



Media
innovation
and the civic
future of
Australia's
country press

Local newspaper audience survey

National report 2021





Media innovation and the civic future of Australia's country press

National audience survey report

Kristy Hess

Lisa Waller

Angela Blakston

Jerry Lai

An Australian Research Council Linkage project
(LP180100813)



Cover photo:
iStock by Getty Images

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	3
Executive summary.....	5
Methodology	7
Local news readers: who are they?	8
A preference for print.....	9
Accessing local news digitally.....	10
Paying for local news	10
Accessing local news for free.....	10
Audiences want a say on media policies	11
Towards the future: an audience view of innovation	13
Local politics	13
The social and cultural.....	14
Recycling	17
Summary.....	21
The Local News Innovation Project	23
Future directions	24
The research team.....	25
References	26

Preface

By Associate Professor Kristy Hess, Deakin University

I am delighted to present this national survey report of country press audiences – the biggest survey of its kind in Australia. One of the most memorable experiences of being involved in this project has been the steady stream of phone calls that have come my way from people who want to talk about their passion for their local newspaper. Elderly newspaper readers, in particular, have reached out (these phone calls often last up to an hour) as people share their many years of experience engaging with local news, what they love about the paper and ways it might improve. Romaine, from regional New South Wales, said a newspaper was simply not a newspaper unless it printed death notices. While Charles, from rural Queensland, said he cared deeply about inequalities facing those regional Australians who were without internet access.

Such passion, however, has not been enough to fully counter the impact of COVID-19 on the newspaper sector in Australia. Since the nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns began in March last year, more than 200 local and suburban papers across Australia have either permanently or temporarily closed, or shifted to digital-only platforms as a sharp decline in advertising expenditure further cripples the media industry. In early 2021, conglomerate NewsCorp made the decision to stop sending printed newspapers to parts of regional Queensland as part of a major cost-cutting program.

It is widely acknowledged that local news outlets perform vital functions in regional and rural communities. When practised well, country journalism informs, educates and entertains a public that is often marginalised in favour of their big-city counterparts. It contributes to a functioning local democracy and public sphere, creates a shared sense of community, and fulfills a watchdog role by providing a check and balance on institutions such as local government, courts, churches, schools and police. The sustainability of news media in Australia, especially at the local level, has been identified as a national priority and also the focus of several Senate inquiries. Media policy change and local news closures and start-ups across the country have also sparked public debate and stimulated academic interest. However, there has been little academic research in Australia that has focused specifically on understanding the state of independent newspapers and their audiences. So often, audiences are talked about by those in the news business, by scholars and policymakers, rather than listened to.

That is something Professor Lisa Waller (RMIT) and I (along with the support of a wonderful research team) have sought to address in designing this survey. Independent local newspapers have served as the voice of their communities for more than a

century and yet attract little attention in policy debates and Senate inquiries, often overshadowed by bigger players, such as News Corp, Nine Entertainment Co. or Australian Community Media.

Independent newspapers, of course, are not immune to criticism, but their commitment to the 'local' should not be underestimated. Australia now has more than 160 independently owned local mastheads aligned with Country Press Australia, the peak media body representing independent news organisations – a figure that is growing during the pandemic as the association looks to support those providing journalism for local audiences. The end goal is to ensure that quality local media not only survives but thrives in Australian country regions. We hope the findings from this survey go some way to guaranteeing regional voices are heard in discussions about the future of newspapers in this country.

Kirsty Hess

Executive summary

This report outlines the findings from a nationwide survey of almost 4200 Australian country press newspaper readers in rural, regional and outer suburban areas. The survey investigated audiences' digital-news practices, their thoughts about local news, and their ideas for innovation within the sector. Conducted in November 2020, the survey is part of the largest Australian research project on how regional newspapers can thrive in the digital era. The project, 'Media Innovation and the Civic Future of Australia's Country Press (LP180100813), is led by news-media scholars and experts from Deakin University, RMIT University and Country Press Australia. It is supported by more than \$250,000 from the Australian Research Council, one of the Federal Government's main competitive research funding agencies, and Country Press Australia.

People responded to the survey with their ideas and suggestions to improve local newspaper coverage. We found audiences across the states and territories had a similar response to most of the survey questions. Key findings include:

- There is continued strong demand (and passion) for the printed product in rural and regional Australia.
- Audiences overwhelmingly view a printed copy of their newspaper as an essential service for their community.
- Audiences believe they should be invited to have a say about government policies and decisions affecting the future of local newspapers.
- In general, audiences indicate they are five times as likely to go directly to a local news website for their local news than Google or Facebook, and almost 10 times as likely to go to the local newspaper website over a local council website for their local news and information.
- Policies that affect the future of local newspapers would influence the way audiences vote at the next federal election.
- Audiences believe local newspapers should be collaboratively funded by a range of relevant stakeholders to ensure their future.
- Audiences are not in favour of their newspaper subscriptions being made tax deductible.
- Audiences overwhelmingly indicate any additional funding for local news should be directed to employing more local journalists to report news, over increasing digital connectivity and digital innovation products.

Thousands of comments from survey participants reinforce these findings, such as:

“ ... I grew up in several different locations and there was always the local paper available. As a child, I would look forward to the paper to find news of football/cricket scores, reports of local events, e.g., the annual church ball, who was engaged, married, or died. Apart from the small "notice" details, there would sometimes be a feature report detailing aspects of the lives of locals, particularly if they had some impact in the community. Some of my reading included the status of those in military service; sadly, including the names of those had been wounded, missing in action, or died. Also, there were details of court appearances by locals who had transgressed - this was always good reading. I have always looked forward to the local paper, and whilst the format is now different, it is still a "must" to catch up on whatever is happening in my town.

Male reader, 88, Victoria

There too are stark warnings about the future of local news access for older Australians in a digital world:

“ After our local paper was no longer available in print, we were unable to have any newspaper delivered. This left us with no option other than to go to the newsagent each day ourselves or go fully digital. We are both very computer literate and chose digital. Not all in our community are computer literate and are thus left with no news source.

