

Hope for the Hyper-Local? How Women's Leadership in Local News Builds Regional and Rural Communication and Communities

الأمل لفرد المحلية؟

كيف تعمل القيادة النسائية في الأخبار المحلية على بناء التواصل
والمجتمعات الإقليمية والريفية

Ewart Jacqueline^{*1}, Griffith University, j.ewart@griffith.edu.au, AUSTRALIE,

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5907-6032>

Brabazon Tara², Charles Darwin University, tara.brabazon@cdu.edu.au, AUSTRALIE,

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7619-5372>

Received in	25-10-2023	accepted in	14-01-2024
-------------	------------	-------------	------------

Abstract

Australia's regional and rural news media exist in a context of closures and threat. Globalization and digitization shape, frame and limit the definitional origins and trajectories of news. The consequences of the absences and gaps from this suburbanized trans-localism are now emerging. This article investigates hyperlocal news in regional and rural Australia. Drawing on a series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with women journalists from regional and rural news outlets in Australia, this article explores the contribution these news outlets, and those who work for them, are making to areas typically under-served by metropolitan news media. This research enhances our understanding of the important role of regional and rural journalism in Australia through probing the function of hyperlocal news in new and established news outlets. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, these hyper local news outlets are run by women, occasionally while maintaining a feminist imperative.

Keywords: Connecting community, good news, non-metropolitan news outlets, independent journalism, local news.

ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى معرفة الأخبار المحلية في المناطق الجهوية والريف الأسترالي اعتمادا على سلسلة من المقابلات النوعية وشبه المنظمة مع صحفيات من وسائل الإعلام الإقليمية والريفية في أستراليا. حيث يستكشف مساهمة تقدمها هذه المنافذ الإخبارية، وأولئك الذين يعملون لديها في المناطق التي تعاني عادة من نقص الخدمات الإخبارية الحضرية، يعزز هذا البحث فهمنا للدور الهام للصحافة الإقليمية والريفية في هذه المنطقة من خلال استطلاع وظيفة الأخبار المحلية في منافذها الجديدة والراسخة ومن المثير للدهشة، أو ربما لا، أن هذه المنافذ الإخبارية المحلية الكبيرة تديرها نساء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ربط المجتمع، الأخبار الجيدة، وسائل الإعلام غير الحضرية، الصحافة المستقلة، الأخبار المحلية.

* Corresponding author

Introduction

The local, as a concept, theory and trope, has been buffeted by ideological waves from the environmental movement, politics, neoliberalism and media. As an adjective, 'local' is added to an array of nouns: local business, local newspaper, local post office and local community. Yet the addition of this adjective is ambivalent, signalling relevance and marginalization, belonging and insularity. Through digitization, the local has become translocal, shaving expectations, sliding into assumptions, and transforming configurations of meaning and mattering. The confirmation of this argument is the current agitations to 'local news' in Australia.

Australia's regional and rural news media outlets survive in a constantly changing landscape, with mastheads closing and others rising from the destruction. These news media, whose mandate is to provide local news to their communities, are constantly transforming. However so is the notion of 'local news' for 'local people.' With so many disintermediated platforms – from YouTube to TikTok and X to Threads – it is timely to (re)consider the role of local media to reintermediate and respond to dominant models of information, moving from 'the centre' to the 'periphery.' While it is easy to locate information on Donald Trump or Elon Musk, it is much harder to discover the closure of a local school or a bank. Globalization brutalizes information, people and places that do not welcome easy commodification through national borders. Yet the value of connection and community beyond a Facebook 'like' or an Instagram 'love' is difficult to research. Research metrics and targets emphasize funded projects in the applied sciences, with an impact on public health. Still, in a university culture that validates 'impact' and 'translational research,' the local matters. We as researchers require different methodologies to formulate and track these mattering maps.

These mattering maps are revealing unusual undulations. Natalie Leamy, a former regional and rural journalist, stated that,

It's been about two years now since APN (Australian Provincial News and Media) was sold on to News Corp (News Corporation) and News Corp then decided to kill all these (regional newspapers). There are lots of newspapers that have sprung up that are servicing the community (since then). So, it's almost like a bush fire ravaged them and now you're seeing the green shoots come back up (Interview with Natalie Leamy, 2021).

This statement confirms the scale of corporate destruction of local media. Yet alternative models and modes of communication, writing and reading are jutting from the Australian news media landscape. Some of these alternative modes are women-centred and – occasionally – feminist.

This article is formed from original and distinctive data sets. The project explores women and leadership in Australian regional, rural, and remote locations and their communication systems. It focuses on the challenges facing new, and established local news outlets in regional and rural Australia through the stories of some of the women who have established and worked for these news media. Their work provides crucial local information, building a sense of connectivity and continuity for their communities, while countering the narrow parameters of meaning and mattering granted to coverage of regional and rural communities and issues, derived from the metropolitan news media. These news outlets create imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), using text to build relationships in specific geographical locations. This is an innovative mode of regional and rural communication, that refashions and reconfigures critical theory and communication studies. This is hyper-local communication in supposedly globalizing times. It matters and transforms the parameters of mattering.

Our research reveals how these women conceptualise their roles and those of the news media outlets they lead and for which they work. These women are driven by the desire to contribute to their communities, to tell the untold stories and to make a difference. To understand this drive and desire, our research is structured in three parts, beginning with an overview of recent changes to the Australian news media industry. The original and qualitative study that follows – based on a series of interviews - explores the hopes, challenges and expectations of women journalists in regional and rural locations in Australia. This research concludes by summoning the future of non-metropolitan news media in Australia.

