

REGIONAL NEWS MEDIA





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CONTENTS

01 INTRODUCTION	5
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	10
02 SURVEY SAYS	12
03 GOING GLOBAL	26
Brazil	27
United Kingdom	32
Canada.....	36
New Zealand.....	40
European Union.....	44
India.....	46
USA.....	52
04 GOING LOCAL	60
Guardian Australian Rural Network.....	70
05 STUDENT REFLECTIONS	80
06 BLUEPRINT	92
REFERENCES	106



Suggested citation: Attard, M., Dickson, G., Jehangir, A., Newling, N., 2024. *Regional News Media*. Centre for Media Transition, University of Technology Sydney, Australia, cmt.uts.edu.au. DOI: [10.6084/m9.figshare.27965277](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.27965277)

This research was funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF) and approved by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee, project ETH21-5787-22-2. Our thanks to the VFFF for their generous support. Thanks also to Professor Derek Wilding, Co-Director of Centre for Media Transition for his vision, advice, and assistance.

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01 CHAPTER



MONICA ATTARD

INTRODUCTION

There have been five government inquiries and a stream of academic research into the plight of regional media in Australia. These inquiries and research describe the problem and attribute its causes to a variety of factors, primarily to the digital evolution which has swallowed up the advertising dollars available to fund journalism across all news media including metro media.

The impact of the digital transition, followed by the profound changes wrought by Covid-19 has left Australia grappling with an information problem. The past five years have seen considerable market change, according to the Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI), which has logged more than 600 market events since 2019, including more than 180 outlet closures (Dickson and Des Preaux, 2024). That is a sharp acceleration from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's (ACCC) estimate of 106 closures over the previous decade (ACCC 2019). Roughly two-thirds of total news contractions are skewed towards regional communities (Dickson and Des Preaux, 2024).

As we write this report there is more news of decline. In July 2024, regional print publisher Australian Community Media (ACM) announced that three Central West cities will lose their weekday printed editions of their daily newspapers; the Central Western Daily (Orange, founded in 1946), the Western Advocate (Bathurst, founded in 1848) and the Daily Liberal

(Dubbo, founded in 1874) will be available only online with expanded print editions on Saturdays. The Oberon Review and The Blayney Chronicle will stop publishing print editions completely and move online. The weekly printed editions of ACM's The Inverell Times, Moree Champion, Tenterfield Star, Glen Innes Examiner and Country Leader – all in the New England and North West region of NSW, along with the Dungog Chronicle and Gloucester Advocate between the Hunter Valley and the Barrington Coast and the Milton-Ulladulla Times on the South Coast will all discontinue their weekly printed editions. ACM will leave Lismore entirely, only a few years after it moved in. And in early September 2024, ACM announced another 35 jobs would go across The Canberra Times, the Newcastle Herald and the Illawarra Mercury.

Simultaneously, there have been deep cuts at News Corp and Nine Entertainment, as both companies face tough economic headwinds and Meta announces it will no longer contract news organisations to provide its Facebook platform with content. At News Corp, more redundancies were imposed on The Daily Telegraph than elsewhere in the business. This is notable given the masthead houses the regional coverage verticals which have provided the vast bulk of the group's regional coverage. Each of these businesses have cited the Meta decision as the primary reason for the cutbacks. ACM Managing Director Tony Kendall noted "every title in the ACM



portfolio has been affected by Meta’s decision to withdraw its funding for the trusted local news that Australian social media users rightly expect to see in their feeds” (Canberra Times, 2024).

In this final report in our research on the flow of news and information from regional Australia to metro audiences, we turn our attention to possible solutions that might ease the already significant bush/city divide.

Many different attempts have been made to apply solution-oriented programs and funding to address the clear depletion in regional news media. These include \$5 million in public funds made available for the hiring of cadets in regional locations through the Journalists Fund, \$60 million to fund innovation in rural and regional media and scholarships to support students from regional areas to study journalism (Attard et al. 2022). The Regional and Local Newspaper Publisher Fund provided \$15 million to help with the cost of increased newsprint costs which was threatening the sustainability of local newspapers which had not yet moved to digital only production and distribution. Finally, regional media businesses were successful in negotiating funding with

both Google and Meta, under the auspices of the News Media Bargaining Code. Country Press Australia negotiated deals for its 100+ members, while another 24 small publishers were given a financial boost under a deal negotiated by the Minderoo Foundation.

All of these have been temporary fixes. As noted, in 2024, Meta announced it would no longer negotiate with news organisations for a renewal of funding, and Google looks set to pay significantly less. Temporary funding programmes like those which permit the hiring of cadets and newsprint rebates are a sugar hit that do not meaningfully address the business model or economic environment for media companies, large and small.

These temporary fixes also do not address the broader issues of what types of news is produced in and for regional areas. With many regional outlets reduced to one person enterprises, the capacity to cover local issues is diminished, including the capacity to conduct investigative work on issues which have been subject to significant policy discussion and change. So too however, is the capacity of regional outlets to inform their communities of their place in the wider Australian

community diminished. With limited capacity to cover events beyond their immediate communities, many regional news media organisations rely on Australian Associated Press (AAP), a not-for-profit charitable company with deductible gift recipient status. AAP is a wholesale supplier of news and currently counts some 250 regional news outlets, predominantly radio outlets, as clients, providing them with national and international reportage and in the process, increasing the plurality of voices read by regional audiences. This provides some relief to regional outlets to use their limited financial resources to focus on reporting their own communities. As AAP noted in its submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Regional Newspapers: “Without AAP, it’s no understatement to say many would be forced to dramatically reduce their offering, deliver ad-hoc and sub-standard journalism from outside their local patch or abandon altogether the communities that so badly need them” (Parliamentary Inquiry into Regional Newspapers, Submission 49, 2022). Regional media is however, financially constrained in the amount of journalism it can purchase from AAP.

When major policy decisions impact a regional location, there is a community expectation that the issue will be covered by local media. With the diminution of regional news media, this capacity has also lowered. There is also an issue

around how much regional peoples’ priorities and concerns about major policy reaches metropolitan audiences. In 2023, the Centre for Media Transition (CMT) analysed coverage of two significant policy areas to determine the scope of regionally-formed narratives and the degree to which they appeared in metropolitan coverage. In our analysis of the coverage of water management and alcohol bans in the Northern Territory, both of which related to issues of national cohesion, we found little to no evidence of narrative movement from regional news ecosystems to metropolitan news ecosystems. Without strong, locally-based regional media, with a capacity to investigate as well as react, Australians have little hope of representation in national conversations. For these reasons, any efforts to support journalism as a whole must also focus on local, regional news. With this report we attempt to provide some paths forward.

The difficulties in news production are not unique to Australia, thus we have conducted a review of how select countries, with not dissimilar political economies in media are responding to the challenge. We looked at Brazil, Canada, Europe, India, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and found ideas that we think could be tested in Australia.

No single answer to the sustainability question exists; any future for media will involve multiple solutions employed



NO ONE ANSWER TO THE SUSTAINABILITY QUESTION EXISTS; ANY FUTURE FOR MEDIA WILL INVOLVE MULTIPLE SOLUTIONS EMPLOYED ACROSS INDUSTRY, GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY.

The moment in time when regional Australia was inextricably linked to mainstream media through corporate association and ownership is well in the past. By the time John B Fairfax's branch of the sprawling family took a controlling stake in Rural Press, the latter was a journalism juggernaut which journalist and author Pamela Williams described in her book Killing Fairfax as "rolling in earnings, firmly in the print space, but holding out hope that small communities would follow their favourite newspapers and weeklies online." A merger with the old Fairfax media empire was inevitable, if difficult to pull off. Rural Press owned a large number of newspapers and radio stations. Bringing a metro and non-metro company together would mean Australia-wide coverage with the regional papers still attracting local ads to counterbalance the loss of classified advertising in the metro papers. In April, 2007, nineteen years after Warwick Fairfax had destroyed the Fairfax family hold on the media empire, the merger was proclaimed. The merged entity valued at nearly \$9 billion had a geographic footprint covering the metropolitan markets of Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra, and the printing and publishing of over 240 rural, regional and community publications. Critically, as John B Fairfax noted at the time: "The merger with Rural Press will provide opportunities for Fairfax Media to leverage its online media businesses and expertise across regional communities throughout Australia" (Kruger and Murray, 2006). At a moment in time when Australia's cross media ownership rules were about to be relaxed and media moguls were circling, it made Fairfax too big for anyone to take over.

It is a matter of record that John B Fairfax severed his ties with Rural Press and the company that bore his family name, in 2011. Seven years later, the ties between the Fairfax name and the newspaper empire itself ended completely when Nine Entertainment Co Holdings Ltd paid \$2.16 billion for the company. For the first time in a 177-year-old history of largely family ownership, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Australian Financial Review would not carry the Fairfax name. Moreover, the ripples from this seismic shift would continue for years and envelop rural and regional publications.

In 2019, Nine Entertainment struck a \$115 million deal with Australian Community Media to offload the regional newspaper group. More than 160 regional mastheads changed hands, including the Newcastle Herald, the Illawarra Mercury, The Canberra Times, The Land and The Examiner. Nine and ACM continued to share content for a period of time. However, as Newcastle Herald reporter Michael Parris told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) at the time of the sale, the paper where he had worked for 24 years would lose vital access to metro audiences. "We have professional links with these people, our stories appear in those papers, its seen as a stepping stone for young reporters to move onto those titles, to progress those careers."

Whilst some saw the ACM acquisition as good news for regional audiences, allowing rural and regional publications to focus more narrowly on rural and regional issues (ABC 2019), others like Mark Baker, former editor of The Canberra Times noted that readers in Canberra were not only interested in local news. In his view, the sale of the paper to ACM pushed the publication "down the totem pole" from a metro paper to a regional publication (ABC 2019), a view similarly held at the Newcastle Herald and Illawarra Mercury. This sentiment appears more prescient now than at the time. It speaks to a concern about access to news and information beyond the geographical confines of a publication and a definition of news that exceeds local requirements or curiosity and encapsulates the affairs of the nation and indeed, the world as a whole.

across industry, government and community. In this report we have also brought together our observations of programmes from around the world and the ideas and evidence that have been generated here in Australia, to sketch out a blueprint of the measures that we think will help.

We also look back on three years of the Guardian Australia Rural Network (GARN), assessing its impact with audiences and have conducted focus groups in three regional locations and in Sydney to collect insights into the needs of news media consumers, their levels of satisfaction with metro offerings on regional issues, and the importance people living in regional locations place on having their voices heard in metro news. In Sydney, our focus group reflected on how much they knew of regional Australia and how much they wanted to know.

In keeping with a tradition in this series of reports, we also sought the reflections of UTS graduate journalists assigned to Guardian Australia's Rural Reporting Network, of their time posted to regional locations. In this edition, Aston Brown and Eliza Spencer report from Warwick in Queensland and Cowra in New South Wales. Aston and Eliza follow in the footsteps of three previous UTS Journalism graduates posted to regional locations for Guardian Australia's Rural Reporting Network –

Natasha May, Khaled Al Khawaldeh and Fleur Connick whose reflections can be found in the first and second regional report.

We provide the final results from our three-year survey of regional news in metropolitan media, finding a severe decline in the flow of regional news and information to metro audiences across the life of this project.

Over the past twenty years, journalism has become accustomed to disruption. Whilst regional newsrooms, small in scale and struggling financially, have adapted less efficiently to technological change, the latest disruptor – generative artificial intelligence (AI) – might not prove to be as difficult a challenge as other phases of change. In the first instance, help is available, with tech companies such as Google offering training to smaller newsrooms, particularly those located regionally. Secondly, lessons from the application of AI to subscription management have shown even small newsrooms that new technologies such as generative AI will lead either to new sources of funding, or new reasons for contraction, if appropriate guardrails are deployed. What has remained unchanged over the past 20 years of digital impact is society's dependence on news media to ensure good governance, a sustainable and healthy democracy and our participation in it.



WHAT HAS REMAINED UNCHANGED OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS OF DIGITAL IMPACT IS SOCIETY'S DEPENDENCE ON NEWS MEDIA TO ENSURE GOOD GOVERNANCE, A SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY DEMOCRACY AND OUR PARTICIPATION IN IT.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Over three years of research, we have identified a steady decline in production of regional local news by metropolitan news outlets, in the number of stories, the types of issues covered, and where coverage is occurring. Of the outlets surveyed, The Daily Telegraph is presenting the most regional stories to its Sydney audience, but none of the organisations surveyed gave regional issues significant prominence.

2 Regional and metropolitan news audiences have different needs and interests, and any alignment between them has been impacted by contractions in regional media. Regional audiences were dismissive of metro news outlets' efforts to cover local issues unless they perceived the reportage was derived from a connection to community, usually through the physical presence of a journalist. Metropolitan audiences reported being uninterested in regional stories unless they concerned national narratives directly relevant to them, such as energy production.

3 A review of select countries identified multiple models that could help to increase the sustainability of regional news businesses and the visibility of regional stories to metropolitan audiences.

4 Collaborative journalism, particularly around national issues that affect both multiple regional and metropolitan audiences simultaneously – such as water – could leverage the expertise of local media while providing both greater resources and prominence to regional issues. Examples from Brazil suggest that sustained collaboration on shared challenges like addressing misinformation is possible even between significant commercial rivals.

5 Network journalism allows for a sharing of infrastructure, back-end processes and common journalism practices, as well as content, and could be developed in the Australian context to allow for a more efficient allocation of scarce resources. International examples, such as the United Kingdom's Local News Partnerships or New York Times local media network, offer a template which can be adapted to suit the unique needs of the Australian market. Revisiting approaches to intellectual property, such as through greater uptake of the Creative Commons framework or in contractual arrangements akin to the Radio New Zealand's 'radical sharing' approach, may increase the overall amount of regional journalism available to audiences.

6 News aggregation platforms, similar to those widely used in India, may provide a new pathway for reaching metropolitan audiences with regional stories.

7 Developing the not-for-profit media sector could see greater seed funding reaching newsrooms, particularly those with a social purpose and innovative production models. Charitable news companies may thrive in markets where commercial media may struggle, and philanthropic and social impact investment is likely to have a higher risk tolerance than other seed funding.

8 Focus groups reflecting on output from the Guardian Australia Rural Network which uses a 'hub and spoke' model, reported little cognisance of the depth and scope of the networks reporting. They did however identify the value of this reporting to audiences outside their communities and in keeping authorities accountable. Regional focus groups reported a level of mistrust of urban based media reporting from regional locations, whilst city-based participants reported little interest in the network's reporting.

02 CHAPTER

GARY DICKSON

SURVEY SAYS

Over the last three years, we have regularly sampled Sydney-based print, digital, radio and television media outlets in order to quantify the amount of regional news reaching metropolitan audiences. This chapter reports the final round of results, covering samples in 2023 and 2024.

The survey informs the research project's goal of understanding the investment by major metropolitan news companies in regional stories. Within these regularly conducted surveys, we are seeking to answer the following research questions:

- What stories from regional areas are published/broadcast to metropolitan news audiences?
 - What are the subjects of such stories?
 - Are there differences in coverage of different kinds of regional areas?
- What prominence is given to regional news stories?
- What are the pathways by which news stories from regional areas reach metropolitan news audiences?

The latter two research questions have been given dedicated attention through both these biannual content surveys and other studies throughout our research and have therefore been descoped from this stage of the study.

The research question “What prominence is given to regional news stories?” was the focus of the first report, both within the survey research, a study of the media market in New South Wales, and qualitative research with metropolitan news editors about regional news. We found that regional stories are not given much prominence, and that though editors report wanting to produce and elevate regional stories, they do not believe their predominantly metropolitan audiences are interested.

The research question “What are the pathways by which news stories from regional areas reach metropolitan news audiences?” was the focus of the second report in 2023, and particularly two detailed studies of major policy issues that affect both regional and metropolitan areas: the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and alcohol bans in the Northern Territory. This research found few examples of narratives travelling from regional media into metropolitan, but did find that local media can act as a corrective or challenge to the dominant frames of more mainstream titles.

This final survey addresses the first question set, which is best answered through content analysis: what stories are reaching metropolitan audiences, what are the subjects, and how does coverage differ across regions?



Survey period

Two survey periods were included in the first year’s report, in March 2022 (S1) and May 2022 (S2) (Attard et al. 2022); two in the second year’s report, in October 2022 (S3) and April 2023 (S4) (Attard et al. 2023). The results of two final surveys are presented in this report:

- The fifth survey period (S5) was the seven consecutive days between Monday 23 October – Sunday 29 October 2023. In this period a total of 255 items were coded across eight news outlets, of which 151 concerned a regional issue or place.
- The sixth survey period (S6) was the seven consecutive days between Monday 8 April – Sunday 14 April 2024. In this period a total of 136 items were coded across seven news outlets, of which 90 concerned a regional issue or place.

The coders and overall structure of the data collection remained consistent between the second set (S3, S4) and third set (S5, S6) of surveys, with the same coding rules applicable and options available.

Sample

Eight news outlets are included in the results for S5, and seven news outlets are included for S6. The study captures outlets across each of the largest metropolitan media companies (News Corporation Australia, Nine Entertainment Co, Seven West Media); a medium-sized digital news company (Guardian Media Group) and a public broadcaster (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)).

The number of outlets sampled has been increased since the second survey set, with the addition of Nine News Sydney (TV bulletin) in both sample periods five and six and ABC Local Radio Sydney in S5. ABC Local Radio Sydney was not able to be included in S6 as the public broadcaster was not able to supply the bulletins for assessment and no backup source was found.

The following outlets in Table one were sampled in the study.

Print has been excluded from consideration for each survey period; the digital mastheads of Sydney’s two major metropolitan daily newspapers are included instead. We considered that the digital product is likely to contain a

greater sample of story output and be accessed by a larger audience than a print newspaper. These titles are referred to as “digital print” to distinguish them from the digital-only news outlet in the sample, Guardian Australia.

Only a subset of the total content published by each outlet was coded each day, reflecting the specific interest of this project in stories about regional New South Wales.

- For digital print and digital outlets, coders first identified sections of the website that contained news from across New South Wales. Output to these sections were tracked using a combination of really simple syndication (RSS) feeds, sitemaps, Factiva and manual searching, and coded. Only news stories were coded, not opinion or analysis pieces.
- For radio and television outlets, coders assessed either the nightly news bulletin (television) or a selection of news bulletins at regular intervals throughout the day (radio) totalling 30 minutes. Talkback segments on radio broadcasts were not included in the assessment.

- For all outlet types, only stories about regional issues, places or people are included within the reported results. Stories located in Sydney or with no clear local geography have been excluded.

With this method the total output of publishers is more thoroughly assessed for regional stories than the output of broadcasters. With digital content we can easily assess all output on any given day and are confident in identifying all regional stories; whereas with broadcast we are only coding the stories that make it to air in select bulletins while not sampling those that may appear in other bulletins or only on web. This imbalance should be considered against the results presented. While we can be confident that we are assessing all digital print regional content in the period, we cannot say the same for broadcast.

One final caveat applies to the sample; every day The Daily Telegraph publishes more than 100 stories that are not written by a journalist but are instead AI-generated, covering traffic conditions, fuel prices, weather, court listings and business liquidations, localised to different areas around the state.

Outlet	Format	Ownership	S3	S4
Daily Telegraph	Digital print	News Corp Australia	✓	✓
Sydney Morning Herald	Digital print	Nine Entertainment Co	✓	✓
Guardian Australia	Digital	Guardian Media Group	✓	✓
Seven News Sydney	Television	Seven West Media	✓	✓
Nine News Sydney	Television	Nine Entertainment Co	✓	✓
ABC News Sydney	Television	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	✓	✓
ABC Local Radio Sydney	Radio	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	✓	
Nine News Radio Sydney	Radio	Nine Entertainment Co	✓	✓

TABLE 1 | OUTLETS INCLUDED IN SURVEY PERIODS FIVE AND SIX.



These articles were not coded and have not been included in the discussion.

Survey results

We found serious declines in the total number of news articles about regional Australia that were published in the fifth and sixth survey periods as compared to the initial survey in March 2022, with the results varying by outlet. The number of stories about regional areas published in metropolitan titles was almost a third lower in October 2023 as compared to March 2022, with the largest percentage falls at the Guardian Australia and Seven News Sydney. ABC News Sydney recorded a small increase in this period.

Declines were even more pronounced in S6, with an overall fall of almost two thirds as compared to the first period. Every outlet sampled recorded a decline since S1. The smallest decline was at The Daily Telegraph, which produced only 45 per cent of the number of stories as in S1. The largest fall was at ABC News Sydney, where no regional stories were observed across S6, followed by Guardian Australia and The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) and Nine Radio Sydney. Each of these produced less than a single story about regional Australia per day during S6.

Nine News Sydney and ABC Radio Sydney have been separated in these results as they were not sampled in S1, and therefore comparison is not possible. Nine News Sydney showed no change in the number of regional stories between S5 and S6. ABC Radio Sydney was not available for

sampling in S6, but was not found to be a significant broadcaster of regional stories to its metropolitan audience in S5.

Every observation should be understood with the caveat that many of these shifts, though high in percentage terms, represent a relatively small overall change in the number of articles published or broadcast. Increasing from seven to 19 articles is a large 171 per cent increase; but only represents 12 additional stories over the course of a week. These shifts in percentage terms are unreliable due to the small sample size at most outlets.

Nevertheless, across three years this survey research has consistently found

that the number of stories about regional Australia in metropolitan areas is in serious decline.

Across the entire life of this research project no other news outlets have appeared as dominant in regional coverage as The Daily Telegraph. This reflects the large investment that News Corp makes in regional local journalism, far beyond what rival metropolitan daily newspaper The Sydney Morning Herald produces. It also appears to be the case, however, that The Daily Telegraph is better at surfacing regional stories for metropolitan audiences than other surveyed outlets. Broadcasters including the ABC, Seven and Nine in particular produce far more regional reporting than these results suggest;

however, these stories are not presented to a Sydney-based audience with the same frequency, and therefore are not available for assessment in this Sydney media-focused study.

A discussion of results from The Daily Telegraph is presented later in this chapter.

Coverage by day

Across the life of this project, we have found no consistent pattern of coverage across all outlets during the week. The Daily Telegraph, for example, which published the largest volume of stories and is therefore the most reliable data available, appears

	S1	S5	S1-S5 diff		S6	S1-S6 diff	
			Net	%		Net	%
Daily Telegraph	141	95	-46	-33	64	-77	-55
Sydney Morning Herald	29	20	-9	-31	5	-24	-83
Guardian Australia	27	7	-20	-74	4	-23	-85
Seven News Sydney	11	4	-7	-64	3	-8	-73
Nine News Sydney	18	13	-5	-28	4	-14	-78
ABC News Sydney	7	8	1	14	0	-7	-100
Subtotal	233	147	-86	-37	79	-154	-66
Nine News Radio Sydney	-	11	-	-	11	-	-
ABC Radio Sydney	-	5	-	-	-	-	-
Total	233	163	-70	-30	91	-142	-61

TABLE 2 | THE NUMBER OF ARTICLES CODED FOR SURVEY PERIODS ONE, FIVE AND SIX; AND THE ABSOLUTE AND PERCENT VARIANCE BETWEEN THE FIRST AND LATER SURVEY PERIODS.

to have a general pattern of publishing less toward the end of the week than at the beginning (see Figure 3). This was not universally true: in April 2024 the Telegraph started low at the beginning of the week and peaked on Thursday; in October 2023 the peak was Wednesday. Most outlets stayed much more consistent in their output each day, though producing far less content.

Figure 3 only includes stories published by The Daily Telegraph across five sample periods. S2 in April 2022 has been excluded as it was a specific sample of election-related stories and not a full sample.

Localism

The following sections focus on local news stories about regional areas in metropolitan outlets. Where an item is not place-based and instead represents an issue that affects regional areas across the state or country it is not included in these results.

Localism is determined using two Australian Bureau of Statistics frameworks: Remoteness and Statistical Area Four (SA4). There is a grey area between a local story and general regional story where it is about a state-wide or national trend but uses local examples as illustration, or conversely, uses national statistics to support a local experience. Examples here would be a story about regional rental markets broadly that is supplemented by an interview from somebody in one town; as compared to a story about a localised COVID-19 outbreak with discussion of state-wide and national

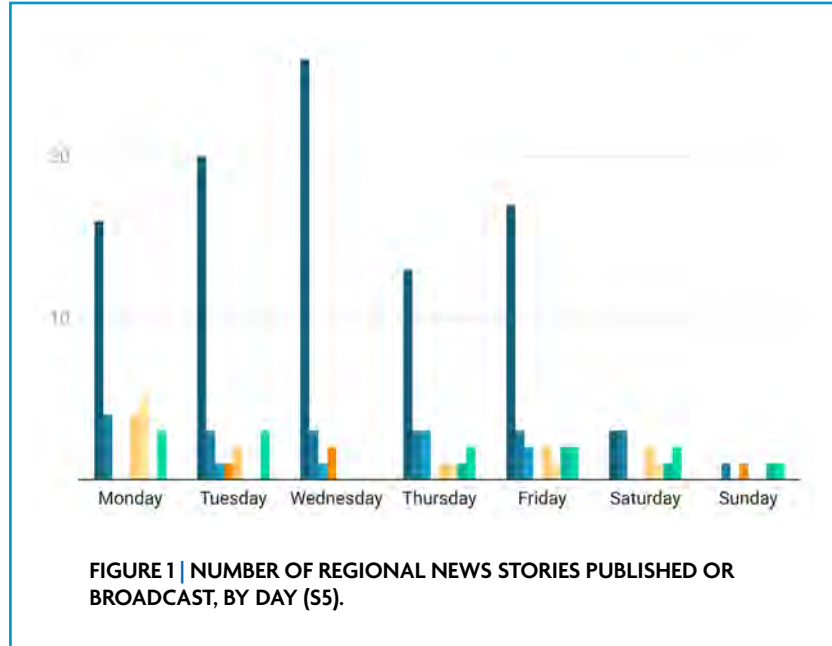


FIGURE 1 | NUMBER OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES PUBLISHED OR BROADCAST, BY DAY (S5).

