environment as a potential *victim*. Some of these stories came from the period before the Guide was launched. In two stories in the lead-up to its release, The Sydney Morning Herald presented the environment simultaneously as a *victim* — of the policy problem up to that point, being improper management of water resources

— and also a potential beneficiary of the proposed solution, the imminent MDBP. After the release of the Plan, however, The Sydney Morning Herald shifted to focussing on regional people as *victims*.

The Australian presented the environment as a *victim* in a story after the release of the Plan: in coverage of a meeting organised by the Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales in Sydney. In that, the organisation's chairman wrote of the Guide that it:

is signing a death warrant for some of the state's most valuable aquatic habitats and birds, fish and wildlife that call them home (The Australian, 4 November 2010).

That view that the MDBP does not solve the policy problem because it does not go far enough to recoup water from irrigation for the environment, was seldom covered in P1: it was not present in The Sydney Morning Herald, The Daily Telegraph, The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, The Murray Valley Standard or in what was sampled from the ABC, but appeared once each in The Australian and The Advertiser. The latter paper covered the South Australian State Water Minister's intervention in the debate over the triple bottom line, stating that he "do[es] not see how they can credibly go below [3000 gegalitres of water returned to the environment], whatever the interpretation of the legal advice". That amount of water, he said, would only return the river to "poor to moderate health" (The Advertiser, 27 October 2010).





Victim characters were far less common in P2, and entirely absent at both The Daily Telegraph and The Sydney Morning Herald. Regional people (22 stories) and agricultural interests (9 stories) were still the largest two categories of *victim*, the latter alongside the environment (9 stories). More than half of all cases where regional Australians were portrayed as *victims* in The Deniliquin Pastoral Times. The same outlet also only identified a single environmental victim in 2012: after the New South Wales government announced it would cut funding to the MDBA, likely meaning the end of a 50-year Native Fish Strategy, it reported a local angler saying that:

We have to talk about the environment, the environment, the environment, and now they're not going to do anything.

The funding cut would “set the rivers back 30 years”, the angler said (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 4 December 2012).

The potential impact of funding cuts on fish positioned the environment as a victim in other outlets in this same period. ABC reported that the Basin’s Recreational Fishing Council wanted the federal government to incorporate a replacement strategy inside the MDBP:

Native fish are out of sight, out of mind ... the trouble is the only time people see native fish is when they're floating dead on the surface as a result of black water events. And by then it's too late (ABC, 21 November 2012).

The Murray Valley Standard similarly reported on a call from the National Irrigators’ Council to reintroduce funding for the strategy (The Murray Valley Standard, 18 December 2012)

Peripheral characters

At all outlets, the most commonly identified *beneficiary* of the MDBP was the environment. The Advertiser and The Daily Telegraph were the most likely to include the potential positive impact that the Plan could have on the Murray River. The Advertiser typically framed the benefits of improving the environment in economic terms, whether explicitly ...

South Australia’s demands for a national overhaul of the Murray-Darling system have been strengthened by an independent study that shows saving the Coorong would deliver the state a \$4.3 billion windfall (The Advertiser, 6 November 2010).

... or implicitly, as in an article suggesting that saving the Lower Lakes would be good for fishing (The Advertiser, 9 October 2010).

There were also occasions across most outlets where the fact of the environment being a *beneficiary* of the Plan was presented as a negative, as in this example from The Advertiser:

Mr Ablett said the MDBA’s report was weighted too heavily in favour of environmental flows at the expense of irrigators. “This may be what the river needs, but let’s negotiate to see what the country can afford. We still need to eat in Australia, although some people don’t think we do” (The Advertiser, 9 October 2010).

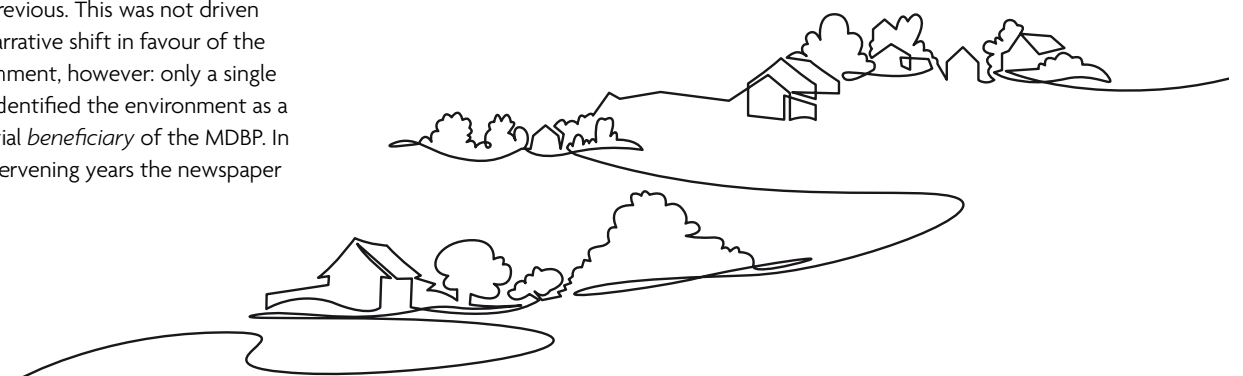
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times rarely identified a *beneficiary* in its stories in P1. Only six per cent noted that the environment would benefit from the MDBP, where other outlets ranged from 15 per cent (The Australian) to 39 per cent (The Advertiser). This changed in the 2012–13 period, where it was broadly still on the low end — 29 percent of stories included a *beneficiary* — but considerably higher than previous. This was not driven by a narrative shift in favour of the environment, however: only a single story identified the environment as a potential *beneficiary* of the MDBP. In the intervening years the newspaper

Publication	Bene.	Bene. %	Ally	Ally %	Oppo.	Oppo. %
The Advertiser	13	57	2	9	4	17
The Australian	6	22	4	15	6	22
ABC	12	24	18	36	5	10
The Daily Telegraph	5	38	1	8	6	46
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	5	9	18	33	9	17
The Murray Valley Standard	1	20	0	0	0	0
The Sydney Morning Herald	16	42	8	21	6	16
Total	58	28	51	24	36	17

TABLE 16 | PERIPHERY CHARACTERS DURING PERIOD 1, OCTOBER 2010 - DECEMBER 2010.

Publication	Bene.	Bene. %	Ally	Ally %	Oppo.	Oppo. %
The Advertiser	5	45	6	55	2	18
The Australian	7	41	7	41	6	35
ABC	19	51	6	16	7	19
The Daily Telegraph	2	33	2	33	2	33
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	8	29	10	36	8	29
The Murray Valley Standard	6	86	2	29	2	29
The Sydney Morning Herald	0	0	1	33	1	33
Total	47	43	34	31	28	26

TABLE 17 | PERIPHERY CHARACTERS DURING PERIOD 2, NOVEMBER 2012 - JANUARY 2013.





appears to have warmed to the Plan, as five stories included its benefits for regional Australians and two stories on its benefits for irrigators.

Ally and *opponent* characters were rarely impactful on the overall narrative of a story. They tended to be positioned to reinforce the *hero* or *villain*, respectively, without necessarily contributing a unique view themselves.

Moral of the story

The moral of the story is how the narrative presents the policy solution or call to action; the action of the *hero* that creates a *beneficiary* or protects a *victim*. It may be an explicit action that will solve the problem (*solution*), commentary on the problem or the proposed *solution* (*reference*) or a call to action in support of/opposition to the *solution* (*intermediary*).

Publication	Inte.	Inte. %	Ref.	Ref. %	Solu.	Solu. %
The Advertiser	1	4	22	96	0	0
The Australian	9	33	18	67	0	0
ABC	13	26	36	72	1	2
The Daily Telegraph	3	23	9	69	1	8
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	28	52	23	43	3	6
The Murray Valley Standard	2	40	3	60	0	0
The Sydney Morning Herald	8	21	27	71	2	5
Total	64	30	138	66	7	3

TABLE 18 | NARRATIVE MORALS DURING PERIOD 1, OCTOBER 2010 – DECEMBER 2010.

Publication	Inte.	Inte. %	Ref.	Ref. %	Solu.	Solu. %
The Advertiser	5	45	5	45	1	9
The Australian	1	6	16	94	0	0
ABC	15	41	15	41	7	19
The Daily Telegraph	1	17	3	50	2	33
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	3	11	19	68	6	21
The Murray Valley Standard	1	14	3	43	3	43
The Sydney Morning Herald	0	0	3	100	0	0
Total	26	24	64	59	19	17

TABLE 19 | NARRATIVE MORALS DURING PERIOD 2, NOVEMBER 2012 – JANUARY 2013.

The majority of articles in both periods were of the *reference* type: they were about the perceived shortcomings of the MDBP without necessarily advancing a *solution* or containing a call to action. However, there was also a considerable shift in morals between periods: the *intermediary* step toward solving the problem was less frequent, and solutions became much more common. This would appear consistent with the setting change over this period: it is fair to assume that in the immediate aftermath of the release of the Guide in P1, its opponents knew that something had to be done to change it but not what; whereas two years later as the federal government was preparing to pass it into law, the various interest groups had developed solutions that had been either accepted, rejected or ignored.

In P1, the intermediary type became more common over time, particularly at The Deniliquin Pastoral Times. As particular interest groups — regional communities, agribusinesses, the federal opposition and state governments — organised around particular issues, there came to be explicit calls to action from submissions ...

Locals are being asked to help stop the negative impact the proposed Murray-Darling Basin is already having on our communities by joining the fight (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 3 December 2010).

... to community organising ...

[Bruce Simpson] said the meeting would also be a forum for receiving feedback from communities and impressing upon all people the role they can play in influencing the outcome of the final plan (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 5 November 2010).

... and protests when MDBA officials were in town, including blocking off streets and burning copies of the Guide (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 15 October 2010). In a front-page piece in late October, The Deniliquin Pastoral Times described how residents could join a protest that would take place in Melbourne, with buses being chartered from the town, and a “fighting fund” established to pay for these activities (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 26 October 2010).

In some cases, these calls came from action groups and advocates within the community, and in others from the media itself: The Deniliquin Pastoral Times’ coverage was openly opposed to the Plan and in support of protests against it, as was Country Press NSW (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 22 October 2010).

The other local newspaper in the sample, The Murray Valley Standard, did not campaign. It included two *intermediary* stories in P1, both following on from community meetings. In one of only three mentions of Indigenous Australians at any publication across either period, the Standard wrote that the Murray Bridge community had told the MDBA that:

the Murray-Darling Basin Plan’s sustainable diversion limits are too low, Aboriginal people have been left out of the water debate and more attention needs to be paid to socio-economic impacts on Lower Murray communities (The Murray Valley Standard, 1 November 2010).





At a subsequent meeting without the MDBA present, these concerns were reiterated, with an explicit call from the South Australian Water Minister Paul Caica that residents “engage and raise with the Authority where there are problems that need to be ironed out” (The Advertiser, 17 November 2010).

Intermediary stories by the ABC tended to be in a similar vein to The Murray Valley Standard and in contrast to The Deniliquin Pastoral Times: subjects of coverage calling for particular actions, without a suggestion that the broadcaster itself was endorsing those calls. Many of these stories tended to be reports on public meetings in regional towns. As these meetings identified their next steps, this tended to be picked up by the public broadcaster and form the moral of its coverage. In an ABC story, the Murray Shire Mayor Graeme Shiells said that for regional people:

It’s one thing to be active at these sorts of meetings and to show their displeasure and say, “listen do some more about it” ... but I do think those people have to do more as well and we have to be able to convince the politicians that this is not the way to go at the moment (ABC, 9 November 2010).

In the second mention of Indigenous Australians in the sample, ABC reported on a meeting between Aboriginal leaders and the Murray-Darling Basin Authority in Tamworth. Murrawarri man and chair of the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations Fred Hooper told the ABC that:

The cultural significance of water is tied, not only to conversations with elders past and present, but to the ability of Aboriginal people to harvest food at the right time and ensure they have proper nutrition (ABC, 21 October 2010).

The meeting called on the MDBA to consult further with Indigenous Australians and ensure that their knowledge and cultural requirements for water are incorporated into the Plan. The final mention of Indigenous affairs was in The Deniliquin Pastoral Times in which a workshop attendee viewed cultural waters as a framework that could be used for their own purposes:

... one attendee said provision had been made for Indigenous cultural waters in the plan, but no consideration was given for soldier settlement farms — awarded to those who fought for Australia. Mr May said research will be done to look for any legal provision for water on those farms (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 12 November 2010).

Very few *solutions* to policy problems were identified in P1. On one occasion The Deniliquin Pastoral Times reported the federal opposition’s position that the *solution* to the problem that had been created — which, in this narrative, was not the problem of how to prevent the collapse of the river system but the problem of how to protect regional communities — was to kill the Murray-Darling Basin Plan entirely and start again from scratch (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 24 December 2010).

In another article, Deniliquin Mayor Brian Mitsch suggested that an existing Murray Lower Darling Water Sharing Plan

was the appropriate framework for that reset (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 30 November 2010). These *solutions* were preceded by the New South Wales Coalition opposition, which also promised that it would refuse to implement the MDBP and would instead expand existing Water Sharing Plans (The Daily Telegraph, 21 October 2010).

In its coverage, The Sydney Morning Herald, conversely, identified the problem as being how to sustain the environment. In an exclusive report based on South Australian government research it obtained, the newspaper reported that the MDBP may save globally significant wetlands at the river mouth ...

As rural communities brace themselves for big cuts to farmers’ water rights, environmentalists hope a new Murray-Darling Basin plan may deliver the massive amounts of water needed to save the Coorong and lower lakes (SMH, 8 October 2010).

... and that it might restore river red gum forests along the Victorian-New South Wales border:

Lance Howley ... hopes that the Murray-Darling Basin Plan will end the river mismanagement and over-allocation of water upstream that he blames for the loss of giants whose rings indicate they were here when Captain James Cook landed in Australia in 1770 (SMH, 9 October 2010).

More commonly, however, most outlets identified the policy problem as being how to achieve the necessary level of cuts to agricultural water use without ‘devastating’ rural communities. This was particularly true in P2, when the

MORE COMMONLY, HOWEVER, MOST OUTLETS IDENTIFIED THE POLICY PROBLEM AS BEING HOW TO ACHIEVE THE NECESSARY LEVEL OF CUTS TO AGRICULTURAL WATER USE WITHOUT ‘DEVASTATING’ RURAL COMMUNITIES.



Plan approached its final form. By this point, there were not multiple policy problems being identified, but broad consensus around this as the central issue. The least controversial option — and, perhaps for that reason, the most repeated — appeared to be investments in irrigation infrastructure. The Deniliquin Pastoral Times reported an industry wish list that in implementing the Plan, the government should limit water buybacks, put a greater emphasis on infrastructure and on water saving measures from before the Plan was developed, and commit to helping rural communities adjust (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 20 November 2012).

Some of these solutions received federal government commitments across the sample period as it sought to smooth the passage of the Plan into law. The government announced irrigation infrastructure funding in Victoria's Sunraysia region, and floodplain restoration funding for South Australia was covered by the ABC, The Advertiser and The Murray Valley Standard.

Plot

The plot is the element that links characters to each other, organises action, draws attention to particular narrative elements and highlights the moral or policy solution. Seven plot types were available to be coded for, of which four had a meaningful presence in the sample:

- 1 *Story of decline*: the plot describes how in the beginning things were good, but got worse, and are now so bad that something must be done.
- 2 *Story of improvement*: the plot describes how in the beginning things were bad, but got better, usually due to the actions of the *hero* or *solution*.
- 3 *Stymied progress*: the plot describes how things were terrible, got better due to a *hero*, but are getting worse because someone/something is interfering with the *hero's* work.
- 4 *Helplessness and control*: the plot describes a situation as bad, and that it has always been believed the situation must be acceptable because it was unchangeable, but describes how change can occur.

The most common plot in the first sample period was story of decline, a narrative that describes how things have only become worse over time. This can easily be seen in coverage of the release of the Guide, which tended to recognise that the situation was not necessarily positive — that the Basin had been mismanaged for decades, that the Millennium Drought (2001-2009) had left a lasting mark on agribusiness and/or that the Lower Lakes, the mouth of the Murray and the Coorong were increasingly degraded — but that the proposed Plan would only make things worse, not better. These stories, which were common across all outlets except The Murray Valley Standard, usually emphasised the need for the Plan to be scrapped or significantly altered in order to address these (sometimes mutually exclusive) issues.

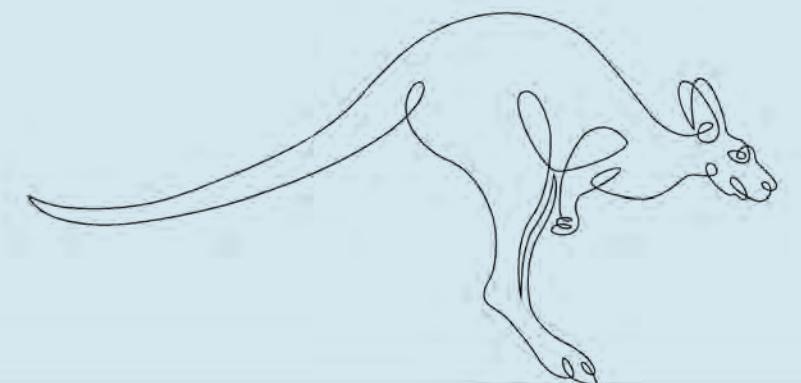
There was then a significant shift toward the *helplessness and control* plot as the sample period went on, particularly at The Deniliquin Pastoral Times and the ABC, which each covered the efforts of regional organisations and communities to influence the development of the Plan. As these groups formalised strategies for engaging with the Plan, organising meetings, making demands of the MDBA and the federal government, and as the federal opposition, led particularly by the Nationals, began to call regional communities to action, the *story of decline* plot largely subsided in the face of narratives about agency. There was a large shift toward the story of improvement plot between the two sample periods: it was present in only 10 per cent of stories in 2010 and jumped to 40 per cent in the second period.

Publication	1	1%	2	2%	3	3%	4	4%
The Advertiser	9	39	6	26	1	4	1	4
The Australian	11	41	4	15	0	0	3	11
ABC	21	42	1	2	0	0	15	30
The Daily Telegraph	7	54	0	0	0	0	3	23
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	18	33	0	0	1	2	25	46
The Murray Valley Standard	0	0	3	60	0	0	1	20
The Sydney Morning Herald	13	34	7	18	2	5	3	8
Total	79	38	21	10	4	2	51	24

TABLE 20 | NARRATIVE PLOTS DURING PERIOD 1, OCTOBER 2010 – DECEMBER 2010.

Publication	1	1%	2	2%	3	3%	4	4%
The Advertiser	1	9	6	55	2	18	0	0
The Australian	4	24	7	41	2	12	0	0
ABC	10	27	16	43	5	14	5	14
Daily Telegraph	1	17	2	33	2	33	1	17
The Deniliquin Pastoral Times	4	14	8	29	1	4	10	36
The Murray Valley Standard	2	29	4	57	0	0	0	0
The Sydney Morning Herald	0	0	1	33	1	33	0	0
Total	22	20	44	40	13	12	16	15

TABLE 21 | NARRATIVE PLOTS DURING PERIOD 2, NOVEMBER 2012 - JANUARY 2013.





This reframing of the MDBP as a positive step toward solving a policy problem suggests that key regional stakeholders, not least the media, had been won over in the intervening years. That the growth in this plot comes at the expense of the dominant two plots from the first period — particularly story of decline, but also *helplessness and control*, supports this analysis.

There was also a smaller increase in the *stymied progress* plot in P2, particularly related to efforts by some of the crossbench — Bob Katter and the Greens, though for opposite reasons — to disallow the Plan before it entered into force. Both the South Australian and New South Wales governments both announced funding cuts to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority during this period, which also led to narratives focussed on how, right as the Plan had finally entered into law, the MDBA was going to lack the resources to enact it.

Triple bottom line framing

As previously described, the triple bottom line was a phrase that described a perceived imperative that any water policy reform must treat the interests of the environment, economy and society equally. This argument stemmed in part from a reading of section 3 of the Water Act 2007, which states that part of the object of the Act is to “promote the use and management of the Basin water resources in a way that optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes”. Proponents argue that section 31 of the Act creates an equivalency in its requirement that each of the interests be ‘optimised’, with no clear preference given to any one interest. This interpretation was widely discredited (SMH, 27 October 2010) and described as a ‘myth’ and ‘pernicious’ by Bret Walker SC in his role as Commissioner for the South Australian Royal Commission into the Murray-Darling Basin (South Australia 2019). The Royal Commission expressed concern at the repeated use of this phrase to advance a position that it viewed as without any merit.

Both implicit and explicit triple bottom line framing was evident in coverage, particularly in 2010, but it was not common. In most cases, the frame was introduced by a character in the narrative, rather than by the author themselves.

Articles were coded as having explicit triple bottom line framing if they directly called for a balance of interests between water, economic and social uses of water with specific reference to the triple bottom line concept. Four examples of this were found, two from The Deniliquin Pastoral Times and two from the ABC, all attributed to federal politicians, and all in the context of the public disagreement that had occurred about the interpretation of the Act between Water Minister Burke and the MDBA.

Tony Burke is a recurring source of legitimacy for triple bottom line framing in the 2010 sample period. In the first example, he is quoted (though third-hand by an attendee at the meeting) by the ABC:

[National Irrigators’ Council chair] Danny O’Brien is welcoming assurances from Mr Burke that he wants a triple bottom line outcome that considers social and economic issues as well as the environment (ABC, 20 October 2010).

The Deniliquin Pastoral Times similarly had a third-hand quote from a different meeting attended by the Minister, in which he is quoted as believing that the Water Act 2007 already allowed the MDBA to deliver the triple bottom line:

Mr Burke, addressing Murray Darling Basin councils in Canberra on Monday, said he believed the Act covered the triple bottom line — environment, social and economic (Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 26 November 2010).

In December, after the resignation of MDBA head Mike Taylor, the ABC again quotes Burke saying that:

The concept of optimising the environmental, economic



and social outcomes is contained as an objective of the Water Act — it's the exact words in the objectives of the Water Act that's one of the things it's meant to do (ABC, 7 December 2010).

Barnaby Joyce is also quoted using triple bottom line framing in December of that year:

The Coalition is completely open to discussing all facets of Murray-Darling Basin legislation and policy to make sure we deliver a triple-bottom line for the economy, the community and the environment (ABC, 3 December 2010).

There were more examples of implicit use of this myth. To be coded as implicit, the article or a character within it needed to suggest that a triple bottom line had to be delivered without using that phrase. All outlets except The Murray Valley Standard included implicit framing at some point. The Advertiser had the highest proportion, with a quarter of its PI stories including implicit framing. One story simultaneously quoted federal Regional Minister Simon Crean as saying that the Plan “would require a balance

between environmental and economic interests”, as well as the Australian Conservation Foundation stating that any assessment of socio-economic impact of the Plan should also consider the impact of continued river decline (The Advertiser, 13 November 2010).

The Australian also quoted National Irrigators' Council chair, Danny O'Brien saying on a different occasion that:

[The Plan] needs to be balanced to ensure we can protect the environment, food production and regional communities equally (The Australian, 11 October 2010).

In November, the opposition's Murray-Darling spokesperson Senator Simon Birmingham was quoted in The Sydney Morning Herald as saying that:

the government had allowed a perception to stick that the Water Act — which underpins river reform — did not provide balance between farming and the environment (SMH, 2 November 2010).

Implicit uses of the triple bottom line that recognised it could not be delivered without first amending the Water Act 2007 were not coded as furthering the myth, as they did not advance the underlying misrepresentation of the objectives of the Act. The Deniliquin Pastoral Times quoted Barnaby Joyce, giving an example of this from only a few days after he first explicitly used triple bottom line framing:

Senator Joyce said when Malcolm Turnbull introduced the Act, which is now being used as the basis for the Murray Darling Basin Plan, the intention was to deliver a balanced outcome for the environmental, social and economic needs. He said that it has become glaringly obvious that it doesn't do enough to reach the balance, and that it must be changed (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 7 December 2010).

The Sydney Morning Herald was the only outlet that explicitly challenged triple bottom line framing in the sample period. This came after University of New South Wales constitutional law professor George Williams disagreed with the Minister's interpretation of the Act. In an interview with The Sydney Morning Herald, he suggested that doing anything other than giving the environment precedence in the Plan could lead to a constitutional challenge to the Act, which was repeated three more times over subsequent weeks (SMH, 27 October 2010).

Pathways from local to metro news

Part of the goal of this study was to identify whether there was evidence of stories, narratives, or information that originated in regional local news before being picked up and presented to a larger audience by metro and national news outlets. There was little evidence of this: no single story or issue within the coverage of the broader MDBP was identified as being picked up first by local news before reaching metro

audiences.

Some issues were identified as being published by The Deniliquin Pastoral Times before other outlets, but there is no evidence that metro outlets picked up these issues from the paper. The biggest of these is the immediate framing of the Plan as being potentially devastating for rural communities, which became the most common narrative at all outlets. This commenced in The Deniliquin Pastoral Times from before the beginning of the sample period, at a time when outlets such as The Australian and The Advertiser were focused on the potential environmental benefits of the forthcoming Plan. Once the Plan had been released, as has been described, all outlets broadly shifted to presenting the MDBA as a *villain* and regional Australians as its *victims*. It seems very unlikely, however, that The Deniliquin Pastoral Times caused this framing. Absent the paper's coverage, cuts of water entitlements by up to a third would inevitably lead to questions about the effect on those communities, and agricultural peak body organisations were positioned to bring attention to that impact either way.

An issue that The Deniliquin Pastoral Times identified ahead of other media sampled was that the MDBA had not completed a study of the potential socio-economic impacts of its Plan on Basin communities. The Deniliquin Pastoral Times first published this fact on 8 October, 2010, before the Guide's release, and this became part of the paper's subsequent coverage. There were two major policy shifts on this issue nearly immediately: on 14 October, the federal parliament announced an inquiry into the impact of water cuts on communities to be headed up by independent MP Tony Windsor, and on 16 October the MDBA announced that it would also commence a new study of the issue.

However, The Deniliquin Pastoral Times does not appear to have impacted coverage by other outlets. No other publication sampled covered the lack of evidence around

...NO SINGLE STORY OR ISSUE WITHIN THE COVERAGE OF THE BROADER MDBP WAS IDENTIFIED AS BEING PICKED UP FIRST BY LOCAL NEWS BEFORE REACHING METRO AUDIENCES.



socio-economic impact until after the parliamentary inquiry had been announced. At that point the ABC covered the establishment of the Windsor inquiry. The Australian, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Daily Telegraph and The Advertiser all waited until after the MDBA study was announced to acknowledge the issue. All other media appear to have been responding to these events, rather than recognising them earlier, as The Deniliquin Pastoral Times had.

There is some evidence that information may have moved in the opposite direction. The Guide suggested that proposed water cuts could cost 800 regional jobs and an \$800m decline in agricultural output. The NSW Irrigators' Council, however, used its own modelling to claim that the cuts would cost 17,000 jobs and up to \$2.4b in lost agricultural revenue in New South Wales alone.

This claim first appeared in The Australian on 9 October, 2010 and subsequently on the ABC, 11 October, 2010. It appeared in regional local news, The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, for the first time on 12 October before appearing in The Daily Telegraph (16 October 2010). It did not directly appear in The Sydney Morning Herald, but a water economist from the Australian National University was quoted as saying that "farm groups" were "grossly exaggerating" and making "false claims" about job losses and the death of rural towns, in a possible reference to the figures. The claim did not appear even obliquely in either South Australian title.