Context

Australia's news media landscape is constantly evolving. As early as 2003, Raboy tracked the impact of globalization on local news (Raboy, 2003: 101-120). In the same year, Ewart confirmed this argument in the Australian context, demonstrating that the amount of local content in regional newspapers was declining, alongside the routine sharing of networked content between metropolitan and regional newspapers owned by the same news media organisation (2003). These changes have continued and escalated, with additional changes to Australia's news media environment in recent years, including the closure of mastheads and the sale of local titles serving regional and rural areas. In the middle of 2023, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC 2023), which is the country's major free to air, non-commercial broadcaster, sacked 120 staff. These cuts affected the broadcaster's news division, with 41 job losses and its regional and local division where seven jobs were removed.

Job losses in news organisations have not been confined to broadcast outlets, with regional and rural mastheads closing. The *Jimboomba Times*, a rural newspaper based in Queensland, Australia, was one of several regional newspapers that

Australian Consolidated Media (ACM) closed on April 3, 2023 (*Redland City Bulletin*, 2023). ACM explained that “Increased newsprint costs and a shift in advertiser spending” had led to the closure (*Redland City Bulletin*, 2023). These developments followed an earlier decision by ACM in 2022 to sell off 14 regional newspaper titles to the Star News Group. Star News Group’s Paul Thomas said ACM wanted to see the mastheads the group purchased expand and that would occur through a “strong focus on local content”. He explained the rationale behind the acquisition:

Mr Thomas said local newspapers provided an invaluable service to their communities which couldn’t be copied by social media. “A local newspaper will ultimately provide the opportunity for everybody to have a say,” he said. (SA Police News, 2022)

These closures and acquisitions confirm the volatility in Australian news media organisations. Between 2019 and 2022, Australia’s news media organisations faced extraordinary change with the closure of hundreds of print newspapers and many of their online sites in regional and rural areas and the subsequent loss of jobs (Walkley Foundation, 2022). This included the closure, suspension or shift to digital only offerings of more than 200 suburban and local news outlets (Hess and Waller, 2021). Noting this transformation, Hess (2020, 1) confirmed:

As of March 2020, there were an estimated 578 regional and rural newspapers in Australia (Fisher et al., 2020: 9). From 2008 to 2018, 106 local and regional newspaper titles (many suburban) folded across the country, leaving 21 of Australia’s 537 local government areas without coverage from a local newspaper (in either print or online formats), including 16 local government areas in regional Australia (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019).

From this chaos emerged some green shoots in the form of initiatives aimed at supporting the continuation and establishment of new regional, rural, and remote news ventures including a series of grants focusing on regional and digital news innovations. Some of these initiatives were sponsored by endeavours such as the Facebook Australian News Fund which funded the \$2.5 million Public Interest Journalism Fund and the \$2.5 million Newsroom Sustainability Fund from 2021-2023.

These sources assisted a variety of initiatives involving regional and rural news sites including employing journalists, special news supplements focussed on women in regional areas, transitioning the news to digital platforms, a hyperlocal e-newsletter service, news focussing on farming, remote reporting projects, re-launch of extinct news services, increasing coverage of women, and services for non-English speaking audiences amongst a raft of other initiatives (Walkley Foundation,

2022). The Walkley Foundation (2022, n.p.) revealed the massive changes experienced by journalists in non-metropolitan Australia from 2019 onwards:

Regional journalism is in a well-documented state of flux and is facing unprecedented funding challenges, which the Covid-19 pandemic has magnified. More than 227 print or digital news mastheads have either closed or reduced services since January 2019, according to the Public Interest Journalism Initiative's Australian Newsroom Mapping Project. Some 155 of these were the result of a contraction in a rural or regional area. As a result, 33 local government areas, or six per cent of Australia's total municipalities, are now without a local print or digital news outlet.

Changes to news media in 2021 included a major shake-up of Australia's regional and rural newspaper landscape, with News Corporation purchasing a group of Australian Provincial News and Media regional and rural titles in Queensland and New South Wales. Following the change of ownership, some of these mastheads purchased by News Corp transitioned from being published in print formats supported by online versions to online-only publications. Other titles that were acquired as part of that deal were closed, some devolving to a single or double page of news from a specific regional area published in News Corporation's metropolitan title *The Courier-Mail*, which services the entire State of Queensland. The loss of hundreds of journalism and support jobs in the affected areas followed.

The effects of the closure of regional and rural titles were compounded when many regional, rural and remote communities in Queensland were denied access to print copies of the State's main metropolitan newspaper *The Courier-Mail* in a cost saving measure that targeted select areas including those "further west than Charters Towers in the north, Emerald in Central Queensland and in some parts of the state's south-west" (Grounds, 2021). This distribution protocol was particularly serious for the state of Queensland, as a large proportion of the population is spread throughout the state, unlike Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Regional media matter economically, socially and culturally. Yet regional media can create a convergence of ideas and expectations that are neither real nor useful. That is why this article deploys interviews to both recognize and log this diversity, enabling an understanding of hyper-local media.

Literature

Australian regional and rural news outlets have - until relatively recently - attracted little research attention. The last decade has revealed a renewal of interest amongst scholars in these types of news media. Two foci emerge from recent research in this area: (1) the contribution to community identity made by regional and rural news outlets and, (2) their important focus on local content enabling the definitional configuration of the location. In relation to the first of these foci, Bowd (2018: 63) tracked "some of the ideas about regional community and identity that

are communicated to news audiences,” through an analysis of front pages of Australian regional newspapers over time. She identified the importance of localness in the coverage regional newspapers provided over time to their communities, writing that these news media:

highlight a number of ideas associated with regional life: that communities need to work together in the face of external threats; that the achievements, participation and involvement of local people in local life are valued; and that the interests of regional communities should be promoted and protected. Their prominence on front pages suggests these are elements of regional life that are valued in Australian towns and districts – or at least that this is the perception in regional newsrooms. (2018: 70)

In respect to the second foci, Bowd noted that while definitions of what comprises local news are contested, local news in non-metropolitan contexts configure, frame and shape the meaning systems that construct the local.

