



Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's regional newspapers

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Inquiry Terms of Reference

- The impact of decisions in a number of markets in regional and remote Australia by large publishers such as News Corp and Australian Community Media to suspend publication of print editions
- The extent to which there has been entry into these or other markets by new operators, particularly small businesses
- The impact of the News Media Bargaining Code for regional and remote newspapers
- The degree to which there has been economic recovery in regional and remote markets from the impacts of COVID, and whether this has led to advertising revenue improving.

My name is Jimmy Cocking and I live in Mparntwe - Alice Springs, Northern Territory. I have been an Alice Springs Town Councillor since 2017 and work professionally as the Principal Consultant for Northern Possibilities, a people centred, purpose driven consultancy business working in and for regional and remote Australia. I am currently working on a project investigating the viability of establishing a local newspaper in Central Australia, through this process I have come to understand a) the impact of the decisions by large publishers to close local newspapers, b) some of the challenges for those entering into the market and c) the opportunity for local newspapers to play a role in the economic recovery (when we get to that point in the pandemic).

The drying out of local media

Central Australia is suffering the loss of its local newspaper. While technically the News Ltd owned Centralian Advocate survives as an 'online' version and the NT News contains some stories from Central Australia in its Tuesday and Friday papers, the role that the newspaper played in the community from 1947 until June 2020 is essentially dead.

Newspapers play an essential role in providing the local community with hard news (important announcements, breaking news and politics), community news (local sports, events, social pages and letters to the editor), local advertising and public announcements (births, deaths, marriages, funerals). The Centralian Advocate has played this role as the single local broadsheet in Central Australia since 2011.

Alice Springs has had a number of newspapers over the years. The Alice Springs News was a free newspaper delivered to households weekly from 1994-2011 but moved to become an online news platform from 2011 - current. While Central Australia is lucky to have a local ABC Alice Springs, Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Central Land Council's Land Rights News, 8CCC community radio, commercial radio 8HA/SunFM and Alice Springs News Online, there is a void that has been left by the closing of the local newspaper. Hard news is still reported locally but there is no permanent record. Most news stories associated with government decisions either local or Territory are discussed on radio and rarely become stories that feature permanently online or on social media. While Central Australia is not a 'news desert', there has been a drying out of the local media ecosystem without a local newspaper present.

The closure of the Centralian Advocate dealt a severe blow to the community where many older people relied on the paper for news and connection to local events, while many others appreciated the community news and the permanent record of history. The Centralian Advocate was widely read in the community and had a per capita sales rate that rivalled metro dailies . The Advocate was also profitable at the time of closure (*personal correspondence*). The decision to effectively close the Advocate has left people feeling disconnected. While many remain up to date with local happenings through social media and online news, a significant proportion of our older people are missing out entirely on important local events including funerals, and many people across the demographic spectrum report that they 'don't know what's going on in town anymore'.

This disconnection has negative impacts on the individuals, our communities and on our broader society. Newspapers and professional journalists are integral to the health of democratic systems to ensure government's are held to account for the decisions they make and the money they spend; voters are informed of the performance of elected and non-elected officials before heading to the polls and public debate is balanced and not driven by click bait and algorithms. This impact has been widely reported in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States - as reported in the Regional News Media State of the Play (P. Fray & C. Giotis (Eds.) 2019) referred to a US study that found local government spending efficiency was higher

in towns with a local newspaper than those without. In other words, communities where local governments were subject to scrutiny by local journalists had better financial performance.

There are many seeking to fill the void locally including the Alice Springs Town Council with the publication of online magazine, *Council Connects* and exploring options for listing public notices on the website; Braitling MLA Josh Burgoyne (CLP) has published the *Braitling Bugle* to update the community of his activities and even includes a local crossword and word puzzle; the *Alice Springs News Online* has continued to provide news and editorial along with feature articles, local netball and football results and local gardening column; 8CCC radio has run local Community Journalism workshops and a host of local Facebook groups have emerged to share information and events including Alice Springs Bulletin Board (news and events), Action for Alice (crime reports and advocacy), Mutual Aid Alice Springs (Covid information and community support) and a host of others. Local Independent MLA for Araluen Robyn Lambley has organised a public meeting and her electorate staff have been researching independent local papers across Australia.