Female reader, 61, Queensland

Methodology

This survey was designed to position the audience as central in shaping a media innovations agenda for country newspapers. This required venturing beyond what audiences do with news (such as studying demographics, habits and news-engagement behaviours alone) to explore what they think and imagine innovation in the sector to be, and what they value about their local newspaper. Asking audiences to think about the future of the media also presents an opportunity to road-test existing theories and approaches to academic scholarship that shape understandings of local journalism.

A geo-social methodology provided a multi-dimensional framework for understanding the 'place' of newspapers in the digital age within their specific geographic contexts (Hess and Waller 2020a). This approach offers scope to consider digital, cultural, social, political, economic and environmental factors relevant to the future of local newspapers. The digital survey was developed using the software program Qualtrics and promoted across the Country Press Australia network. More than 100 newspapers helped to distribute the survey via their news platforms during November 2020. In print, prominently-placed advertisements carried information about the survey for potential participants, including a Qualtrics-generated QR Code to access the survey online. Online, the survey was promoted via homepage advertisements, carrying similar information as for the print advertisements, with the addition of a link that took people directly to the survey. The survey comprised a range of questions, including Likert scale, sliding scale, multiple choice and qualitative questions, designed to gauge insight into audience views. (For example, what do audiences think their local newspaper does well or might improve on? How should a local newspaper be funded and how should this money be spent?) As an incentive, participants were offered the chance to go into a draw to win one of 10 iPads.

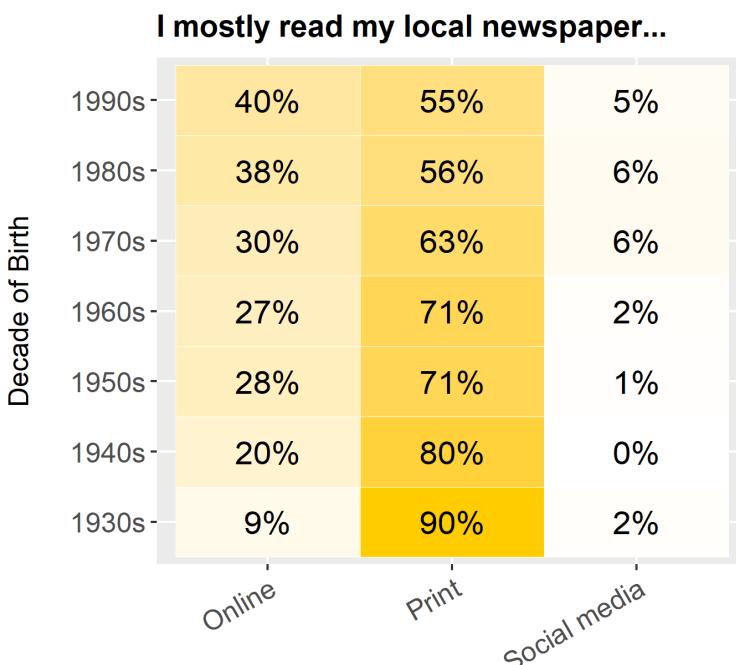
The survey produced Australia's most comprehensive insight into country newspaper audiences ($N = 4198$). Data was divided into the geo-social dimensions that provided the framework for the survey and findings presented accordingly in the sections that follow.

Local news readers: who are they?

We begin our findings section with a brief demographic portrait of just who makes up the country press audience. Of the 4198 rural, regional and suburban press readers who responded to our survey, 61% were female and 38% male (1% preferred not to say). The mean age of survey respondents across Australia was 60-61 years of age (standard deviation 14.2), with 79% being born in Australia. Of those born in Australia, 1% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. There was a wide spread in the number of years respondents had lived in their local areas, with 36% stating between 0 and 10 years, 22% between 11 and 20 years, 15% between 21 and 30 years, 11% between 31 and 40 years, and 26% for more than 40 years.

Audiences have a strong loyalty to their local paper, with 52% of respondents indicating they had read the same local newspaper between 11 and 30+ years, compared with 38% between 1 and 10 years. Only 10% of respondents had been reading their local paper for less than 12 months. While 59% said they only read one local newspaper, 41% said they read two or more local newspapers.

Similar to other news audiences in Australia, younger local news readers lead the shift towards reading news online. A clear pattern showing declining use of printed newspapers can be seen of those respondents born in each decade up to the 1990s (see table on right). Those born in the 1930s and '40s mostly prefer print (80-90%) compared with those audiences aged 20-30 (55%).



That said, country press readers overall are 2.6 times as likely to read their local paper in print than in digital format.

The findings also reveal participants across all age groups rarely use social media sites, such as Facebook, as their main platform to read local newspaper content. Just 5% of younger audiences say they mostly use social media to find out about local news.

A preference for print

“

Print, it's essentially perfect. There is nothing as satisfying as flicking through the paper with a cuppa in bed ... and it's easy to pass on to others and to refer back to articles and events. The printed form is a friend; the online version is not.

Female reader, 64, Victoria

News companies across the globe have placed increasing emphasis on a 'digital-first' approach to news, with some adopting this as a cost-cutting measure and others viewing digital technologies as central to media innovation. In

their submission to the ACCC mandatory bargaining code proposal in 2020, Country Press Australia highlighted the importance of supporting the printed product to meet the needs of their communities. The survey results provide resounding evidence of a continued strong demand for the printed newspaper across rural and regional Australia.

Audiences overwhelmingly view print as an essential service for their community (see pie chart on right). Many readers indicated the importance of government and industry working together to ensure a printed product for rural and regional areas, such as this comment from one respondent:

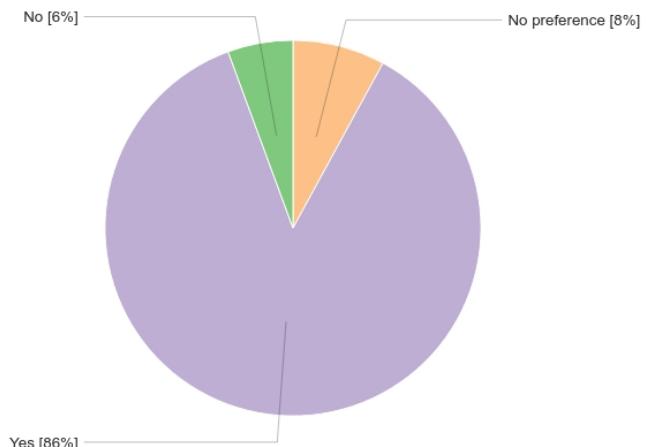
“

The printed newspaper is essential for older readers in the district, many of whom have limited or no internet access, are on pensions so cannot afford the technology, and are feeling disregarded and disenfranchised in today's digital age. Print media MUST continue.

