

RESCUING REGIONAL JOURNALISM

Special report for the Walkley
Regional Journalism Summit

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Introduction

Local newspapers, websites and broadcast outlets are the heartbeats of communities in regional and rural Australia.

By reporting on local stories that the big metro outlets cannot or will not cover, they keep their communities connected and informed about what is happening whether it be local government, schools, healthcare, or the courts. They serve as a community noticeboard for local sport, events and announcements, and as an essential service in times of drought, flood, bushfire ... and pandemic.

Most importantly of all, they serve a vital role in democracy by holding those in power to account and giving a voice to everyone, no matter how small their community.

If regional towns and rural communities can no longer tell their stories through local media, all of Australia loses out.

The UTS Centre for Media Transition says: “Regional media fulfils functions beyond the simple provision of information: it is often a focal point for community connection, cohesion and education.”

But the reality is that regional and rural journalism in Australia is on a slow decline that must be arrested before it is too late.

Since the start of 2020, we have seen more than 100 regional

and community newspapers cease printing and commercial broadcasters cut back their staff, bureaus, bulletins and coverage. This is on top of the 106 local and regional papers that closed over the previous decade.¹

Many of those papers are more than a century old. Many may never reopen.

MEAA’s analysis over several years indicates that there are now fewer than 10,000 recognised journalists serving Australians. We believe their number has fallen by around 5000 in the last decade.²

Large parts of regional and rural Australia are becoming “news deserts” with no local media at all, or at best, tokenistic coverage of their area from distant locations.

As media outlets have closed leaving towns without their community newspaper, radio or TV station or smaller media outlets have simply consolidated into bigger businesses elsewhere, local content has been slashed dramatically if not abandoned altogether.

Along the way, we have seen critical areas where journalism preserves public interest — like courts coverage, local council and corporate malfeasance — be taken out of play.

There are some green shoots: the ABC recently announced it would employ about 50 new journalists

Since the start of 2020, we have seen more than 100 regional and community newspapers cease printing and commercial broadcasters cut back their staff, bureaus, bulletins and coverage.

1 Final Report – Digital Platforms Inquiry, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, June 2019, page 321 ([acc.gov.au/publications/digital-platforms-inquiry-final-report](https://www.accc.gov.au/publications/digital-platforms-inquiry-final-report))

2 MEAA Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Media Diversity, January 2021 (meaa.org/download/meaa-submission-to-the-senate-inquiry-into-media-diversity/)

“Make owners accountable for closing regional media outlets. Buying a company and closing down offices and publications shouldn’t be an option. Investing in regional media outlets to help them boost income and advertising revenue should be a priority ... No-one in regional areas wants to watch, read or listen to news from larger city areas so the consolidation of news organisations to these areas is not suitable. People want local news produced by locals.”

Female reporter, digital/
print outlet, NSW

in remote and regional parts of Australia; Guardian Australia has expanded its coverage with a new rural network; News Corp has announced it is hiring new journalists in regional Australia; and a small number of new publications have sprung up around Australia to fill the void left by the closure of long-established mastheads.

But the overall prognosis for regional journalism remains poor.

In 2020, the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, which for 111 years has been the union and professional body for Australia’s journalists, launched a campaign called *Our Communities, Our Stories* to provide an avenue for local communities to fight for the survival of their media and to advocate for reforms to ensure regional journalism and media have a sustainable future.

We believe that by working together with local, state and federal governments, local businesses and communities, and with regional media outlets, we can build a path to survival for regional and rural media.

The campaign has, among other things, urged members of the community and their municipal and political leaders, to lobby the federal government for support for local media.

This lobbying contributed to the Federal Government committing \$50 million in grants through its

Public Interest News Gathering (PING) program (recently extended by another \$10 million over two years), but more needs to be done to sustain and strengthen a vibrant and independent regional media ecosystem.

This support could include direct support for regional journalism, or tax incentives to support emerging community media models.

The regions must get their fair share of funds that will flow from the mandatory code for digital platforms introduced last year to make Facebook and Google pay a fair price for the journalism that they use on their platforms.

It must be stressed that the solution is not further mergers, acquisitions and consolidation of media in regional Australia.