Despite the stepping up of the local community to fill the void left by the effective closure of our local broadsheet, there remains a strong desire and a need for a local newspaper. A number of local business people have explored the possibility of establishing a local newspaper here but while there are opportunities for local advertising, sourcing expertise and experienced editorial and journalistic staff is a major barrier. The loss of the Advocate locally has seen a shrinking of the journalistic workforce in Central Australia with previous staff being gainfully employed elsewhere. Government support is needed to ensure the public good of professional journalism is not subject only to the ability to secure advertising revenue.

The local business community is suffering from a range of economic and social factors including the acute outbreak of Covid in the Central Australian community and virtual lockdown where residents are not visiting shops or hospitality venues as often, rising crime and anti-social behaviour, pandemic related tourism impacts, not to mention the supply chain issues impacting national and international businesses. Despite all the challenges, members of the business community see opportunity for a local newspaper to play an economic recovery role by connecting local readers to local business and helping rebuild confidence within the region. A local newspaper that reports the local news, local events, local sports and fills the niche for building community cohesion will help break down some of the polarisation that social media has fuelled in the absence of local information and news.

Opportunities and challenges for local newspapers

Addressing the challenges

Zombification: Alive online, dead in real life

Alice Springs shares the challenge that many regional communities have faced and that is the zombification of our local newspaper. Alive in name and online presence only but increasingly dead as far as local relevance and utility goes. While going online has its benefits in the

scalability of news articles to a wider national and international readership, many of the people living in the community are becoming increasingly isolated and disconnected. Moving online is a critical part of any news publication and support for newspapers to maintain a printed edition and an online edition is important. While global trends and advertising dollars have moved online and into social media, regional audiences remain loyal to their local papers. This is backed by research by Hess and Keller (2020) that showed that regional communities value their printed newspapers, where 71% of country press audiences prefer to read their newspapers in print and are reluctant to follow them online on a subscription basis.

Recruiting and retaining editorial and journalistic staff

Regional areas are shaped by the people who live and work in them. The vision and dedication of people committed to producing regular newspapers and reporting the local news helps communities remain connected. Social cohesion, shared experiences and local knowledge of current events and breaking news are important for communities and need to be recognised as a public good. The challenge of recruiting and retaining staff in regional areas needs to be addressed as it is in other professions. Direct support for the employment of public interest journalism in regional areas could assist on this front.

Transitioning the business model of newspapers

The traditional business model of newspapers has changed forever. The situation in Alice Springs is similar to that of many towns across Australia and the world. The digital disruption has changed the old business model for newspapers - selling advertising and classifieds to pay for the journalists and the editorial staff to bring the news to the community. Some newspapers have managed to survive and others thrive through the disruption by remaining relevant to the community they serve. The sole reliance on advertising to pay for public interest journalism has been in decline since the advent of the internet. The changing advertising landscape may require support for regional newspapers to adapt to the online environment and embrace the opportunities of both. There is also a need for government support for journalism to provide the news required to ensure local communities are informed. There are a range of options for government to consider based on examples from across the world as outlined in Foster and Bunting (2019) p7 for the ACCC which includes:

- *Indirect support:*

For example, a range of tax reliefs and exemptions which reduce costs to news providers and/or encourage higher consumption of news products and services.

- *Direct support:*

For example, direct grants which support various types of news production, marketing and distribution, and funding of public service media, like the BBC

- *Encouraging philanthropic support*

For example, government support or encouragement for private donations to support news provision.

The changing media environment requires support from the government to ensure regional newspapers and media organisations can provide the level of service required to get the news to the communities that need it and how they read it.

Opportunities for the regions

News as a public good

The news media plays an important role in public life and needs to be recognised as a public good and in regional areas, an essential service. The reporting of news in regional communities is important for community wellbeing. It is evident here in Alice Springs that the departure of a local newspaper has left many saying 'I don't know what's going on in town anymore'. The migration online may be inevitable but the role of a newspaper in a regional community needs to be supported to exist and not simply left to the market. Public interest journalism is a profession that needs to be recognised as a critical part of a healthy regional community and be supported as such.

More opportunities for more journalists in the regions

The closure and condensing of regional newspapers has seen the regions lose journalists as the opportunities for pursuing a career in journalism are limited. More opportunities to encourage and incentivise cadet journalists to live and work in regional areas is required. There is also more support required for locally based newsrooms to remain local, creating jobs and helping to maintain local populations. There is also a need for support for the establishment of local newsprinters as the equipment largely resides in capital or major cities which requires long distance transport and in our case, limited to a single road in and out.