Female reader, 76, Victoria

Do you consider a print copy of your local newspaper an essential service for your community?

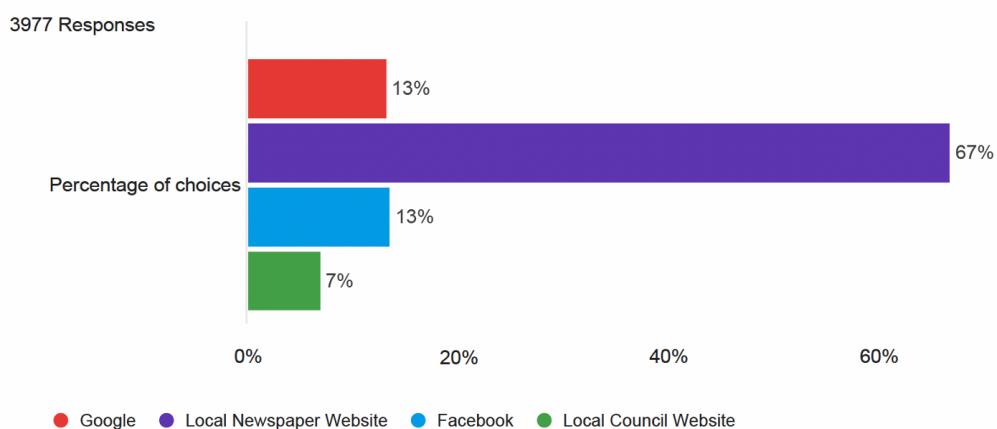
3976 Responses



When it comes to viewing news online, audiences also prefer to read a digital news site that has the look and layout of a printed newspaper (59%); 29% stated that they had no preference. While social media platforms may dominate the share of digital advertising

revenue in metropolitan and regional areas, country press audiences indicate when searching for local news online, they will first seek out the reliability of a local news masthead. Audiences indicate they are five times as likely to go directly to a local news website for local news than Google, Facebook or a local council website (see bar chart below). Such a finding may be especially useful for local newspapers in the pursuit of digital advertising revenue in a COVID-19 world:

When I want to find local news and information online, I would FIRST go to:



Accessing local news digitally

For those respondents who prefer to access local news digitally, a computer is the preferred medium (67%), ahead of smartphones (51%) or iPad/Tablet (47%). An assessment based on comments from readers as to how the newspaper can improve shows that many who do read news online are frustrated by issues around presentation, navigating their way around content, font size and connection difficulties, as well as access to puzzles and costs relating to subscription and technology access.

Paying for local news

72% said they don't pay for local news, while 28% do. Of those 28% who do pay for news, they are 1.5 times as likely to pay for their local paper to be home-delivered (59%) as they are to pay for it digitally or otherwise (40%).

Accessing local news for free

88% access their local printed paper for free via home delivery, shop or outlet, work or public place. 36% access local news for free via the paper's website or social media.

Audiences want a say on media policies

Securing the future of local media has become a national priority, evidenced by three recent Senate inquiries into the future of news and rural/regional communication and a suite of subsidies to support public interest journalism in rural and regional areas (Australian Government 2018b). A ‘top down’ approach to shaping policies around the future of local journalism has been adopted (Hess and Waller 2020b), with politicians and industry rarely engaging everyday audiences to help evaluate the effectiveness of measures to support news media (Costera Meijer 2013).

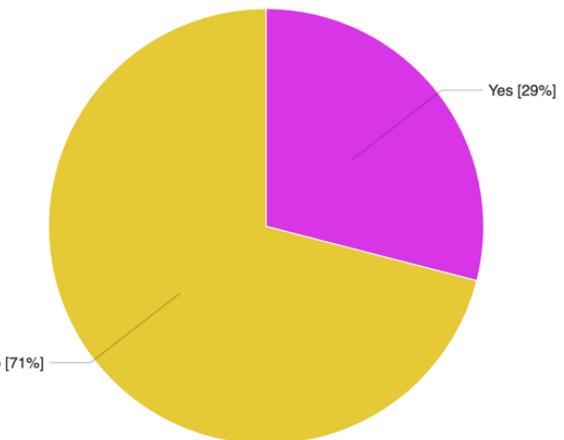
Our survey found that 94% of respondents strongly believe they should be invited to have a say about government policies and decisions affecting the future of local papers, compared with 6% who did not.

Policies affecting the future of local newspapers would also influence how 61% of respondents would vote in the next federal election, compared with 39%. While some media lobbyists in Australia and overseas have called for newspaper subscriptions to be made tax deductible for everyday readers, audiences were overwhelmingly against this approach (see pie chart on right).

Audiences were divided over the value of a friends of local newspapers association, with 51% indicating they would be prepared to join such a group, compared with 49% who said they would not.

My subscription to my local newspaper should be tax deductible:

1179 Responses



Resourcing local news a team effort

Survey participants indicated local newspapers should be collaboratively funded by a range of relevant stakeholders (industry, government, advertisers, audiences) to ensure their future (59%), compared with government subsidies alone (30%), supporters and sponsors (10%), and volunteers (2%).

“
There should be free subscriptions (online or print) for all residents, funded by council rates.

Female reader, 60, Victoria

A recent ‘one-off’ innovations fund established by the Federal Government in 2018 required local news proprietors to pitch for support for digital innovation (computer and software upgrades and equipment etc) and/or funds for the employment of cadet journalists (see Australian Government 2018a). Respondents in this survey overwhelmingly stated that any additional funding (i.e.: government subsidies/grants) that came the way of local news outlets should be directed to employing more local journalists to report news (71%), over increasing digital connectivity (13%) and digital innovation products (17%).

