

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts

Summary – Survey on Australia’s regional newspapers

Background

The Committee undertook a survey as the first stage of its inquiry into Australia’s regional newspapers. The survey launched on 17 January 2022 and consisted of 13 questions.

The survey was also promoted via Facebook and Twitter.

The survey closed on 11 February 2022 and received 1,731 responses.

Question 1: What Australian state or territory do you live in?

While all states and territories were represented, 1,146 of all respondents (66.21%) were from NSW or Queensland. The breakdown by state/territory is as follows:

- Victoria – 15.83%
- NSW – 35.82%
- Queensland – 30.39%
- Western Australia – 5.03%
- South Australia – 2.66%
- Australian Capital Territory – 2.25%
- Tasmania – 4.27%
- Northern Territory – 3.76%

Question 2: Do you live in a metropolitan or regional area?

Almost 1,600 of all respondents (92.03%) live in a regional area. The breakdown by location is as follows:

- Metropolitan – 7.97%
- Regional – 92.03%

Question 3: What is your age?

Over 1,000 of all respondents (62.33%) were aged 55 or older. The breakdown by age is as follows:

- Under 18 years – 0.23%
- 18 – 24 years – 2.54%
- 25 – 34 – 6.87%
- 35 – 44 – 12.07%
- 45 – 54 – 15.94%
- 55 – 64 – 24.73%
- 65 – 74 – 27.09%
- 75 or more years – 10.51%

Question 4: In the past 7 days, how did you access your news? (select all that apply)

Almost 1,200 of the respondents selected regional news service (print or digital) (68.81%), while 55.32% chose television.

- Regional news service (print or digital) – 68.81%
- Metropolitan news service (print or digital) – 41.20%
- Television – 62.69%
- Radio – 48.61%
- Social media – 55.32%
- Other (please specify) – 11.28%

Respondents who selected 'Other' largely cited that they accessed their news from the ABC website or the ABC news mobile application (34 respondents, 17.35%).

- "ABC local radio 783 is only reliable news source in the area." (#88)

24 respondents (12.31%) cited that they had accessed their news in the past 7 days through word of mouth, and friends and family.

Question 5: Has the way you access news changed in the past 12 months?

While 766 of the respondents replied 'yes', over 960 respondents said that the way they accessed news hadn't changed in the past 12 months. The breakdown is as follows:

- Yes – 44.25%
- No – 55.75%

Question 6: What is more of a priority for you when consuming news?

Almost 1,100 respondents opted for 'local' news, while 419 respondents chose 'national/global' news as a priority. The breakdown is as follows:

- Local – 62.10%
- National/Global – 24.21%
- Other (please specify) – 13.69%

180 of the 237 respondents who selected 'Other' cited that both local and national/global news are of equal priority (75.95%).

Other respondents stated that it depends on what is relevant to them and the topic or story.

Question 7: Do you access local news websites for your news?

The majority of the respondents (958) said yes. The breakdown is as follows:

- Yes – 55.34%
- No – 44.66%

Question 8: Do you subscribe to any local news services?

Most respondents (961) said they don't subscribe to local news services. The breakdown is as follows:

- Print – 19.82%
- Digital – 24.67%
- No – 55.52%

Question 9: Where do you find your local community and/or issues that are important to your local community represented most?

While 794 of the respondents (46.03%) chose regional news services (print or digital), 471 chose 'social media' as the second most popular option. The breakdown is as follows:

- Regional news service (print or digital) – 46.03%
- Social Media – 27.30%
- Radio – 8.64%
- Television – 5.22%
- Metropolitan news service (print or digital) – 2.26%
- Other (please specify) – 10.55%

Analysis of the 182 free text responses in 'other' indicated the following common themes:

- Local newspaper, newsletters, local online news (28 responses)¹
- Word of mouth/friends/family (28 responses)
- Community radio, community newsletter/bulletin board (16 responses)
- ABC news, radio and ABC's social media (11 responses)
- Local council (10 responses)

Approximately one quarter (46) of the free text responses said that the respondent does not receive or is unable to access news that is important to their local community.

Question 10: Are you aware of any initiatives in your community to support regional news services?

Just over 360 of the respondents mentioned the name of an initiative while 1,326 responded with 'no' or did not respond. 43 respondents wrote 'yes' but did not name an initiative in their response.