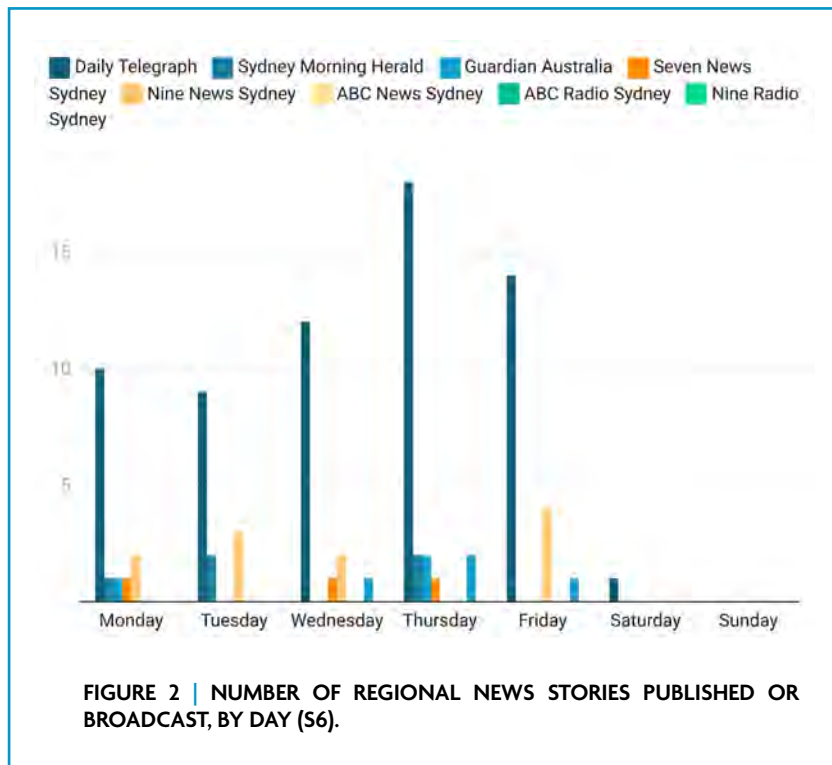


FIGURE 2 | NUMBER OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES PUBLISHED OR BROADCAST, BY DAY (S6).

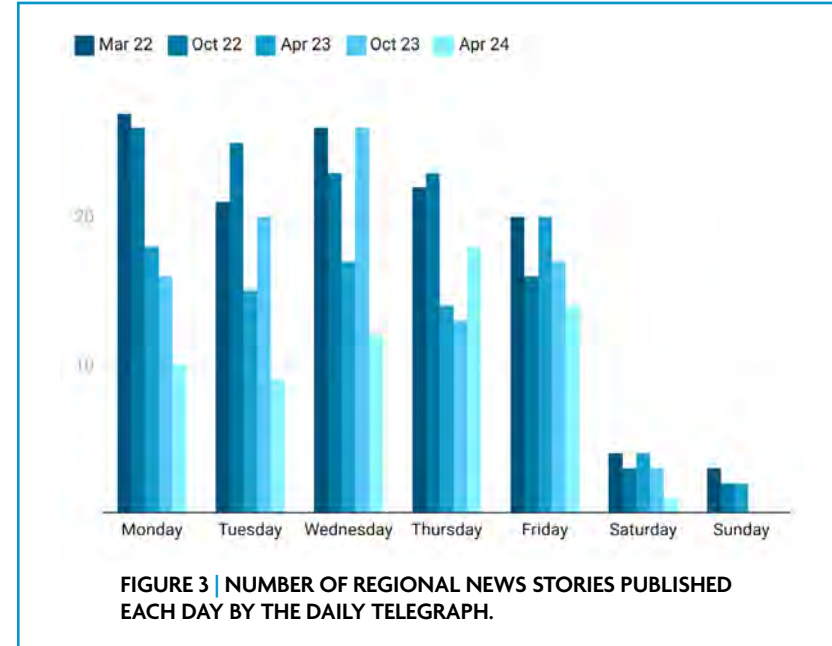


FIGURE 3 | NUMBER OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES PUBLISHED EACH DAY BY THE DAILY TELEGRAPH.

SA4	TEL	SMH	GUA	SEV	NIN	ABCT	ABCR	2GB
Capital Region	8	2	0	0	0	1	1	1
Central West	2	2	1	0	0	0	1	1
Coffs Harbour	13	4	1	0	2	1	0	1
Far West	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Hunter Valley	6	3	0	0	2	0	1	0
Mid North Coast	10	2	0	0	2	0	0	4
Murray	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
New England	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1
Richmond-Tweed	25	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Riverina	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0
S. Highlands	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regional	72	16	2	1	7	5	4	10
Central Coast	9	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Illawarra	12	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Newcastle	5	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Regional city	26	2	0	0	1	1	1	1
Total	98	18	2	1	8	6	5	11

TABLE 3 | NUMBER OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES ABOUT EACH STATISTICAL AREA, BY OUTLET (S5).

trends. Coders assessed whether the story was primarily local or general regional on balance, but there is room for subjectivity in this decision.

We found that no outlet provided coverage of the entire state in either survey period. The Daily Telegraph came closest in both periods, but did not cover any stories in the Riverina in S5 and did not cover the Central West, Murray and Riverina in S6. The Sydney Morning Herald had a broad spread in S5, but missed Murray, the Southern Highlands and both Illawarra and Newcastle. Its coverage was far lower in S6. No other outlet came close to covering the whole state.

The Daily Telegraph's coverage was strongest on the northern coast, with 16 codes against the Richmond-Tweed region on the border with Queensland, and 11 in the adjacent Coffs Harbour region. The Telegraph operates four publications in the former area and two more in the latter, by far the highest concentration of titles and journalists that News Corp has in New South Wales outside of Sydney. In S5 the Mid North Coast region, which includes Port Macquarie and is south of Coffs Harbour, was also highly covered, though this dropped in S6.

The Capital Region statistical area was another strong focus for the Telegraph, though this is primarily because the south coast, including Bega, Moruya and Batemans Bay, is within this SA4. The Daily Telegraph's the South Coast News local title is the source of most coverage of this area, whereas there is very little coverage of Queanbeyan, Goulburn or the Snowy-Monaro.

Statistical area	TEL	SMH	GUA	SEV	NIN	ABCT	ABCR	2GB
Capital Region	5	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Central West	0	1	1	2	0	0	-	0
Coffs Harbour	11	1	0	0	1	0	-	0
Far West	8	0	0	0	0	0	-	1
Hunter Valley	4	1	0	0	1	0	-	0
Mid North Coast	3	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Murray	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
New England	1	0	0	0	1	0	-	0
Richmond-Tweed	16	0	0	0	1	0	-	2
Riverina	0	1	0	0	0	0	-	0
S. Highlands	2	0	0	0	2	0	-	0
Regional	50	4	1	2	6	0	-	3
Central Coast	5	0	0	1	1	0	-	0
Illawarra	3	1	0	0	1	0	-	0
Newcastle	4	0	0	0	2	0	-	1
Regional city	12	1	0	1	4	0	-	1
Total	62	5	1	3	10	0	-	4

TABLE 4 | NUMBER OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES ABOUT EACH STATISTICAL AREA, BY OUTLET (S6).

The Newcastle, Central Coast and Illawarra areas were all well-covered across both periods. Coverage of the Far West and Orana at The Telegraph is heavily centred around Dubbo, while the few Hunter Valley stories are produced by the newsroom in Newcastle.

We found little to no coverage in either survey period of three regions where the Telegraph doesn't appear to have an active presence: despite nominally having a publication in Wagga Wagga, there was no coverage of the Riverina in either S5 or S6. The Bowral News failed to produce any stories about its Southern Highlands region in either period; four stories about this area in S5 were actually in Shoalhaven and

produced by The South Coast News. The Albury-Wodonga newsroom produced a single story about the Murray region in S5 – a story about Albury Hospital (Cox 2023), and none in S6.

The Sydney Morning Herald's attention was more thinly spread, with only a couple of stories in each location. In Coffs Harbour in S5, the paper covered horse racing (Sydney Morning Herald 2023; Schell 2023), a bushfire (Keoghan and Segardt 2023) and local health infrastructure (Thomson 2023). Similarly, of three stories in the Hunter Valley in this period, two were horse racing-related and one was about a bushfire (Shteyman and Banks 2023).

The Herald's regional coverage collapsed in S6, with only five codes across the state: one each in the Central West, Coffs Harbour, the Hunter Valley, Riverina and Illawarra. The Central West and Illawarra stories were both about horse racing (Sydney Morning Herald 2024a; 2024b), the Hunter Valley and Riverina stories were violent crimes (McPhee 2023; Sibthorpe 2023), and in Coffs Harbour somebody bought a beach house (Macken 2024).

Nine News Radio had similarly broad but thin attention, with single stories covering more than half of the regions in S5, and far less in S6. Its strongest coverage was of the Mid North Coast area in October 2023, driven by two events: a bushfire in Hat Head National Park near Kempsey (Nine News Radio 2023a; 2023b), and a helicopter crash near Port Stephens (Nine News Radio 2023c; 2023d). Stories in the Central West, New England and Richmond-Tweed areas were all crime-related, and in the Capital Region the station covered the New South Wales governments' authorisation of a cull of wild brumbies (Nine News Radio 2023e).

The radio station's regional coverage in April 2024 was lower, but included two stories about a stabbing in Kingscliff, just south of Tweed Heads – both the initial incident (Nine News Radio 2024a) and when a man appeared in court to face charges the following day (Nine News Radio 2024b). In the Far West and Orana region, the station covered a decision by Warrumbungle Council to start allowing solid fuel fires at campsites (Nine News Radio 2024c).

Nine's television arm, Nine News Sydney, had the second highest coverage of regional issues in S6 and third highest in S5. This was heavily driven by crime; it aired stories about incidents in the New England, Hunter Valley, Richmond-Tweed, Newcastle and Central Coast regions. Two non-crime-related stories in the Southern Highlands still concerned a death: a bushwalker who went missing, and whose body was later found (Nine News Sydney 2024a; 2024b).

Guardian Australia was not found to be a significant producer of locally-based regional news in either sample period, covering only two regions in S5 and one in S6. In October 2023 both regions were the same story about a gold mine proposed for Wiradjuri country that has insufficiently considered Indigenous cultural heritage (Spencer 2023). The single story in S6 was connected to the Cowra local government area (Spencer 2024).

Subjects

Each item coded was recorded against up to three subjects, representing the topic of the story. As each item could be coded to multiple subjects, the total number of subjects exceeds the total number of stories. Where no stories were recorded against a subject, that line has been removed from the tables in this section for improved formatting. Like all others, this table only includes stories that have some connection to a regional area.

There were 29 unique subjects identified in S5, a small increase from S4 (28). The number of coded subjects

Subject	TEL	SMH	GUA	SEV	NIN	ABCT	ABCR	2GB
Accidental injury	4	0	1	1	3	0	2	4
Arts and culture	2	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
Business, other	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Business, primary	1	3	3	0	0	0	0	0
Climate change	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Comm. Event	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Comm. Individual	14	2	0	0	3	0	0	2
Court report	41	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Crime non-violent	26	1	0	0	2	0	0	4
Crime violent	30	2	0	0	4	2	1	2
Defence	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disasters	2	4	1	3	2	1	0	3
Economy	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Education	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Environment	3	2	1	1	0	1	2	1
Food and drink	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Govt, federal	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Govt, local	9	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Govt, state	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
Health	6	1	1	0	0	1	1	1
Immigration	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Indigenous	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Industry	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure	9	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Motoring	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	3	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Property	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Religion	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Sport, int.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sport, local	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sport, national	1	8	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sport, state	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Technology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Weather	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total	181	27	17	5	16	9	7	17

TABLE 5 | SUBJECT OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES, BY OUTLET (S5).



(278) also increased from S4 (256). The difference between the number of coded subjects in S4 and S5 (23) is, coincidentally, also the number of subject codes that were added by the inclusion of Nine News Sydney (16) and ABC Radio Sydney (seven).

Consistent with the lower number of stories overall, these numbers fell in S6, with only 26 unique subjects identified and 150 coded subjects overall. The absence of data from ABC Radio Sydney in S6 cannot explain this very large decrease as coded subjects fell at all outlets assessed.

Courts and crime were the largest category of coverage in both survey periods (S5 and S6), driven particularly by The Daily Telegraph's coverage. Most outlets produced at least one crime story – only Guardian Australia did not produce a crime story across either sample period. The Daily Telegraph was by far the source of most crime stories. In S5 it produced 98 per cent of court reports, 79 per cent of non-violent crime stories and 73 per cent of violent crime stories. In S6 it produced 97 per cent of court stories, 89 per cent of non-violent stories crime and 70 per cent of violent crime stories. Most of these appeared to be reporting from Local Court and heavily covered guilty plea hearings, consistent with prior research

that has found time-poor journalists tend to cover lower courts due to the speed at which cases are heard and decided (see Hess and Waller 2013; Dickson et al. 2023).

The S6 combined crime stories that the Telegraph produced in S5 were 20 per cent of all stories in the corpus across all outlets. In S6 this increased; 40 crime stories were 27 per cent of stories. These results suggest that a very large proportion of the news that metropolitan audiences receive about regional Australia are court and crime-related.

These results are consistent with previous surveys in this research project, as well as research by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative (Dickson et al. 2024), which found that News Corp and Australian Community Media dominate court reporting in regional areas, producing as much as 92 per cent of all print and digital reporting of outlets in the study. No other entity – including the ABC, Australian Associated Press and independent newspapers – produced nearly as much coverage.

A large number of stories in S5 concerned individuals in the community. This subject tag was frequently included alongside other subjects – an individual would most often

be the subject of coverage due to something happening to them, such as experiencing crime or a disaster, or due to their own activities, like organising an event in the community.

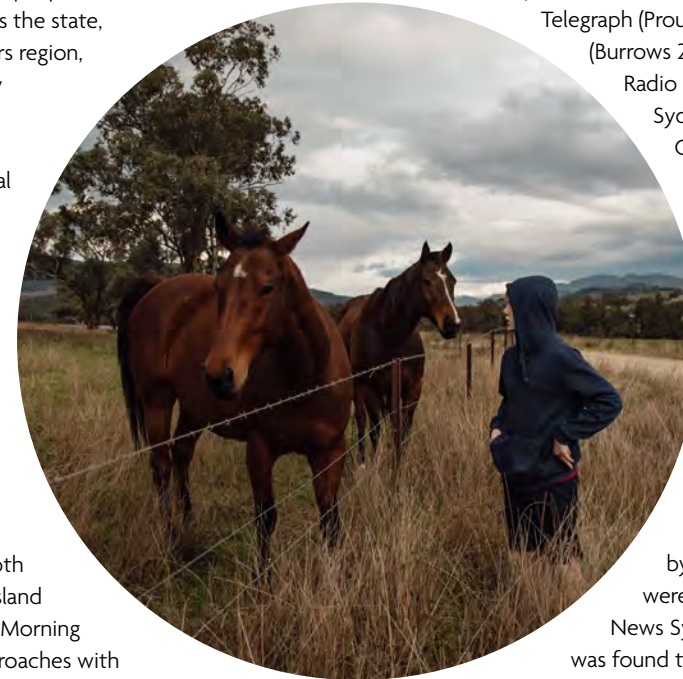
Only ABC Radio Sydney did not produce any stories about natural disasters in the fifth sample period. This week coincided with bushfires across the state, including in the Northern Rivers region, covered by Nine News Sydney (Creedon 2023), near Grafton, covered by the ABC (Parmeter 2023), and at Hat Head National Park near Kempsey, which was covered by multiple outlets. During the week the Hat Head fire was investigated as arson, which provided further opportunities for coverage as information was given to media (Nine News Radio 2023a; 2023b). The Guardian Australia produced only one story but included broader coverage of fires in both New South Wales and Queensland (Belot 2023) while The Sydney Morning Herald combined the two approaches with both locally specific information in the Hunter (Shteyman and Banks 2023) and aggregated reporting from across New South Wales (Keoghan and Segart 2023). The SMH additionally produced a feature story profiling regional firefighters in connection with the events (Moir 2023).

Only The Daily Telegraph covered disaster issues in S6. There was no active large-scale disaster in New South Wales in this time period and the three stories were more focussed on recovery and prevention: a fundraiser for individuals who lost their home to fire in Moruya (McGann 2024a), the reopening of the Lismore and District Netball Association clubhouse

after it was damaged by flood (Piltz 2024a) and an ongoing federal inquiry into insurers' responses to 2022 floods in Lismore (Piltz 2024b).

Accidents and injuries were broadly reported. A missing helicopter near Port Stephens was covered by The Daily Telegraph (Proudman 2023), Nine News Sydney (Burrows 2023, Upcroft 2023), Nine News Radio (2023c; 2023d) and ABC Radio Sydney (ABC Radio Sydney 2023a). Car crashes were covered by The Daily Telegraph (Francis 2023a, Arvela 2023), as were missing people (Watson 2023). ABC Radio Sydney covered a swimmer caught in a rip near Wollongong (2023b), while Nine News Sydney reported on a farmer stuck in a grain silo in Banana Shire, Queensland (Geran 2023). In S6, a bushwalker in the Southern Highlands was covered by Nine News Sydney when they were first reported missing (Nine News Sydney 2024a) and when a body was found the next day (2024b). The Daily Telegraph again reported on car crashes when three people died in three separate accidents in the Central West (Birdjan 2024) and again when a woman died alongside two horses near Wangaratta, Victoria (Jaeger 2024).

Environment stories have been a consistent feature of outlets surveyed, and were spread across all outlets except Nine News Sydney. Some stories were framed as hostile to environmental issues, such as coverage by The Daily Telegraph of new restrictions on tourism operators in Narooma (Barwell 2023) and a vote on banning native forest logging in Clarence Valley Council (Blain 2023). State government approval for



A VERY LARGE PROPORTION OF THE NEWS THAT METROPOLITAN AUDIENCES RECEIVE ABOUT REGIONAL AUSTRALIA IS CRIME RELATED.



an aerial culling of wild horses in the Snowy Monaro was widely covered, with reporting by The Sydney Morning Herald (Chung 2023), Nine News Radio (2023e) and both ABC Radio Sydney (2023c) and ABC News Sydney (2023a). In S6, the Telegraph covered animal-related stories, including the release of captive-raised quolls into Barrington Tops National Park (Watson 2024a), a green sea turtle nest destroyed by weather at Coffs Harbour (Watson 2024b) and a new wildlife rehabilitation sanctuary in the Bega Valley (McGann 2024b). The Guardian Australia covered a merino sheep who was captured and shorn after three years living wild (Spencer 2024).

Infrastructure and planning were covered by The Daily Telegraph, Guardian Australia, Nine News Sydney and ABC News Sydney, with most coverage produced by the newspaper. Developer proposals and planning approvals issued by council were a reasonably common feature in News Corp’s hyperlocal titles and tend to read like press releases, often complete with artist concepts presumably supplied by interested parties. Stories in S5 including affordable housing (Francis 2023b) and childcare (Blain 2023b) in Tweed Heads, aged care facilities in Alstonville (Francis 2023c), and business facilities on the Central Coast (Noone 2023). Not all infrastructure and planning stories at The Telegraph were in this vein: the Daily Examiner in Grafton also reported on a Clarence Valley Council vote to study a road

bypass of Yamba (Blain 2023c) and increased bus services in Coffs Harbour (Knight 2023). In S6, continuing prior reporting (see eg. Chan et al. 2022), the Guardian Australia covered concerns that the Inland Rail freight project is ‘stalled’ (Vistonay E. 2024).

The Sydney Morning Herald provided considerable coverage of horse racing: in both survey periods, it made up around 40 per cent of all regional stories identified (eight of 20 in S5, two of five in S6). This was not a topic in any other publication, though The Daily Telegraph did provide some local sport coverage, including netball and rugby.

Summary

This project has regularly reviewed regional coverage in select Sydney-based metropolitan news outlets over three years and has repeatedly found that most outlets present few regional issues to their audiences each week. The small amount of content that was identified in 2022 has declined considerably in the period since, across all surveyed news outlets, to the point where most outlets don’t run even one story about regional New South Wales on average each day. The stories that are printed or broadcast are from fewer locations, and the issues that are reported on are primarily related to criminal justice, and less about issues such as infrastructure, education, health, social issues and telecommunications that affect regional Australians.

Subject	TEL	SMH	GUA	SEV	NIN	ABCT	ABCR	2GB
Accidental injury	1	0	0	0	2	0	-	0
Arts and culture	0	0	0	0	1	0	-	0
Business, other	4	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Business, primary	1	0	1	0	0	0	-	0
Climate change	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Comm. Event	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Comm. Individual	1	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Court report	32	0	0	1	0	0	-	0
Crime non-violent	17	0	0	1	1	0	-	0
Crime violent	23	2	0	2	4	0	-	2
Defence	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Disasters	3	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Economy	0	0	0	0	1	0	-	0
Education	2	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Environment	4	0	1	0	0	0	-	0
Food and drink	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Govt, federal	3	0	1	0	0	0	-	0
Govt, local	6	0	1	0	0	0	-	0
Govt, state	2	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Health	1	0	0	0	1	0	-	0
Immigration	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Indigenous	1	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Industry	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Infrastructure	8	0	1	0	1	0	-	0
Motoring	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Other	1	0	1	0	0	0	-	1
Property	2	1	0	0	0	0	-	0
Religion	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Social	2	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Sport, int.	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Sport, local	4	0	1	0	0	0	-	0
Sport, national	3	2	0	0	0	0	-	1
Sport, state	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Technology	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Weather	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0
Total	121	5	7	4	11	0	-	4

TABLE 6 | SUBJECT OF REGIONAL NEWS STORIES, BY OUTLET (S6).

03 CHAPTER

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GOING GLOBAL

This chapter provides an overview of collaborative and network journalism between regional and metropolitan media companies in countries with similar market structures and/or media histories to Australia.

Brazil

Like Australia, Brazil has a highly urbanised population surrounded by vast and sparsely populated country, including areas very remote from the major coastal cities and inland capital. Around 88 per cent of Brazil's population live in cities, compared to around 87 per cent in Australia (World Bank 2023).

Brazil's media industry is also organised geographically, with dense markets in cities – particularly in the southeast states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro – and thinner markets outside of metropolitan areas. A small number of conglomerates dominate both national and local media markets (Becker and Waltz 2017: 117), the largest of which, Globo, based in Rio de Janeiro reaches around 70 per cent of the national television audience. Media is heavily concentrated in São Paulo, with 73 per cent of the largest media entities by company size and 62 per cent of the largest outlets by audience reach based in the city in 2017 (Media Ownership Monitor 2017).

A “cluster” effect has been identified as occurring in locations with multiple nearby markets, such as cities, encouraging

innovation and diversification (2024: 97). By contrast regional media markets in Brazil, with less economic activity that might support competition among multiple media outlets, are more likely to be dominated by a single monopoly owner (Da Silva Deolindo, 2024).

Radio and television broadcast licenses are issued by the federal Ministry of Communications, and the use of broadcast transmission infrastructure is regulated by the National Telecommunications Agency. This process sees licenses awarded according to existing patronage networks among political and financial elites (Becker and Waltz (2017, pp. 116-117); Dantas do Rego Silva et al. (2019, p.119); these researchers along with their own work in Maranhão, cite multiple studies on favour trading between media and political elites (Couto, 2007; Pieranti, 2006; Porcello, 2019). Ownership concentration is structurally incentivised in broadcast media markets through affiliation agreements, which, through commercial arrangements between national and regional media groups, encourage integration of news production processes and political homogeneity in news content (Bolaño, 2003).

Unlike Australia, there is no regulatory obligation attached to broadcast licenses to produce news content in Brazil, however, there are “must carry” requirements for certain public channels, including those dedicated to broadcasting state and federal legislatures and the Supreme Court (Chipranski Cavalcante, da Penha Lopes Santana and Pretti Serraglio, 2022).



Nevertheless, local journalism is a component of Brazilian television news coverage, including outside capital cities. For example, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, media company RBS Group’s regionalisation – meaning, presence across the entire region – is a defining characteristic of the company. For decades its television, radio and newspaper assets were spread across the state and neighbouring Santa Catarina. Echoing Australia and other markets, a financial crisis forced RBS Group to consolidate its presence in 2016 (Ibid, 41), alongside rival network TV Pampa, which slowly ended its regional presence in the decade to 2020. RBS TV is one of two stations in Rio Grande do Sul that maintains news programmes covering the state’s interior, the other being TV Cachoeira (48).

Regional media

Brazil’s media market structure is best understood as a national media system that exists alongside a set of five regional media systems, according to Pinto (2017). The five regional media systems correspond to the five official geographic units of the country – the North, Northeast, Central-West, Southeast and South – and are themselves each made up of 3-7 states. Within this framework, a media outlet within the regional system can exist at the “suprastate”, “state” or “substate” level: a “suprastate” outlet will have an editorial focus and geographic reach that covers multiple states at once, such as the entire South region; a “state” outlet will be singularly focussed on, for example, the entirety of the state of Rio Grande

do Sul, and a “substate” outlet will exist more narrowly on a town, city or municipality, such as the state capital of Porto Alegre.

This conceptual approach, according to Pinto, allows for consideration of the mutual interests between the national and regional systems – each need the other to complement their coverage and reach – while also recognising the different characteristics that exist within each regional market. Pinto stresses that the relationship between national and regional media systems is not equal, and that national media can dictate the terms by which regional media operate (Pinto 2017, p. 81).

Though the Australian and Brazilian market structures differ – few, if any, Australian outlets could be described as “suprastate” but “subnational” – this systems theory approach is conceptually similar to the questions that CMT has sought to answer in this local news research project:

1. To what extent are “mainstream” media, based in cities and typically with a focus on state and national issues, covering regional and local issues?
2. Is there is scope for increasing that coverage?

