

# Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts *Inquiry into Australia's Regional Newspapers*

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News & Media Research Centre

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## The Scope of the Submission

In this submission we are responding to the following Terms of Reference of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communication and the Arts *Inquiry into Australia's Regional Newspapers*:

- The impact of decisions in a number of markets in regional and remote Australia by large publishers such as News Corp and Australian Community Media to suspend publication of print editions.
- The impact of the News Media Bargaining Code for regional and remote newspapers.

## Overview & Recommendations

The News and Media Research Centre ([N&MRC](#)) at the University of Canberra advances public understanding of the changing media landscape. The Centre publishes independent reports based on surveys and qualitative analyses of news media markets and news consumption habits. Since 2015, N&MRC has produced the *Digital News Report (DNR): Australia*, a national annual online survey of more than 2,000 adult Australians that monitors changes in news consumption, as part of a global study of 46 news markets by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. We have also conducted original research on regional news audiences and journalists. In September 2021 the Centre hosted the *News Futures: Research and Policy Roundtable* with representatives from government, news media, digital platforms, researchers and consumer organisations to tackle key question in Australia's news media policy landscape.

This submission considers the impact of newspaper closures and the introduction of the News Media Bargaining Code in the context of the wider news media market and Australian news consumption trends.

In **Part 1** of the submission, we compare print media news consumption trends with television, radio and digital media, consumer's understanding of disruption to print news media, and their willingness to pay for news. We then consider the impacts of print media closures on news consumers. We find:

- Declining print newspaper readership in regional Australia has not led to an increase in regional online news use.
- Like their city counterparts, regional news consumers have limited concern about the financial state of commercial news organisations.
- Regional journalists are under resourced and overworked.
- Newspapers are a valuable source of both information and community connection for regional news audiences.
- Newspaper closures have led to a decline in both information and a sense of belonging for local news consumers, particularly in smaller Local Government Areas.

Based on the findings of our research, we recommend that identifying the news gaps, and developing new initiatives to support regional news fit for the digital age.

**Recommendation 1:** To revive regional news, a program of incentives is required to establish and grow local news start-ups and fund locally produced journalism, particularly in communities where there are news gaps.

**Recommendation 2:** Research on digital news business models in the contemporary Australian context is needed, prioritising regional and local news businesses.

**Recommendation 3:** We suggest a collaboration between regional news businesses and the ABC should be considered, that explores the development of an Australian version of the BBC Local News Partnerships programme<sup>1</sup>. This will provide an opportunity to boost public interest journalism (PIJ) in parts of regional Australia currently underserved by quality local news.

In **Part 2** of the submission, we address the impact of the News Media Bargaining Code (NMBC) on regional and remote newspapers and their audiences. To date there is insufficient evidence to assess its impacts on the financial viability of the signatories and the wider news landscape, and whether the deals have led to increased provision of PIJ.

**Recommendation 4:** Urgent research is needed to monitor the longer-term impact of the voluntary content agreements with regional and rural newspapers on the signatory companies, those who have not become signatories, and the wider regional and rural news environment.

**Recommendation 5:** Signatories of the voluntary content agreements must disclose the size, uses and outcomes of the funding on a regular basis, in order to monitor the impacts of the agreements.

**Recommendation 6:** Evaluation is required of the impact of the eligibility criteria for the News Media Bargaining Code Register - particularly the \$150,000 annual income rule - on small news outlets, including regional and rural newspapers.

**Recommendation 7:** Federal government should commission an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of current and previous funding programs for regional news media such as the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Fund and PING. The original \$60.4 million package included financial support for regional journalists, and scholarships for regional students to study journalism. Elements of these and other programmes could be revived if assessed as having been effective.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/lnp/partners/>

## Part 1: Impacts of newspaper closures on local communities

This section of our submission provides an overview of the decline of regional news consumption in Australia since 2016, offering insights into audience attitudes about the role of local and regional news media, as well as the perspectives of regional journalists about the state of regional news.

The data presented here is drawn from research<sup>2</sup> conducted by the N&MRC since 2016:

- *Digital News Report: Australia (2016-2021)*
- *Local News Consumers* (Park, S., Fisher, C. & Lee, J. 2020)
- *Australia Regional Journalists: What they need and how they see the future* (Fisher et al., 2020)

### State of regional newspaper consumption

The data show that in the period coinciding with the suspension of many print editions in regional areas newspaper consumption has declined significantly. Regional newspaper consumption has halved since 2017, escalating from 2019 following many closures. Social media is becoming more popular as a main source of news in the regions, however online news outlets have not seen a similar increase in popularity. In particular regional and local newspaper websites have struggled to increase their readership. Many regional consumers remain unaware that commercial news organisations are less profitable than they were ten years ago, and less than a third say they are concerned about the financial state of the industry. In 2021, regional consumers were about as likely as those living in major cities to be paying for online news (13%), however they were less likely to say they will pay in the future.

### Decline in regional newspaper consumption

Local newspapers have lost around half of their readership in regional areas since 2016 (figure 1). Those living in regional areas are much more likely than those living in a major city to say they read a regional or local newspaper. However, from 2016 the proportion saying they read a regional or local newspaper fell from 34% to 17% in 2021. Regional or local newspaper use is also falling in major cities, suggesting an industry wide decline among smaller media outlets.

FIGURE 1: REGIONAL OR LOCAL NEWSPAPER USE 2016 – 2021 (%)



[Q5A] Which of the following brands have you used to access news offline in the last week (via TV, radio, print, and other traditional media)? A regional or local newspaper. [Base: N=2,034].

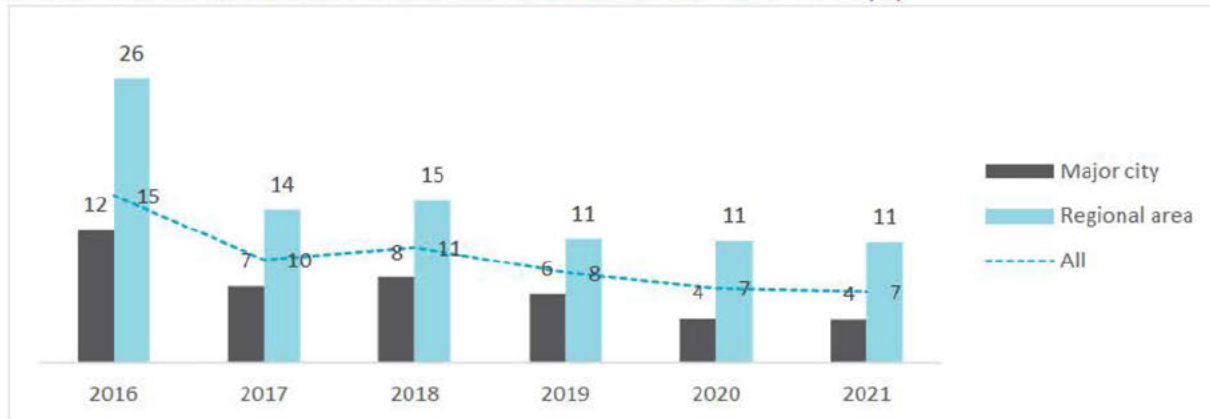
<sup>2</sup> The reports are available on N&MRC website: Digital News Report: Australia 2016-2021.