“ **Employ more journalists and invest in their development.**

Male reader, 25, NSW

Audiences also mostly believe (68%) free training should be provided to help readers without digital skills transition to the paper’s online site, compared with those who do not (32%). Respondents indicated this training should be collectively funded (57%) rather than be the responsibility of individual bodies, such as government (22%), the newspapers or proprietors (19%), or Facebook and Google (2%). The survey found audiences were most receptive (89%) to the idea of local papers combining resources with other local newspapers to shed light on issues that affect their areas.

“ **As a former [local newspaper editor], I believe that financial assistance through tax breaks for publishing costs and wage support for journalists/compositors employed by the paper would be more beneficial.**

Female reader, 72, Victoria

Accountability

While audiences are passionate supporters of their local paper, many respondents saw the need for local newspapers to be held more accountable for their content. For example, if local papers were to receive significant government subsidies or support,

85% of respondents favour the establishment of an independent watchdog to ensure papers adequately serve their communities.

A remark from a reader summarised some of this sentiment in the comments section of the survey. This respondent indicated that honest and ethical conduct, fairness, impartiality and responsible conduct of publishers was essential to the ongoing legitimacy of local paper:

“I believe that community publishers have an obligation to their communities to assure these qualities in all respects and at all times, and that any external funding – whether from government, industry or private donors – should be conditional on proof of delivery.

Male reader, 70, Queensland

Towards the future: an audience view of innovation

Audiences were asked a series of questions about which sections of the newspaper they value most and what they would like to see more (and less) of in the future. These sections of the survey were designed to explore the various roles and types of content for which local newspapers are considered most renowned, such as holding power to account (for instance, local government reporting), social connection, as well as developing a sense of community and community leadership. They were also designed to seek new and fresh ideas to inform industry and academic work in establishing a media innovations agenda for Australia's rural, regional and suburban newspapers.

Local politics

Audiences were first asked to assess how well their local newspaper covered local politics. Almost half (47%) believe or strongly believe (13%) that their local newspaper scrutinises local politics well. In comments made about the newspaper's future, however, many respondents offered suggestions on how to improve coverage of council politics, such as a need to provide more information about candidates at election time, regularly publishing council agendas in the lead-up to monthly meetings and greater coverage of women in politics.

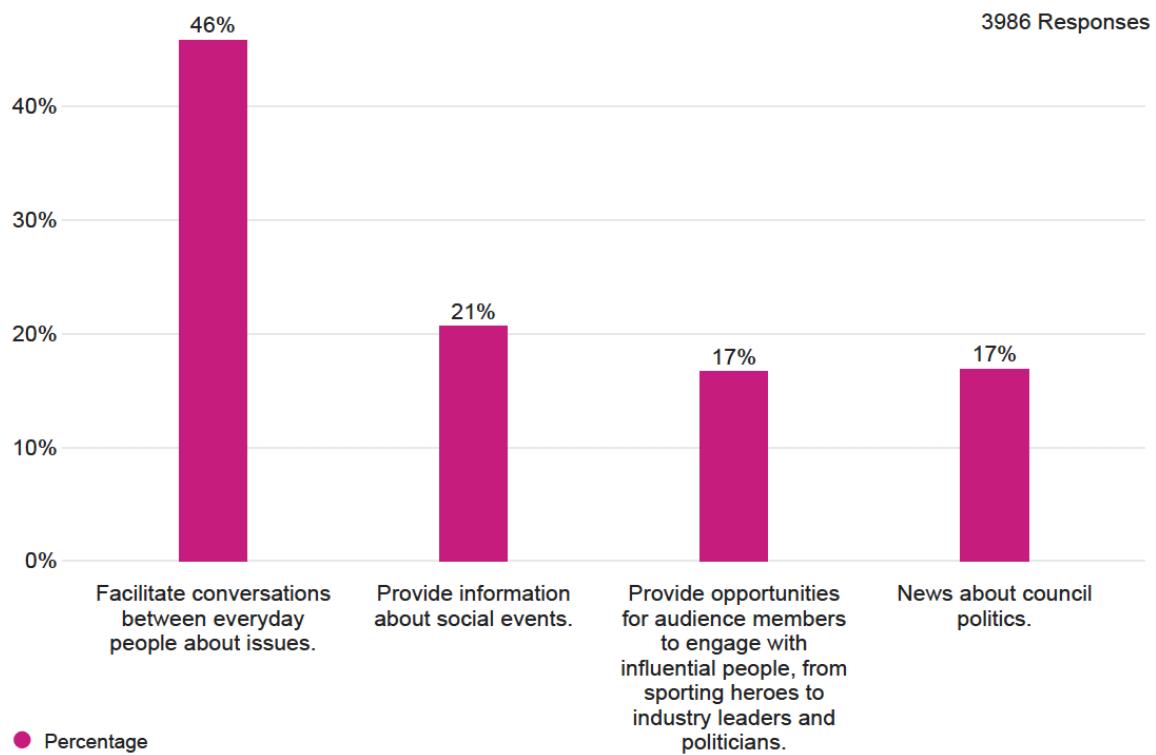
The social and cultural

Audiences agree (48%) or strongly agree (25%) that different religions, ethnicities and lifestyles are represented in local newspapers, although it's important to note that most respondents to this survey were born in Australia (79%).

Audiences were also asked to consider the most important role of the newspaper. Serving as a community hub was considered most important (59%), followed by the watchdog role on powerful people/organisations (18.7%), community champion (17.9%) and historical record (4.4%).

In regard to appreciating and advancing the social value of journalism, audiences ranked the activities and content they would most like the newspaper to do more of (see bar chart below).