Metropolitan media coverage of regional issues

Reviewing the digital presence of 30 major print and digital news brands suggests mixed amounts of coverage of local regional issues. The titles for review were identified using the Media Ownership Monitor, a global database

Outlet title	Location	Local news
A Tarde	Salvador	Coverage of state of Bahia.
Agora São Paulo	São Paulo	Coverage of city of São Paulo.
BBC Brasil	São Paulo	Inconsistent, national focus.
Brasil de Fato	São Paulo	Dedicated sections for nine states providing daily updates from its network of local newspapers. Far less coverage outside of these states.
ClicRBS	Porto Alegre	Coverage of state of Rio Grande do Sul.
Correio Braziliense	Brasília	Coverage of Distrito Federal with inconsistent local news coverage elsewhere in Brazil.
Correio do Povo	Porto Alegre	Coverage of state of Rio Grande do Sul.
Daqui	Goiânia	Coverage of state of Goiás.
Diário Gaúcho	Porto Alegre	Coverage of state of Rio Grande do Sul.
Época	Rio de Janeiro	None, national magazine.
Estado de Minas	Belo Horizonte	Coverage of state of Minas Gerais with inconsistent local news coverage elsewhere in Brazil.
Extra	Rio de Janeiro	Inconsistent, national focus.
Folha de S.Paulo	São Paulo	Dedicated sections for each state providing local news at intermittent frequencies.
Gazeta do Povo	Curitiba	Coverage of state of Paraná.
Gazeta Mercantil	São Paulo	None, financial newspaper.
iG	São Paulo	Extensive local news in largest states. Dedicated news sites for municipalities in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. Dedicated sites for Distrito Federal and states of Minas Gerais and Tocantins.
IstoÉ	São Paulo	None, national magazine.
Jornal do Brasil	Rio de Janeiro	Coverage of city of Rio de Janeiro.
O Antagonista	São Paulo	None, investigative news website.
O Estado de São Paulo	São Paulo	Coverage of city of São Paulo.
O Globo	Rio de Janeiro	Coverage of states of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and São Paulo.
O Tempo	Belo Horizonte	Coverage of state of Minas Gerais.
Portal Abril	São Paulo	None, lifestyle news.
R7	Brasília	Coverage of city of Brasília, with pathways to news about Minas Gerais and São Paulo states produced by other Grupo Record titles.
Revista Forum	São Paulo	Dedicated sections for state regions. Frequency varies: from average of one story per month in the North, North East and Centre West to one per week in South East and South.
Super Notícia	Belo Horizonte	Coverage of state of Minas Gerais.
The Rio Times	Rio de Janeiro	Coverage of cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.
Valor Economico	São Paulo	None, financial newspaper.
Veja	São Paulo	Inconsistent, national focus.
Zero Hora	Porto Alegre	Coverage of city of Porto Alegre.

TABLE 1 | TITLES REVIEWED, THEIR LOCATION AND NATURE OF LOCAL NEWS COVERAGE.



providing structural information about the largest media entities based on audience share. The Brazilian registry tracks 50 outlets across television, radio, print and digital platforms and is maintained by social enterprise Intervezes.

Some, such as Folha de S.Paulo, appear to produce nationwide local news, with dedicated sections for each state region and subsections by state. The amount of news available when reviewed was relatively low in some regions – four stories per month in Acre between December 2023 – February 2024; six-eight in Roraima per month in the same period – but was being regularly published. A similar structure is in place at São Paulo-based outlet Brasil de Fato, which has dedicated subdomains for each of the nine states in which it operates a local newspaper: Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Paraná, Pernambuco, Ceará, Bahia, Paraíba and Rio Grande do Sul.

The largest hub for local news within the review was iG, a free news website established as an internet service provider in 2000 rather than coming from a news media tradition. iG's website has dedicated local news sites at the municipality-level – that is, substate – in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Bahia,

Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. It also has sites for the Distrito Federal, the capital region which includes Brasília and does not have any municipalities, as well as the states of Minas Gerais and Tocantins. The last of these, Tocantins, is one of the smallest states in Brazil and at time of review in March 2024 has not had a news story posted since 2020.

Other outlets, including the Belo Horizonte-based Estado de Minas and Brasília-based Correio Braziliense, have general sections for country-wide news that include local stories from across the country, suggesting only sporadic attention to any particular place.

It was more common for the reviewed outlets to produce local news only within their home market, either within a metropolitan area or state-wide. Belo Horizonte-based sister titles Super Notícia and O Tempo both cover issues across the state of Minas Gerais, Daqui across Goiás from its base in Goiânia, and both Diário Gaúcho and Correio do Povo in Porto Alegre cover Rio Grande do Sul.

Titles that only appear to cover their metropolitan areas include São Paulo-based outlets O Estado de São Paulo and

Agora São Paulo, the latter of which has dedicated subsections for each zone of the city, Jornal do Brasil in Rio de Janeiro, and Zero Hora in Porto Alegre.

Few titles were not found to produce any local news with any consistency. Some of these were specialist titles, such as Gazeta Mercantil, a financial newspaper or Época, a news magazine that publishes feature stories rather than day-to-day hard news.

There are significant caveats to this finding and it should not be treated as comprehensive. The first is reliance on Google Translate to assess these pages, which may lead to misunderstandings where the translation quality is poor. The second is that review did not include broadcast outlets, which make up a significant portion of news production in Brazil.

Though this review does not directly adopt Pinto's systems theory approach to Brazilian media, it provides anecdotal evidence to support that approach. When considering only their local news production (rather than their coverage

or industrial organisation more broadly), discrete groups can be identified at the suprastate level (Brasil de Fato, Folha de São Paulo, iG), state level (A Tarde, Daqui, O Tempo and others) and substate level (Agora São Paulo, Jornal do Brasil, Zero Hora).

Collaborative journalism in Brazil

Within the reviewed outlets there was some evidence of network journalism enabling local news production. There was not, however, evidence of collaborative journalism – that is, production efforts across multiple different corporate entities – in the local or regional journalism space.

Collaborative journalism in Brazil has occurred on other issues, particularly around fact-checking (Graves, 2018). Noain-Sanchez (2020) finds that fact-checking comes from a number of different traditions – journalism, and also content expertise and research practices of academia and non-governmental organisations. Graves and

Cherubini (2016) found that the wave of fact-checking organisations established particularly in the 2010s could be divided into two models – those based within newsrooms, embedded in traditional journalistic practice, and standalone NGOs. The latter model, they found, is more common in Latin America (2016, pp. 10-11). By operating outside of a single commercial entity, this model presumably facilitates greater collaboration.

Stonbely (2017) developed a typology for understanding collaborative journalism efforts, where the project is assessed against two variables: the degree to which organisations are collaborating, and the length of time for which the collaboration will take place. Each of these models have different benefits and tensions that emerge, according to Stonbely, and may be suited for different types of reporting project.

Projeto Comprova was first launched in 2018 as a joint effort between global misinformation NGO First Draft, the Brazilian Association of

	Temporary	Ongoing
Partners create content separately and share it	Temporary and separate	Ongoing and separate
Partners work together to create content	Temporary and co-creating	Ongoing and co-creating
Partners share content / data / resources at the organisational level	Temporary and integrated	Ongoing and integrated

TABLE 2 | TYPOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM (STONBELY 2017)

Investigative Journalism (Abraji), the Brazilian Institute for the Development of Journalism, Google and Meta. It was launched ahead of the 2018 general election as a 12-week commitment with a mission to 'identify and explain rumours, fabricated content and manipulation tactics' (First Draft 2024) related to the election.

When it launched, 24 different Brazilian media companies were involved, including Agence France Presse, Correio do Povo, Gazeta do Povo, Folha de S.Paulo and O Estado de S.Paulo, each contributing journalists to collaboratively identify, research and distribution corrections to misinformation through their own channels.

Comprova could be understood initially as a 'temporary and integrated' project under Stonbely's typology, though it has since shifted to an 'ongoing' effort. The benefits of this approach are sharing the resourcing burden, diversity of skills, reaching across any single audience and a greater product than would be possible otherwise. Tensions include different newsroom cultures, levels of expertise, expenditure on training, managing unequal power dynamics and ensuring sufficient internal buy-in.

In the initial period, 145 items were reviewed and addressed through this method (Mesquita et al. 2024, p. 135), 92 per cent of which were found to be false (Projeto Comprova, 2018). Comprova continues to operate in 2024, and now has 42 media partners, including Correio Braziliense and CNN Brasil.

In her assessment of collaborative journalism projects in Latin America, Noain-Sánchez (2020) found deficiencies with the Comprova approach. In particular, it was found to provide insufficient detail about its funding sources, the scope of its activity, its verification methodology and ethical commitments. Other projects, including Chequeado in Argentina, Verificado in Mexico and Colombia Check in Colombia, were more transparent in these important areas.

Shortcomings aside, projects like Comprova offer a model for collaboration between news entities that would otherwise be competitors. There may be potential to develop a similar partnership model to enable news production in geographic areas where investment is commercially unviable.



United Kingdom

The British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Local News Partnerships programme is a closely-watched experiment in collaborative news production. It has lofty aims to support public service reporting and local democracy, as well as improve the skills of regional and rural journalists.

It is a response to well documented challenges to the United Kingdom (UK) regional media sector, which includes a 35 per cent decline in news advertising revenue over five years to 2017 and an alarming drop in the number of working journalists across the sector, from 23,000 in 2007 to 17,000 in 2017. One result has been an ongoing decline in coverage of councils and significantly reduced coverage of decisions impacting the lives of the affected communities (see for example Moore and Ramsay, 2016; Cairncross, 2019; Communications and Digital Committee, 2020; Barclay et al., 2024).

In 2014-15, aware of these trends, the BBC conducted the Future of News project, a collection of research activities examining disruption in the British media market and defining a path forward for the public broadcaster (BBC, 2015).

The report found that local and regional news were highly valued by audiences – more than 50 per cent of UK adults

surveyed said that they value it, and "more local news" received the most positive response among potential BBC initiatives that were tested with audiences (BBC, 2015: 21). At the same time, regional local news saw "one of the biggest market failures in news" over the decade to 2015. This was leading to a "democratic deficit" in the UK, with some parts of the country not reported and public services and officials not held accountable (BBC, 2015, p. 21).

While the public broadcaster saw a greater role for itself in addressing this growing deficit, commercial news publishers and the then-Chancellor George Osborne reacted strongly. Osborne described BBC as having "imperial ambitions" and declared that it must not crowd out other media (Syal, 2015), while Ashley Highfield, then-CEO of newspaper publisher Johnston Press and chair of the News Media Association, published an open letter accusing the BBC of "parking a tank on every lawn" and offering "local news controlled from London" (Highfield, 2015).

Model

The Local News Partnerships programme was created amidst this hostile reaction from industry and government. It was established in 2017 after more than a year of negotiation with Highfield and the News Media Association (NMA). Rather than placing additional BBC reporters in the regions, which was its

first instinct, but which was sharply criticised by commercial media (Wiltshire, 2019; Greenslade, 2015), the broadcaster agreed to fund positions within existing commercial newsrooms. The programme took considerable negotiation between the BBC and NMA, resolving issues such as editorial control, funding, cultural differences and commercial imperatives for private companies that were not acceptable to the public broadcaster, such as running advertising against publicly-funded content (Wiltshire, 2019).

The programme has three components:

1. More than 150 Local Democracy Reporters are funded by the BBC to cover public services under the editorial direction of local commercial news outlets.
2. Member media organisations gain access to BBC video material for use on online news portals.
3. A shared data unit, staffed by BBC reporters working with local reporters on secondment to the national broadcaster.

To date, around 150 news media organisations representing more than 1000 print, online and broadcaster outlets have participated in the programme, which is funded through to the end of 2026. Not all partners participate in all elements of the scheme – the BBC has noted, for example, that many

smaller newsrooms which may not be capable of absorbing the overhead of hosting a Local Democracy Reporter can nevertheless access stories that they produce, as well as video material and insights from the shared data hub (BBC, 2020).

Local Democracy Reporters are expected to produce around 40 stories per month, covering local council meetings and activities. An internal review of the scheme found that Local Democracy Reporters combined produced around 1,200 original stories per week in 2019. It estimates that in an average week, each story filed within the project results in three stories being published, as partner newsrooms access and republish material in ways most relevant to their audiences (BBC, 2020, p. 14).

The scheme has been largely well-received, particularly by commercial operators who benefit from access to additional labour at a marginal cost. One independent news operator, which hosted a Local Democracy Reporter in 2018, said that the scheme gave credibility to their otherwise small newsroom:

...I think the scheme has been helpful for us, because it's lent us some authority. The fact that it's funded by the BBC has alerted politicians to take local journalism more seriously, I think (Wiltshire, 2019, p. 30)

Both the internal review and independent research (Wiltshire, 2019, pp. 33-37) have found that the scheme has had significant impact beyond journal of record functions, including investigative stories that have exposed wrongdoing in local government.

Criticisms

An internal review of the programme released in 2020 found that it had been “a great success” (BBC, 2020, p. 3), though not without shortcomings. It dismissed concerns that the BBC, in choosing to place Local Democracy Reporters in some newsrooms and not others, was having a competitive impact in local media markets (BBC, 2020, p. 28). The internal review did find that the programme favoured large media companies, however, with around 90 per cent of partnership contracts awarded to the UK's three largest regional news publishers: Reach PLC, Newsquest and JPI Media (formerly Johnston Press). Other research has found that the procurement

process is “onerous” for small media (Wiltshire, 2019, p. 30). In its acknowledgement of this shortcoming, the BBC has moved to address this issue by increasing the number of reporter contracts and regional publications, while also relaxing procurement criteria and tender process.

The Cairncross Review, while commending the scheme, also raised concerns. Evidence presented to the Review suggested that rather than providing an additional reporting resource, commercial newsrooms which hosted a Local Democracy Reporter tended to reduce their own investment in public interest journalism – becoming, in effect, a public subsidy for private companies to conduct reporting they may have already been undertaking (Cairncross, 2019, p. 85). Others have noted that there is no systematic process by which the BBC can determine if its Local Democracy Reporters are displacing existing reporters in partner newsrooms (Barnett and Greenslade, 2020).

In addition, the Cairncross Review noted that resources had been spread evenly rather than in places with the greatest need and echoed the concern about the proportion of contracts awarded to the largest media companies (Cairncross, 2019, p. 85). The Review nevertheless recommended that the programme should continue and be expanded – potentially up to double its scale. (2019, p. 100).

A commentary piece published in the British Journalism Review by Stephen Barnett and Roy Greenslade criticised the BBC for being insufficiently rigorous about where and how its funding is used (Barnett and Greenslade, 2020, p. 47), highlighting anecdotes that suggest some commercial media are taking advantage of the scheme to improve their commercial businesses (Barnett and Greenslade, 2020, p. 46). This view was rejected by the internal review (2020: 28), which said that the BBC's monitor mechanisms were sufficient, and instances of staff substitution have ‘decreased over time’.

Relatedly, a Freedom of Information request of the BBC by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) showed that there is a significant gulf between the amount that Local Democracy Reporters receive compared to what the BBC pays (BBC, 2024). Under the agreements with publishers, the minimum salary for a senior reporter outside London is £24,055 per annum, while a trainee can receive as little as £16,998. Publishers receive £37,733 from the BBC for any filled role; even after

accounting for overhead, the NUJ estimates that publishers can have a £10,000 surplus per reporter if they are paying the minimum salary (National Union of Journalists, 2024). These low pay rates partly explain the high attrition rates among Local Democracy Reporters, according to the union – 28 per cent left their positions in 2022-23, and 31 per cent in 2023-24 (National Union of Journalists, 2024).

Relationship with commercial media

The Cairncross Review additionally recommended that the programme should be removed from the BBC and housed within a new Institute for Public Interest News that would operate as a public interest peak body across the sector (Cairncross, 2019, p. 100). This recommendation was made in part based on evidence that the inherent tensions between the public broadcaster and commercial media – entities which are both collaborators and competitors in the same markets – were irreconcilable and would lead to poorer outcomes. The BBC's internal review explicitly rejected the recommendation to remove the programme to a new entity (2020, p. 31), arguing that in its interviews with programme participants none expressed a concern about the current governance arrangement.

Nevertheless, tensions periodically flare up. Most recently, a 2022 plan by the BBC to create 130 new local journalism roles outside of the Local News Partnership Programme led to claims from regional providers that the BBC is the “neighbour from hell” (Carter et al., 2023). The News Media Association wrote to the BBC Board that the broadcaster “is directly threatening the sustainability of independent local journalism with plans to be ever more local” (Maher, 2022), while the UK's five biggest commercial regional news publishers called on the BBC to ditch its local news strategy and made clear they regard the BBC “as little more than a state-funded juggernaut on course to suffocate independent journalism in every city, town and village in the UK” (Carter et al., 2023). The publishers claim the BBC wishes to be the “only show in town” and that having axed many local radio stations, it now intends to write and publish stories online in direct competition with local newspapers which do not have guaranteed funding. The publishers assert the British public is underwriting the biggest threat UK regional journalism has faced, making it barely possible for the independent sector to survive. The BBC has responded with a blanket denial that it is attempting

to suffocate regional providers and that its commitment to regional journalism is evident by the Local Democracy Reporter scheme under the regional news programme. The BBC said in response that declining advertising revenue, not its local journalism, is the biggest threat to commercial news companies (Duell, 2022).

Future

The current funding and salary model for the programme expires on 30 June, 2025, and the BBC has committed to continuing it beyond that point.

The BBC's Local News Partnerships programme and the traditional commercial sector are challenged by another nascent yet potent challenger: the independent digital sector which is reimagining local news across the UK. The Mill in Manchester had attracted thousands of paying subscribers to its in-depth local journalism, whilst The Bristol Cable is producing investigative journalism on a co-operative basis with locals setting the agenda. Some of these start-ups are in multiple locations: The Bylines Network has 10 outlets from Sussex to Scotland and The Mill has also launched spin offs in three regional locations outside of Manchester. The ethos of all, as noted by the Executive Director of the Public Interest News Foundation, Jonathan Heawood (2024) is that they “don't provide journalism in order to make money, they make money in order to provide journalism.” The ethos is distinctive and distinguishable from both the BBC and its commercial rivals.

The Local News Partnerships programme, and particularly the Local Democracy Reporting Service, has attracted significant attention in other jurisdictions struggling to sustain regional local news. The Republic of Ireland, for example, allocated €6m in its 2024 budget for establishing both a Local Democracy Scheme and a Courts Reporting Scheme (Coimisiún na Meán, 2024). Similar efforts in Canada and New Zealand will be discussed in subsequent sections.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has not yet launched a similar service, but is engaged in a major research project with Deakin University to investigate its potential in Australia. This will be discussed further in Chapter 6.



Canada

Across its 10 million square kilometres of land mass, and a shared border with the largest media market in the world, the United States, Canada has taken bold steps to protect its media ecosystem and public interest journalism. It has historically used a range of mechanisms to support news media providers. And, as Taylor and DeCillia note (2022), in its bid to slow the flow of American media across the border, Canada prevents its media companies being controlled by foreign companies or people, and “content regulations try to ensure space for Canadian productions despite the overwhelming presence of American programming.”

A protective attitude towards its sovereignty is not new to Canada. The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, which is now the Canadian Broadcasting Commission (CBC), was created in 1929 and, like the ABC in Australia, is funded by the government, if poorly so compared to other national broadcasters in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2024). Its remit is to tell Canadian stories to Canadians, despite a decline in spending on news. In early 2024, CBC announced that a CAD\$125 million budget shortfall would result in the loss of 600 news jobs, vacant positions would not be filled, and programming would be reduced (Egwu, 2024).

There has been a similar decline in news spending in the commercial sector. In 2024, Black Press, which publishes some 140 titles across Canada and employs some 1,200 journalists announced it was filing for bankruptcy and being acquired by its lenders, two Canadian investment firms. One of Canada’s largest news publishers, Metroland Media Group, has also filed for bankruptcy and moved to lay off 650 of its employees. It will stop publishing all its weekly community newspapers across Ontario (Egwu, 2024). In the meantime, Bell and Vice Media have both announced journalist layoffs. As the Canadian Journalism Foundation noted: “In the past five years, media job losses nationally have reached about 10,000 in Canada, according to preliminary data compiled by the Canadian Media Guild. Of this number, the print sector lost nearly twice that of the broadcast sector — 6,000 jobs versus 3,700. Categories include journalists, printing-plant workers, technicians, mailroom employees, sales persons, accountants and managers” (Wong, 2024).

Further and as yet indeterminate threats to sustainability are posed by the passage of Canada’s Online News Act, or Bill C-18, which the Canadian government enacted citing loss of advertising revenue by media companies to two companies – Alphabet, owner of Google and YouTube, and Meta, owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. The legislation forces the platforms to compensate news outlets when their

content is made available of their platforms. As a result, Meta has blocked Canadian news outlets from publishing news on both Facebook and Instagram. Although in November 2023 Alphabet threatened to take action, the Canadian government reached an agreement under which Google will pay \$100 million annually to news outlets across Canada.

Six multimedia corporations own the bulk of the country’s commercial media: Rogers, Bell, Corus, Postmedia, Torstar and Quebecor. Three companies produce most of Canada’s daily newspapers; Torstar, Postmedia and the Thomson family, which owns The Globe and Mail.

Postmedia produces a national newspaper, The National Post, and several major metro daily newspapers and community papers, though there has been considerable downsizing and even closures over the past 10 years. The company remains Canada’s largest newspaper chain, with holdings including 33 daily newspapers, such as the Ottawa Citizen, Edmonton Journal, Calgary Herald, Vancouver Sun, and Montreal Gazette.

Postmedia, however, has made controversial decisions impacting editorial output. The news organisation merged newsrooms in cities where it owned both the broadsheet and tabloid newspaper and its daily newspapers are increasingly using Canadian Press wire stories to save costs, instead of assigning their own reporters. The Journal de Montréal and

Journal de Québec, both owned by Quebecor, continue to print newspapers. In the meantime, La Presse, a French language newspaper owned by an independent nonprofit trust has become a digital-only service.

The newspaper most Australians commonly associate with Canada is The Globe and Mail, which has been publishing since 1844 and has a well-earned reputation as a newspaper of record that has impacted the country’s political life. In 2017, The Globe and Mail decided it would no longer distribute its newspaper in Atlantic Canada. This reflects a wider trend regarding news distribution across Canada where larger cities are relatively well served while smaller communities are increasingly left with diminished local news outlets able to employ very few journalists, and some regions becoming news deserts, without any local news at all.

Local coverage reached a low point in March 2020, when CBC News announced it was suspending local television newscasts in many regions (Taylor and DeCilia, 2020). The Premier of Prince Edward Island, Canada’s smallest province, put out an angry public statement noting that CBC News was the only local television news in the province (Hurst, 2020). Two weeks later, CBC News was forced to backtrack and reinstate the local television news shows.



Canadian media also offers community television and radio which caters to the country's multiethnic society. The world's first indigenous national television service was born in Canada; the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network which broadcasts about and to Canada's first nations, the Inuit and Metis Peoples. It first broadcast in September 1999 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, providing news, drama and documentaries. There are also small, often alternative and minority services, as well as right-wing media news organisations, all of which publish for niche audiences and are invariably digital only. Finding an audience has proven difficult for some. The Sun News Network which modelled itself on Fox News in the US folded after four years, and shifted to broadcasting online from 2011 to 2015. There are some 949 community newspapers across the country publishing 13.8 million copies every week with most, free to readers. Roughly 85 per cent of all editions of these publications are tabloid (News Media Canada, 2022).

Local journalism crisis

The crisis in Canadian local journalism, much like in Australia, began long before Covid-19 struck. The Canadian Local News Map project, similar to our own Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI), crowdsources information on changes to the local reporting environment. Its work indicates that between 2008 and June 1, 2024, 521 local news operations closed in 347 communities across the country. Community newspapers have not been immune from contractions and

closures; they accounted for 400 of these closures. One hundred and eleven closures were community newspapers which were merged to produce regional publications. In contrast, only 126 new local news outlets were created in the time period and many of these have also closed (Lingren et al., 2024). After a brief period in which post-Covid-19 closures slowed, there has been a marked increase between 2022 and 2024 with nearly half the closures of community newspapers occurring in the Montreal area in 2023 alone; Metro Media shuttered 17 papers and declared bankruptcy.

In 2017, when Postmedia and Torstar announced the closure of dozens of their newspapers, the Canadian government responded with a CAD\$50m grant to support local media (Lingren, 2018). This has recently been extended to 2027 with an additional CAD\$58.8m. Administered by seven not-for-profit organisations representing different segments of the news industry, the programme aims to provide original journalism to underserved communities. Funding is made available to hire journalists or pay freelance journalists and content is made available to media organizations through a Creative Commons License (Government of Canada; Local Journalism Initiative, 2024).

Inspired by the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service, the Local Journalism Initiative (LJI) was launched in December 2019 and is open to Canadian news media organisations that have completed at least one uninterrupted 12-month publishing cycle and are engaged in coverage of democratic bodies/institutions as core principles. According to the Canadian Government, organisations must first identify a need, such

as a news desert in a local community or an area of news poverty, then an independent panel of industry experts review applications, select recipients and allocate funding. Host news organisations can publish LJI content produced by LJI reporters in their newspapers and websites, bearing the LJI reporter's byline, and they will also be required to upload them to the LJI news portal. The LJI news portal is an online searchable database of LJI stories and other content including text, photos, audio, video and graphics files produced by LJI reporters in both official languages. The portal makes LJI content available to other news organizations to republish with appropriate credit to the LJI reporter and host news organization.

A large source of funding for Canadian news media comes indirectly through tax relief, which includes the Canadian Journalism Labour Tax Credit, charitable status for non-profit journalism and digital news subscription tax credits for consumers. Combined, these measures cost the government approximately CAD\$170 million annually and the measures are monitored by an independent advisory board that determines media outlet eligibility.

In a Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 survey of most trusted news brands of English language news, regional or local newspapers came first with a trust score of 60 per cent. There was similar trust levels for regional or local radio amongst French speakers, and in general French language news appears to be more trusted than English. However, overall trust in news has fallen significantly, from 55 per cent to 40 per cent between 2016 and 2023.

A LARGE SOURCE OF FUNDING FOR CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA COMES INDIRECTLY THROUGH TAX RELIEF, WHICH INCLUDES THE CANADIAN JOURNALISM LABOUR TAX CREDIT, CHARITABLE STATUS FOR NON PROFIT JOURNALISM AND DIGITAL NEWS SUBSCRIPTION TAX CREDITS FOR CONSUMERS



New Zealand

Like many similar markets, the news media sector in New Zealand (NZ) has experienced sustained stagnation and decline. A baseline report prepared for the Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage (Angus & Associates, 2023) assesses the current state of the media against three measures: vibrancy, trust and diversity.