<https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia-2021>; Local News Consumers <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/research/local-news-consumers>; Australian Regional Journalists <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/research/regional-journalists-what-do-they-need>



Declining print audiences have not translated to an increase in regional and local online news use (figure 2). In 2021, only 11% of those living in regional areas said they used a regional or local newspaper website. This is a decline from over a quarter of respondents in 2016. The trend appears to be stable, with the proportion using regional or local newspaper websites remaining steady since 2019.

FIGURE 2: REGIONAL OR LOCAL NEWSPAPER WEBSITE USE 2016 – 2021 (%)



[Q5B] Which of the following brands have you used to access news online in the last week (via websites, apps, social media, and other forms of Internet access)? Other regional or local newspaper website. [Base: N=2,034].

### Decline of regional newspapers as a general source of news

Figure 3 shows More than one-third (37%) of those living in the regions said they used print as a general source of news in 2017, but this fell to only 18% in 2021. The use of all platforms by regional Australians for has declined since 2017.

FIGURE 3: GENERAL SOURCE OF NEWS IN REGIONAL AREAS (%)

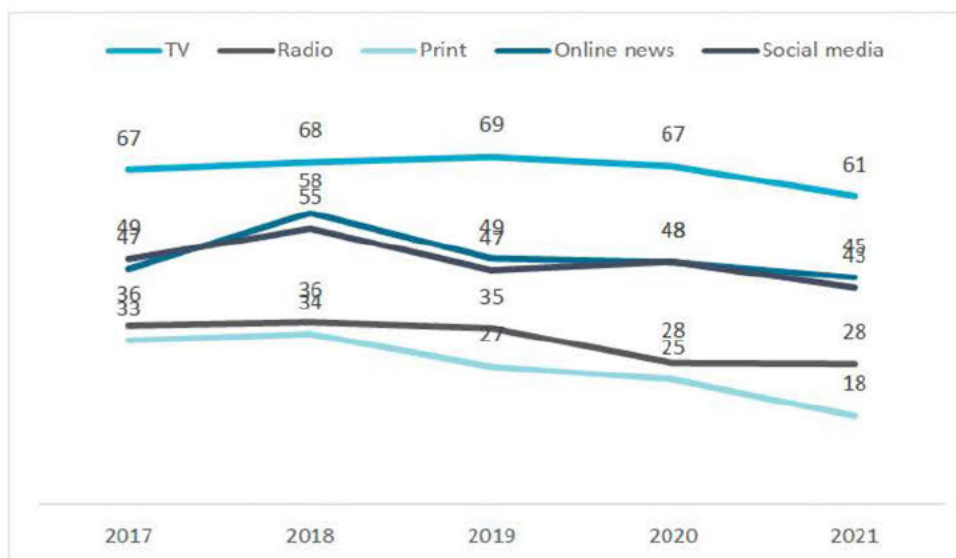
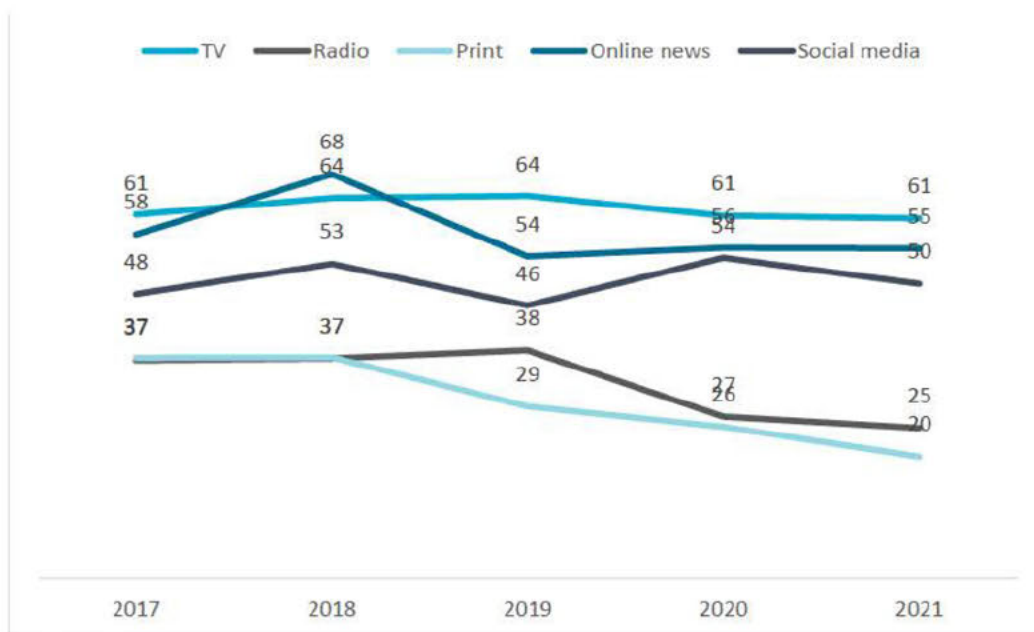


Figure 4 shows a similar drop in print news consumption among city-dwellers from 37% in 2017 to 20% in 2021. This drop was matched by a large decline in the use of radio as a general source of news (37% to 25%). While Online and social media have experience falls, they have stabilised as general sources of news over the past few years. In both major cities and regional areas, TV remains consistently the most popular general source of news.

