

SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY ENQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS

From The Hunter River Times

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SUBMISSION

OUR STORY

If ACM did not make the stupid decision to stop publishing the print edition of The Singleton Argus, The Hunter River Times would not exist. At a time when the community needed its newspaper more than ever, primarily for community connection, ACM deserted its people. After hearing this on ABC radio, I was contacted by the publisher of Coalface magazine, Shane Davey, to consider a new publication for the region. It was a five-minute conversation on a Friday that resulted with my response: "See you Monday". I resigned from my position of editor of The Singleton Argus in 2013 because I was disheartened by the business model for regional newspapers and knew it was a plan for failure of print media. I have a huge passion for print media and the impact it can have on the culture and pride it can generate in a community. It was a heartbreaking decision to resign from The Singleton Argus, one of the most successful newspapers within the ACM group in terms of circulation, revenue and editorial content and it is content that holds the secret to newspaper success. However, I felt if I followed the direction of the company, I would be trying to sail a sinking ship and after years of hard work, it was not something I was prepared to do. I resigned but was soon asked to editor The Muswellbrook Chronicle while the new editor for The Singleton Argus settled in. I did for about three months until my regional manager tried to explain to me why they were appointing an editor to cover four regional newspapers. "How on earth will they be able to do that, how can they be involved in all the community events?" The response from the regional manager was a kick in the face. He said something like: "I don't think the company is so focussed on community anymore." With that I packed up my desk and said goodbye. In my opinion, print did not fail because of digital, print failed because the large publishers refused or failed to evolve. The internet brought with it the 'Free Information Age', what that meant was pressure on the outdated model of paid circulation. Without reader numbers there is no value. Free circulation is the only way to maintain readership in volume that actually has value for advertisers. They also put profit exclusively ahead of readership and from there the content quality and relevance went too and the decline accelerated and so did the public's interest. They stuck with telling the same news that could be found in countless places on the internet and they didn't realise that in regional communities, it is local stories people want to read in their paper. The simple fact is that the internet serves regional communities poorly and in a very disjointed way.

When we embarked on The Hunter River Times, we decided a fortnightly newspaper of 24 pages was doable. We would focus on Singleton and Muswellbrook. Two sales representatives, both of whom had lost their jobs because of covid, hit the streets with the experienced Shane Davey. Shane was concerned about how we would generate stories and I told him not to worry and that they would just walk through the door and they have done so from day one. We employed a sports specific journalist, a journalist from The Singleton Argus – Alex Tigani. Sport is the glue of regional communities at both a junior and senior level and it is also a major factor or key in reintroducing lapsed newspaper readers to print of all demographic groups.

On Monday we had our heads down. On Tuesday I heard the sale reps say we would have to go up in pages and that the paper would be 32 pages. Thirty-two, okay that would be a push but still doable but a lot more work than I had anticipated. By Wednesday, lunch time the paper was 40 pages and I firmly told those sale reps not to leave the office again. Our paper has been consistently 40 pages, a couple of times 48 pages, ever since. Our first copy was on the streets on June 19, 2019. We print 12,000 copies and forgot to save a copy of this first edition for our own records. They were all gone within a couple of days. Within a month I received several phone calls from people in Scone who asked could we also cover that area which we now do. Cessnock and Maitland residents have been requesting inclusion as well but we just don't have the staff to cover the entire region properly so at this stage, this isn't something we plan any time soon.

We have a 97 per cent take up (12,000 copies) and offer the paper free of charge (another conscious decision) and it is available at shopping centres, small businesses, coffee shops, council buildings, service stations, pubs and clubs and everywhere in between.

The community response to what we are doing has been humbling to say the least. Cards and phone calls of thanks, flowers, and even a couple of donations of appreciation.

One phone call I must include in this submission was from an elderly lady who called me while I was on the road. Here I am, on the side of a back road near Scone and the woman on the end of the phone is crying. I asked her should I call 000 and she managed to get out the words thank you. Covid had isolated her at home with her only news coming from family members. She felt lonely and isolated as never before. She felt she had lost all independence. "Di, you have given me my life back and I just want to thank you." I was overwhelmed by her comment, but it reminded me of the importance of what we were doing and why.

