



# [The Nature of the Editorial Deficit]



# The Nature of the Editorial Deficit

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This project sought to shed light on the nature of the editorial deficit in different kinds of Australian newsrooms and to gain insight into how editors and newsroom managers would deploy additional journalistic resources, should they become available.

We conducted a series of in-depth interviews with editors and newsroom managers at 12 media organisations, selected to represent a diversity of types – across print, broadcast and online, national, metropolitan and local.

Our questions were designed to tease out the way in which the decrease of working journalists – nine per cent since 2014, according to the ACCC<sup>1</sup> – plays out in newsrooms, and in the news and information available to the Australian public. We sought to examine the ways in which media organisations are responding to the pressures, and the choices they are making. We also asked how editors would seek to use any increase in the funding available for public interest journalism. Such additional resources could come from commercial operations, from philanthropy and /or through the measures proposed by the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry report, including grants and tax deductible philanthropic contributions. They could also be made available through tax rebates, which are the subject of separate research commissioned by PIJI.

As detailed below, this project has indicated a worrying “shallowing” of public interest journalism, with clear consequences for the reputation and capacity of local media in particular.

As well, our data suggests that if more resources were available for journalism, editors would use them to provide more public interest journalism – both routine reporting of public forums and public issue “beats”, and also investigative work. This is of relevance when considering whether additional public support would bring the sought-after benefits of more and better information being available to the public.

Finally, the interviews revealed a need for further investigation of contemporary journalistic career paths.

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1 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2019 (ACCC), p. 280

## Public interest journalism

The ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry report is the most recent contribution to examining the extent and impact of the declining revenue in Australian news media businesses. That report has added to existing research on the impact of this on public interest journalism, which the ACCC (following the PIJI submission) defined as

*Journalism with the primary purpose of recording, investigating and explaining issues of public significance in order to engage citizens in public debate and inform democratic decision making at all levels of government.<sup>2</sup>*

The ACCC report said:

*Census data shows that from 2006 to 2016, the number of Australians in journalism-related occupations fell by nine per cent overall, and by 26 per cent for traditional print journalists (including those journalists working for print/online news media businesses). Data provided by the main media companies show the number of journalists in traditional print media businesses fell by 20 per cent from 2014 to 2018. This is at a time when Australia's population and economy were growing strongly.<sup>3</sup>*

The ACCC went on to identify local journalism as particularly at risk, and therefore recommended that this be the focus of a grant program.<sup>4</sup> Data collected by the ACCC showed that between 2008 and 2018, 106 local and regional newspaper titles closed across Australia, representing a net 15 per cent decrease in the number of these publications. These closures have left 21 local government areas previously covered by these titles without coverage from a single local newspaper (in either print or online formats), including 16 local government areas in regional Australia.<sup>5</sup>

The report both draws upon and adds to previous research on the nature of the journalistic deficit, including some by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative<sup>6</sup>. In a review of previous research, plus a survey of local government conducted in partnership with the Australian Local Government Association earlier this year, PIJI found that fewer local journalists available to report on local government and local issues of concern meant communities were less informed, leading to public opinion being more easily manipulated by partisan interests, undermining social cohesion.

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2        *Ibid.* p. 285

3        *Ibid.* p. 18

4        *Ibid.* p. 33.

5        *Ibid.* p. 18.

6        Simons and Dickson 2019.

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The resource deficit is most noticeable in what has long been called the 'journal of record' function of the media: the continuous daily work of covering parliaments, courts and local governments,<sup>7</sup> as well as in some specialist coverage. A content analysis of the major metropolitan papers by the ACCC found a significant reduction in local government, local court, health and science coverage over the last 15 years<sup>8</sup>.

These trends, as the ACCC identifies, are of great concern. While the impact of journalism is difficult to quantify, previous scholarship consistently identifies a strong connection between the availability of journalism and other measures of civic health. A 2016 study by the Pew Research Center found that in the US, civic engagement is strongly tied to local news habits, though the causality is undetermined. Those with stronger news interest, consumption and better attitudes toward the news media were considerably more likely to feel attached to their communities and to always vote in local elections. People who regularly used three or more sources of local news were more likely to be involved in political activity and local groups, and those who rated their communities favourably were also more likely to think their local media were doing a good job.<sup>9</sup> Other studies have found:

- that the closure of a newspaper led to fewer people voting in city council, city commission and school board elections; fewer candidates for those seats; campaign spending dropped and the chances of incumbents improved<sup>10</sup>;
- that higher newspaper circulation corresponds with lower levels of political corruption<sup>11</sup>;
- a causal relationship between the closure of local newspapers and increased borrowing costs, wages, deficits and financial waste in local governments<sup>12</sup>;
- that monitoring by journalists improves corporate governance and exposes fraud<sup>13</sup>.

