

“It has a bleak future”: The effects of job loss on regional and rural journalism in Australia.

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ABSTRACT

Severe contractions in the Australian media landscape have led to a loss of jobs in major metropolitan newsrooms. In 2015, those cuts spread significantly to regional and rural newsrooms in Australia. This paper explores the effect of job loss on rural and regional journalism through a survey of 31 journalists working at rural and regional media organisations whose positions were made redundant from 2012 to 2015. As well as providing accounts of their own personal redundancy experiences, this paper explores the participants’ opinions of regional and rural journalism. It concludes that those whose positions in local journalism have become redundant are concerned about the resources of local newsrooms, and the quality of journalism these newsrooms can subsequently produce.

Introduction

As the digital transformation of the media continues, contractions in journalism jobs, especially in legacy media, have been a feature of the news landscape in most western countries over the last decade. But the patterns have not been uniform or simultaneous. The large scale redundancies experienced in the US (Jurkowitz, 2014) and Britain (Nel & Journalism.co.uk, 2010) between 2006 and 2009 were not realised to the same intensity in Australia until 2012, when an estimated 1500 journalists became redundant, with the majority of jobs lost from the country’s two largest print companies, Fairfax Media and News Limited (now News Corp Australia) (O’Donnell, Sherwood & Zion, 2016).

While precise figures are difficult to determine, available evidence suggests that the distribution of those redundancies has also been uneven within Australia. Some larger regional titles in Queensland (Bourke, 2012) and New South Wales (Messenger, 2012), experienced substantial journalism job cuts in 2012 around the same time that mass redundancies were occurring at the major capital city mastheads. But many other regional daily newspapers appeared to experience relatively few cuts during the large-scale layoffs of 2012 and 2013 that were experienced in metropolitan media outlets. This pattern appears to be in contrast to that experienced in the UK, where there is evidence to suggest that cuts in the regional press in the first decade of the 21st century were deeper than those in the national press (Nel & Journalism.co.uk, 2010, p.9).

Hess, Waller and Ricketson have noted that “Australia has not experienced the same rapid demise of its rural/regional press as the UK” (2014, p. 159), while in his 2012 study of local media in Australia and Canada, Richards observed that despite facing many challenges to their continued existence, rural and regional media have survived. A possible reason, he argued, is “local media have been a key factor in connecting people within a region, empowering communities and building trust and mutuality” (Richards, 2012, p. 631.). Richards’ study concluded that local media “facilitate communication between journalists and non-journalists to the benefit of the local community” (p. 638).

However, the scale of more recent redundancies in regional and rural Australia is causing concern about the ongoing viability of its news media. McNair, for instance, has argued that Australia’s crisis of journalism is now nowhere more evident than in the local and regional sectors (McNair, 2016). This is an obvious concern for regional and rural

communities, where the appetite for local news remains stronger in most cases than in capital cities (“Aussies in mid-size towns want more local news,” 2015), despite the fact that local newspaper readership in many regional centres has declined (“Regional newspaper readership in Victoria,” 2015). The recent acceleration of journalism job losses in regional and rural Australia also raises questions about the future career prospects of the journalists whose positions have become redundant.

The developments outlined above have provided the catalyst for a one-off survey conducted as part of the New Beats project, which was launched in 2013 in response to the large scale journalism redundancies experienced in Australia in 2012 (See O’Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2016). Since then, the New Beats project has broadened its scope to include journalists whose positions were made redundant in Australia between 2012 and 2014 in its five-year study. The project’s main focus is on the aftermath of mass journalism redundancies across Australia, and the research team is conducting a series of annual national surveys of affected journalists to track post-redundancy career trajectories over time. One finding from the 2014 survey was that more than half of those who left journalism altogether were working in the area of strategic public communications (Zion, et al. 2016, p. 125). Another key finding from that survey was that while the incomes of participants fell after redundancy, those who had found full time employment outside of journalism were earning more than those who continued to work as full time journalists (131).

This article focuses on the findings of a survey of 31 journalists from regional and rural outlets whose positions have been made redundant. Our central questions are: What are the post-redundancy experiences of these journalists so far? Do they find work? And how do they view the future of their profession in the communities that they have served?