The report found that confidence in the future of the New Zealand news media is low, and many participants expected their businesses to get worse over the coming years. Industry figures are pessimistic about both macro and micro settings (Angus & Associates, 2023, p. 17).

New Zealand is not included in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, so direct comparison with Australia is difficult, but the same baseline study found that 31 per cent of New Zealanders are willing to pay for news, and 63 per cent are not willing. Six per cent are undecided (Angus & Associates, 2023, p. 22). Media figures have expressed a belief that greater public funding is necessary to sustain the sector (Angus & Associates, 2023, p. 17).

The Public Interest Journalism Fund (PIJF) was one such initiative. The fund was established to support media businesses during Covid-19-related economic downturn. NZ on Air, the country’s independent commission responsible for media, distributed NZD\$55m across 95 projects and 217 positions between May 2021 and June 2023. National media received around 61 per cent of funding, and local media the rest, though an interim report says that many national media outlets used their funding to invest in their local journalism product (NZ On Air, 2023).

Local Democracy Reporting

A major initiative through the PIJF was the Local Democracy Reporting (LDR) scheme. The Local Democracy Reporting scheme is modelled on the service of the same name run by the BBC. It launched in 2019 as a pilot scheme that aimed to increase reporting of local issues relevant to democracy. In its pilot phase it was funded by NZ on Air. An expanded scheme followed (NZ on Air, 2024). A total of NZD\$3.6m was provided for the scheme over two years; NZD\$2.9m through NZ on Air and NZD\$600k in-kind from newsrooms.

Up to 20 reporters were placed in newsrooms across the country. Under the editorial oversight of both their host newsroom and Radio New Zealand (RNZ), they covered relevant issues for local democracy, making their stories available both to their local hosts and to other newsrooms within the scheme, including the public broadcaster and other commercial interests. In the first year of the scheme, reporters had story quotas that they had to meet (Ellis, 2020) but this was changed in subsequent agreements.

At time of writing, reporters are in place in 16 newsrooms in the following 15 locations:

- Ashburton
- Auckland
- Nelson
- New plymouth
- North Canterbury
- Northland
- Rotorua
- East Coast
- Marlborough
- Tauranga
- Wairarapa
- West Coast
- Whakatāne
- Whanganui

A 2023 review of the scheme (Ellis, 2023) found, through surveys with participants and content analysis of produced reporting, that it largely met its goals. In particular, it addressed the underlying rationale for the scheme, which was that a long period of decline in New Zealand’s local media was leading to increasing “gaps” in reporting on issues relevant to local democracy. Local news editors and owners were broadly positive about the scheme.

Two procedural concerns were raised about the scheme’s design by local editors. Editors reported that as the reporters were managed by both their local newsroom and by the LDR management team at RNZ, there were situations where journalists were being “double-edited.” Ellis reports mixed views

on this; with some editors feeling that their local control over stories was being impinged by RNZ, and others positively saying that it served as a quality control measure on stories, as well as a necessary test of whether issues would be of interest beyond the immediate newsroom where they were produced.

The other, larger issue concerned competition. LDR journalists are required to file stories into the joint content management system “in a timely manner,” usually meaning on the same day. Participant newsrooms have different publication schedules, however, meaning that stories can be published by “rival” newsrooms in the scheme before a more local title or the host newsroom can publish. Local editors reported frustration at having stories about their local areas produced by an LDR journalist within their newsroom being pre-emptively published in other news outlets (Ellis, 2023, p. 12). As a consequence, filing tended to operate according to the host newsroom’s timeline, rather than according to the LDR’s “in a timely manner” requirement.

Editors at the nationally focussed newsrooms in the scheme were more critical than their local counterparts. They told the Ellis review that LDR stories aren’t of interest to their broader audiences, and frequently do poorly in analytics. These statements are consistent with findings from this programme of research in Australia, where resistance to incorporating more local, regional coverage in metropolitan news outlets is often on the argument – which may be correct – that city-based audiences don’t care about local issues that don’t affect them. Ellis (2023) concludes from this finding that:

if anything, lower levels of support from these editorial executives in head offices suggest LDR reporters should not be placed in national newsrooms where the reporting focus is too broad to capture the essential purpose of the scheme (p. 9)

...CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE OF NEW ZEALAND NEWS MEDIA IS LOW, AND MANY PARTICIPANTS EXPECTED THEIR BUSINESSES TO GET WORSE OVER THE COMING YEARS



Ellis conducted two separate content analyses of stories produced through the scheme, looking at both the topics of coverage (2023, 13-15) and the relevance of the work to local democracy, assessing things like news value, impact, community engagement and content depth (2023, pp. 16-19).

The largest subject area of coverage was the environment, which included planning decisions with environmental impact (18 per cent of stories), such as local authorities dealing with extraordinary weather. Ellis says that environmental stories “are likely to affect the largest number of people,” including beyond the immediate newsroom, so this focus is unsurprising. Development stories (15 per cent) and transport (13 per cent) stories are second and third, despite these not fitting into Ellis’s theory that stories with the broadest impact are likely to receive more coverage. Nine per cent of stories covered the “representational aspects” of local government (2023, p. 14). The Ellis review noted that coverage of Te Ao Māori, the Māori worldview, had improved since a 2020 review, but was still low (seven per cent of all stories).

On quality measures, Ellis found that the scheme again scored highly, with the highest average rating for the “community engagement” metric, followed closely by “news value,” and the lowest score for “journalistic attributes,” a category which includes professional standards such as fairness, accuracy and media ethics (2023, pp. 16-17).

The report also found that the scheme is reducing the “gap” in coverage,

particularly in reporting on local government. One editor reported that coverage of the four councils in their area has “probably doubled” (2023, p. 20); this is broadly representative of the response from editors and journalists. Council staff interviewed for the report are more mixed. Most said coverage had increased, though others had reservations – some said that coverage had decreased but was being done in greater depth; others did not notice a local increase but felt that stories were getting more national attention.

These results should be read with appropriate scepticism. Labour is typically the highest category of expenditure in media companies and local news owners have a commercial incentive to preserve a “free” reporter in their newsroom, which may influence their responses. The author has taken some steps to independently assess the LDR’s impact, but further independent study is warranted. In particular, a gap analysis comparing the levels of coverage before the introduction of the scheme to after the introduction would be a simple task to determine whether reporting has increased, beyond the views of affected staff.

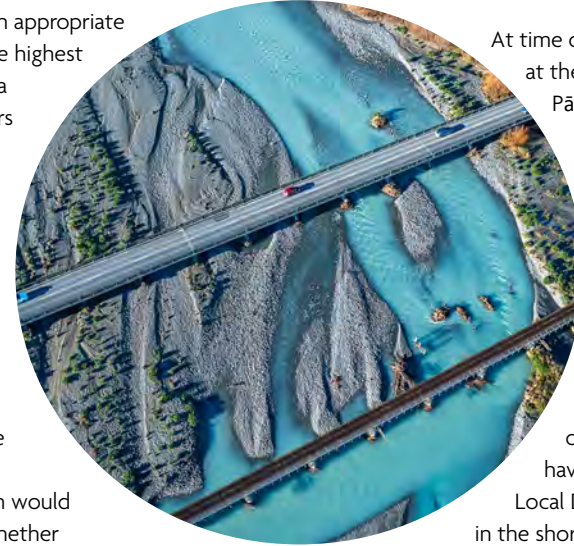
Nevertheless, the review is highly positive about the impact of the Local Democracy Reporting scheme in New Zealand and recommends its continued operation.

Māori Media Sector Shift

In 2019 the Te Puni Kōkiri Ministry of Māori Development commenced a consultation programme about the future of the Māori media sector (Office of Te Minita Whanaketanga Māori, 2018). The consultation considered how to best support publicly funded Māori broadcast media content in a changing media environment, including news and journalism

(Te Puni Kōkiri Ministry of Māori Development, 2024a).

In 2020, four collaborative regional news hubs were established to produce te reo Māori journalism in partnership with 11 local radio stations (NZ on Air 2023, p. 29). The 2022 budget allocated a further NZD\$10m over two years to support the scheme (Te Puni Kōkiri Ministry of Māori Development, 2024b). NZD\$3m was also allocated to the scheme through the Public Interest Journalism Fund in 2023 (Scoop, 2023).



At time of writing, funding for these hubs expires at the end of 2024. In August 2024, Te Māngai Pāho, the NZ Crown entity responsible for promoting Māori language and culture, commenced a process to determine the future of the hubs (Te Māngai Pāho, 2024).

Future of public funding in New Zealand

The Public Interest Journalism Fund closed on 30 June, 2023, though some projects have continued funding through to 2026. The Local Democracy Reporting scheme continues in the short term, though its future is uncertain.

Regional news hubs funded by Te Māngai Pāho appear to have a stronger likelihood of continuing; the entity has said it expects to invest NZD\$11m in Māori journalism during calendar year 2025 (Te Māngai Pāho, 2024).

The PIJF was established by the Labour government of Jacinda Ardern; the current Deputy Prime Minister, Winston Peters of NZ First, has called it “\$55 million of bribery” (Thompson, 2023). The current government is instead proceeding with the Fair Digital News Bargaining Bill, a localised version of the Australian News Media Bargaining Code (Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2024), suggesting a focus on forcing commercial deal-making rather than greater public funding.





European Union

The territory of the European Union (EU) is defined by different socio-political contexts, languages and media systems. As a result, the EU media ecosystem is a cross section of national and regional and local media with local news media, regional and community broadcasting overlapping.

There is little agreement across jurisdictional lines as to the definition of “local media” (Gulyas and Baines, 2020) but local media is often defined by national media as being dependent on the size and demographic make-up of the country, the number of minority communities they contain, and the political sway of national governments.

As noted by Blagojev et al. (2023, p. 3) in the smaller nations, where local news media plays a significant role in producing news content that is nationally significant (Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus), there is little distinction between local and national media. In others, digitisation is advanced enough to make the contribution of local media to national outlets

and debate significant even if, as Napoli (2019a) has noted, digitisation serves to “deceive and obfuscate what qualifies as genuinely local.” However, as Gulyas (2021) has observed in many western and northern European countries, local newspapers have been publishing for hundreds of years and played an important role in the political and economic life of the nations where they publish although even older publications tend to vary in influence with those in central and south eastern Europe, being weaker and less significant than those in western Europe, probably for political reasons.

Given the differing political influences across the European Union, the role of local media in maintaining social cohesion can be significant. Unlike the Australian experience where “hyperlocal” is often used to describe publications that can be owned by larger entities (such as News Local owned by News Corp) as well as independently owned start-ups, in the European Union, hyper local often refers to digital start-ups sitting outside the corporate mainstream media, devoted to news gathered in and focused entirely on a particular geographic location (Jangdal, 2021). Such publications are increasing in number across the EU.

Community media in the EU also plays an important role. According to the Council for Europe, community media tends to be “independent from business and political influences, not-for-profit oriented, accountable and beneficial to the communities they serve.” The benefit of community media for minority and marginalised groups has also been noted (Arguedas et al., 2023), particularly in Germany and Austria where migrant communities are reliant on them. The Media Pluralism Monitor (2023) notes community media exists in “some form across all countries” in the European Union although it appears less prevalent in smaller states such as Malta and Macedonia and more prominent in France and Germany. Both the Council of Europe (2022) and the European Parliament (2020) have proclaimed that “community media ... can strengthen local identity and interest in local affairs through the production of broadcast and online programmes that are closer to its listeners, viewers and users.”

The Council of Europe has also emphasised that nation states should legally recognise this media and ensure its financial sustainability (Council of Europe, 2022). Regional media in the EU covers news in larger administrative regions, states, provinces and counties. As Gulyas (2023) noted in the Media Pluralism Monitor, “public service media have tended to fulfil regional media roles with legislation typically requiring public service broadcasters to provide a certain amount of regional content as well as having a presence in the regions.” In some European nations, commercial operators also provide regional and local broadcasting services. For example, in Hungary and the Netherlands the use of local television is like that of local newspapers, whilst in Croatia it has a larger audience (Gulyas, 2023); the differences due to variations in policy approaches. France has a strong local television presence and usage because it has been legislatively recognised and funded since 1985. Local radio tends to have greater importance and use

in EU nations where local press has less prominence, such as Cyprus (Christophorou and Karides, 2022).

The fragmentation of the European media market is due, in part to the varying policies and regulations across nations and in part to the lack of comprehensive EU regulatory regimes (Gulyas, 2023). Mainstream media tends to be regulated and supported financially, whilst local media tends to be less regulated. Another key determinant of the presence and influence of regional media in Europe is the degree of political independence of local and community media. The Media Pluralism Monitor (2023) identified eight countries scoring as high-risk of lacking political independence, where “political independence” is characterised by public service media values, pluralism and transparency of media ownership. At the low-risk end are countries with strong democratic institutions and legislation requiring ownership transparency and financial support to avoid political interference (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Sweden and the Netherlands). The sustainability of local media across Europe emerged in the latest Media Pluralism Monitor (2023) report as a key issue of concern. Revenue and the number of outlets were reported to be in decline. Declining revenue particularly affected legacy local media (Fidalgo, 2021) with audiences migrating to digital, a consequent movement of advertising revenue to digital and a corresponding lack of innovation investment.

Government subsidies for local media in Europe is focused on “actors” rather than the “health of the media ecologies as a whole” (Media Pluralism Monitor, 2023, p. 12). The result is that legacy local media is well supported whilst digital start-ups are not. The Media Pluralism Monitor reports that Covid-19 increased the overall levels of subsidies available to local media but these were short-term and health targeted.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN MEDIA MARKET IS DUE, IN PART TO THE VARYING POLICIES AND REGULATIONS ACROSS NATIONS AND IN PART TO THE LACK OF COMPREHENSIVE EU REGULATORY REGIMES

Sources for subsidies vary across the EU from national governments to local authorities. In France, 22 out of 36 local television stations are subsidised by local governments and the subsidies make up more than half of their revenue, raising concerns about independence. The Media Pluralism Monitor (2023, p. 14) noted: “Out of the 20 countries that provide direct subsidies to local media, three (Greece, Luxembourg and Turkey) were reported as high risk in terms of transparency and fairness, nine at medium risk (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia and Serbia) and eight as low risk (Denmark, France, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden).”

Given the physical proximity of nations within Europe, albeit with significant differences of commitment to democracy, the European Commission is funding a cross border, local investigative journalism project across the continent targeting journalists from both EU and non-EU nations. The programme will provide small grants for local media to produce investigative journalism on local issues. Critically, these grants will be allocated to outlets for stories which have resonance at a macro level; stories which carry meaning for and can contribute to social cohesion across Europe, in possible cross border collaboration. Local journalists with little experience or understanding of cross border collaboration will be trained in these activities and other aspects of investigative journalism, as well as audience engagement.

The European Commission will also fund, as part of this programme, training for innovative sustainable business and management models for local news media, to ensure collaboration continues and that outputs carry European-wide significance.



India

In India, the news media ecosystem reflects the country's diverse culture and geography with distinct national and regional/rural presence.

The national or mainstream media in India refers to a few Hindi and English language publications, broadcast and digital media consumed in the metropolitan cities of Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad and Bengaluru. Many of these national media companies also have a strong regional language presence. In fact, with over two-thirds of its population living in regional and rural areas, and 22 government-recognised languages spoken in 1,600 different dialects, the Indian media

landscape is dominated by regional language media.

The regional media in India are usually defined in relation to the geographic boundaries of the states and the dominant languages within those states since most states within India are linguistic entities – states with their own language. A significant section of the Indian population consumes content through their native language, allowing regional media to speak to its audience and, as noted by Pandey

(2023), help “empower regional audiences and producers” (p. 238).

While Hindi and English language news is consumed in the main heartland (North and Central India), regional languages take precedence as one goes to the western, northern, eastern and southern parts of the country. According to a 2019 Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) report, almost 70 per cent of the news market is shared among the Hindi (45 per cent), Tamil (nine per cent), Marathi (eight per cent)

and English (six per cent) language media, followed by Malayalam, Telugu, Gujarati, Bengali, Kannada, Oriya, Punjabi, Assamese and Urdu languages.

According to the MOM report, India has 118,239 publications registered with the Registrar of Newspapers, which include over 36,000 weekly magazines, operating in print and online. Additionally, there are over 550 FM radio stations in the country and, according to the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, over 880



satellite TV channels reach over 197 million TV households every day. These include over 380 TV channels that broadcast news and current affairs 24/7 and run on a “breaking news culture” (Krishnan, 2021). The number of exclusive news websites operating in India is simply unfathomable. However, for a rough idea about India’s dependency on online platforms for news, a 2023 survey by the Reuters Institute of Journalism found that nearly 72 per cent of Indians use online platforms for their daily news consumption (Digital News Report, 2023).

Despite its flourishing media scene, the news media market in India is highly concentrated. Most of the leading media companies are owned by large conglomerates that are themselves owned and operated by business families who have strong political and religious affiliations. For instance, the Hindi language market – the country’s largest homogenised media market – is dominated by four media companies: Dainik Jagran, Hindustan, Amar Ujala and Dainik Bhaskar. These companies capture three out of four news consumers within the national Hindi language market, and account for the highest share of viewership (See: Table 1).

With the Hindi language media dominating the market, and mostly family-owned news corporations with strong

political clout, the regional audiences have been increasingly concerned about inclusivity in the national narrative (Pande, 2024).

As a result, regional media has played a pivotal role in highlighting complex hyperlocal issues and has been instrumental in imbuing a sense of pride for native identity. Unlike the global trend of regional media’s decline, in India it thrives, driven predominantly by a fragmented reader base and digital media affordances. This growth, however, is not without its challenges, particularly in financial sustainability and the need for constant adaptation to the digital age.

Regional goes digital

Over the past two decades, India’s media sector has witnessed profound and transformative change reflected in the expansion of both outlets and audiences, primarily as a result of the astronomical growth of digital media. Internet penetration led to a boost in the use of mobile technologies, including in the remotest of towns (Tenhunen, 2018).

According to the Internet in India 2023 report, there are 442 million internet users in rural India, which is 64 million more

than the number of Internet users in metropolitan India (378 million). According to the same report, of the total 821 million Internet users in the country, 739 million Indians consume news through a digital media platform (Kantar, 2023). Pal, Chavan and Hasan (2024) argue that 95 per cent of online news in India is consumed in regional languages.

Driven by rapid internet penetration, digital news in India is forecast to reach 700 million consumers by 2026, while print is forecast to fall by around 20 per cent (Dalberg, 2021). The Dalberg report also forecasts a 10 per cent increase in regional media production and consumption by 2026, overtaking English language media consumption in the country.

The platformisation of regional and rural media in India is part of the broader digital revolution brought about with the launch of the Digital India initiative by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government in 2015, aimed at transforming India into a digitally empowered society through the growth of Internet access in regional and rural areas.

The last decade has particularly witnessed growth in digitally native regional and rural platforms that promise the public non-partisan truth and draw sizable audiences.

Regional goes independent

Most national/mainstream media operate in regional areas with regional editions and broadcast channels in the local language. However, most operate in isolation from their national

counterparts. As a result, regional news barely reaches metropolitan audiences. Language barrier also plays a significant factor in limiting the outreach of regional media, leaving regional voices geographically constrained, and the issues of regional communities omitted from mainstream media. The class and caste system in India also contributes to the underrepresentation and omission of certain voices, thus leaving room for independent digital media to thrive in regional areas.

According to an Oxfam India and Newslandry report (2019), the skewed caste equation in newsrooms reflects on the way news is collected or presented. The report found that none of the 121 newsroom leadership positions at Hindi and English language news outlets in the study were held by a journalist from the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes - limiting opportunities for representation

of marginalised communities in the national media.

On the other hand, independent regional media has afforded diverse journalists an opportunity to report freely and find creative ways to pool resources together to not just survive, but also thrive. Since 2014, many small players have emerged and continue to operate as digital islands in the regional media ecosystem, funded by subscriptions and early-stage investors. This has also allowed them experimentation with how they create, distribute, and monetise news, and also who they include in this process.

An interesting example is The Quint, an English language digital news platform started by journalists Raghav Bahl and Ritu Kapur in January 2015 after their exit from Network18, an Indian media conglomerate owned by the energy giant Reliance Industries, headed by billionaire Mukesh Ambani. What

Language market	Top owners	Market share (%)
Hindi	Dainik Jagran	45
	Hindustan	
	Amar Ujala	
	Dainik Bhaskar	
Tamil	Daily Thanthi	9
	Dinakaran	
Marathi	Lokmat	8
	Sakal	
English	Times of India	6
	Hindustan Times	
	The Hindu	
	The Economic Times	

TABLE 1: TOP FOUR LANGUAGE MEDIA IN INDIA AND THEIR MARKET SHARE.



started as a Facebook news page turned into a news website within three months, and by December 2016, The Quint website had over 10 million unique visitors. In 2017, The Quint launched a fact checking initiative WebQoof and partnered with BBC News for the production of a video series to combat disinformation.

In the same year, The Quint also launched two regional editions – Quint Hindi and Quint Bhojpuri – which exclusively focus on local stories from the Hindi and Bhojpuri-speaking regions. Successful stories from the two editions often make their way to the main English platform, amplifying their reach to a wider audience. This model leverages the strength of regional language content to draw attention to issues that may not initially attract national attention.

Emerging regional media models

Five models stood out during the analysis of the Indian case study.

Subscription-based and crowdfunding

Although the online subscription market in India is in its early stages, it is already as big as in some of Europe's largest markets.

These are online-only independent small publishers that present long-form investigative hyper local news focused on a specific region, and mostly offered via subscriptions. Such regional outlets include East Mojo, a digital news media from northeast India, founded in 2018; The News Minute, an independent digital platform that covers South India; and Alt News, a non-profit fact checking news website founded and run by a former software engineer and a journalist. Alt News solely runs on funding and donation, encouraging viewers to donate for a “novel cause” of debunking fake news (Dahiya 2023, p. 141).

News outlets such as News Minute and East Mojo focus on local and regional coverage but are recognised for their national and international reach. As India seeks to solidify its global position as a hub for start-ups, the crowdfunding model has emerged as an effective source for generating

funds. Scroll.in, a digital news outlet launched in 2016, covers various parts of India, including rural and regional areas, through in-depth reporting, and presents an excellent example of the crowdsourcing model. In 2022, the company launched The Scroll Ground Reporting Fund to support journalists to report on important stories from under-covered regions and to gain traction on the main platform, highlighting regional issues on a national scale.

News aggregation

In this model, digital media outlets license content from multiple publishers, synthesising and recommending it to audiences, mostly free to the consumer and supported by advertising, but some businesses charge monthly subscription fees. News aggregators are incredibly popular: 53 per cent of English-speaking respondents to the Digital News Report said that they access Google News, 25 per cent Dailyhunt, 19 per cent InShorts and 17 per cent NewsPoint (Krishnan 2022).

Dailyhunt is a Bangalore-based news aggregator, first launched as NewsHunt in 2009. It was acquired from its founders by Verse Innovation in 2011 (Rishi et al., 2019) and rebranded in 2015. It currently provides news in 14 languages, receives over 2.3 billion page views across 90 million unique users each month, and aggregates more than 100,000 articles each day from across 200 publications (Sen and Nielsen 2016, p. 26). The news service is free to the user and supported by advertising, sales of eBooks and comics, materials for exam preparation, and partnerships with media companies trying to reach its extensive audience (Reddy 2024, 346). Its investment in becoming a multilingual service was an intentional strategy, its CEO has said, to differentiate Dailyhunt from Google News and other international services as they enter the local market (Reddy 2024, p. 346), as well as to maximise their potential audience: only 10 per cent of Indians read English, making the non-English language market considerably larger (Sen and Nielsen 2016, p. 27).

Strategic content partnerships between journalists and PR professionals

These collaborations are increasingly viewed in a positive light, reflecting a growing acknowledgment of mutual benefit. Such partnerships produce multimedia content of hyperlocal coverage that mirrors the linguistic, cultural, and social fabric of the region. According to a 2024 study on regional media in India, 64 per cent of regional media outlets regularly collaborated with a public relations (PR) partner, demonstrating more positive results in comparison with media – PR interactions for national media (School of Communications & Reputation, 2024, p. 11). Two-thirds of regional journalists and editors that the researchers interviewed said they were eager for meaningful collaborations with PR and independent communication professionals.

Citizen journalism

The proliferation of affordable mobile technologies and digital platforms have also given rise to citizen journalism in India. Moreover, the growth of short audio-video formats (such as 60-second snippets) has also augmented the role of citizen journalists in the broader Indian independent media market. Citizen-produced content is primarily used by digital news outlets that are interactive voice-based community media, working through mobile phones.

A prominent example is the citizen journalism project CGNET SWARA which has been using audio to tell stories. The project is the brainchild of former BBC World Service journalist Shubhranshu Choudhary, who notes that most rural and Indigenous communities in India do not have a voice “because newspaper and radio are not in their dialects” (Anderson, 2021).

The Better India and Citizen Matters are other digital media platforms that largely rely on submissions from citizen contributors to focus on positive news and developmental

AS INDIA SEEKS TO SOLIDIFY ITS GLOBAL POSITION AS A HUB FOR START-UPS, THE CROWDFUNDING MODEL HAS EMERGED AS AN EFFECTIVE SOURCE FOR GENERATING FUNDS.

stories from across India. In both cases, stories from rural and regional areas are shared widely on social media and sometimes picked up by mainstream metropolitan media. Their model emphasises grassroots stories that have broader social relevance.

Sharing newsrooms

Since most start-ups do not have large newsrooms, bringing newsrooms together can give journalists access to greater resources, including money, time and expertise, than working separately.

For instance, in 2023, The News Minute started partnering with Newslaundry, a nationwide independent digital news outlet. For the 2024 general elections, the two independent news sites combined resources with three more digital sites to increase on-the-ground reporting around issues that they claimed were not covered in detail by mainstream media. The News Minute, Newslaundry, Scroll, The Wire and the Caravan joined forces to cover the battleground states in the country's lower house election, promising no shouting, no ads and no over-the-top graphics as reporters kept close watch on the political antics of the Modi Government. Together, they raised enough money through a joint crowdfunding campaign to cover the elections (Mittal, 2024).