Bowd's analysis highlighted that the newspapers in her study placed the emphasis on “local people, issues and events” thus contributing to social capital formation in the communities in which they are located. She wrote that there are three social capital elements to which these newspapers contribute: the provision of a network, the signalling of norms, values and expectations, and showing sanctions for inappropriate behaviour. In this respect Bowd (p 71) argues that local news media send “messages to regional communities about what it means to be part of these communities, and the expectations that flow from this.” Additionally, Bowd (p.85) noted regional newspapers contributed to social capital in their communities “by reflecting ideas of what it means to be part of a regional community to those both inside and outside that geographical location”.

Research into Australian regional news audiences' perceptions of local news highlights that their contribution to social good was “largely determined by community-oriented values such as a sense of belonging, the ability to share the news with others, and the loss of a local news service, rather than the actual content” (Park, Fisher and Lee 2022, p. 1663). A recent study on local news customers demonstrated that people who live in areas where the local newspaper or television news service has closed confirm that the loss of local information has revealed a negative impact on the town and reduced a sense of belonging in the community (Park et al., 2020). Of importance were the building of community and societal values, while that study also noted the concurrent importance of convenience when deciding to pay for news media (Park, Fisher and Lee 2022). What this research demonstrates is that regional news media are important as both an informational and community-building functionality.

Researchers who have focused on the roles of Australian non-metropolitan journalism and journalists note that those who work for non-metropolitan news outlets are committed to serving their communities (Killiby, 1994; Bowd, 2003; Hess and Waller, 2022; Ewart, 2005). This is brought into sharp relief when metropolitan journalists report on regional and rural cities and towns. There is a long-standing ideological division between the bush and the city in Australia (Bilboe, 1998). When major news stories break in regional, rural, or remote communities, this division is revealed with stark clarity in the divergent approaches local journalists and their metropolitan counterparts take to reporting. The latter are viewed as parachuting into small communities with little knowledge of the geography, customs and culture of these communities and a disregard for those involved in the events (Bilboe, 1998; Ewart, 2020). These tensions are particularly evident and heightened at times of crises, crimes and disasters, when journalists from outside regional and rural communities are sent to cover extraordinary events. Research highlights that some city-based journalists who visit disaster sites in regional locations behave inappropriately. Bilboe (1998) reveals the empirical and interpretative differences in her comparison of the practices of local and non-local journalists covering a major landslide at a ski resort of Thredbo (New South Wales). Similarly, a study by Cohen, Hughes, and White (2007) demonstrates some significant differences in how local and non-local journalists approach reporting natural disasters in Australia. Ewart (2020) identifies that national and state news media focus on the drama of disasters drawing on images that shock audiences. They grant little attention to the recovery process. Ewart reveals that local news outlets,

are able to provide vital information for disaster communities, with reporters being more attuned to their own communities than their state and national counterparts. Local news coverage is also able to help those affected by disaster, with audiences reporting high levels of trust in local media as a consequence (Ewart, 2020: 72-72).

Local news provision is crucial to the function of regional, rural, and remote communities, in times of crisis and beyond. To align regional, rural and remote communities with crimes, disasters and drought serves to limit the parameters of reality, truth, value and authenticity. Such an inelegant proxy both agitates and demeans the definition of news.

This article rebounds from and contributes to this hyperlocal news literature. Over the past two decades, the research into hyper-local news has grown. Despite this burgeoning research, there is no universally agreed definition of what constitutes hyper-local news (McLellan, 2011). Definitions range from it being a type of news that is focussed on a specific and narrow geographical area, to news about specialised topics (Foust, 2009). It has been described as a tool for civic engagement (Kurpius et al. 2010) and defined as being “devoted to the stories and minutiae of a particular neighbourhood, ZIP code or interest group within a certain geographic area” (Picone

2007: 102). Radio has also been positioned as a form of hyper-localism, with radio working to 'map our symbolic and social environment' (Berland, 1990: 191). Such platforms provide an opportunity for sharing mini narratives about life in a community, which in turn contributes to the creation of hyper-local news (Hujanen, Lehtisaari, Linden and Gronlund, 2019). While these distinctive definitions of hyper-local news may seem problematic or unworkable, this diversity enables a wider conception of the term beyond a singular platform or cultural geography. Significantly the varied nature of hyper-local news, includes the contexts and conditions under which it is created.

If there is a singular and workable definition from the literature, then it is the provision of local news that focuses on one or more small communities in a defined geographical area. This is the tightest determination of 'hyper-local news' (Picone, 2007). The role of local news outlets is nuanced because hyperlocal news maps the "symbolic and social environment" of the communities it serves (Berland, 1990:91). For those outside of global or second tier cities (Brabazon, 2014), there is an absence of a *local news media source* (Ewart and Dekker, 2013). *Local news media play a crucial role in informing residents of small communities about important events and issues, particularly when trouble strikes for the people who live, work, and play in non-metropolitan communities* (Downman and Murray, 2017).

When mapping and tracking the role of hyper-local news in regional and rural news outlets in Australia, the research literature has confirmed the vital role that local news outlets perform in Australia's regional and rural communities, and their function as a binding agent for the communities which they serve. Hess summed up some of these functions:

It is widely acknowledged that local news outlets perform vital functions in regional and rural communities, including informing, educating and entertaining a public that is often marginalised in favour of their big-city counterparts; providing a forum for public debate; creating a shared sense of community; and fulfilling a watchdog role by providing a check and balance on institutions such as local government, courts, churches, schools and police. (2020 p. 9)

This is another mode of a sharing economy, enabling the formulation of communication and community. Such models unravel simple binary oppositions of centre and periphery, core and marginal. Indeed, the foundational definitions of 'regional,' 'rural,' and 'remote,' rely on a city, urbanity and a centre to provide meaning, via default and difference. Yet a remote location is central to its denizens. The regional is meaningful and configures different modes and modalities of cities. The rural summons different patterns of time, space, production and consumption. There is profound value for journalism and media studies scholars to understand disintermediation and deterritorialization, and the gift of digitization (Brabazon,

2014). The way in which metropolitan cities dominate news and news cycles inhibits and undermines the great gifts and potential of digital mobility. Therefore, the remainder of this article grasps this literature on hyper-local news and activates interviews with women who lead regional, rural and remote news delivery.