FIGURE 4: GENERAL SOURCE OF NEWS IN MAJOR CITIES (%)

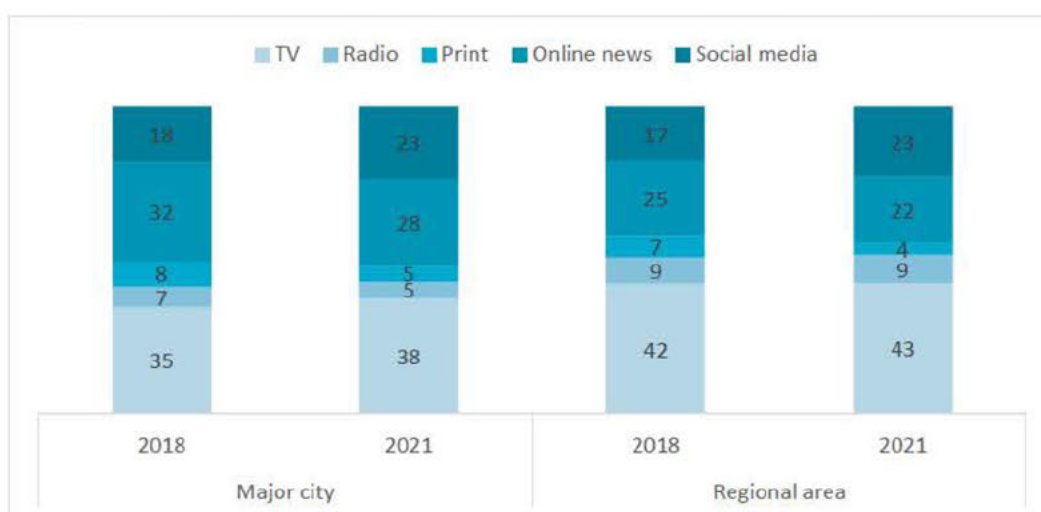


[Q3] Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? Please select all that apply. \*Note: Prior to 2020 'blogs' were included as 'social media', in subsequent years they were not included in the questionnaire. [Base: N=2,034].

### Decline of regional newspapers as a main source of news

In 2021, only 4% of those living in regional areas said they use print newspapers as their main source of news (figure 5). This is a 3-percentage point decline since 2018. TV continues to dominate in both the cities and the regions as people's main source of news, and there has been a shift towards more reliance on social media as well. In the regions, about the same proportion of people said they mainly use online news sources (22%) as those who mainly use social media (23%). However, while the use of social media as a main source of news is increasing, the proportion saying they mainly use online news is falling.

FIGURE 5: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS BY REGION (%)

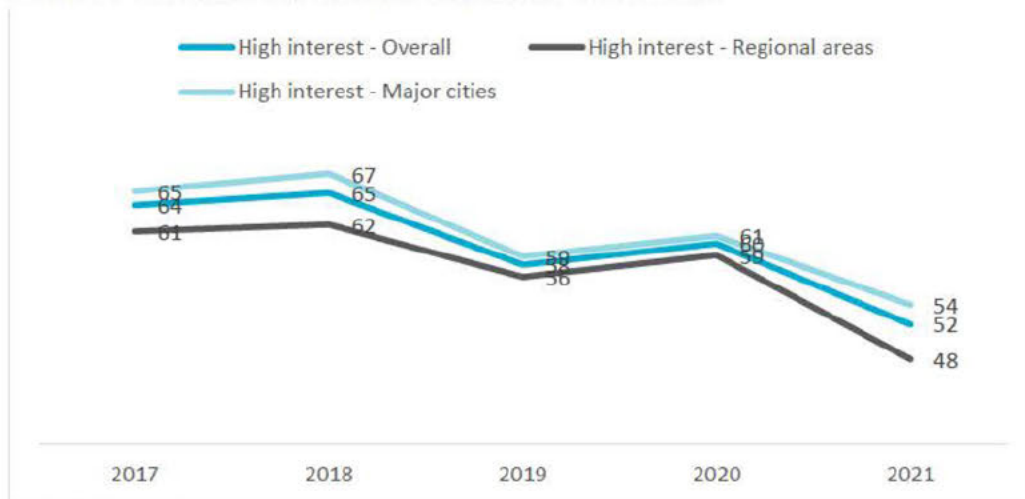


[Q4] You say you've used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is your MAIN source of news? \*Note: Prior to 2020 'blogs' were included as 'social media', in subsequent years they have been excluded. [Base: Those who used at least one source of news, N=1,909].

## Interest in news is declining among regional consumers

The fall in consumption is accompanied by a fall in interest in news (figure 6). In 2021, regional news consumers are less interested in news compared with those living in major cities, and less interested than they were five years ago. Interest in news has been declining in Australia generally.

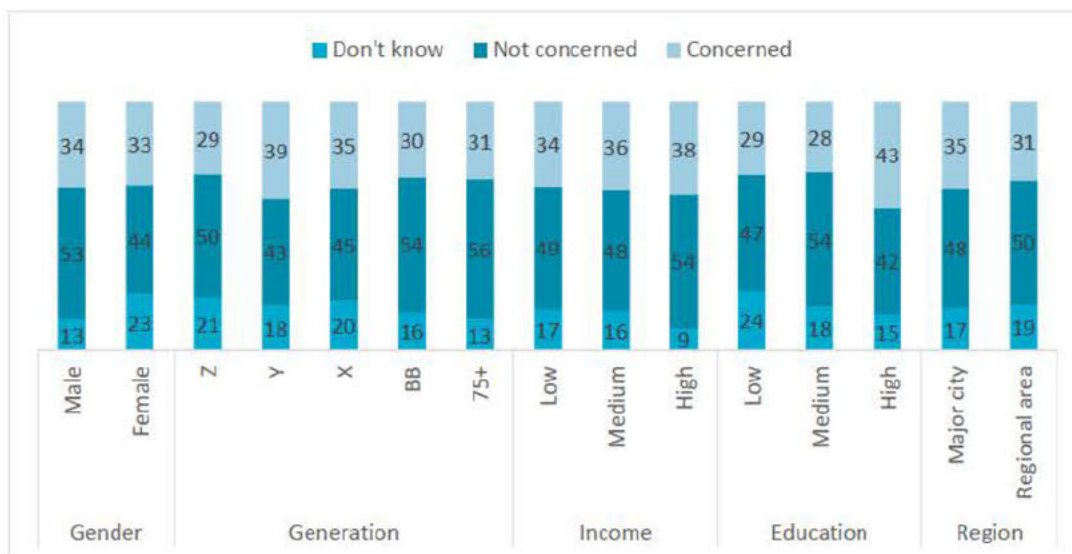
FIGURE 6: NEWS INTEREST AMONG REGIONAL CONSUMERS



## There is little knowledge or concern about the financial state of the news media

In 2021, around half of all Australians said they were 'not at all concerned' or 'not very concerned' about the financial state of commercial news organisations (figure 7). The proportion is slightly higher among those living in regional areas (50%) compared with those living in major cities (48%). Around 35% of those living in major cities said they are concerned about the commercial state of the news, while only 31% in the regions said the same. Those living in the regions (19%) were more likely than those living in major cities (17%) to say they 'don't know'.