We are hyper-local and do independent stories, no media releases (although I might say we have given recent covid lockdowns but always with a personal reference and not just a re-print). We have stories about our local people, what is happening in the community and share the stories that make people laugh, cry and learn. When I saw the first proof of the paper, we spelt covid in capital letters and this was something we were trying to avoid, this constant covid, covid, covid reminder. It is a word that initially generated much fear and uncertainty which was the exact opposite of what we were trying to offer. We wanted to generate economic confidence, hope, well-being and a sense of community comfort. That first proof had covid in capital letters and that was all I could see on every page, so we changed it to lower case, used it only when absolutely necessary and at times it was. That lower case spelling, while it may be incorrect, is something I am proud we did and not one person has ever commented that we are doing it wrong.

CHALLENGES

Initially, I think people thought it was just a fill in while the other publications were not printing. I would be lying if I said everyone thought it would be a huge success. We had our doubters and they were vocal. There were the comments: 'Print is dead', 'Good luck with that!!'.

There were potential advertisers who wanted to wait to see how we went before they booked space. It is difficult to sell advertising space into a product people had not seen and there were questions over the longevity of The Hunter River Times. On the other hand, we have local businesses who have advertised in every single edition and they are doing it, not to generate more business necessarily, but to show their support for their local community and it is something we acknowledge at every opportunity.

By far our greatest challenge is getting government advertising and advertising from the major retailers such as Harvey Norman. Harvey Norman advertises heavily in ACM publications, it is nothing for the Newcastle Herald to feature eight page wraps from Harvey Norman and Domain often take full page after full page of advertisements.

Organisations such as TAFE, regularly send us stories to consider but have never once advertised despite understanding the circulation we enjoy.

Other government organisations, such as the Department of Defence don't consider placing advertisements in our publication and the list goes on and on.

This is simply laziness from both Government and big business and the advertising agencies who operate on a 'take the easiest approach, not the most appropriate and best value approach'. We expect no free rides, but we do expect to be judged on merit, and on merit in the Hunter Valley, we are so far above and beyond the ACM's of the world on every measure and in a true sense. We have the hearts, minds and numbers of our jurisdiction and that is just a simple fact.

We understand that much of the government advertising is placed in the hands of advertising agencies and it is just too easy for them to tick the box and go ACM without considering the readership of each local district. Many of the ACM mastheads only exist on-line, yet the ad agencies continue to go with ACM and other media conglomerates. It does make me wonder how much money directed for print only every appears on-line?

Fortunately, we get support from our state and federal members who fully understand what we are trying to do but we simply miss out on the broader government advertising. Advertising agencies need to act in the best interest of their customers, and I do not believe they are doing that at this present time. They should be made far more accountable to their clients and the decisions they make. I challenge any one of them to explain to me why they don't advertise with us. There truly should be a public enquiry.

DIGITAL CHALLENGE

Facebook, Instagram, e-newsletters, digital newspapers, local government 'newsrooms' have a place but I ask this inquiry to think about this.

What and how do you gain your news? Yes, if you want to know something urgently you will jump online but what about all the things you did not know you needed to know? Do you really read a digital newspaper or do you just skim the headlines and first couple of paragraphs? What other platform gives you an option to skip the ad?

You cannot skip an advertisement in the newspaper, in fact if it directly impacts you, it could soon find itself cut out and stuck on the fridge. Same for that photo of your grandchild that excelled in the local school swimming carnival or the visit they made to the local aged care facility.

One of my favourite past times is to secretly watch people read a newspaper, I've been doing it for years. Some flick straight to the back to check out the sport and on a local level, it is not about Olympic gold medals but about the accomplishments of our local people. Golf, bowls, swimming, athletics, soccer, rugby league, AFL, netball, tennis and even croquet all with local people doing wonderful things and inspiring others to watch a local match or try the sport for themselves. It is the slaps of the backs our champions receive that in a digital world, that is wholly focussed on self-interests, just would not happen.