Method

This article draws information from semi-structured, open ended interviews with women in Australia who have established, worked for, and lead regional, rural, and remote news ventures. These interviews were undertaken in late 2021 and early 2022 as part of a wider research project about women's leadership in regional, rural, and remote Australia. This project spanned thirty interviews with women in positions of leadership in regional, rural and remote communities in Australia. Seven of these interviews were with women journalists who at the time of the interviews were or had been in leadership positions. Some of the women journalists interviewed, owned and operated news media outlets, while others were or had previously been employed in regional and rural news outlets in a leadership capacity. Therefore, this data set is not indicative or representative of all women journalists' experiences. Indeed, the variety, depth, and uniqueness of the experiences of the interviewed women is noteworthy. However, there are also commonalities in their motivations for working in journalism in regional and rural Australian communities. Ethics approval was granted for the interviews through Griffith University in Australia. Interviewees were provided with a copy of the informed consent mechanism, approved by Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee, prior to the interview and requested to read the information and sign and return the consent sheet by email. All interviewees gave their approval for the content of their interviews to be used in academic publications.

The interviews were constructed, organized and enacted using a conversational style (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), with open-ended questions. This qualitative technique configured the time and space for interviewees to raise issues or offer comments about matters that were specific to regional and rural journalism. Interviews took place using a digitized platform. They were recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcription service. The interviewer checked the transcripts against the recordings to ensure they were accurate. The duration of interviews was between 30 minutes and just over an hour. Interview questions focussed on the interviewee's experiences working for regional and rural news outlets, their experiences of providing leadership in these organisations, and their reflections on the role of local news outlets in non-metropolitan settings. Interviews were coded using the program NVivo with inductive coding used to analyse the data, so that the themes emerged from the data without constraints that could be imposed by pre-set themes or codes (Joffe and Yardley, 2004). While some commonalities were identified in the data sets that related to the women's experiences, the coding and subsequent analysis highlighted that there were also marked differences revealed

through their experiences. This diversity is significant, as the clumping of the regional, rural and remote into a unified category outside of metropolitan or mainstream news is demonstrated to be flawed, problematic and simplistic. The diversity in and of itself is important and critiques the othering and reification of news, information and knowledge constructed outside of metropolitan cities.

Results: Data and Discussion

While the pandemic and the Trump Presidency heightened the awareness of crisis, fear, chaos and unpredictability (Brabazon, Redhead, Chivaura, 2018), researching and understanding the differing patterns of daily life are valuable and meaningful. Stepping off Paul Virilio's acceleration (2012), variable speeds of life and living emerge. As Jen Gourley confirmed,

So in the grand scheme of things maybe these stories about a house elf made out of chocolate and a milkman might not be important to some people but I think there's a lot of value to them and they matter to me and I know that they matter to other people too (Interview with Jen Gourley, 2022).

Research reveals the importance of local news outlets for communities outside the metropolis and as Gourley indicated in her interview, the nature and formation of that news transforms as the geography of its collection and its creation shifts. The ideology of cultural value also alters (Frow, 1995). This news is valued by the communities in which it occurs. It is contextually resonant. News outlets in regional and rural communities connect those living in these geographical locations, while fulfilling a symbolic role as the voice of a community. In mapping their environments, local news outlets enhance the communities in which they are based. These news sites have a practical role in informing people about local issues and events but are also an important symbol of community connectivity. Their focus on hyper-local news such as everyday life and events in small towns and settlements manifests as storytelling that is designed to build connections and communities. In many cases, this storytelling departs from the conflict-driven, negativity that characterises metropolitan journalism, to focus on journalism about the people who contribute to and live in these communities, and the issues that matter to them. As well as connecting communities, these news outlets are accountable to their communities (Ewart, 2014). This is a disintermediated, flat model of writing and thinking that disseminates ideas to readers in a way that matters and indeed transforms the idea of mattering.

The women interviewed put their commitment to their communities at the forefront of their work and it was embodied in their approach to the journalism they produce. Jen Gourley owner and editor of *The Biloela Beacon*, an online news outlet in the rural town of Biloela in Queensland, Australia developed an appreciation for local news when she started working at a print newspaper in the town of Biloela in

Central Queensland. She recognised the importance of local news because it provided regional connectivity. The sense of connection that these news outlets provide to communities was reinforced by *The Moorabool News* (Ballan, Victoria) editor and owner Helen Tatchell who stated: “So, the importance of the local newspapers is again – I’m going to say this often – is to keep the community connected and that’s what they want” (Interview with Helen Tatchell, 2021).

In regional and rural communities, journalists are more than reporters. They are community members, and they bring that lens to their role and reporting. Natalie Leamy, a former regional and rural journalist, said that during her time in non-metropolitan newspapers she, “worked more as a community member than as a journalist” (Interview with Natalie Leamy, 2021). The stories she wrote benefited the communities in which they occurred and that meant making “sure that we were holding the mirror and holding those that were in power accountable and serving what was appropriate”. Editor and Co-owner of southburnette.com.au, Anne Miller, offered a similar perspective to Leamy with regard to news provision, describing her news site southburnett.com.au as a community connector. She said:

We can connect people together because we know so many people in the local community. We can be a channel of communication between people and connect people with their local politicians because there's still a lot of ignorance about whether this is a council matter or state government matter or federal government matter, so we can spell that out in our stories and also on the phone when we're talking to people. We're a bit of a networking hub as well... we ensure that we cover all the different little towns around the place, we don't just concentrate on the larger settlements like here or in Nanango. We'll run through to Yarraman, Cooyar, Blackbutt. We're trying to weld the region together a bit. We work towards that because we don't feel that we are a Kingaroy newspaper, we are a South Burnett newspaper.