FIGURE 7: CONCERN ABOUT FINANCIAL STATE OF COMMERCIAL NEWS BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)

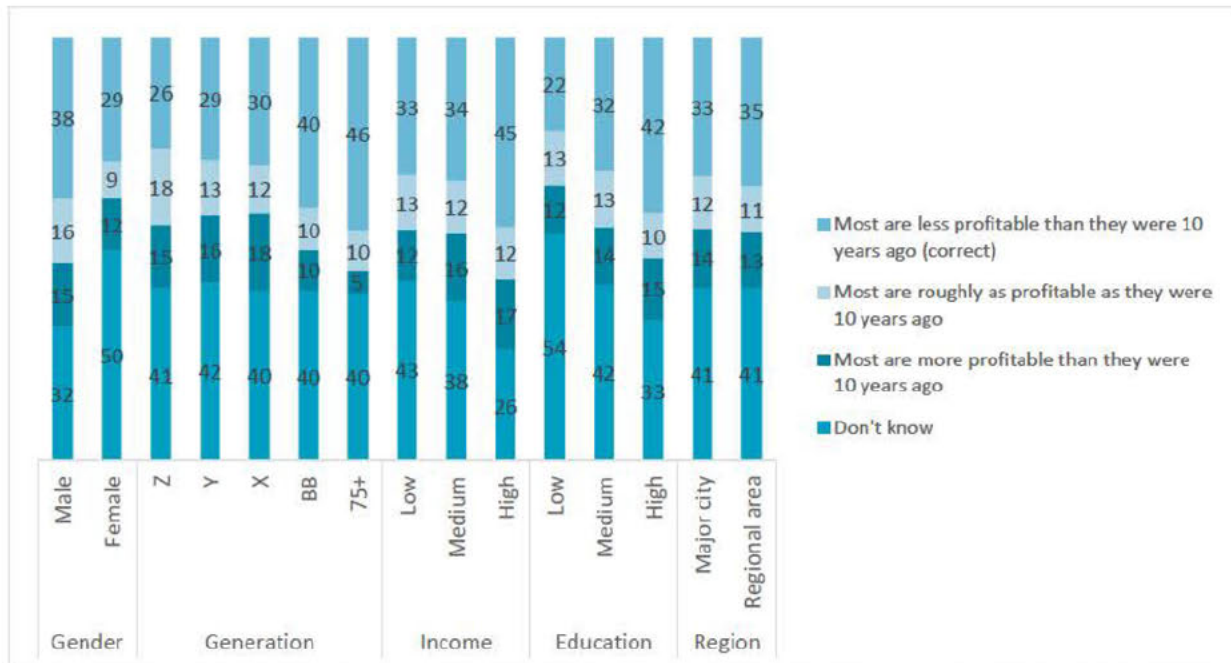


[Financing1\_2021] How concerned are you, if at all, about the financial state of commercial news organisations in your country?  
[Base: N=2,034].



We asked participants to describe the financial profitability of commercial news organisations to the best of their knowledge (figure 8). Those living in regional areas (35%) were slightly more likely than those in major cities (33%) to correctly observe that most commercial news outlets are less profitable than they were 10 years ago. However, for both metropolitan and regional consumers a high proportion (41%) said they 'don't know'.

FIGURE 8: KNOWLEDGE OF THE FINANCIAL STATE OF COMMERCIAL NEWS BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)



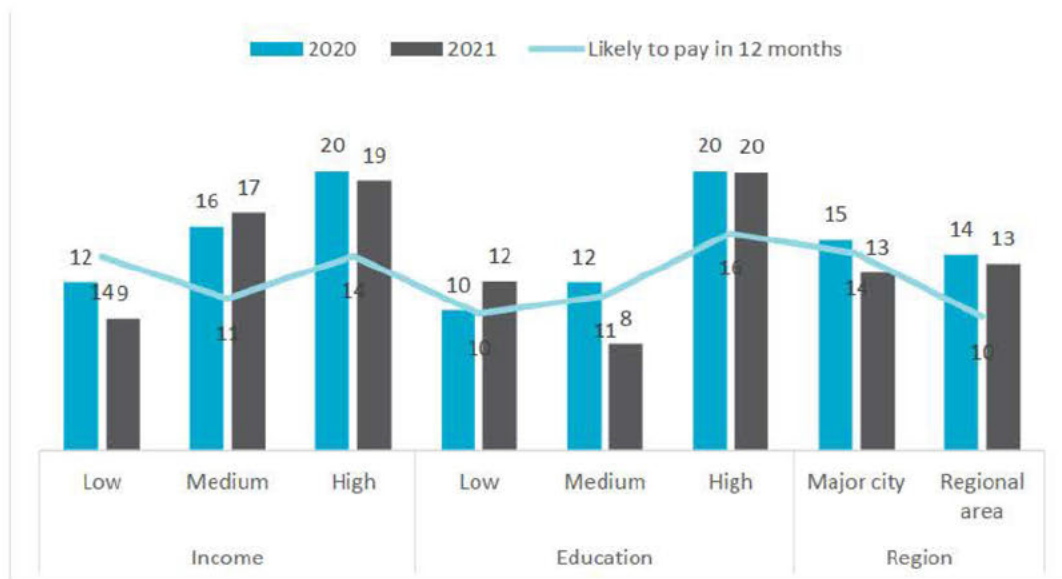
[Financing2\_2021] To the best of your knowledge, which of the following best describes the financial state of commercial news organisations in your country? [Base: N=2,032].

### Regional Australians less likely than city-dwellers to pay for news in the future

Compared with other markets, Australians are among the least likely in the global Digital News Report survey to pay for online news and this has consistently been the case for the last five years. Only 13% of Australians say they pay for online news compared to the global average of the 46 countries surveyed (17%).

In Australia, figure 9 shows there is little difference between consumers in major cities (13%) and those in regional areas (13%). However, we asked those who did not pay for news how likely they would be to start paying in the next 12 months. Those living in major cities (14%) were more likely than those in regional areas (10%) to say they might start paying in the coming year.

FIGURE 9: PAYING FOR ONLINE NEWS BY INCOME, EDUCATION AND REGION (%)



**[Q7a]** Have you paid for ONLINE news content, or accessed a paid for ONLINE news service in the last year? (This could be a digital subscription, combined digital/print subscription, a donation, or one-off payment for an article or app or e-edition). **[Q7aiv\_rc]** You said you have not paid for online news content in the last year... How likely or unlikely would you be to pay in the next 12 months for online news from particular sources that you like? [Base: N=2,034].

## Local News Consumption and Community Connection

Local news is not only an important information source for citizens, but it is also a venue for people to engage with current issues that are relevant to the community.