Other people have a flick, then go back to the front. We have readers that read every single word, they read The Hunter River Times from front to back. It hangs around on the coffee or kitchent table, people go back to it over the fortnight until the fresh paper is on the stands. How many times have you gone back to try and find a story on-line and have been unable to locate it? That doesn't happen in a newspaper.

Digitally, you read what you are interested in. A newspaper has the news you need to know at your fingertips. It is the record of history for your place in the world. There are stories you may not be interested in but because it is in front of you, you tend to read it regardless of your own, individual interests. The stories must be well written, they must be informative, and they must answer the questions your community has. They must involve local people. You will never read 'a spokesperson said' in The Hunter River times.

I follow digital media but gauge more on the comments than the information. It gives you an insight into some community emotion. Many times we have nipped potential uproars in the bud simply by going to a reliable source to explain a situation. There is a sense of trust that comes from a newspaper and you don't feel quite the same about on-line stories. I love the Beroona Advocate for entertainment but I do think there is a sense of the BA in most online news platforms. We have digital media for our titles, but it is firmly a support medium and not the primary driver.

There is the perception that our readers are all old and can't get online and nothing could be further from the truth. Content drives the readership and having stories about young families, young sportspeople, school news, new developments, local economic stories engage a broad sector of the community. Any newspaper must represent the local demographic and the Upper Hunter certainly has a broad demographic. One of our local pre-schools regularly reads the paper to the students just so they understand options on where they can get their news and they are particularly excited if they find someone they know pictured in the paper.

OUR SUGGESTIONS

Make advertising agencies more accountable. Perhaps make a percentage of their client spend directed to independent, rural newspapers. Do this on merit.

Government should ask questions about its advertising spend to ensure the message is getting to those it is meant for.

Compile a list of all the new independent newspapers that have arrived on the scene since covid, circulation is an important consideration, and provide that to the advertising agencies for their consideration.

THE FUTURE

We never started this venture to make a million dollars. It is a passion project but at the same time, it cannot cost us money. To put it into perspective we made around \$12,000 profit in the last financial year and paid around \$3000 in tax. Our accountant said we are in a good position for a start-up small business so I take comfort in that. At the moment we run edition to edition financially. We wipe our brows when we reach the income we need to go to print but it is a fortnightly challenge. We provide an essential service to our community and many, many hours go into what we do and our community appreciates it but it would be nice for the government to also recognise what we do. One simple way is to ensure we have the same advertising opportunities as the big players in the media world. Where grants are concerned, they seem to be largely reserved for the big media organisations and they are the ones who are primarily rewarded from the available grant such as the ping grants. We truly believe we provide an essential service, government clearly does not.

I pray that we are never in a position where the only option is digital news and generated media releases. The result will be a less-informed, less socially aware society.

Take the simple cheque presentation for example. Many companies, as their social licence to operate, make donations to their community but they expect recognition. How many cheque presentations do you read about on a digital platform? If you do come across one, do you bother to read it? Will this mean, in the future, there will be less donations because the recognition is not there? Local charitable organisations, boosted by the goodwill of volunteers, spruik about their activities and local causes and it encourages others to put their hand up to volunteer. On the first read they may not jump in to help but later, on reflection and another read of who to contact, they just might.

As one of our federal members said: "Without your local newspaper, how can anyone be famous in their own town?"

So, here's to a strong future for print media. I would be happy to have a conversation with any of the inquiry committee members and would love nothing more than a one-on-one with ACM directors. It is a tough industry but one that is needed now more than ever. We would be even happier if some ongoing recognition and support were provided by government, but we most definitely will not hold our breath.

I hope this submission helps with what you are trying to do. The outcome I wish for is a more informed community, a connected community, a proud and confident community. I also wish that the masthead, The Hunter River Times, can continue with the additional support of the advertising agencies and government without fear or favour. It is all about who, what, why, how and when we

are for a continued positive future for everyone who live in the Upper Hunter and a model that can be replicated throughout every Australian region.

Yours sincerely

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