When local news outlets cease operation, their absence is keenly felt by the rural towns and regional cities in which they once existed. Gourley established *The Biloela Beacon* in 2021, a few years after the demise of the town's only local print newspaper, to ensure her community has continued access to local news. She writes and publishes the stories of relevance to those in the area. She explained:

More than anything else I believe that community news, regional news, rural news connects people. It reminds them that they're important, that they matter and particularly if they've got somebody on the ground covering their stories it does keep them connected, it's very important (Interview with Jen Gourley, 2021).

Local news outlets matter to their communities, but those who operate and work for them recognise that the communities they serve are important and that they matter.

Shifting the Focus from Conflict

Regional and rural journalists construct and reveal stories in ways that are distinct from approaches taken by metropolitan news outlets. The journalists interviewed put good news at the forefront of their story telling, in contrast to metropolitan journalism which they believed focussed on negative, conflict driven stories. Tatchell explained how her news outlet's approach was different from metropolitan journalism:

We're finding that's what's happening, people aren't watching mainstream media because it's all doom and gloom and that's why they're referring back to their local paper just to – it's probably like reading a good book, they get that enjoyment and satisfaction out of knowing what's going on in their community is not doom and gloom (Interview with Helen Tatchell, 2021).

This point was reinforced by Amanda Gearing, who worked as a journalist in remote, rural, and regional locations. She said: "The other thing that's tricky in the bush is that the media thrives on conflict but if you generate and beat up interpersonal conflict in a town that can be quite unconstructive" (Interview with Amanda Gearing, 2021). Similarly, Miller tried to focus on positive news in her news outlet. As she explained:

People seem to appreciate the fact that we have filled that gap in providing local news and not just negative local news. It'd be very easy to sit back and just cover courts or just to cover police rounds but we try to temper it with covering events and promoting events that are coming up as well so that we've got a positive view of the area, business expansions because there's a lot of good things happening in South Burnett and there's a lot of good things happening in our little towns (Interview with Anne Miller, 2021).

Apart from their approach to storytelling that centred on the people in regional and rural communities, these women ensured their journalism enhanced and developed their regions and communities.

Value Adding

The stories that are at the core of local news coverage reflect the diversity of the people and communities in which they emerge. In reflecting the diversity of their neighbourhoods, these news outlets add enormous value to these communities by prioritising their interests (Hess and Waller, 2022). *A common argument from the journalists interviewed was that non-metropolitan journalism was about making a difference to the communities it served. That, coupled with providing a trusted news source, underpinned their approach to journalism.* These women ensured that their journalism made a positive contribution to their communities and that the diversity

of their regions was reflected in their publications. This was assembled in part to counter the stereotypes that characterise much metropolitan news coverage of the bush, but also to ensure everyone in their communities was represented in their news outlets and could share their stories. *This involved challenging stereotypes about the bush promulgated by some mainstream news media, which was important for Region Media's Genevieve Jacobs:*

I find that more irritating than I can express, the idea that this sort of romanticised surface vision of rural life is what we are all about out here in the regions. Regions are incredibly vibrant and diverse places. I was in Wagga just a couple of weeks ago. We are in the midst of an expansion process for our digital news platform. There are 114 different nationalities represented in Wagga. You know in 2019 they had their first Mardi Gras. It will be a city of 100,000 people within the next 20 to 25 years (Interview with Genevieve Jacobs, 2021).

However, PS Media director Margaret Simons pointed out that many Australian newsrooms lack cultural and ethnic diversity in their staff and that they did not always reflect the make-up of their communities. This can add another layer of difficulty in representing the diversity of a community. She explained:

I think Australian media have a long way to go on this. If you walk into most newsrooms most people look like me well younger but white middle class which is my background and if you walk out into the street outside the newsroom it looks quite different - that's certainly the case in the cities and certainly the case on the edge of the cities... I was in Shepperton and a few weeks ago now and you know that's an incredibly multicultural community. It is an important centre for traditional owners, for Indigenous people, but you've also got a long history of migrant workers coming to work in the fruit canning industry and that sort of thing there and you don't see that represented in reporting of the region really. I think that you know it's a general criticism that can be made of the Australian media that we are blind sometimes to multiculturalism and newsrooms don't resemble the community which they claim to (Interview with Margaret Simons, 2022).

The sociological configuration of journalists will transform and diversify. But a key stepping stone in this process is to ensure that regional and rural newsrooms reflect the diverse make-up of the communities in which they are located. These regional, rural and remote news services maintain an andragogical function. They teach the value and importance of diversity and multiple standpoints. The 'story' always contains 'stories.'

Working and living in communities outside of the metropolis gave the journalists interviewed an understanding of their communities that informed the type of journalism they practised. While working as a journalist at a small community newspaper on remote Thursday Island (Queensland, Australia), Leamy had an early lesson in understanding the expectations of that diverse community. This

consciousness and reflection became a vital part of her job as a reporter. She explained:

For me it was an eye-opener because it wasn't journalism as you would expect because it was culturally sensitive. So, I guess the way that you expect journalists to be is tough and hard and the first thing I learnt there was what you could and couldn't report on. So, if somebody had passed, for instance there was an inquest going on when I arrived, it was not something that we were going to be covering in the newspaper. The publications down south were [covering it] because it wasn't culturally appropriate [for our newspaper to cover]. So, for me it was an eye-opener on how to work in with the community and what was acceptable to start with (Interview with Natalie Leamy, 2021).

