

THE BARCOO INDEPENDENT

BLACKALL'S OWN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

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Contact: barcooindependent@gmail.com

98 Shamrock Street
Blackall Qld 4472
19 January, 2022.

Parliament of Australia
Committee Secretariat
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra 2600

RE: INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS

Dear Sir/Madam

I am the Editor/Salesperson/Photographer and Reporter for The Barcoo Independent in Blackall, central western Queensland, a weekly publication that runs between 16 and 24 pages, depending on news availability and advertising revenue.

The newspaper is published by the Blackall Newspaper Group (BNG) and is unique in that it is one of Australia's last operating community owned and run newspapers.

In its present form the Barcoo Indy began production as a bi-monthly print in 2004. (Please go to: thebarcooindependent.com.au/about-us/). The Blackall community donated \$60,000 to BNG in 2008 to enable it to advance to a weekly by making the Editor a paying position.

In reality the Barcoo Independent and its predecessors have provided news to the area since 1879. It has been an amazing journey and is a worthy read.

As this town's only local source of news I can say we are struggling. We do not make a profit and most weeks there is only enough revenue to cover costs, nothing for contingency.

The biggest threat to our ability to keep bringing news to our communities (a rough map of who reads us is at the back of this submission) is lack of working capital, which in turn can be attributed to lack of paid advertising.

Advertising is what brings in the revenue and is not easily obtained. First there is social media which most people use for sale of goods (no classifieds any more) as it is free. Our classifieds cost \$25.

Drought has impacted our community and many others in the bush severely. There is no money to pay for advertising, BUT they still like to feel connected by reading their local news.

In small communities, small businesses are very generous. They contribute where they can. In Blackall for example there are three school Parents & Citizens groups, at least 10 sporting groups, all looking for sponsorship and items for raffles on a weekly basis. Fundraisers for mental health (a huge issue out here), education extension excursions, art shows, flower shows, the local RSL - the list goes on - always see the local businesses putting their hands into their pockets. There is only so much to go around.

The first thing to go is advertising in their local paper, because, after all there is no where else to go that's easily accessed in a day for shopping etc and again all businesses have a Facebook page.

It has been suggested by some powerbrokers that the regional newspapers need funding to keep going. Can I just say we don't need funding, we want to pay our own way, so what we need is advertising revenue. That is, IF those advertising companies/agencies responsible for government advertising, would just give us smaller places a fair go by advertising with us, that would be sufficient. Just one full page a week would help us immensely.

After all, even though we may only reach 500 people, those people still need to know what the government is doing. An ad will always catch their eye before an editorial headline.

Take last year's census for example. We received ads from the marketing people and I rang and asked how were they going to pay for them? They expected us to print them for FREE!! That was a million dollar advertising campaign and they couldn't throw a thousand dollars our way. Our citizens were involved in that national count just like those from the city who received daily information. I had to publish every single thing on the census for free. IF I had been paid for some advertising, they would have got value for money from us because all the ads that go in our paper go up on our Facebook page as well. In the census situation I would have put up social media reminders, cut off dates, look in your letterbox etc. etc and so on. I never of course, other people have to pay for advertising. I only printed the bare necessities as a community service.

Another example - the Queensland government. The Breast Screen bus was due to come to Blackall and the person in charge phoned me and said she needed to book two half page ads and gave me the dates. These ads had to come from an agency. They never supplied them, they never got back to me - we missed out on \$250 of revenue and had to run it all for free as it is a vital service and only comes once a year if we are lucky.

Both governments send press releases all the time about campaigns that are forthcoming etc and cite they will be advertising in local media. It does not happen. They do not advertise with us.

Small communities don't operate like cities. They are more inclusive, much more tight knit and often have much more pride in their community. They tend to commit to each other's health and well being. This pride includes the fact that they have their own newspaper.

Out here they contribute to their communities in all sorts of ways, not just economically.

These contributions are often reported in the local paper bringing a focus on positivity to all and acknowledging the many quiet achievers who live in these regions.

No-one else gives them much recognition, the television news is often all about sensationalism, as are magazines and other outlets that aren't region-specific.

With the continual stripping of services from small towns with no thought to social obligations just the bottom line, is it no wonder that communities want to hang onto their little local newspaper?

Not all decisions should be based on economics, there is a social responsibility by governments to all citizens not only those in the cities. These towns suffer from the tyranny of distance and lack of numbers to be crunched to make services viable, but still make a huge contribution to the nation's economy and its wellbeing.

For the purpose of this submission I will address the terms of reference in order.

- The impact of the decisions by News Corp. One of these saw the large city daily refuse to provide papers to newsagents in the central west (one of them was ours in Blackall), unless they paid the freight. Blackall for example, gets Sunday's paper on Monday. As to reading it on-line. We have 300 people aged over 60 in our community, most of who are not tech savvy and nor do they intend to be.
- Many smaller, independents started up in areas that News Corp stopped printing hard copies for. We weren't one of them, so I am unable to comment on this, however there are many that could. Saying that, I did have my own struggling, independent newspaper from the years 2011 to

2016 and was subject to some unfair dealings by my large corporate counterpart in the region. Once that publication was ceased in print form, the manager and editor went out and formed their own independent newspaper which from all reports is highly successful.