In the 2016 study, *Who Owns the World’s Media?*, Australia was found to have the fifth highest level of concentration of all forms of media, and the third most concentrated newspaper industry in the liberal democratic world.³

According to IbisWorld, the four major newspaper companies have routinely accounted for 85% to 90% of industry revenues over the past five years. The four largest television companies consumed over 70% of all industry revenues, while radio’s four largest companies pull in two-thirds of all industry income.

This extraordinarily high level of

3 Cited in: ‘Australia’s newspaper ownership is among the most concentrated in the world’, Nick Evershed, The Guardian, 13 November (theguardian.com/news/datablog/2020/nov/13/australia-newspaper-ownership-is-among-the-most-concentrated-in-the-world)

concentration has been a major factor contributing to the decline of regional media and journalism in recent years.

It's important that communities including journalists have a say in shaping the future of the regional media industry.

To help inform future policy solutions and provide an accurate picture of the state of regional journalism, in late-2021, MEAA undertook a nationwide survey of journalists.

This provides a comprehensive picture of the working conditions of

regional journalists, their outlook for the future and some possible solutions to the crisis based on their years of experience and embedded local knowledge of the communities they serve.

The MEAA regional journalism survey was open between August and November 2021. The survey engaged with those directly involved in newsgathering — the journalists who are best connected to the communities they serve. In that way, journalists could explain exactly what was taking place at their media outlet and what their local community wanted.

“Stop the agglomeration of existing outlets — the expansion of the broadcast spectrum has been lost — make regional content and delivery a condition of capital city licences and facilitate tax incentives for genuine regional outlets.”

Broadcast journalist/
producer, Central Victoria

About the survey

In total, 199 regional journalists completed the survey.

As expected from the distribution of Australia's population, 33% of participants were from NSW, 22% from Victoria and 18% from Queensland, but there were no distinctive geographic differences in survey results from different parts of Australia.

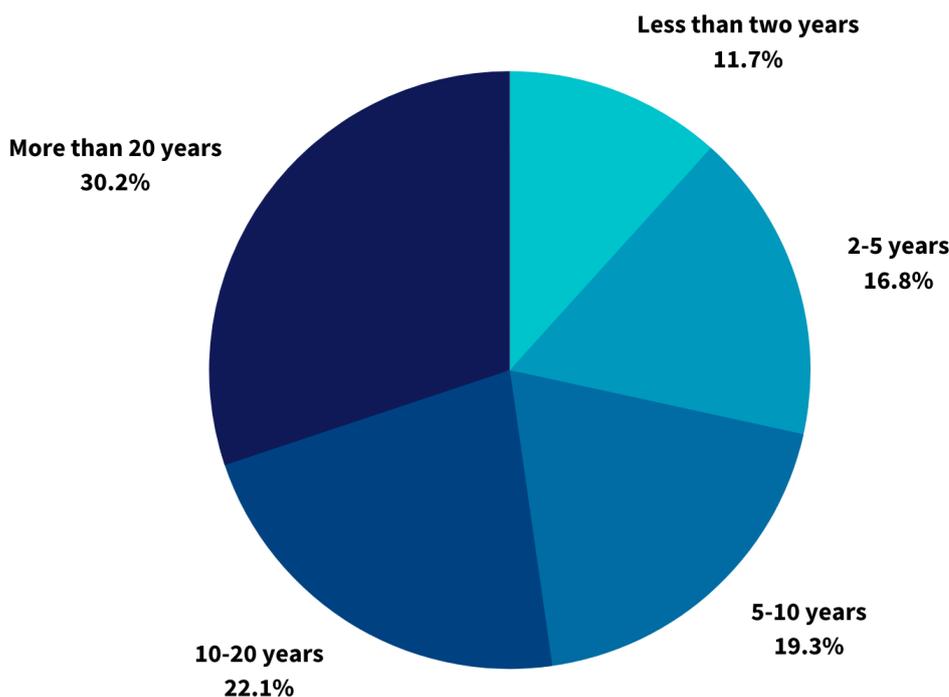
The majority of participants (52%) were mid-career journalists with at

outsourcing, 17% of respondents worked in regional Australia as freelance contributors.

The survey captured the realities of working in a regional media newsroom that is often under-resourced and requires journalists to be adept at several journalism skills — they must “multi-task”.