Another newsroom collaboration between Newslaundry, The News Minute and Scroll brought together 25 journalists, who covered one of the most high-profile stories of 2024. Their investigative story resulted in the Supreme Court of India outlawing an anonymous political funding scheme. Under this scheme, private companies donated to the governing party when they were being investigated by authorities. In a country where digital media organisations have expressed serious concern about a raft of laws passed by the Modi Government to survey journalists accessing data, impose internet shutdowns and allow government access of encrypted social media messaging, the emergence of these independent journalism horizontally organised newsrooms may shift the "trust" dial. This year's Digital News Report shows trust for some news brands is continuing to decline.



United States

The mass media market in the United States (US) is one of intense concentration, polarisation and centralisation. It is a market in which 90 per cent of all media is owned by six organisations: AT&T, CBS, Comcast, Disney, News Corp and Viacom, with just 232 executives at the helm of most of the mass media market (Nalbandian, 2022). It is a market where 57 per cent of journalists fear for the future of press freedom (a statistic collated prior to the Presidential election of November 2024), and only 32 per cent of consumers express trust in the media (Forman-Katz & Nasser, 2023; Reuters Institute, 2023) and with rapidly spreading news deserts that have left some 70 million citizens without a "credible source of local news" (National Public Radio (NPR), 2023).

These realities do not bode well for the future of American media at large, and yet there are deeper ramifications for the increasingly pressured and underrepresented American regional media. Between 2005 and 2022, over 2,500 local newspapers shuttered (Pew Research Centre, 2021), with on average two newspapers closing each week since 2008 and digital and print replacements rarely emerging to fill news gaps. Approximately 60 per cent of counties across the nation

have either one or no local news service, and newsroom staffing has declined by a similar rate (Abernathy & Franklin, 2022). An additionally concerning factor is that American citizens seem confused about the state of their local media. A 2019 report by the Pew Research Center found that 71 per cent of Americans believed their local news outlets were "doing very or somewhat well financially" which may impact support patterns, as only 14 per cent of surveyed participants had ever paid for local news (Pew Research Center, 2019). To better understand the pressures faced by local news markets, a broader understanding of the mass media market is necessary.

The largest mainstream media service operating in the United States is News Corp's FOX, with a monthly reach of approximately 83,000,000 multiplatform unique visitors, according to the cable service. FOX is followed by Cable News Network (CNN), E.W. Scripps Local TV, ABC NEWS, National Broadcasting Company (NBC) NEWS, CBS NEWS, YAHOO News, MSNBC, NPR, and Hearst Communications, all of which claim a total of over 150,000,000 monthly consumers. Most of these services produce television and digital content, excluding YAHOO News (digital only) and NPR (radio and digital) (Harvard University, 2021).

Television is by far the most popular traditional news medium in the United States, with over 10,000 commercial stations in operation across the country, many of which are affiliates of larger networks like FOX, ABC and NBC (BBC, 2023). Affiliates are local broadcasters that carry various programmes produced by the larger network, and often share a localised styling of the network name (e.g. FOX29 WFLX is the FOX affiliate in West Palm Beach, Florida). Major organisations that hold large affiliate networks include Gray Television, Sinclair and Nexstar Media Group, all of which own several hundred television stations, many of which are affiliates with larger networks like FOX, ABC and NBC (Gray Television, 2024; Sinclair, 2024; Nexstar Media Group, 2024).

Beyond simply being the strongest traditional media industry, television news is also the most powerful local news industry in the United States, with 38 per cent of news consumers turning to the medium for their primary local news consumption, and 83 per cent believing it to be the most trusted form of local news (Forman-Katz, 2023; Mann, 2022).

Local television news is subject to cyclical financial fortunes based on the American electoral cycle. In 2022 (a midterm election year), the market saw approximately USD\$4.3 billion in advertising revenue on political advertising in cable



television, most of which was spent in local cable television (Franz et al 2023). Political advertising represents a significant part of the financial takings of news producers, with five major local television companies (Gray, Nexstar, Scripps, Sinclair and Tegna) reporting approximately USD\$1.9 billion in political advertising dollars in both 2020 and 2022 (Pew Research Center, 2023a). There is a concern however, that the high prevalence of political advertising has led to many consumers using advertisements as a primary source of information gathering on issues of civic or electoral importance, regardless of the subjectivity of their content (Usher, 2023).

The core threat to the television market is digital news consumption, which is rising quickly. However, audiences appear to be preferring official news websites and apps over social media and podcasting as news sources, which may provide some comfort to traditional news producers (Pew Research Center, 2023c).

Radio also plays a key role in American media consumption, with over 80 per cent of citizens tuning in to the radio on a weekly basis, even though news consumption through radio is lower at 47 per cent, and local news consumption is even lower at 20 per cent. Listenership remains steady, despite falling from 92 per cent to 82 per cent between 2010 and 2022, numbers which include all forms of radio content. (Forman-Katz, 2023).

Alongside television and radio there is a declining but present local print media market in the United States, with a digital and print newspaper circulation of approximately 21 million daily readers (Pew Research Center, 2023b). Ownership of this sector of the market is similarly concentrated with a few organizations wielding control. Gannett Co., Inc. leads the way with 250 mastheads, followed by Lee Enterprises, Alden Global Capital venture

Capital, Chatham Asset Management, Hearst, and Advance Local Publications (Harvard University, 2021). All except Hearst and Advance Publications, which are family owned, are owned by investment management groups or hedge funds.

A mix of investment firm management and family ownership appears to be the dominant form of ownership in the American mass media. When it comes to family ownership, individuals like Rupert Murdoch, Michael Bloomberg and Samuel Irving Newhouse Jr. represent the traditional media baron archetype, exerting significant influence in the industry through their controlling interests in News Corp, Bloomberg and Condé Nast, respectively. However, a new breed of media mogul has entered the market, with billionaires like Amazon's Jeff Bezos purchasing The Washington Post in 2013, and investor John Henry, owner of Boston Red Sox and Liverpool FC, purchasing the Boston Globe the same year (Vinton, 2016). There appears to be a primary focus on purchasing and backing metro news outlets with prestigious titles while smaller localized media does not receive the same treatment as big brand names.

Where big money flows, it occasionally flows philanthropically, and in the case of the United States media, a growing trend of philanthropic investment in local media has peaked and appears to be levelling. The Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) observed in 2017 that approximately 25 per cent of nonprofit newsrooms in the United States focused on local news. The percentage in 2022 grew to 46 per cent, with 63 per cent of nonprofit startups that opened since 2020 being local focused. The term "local" used in this study includes both metro and regional publications but represents the changing face of funding for small-scale publishing models. Nonprofit outlets covered by INN primarily focus on government, arts and culture, and primary and secondary education, with most outlets stating that "encouraging and inspiring civic

engagement is a top priority" (Institute for Nonprofit News, 2023).

An example of a successful news organisation funded through both private and philanthropic means is 100 Days in Appalachia. Partnered with the Rural Digital Resilience Project, 100 Days in Appalachia is an independent nonprofit that seeks to produce news for and by those living in the largely rural Appalachia region of the United States. Founded to cover the impact of the first 100 days of the Trump presidency in Appalachia, it has continued operating. As a member of INN, the site has sourced funding through a variety of philanthropic foundations as well as through direct donations from readers and supporters. For the most part, content produced by 100 Days in Appalachia is done so under a Creative Commons license, with the organisation actively encouraging other publishers and broadcasters to "steal our stories."

Press Forward, another body designed to bolster philanthropic investment in local journalism calls itself a "coalition of 22 donors." In 2023, it pledged \$500 million to the revitalization of local news over the course of five years. Citing growing news deserts and the continued closure of local mastheads, Press Forward joins organisations like the American Journalism Project which offers grants to nonprofit news organisations; establishes new news outlets; and trains news professionals. Between 2019 and 2022, the American Journalism Project committed \$37 million in grants and funded 33 news organisations across the country (American Journalism Project, 2023). Despite these positive signs, philanthropy that specifically targets local journalism is negligible. Philanthropic funding across the board is primarily targeted at large, national and global news organisations, with local news receiving less than five per cent of the total foundation grants made between 2010 and 2015 (Institute for Nonprofit News, 2022; Abernathy, 2020).

ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA ARE NOT LIMITED TO PUBLIC BROADCASTERS. ANTI-PRESS RHETORIC ROSE TO FEVER PITCH DURING THE CAMPAIGN AND ELECTION OF PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP IN 2016 AND HAS YET TO COOL DOWN.



There are also networks of public broadcasters funded through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which funds the National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Both NPR and PBS have domestic and international networks of newsrooms, often utilising university campuses and student journalism to produce content. Domestic newsrooms are found across the country, and often focus on local civic and social news. However, these services are run on low budgets, with the United States government providing just \$3.16 of annual funding per capita to the CPB. In comparison, Australia provides USD\$35.78 per capita to its public broadcasters, Botswana provides USD\$18.38, and Norway USD\$110.73 (Benton, 2022). Furthermore, many public broadcasting services across the United States do not produce their own news content, but rather repurpose and broadcast existing content produced by other organisations (Abernathy, 2020).

While public broadcasting has been a proposed option to support local media in countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and is a significant player in the United Kingdom, there is doubt over its place in the American political landscape. There are significant pushes, particularly from the

Republican party, to have the CPB, the body that funds public broadcasting, defunded; Mitt Romney made this pledge part of his electoral campaign in 2012, as has Donald Trump in consistent messaging since 2016. When NPR's listenership rose steeply in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, with many Americans seeking a reliable source of news in the quickly changing environment, the Democratically controlled congress proposed a funding injection for the public broadcasters as part of a larger stimulus package, which was ridiculed by Republican lawmakers (Abernathy, 2020).

Attacks on the media are not limited to public broadcasters. Anti-press rhetoric rose to fever pitch during the campaign and election of President Donald Trump in 2016 and has yet to cool down. Trump routinely characterises journalists and the media as “absolute scum,” “totally dishonest people” and has described the American press as “the enemy of the people” on X (Hetherington & Ladd, 2020; Samuels, 2019). Between 2015 and 2019 Trump attacked the press in almost 1900 tweets, which in some instances led to the doxing of journalists’ private details, and the hiring of security staff to protect political correspondents. Trump’s attacks via X included 600 instances of targeting specific news organisations, and the

naming of over 100 individual journalists, some of whom were threatened with violence by members of the public (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020).

Institutional attacks on the press have significantly influenced a continued degradation of trust in the media over recent decades. In 1973, 13 per cent of Democrats and 16 per cent of Republicans demonstrated distrust in the media. By 2018, those numbers had risen to 28 per cent for Democrats and 65 per cent for Republicans (Hetherington & Ladd, 2020). There has also been a continued diminishment of the American press’s standing on the global stage. As of 2023, the US was 45th on the Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) Press Freedom Index, far below similar markets like Canada (15th), the United Kingdom (26th) and Australia (27th). A decade earlier, in 2013, the United States ranked 32nd in the world.

A positive side to this bleak picture is that local news is faring better in terms of trust than its national counterparts. In general, Americans are twice as likely to trust their local news service than a national one, and this sentiment is strongest among Republican voters. However, this goodwill extends exclusively to questions of broad trust of local rather than national news. On questions of bias, and journalism as a tool for problem solving and balance, more than half of Americans trust neither local nor national news (Fioroni, 2022).

There has also been a long history of support of local media. The Postal Act of 1792, established by George Washington and James Madison created a precedent by which the United States Government heavily subsidized the mailing costs of periodical newspapers. This was reaffirmed in the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 which saw 75 per cent of costs subsidized. However, between 1970 and 2010, subsidies were reduced to 11 per cent, creating a market that was unviable for many publishers (Cowan & Westphal, 2010).

Other federal acts have been put forward to support local journalism, however they appear to suffer stagnant fates once

in the halls of Congress or the Senate. The Local Journalism Sustainability Act was introduced in July 2020 offering tax credits to consumers of new subscriptions, employers of journalists, and to those wishing to purchase advertising space in local newspapers/radio/tv stations. While it received support from the industry it was never voted on in Washington (News Media Alliance, 2024). Similarly, the Future of Local News Act, a 2021 bill that was tabled to establish the Future of Local News Committee was introduced in 2021 but never voted on. The Committee’s purpose was to examine, report on and make recommendations regarding the state of local news, but it seemed not to develop the momentum to carry itself through to law (Future of Local News Act, 2021). Another attempt in 2023 was made to bolster the industry through the tabling of the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act. The Act attempted to create an American version of Australia’s News Media Bargaining Code, in an endeavour to redirect profits from social media giants towards publishers. This piece of legislation also appears to have lost momentum (Journalism Competition and Preservation Act, 2023). Given the state of American politics and the difficulty with which legislation passes through Washington, some believe it is unlikely that meaningful federal reform will pass in the near future (Buni, 2023).

There has, however, been some movement on the state level to support local media. In September of 2022, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed California Assembly Bill 179 which placed \$25 million in journalism funding for underserved and underrepresented communities through a fellowship programme with UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism. The programme will employ 120 journalists by 2025 (Buni, 2023). In New Jersey, the 2018 New Jersey Civic Information Bill established a 16-member consortium of academics, media professionals, community members and students to distribute USD\$3 million in funding from the 2023 Civic Information Fund. So far, 14 news organisations have received grants of up to USD\$35,000 each (Karr, 2021).

**ON QUESTIONS OF BIAS, AND JOURNALISM AS
A TOOL FOR PROBLEM SOLVING AND BALANCE, MORE THAN
HALF OF AMERICANS TRUST NEITHER LOCAL NOR NATIONAL NEWS**



Alongside these pilot programmes, states like Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin are considering tax breaks for subscriptions and payroll for news publishers. The state of Wisconsin has also offered to pay back half of advertising costs up to USD\$5,000 for businesses that advertise in local media. Cities like New York City and Chicago are similarly offering their own advertising dollars to struggling news outlets (Buni, 2023). In California, a nation-first deal will see Google hand over millions of dollars to help pay for local journalism which combined with public funds is aimed at keeping local news organisations operational. In return for the platforms funding, Californian politicians have agreed to kill a bill which would have required big tech to support news outlets they profit from. The deal has attracted significant criticism that it is allowing the tech giant to avoid a fee under what would have been groundbreaking legislation, similar to Australia's News Media Bargaining Code.

In the political, economic and social state of the American media, several start-ups have emerged to challenge the current landscape and provide public interest journalism in increasingly prevalent news deserts. One such example is Report for America, a privately funded organisation founded by journalists Steven Waldman and Charles Sennott, which places young journalists into local newsrooms to cover issues and communities that are underserved. Competitions are held to select news organisations and young journalists who can be partnered to produce news content for two-year periods. Report for America then pays for approximately half of the journalist's salary, the partner newsroom pays a quarter, and the final quarter is garnered through fundraising within the local community. Since its founding in 2017, Report for America has placed 604 journalists in 338 newsrooms and raised over USD\$21 million from local communities (Report for America, 2024).

Another method of tackling the local news dilemma is the establishment of peer networks, that connect established or successful newsrooms, with struggling localised ones to create and spread news content.

One such programme came from the Seattle Times, which formed the Seattle Times News Partner Network in 2009 to connect with hyperlocal news sites in a content sharing arrangement. Many readers and industry members celebrated the network as it grew to host over 50 hyperlocal partners,

but it was reduced after Seattle Times management questioned its value. The Network was characterised by Seattle Times management as one that greatly supported local news sites, but did little for the Seattle Times itself, and was in some cases cannibalising advertising funds from the larger organisation (Stonbely, 2017).

Another example is the ProPublica Local Reporting Network, founded in 2018 to reverse a lack of local investigative reporting. The Network has partnered with over 70 newsrooms across the United States and has won a Pulitzer Prize for public service in 2020 for a collaboration with the Anchorage Daily News (ProPublica, 2024). ProPublica, as a wider investigative journalism outlet, has consistently offered its content for distribution by other news sources under a Creative Commons license since its founding in 2008.

Delaware Local Journalism Initiative (DLJI), in collaboration with the Delaware Community Foundation, created an internship programme to provide work experience for student journalists from “underserved and underrepresented communities” in professional newsrooms. The pilot programme of this internship saw students working collaboratively across newsrooms, in an attempt to foster a broader sense of collaboration between newsrooms in the state.

The DLJI also established the Delaware Journalism Collaborative, in conjunction with the Solutions Journalism Network, an organisation seeking to support solutions-based journalism in the United States. The Delaware Journalism Collaborative has partnered with several news and community organisations to produce content across a two-year project focused on polarization.

The topical focus of the network is characteristic of several journalism networks established across the United States, who seek to tackle individual social issues through networked journalism, rather than address a broad gap in a geographic areas access to public interest journalism.

Resolve Philadelphia is another example of such a network. The organization claims to “develop and advance journalism rooted in equity, collaboration, and the elevation of community voice,” and established the Philadelphia Journalism Collaborative (PJC) to achieve these goals. The PJC is a network of 29 local newsrooms that covers community news within Philadelphia, through a solutions-based lens.





GOING LOCAL

In this chapter, CMT has consulted with audiences to gain an insight into their needs and wants from both local media and metro media coverage of their regions. In the methodology section of this chapter, we have detailed where and how we found these audiences, and how we framed our questions to them.

Reporting the disruption to the traditional media ecosystem from inside the media has given a deep focus on institutional collapse and loss of information. But how has it been experienced by the communities that long relied on that ecosystem to meet their news and information wants and needs?

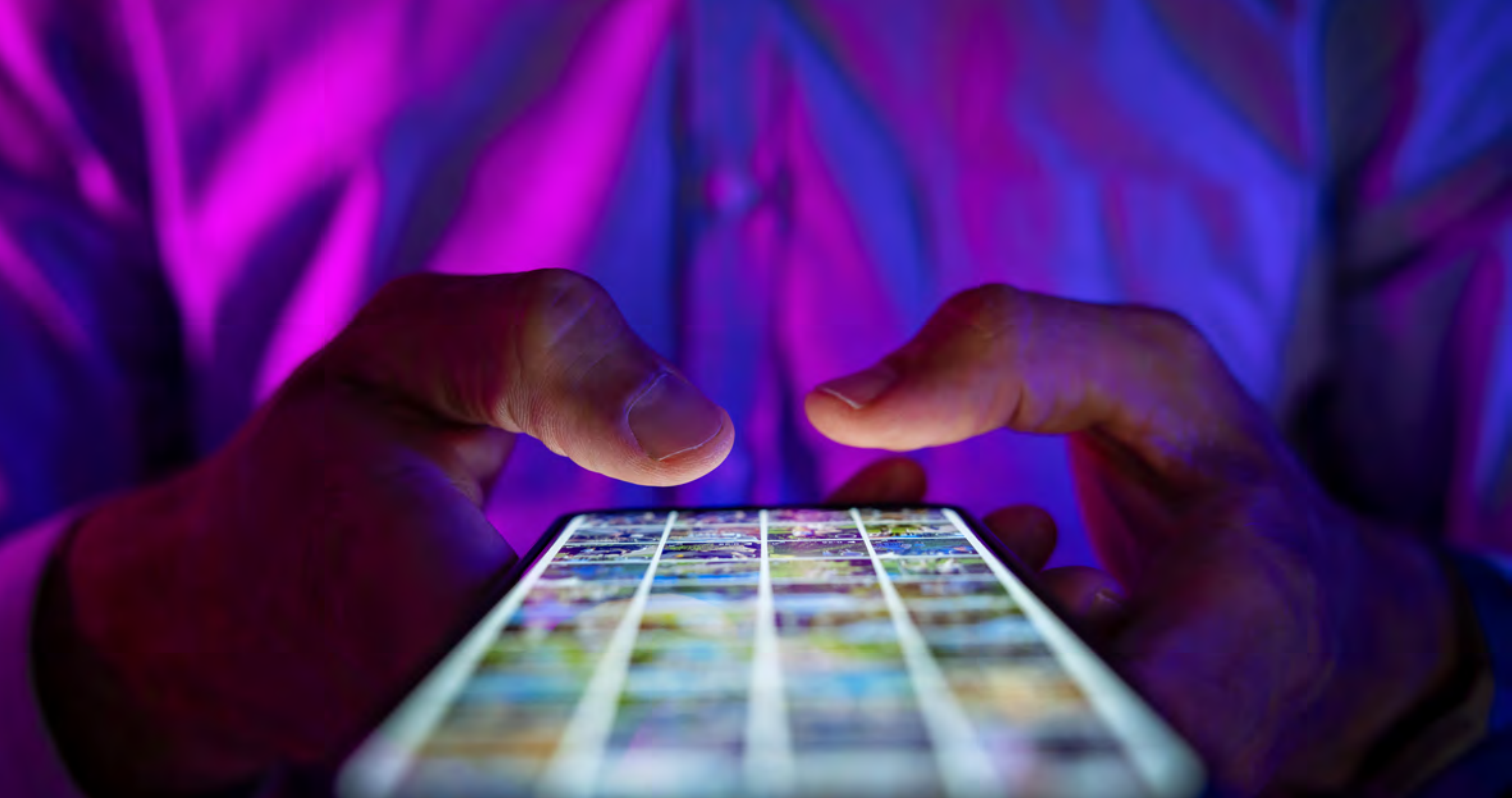
There was a time when regional media served its communities with local news as well as relevant state and national news relevant to the region. Local media was integrated into the larger media ecosystem, both as takers of national and state news and as providers of local news that was either important, relevant to state or national narratives or just interesting to a society where many metro residents still had direct family links to regional communities.

Every town had its own masthead, printing with varying frequency from daily to weekly, depending on market demand. They were usually locally owned by prominent

resident families or, in the case of Broken Hill, by the local union organisation, the Barrier Industrial Council. Drive through any of these towns today and the building that housed the masthead endures on main streets as a reminder of their status and contribution to the local community.

Metro media – as shapers of the state and national narratives – actively engaged with regional audiences. All papers produced early country editions for distribution to regional areas that included regional news for those communities. Up until the 1990s, most had full-time reporters in Wollongong and Newcastle, which were, rightly or wrongly, considered by metro publications to be regional.

That integration is now broken from both ends of the chain. Regional media are struggling to build a viable business model in competition with digitally delivered news and information and have largely abandoned reporting state or national news. Lighter regulation largely freed regional commercial radio from the obligation to broadcast their own news early this century (Dwyer et al., 2006). In 2020, Covid-19 accelerated the decline as many regional mastheads stopped printing and converted to digital-only output. Only five regional daily papers continue to print in New South Wales and many others have closed or been reduced to tabs inside the web sites of state-based papers.



Methodology and framework

This research seeks to understand how news consumers get their news and how they integrate it into their understanding of what's happening both within their regional or local communities and at a national or state level. By understanding the point of view of news users, news leaders can be better equipped to understand how to reach audiences.

The research questions are:

- What do regional audiences value in their local media and in the coverage of regional Australia by metro outlets?
- How do regional audiences want to be connected into national narratives on issues that matter to them?
- What regional issues are metropolitan audiences interested in?

CMT wanted to test some of the essential assumptions that have underpinned the research so far, including the

extent to which metropolitan communities are interested in news about regional communities; how important it is for regional communities to see themselves in the national news narratives; and whether local communities are interested in news from outside their area.

Both the media ecosystem and media research of the previous century had a market-driven simplicity. As audiences shifted from consuming news from a consolidated media structure of newspapers and broadcast networks, transitioning to the diverse digital environment, research followed this structural focus on the media builders themselves. It was qualitative and theme-based, using in-depth interviews with practitioners and readings of their real-time comments in blogs, speeches and articles (Park, 2020). This required it to be taken as given that the people driving the transition knew what they were doing and had some sense of who their audience was and what their news wants and needs were.

Drawing on action research, this project uses focus groups to identify what consumers value, what they want and what they need. The project is informed by design thinking tools developed at the d.school at Standard University (Camacho

2016) and in behavioural economics (Kahneman and Tversky 2011) which enable us to not look at whether or why news consumption is changing, but how that change is experienced (Wagemans & Witschge 2019).

We aim to understand the perspective of the news consumer by unpacking the notes and interviews from the focus groups, together with the artefacts created by participants such as their daily news journey, insights, thoughts, stories and observations to see the connections and patterns.

This qualitative data collected through the focus groups is then analysed through two frameworks: disruption and innovation theory, and particularly the “jobs to be done” framework that draws out lessons for news leaders (Christensen 1997); and through narrative analysis, which examines how news users consume and understand news through a “narrative” rather than through stand-alone news stories, traditional products or time-based news cycles.

Narrative analysis helps explain both the values and foundational stories that communities tell themselves with recurring set of “themes, actors and moral lessons.” We can best understand narratives through ethnographic research of open conversations with news consumers (Berkowitz and Nossek, 2001).

To aggregate audiences at both the local and metropolitan level, CMT structured focus groups more as shared group interviews – where the participants are encouraged to provide thoughtful contributions and to feel free to question and converse – with five to 10 news consumers (of varying density) in five separate groups. Three were held in regional areas of NSW – Wagga Wagga (seven participants including two participants from nearby Lockhart), Orange (nine participants including two who travelled from Dubbo), Byron Bay (10 participants) – as well as two groups in central Sydney (11 participants across both).

In accordance with best-practice, the groups were diverse across ages (from 18-80), professions, genders and both Australian-born citizens and migrants, creating the foundation for the kind of “radical collaboration” in the meeting that can lead to breakout thinking (Burnett and Evans, 2021). They were not statistically representative or quantitatively weighted.

The disruption of social platforms by bots, bad-faith actors and AI gaming the system made putting groups together harder than CMT has historically found to be the case, with many of the registrants from Facebook promotion turning out to be literally “fake news” with false details.

Although the discussions were non-directional, they were guided in the context of the research question and the key challenge identified in the earlier research work: How are news narratives (choices, cycles, framings) at a local or regional level integrated in the national narrative as it is mediated through national or state-based metropolitan media and vice-versa?

The group discussions were conducted through the adaptation of design thinking tools, specifically with open questions, conversation and exercises designed to co-curate experiences. Over two hours, participants were guided through the following topics:

- We mapped their news and information consumption journey over a typical 24 hours, to learn where and how, they were getting their news and information, where they would turn if they needed to find information. We were looking for local and national sources, and to understand what role non-news sources play. We asked people about their region and local media to explore the issues that they care about. This helped us understand what was important to them, how they see themselves, and later in the session, how they felt they and the issues they care about are covered in national media.
- We asked what regional stories published in metro media they could recall, showing a number of regional stories from their own and other regions produced as part of the Guardian Australia Rural Network. The discussion explored how they value stories like these and efforts by metro media reporting on their community.
- We explored how they thought local media might be better, and asked what they would change to improve it.
- With our metro-based focus groups we explored what they were interested in learning more about in regional Australia.



