

# Submission to the Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts

## Inquiry into Australia's Regional Newspapers January 2022

The Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas (**JNI**) thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts' Inquiry into Australia's regional newspapers.

### Introduction to the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas

JNI was established in 2018, and since then has engaged with thousands of journalists through our education and events programming, and supported hundreds of journalists and newsrooms through direct grants for individual stories and projects, hiring journalists to cover under-reported rounds, further education, conferences, fellowships and cultural exchanges.

JNI's central mission is to support quality journalism and informed debate. Local and hyperlocal media outlets and journalism are critical in helping inform the electorate, foster community relations, and a common sense of identity. While this Inquiry focuses on regional and remote news providers, JNI would argue that local journalism regardless of whether it serves a metro, regional or remote location is important to the Australian population.

### Key points to note:

- Philanthropic and public grants may be able to assist local and regional news organisations in the short-term, particularly during a crisis such as the on-set of COVID-19. However, this is not a sustainable or reliable revenue stream, or business model, for news outlets to rely upon.
- While direct funding from philanthropic or government sources may provide lifelines for struggling businesses, it is the long-term viability of the industry that should be considered. Helping this sector develop the skills and resources required to run viable commercial

operations, as well as help to lower the costs and barriers to entry will provide a long-term solution.

- As the hyperlocal news market in regional and metro areas has expanded, JNI and the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) have incorporated a dedicated hyperlocal association, the Local and Independent News Association, in order to help these news organisations survive and grow, and to encourage new hyperlocal media entrants by providing capacity building support, expert advice and access to critical third-party services.

## Why does JNI think local media is important in the Australian media?

Regional and local media is a critical element of the media landscape in Australia and is clearly associated with the broader civic engagement and democratic health of communities.<sup>1</sup> A lack of local news outlets means that important community issues may not be monitored or reported as large publications do not have the resources or mandate to investigate matters of local importance.

## What is the difference between hyperlocal news media and regional news media?

It should be noted that there are various definitions of regional and hyperlocal news, and even in our consultation with industry we found there is disagreement in the industry as to how to define which category news organisations fall into. However, based on our work with the industry and our understanding of the needs of these organisations we have attempted to define the sector we believe requires support.

We consider that regional news organisations and hyperlocal news organisations are distinct, although the concepts are related and overlapping:

Hyperlocal news organisations	Regional news organisations
<p>Print or online publishers that are community-focused, independently owned and original, covering public interest news and issues of local importance, and most likely working within a particular local geography. The locality served by a hyperlocal news organisation might be either regional or metropolitan.</p>	<p>Regional news refers to news organisations operating in and for regional geographies and communities. This may include hyperlocal news organisations.</p>

<sup>1</sup> Simons, M & Dickson, G 2019. Availability of local news and information. Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 'State of the Regions Report'.

## How is the market responding to a changing commercial playing-field?

Recent years have seen widespread closures in local and regional media, particularly in mastheads owned and operated by large publishers such as News Corp Australia and Australian Community Media, reflecting the rapidly changing commercial dynamics of the local media sector.

Large publishers have made moves to partially return to the local and hyperlocal news market, for example in May 2021 News Corp Australia flagged new roles in the hyperlocal segment<sup>2</sup>.

As the legacy media companies have either left or altered the commercial playing field, communities have been spurred on to find new ways to create and disseminate credible, independent news. There has been a wave of new local and regional news media organisations launched by independent or small publishers including organisations using new media models and technology.

Since 2020, we calculate there have been at least 74 new local, regional and remote online and print news outlets launched by independent or SME publishers.<sup>3</sup> This number does not include outlets that meet these criteria but have closed since opening within this timeframe, or media outlets launched by large publishers such as News Corp Australia, Australian Community Media and Seven West Media. While these large publishers have launched some new mastheads, many were online-only replacements or amalgamations of several shuttered titles.

The local and hyperlocal sector has far from disappeared, with over 500 organisations currently operating regional and local news publishing across Australia.<sup>4</sup>

## What can help make the local media organisations more sustainable?

The answer is not endless philanthropic or public funding to help a struggling business model. JNI believes strongly in both the importance of the hyperlocal and regional media industry, as well as the necessity to find and implement sustainable business models.

During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when it appeared there may not be any revenue streams for local news media, JNI received multiple requests from small local and hyperlocal publishers for direct grants, essentially bridging funds, to help them weather the storm.