This could be an example of information moving from metro to local, though it seems more likely that the NSW Irrigators' Council's own efforts are the reason that it spread.

Finally, there is some evidence of an individual source emerging as a local champion in regional media before being picked up in metro media. The Murray Group of Concerned Communities, a business advocacy organisation formed in Deniliquin to coordinate local opposition to the Plan, was present in 24 articles across The Deniliquin Pastoral Times in P1, particularly through quotes from its chair, Bruce Simpson. Simpson was later quoted twice in the ABC and once in The Sydney Morning Herald.

Discussion

While macro narratives about the MDBP were broadly similar, there were some differences between outlets. These differences were particularly pronounced between The Deniliquin Pastoral Times and other titles, with the former taking a narrative position of open opposition to the Plan and encouraging its audience to take action against it. There was no evidence that the other local newspaper in the sample, the Murray Valley Standard, took a similar narrative strategy. The two South Australia-based titles, however, did show greater concern for the environmental needs than the New South Wales-based publications, and tended to present a more balanced picture of the trade-offs of the Plan than others.

There was also no direct evidence of issues related to the policy first emerging in a local media ecosystem before being picked up and amplified in metro or national media. The broad narrative that was established after the release of the Guide in 2010, that the proposed cuts to economic water allocation would devastate regional communities, may have emerged first in regional titles: an informal review of coverage of the forthcoming Guide even prior to the sample period, showed that The Deniliquin Pastoral Times was already predicting that the MDBP would be ruinous. There was also evidence that the metro titles — in particular The Australian and The Sydney Morning Herald — were more neutral in their presentation of the Guide ahead of its release, with the former covering the potential environmental benefits of reform, before shifting to a near exclusive focus on the negative impact on regional towns in New South Wales (in particular) after its release. Metro titles were a step behind The Deniliquin Pastoral Times in adopting this focus, but it is not clear that they did so because of the reaction of the regional press.

It is possible that the prominence given to Bruce Simpson by The Deniliquin Pastoral Times led to his appearance in metro media outlets. That said, Simpson was only present in three articles across all other outlets, despite his clear position within Deniliquin as a leading opponent of the MDBP. Metro titles instead relied on national organisations such as the National Farmers' Federation or state organisations such as





the NSW Irrigators' Council, rather than local figures. This suggests a lack of specific attention to issues of local concern by these titles, which instead tended to be interested in broader narratives, especially in the second period.

One possible explanation for the lack of issues moving from local media into a metro or national information ecosystem could be that almost all coverage of the Plan was, in some way, responsive to it. Anecdotally, there was very little entrepreneurial reporting of the kind that might be expected to uncover new facts that might then be attractive to editors from outside the local ecosystem. Past research has found that investigative journalism is beyond the resources of many small regional media outlets (Simons, Dickson & Alembakis 2019), but if such an investigation had occurred, it seems reasonable to conclude that there would be a greater likelihood of a new facts being established that other media may then pick up. Absent that work, however, each outlet appeared to mostly respond to developments stemming from policy actors: in Deniliquin, this largely meant the Murray Group and the local government, which both emerged as local opponents of the Plan.

While the Deniliquin Pastoral Times presented the Guide as an existential threat, those interviewed in Murray Bridge were lukewarm on it. The Plan appeared to be far less contentious in South Australia in 2010–13, and perhaps as a consequence, there does not appear to have been business or civic action on either side. This was a major

point of difference between the two local newspapers: while the Plan dominated The Deniliquin Pastoral Times coverage for months in 2010, it barely rated a mention in The Murray Valley Standard. If there had been an organised opposition in Murray Bridge as there was in Deniliquin, it seems likely that the Standard would have had more to respond to in its coverage, and therefore a greater volume overall.

The MDBP was chosen for this study, in part, because CMT viewed water as being a policy domain of direct relevance to regional and metro audiences alike. Though the cuts would clearly impact irrigators and their communities most directly, people in the cities are clearly reliant on both the food production enabled by irrigation in these regions, but also, in the case of Adelaide, consumption of water from the Murray River itself.

There was some evidence of water issues being presented as relevant for a Sydney audience. The National Farmers' Federation made the point to The Daily Telegraph that any water cuts would impact not just Basin economies but "all Australians, every household" (The Daily Telegraph, 14 October 2010), and a few days later the paper followed up with an article on the potential for higher food prices.

To a city person the demise of a town might not mean much and they have their own issues, but without water there will be no food (The Daily Telegraph, 16 October 2010).

One article published in The Australian directly concerned a metropolitan subject: a meeting of an environmental NGO in Sydney, which was not concerned about the impact of water on the cities, but on the need to recover more for the river system.

There was also some discussion of the cities in The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, both in the context of potential high food prices but also suggestions about 'heartless city-folk' who don't understand (or care about) regional issues. An article published by The Deniliquin Pastoral Times in October even directly suggested that food prices should concern metro media and their audiences:

[Water4Food chair Terry Hogan] said that while there have been many pushing the sentiment behind the scenes, this forum seemed to have captured the attention of metropolitan media sources.

"There have been a few of these sorts of forums, but never with this amount of airplay, and that's probably because of the price increase prediction" (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 1 October 2010).

No outlet within the sample was found to cover this forum, but it may have been confined to local ABC radio or another outlet outside this study.

Adelaide is heavily reliant on the Murray River for its water, but there were no articles about water security for the city in either sample period.

Part of the contention of this study — and this project overall — is that regional issues are worth metro media coverage whether they do directly impact city-based audiences (such as the potential for higher food prices) or whether they do not. This study found ample evidence of coverage of the development of the MDBP at most outlets, including metro media, and that coverage was overwhelmingly not presented in terms of its direct impact on Sydney or Adelaide audiences. More often than not, the Plan was covered as an issue important to regional Australia, and worth attention on that basis alone.

...REGIONAL ISSUES ARE WORTH METRO MEDIA COVERAGE WHETHER THEY DO DIRECTLY IMPACT CITY-BASED AUDIENCES (SUCH AS THE POTENTIAL HIGHER FOOD PRICES) OR WHETHER THEY DO NOT.



NICK NEWLING

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

Stretching from the Victorian border to the end of the Murray–Darling Basin, where its waters spill out into the Great Australian Bight, are the regions known as the Murraylands and Riverland.

Home to roughly 65,000 people, the two regions are inextricably linked to the waterway that runs through them: the Murray River. CMT spoke to four editors of regional news services operating in the Murraylands and Riverland to better understand the connection communities have to water, and how that impacts reportage of water issues in regional South Australia.

After decades of complex policy and environmental challenges, regional South Australia, according to the broad consensus of the editors, sees itself as the underdog of Australian water management, reliant entirely upon the goodwill of upriver consumption, and metropolitan policymakers.

“If the water gets to this end of the river, then everyone wins, whether it’s environmental, whether it’s agricultural, whatever it might be used for,” says Peri Strathearn, Managing Editor of the Murray Bridge News and former journalist at the Murray Valley Standard. “Our whole problem is people upstream won’t give us environmental water, people upstream won’t give us productive water.”

According to the editors we spoke to, South Australians, especially those closest to the mouth of the river, say they’re constantly concerned about whether they will receive sufficient

levels of water for environmental, social and economic use. They say this fundamentally affects the way they cover water issues.

“I feel like in South Australia, there’s almost a little bit of a ‘keep your head down’ attitude,” says Elizabeth Anderson, editor of the Adelaide-based agricultural trade paper Stock Journal. “As long as we’re getting our water, and everything’s going okay, we’re not going to pick too many fights.”

Anderson believes that unlike in Queensland and New South Wales, where a number of vocal lobbying groups regularly engage with national media, their South Australian alternatives are less engaged, a statement that is consistent with previous findings in this chapter.

“I obviously talk to my counterparts in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria a lot, and they would probably cover more Murray-Darling Basin issues than we would just because I feel like they have more people who are willing to come out and talk on it.”

Beyond the power of primary industries and the voices that back them, editors universally spoke about the intrinsic and often emotional relationship regional South Australians have with their rivers. This factor, in some cases, has led to a sense of caution in the reporting of water issues from local journalists. “You have to be selective [about] what you do sometimes,” says Sharon Hansen, long-time editor of the Murray Valley



Standard. “We still have to report on it, but we have to look seriously at how we do it sometimes.”

However, given the vast number of regional South Australians who are employed in the primary industries, some editors feel they need to prioritise some facets of the debate over others. Paul Mitchell, former editor of the Renmark-based Murray Pioneer, says that he tried to report on all issues equally, but was primarily concerned that irrigators and those that use water for agricultural and irrigational purposes were given their fair share of coverage.

“We try to play it straight if we can. We need to be careful, mindful, that when we report on environmental issues, water buybacks, and in the past water allocations, we need to be mindful that the environment isn’t the only factor to be taken into account.”

Mitchell is concerned that environmental use of water receives too much attention and stressed the necessity for media reporting of the ‘triple bottom line’. As previously noted, the triple bottom line is a contentious concept, that was wholly rejected by the 2019 South Australian Royal Commission into the Murray–Darling Basin.

The South Australian Royal Commission found that the MDBP may have broken federal law by upholding the triple bottom line, when it was the Plan’s mandate to prioritise environmental use of water above all else (Murray–Darling Basin Royal Commission, 2019).

During the initial consultation and roll-out periods of the MDBP, negative reactions to the proposal were heavily reported. Scenes of angry town-hall meetings, and irrigators burning copies of the Plan were regularly featured in metro news coverage. However, from our discussions with editors and evidenced earlier in this chapter, it appears that South Australians have a very different perspective on the Plan and MDBA.

“It’s welcomed by farmers, environmental people, townspeople. We like the Plan,” says Strathearn. “We’re at the bottom of the food chain. We’ve got to get what’s ours and the Basin Plan is a tool for all South Australians to do that. I’m not sure how many folks around here would read The

Australian or the AFR, but certainly Adelaide media has been in favour of the Basin Plan.”

Both Paul Mitchell and Elizabeth Anderson shared this sentiment, with Anderson going so far as to say that she’d never had a South Australian farmer tell her they were unhappy with the Plan.

However, Sharon Hansen — who splits her time as editor of The Murray Valley Standard with her work as a dairy farmer — believes the exact opposite, strongly stating her opposition to the Plan for its social, environmental and economic consequences.

“Hated the Plan. There was nothing for us,” says Hansen. “All of South Australia would be negatively affected by the Plan.”

Hansen argues that the Plan was killing the Coorong Wetlands at the mouth of the Murray River, saying that the various ecosystems in the area — many of which are habitats for threatened species — were becoming increasingly salinated and uninhabitable for wildlife (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, 2010). While this phenomenon is true, there is nothing to suggest that the MDBP is exacerbating this problem (Gaskin, 2023).

Questions over the operation and results of the MDBP were significant enough to lead to the establishment of the 2019 South Australian Royal Commission. The Commission’s purpose and findings, however, fell flat in South Australia.

“It almost seemed like a bit of a joke,” says Elizabeth Anderson. “The South Australian Royal Commission, about South Australian issues. Nothing was ever going to come out of that. You couldn’t have a royal commission where we have a result

at the end of it, and then upriver states are going to say, ‘Oh, yes, you’re absolutely right, we do need to change our ways’, because it’s just going to be seen as more South Australians talking about South Australia. Whereas if we had a national royal commission, maybe, but the fact that it was a South Australian–led thing meant that nothing was ever going to come out of it.”

Not only was it deemed ineffective from the start by local residents, it also appeared to not register as a priority to many living and working on the river: “you’d ask the average local Riverland, River Murray resident about the royal commission and in terms of priorities or interest levels, it would be very low,” says Paul Mitchell. “Most people would have minimal interest in it and its outcomes and its recommendations.”

Despite conflicting views on the Plan, and the general apathy towards the royal commission, they all agreed that water policy was a vexed and complex issue which is difficult to understand.

“It’s really hard to report on water policy and on the Basin Plan if you don’t have a long-term understanding of what it’s all about,” says Peri Strathearn. “So that’s probably the thing that works against regional media. It’s not so much the outlets or even the time we have available, even though it’s limited. It’s just the personal experience.

“Because water is such a dense topic, you really need to spend a few years getting to know the policy, the angles, and the stakeholders, and building relationships to really start getting any kind of understanding of that. I’ve been here 12 years or something, and I feel like I’m still only halfway there.”

Strathearn is not alone in his struggle with water policy. Every editor CMT spoke to commented on their struggle in

DESPITE CONFLICTING VIEWS ON THE PLAN, AND THE GENERAL APATHY FELT TOWARDS THE ROYAL COMMISSION, ONE FACTOR REMAINED CLEAR AFTER SPEAKING WITH EDITORS: NOBODY CAN GET THEIR HEAD AROUND IT.



tracking water issues, maintaining an informed staff and hiring journalists with knowledge of the Plan, or water issues more broadly.

“I barely understand the Plan,” says Sharon Hansen. “You won’t get any [new journalists] that would know about the Basin Plan, as far as I’m concerned, that would come in and know all about it.”

Paul Mitchell was quoted in an article in *The Australian* newspaper in 2018 about what he claimed was the low-quality pool of graduate journalists who applied for positions at the *Murray Pioneer* (Brook, 2018). Mitchell remains critical of the abilities of graduate journalists in all aspects, not just water: “I would get young journalists and they have next to no idea of what they’re talking about. But as I said, certainly not unique to water and water related issues.”

Regional news providers are often reliant on graduate journalists who work for short periods before moving on to metro positions. The number of young journalists entering regional newsrooms has been bolstered by recent grants from the Journalist Fund, which have seen the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development,

Communications and the Arts delivering \$150,000 packages to 34 regional newsrooms to hire cadets (DITRDCA, 2023).

While many in regional and rural journalism believe they are in dire need of government support, Elizabeth Anderson doesn’t think the business model is sustainable, or beneficial when it comes to building a knowledgeable, specialised base of journalists:

“They get shipped out to Murray Bridge, and are told, ‘all right, this is your turf now,’ and they don’t have a clue what the issues are, they don’t know who the people are, they don’t know any of that stuff. And they’ll probably stay up there a year, maybe two, and then they’ll move on,” says Elizabeth Anderson. “Every time you get a new journalist, you have to try and explain it to them, but you have to sum it up in a quick way. And it’s just ‘okay, when you go in, you need to know this, this, this, this’, and that’s it. That five-minute explanation is never going to be enough. I’ve been here 10 years, and I still don’t completely understand it all.”

The issue of government relations does not end with where grants are allocated. Almost every editor we spoke to argued emphatically that South Australian governments have been

less than fully invested in promoting and supporting regional media. w“South Australia is very Adelaide-centric,” says Peri Strathearn. “The state government will put out press releases that use the terms Adelaide and South Australia interchangeably because there aren’t big regional centres here. Eighty-five to 90 per cent of the population of the state is in Adelaide. All the electoral interest is in Adelaide. I understand people’s frustrations about not getting listened to because they don’t listen.”

In the most recent ABS census data, approximately 80 per cent of South Australia’s population lived in the capital city area of Greater Adelaide (ABS, 2022).

Many editors believe that even when the South Australian government speaks about rural issues, they do so for metro audiences. Multiple sources commented specifically on the bias South Australian governments have had towards the *Adelaide News Corp* paper, *The Advertiser*.

“There is a bit of an urban legend,” says Elizabeth Anderson. “Any story [the state government will] have, they’ll go to *The Advertiser* first, and *The Advertiser* wants it exclusively, so then *The Advertiser* will get it exclusively. And everyone else will get it a little bit later.”

“A little bit later”, according to Sharon Hansen, means that regional outlets will sometimes receive press releases between 24 and 48 hours after *The Advertiser* does. It gets worse when politicians come to town to hold press conferences. “Sometimes we don’t even know, or we’ll find out an hour beforehand” says Hansen. “[Politicians] do

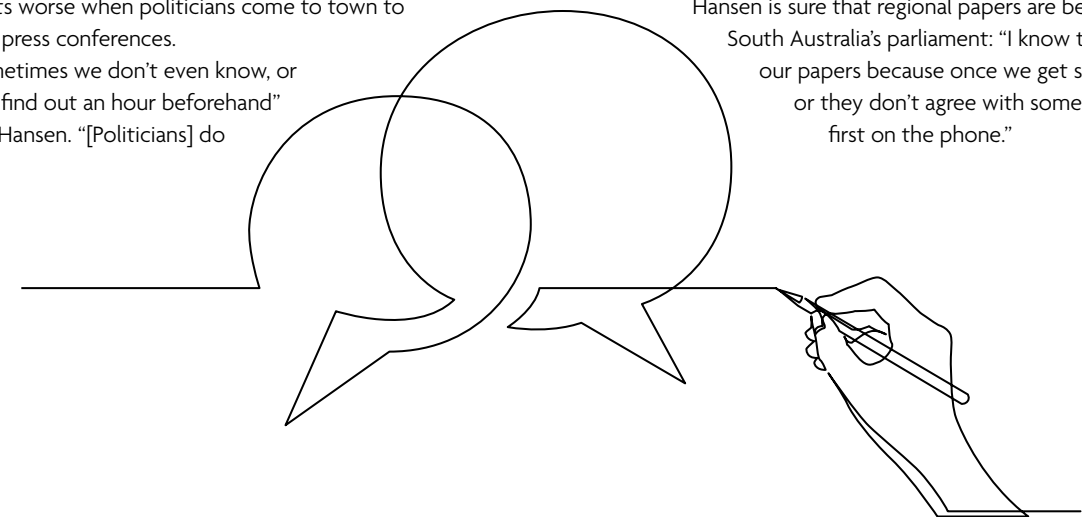
a press call down by the river and nobody turns up. Well, you don’t tell us anything, how are we supposed to know? We’re not going to drop everything just because you decide to turn up and talk about fishing or something.”

Strathearn was equally frustrated by government performance communicating with local media, particularly in the past: “We had both [former premiers Jay] Weatherill and [Steven] Marshall come and do things ten kilometres down the road, and no-one thinks to tell regional media, which is disgusting — that we should be finding out about multimillion-dollar announcements for our region from other media because they didn’t even think of us.”

Both Strathearn and Mitchell did say, however, that the situation appeared to be improving. Strathearn cited regional media briefings after the most recent state budget, and the occasional cabinet meeting that is held in a rural centre.

“I think they are making an effort with regional and rural media,” says Mitchell. “Whether that impacts their decision-making is a different matter. And that’s a really important point I’d like to stress, you know, whether that is impacting what they do. I’m not sure in terms of policy, but they certainly are making an effort to be on the ground up here and hear the concerns of locals.”

Measuring the true impact of regional reporting on policy formulation is difficult as previously noted. However, Sharon Hansen is sure that regional papers are being read in South Australia’s parliament: “I know they are reading our papers because once we get something wrong or they don’t agree with something, they’re the first on the phone.”



05 CHAPTER

AYESHA JEHANGIR

LINES IN THE SAND

This chapter offers insights into the interplay between framing and policy narrative in regional and metro media coverage of alcohol-related restrictions in the Northern Territory during three major events of policy change over the past two decades: the enactment of the Howard government Intervention in June 2007, the extension of the Intervention as Stronger Futures legislation in June 2012 under the government of Julia Gillard, and the reinstatement of alcohol-related restrictions in Alice Springs in January 2023 by the Albanese government.

In Australia, government policies around Indigenous health and substance use, particularly alcohol consumption, remain a controversial issue for both Indigenous communities and policymakers. Many Indigenous communities argue that in most cases governments develop policies without genuine listening and/or consultation with elders or local communities. Narratives of this population management also emerge in the media and can contribute to the way we see race relations, social hierarchies, cultural practices, and even First Nations histories. At their worst, they can contribute to marginalisation and disempowerment of Indigenous communities through the creation of harmful stereotypes that influence public attitudes and social interactions and pave the way for radical policy change. CMT argues that journalism has the potential to take on an intimately localised flavour, interwoven with personal stories and community concerns to alleviate some of these risks.

This chapter asks whether news coverage of alcohol bans in regional media instigated coverage in metro media or whether policy-related narratives first emerged in metro media, making their way into regional media reporting. In so doing, two questions are relevant: what framing strategies were employed to cover alcohol bans and related policies imposed in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in 2007 and 2012, and in Alice Springs in 2023; and how policy narratives travelled between metro and regional media. These questions require a thorough examination of how metro and regional media represented Indigenous communities affected by these restrictions.

In 2007, the Coalition government, led by John Howard, enacted the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act (NTNER), also known as the Intervention. The NTNER is amongst the most controversial government policies in the modern history of Australian politics, with consequences for all Indigenous Australians living in urban, rural and remote settings (McCallum (2013).

There is settled understanding of the role the news media played in describing the dysfunctionality in Indigenous communities, shaping public perception and influencing policymaking by framing and defining issues in a certain light (Entman, 1993; Newman & Persson, 2009). The framing process involves emphasising certain aspects of a story while neglecting others, and creates biases which can impact public attitudes and behaviours, as well as policy agendas and decisions.



Academic researchers have identified media influence on both public opinion and policymaking (Scheufele, 1999; Millenson, 2002) and have called for new norms in the coverage of critical issues, such as crime and public health, including problematic alcohol consumption, while others have argued the need for reporting norms with the aim of promoting policy objectives (Dorfman, 2003; Holder & Treno, 1997).

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, the NPF (Shanahan et al., 2018) informs the methodology employed here to analyse media discourse, enabling us to empirically study the capacity for narratives to shape public policy at multiple levels of analysis.

CMT is aware of the external forces that often operate simultaneously on both the media and the policy agenda. However, any external social, political, legal/regulatory, and environmental factors are outside the remit of this study. Instead, news coverage of policy narrative (e.g., advocacy/criticism/action) and discursive strategies in framing of the issue and affected communities serve as the current starting point of this study.

Article selection

The regional focus of this chapter is on the Northern Territory, which provides a salient context to examine and compare coverage of alcohol bans, as the epicentre of alcohol-related restrictions in Australia since 2007.

Six news media sources — three metro and three regional — were selected. Using a two-decade timeframe consistent with long-term studies of media-policy nexus (Apriliyanti et al., 2021; Crow, 2017), articles (news stories and a small number of op-eds) published during three key policy events were catalogued:

- 1 21 May–21 July, 2007: a month before and after the Intervention was enacted by the Howard government;
- 2 17 May–17 July, 2012: a month before and after Stronger Futures replaced the Intervention under the Gillard government; and
- 3 24 December 2022–24 February, 2023: a month before and after new alcohol bans were reinstated in Alice Springs communities under the Albanese government.

Six titles between metro and regional news media were analysed for this study.

Metro News Outlets	Regional news outlets
• ABC	• Northern Territory News
• The Australian	• Katherine Times
• The Sydney Morning Herald	• Alice Springs News

All articles and transcripts, such as in the case of ABC, were documented using the Factiva database. In the case of Alice Springs News, the online archive on its website was accessed to retrieve news stories from 2011 onwards.

Relevant search terms were constructed to identify articles with predominant focus on both the Intervention/alcohol bans and Indigenous communities in Northern Territory, and in Alice Springs. Search terms “Northern Territory National Emergency Response” or “NTNER” or “Intervention” and “Northern Territory” or “NT” and “alcohol*” or “alcohol ban*” were used to generate results for 2007; the terms “Stronger Futures” or “intervention” or “alcohol ban*” and “Northern Territory” or “NT” were used for 2012; and “alcohol ban*” or “restrictions” or “intervention” and “Alice Springs” were used for 2023.

Duplicate stories and other articles with passing references to the Intervention or alcohol bans, and which did not carry enough coverage to be analysed, were excluded from the corpus. Letters to the editors were also excluded. A total of 459 articles were selected for final screening: 206 in 2007, 64 in 2012, and 189 in 2023. Within each article, the headline and complete body text were coded for content. The coding scheme captured the date of publication, the author of the article, the setting (such as local/state/federal level), the characters (e.g., *hero*, *villain*, *victim*, *beneficiary*, *ally*, *opponent*), the moral of the story (type of policy narrative, i.e., *policy mention*, *advocacy*, or *criticism*), and causal mechanisms (*intentional*, *inadvertent*, *mechanical*, or *accidental narrative strategies*). Additionally, thematic codes were developed inductively to identify broader framing strategies, such as colonialism, criminality, securitisation, etc. Finally, any major events linked to the article’s publication were also recorded, such as parliamentary inquiries or publication of reports by public/non-governmental/international organisations during the three periods studied for this research.

CMT has consulted with Indigenous researchers at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at UTS. This chapter contains the name(s) of Indigenous people who have died.

Publication	007	2012	2023	Total
ABC	60	19	57	136
The Australian	29	13	36	78
The Sydney Morning Herald	49	12	33	94
NT News	53	13	52	118
Katherine Time	6	2	3	11
Alice Springs News	9	5	8	22
Total	206	64	189	459

TABLE 22 | PUBLICATIONS ANALYSED



Indigenous communities and alcohol bans: an overview

Prohibitions and bans around alcohol purchase and consumption among Indigenous communities in Australia are not a new phenomenon. While the earliest known laws to prevent Aboriginal access to alcohol were passed in 1838, it was in the 1930s that the licensing acts of all states and territories included special clauses prohibiting sales to Aboriginal people (Brady, 2007).

The campaign for civil rights and an end to all forms of state endorsed racial discrimination that was waged during the 1950s and 1960s brought change, and by 1964, Aboriginal peoples in Western Australia and the Northern Territory were finally given the legal right to consume alcohol. In South Australia, the prohibition on providing liquor to Aboriginal people persisted until 1967 (Parliament of Australia, 1990). In Queensland, off-reserve Aboriginal people gained the ability to access alcohol in 1965. However, like in other regions, this right remained more of a legal formality than a practical solution for many Aboriginal communities and individuals, as beer could only be sold on reserve, but restrictions on reserves or missions continued well into the 1970s. This was due to ongoing restrictions on owning or consuming alcohol by Aboriginal people living on reserves or missions, which persisted well into the 1970s (Barber et al., 1988).

During the 1970s, a significant shift occurred from a policy of assimilation to one of self-determination. This shift resulted in the gradual removal of most access restrictions, both on paper and in practice. As a result, by the end of that decade, the majority of Aboriginal communities across Australia finally had unrestricted access to alcohol, until 2007 with the enactment of the Intervention, a policy

initiative introduced by the Howard government, which cited the urgent need to address issues of child abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

The Intervention emerged as a response to the Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: 'Little Children are Sacred' report (NT Government, 2007), which detailed the distressing levels of child abuse and neglect prevalent in many Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The report exposed the alarming vulnerability of Aboriginal children to physical, sexual, and emotional harm, sparking widespread public concern and a call for immediate action. The report was commissioned by then Northern Territory Chief Minister Clare Martin as a response to an interview on the ABC's Lateline program, in which Alice Springs Senior Crown Prosecutor Dr Nanette Rogers SC commented that the violence and sexual abuse of children that was entrenched in Indigenous society was "beyond most people's comprehension and range of human experience" (Gray, 2015). The report's compelling facts, vivid imagery, and impassioned call for action captured widespread attention to this pressing issue both in the media

and, in the words of Gray (2015), "in the political agenda, inciting divisive debate and discussion".

The Howard government viewed the findings as a mandate for intervention, referring to the situation as a "national emergency" (Schubert et al., 2019). Subsequently, on 21 June, 2007, the federal government, without consultation with local Indigenous communities or elders, launched the NTNER, enforcing a set of reforms as an emergency response. The Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) was suspended to accommodate measures under the NTNER.