Regional journalism in Australia – an emerging subject of inquiry

Regional, local and rural journalism is an area of increasing focus amongst scholars, but as Richards has noted: “In much of the literature ... there is a lack of clarity around concepts such as ‘local’ and ‘community’ which are central to understanding rural and regional journalism” (Richards, 2012, p. 628). Meanwhile, “journalism as it is practised outside of metropolitan centres is still one of the least researched fields of journalism studies” (Hanusch, 2015, p. 816). Moreover, there has been no comprehensive study of Australia’s rural and regional media, which means that “Australia is yet to develop a clear picture of how local and regional media is serving society’s news needs” (Hess et al., 2014, p. 159), which has in turn, led to problems with framing appropriate policy responses.

Hanusch (2015) focused on Australian examples in his research into the distinctions between local and metropolitan news cultures, where “local” is used to refer both to media located geographically outside of metropolitan areas, and suburban news media. From interviews, he concludes that local journalists are strong advocates for their communities and supportive of their development, but they also see a need to be a check on local governments to ensure that such development takes place (p. 829). This is important in the context of this study because it raises critical questions about what happens to this advocacy role when large numbers of journalism jobs are shed in regional Australia. However, it needs to be noted that inclusion of journalists working in suburban newspapers within the category of “local” in Hanusch’s study represents a methodological discrepancy with this study, where journalists surveyed all worked for media outlets located outside of the metropolitan areas of Australia’s eight capital cities.

Building on their earlier work, Hess and Waller have identified salient characteristics of local journalism in Australia through three qualitative case studies of local newspapers serving small towns and cities in Australia. They conclude “that to be local is to have a

grounded connection with, and understanding of, a physical place and its social and cultural dimensions that is practical and embodied” (Hess & Waller, 2016, p. 273). They point to the specific role that newspapers play in the news ecology of regional communities, but argue that this role is being undermined by a reduction in resources. They comment: “One editor said while coverage of local news was what made the business model for regional newspapers competitive in the wider news marketplace, his company’s persistence in cutting resources made it difficult to chase and cover the news and for new reporters to develop local knowledge” (2016, p. 272). These challenges also emerge in the responses of participants from our own study, as will be discussed further below.

Could it have been that these relationships that regional newspapers enjoyed with their communities might have led to the attenuation of further job cuts? Did the companies that owned these titles conclude that the mass reductions in metropolitan mastheads would not need to be repeated in smaller centres because those markets were deemed to be more resilient? In a word, no. Like their big-city cousins, circulation in regional newspapers had also been in decline. In October 2014 it was reported that Fairfax Media – a major owner of regional papers - was planning a substantial regional restructure (Markson, 2014). Soon afterwards the ABC announced that it would be shedding staff in Newcastle (Virtue, 2014), and during 2015 commercial regional broadcast outlets also announced the axing of journalist positions (Davidson, 2015) (Testa, 2015).

By the end of 2015 some of Australia’s larger regional dailies had experienced losses of up to half of their editorial staff. These included Albury/Wodonga’s *Border Mail*, the *Bendigo Advertiser* and the *Warrnambool Standard* (Robin, 2015). Further deep cuts at the nation’s largest regional daily, the *Newcastle Herald*, meant that overall staffing was projected to fall from 110 staff a few years ago to just 24, according to one former employee (“Newcastle Herald cuts hit hard - ABC Media Watch,” 2015). Meanwhile a number of smaller non-daily print titles had closed or were facing closure by 2016, including the 135 year-old *Cooma Monaro Express* (Nicholson, 2016) and three regional papers in Western Australia (Christian & Asher, 2015).

It wasn’t just old print publications that were casualties. In regional Victoria, the hyperlocal online publication, the *Castlemaine Independent*, which was launched in 2010 (Simons, 2011) has also ceased publication. On the site’s “goodbye note”, the editor, Tim Preston, lamented that “we failed to make enough money to justify the work involved” (Preston). It is within this context of recent and significant job reductions in regional and rural Australia that the current study is situated.

Method

This study is based on a survey conducted in 2015 of journalists whose jobs were made redundant from regional and rural news outlets in the period 2012 – 2015.

