

25th January 2022

Parliament of Australia
Committee Secretariat
Parliament House
PO Box 6021
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir / Madam,

RE: PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS (PRINT / DIGITAL).

I write to you today as the General Manager of one of the new rural independent publications which was borne from the annihilation of regional print news within our area at the hands of NewsCorp in June 2020.

NewsCorp's insistence of rapidly shifting to a solely digital model was, in my opinion (borne from my 20+ years working and managing what was then the Gatton Star), a glaring indicator of how much the "big guys" simply refused to evolve steadily. With a focus that I felt was too concentrated on profits rather than readership and community, this resulted in what I feel was a decline of content relevance, followed closely by the public's interest.

It is paramount to acknowledge that in regional communities, locals want to read about locals, local stories & local events. This is something that cannot always be easily obtained via digital mediums, hence my feeling that online news does not serve regional communities in the same way that print does.

After NewsCorp's decision to shut down the print edition of the Gatton Star in June 2020, there was a period where I was fielding multiple phone calls, visits & emails daily from locals, all asking the same question – "What do we do for news now?" The suggestion of obtaining their news via subscription service online was almost always vetoed (for a variety of reasons including cost, lack of accessibility, the perception of a lack of a local link, etc). This then left a community that had come to know & respect a print publication 60+ years strong wondering what would happen next.

Enter some strong community minded local business owners, and some former staff of the Gatton Star, and The Lockyer & Somerset Independent was born.

The Independent however was not without its challenges at start up. While we had a core group of local businesses who have supported us wholeheartedly from our first edition, to not only generate their own business, but to show support for another local community business, there have also been advertisers who have adopted a "wait and see" approach, given The Independent is a new product.

Our first edition was published on Wednesday October 14th, 2020, to a wonderful reception from readers & advertisers alike. We offer the paper free of charge, and currently distribute 15,000 copies every week to over 230 locations within our circulation area (map attached to this submission for reference), covering the Lockyer Valley, Somerset & Ipswich Regional Council areas.

We pride ourselves on upholding our slogan in each edition – "Keeping the community in community newspapers." We enjoy being able to report on local people & community events and having the opportunity to share the stories that the community want to hear.

Shop 2
45 North Street
Gatton Qld 4343

07 4574 5200

To show our thanks to these businesses, and to the community at large, we have sponsored many community events in the past 18 months – including local cultural festival, billy cart derby's, junior swimming competitions, local agricultural shows, fun runs, and even a bull ride!

The biggest ongoing challenge however, is to keep the doors open which, as a free publication, falls back wholly and solely on paid advertising. Between Covid and an ongoing drought, money for advertising is normally the first item to be sacrificed from the budget, however the newspaper is still required as a connection.

Securing advertising from major retailers & national businesses also remains an ongoing challenge. A paper based 30 minutes from our office includes weekly multiple full pages from the likes of Harvey Norman, The Good Guys, etc. We are also regularly sent press releases from other state & national bodies, however these same organisations have never once taken out advertising with us.

I feel a fair & equitable consideration to these ongoing challenges, not only for us, but for all print publications trying to still bring the news to their local communities, while still remaining a viable business, is to somehow ensure that we are all able, or at least all be considered for, a piece of the larger advertising pies as they become available.

However, newspapers such as ours also do not happen without the contribution of our journalists. I feel that the "lure" of bright lights, big city journalism has taken a lot of promising journalists out of the regional areas, only to find that once they get into larger publishing organisations, the bloom is definitely off the rose, and within a year or two they become so disheartened, that they move away from journalism altogether. Or journalists do start with smaller regional publications, however their tenure is short lived due to something "bigger / better" coming along or being promised. I wonder if there is avenue to investigate subsidies or support to keep local journalists local, and encourage them to stay long term in order to take advantage on long standing business relationships, something that remains absolutely crucial within regional communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this submission, and should you require any further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Kind Regards,
Bruce Horrocks
General Manager
The Lockyer & Somerset Independent

A map of the Toowoomba region in Queensland, Australia. The map features a network of roads, including major highways like the A3, A17, A2, A21, and A139, as well as local roads. Numerous blue location pins are placed across the map, indicating specific points of interest. Key locations labeled include Toowoomba, Helidon Spa, Galton, Law, Plunkand, Laidk, Mulgowie, Rosewood, Fernvale, Coominya, Mount Hallen, Buaraba, Ravensbourne, Groomsville, Pechey, Crows Nest, Eskdale, Mount Beppo, Toogoolawah, Harlin, Colinton, Moore, Linville, Blackbutt, Yarraman, Taromeo, Monsildale, Sheep Station Creek, Kilcoy, Mount Archer, Hazeldean, Somerset Dam, Mount Byron, Dundas, Lake Wivenhoe, and Deongwar State Forest. The map also shows geographical features like Emu Creek, Googa Creek, and Mount Binga.