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Perhaps we can thank Donald Trump and the soul-searching of the fractured nation that elected him. Perhaps it is because of the latest [round of redundancies at News Corp and Fairfax](#) here in Australia.

Whatever the reason, the debate about what's happening to journalism has broken out of the newsroom and entered the broader civic conversation. We have [an Australian Senate inquiry into public interest journalism](#). The prevalence of "fake news" has highlighted the importance of its opposite – what good journalists do.

But does journalism really matter? Do we really need to worry that journalists are losing their jobs, or will society simply adjust the way in which it satisfies its information needs?

The importance of journalism in democracy is asserted as a truism by journalists, media proprietors and politicians. Yet empirical evidence on how journalism affects the operations of democracy, and civic society more generally, is thin.

For the past two years a research project based at the centre for advancing journalism at the University of Melbourne has been trying to build that evidence. We have been finding out how and why journalism matters – and the implications of a decline in society's journalism capacity.

Our work has taken us to Moree, on the black soil plains of New South Wales, to look at how remote and regional communities understand themselves through media – and how that is changing. We have been to Broadmeadows, a disadvantaged suburb on the outskirts of Melbourne, and to Newcastle, where the investigative work of Joanne McCarthy was a decisive factor in then prime minister Julia Gillard's decision to appoint [the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse](#).

We have examined the undervalued, non-glamorous work of court reporting, and its relationship to justice. We have interviewed dozens of journalists, judges, police officers, civic leaders and community members, and pored over circulation and reach figures.

As a result, we can say a few things about how and why journalism matters, and how this is changing.

It's not hard to understand why assessing the impact of journalism is complicated and hard. As one of our research team likes to remind us, not everything important can be measured.

Journalism is really a number of different kinds of activity, and it is nearly always operating in a complex web of causation. It's not often that a clear line can be drawn between a particular news report and a social outcome. There are always other factors to consider.

Attempts to measure impact, largely conducted by journalists and media outlets, have foundered on these difficulties.

It is possible to measure how many people saw a piece of news content, but this is not all we mean by impact. If the item is a piece of light entertainment, quickly forgotten, then the fact that it was seen by many hardly matters.

On the other hand, a long-form piece of investigative journalism might be read by very few people, but if they have the power to make decisions and changes, then the impact may be very great – for example, a royal commission.

There isn't room here to describe everything about our methodology, but after much thought and talk, we defined three different kinds of impact.

Relational – how other institutions such as governments, NGOs and businesses respond to journalism.

Engagement – action taken by individuals as a result of journalism – assessed on a sliding scale from sharing or discussing with others through to protest, letter writing and campaigning

Reach – both raw audience numbers, and the different groups within the audience, from general public through to leaders and the powerful.

With this in mind, we examined five different kinds of journalistic activity: investigative, campaigning, journalism that reports on public institutions such as courts and parliaments and local councils, reportage and commentary and opinion.

Finally, we chose sites and types of journalistic activity for our case studies – from the courts of Melbourne to the beaches of Byron Bay, taking in urban, city fringe and remote and rural areas.

So what did we find?

The evidence suggests that, so far at least, it is not investigative journalism that is most at risk. Old media has safeguarded it, and new entrants to the media game are investing in it. Rather, it is what was once called the “journal of record” functions – the continuous and non-glamorous work of covering parliaments, courts and local governments – that has been hollowed out.

A matter of justice

In the courts of Victoria, the reduction in the numbers and the experience levels of reporters means that some areas of law are barely covered at all. Every day thousands of magistrates make decisions that go unreported even in local media. The police worry that this has an impact on deterrence.

Even here, getting precise numbers is difficult. The courts only recently began to register court reporters, and in any case sometimes reporters are in court for one case only, who come from other specialities, such as business or environment, and therefore are not on the registers.

Thirty years ago, the Age had a court reporting team including two senior reporters – one each for the supreme and county court, and a team of two to three more junior reporters covering the magistrates courts. More were brought in for particular stories or when things were busy.