The population of concern comprised all Australian regional and rural journalists whose positions had been made redundant between 2012 and 2015. For the purpose of this study, regional and rural was defined as outside of Australia’s capital cities. The recruitment of the research sample adopted the non-probability method of snowball sampling, a method that is effective for locating a dispersed population such as laid-off journalists. This approach drew on previous investigations into both regional and rural Australian news media (see Hess et al., 2014), and the aftermath of job loss in Australian newsrooms (see O’Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2016; Zion et. al., 2016). However, one potential limitation of this method of participant-driven sampling is that it runs the risk of over-representing those most invested in the topic (e.g. disgruntled regional and rural journalists). And the fact that many of the participants had lost their jobs just months before completing the survey and were still

looking for work may also have contributed to their perceptions, particularly with respect to the negative impact of job cuts.

Hess et al. (2014) indicate regional and rural news outlets across Australia vary widely in terms of newsroom size, audience reach and market share. Therefore, particular effort went into recruiting laid-off journalists from a mix of commercial and non-commercial, print and broadcast news outlets, in a range of small and large regional and rural cities and towns across the country. Likewise, following previous research (see O'Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2016; Zion et. al., 2016), the investigation adopted the non-probability method of purposive and snowball sampling as an effective way of recruiting laid-off journalists who had been dispersed across an unknown number of workplaces.

The initial call-out for participants drew on formal and informal industry and professional networks, and used online and social media to make contact with them. Those laid-off journalists who agreed to participate were asked to share the survey details with other former colleagues and, in this way, the iterative recruitment process identified approximately 40 participants. The final survey sample consisted of 31 participants, after incomplete surveys were discounted. An important ethical issue raised by this research relates to preserving the confidentiality of participants. For that reason, we have removed identifying information from the individual data that is presented, including in one case, the name of the newspaper that the participant worked for.

The research instrument was a self-administered online survey of 60 questions, created and accessed using the cloud-based Survey Monkey tool, and available from October to December 2015. The survey included a range of closed and open-ended questions designed to capture quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the respondents' experiences of job loss and its aftermath. The three principal lines of inquiry are summarised in the following questions: What are the post-redundancy experiences of these journalists? Do they find work? And how do they feel about the state and future of regional and rural journalism?

This article presents the findings in responses to these three questions. In terms of data analysis, quantitative results are expressed in frequencies and percentages while the qualitative data has been coded and organised according to themes that emerged from the interviews. Initial coding was guided by the analysis procedures set out by Saldaña (2013). Initial descriptive codes were developed for each qualitative question that aimed to identify the most common topics. For example, a major theme identified in the question that asked how participants felt about journalism in regional and rural Australia today was a decrease in the quality of journalism. Secondary detailed coding then explored the nuances in these topics. For example, decreases in quality could be linked to an increased reliance on template news, fewer sub-editors, and fewer journalists present in newsrooms.

The small size of the sample is one limitation of the study. It is also important to note concerns that the snowball method, also known as respondent-driven sampling (Lee, 2009), may over-represent those most invested in the research topic (e.g. disgruntled ex-journalists). Nonetheless, we argue that the particular experiences and concerns of this cohort of regional and rural journalists provide new insights into the state of play in regional and rural news services, a topic that has not been empirically studied in any depth. While the findings cannot be generalised, due to the sampling method, they provide important insights into experiences of redundancy and a basis for further investigation into the future of regional journalism both in Australia and internationally.

Results

This survey had 37 respondents, however six were excluded due to failing to complete the survey. This section therefore reports on the results from 31 completed surveys.

Participants' Descriptive Characteristics

The participants in this survey were mostly male (n = 21 to 10, 67.7% to 32.3%), had an undergraduate degree (n = 18, 58.1%), had completed a journalism cadetship (n = 17. 54.8%), and were aged between 31 and 50 (n =18, 58.1%) (see Table 1). These participants took redundancies from media outlets across most Australian states. They came from places such as Albury/Wodonga, Bendigo, Ballarat, Mackay, Wollongong, Newcastle, Whyalla, Mooloolaba, Mt Isa and Albany, and had worked at publications such as the *Border Mail*, the *Illawarra Mercury*, the *Newcastle Herald* and broadcasters such as WIN, Prime and the ABC

Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics of Survey Respondents – Regional & Rural Survey

Variable	Value	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	10	32.3
	Male	21	67.7
Education Level	Year 10	2	6.5
	High School	7	22.6
	Advanced Diploma or TAFE	4	12.9
	Undergraduate Degree	18	58.0
	Postgraduate Degree	0	0
Journalism education*	Cadetship	17	54.8
	Undergraduate Degree	8	25.8
	Other	5	16.1
	None	5	16.1
Age	18-50	21	67.8
	51+	10	32.2

n=31

Source: 2015 New Beats survey

*respondents could select more than one answer to this question.