Increasing local collaboration to produce content

Local and regional newspapers have an opportunity with the changing landscape and the withdrawal of News Ltd and ACM to develop hyperlocal models that collaborate with a wide range of organisations to produce community based content. Local features, event listings, sports scores and photos are already being deployed with a range of other regional newspapers to reduce costs but also to create a sense of ownership by the community. Collaboration needs to be invested in and mechanisms to encourage and support these community based opportunities need to be explored. These opportunities will depend on the ownership model and willingness of the editor to work with the local community to focus on the key ingredients of 'proximity, relevance and advocacy' as described in the Regional Media State of Play edited by Fray and Giotis (2019) to develop a sustainable, bespoke model for the local community.

A Driver of Economic Recovery

The Centralian Advocate was established by Charle 'Pop' Chapman in 1947 as a vehicle for driving post-war economic development (*personal correspondence*). The newspaper was bought by News Ltd in 1966 and continued in print until June 2020. Throughout that time, the Advocate was an advocate for the town and the region. Raising issues and putting pressure on governments to deliver for the community it served. The advocacy role of newspapers for local and regional communities is often overlooked by the general public but it is an important role in

supporting local confidence and understanding of what the current situation presents. Local and regional newspapers showcase local businesses through advertising but also highlights the opportunities for local people to get more involved. The current impacts and the lack of a local newspaper means that those on social media and access to the internet have an abundance of information while those that are not, are missing out on key health advice. Local and regional newspapers need to be viewed as a purpose driven business, where the social and economic benefits need to be supported. The market for advertising has been changed forever, but local businesses will support a local newspaper and vice versa. This cohesion and mutually beneficial relationship can strengthen the collaborative potential between local businesses and aid in the economic recovery and build the resilience of regional economies.

Local news supporting local democracy

Local newspapers have an important role to play in supporting local democracy. Whether it is reporting on Federal and State/Territory decisions that impact on local and regional communities or scrutinising decisions made on the local and regional council level. The role of the local newspaper in holding local decision makers to account is a critical function that has been on decline over the years. This was analysed in depth by Fray and Giotis (2019) with the Local Democracy Reporting Service in the United Kingdom put forward as a potential way to reduce this. The model in the UK and also New Zealand has seen the national broadcaster (BBC in the UK and NZRI in NZ) providing journalists to ensure local council meetings are reported on and the news articles shared amongst a local network of media outlets. This would ensure local communities are kept informed of local decisions being made that affect them. It would be prudent to consider if and how a similar model could be adopted here in Australia to ensure local and regional communities can be kept informed of the decisions made on their behalf by independent and public interest journalism.

Moving forward

Alice Springs provides a living example of the wide ranging impacts of essentially losing a long-term local masthead. The impacts on the community are real and felt disproportionately across the community. The loss of the newspaper comes with the loss of journalists, the loss of important information and the disruption of community cohesion. Social media and online platforms do not fill the information void. Regional communities need local newspapers to help bring the news ecosystem together and keep the community informed. Regional newspapers are a public good and need direct government support to ensure regional communities have a healthy news ecosystem. The drying up of advertising revenue is disrupting business models but regional communities love their newspapers and are proven to be loyal customers.

But goodwill alone is not enough.

The duality of newspapers caught between advertising and news (both hard and community) can be hyperlocalised through better collaboration with the local community. The business case and the support for economic development in regional Australia is strong. But the underlining challenge for communities who have lost newspapers and for those maintaining newspapers is the succession of regional journalism and editorial staff. Without government support for regionally based public interest journalism, many communities face the growing risk of

becoming 'news deserts'. In the interest of Australian regional and remote communities, public interest journalism needs to be considered a public good and supported to ensure regional Australia has the information it needs to economically and socially recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Recommendations:

- That the Federal Government recognise the importance of public interest journalism and provide support to maintain and grow local and regional newspapers
- That incentives and funding support for the employment of regional newspaper journalists and editorial staff are considered
- That incentive schemes for cadet journalists to live and work in regional Australia be developed
- That a fund to support the establishment and operations for regional newspapers be created
- That further investigation of an Australian version of the Local Democracy Reporting Service be considered

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on this important issue.

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