Today the equivalent team that fluctuates in number day to day but peaks at three. The reporters run from building to building, trying to cover it all – and they are also responsible for more general crime reporting outside the courts.

Journalists, lawyers and judges lamented the departure of experience. In the past few years experienced court reporters who were part of the informal community that builds up around the courts have left. These journalists used to play an informal training role for younger talent coming through. Now, that doesn't happen, and the legal community notices the difference. We estimated that at least a combined 90 years of court reporting experience has left the profession in Melbourne in the last three years.

Important civil cases are rarely reported, and criminal cases are reported by journalists who pop in and out of court, spread thin and always struggling to catch up. Increasingly these reporters depend on media specialists employed by the courts themselves – which helps, but potentially undermines their independence. The courts have stepped up, taking more trouble to provide transcripts, judgments and other information to reporters who sometimes never actually step in to the courtroom, but are obliged to file news reports in any case.

Judges watch the behaviour of journalists in court closely. They take small things, such as whether a reporter understands how to enter and leave the court room, as measures of how experienced the reporters are.

And because they feel that less experienced reporters may not understand the rules of court reporting, judges are more likely to issue suppression orders if they are concerned about the impact of publicity. Poor reporting, they say, has in recent times led to more cases being aborted due to prejudicial publicity.

The impact of court reporting is cumulative, and institutions of the law are responding to its decline. Take out the journalists and over time you alter the way justice operates.

The impact of campaign journalism

We examined campaigning journalism, taking as our examples the Herald Sun's Take a Stand Campaign on domestic violence – part of the lead up to the Victorian royal commission on violence against women – and a much earlier example from the 1960s, the War on 1034 road-safety campaign by the Melbourne Herald, which created the political climate in which the Victorian government was able to make compulsory wearing of seatbelts and random breath tests to counter drink-driving.

In both these cases, the campaigns were a crucial part of a picture that included long-term work by social activists, politicians and others – but it was when the media amplified the work and the issues involved that decisive action resulted.

Then there was the investigative journalism of McCarthy of the Newcastle Herald. One of then prime minister Julia Gillard's last actions in office was to ring McCarthy to [tell her that her work had been crucial to the decision to set up a royal commission](#).

McCarthy started with what she described as a "boring as batshit" story idea about why enrolments in Catholic schools were falling. Months of work and many interviews later, she began to publish stories that rocked the town, the church and eventually the nation.

One of our interview subjects, a leathery faced survivor of sexual abuse in the Salvation Army, described what McCarthy had done. The effect, he said, was to give him a voice, to empower others to come forward, and to exert accountability on the institutions involved. "I've had the biggest boss

from the Salvos now emailing me ... This is all forced on them because the journos kept up the story. If the journos hadn't kept up the story, he wouldn't have given a bugger about me."

Quite. Sadly, since we did our Newcastle field work, the Newcastle Herald has lost two thirds of its staff. With them, the community has lost the skills, subtle social licence and professional understandings that allow a McCarthy to dig, interview and examine.

Local news and shoe leather

There are other stories of deficit. In Moree, the local newspaper the Moree Champion and the local radio stations are vital to the area. The city based media rarely reports on Moree, and when it does it is nearly always negative.

Yet the radio station has only one journalist, and he has no formal training. He joined the station six years ago from the spare parts industry. There are three journalists at the Moree Champion where there used to be four only a few years ago, and six years before that, and a staff of more than 30 printers and production workers have long gone. Today, behind the front section of the newspaper's premises stands a cavernous room, now dark and dusty and containing a single flatbed press in need of restoration. The paper is printed far away and trucked in.

At the shire council it has been noticed that reporters don't sit through the full council meetings any more, but come only when there is something on the agenda that interests them. Instead of detailed court reports of former times, the paper now publishes only a list of people convicted of offences, and the penalty.