*This is age at the time of the survey, not the redundancy.

The Redundancy Experience

Most respondents did take voluntary redundancy (n = 19, or 61.3%), from a full-time position (25 or 80.7%), and the majority of these participants took redundancies from a Fairfax newspaper. Their range of experience in journalism varied, but only seven (22.6%) had less than 10 years of experience. As such, this was a cohort with significant years of work experience (see Table 2).

Table 2 - Redundancy Experience

Variable	Value	Frequency	%
Job status	Contract	1	3.2
	Part-time	5	16.1
	Full-time	25	80.7
Redundancy Type	Voluntary	19	61.3
	Involuntary	12	38.7
Previous employer	Fairfax	22	71.0
	ABC	3	9.7
	APN	2	6.5
	WIN	1	3.2

	Prime	1	3.2
	News Corporation	1	3.2
	Other	1	3.2
Journalism Experience (Years)	1-20	16	51.6
	21+	15	48.8
MEAA Membership	Yes	23	74.1
	No	7	22.6
	Other Union	1	3.2

n=31

Finding Work in Regional and Rural Areas

Participants were asked to select their current work situation from pre-set categories, presented in Table 3. The majority of these respondents nominated that they were looking for work or taking a break. This finding relating to employment status perhaps reflects the higher level of unemployment in regional and rural areas in Australia (Hutchens, 2015), but it also makes it difficult to further analyse where these participants worked post-redundancy in more detail, given that only 14 of the survey participants were in paid work at the time of the survey. However, of those 14, five participants self-selected that they were still working within journalism, six in a mix of journalism and other work, and three were working in a role that was not journalism.

In addition to current work, participants were also asked to discuss the availability and requirements of journalism job openings in their local area since redundancy. With the exception of one who noted that his current metropolitan paper had hired a substantial number of subeditors during his employment there, almost all participants stated that job openings were extremely limited (n = 27), and two stated there were no jobs. A common theme from these participants was that they still wished to work in journalism roles in media organisations, however there simply was no employment available. This can be seen in the response from Participant 19, which echoed the responses of many other participants, illustrating the precarious nature of the work these participants found.

Since my redundancy in May 2012, I have not managed to secure ongoing full-time employment in the journalism field. My work history in the past three-years has consisted of multiple short-term and casual contracts - my hours have varied from zero for weeks at a time, to 40+ hours per week for several months on a casual rate ... nothing permanent, unfortunately. (Participant 19)

These responses indicate that these journalists had instead found employment in other roles, such as, in some cases, public relations or communications work. Participant 9 said “There are very few journalism jobs in my area. As a result I moved into a Communications /Publicity role - seems to be where many of my ex newspaper colleagues have ended up.”

Some did indicate that those few journalism jobs on the ground that did become available were only for “young” people. For example, Participant 28 noted “From my understanding, media jobs are thin on the ground and targeted at new, young people who are more adept at social media platforms, have basic experience in multimedia, writing and promotions.”

While participants noted that there were extremely limited journalism jobs, only six respondents noted that they had moved location for work since redundancy. This may be attributable to the fact that they had other commitments, with one participant for example indicating that their partner’s stable job in their regional location meant they could not move.

This social and relationship context within which an individual is located is a critical issue to consider when analysing the ongoing impact of redundancy on the individual, both at the time of redundancy and in terms of career opportunities post-redundancy.