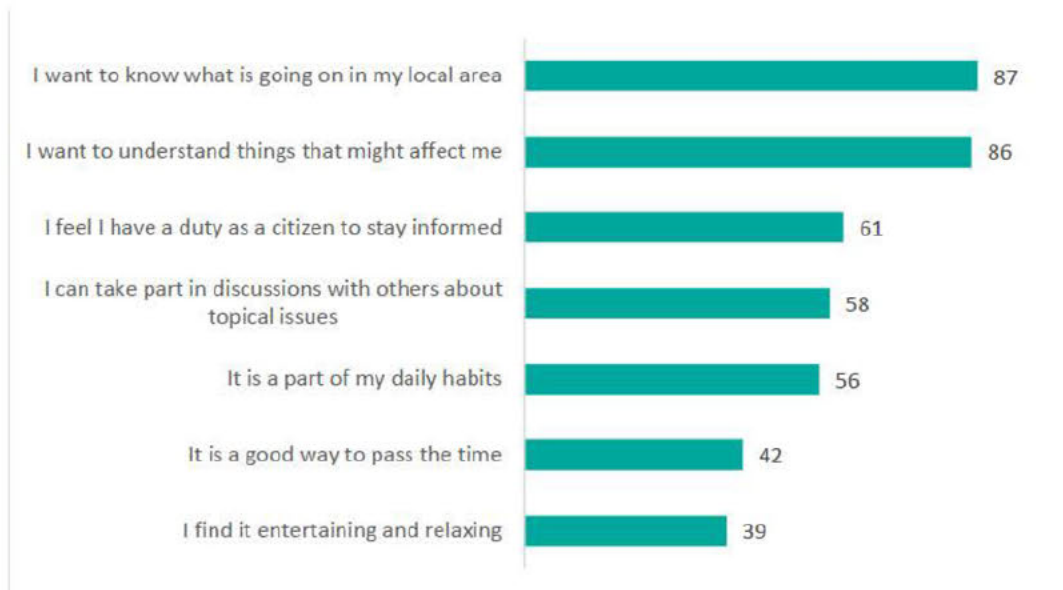
Compared to national news regional news provides news reporting through the lens of the local community and is known to be linked to community cohesion (Stamm et al., 1997; Viswanath et al., 1990).

This section of the report summarises the findings from an online survey (n=2,038) conducted in November/December 2019. We mainly targeted Local Government Areas (LGAs) with a population between 25,000 to 100,000 for recruitment. In addition, Toowoomba (135k) and Griffith (20k) were included in the sample. All metro LGAs were excluded from the sample. We used a quota for gender, age and education, reflecting the Australian Bureau of Statistic's Census 2016.

The *Local News Consumers* study found that the desire for community connection was a driver of local news consumption. The top reasons for regional Australians to consume local news were to know what is going on in their local area (87%) and to understand how things may affect them (86%) (see figure 10).

These reasons were much higher than for entertainment or out of habit. Regional audiences access local news to stay connected to their community and keep abreast of critical information (Park et al., 2020).

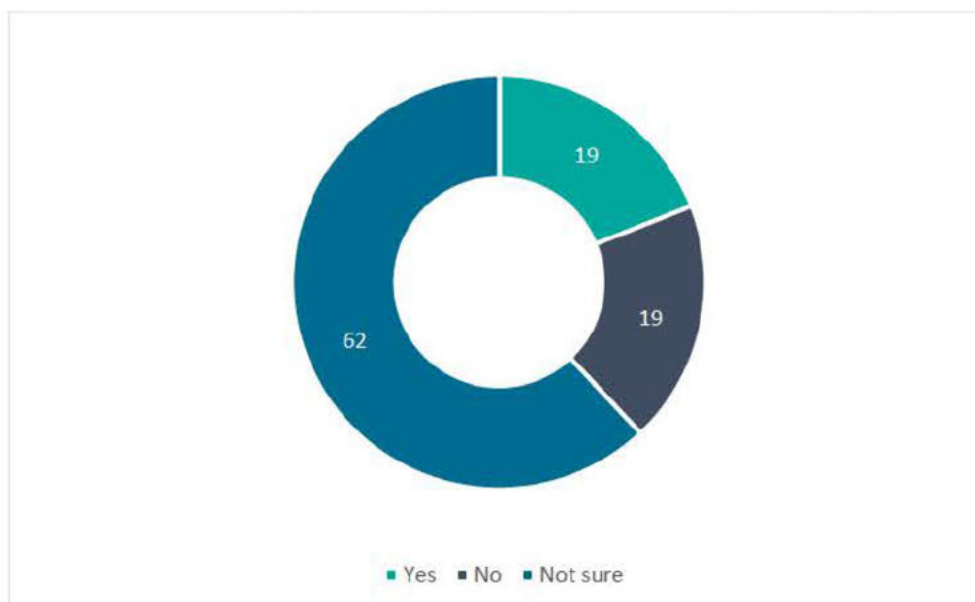
FIGURE 10: REASONS FOR ACCESSING LOCAL NEWS AMONG REGIONAL NEWS CONSUMERS (%)



### Impact of regional news closures

Our *Local News Consumers* study shows that one in five regional Australians have experienced a closure or merger of a news service in their area in the past five years (figure 11). It should be noted that this study was conducted pre-Covid and the acceleration of closures and suspensions of newspapers in regional Australia in 2020. It can be safely assumed that were this study replicated today, the proportion of people saying they had experienced a news outlet closing or contracting in their area would be higher.

FIGURE 11: EXPERIENCE OF LOCAL NEWS CLOSURE IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS (%)



In this study of local news consumers, most respondents (88%) said they accessed local news regularly. But a quarter of respondents said they did not have a local TV news service (24%) or a newspaper (25%). One-third said there was no local commercial radio (33%), and more than half (55%) said there was no physical ABC local radio in their area. Almost a quarter (23%) were accessing local social media sites to get local news instead. Social media sites were the fourth most used source of local news among regional news consumers. Another 47% said they had joined a social media group, such as Facebook Groups or group chats on WhatsApp to get local news. This clearly indicates that people are using digital platforms to meet news gaps in the regions (table 1).