The Intervention created a \$587 million funding package to impose several restrictions affecting specified Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. These included restrictions on changes to welfare payments, acquisition of leases on Aboriginal lands, education, employment and health initiatives, restrictions on pornography access, and the purchase and consumption of alcohol. It was argued that the approach taken to Indigenous policy through the Intervention was yet another attempt by the government

to manage Indigenous Australians (Broome, 2010).

In June 2012, the NTNER expired and was replaced by the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act as a continuation and expansion of the Intervention. Building upon the foundations laid by the Intervention, Stronger Futures — a 10-year \$3.4 billion commitment — was a federal government policy aimed at "making communities in the NT safer" (Australian Government, 2012).

Like the Intervention, Stronger Futures contained several measures to improve school attendance and educational outcomes for Indigenous children, community safety and law enforcement, economic development and employment, child and family wellbeing, and most importantly, alcohol management and rehabilitation which included restricted access to alcohol. Over the past decade both the NTNER and Stronger Futures policies have been subject to ongoing debate, discussion and criticism regarding their effectiveness, impact on Indigenous rights, and the extent to which they have, and have not, addressed the underlying issues faced by Indigenous

THE CAMPAIGN FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND AN END TO ALL FORMS OF STATE ENDORSED RACIAL DISCRIMINATION THAT WAS WAGED DURING THE 1950S AND 1960S BROUGHT CHANGE, AND BY 1964, ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY WERE FINALLY GIVEN THE LEGAL RIGHT TO CONSUME ALCOHOL.



communities in the Northern Territory for decades.

Stronger Futures ceased on 17 July, 2022, consistent with its legislative provisions. The next year, in January 2023, new temporary restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol were reimposed in Indigenous communities in Alice Springs by the Albanese government, which said that the decision was taken on account of a "dramatic rise" in alcohol-fuelled crime in Alice Springs (Thomson, 2023) and problems in other Northern Territory Indigenous communities after the lapse of Stronger Futures.

The Northern Territory government had previously refused to reimpose the bans, asserting that to do so would be 'race-based discrimination', and that communities that wanted to stay 'dry' had to 'opt-in' (Grattan, 2023). However, this soon changed, and the Northern Territory government

supported the federal government's decision to restore the bans. The federal government also announced a funding package of \$48.8 million over two years to keep the community safe and provide support for young people in Alice Springs.

Media, Indigenous policy and alcohol bans

While there is extensive literature on Australian media representations of Indigenous people and issues related to health and crime, there is little documented research examining media framing strategies and the media-policy nexus in terms of alcohol bans and other alcohol-related policies in Indigenous communities.

Examining power relations between the Indigenous population and mainstream news coverage of the NTNER, Mesikämmen (2016) writes

that the media created their own pool of 'experts' and 'officials' to speak to, forming a 'vicious cycle' in which both the media's daily operations and the communication practices of these so-called authoritative figures reinforce and rely on each other. This cycle, she argues, is difficult to disrupt, and consequently, individuals who hold less recognised or official positions, such as representatives from Indigenous communities, struggle to break into this cycle and have their voices heard in the media.

Some evidence of references to alcohol use and misuse was noted in research on media coverage of health policy. For instance, McCallum (2013) found that issues of alcohol use were told through frames of policy failure and the Indigenous health crisis (p. 339). She noted a sharp shift in both the volume and focus of news about Indigenous health in 2007, which shows, in hindsight, that the government

was raising its political tone to 'solve' the problem. This is also evidenced in McCallum's interviews with federal and Northern Territory public servants, in which she identified an internalisation of 'media logic' by policy bureaucrats and influence of media discussions on "their ability to straddle the policy and political words, resulting in cross-filed effects" (p. 143).

Further, an overwhelming number of studies have found that the media represent Indigenous Australians negatively, and as problematic to the mainstream (Bray, 2022; Burrows, 2004; Cripps, 2021; Meadows, 1995; Stoneham Et. al, 2014). These studies found repetitive trends in the media coverage of Indigenous health, in that negative descriptions related to alcohol, child abuse, petrol sniffing, violence, suicide, deaths in custody and crime were the most common. Our study offers insight into the power dynamics between government, media, and Indigenous communities and areas where more balanced reporting or increased attention to Indigenous perspectives is needed. Moreover, how these issues are reported in the media also potentially influences the trajectory of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

Key findings

Consistent with existing research on the media-policy nexus and framing of Indigenous issues and affairs, this analysis offers six key insights into the ways regional and metro media reported the policy issue. The first four findings address our research question 1 about media attention and framing, while the rest address research question 2 about the origin of policy discussions and pathways between metro and regional media. We found:

- 1 a varying amount of media attention given to the Intervention, Stronger Futures legislation, and new alcohol bans in Alice Springs;
- 2 stereotypical characterisation of government and Indigenous communities;
- 3 narrow regional and metro reporting, demonstrating largely journalism that is uncritical of government approaches and policies on one of the most important issues in the country;
- 4 over saturation of particular voices as 'media stars' —

both Indigenous and non-Indigenous — creating singular influence/perspective;

- 5 traces of a narrative of resistance and reclamation of Indigenous rights and identity, including agency in policy consultation, emerging from regional media, and becoming more explicit in 2023;
- 6 no evidence of pathways of information between regional and metro news media, and incursions into policy debates in both regional and metro media were aimed at particular outcomes. In metro media, these incursions were mostly motivated by the consideration of the political/policy elite.

Newsworthiness

The realm of newsworthiness has long captivated researchers in the field of media studies, offering insights into the dynamics that dictate which events and topics receive prominence in the news.

The present analysis of media coverage shows that the Intervention, by far, was a more intensive news event when it was first announced in metro media than regional media. A significant number of news stories positioning it as a pivotal and necessary policy intervention, emphasising its significance over any potential invasiveness. As a key policy moment in recent Indigenous affairs history and a potential exemplar of mediated policymaking, the Intervention has been described as the 'most extraordinary' federal takeover in Australia's modern history and, in the words of Langton (2008), "the most decisive" (p.145) change in Indigenous policy since the emergence of land rights in the 1970s. Not only was it unprecedented for the public, executed abruptly and announced by the prime minister via the media, it also bypassed the 'Little Children are Sacred' report's recommendations for consultations with local elders/communities.

However, compared to the Intervention, there was a marked decrease in media coverage of the Stronger Futures legislation. An explanation can be that the legislation was seen as, and in fact was, an extension of the Intervention, and therefore not a novel policy announcement or change. It is important to note that Indigenous voices and movements critical of the legislation

had significantly accelerated on the ground, but the overall media coverage of these protests and critical voices was limited, although not altogether missing.

In a way, this changing threshold of newsworthiness is explained by what Downs (1972) refers to as the 'issue-attention cycle', in which extraordinary news stories receive unusual attention, before fading away after being overtaken by other, more newsworthy events. A discernible decline in media coverage was evident in 2012, signalling a shift in perceived newsworthiness. The reduced attention to the Stronger Futures legislation may be attributed to a confluence of factors, including the normalisation of policy interventions over time and the emergence of newer, more captivating news stories that

displaced the legislation from the forefront of public attention.

This phase of declining newsworthiness illustrates the ebb and flow inherent in the issue-attention cycle, as events once deemed extraordinary gradually fade into the background. Moreover, the August 2012 Northern Territory elections may have also contributed to this shift in attention, as coverage was more focused on the elections and political profiles than an extension of an existing policy.

However, the trajectory of newsworthiness took an intriguing turn with the coverage of new alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs in January 2023 (see: Table 4.1). This phase saw an overall resurgence in media reporting of alcohol bans, accompanied by a heightened

critical lens — more in regional media than metro media — in relation to alcohol bans, lack of consultation with communities, and the government's overall treatment of Indigenous policy, when compared to the earlier interventionist policies.

A marked shift in this pattern was noted in regional media coverage of new alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs in 2023, this time indicating a high volume of reporting of the alcohol-related restrictions, and in fact, it was more critical of government policies compared to that of the Intervention and Stronger Futures policies. This shift, in many ways, underscores the evolving dynamics of regional and metro news media portrayal of government policies. The heightened attention given to alcohol-related restrictions by regional news media in recent coverage signifies a departure from historical trends. This departure can be attributed to several factors, including a growing recognition of the unique challenges faced by regional communities and a desire to prioritise local perspectives that can go unheard in broader metro coverage. Furthermore, the increased critical tone of regional media coverage also signals a shift in how policy issues are framed and discussed. This deviation from previous stances on government policies such as the Intervention and Stronger Futures highlights, to an extent, the growth and significance of the role of regional media as an independent and critical voice, capable of interrogating policy decisions and their impacts on local populations. Moreover, as the Australian media landscape evolves, this shift may also be indicative of a

broader transformation in media's role within the discourse of Indigenous affairs and community well-being, wherein regional media may be embracing its potential to hold power to account, challenge established narratives, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of complex policy issues.

A comparatively intensified cycle of media coverage in 2023, and the employment of a critical tone by regional media can be seen as a manifestation of Downs' cycle (1972), where attention is renewed due to the novelty and the contentious nature of the topic, since the new alcohol bans were reinstated after a snap review commissioned in the wake of rising crime in Alice Springs. Although the regional and metro media's increased responsiveness to the new alcohol-related restrictions in Alice Springs in 2023 underscores the malleability of newsworthiness, more importantly, this analysis highlights the role of regional media in amplifying specific issues based on their perceived relevance, along with their societal and political implications.

Scrutiny of shifts in newsworthiness in this case offers valuable insights into the mechanisms that govern metro and regional media attention and the subsequent public perception of one of the most critical issues faced by Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, and indeed across Australia.

Characters

Characters in the stories were categorised into six broad actor types: the *hero*, the *villain*, the *victim*, the *beneficiary*, the *ally* and the *opponent*.

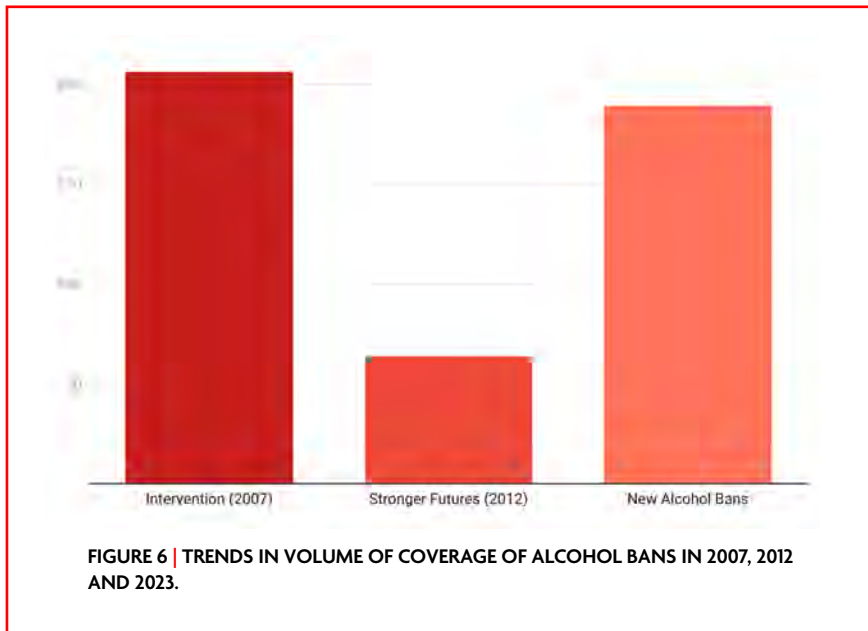
Various characters, such as the government, Indigenous individuals/communities, advocacy groups, and other organisations, were portrayed in terms of their involvement, influence, or accountability in the events, issues, or policies discussed in the stories. While the ways in which certain roles

or responsibilities were assigned to these various characters remained the same through the three time periods under scrutiny, the number of times these attributions explicitly appeared in both regional and metro coverage changed over time. This means that the characterisation of the federal government, for instance, as the *hero* remained unchanged, but the frequency of mentions decreased over time, as more personalised accounts from Indigenous communities, both active and passive, emerged in the coverage over time.

2007: government as *hero*; Indigenous communities as *beneficiary/ally*

The framing and positioning in 2007 identified three dominant characters: the government as *hero*, and the Indigenous peoples/communities as *beneficiary* and also *ally*. Some coverage in metro media also portrayed the broader Australian nation as the beneficiary of the policy, reminding the audience of the scale of the impact of this 'national emergency'. Such narratives of emergency, wherein a local issue is presented in the media as a national 'crisis' or 'problem' with perceived significant implications for non-local communities, often draw on the official language/communication that describes, for example, migrants as 'dangerous', and are inherently racialised (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022).

Our analysis shows predominant trends of stereotyping when it came to assigning characters to various stakeholders, including the government and Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. News Media uses stereotypes to construct a 'common sense' understanding of issues for audiences. Gramsci (1980) refers to this as the 'production of consent'. The findings in this chapter show that a common sense understanding about Indigenous affairs has tended to be constructed by metro media, and occasionally echoed by regional media. In this 'common sense' understanding of Indigenous affairs, Indigenous people are presented as not being 'ready' to exercise control of their lives. They therefore need a *hero* —such as





government—to rescue them.

More than half of the stories in the 2007 corpus (59 per cent) (see Table 4.2) presented the federal or the territory government as the *hero*, providing a safe environment for vulnerable children from a ‘national shame’ (SMH, 27 June 2007). There were frequent references to ‘the Aboriginal problem’ (SMH, 27 June 2007) or the alcohol problem (e.g., ABC, 27 June, 2007; ABC, 17 July 2007; The Australian, 17 July 2007; SMH, 17 July 2007) as one needing ‘a long-term commitment’ (ABC, 28 June 2007; NT News, 9 July, 2007) and urgent response (NT News, 18 July, 2007). Repeated references were also noted to other government-led ‘successful programs’ (SMH, 27 June 2007; NT News, 15 July, 2007) through which the government had ‘reduced violence and alcohol/drug abuse’ (SMH, 27 June, 2007). The Intervention was, in some cases, presented as a ‘rapid and decisive action’ that has “allowed Howard to be recast as a compassionate man motivated by high moral principles” (NT News, 18 July 2007).

Additionally, no references to any plans of implementing the Intervention were found in the coverage leading to 21 June, 2007 (the day the Intervention was officially enacted). One possible explanation, as Mesikämmen (2013) also argues, could be that the federal government was quite discrete about the planned Intervention, despite recommendations in the ‘Little Children are Sacred’ report for genuine consultation with Indigenous communities in finding solutions to the reported issues. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission’s Social Justice Report 2007, Minister for Indigenous Affairs Mal Brough had stated publicly that neither he nor the federal government had seen the report prior to its public release (AHRC, 2007).

Moreover, findings show that 64 per cent of stories (41 per cent in metro and 23 per cent

in regional) in 2007 (see: Table 4.2) characterised the local community and/or Indigenous elders as either the *beneficiary* or the *ally* — in other words the reinforcement of the government as the *hero*, in an implicit manifestation of political power and management of citizen identities.

The *beneficiary* or *ally* presences assigned to these actors, in fact in most cases almost imposed on the broader Indigenous community, varied between active and passive ones. Embedding first-person testimony and third-person accounts of Indigenous elders, was evidenced by direct voice such as:

we look up to the Government to help us (SMH, 27 June 2007)

Howard’s plan to eradicate sex abuse from NT communities (NT News, 20 June 2007)

It’s confusing for us people out here (SMH, 7 July 2007)

Mr Wilyuka from Titjikala Council blamed the current situation on “the poison in the little bottle that brainwashes our people” — alcohol (Alice Springs News, 19 July 2007)

The biggest problem I see in the town camps today is alcohol and I’ve seen that ever since I arrived here in 1970 (Alice Springs News, 19 July 2007).

And passive accounts such as:

... female elders who knew what a blessing the promise of police and security would be (The Australian, 30 June 2007)

the government response needs to build on strengths and leadership in local communities, and in particular

work with elders; the grandmothers, the mothers and the aunties in indigenous communities who have been speaking out about this problem for many years (SMH, 27 June 2007).

It is interesting to note that the 19 July, 2007 edition of the Alice Springs News also published a public poll asking local readers what they thought about alcohol bans under the Intervention. According to the poll results published in the newspaper, 61 per cent of the respondents said they would like to have alcohol product restrictions dropped and the normal 10am–10pm trading hours for takeaway liquor outlets restored.

2012: government as *hero*, Indigenous communities as *victim* and *opponent*

The discursive trends of portraying the government as the *hero* continued in 2012, where readers are repeatedly reminded of the efficacy of the Intervention, such as then Prime Minister Julia Gillard quoted as saying the “Northern Territory intervention has done great things for remote Aboriginal communities” and that “children are safer and better educated because of the policy” (ABC, 18 July 2012).

Then Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin was quoted, both directly and indirectly, 50 times in the corpus (47 times by metro media and 3 times by regional media), repeating the need for the Stronger Futures legislation and articulating how it was a policy solution for the ‘devastating conditions’ in many Indigenous communities.

She was also frequently quoted by metro outlets in stories that linked Aboriginal people in custody, crime and violence to alcohol consumption in Indigenous communities and alcohol-related abuse. For instance, during the same week as the Senate was set to pass the Stronger Futures legislation on 29 June, 2012, the coronial inquest into the death in custody of the

THE DISCURSIVE TRENDS OF PORTRAYING THE GOVERNMENT AS THE HERO CONTINUED IN 2012, WHERE READERS ARE REPEATEDLY REMINDED OF THE EFFICACY OF THE INTERVENTION...



27-year-old Aboriginal man Kwementyaye Briscoe turned the attention of media, and consequently the public, towards the alcohol industry in central Australia. Macklin or her office was quoted several times by *The Australian* in reference to the inquest, almost using it to justify the extension of the Intervention as the Stronger Futures legislation; in September 2012, the Northern Territory Coroner found that Briscoe's death in custody was due to a "lack of care by police and could have been prevented" (Horn & Jones, 2012). It was reported that he had not committed any crime (SMH, 17 September 2012), and was arrested only for being intoxicated (SMH, 18 September 2012).

Additionally, multiple references to the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) were also noted in the coverage. The Howard government had temporarily suspended or modified certain provisions of the RDA to implement specific aspects of the Intervention. This allowed for measures such as compulsory land leases and restrictions on alcohol and pornography to be implemented without immediately being subject to the RDA. These modifications were controversial and faced criticism for potentially infringing upon the rights of Indigenous and Aboriginal communities. The suspended sections of the RDA were automatically reinstated in 2010, restoring its full applicability.

There were 14 references to the restoration of the RDA in the 44 stories on the Stronger Futures legislation in the metro media corpus. The restoration was extensively portrayed as a positive step by the federal government, highlighting a strategic framing technique employed to emphasise the federal government's heroic role in policy change narrative. By repeatedly underscoring this aspect, metro media highlighted the government's role in rectifying a perceived wrong and aligned its image with principles of fairness and justice. Moreover, this finding underlines the media's ability to selectively focus on certain elements within a policy narrative to construct specific perceptions, ultimately influencing public opinion and debate. For instance:

... Labor was satisfied ... and a further amendment ensured nothing in the bills suspended or limited the application of the Racial Discrimination Act to the intervention. The law delivers a \$3.4 billion investment in the Territory to tackle disadvantage (*The Australian*, 30 June 2012).

The legislation has been designed to comply with the Racial Discrimination Act (ABC, 13 July 2012).

The most important thing about the NT intervention is that the Federal Government has made the Racial Discrimination Act effective again (ABC, 17 July 2012).

In the coverage of Stronger Futures legislation, however, some shifts were noted in the range of ideas, perspectives, and linguistic resources used by journalists and editors. Regional media was slowly incorporating more Indigenous voices that were resistant to government policies formed without genuine consultation with local communities. Metro media were still using more conservative Indigenous peoples who were explicitly in favour of alcohol bans and other restrictions that came under the Intervention and the Stronger Futures legislation. These voices in metro coverage, and to some extent also in regional media, were thus presented as the *ally* (of the government/legislation).

Most of these elders and community leaders quoted in metro coverage were assigned the *ally* character. This is an interesting finding because it challenges the concern that Indigenous voices are underrepresented or, in some cases, missing from the media (Mesikämmen, 2016) and enhances the metro news media's policy supportive narratives. This framing seemingly validates the policy's intentions and affirms its purported benefits. However, this positioning warrants critical examination of whether the inclusion of these particular voices genuinely captures the diversity of Indigenous opinions or inadvertently advances a specific agenda, raising important questions about the broader

motivations behind media choices both regional and metro — in representing Indigenous communities and policy affairs.

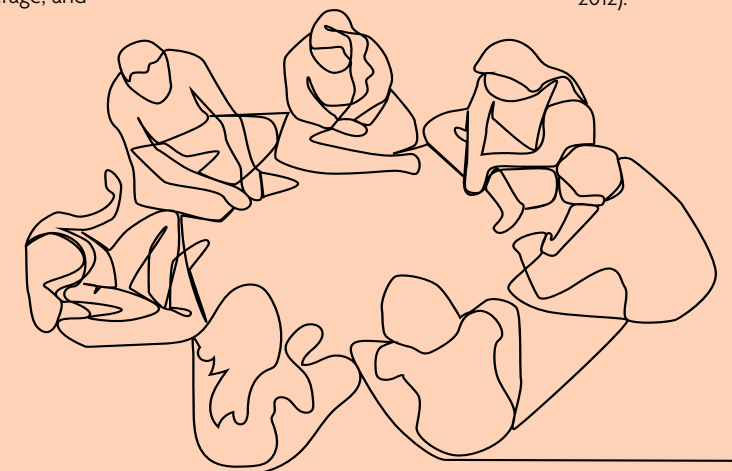
This finding aligns with previous research that has found media coverage highlights conflict amongst members of local Indigenous communities and prevalence of limited selection of voices (Budarick & King, 2008; McCallum et al., 2012). For instance, Stuart Rintoul's article in *The Australian* (10 August 2012) accentuates the clash of perspectives within local communities by highlighting the confrontation between Indigenous elder Warren Mundine and Bess Price, former Country Liberal Party member of the NT Legislative Assembly and an Aboriginal woman. The technique underscores the conflict between the *opponent* and the *ally*, respectively, contributing to the narrative tension.

Amnesty International, which has advocated for the rights of Indigenous peoples in the Northern Territory since the Intervention was enacted in 2007, is positioned as an *opponent* in the news coverage, and

an *ally* of Warren Mundine. Rintoul's article refers to Amnesty International's criticism of the extension of the Intervention policy as the organisation's 'outspokenness', while also reminding the readers of the organisation's 'silence' over "death and sexual abuse of children resulting from a refusal to take them away from 'culture'" (*The Australian*, 10 August 2012).

On the other hand, Indigenous people vocally opposed to the policy were quoted by regional media. They cited the failures of the federal government to effectively manage the issue:

... institutional arrangements charging police with the task, and requiring the public to bear the cost, of picking up and protecting what amount to society's flotsam and jetsam, the weakest and most vulnerable in our community; who are above all the product of misguided and failed alcohol policy which continues not to squarely and unambiguously address alcohol-caused or related harm (*Alice Springs News*, 27 June 2012).





There were also more non-Indigenous voices, critical of the government's policies, speaking on behalf of NT communities. For instance, Nicolas Rothwell, Northern Australia correspondent for The Australian, wrote:

... more than 4 1/2 years into a Labor federal government committed to progress in indigenous affairs, none of those original goals has been met, few are even in sight, and the emergency response, reshaped and rebranded under the pleasingly pluralist-sounding label Stronger Futures, has just been extended for another decade, making for 15 years of commonwealth control over the remote north: almost a full generational cycle in the Aboriginal bush (The Australian, 4 August 2012).

On rare instances, some non-Indigenous political candidates running in the August NT elections were also included in news coverage, speaking for local communities. However, these voices only appeared before the election and were largely missing from the 2007 and 2023 coverage. Such appearances were, understandably, more frequent in regional news, targeting local communities. For instance, in the same story where Labor's candidate for Araluen, Adam Findlay, was quoted as saying he was strongly against uranium mines on top of the water table in Alice Springs, the readers were also reminded of his support for the Stronger Futures legislation

and how 'the situation had improved' and law and order concerns are at 'the top of the agenda' (Alice Springs News, 14 June 2012). Similarly, Country Liberal Party's Robyn Lambley promised an 'overhaul of alcohol management policy' if she was voted into office and her party won government (Alice Springs News, 14 June 2012).

National and international advocacy groups also emerged alongside Indigenous elders and leaders as critics of the extension, more often in the coverage in 2012, characterised, in most cases, as *opponents*. These included the Australian Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (closed in 2019) the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, People's Alcohol Action Coalition (an Alice Springs-based community alcohol reform group), and the Indigenous advocacy group Concerned Australians.

Most of these groups/organisations were reported to be concerned about the inadequate consultation process as referenced in multiple letters written by UN Commissioner Navanethem Pillay to then Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin in which she expressed concern that:

Without the genuine participation and support of indigenous communities ... the measures may not

achieve their potential to improve the lives of indigenous peoples (NT News, 2 August 2012).

Concerned Australians were also vocal in regional media about the legislation being discriminatory and racist.

In most cases, the Indigenous figure was stereotypically characterised as angry and defensive and Indigenous elders as resistant to change and government attempts to 'help' — an overall attribution of negative sentiment.

2023: government as *hero* and *villain*; Indigenous communities as *victim* and *opponent*

Overall, there was a shift in the discussion in 2023 where the Indigenous communities were also characterised as *victims* of government policy exemplifying a "failure to address the crime crisis" (NT News, 31 January 2023) and *opponents* of alcohol bans, calling them ineffective, short-term solutions. In this regard, the most interesting observation in the coverage in 2023 was the overt inclusion of the Indigenous voice in the stories on the alcohol bans. Compared to 2007 and to some extent in 2012, in 2023, the narratives of criticism were more explicit. For instance, Benedict Stevens, an Alice Springs traditional owner and senior Arrernte Elder appeared in regional media coverage multiple times, rejecting calls for 'racist' alcohol bans to be reinstated in the Red Centre's town camps, saying:

It was not fair for there to be one rule for Aboriginal people and another rule for non-Indigenous

residents (NT News, 5 February 2023).

Just ask the residents of the town camps whether they want it dry, it's up to the residents to be able to make that decision, not one person to make the decision for the whole of the community (NT News, 5 February 2023).

Some other elders from Yuendumu, Katherine and Alice Springs were quoted, both in metro and regional media, as saying:

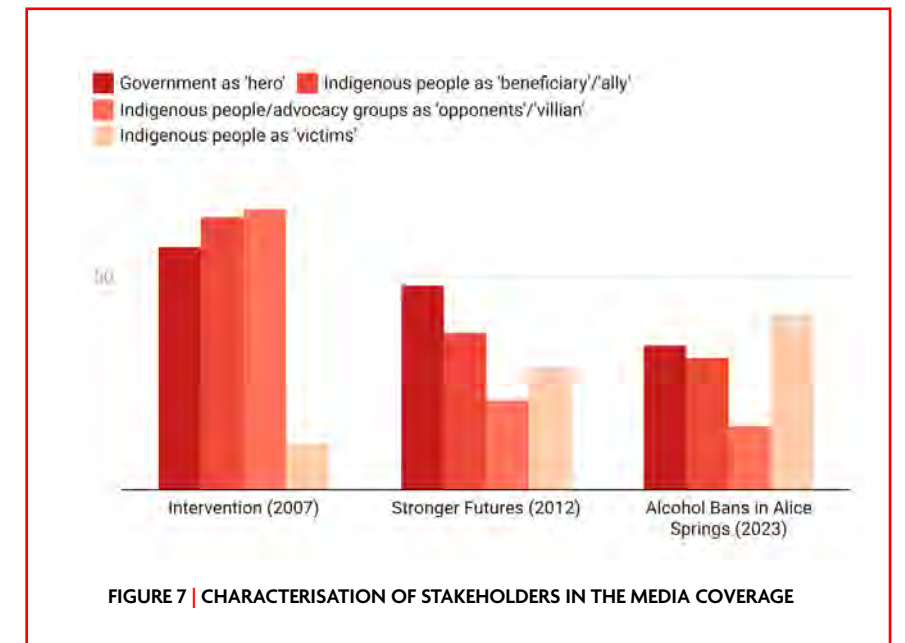
It's a hard one, but if elders are strong and they stand strong with what they'd prefer to have for a safe community, they will put their own alcohol plan in place — and that should be respected (ABC, 15 February 2023).