Yet asked to imagine what civic life would be like without the local media, many of the people we interviewed either found it impossible to do so, or stated that they would have no means of knowing what was going on in their community. The local media were part of the way Moree knew and defined itself. They were a source of a sense of place and identity. Local media is still as important as ever in this remote area, and new media has made little or no impact on its role.

The disadvantaged outer Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows has two local newspapers, but reductions in reporters mean that they rarely leave the office – which is far away in another suburb.

Broadmeadows community worker Jaime de Loma Osorio said traditional media were unable to report local news as comprehensively as they once did because of syndication and cutbacks. "Who is filling that vacuum? Nobody here. Well, that's my perception. It would be really good to have alternative voices providing really good information."

Local reporters have become news takers rather than news makers. Community groups and even the local police were trying to fill the gap by setting up blogs and using Facebook. Some of these social media outlets have become part of the news ecology.

Broadmeadows police Sergeant Ivan Petrunic sees community benefits in sharing content for crime detection and prevention. For example, the local paper published "Street Watch", which was based on the popular news items from the police Facebook page EyeWatch.

There are green shoots here. The internet allows people to use podcasts, vodcasts, forum boards, Facebook pages, and Instagram to tell their own stories. This empowers community organisations, but it is a niche activity with a limited audience. It doesn't fill all the gaps in reporting that have resulted from the exodus of traditional local media. News releases are printed verbatim. The

journalists were, once again, largely dependent on the institutions they were covering for giving them the news.

While the basic news about crime can be taken from a Facebook page, there is very little traditional, independent, shoe-leather reporting in Broadmeadows. If there was a problem with the local police force, reporters stationed in an office suburbs away are unlikely to stumble across it as they might once have done if they were rubbing shoulders on the high street of the suburb they were covering.

The new news ecology

There are some good news stories. At the same time that the internet has undermined the business model for traditional journalism, it has also lowered the barriers to entry to the media business.

In the last few years we have seen new entrants to the news media, including local versions of international brands, taking advantage of the cost efficiencies of web-only publishing. They include this outlet, Guardian Australia, the Daily Mail, HuffPost (in partnership with Fairfax), BuzzFeed and now the New York Times. But all of these have tiny editorial staff numbers, and as a result, tight specialities. None are reporting state parliaments and the courts in the old-fashioned, comprehensive fashion.

On the other hand, new voices can be heard. Our research identified 150 Indigenous-controlled news sources including legacy print and broadcast media but also including a flourishing network of new and social media outlets. Some of these serve particular communities, others are issues or personality based.

Together, they are breaking news and distributing original content. One of the best known, IndigenousX, has partnered with Guardian Australia. Meanwhile its founder, Luke Pearson, has recently been hired by the ABC, largely thanks to the profile he has gained on social media.

This increase in voice for a neglected segment of Australian society is a shift in the ecology of news media in Australia. We continue to study what impact it might have on policy and public debates.

More generally, our evidence suggests that citizen journalism will continue to be part of the mix, and is increasingly powerful and important – but it is not enough. It works best as an adjunct to professional journalism, rather than on its own.

Few citizens have the skills, time and commitment to dispassionately report issues in which they are not personally invested. Hardly any have the time and dedication to report parliament, local government and the courts.

Citizen journalism is largely about the commentary and opinion function of journalism, and that is important – but not enough. Without facts, opinion is hollow and commentary impotent.

So what can we say in conclusion? As is so often the way with academic work, nothing simple.

Journalism matters in different ways and in different contexts. It is part of the glue of our society, part of the way we define ourselves and sort ourselves out.

It matters both because of the long-term cumulative effect of the activity – the presence of reporters in court and local government for example – and because of particular acts of campaigning and revelation.

According to best estimates by our colleagues at the New Beats Project – [a study of journalists who have been made redundant](#) – mainstream media has lost 3,000 journalists over the last five years. This is a large and worrying change in the way our society operates.

Our team believes we need to understand it better, and rapidly build the evidence base that might guide what must surely be a well-considered and determined public response.