Her comment highlighted the varying community expectations of journalists and their reporting methodology and modality. *Miller's approach to the provision of news in a very diverse community was to reflect that diversity including the region's large Indigenous community (Cherbourg). She focussed on the positive developments happening in Cherbourg, rather than negative news stories which she felt preoccupied metropolitan journalists when covering stories from that community. The idea of giving the voiceless a space, place and credibility was emphasised by Jacobs (Interview with Genevieve Jacobs, 2021) who felt it was crucial to give people fair representation in rural and regional Australia. She said a challenge that RRR news outlets had experienced in the past decade was the lack of deep local connection caused by disaggregation. That disaggregation has removed the voices of many people across the community from the public sphere. Colonization continues.*

Non-metropolitan journalists and news media outlets have a deep sense of commitment to making a difference to their communities, building journalism that meets the needs of their community members and respects their interests. Value adding for Jacobs meant ensuring that regional communities had access to a "free, accessible, reliable and professional press". She elaborated:

Professional [journalism] is really important because some of the things that have sprung up to replace the local newspapers. I have seen passionately run local Facebook pages, for example. That's great and it's really important but often those people will be either not professional journalists with the standards and balance that we bring to bear, they will have hobby horses perhaps, they're not necessarily sustainable long-term projects. So, we've got to have a free, viable, sustainable and professional local media model. I think we're starting to feel our way towards what that might be (Interview with Genevieve Jacobs, 2021).

For Tatchell, value adding meant enlightening community members as to "what has happened, what is happening and what is due to happen" (Interview with

Helen Tatchell 2021), particularly when it came to news about their councils. *Being part of a regional or rural community involved a deep sense of caring for those who lived in these locations. Gearing noted journalism in these places was community-centric, holding layers and levels of government accountable. The women featured in this article see value adding as informing their communities about what is happening and highlighting the effect of issues.*

The journalists interviewed were also judicious about what stories they covered because they cared about the communities in which they lived and worked. For Natalie Leamy, this was best illustrated by an incident in which a white supremacist group distributed racist leaflets around a regional Queensland city on Harmony Day, a day established to celebrate unity and diversity in Australia. While this story with its news value of conflict would have made headlines in many city news outlets, it was not reported by the regional newspaper because Leamy and her editor thought it would have derailed the spirit of the day. For Leamy this was a way of her newspaper saying, “this is what we’re going to celebrate as our community and what we believe in” (Interview with Natalie Leamy, 2021). All information is selected, sorted and interpreted. In regional, rural and remote regions, this interpretative matrix is distinctively configured.

News outlets serving regional areas provided an important but under-rated opportunity for local communities to have a voice in national affairs. As key issues are provided a context – rather than simply configuring a crisis-fuelled narrative arc – arguments and evidence can be developed in an authentic, granular, careful and respectful fashion. As Simons explained:

That's so important, bringing these issues to the attention of city folk, city dwellers who may not really understand the political intrigues that go on around those issues and how they affect local people exactly... We have a really severe urban rural divide in Australia and that sort of cuts across economically in terms of service provision but also culturally. I think many city people just don't understand country people and think Clancy is still riding over the overflow and all that sort of thing. When in fact you know rural Australia has been through more rapid change in the last couple of decades than the cities have (Interview with Margaret Simons, 2022).

Information, evidence and knowledge emerge from a social, economic and political context. Ideas are anchored in their environment. Yet with the maintenance of binary oppositions of rural and urban, regional and metropolitan, remote and centre, the intricate and diverse lives of citizens are marginalized and devalued. Through the interviews conducted for this article, this was the shared trope: metropolitan-based news media did not have a comprehensive understanding of the bush and reinforced unproductive binary oppositions through neglect, inconvenience, click bait, or accelerated news cycles.

Often it is a crisis that reveals and displays this marginalization, displacement and invisibility. For Miller, the vital need for news and information became obvious in 2011, the year before the establishment of her newspaper, when there were major floods which isolated the area. She said:

The news trucks couldn't get through, the whole area was basically cut off and we realised then that there was this huge gap that needed to be fulfilled in regard to providing local sources of information about what roads were cut, that sort of thing, whether or not Woolworth's have toilet paper (Interview with Anne Miller, 2021).

The crisis – and the inability to convey the news of the crisis because of a lack of regional, rural and remote access – is a powerful node of consciousness and change. Gearing confirmed that being a reporter in a community affected by a major flood changed the approach she took to covering those events:

Over the following weeks the task was – it was quite a big task. It was an overwhelming task because there were 500 people missing and we didn't know if they were dead or alive. So, every day the paper would publish these little black silhouettes and my job was to turn those silhouettes into real people and photos of people and to work out where they were and how they died and who they were (Interview with Amanda Gearing, 2021).

The journalists who work in regional and rural communities in Australia are well placed to report on events in those communities, whether calamitous or otherwise. News exists in context, rather than via a deterritorialized, digitized, hyper-mobile screen.

It is not just at times of disaster that journalists who live and work in regional and rural communities are best able to serve the interests of those communities. Whereas metropolitan news media tend to focus on extremes when configuring stories that happen outside the city, local news outlets take a more nuanced and detailed approach. Jacobs explained how metropolitan news media approached reporting on locales outside of the metropolis:

One of the things that's a real problem with what's happened in regional media [closures of news outlets] is that there are only two kinds of stories that ever make it to the attention of urban people and contribute to this really difficult situation of a lack of understanding. You get the enormous natural disasters which would always make the news anyway but then the other thing that also brings it up is what I sometimes call the alpacas knitting their own socks stories which is the cute little ones, someone goes out into the sticks and they'll find the story and it's really sweet and quirky and people in the city can look at it and go 'oh those country people, aren't they sweet and cute and endearing?' (Interview with Genevieve Jacobs, 2021).

The binary of crisis and cute undermine the lived experiences – and the economic, social and political complexity – of regional, rural and remote citizens and communities. She found this superficial approach to stories about the bush obscures the significant drivers that dictate and shape their lives.

I think when we tell superficial, cute, appealing stories about the bush we miss out on the big drivers that are dictating people's everyday lives, the issues about how we live, how we address issues around health and education, what the broader impacts of something like drought or floods are. What happens four, six, eight months down the track after you've had a natural disaster of some kind? (*Interview with Genevieve Jacobs, 2021*).

Jacobs offers a key argument about the intense specificity of health and education in regional, rural and remote areas. Any discussions of 'national education' or 'national health' programmes impose a cookie cutter of policies on very distinctive and different environments.