JNI provided more than AU\$260,000 worth of direct grants during this time, however it became clear that this was not a long-term strategy to remedy the wider issues with the market

JNI considers that the renewal of hyperlocal publishing in response to the above-mentioned disruption represents an important opportunity to provide specific communities with news. However, hyperlocal publishers exist in a commercially difficult and unpredictable landscape, which places pressures on their production of quality local journalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Telum Media. 11 May 2021. 'News Corp announces growth and changes'. < <https://www.telummedia.com/public/news/news-corp-australia-announces-growth-and-changes/k2Inrpg21z>>

<sup>3</sup> See figure X, which depicts launches of new media organisations by independent or SME publishers since 2020. Data for this analysis sourced through Telum Media.

<sup>4</sup> Estimate based on information retrieved from Telum Media.

## Is there a sustainable whole-of-industry support mechanism?

JNI has identified an opportunity to support the sector through broad-based, sustainable, industry-led practices that reduce ongoing reliance on emergency or crisis grant funding. We have developed a mechanism that we believe effectively responds to the unique Australian context and that we are prepared to support on a three-year pilot basis.

By seeking to understand the motivations and operational challenges of hyperlocal news organisations in Australia, we have identified common needs and challenges of operators in this space. These include:

- Sourcing varied skills and capabilities required to perform the governance, administrative and editorial functions of the news organisation, and staff with the flexible, entrepreneurial mindset needed to continually experiment and adapt to keep the organisation growing.
- Implementing a sustainable business model, achieved through a diverse range of revenue streams that might include advertising, audience generated income, services and e-commerce.
- Implementation of effective technology to reach their target audience and monetise outputs.

JNI considers that a **Local and Independent News Association (LINA)**, focused on capacity building and shared services will respond to these challenges as well as other opportunities to support a healthy local news ecosystem in Australia.

## How did we form our views?

### 2018

- The Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas launches.

### 2019

- Small and local publishers are requesting financial assistance from JNI.
- Based on the volume of requests, JNI determines there is a wider structural industry issue, so convenes a panel of 10 industry experts and practitioners to consult with.

### 2020

- COVID-19 exacerbates commercial challenges for hyperlocal, local and regional media.
- An increase in applications for direct grant funding is received by JNI.
- Some emergency funding is provided to local and regional media.
- With the support of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBA), and a Hyperlocal Media Advisory Group, JNI conducted a survey of 100 local news organisations who appeared to meet our definition of a hyperlocal publisher, receiving 43 responses.

### 2021

- JNI hosted an online summit for hyperlocal media which was attended by over 50 representatives from Australian hyperlocal news organisations, which further demonstrates the energy and interest in developing this sector.



The results of the abovementioned survey demonstrated that 88 per cent of respondents were interested in an industry association to support hyperlocal news and media organisations and the same number were interested in conferences, events and other content relevant to hyperlocal news and media organisations.

The Hyperlocal Survey identified that the most common reasons identified by individuals for founding and working in these organisations were about filling gaps in local news coverage, and having a passion for local news. We believe that these individuals can be supported to develop thriving news organisations.

## The Local and Independent News Association

JNI, in collaboration with CBAA has established and incorporated the Local and Independent News Association (LINA) to provide broad-based support to the sector.

Key features of the model proposed and established by JNI and CBAA include:

- **Hands-on support for members:** Direct support from LINA staff to establish and grow a sustainable, high-quality news publication including strategic advice, technology support, operation advice, and support for establishing sustainable business models.
- **A network of organisation and resources:** Support for peer-to-peer learning through online and in-person forums, conferences, and an online library of resources including style guides and content templates.
- **A fee-based membership model:** member organisations will pay a fee to access the services and benefits of the association, in addition to accessing discounted critical services provided by third parties.
- **Research and advocacy:** Co-ordinated advocacy on behalf of hyperlocal news organisations on issues of sector-wide importance, and targeted research relevant to the sector's advancement.

Further details of the proposal for this association are contained in the early pitch document at Appendix B.

Government support of the Local and Independent News Association would be an important signal of the Australian Government's support for local and regional news coverage, job creation and engaged communities.

## Conclusion

Thank you to the Committee for your consideration of this submission. JNI was established to champion quality journalism and informed debate with the goal of an informed and engaged public. In our geographically dispersed nation, local news plays a vital role in achieving this. We welcome the opportunity to further engage both with the committee and the industry as a whole to promote a diverse and thriving media industry in Australia.