An overwhelming majority, 88%, describe the bulk of their work as “reporting”; almost two-thirds said

How long have you been working in regional media?



least 10 years' experience working in regional media. Participants were spread across all age groups with 11% aged under 25, 39.7% aged between 26-45, and 48.7% aged over 46. Almost two-out-of-three were full-time employees (62%) and almost a fifth (17%) worked casual or part-time. In line with the trend towards

they also doubled as their outlet's photographer, and almost 40% worked in video/audio. Others worked in production and one in 10 worked in graphic design or illustration.

A reflection of how even more additional duties have been added

What type of media outlet do you work for?

51%

Print and digital



28%

Broadcast/digital



12%

Print only



9%

Digital only



to their workload, almost half of the respondents, 47%, said they worked in social media reporting or production.

Most respondents (51%) worked in a hybrid digital and print business and 28% worked in broadcast and/or digital. Of those who worked in print and/or digital, 45% worked for outlets that published daily, and 32% worked for weeklies.

Respondents were employed by

a wide range of outlets including Australian Community Media, the ABC, McPherson Media, News Corp, Southern Cross Austereo, WIN TV, as well as some independent publications and radio stations.

Not all participants knew the circulation of the print outlet they worked for, but of those who did, 42.7% had a circulation of more than 20,000, 30% printed between 5000 and 20,000 copies, and 28.1% had a circulation of fewer than 5000.

Regional journalists are doing it tough

“I don’t think it’s sustainable when you aren’t being paid for hours worked or even given TOIL for hours worked.”

Broadcast journalist/
producer, Queensland

Pay for a regional journalist is well below the average wage in Australia which is more than \$90,000.

On an annual basis, only one-in-three regional journalists who participated in MEAA’s survey earns between \$50,000 and \$75,000 a year and 44% of regional journalists earn less than \$50,000.

As newsrooms get smaller due

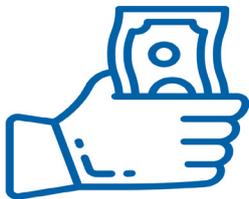
This leads to regular, and often excessive, hours of overtime.

Some 7% report they work more than 10 hours of overtime a week and a further 6% say they are working more than 15 hours a week beyond their normal or rostered hours.

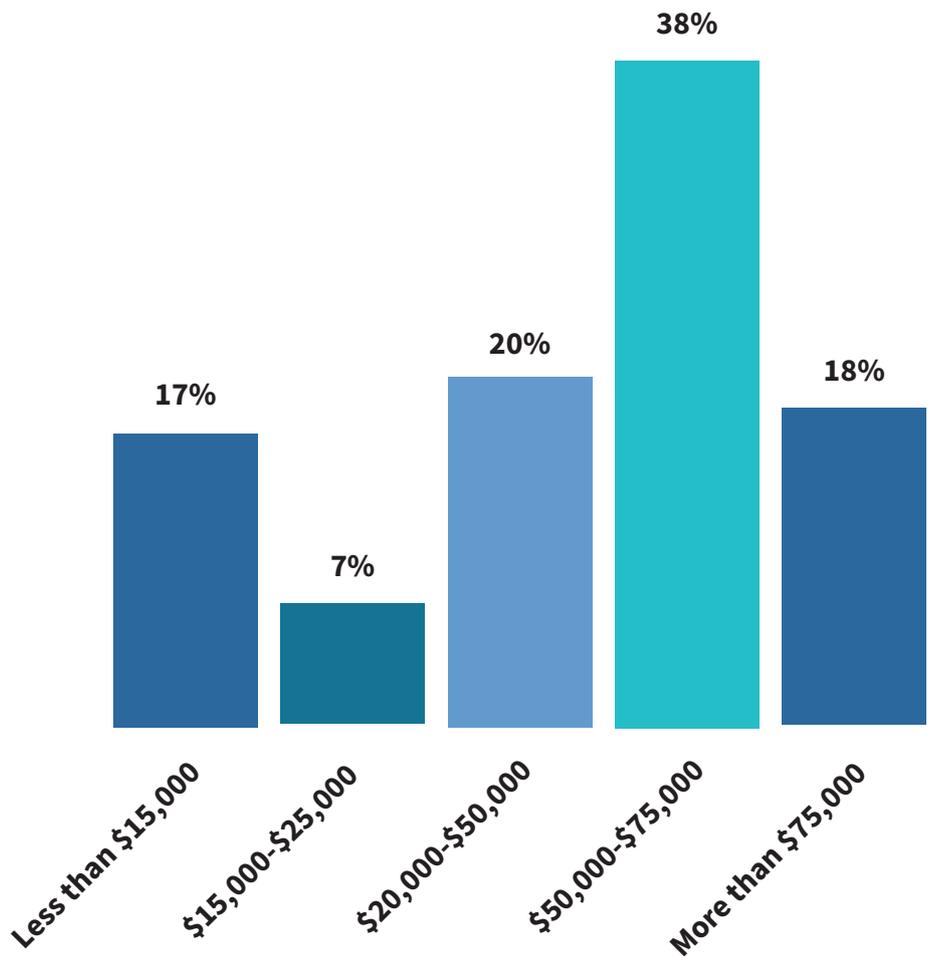
That’s more than one-in-10 regional journalists regularly working an

