

Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts

Inquiry into Australia's regional newspapers

Background

Cape York Weekly is independently owned and operated in Far North Queensland. Our newspaper covers an area that is almost as large as Victoria, however has a population of around 25,000 people.

Our two major bases are Weipa and Cooktown, although we cover news in a dozen Aboriginal communities throughout Cape York Peninsula.

Cape York Weekly was established in September, 2020 at the height of the pandemic due to the closure of the *Cape & Torres News*.

We are a free publication and have a strong focus on our weekly print product. However, we also publish the full newspaper online so it can be accessed by hundreds of people living outside the region.

To date, it has been a successful venture, although relies heavily on the owner/operator model. There have been significant hurdles along the way.

Concerns

Lack of bigger advertisers

One of the roadblocks facing regional newspapers in Australia is the lack of government and big-business advertising.

Over the last 18 months, the federal government has been reasonable in its advertising spend, while the Queensland government has virtually been non-existent.

The Torres and Cape Hospital and Health Service has been a shining light as far as the state government is concerned, mostly through advertising COVID-19 vaccination clinics in the region.

Big franchises such as Woolworths and Qantas, which operate and profit from Cape York, have not spent any money with our newspaper. Our readers also shop at places like Harvey Norman, even though they are not based directly in our region.

For example, there are no car dealers in Cape York. If you want to buy a new Toyota or a new tractor, you would be required to travel south to Mareeba, Atherton or Cairns to do your shopping.

If the Queensland government did its fair share and the likes of Harvey Norman and Woolworths looked outside of the major cities, then our newspaper would be in a much stronger position.

"Indigenous" advertising

A serious concern to our publication is how the federal government targets its advertising. As it stands, the federal government uses a third-party agency to deal with advertising bookings.

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That company then categorises publications based on their target audience. For example, the Koori Mail is probably considered to be an Indigenous publication.

One issue *Cape York Weekly* has been frustrated with is that we had to pick which category to be in. If we were regional, we would receive some advertising that wasn't targeted at Indigenous audiences. But if we were put in the Indigenous category, we would miss out on other campaigns.

There were several conversations between the agency about this issue and in the end, we gave up and asked to be categorised as an Indigenous publication. This has meant we have missed out on some important advertising campaigns – some of which would have been important to all of our readers.

For the record, *Cape York Weekly* does not regard itself as an Indigenous publication. We are a newspaper that covers news across a large number of communities of diverse backgrounds.

Google/Facebook funding

While it has been pleasing that Google and Facebook have been brought to the table to negotiate terms with publishers in Australia, the harsh reality is that their conditions do not suit a lot of smaller publications.

For example, Google has required publishers to upload a minimum of six stories per day. While it might not sound like a lot, that could be 20 more stories per week than a regional newspaper publishes.

We are in the news business, not the content generating business. Since Google has established some deals with regional newspapers, some not far from us, it has been noticed that these mastheads have been uploading a lot of press release material and generic content that would never see the light of day in their print publication. There is no doubt this is to appease Google's quota.

Applications for Facebook funding will open soon and will require statutory declarations about the newspaper company and employees. How this will benefit regional newspapers remains to be seen. Some new projects are sure to be created as a result of the short-term windfall, but those are unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term.

Federal grants/funding

The federal government put together a \$50 million fund in 2019 to support journalism through a Public Interest News Gathering Fund

Most of this money went to major companies and very little ended up in the hands of regional newspapers. Some media organisations received large amounts of money and still ended up slashing jobs.

Successful companies should not be relying on handouts from governments. However, grants for equipment, such as computers, cameras and audio recording, would be money well spent. Freight subsidies are another option. *Cape York Weekly* flies its newspapers to all corners of the Far North at a significant annual cost. Road transport simply is not an option.

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The federal and state governments should be looking at options to support regional newspapers in small ways that will make a difference. A \$5000 grant for equipment upgrades would make a big difference in most newsrooms.

Printing press access

We are very lucky in Far North Queensland to have access to the Townsville-based News Corp printing press and its highly skilled team. Virtually all newspapers north of Rockhampton are printed at this site. Their prices are reasonable and their quality of service is excellent.

However, if News Corp were to make cuts to the print editions of the *Townsville Bulletin* and *Cairns Post*, which has been forecasted by some, then all regional newspapers in North Queensland could suffer from the fallout.

At this stage, there is no immediate concern, although conversations have been had with publishers about possible alternatives if the worst-case scenario were to happen. The solution would not be cheap or easy.

As it stands, *Cape York Weekly* is printed in Townsville, trucked four hours to Cairns and then flown to communities further north. Any additional freight would be a major impediment to business.

The future of regional newspapers

Despite the concerns, the long-term future of regional newspapers should be reasonably healthy if they are managed correctly and can draw the support of their governments.

The idea of getting rich from running a newspaper is simply a pipe dream, however.

Based on our initial operating experience, it is clear that regional newspapers can be sustainable if they are owner/operated. What we may see is the closure of some smaller News Corp and Australian Community Media publications, which could be replaced by locally-owned independent newspapers.

The challenge for those communities would be finding the expertise. I was lucky enough to have completed my cadetship at an independent regional newspaper in Victoria and went on to gain experience at Fairfax Media and News Corp. I was an editor of a regional newspaper for close to a decade before starting my own publication.

It would be difficult to train someone from scratch to start their own newspaper, but not impossible. Writing stories is just a small part of the equation.

What is clear is the role that regional newspapers play in the community. While we may be smaller than our city counterparts, we do important work. Our newspaper has told stories that have been picked up by national and international media. But most importantly, we keep our communities informed of what is happening in their backyard.

Throughout the pandemic, there has been no "fake news" about the virus in the newspaper. We have worked closely with health services, governments and councils to keep locals informed. And we are trusted. Certainly more trusted than some of the bigger players.

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If regional newspapers were to die off – and it's not impossible if the federal government decided to stop advertising – then Australia would be much worse off as a result.

The decline of regional journalism is a concern but many communities that have lost their newspaper should be warmed by the fact that it can be done. More newspapers have been created in the last two years than in the previous 10 years. A lot of them are operating successfully.

A new business model has been established by those independents which can be replicated. But help is needed. We urge the federal government to do its bit to keep the lifeblood of regional communities alive.

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