This Labor Government are out of touch, out of ideas and unfit to govern. With the alcohol bans instated in Alice Springs we have seen an escalation in crime across our community (Katherine Times, 22 February 2023).

It is important to note that although such characterisation was more commonly noted in regional media than metro media, it was not limited to regional media alone.

The characterisation of the government as *hero* continued in 2023, despite, as the analysis indicates, the emergence of narratives that challenged the government's alcohol management policies.

The most prominent politician in the coverage in 2023 was Northern





Territory Chief Minister Natasha Fyles, who was mentioned 305 times across all publications analysed for this study. This includes direct interviews, passive references, quotes and press releases issued by her office. Fyles was the leading voice of opposition to the alcohol bans being reinstated by the federal government. She later changed her mind, deciding to support the reinstatement of the bans “demanded by police, health providers and Indigenous elders aimed at halting a wave of alcohol-fuelled violence and crime” (The Australian, 7 February 2023).

Fyles was notably portrayed to be standing with the Indigenous communities in Alice Springs and not against them. For instance:

Ms Fyles had warned such an approach amounted to the introduction of “race-based” policies and would disempower Aboriginal Territorians and entrench disadvantage, but she said on Monday there would be a new process allowing communities to develop their own alcohol plans (The Australian, 7 February 2023).

We have been listening to Aboriginal Territorians around this issue and that is why we’ve put in this strong process of community consultation (NT News, 16 February 2023).

Our policies are agile ... there is a crystal clear path for communities (The Australian, 17 February 2023).

But we are doing what is right — for Territorians, and for the Northern Territory (Katherine Times, 22 February 2023).

While the government was portrayed as *hero* to a great extent in 2023, the Indigenous communities were not always juxtaposed against the government as *opponent* or *villain*, at least not explicitly. Findings show that 31 per cent of stories in 2023 (see: Table 4.2) characterised the local community and/or Indigenous elders in Alice Springs as either the *beneficiary* or the *ally* of the government — in other words the reinforcement of the government as the *hero*, an implicit management of citizen identities. This was mostly done, as also noted in 2012 coverage, by using Indigenous leaders as sources. For instance, Indigenous elders, and also some local government representatives, were used, in some instances

repeatedly, as news sources in various stories that stressed the need for alcohol bans and other restrictions:

Dagoman-Wardaman elder May Rosas said she believed the Central Australian alcohol restrictions were “absolutely” having an impact (ABC, 14 February 2023).

Dagoman-Wardaman elder May Rosas, who lives and works in Katherine, said communities who wanted to see the managed return of alcohol and transition out of the bans should be listened to (ABC, 15 February 2023).

I called on this government to think about what it was doing and the possible ramifications and the impact of this crazy, destructive decision the Northern Territory government made to not continue with those restrictions (NT News, 17 February 2023).

Some examples were noted where government representatives spoke on behalf of Indigenous communities affected by the bans and other restrictions. For instance, the newly appointed Central Australian Regional Controller Dorelle Anderson, a Luritja woman, who also prepared a snap report on alcohol-related harms in Alice Springs ordered by the federal government in January 2023 and is understood to have recommended bringing back the bans, was quoted multiple times as speaking on behalf of the local communities:

... immediate measures put in place will not alone see long-term generational change (SMH, 7 February 2023).

... rates of alcohol-fuelled domestic violence in Alice Springs had risen by 96.7 per cent since 2019 (NT News, 11 February 2023).

The children who have been spoken to have unanimously voiced their hatred of alcohol and the harm it inflicts on their families (NT News, 24 February 2023).

At the time of Anderson’s appointment, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese received some criticism from conservative media in Australia for whipping up a report without talking to local authorities and communities, and handing over an important job to someone who could not do it. For instance, Sky News reported that instead of “walking hand-in-hand with the community” and getting “to the bottom of these long-standing problems, he has palmed it off to Dorelle Anderson” (“PM Albanese ‘palmed’ Alice Springs crisis to Dorelle Anderson”, Sky News, 1 February 2023).

The analysis also found that Northern Territory police were also repeatedly used as sources of information and commentary on the policy in metro media, despite concerns from local advocacy groups, some communities and conservative media that the government did not talk to the police association during the preparation of the snap report. Most of these police references were regarding the increase in crime rate in Alice Springs communities and its connection with alcohol consumption. For instance:

Northern Territory Police Association president Paul McCue said the increase in weapons detected was likely because of cessation of Stronger Future legislation (ABC, 6 February 2023).

Lapsed alcohol bans in Alice Springs are behind a catastrophic uptick in the number of dangerous weapons present in town, the NT Police Association says (The Australian, 23 February 2023).

THE ANALYSIS ALSO FOUND THAT NORTHERN TERRITORY POLICE WERE ALSO REPEATEDLY USED AS SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND COMMENTARY ON THE POLICY IN METRO MEDIA, DESPITE CONCERNS FROM LOCAL ADVOCACY GROUPS...



The accumulated analysis of coverage from all the three time periods identifies the Indigenous communities as a fundamentally ambivalent media figure. On the one hand, the Indigenous community emerges as the ‘problem’, almost a threat to the national image, yet on the other, they appear a *victim* of invasive political interventions and policies, and thus in need of protection. In both circumstances, the government policies were portrayed as legitimate and the government having a political will to ‘invest’ in the sorts of basic services in the Northern Territory and other Indigenous communities that other Australians have been enjoying for decades.

Dominant frames

Framing is the deliberate selection and emphasis of certain aspects of an issue, event, or topic over others in order to shape the way that information is presented and perceived (Entman, 1993). It involves choosing particular words, images, perspectives, and contextual elements to create a specific interpretation or understanding of the subject matter — in other words, building a media frame.

Frame building is highly significant in the strategic shaping and communication of information regarding international, domestic and regional policy issues. By constructing frames that resonate with the target audience, political actors effectively mobilise public support for their policy objectives and promote specific policy agendas.

In this way, political parties in power become the producers of knowledge about the potential risks that can come from individuals or communities. As a result, the potential risk can be put to the electorate not as a risk of danger but as one in which an individual or a community ‘become dangerous’ (Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

The interplay of political power and media framing legitimises policy interventions, no matter how invasive. Media coverage before the Intervention remains, in the words of Callum and Waller (2013) “the template for media-driven policy-making in Indigenous affairs” (p. 139).

Adding another layer of complexity is the historically problematic relationship between Indigenous Australians and government (Meadows, 2005). These debates often present Indigenous affairs in media coverage as ‘unsolvable and intransigent’ (Baum et. al, 2007), wherein deviant characteristics are, as findings of this analysis also suggest, inherent in the Indigenous communities.

This analysis indicates three dominant framing strategies in the coverage of alcohol-related restrictions and Indigenous communities over the three time periods, distilled as: the neo-colonial frame, the criminality frame, and the accountability frame.

The neo-colonial frame

Race and race-related discussion was dominant in the coverage. In this study, race was expressed in ‘us’ and ‘them’ terms, between the ‘white fellas’ and Indigenous communities. White Australia and Indigenous communities are presented almost as two separate nations inside one country, with Indigenous communities often referred to as ‘grog towns’ in the metro media coverage. While Indigenous peoples were frequently represented as the ‘problem’, or people with problems or people creating problems, alcohol consumption and related issues in Indigenous communities were framed as Australia’s ‘Katrina crisis’ (SMH, 26 June 2007); in other words: a disaster.

The word race, including ‘race-based’ and ‘racism’ in the context of Indigenous people was used in the corpus 100 times in 2007, 29 times in 2012, and 113 times in 2023, indicating that race-related debates, both by government and Indigenous people were at the centre of the policy narrative at all times.

Within these frameworks, the construction of the Indigenous figure no longer takes place within the explicit binary of victim or threat, as before, but now shifts into the binary of the peaceful or the aggressive, the compliant citizen or the unruly citizen, the Territorian and the non-Territorian; that is, the ally or the opponent. The way in which news media focuses on these binaries, along with the governments’ techniques of managing Indigenous issues is a form of racialised and neo-colonial control over public discussion.

Regional media significantly challenged these neo-colonial descriptions of Indigenous people and communities. Critics of the government’s interventionist policies in the Northern Territory and later new alcohol bans in Alice Springs were reported as saying these policies were in fact “race-based ... that disempowered Aboriginal Territorians” (ABC, 26 January 2023), and embracing the worst effects of colonialism and resulting in higher rates of incarceration among Indigenous Australians, “while doing little to make Aboriginal children safer” (ABC, 28 January 2023). For example:

It was initiated in response to a report indicating high levels of child abuse in Indigenous communities — but has since been widely criticised as inherently racist, ineffective and far too heavy-handed (NT News, 8 July 2012).

While race remained a prevalent issue in the news coverage, a clear discussion emerged in regional media about whether or not alcohol bans and other related restrictions were race-based. Labor politicians in 2023, for example, capitalised the most on this narrative and were repeatedly quoted as





referring to the Intervention and other alcohol restrictions as “race-based policies of the Coalition government” that the Northern Territory Labor government wanted no part of (NT News, 28 January 2023).

Analysis also indicates that each government in the three time periods studied repeatedly dismissed criticism by Indigenous communities and advocacy groups that their interventions were ‘race-based’. However, it is interesting to note that at the same time, the governments referred to the policies of previous governments as ‘race-based’. The Albanese government repeatedly referred to the Intervention and Stronger Futures Act as policies based on race. In 2023, the Opposition leader Peter Dutton was referenced 80 times as saying that “the Albanese government has been slow to act in Alice Springs because of race” (SMH, 27 January 2023).

A substantial number of articles that used personalised firsthand accounts of Indigenous peoples who were against the bans/short-term policy solutions. Sources suggested that these restrictions were imposed on local communities by using the ‘race card ... despite strong objections’ (NT News, 13 February 2023), and without consultation, and ‘disregarded the wishes of local communities’ (ABC, 27 January 2023).

The Intervention explicitly emerged in the media coverage as the most criticised federal government policy of the three alcohol-related programs discussed in this chapter, followed by the Stronger Futures legislation. According to Watson (2009), the necessity for the Intervention arose from the deeply entrenched socio-economic disadvantages and historical injustices faced by Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Calling the Intervention a ‘contemporary colonial project’ (p.46), Watson argues that the Australian government used the ‘save and transform’ (p. 46) narrative to intervene in the lives of Aboriginal peoples living on Aboriginal lands without negotiating with Aboriginal communities. Further, she argues that while the media and the public focus was solely upon child sexual abuse, other issues, such as the opening of a number of new uranium mines in the NT and a new railway line across Aboriginal lands in the Northern Territory, had been ignored by news media, and consequently in the public debate.

In reality, decades of marginalisation and neglect led to the creation of a vicious cycle of poverty, substance abuse, and family breakdown, culminating in a severe child protection crisis, giving the Howard government reasonable justification

for urgent and extraordinary measures which, according to the government, were essential to protect vulnerable children and restore community stability (Grubel, 2007).

The criminality frame

The media can create a context in which certain people or issues are viewed as increasing a perceived threat. Research indicates that Indigenous peoples and communities have long been caught up in this ‘spiral of signification’ (Dreher, 2010) — in which some aspects of a perceived reality are made more salient by linking them to ‘criminal’ and ‘anti-social’ activities and behaviours.

The focus on alcohol-fuelled crime was more prominent in metro media than regional. Overall, there were 45 references to criminality in the 206 stories analysed for 2007 and five in the 64 stories in 2012. Compared to this, there were 354 references to criminality and criminal behaviour and 15 references to criminal/criminals in the 189 stories selected to represent coverage of the Alice Springs alcohol bans in 2023.

The striking difference in the use of the criminality frame in the coverage in 2007/2012 and 2023 demonstrates a major shift in the representation of the issue and Indigenous people’s alcohol consumption. There were frequent reminders in the coverage of the increasing crime rate in the ‘crime-plagued Alice Springs’ (SMH, 25 January 2023) and other Indigenous communities, evidenced by the following few extracts:

... organisation had predicted the rise in crime after Stronger Futures ended (ABC, 24 January 2023).

The measures were put in place following the latest outbreak in crime across the Central Australian town which has resulted in buildings broken into, people assaulted and many cases of domestic violence (NT News, 25 January 2023).

Alice Springs was one of the only hospitals ... where the police bring in more people than the ambulance (The Australian, 26 January 2023).

... escalating violence in Alice Springs had reached “crisis” point ... before Prime Minister Anthony Albanese flew to the Central Australian town in the grip of its worst crime crisis in decades (NT News, 26 January 2023).

While increasing crime was a significant issue faced by many Alice Springs communities, repetitive references to ‘crime plagued’ and ‘worst crime in decades’ not only positively reinforced government intervention but also highlighted the potent role of media in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards both policy and Indigenous people, while ignoring decades-old underlying issues such as government negligence (Altman & Hinkson, 2007). Indeed, underlying issues, such as a historical lack of political will to devise long-term, co-created policies that genuinely benefit Indigenous communities were not mentioned. An overwhelmingly large number of stories shifted responsibility away from the governance system; ascribing it to individuals and communities in a process of ‘othering’ which then becomes the public representation of what Indigenous people and ‘their’ problems mean for ‘us’ as non-Indigenous people. Contributing further to this is the presentation of Alice Springs as a battleground, reducing the town and its identity to being merely ‘rivers of grog’ (NT News, 3 February 2023), where an ‘alcohol-fuelled crime wave’ (ABC, 25 January 2023)

THE MEDIA CAN CREATE A CONTEXT IN WHICH CERTAIN PEOPLE OR ISSUES ARE VIEWED AS INCREASING A PERCEIVED THREAT. RESEARCH INDICATES THAT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND COMMUNITIES HAVE LONG BEEN CAUGHT UP IN THIS ‘SPIRAL OF SIGNIFICATION’



keeps the police ‘braced for violent response’ (The Australian, 27 January 2023), growing into ‘a national political crisis’ (ABC, 25 January 2023). The analysis indicates that the coverage of Indigenous crime is, in most cases, so pervasive that categories such as crime and violence become synonymous with Indigenous crime, and alcohol bans become synonymous with Northern Territory or Alice Springs, despite the fact that alcohol bans also exist in some communities outside Northern Territory, including Western Australia and Queensland.

Although the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report (RCIADIC, 1991) suggested that racism and criminalisation in the mainstream media appeared to be lessening over the years, findings of this analysis clearly show the continuing racialisation within media in crime reporting from the Northern Territory. In fact, some research has shown that Indigenous issues are frequently only covered if they contain a criminal element (Meadows, 2001; Jakubowicz, 2003), creating a media panic around Indigenous people and crime.

By relying on the tropes of neo-colonialism and criminality, it is argued that the media perpetuate Indigenous issues as either intractable or criminal problems, but never as victims or targets of the structural violence in the system that will, for instance, ignore undergrounding power cables in Aboriginal communities in Crocker and Tiwi, which are hit by cyclones every second year (ABC, 28 June 2007).

The accountability frame

The news media is publicly perceived as a domain where accountability of government and others with power occurs (Fairclough, 1995). Moreover, social media has added a new public space where ordinary people can speak to power. In this way, the media serves as a moral device between the government and the governed, in which senses of accountability are pursued and actions can be made normatively accountable (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2003).

It is interesting to note that in 2007, the federal government emerged as a lone saviour. Fast forward to 2012, and the media now portrayed government as carrying the sole responsibility of not only addressing the issue, but also playing a role in its resolution. By 2023, the media had resumed its traditional role as the watchdog. Matt Cunningham’s 2023 articles in the NT News stood out as compelling examples where the accountability frame was employed through the use of language that highlighted the local communities’ lack of trust in the government’s competence or a genuine political skill in the policy management of Indigenous issues, particularly alcohol-related bans in Alice Springs. He writes that both the NT and federal government’s policies made Indigenous people “look like fools” (NT News, 28 January 2023) on their own native land, where they (government officials) walked, stayed and camped, and disrespected “our country as well”. This article also notes the absence of plans to improve programs and facilities in remote communities after the 10-year-old Stronger Futures legislation ceased.

The analysis in this chapter indicates an emerging focus on the Indigenous agency and policy impact in news coverage by regional media, wherein themes of responsibility and accountability were incorporated in media framing to draw attention to political negligence. Metro news, however, tended to focus more on the hope that policy would succeed.

‘Howard’s plan wiped out years of quiet and successful efforts on Aboriginal communities at

improving the social fabric?’ (Alice Springs News, 28 June 2007)

... the so-called “Intervention” is the crux of problems. It caused upheaval in Aboriginal communities and a drift to town Northern Territory wide (NT News, 5 May 2012).

The money never trickles down to the people that matter, on the ground ... there’s no extra food in communities, there’s no extra health services in remote communities ... When a government puts a protective regime of that kind in place and leaves it in place for that long, you can’t just suddenly pull the pin on it without any protection ... the failure of governments to properly invest in remote communities was now wreaking havoc on the streets of Alice Springs (NT News, 28 January 2023).

The PM’s Alice Springs alcohol response ignores calls for needs-based domestic violence funding (ABC, 25 January 2023).

Interestingly, in some other regional articles, metro journalists are also brought to the centre of the discussion on accountability, where their reporting priorities are questioned; an article in the NT News asks why journalists were “more focused on whether Sydney or Adelaide should host the New Year’s cricket Test” than asking “Anthony Albanese or Chief Minister Natasha Fyles a single question about Alice Springs” at the national cabinet meeting (NT News, 11 February 2023). Another

NT News article noted that “many of the journalists who have flown in and out of the Territory in the past month to cover the story in Alice Springs have been keen to frame it as a black-versus-white issue” (NT News, 11 February 2023)

The Intervention policy, which was repeatedly referred to as Howard’s “positive policy ideas” (SMH, 17 July 2007), and the Stronger Futures legislation, which was seen as racist as “it selectively targets one race” (SMH, 2 July 2012), were both, in retrospect, generally criticised for being neo-colonial and a “major national disgrace” (NT News, 31 January 2023) in the coverage in 2023. This paradigm shift from being a ‘national emergency’ in 2007 to a ‘national disgrace’ in 2023 not only demonstrates the influence of social, political and economic factors over time, but also a shift in the choice of news sources quoted in reporting, serving as an opportunity to radically rethink media responsibility in introducing public, and indeed also policy, dispositions to attitudes and actions towards the vulnerable.

In so doing, the Indigenous identity as presented by news media, shifted from being a ‘national shame’ (SMH, 27 June 2007) to being subjected to invasive policies that embodied ‘national disgrace’.

At the same time, some coverage in the metro media incorporated the accountability frame to present the government in a positive light, carrying political communication suggesting that the Albanese government, together with the Northern Territory government, was ‘un-doing’ the Howard



and Gillard governments' race-based policies, and therefore excusing 'accountability' for the actions of the previous governments.

Policy narrative: pathways and mechanisms

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, part of this discourse analysis entails the identification of news pathways between regional and metro media to see whether stories and narratives first emerged in regional media and were picked up by metro, or the other way round.

Analysis indicates no evidence of metro media picking stories or policy narrative from regional media or vice-versa.

While policy narrative and mediated debates appeared in both regional and metro media, it was evident that metro media had more coverage of government policies during the three key moments. One reasonable explanation of this can be the national/federal level ascribed to the three policy events by the governments at the time. However, in most cases, this coverage was more descriptive than investigative.

On the other hand, there were more stories in the regional media, especially in NT News, that carried firsthand accounts of Indigenous elders who were against the federal government's interventionist policies. Consequently, there were more traces of a narrative of resistance in regional media than metro media. This was emergent in 2007 and 2012 in both Northern Territory News

and Alice Springs News, however, by 2023, these narratives became more explicit in the coverage.

Overall, while Alice Springs News and Katherine Times mostly published press statements issued by the Northern Territory and federal governments, Alice Springs News carried some articles with significant criticism of government policies during the three key policy events. The coverage of Alice Springs News and Katherine Times was largely targeted at a local audience, and overt references to alcohol-related policies primarily appeared in interviews with political candidates or op-ed pieces. None of these interviews were picked up by metro media.

The Indigenous affairs policy debate in the media is often characterised by 'fierce policy battles' and "strongly-held ideological positions between political and advocacy groups" (McCallum et. al, 2012: 3). Though analysts of Indigenous policy have often criticised the media for sensationalist and biased reporting that complicates the policy debate and consequently have an impact on the lived experience of all Indigenous Australians, teasing out the elements and directions of policy influence is not a simple task. Indeed, it is fraught.

Conclusion

While a number of studies have explored the ways many Indigenous affairs are framed in the Australian media, rarely have studies examined the differences between regional and metro news media coverage of alcohol-related policies. Our study found interesting shifts in media coverage of alcohol bans during the three major policy events, however, there was no evidence of pathways of information flow between

regional and metro media.

We found that the Intervention was broadly represented as a key policy moment of the Howard government in both regional and local coverage, but by 2012, it was heavily criticised, particularly by regional media. The same was revealed about the Stronger Futures legislation, which received criticism by both regional and metro media coverage in 2023. Contrary to the coverage of the Intervention in 2007, in which there was explicit support for the federal government's policies, with only rare criticism of the broader 'white fellas-centric' government policies, findings from analysis of coverage in 2012 and 2023 indicate emerging critique and condemnation of the Stronger Futures legislation and new alcohol bans in Alice Springs.

While the government primarily remained the hero in the coverage throughout these years, with some decline in that characterisation noted in 2023, key opponents of these policies were Indigenous leaders, communities and advocacy groups, which marked the passage of these laws as a day of shame. Other opponents in the coverage included some opposition members, local government representatives, and local and international welfare and advocacy organisations. In regional media coverage that focused on the opponents, the governments and the opposition were presented as using these policy events for political point scoring.

Moreover, protests by Indigenous communities, led by elders in most cases, received ample coverage in both 2012 and 2023, which could be attributable to the sudden enactment of the Intervention in 2007, and significant reported government advocacy which gave local communities little time or freedom to protest. Local communities were reported by the ABC to be otherwise occupied in the protection of their families as fear and suspicion ran "high about the Commonwealth's emergency

OUR STUDY FOUND INTERESTING SHIFTS IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF ALCOHOL BANS DURING THE THREE MAJOR POLICY EVENTS, HOWEVER, THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE OF PATHWAYS OF INFORMATION FLOW BETWEEN REGIONAL AND METRO MEDIA.



intervention into the Northern Territory” (ABC, 5 July 2007).

By 2012, as evidence also suggests, the Northern Territory elections in the last week of August potentially played a significant role in shaping the policy narrative in the media coverage. The Stronger Futures legislation was, as mentioned above, often used by politicians, both in power and from the opposition, for political point scoring and to win Indigenous votes. This was understandably more common in regional media due to the relevance of the Northern Territory elections for local communities. While the opposition was presented, in most circumstances, as trying to negotiate with the government to review the Stronger Futures legislation (e.g., NT News, 27 June 2012), especially on laws that included jail terms for alcohol possession, the territory government was noted to be building support through the media on a platform of a “genuine process of consultation with NT Aboriginal people, despite a Senate inquiry being told the process was flawed” (NT, 29 June 2012), and that “alcohol abuse is still devastating the lives of too many Aborigines” (The Australian, 30 June 2012).

Framing that focused on individual or community dysfunction, issues of alcohol abuse and the need to reduce access to alcohol in Indigenous communities, or what are commonly referred to as ‘grog towns’ remained consistent in metro media coverage throughout the three periods. This is not to say that regional media did not report on the impact of alcohol-fuelled crime. However, the focus on the link

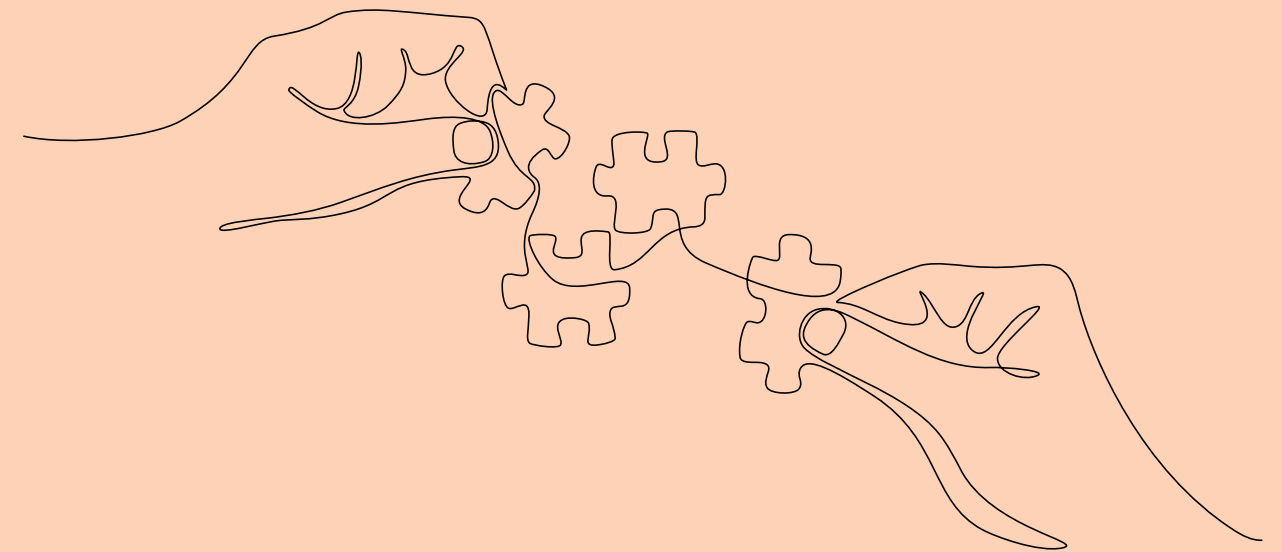
between alcohol and crime was more explicit in metro media.

The interplay between policy objectives and news media narratives exhibits intriguing variations between regional and metro media. Regional media accentuated localised concerns, intertwining policy goals with grassroots perspectives. In contrast, the metro media moulded policy objectives to fit an urban understanding of regional issues.

Evidence suggests that regional media has the potential to wield a stronger influence in shaping policies attuned to specific community needs, as shown by extensive interviews with Indigenous elders and community leaders who stressed the need for community consultation and addressing underlying issues to resolve resulting problems. In a way, regional media’s spotlight on consultation in 2012 and in the lead up to new alcohol bans in 2023 could have catalysed policy adjustments such as the initial ‘opt-out’ option for some Northern Territory communities. On the other hand,

metro media tend to sometimes steer policy directions towards broader inclusivity, especially as demonstrated in the 2023 coverage where the focus was more on the difficulties faced by local communities due to alcohol bans. At the time of writing, the federal government had extended the alcohol bans in Alice Springs indefinitely (SMH, 2023).

Finally, both metro and regional media would benefit from mutual information sharing. This would enhance news coverage, ensuring both local nuance and broader issues receive due attention. It would provide audiences with a holistic understanding of events and enable the pooling of expertise and resources, resulting in cost savings. By sharing information, both types of media can expand their reach and credibility, catering to wider audiences and bolstering their influence as reliable sources of information. This symbiotic relationship ultimately strengthens journalism’s vital role in society.