Table 3 – Current Employment

Variable	Value	Frequency	%
Current Employment	Looking for work	7	22.6
	Taking a break	7	22.6
	Work includes a mix of journalism and other	6	19.4
	Working in journalism (including freelance)	5	16.1
	Working in a role that is not journalism	3	9.7
	Retired	3	9.7
Moved since redundancy?	No	22	71.0
	Yes	6	19.3
	Other	3	9.7

n=31

Income and Regional & Rural Redundancy

Results from the survey suggest that there is a drop in income post redundancy. 13 participants (42%) earned more than \$80,000 before redundancy while only three of the 15 participants working at the time of the survey earned that amount of income post redundancy. However, income drop was not as dramatic as in our other research: (O'Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2016; Zion et. al., 2016) the majority of participants surveyed for this paper earned between \$60,001 and \$80,000 (eight of the 15 working at the time of the survey). This perhaps reflects the fact that these participants didn't have as far to fall compared to their metropolitan counterparts (see Table 4).

Table 4 - Income Comparison.

Income	Pre-Redundancy (31)	No.	%	Post-Redundancy Journalism (11)	No.	%	Post-Redundancy – Non-Journalism (4)	No.	%
Under \$20,000	0	0.0	Under \$20,000	3	27.3	Under \$20,000	0	0	
20,001-40,000	7	22.6	\$20,001-\$40,000	0	0.0	\$20,001-\$40,000	0	0	
40,001-60,000	4	12.9	\$40,001-\$60,000	0	0.0	\$40,001-\$60,000	1	33.3	
60,001-80,000	7	22.6	\$60,001-\$80,000	5	45.5	\$60,001-\$80,000	3	66.7	
80,001-100,000	10	32.3	\$80,001-\$100,000	1	9.1	\$80,001-\$100,000	0	0	
100,000-120,000	3	9.7	\$100,000-\$120,000	1	9.1	\$100,000-\$120,000	0	0	
120,001-140,000	0	0.0	\$120,001-\$140,000	1	9.1	\$120,001-\$140,000	0	0	

n=31

Thoughts and Perceptions on Regional & Rural Journalism

Respondents were asked to elaborate on the statement “please tell us how you feel about journalism in regional and rural Australia today”. A key theme to emerge was that the connection between news media outlets and regional and rural communities is particularly strong. Respondents often linked their observations about the fate of their news media outlet to the wellbeing, or more pertinently the emerging lack of wellbeing, of the rural or regional community in which it operated.

Many participants considered that the quality of their regional or rural news outlet had diminished. Others criticised what they referred to as “template-style newspaper production” because it undermined their ability to tell stories for local audiences. These responses indicated the view that journalism was becoming prepackaged: their newspaper designs were now mandated, which left little space for creativity or flexibility in the delivery of stories. Others complained that their capacity to report was hampered by a lack of financial and other organisational resources. Most participants said these issues were particularly problematic because the media needs of regional and rural communities are different to those of major metropolitan centres. These ideas are succinctly summed up by Participant 27:

I feel sad that the quality is no longer there. The paper is subbed by the few remaining journalists as part of their daily routine as well as sourcing, interviewing and writing the stories. Less journalists equate to less contact with the community, the source of its stories. An increased workload has led to more mistakes and a downturn in the quality and quantity of locally sourced, community based reportage. Photos and stories are subbed into a paper which is now template based, leading to less creativity from the start of the process through to the final product. It is no longer as interesting a product as it once was. (Participant 27).

Overall, 25 participants expressed some sort of negative response about regional and rural journalism, and many of these expressed sadness at the diminishing status of the news media in their local communities, and the important role of local media in telling local stories. This perspective is evident in the following response from Participant 28:

Regional journalism is more important than ever as it is the best tool for keeping people accountable, no matter (what) position they hold. Local stories are more relevant than ever as we move to a more insular society. Regional journalism can make a huge impact on people’s lives with support, information, sticking to facts and having a presence. I’ve seen our local newspaper decline in quality and consequently in sales. Local content is lacking and the public are turning away in droves, it’s very sad to see a 150-year-old community paper in disarray. The community no longer relies on the paper as its main source of information or debate. (Participant 28).