It is the complexity and diversity that interviewees confirmed is most lacking from the contemporary news landscape. Jacobs argued that the issues facing regional and rural Australia are far more complex than most mainstream urban journalists comprehend. She elaborated:

how extremely annoying it is to see coverage of regional issues, mostly in a dust haze of someone riding into the distance wearing a cowboy hat, I'm a farmer, that's not my life. So, I want people to pay attention because we matter out here (*Interview with Genevieve Jacobs, 2021*).

Mattering is important. Mattering – indeed – matters. Regional and rural news outlets enact mattering in multiple ways to their communities. They signal through their approach to reporting that their communities matter, and the ways in which their communities engage with local news media outlets shows the importance of those outlets matter to the people who live in those communities.

Discussion and Conclusion

I think certainly rural Australia is becoming increasingly disconnected from the urban world when people no longer have multiple relatives in the bush... an old friend of mine and she talks about how there's this growing rural and regional divide of trust and understanding. Often that occurs among people who are more economically vulnerable, less advantaged, less educated and there is an absolute importance of continuing access for those people [to local news] so that the paywall, the subscription, the cost doesn't stop them from participating in their democracies. It's as simple as that (*Interview with Genevieve Jacobs, 2021*).

Citizenship and community are words that punctuate policy documents. But who is a citizen that matters? Which communities have the right to express and share

their stories? This statement from Jacobs highlights the importance of access to local news for regional and rural communities. This is news about what is happening in their own geographical areas.

This article has highlighted that, despite the lack of interest from major news organisations in providing news outlets in regional and rural Queensland, independent operators including new ventures such as PS Media and Region Media, and existing independent ventures recognise the vital role of local news in these areas. It is noteworthy that two recent new ventures - PS Media and Region Media - have identified the provision of local news to regional communities as being a worthwhile investment. Regional and rural news outlets provide vital local information to residents, and perhaps more importantly create a sense of connection, acting as a hub around and through which a sense of belonging to a community and sense of shared purpose can be created and curated. The journalists involved in the study from which this article drew data, recognised the value of their work to their local communities. The recently established ventures of PS Media and Regional Media have clearly recognised that people want news about the regional and rural locations in which they live, work and play.

Too often, the regional, rural and remote are configured in deficit, in denial, and in displacement. This article has activated the voices of the people who work in regional and rural news outlets, to reveal their understanding of news and the people for whom they deliver this news. Their testimony reveals the critical role news media in Australian regions and rural location in informing those who live in metropolitan areas of the contribution these areas make to the country's social, cultural, and economic life. Additionally, it has reinforced and expanded our understanding of the contribution regional and rural news media make to community formation and connection. Jacobs explained why these news media must continue to exist and agitate their presence:

I think I would encourage people don't give up. It's critically important that we find a way to do this, and the forces of commerce have been against us thus far. They won't be forever but just as we have those voices for movements, that passion and that energy in our politics, we need to find the same voice in our media so that we're heard, that our significance is noted. It's like the old saying: I am woman, hear me roar. I'm from the bush, hear me roar (*Interview with Genevieve Jacobs, 2021*).

Jacobs reveals – with commitment and clarity – that news media in regional and rural Australia play a key role for the people who live in those communities. The reflections of the women interviewed in this article enhance our understanding of the role of news outlets outside of metropolitan Australia at a time of extraordinary change with closures of newsrooms and resultant job losses. The experiences of the women journalists highlighted in this article display the important roles that

journalism and journalists play in regional and rural areas of Australia. They emphasised that the key role local news outlets, whether online or in print, play is in connecting members of the community with each other. They are bringing stories from the bush to the attention of state and national news media and those in positions of power. However, they feel there is much to be done about the approaches metropolitan news media take to covering stories from the bush. These women want metropolitan media to cover the bush in more nuanced, less stereotypical ways that highlight to city folk the importance of those who live and work in the margins. There is a need to staff regional and rural newsrooms with those convey and carry the diversity that characterises these areas.

The care and concern of local journalists for the communities in which they live is at odds with what the interviewees confirm is the detached approach to news coverage in metropolitan regions when reporting on regional and rural issues. This article highlights the value of narrowcasting to localised audiences. This is news that matters to a specialized audience who access news that matters to their communities, whether they live in regional or rural Australia. The women illustrate how their reportage requires and benefits from approaches that focus on people and community while avoiding drawing unnecessary attention to conflict. In doing so, they provide a mode of leadership that is driven by care and concern for their communities. Their entrepreneurial activities are providing advocacy for communities that desperately need care, while creating a sense of community and connection for their publics and audiences. In the process, they are building consensus and community through the provision of alternative news spaces and alternative ways of reporting on the communities in which they are embedded, including marginalised populations in that reporting. This is not just reporting on the marginalised, it is reporting for and with them. Women are leading efforts to broaden the availability of news outside cities, working to represent the diversity in their communities, reflect those communities back to themselves, in the process deepening our understanding of the issues that affect and matter to regional and rural Australia.

The continued presence of regional and rural news outlets is vital. Efforts to ensure the continued existence of news outlets in these areas have included funding from a variety of groups including the Australian government. It is yet to be determined whether the types of funding opportunities for non-metropolitan news media mentioned at the start of this article continue in the future. The vital role played by regional and rural news media provides further impetus for future funding initiatives including the kind of support already provided by the Australian federal government for start-up news media ventures and the continuance of those that already exist in regional and rural remote Australia. There is much talk about social capital. Yet the bricks to build this connectivity and community remain regional and rural news outlets. Without the mortar of local media, the building of cohesion and community is demolished.

Declaration of Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. The authors received no funding for the research they undertook for this paper.