BOTH METRO AND REGIONAL MEDIA WOULD BENEFIT FROM MUTUAL INFORMATION SHARING...THIS SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP ULTIMATELY STRENGTHENS JOURNALISM'S VITAL ROLE IN SOCIETY.

06

CHAPTER

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1, 2 AND 4 – MONICA ATTARD
CASE STUDY 3 – NICK NEWLING
CASE STUDY 5 – AYESHA JEHANGIR

CASE STUDY 1: THE NEW ENGLAND TIMES

New England in northern New South Wales has a growing population, with two large traditional centres and almost a dozen smaller ones. It also has a rich history of local media-supported secessionist sentiment.

The region is rich in coal, has large livestock farm holdings, houses small to large multinational corporations, has a public university and a transport system that links two states, New South Wales and Queensland. It is, in short, an economically and culturally significant region. So much so that in the 1930s and again in the 1960s, the now defunct New England New State Movement campaigned for the region to secede from New South Wales and elect its own premier and government for a seventh state, to be called New England.

The movement was fuelled by an abiding community-wide sentiment that decision-making in New South Wales was Sydney-centric, run by politicians and bureaucrats who knew little of the needs and aspirations of the region. That movement forced a state-based referendum on the issue in 1967, which failed. But for New Englanders, the referendum's failure was yet more proof that Sydney called the shots. At the time, locals said the referendum failure was the result of political skulduggery engineered by the then-premier Robert

Askin who, when he realised the referendum might succeed, instructed a cabinet subcommittee to redraw the region's boundaries. The subcommittee duly did so, including the Upper Hunter Valley and Newcastle within the New England boundaries. Novocastrians, less than enthusiastic about being a mid-sized city in a new state, caused the vote to fail.

However, the secessionist sentiment was born decades before the referendum. It was the editor of the Tamworth-based Northern Daily Leader, Victor Thompson, also the Federal Member for New England, who launched the secessionist movement in a newspaper campaign in 1922. That campaign, which was picked up by several other newspapers in the region, led to two royal commissions to examine the issue and lasted more than a decade. Perhaps this history of secessionist thinking has left a mark on modern New England.

When Raphaela Crosby, a Moree-born marketing researcher decided to test the prospects of successfully establishing a new newspaper in the region, she found that people felt 'disconnected' from the rest of the state, somewhat maligned and definitely pessimistic about how metro media portrayed them and the importance of the region to the state economy.

Crosby, the publisher of The New England Times, which began publishing in February 2023, attributes the modern-day disconnectedness felt by the region to the way some of



its more colourful politicians are reported by metro news media.

“One of the things that is kind of unique to New England is the level of hate that New England gets from the rest of the country because of Barnaby,” says Crosby, referring to the former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce, who is the current federal member for New England.

“The issue that came out in the research very, very clearly was that New Englanders, particularly those around Armidale and the northern Tablelands, who basically created the National Party, felt as though they had been knocked off their perch as the shining lights of rural intelligentsia; that they were no longer respected, that their views were no longer respected, and that they’d kind of lost their voice in terms of being able to contribute to the debate and make sure that, you know, these incredibly special parts of the world are protected and respected.”

Crosby says in the last federal election in May 2022, when polling indicated the Morrison Coalition government was viewed negatively across the nation, opposition politicians

and national media used New England as “a saber rattle to show we were evil people” who, through the re-election of Joyce would stop any action on climate change. She says the community felt that national sentiment towards Joyce was so negative that it permeated into a general antipathy towards the region’s population at large. She found this surprising because she sees New England as a progressive community.

“Most of the environmental scientists at the University of New England are the ones that are leading the way on things like reducing methane output of livestock, and no-till farming and all of those kinds of things. So being sustainable and environmentally sustainable is very much part of being New England. And that got lost entirely when you had not just the Teals but the Labor Party writ large [in media coverage during the federal election of March 2022] saying, if you don’t vote for this incredibly nice moderate liberal, you will get Barnaby, as though Barnaby in New England was everything that is wrong with the world.

“And that was personally painful to a lot of people in New England, so much so that they’d started disengaging from national debate, which in turn creates its own problems, right?”

Disengagement from national debate doesn’t appear to be on Barnaby Joyce’s agenda. His appearance at the first regional event on the Voice referendum, held in New England in April 2023 and advertised as an event designed to help locals understand why they “should oppose the Voice to parliament”, appeared to cement the view that the former deputy prime minister was at the forefront of the No campaign in regional Australia (Chan, 2023).

That appears to support one of Crosby’s research findings — that the region feels maligned by those outside New England who are pessimistic about the region’s ability to contribute positively to the nation, including economically. She says the economic indicators show no basis for this sentiment given the large demographic shift to the region in the period of COVID-19 lockdowns and its immediate aftermath. To counter it, Crosby concluded that the New England community needed a strong regional media presence to reflect a positive view of itself to counter what the community perceived as a history of national slights.

It’s not that the New England region is starved of local media offerings, scattered though they are across a very large region. Print media is bountiful, if largely offered by Australian Community Media (ACM). And whilst most of these are local publications, some are regional, with a broad reporting remit. Amongst ACM’s papers is the once secessionist-minded The Northern Daily Leader, a print publication with a strong online presence, producing local, state, and national news. The Northern Daily Leader has an average Monday to Friday print

readership of 6,401, according to ACM, which jumps to 13,597 for its Saturday edition. Its monthly digital readership hits a significant 69,743 unique views (Australian Community Media, 2023a).

ACM also owns The Armidale Express, which is the third oldest newspaper in New South Wales. It is a paywalled online publication that recently restarted publishing a weekly print edition after being forced to an online-only format during the Covid-19 period. Its focus is on breaking news across Armidale, Uralla, Guyra and Walcha and it is sustained by advertising. ACM boasts a monthly print audience of 29,977 and a digital audience of 9,124 for the publication (Australian Community Media, 2023b).



ACM also publishes the Glen Innes Examiner, a weekly paper with an online offering. First published in 1874, the paper covers only Glen Innes on the Northern Tablelands with an average weekly print readership of 2,800 and a monthly digital audience of 4,527 (Australian Community Media 2023c). ACM also owns The Moree Champion (print and online), The Namoi Valley Independent (online only), The Tenterfield Star (print and online) and The Inverell Times (print and online), all of which are local publications that regularly share content across mastheads.

There are a number of privately owned newspapers as well. The Dunnet family own two newspapers in the region — The Narrabri Courier which publishes a print edition twice weekly and has an online presence, and The Gunnedah Times,

...THE COMMUNITY FELT THAT NATIONAL SENTIMENT TOWARDS JOYCE WAS SO NEGATIVE THAT IT PERMEATED INTO A GENERAL ANTIPATHY TOWARDS THE REGION’S POPULATION AT LARGE



a weekly publication with a paywalled online offering. The privately owned Quirindi Advocate, launched in 1925, has survived a crippling Covid-19-induced blow to its advertising revenue (Jelinek, 2020) and a two-week period when it couldn't afford to publish because of a decision by ACM to briefly refuse to print the paper at its Tamworth presses. Transporting the paper from printing presses in Sydney to Quirindi proved uneconomic. When ACM reversed its Tamworth boycott, the Quirindi Advocate was back in business (Thompson, 2023), much to the relief of the region's 3,400 residents. The paper's owners hope that commitment to the fiercely local publication will help it celebrate 100 years of publishing in July 2025.

Raphaella Crosby, however, believes that what is currently on offer across the New England region doesn't stringently serve the public interest. She believes The New England Times will improve what is available for locals to read. A free online offering, The New England Times publishes a combination of sponsored content (content produced by freelance writers sponsored by a third party), advertorials (produced by freelance writers as branded content) and traditional public interest journalism. The latter is difficult to produce, says Crosby, as she is unable to fund the full-time employment of journalists. The New England Times runs on the smell of an oily rag, so to speak, with freelance journalists paid by the

story, leaving little room for researched investigative work.

The paper's mission, as Crosby sees it, is three-fold. Promoting the region, particularly its smaller villages, so that people feel heard and seen; connecting communities because she says Facebook notices of community events aren't serving communities well enough; and producing public interest journalism.

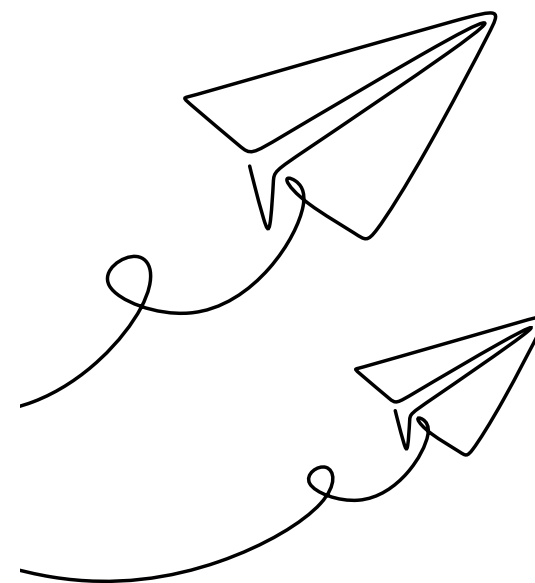
Crosby claims New England has its fair share of malfeasance that requires journalistic investigation. She also thinks metro media has done a poor job of covering the region's problems, amongst them a health care crisis, with about 6,000 people in the region on waiting lists to see a general practitioner. Crosby says having 6,000 people waiting to see a GP will only come to the attention of metro media on a slow news day.

"It is real exclusion. When you talk about issues like losing doctors, they sent an ABC 7.30 crew up because they were begged to, but they didn't run the story for two months," she says. The ABC 7.30 program denies the nightly current affairs show was begged to cover the story or that the story sat on the shelf for two months awaiting broadcast. The ABC says the report was briefly held over for broadcast according to normal program practice.

As with all regional startups, funding to sustainability is a challenge. The New England Times carries traditional digital advertising and Crosby says 60 per cent of the outlet's revenue comes from its sponsored and advertorial pieces and traditional advertising, the availability of which she anticipates will increase as the region's newest arrivals open more businesses. The newspaper is also flirting with a form of micro payment, via shared content deals or 'cents per read' with local libraries. Funding grants are critical in the startup phase; The New England Times has attracted one local government grant and hopes to apply for a regional media grant from the federal government in future rounds.

But the ambition doesn't stop there. Crosby hopes to build a non-profit vertical business which could include a bulk billing medical centre and an events arm, to showcase New England's offerings and at the same time, diversify the company's activity base.

"We're looking at developing a regional brand that will allow businesses and companies and manufacturers to label their products as New England proud, so that will have a revenue stream in and of itself as well as boosting both the concept of what New England is, and the prominence and salience of New England in the broader Australian community, at least — if not beyond," she says.



CASE STUDY 2: NSW LOCAL APP COMPANY

The NSW Local App Company is the minnow that wants to survive and thrive. For the moment, it is just a collection of separate apps covering Orange and Lismore, but the aim of its owner Simon Mumford is to expand. And fast.

The business model is simple. Freelance journalists, abiding by internally created editorial and ethical principles, produce local news coverage, distributed via a geographically targeted app owned by local investors that is free to use. However, simple does not always mean easy.

The NSW Local App Company owned and operated a local news app in Port Macquarie on the New South Wales Mid North Coast before it shuttered due to a lack of interest from local businesses in placing advertising.

"We like it to be free to people. And we just couldn't get the advertisers to support the app," says Mumford. "It's a business decision in the end."

Given the hesitance encountered in Port Macquarie, choosing the next region for expansion beyond its most successful venture into Lismore, comes down to a combination of guesswork, the general business health of the location and good luck.

"Ultimately, it's finding business partners. It's finding people in the local regional areas that want to own part of a digital newspaper, and realistically, you know, be part of the community fabric, in an integral way. When we started this — yes, we did it to make a living and to try and make a profit and what have you, but we also wanted to make a difference to the community and I think in Lismore, we've absolutely done that."

Lismore worked, says Mumford, because he was able to show the efficacy of an app providing updated information in a crisis. At the height of the flood crisis of 2022, approximately 60,000 residents downloaded the app. At a time when people were being made homeless and seeking shelter, accessing a physical newspaper was dangerous at worst, and difficult at best. Having locally produced information on one's phone was important.

"There was nowhere to buy a paper! So, you only ended up having Goonellabah [located on the outskirts of Lismore] and out of



areas where shops were open. You're not going to drive five kilometres to go buy newspapers when you know you'll get it on your phone. I think that's the beauty sometimes of what we do. Also, we have push notifications and of all those push notifications, we've got 17,000 still registered [post crisis] to receive those push notifications," says Mumford.

Mumford believes the constant refrain of large newspaper proprietors that regional communities have a temperamental relationship with digital technologies because of the intermittent failures of the National Broadband Network (NBN) and the regional demographic skew towards older generations is self-serving.

"This is part of the frustration I get with government grants and government funding for newspapers. We would be now, and I think quite easily, the largest newspaper in the Lismore [local government area]. And we're digital. We're digital only. And the Northern Star [owned by News Corp], which I think started in 1887, went digital during Covid-19, earlier than they wanted to, but it went digital.

"And then when you're looking at actual printed publications, there's one called the Lismore City News [owned by ACM], which has about eight pages in it. And it's printed once a week. So, we're easily the largest and we have people — I know people in their 80s, in their 70s and 80s, that use the app, or use a website. If they've got vision problems, the website on a laptop and iPad is easier to read as well."

"So I don't buy that theory, or subscribe to that theory that older people don't use it; they can use it, they will use it if they want to, if the content is strong enough and good enough and they are aware of it, they will use it."

Awareness of The Lismore App came of age during the 2022 floods. At the same time, says Mumford, newspaper proprietors in regional areas were asking the federal government for grants to help with increased printing costs under the threat that unless the grants were given, regional newspapers would close. Mumford says proprietors such as ACM, owner of the Lismore City News, and News Corp, which owns The Northern Star, were understandably protecting their profits. Whilst he concedes that older generations prefer a physical newspaper, he says if these groups were made aware of the availability of news and information on an easily accessible app on their smartphones, they would use it, a proposition proved during the Lismore floods.

The 60,000 app downloads during the floods translated into 196,000 readers at the height of the crisis, with people using the app from as far away as Perth because they had relatives in the impacted area. Mumford is proudest of the community service the app performed at a time when the community most needed up-to-date information. However, when the crisis subsided, so did the numbers. The app now reaches approximately 30,000 readers each month.

"And that's fine," says Mumford, "it's probably where the realistic level is." But he is aiming higher, determined to change habits from print to digital.

"You know, you go to a cafe, and people will sit down, order their coffee. And normally what used to happen, they'd have a couple of free papers sitting around and read them. Now

they just open their phone and start reading stories. So, it's just a change of habit. But it's doing exactly the same thing as what they've done for the last 40 years." The shift away from print to digital is inevitable because of generational attrition, according to Mumford. Younger generations, or digital natives as they are described by some, will boost the efficacy and success of digitally-delivered news in regional communities. So too with natural inflection points such as flood or pestilence.

"We were probably a little bit lucky in our timing because of Covid. As I've mentioned The Northern Star had the digital platform, but they also printed the newspaper and that was an institution in Lismore because for over 100 years it was in print. So, when they went digital and they had a subscription model and ours was a free digital product that gave us a bit of a head start or a lift up — and then the floods hit and you know we worked really hard during that period to inform the community," he says.

"There were two tipping points that that made people aware of who we are — Covid and the floods. It's rare that we talk to someone, and no-one knows who we are, whereas pre Covid it was 50 per cent. So, you need to guess when there's those tipping points which also then give you that broad market awareness which we now have in Lismore that the other apps like Orange and Hunter haven't done," Mumford says. He adds that while both Orange and Hunter have healthy growth, the number of app downloads is significantly fewer than in Lismore, with less smartphone penetration. It's worth noting that at the time of publication, The Hunter App is unavailable and the website appears defunct.

The business model for the NSW Local App Company depends as much on advertising as it does on finding investors. Mumford refers to investors as locals who are

THE 60,000 APP DOWNLOADS DURING THE FLOODS TRANSLATED INTO 196,000 READERS AT THE HEIGHT OF THE CRISIS, WITH PEOPLE USING THE APP FROM AS FAR AWAY AS PERTH BECAUSE THEY HAD RELATIVES IN THE IMPACTED AREA.



willing to put the hours in, usually for little to no monetary compensation, to deliver local news. “And that’s a critical part of it. If you’re just an employee, you can have that mentality where you do your hours and clock off and go home. And I think if you want to be part of a community as such, especially in media, you really can’t do that. You’ve got to be willing to get up and go and talk to people and interview at different times and various times and odd times and work probably a little bit harder.”

It has been harder in Orange than in either Lismore or the Hunter Valley to find journalists willing to work as freelancers. Skyrocketing rental costs in regional locations have been a factor, given the low rates of pay on offer. Mumford says he’s casting the net wider as a result.

“Does someone have to go to university to become a journalist? Is that the only way you can write? A journalist is someone that reports the news, and if we hire a person who is good at writing, has a talent at writing and enjoys it and they get the facts right, and we train them and they have a story, then they can tell the story. I’m okay with that.

“The facts have to be right. And I’ll make sure that they are.

I think it’s the way we have to sometimes do it because you can’t attract people and you wouldn’t have a business because you can’t attract those sort of people, given the money that you’d be paying.”

As he tries to convince ‘investors’ to come on board in all locations, Mumford uses a largely casual workforce to provide content. “We’ve changed that model a little bit where rather than full-time journalists we have a lot of casuals. I’d be the main journalist in Lismore, then there’s another guy who’s on for a couple of months doing about 20 hours a week. And then there’s another lady who’s running Sunday profiles and doing the odd story; she might do 10 hours a fortnight. It really depends on what the needs are at the time.”

While the NSW Local App Company doesn’t shy away from providing branded content, paid for by the subjects of its journalism, Mumford says it is not always possible in local news to distinguish between the business of journalism and its journalism. Mumford calls this genre of journalism the ‘soft elephant hug’.

“Some other apps do more obvious, branded content. We try and steer away from it all. But I just did one story yesterday,

it’s sort of flood-related, which is a bit of both [branded and soft elephant hug journalism]. There is a dentist that was down in Woodlock Street in Lismore, on the first floor of their building in the CBD. A lot of businesses got flooded. And when you’re a dentist, you can’t move your chairs and your heavy equipment. And you can’t get insurance because it’s too expensive. So, they lost a lot. And they ended up going to Wollongbar which I’d say is about 20 minutes away and they’ve just opened up. That story is of public interest. But also, it’s going to help them, it’s going to be an advantage for them and for their clients.

“It is sometimes a bit of that — a soft elephant hug for the client. But we try and make sure there’s a community interest in the story. We wouldn’t run just the straight sales, advertorial,” Mumford says. In this instance, the dentist has become a paying advertiser.

And who keeps the gatekeeper honest?

The NSW Local App Company has not signed up to membership of the Australian Press Council and though Mumford sees APC membership as a commitment to a set of standards that apply across the industry, he says he is able to do the policing work himself, without the associated financial cost of membership of an external organisation.

“I’ve got my own set of standards, and they have to be high, otherwise people aren’t going to read what I write. I’d argue, on the flip side of that, mine is the same if not better than theirs. And I’m my own harshest critic, because otherwise I

don’t have a business,” he says. Nor does Mumford believe that the widely accepted industry code of ethics, as articulated by the Media, Arts and Entertainment Alliance is indispensable, despite employing freelancers who don’t necessarily have training in journalism.

“We’ve got our own code on the website that we go by. And I’ll always have the chat with anyone new about how we operate. I make sure that they are aware. We’ve got to build up good relationships within the city. And if they’re doing an interview, and we hear that they might have cut corners or I don’t know, operated in a way that we find not acceptable, then I’ll have that conversation saying that you can’t do that. This is how we want you to operate. It’s ongoing training.”

Given the significant number of environmental issues which afflict regional communities, advocacy is common. Though writers cannot publish to the app without Mumford’s oversight, bringing in untrained writers to write about issues they may be passionate about has caused the odd problem.

“I had one writer who had a green activist background and produced a very skewed article. And one of our codes is that we want to have a balanced publication. We offer both sides, so people can make up their own mind when they’re reading the story. And often, her passion would override her head. And it would be a very ‘leaning’ article. And then I would talk to her saying, ‘Look, I need to have you ring up your federal member here and get a comment because I need the other side to balance this out.’”

That’s a narrow view of balance, but it’s a start.

GIVEN THE SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES WHICH AFFLICT REGIONAL COMMUNITIES, ADVOCACY IS COMMON. THOUGH WRITERS CANNOT PUBLISH TO THE APP WITHOUT MUMFORD’S OVERSIGHT, BRINGING IN UNTRAINED WRITERS TO WRITE ABOUT ISSUES THEY MAY BE PASSIONATE ABOUT HAS CAUSED THE ODD PROBLEM



CASE STUDY 3: GILGANDRA PAPERS

When Lucie Peart moved to Gilgandra she didn't anticipate becoming regional New South Wales's emergent media maven. Her arrival in the Orana centre of just over 4,000 people, spurned by her husband's desire to move back to his hometown, started with a search for a job.

Fatefully the Gilgandra Weekly had just lost its only journalist so Peart applied and took over the position. It was the same kind of serendipity that, a few years later, put her in charge of the paper. The former editor, looking to retirement, complained that no-one wanted to buy her regional paper. Lucie responded, "I do", and the deal was done.

Since taking the helm, Peart's influence has grown rapidly: she's expanded her operation to fill a void left by the closure of ACM title the Nyngan Observer, by founding the Nyngan Weekly; formed a partnership with Tim Pankhurst — owner of Dubbo Photo News and Orange City Life — to bring the Narromine Star and the Warren Star into their auspices;

become the President of Country Press New South Wales; and has recently signed on to the acquisition of seven titles from ACM through a joint partnership with North-East media publisher, Hartley Higgins and Pankhurst under the title Midwest Media.

Peart's trajectory and rapid business expansion within New South Wales regional media bucks the national trend of shuttering news desks and failing print publications. While Peart is quick to understate her success, the business she's acquired and partnerships she's formed tell an interesting story about what is possible within the current regional media landscape.

The heart of Gilgandra Newspapers — as Peart's operation is formally called — is their printer, a 1980s Heidelberg MO. Located on-site at their Gilgandra office, privately owned printing has proven to be a major asset for Peart's independent operation. Not only does internal printing allow for quick turnarounds and lower costs, it also opens a secondary revenue stream through commercial printing.

Gilgandra Newspapers prints for local businesses, producing flyers, brochures, posters, business cards and showbooks, whenever a print run of less than 1,000 is required. Peart also prints two other local newspapers: The Walgett Spectator and the Wellington & District Leader, creating a commercial printing revenue stream that makes up over 40 per cent of Gilgandra Newspapers' business.

However, when a business is reliant on relatively old-school machinery, staffing becomes an existential dilemma. Peart currently employs one full-time and one part-time printer, but with few training courses available anywhere in Australia, and low interest in news printing as a career, it is unlikely that Gilgandra Newspapers will be able to keep their printer operational into the future.

"I'm not aware that you could go and study offset printing, you may be able to, but I've never really seen it. It's not a natural thing that you think people would be interested in doing," says Peart. "If we were to train somebody [on our machine], then they wouldn't be able to go and work anywhere else, unless somebody else has these old dog machines, which no-one really does."

Beyond the struggle of maintaining staff, it's also become much more expensive to operate her business. In the past two years there has been a 77 per cent increase in printing costs after Peart's paper supplier chose to push through ten years of price hikes overnight. This came alongside a tripling of freight costs.

Peart's business has also faced significant supply issues in supporting their antiquated printing operation since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Supply instability has increased their costs, as they must now keep significant stockpiles of printing materials and printing plates — the aluminium sheets news text is engraved on before transferral onto paper — to ensure they can print each week.

"You can't have that 'just-in-time' stocking mechanism. Now you've got to have 'just-in-case'. Instead of having a spare packet of plates, we always have three, we are always sort of working three weeks ahead to allow for problems with freighting, problems with shipping, problems with plates coming off boats."

But without the printing operation in Gilgandra, complicated as it may be, Peart would be forced to print out of Sydney, a cost that would be entirely unsustainable to the business and a process she describes as "a real pain".

The commercial printing process requires a certain number of unusable papers to be printed and immediately recycled at the beginning of each print-run. These papers are unreadable and unsellable, but necessary to prepare the machinery to print good-quality newspapers. The number of unusable papers varies depending on the size of the print operation. At large metropolitan printing sites, unusable stock can exceed 1,000 copies per print-run. The Gilgandra Weekly's regular circulation tends to be around 750. Whenever Peart is forced to print out of large printing centres, more of her papers are destroyed than read.

"I've had our papers all printed on the News Corp press at Chullora once and it was a huge favour, because they would have recycled thousands of editions just running them up the press."

The "favour", Peart says, was News Corp's willingness to destroy more copies of her paper than were actually distributed. "These presses in Sydney, they do 1000 copies before they get one that they can sell. Whereas we do 50 or 30, and then we start printing ones we actually sell. You can't access a big printer as a small print-run because it's just not economical for the presses."

'WE ARE ALWAYS SORT OF WORKING THREE WEEKS AHEAD TO ALLOW FOR PROBLEMS WITH FRIEGHTING, PROBLEMS WITH SHIPPING, PROBLEMS WITH PLATES COMING OFF BOATS.'



This issue is reflected more broadly across the regional industry. If a news organisation doesn't have their own printing press, they are saddled with significant cost and waste just to get a physical paper distributed.

"There's a vacuum for this sort of community news level printing ... that's going to become more and more difficult to sustain in the next decade."

Given her growing costs and narrow printing options, funding remains a front-of-mind issue for Gilgandra Newspapers. Peart has managed to finance her operation through a variety of streams, shaking off the advertising-first model that many news organisations are reliant on. While local advertising does play a significant role in the funding of her operation, Peart also balances the books through the operation of her commercial printing service.

"It's a bit of a mix, I guess. It used to be that your advertising was your biggest income, and ours has sort of shrunk back a bit so the advertising and the commercial printing income are sort of similar."

Private and public grants have also played a significant role in the functioning of Peart's business, with grants recently being awarded from Country Press Australia, the Meta Australian News Fund and the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund.

The latter, in March 2020, awarded Gilgandra Newspapers over \$250,000, which funded a variety of measures including a new printing press: "It allowed us to build the website for Gil, we got a new printer, and by new I mean an absolute bucket of shit, and we really replaced everything in it, and it's still a pain in the ass but we got a new printer!"

"Since that grant, we sort of go for most of the other opportunities that are out there. There's sort of two schools of thought with that, originally when that [Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund] grant was funded, I do remember there were some staunch journalist people being like 'you shouldn't be relying on government money or taking government money because it affects your editorial independence'. I think most publishers have sort of navigated around that. My argument all along was 'none of us would

need any grants if you just advertised all the stuff that you're sending us emails for, seeking free publicity:'"

Peart also believes that all levels of government should step up their investment in regional media. Without government advertising revenue, she believes regional media suffers greatly — an argument that is echoed in our case study of Star News Group and its managing director Paul Thomas, also in this chapter.

Peart says, "If they advertised all the programs they are currently running, it would be a river of gold. But they don't because somewhere along the line people made decisions that newspapers were dead and that fed into other people's perception of the industry. Now it's all data-driven, and eyeballs, and numbers and all these data metrics and analytics, and all that sort of stuff. So, we as an industry are working in the way of going, well you know nothing does beat your local newspaper."