The ACCC has observed:

*In promoting the public interest, journalism is an important contributor to the 'public sphere', democracy and the economy, and has a place within much broader constructs of societal communication and debate. Journalism also exists alongside more formal institutions with similar purposes ... [but] due to its independence from these institutions and the professional expertise exercised in its production, journalism can fulfil these public interest functions in a unique and significant way.*

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7 Simons et al. 2017. p. 4

8 ACCC 2019. p. 8.

9 Barthel et al. 2016. p. 4

10 Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2009.

11 Adsera, Boix and Payne 2000.

12 Gao, Lee and Murphy 2018.

13 Dyck and Zingales 2002; Dyck, Morse and Zingales 2010.

The ACCC said that journalism should be defined as a “public good”, and thus that the decline in journalists was deserving of public policy response, recommending a range of measures including tax deductibility for philanthropic contributions to not for profit journalism, and an expanded system for grants with a focus on local journalism in particular.

## Research project aims

This research project is aimed at informing public policy responses to the crisis in journalism, including both the ACCC’s recommendations, and also other measures examined and advocated by PIJI. Where the ACCC sought to gain insight into editorial deficit through analysing the content of major metropolitan and national daily newspapers, our approach has been to speak to editors at a variety of different types of outlet in order to gain their perspectives.

The following individuals participated in this study:

- Laurie Bullock, Group Editor, Northern Tablelands Newspapers (NSW)
- Maddison Connaughton, Editor, The Saturday Paper (National)
- Lisa Davies, Editor, The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW)
- Jemillah Dawson, South West Editor (WA)
- Matt Deighton, Editor, Adelaide Advertiser (SA)
- Genevieve Jacobs, Group Editor, Region Media Group (ACT)
- Jack Latimore, Online News Editor, NITV (National)
- Lisa Markham, Chief of Staff, ABC South East NSW (NSW)
- Paul Mitchell, Group Editor, Taylor Group of Newspapers (SA)
- Hugh Nailon, Director of News, Nine Melbourne (Vic)
- Lane Sainty, Editor, BuzzFeed News Australia (National)
- Ben Taylor, Managing Director, Taylor Group of Newspapers (SA)

One other editor regional Australia, participated and has been anonymised.

- E1, a regional newspaper editor.

## Nature and limitations of our work

The nature of interview-based research is that it yields qualitative responses rather than quantitative figures. It is not a broad ranging survey, and therefore does not claim to be representative in a statistical sense, but rather indicative and in-depth. In this case, our aim was to gain a rich

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dialogue-based insight into how newsroom managers in different sectors of the industry are thinking through their journalistic priorities in the context of reducing numbers of journalists. We feel we have achieved this aim.

Our work was limited by those editors and managers who agreed to participate, giving up around 40 minutes of their time to answer our questions. Some outlets we particularly wished to include did not agree or respond, and this has led to some gaps. In particular, we repeatedly approached the Australian Associated Press (AAP) to participate but were unsuccessful in securing an interview. The AAP's court reporting was identified by many participants, particularly those in regional and rural areas, as an element of their public interest journalism. We feel that having the perspective of the wire service would have considerably benefitted this work.

## Beats or rounds

As might be expected, given the spread of media outlets included in our interviews, there was a wide diversity of priorities when it came to the “beats” or areas of reporting speciality – considered important to each outlet.

Given our focus on public interest journalism, we asked whether journalists report from civic fora such as local government and courts, and whether newsrooms had the capacity to conduct longer term investigations. Though our report is structured to reflect our public interest journalism focus, it is not necessarily the way that newsrooms are organised. This was particularly true in local and regional media, where resource constraints mean that reporters need to be flexible enough to cover different types of stories and institutions without being solely dedicated to any one beat. In an average working day, a local reporter can be expected to report on both “public interest” topics and less weighty matters, such as entertainment or lightweight human interest.

