



**JOURNALISM EDUCATION  
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OF AUSTRALIA**

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## **JERAA submission to the Inquiry into Australia's regional newspapers (print and digital).**

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with input from JERAA President Dr Alexandra Wake and members of the JERAA executive.

The Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia Incorporated (JERAA Inc.) is the peak body of Australian journalism educators and researchers from tertiary education and industry organisations. JERAA's primary aim is to raise the standard of teaching and training in journalism to foster excellence and integrity in the future generation of journalism practitioners. JERAA also supports research, with the understanding that research can help communities identify trends and issues, resolve problems, and promote or celebrate excellence in journalism and journalism education. JERAA runs annual awards and grants for journalism students and journalism researchers to recognise and encourage quality in journalism practice, study and research. This submission from JERAA addresses the terms of reference that are particularly relevant to the Association's work and the interests of its members and their students.

This submission was prepared at the request of the 2022 JERAA executive: Assoc Prof Alex Wake (RMIT), Prof Matthew Ricketson (Deakin), Assoc Prof Fiona Martin (USyd), Assoc Prof Angela Romano (QUT), Dr Janet Fulton, Dr Peter English (SCU), Dr Katrina Clifford (Deakin), Dr Catriona Bonfiglioli, (UTS), Assoc Prof Caroline Fisher (UC), Dr Jeanti St Clair (SCU), Dr Laura Glitsos (Edith Cowan University).

Our submission considers the following issues:

- 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 extent to which there has been entry into these or other markets by new operators, particularly small businesses
- The impact of the News Media Bargaining Code for regional and remote newspapers
- The degree to which there has been economic recovery in regional and remote markets from the impacts of COVID, and whether this has led to advertising revenue improving.

## 1. Introduction

The shrinking of Australian regional media since the beginning of 2020 has created significant issues for Australian journalism, journalists, journalism education and the wider community. The decision by major publishers such as News Corp Australia and Australian Community Media to cease printing more than 100 local and regional newspapers and shift them to digital-only platforms, consolidate mastheads or close them altogether has resulted in fewer journalists and a lack of diversity in media, contributing to what are known as “news deserts” (Bucay et al., 2017). In these newly depleted areas, communities can miss out on key information and opportunities for local debate and deliberation. Social media may be left as the only available source of local information, but on social media misinformation and disinformation are widespread, and conventions that inform journalism – such as balance and fairness – may be absent. Despite the rise of some newspaper and online start-ups, there are fewer opportunities for media, communities, and journalists – particularly graduate journalists who are a central element of local newspaper staffing – in regional Australia. The closures or shifts to pared-down digital sites, which have occurred throughout the nation, have had a huge impact on regional and remote news markets and communities. They have led to lower standards of journalism, fewer news media staff, uniformity of content across regions and less specific and targeted content for towns and regions – where local news and information is available at all. This results in less informed communities, and has considerable impacts on citizens’ engagement with democracy.

## 2. News deserts in regional media

Shifts in local journalism have resulted in many regional and remote areas of Australia becoming “news deserts” (Bucay et al., 2017), due to the lack of local news or information being provided to communities, changes to – or closure of – traditional media and shifts in news media business models and ownership. This has become increasingly evident since News Corp Australia and Australian Community Media either shut down newspapers or transferred them to digital-only publications in 2020. Well over 100 local and regional newspapers were affected by this decision, resulting in widespread job losses and a reduction in news quality and availability in regional areas across Australia (PIJJ, 2022). Even though some of these newspapers have recommenced publication, the impacts of change continue to be felt, with reduced staffing and resources, newsroom and masthead consolidation, greater use of shared news copy and an overall reduction in capacity to provide local news. Queensland suffered the most in the initial closures, with more than 40 publications going to paid digital-only platforms, and 15 titles closing, including the state’s oldest publication, *The Queensland Times*, which started in 1859 (Gribbin & Faa, 2020). However, other states have also been hit hard by the closures and rationalisations, led by major publishers, but also affecting independent news outlets. For example, in South Australia, the independent *The Border Watch* closed in August 2020 after around 150 years of publication (although it later reopened under new ownership). The outcome of these closures, suspensions and consolidations has been a reduction in – or the disappearance of – local news content available to communities. Where news outlets have continued to exist but in a reduced form, there has been an increase in the “pooled” information provided by regional hubs, state and national desks, and less tailored information about particular towns or regions, resulting in coverage that may be of generically regional interest but that is not directly relevant to the concerns of individual towns or districts.