Mapping the news journey

Applying the “user journey” methodology to news consumption helps unpack the news habits that are being remade by the digital transition to see what audiences are doing, recognise how they move from product to product or from narrative to narrative, and how they weave their own complex basket of news and information sources from a range of media offerings and non-traditional sources.

The key insight from all groups is that news users have broken free from the new producers’ perspective that media can control the news user journey. Instead, users curate their own idiosyncratic news feed from diverse sources – including non-news media like local parliamentarian Facebook pages. Bowerbird-like, they pick and choose what they want and need from diverse sources to create a bespoke news diet out of what’s available.

Asking focus group participants to track their own news consumptions revealed some key observations about current news journeys.

- News consumers usually draw their national news feeds from a wide variety of self-curated sources: traditional metropolitan and national media like The Sydney Morning Herald, Guardian Australia, The Daily Telegraph, The Australian, commercial television news bulletins and the ABC, The Saturday Paper and some international media. They also relied on sources we would not

usually think of as “news media” such as police, libraries and local council information and newsletters, Reddit and Facebook groups which are particularly curated around special interests or the “what’s on” category.

- Regional and local news feeds are similarly curated through a range of independent media, surviving local franchises of chained media, the ABC, community and commercial radio, some digital media sources, as well as police and local council information, Facebook groups and local members of parliament.
- There is limited evidence that people live in ideologically discrete news silos, such as an exclusive diet of News Corp media. Regular news consumers read, watch or listen to a diverse mix.
- Habits are malleable: some consume news in one go in the morning and/or evening. Others graze through the day (particularly on social media) or consume lightly through the week and engage heavily at weekends.
- Paid subscriptions were uncommon with the value proposition of subscription not clearly understood. For example, two participants from the Sydney and Byron Bay focus-groups who subscribed to The Sydney Morning Herald saw value in the weekend editions of the paper and receiving the daily digital news as an add-on. Participants in the Wagga Wagga and Orange focus groups mentioned reading the Daily Telegraph but none subscribed, explaining they mostly looked at headlines and alerts. Others interpreted The Guardian Australia’s donations promotions as constituting a paywall which, believing they were locked out, drove them away.
- Regional focus groups rarely saw themselves or their local narratives in the national media – and often did not like what they did see reported, with a metropolitan

media focus on crime and traffic fatalities seen as click bait, and a lack of sustained focus on natural disasters such as floods after the initial crisis reporting left some feeling let down. Others saw an almost-cartoonish characterisation of their region and its people.

- Some participants in the regional groups expressed concern that the lack of break-through of important local stories into the metropolitan media undermined their ability to influence state or federal governments over local issues or the impact of national or state issues in their own region.

Attitudes toward regional local media ranged from love, to trust, respect, like and indifference:

In Byron Bay, the community valued their independent media most and said they engaged with (read and discussed with others) the Byron Echo, the Nimbin Good Times, which emerged from the 1970s and 1980s environment community protests (Wyatt, 2024), the Koori Mail, the ABC, as and local community radio station BayFM. They valued local media for its civic function; as a way of understanding what governments were, should or could be doing at their local level and saw it as a vehicle through which community members could influence the implementation of government policies in their community, particularly in relation to development with its impact on housing, livability and the environment.

The Echo does cover all of the issues. It’s covering homelessness regularly, frequently and giving points of view and the latest that’s happening, including having a go usually at [local federal representative] Justine Elliot and what she’s not doing. It’s covering climate change to an extent. It prints Cosmos magazine articles, which are good. It’s had good coverage on the no vote

ATTITUDES TOWARD REGIONAL LOCAL MEDIA RANGED FROM LOVE, TO TRUST, RESPECT, LIKE AND INDIFFERENCE



So the invited guests, the ones on the pages next to the letters, are generally the best

There's antagonism towards the council from the editor's chair. Which is good and the council do leave themselves open at times. There is good reason

The Echo played a strong role when they were trying to close down the old people's home. And they didn't get away with it ...

A number in the group also mentioned The Echo's role in an ongoing campaign around the former Mullumbimby Hospital site "which was supposed to be for the community, and community housing would be a really good result. But the council probably sees it more as a development for money raising" according to one participant.

The quality of the coverage is streets ahead of other local papers

When asked if they felt any loss of news with the closing of the News Corp-owned Ballina Shire Advocate and Byron Shire Newspapers, the response was universal: "Not at all."

In Wagga Wagga, all participants said they read, liked or valued the Daily Advertiser, owned by Australian Community Media for day-to-day information needs and to find out what was happening in the community. Several participants however indicated they believed the newspaper could do better with suggestions such as working to retain journalists who otherwise too quickly moved out of the region without developing the deep or nuanced understanding that came from putting down roots.

I sometimes feel that because most of the local journalists, they're not locally based... so, they have limited knowledge of our area... I get the essence of what's in our local media, but I really need more depth or that local connection, I think that emotional connection is missing from the news

Which is not the case with Prime Seven. Because some of their journalists have been staying in the region more than seven or eight years. So at least they get a sense, this is the news

But having said that, I do love Region Riverina... They're not a really a big enterprise. But they are doing all the groundwork. I love the depth of information ... the level of questions or the type of questions they ask to the community

They listened to and valued the ABC, particularly the local morning presenters and news bulletins. They felt a deep affinity for what they saw as deep engagement by the presenters, themselves members of the local community, but lamented cutbacks to local news production and bulletins. They also appreciated the local FM radio station.

Local free to air news was an important source of news for participants in Orange and Wagga Wagga. In both groups Prime Seven, with "a full half hour local bulletin" was recognised as the standout news source for their coverage of local issues and sport due to it

...having journalists and camera people out covering stories and asking people on the street. You can't write a local news story sitting in an office in Canberra

They noted that Ten had few resources for local news and was more a "rip and read."

In Orange and Dubbo participants said they usually read the relevant local paper – the ACM-owned Central Western Daily for Orange, and the Daily Liberal for Dubbo – for daily updates about what was happening in the community. Most accessed the print versions of these newspapers as few had a subscription to access the digital versions.

[The Central Western Daily] could be better. They do a reasonable job covering most of the big stuff, but they are about the only paper actually covering it. Plus, if you're not actually subscribing to it, or if you're not actually picking it up, you don't see it. And almost everything is paywalled online. So, there's very little stuff if you're not subscribed, you'll actually get from them.

Others saw little value in the newspaper, saying that they neither read it nor had faith in its reporting. Note that at the time of the focus groups in winter 2024, both papers were being reduced to a single, "beefed up" weekly edition, rather than daily editions. This may have influenced how participants valued (or under-valued) the soon-to-be reduced print products.

Participants from Orange also noted the high turnover of journalists in their region:

For all journalists, print, TV, radio, this is a stepping stone, they start in the regions. ... So there's a high turnover of journalists

And of the Dubbo Daily Liberal, there was a sense that its value had shrunk with the paper, and that its coverage was influenced by advertisers.

[It] costs you a fortune but there's only about three pages in it

When asked where they go for information if something happens in Orange they need to know about, participants said that:

The Central Western Daily website is usually up to date. If something's going down, they'll usually put something up

Another said the Central Western Daily sometimes "missed the community sentiment a little bit," as when the local council in Orange had removed much-loved trees from the city centre.

There's this feeling that something's not completely been covered. It's not full coverage. Some part of the story is missing... it's always the follow up that's missing

A few mentioned the independent Orange News Examiner, which closed earlier this year:

I was getting that...and it was quite good... it was free, which is what made it very accessible. And they did a reasonable job of doing everything. But I think costs



have caught up to [it]. And then they went to subscriptions and running ads. And I think [they're] now looking at closing it down because [they] just can't keep it going

The regional groups did not see that metro or national media was filling the gap in reporting local news. One participant in Orange reflected that:

When watching metro news (television) people "could think that the only place that existed in New South Wales was Sydney. Yeah. That would be fairly common

They also felt that rather than covering issues of value to the community, their focus on crime and fatalities, let them down. They talked about a community buying out the only pub in a town to keep it going as an example of an important story of community ingenuity and resilience that was ignored by metro media.

It has to be death and destruction or fatality, to get on to national news. It's bad news. Yeah, they might do a giraffe being born at the zoo. There's plenty of positive things happening out in these regions. We're growing all the food

The Orange focus group highlighted that bank closures and doctor shortages could be better reported in metro news in order to deliver solutions.

Local news narratives

Drawing on the feedback from the user's journey, "I like" and "I wish" prompts encouraged participants to articulate what they valued in their region, and what was the job that communities wanted done by regional or local media. In regional communities, we found that traditional regional media all contribute to the job of shaping the narratives of how people understand their communities.

We read their comments through Downs' sorting of news needs (Downs 1957) as adapted by Hamilton (2004): information needs as a producer or worker, needs as a consumer (particularly of local services and amenities), needs for entertainment and needs for knowledge to engage in civic society.

Civic narratives are the most significant of the news narratives at the local level, particularly where they overlap into narratives of needs as producer or consumer/resident.

The most widely shared narrative involved housing shortages. We found in our groups that this narrative was understood and experienced as a local narrative shaped by the issues at play in their region and situated within the national narrative.

In Byron Bay, the narrative was refracted through the context of a region dealing with housing shortages, a large unhoused population, high tourism and population inflows, and national issues like extreme climate events such as flooding.

I think the counterweight to this thinking is that we also need housing. We've got grandmas living in cars, it's just beyond despair

Yes, but it's about the selection of appropriate sites. You know, why build on arable farmland? Who's going to provide food in the future ...

The obvious place to house people is to go up, is to put four storeys and avoid Woolworths building luxury hotels, and building residential. The issue is...the council has no money to build public housing and the state government seems to have no money to build public housing. So there's a very different thing about low cost housing and social housing. They're completely different. And what we need is social housing

I think we're all pro housing, it's just about where

And when asked: how this is covered in the news media:

It's covered well here but it's not taken up at the state level...not even by the ABC

If people aren't reading about it in Macquarie Street, they're not going to know what's going on here

It's the too hard basket. It's too expensive. It's too hard. We just want housing that's going to bring in money for the state. And then we can spend it in Sydney too. But to build more infrastructure. There's my opinion

Participants were conscious that their local media's shaping of these narratives was most influential at the local level but that it did not break through into the national or metropolitan media narratives in a way that influenced their lives, or enabled them to make change.

In Orange and Dubbo, narratives focused on access to housing for a mobile workforce, particularly for critical service workers, as employers bought up or rented hotel accommodation to house incoming or short-term employees. This had an impact on both tourism and other movement into and out of town, and washed over into their need for information about the amenity of local livability and access to critical services, as well as their own housing issues.

THE REGIONAL GROUPS DID NOT SEE THAT METRO OR NATIONAL MEDIA WAS FILLING THE GAP IN REPORTING LOCAL NEWS

Participants from Orange and Dubbo shared their understanding of what housing shortages meant in their local contexts where “the numbers have exploded ... and the former New South Wales government’s planning projections were way off”; critical workers have difficulty finding accommodation, and increased homelessness leads to more crime.

Our homeless rate is bad as well. We’ve got people in tent cities down on the river now. And that’s causing more crime problems as well

Rentals are very scarce, and they’re expensive. Now we’ve got such a shortage of houses and rentals ... all our caravan parks are full. And most of our hotels are full as well. People have full-time jobs, but they just can’t find anywhere to live. It’s scary. We’ve got lots of couch surfing

It’s one of the problems with getting specialist doctors to come to Dubbo, because they just don’t have anywhere to stay

The NSW Government bought one hotel to accommodate doctors and nurses and our biggest employer, Fletcher’s international grain exports and abattoirs, bought three hotels and closed them down just so they can have accommodation for their employees. So we’ve lost (another) three hotels in Dubbo.... All in the last three years



GUARDIAN AUSTRALIA RURAL NETWORK

Regional participants were asked about specific stories published in Guardian Australia’s Rural Network. Although some read Guardian Australia stories – and could remember at least one of these stories – most seemed to come across Guardian Australia reports through social media once they had been highlighted by others. In Byron Bay, some participants said they avoided Guardian Australia as they had taken the near full-screen pop-up prompts to donate as a paywall.

One problem for me with the Guardian is its pay wall? I like to read the Guardian, but you just can’t get into it

You get limited access ... I thought it was a paywall too

You access a certain number of articles but then you can’t

They also said that when Guardian Australia does a story about the Northern Rivers region it is widely shared on social media indicating how it is valued. This was confirmed by two participants in one of the Orange focus groups:

There often is a link that people will share things from, they are more in depth than a couple of paragraphs

Participants identified the value of the Guardian Australia Rural Network reporting to an audience outside of the community, for the accountability it could potentially bring. However, in relation to one Guardian Australia story about rural health services shown to the first Orange focus group:

It does say things that we already know from a regional experience. So, it’s not easy to find a regional GP. Well, that’s not news

Regarding coverage of pollution by a mining company,

It’s keeping people accountable. You know, they’ve got a gold mine out there. They’ve got to go by what the conditions are. And, and if they’re not doing the right thing, well, people need to know about it

Participants in the Sydney focus groups did little to actively seek out news and information from regional areas beyond ABC offerings, and could not, unprompted, recall regional stories. Prompted with examples from Guardian Australia’s Rural Reporting Network, participants recognised the value in the reporting and agreed they would be interested in seeing stories like these in the future

How local media can be better

All groups were asked: If there is one thing you could change about the local media what would that be? Participants from across the regional groups had a variety of responses:

I would have more of it

More reporters that can cover more stories

More in depth

More health reporting

More local news on free to air television and that would probably attract people to watch it

Participants also wanted more coverage of local news.

I reckon that’s important. I think people love to hear what’s going on in their backyard. If [Dubbo] has really cool, generic human being stories ... like this amazing festival, then I want to know about it, and that helps Dubbo as well because that attracts tourism and numbers to those festivals. But my personal belief is that local news is dwindling in regional areas and I don’t



know what the end results can be

Participants also wanted a mix of news – to identify both the good and the bad occurrences in their communities:

We've got so many great people and volunteers in our region. We never hear those stories, we're always hearing about the kids who are breaking into the store, or setting fire to the depot

Just be balanced

Sticking to facts doesn't sell papers. It's really bad stories that sells media

Participants are looking for news that reflects a deeper understanding of the local news narratives that may better serve their wants and needs with a solutions-based lens.

The Central Western Daily seems to run on fairly standard stories. Here's a poor family who can't get local medical care. It's been a long wait, and they've had to go to Sydney, that kind of story runs regularly. ... Here is a young family who can't afford to buy into Orange, or are waiting for housing for a long time. That's the big story. That kind of report. And it's not unique to Orange. This kind of reporting doesn't actually help you to come to grips with ... can the local council do anything? Can the state government do anything? How much of the health issues are federal government issues? As a whole, we're probably not very aware

as a community, exactly who could do what to change things. And so those stories are just spat out, and they don't have more analysis or framework as to much more around that. I don't know who is going to do the work of that for how many dollars like, for a town, like Orange to have every local issue put into a bigger framework? Well, that's not going to happen

Participants noted what they saw as a shortage of reporting of local arts and culture in traditional corporate media, whilst others noted that new independent local media made arts and culture with photographs a focus of their reporting. Particularly in Wagga Wagga and Orange participants said their communities would be richer if they knew more about events that were happening in nearby towns before they happened. As one participant from Orange said:

It's good for the smaller towns. For all of us. For example, the Bathurst festival ... if you see it's advertised, you are going to drive to Bathurst. Or to the Dubbo Zoo, or wherever. It's good for the other towns ... and it would be nice if more of these events were covered by the local media

There was also a desire to see local media support commercial interests of the community, through promoting local events and attracting sponsorship. One participant from Dubbo in the same group said:

The big [Dubbo] festival got canned this year. What does it say? We had a dream festival, ... if it was

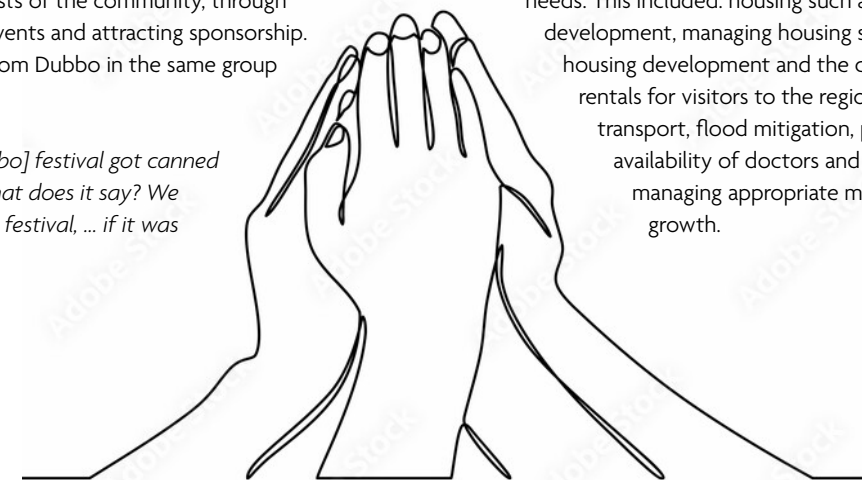
advertised properly, if we had more sponsorship behind it, maybe that wouldn't have happened

One participant in Wagga Wagga reflected that the Lockhart Show also almost folded because the local media saw their role as covering the event afterwards, when the organisers needed promotional coverage before the event.

There was a keen understanding of the need for reporting that can help communities bring about change:

What are the differences between living here or living metro... The lack of funding for healthcare ... and the problem of attracting doctors and healthcare workers ... seems to me those are things we can't fix locally without the State knowing and someone else intervening ... and it would be worth people knowing that those are issues ... why do we put up with that? Sometimes locally we just think that's the way it is ...

Through the “I like” and “I wish” exercises on how participants saw their local communities, we found a broad range of issues that could be approached through a state or national entrepreneurial journalism frame to generate local news narratives that aligned with the communities wants and needs. This included: housing such as the need for housing development, managing housing shortages, sustainable housing development and the complexities of short-term rentals for visitors to the region; public or community transport, flood mitigation, public health and availability of doctors and services, attracting and managing appropriate migrant services and jobs growth.



THERE WAS A KEEN UNDERSTANDING OF THE NEED FOR REPORTING THAT CAN HELP COMMUNITIES BRING ABOUT CHANGE



Participants recognised that a better local news feed depended on more locally experienced and engaged journalists. In each of the regional focus groups, we found a critical awareness of the experiences and community engagement of the journalists working in and for their local media whose work they read or listened to.

Although they valued the younger journalists who moved to the region to work for the local masthead or for the commercial free-to-air broadcasters, they recognised that many were unlikely to stay and that this turnover had a direct impact on the media's understanding of continuing news narratives. In contrast, in Byron Bay many participants respected and mentioned contributors to the Echo or to the Nimbin Good Times by name.

Participants valued independent local media, which was usually launched by people who already lived in the region and engaged in its civic life. In Byron Bay, for example, some of the independent community media emerged from the community rainforest protests in the late seventies and early

eighties (Wyatt, 2024). Orange News Examiner was started in January 2022 by a local journalist Peter Homes who told Crikey in 2022, "I spend a lot time driving around town getting yarns. I look for developments. Things closing and opening, scaffolding, vandalism, road works – there's always something if you keep a keen enough eye out."

Participants also like the free weekly arts and culture magazine Orange City Life which felt more connected with the community, saying, it "has good things in it. It'll have tradesmen you can go to, a few interesting things that you can read about the local area or what's on...what music is happening, Or farmers markets." In the Wagga Wagga group, Region Riverina was also mentioned favourably.

Group participants believed that the point of local media was to be local, to report what was happening in and around them. There was little interest in reading national or metropolitan or other regional news in the local news. There was some expressed interest in knowing more of what was going on in nearby regional communities, such as the broader Riverina region for Wagga Wagga, or the Central Western

Plains for Orange and Dubbo, but there's a boundary to the communities of interest that people have - regional people aren't interested in regional news just because it's regional news. This may suggest a disconnect in the regional-national approach of some metro media: while metropolitan audiences are interested in the broader issues without local connection, regional audiences aren't interested in seeing their local issues used merely as case studies in national narratives.

All participants demonstrated high literacy and understanding of the economic and social forces driving the decline of traditional media.

The size it was a decade ago, or 20 years ago... There were reporters and printers, and then it went to Dubbo. I think it's just the sign of the times where they are trying to make it more cost efficient.... it's just limited staff trying to cover all these areas and... try and get it relevant for that local community

There was some support in Orange for the shift to a better mix of deeper or more comprehensive weekly coverage with online daily breaking updates:

I feel as though the Central Western Daily could use its resources better than pumping out a paper every day. I wonder if they have considered the online content different from their weekly content? ... I think people want to know if there's anything major that's happening in a week, but whether there was more deep diving into some issues once a week, whether that would be more helpful

So, less frequency of the actual printed paper, some places do that

Others suggested shared newsrooms between commercial free-to-air stations and the local mastheads.

I wonder whether there's a possibility for Prime and the Central Western Daily to share resources, making both of them more efficient

When I was a kid in a small town, the local paper was an exciting place to find out all sorts of local

things... Orange City Life has taken off more because.. this activity happened at the park and that activity happened and there was this music thing and there was that and it feels like the themes have been separated rather than they used to come in one package. And so to have them in one place might be a more efficient way to do it

Participants "liked" business models that seemed to draw on the local community for support. However, there was little enthusiasm for paywalls and digital subscriptions.

Some were critical of an over-reliance on advertising, particularly in digital products and worried about the impact on the independence of the newspaper, although there were no suggestions of practical alternatives. For some participants, the prevalence of ads was an annoyance:

They're trying to stay afloat, the paper. That's why there's so many ads and real estate ads

The view from the city

The Sydney focus group participants were aware of the impact on resources and news availability driven by the news media's financial decline. The focus groups were held in the midst of widespread reporting of job cuts at both the Nine and News Corp mastheads (Guardian Australia, 2024) Some participants also noted the influence of advertising and of unspecified corporate interests.

Although some participants subscribed or had work-provided access to traditional media mastheads, for others the consumption of news from traditional providers is mediated through social media with the choice of platform shaped by demographics; younger and light news consumers audiences graze on Instagram; older groups gorge on Facebook.

As with regional audiences, habits are malleable, adjusted to other time demands, although participants who are news consumers lean to one or more of three patterns: accessing news from various sources once per day access throughout the day, particularly on social media, or heavier engagement at week's end.



Local news is largely missing in the metropolitan focus group news diet. Almost all suburban print media in all of Australia's capital city metro areas ceased printing or closed altogether in mid-2020. Participants noted that local news and perspectives on national or metropolitan narratives concerning their own "village" within the greater metro area are almost totally absent from the drivers of metro-local news narratives.

The city-based focus groups recognised that with the closure of most corporate-owned suburban and community newspapers distributed in metro areas, there is no driver for community narratives in those urban villages.

The eastern suburbs is a news desert, I would claim, because there's so much that happens there... but it's just never covered... there are poor people who live there, there's a lot of rich people who live there. There's a lot of stuff that happens, but... apart from what might end up in the Herald about cafes or restaurants...[there's] a huge amount of things that people are oblivious of

In a few metro suburbs, new independent media has emerged, either in print like The Beast in Sydney's eastern beaches or fully digital, such as In The Cove, in and around the Lane Cove area which is now 10 years old but still searching for a viable business model. Traditional metro media feature sporadic local stories, such as on the morning and drive programs on ABC

local radio. The Sydney Morning Herald coverage tends towards real estate and development-related stories, often triggered by a conflict news value of rows between residents and developers. The Daily Telegraph has carried over some reporting from its metro-community mastheads into tabs on its tightly pay-walled web page.

Absent ready access to traditional metro local news, group participants defaulted overwhelmingly, to local Facebook group pages, aware equally of the strengths – community embedded with high content range – and weaknesses such as mixed reliability and lacking the control of journalist ethics.

I have my street, and I have the groups I'm involved in locally... Whether I think I'm part of the [broader] community... I don't have that sense anymore, except for my involvement in various things, whereas once I used to hear all about that ...when I saw the breakdown of figures [on the Voice vote] for my area, I thought: 'I actually don't...know my community as well as I used to think I did'

Metro participants did not seek out regional stories, and apart from a couple of exceptions, from an ABC 7.30 report and Landline, no one could recall any actual regional stories they had recently consumed. When shown stories from Guardian Australia Rural Network, they agreed they 'could' be interested in such news, particularly those dealing with national issues like transport and energy. As one Sydney participant said:

I've been really interested in energy issues and there's been some interesting things that I've found illuminating on television. You suddenly find there's a town in South Australia that's completely run on solar, and you go, 'Oh my God, When did that happen?'

And how did that happen? Or the little battles that are going on about people not wanting wind farms and things, that's a very regional thing, and yet it's got huge implications for us sitting here saying we want more

wind, and yet, out there, that's the real front line of that issue. And so I've only just been starting to hear about those things. It's starting to kind of filter in, but again, on things like ABC 7.30 and stuff that goes a little deeper

In Dubbo, a renewable energy zone, the opening up of solar farms across the region is a big issue for many and has different narratives relating more to the lived experience.

There are different sides of the story. Some say that all of my views are gone because there's now only solar farms? There are some farms that are opening \$90,000 a year for one solar thing. ... Aboriginal land is being taken up by solar

Those metro residents with a direct, usually family connection to a regional area consumer regional news. Amongst our Sydney participants was one who stayed in regular touch with news from the Northern Rivers where she grew up: ,

If you go to Lismore, there are local papers ..there's more cohesion, in that sense, in the media, than I have in Sydney...My little village of Clunes, where I lived, has a newsletter that comes out once a week that's really, really detailed, and we don't have anything, any sense of that in my community in Sydney

However, another who had grown up in Wagga Wagga said that he only engaged with news about the regional city when he returned to visit, and not while he was in Sydney.

There was some evidence of metro interest where a regional or local narrative both aligned with and was relevant to a national narrative. A couple of examples illustrate the difference.