Some newsrooms that are responsible for covering large areas organise their journalists on geographic beats. This can reflect an existing structure of production: Jemillah Dawson, who edits five weekly newspapers<sup>14</sup> in southern Western Australia at Australian Community Media, has a reporter at each of the papers who covers the entirety of their local area.

*Our journalists have probably about four to six rounds each, so they wouldn't have a sole round that they are assigned to and do stories only on that issue.*

Geographic beats are discussed in more detail below.

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14 *Busselton Mail, Bunbury Mail, Collie Mail, Esperance Express, Margaret River Mail.*

On the other hand, the national online outlet BuzzFeed Australia challenged our focus on civic fora coverage. Its “beats” had developed – in the context of a small editorial staff – to be more identity focussed, rather than resembling the traditional beats of print journalism. This was also a response to a perceived gap in the Australian market, and reflected BuzzFeed’s overseas experience. Editor Lane Sainty said:

*One of our reporters, Gina Rushton, her realm can be loosely defined as gender. She does a lot of reproductive rights, but also violence against women, other women’s health issues. My beat used to be LGBT rights in Australia.*

Is [organising around identity] part of the BuzzFeed culture?

*It is and it isn’t. Politics was the way we broke through in Australian coverage. We had a couple of high-profile journos ... people who were young and became quite high-profile online covering Australian politics, and then that’s how we broke through.*

*My role as LGBT reporter was focused on building a news round around identity. That was very much done because we have had similar success with an LGBT reporter in the US and the UK. So it was just something that was really working well for the company and wasn’t really widely being done in Australia at the time. It was something that they thought they would try here. And it worked well.*

BuzzFeed still covers politics and courts, but does so within the reporter’s specific focus. Sainty said that when she covered the courts, she didn’t cover them in a broad way but instead focussed on #metoo, defamation and immigration cases.

We also asked the editors what other beats they consider to be within the scope of public interest journalism. Common responses from other editors included coverage of public services, with health and education being particularly singled out.

Editor of *The Saturday Paper* Maddison Connaughton nominated two: asylum seekers and immigration, and environment and climate. Though both often intersected with politics, she said that they had also come to stand on their own, and reflected the interests of her regular contributors. Connaughton also stressed that, not being a daily paper, their function is not to perform rolling coverage with short, incremental updates in the way that a daily or online news outlet is able to, but rather to publish definitive takes every few weeks, which, she noted, presents its own challenge.

E1, a newspaper editor from a regional area, felt that the definition of public interest journalism should also encompass human interest articles. Often, of course human interest stories do

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incorporate an issue of broad public interest. For example, stories about mental health are often illustrated with stories of personal struggle. Stories about education often focus on individual stories, and so on. They said:

*Then there's public interest and we have, as journalists may think, that we should be writing about local government and about courts but I think if you have a look at what stories get traction, a lot of them are human interest stories. Human interest stories, I think, are shown to be very much public interest. I think the definition is far too narrow.*

## Breadth and depth

Most of the newsroom leaders we spoke to said they felt their coverage had retained much of its breadth despite the decline in resources. This was particularly true in the metropolitan newsrooms. Lisa Davies at the *Sydney Morning Herald* said that while they were covering all of their beats adequately, inevitably more resources would mean more depth.

*I don't have any specific areas that we don't do at all. We're a board church organisation that covers a wide variety of content. So I don't think we're necessarily missing huge chunks of coverage. I think we would probably like to do more, particularly around Indigenous affairs, but that process is happening. I'm adjusting the newsroom accordingly.*

Matt Deighton of the *Adelaide Advertiser* expressed a similar sentiment: confidence that the breadth of coverage is adequate, but that he would like to do more.

*I'd like to have more court reporters. I want to have more reporters in the councils. I'd like to have more reporters doing the local news, because, that's where it's not only important for in terms of the amount of traffic and subscriptions we drive through our website but also a lot of where the community interest is, but that's also an area that we cover that no one else does. I'm never going to sit here and say, 'yeah we've got heaps of reporters, I couldn't do any more in this area.' The more reporters you get, the better.*

Some editors indicated that while they feel that they are adequately covering their beats, they are at their capacity in doing so. For some editors reaching that breadth has come at the expense of depth. Paul Mitchell, the group editor at the Taylor Group of Newspapers in the Riverland region of South Australia, was one of those.