How much are you paid?

82%
earn less than
\$75,000 pa



44%
earn less than
\$50,000 pa



to redundancies and attrition, for those that remain the workload rises sharply. Almost three out of four journalists say their workload is high to very high.

additional 10 or more hours for their employer. Disappointingly, many of the survey respondents report that they don’t get paid overtime in compensation for the extra hours

they work. Some 30% say there is no compensation in the form of overtime or time-off-in-lieu in their workplace.

Some report that there is an overtime threshold that must be reached before compensation is paid, so they are giving many hours of extra labour without remuneration.

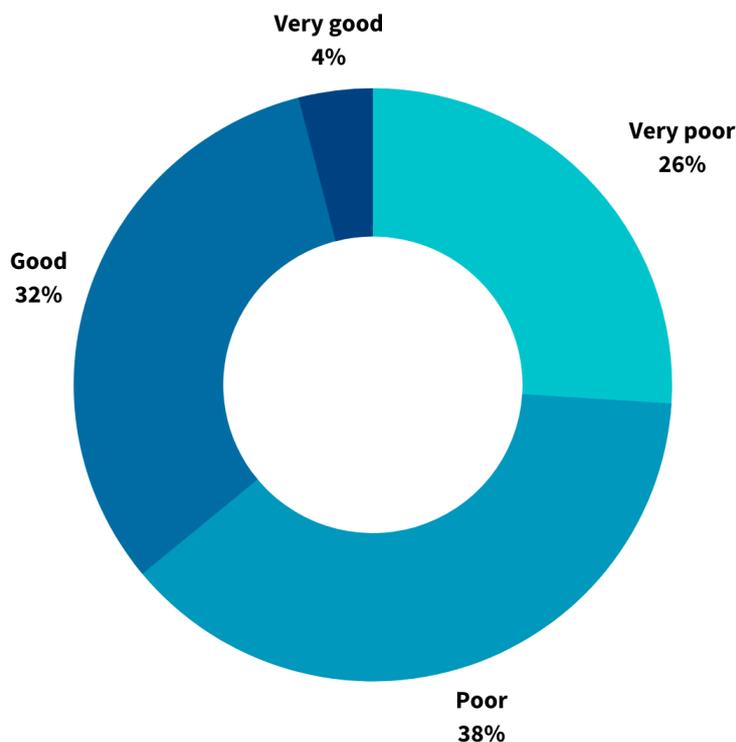
Just 2% receive overtime for all their

REGIONAL MEDIA COMPANIES ARE NOT MEETING THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES TO EMPLOYEES

But it is not only on pay and working hours that regional journalists are doing it tough.

One in two media outlets don't provide opportunities for career advancement such as promotion and moving through a journalist

What state are the resources used by your media outlet?



64%

said the resources at their outlet were poor or very poor.

hours worked beyond normal. One-in-three say they are compelled to take time-off-in-lieu (TOIL) as their employer won't pay or overtime.

Given that wages are low in regional media, it's particularly disappointing to have seen examples of underpayment by some regional media employers in recent years.

grading structure. As a result, 63% of respondents say career advancement opportunities at their employer are poor or very poor.

Advancement should be encouraged through learning additional journalism skills and keeping up to date with ongoing professional development and education — not least in the advances in digital

“The availability of training at affordable prices is a big thing, especially when there is substantial travel required to get to the courses ... Most small media in regional areas that I’ve worked in are run on a skeleton staff, either deliberately or unintentionally due to a shortage of applicants, meaning that there is a need to make it easier to facilitate those connections.”