Aligned but not relevant stories have narrative lines that loop in parallel. For example, participants in all regional areas referred to a local narrative around the housing shortage with references to local factors such as short-term holiday rentals

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in Byron Bay or the impact of FIFO (fly in, fly out) or DIDO (drive in, drive out) mining operations in the Central West. A similar narrative with different factors driving the narrative was noted by metropolitan participants. But neither group was interested or saw much value in news about local stories from outside their area concerning the national housing crisis.

Aligned and relevant stories are exemplified by extreme weather events such as those that caused floods in northern NSW and produced a regional narrative that was both aligned with the national narrative of global warming and the direct impact on the northern rivers community, which was experienced as relevant by metro participants in a “there but for the grace of God” way.

Stories that are both aligned with and relate to national narratives are rare.

Regional participants do not turn to national media for news about their region. These stories are not seen to have news value as they have generally been covered by local media. When regional stories did break into the national narratives,

most regional participants resented how they discovered themselves represented in the national and metropolitan media.

For example, residents in Wagga Wagga felt that their town, one of the largest in regional Australia was misunderstood in the national context as a place with one “general store and somewhere to hitch your horse.” Wagga Wagga, they believe, understands itself – and should be understood by others – as an urban community with a diverse community including significant numbers of first and second generation migrants with all the main services and stores, health facilities, artistic institutions, and a large university campus, evolving towards a knowledge economy centre.

Wagga is an urban community with semi-rural and rural surrounds, and that’s an issue that Wagga has not yet come to terms with, that it is basically an urban area now, and the mindset that thinks it’s a rural area is no longer correct

Participants from nearby Lockhart similarly felt that Wagga Wagga was ill-informed about their community.

In Byron Bay where we drew participants from a range of towns, including Ballina, Goonellabah, Brunswick Heads and Mullumbimby participants felt that in the news narratives formulated outside their region there was a lack of nuanced understanding of their community, and that they were misjudged as hippies and conspiracy theorists.

It’s such a diverse community. When it was full on Covid, all we ever heard about was ‘Mullumbimby is the least vaccinated place in Australia’. So it’s either that, or it’s hippies, or it’s the influencers. Where’s just normal us people?

In a discussion about why national and metro media had largely ignored their ongoing push for short term holiday rental policy controls until after the policy change had been achieved, one participant asked the group:

But do you think there’s a general prejudice against hippies? I think this region suffers from that sometimes

Summary

Through these focus groups, CMT has found that regional and metropolitan news consumers have different habits, likes and wants from local and metro media sources. The study found that news consumers curate their news feeds from a variety of sources, including both traditional media and non-news sources like local councils and police, community groups and local social media influencers. These sources often come to the consumer mediated through social media algorithms, particularly Facebook for older audiences, Instagram and YouTube for younger audiences.

Regional focus groups rarely source news about their local community from national or metro media and did not show interest in doing so. When metro media tell stories from their regions they are usually already known to regional audiences through local sources. These groups reported trusting traditional media chains less than independent owned and operated media but understood that metro media coverage meant a greater possibility of solutions or change. Trust was tied to the perception that news was prepared by a local journalist engaged in the community, and participants showed a high degree of awareness of the financial difficulties facing the news industry.

Metro focus groups reported being largely uninterested in news from regional areas unless it was both aligned with and relevant to a national narrative directly relevant to them (such as renewable energy production). They did not generally seek out information unless it was bundled with other news. Participants originally from regions knew more about that region than their Sydney suburb if they accessed local media.

These findings present a challenge for metro news editors seeking to incorporate more regional coverage in their outlets, and suggest that meeting the needs of the two audiences simultaneously is likely to be very difficult.



REGIONAL FOCUS GROUPS RARELY SOURCE NEWS ABOUT THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITY FROM NATIONAL OR METRO MEDIA AND DID NOT SHOW INTEREST IN DOING SO

05 CHAPTER

ELIZA SPENCER

FROM COWRA IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Asking the price of a semen straw for a record-breaking bull wasn't how I planned on starting my career as a rural reporter. Taking a deep dive into the issues of wine prices, grape crushes and contracts weren't either. On the phone with a local politician who graciously explained the ins and outs of a South Australian wine grape growing stoush, I heard a comment that would be repeated many times over the months to come:

A Guardian reporter covering the regions? That's like a Liberal member voting 'yes'!

Packing up the car in Sydney and heading across the Blue Mountains into a potentially catastrophic fire season and in the depths of a fight over an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament, I began my work as a rural and regional reporter for Guardian Australia, in Cowra, contributing to reporting for the local paper, The Cowra Guardian one day a week.

In the New South Wales (NSW) Central Tablelands and on the banks of the Bila Galarri-Lachlan River, Cowra is a town of about 12,000 people. It's an ageing population, with a shortage of care workers and, for the other end of the demographic spectrum, preschool staff. Cowra is known for its famous fat lambs and pioneering wheat and grain innovation at the Agricultural Research Station on the town's outskirts. New-build houses and mansions look down onto homes built on floodplains, and over the former Erambie mission,

an Aboriginal community sprawling 32 acres, which the New South Wales Government once operated. The town maintains strong colonial roots, but with a staunch Wiradjuri presence – each school has a Wiradjuri language program.

Healthcare is, simply, inaccessible, with an infamous “express lane” line outside the medical office beginning from as early as 7:30 am, and recommendations shared online to instead attend the Cowra Health Service, which has an emergency ward so small it isn't recognised as an emergency department by NSW Health.

Issues of domestic violence, drug use and abuse, and poverty are easy to see, but they are more visible at the courthouse which is conveniently located at one of two traffic light intersections in the centre of town.

In the courtroom, my initials and “GA, 2023, 2024” are carved into the press bench, alongside many “CG” staffers, dating as far back as the 1910s. The Cowra Guardian's former editor, Andrew Fisher, carved his initials in 1984, and sporadically since, during his forty-year career with the paper.

Fisher retired in August, 2024, after pioneering regional journalism cadetships at the Cowra Guardian and its sister papers; the Boorowa News, The Young Witness, Forbes Advocate, Grenfell Record, Canowindra News and Parkes Champion-Post, all recently acquired from Australian Community Media by Regional Media Corp and the Higgins



family. The program required no prior experience, beyond completing high school. One of the most recent cadets was poached from the hot bread shop two doors down, and within six months, Cara Kemp was writing, producing and laying out the Canowindra News for publication and distribution. Today, the newspaper is run by a former communications officer for Cowra council and one cadet.

Getting journalists to move to regional Australia is a big ask. And you can't blame people for not moving their entire lives across the mountains and into a small town when rental vacancies remain at low rates across the region. Even local families regularly post in local Facebook groups for assistance with housing. The public housing waitlist, including for priority housing, has blown out up to two years in the Cowra Local Government Area.

There's no easy solution to not finding a home in the region. In Canowindra, local resident Beck Carter told me she and her family couldn't afford to move back to their previous home Sydney, even if they wanted to.

In the end, you're actually paying less rent but you're earning less as well," she said. "And you're paying higher fuel costs and travel ... just getting your minimum health needs met is sometimes a much bigger challenge, that really caught me off guard

This wasn't the first time a story had hit close to home, but it was the first time I'd choked up on a call. The rental price where I'd lived in Sydney had shot up to \$800 a week, and like Carter, I was driving back to Sydney for specialist appointments and even to see a GP. The reality of just how expensive the "good choice" to "go regional" truly is overtook most of my conversations, and I spent hours with the Rural Network's editor Calla Wahlquist looking at the handful of flood-damaged, fire-prone houses available for three times the median salary in New South Wales.

I told demographer Dr Liz Allen about the hours spent on real estate sites, the realisation that I can't afford to move back to the big smoke, and the struggle of trying to find stability and security while reporting on it yourself. Over forty minutes, we

cried and pulled together a decent enough interview to do the story justice. She told me,

We hear 'oh, just get a better job, go out and find a house in a regional area,' and it's often accompanied by the saying 'that's what I did,' or 'in my day we worked harder, got a better paying job,'

The idea that these anecdotes reflect reality is a smack in the face.

Trying to make the right decision, I left the Rural Network in June of 2024, to begin working as a rural reporter for ABC Mid North Coast. It wasn't an easy choice, but it was the "secure" choice, in one of the few full-time, permanent, dedicated rural roles in the state.

The national broadcaster is often the best choice for rural reporters but hasn't escaped issues highlighted in an all-staff survey released in June of this year. ABC employees reported 25 per cent of employees had experienced harassment and bullying within the ABC News division. This includes regional bureaus, where reporters have also highlighted pay gaps compared to their metro colleagues.

The shuttering of more papers at Australian Community Media has eroded reporting in rural and regional Australia. Authentic investment in regional communities is one of the few ways to overcome increasing polarisation in regions where fights over renewables, land rights and land use are increasing.

The most recent Australian Community Media Quantitative Agricultural Research Survey found farmers are tuning out of city-based news (Marshall, 2024). The report produced by ACM for its advertisers claimed farmers viewed news from metropolitan broadcasters and publishers as "likely to be sensationalised or city-centric, and undervalued rural issues," and that farmers rely more on podcasts and government communications for their news than on metro media.



In one case, a town of 2,000 people living off bottled or boiled water for 26 days was not covered by metro outlets until I travelled to Boorowa to see what was happening. The nearby, larger town of Yass made the 7 pm ABC TV news after a few days under a similar notice.

Boorowa resident, Sam Jansen, explained she had been living off bottled and filtered water for two decades, and still hadn't seen real changes made.

"I remember the day we moved into Boorowa, I ran to the kitchen sink and filled it up with a glass of water. I had a sip and said, 'Oh mum, the water's no good,'" she told me in February. "Mum had a try and she said, 'Oh my god no, you can't drink that.' That was 20 years ago."

After covering the story for the Guardian Australia Rural Network, the pipeline to Boorowa has drawn enough attention to become a key issue for candidates running in the September 2024 local government elections. Multiple candidates have promised to fight to "fix the water" and secure funding to build a pipeline from the Murrumbidgee

AUTHENTIC INVESTMENT IN REGIONAL COMMUNITIES IS ONE OF THE FEW WAYS TO OVERCOME INCREASING POLARISATION IN REGIONS WHERE FIGHTS OVER RENEWABLES, LAND RIGHTS AND LAND USE ARE INCREASING



River to the town, at an estimated cost of \$60 million.

Smaller stories, reported closely by local publications where they have the resources to do so, fall under the radar of larger newsrooms where there is one rural reporter, at best. In the Central West, there is no dedicated ABC rural reporter, and Prime7 journalists have reached out to farming families for help in filming extra video footage to get stories to air. One such example was with Woody the sheep and his dramatic haircut after a year on the run, where a journalist wasn't able to attend on the weekend, and asked the family shearing Woody to capture footage in time for that evening's news.

Anna Saulwick and Brad Esposito who've established the Gazette News told Crikey they would be "recruiting local reporting talent" in regional Australia, to combat mis- and disinformation and provide free, local, news. At the time of writing, the philanthropists and level of funding behind the project had not been announced, but their first outlet was launched in eastern Melbourne (Eastern Melburnian 2024) and second on Sydney's north shore (North shore Lorikeet 2024).

Transparent funding models in the Guardian Australia Rural Network and at AAP are two examples of a potential way forward for regional journalism. More charitable and for-purpose organisations are asking supporters to pledge multi-year support, emphasising the importance such stability can bring to the working lives of journalists who otherwise live contract-to-contract, after forking out thousands to move from the city. It's a big ask, but in the face of media monopolies, information disorder, news deserts and polarisation, it's worth asking.

Co-operative, reader-funded models like Defector Media and 404 Media in the United States are examples of another solution, and one I would be keen to see championed in rural Australian media.

In the final year of the partnership between the Vincent Fairfax Foundation, CMT and Guardian Australia, it is crucial to call for greater funding for programs like these. Guardian Australia now has only one full-time, dedicated, rural reporter in any state, and editor Calla Wahlquist has also taken on the role of leading the Rural Network into a new, freelance future.

Regional voices matter, beyond a quick grab for a national piece or an easy stereotype to rely on when sources are thin on the ground. I'm proud to be back in Cowra, working to serve my new home a little more as media liaison for the local Nationals MP, Steph Cooke, but there will always be the inner journo – ear to the ground, in search of a good story in need of a home. I hope more reporters can cross the great divide to find stories worth telling.

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ASTON BROWN

FROM WARWICK IN QUEENSLAND

Three days into my one-year regional posting away from my Sydney home, and I was exposed to the most horrific Indigenous slurs from my neighbour's mouth. A moment earlier he'd politely asked me which way I'd vote in the upcoming referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. I told him I'd decided to vote yes. In my first few weeks in regional Queensland, as I tussled to find my bearings as a fresh rural reporter, Australia was preparing to vote on what would become a significant moment in the nation's history. In Warwick, a farming town of about 12,000 people on Queensland's Darling Downs, some 160 kilometres from the state capital of Brisbane, those weeks brought with them moments of unashamed racism and vitriol. Everybody around me was voting no. I would only need to go as far as my new share house's fridge where 10 reasons to vote no were printed on a leaflet. That was courtesy of the region's local member and leader of the National party, David Littleproud, a chief no campaigner.

Early on voting day, 14 October 2023, a few constituents paced at the doors of a polling booth. Some were visibly angry. "Let's get this waste of money over with" one man uttered under his breath. As the day wore on, a few yes campaigners stood by the hall handing out pamphlets to, it should be said, a generally receptive flow of voters. One of the campaigners prophesied a "simmering yes vote" would prevail. As pre-polling indicated, he was unequivocally wrong. Almost two-thirds of Australians voted against enshrining an Indigenous voice in the constitution. In Warwick's federal electorate

of Maranoa, stretching 1000km west from Warwick to the South Australian border, the rejection, as it was for the gay-marriage plebiscite, was the most definitive in the country. Unsurprisingly, 85 per cent of people voted no (Brown, 2023b).

It was in this nation-defining moment that I found myself thrust into regional Australia, trying desperately to get under the skin of this then-foreign-to-me world of rural politics. Overtime, I came to understand the experience as one of the many contradictions of the rural zeitgeist. Warwick was a place of cultural courtesies and outward friendliness unbeknown to city living. But how could that be reconciled with such hurtful and divisive messaging that surfaced during the referendum campaign?

The answer to that question, in part, lay in mis- and disinformation stirred up by interest groups to sow doubt and confusion over what the referendum was actually proposing. Over the course of my posting, it was a theme I saw play out repeatedly (Brown, 2024b), and one that underscored both my appreciation for the vital role of local journalism to inform the public, and the catastrophic lack of it.

From 2021-2024, the Guardian Australia's Rural Network saw five graduate journalists embedded in local newsrooms in regional New South Wales and Queensland. In exchange for a desk in an office in town, each journalist was required to work one day a week at the local paper with the remaining four



days spent reporting for Guardian Australia. This arrangement, in theory, would allow fresh regional reporters to tap into a wealth of local knowledge from the local outlet's editorial staff while strengthening their own coverage in a time of growing news deserts and declining revenue.

In Warwick, I spent a year working out of the town's free weekly newspaper, The Town and Country Journal. The newspaper was selected because it was one of the few remaining independent regional newspapers with a physical office space in a part of the state where the Guardian Australia wanted a presence. Warwick is also centrally located in southeast Queensland, and within three hours of Brisbane.

Five thousand copies of the Town and Country Journal were distributed each week around Warwick and nearby towns by two elderly newspaper salesmen who I shared the office with. When they weren't on paper runs or frantically pulling the paper together, they sold advertising space to local businesses which brought in enough revenue to keep the bank balance in the black. A few writers living in nearby towns contributed stories on community events, local news and sport in their spare time, but I was the only reporter in the office. Without a single full-time journalist or editor, coverage was incomplete, erratic and lacked direction. In the opinion

section, racism, climate denialism, and baseless conspiracies were commonplace.

The individuals that hold small town news publications together despite worsening economic and social headwinds are often characterised by their passion and love for journalism that sees them working long hours for little or no pay at all. Traces of those more noble motives lingered in the paper's office, but it seemed more expedient desires largely kept the newspaper salesmen going in their retirement years.

They expressed common fears of irrelevance and boredom associated with retirement. As one said, "I don't know what else I'd do." But above all, it was a determination to see the paper triumph over its competition, The Warwick Stanthorpe Today, a better resourced newspaper and part of a national regional network of newspapers that appeared to motivate them most.

The town was also serviced by the News Corp-owned, Warwick Daily News, which focused on crime, courts and car crashes to drive online traffic after it ceased printing newspapers in 2020 due to funding cuts and declining readership. Like Warwick Today, it employed just one Warwick-based junior reporter who was supported by

journalists in nearby towns. Together Warwick's three news publications covered a smattering of local politics and news, but this coverage was fractured, locked behind paywalls, or in the case of Town and Country Journal, clunky to access online at all.

The result was a population that often had little to no idea of the goings on in their own town. By the end of my posting, I'd heard the phrase "I don't know what's going on anymore" so many times it became a dreary cliché. Many residents wanted to stay connected with the happenings of their community but no longer had a practical way of doing so. As my neighbour, Douglas Bryce, told me: "we've lost something that made us who we are" (Brown, 2024c). The shame in it all was that if the resources of all Warwick's local publications were somehow pooled together, there would be enough money to support one half-decent local news publication. Media pluralism is important to aspire to but wouldn't a town like Warwick have more to benefit from one solid – ideally free to access – news source rather than a few disparate ones?

That said, the town's newspapers were still dearly valued by parts of the community, and I respected the newspaper salesmen's dedication to pushing out a paper every week of the year. In Warwick, the latest edition of the Journal could be found tucked under the arms of locals running errands in town, in waiting rooms, and on the coffee tables of nearby cattle properties. Then there were the most enthused readers – retirees – who'd come into the office to pick up a copy, buy an ad, have a chat or pitch a story. Those moments reassured

me. However dire the state of regional media, it became clear to me there's an underlying demand for robust local reporting.

My presence in the newsroom had value too, and I implore Guardian Australia and other metropolitan publications to further investigate the viability of long-term regional postings. If anything, I was a young face up the back of an otherwise empty office that the newspaper salesmen could point to as proof their newsroom was a functioning one. I took calls from disgruntled farmers ringing the office about local government blunders, or managed walk-ins keen for us to cover the next feral pig management meeting. At council meetings and community events, a notepad, camera and story in next week's edition told people their civic participation mattered. When local government representatives addressed a crowd, a voice recorder held them accountable to their words and broadcast them beyond their initial audience. A journalist in the room told the community that the fourth estate, however maimed, was still chugging along.



Local reporting for the Town and Country Journal would occasionally inform a larger feature article in Guardian Australia. Without a local editor to assign me stories, showing up on Friday expected to drum up a few local stories after a week tuned into national coverage was at times frustrating, but I came to value this local-national hybrid model. Writing local news stories gave me the impetus to connect with the immediate region more than I otherwise might have, which deepened my national reporting with case studies and a ground-level perspective.

...IF NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS ARE SERIOUS ABOUT CREATING IMMERSIVE REGIONAL JOURNALISM WITH AN EMBEDDED REPORTER AIMING TO GIVE VOICE TO THE LIVES OF PEOPLE...THEY NEED TO INVEST HEAVILY.



As the year wore on, that arrangement anchored my belief in the advantage of on-the-ground regional reporting, particularly for a journalist from Guardian Australia whom many in regional Queensland were understandably suspicious of. Living in the bush was the highest form of social currency that paid dividends in people's willingness to be involved in a story or share their opinion. "The Guardian! That's the left-wing newspaper from the city, isn't it?" many would chuckle. "It might be, but I live in Warwick," I'd fire back. My age was another valuable point of difference. At 22-years-old at the time of commencing the placement, I was the youngest rural reporter posted to Guardian Australia's Rural Network. Generally speaking, I found this made people more willing to help, perhaps driven by some kind of parental urge. In other instances, people would underestimate my ability and divulge more information than they intended to or agree to an interview.

Moreover, embedded in a small town allows the economic and social rhythms to unfold in front of you in a way that's concealed behind the endless sprawl and anonymity of large cities. From a hill nearby to my rental, the entirety of Warwick

lay neatly in view, which, framed by the Great Dividing Range in the distance, often served as a fitting case study for one of the many towns west of the sandstone curtain. In town, low lying fencings gave way to belongings sprawled across quarter acre blocks; road trains filled with cattle and grain thundered down the main street like a faltering pulse. At every moment anecdotal gauges in the landscape hinted at broader, emerging stories, typified by the shade of grass covering rolling hills of nearby livestock pastures.

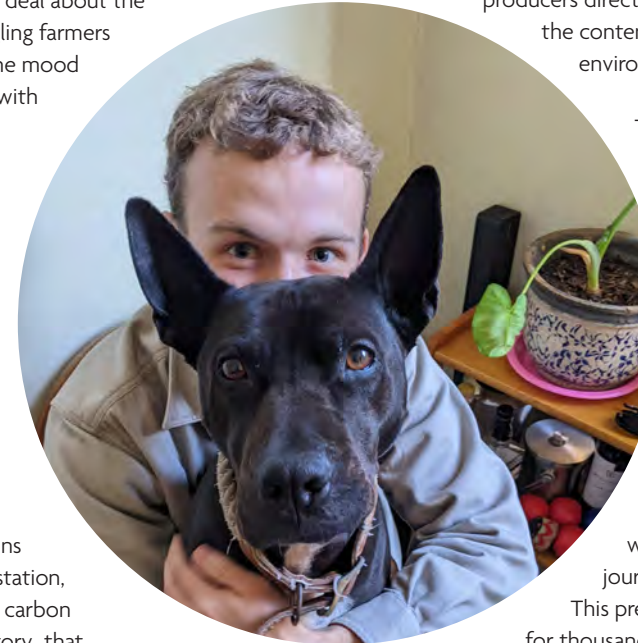
By the time I relocated to Warwick in October 2023, parts of south-east Queensland hadn't received substantial rain in more than eight months, many paddocks were turning a dull brown (Brown, 2023d). The media's fixation on a forecast dry and hot summer and fresh memories of the last 2019 drought, considered the worst in living memory, only added to the panic. The cattle market collapsed and by the time I pulled into Warwick in late spring, fires were raging across Queensland (Brown, 2023c). In November, I travelled west to Tara where 58 homes had already been lost, exceeding the total number of properties lost in Queensland during the black summer fires (Brown, 2023a). But as I was settling in for

a summer chasing fire crews around with a video camera, it started raining and didn't stop, and those plans were put on indefinite hold.

The unexpected outcome of that reporting stint before the rain arrived was that I learnt a great deal about the beef cattle industry. I visited struggling farmers recovering from fires and gauged the mood at saleyards as producers grappled with plummeting livestock prices. In the new year, those experiences laid the groundwork to report on environmental claims made by Australia's beef cattle industry, namely their progress on reaching their much-publicised carbon neutral by 2030 target, which until then had received largely scant and uncritical media attention. By the conclusion of my posting on I had published 13 articles relating to this topic, including analysis of flawed emissions accounting, herd estimates, deforestation, enteric methane emissions and soil carbon sequestration. An excerpt from a story that unpacked the "erroneous" data behind the industry's claimed emissions reductions (Brown, 2024a) was posted to Instagram by actor and environmentalist Leonardo DiCaprio (@leonardodicaprio, 2024) then followed up by the ABC. (Hughes, 2024).

These topics were complicated and at times controversial, but on a long editorial leash not usually afforded to junior

reporters, I was given enough time to thumb through convoluted scientific papers and conducted detailed interviews with scientists. This reporting could have been done remotely, but my earlier coverage on the cattle industry gave me the contacts to engage with industry and producers directly, and I took pride in walking the contentious line between scientific, environmental and industry voices.



This body of work - a five-part series and a podcast episode (Parkes, 2024) I produced on the renewable energy rollout - accentuated the need for greater in-depth environmental regional reporting from Australia's national metropolitan outlets. As the home of Australia's burgeoning onshore wind and solar industry, regional Australia will prove pivotal to the nation's journey to reach net zero emissions.

This presents enormous challenges for thousands of small towns like Warwick, but also immense economic opportunity in an increasingly hot, dry and volatile climate which rural areas' agriculture-dominant economy is extremely vulnerable to. Climate change is one of the biggest stories of our generation, and regional Australia is on the front line. I hope the media can somehow muster the resources to reflect the nuance and enormity of that reality. There's too much at stake for it not to.

CLIMATE CHANGE IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST STORIES OF OUR GENERATION, AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA IS ON THE FRONT LINE. I HOPE THE MEDIA CAN SOMEHOW MUSTER THE RESOURCES TO REFLECT THE NUANCE AND ENORMITY OF THAT REALITY. THERE'S TOO MUCH AT STAKE FOR IT NOT TO.

06 CHAPTER

MONICA ATTARD
GARY DICKSON

BLUEPRINT

From our canvassing of models used abroad in comparable political economies, we seek here to draw down on which elements would feasibly deliver more regional news to metro audiences and discuss where there may be differences in political and economic imperative such that the global models will falter. For example, in Brazil and in some small European nations where regional news is as much a part of the national narrative as it is locally, there are stringent licencing rules concerning the inclusion of regional stories in national news outlets; creating licencing standards around the carriage of regional news into metro markets would likely be problematic in the Australian context or commercially unfeasible. Even where the issues and concerns of regional Australia are the same as or impact those of metro audiences, there is also unlikely to be the same level of regional media presence in Australia to take carriage of similar operational associations. Further, as our focus groups results indicate, at a regional level there is a mistrust of the way metro media reports on locations far from them and in Sydney, and in metro markets (see Chapter 2: Survey Says), a disinterest in regional issues even when the issues are cognate and relevant. Our suggestions are therefore tailored to the limitations which currently exist here and which are operable in both a geographic and legal sense.

As a result, no single model canvassed in Chapter 3: Going Global is likely to work in isolation; metro media which is considering increasing its coverage of rural and regional news and information will likely be required to deploy a combination of strategies. Amongst these strategies, we have identified:

- Collaborative efforts
- Networking
- Radical sharing
- Aggregation
- Not-for-profit media

Collaborative journalism

Collaborative journalism refers to the practice of cooperatively executing journalism using individuals and organisations working together to ideate and publish stories. The stories collaboratively published can be uniformly the same across the collaborating institutions, or in some instances may be tailored to suit the audience or nation in which the story is published. The investigative cross border collaborations performed by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ)



is an example of collaborations which involve small and large media organisations, whose journalists work together to perform watchdog journalism. The ICIJ's work is often based on data leaks and the participating organisations focus on the data pertinent to the origin nation. Their journalism is sometimes coordinated by the ICIJ's main editorial office, and at other times individual participating media organisations work independently. Usually, the journalism produced from a common data set is simultaneously released for maximum impact.