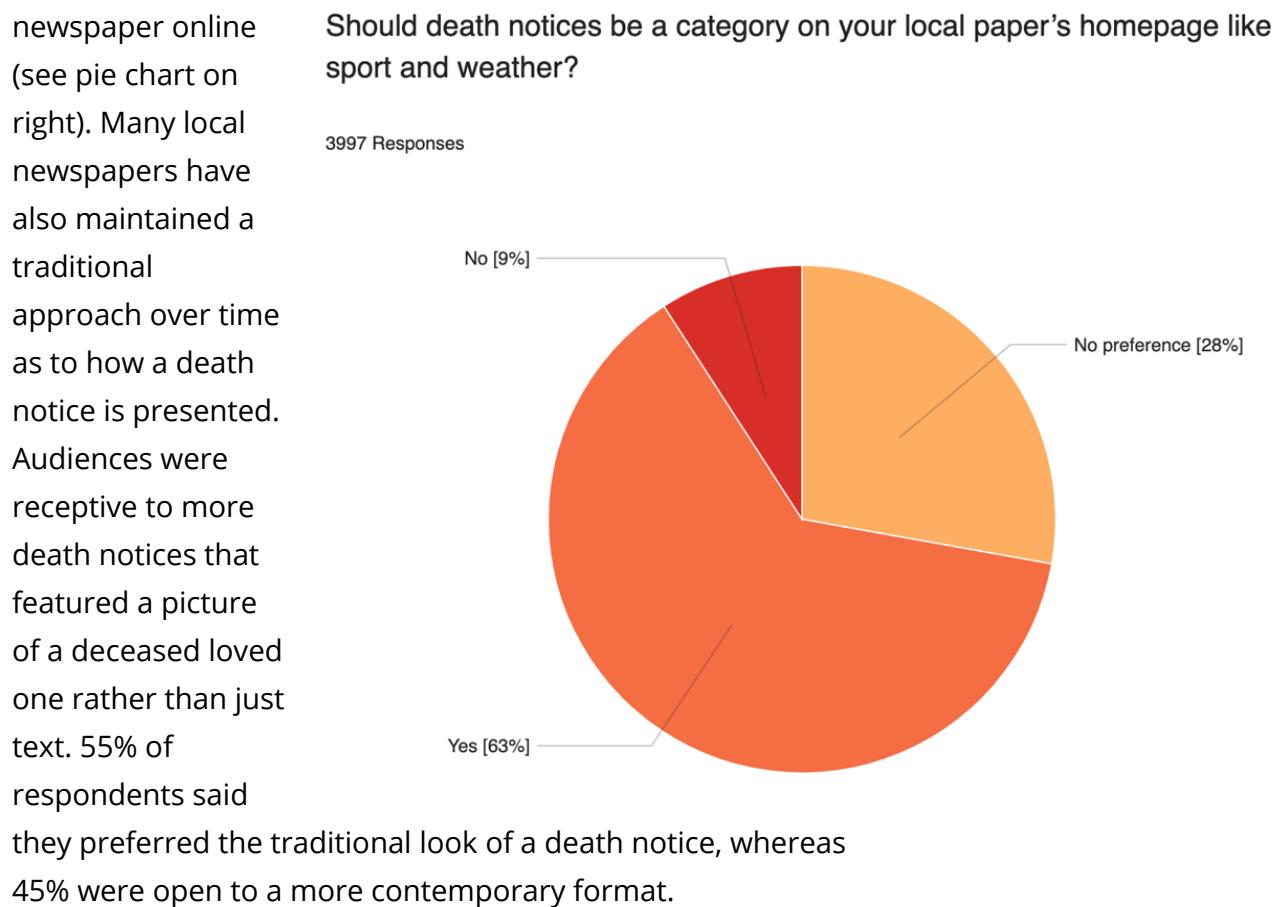
Choose ONE of the following you would most like your local paper to do MORE of:



Audiences agree (37%) or strongly agree (58%) that local knowledge is vital for journalists working on local newspapers. Participants were asked to consider the value of the traditional role of 'objective' reporting alongside more contemporary ideas, such

as solutions journalism and constructive journalism (see Aitamurto and Varma 2018) and bridging social capital (Hess 2015) – all of which encourage journalists to play a more active role in discussing problems relevant to local areas and which are gaining momentum in academic scholarship and within industry thinktanks. More than half (58%) said that local journalists should report problems and issues, not try to solve them, aligning with a more traditional view of journalism, while 40% said local journalists should bring people together to identify problems and potential stories. Only 1% said that local journalists should help develop solutions to problems. These findings suggest that while there is certainly a desire to involve community stakeholders more actively in reporting and solving issues, there is little appetite among Australian country newspaper audiences for local journalists actively attempting to seek solutions to problems.

When it came to time-honoured information such as the reporting of death notices, audiences were clear that the local newspaper should give more attention to this section of the