These decisions continued the decline of media evident over the past decade, which has led to reduced circulations and numbers of employed journalists, and increases in workloads for those remaining (Finkelstein, 2012; Hess and Waller, 2008, 2016; Napoli et al., 2017; Waller, Hess and Ricketson, 2014). The Digital News Report Australia 2021 shows the proportion of Australian news consumers using regional newspapers has fallen from 19% in 2016 to 11% in 2021 (Park et al. 2021). Among the issues created by these absences or reductions in regional and remote media are lower standards of journalism, a uniformity of content across regions with less specific content, less informed communities and reduced opportunities for local debate and discussion. Local newspapers' capacity for facilitating debate and interaction has long been seen as a fundamental element of their role, and as contributing to democratic participation, particularly at a local level. For example, Ali et al., (2018) and Simons et al. (2017) have noted the shifts in regional media contributing to democratic participation, while Wang (2016) argues that loss of local news affects communities' capacity to discuss and reflect. Furthermore, in "news deserts", communities can miss vital information and, in lieu of traditional media, may seek out social media to fill information gaps (Park et al. 2020), despite the widespread misinformation and disinformation that characterise social media. This has been a particular issue in the past two years of the COVID pandemic, where the role of social media in promoting information that is inaccurate – and at times dangerous – has been widely noted. Further, closures of local and regional newspapers have led to a reduction in internship and job opportunities for journalism students and graduates. Those who find employment are often working in small and under resourced newsrooms (Fisher et al. 2020). There has therefore been a considerable negative impact on journalism, journalists, educators and communities following the closures of newsrooms and the disappearance of local news outlets. The impacts on opportunities for journalists and journalism education can be seen in the reduced numbers of journalistic roles, but the impact on journalism and communities – as well as local democracy – is more difficult to quantify.

### 3. A return to print?

After the 2020 newspaper closures or suspensions by News Corp Australia and Australian Community Media, a range of new print newspapers emerged in an effort to fill the gaps left by the closures. In part, this was due to the community "demanding print" in regional areas, especially in Queensland (Robinson & Goetze, 2020). However, these new publications did not necessarily mirror previous ownership or journalistic structures, with local businesspeople or, in some cases, local councils being financial backers. In other instances, new online-only outlets were established, and these too utilised a variety of business models and ownership structures. In some cases, the publishers were established journalists or editors, but the range of models and structures reflects that of new print newspapers. Though declining, print remains a dominant medium in regional areas, partly because of established buying habits, partly because newspapers retain currency for longer in news markets where they are printed weekly or bi-weekly rather than daily, and partly because they are accessible and/or appealing to a wide audience. For example, the generally older demographic mix in regional areas means that many people may not be comfortable operating in the online environment. And many areas of regional and remote Australia have limited – or very slow – internet access (Park et al., 2019). Most importantly, audiences perceive a link between their local paper and a sense of community belonging (Park et al. 2020).

Where established ownership structures and business models have shifted in the wake of local news closures, this has the potential to exacerbate information biases and imbalances. Regional media has often been conflicted by news choices, particularly in relation to government or major business (Waller, Hess and Ricketson, 2014; Hess and Waller, 2008), but differing business models have the potential to create issues over whether the new outlets are journalistic, community-focused, or a substitute for local government public relations. Local government decisions remain a key aspect of local news coverage, and council stories have formed regular parts of coverage (Bowd, 2015; Hess and Waller 2008), but there is potential for less rigorous reporting when a Council is a backer of a publication claiming to be news or where the capacity for journalists to critically engage with council public relations is absent.