- The News Media Bargaining Code doesn't really affect us, I doubt if anyone is going to pick up our content from those platforms and publish it. I don't feature stories on Facebook and one reason is that new rule about people's comments which we apparently are responsible for. At the risk of being sued it isn't worth it. A downside of being 'everything' from Editor to cleaner is we don't have the time to expand or spend time watching social media as much as we would like to. There is only so much one person can do.
- On the whole economic recovery in regional and remote markets is a hard one to assess. We weren't really affected that much by covid out here like the cities were. Agriculture is our main industry and that, along with the drive in/drive out miners that live in the town kept our economy going along with that of the state. No one had to shut down completely, they just had to change and adapt which rural and remote people are good at. I don't know the uptake of JobKeeper/Seeker figures either as community newspapers tend to focus on the positive and not sensation or negatives. We actually had two bumper tourism seasons because people couldn't travel overseas, so they came to the outback! It's only just hitting now with the supply chain issues and changes to Telehealth etc.

What would we like done?

We want someone to lobby advertising agencies that look after the nation's advertising. We want you to get them to consider advertising with us.

When a government campaign is launched we want to hear from them through their press releases, yes please, keep us informed, BUT we also want them to advertise it as well. Let our readers know what's going on. We want advertising to back up all those press releases we receive, highlighting all the good being done throughout our region with tax payers money.

In short, we want to get paid for getting THEIR news out to the residents in the areas our local publication covers whether it be to 30 or 30,000 residents.

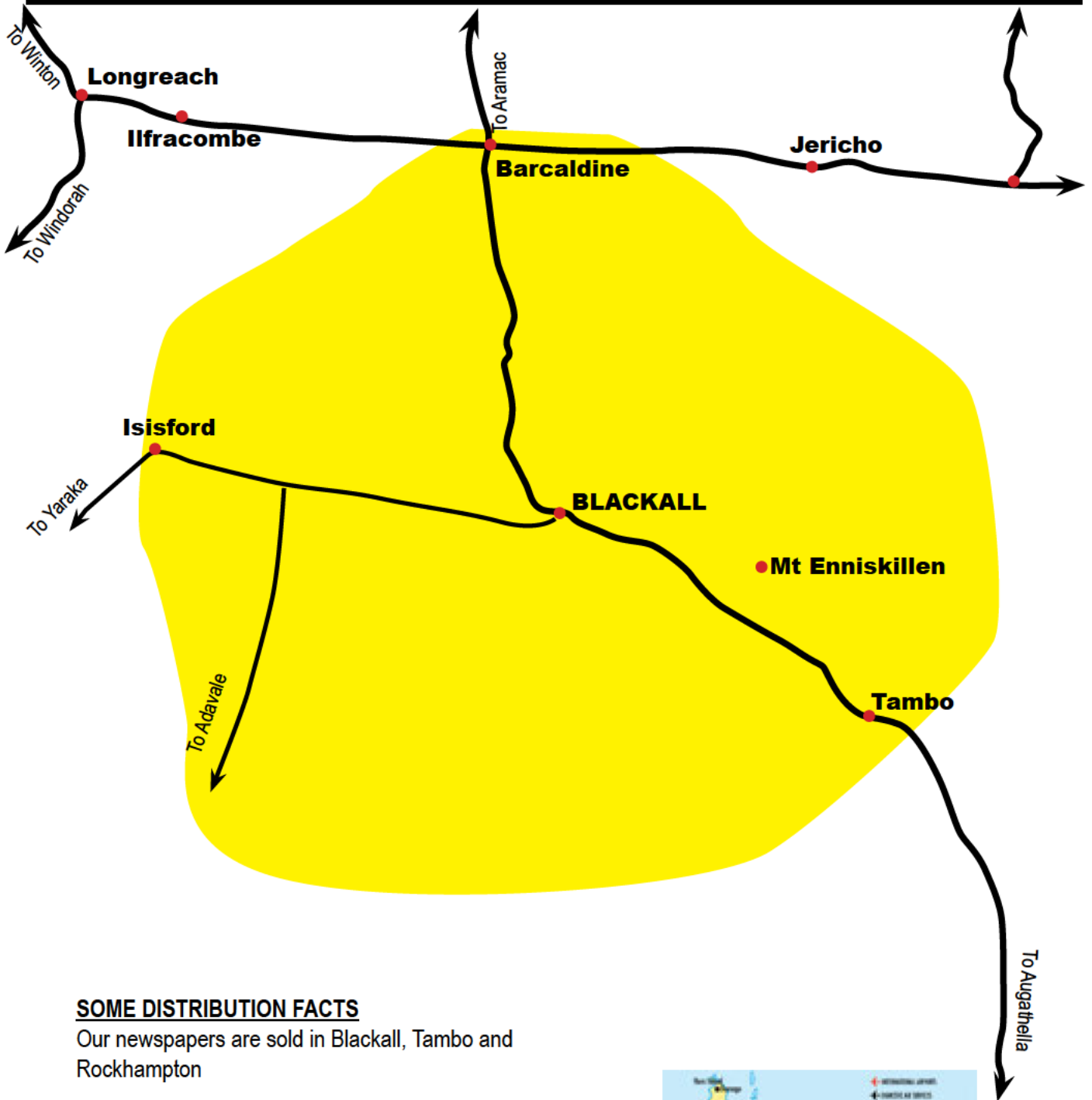
Yours sincerely

Ann Kirby

Editor

Blackall Newspaper Company Inc. trading as the The Barcoo Independent

DISTRIBUTION MAP & INFORMATION



SOME DISTRIBUTION FACTS

Our newspapers are sold in Blackall, Tambo and Rockhampton

We post to Rockhampton, Barcaldine, Brisbane, Mapleton

We are available to read on-line on a subscription basis

We post our advertisements on Facebook as well as in the newspaper

BLACKALL