## Appendix A: Local and hyperlocal news publications launched by independent or SME publishers in Jan 2020 – Jan 2022

Local or Hyperlocal publications launched by independent or SME publisher				
Source: Telum Media. List created and downloaded 21st January				
Media / Organisation	Media type / Contact type	Frequency	City	State
Beaudesert Bulletin	Regional / Local Newspaper	Fortnightly	Beaudesert	QLD
Bendigo Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Ballarat	VIC
Blacktown News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Sydney	NSW
Bundaberg Today	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Bundaberg	QLD
Burdekin Local News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Ayr	QLD
Cairns Local News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Cairns	QLD
Cape York Weekly	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Weipa	QLD
Central and North Burnett Today	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Kingaroy	QLD
Coffs Coast News Of The Area	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Raymond Terrace	NSW
Collie River Valley Bulletin	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Collie	WA
Cootamundra Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Cootamundra	NSW
Country Caller	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Chinchilla	QLD
CQ Reporter	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Tannum Sands	QLD
CQ Today	Regional / Local Newspaper	Twice Weekly	Rockhampton	QLD
Douglas Weekly	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Port Douglas	QLD
Eastern Beaches News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Sunshine Coast	QLD
Esperance Weekender	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Esperance	WA
Eyre Peninsula Advocate	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Eyre Peninsula	SA
Fassifern Guardian and Tribune	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Boonah	QLD
Good News Fraser Coast	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Hervey Bay	QLD
Goulburn Express	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Goulburn	NSW
Gunnedah Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Gunnedah	NSW
Gympie Today	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Gympie	QLD
Hawkesbury Post	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Hawkesbury	NSW
Hornsby Ku-ring-gal Post	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Sydney	NSW
Indy NR	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Casino	NSW
Inner City News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Docklands	VIC
Ipswich News Today	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Ipswich	QLD
Kanebridge News	Online Publication / News Portal		Sydney	NSW
Local Bondi	Regional / Local Newspaper	4 issues per year	Sydney	NSW
Local Ipswich News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Brisbane	QLD
Mackay and Whitsunday Life	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Mackay	QLD
Manly Observer	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Sydney	NSW
Mildura News	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Mildura	VIC
Murray Bridge News	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Murray Bridge	SA
My News Feed	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Logan	QLD
MyCity Logan	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Logan	QLD
Naracoorte Community News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly		SA
Narromine Star	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Narromine	NSW
New Norfolk and Derwent Valley News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Norfolk	TAS
North Sydney Sun	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Sydney	NSW
North West City News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Docklands	VIC
Northern Beaches Advocate	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Mona Vale	NSW
Novo News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Newcastle West	NSW
NT Independent	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Darwin	NT
Orange City Life NEWSWATCH	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Orange	NSW
Parra News	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Sydney	NSW
Parramatta Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Fortnightly	Sydney	NSW
Pellican Post	Regional / Local Newspaper	Fortnightly	Gosford	NSW
Queensland Farmer Today	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly		QLD
SeniorsToday Sunshine Coast	Regional / Local Newspaper	Quarterly	Noosaville	QLD
South Burnett Today	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Kingaroy	QLD
Southern Highlands Express	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Bowral	NSW
Sunny Coast Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Sunshine Coast	QLD
sunshinecoastnews.com.au	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Sunshine Coast	QLD
The Ararat Advocate	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Ararat	VIC
The Ballarat News	Online Publication / News Portal	Online	Ballarat	VIC
The Border Watch	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Mt Gambier	SA
The Callide Dawson Leader	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Emerald	QLD
The Chin Wag	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Toogoolawah	QLD
The Coburg Meddler	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Melbourne	VIC
The Horsham Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Horsham	VIC
The Hunter River Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Fortnightly	Singleton	NSW
The Lilydale Star Mail	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Healesville	VIC
The Lockyer and Somerset Independent	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Gatton	QLD
The Maryborough Sun	Regional / Local Newspaper	Fortnightly	Maryborough	QLD
The Northern Rivers Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Casino	NSW
The Nyngan Weekly	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Nyngan	NSW
The Rotunda	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Fitzroy North	VIC
The Rural Leader	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Emerald	QLD
The SE Voice	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Mount Gambier	SA
The Wine Coast Whippet	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly		SA
View of the Valleys	Regional / Local Newspaper	Monthly	Callide	QLD
Yass Valley Times	Regional / Local Newspaper	Weekly	Yass Valley	NSW