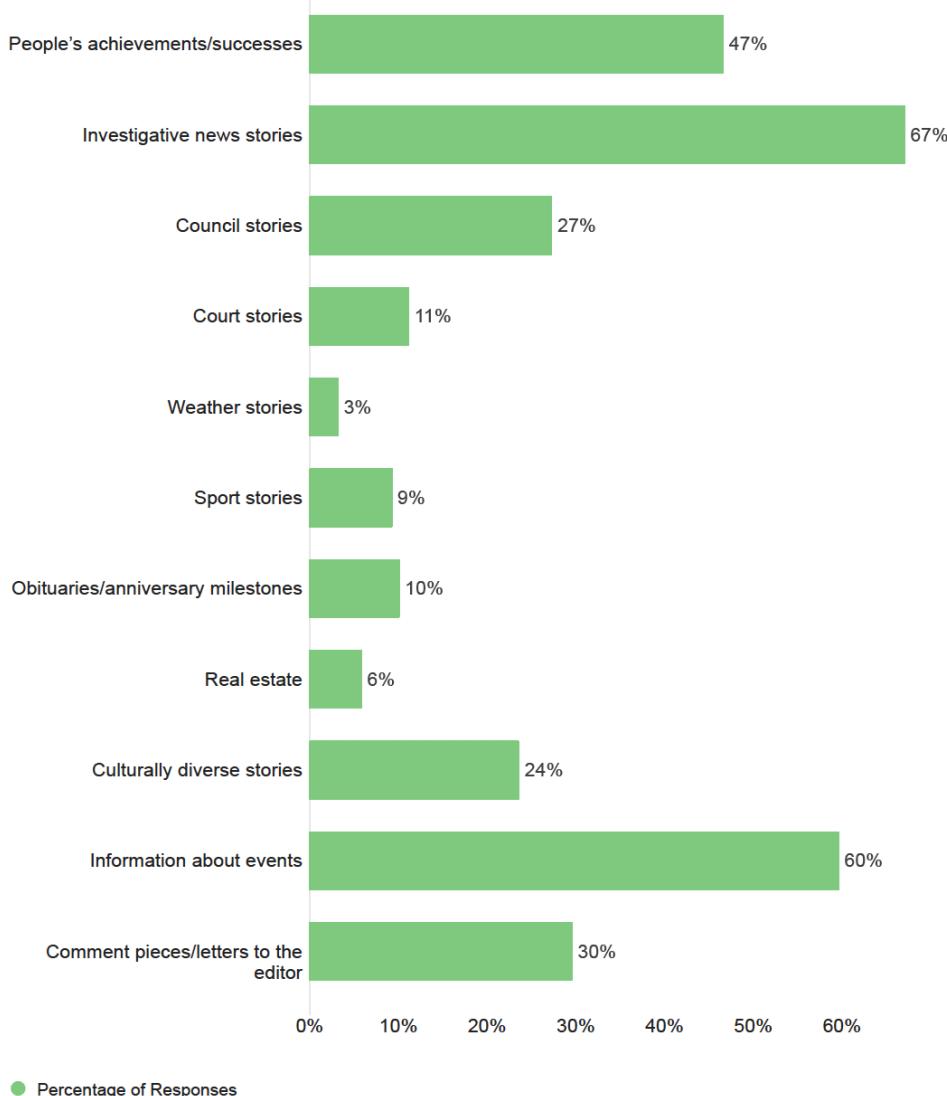


Audiences also had clear ideas about the types of stories they would like to see more of in their newspaper. Investigative news stories (we were not prescriptive here about what types of 'investigations' audiences wanted) and more information about events were most in demand (see bar chart below).

I would like to see more of the following in my local newspaper:

(Select your top 3)

3986 Responses



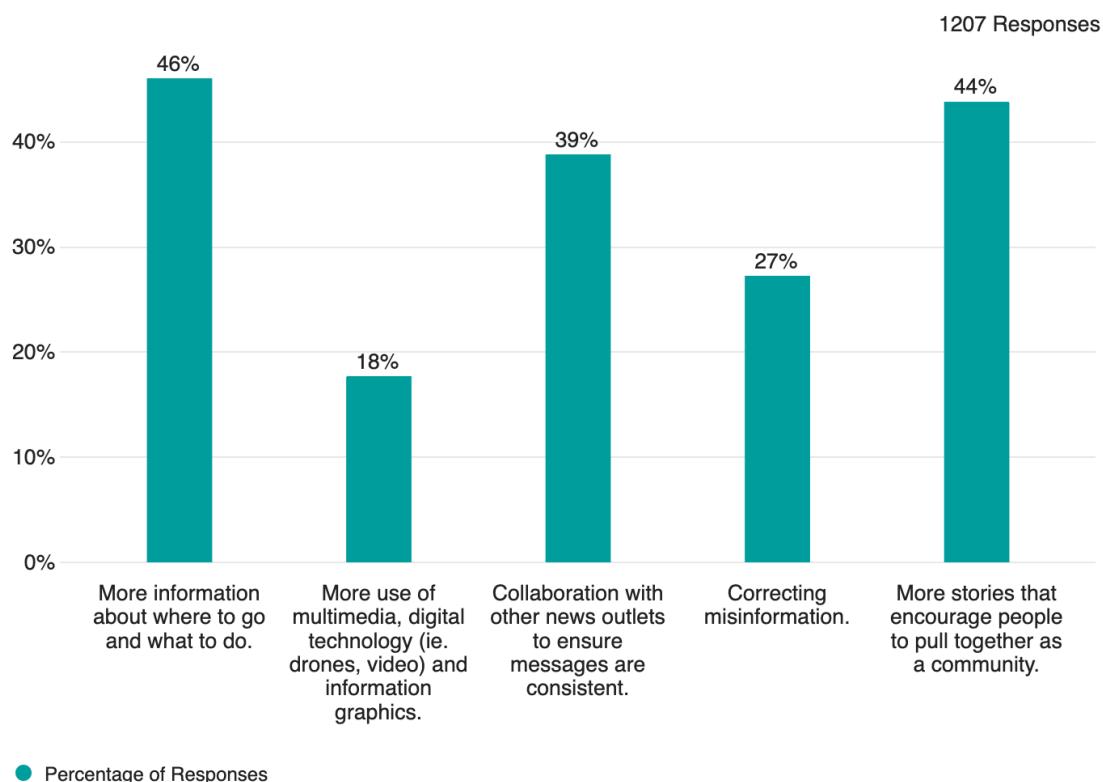
“ I would like to see more investigative reporting on scams, criminal activities, shonky trades etc ... that inform and warn community members so that they are on their guard. There needs to be more timely notice of events going on around in the districts. Sometimes events are only reported on after they have occurred and when nobody even knew they were on.

Female reader, 67, Victoria

Environment and emergencies

Local news outlets and ABC local radio are credited for playing a powerful role in helping communities navigate a natural disaster. More than 30% of country newspaper readers said their areas had experienced a natural disaster such as flood, fire or cyclone in the past two years. Those who had recently experienced the impact of climate change in this way were asked to identify how their local newspaper could improve coverage of natural disasters (see bar chart below).

How could your local newspaper improve its coverage of natural disasters/emergencies? (Select the top 2)



Recycling

Given the printed newspaper continues to serve as an important medium in which audiences receive their news, the survey sought to ascertain the value of the physical product to people's everyday lives. Of those respondents who had moved from print to digital, 35% indicated that part of their decision to go digital was due to environmental concerns (for instance, reducing paper). Audiences recycle their local papers in various

and creative ways. By far, the most popular is through kerbside recycling (73%). Using papers to light fires (23%), followed by cleaning windows (18%) and wrapping food scraps (18%) were also identified as popular uses. In one of the phone calls from participants noted in the Preface of this report, a female newspaper reader rang to say she was disappointed the survey did not provide scope to include newspapers being used for gardening compost. This highlights how people have many and varied uses for the printed newspaper in their daily lives.