Responses such as these suggest that local media outlets once served several distinct, but surprisingly compatible, functions. From this perspective, newspapers, and radio and TV news programs, held local institutions to account, while serving as journals of record. They criticised these local bodies when needed, and revealed abuses of power. But they also managed to unite and advocate for the community they served. They therefore became powerful agents of cohesion and community building. Participant 28, quoted above, noted the decline of at least one outlet’s capacity to fulfil these important roles. Participant 2 explained that he felt regional journalism was “doomed”, although, as was noted, this was particularly pertinent for newspapers, rather than all news media. The participant said:

The coverage of local issues has fallen, the quality of the published work has dropped and readers are noticing. Regional media should not be forced to bear the brunt of poor decisions made by city based managers but that is exactly what has happened. Regional readers don't buy their local paper for generic pages hubbed and shared across the state. They want local stories about local people and issues, and pictures of local people and events. How can that be done on skeleton staffing levels like those now at Fairfax? (Participant 2).

Some participants expressed frustration because the perceived downgrading of the local media outlet was seen as a kind of continuous missed opportunity. One participant admitted to exasperation at seeing what was once an important media organisation failing to fulfil its potential: “I see how good it can be and (I) am angry at the direction it is heading. Regional journos have a much better opportunity to influence their communities a lot more than in metro areas. Unfortunately, they don't see that or, through limited resources, can't do it” (Participant 31).

These responses addressed the social costs of the increasing remoteness of media companies from the markets they serve. Some participants asserted that media companies have historically derived a commercial reward for providing a valuable community service. However, those media companies are now more likely to chase diminishing profits without the concomitant commitment to serve the needs of their readers and local staff. As Participant 30 noted:

I still love the concept of people who live in regional communities telling the stories of those communities. I hate the motivations of large media companies like Fairfax Regional and WIN Television. Both have made hundreds of millions of dollars out of providing that voice over the course of decades. Now they seem motivated only by greed. (Participant 30).

Participant 12 added:

Regional Australia needs quality and constant journalism to maintain contact within the communities. The future of regional journalism is under threat as the result of companies - largely Fairfax - cutting costs by slashing reporters and pages without regard for the readership or employers affected. (Participant 12).

This perceived decline in status and capacity has been exacerbated by another important force: the trend towards hubbing several core news media functions, such as sub-editing and template style news. A total of 11 participants noted that they saw the quality of reporting falling in regional and rural media, represented both by a high error count and a decreased quality of writing, as is evident in this quote from Participant 13.

I feel sad that the resources have been cut so thin that the papers have become a collection of press releases and lacking in-depth stories. Even web content is dismal - everyone seems content to just have four paragraphs as long as it's up there quick. I also dread how it is overlooked to provide quality journalism to entice advertisers to buy the paper. It's a lose-lose situation. And it reduces the independent voice. The craft of writing is fading - stories are becoming simple sentences. There are no pictures drawn, characters don't shine. It's all fact after fact, quote from press

release, cut and paste. There used to be a huge divide between reporting and communications. That divide no longer exists. (Participant 13).

Some other participants also added that the increasing use of community-sourced content led to quality issues, while the template-style news in NewsNow (a publishing platform used by Fairfax for regional publications) had led to instances of cookie cutter style reporting. As Participant 8 noted:

Under ACM/Fairfax's News Now system photo holes on the print pages are pre-framed so rather than designing the page/story around the image, the image is shoe-horned into the page often with disastrous cropping. Also under News Now, photographers are required to put up at least one online gallery by a certain time each day regardless of whether or not there's a story to justify it. Online presence, the number of 'hits' has become an end in itself rather than serving the content. (Participant 8)

Taken together, these responses suggest that journalists whose positions have been made redundant perceive that the rural and regional media have a diminished capacity to properly serve their local communities. These participants found that as well as diminishing quality, noted by just over a third of participants, regional and rural media were no longer able to tell local stories. Commercial imperatives were driving a cost reduction process that was resulting in a diminution in investment in resources to facilitate local reporting.

Discussion

This paper captures the responses of a cohort of journalists to questions about their redundancy experiences, current work, and their views about regional and rural journalism in Australia at a time of profound transformation in Australia's media. The timing of this survey so soon after many journalists had left their positions means that it is difficult to reach general conclusions about their future careers and the extent to which these might evolve differently from the post-redundancy careers of metropolitan journalists. As noted, unemployment in regional Australia in general remains higher than the national average. Within this context, however, the findings of this research provide new insights into the experiences of an important journalism cohort.