Collaborative journalism can be categorised by duration as well as end goal. Some collaborative practices are temporary, whilst others are ongoing. The practice can also be distinguished by the level of cooperation and integration among collaborators; some practices require high levels of organisation by one main coordinator, whilst others require no level of coordination. Both require news organizations to work together on reporting projects, and in some, if not most instances, cooperating to engage audiences, and collecting and sharing data. Often the collaborators share technology to build platforms for the collective dissemination of the journalism.

Collaborative journalists work differently depending on the methodology used and the story or stories. Often, they use a collaborative platform where information is shared. At other times, they work entirely alone. In the early days of web-based journalism, linking to external sources of information was frowned upon. As digital journalism became more sophisticated, and to increase audience trust, linking to external sources, including other new websites became common practice and was considered 'collaborative' journalism. The common characteristic from this era with current collaborative practices is that a participatory ethos is required.

In addition to the ICIJ, there are current examples of collaborative practices which contribute to broader coverage of issues and geographic areas that would otherwise be difficult for a single media organisation to successfully and consistently cover. Internationally, Australian journalists have taken part in collaborative projects through the ICIJ. At times, these have involved journalists from different outlets: the Implant Files investigation, for example, which tracked the harm of medical devices implanted into patients without sufficient testing, involved journalists at the Australian

Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Financial Review and Sydney Morning Herald (Shiel, 2018).

Although collaborative journalism in Australia is rare and tends to be ad-hoc, it has occurred between legacy metro media organisations. For example, the Nine Media television program 60 Minutes has regularly collaborated with its sister newspapers, The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald, and vice versa (where stories have predominantly emanated from the newspaper side of the business). Similarly, prior to the Nine Media takeover of the former Fairfax Media owned papers, there was reasonably consistent collaboration between investigative reporters from The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald and the ABC Four Corners program.

Australian student journalists too have collaborated, institution to institution and institution to metro media, on election coverage. First through UniPollWatch and subsequently through The Junction, "a publication that showcases the best university student journalism from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific and allows universities to work together to produce impactful and creative reportage" (The Junction, 2024). At the 2014 Victorian election, four universities collaborated on the inaugural UniPollWatch. Two years later, around 1000 students and 70 staff at 28 universities from every state and the ACT participated in online coverage of the 2016 federal election (Dodd et al., 2018, p. 42). The students wrote approximately 700 stories, profiling candidates and writing electorate profiles, while also providing daily news and data journalism (Dodd et al., 2021).

The project also saw collaboration with industry partners. In 2016, Guardian Australia republished three electorate profiles, an analysis piece by academics on the project, and worked with Bond University students on a data journalism project analysing parliamentary question time (Jacques, 2016; Ticha, 2016; King, 2016; Mullins and Ricketson, 2016; Evershed, 2016).

Guardian Australia did not return as a partner, but a live election night special was broadcasted on Melbourne's Channel 31 community television station for the 2019 and 2022 federal elections (Colosimo, 2019) by journalism students from various universities.

There are fact-checking-based consortia both globally and in Australia which variously facilitate different degrees of collaboration. In Brazil, the Comprova Project brought together journalists from across commercial news providers to identify, fact-check and counter false election narratives. The project was coordinated by First Draft, the former UK-based not-for-profit, which was founded to combat misinformation. First Draft, which closed in 2022, was also present in Australia (at the Centre for Media Transition) and the United States. Upon closure, it transferred its materials to the Information Futures Lab at Brown University. Similar to Comprova, the Australian arm of First Draft focussed heavily on providing fact-checking and training for news organisations, as well as conducting research on trends in misinformation in the Asia-Pacific. Unlike Comprova, however, its activities in Australia did not involve collaboration with industry on story output, beyond sharing information of narratives which were commonly defined as mis and disinformation. A sustained collaborative journalism project for regional media would be challenging, as it would require both an ongoing commitment from small organisations to contribute a portion of their editorial resources and an issue significant enough to justify that level of continued work, and investment from metro media organisations. It is however a model that could work for individual projects. For example, a project about the implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan (MDBP) could involve multiple small newspapers and radio stations from Queensland to South Australia, each using their local expertise to report on the impact of a decade of water policy in their towns, while national media focus on reporting from state capitals and Canberra. The project could be coordinated by a commercial national media outlet, by the

ALTHOUGH COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM IN AUSTRALIA IS RARE AND TENDS TO BE AD-HOC, IT HAS OCCURRED BETWEEN LEGACY METRO MEDIA ORGANISATIONS.



ABC, or by an organisation with existing expertise in journalism (such as Country Press Australia) or in regional Australia (such as the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal).

Whatever the project, collaborative journalism leverages the strengths and expertise of each individual outlet to produce something greater than would be possible by any individual outlet. Further, as the ICIJ model demonstrates, once the infrastructure is in place, different parts of a collaborative network can be more easily brought together for future projects. In that way, this model encourages occasional coverage of important issues in regional Australia to reach metropolitan audiences. It allows for frequently time-poor news organisations to come together when the story warrants it, without imposing a long-term burden.

Networking

Network collaboration refers to practices which rely on digital networks producing and sharing not just information and sources, but also technologies and services. The result is a shared infrastructure for journalism, as well as shared practices and back-end processes to ensure timely and relevant journalism is disseminated to targeted audiences. Its impetus is the evolution of digital media and technologies which has created new methods of news production, as well as the financial pressures which have reduced the elements of 'watchdog' journalism that small to medium sized organisations have been able to produce. In a sense, networking collaboration is a fight-back response to the financial pressures, turning the negative results of digitization of journalism into positive outcomes.

In the US market, networked collaboration has occurred between major media organisations and smaller news media organisations, as well as between major media organisations and journalism schools. As noted by Martinez de la Serna (Columbia Journalism Review, 2018), three core themes have emerged in this genre of journalism. They are:

- Collaboration as a field repair in which the networked collaboration seeks to account for and fill “the vacuum left by the industrial decline of media and the constant erosion of the conditions for journalism.”
- Shared resources for journalism in which public databases, open sourced technologies and networked communities are shared in order to affect the “fullest impact in revitalizing investigative reporting through local, national, and international partnerships.”
- The expanding role of journalism schools, nonprofit organizations, and other players in which advantage is taken of the increased role these entities play in the information ecosystem.

The result is the development of a “journalism commons” which Martinez de la Serna describes as “an intricate resource system functioning under an open access scheme and hosting critical technological and social components pertaining to journalism. This commons works as a supporting infrastructure for news work. It is structurally dependent of network collaboration” (Columbia Journalism Review, 2018).

Given the ubiquity of journalism courses at Australian universities, the continued enthusiasm for journalism careers amongst school leavers, including students who were raised in rural and regional locations, and the emphasis within the courses available on practice, a model in which legacy metro media cooperated more closely with journalism schools may be efficient. It has long been recognised that a placement in regional newsrooms is a fruitful and satisfying introduction to news journalism for graduates. Coupled with a more formalised and extended network of technological infrastructure, such a model would create more extensive coverage of regional issues, which could be co-published by metro and regional outlets across print and broadcasting.

A version of networked collaboration has been developed in the UK and in New Zealand. These are known as Local News Partnerships in these markets and operate outside the realm of journalism schools.

The Local News Partnerships scheme, at its most basic, is an arrangement between different news entities to combine

resources in covering a particular story or round. The distinguishing feature from other collaborative journalism projects is that one entity in the partnership – the BBC in the United Kingdom, Radio NZ in New Zealand – takes on the financial burden, subsidising the others, and provides technological infrastructure for the network, including shared data bases.

Though this model is best known in its UK form, with a public broadcaster subsidising local independent media, there are examples where larger commercial media subsidise independent local media, or where a philanthropic gift pays for both.

In the United States, other versions have been the subject of experimentation. In response to the reported collapse of local news across the country, The New York Times has experimented with a number of methods to increase and ensure its coverage of the vast landscape of regional America. In 2021, when the extent of damage to regional news in the country became apparent as a result of the Covid-19 crisis and consequent media closures, The New York Times experimented with a model which involved the creation of a participant local media network, collaborating with Times reporters on specific stories which required a level of investigation and reportage. One or more Times reporters were allocated to work on the story, locally or from New York City, sharing data bases and technological infrastructure (Bacquet, 2022) The resulting journalism was then co-published in the local newspaper and The New York Times.

Separately, the Guardian Australia Rural Network (GARN) partially operated on a similar model. The Network involves both contributions from a broader group of freelance journalists and commentators around the country, and staff journalists. Under the program which includes this research by the CMT, recent journalism graduates from UTS were appointed by Guardian Australia to regional locations, their salaries paid by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation. In addition the funding permitted the appointment of a regional editor, and the creation of a network of freelance reporters and contributors. The graduate reporters were placed within regional commercial newsrooms, spending the bulk of their time reporting for the Guardian Australia and one day per week reporting for the local newsroom. The program does not operate with the same level of collaboration between newsrooms as the Local News



Partnerships scheme – GARN journalists report for one or the other newsroom, but not both simultaneously – but may be the closest analogue within Australia to it.

The limitation of this approach is that there are a myriad of local news stories which are vital for local communities to be aware of and which deserve investigation (or at the very least reportage) but which audiences of major national media outlets would not, justifiably be interested in. It is not unforeseeable that some stories which would require this high level of resourcing may be overlooked either by local reporters or because resourcing doesn't permit their investigation. The efficacy of the so called "hub and spoke" model would depend on the available level of local media resourcing of participant newsrooms. If local newsrooms had enough resourcing to identify issues requiring more comprehensive investigation, sufficient distance from the issues and corporate affiliations allowing collaboration to occur, it is feasible to envisage collaboration. The method is one which may scale down to suit Australian purposes, as evidenced by Guardian Australia's Rural Network.

Indeed, a more extensive Australian version of the Local News Partnerships service, as developed by the BBC, may increase the amount of regional news produced, alleviate financial

pressures for regional newsrooms, and improve the pathways for regional news content to reach metropolitan audiences.

The model has received some attention. The 2022 House of Representatives Inquiry into Regional Newspapers recommended that the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, the ABC and the SBS work to establish partnerships with small regional publishers and broadcasters. (House of Representatives, 2022).

Kristy Hess (Deakin University) and Angela Ross (ABC) conducted focus groups with regional news media news workers about how the public broadcaster can support local news. The authors say that participants were "hesitant, if not resistant" to adapting the BBC model to Australia (Hess and Ross, 2022, p. 235), but that other opportunities might exist. The news workers expressed difficulty in competing with the ABC in local markets; in retaining staff (Hess and Ross, 2022, p. 235) who seek better pay and career opportunities at the broadcaster (Hess and Ross, 2022, p. 236). There was strong resistance to the model of the ABC putting journalists into markets where an existing player existed, though willingness for the broadcasters to financially support local newspapers (Hess and Ross, 2022, p. 235). The authors identified that the

ABC could work with local media to elevate local stories to its national audience (Hess and Ross, 2022, p. 237) or that the ABC could foster greater collaboration between local media outlets themselves through an organisation like Country Press Australia (Hess and Ross, 2022, p. 239). The study concluded that it would not be appropriate to 'transfer' the BBC model to Australia (Hess and Ross, 2022, p. 240).

In 2023, the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded further study into how the ABC can support local media, led by Hess and Ross (ARC, 2023). The study runs to 2025 and will likely provide a comprehensive assessment of the potential of such a scheme in Australia, and how it would need to be designed in order to have buy-in from regional commercial media.

Radical sharing

In 2018, the president of the Public Media Alliance global peak body for public broadcasters, Radio NZ (RNZ) CEO Paul Thompson said that in a challenging environment, public media have a responsibility to "help their commercial counterparts survive" (Thompson, 2018). In practice, this has meant implementing a policy of what the broadcaster calls "radical sharing", making their content available free of charge to approved commercial partners for rebroadcast (RNZ, 2019).

Royalty-free intellectual property arrangements are not new to the Australian news market. For more than a decade The Conversation has published its content under a Creative Commons license that allows any user, whether individual or

private company, to republish according to loose guidelines (The Conversation, 2024b). The Conversation has been modelled abroad in various markets, including very successfully in the United States. Other projects, such as 100 Days in Appalachia, actively encourage republication of stories.

Rather than supporting commercial ventures, as Thompson suggested, The Conversation's model is intended to maximise reach. The Conversation Australia reported 8.6 million average monthly page views on its site and through Apple News, which increases significantly to 13.5 million average monthly page views when including republication. Globally, The Conversation's network reported 25.4 million and 46 million average monthly page views, respectively (The Conversation, 2024a).

Rethinking intellectual property arrangements, particularly at non-commercial news outlets, offers an opportunity to support and expand regional news. A radical sharing regime akin to New Zealand's could help to build links between the ABC, SBS and local regional media, which might then serve as the basis for a Local News Partnerships scheme. In particular, this might include news content that the broadcasters are able to produce that local media may have less capacity to cover, such as relevant state- and federal-level issues, courts and crime coverage, or reporting on and for Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

By building a culture of partnership with regional media, rather than the prevailing dynamic of competition in many areas, a future scheme modelled on Local News Partnerships may be





possible. In particular, establishing a reciprocal sharing arrangement that is unlikely to hurt the commercial prospects of regional media – such as producing local stories for broadcast in capital cities – may improve collaboration between public and commercial media while giving city audiences more information about the priorities of regional communities.

The Conversation's model of publishing under Creative Commons may also be adaptable to improve the reach of individual news stories both regionally and into metropolitan areas, though it requires forgoing the revenue that may ordinarily be earned on that content.

News aggregation

Greater use of news aggregation services in the Australian market may address the issue of metropolitan audiences accessing regional news, though do little to directly increase overall production.

News aggregators in India have established themselves as significant players in the national media market. Dailyhunt found its competitive advantage over international services like Google News and Apple News by offering its service in more than a dozen regional languages. Its revenue streams include display advertising but also brand partnerships and direct sales of educational products.

In Australia, by comparison, news aggregator use remains low. In the latest Digital News Report only 16 per cent of Australians reported accessing news through an aggregator, far less than through email newsletters (20 per

cent), search engines (26 per cent), social media (42 per cent) or directly on the news website's homepage (50 per cent) (Park et al., 2024, p. 88). Google News and Apple News are the most used services, with far fewer using Snapchat Discover (six per cent), dedicated aggregator platforms like upday (six per cent) and Flipboard (three per cent) or RSS service Feedly (three per cent). Usage of all services fell between 2023-2024 (Park et al., 2024, p. 101).

Australian Rural and Regional News (ARRN) is a local example of a news aggregator with a specific focus on local regional news. It launched in 2021 with a focus on providing a single platform for independent local news producers. It produces its own journalism and republishes stories from affiliated outlets in New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia (ARRN 2024). It operates as a showcase of stories from its affiliates, providing only select articles, before directing users to the websites or digital editions of printed newspapers for more.

News aggregation also stands to benefit considerably from generative AI. For example, The Newsroom, a Lisbon-based startup, is using AI to generate summaries of daily news stories for its subscribers (Adami, 2023). The founders say that their model does not incorporate breaking news, but widely-reported stories, and can assess the quality of news inputs based on the presence of facts and bias. The output is prepared by AI but reviewed by human editors (Adami, 2023).

Previous CMT research has found that Australian newsrooms are already using AI in backend processes, such as audience personalisation, content recommendation, automated distribution and image and speech recognition (Attard et al., 2023, p. 39). In mid-2023, when interviews with editors at major news companies were conducted, none said that they were (yet) considering using generative AI to produce editorial content (Attard et al., 2023, p. 39). Some startups have emerged: the Worthview Group, which launched six titles in Queensland

in 2023, has been accused of using generative AI to aggregate other news and press releases (Wilson, 2024). The company has denied this, but using generative AI for aggregation was presented as an "accusation" and that content was being "ripped off" may suggest that the Australian market is not sympathetic to a startup similar to The Newsroom in Europe.

There is competing evidence as to whether news aggregation affects the revenue of news outlets being aggregated. Some news publishers, particularly News Corp, say that audiences use news aggregators as "substitute" sources, rather than visiting the publisher directly (Thomson, 2014). In its submission to the Digital Platforms Inquiry, News Corp referred to a European Commission survey in which 47 per cent of respondents said that they browse headlines on social media and aggregators without clicking through to the article (European Commission, 2016, p. 5). A similar proportion (45 per cent) said that they do click through. Another study found that by increasing the amount of information available on the news aggregator – a headline, a snippet, an image – led to a decreasing probability that a user would click through to the article (Dellarocas et al., 2015, p. 2544).

Other studies have found a non-competitive relationship between aggregators and news companies, however (see for example Lee and Chyi, 2015). A 2021 study on the Spanish news market, where aggregator Google News did not operate between 2014 and 2022 (Chee, 2022), found that the service shutdown led to an overall decline in news consumption of 20 per cent, and a reduction in page views outside of Google News of 10 per cent. This was particularly concentrated among small publishers (Athey, 2021).

If that dynamic holds true in Australia, then increasing the presence and use of news aggregators could mean that regional media reach more Australians, and receive a commercial benefit for it.

SOME NEWS PUBLISHERS, PARTICULARLY NEWS CORP SAY THAT AUDIENCES USES NEWS AGGREGATORS AS "SUBSTITUTE" SOURCES RATHER THAN VISITING THE PUBLISHERS DIRECTLY



Not-for-profit news

Many of the identified models are more easily imagined occurring among not-for-profit media outlets. Though charitable media faces its own pressures around fundraising, mitigating commercial imperatives can allow for greater experimentation and participation in collaborative, networked and radically shared information economies. Commercial media is likely to always be the largest and most significant sector for news production in Australia, but a better developed not-for-profit sector may help to increase the reach and impact of the news industry as a whole.

Not-for-profit news is an important part of the media industry in the United States. The Institute for Nonprofit News, the sector peak body, represents 450 organisations with a combined annual revenue of around USD\$600 million (Institute for Nonprofit News, 2024).

The sector in the United Kingdom is still in early stages of development. The first UK organisation to gain charitable status on the basis of its work as a producer of public interest journalism was the Guildford Dragon News in February 2024

(Charity Commission for England and Wales, 2024), which was achieved with support from the Public Interest News Foundation (Brock, 2024).

The not-for-profit news sector in Australia is slightly behind the United Kingdom. It is small, with very few organisations registered as charities and able to receive charitable gifts. The vision of a charitable sector worth hundreds of millions of dollars, similar to the United States, is unlikely to be plausible (see Birnbauer, 2018, p. 65). At least three factors influence this:

1. The difficulty of registering as a charitable journalism entity and accessing deductible gift recipient status
2. A low level of literacy among news producers about philanthropy, including the work required to build and maintain relationships with funder
3. The relatively small amount of money that is likely to be available for not-for-profit news production compared to potential revenue from commercial services

Nevertheless, there is likely to be considerable room for growing this sector by addressing these issues.

Difficulty of establishing charitable journalism organisations

Organisations that operate as not-for-profits and have one of 12 charitable purposes may register with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) as a charity in order to receive special tax treatment, including income tax exemption, goods and services tax concessions and a rebate on fringe benefits tax. In addition, some charities may be able to access tax deductible gifts.

News production does not clearly fit into any existing category of charitable purpose, and organisations must redefine their activities accordingly. Some have been accepted as advancing education and culture (for example, 104.1 CHY FM (ACNC, 2024a) or the Walkley Foundation (ACNC, 2024b)), or promoting or protecting human rights (Alliance for Journalists' Freedom (ACNC, 2024c)). The Public Interest Journalism Initiative is registered to advance public debate on law and for analogous purposes beneficial to the general public. (ACNC, 2024d). Perhaps the most significant charitable news producer, the Australian Associated Press, is registered as advancing education, advancing social or public welfare, and promoting reconciliation, mutual respect and tolerance between groups in Australia. (ACNC, 2024e). Guardian Australia has also received tax deductible gifts through UTS's DGR status.

There are three paths to obtaining deductible gift recipient status as a news charity:

1. Organisations whose activities fall within one of the categories of general purpose can apply to be endorsed for DGR status by the Australian Taxation Office or other department. This is the standard route to DGR status for other types of organisation. Historically, the community radio sector has obtained DGR status through endorsement by the Department of Communications and the Register of Cultural Organisations list, though this has ceased.
2. The second path is to be specifically listed in the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 by Parliamentary amendment. This is a high threshold and significant regulatory barrier for most not-for-profits to overcome, as it requires long-term engagement directly with elected officials

for endorsement (Papandrea, 2016, p. 22). Australian Associated Press and The Conversation both obtained DGR status through this process.

3. A third path is through a partnership with another institution that has already been endorsed and which shares a common purpose and objectives. The Guardian Australia operates the Guardian Civic Journalism Trust in partnership with the University of Melbourne; the Trust can receive tax deductible gifts through the University's DGR status (Guardian Australia, 2019, p. 24).

This process has been repeatedly identified for reform. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) in its Digital Platforms Inquiry final report recommended that a new category of charitable purpose be established for not-for-profit organisations that create, promote or assist the production of public interest journalism (ACCC, 2019, p. 338), as did the Future of Public Interest Journalism Inquiry (Australian Senate, 2017, pp. 117; 135). Both the Future of Regional Newspapers Inquiry and the Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill heard evidence about the potential impact of philanthropy (House of Representatives, 2022, pp. 62-64; Australian Senate, 2024, p. 19) but did not make recommendations.

Most recently, the Productivity Commission's Philanthropy Inquiry proposed extensive reforms that, if implemented, could reduce these structural barriers to charitable news. The Commission's proposed reforms would provide registered charities with DGR status automatically if they are undertaking activities which provide a public benefit and which would be unlikely to occur without philanthropic support (Productivity Commission, 2024, p. 180). Though the Commission concluded that there is no strong case for a separate definition (Productivity Commission, 2024, p. 207), it stressed that journalism should be considered eligible in the existing "Other charitable purposes" category. Under its proposed reforms, this would be enough to provide DGR status to not-for-profit media, a benefit the Commission notes repeatedly in its report (Productivity Commission, 2024, p 185, 207, 221). At time of writing, the Federal Government has not responded to this inquiry.



The difficult legislative environment is not the only barrier to growing not-for-profit news. Previous research has found that there are disconnects between the philanthropic and news sector, with funders unaware of the scale of the need and news producers lacking the knowledge of how to build and maintain relationships with funders and how to articulate the social and civic impact of public interest journalism (Hill, 2021).

There are some markets where commercial news is unlikely to be viable, but where not-for-profit news may survive due to its lower cost base. A strong not-for-profit news sector could also see greater experimentation in model, as philanthropic and social impact investors are more likely to act as seed capital for ventures with lower chance of return if the potential civic outcomes are worth it. A charitable news sector, therefore, has the potential to both increase the overall amount of news production, particularly in regional areas, and see new models of partnership and distribution that could bring that news to wider audiences.

Philanthropic gifts can be particularly effective when directed toward specific projects or outcomes, rather than ongoing efforts. Collaborative student journalism coverage of the 2019 federal election, for example, was supported by the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas (Mediaweek, 2020). In 2021, a gift from the Jibb Foundation saw the Australian Associated Press establish a rural and regional desk (Ward, 2021).

Summary

As noted above, there is not a single, stand-alone model which is likely to both save regional media and produce more quality journalism originating in regional locations which is relevant for both metro and regional audiences. The days of corporate networked journalism appear over and replaced by an array of business models, ranging from single ownership through to large though regionally focused media entities. As a result, the core problem with increasing the flow of regional news to metro markets remains; the quantum of investigative or entrepreneurial journalism which might attract the attention of metro editors and be framed as being of importance to metro audiences is still limited by the business models currently in operation.

Our research has focused on both the amount of news flowing to metro markets from regional locations, and also the quality of that news and information. As we have found, journalism originating in regional locations, even journalism which has direct impact on metro markets, tends to be focused on hyper local issues and personalities. When metro news media covers these stories, either with fly in fly out reporters or with freelancers based in the relevant locations, the focus tends to shift to a national perspective and uses sources better known to national audiences. As a result, what is produced regionally, which often more accurately reflects the dynamics of reaction to the issues in those locations, tends to be overlooked. Further, because of the financial constraints in regional media outlets, the resourcing available to conduct entrepreneurial journalism which is usually beyond the remit of fly in fly out or freelance journalists is limited.

Though there is no single model for achieving the goals that this project has examined, there are already a number of options which may contribute to improving the health of the Australian media ecosystem. Further, by reviewing international media markets CMT has found significant

and ongoing innovation in business models, media policy, news production and delivery. Continued experimentation should be undertaken in Australia and globally and assessed for its potential to increase both the quality and quantity of entrepreneurial journalism on issues which originate in the regions and would be of relevance and importance to metropolitan audiences. This may be in the form of increased collaboration, formal networking, radical sharing, aggregation and encouraging the development of non-commercial business models.

The importance of regional media to the communities they reflect is well documented. The importance of regional media to metro audiences appears less important. But the flow of a common factual narrative from regional to metro markets forms the basis of heightened understanding between the two and the basis for better policy making across a range of issues. In an environment where social cohesion is being undermined by the fracturing of legacy media and the impact of social media, the formation of these national, factual narratives around common issues would appear to be a priority. As the Frame Reflection Interviews we conducted in year one of our investigation and the focus groups conducted in year three indicate, regional audiences feel ill served by metro media, and metro audiences are disinterested in regional news. Metro editors we interviewed in year one agree.

For three years the Guardian Australia has attempted to bridge the divide between these two audiences with the Rural Network, producing local regional news and opinion for its national and international audience. The network has been most effective where it has had reporters on the ground working in collaboration with independent regional media. This suggests that metro media can have success where it makes sustained investments in regional locations, coupled with an editorial willingness to put regional stories before metropolitan audiences. This network model merits further development.

...THE FLOW OF A COMMON FACTUAL NARRATIVE FROM REGIONAL TO METRO MARKETS FORMS THE BASIS FOR BETTER POLICY MAKING ACROSS A RANGE OF ISSUES



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