TABLE 1: LOCAL NEWS PROVISION AND CONSUMPTION (%)

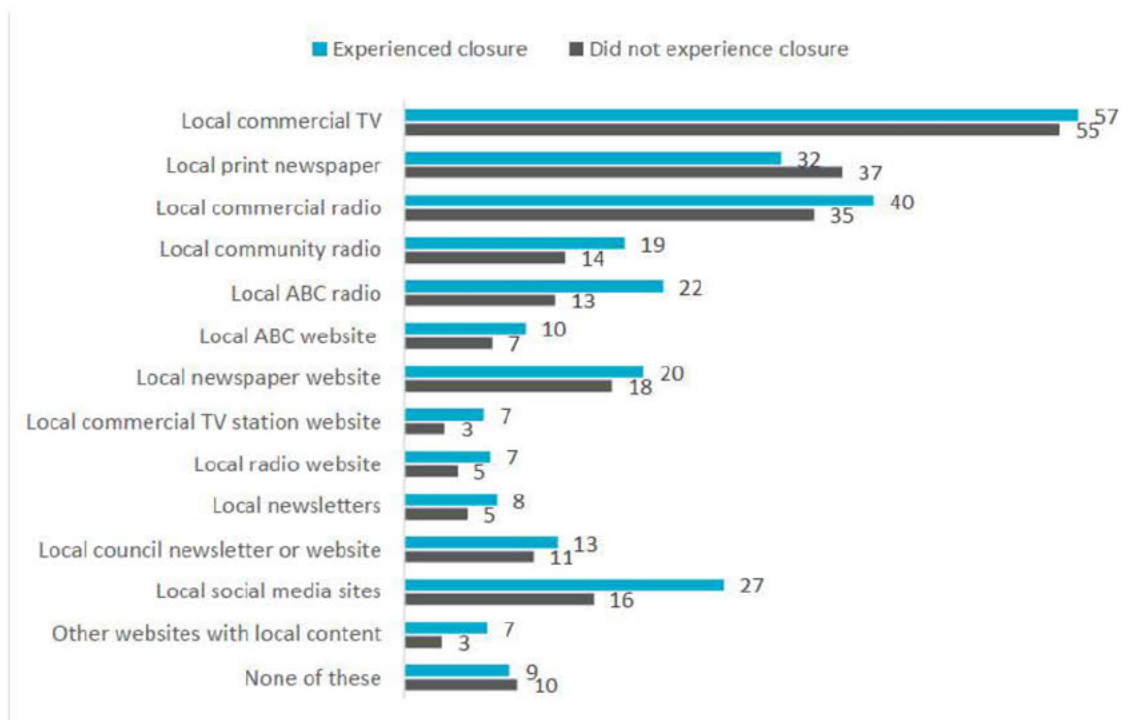
	AVAILABLE (%)	ACCESS REGULARLY (%)
Local commercial TV	76	50
Local print newspaper	75	28
Local commercial radio	66	34
Local community radio	48	14
Local ABC radio	45	13
Local ABC website	29	6
Local newspaper website	46	15
Local commercial TV station website	25	5
Local radio website	27	4
Local newsletters	22	5
Local council newsletter or website	35	9
Local social media sites	37	23
Other websites with local content	15	4
None of these	4	12

### Regional consumers turn to social media to fill the gap

Those who experienced local news closures are much more likely to access news via social media sites (27%) compared to those who haven't experience closures (16%) (figure 11).



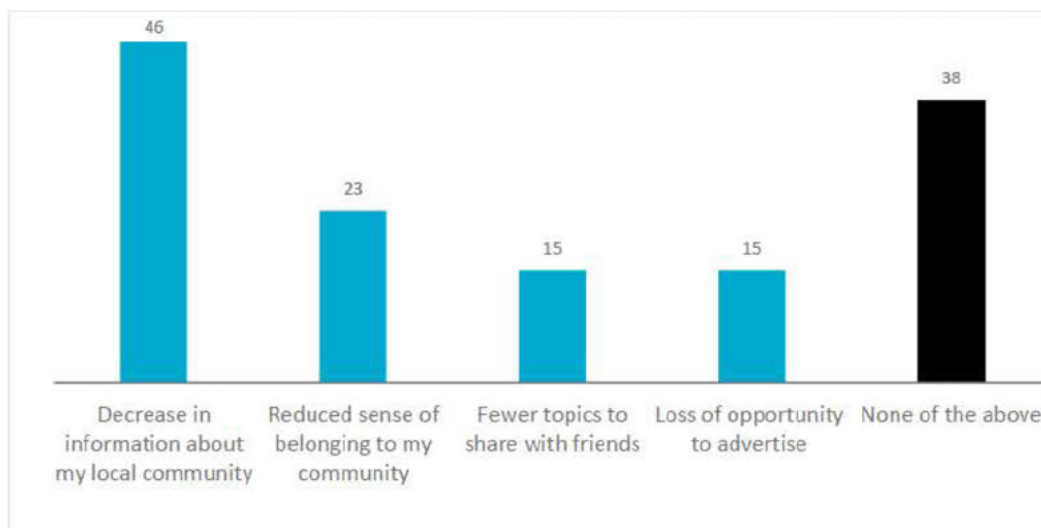
FIGURE 11: ACCESS TO LOCAL NEWS BY EXPERIENCE OF CLOSURE (%)



### Reduced sense of community

Those who experienced local news closures in their community reported a decrease in information about their community (46%), and a reduced sense of belonging (23%), indicating the importance of local news in regional areas (figure 12).

FIGURE 12: IMPACT OF LOCAL NEWS CLOSURE ON REGIONAL AUDIENCES (%)

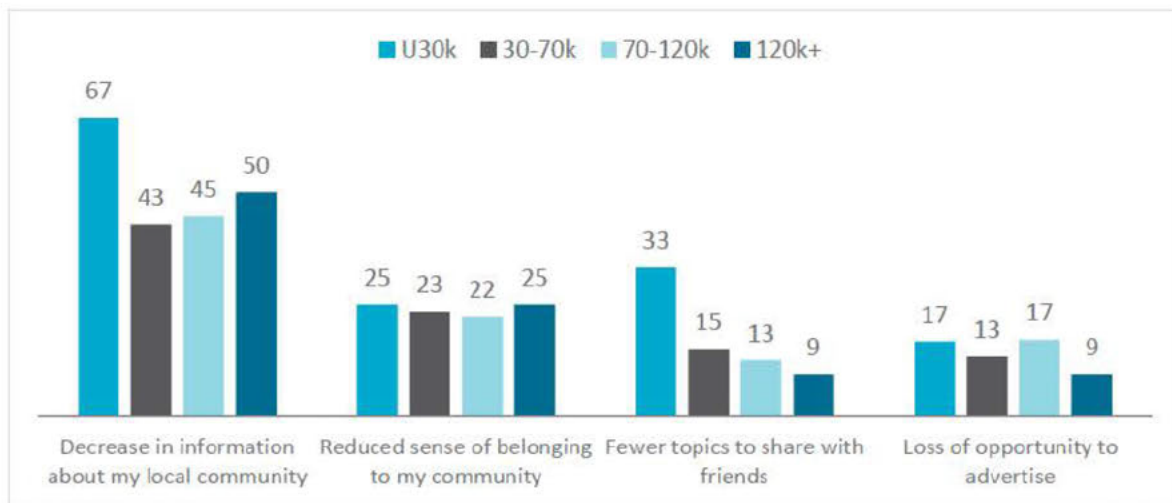


### Smaller LGAs most impacted by news closures

Closures of local news outlets have had a greater impact on smaller regional communities. Two-thirds (67%) of those who live in LGAs with populations less than 30,000 people said there was a decrease in information about the local community and 33% said they had fewer topics to share with friends (figure