Peart believes that social media is being preferred over local media — print or digital — when it comes to government advertising. She says this has a knock-on effect when it comes to the distribution and intention of government grants.

"The government continues to use those other sources, with preference, over newspapers, which we just think is a failure in their way of doing democracy. We understand you can't advertise every program, and there's different targets and all sorts of things. But I think what we as editors get really annoyed about is being told 'oh we need to know more about your audience, we need more data, we need this, that, and the other'. My argument is, 'well, if you're going to roll up a service into my town what other data do you need other than that there is a local newspaper?'"

"We're being pushed in this digital way, there's a huge digital bias for grant money, but at the same time, the government's not coming in and then using those services. There's not a huge uptake in digital advertising coming out of any level of government."

Citing data from internal Country Press NSW research, Peart says that of the state government regional advertising budget,

less than one per cent goes to print media: "We're getting less in advertising from the state government than we are from our local real estate, or our local butcher even. My argument is 'Do you think my local butcher has more to tell my readers than the state government?' I believe the answer is no.

"It's not about getting money for publishers. It's about recognition for the public service we provide."

Despite the significant challenges surrounding her business, Peart has managed to continue expanding fearlessly in the regional media market.

It was reported in March of this year that seven titles previously held by ACM — Parkes Champion-Post, Forbes Advocate, Canowindra News, The Grenfell Record, Cowra Guardian, Boorowa News and The Young Witness — had been purchased by Midwest Media (formerly Regional Media Corp).

"It was an invitation from our colleagues to grow," Peart says of the partnership with the Higgins family, which she described as community-focused and nurturing. "They've got a lot of publications, a lot more than us, so it's great. It's a good opportunity for us to see where we can grow in our own business."

Peart, while not directly tied to the operational or editorial functions of the new entity, seemed excited to expand her influence to new ventures: "We see the opportunity to take what we love doing and do that in other communities.

"We're hoping that as independent owners, we can sort of garner some of that social faith back. We can do things a bit differently to a big corporate, and I guess, for me personally, I like the idea of collaborating with other people, because I haven't been in this industry as long as others and because I see opportunity, but it's so hard to do things on your own.

"Every town in New South Wales has its own identity, has its own little quirks, has all its different clubs. That sense of identity is extremely important. I'm particularly conscious of the fact that corporate entities don't understand that quite as well."



CASE STUDY 4: Star News Group

Star News Group, a company that has been in the news publishing business for more than 100 years, is on the road to rapid expansion — and whilst neither the company itself nor many of its newly acquired titles are startups, Star says it needs to start from scratch and reinvent its latest acquisitions.

Expansion and reinvention however will come at a price for readers of the 14 mastheads across South Australia and Queensland that the group has recently purchased from Australian Community Media (ACM). With advertising revenue still languishing, even in the post-Covid era, cover prices will need to make up some of the shortfall. Consumers however can expect a significant increase in local reporting for the price, according to Star.

Star News Group's Managing Director Paul Thomas is a fourth-generation newspaper proprietor. It was his great grandfather, Albert, who started the family newspaper business in 1894 with the establishment of the Violet Town Sentinel in Victoria, printed and digitised copies of which are available at the Australian National Library. The great-grandson who now chairs the Thomas Family Trust joined the family business in

his early 20s, in 1992, growing the family newspaper empire to span Victoria, South Australia and Queensland.

Thomas says he is unafraid to aggressively grow the business and says consumers appear willing to pay for local news. He says the communities where he has bought mastheads are “screaming for a local newspaper” and consumers of the group's newspapers across three states have not complained about paying for more and better content.

“Cover price is really important. So from day one, we've increased the cover price in South Australia, which is always controversial in the market. But the reality is, if people want journalism, they've got to pay for it,” says Thomas.

Star's expansion was also fuelled by the decision by News Corp to close down many of its mastheads during the COVID-19 economic crisis. In Queensland, News Corp closed 15 titles in 2020 when advertising slowed to a trickle during nationwide lockdowns, leaving some communities with no local news. With printing costs increasing in the post-pandemic inflationary environment, ACM has been sounding the alarm bell concerning its titles in both Western Australia and South Australia, a precursor to its decision to offload

some of them.

“We're one of the only ones that believe in regional newspapers and regional media. So, we have had opportunities because the big players have given up on them. They've closed them, or they have — as in the ACM instance — not really been interested in them. So, they've sold them to us. But in reality, the papers that we've bought are really skeletons.' It's now going to be a big job for us to breathe new life into them.”

Star also had the back-end capacity to scale up. With its related entities, Star has a shareholding in various newspapers owned by the Today News Group, an independent media provider, which itself is a collection of related companies that make up the Today News Group network. Paul Thomas is a director on all related entities. That represents significant printing and staff capacity.

Today News Group began its expansion in Queensland, reintroducing a print edition for Noosa Today and opening new publications in regions left by News Corp, including Bundaberg, Gladstone, and Rockhampton. It purchased the Longreach Printing Company's flagship newspaper Longreach Leader when the company collapsed in 2021.

When three venerable newspapers in South Australia — The Border Watch (Mount Gambier), South Eastern Times (Millicent) and Penola Pennant, were closed in 2020, Today stepped in, establishing a foothold in that state's east. In 2023 it significantly increased this presence, acquiring nine titles from ACM (The Border Chronicle, Naracoorte Herald, Port Lincoln Times, The Islander, The Murray Valley Standard, The Recorder, The Victor Harbour Times, The Transcontinental, Whyalla News) and four from Papers and Publications: the

Eyre Peninsula Advocate, Two Wells and Districts Echo, Fleurieu Sun and Plains Producer.

The ACM purchase came with an additional two titles in Queensland, in Goondiwindi and Beaudesert, and the opportunity to expand in Jimboomba. Most recently, it has opened a new title in Alice Springs.

As an independent family-owned provider, Star is now looking dominant in the regional media landscape, with its jointly purchased titles in Queensland and South Australia. It is second only to ACM in terms of the number of owned print mastheads; according to the Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI), Star group with its affiliate Today, owns 58 titles whilst ACM owns 62 (Dickson, 2023).

The headlines about regional media had, until Star's recent acquisitions, been uniformly bad. In 2023, ACM stopped printing four West Australian regional titles, reducing them to online-only publications serviced by just one journalist at each location. The mastheads impacted are the Augusta-Margaret River Mail, Bunbury Mail, Busselton-Dunsborough Mail and Mandurah Mail. ACM had already suspended publication of its Esperance Express and the Avon Valley Advocate in 2020, as Covid hit Australia. To date, neither have re-opened, although Star says it has no intention of moving into the West Australian market to bridge the gap. “Too far,” says Victoria-based Thomas.

Thomas says this year's acquisitions are designed to focus Star News Group on content. “What we can do is have a focus and have a hands-on role on in producing those papers, backing content. Ultimately, local media is all about content. If you've got content that's relevant, then people will come. And to be frank, those papers have very, very little content. I would, in a lot of instances double the sizes of the papers overnight. So

**“WE'RE ONE OF THE ONLY ONES THAT BELIEVE IN REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS AND REGIONAL MEDIA. SO, WE'VE HAD OPPORTUNITIES BECAUSE THE BIG PLAYERS HAVE GIVEN UP ON THEM.”
-PAUL THOMAS**



[when Star bought the titles], a lot of the papers were 16 pages. And we've increased it to 32 pages. Now, that's not all local content. Admittedly, some of that includes putting in TV guides or bigger TV guides, expanding things like puzzle pages, etc. But our experience is that TV guides, puzzle pages are really important to our audiences," Thomas says.

The aim for each of the 'skeleton' mastheads Star has purchased is to "bring them back to providing relevance to their communities, getting them back to grassroots and providing local journalism," says Thomas.

Workforce expansion looms as a significant challenge. Whilst the ACM mastheads sold with very few journalists attached, and with Star's proclaimed commitment to content, the group will need to quickly hire local journalists. Thomas says the group currently employs "some 100 journalists in total" and whilst its acquisition of the Papers and Publications mastheads gives Star a degree of back-end staff leverage, particularly in South Australia, more journalists will be needed.

As CMT noted in its 2022 Regional News Media Report, although around 5,000 editorial positions have been lost in the past decade (MEAA, 2022) the assumption had been that many journalists made redundant would be seeking freelance careers (Zion et al, 2018). However, that appears not to be the case. As Gabrielle Chan, then commissioning editor of Guardian Australia's Rural Network noted, journalists are not waiting around for "the odd commission". They appear to have transitioned into communications

roles or where possible, remain working for established and successful local newspapers. Thomas acknowledges that it will be difficult to attract journalists to some of the locations where he has bought mastheads.

"It is difficult, definitely. I guess one of the benefits we've got is that we can centralise [share content across mastheads] for a period of time. But that's not our model. Our model really is to get people on the ground in those markets. It's going to be place-based journalism."

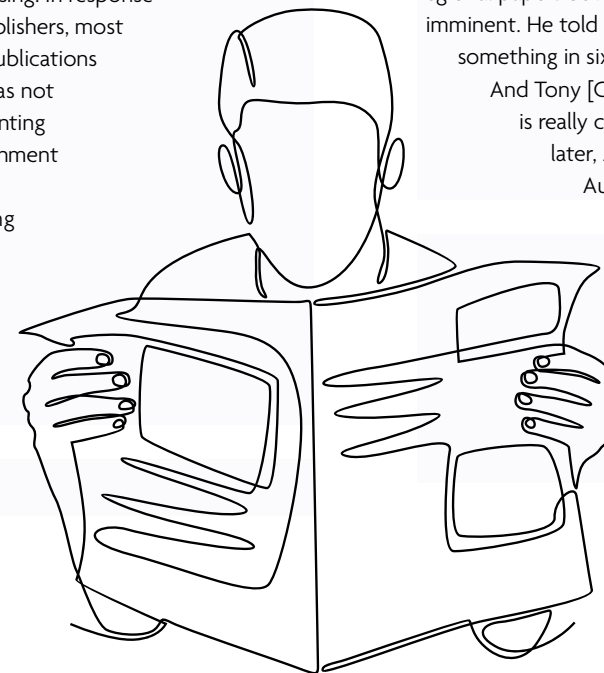
With expansion comes the perennial headache of sustainability, a problem Thomas says could be at least partially remedied with commitment from the federal government to send advertising dollars to the regions. Regional newspapers have confronted the double dilemma of a dramatic rise in printing costs which spiked in July 2022, and a drop in government advertising. In response to warnings from regional publishers, most notably ACM, that regional publications would be shuttered if help was not forthcoming to offset the printing cost rises, the previous government diverted \$10 million from the Public Interest News Gathering program to assist. Thomas says whilst this was helpful, it hasn't offset the drop in advertising resulting in part, from the Covid lockdowns.

"There have been four different government

inquiries [into regional news media] over the last two or three years. Every one of those inquiries recommended that there be a commitment of [advertising] spending, a minimum spend to [regional] newspapers through advertising. The current government has basically turned the tap completely off. So, it's a really major issue right at the moment," says Thomas.

"The agency that supports most of country press, they placed about, I think \$1.6 million in advertising in July 2021 to February 2022, across some 200 regional papers, but the equivalent of July 2022 to February 2023 was less than \$100,000. From basically \$1.6 million to \$100,000, which just gives you the sort of scale," he says.

Thomas says he has met with advisors to the Federal Minister for Communications Michelle Rowland to press the urgency of the case for more federal government advertising in regional papers but says he is not confident change is imminent. He told the Minister's advisors: "If you don't do something in six months, newspapers are going to close. And Tony [Catalano] from ACM said, 'Look, for us, this is really crisis stuff.' And sure enough, six months later, ACM announced closures in Western Australia."



Cover prices are important, according to Thomas, but sustainability requires money that can be banked. "That's why the page a week commitment is so important. It's very tangible, it's hard to hide from. And it provides a sustainable framework for news media to work off."

THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT HAS BASICALLY TURNED THE TAP COMPLETELY OFF. SO, IT'S REALLY A MAJOR ISSUE – PAUL THOMAS



CASE STUDY 5: THE MULTILINGUAL NEWS NETWORK

Community broadcasting is the largest independent media sector in Australia. It is globally acknowledged for its effectiveness in promoting localised, participatory, and inclusive media practices and content. Indeed, earlier this year, when the federal government launched its landmark National Cultural Policy — Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place — the role of community broadcasting was highlighted with an acknowledgment that there needed to be more government support for the sector. For ethnic communities, community broadcasting serves as a way to become engaged citizens.

The National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council (NEMBC) was established in early 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and coincidentally aligned with the development of the Australian Communications and Media Authority's (ACMA) News Measurement Framework which monitors levels of diversity and localism across Australia's print, radio, TV and online news media landscape. NEMBC's executive officer, Russell Anderson, claims his organisation is one of the few that has evolved and adapted since ACMA's Framework was released.

And it continues to grow.

The NEMBC has run a national news service since May 2020, and a Victorian service since September 2020. Two years later, in March 2022, a New South Wales service began operating. The news service has now evolved into the Multilingual National News (MNN) Service that, Anderson says, will be in operation until mid-2024, funded by the Meta Australian News Fund administered by the Walkley Foundation.

Anderson explains that the MNN is available to the NEMBC members, all of whom are radio broadcasters from about 60 community radio stations. They choose stories prepared by the MNN's 59 editors and producers who Anderson says are paid.

The model is complex. NEMBC picks stories currently in the news cycle from a number of trusted media sources, amongst them AAP, Guardian Australia and The Age newspaper. NEMBC producers and writers then repurpose this journalism for their member outlets, sometimes outsourcing its translation into one of 35 different languages. NEMBC members are able to choose which of the networks stories they wish to broadcast on their community radio stations. Anderson says the member radio stations collectively run around 600 radio programs across regional and metro Australia.

In a 24-hour cycle, on-access license stations which are not-for-profit and largely run by volunteers in regional areas, run between 16 to 25 programs in different languages. In Wollongong in New South Wales for example, 16 ethnic language programs are broadcast every day, in addition to other English language programs. Produced in over 35 languages, including Greek, Serbian, Swahili, Tamil, Mandarin, and Tongan, Anderson says the MNN is not driven by the usual hourly media deadlines, and editorial guidelines ensure “the bulletins are delivered without sensationalism so that the information is easily absorbed by and connected to people in these communities.”

The NEMBC's revenue model is reliant on the Victorian Government which contracted it during Covid-19 to provide a daily news bulletin for the state in 22 languages. Membership fees, which at the time of publication sat at \$35 per member, also bolster the coffers. The Meta Australia News Fund has also given the NEMBC two grants since 2021 which have allowed it to pay its writers and producers.

New languages, Anderson says, are added as community members express interest in contributing to news production. The network's conscious focus on linguistic and cultural diversity, he says, is underpinned by a simple realisation: “effective communication hinges on reaching people in their native tongues”. Sometimes that may mean broadcasting news reports in varying lengths depending on the importance of its content and contextualisation to the targeted community.

Anderson says this ensures that the essence of the news

is conveyed accurately, while respecting the linguistic and cultural nuances that define each community.

So, how does the NEMBC measure its success?

Understanding the success and impact of MNN's work is no small feat, given the 35 languages and cultures it caters to. Anderson explains that MNN primarily measures its impact by the number of news bulletins produced each week. Around 100 bulletins currently carry MNN stories, and the network aims to double that number by expanding its reach to Queensland and Adelaide. While traditional methods of audience measurement are challenging for linguistically diverse communities, Anderson says the coverage, impact and reach of the service for Victoria and New South Wales is estimated by McNair Surveys to potentially be around 2.2 million listeners.

Anderson says the NEMBC has also made use of social media and digital platforms for distribution. He says that while the estimated reach and impact of social media and digital distribution of emergency warnings and lockdown explainers during Covid-19 are harder to estimate, listenership could be as high as 1.5 million for news.

Sustainability, however, remains dependent on external funding. Anderson says the network hopes to develop a sustainable business model that leverages multiple sources of funding, including government grants, philanthropic support, and revenue from campaign collaborations with local communities.



07 CHAPTER

MONICA ATTARD
GARY DICKSON
NICK NEWLING

LOCAL AND VOCAL

GUARDIAN AUSTRALIA RURAL NETWORK What it has been covering

Over the 12 months to 30 June, 2023, 261 items were published to the Rural Network, 215 of which (82 per cent) were reported news stories. The remainder were a mix of opinion and analysis pieces and audio and video recordings of events. This is an increase over the period to 30 June, 2022, which saw 189 pieces, 159 of which (84 per cent) were reported stories.

The Rural Network launched in September 2021, at the start of CMT's regional news media research program. As a result, the first year of the network to June 2022 was a slightly shorter 10 months, compared to a full 12 months in the current period which partially explains the overall increase in output. Adjusting for this, the Guardian Australia was found to publish an average of 17.9 news stories to the Rural Network each month between 1 July, 2022 and 30 June, 2023; up from 15.9 news stories in the 1 September, 2021 – 30 June, 2022 period.

The output of the two UTS graduate reporters in 2022–23 individually was nearly half that of the UTS reporter in 2021–22. Combined, these two reporters produced 108 stories for the network whilst the Gilgandra based reporter in the network's first year produced 98 stories.

The average monthly output by the rural network reporters was unchanged – 9.8 stories per month – despite the network having an additional reporter in the 2022–23 period.

The overall increase in monthly output in 2022–23 came from the broader network. Excluding the two reporters, the network's editor, Gabrielle Chan, then deputy editor Calla Wahlquist and wire copy from the Australian Associated Press, we identified 32 bylines in 2022–23, a small increase from 30 in 2021–22. The proportion of stories that came from the broader network increased more significantly, climbing from 61 (32 per cent) in 2021–22 to 99 (38 per cent) in 2022–23.

We also found a small increase in the overall number of subjects covered in the current year, from 26 to 32: new subjects were court reporting, motoring, sport at local, national and international levels, violent crime and a generic 'other' subject.

There were also shifts in the amount of attention given to particular subjects. Primary industry remained the highest subject of coverage, being a topic of 78 stories (30 per cent), up from 36 stories (19 per cent) in 2021–22. Environment coverage also increased to become the second most covered issue with 48 stories (18 per cent), up from 15 stories (8 per cent) in 2021–22. Though there was significant flooding in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland during part of this

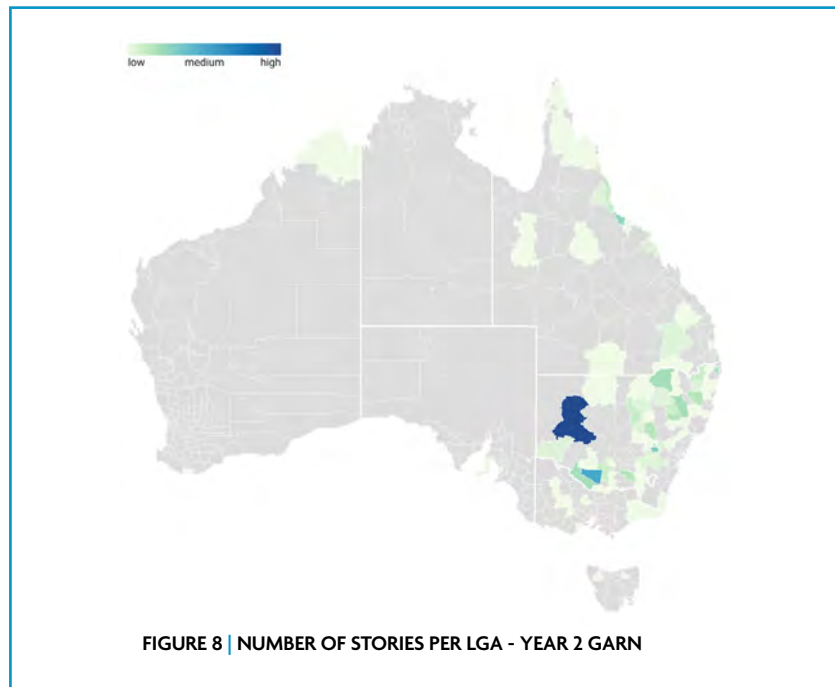


sample period, this does not appear to account for the increase in Environment coverage: ‘Disaster’ coded stories only recorded a very modest increase, from 19 (10 per cent) to 28 (11 per cent). It appears instead that there was a greater emphasis on the environment as a subject in and of itself in year two.

Other topics were covered at a markedly reduced rate, despite having been given ongoing attention through year one. Regional health issues, such as the availability of mental health services, maternity ward closures and shortages of GPs in regional areas and hospitals, formed the basis of an ongoing series of stories for the Rural Network in 2021–22: 31 stories over the 10 months addressed the issue, 16 per cent of all stories. That focus dipped in the subsequent 12 months, with only 19 stories published (7 per cent). Similarly, regional infrastructure stories, particularly the Inland Rail project and telecommunications accessibility, fell in both absolute and percentage terms: from 35 stories (19 per cent) in 2021–22

to 22 stories (8 per cent) in 2022–23. Other big movements include state government coverage, which climbed from 11 stories (6 per cent) to 33 stories (13 per cent), and Indigenous issues,

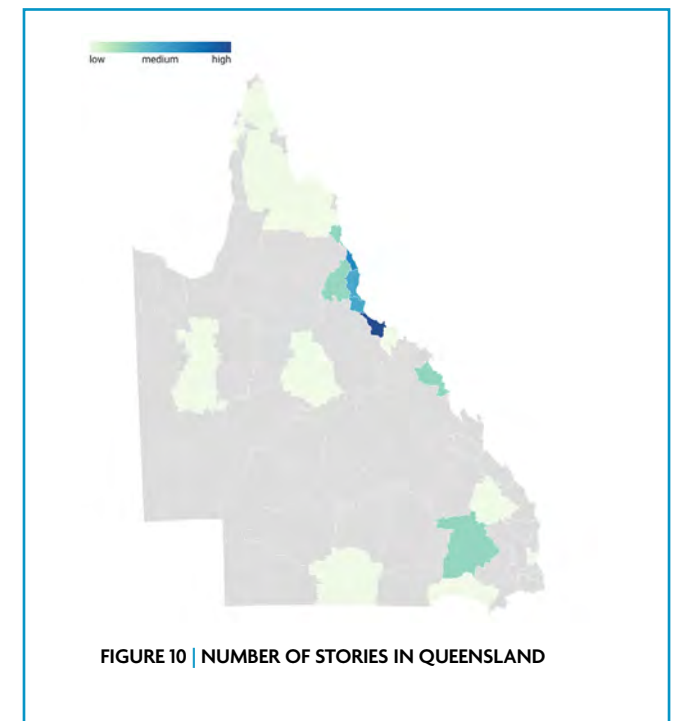
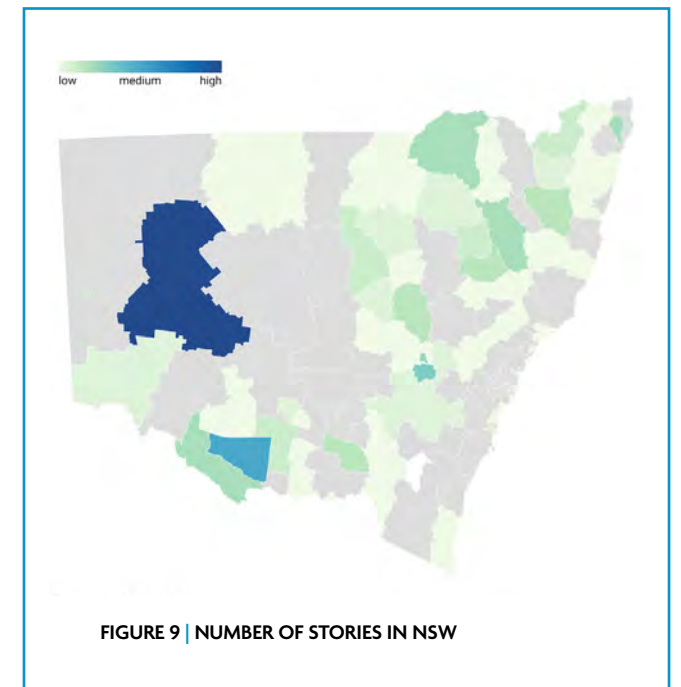
which increased from six stories (3 per cent) to 24 stories (9 per cent). The increase in coverage of Indigenous issues is partly associated with a federal referendum on establishing a Voice to



Parliament, which was the subject of eight of the 24 stories about Indigenous issues. Two state elections took place in 2022–23: Victoria in November 2022 and New South Wales in March 2023, each of which received two stories during the entirety of the campaigning.

The network’s coverage was more geographically spread out in 2022-23 reflecting increased funding and the allocation of a UTS graduate reporter to Queensland. In the first year, the overwhelming majority of stories (115 stories, 61 per cent) were located in New South Wales with Victoria (18 stories, 10 per cent) and Queensland (14 stories, 7 per cent) far behind. In 2022–23, New South Wales maintains a dominant position, but less so: 112 stories (43 per cent), followed by Queensland, which doubled its share after the arrival of Khaled Al Khawaldeh in Townsville (37 stories, 14 per cent) and Victoria, which remained stable (29 stories, 11 per cent). The network appointed a deputy regional network editor in the second year: Calla Wahlquist posted 11 stories over the course of the year, covering multiple states (WA, Vic, NSW). 54 per cent of stories covered local issues, while 46 per cent covered national issues. Other states and territories were rarely mentioned: four stories focused on Tasmania, two in Western Australia and one each in the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and South Australia. It is important to note that this paragraph considers the location of the story itself, not the reporter: Khaled Al Khawaldeh wrote 52 stories from Townsville across 2022–23, of which only 37 were specifically about Queensland.

We also found that the types of local government areas that were covered changed slightly in 2022–23. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Remoteness Framework (ABS 2023) allocates every local government area to one of five categories based on the relative access to services: Major City, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote. The 2022-23 period saw a shift in the Rural Networks reporting away from Major City, Inner Regional and Outer Regional areas and toward Very Remote ones. The most significant change was a jump in Very Remote area reportage, from five stories in 2021-22 (3 per cent) to 20 stories in 2022–23 (8 per cent). Major Cities, Inner Regional and Outer Regional each dropped by about 3 percentage points. Remote areas remained stable at around 3 per cent of all coverage in each year.





Impact of the Rural Network on policy inquiries

With the Rural Network in its second year, CMT has attempted to identify the impact that it may have had so far on policy discussion and policy initiation and change. The impact of any one news story or series of reporting is hard to assess; this is particularly true on policy issues that have many inputs from different stakeholders over a long period of time. The examples where news reporting directly and immediately lead to an inquiry or legislative change are rare, though there are instances in which news reporting has directly led to Royal Commissions and parliamentary inquiries (Browne, 2023). The impact of news media is often experienced in public pressure exerted on political actors to respond or react to reportage, particularly when case studies are used. Far more often, media outlets are just one group in a complex information ecosystem.

That caveat is important for interpreting the following results. We reviewed four recently completed inquiries that engaged with issues that have been the subject of coverage from Guardian Australia's Rural Network:

- 1 The Australian Government's Independent Review of Inland Rail, which commenced 7 October, 2022, nine months after the Rural Network released an investigation into the project. Findings of the inquiry were delivered to the government on 13 January, 2023.
- 2 Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport inquiry into bank closures in regional Australia, which commenced 8 February, 2023 and is ongoing.
- 3 The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's regional mobile infrastructure inquiry, which commenced 31 March, 2022 and was delivered to the government on 30 June, 2023.
- 4 The independent 2022 NSW flood inquiry, which commenced in March 2022 and was delivered to the New South Wales Government on 29 July, 2022.