A need for stronger environmental reporting was also evident in the comments section of the survey, with many readers calling for improved coverage and awareness about environmental issues:

“ While its [coverage] is good as it is, I would love more stories on the local environment, wildlife, parklands, developments and how they impact wildlife etc.

Female reader, 40, Victoria

Younger readers differ on news

The survey captured perspectives from 277 audience members, aged 35 and below. This represented 6.6% of the total number of survey participants. The news needs of this demographic diverged somewhat from that of older generations, highlighting the differing stages of life and generational influences. In line with the key overall finding of the audience's preference for print, more than half (57%) of younger readers said they preferred to read a physical copy of the newspaper. But as stated earlier in the report, they have a stronger preference for digital editions than older age groups.

Comments and suggestions offered by younger readers point to a particularly strong demand for more coverage of local events and an appetite for the newspaper to play a greater role in their social life:

“ Engage the community by sharing activities, recreations, groups, events etc. I never know what there is to do or how to get involved.

Male reader, 21, Victoria

“ I think they should add entertainment and a sports section that could attract younger audiences.

Male reader, 20, Victoria

Improving news about local politics and council affairs was a priority among this group of respondents. In addition, some participants suggested that council should do more to help distribute the newspaper to citizens, and the local newspaper should include information of general interest that appears on the council website:

“ I know in the past every household would receive the local newspaper delivered to their property. It would be great if there could be a collaboration with local council and this could be delivered to homeowners'/residents' email addresses in a bulk mailout.

Female reader, 22, Victoria

Views from this group of readers show how home ownership and mobility shape news needs in local areas. For example, some underlined the importance of covering the rental market in the real estate section, and when it came to recycling the paper, this demographic tended to use it for art and craft activities and for moving house. Research indicates that when audience members purchase a home or have a young family, they are more likely to engage with their local newspaper (Shaker 2016). Suggestions from survey respondents who are parents included introducing children's activity pages to make reading the newspaper a shared experience:

“ A page for the kids. My kids would absolutely love a puzzle or something to do while I read the paper.

Female reader, 27, Victoria

Other innovative ideas from younger readers included publicly celebrating family events for paid subscribers:

“ Inclusion of a kids' page, with cartoons, puzzles and birthday shoutout when parents sign up.

Female reader, 37, Queensland

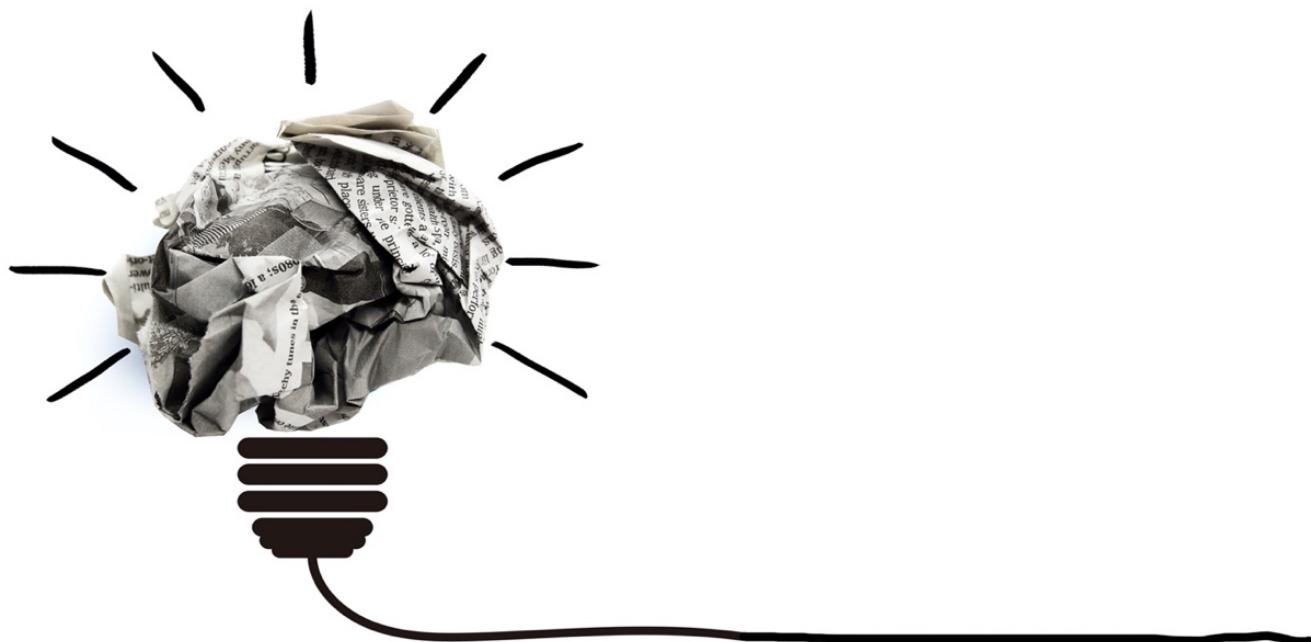
While the survey results overwhelmingly point to the dominance of readers aged over 55, perspectives from younger people are a reminder for local newspapers of their core responsibility to reflect and cater for the full spectrum of the communities they serve, across age, culture, education, gender and race. Some participants felt their newspaper was more concerned with issues and news relevant to older community members at the expense of younger people.

For example, a 35-year-old female reader from Victoria commented:

“ Less about senior citizens; it's like they think that's all who reads it.

And this from a 35-year-old male reader from Queensland:

“ So much of the paper seems to be about old people and what they're doing. So many old people seem to be celebrated just for things like having a birthday or something ... I, for one, would much rather read just about anything else than what a bunch of old people did on the weekend.