*We have to skim to some degree. We have to take submitted material and we don't have the time necessary to give it the treatment that we would if we had the staffing level of the ABC or others along those lines.*

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Taylor Group managing director Ben Taylor elaborated, focussing his comments on The Bunyip, which primarily serves Gawler but is distributed in a wider area that includes the Barossa Valley.

*The breadth and depth of reporting has really been cut back. Our page numbers have been reduced, and that newspaper has been hit with declines more than any other in the group, hence the cutbacks in journalism and staff in general. Most of that is due to real estate advertising declines – we have a massive hole in our advertising revenue.*

For others, there is very little capacity to respond to change or fill temporary gaps. Lisa Markham and Laurie Bullock said that when all of their staff are working then all of the issues get covered, but that it can be difficult to maintain that as their reporters' availability shifts. Bullock clarified that

*Where it gets tricky is when staff are on annual leave. On the non-dailies, the staff get six weeks of annual leave per year ... so particularly for those that are the only journos on a paper, it can be hard on production.*

He also noted that the changing production cycle for news has meant that even as the number of journalists has shrunk, each journalist is writing more every day than they were a decade ago.

*When you're working toward a print deadline, you write enough to fill a page. Now you've gotta write more, so you write more.*

Two editors, Genevieve Jacobs and Jemillah Dawson, said that they are not adequately covering all of their beats. Jacobs said that she is planning an expansion that will give RiotACT a court reporter for the first time, and change the way that the territory government is covered so that they have a journalist physically present in the legislative assembly rather than reporting at a distance. Dawson said that she would need at least one more journalist. When asked what coverage was suffering due to the lack of resources, she said that:

*I'm really missing out on investigative journalism, and there's a fair bit of breaking crime we missed out on because we don't have enough staff. And even sport as well, there's so much local sport in our communities and we just can't cover them all. So we only cover the really big ones.*

Investigative journalism was highlighted by many editors as a goal that they would like to pursue if they had more resources. This is discussed further below.

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## Local news

The particularly concerning decline in local news has been identified both by the ACCC and by PIJL and other research, as mentioned previously.<sup>15</sup> Most of the newsroom leaders we spoke to acknowledged that it was important to report on local government – however this was also the level of government they were least likely to cover.

The *Adelaide Advertiser* covers local government, and Matt Deighton said that their newsroom benefits from having the local newspaper chain Messenger Newspapers – also owned by News Corp – as a hub for local news coverage.

*The Messenger is integrated pretty heavily into our newsroom now as part of our urban affairs team, and they drive a lot of that content. There's a massive appetite down at a place like Adelaide for local news. I was formerly the editor in chief of Messenger, and it has always been a serious paper, and that is reflected in the seriousness of the reportage.*

Deighton said that he is confident in the level of coverage of local news, but that he'd always want more reporters.

*I want to have more reporters being in the councils. I'd like to have more reporters doing the local news, because it's important in terms of the amount of traffic and subscriptions we drive through our website, and it's also a lot of where the community interest is. That's also an area that we cover that no one else does.*

Local news is a broader set of issues than just coverage of local government: it includes local courts and crime, businesses and events in the community. For the *Advertiser*, urban affairs has emerged as an area of local news that is of great interest to their audience – a beat with a particular focus on urban planning and local council decisions. Those insights came once the paper implemented a paywall and began to closely track the content that was being accessed.

*For us, introducing a paywall opened our eyes to a lot of areas of interest that we probably hadn't resourced properly in the past. Urban affairs, development applications, businesses going into liquidation, those sorts of areas have enormous interest in Adelaide, enormous interest, and that has allowed us to do stuff since the introduction of the paywall.*

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15 Simons and Dickson 2019.

News Director at Nine's Melbourne newsroom Hugh Nailon said that local news is a priority for the network, but also indicated that it's an area where a lack of resources is very keenly felt.

*In local news it's people looking to their local network to stand up for them and to go to bat for them. Some of those stories, the campaigning journalism, is an area that we do some of but we could do more if we had the appropriate resources.*

*We did Growing Pains, which was a series of stories over a week, which was out in the outer suburbs. We hosted at 4:00 PM local news from Cranbourne and we put a lot of effort into that. It was very successful. It touched a lot of nerves, but it was a real drain. We covered everything else, we got through, but we need additional resources to really do that sort of stuff properly and thoroughly.*

At National Indigenous Television (NITV), covering local issues also means looking at Indigenous land councils. As a national news organisation, Jack Latimore said that their reporters are assigned to geographic regions more than they are to specific beats, which helps their reporting.