Our goal in reviewing these inquiries was to identify whether reporting from Guardian Australia's Rural Network was directly referenced in either a submission to the inquiry or the final report of an inquiry. If so, CMT would view this as evidence that the network is directly impacting the way that stakeholders are engaging with major opportunities for policy reform and, potentially, the recommendations for and implementation of those reforms.

However, we found very little evidence of this throughout the available inquiry documentation.

Across 140 submissions to the review of Inland Rail, we found only one mentioned Guardian Australia's Rural Network reporting. The submitter, who is also an active member of a Facebook group run by the network's journalists, cited Natasha May's reporting on Narrabri Shire Council objecting to the project route (May 2022), as well as a major investigation by Gabrielle Chan, Mike Bowers, Andy Ball and Natasha May that looked at potential for flooding, impact on property owners and poor community consultation (Chan et al. 2022).

This was similar at other inquiries. Of 562 submissions to the bank closures inquiry, only one – the Country Women's Association of Western Australia (Bridgetown Branch) – referenced the network's reporting: a story from freelancer Emily Middleton in Kununurra, WA, where the closest Westpac branch is more than 800km away and across the border in Darwin.


The 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry cited Guardian Australia five times, although none of these stories were from the Rural Network specifically. There were no mentions of Guardian

Australia or its Rural Network reporting in the regional mobile infrastructure inquiry.

A fifth inquiry, into February 2023 fish deaths in Menindee, was also intended to be included, but no documentation was public at the time of writing this report. CMT was unable to access submissions to the inquiry or the final report ahead of its publication. Given Guardian Australia was a leader in reporting this issue, it seems possible that there will be further and stronger evidence of impact to this inquiry than others.

It is important to note that the absence of explicit citations of Guardian Australia stories does not mean that issues first uncovered by the publication are not reflected in the submissions or reports. Citations are a relatively simple – if time consuming – metric that CMT can track. It is also true that Guardian Australia is not unique among news media in not being frequently cited: we found no evidence that any other media outlet had more than a couple of citations, typically within submissions, and rarely within reports.

A review beyond citation metrics may reveal that a particular detail, frame or individual which was contained within submissions or a final report originated from a Guardian Australia journalist. However, this level of data collection and



analysis, which forms the basis of our study of the coverage of both the Murray–Darling Basin Plan and alcohol bans in the Northern Territory, requires establishing the first published appearance of any number of pieces of information and then tracking those details from document to document as they move through the ecosystem from origin to outcomes, is beyond our resourcing.

Journalism can also impact policy activity through interactions with government and agencies. In her piece below, Fleur Connick writes that when she began investigating a wave of fish kills in the Menindee Lakes in February 2023, the NSW Government was not yet aware that these deaths had occurred. Her reporting, which was weeks ahead of other major media outlets, led to the state government turning its attention toward this emerging issue. Her persistent journalism was one input in a process that saw Water NSW, the NSW EPA and the NSW Department of Planning and Environment acknowledge the issue, release more and better data, and commit to an investigation of the underlying cause of the event. CMT considers this to fall within the definition of reporting impact.

Khaled Al Khawaldeh, conversely, describes the potentially negative impact that journalism can have in attempting to cover Indigenous affairs, for example on Palm Island, where he encountered a community that had been mistreated by reporters in the past, misrepresented in news coverage, and skeptical of engaging with him. The difficulty that he had even visiting the island reinforced for those who were willing to give him a chance that national media was not serious about telling their stories. Khaled's reflection on his year reporting for the Network is ahead.

The interaction between reporters and their audiences is another potential site of impact. Since inception, Guardian Australia has run a Facebook group where rural and regional Australians can discuss issues of importance to them and their communities. Between April 2023 and September 2023, the number of group members attached to the Rural Network Facebook group increased from 4,684 to 5,060 (Guardian Australia, 2023, Guardian Australia Rural Network, September 2023).

When reviewing the data found within group posts and discussions it was clear that the page had become a broad community discussion board for rural and regional residents across Australia. Guardian-aligned users, which includes Guardian Australia employees and freelancers working for the Network were the primary contributors to the page, with 57 per cent or 216 posts coming from journalists and editors.

Conversations were primarily initiated through the posting of soft content, often relating to country life. Images of livestock, sunsets, fresh produce and community events, initiated conversations about the regional experience. This type of content was primarily posted by non-Guardian-aligned users.

Guardian-aligned users would regularly post Guardian journalism, primarily stories published through the Rural Network to initiate discussion on regional and rural topics. Non-Guardian-aligned users would primarily (50 per cent of the time) post soft-content, however they also regularly (46 per cent of the time) posted content related to broader issues facing regional Australia, regardless of whether the Network was covering these issues.

Guardian journalists and editors also reached out to group members to enquire about regional issues and to seek story ideas. This resulted in one direct instance of a user being quoted in a published article (Al Khawaldeh, 2022). However, there may be circumstances in which stories are generated through direct communication between group members and Guardian Australia journalists, which are not visible to us. There was a clear benefit observed in the facilitation of conversation, and the involvement of regional residents within the broader process of research.

Little valuable information can be drawn from an analysis of the volume of comments and reactions on individual group posts, however it can be seen that users generally interacted more with posts initiated by Guardian-aligned-users, over non-Guardian-aligned users.

In the third year of this project, CMT will deepen the understanding of the impact of the rural network on audiences through a series of focus groups with regional and metropolitan communities.

DENILIQVIN

FLEUR CONNICK

As dusk descends on the river red gum forest, thousands of crickets begin to sing. Eight months after flood waters swallowed parts of Deniliquin in November 2022, the Edward River is slowly rising again. Dark water lines mark the 9.2m peak across the pale tree trunks in one thick horizontal brush stroke. It was the biggest flood to hit the Riverina town since 1956 and many of the local businesses are still recovering.

Relocating to a country town during a housing crisis and record flood event was the perfect storm. My move to Deniliquin was delayed by three months, with local real estate agents saying the town's rental vacancy rates were "close to zero". I joined the housing waitlist with six local agencies, eventually securing a house in October 2022, with La Niña in full swing.

The town was on track for one of its wettest months on record, and indeed, it received a total of 187mm of rainfall that month (Bureau of Meteorology, October 2022). The Edward River at Deniliquin had risen by 3m since September (Water NSW, October 2022). With widespread flooding across the state, every inland river and catchment was either full or

flooded. The NSW State Emergency Service had 99 active warnings; 16 at emergency level.

On 27 October the town was upgraded from a minor to moderate flood level. The Edward River was at 8.2m and rising. Roads had been closed and part of the town was already inundated. A large swathe of Craig Butcher's property was under water, including his shed, chook house and clothesline (Guardian Australia, 2023). Butcher, a plan operator for the Edward River Council, said there was a sense of unease in the community around the lack of information about how high the river would rise.

Across town, large lakes had formed across Deniliquin resident Steve King's seven-acre property. King's house is located on the township side of the levee; he said all of the water on his property was solely from the latest rainfall. In the 35 years he has lived there, King had never seen anything like this.

I also spoke to florists Brooke Wilson and Janine Clarke. Although the Covid-19 pandemic was a difficult time, both said the current flood emergency was worse. Their local

business, Deniliquin Florist, was hit hard by the floods, with deliveries hampered. During Covid-19, Clarke said it was the busiest the shop has ever been "because people couldn't visit, so they'd send flowers instead" and she and Brooke had "never missed a flower delivery". But she said the floods were a different problem: "This isn't good for business at all. People don't want to be sending flowers at the moment." On top of this, because their flowers are sourced from Melbourne, their supply route was cut off at Echuca, 45 minutes south of Deniliquin, on the Victoria-New South Wales where the Murray River was at its highest level in more than a century. (Murray-Darling Basin Authority, River Data 2022).

The 2022 floods drew then New South Wales premier to visit Deniliquin. Dominic Perrottet committed to asking the prime minister for 'exceptional circumstances' funding for flood-affected communities (Guardian Australia, 2022). His visit coincided with my first official day working out of The Deniliquin Pastoral Times office, while reporting for the Rural Network. Those of us appointed to the Rural Network from UTS spend one day a week producing stories for the local newspaper. Covering the unfolding flood emergency only days after arriving in Deniliquin, I was grateful to be embedded in a local newspaper which understood the ins and outs of local politics, the issues that concerned residents, and the history of the area.

With only an hour to prepare, one of the newspaper's cadet journalists and I were sent out to meet the premier at a press conference at the Deniliquin Emergency Operations Centre. We were joined by journalists from other regional media outlets such as ABC Riverina. Afterwards, Zoe McMaugh, a senior journalist and the Deniliquin Pastoral Times' content manager, told me about some of the challenges they face as a local newspaper. She said the larger news outlets are often prioritised and given more time when politicians come to town, which she said was frustrating as it is the local

journalists who understand the local community and issues best, rather than those who fly in from metro-based media. McMaugh added that "being overlooked for larger outlets" also extends to government advertising expenditure, an issue CMT notes in its case studies of regional media startups. Some government departments have told the Deniliquin Pastoral Times they believe advertising in Albury's The Border Mail or Wagga Wagga's The Daily Advertiser, such as for upcoming important community meetings, and policy discussions and implementation including the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, "can capture the whole district". But McMaugh said the majority of the Deniliquin community don't read either of these publications "because they choose to read their local paper instead". Because of this, she said they often miss this information and therefore "cannot appropriately respond to matters that concern them directly".

First established in 1856, The Deniliquin Pastoral Times is one of the nation's oldest newspapers. It is published twice a week by the McPherson Media Group, which also owns 21 other publications across North-Central Victoria and Southern New South Wales. The paper, like many of the local newspapers in rural Australia, is understaffed. When I first started, the editorial team consisted of McMaugh and one cadet journalist. As mentioned previously, part of my role with Guardian Australia's Rural Network was to produce stories for The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, typically each Friday. The paper's staff and I would also produce weekly content for the Southern Riverina News, another McPherson Media Group title based 45 minutes away in Finley. McMaugh said staff shortages are impacting the paper's news coverage, particularly its capacity to cover local stories in detail. The growing difficulty of recruiting journalists to country mastheads has increased the newspaper's reliance on local organisations and community groups to supply news copy and photographs for stories. She said that the staff shortages have forced The Deniliquin Pastoral Times to temporarily halt their

**THERE WAS A SENSE OF UNEASINESS IN THE COMMUNITY
AROUND THE LACK OF INFORMATION ABOUT
HOW HIGH THE RIVER WOULD RISE.**



weekend journalist rostering, although they are hoping to reinstate it in the near future. I was able to help ease the load and was often assigned more of the issue-based stories for the newspaper, which included politics, health, education and community affairs. The one subject the newspaper rarely assigned me was water.

Similar to many irrigation communities along the Murray-Darling Basin, water plays a prominent role in local politics and media coverage. The Deniliquin Pastoral Times office is on the town's main street next door to the office of the independent state MP for Murray, Helen Dalton, and that of the deputy leader of The Nationals and federal shadow Water Minister, Senator Perin Davey — both of whom are strongly opposed to water buybacks. During question time at the Deniliquin Business Chamber's 'meet the candidate' forum in March 2023, Dalton said she would "vehemently oppose buybacks" (The Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 2023). And in 2020, Senator Davey welcomed the then Water Minister Keith Pitt's announcement that there will be no more water buybacks under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (The Nationals, 2020). The following year, Senator Davey was unsuccessful in reversing a 450GL commitment to the environment (ABC, 2021). When the federal government reopened water buybacks from the Basin by voluntary tender, from 23 March, Senator Davey described it as the "lazy water recovery option" and she remained a vocal opponent to buybacks (The Nationals, 2023). Throughout my time in Deniliquin, this topic featured in The Deniliquin Pastoral Times almost weekly via 'contributed' content, ministerial media releases and letters to the editor.

However, I wrote a lot about water for Guardian Australia's Rural Network. The aftermath of the floods set the scene for many stories I would cover over the next few months

and prepared me for deeper investigations, including a series on water quality issues in the Murray-Darling and how this was causing mass animal and fish kills. For this series, I won the 2023 Walkley Foundation's Young Australian Journalist of the Year Award for short-form journalism (CMT, 2023).

The first story featured in the investigative series (Guardian Australia, 2022) was sparked by a conversation I had with Peter Phillips, an environmental science teacher from nearby Echuca. He was among locals who had witnessed the fish kills along sections of the Murray River in November 2022. Authorities had reported it was due to blackwater, an event often caused by flooding when high levels of organic material are washed into the river systems, which "sucks all the oxygen out of the water" as it decays, depleting the dissolved oxygen (DO) available for aquatic organisms and causing them to suffocate.

But Phillips, who was accustomed to blackwater events, told me that things were unusual this time and that the water "smells like there is sewage in it". He suspected major flooding in Shepparton on the floodplain of the Goulburn River in northern Victoria, 140 kilometres from Deniliquin, had contributed to significant fish deaths including in his hometown of Echuca. Based on the data from meters at hydrological stations, Philips could pinpoint the sudden drops in DO levels with the arrival of the flood water from Shepparton. When we put these concerns to the Environment Protection Authority Victoria (EPA Victoria) it launched a "high quality" sample analysis program, which included testing for *Escherichia coli*, better known as *E. coli*, a bacteria which is generally harmless but a few strains of which can cause mild to severe illness in humans. EPA Victoria later released the results, which showed levels of *E. coli* and other contaminants in the flood waters were above normal levels. My





conversations with Phillips, particularly regarding DO (dissolved oxygen) levels, played a significant role in determining the stories I would next investigate on water quality across the Murray-Darling.

You could say that I quickly became a little obsessed with DO levels. I spoke to another scientist, Dr Ian Wright, an academic at Western Sydney University who warned that stretches of the Murray River could become an “ecological desert” because widespread flooding had reduced water quality as DO levels plummeted (Guardian Australia, 2022). Wright feared the ecological impact could be “catastrophic” across the Murray-Darling catchments in New South Wales and Australia could potentially see more fish kills, similar to those in Menindee in 2019, in which an estimated one million fish died on a 40-kilometre stretch of the Darling River in far west New South Wales (CSIRO, 2019). Dr Wright’s concerns sparked some criticism from one of my sources at the NSW Department of Primary Industries, who thought the scientist was overstating the risk. However, as floodwaters receded and the summer months brought hot conditions, thousands more fish began to die.

The Rural Network was the first to cover the Menindee fish kills in February 2023, which predominantly affected carp, after local residents raised the alarm on Facebook. When I first contacted the department about this incident, I was told the department was not yet aware of the extent of the fish kills and in fact, the DPI asked for more information. It later provided a response along with a copy of a media

release, which was published shortly afterwards, stating it believed the fish deaths were likely related to low DO levels. However, this data for Menindee was not publicly available on Water NSW’s website, despite finding similar information for other locations across the state. I was then referred to Water NSW, which told us it had increased monitoring at Menindee Lakes in recent months to track water quality in the wake of the floods. But again, Water NSW did not supply the DO levels for various locations around Menindee. After persisting, I was given the numbers ‘off the record’, in other words not for publication.

I also spoke to an expert, Professor Fran Sheldon, head of the School of Environment and Science at Griffith University and a river ecologist who was on an independent panel investigating the 2019 Menindee fish kills. She warned of a “domino effect” on water quality as the volume of dead fish caused DO levels to decrease further, putting more fish, including native species, at risk (Guardian Australia, 2023). One week later, Sheldon’s prediction became reality when masses of dead fish washed up at the Menindee boat ramp in the second fish death event in a fortnight (Guardian Australia, 2023). Yet, the DO levels for Menindee were still not publicly available. After multiple requests, the Guardian Australia Rural Network was then supplied with the latest water quality update from the NSW Department of Planning and Environment which showed the DO level for the lower Darling River at the town of Menindee was at 1.58mg/L on 22 February. Native fish and other large aquatic organisms require at least 2mg/L to survive. Other national media turned their attention to Menindee two weeks later, on 16 March, when millions of dead fish were reported floating on the river’s surface in one of the worst mass fish kill.

In April, I pursued the New South Wales Environment Protection Authority (NSW EPA) for the results of the water testing it conducted in the days following the Menindee fish kill. When an overview of the results was released on

6 April, I again contacted Dr Ian Wright. He told me he had multiple concerns with the accuracy of the NSW EPA’s water testing methods and that the initial test results were flawed and inefficient (Guardian Australia, 2023). Wright said if this was an assignment submitted to him by one of his first-year university students, he would “fail them”. The NSW EPA released the full results after questions from Guardian Australia to provide greater transparency to the public and soon after the New South Wales Government decided to investigate the Menindee fish kills as a “pollution event” (Guardian Australia, 2023).

Another investigation I covered for the Rural Network was on the Cadia Hill goldmine — near my hometown of Millthorpe in central west New South Wales (Guardian Australia, 2023). My article, which again featured Dr Wright’s concerns regarding the adequacy of the NSW EPA’s water testing, led to the chief executive officer of the NSW EPA, Tony Chappel, inviting him to a meeting. This was followed by a series of meetings between Dr Wright and Chappel, along with concerned local residents from the Cadia Community Sustainability Network. Dr Wright had been involved in the initial rounds of community water testing of residents’ rainwater tanks near the mine, which found elevated levels of heavy metals including lead (Guardian Australia, June 2023). In April, he flagged with me that community members were now going to their local doctor for heavy metal blood tests. The results of these blood tests sparked the NSW EPA to launch an investigation into the Cadia goldmine. In May 2023, the mine’s operator, Newcrest was issued with a draft pollution prevention notice and a draft licence variation regarding the management of emissions of dust and other pollutants.

This was the first of 14 stories I wrote for the Rural Network over the following months, which included working with the Guardian’s audio team to produce an episode for their Full Story podcast (Guardian Australia, Full Story, 2023). By the end of July, the New South Wales government had announced

EPA VICTORIA LATER RELEASED THE RESULTS WHICH SHOWED LEVELS OF E. COLI AND OTHER CONTAMINANTS IN THE FLOOD WATERS WERE ABOVE NORMAL LEVELS



a parliamentary inquiry into the health and environmental impacts of metal mining to examine the effectiveness of the regulator and the wider regulatory framework.

There was one more issue I wanted to cover in depth before my 12-month placement in Deniliquin ended: racism, and how misinformation around the Indigenous Voice to Parliament debate was fuelling this ugly and old phenomenon. I vividly remember the first time I sat down with Laura Hand-Ross, a Wamba Wamba and Mutthi Mutthi woman and chair of the Deniliquin Local Aboriginal Land Council. She described The National Party's decision to oppose the Voice as "a slap in the face to black people" (Guardian Australia, 2022). Hand-Ross said not only was this an insult, but it sent the message that First Nations people are not worth their vote. Indigenous Australians make up 5.3 percent of Deniliquin's overall population (ABS 2021), more than 2 percentage points higher than the overall percentages for New South Wales and Australia. After the referendum legislation was passed by the federal parliament, questions were raised locally about the details of the Voice proposal and its repercussions. I

began speaking to Hand-Ross's parents, Jeanette and David Crew, who run the Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre in Deniliquin. They told me of their personal experiences of being targeted by hate mail, events which ran as a front-page story for The Deniliquin Pastoral Times in June 2023. This was followed by multiple stories for the local paper on how misinformation about the Voice — such as rumours of an impending "land grab" — was fuelling racism in the community, including racial attacks on local school children (Deniliquin Pastoral Times, June 2023). Yet, on the same day one of these stories was published in the Deniliquin Pastoral Times, a letter to the editor was also featured in the newspaper titled, 'United we stand, divided we fall', written by a local community member. The letter referred to a number of arguments used by no campaigners, proven false by fact-checkers. This led to a meeting between Yarkuwa and the Deniliquin Pastoral Times, with the newspaper agreeing to work with the Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre to share fact-checking resources and to consult should similar content be received for publication in the future (Deniliquin Pastoral Times, 2023).

But racism was clearly a touchy subject. When I interviewed Laura Hand-Ross in December of 2022 for the Rural Network, she told me that there are many examples of discrimination and racism in Deniliquin towards Aboriginal people: "they include having access to equitable services across all government agencies and non-government agencies, for that matter, NGOs [non-government organisations] and that has a really long-term impact on the well-being of Aboriginal people, whether it be physical, spiritual, emotional, financial wellness." Hand-Ross added that First Nations people are disadvantaged in many ways, particularly when you look at employment for Aboriginal people in Deniliquin, which she described as "not fantastic" and an ongoing issue. I sensed a hesitancy at the Deniliquin Pastoral Times towards stories which questioned whether racism was, in fact, a problem in the town.

At the time, and more recently, I've asked senior journalist Zoe McMaugh if there was in fact a reluctance to run stories that addressed the treatment of the Indigenous community. She said The Deniliquin Pastoral Times "does not shy away from any issue" that is brought to them by their readers: "We are very conscious, however, that as a small community, some content may cause division." McMaugh added that any content which The Deniliquin Pastoral Times suspects may create legal problems is first run by the company's legal experts. Social issues are of a different nature. Editorial priorities differ masthead to masthead. And those who work in local newspapers, also live in the towns they report. Being able to look at an issue as an outsider and report for a metro publication brought a freedom a local reporter might not have.

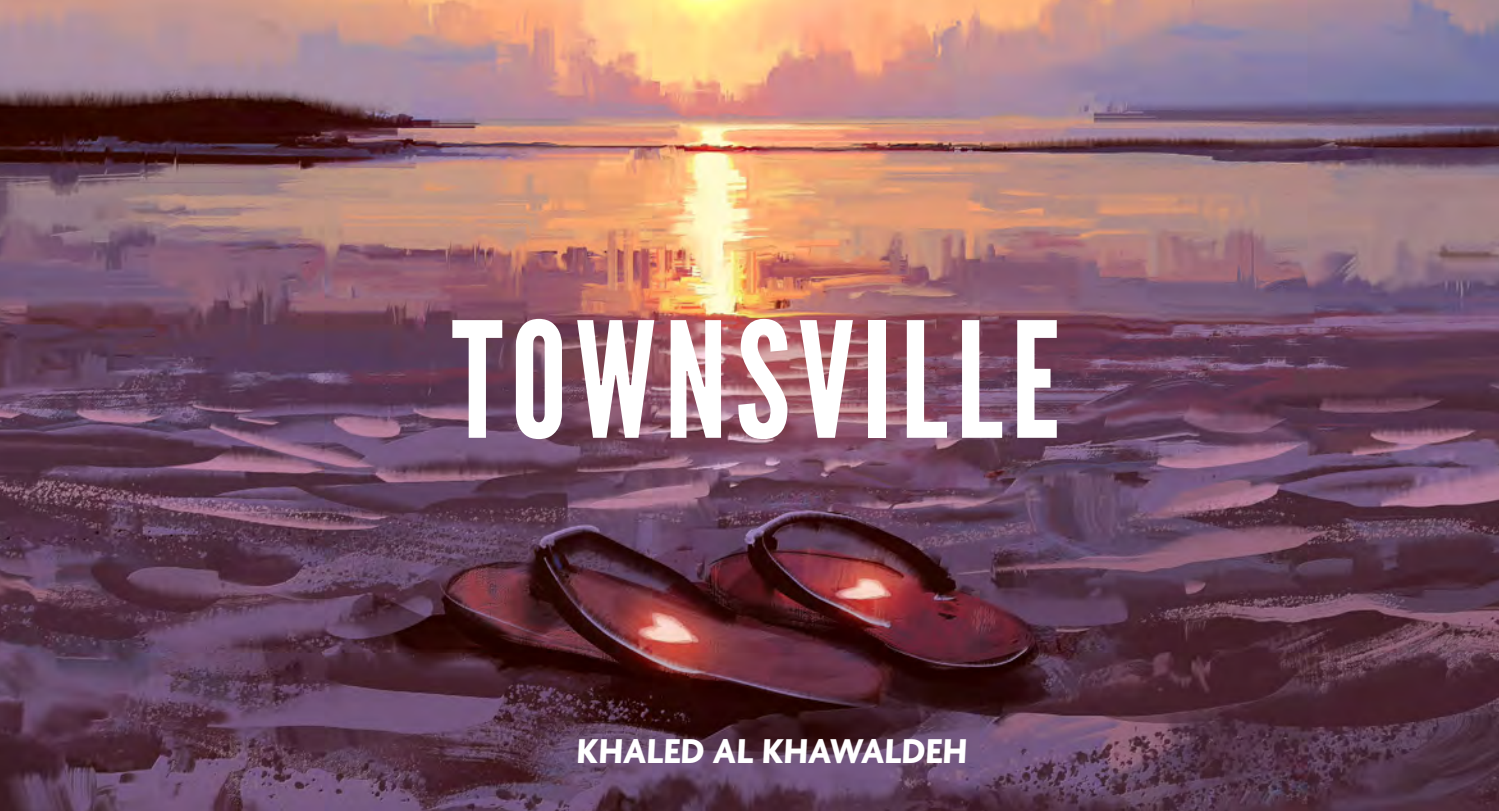
As a result, I was able to write for the Guardian Australian Rural Network about the significance of Hand-Ross raising the Aboriginal flag and lowering it to half-mast for the first time in front of hundreds of people before Deniliquin's Australia

Day celebrations began (Guardian Australia, 2023). Some in the crowd were wearing Australia Day shirts and hats, others were carrying small national flags. But for Hand-Ross and many others, 26 January is Invasion Day. At the back of the crowd, members of the local Aboriginal community stood, before they took part in a "peaceful, sit-down protest", followed by traditional song and dance. In contrast, the local paper focussed on welcoming 12 new citizens.

As I left Deniliquin, the housing situation like so many others that I reported on, had not improved. The week before we vacated our rental in mid-August 2023, at least a dozen interested tenants flocked to the first inspection. One woman told me she had been evicted from her previous rental and was desperate to find a place to live. In February 2023, I wrote about how rural financial counsellors were bracing for an 'avalanche' of clients in mortgage stress (Guardian Australia, 2023). A Deniliquin real estate agent said the number of properties available to rent was declining due to more properties becoming owner-occupied after nine consecutive interest rate rises. This remains the trend. The low vacancy rates have also impacted local employment in industries such as health and education, which were already struggling to secure staff amid widespread post-pandemic labour shortages.

Through my reporting, I have witnessed firsthand the impact that independent journalism has in the regional media landscape and the vital role it plays. The importance of local reporting includes its ability to influence and create change on a national level by influencing policymakers and provoking parliamentary inquiries, such as with the investigations I covered on water quality issues in the Murray-Darling Basin and community concerns regarding heavy metal dust pollution from the Cadia Hill goldmine. All of these stories helped ensure rural communities felt heard and that those responsible were held accountable for their actions.

THROUGH MY REPORTING, I HAVE WITNESSED FIRST HAND THE IMPACT THAT INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM HAS IN THE REGIONAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND THE VITAL ROLE IT PLAYS.



TOWNSVILLE

KHALED AL KHAWALDEH

There is no doubt that north Queensland is a region central to the prosperity of Australia, contributing \$17.1 billion annually to the national economy. Stories about the Great Barrier Reef and juvenile crime often make national and international headlines, and the region is set to become one of the nation's largest renewable energy hubs.

And yet, in my year as a rural reporter in north Queensland I witnessed the closure of the Burdekin Local News where I was posted, and the consolidation of the Townsville Bulletin's regional coverage once extensive with dedicated websites for Burdekin, Bowen, Charters Towers and Hinchinbrook — into mere sections on the main site. The region might be booming. But its media is contracting.

I experienced how difficult it was to make this regions news relevant to a national audience. Adequately covering the region poses major challenges to metro-based news organisations and the sparse population and extreme isolation makes operating in it an expensive endeavour.

This has meant that many larger news organisations have opted to use fly-in, fly-out journalists to cover the region which can cause animosity amongst locals who feel that they

are not given a fair go and are often misunderstood at best and, at worst, judged by 'city people'.