As Barnes et al. (2021) note, ownership models range from a community "hybrid" form of journalism, with both not-for-profit and sponsored approaches, to those fitting the traditions of regional media related to business models and staffing. The hybrid models have tended to focus on elements such as community cohesion, positive news, and social news, in contrast to the traditional end of the newspaper spectrum with its breaking news and watchdog-style reporting. One of the issues associated with hybrid and non-standard news production models is that audiences with limited information literacy might not be able to critically consider the

information that is being provided, and the business or political agendas that may inform it. Barnes et al. (2021) also note that some of these new news offerings have already closed, unable to find a sustainable business model.

Feedback to university educators from recent graduates working at some of these newer or expanded publications has been that workloads have increased significantly. Furthermore, with newsrooms smaller than before consolidation, fewer journalists can mean an even greater reliance on media releases for news, providing citizens with less independent thought or critical analysis of decisions. Again, this leads to lower quality of information being disseminated to the public, and less chance of democratic education or involvement. Despite the inclusion of new players in the media market, a major gap remains from the closures by News Corp Australia and Australian Community Media, adding to the news deserts in communities across Australia, and the potential for greater misinformation, particularly through social media, and information gaps. The impact of these gaps goes beyond access to local news to affect local democratic engagement and community participation. Where news consumers are forced to rely on social media and/or news outlets reflecting the interests of local institutions for their local news and information, their capacities for engagement in informed local debate may be limited. And where fewer journalists than previously are covering local news, their scope for critically engaging on behalf of their audiences with information produced by organisations such as councils is also restricted, with the result that even where local news is available it may not fully reflect journalistic conventions such as balance and fairness.

#### 4. The impact of the News Media Bargaining Code

Finally, it is noted that while some larger regional publishers and groups (the ABC, Australian Community Media, Australian Country Press) have struck beneficial deals under the News Media Bargaining Code, it is unclear whether the revenue negotiated is being spent on maintenance or expansion of regional media services, or increased job opportunities. Previously, the Centre for Media Transition (2019) has argued that a weighting should be given to smaller and regional publishers, taking into account: public affairs content; localism; originality; independent ownership; and organisational capacity. Further, research needs to be done on how the code has affected the viability of regional media in Australia's news ecology, including what types of regional and rural publishers have failed to benefit from negotiations and why, and how the exclusion of some publishers who have an important regional role (e.g. SBS, small independent titles) will affect their capacity to respond to regional community needs. It is also crucial to analyse whether deals under the code have had any impact on either the scale of reporting of critical local news e.g. councils and state govt, rural land and water planning, health and industry development, or the scope of regional media diversity (e.g. publishers, news sources, diversity of reporters).

#### 5. Recommendations

We respectfully make the following recommendations to support local and regional journalism. Firstly, we identify two key areas that need to be supported:

- a. The growth and/or maintenance of locally based news outlets employing journalists who are embedded in local communities
- b. Opportunities for local journalism that go beyond publishing council press releases. This includes sufficient resourcing to assist in the production of independent local journalism free from local political and commercial interests.

To achieve this, we offer the following recommendations:

- a) Government subsidies or support for the wages of journalists employed by local news outlets and living and working in the regional community on which they are reporting. Ideally, this includes an ongoing

commitment to regional journalism to encourage journalists to stay for more than a year, to capitalise on long-standing knowledge and networks.

- b) Tax benefits for local and regional news organisations that maintain local offices with local staff, and which demonstrate commitment to fair and balanced coverage of key institutions such as local government, business and courts.
- c) A return of the Federal Government's scholarship program for regional university students studying journalism or related degrees in return for a commitment to spending at least two years working for a local news outlet in their home region, or another regional/remote area within their home state.
- d) In recognition of the value of journalism to society and its vital role in our democracy, a reduction in course fees for students undertaking a journalism degree or journalism major within a related named degree.
- e) In line with recommendations a) and b), we recommend support for investigative, in-depth and public-interest journalism in regional areas.
- f) Funding for detailed research into how the News Media Bargaining Code has affected the viability of regional media in Australia's news ecology.

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