While some of the negative views expressed about regional and rural journalism may have been heightened by the still very recent experiences of many of the participants, they also highlight more broadly held concerns about the viability of regional and rural media to serve local news needs following such severe contractions in its workforce. In this respect, the perspectives and experiences of the participants in this article echo the findings of Hess and Waller (2016) that the availability of fewer resources is undermining the news ecologies of local communities, and support McNair's (2016) argument that the crisis in Australian journalism is nowhere more evident than in regional and local sectors. Certainly, participants in this research expressed concerns about the future of journalism in rural and regional Australia, in a context in which news organisations were continually cutting costs, with staff reductions emerging as a managerial strategy for achieving such cost reductions.

The findings presented in this paper provide insights into perspectives and experiences of regional and rural journalists that are frequently overlooked in discussions of journalism in Australia, which tend to be focused on metropolitan journalists. These perspectives and experiences also take on a broader significance when we locate them within the wider policy and political economy context of media ownership and regulation. In this

regard, it is important to remember that the 2014-2015 redundancies at News and Fairfax, and the redundancies that are the focus of this article, unfolded against a backdrop of debate about laws governing media ownership that had barely changed in Australia since before the advent of the internet. In early 2016 the federal Communications minister, Senator Mitch Fifield, introduced bills to Parliament that, if enacted, would have allowed commercial television networks to extend their reach from 75 per cent of the national audience to 100 per cent, enabling media proprietors to extend ownership from two out of the three traditional media forms (newspapers, radio and television) to all three. The bills lapsed when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called a double dissolution election for July 2, 2016. At the time of writing, the reelected Coalition government had introduced the Bill to the House of Representatives and it had been referred to a Senate committee that is due to report in November, 2016.

There is broad agreement across the major political parties that the reach rule has been rendered redundant by the internet and that it is likely the three commercial metropolitan television networks – Seven, Nine and Ten – will take over the regional affiliated networks – Prime Media, WIN and Southern Cross Austereo. On the two out of three rule, the Australian Labor Party has been ambivalent and did not formally declare its position before the bills lapsed. In August 2016, the new opposition spokeswoman, Michelle Rowland, said that the ALP “remain to be convinced of the merits of scrapping the two-out-of-three rule” (Murphy, 2016). A third provision in the bills was aimed at ensuring that locally reported news and current affairs would continue to be provided in regional and rural areas.

A number of submissions to a Senate inquiry into the bills before the July 2016 election expressed concern about the declining quality of local news and current affairs coverage. For instance, the president of the New South Wales Farmers’ Federation, Derek Schoen, told the inquiry’s public hearing that he had observed “an enormous decrease in the local content that is offered to rural media users” over the past two decades”, adding that “the ABC used to have a local news; it no longer exists. A lot of the commercial stations have also reduced their amount of local content” (Commonwealth of Australia. 2016a. p. 55).

Despite such concerns being expressed, a number of the submissions to this Senate inquiry questioned exactly how legislation could force commercial television networks to continue providing locally reported news and current affairs when it was expensive to resource, and when networks faced strong competition for advertising revenue from online companies. For example, in evidence to the Senate inquiry’s hearings, the chief executive of Nine, Hugh Marks, went so far as to suggest that provision of locally reported news and current affairs could be left to the publicly funded national broadcaster, the ABC: “the local content provisions in the bill are attempting to address a market failure in the provision of local news in rural and regional Australia. Nine believe the ABC, as the public broadcaster, should be a mechanism for addressing what is a market failure” (Commonwealth of Australia. 2016b. p. 25). This is despite the fact that the federal government had reduced the ABC’s funding in its budgets, especially in 2014.

In sum, media policy initiatives such as this stalled media reform bill are unlikely to arrest the rationalisation of newsrooms. The commercial imperatives of media organisations, and the adoption of managerial strategies that involve staff reductions as a means of engaging with such imperatives, will continue while media organisations struggle to develop viable business models for regional and rural Australia. In this context, the mostly pessimistic perspectives of journalists presented in this paper concerning the negative impacts of journalism redundancies, both at the individual and professional levels, remain significant in highlighting the immediate and potential long term impacts of such redundancies on Australia’s rural and regional news media.

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