Initiatives cited that support regional news services in the community include:

- Local newspapers that have started as a community initiative (64 respondents)
- Local council distributing local information and news (28 respondents)
- Social media to advertise when the local paper is available or share the local news (26 respondents)
- Community radio/events (25 respondents)
- Independent publications (24 respondents)

69 respondents indicated 'local newspaper' or purchasing their local newspaper as an initiative to support regional news services.

¹ Words also included in this total: 'local news sheet', 'local papers'.

20 respondents mentioned the ABC, speaking of its coverage and support of regional news:

- “In the past 10 years we have seen all our local newspapers close and the apps that have sprung up are vastly inadequate. The ABC is the only decent local news service.” (#1012)
- “ABC radio is also a good source of news and info. They struggle getting enough funding though. In times of crisis they are essential, so they should be supported.” (#392)

Additionally, some of the free text comments included:

- “A group of local community members formed a syndicate and commenced a new local weekly newspaper called the Esperance Weekender. This provides excellent local news content. Another free local monthly newsletter called the Esperance Tide covers local lifestyle news.” (#548)
- “Our local newspaper was abolished, so the community got together and now we have a new local paper once a week. Better than a paragraph in the big city papers.” (#266)
- “Local Council has taken on the task of distributing a monthly newspaper after the local newspaper owner closed the doors due to being unable to sell the business. The community advised council that having a news outlet was of vital importance to their ageing population and thus a monthly newspaper version was produced.” (#10)
- “A group of former local paper employees, including three editors, put together a newspaper on a voluntary basis with some support from the local Rotary club and the Bendigo community bank. Within three months, opened an office in CBD and employed 2 people, now employing 5 (three volunteers still contributing). It is a tough slog, but worth it.” (#45)

Question 11: In the last two years have you advertised in a regional newspaper?

While 1,343 of the respondents (77.59%) said ‘no’, more than 180 (10.46%) replied 1-2 times. The breakdown of the responses is as follows:

- 1-2 times – 10.46%
- 3-4 times – 5.20%
- 5-6 times – 1.79%
- 7+ times – 4.97%
- No – 77.59%

Question 12: Are you aware of the News Media Bargaining Code?

The majority of the respondents said ‘no’ they were not aware of the News Media Bargaining Code. The breakdown of the responses is as follows:

- No – 82.55%
- Yes – 11.55%
- If yes, do you think it has had an impact on regional news services? 200 free text responses.

Of the 200 free text responses:

- 97 (48.5%) said no, the Code has not had an impact on regional news services
- 53 (26.5%) said yes, the Code has had an impact on regional news services
- 18 (9%) said that they don’t know
- Some respondents stated that it is too early to tell whether the Code has impacted regional news services.

Some of the respondents who cited 'no' it has not had an impact, stated that the reason was due to not having any local papers or the local papers did not have the budget or the ability to make agreements through the code:

- "Sounds like more of the pie for the big guys" (#173)
- "Our local papers were scrapped so it's not had any impact here" (#103)
- "Small news organisations have less ability to negotiate with tech giants" (#74)

Question 13: What do you think are the issues affecting regional news services?

While 230 respondents left the response blank, 492 of those who responded (32.78%) said that financial constraints, funding cuts and/or lack of government support were major issues affecting regional news services.

The breakdown of responses is as follows:

- Financial constraints, funding cuts, lack of government support – 32.78%
- Lack of coverage/reporters, lack of local information/local newspapers, lack of quality journalism – 21.25%
- Social media/Facebook – 14.39%
- Advertising revenue declining – 13.66%
- Big media monopolies/concentrated ownership/lack of diversity in ownership – 5.19%
- Local residents not wanting to subscribe to view online news that is usually delivered for free/paywalls – 4.93%
- Closures of local media offices/small newspapers – 3.26%

Issues cited by respondents that are affecting regional news services include:

- "Regional news services are battling a lack of funding and a lack of staff to cover all of the important issues in our community. They need more support so regional areas can stay informed..." (#1381)
- "Lack of coverage. Lack of reporters. Local newspapers are very generic with only a small amount of local news. And because papers only come out every few days the news is out of date." (#836)
- "Lack of local journalists to actually pursue the local area for items of interest." (#406)
- "Facebook pages on social media have usurped the role previously dominated by local newspapers..." (#1297)
- "Social media and digitising of news has had a terrible impact on local newspapers which are struggling to survive." (#805)
- "Concentration of ownership and using consolidated newsrooms to cover multiple areas, diluting original news reporting." (#1203)