Radio journalist/producer,
central NSW

journalism that are transforming newsgathering, production and distribution. But two-thirds of journalists (67%) say training at their employer is poor or very poor.

Respondents reported that two out of three media employers don’t provide regular and structured training in subjects such as media law.

In Australia, with its expensive and easily triggered defamation law regime, failing to train journalists in these two essential subjects is leaving both the media outlet and the journalist vulnerable, and doing a great disservice to the community.

When it comes to promoting high quality, ethical public interest journalism, almost two-thirds of regional newsrooms fail to educate

their editorial staff about the MEAA *Journalist Code of Ethics* to their editorial staff.

Regional newsrooms should be making sure that all editorial staff are equipped to handle ethical reporting issues that may arise — issues around currently critical topics such as privacy, sources and attribution, plagiarism, disclosure, privacy and correcting errors.

At a time of growing mistrust of mainstream media, and the propagation of misinformation and disinformation by fringe outfits that claim to be alternative news outlets, actively adhering and being seen to adhere to ethical behaviour is not just in the best interests of media workers but it also builds trust and loyalty in the community towards their local media.

The sorry state of regional journalism

Regional journalists are conscious of the precarious position of regional media.

Nine out of 10 survey respondents say the health of regional journalism in Australia is poor to very poor. Sixty-one per cent of respondents said the future for their career as a regional journalist looks poor to very poor.

The outlook is bleak with 54% of regional journalists saying they can't see themselves still working in regional journalism in five years' time, and a similar number (54%) don't believe their employer will continue to serve the local community.

In ranking the issues that they believe are of greatest concern about the poor health of regional journalism in Australia, the respondents were strongly focussed on what that meant for the communities they serve.

This poor health is also reflected in the lack of resources devoted to regional media which makes it harder for journalists to effectively do their job of serving their communities.

More than one-in-three of regional journalist respondents said their media outlet's ability to provide public interest journalism to their community is poor or very poor; almost two-thirds of journalists said they are not given proper resources to do their job.

One fix for regional journalism being sought by media proprietors — relaxing ownership laws to allow

for more mergers and takeovers — has virtually no support among the journalists who work in regional media. Only 4% of survey respondents believed further concentration of media ownership was a viable option for regional journalism.

It's clear that the journalists who are the "boots on the ground" in local communities they serve and who have daily contact with the people of their communities, recognise that any further conglomeration and reduction among the remaining media outlets is not a way to fix the current crisis but would, in fact, likely exacerbate it.

When a local newspaper, TV or radio station closes or abandons a regional town to be subsumed into a big regional centre, the impact is massive for the community left behind.

Local voices have been discarded. Community news has gone unreported, local events not promoted, family announcements silenced, sporting triumphs unacknowledged, court cases not covered, and local advertisers unable to promote goods and services to customers.

The regional journalism survey respondents are particularly damning at the rising concentration in regional media ownership in the hands of a few proprietors.

Almost nine out of 10 regional journalists said media diversity in regional Australia was poor or very poor. Leaving regional media outlets in the hands of a few has simply

90%

of journalists believe the health of regional journalism has worsened over the past decade.

"The main problem with regional media is the media ownership laws that have allowed the concentration of media that has seen many outlets closed. There are successful new models for regional media, and these should be encouraged elsewhere."

Newspaper reporter/
photographer, northern
NSW

led to more media closures and concentration of existing outlets.

REGIONAL COMMUNITIES WANT LOCAL MEDIA

The loss of media services from many local towns and the replacement of local newsgathering with conglomerated reporting from big cities far away has the result that there is no local media presence in the community and little interest from elsewhere in reporting what goes on there.

valued by their communities and it was recognised that unless local communities stood up for their local media, their stories would not be told.

Local communities are hungry for their local media. Survey respondents overwhelmingly (84%) said their local audience was a strong supporter of their local media outlet and 70% of respondents felt that the value placed by their community in the journalism they produced is good to very good.

Rank the most important issue in regional journalism

1.	Closure of regional media outlets affecting communities (27%)
2.	Maintaining coverage of community news such as council/shire meetings, sports, courts and crime (23%)
3.	Job security (16%)
4.	Pay and working conditions (10%)
5.	Training opportunities (8%)
6.	Relocation and closure of regional media to centralised media outlets in bigger towns/cities (6%)
7.	Increased concentration of regional media ownership (4%)
8.	Prospects for growth of your media outlet (4%)
9.	Career advancement within your employer (2%)

There are some green shoots in regional media. Where an outlet has closed, some of the journalists made redundant have taken the opportunity to open an outlet to replace it, often creating a digital-only platform for their journalism.