Summary

Overall, this report has highlighted just how passionate country press audiences are about their local newspaper. There is a strong view that people who read and engage with this news should be consulted and involved in ideas and solutions to support its future. In fact, the survey indicates that policies shaping the future of local news would impact how local audiences vote at the next election. While this survey was distributed in digital format, it was evident from the survey responses and comments that the printed newspaper is considered vital to rural, regional and suburban areas, especially for older audiences and those living in areas where internet access may be poor. While the average age of survey respondents was 60+, this demographic will continue to represent a large portion of local news readership for many years to come. It is evident that local news organisations must develop strategies that either aid the transition for all audiences into digital formats or advocate for the survival of the printed product in the interests of democracy and social connection for all who desire to engage with local news. Our findings suggest that local audiences are loyal and develop life-long patterns of engaging with local newspapers in areas where they live and work or have a sense of connection.

In analysing several responses to digital news engagement, audiences indicated that in the big wide world of the web, the local newspaper stands out as a beacon for local news, and they would go searching for their local masthead online as the first hub for such information. This is a significant finding, given there has been much focus on the role of Facebook as a central point for digital news and information, and the Federal Government's introduction of a mandatory bargaining code that forces tech giants, such as Facebook and Google, to pay news producers for content that appears on their platforms (Australian Communication and Media Authority 2021). Many news proprietors within the Country Press Australia network, for example, have indicated they are dependent on Facebook for traffic. However, this survey finding suggests a need for further examination of these audience practices.

More than 30% of respondents had experienced a natural disaster (fire, flood, cyclone) within their community in the past two years and wanted local newspapers to do more to inform people on where to go and what to do in an emergency and help a community pull together to make sense of disaster. This was a clear priority over investing in digital software and technology to improve coverage or correcting misinformation.

Importantly, there is a culture of 'free' that exists among local news readers – where people believe content should be readily available without cost to audiences, although respondents also overwhelmingly supported the idea that news should be collaboratively funded by industry, government, audiences and volunteers. If government funds are to be directed towards supporting country newspapers, there is an expectation that news outlets themselves are monitored for their accountability to communities and funds should be directed towards supporting human resources (more local journalists) over investment in digital technology and innovations.

The Local News Innovation Project

This three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project, launched in October 2019, aims to identify the social, cultural, political, economic and geographical contexts in which Australia's long-serving country press can survive, if not thrive, in the digital era.

Our research addresses a critical need, highlighted by the Federal Government placing a national priority on the future of public-interest journalism in rural Australia. Since the COVID-19 crisis emerged, there have been two key funding schemes introduced (or re-introduced) to support local news providers: the Government's \$50 million Public Interest News Gathering Program and a \$5 million Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund. The Victorian Government has also made a specific contribution to support country newspapers by providing an extra \$4.4 million in advertising support during the pandemic.

We believe these are short-term measures, when there needs to be systemic change and/or a realignment to support local news providers into the future. The Federal Government's decision to ensure Facebook and Google share advertising revenue with Australian media companies is a welcome one, given its intention is to create a more level playing field and support those Australian news providers that have a commitment to the creation of reliable, quality news and information for their audiences.

There is currently no comprehensive study that provides robust evidence into how innovative news media practices beyond technology alone might strengthen the country press. The outcomes from this project will address that need. It will also directly inform the efforts of policymakers to create stronger, more resilient communities by ensuring the future of quality news and information platforms for rural Australia.

The project is guided by two important research questions:

What are the challenges and opportunities across social, economic, cultural, political and technological contexts that influence the sustainability of Australia's country press in the digital era?

How can insights from audiences, news sources and industry leaders into the civic value of Australia's country press inform a model of innovation for the sector and future policy directions?

Future directions

This survey is the first of two national surveys that will be conducted. The second, a survey of non-newspaper audiences, will be launched in the second half of 2021 and will help contextualise the findings of this survey. A series of industry individual interviews and focus groups will also take place this year as part of the project.

For more information, visit the project website www.localnewsinnovation.org

The research team

This Australian Research Council Project brings together several of the nation's leading local media and journalism studies experts from Deakin University, RMIT University and Country Press Australia.



Lead investigator Kristy Hess is an Associate Professor (Communication) at Deakin University. Her research focuses on the future of local media and its relationship to community, democracy and social order in the digital sphere.



Chief investigator Lisa Waller is a Professor of Digital Communication at RMIT's School of Media and Communication. She brings demonstrated research leadership in Australian journalism and media policy to the project.



Chief Investigator Matthew Ricketson is Professor of Communication at Deakin University. He is an expert on the challenges and opportunities facing the Australian news media industry.



Partner Investigator Bruce Morgan is Executive Director of Country Press Australia and has more than 45 years' experience in the newspaper industry.



Angela Blakston is the Associate Research Fellow at Deakin University for this project. She has more than 20 years of news-industry experience.



Dr Jerry Lai is a senior eResearch analyst at Deakin University and Intersect Australia. He facilitated the design and analysis of the survey.



Alison McAdam is a Lecturer in Communication at Deakin University. She is a PhD candidate, attached to this project.

References

- Aitamurto T and Varma A (2018) 'The constructive role of journalism', *Journalism Practice*, 12(6):695-713.
- Australian Communication and Media Authority (2021) '[News Media Bargaining Code](#)', Australian Government, accessed 10 April 2021.
- Australian Government (2018a), '[Innovation fund a boost for regional and small publishers](#)', Australian Government, accessed 20 February 2020.
- (2018b), '[Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism final report. Parliament of Australia](#)', Parliament of Australia, accessed 20 February 2020.
- Costera Meijer I (2013) 'Valuable journalism: the search for quality from the vantage point of the user', *Journalism*, 14(6):754-770.
- Country Press Australia (2020) [Mandatory news media bargaining code submission](#), Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, accessed 10 March 2021.
- Hess K (2015) 'Making connections: mediated social capital and the small town press', *Journalism Studies*, 16(4):482-496.
- Hess K and Waller L (2020a) '[Charting the media innovations landscape for regional and rural newspapers](#)', *Australian Journalism Review*, 42(1):59-75(17).
- (2020b) '[Local Journalism in Australia: Policy debates](#)', in Agnes Gulyas and David Baines (Eds) *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, Routledge: London.
- Shaker L (2016) 'Who loves local news?', *Media Development*, 63(3):27-29.