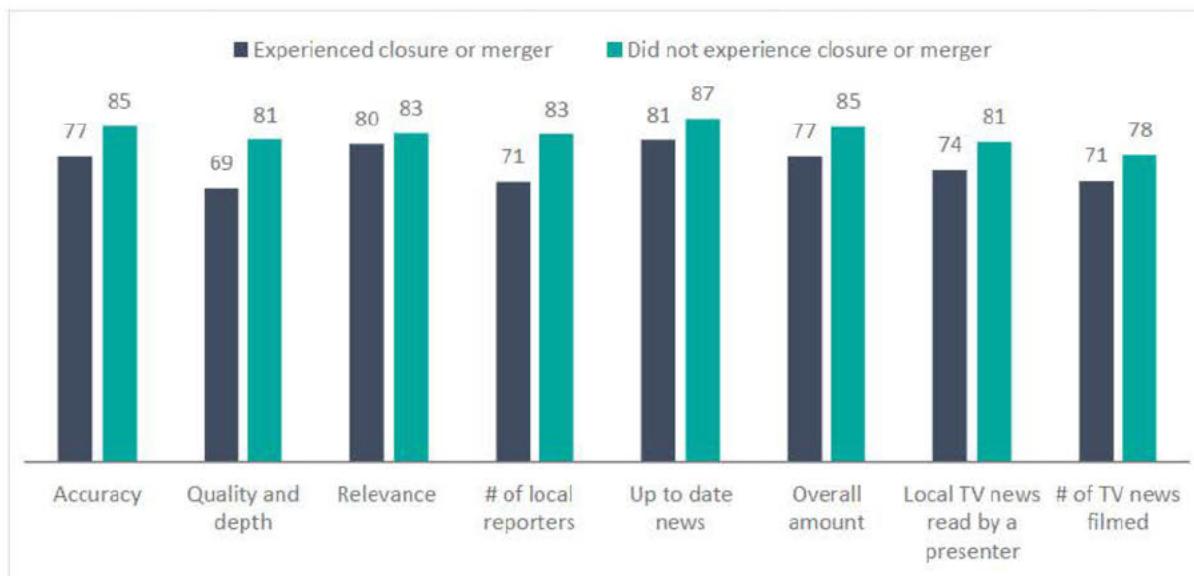
13). Losing a news outlet, where there are few news services will affect the community more, as they have fewer alternatives.

FIGURE 13: IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY BY SIZE (%)



Overall, the level of satisfaction with the provision of local news was lower for those who live in communities that experienced news closures (figure 14). In particular, there was a significant difference between those who did not experience news closure and those who did in their satisfaction of the quality and depth of news (81% vs 69%), which indicates the impact of news closures on the information quality that regional consumers have access to.

FIGURE 14: SATISFACTION WITH LOCAL NEWS BY EXPERIENCE OF CLOSURE (%)



## Practitioner perspectives: Pressures facing regional journalists

Not only are regional audiences feeling the impacts of the financial downturn in regional journalism, practitioners are too. Our study of regional journalists *'Australian regional Journalists: What they need and how they see the future'* paints a picture of hard-working reporters and editors, doing their utmost to serve their communities with diminishing resources, increased production demands, and growing job insecurity.

Between October 2019 and February 2020, we conducted a survey of 307 regional journalists across all platforms and interviewed 31. Half of the respondents (51%) said the pressure of commercial sustainability had got worse over the past five years, 20% said it remained the same, and 29% said it had lessened. This was most keenly felt by print (51%) and online (52%) journalists compared to 47% of TV and 38% of radio.

Amongst all of the respondents, time and resources were the most frequently mentioned obstacles facing them in their work (table 2)

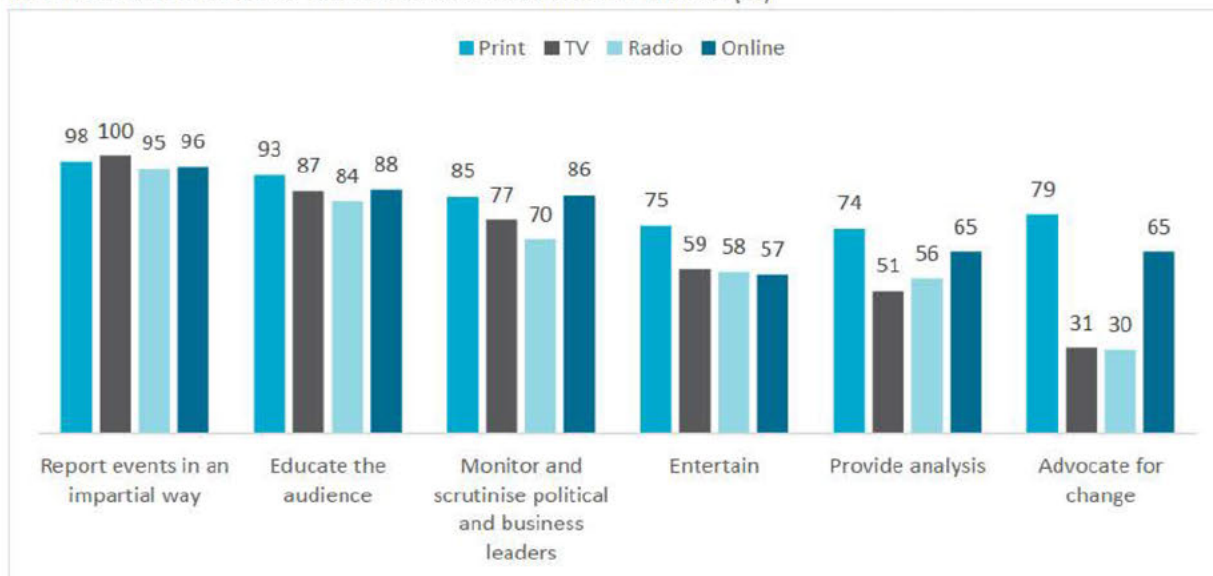
TABLE 2: OBSTACLES THAT AFFECT THE JOB (OPEN ENDED RESPONSES)

OBSTACLES	Number of responses
Time	97
Resources	94
Workload	26
Technology	21
Distance	20
PR & Spin	11
Communication	5

Again, this was particularly the case for regional print journalists who were much more likely to cite a lack of resources as their biggest obstacle (38%), compared to journalists across other media (26% online; 21% radio; 16% online).