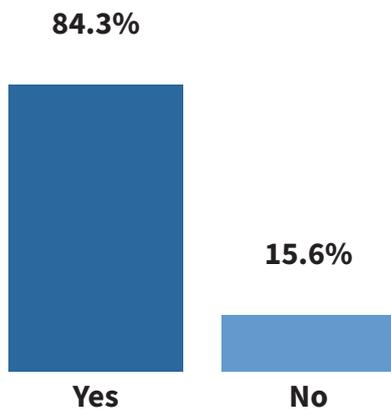
But regional journalists generally don't believe these new businesses are sustainable, with 83% saying their chances of survival are poor to very poor.

Despite this bleak outlook, regional journalists believe their work is still

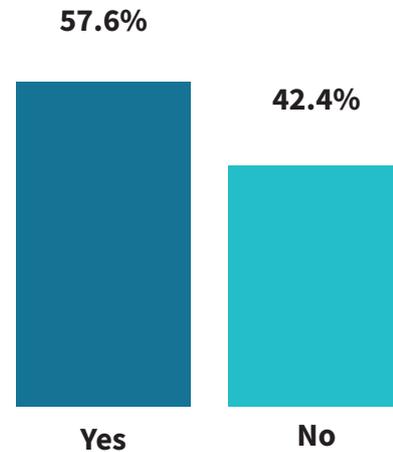
The mutual engagement of local media with their communities is positive, with 71% saying local media works well with their audience.

The communities' elected representatives also back media outlets in their community. When regional journalists were asked if they believed their municipal, state and federal politicians were strong supporters of their media outlet, 57% survey respondents replied favourably.

Do you believe your community is a strong supporter of your media outlet?



Do you believe your local, state and federal politicians are strong supporters of your media outlet?



These two survey results demonstrate that there is a clear recognition that local communities must have local news.

A healthy functioning democracy must be able to listen to local voices and talk directly to their electorates about the issues that matter in their region.

That can't be done when local media has shut, and it can't be done when local news gathering is abandoned in favour of regional issues being

covered remotely in big cities where local issues are either ignored entirely or are passed by untold.

Regional media outlets are the lifeblood of local communities. They ensure voices are heard, vital news and information is shared; community events are promoted and celebrated.

They scrutinise politicians and the decisions they make, and they play an essential role in our democracy.

“Better pay and conditions to encourage senior and experienced reporters to stay in the regions, rather than the regions simply being a cheap ‘training ground’ for journalists.”

Broadcast journalist/
producer, Victoria

Fixes from the coal face

Strong local community support and various measures by governments are essential to help build a sustainable model to ensure that regional journalism can continue to carry out its duties without being crushed or culled.

There is enormous significance in two recent demonstrations of government support for Australian journalism:

- the \$50 million Public Interest News Gathering program (PING) in direct grants to regional media

for news media outlets for the editorial content the platforms use to woo audiences and advertisers.

The survey asked respondents to rank their choices out of a set of proposed solutions to the crisis that is facing regional journalism.

Ongoing government support for regional media businesses through the Public Interest News Gathering (PING) program was favoured as the top option by 19% of respondents.

This was followed by boosting

Rank the following proposals to support regional journalism

1. Ongoing government support for regional media businesses through the Public Interest News Gathering program (19%)
2. **Boost funding for national public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, expressly to expand, restore and maintain a strong presence in regional Australia (18%)**
3. Training and career path programs to improve and encourage regional journalists (16%)
4. **Increased government advertising for rural media outlets (13%)**
5. Ensure regional media outlets can benefit by amending the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code that applies to digital platforms Google and Facebook (11%)
6. **Grants to support new, innovative media start-ups (9%)**
7. Tax deductibility for philanthropic organisations to support regional media outlets and journalism (6%)
8. **Journalist exchanges with big city media outlets to boost journalist experience and skills and regional coverage in big media (5%)**
9. Tax breaks for existing regional media businesses (2%)
10. **Relaxing ownership laws to allow more mergers and takeovers, including across different platforms (1%)**

- outlets⁴, and
- the Mandatory News Bargaining Code to compel digital platforms Google and Facebook to negotiate compensation

the funding of the national public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, expressly to expand, restore and maintain a strong presence in regional Australia.