References

1. ABC (2023) ABC to cut 120 jobs as major changes are announced, 16 June, retrieved July 3, 2023 from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-16/abc-director-of-news-decision-to-cut-120-jobs/102485864>
2. Anderson, B (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
3. Berland, J. (1990). Radio space and industrial time: Music formats, local narratives and technological mediation. *Popular Music* 9(2), 179–192.
4. Bilboe, W. (1998). The Thredbo landslide: Was it only media ethics that came tumbling down? *Australian Journalism Review*, 20(2), 88-110.
5. Bowd, K. (2003). How different is 'different'? Australian country newspapers and development journalism. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 14, 117-130.
6. Brabazon, T. (2014). The disintermediated librarian and a reinter mediated future. *The Australian Library Journal*, 63(3), 191-205.
7. Brabazon, T. (2014). *Unique urbanity?: Rethinking third tier cities, degeneration, regeneration and mobility*. Springer.
8. Brabazon, T., Redhead, S., & Chivaura, R. S. (2018). *Trump studies: An intellectual guide to why citizens vote against their interests*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
9. Cohen, E., Hughes, P. and White, P.B. (2007). Media and bushfires: a community perspective of the media during the Grampians Fires 2006. *Environmental Hazards*, 7(2), 88-96.
10. Darian-Smith, K. and Dickenson, J. (2021). University Education and the Quest for the Professionalisation of Journalism in Australia between the World Wars. *Media History*, 27(4), 491-509.
11. Downman, S. and Murray, R. (2017). *Hyperlocal journalism and digital disruptions: The journalism change agents in Australia and New Zealand*. Routledge.
12. Ewart, J. (2002). Overlooked and underused: How Australia's first public journalism project treated women and Indigenous people. *Australian Journalism Review*, 24(1), 61-81.
13. Ewart, J. (2003). News Connections: regional Newspapers and the web. Transformations. 7: http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Ewart_Transformations07.pdf

14. Ewart, J. (2014). Local people, local places, local voices and local spaces: How talkback radio in Australia provides hyper-local news through mini-narrative sharing. *Journalism*, 15(6), 790-807.
15. Ewart, J., & Dekker, S. (2013). Radio, someone still loves you! Talkback radio and community emergence during disasters. *Continuum*, 27(3), 365-381.
16. Ewart, J. (2020). Drought is a disaster in the city: Local news media's role in communicating disasters in Australia. *Media, journalism and disaster communities*, 67-82.
17. Frow, J. (1995). *Cultural studies and cultural value* (p. 23). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
18. Grounds, E. (2021) News Corp Australia to stop distributing newspapers to much of regional Queensland, ABC Monday 29 March. Retrieved on December 2, 2023 from
19. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-29/news-corp-to-stop-distributing-newspapers-to-regional-queensland/100033124?fbclid=IwAR3-3SoCIcTi1jOvBRt6OxESnDuciZUJ3_-3HrATkib9XHnvGD9nrP0gggYQ.
20. Hess, K. and Waller, L.J. (2021). Local newspapers and coronavirus: conceptualising connections, comparisons and cures. *Media International Australia*, 178(1), 21-35.
21. Hess, K. (2020). New approach needed to save rural and regional news providers in Australia. *Alfred Deakin Institute Policy Briefing Papers*, 1(4), 1-10.
22. Hujanen, J., Lehtisaari, K., Lindén, C. G., & Grönlund, M. (2019). Emerging forms of hyperlocal media. *Nordicom Review*, 40(s2), 101-114.
23. Josephi, B., and Alonso, M. O. (2021). Testing the Connection Between Tertiary Journalism Education and the Rising Number of Female Journalists. *Journalism Practice*, 1-16.
24. Joffe, H., and Yardley, L. (2004). Content and thematic analysis. In D.F. Mark, and L. Yardley (eds), *Research Methods of Clinical and Health Psychology*, London: Sage. 56–68.
25. Killiby, C. (1994). Civic attitudes and regional media use. *Australian Journalism Review*, 16(1), 81-87.
26. Picone, I. (2007). Conceptualising online news use. *Observatorio Journal*, 3, 93–114.
27. Raboy, M. (2003). Media and democratization in the information society. *Communicating in the information society*, 101-120.
28. Redland City Bulletin (2023). Redland City Bulletin and Jimboomba Times to close, 9 March 2023. Retrieved 3 July, 2023 from <https://www.redlandcitybulletin.com.au/story/8115778/redland-city-bulletin-and-jimboomba-times-to>

- close/?cs=213&fbclid=IwAR1X0tQs4GqKmtxLm4SHxd7TiaxzlvlhC76U-mc2vEaTAfCWjNW6OHdJQo
29. SA Police News (2022). Australian Community Media offloads 14 titles to focus on 'core titles'. Retrieved on July 3, 2023 from <https://sapolicenews.com.au/2022/12/23/australian-community-media-offloads-14-newspapers-to-focus-on-core-titles/#:~:text=ACM%20says%20it%20will%20now%20focus%20on%20its,titles%20the%20Coastal%20Leader%20and%20The%20Flinders%20Times>.
 30. Virilio, P. (2012). *The great accelerator*. Polity.
 31. Walkley Foundation (2022). The Walkley Foundation and Meta Reveal 54 recipients in funding \$15m funding program's first round. Retrieved March 3, 2022 from https://www.walkleys.com/the-walkley-foundation-and-meta-reveal-54-recipients-in-15m-funding-programs-first-round/?mc_cid=608962db53&mc_eid=5988e0f943
 - 32. Interviews**
 33. Interview with Amanda Gearing, journalist, on 24 November, 2021.
 34. Interview with Jen Gourley, owner and editor of *The Biloela Beacon* on 17 December, 2021.
 35. Interview with Natalie Leamy, former regional, rural and remote journalist on December 8, 2021.
 36. Interview with Anne Miller co-owner and editor of southburnette.com.au of *The Moorabool News* on December 2, 2021.
 37. Interview with Meg Simons, PS Media co-founder on April 6, 2022.
 38. Interview with Helen Tatchell editor and owner of *The Moorabool News* (Ballan, Victoria)
 39. On December 11, 2021.