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Federal Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts Inquiry into Australia's regional newspapers

SUBMISSION FROM GILGANDRA NEWSPAPERS PTY LTD

Introduction

Gilgandra Newspapers Pty Ltd is a regional, independent commercial and newspaper printer and publisher, located in Gilgandra NSW. The business is owned and run by me, managing editor Lucie Peart. We are also a member of Country Press NSW Inc, for which I am the current association president and as such I sit on the board of Country Press Australia.

We print six newspapers weekly (nearly 3500 copies in total) including our in-house publications The Gilgandra Weekly (over 110 years old), The Nyngan Weekly, and Narromine Star (joint venture with Dubbo Photo News), along with other independent titles The Warren Weekly, The Spectator (Walgett) and the Wellington and District Leader.

We employ: two printers (one full-time, one casual), three journalists, one administration role, one design production role and a casual intern journalist, along with myself as editor.

We have a head office and print site in Gilgandra, a new office of two people in Narromine and a journalist working remote in Nyngan.

I have owned the business for nearly six-years, having taken over from the previous owner/editor in 2016. The business was also removed from a partnership with the then Fairfax Media and became independent.

To give some background on my journey to a newspaper editor: I grew up in Canberra, went overseas when I left school and found my husband. He came from Gilgandra, so eventually we moved here to be with family. I got a job as the journalist at The Gilgandra Weekly in 2013, and quickly loved the job and its connection to the community. In 2015 I agreed to purchase the business and become independent. I now balance the responsibilities of a young family with the business. We received a grant under the Innovation Fund in 2020, (part-funded application) to upgrade some of our print machinery and launch a website.

In 2020 the closure of Australian Community Media's (ACM) Nyngan Observer, gave us our first opportunity to expand. We launched The Nyngan Weekly in October 2020, with a readership of 400. In a joint venture with a neighbouring publisher of the Dubbo Photo News, together we launched the Narromine Star in November 2021, with a readership of 600. Narromine is also a previous ACM held market.

We are now currently at capacity with newspaper printing, two full days per week. We also have a full commercial printing business, operating on the other days.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

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 (ACM) to suspend publication of print editions

Independent publishers were largely unaffected by the closure of ACM or NewsCorp papers, unless they were operating in the same market. The greatest effect felt was in the last 12 months with the closure of ACM print sites, where other publishers had to source different printers. This was not of concern to Gilgandra Newspapers, as we print on site. As part of our Innovation Fund, we upgraded some printing machinery to increase our capacity. We were only part-funded by this grant, so it eventually decreased our opportunity to purchase a bigger capacity printer. The grant also funded website creation and paid for some staff wages at a crucial time during the first months of the pandemic, this was a welcome outcome.

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The extent to which there has been entry into these or other markets by new operators, particularly small businesses

Our business, inspired by other publishers across the country, took advantage of gaps left by ACM. We reached out to the Bogan Shire Council (Nyngan, NSW) an hour and half west of our head office. We put in a proposal for a new newspaper, one of four independent proposals, and were chosen by the council. We began publishing The Nyngan Weekly in October 2020. It is a smaller publication, around 400 circulation compared to The Gilgandra Weekly at 800. Initially we began the paper with no staff on site in Nyngan; we were helped along by an ex-journalist at the council and various contributors. It took over six months to hire a full-time journalist, a wonderful Melbourne woman willing to move to the bush. We also advertised for a sales/admin role, which is yet to be filled. The paper began as 12 pages and is now 16-20 pages depending on the week.

After news of Nyngan Weekly was being established got out, another mayor – this time of Narromine Shire Council, gave me a call asking me if I would establish a new publication in their shire. Due to the birth of my second child and the establishment of the joint venture and again issue with hiring staff, this publication took a bit longer to come to fruition. We now publish 600 copies of the Narromine Star on a Thursday.

Our papers are printed in mono, due to the age and capacity of our printer set up (two machines from the 1980s). Our in-house papers are printed with a different spot colour masthead each week. We do offer spot colour printing in the paper; however, this isn't very popular.

It has been a positive for our business to expand into new markets, especially when they have been abandoned by ACM. Our readerships have embraced the new titles and we have attracted a steady stream of contributors.

The impact of the News Media Bargaining Code for regional and remote newspapers

The Gilgandra Weekly masthead has been part of deals struck by Country Press Australia with big tech companies. One of these deals has only recently commenced, so it is hard to comment on the success at this early stage. It does, however, have an implication on staffing and content production, as the deal requires us to increase our normal weekly output of content to provide a certainly daily number of articles for online. This may lead to a new employment opportunity to manage the digital content production. Country Press Australia also has other negotiations ongoing with other companies. So far, only one of our mastheads meets the required level of digital infrastructure to participate in the deal. Further investment in the digital side of the other mastheads will be explored soon, and grant funding might be needed for this to occur.

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.

The impacts of COVID in our area is only starting to take hold, two years into the pandemic. Our western area, up until mid-2021 was largely protected from the COVID-19 virus itself. However, local businesses and in turn our best advertisers, were great effected by the lockdowns and lack of patronage. Some of these advertisers have not returned to our publications.

Already this year and as school returns, it is hard to see a return to a fully functional town and society. This year will be full of interruptions, not due to lockdowns, but because of isolations due to rising and ongoing COVID infections.

Advertising from the federal government on COVID-19 and vaccines was most welcome and continues to be so. We received little state government advertising in the same period. Some ads for

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the Dine & Discover program, and a few about COVID-19. Most state government departments do not advertise and instead seek regular free publicity through media releases – there is generally no accountability if these media releases aren't run.

Our local councils are very supportive of our publications, as are our local members of parliament (state and federal) however, it is not solely up to them to subsidise government department messages just to get the editorial content published. We regularly see cost-shifting to local government or MPs about events or services that should be advertised by government-run departments in areas such as health, transport, education (TAFE), Local Land Services, and Medicare.

Conclusion

We cannot rely on local advertising to fund our important public interest journalism; in our experience digital uptake in advertising is not a full second income stream, print editions are still much stronger in regional areas. We do need to be financially supported for the service we provide and not just casually recognised as important.

You don't print out a webpage and put it on your fridge, but people still cut out the newspaper with their photo on it. They also like to talk to people in person and still prefer to pay even a \$15 bill by cheque – this is regional Australia.

As I wrote this submission, I was offline, as our SkyMuster satellite internet service was down due to a rainstorm – that is digital connectivity in the bush.

Local newspapers are family-run, small to medium enterprises with brilliant and passionate people looking to tell and record the stories of their town. They don't do it for a big pay cheque, they do it for love of the industry.

Recommendations

1. Funding

I support Country Press Australia in their recommendation for the federal government to re-commit to previous funding, as recommended by the ACCC. This includes funding for cadetship programs and any future funding such as the PING or Innovation Funds.

2. Government advertising

Governments need to come to the table and effectively collaborate with our industry. This should involve regular round tables with industry bodies such as publishers, media agencies and government departments. In short, governments should increase their support of local newspapers through advertising more often and by using more effective messaging. Departments such as the newly formed Resilience NSW would be a notable example of where a collaborative approach to ongoing advertising or sponsored content in local newspapers could effect change and service delivery.

3. Paper and printing costs

As suggested by Country Press NSW Inc - the cost and availability of newsprint is an emerging issue that needs to be looked at by the government.

Thank you to Federal Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts for their interest in our industry and I look forward to positive outcomes for local newspapers.

*Mrs L Peart, Managing Editor
Gilgandra Newspapers Pty Ltd*