Other ideas included increased

³ This was extended by another \$10 million over two years in an announcement by Communications Minister Paul Fletcher on February 7, 2022.

government advertising for rural media outlets, specific detailed amendments to the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code to ensure regional media outlets and the production of journalism content benefit.

Relaxation of media ownership laws that would allow for greater concentration of ownership through takeovers and acquisitions was the least favoured solution.

MEAA believes that media corporations have a duty to maintain their presence in regional centres, to continue serving those local communities and to utilise the government support they receive wisely. Sadly, government support for regional journalism, while welcome, has been misdirected to major media corporations, some of which have continued to reduce operations, close regional outlets and cut jobs to the detriment of the communities they are meant to serve.

There has been insufficient government oversight of how funds are being used and how to keep the beneficiaries of government support committed to maintaining their regional media presence — the very intent of the PING program.

MEAA believes the PING program must provide direct regional media support to all classes of journalism, including freelancers, and media content production.

In its November 2021 report, *Future of Work in Journalism*, the Centre for Future Work estimated the amount of support needed at \$250 million a

year but notes that expansion of the PING program has been canvassed in the Government's November 2020 Media Reform Green Paper .

THE NEWS BARGAINING CODE

The government's legislated demand that for the big digital platforms to pay for the editorial content they use is an opportunity for protecting and nurturing Australian journalism. It should also lead to investment in more regional journalism jobs.

While these are business-to-business transactions between media companies and the digital platforms, they would not be conducted without the backing of legislation that forced the platforms to bargain with media corporations. To date, there is little engagement by the platforms with smaller media outlets including those in the regions.

The News Media Bargaining Code offers only a partial remedy to the revenue losses incurred by Australian media, but the big digital platforms have cynically avoided regulation under the Code by promising to do "just enough". The code in and of itself, is unlikely to achieve the rebalance needed to promote public interest journalism.

It remains unclear to what extent small outlets will benefit from the code and whether Google and Facebook will strike deals with them. For small publishers who fail to make side deals with the tech giants, they could be locked out, further entrenching the narrow ownership base of the Australian media market.

"Digital/print journalism needs to be recognised as a public service akin to a library — it's not necessarily profitable but serves an essential role in the community. It needs to be independent and arms-length from what it's covering, and media owners must recognise this is its strength. Hyper-local coverage is what provides the value, not centralising and cutting."

Print photojournalist,
central Victoria

Conclusion: regional journalism is too important to lose

There are vital community issues relating to democracy at stake from the loss of media outlets in local communities.

- What if there is no one around to report on council and shire decisions? What happens if decisions made in Canberra, or Sydney, or Perth harm the people of your local community but you aren't made aware of it?
- Who will scrutinise political deals, who will hold powerful people and corporations to account?
- Who will uphold the public's right to know what our governments do in our name if there is no local media to ask questions, demand answers and to keep us informed?

The crisis in regional journalism has to be met head on. Yet more mergers and acquisitions are not the answer.

Media assets are not like any other businesses. Media proprietors must accept that. All media serves a vital function in a healthy, functioning democracy. They carry the burden of great responsibility because they wield enormous power.

In times of crisis, they are an essential service that helps save lives. They keep people informed, scrutinise the powerful and through their public interest journalism they ensure the public's right to know.

All media outlets, newspapers, broadcasters and digital, have a duty to the community they serve. In the big cities there has already been a massive decline in the number of media outlets, but choice remains and is being enhanced by rising new, largely digital-only operations.

The crisis in regional journalism has to be met head on. Yet more mergers and acquisitions are not the answer.

The Federal Government must draw a line — that it is not prepared to see regional media suffer further from more concentration, more closures, more job losses, that have left regional communities abandoned.

Indeed, it has shown that it is prepared to provide some support for regional public interest journalism.

It now has an opportunity to help save this essential community asset through significant and vital government support. That support carries with it responsibilities for media outlets that are beneficiaries of the funding.

MEAA's survey of regional journalists has identified the key issues confronting regional media. The wisdom and experience of the journalists who work in regional media and live within regional communities must not be ignored.



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