Importantly for this submission, regional print journalists were much more likely to feel connected to the community they reported on. From a range of journalistic role options, regional newspaper (and online) journalists were the most likely to select 'monitoring and scrutinising political and business leaders' as an important function for regional journalists. Print newspaper reporters were also the most likely to select entertaining, providing analysis and advocating for change as important roles for regional journalists (figure 15).

FIGURE 15: THE ROLE OF REGIONAL JOURNALISTS BY MEDIA (%)



What this data suggests is communities lose more than information when a local newspaper closes, it loses local champions in its reporters who are the most likely to advocate on their behalf, and who feel strongly about holding the local council to account. These findings accord with other studies that underscore the need for local newspapers to perform that public interest journalism function, and find that accountability falls when they close (Fengler, et al., 2022).



## Part 2: The impact of the News Media Bargaining Code on regional and remote newspapers

In this section we address the impacts of the News Media Bargaining Code (NMBC) on regional and remote newspapers and their audiences. The insights and recommendations are drawn from:

- *Research Priority Report: News Futures: Research & Policy Roundtable*. (Fisher et al., 2021).

The News Media Bargaining Code was part of the Australian Government's response to the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission's (ACCC) Digital Platform Inquiry (2019) and widespread concern about news market failure and the decline in Public Interest Journalism. Subsequently, a range of deals have been successfully negotiated between newspaper companies and the major digital platforms. Almost twelve months after the legislation was passed by the federal parliament, however, it is difficult to assess the impact of the News Media Bargaining Code (NMBC) on regional and remote newspapers in Australia. There are a range of limitations to making a comprehensive or accurate assessment.

- Firstly, the federal Treasurer has not designated any digital platforms under the Act, which means the NMBC has not properly come into effect, thereby making it difficult to judge the full impact of the NMBC on regional and remote newspapers specifically, and the news media more generally. Therefore, any assessment of the impact of the NMBC can only be based on the individual voluntary content deals that have been done outside of the NMBC between Facebook, Google, and news outlets.
- Secondly, these deals are commercial in confidence and few details have emerged about either the sum received or the conditions attached.
- Thirdly, there is no public-facing complete list of the deals that have been struck, which makes it difficult to know exactly how many regional and remote newspapers have been included.

Because of these issues, the negotiation process behind these deals has raised important questions about transparency, equivalence of the deals across organisations, the exclusion of some organisations, including smaller, regional, and non-traditional news outlets, and how the money would be spent by news outlets without a requirement for it to go towards public interest journalism. It also raises questions about whether deals have been done with a good range of businesses to enhance the health of the Australian news environment and encourage public interest journalism.

Based on public announcements, deals have been reportedly successfully negotiated between a range of regional newspaper companies and either Google or Facebook. For example, Google has struck deals with Country Press Australia (70 regional mastheads)<sup>3</sup>, the Victorian-based Times News Group (Surf Coast Times, Bellarine Times, Armstrong Creek Times, Ballarat Times, Golden Plains Times, Geelong Times, and Bendigo Times)<sup>4</sup>; and News Corp<sup>5</sup> (which will reportedly be used to fund 20 regional positions and the trial of three

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<sup>3</sup> <https://blog.google/around-the-globe/google-asia/australia/country-press-australia-titles-join-google-news-showcase/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://mumbrella.com.au/acm-signs-letter-of-intent-for-facebook-news-deal-681111>

<sup>5</sup> <https://newsroom.com/2021/02/17/news-corp-and-google-agree-to-global-partnership-on-news/>

regional print editions for *Sunshine Coast Daily* and Mackay's *Daily Mercury*)<sup>6</sup>. Facebook has negotiated deals with Australian Community Media (40+ regional, rural, and suburban mastheads including the Newcastle Herald, Canberra Times, Bendigo Advertiser, The Advocate, Katherine Times, Illawarra Mercury)<sup>7</sup>.

On the face of it, this appears to be a good thing, but these deals cover only a fraction of the hundreds of regional and rural newspapers across Australia. However, in the case of News Corp and ACM, there have been announcements of reductions in print services<sup>8</sup> and staff losses from regional mastheads<sup>9</sup> despite having signed deals with one of the digital platforms.

These events highlight several important issues. Firstly, an urgent need to question and measure the impact of the News Media Bargaining Code and voluntary content agreements on the sustainability of regional and rural newspapers specifically and the wider Australian news industry. Secondly, it underscores that the NMBC was never intended to be a silver bullet and ongoing financial support for regional journalism is required from the federal government. Thirdly, the fact that so many regional and rural newspapers have not struck deals points to the need to review the criteria for news businesses to register for future negotiation under the NMBC if the federal Treasurer decides to designate either Google or Facebook or both. Currently, businesses with an annual income of less than \$150,000 are ruled ineligible, which excludes small regional and rural news outlets from negotiations.

Urgent research is needed to monitor the longer-term impact of the voluntary content agreements with regional and rural newspapers on the signatory companies, those that missed out, and wider the regional and rural news environment. The research needs to be approached from three perspectives: digital platforms, news businesses, and government. Any research agenda must have the impacts of media policy on the public at its heart. For maximum impact, this research requires collaboration with government, digital platforms, news businesses, and academia.

We also need to evaluate the impact of the eligibility criteria for the News Media Bargaining Code Register, particularly the \$150,000 annual income rule on small news outlets, including regional and rural newspapers. While the focus on regional and rural newspapers is commendable, it is important that they are not seen in isolation but as part of a hybrid new media environment made of traditional and digital platforms. Contraction of local news, particularly in regional areas, is an ongoing issue that is unlikely to be remedied by the NMBC alone. The longer-term impacts of the loss of local news on communities, and what is filling the news gaps, are largely unknown. A consistent evaluation of the supply, production, and consumption of regional news is needed. Including:

- The impact of the local news gaps on communities — economically and socially.
- The ability of news start-ups on meeting local information needs, including social media.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/news-corp-formalises-google-and-facebook-deals-announces-hiring-spre-20210509-p57q8d.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7236733/facebook-does-deal-with-acm-for-news-feed/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-01/acm-cuts-publication-regional-newspapers/100500826>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.adnews.com.au/news/news-corp-australia-cuts-more-jobs>

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