This is something that was continuously relayed to me during my time in Townsville, where I relocated after the closure of the Burdekin Local News, and was a barrier I had to overcome to gain access to and trust of the local communities.

As a regional reporter, my aim was to bring nuance to Guardian Australia's reporting on the region and try to break down some of the barriers that exist between the region and the rest of the country. This would prove to be less straightforward than I had anticipated.

Understanding the nuances of north Queensland

North Queenslanders live in a paradox. On the one hand they are in one of the most vitally important natural environments in the world, with the Great Barrier Reef just off the coast, and some of the oldest rainforests in the world in the hinterland. On the other hand, the vast majority of Queenslanders work in agriculture and mining, making their livelihoods dependent on highly polluting industries.

For north Queenslanders, criticisms of agriculture practices and mining from city journalists are met with contempt. Many see city criticisms as ignorant and detached from reality.

They see city folk as quick to critique the agricultural and mining industries but happy to consume its products. It is also true of Indigenous relations, where north Queenslanders are point out that they are the ones who actually live amongst Indigenous people and communities, unlike some people in capital cities who may never even meet an Indigenous person.

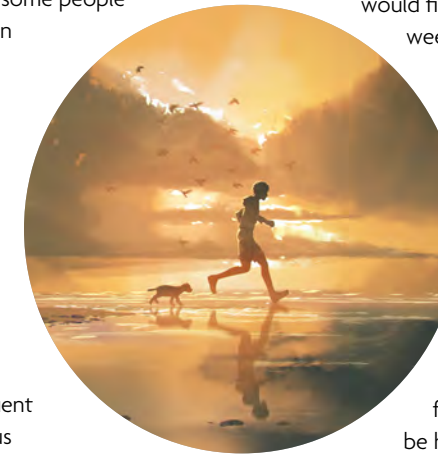
Anecdotally I found this to be true; in the year I spent in the region, I met more Indigenous people and learnt more about Aboriginal culture than in the near two decades I lived in Sydney.

Perhaps this dissonance is best exemplified by the contention that surrounds crocodile attacks in the region. The stories that I would write about the attacks, and subsequent vigilante croc killings would garner enormous attention from international audiences, particularly in the United Kingdom. For those readers, the attraction was the quirkiness of the attacks and the odd characters involved in fiery debates over preserving the species. However, whilst some might have a good chuckle when reading a crocodile story, for a lot of locals, the threat is imminent and real and the ridicule they receive for pointing out the increasing frequency of attacks is seen as further evidence of urban Australia's unwillingness to actually hear their perspective.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IS VITAL but can hold journalism back

As part of my placement, I had initially been sent to the Burdekin Local News, a local independent paper based in the town of Ayr. The paper had been operating for just over two years and had been expanding thanks to funding from the Meta Australia News Fund, administered by the Walkley Foundation.

The rationale for posting those appointed from the UTS Journalism degree to a local newspaper was clear. In an area as remote as north Queensland, local knowledge and connections are absolutely crucial and being attached to a paper would provide an instant support network. This was especially true when you consider the contracts only ran for 12 months, which meant time to develop local connections was limited. Moreover, there was an expectation that we would file at least two nationally relevant stories a week.



However, two weeks into the job, the editor and owner of the Burdekin Local News, Scott Morrison, decided to close the paper in its 99th edition due to a lack of advertising revenue.

This changed everything, and meant that my role became akin to that of a correspondent rather than a traditional regional journalist. It meant that I suddenly found myself isolated in a place which can be hostile to outsiders, with no networks, connections or nearby colleagues.

Without anyone to guide me through the lay of the land, I would be diving headfirst into stories without much knowledge of local journalistic customs. This was exemplified in a story I did on sugar cane burning, a subject that had been considered taboo by many local reporters due to its economic importance to the region, with the only other notable coverage of the issue being a largely uncritical ABC article from 2013. Sugar cane is Queensland's second largest agricultural export with most production based in northern parts of the state. Although 75 per cent of cane in Australia is harvested without burning, the practice is considered essential in tropical Queensland where the crop is extremely thick and weed growth is more intense.

Sugar cane burning has been criticised for its impacts on air quality and the environment. However, due to the size of the industry in towns such as Ayr, the centre of cane growing in far north Queensland, and Ingham, just a few hours away, reporters had often chosen to stay away from the issue in order to avoid the ire of the local population.



Nevertheless, arriving in the region in the middle of the sugar cane burning season, I was dumbfounded that this was not a bigger issue. The silt, or black snow, caused by the burns was a real nuisance in people's lives; locals in Ayr had advised me to always keep my windows closed and to garage my car when possible. Massive plumes of smoke dominated the horizon and at times resulted in air quality worse than that of capital cities.

It seemed like an obvious and important story, especially when you consider the same burning techniques used in the sugar cane industry had become a major issue around the world, most notably in Florida.

Without a local editor to hold me back, I set out, perhaps arrogantly, to pursue what I believed would be an important story. My first point of contact was Wilmar, the primary sugar cane miller in the region, and the recipient of almost all north Queensland cane. The company's media manager said Wilmar did not operate any cane farms in the area and could not help me gain access to a cane farmer.

After some time, I was able to find a cane burning contractor willing to be interviewed and photographed for the story. I immediately booked a local photographer and set out to conduct the interview and capture images of a burn, but on arriving, my contact received a phone call from Wilmar advising him that this was in fact, a company farm and that there would be legal problems if any photographs were taken.

Despite my attempts to mediate and reason with the Wilmar PR team, the contractor, worried for his job, immediately withdrew his participation in the story. I had now cost the Guardian Australia a substantial fee for booking the photographer, and travel costs of more than 100km to reach the location.

But I didn't give up. Eventually I found a sympathetic PR agent at the Queensland Canegrowers Organisation, an advocacy group representing cane growing families across the state, who agreed to connect me to a cane grower as long as I considered their attempts to move the industry towards biofuels and gave them a chance to explain why alternatives to burns were difficult to achieve.

This gave me an opportunity to report on the cane burns and make a mark in the local journalism scene, although it had

taken me almost a month to complete.

I couldn't help but wonder if much of the difficulty associated with writing the story could have been avoided with the guidance, wisdom and contacts of a local editor. Then again, it was those same journalists and editors who had previously advised me against writing the story.

My independence had simultaneously liberated and hindered me.

Impactful rural journalism needs resources to be worthwhile

One thing that is immediately obvious to any news organisation operating out of north Queensland is that it is an expensive expanse of territory to report on. The distances are enormous — the 'just down the road' drive between Townsville and Cairns is more than 300 kilometres.

When parts of the Gulf of Carpentaria, enclosed on three sides by northern Australia, experienced some of the worst flooding in recent history the environmental catastrophe that ensued should have been a major news story. Despite Burketown, the epicentre of the floods being over 1,000 km from Townsville, the region is still very much within its remit, with few people living between the two.

I was desperate to cover this story, especially at a time where there were not many nationally relevant stories to cover in the region. However, the logistical challenges were enormous, likely requiring a helicopter to gain access. Guardian Australia would instead pick up copy from news agencies and use police footage of the floods on published YouTube. The ABC, despite being substantially better resourced, opted for very much the same approach.

A similar dilemma occurred when I attempted to get to Palm Island to write some Indigenous affairs stories. The journey

to Palm Island from Townsville is a low-cost ferry trip. My contact had been adamant that I come to the island to meet in person and be introduced to members of the local community.

Guardian Australia's duty of care requirements meant I would need a mode of transportation due to the extreme isolation and relative risks of operating on the island. I also needed to book accommodation and have all my interviewees lined up before I left. But this would prove impossible, with my contact on Palm Island insisting that I had to actually visit the island in order to line up interviewees due to mistrust of the media within the community.

In 2016, Palm Island residents had been awarded \$30 million compensation in their legal fight with the Queensland Police Service over the handling of riots in 2004, triggered by the death in custody of an Indigenous man, Cameron Doomadgee. After the locals marched to the town square and burnt down the police station, courthouse and an officer's home, police from the mainland were flown to Palm Island to investigate. Wearing riot gear and carrying weapons, they raided several homes and in 2016, a court found the raids had been racially motivated and in contravention of the Racial Discrimination Act. Two media outlets — Nine News and The Daily Mail — reported that the compensation awarded had been spent on sports cars, luxury boats and dune buggies. Locals were angry at the claims, making what should have been a fairly straightforward and easy story for me to write, extremely complicated and expensive. Nor was writing the story remotely from Townsville possible as my contact saw that idea as further evidence of the media's unwillingness to actually invest in reporting on the area.

My experience in far northern Queensland convinced me that if national newspapers are serious about creating immersive regional journalism with an embedded reporter aiming to give voice to the lives of people living in this remote part of the country, they need to invest heavily.

...IF NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS ARE SERIOUS ABOUT CREATING IMMERSIVE REGIONAL JOURNALISM WITH AN EMBEDDED REPORTER AIMING TO GIVE VOICE TO THE LIVES OF PEOPLE...THEY NEED TO INVEST HEAVILY.



CONCLUSION

The findings in this report build on and reinforce those of 2021-2022 in which we found alarmingly low levels of metro media engagement with regional issues and low levels of entrepreneurial journalism being undertaken by rural and regional media organisations. The two are intertwined.

Low levels of entrepreneurial journalism from financially-pressed media outlets means that editorial managers in metro media are left unaware of significant developments, controversy, community concern and even malfeasance at local government levels in rural and regional locations. As a result, metro coverage becomes limited to the coverage of natural disasters or local crime stories which frame regional experiences as inherently negative or of minor significance. These do little to amplify regional voices or bridge the regional-metro divide. More significantly, the ability of regional communities to contribute to policy debates, via news media, narrows when regional media is financially unable to conduct investigations and when the links between regional outlets and metro media are lost or broken.

It is arguable whether formal, non-proprietary links existed in any meaningful way between regional and metro media prior to the decline in the former and the financial stresses on the latter became apparent in the late 1990s. However, as regional media continues to suffer financial stress, struggling to conduct investigative reporting and therefore unable to entice metro media into an interest in the affairs of communities far from home base, it is reasonable to question whether new business models of operation between the two might be feasible. Regional communities wanting to be heard in policy debates that often take place in metro media would benefit and metro audiences would become aware of how policy deliberations impact communities seemingly locked out of the debate.

As our case studies in this report on both water management and the imposition of alcohol bans on Indigenous communities show, the lack of association between regional and metro media leaves often narrow narratives to develop based on individual media constituencies. Broadly, regional media pursue local stakeholders whilst metro media pursue national stakeholders. News reportage as a corrective to misconception, misunderstanding, or narrowed viewpoint becomes difficult when there is little or no flow of information between regional and metro news media. Local voices can become confined to regional media audiences, leaving metro audiences exposed only to voices bolstering the status quo, or government preference.

In the final of our regional reports, CMT will explore the formal and informal associations between regional and metro media that might service to correct these imbalances. We will examine how such associations operate in other jurisdictions around the world and what impact this has had on the outward flow of news and information from rural, regional, and remote areas to mainstream audiences. Our aim will be to explore possible blueprints for Australian metro media to pursue, with the aim of increasing representation of regional communities.

We will also report on one of the central aims of this three-year project: to test whether the 'hub and spoke' model of regional journalism funded under this project, Guardian Australia's Rural Reporting Network, has impacted metro audiences, increased metro audience interest in regional issues, and contributed in any significant way to the policy debates that have taken place.



REFERENCES

Al Khawaldeh, K. (2022, December 9) Australia's diesel price spike causes rethink in reliant regional areas. Guardian Australia. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/dec/09/australias-diesel-price-spike-causes-rethink-in-reliant-regional-areas>

Altman, J. C., & Hinkson, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Coercive reconciliation: stabilise, normalise, exit Aboriginal Australia*. North Carlton: Arena Publications Association.

Apriliyanti, I. D., Utomo, W. P., & Purwanto, E. A. (2022). Examining the policy narratives and the role of the media in policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Indonesia. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 15(3): 541-557.

Attard, M., Dickson, G., & Jehangir, A. (2022). *Regional News Media*. Ultimo, NSW: Centre for Media Transition, University of Technology Sydney, cmt.edu.au. ISBN: 978-0-6455587-2-2.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2016). *Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Volume 5: Remoteness Structure*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/mf/1270.0.55.005>

Australian Community Media. (2023a). ACM Ad Centre: Northern Daily Leader. Accessed 5 September 2023. <https://acm.media/brand/the-northern-daily-leader/>

Australian Community Media. (2023b). ACM Ad Centre: The Armidale Express. Accessed 5 September 2023. <https://acm.media/brand/the-armidale-express/>

Australian Community Media. (2023c). ACM Ad Centre: Glen Innes Examiner. Accessed 5 September 2023. <https://acm.media/brand/glen-innes-examiner/>

Australian Government (2012). *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory*. https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/09_2012/stronger-futures-booklet-jul2012.pdf

Barber J. G., Punt J. & Albers J. (1988). Alcohol and power on Palm Island. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. 23(2): 87-101.

Baum, F., Bentley, M. & Anderson, I. (2007). Introduction. In I. F. Anderson, F. Baum & M. Bentley (Eds.), *Beyond Band-aids: exploring the underlying social determinants of Aboriginal*

health. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop Adelaide, July 2004, CRC For Aboriginal Health, Darwin, pp. ix xvi.

Baumgartner, F. R., & Jones, B. D. (1993). *Agendas and instability in American politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Brady, M. (2007). Equality and difference: persisting historical themes in health and alcohol policies affecting Indigenous Australians. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 61(9): 759-763.

Broome, R. (2010). *Aboriginal Australians: A history since 1788* (4th edition). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Browne, B., (2023) Royal Commissions and Inquiries prompted by ABC Journalism, The Australia Institute, August 1, 2023.

Budarick, J., & King, D. (2008). Framing ideology in the niche media: The Koori Mail's construction of the Redfern riots. *Journal of Sociology*, 44(4): 355-371.

Bureau of Meteorology (Accessed July 2023) Climate Data Online.

Burkein Local News 99th Edition, <https://www.burdekinlocal.com.au/digital-editions/>

Burrows, E. (2004). Bridging our differences: comparing mainstream and Indigenous media coverage of Corroboree 2000. *Australian Journalism Review*, 26(1): 175-190.

Chouliaraki, L., & Georgiou, M. (2022). *The digital border: Migration, technology, power* (Vol. 44). NYU Press.

Clemons, R. S., McBeth, M. K., & Kusko, E. (2012). Understanding the role of policy narratives and the public policy arena: Obesity as a lesson in public policy development. *World Medical & Health Policy*, 4(2): 1-26.

Chan, G. (2023, 4 April). By Choosing to Share a Stage with One Nation, Barnaby Joyce invited Division in his Community, The Rural Network, Guardian Australia.

Chan, G., Bowers, M., Ball, A. & May, N. (2022, 25 January). Trouble on the tracks: is Australia's \$14bn inland rail project going off the rails? Guardian Australia.

Cripps, K. (2021). Media constructions of Indigenous women in sexual assault cases: Reflections from Australia and Canada. *Current issues in criminal justice*, 33(3): 300-321.

Crow, D. A., Berggren, J., Lawhon, L. A., Koebele, E. A., Kroepsch, A., & Huda, J. (2017). Local media coverage of wildfire disasters: An analysis of problems and solutions in policy narratives. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 35(5): 849-871.

CSIRO (2019, January 17), Talking Toxic Blooms and Mass Fish Deaths, <https://www.csiro.au/en/news/All/Articles/2019/January/mass-fish-deaths>

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. (2010). *Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert Ramsar Wetland - Fact sheet*. <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/>

[water/wetlands/publications/coorong-and-lakes-alexandrina-and-albert-ramsar-wetland-factsheet](https://www.dcceew.gov.au/water/wetlands/publications/coorong-and-lakes-alexandrina-and-albert-ramsar-wetland-factsheet)

Dickson, G. (2023). *Australian News Data Report: June 2023*. Melbourne, VIC: Public Interest Journalism Initiative.

Dorfman, L. (2003). Studying the news on public health: how content analysis supports media advocacy. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 27(1): S217-S226.

Downs, A. (1972). Up and Down with Ecology-The Issue Attention Cycle. *The Public Interest*, 28: 38-50.

Dreher, T. (2010). Speaking up or being heard? Community media interventions and the politics of listening. *Media, Culture & Society*, 32(1): 85-103.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of communication*, 43(4): 51-58. Foley, M. & Sakkal, P. (2023, August 22). Victoria shuns revamped Murray-Darling Basin rescue plan. *The Age*.

Gaskin, L. (2023, April 12). Increased flushing vital to Coorong's long-term health. The University of Adelaide. <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/newsroom/news/list/2023/04/11/increased-flushing-vital-to-coorongs-long-term-health>

Guardian Australia. (2023). *Rural Network Progress Report April 2023*. Guardian Australia Rural Network. (n.d.) [Facebook page]. Facebook. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/>

[guardianaustrialiururalnetwork](#)

Guardian Australia. (2023), You Tube Queensland Floods: Burketown Submerged and residents warned of crocodiles <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwHmCklFzeo>

Guardian Australia. (2022, November 8). "Smells like sewage: blackwater from Victorian floods causes mass fish deaths". <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/nov/08/smells-like-sewage-blackwater-from-victorian-floods-causes-mass-fish-deaths#:~:text=It%20is%20a%20toxic%2C%20painful,are%20from%20sewage%20leaks%20upstream.>

Guardian Australia. (2023, April 19). 'EPA's water testing after Menindee fish kill was flawed and insufficient, expert says'. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/19/epas-water-testing-after-menindee-fish-kill-was-flawed-and-insufficient-expert-says#:~:text=4%20months%20old-EPA's%20water%20testing%20after%20Menindee%20fish,flawed%20and%20insufficient%2C%20expert%20says&text=Scientists%20have%20raised%20concerns%20about,assignment%2C%20he%20would%20fail%20them.>

Guardian Australia (2023, February 23). 'Menindee mass fish kill: thousands of carp dead amid water quality fears'. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/feb/23/menindee-mass-fish-kill-thousands-of-carp-dead-amid-water-quality-fears>

Gramsci, A. (1980). Selections From the Prison Notebooks. New York: International.

Grattan, M. (2023). 'Opt-out' alcohol bans in prospect for Indigenous communities after PM's Alice Springs visit. The Conversation. [https://theconversation.com/opt-out-alcohol-bans-in-prospect-for-indigenous-communities-after-pms-alice-springs-visit-198410.](https://theconversation.com/opt-out-alcohol-bans-in-prospect-for-indigenous-communities-after-pms-alice-springs-visit-198410)

Gray, S. (2015). The Northern Territory Intervention: An evaluation. Castan Centre For Human Rights Law. https://www.monash.edu/___data/assets/pdf_file/0008/406943/Caitlin-edit-of-NT-Intervention-page-1.pdf

Grossman, E. (2022). Media and policy making in the digital age. Annual Review of Political Science, 25: 443-461. Grubel, J. (2007, June 26). Australia's Aborigines fear losing children. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSSP157352>

Holder, H. D., & Treno, A. J. (1997). Media advocacy in community prevention: news as a means to advance policy change. Addiction, 92, S189-S199.

Housley, W., & Fitzgerald, R. (2003). Moral discrepancy and political discourse: Accountability and the allocation of blame in a political news interview. Sociological Research Online, 8(2), 18-26.

Iyengar, S. (1997). Overview. In S. Iyengar & R. Reeves (Eds.), Do the media govern? Politicians, voters, and reporters in America (pp. 211-216). Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications.

Jakubowicz, A. (Ed.). (2003). In This Issue: Race for the Headlines. Racism and Media Discourse. Media International Australia. 109, 180-183.

Jelenik, K. Guardian Australia, Facing the Loss of a Lifeline: Won't let this newspaper go down without a fight, April 26, 2020

Jones, M. D. & McBeth, M.K. (2010). A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong?. Policy Studies Journal, 38(2): 329-353.

Jones, M. D., McBeth, M. K., & Shanahan, E. A. (2014). Introducing the narrative policy framework. The science of stories: Applications of the narrative policy framework in public policy analysis, 1-25.

Knox, C. C. (2013). Distorted Communication in the Florida Everglades: A Critical Theory Analysis of 'Everglades Restoration. Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning, 15(2):269-284.

Koch-Baumgarten, S., & Voltmer, K. (Eds.). (2010). Public policy and the mass media: The interplay of mass communication and political decision making (Vol. 66). Routledge.

Langton, M. (2008). Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show. Griffith Review, (19): 143-159.

May, N. (2022, 6 May). 'The right railway in the wrong place': Narrabri council objects to route of \$14.5bn Inland Rail. Guardian Australia.

McBeth, M. K., Shanahan, E. A., Arrandale Anderson, M. C., & Rose, B. (2012). Policy story or gory story? Narrative policy framework analysis of Buffalo field campaign's YouTube videos. Policy & Internet, 4(3-4): 159-183.

McCallum, K. (2013). Distant and intimate conversations: media and indigenous health policy in Australia. Critical Arts, 27(3), 332-351. DOI: [10.1080/02560046.2013.800667](https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2013.800667)

McCallum, K., Waller, L., & Meadows, M. (2012). Raising the volume: Indigenous voices in news media and policy. Media International Australia, 142(1): 101-111.

McCarthy, M. (2013, August 7). Farmers Fan the Cane Flames <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2013-08-07/feature-fire-farm/4870852>

McMaugh, Z. (2023) Five of Nineteen Questions posed. Deniliquin Pastoral Times/MEAA (2022, February 15) Rescuing Regional Journalism special report for the Walkley Regional Journalism summit.

MEAA (2022, February 15) Rescuing Regional Journalism special report for the Walkley Regional Journalism summit.

Meadows, M. (1995). Sensitivity not censorship: reporting cultural diversity in Australia [Media misrepresentations of indigenous Australians.]. Australian Journalism Review, 17(2): 18-27.

Meadows, M. (2001). Voices in the wilderness: Images of Aboriginal people in the Australian media (No. 59).

Greenwood Publishing Group.

Meadows, M. (2005). Journalism and indigenous public spheres. Pacific Journalism Review, 11(1): 36-41.

Mesikämmen, E. (2013). Whose Voice? Presence of indigenous Australians in mainstream media coverage of the Northern Territory Intervention. Asia Pacific Media Educator, 23(1): 23-42.

Mesikämmen, E. (2016). Limited interests, resources, voices: power relations in mainstream news coverage of Indigenous policy in Australia. Media, Culture & Society, 38(5), 721-737.

Meta Australia News Fund
ADD LINK

Millenson, M. L. (2002). Pushing the profession: how the news media turned patient safety into a priority. BMJ Quality & Safety, 11(1): 57-63.

Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission (2019). Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission Report. Government of Aouth Australia. <https://cdn.environment.sa.gov.au/environment/docs/murray-darling-basin-royal-commission-report.pdf>

Newman, C., & Persson, A. (2009). Fear, complacency and the spectacle of risk: the making of HIV as a public concern in Australia. Health, 13(1): 7-23.

NT Government. (2007). Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle "Little Children are Sacred": Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. <https://>

humanrights.gov.au/search/gcs?key-word=the+little+children+are+sacred

Parliament of Australia. (1990). Restricted Areas and Aboriginal Drinking. Northern Territory Drug and Alcohol Bureau Department of Health and Community Services Darwin, Northern Territory. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p?query=Id:%22media/pressrel/72NN6%22>

Pierce, J. J., Smith-Walter, A., & Peterson, H. L. (2014). Research design and the narrative policy framework. In Jones, M., Shanahan, E., & McBeth, M. (Eds.), The science of stories: Applications of the narrative policy framework in public policy analysis (pp.27-44). Springer.

Queensland Government Department of Energy and Public Works, <https://www.epw.qld.gov.au/about/initiatives/renewable-energy-zones/rez-roadmap/northern-REZs>

Queensland Government, State Development Infrastructure, Local government planning. <https://www.statedevelopment.qld.gov.au/regions/queensland/north-qld>

Queensland Farmers Federation, (accessed July 2023), Sugarcane <https://www.qff.org.au/farming-in-qld/cane/>

Rad, M. G. (2012). Identification of a new plot line in public policy narratives using Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) in order to Predict Public Policy Changes. Journal of International Public Administration, 4(3): 31-54.

RCIADIC. (1991). Final Report. Canberra: AGPS. <https://www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/first-australians/royal-commission-aboriginal-deaths-custody>

Rupinsky, S., Schomburg, M., Chandler, G. & Gelardi, C. (2023). Shifting narrative strategies: How monument advocates change their stories in response to conflict over time. *Policy Studies Journal*, 51(1): 101–122.

Sabatier, P. A., & Jenkins-Smith, H. C. (1993). Policy change and learning: An advocacy coalition approach. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of communication*, 49(1): 103–122.

Schubert, M., Murphy, K., and Murdoch, L. (2019, June 19). From the Archives, 2007: Howard announces ‘the intervention’. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/from-the-archives-2007-howard-announces-the-intervention-20190612-p51x2f.html>

Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M. D., McBeth, M. K., & Radaelli, C. M. (2018). The narrative policy framework. In C. M. Weible & P. A. Sabatier (Eds.), *Theories of the policy process* 4th ed. (pp. 173–213). Routledge.

Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M.D., McBeth, M.K. & Lane, R.R. (2013). An Angel on the Wind: How Heroic Policy Narratives Shape Policy Realities. *Policy Studies Journal*, 41(3): 453–483.

Shanahan, E. A., McBeth, M. K., & Hathaway, P. L. (2011). Narrative policy framework: The influence of media policy narratives on public opinion. *Politics & Policy*, 39(3): 373–400.

Shanahan, E. A., McBeth, M.K., Arnell, R.J., & Hathaway, P.L. (2008). Conduit or Contributor? The Role of Media in Policy Change Theory. *Policy Sciences*, 41(2): 115–138.

Simons, M. (2020). *Cry me a river: the tragedy of the Murray-Darling Basin*. Collingwood, VIC: Black Inc Books.

Simons, M., Dickson G. & Alembakis R. (2019). *The nature of the editorial deficit*. Melbourne, VIC: Public Interest Journalism Initiative.

Stone, D. (2012). *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*. New York: W.W Norton & Company.

Stoneham, M., Goodman, J., & Daube, M. (2014). The portrayal of Indigenous health in selected Australian media. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 5(1): 1–13.

Sullivan K and Barbour L., (2022) Secret Water Buy back fund sends ‘shiver down the spine’ of Murray Darling Communities, ABC News

The Nationals (2020)., Nationals Rule out Water Buy backs for good in NSW. *The Nationals for Regional Australia* <https://www.nswnationals.org.au/nationals-rule-out-water-buybacks-for-good-in-nsw/>

The Nationals (2023) Labor Buy Back Tenders Now Open, *The Nationals for Regional Australia* Media release labor-buyback-tenders-now-open

Thompson, A. (2023)., Alcohol bans to be reinstated in Alice Springs communities. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/alcohol-bans-return-to-alice-springs-20230206-p5ci3y.html>

Thompson, Sharon, Sales Manager, Quirindi Advocate, conversation with Monica Attard, July 2023.

Vaughan-Williams, N. (2015). *Europe’s border crisis: Biopolitical security and beyond*. Oxford University Press, USA .

Zion, L., Sherwood, M., O’Donnell, P., Marjorbanks, T., Ricketson, M., Dodd, A., and Winarnita, M92020) *New Beats Report: Mass Redundancies and Career Change in Australian Journalism*. La Trobe.

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/2lXvs6D. Details of events and the CMT’s work can be found on our website at cmt.uts.edu.au



cmt.uts.edu.au