*They develop relationships, say, the Queensland example, Ella [Archibald-Binge], she has established relationships with the anti-Adani [coal mine] mob up there in Wangan and Jagalingou. She'll be able to access a lot better detail around these stories. If we had somebody based out of Sydney that was on the beat of mining or environment, it would be far more difficult and expensive for them to be flying out there.*

Geographic beats have their downsides, particularly where journalists are unreasonably expected to cover very large areas. Jemillah Dawson indicated that covering a large area with few staff forces difficult decisions about what to prioritise. This is particularly true for papers that cover multiple local government areas:

*Esperance has the biggest geographical area to cover but a small population. There are technically two local governments in that patch but one is a two hour drive, making it impossible to cover those stories all the time. Even though there's people in that town that read our paper.*

Laurie Bullock had a similar view. As Group Editor in the Northern Tablelands at Australian Community Media he oversees ten different newspapers, from those serving large regional centres such as the Armidale Express, to the Guyra Argus, covering an agricultural town with a population below 2,000 people. He stressed that each place is different, and that each community has different expectations of and makes different contributions to the papers. Resource constraints can make it difficult to reflect that difference.

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Relationships between journalists and the community are typically much closer in the local news context than in national news and metropolitan areas. Here, too, resource constraints can have an impact: Bullock described an incident in which a community group approached him to cover an event they were holding, and his inability to do so led to tension months later when he wanted to discuss a different issue. The group declined to speak to him, saying they weren't impressed that he hadn't covered their earlier event.

This is an indication that lack of resources can undermine the social position of a news outlet within its community in a fundamental fashion. Declining resources also, inevitably, alter the balance between advertising influenced news and other news.

Ben Taylor said that maintaining the close relationship with the community was essential from the business perspective.

*We've had to work a lot harder at establishing a better relationship with local businesses. We've had advertising decline in so many areas, we have had to be closely involved with the local business to maintain that retail revenue.*

*Having good creative staff helps with that. We've also spent more money on providing other value-adds, like website and online business directories, so that we can retain clients in print while looking after their entire marketing needs.*

*Newspapers have become a lot more willing to work on an advertorial basis, and where there are state-wide campaigns of public interest – road safety, etc – we'll provide editorial coverage to enhance them more readily than we would have 15 years ago.*

Most of the other regional news editors described local news as the bread and butter of their coverage, but they didn't assign reporters to civic journalism beats in the same way that might occur at larger metropolitan newsrooms.

Lisa Markham, whose radio and television newsroom in Bega covers the far south New South Wales coast from Ulladulla to the Victorian border, as well as inland to the snowfields and the Monaro, said that all of their staff contribute to reporting and that the division is more along production lines.

*Our news people cover all of it, and then our feature reporters would step in if there was a story that could be better done with more time, to spend more effort on photographs or the links for online, or more investigation needed, or more television needed. The radio team looks after what they do on radio, but we all contribute to story ideas and decide how to cover things.*

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RiotACT editor Genevieve Jacobs said the same, but also indicated that a goal of theirs is to have people dedicated to those beats.

*We're particularly keen to be able to do court reporting, and to change the way we do local politics reporting. To have somebody actually more often on the ground, in the legislative assembly. We do quite a lot of political reporting now, but it's at a distance. So, one of our priorities is very much to be able to have someone who is in the assembly, and is more dedicated to that full time.*

## Using externally generated content

One of the trends in Australian media is an increased availability of content from external outlets, including under Creative Commons licences. This includes content generated by NGOs, universities and other media outlets – the research publishing site The Conversation being perhaps the best known example. This content has added to that which is available through the traditional wire services, such as the Australian Associated Press and Reuters – services to which most mainstream media subscribe to in order have content available for use.

We asked each of the editors questions designed to examine the extent to which content generated externally to their organisations was used, and the extent to which this compensated for the deficits in their own journalistic capacity.

It was clear that these services do not compensate for the challenges of providing local news. The importance of local relevance came up unprompted in almost all of the responses to these questions.

Few outlets reported using Creative Commons material. Lisa Markham said that articles published in The Conversation can sometimes present an idea that can then be adapted to the local context.

As previously noted, Jemillah Dawson said that wire copy can help overcome geographical challenges, but that it rarely makes it into the weekly print edition.

Matt Deighton said that the wire services are important for world news, but when asked if the use of that material reduces the need for staff journalists, he said it did not.

*If you look at our website, you'll see that that 99% of stuff on the home page is local. If*

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*you're paying for the print edition, it's 50-80% local. Our website would be less than that because it's much deeper. But the home page would be almost 100% local, unless there's something like Christchurch or something major is happening interstate. Our biggest driver is local news and that sort of goes to the whole core of our business strategy, because that's all people care about in terms of wanting to pay for news products. You can get a lot of that [syndicated content] elsewhere, and get it for free. So it helps fill the paper, and it certainly helps fill the website, but it's not what drives the strategy.*

The editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* Lisa Davies similarly said that syndicated content isn't essential to meet the needs of the audience.

*It's becoming less and less important for us because we are a subscriptions business and we prioritise the content we seek out readers want and are willing to pay for. It doesn't serve my, those goals necessarily to fill a newspaper with a lot of content that is available elsewhere.*

Like the *Advertiser*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* primarily publishes wire material where it relates to international news, Davies said. She too disagreed that it reduced a need for staff journalists.

*We've currently got five international correspondents, but even if we had six, seven, eight ... I don't think that any Australian outlet can cover the rest of the world in a satisfactory way. So, no, it doesn't reduce our need for correspondents. It supplements what they do. We want our correspondents to tell us international stories through the eyes of Australia and translate international events for an Australian audience.*

Highlighting again the close relationship between local newsrooms and their audiences, a few of the editors in regional areas said that they receive and publish contributions directly from the community. In some cases this could be opinion pieces, similar to what would occur in other types of newsrooms. Laurie Bullock said that academics from the university in Armidale often contribute columns to the free weekly paper.

*We also had a psychologist sending [a column] in that got picked up by the daily papers. Now all the daily papers picked him up ... he now writes for the Illawarra Mercury, Bendigo Advertiser, he gets run all around the country. We don't run him anymore, because we just don't have the space to get to all the contributions coming in from the university, and he's getting a good run around these other places.*

Unique in the local news context though was the running of news stories directly from the community. This was particularly true for sports coverage, which a couple of editors noted.

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## Investigative journalism

Recent scholarship has painted a comparatively optimistic picture for investigative journalism in the digital media age. Carson, for example, found that investigative journalism is not declining in line with falling print circulation.<sup>16</sup> Though it tends to be more expensive to produce than other forms of reporting, she argues that because it is as an exclusive, high-quality product, it helps a newsroom to build credibility with its audience and is a unique selling-point for commercial media businesses.<sup>17</sup> Fulfilling the watchdog function of the press in liberal society was seen as a core value of some newsrooms<sup>18</sup> and for all the disruption of the digital era, it is also marked by increasing access to data and the potential for global collaborative journalism.<sup>19</sup>

Carson's study found that while there hasn't been a decline in the overall amount of investigative journalism, specific categories of investigative reporting are weaker than others. She highlights corporate investigative reporting in Australia<sup>20</sup> and the US media's largely uncritical coverage leading up to the 2003 Iraq War.<sup>21</sup>

Investigative journalism can be a hard thing to identify as a distinct product from other types of original reporting. Maddison Connaughton described it as:

*...turning a focus to things that are not being covered elsewhere and directing resources in order to break stories about that industry or company or department or region. It's really about focusing in on something and directing journalistic resources towards, in the best version of it, holding the powerful to account in that industry or company, etc. I think a key part of that is that you're doing the primary reporting that perhaps hasn't been done anywhere else. You're not re-reporting or quoting, you're sort of the first pass at it.*

We asked our editors about the value they placed on investigative journalism, and the priority they placed on it in the context of declining resources. All regarded investigative journalism as very important, but not all had the capacity to do it. This was an example of the decline in depth of reportage, identified earlier. However, a number of editors said that if more resources were available, they would do more investigative journalism as a priority.

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16 Carson 2019, p. 112  
17 Ibid p. 196  
18 Ibid p. 95  
19 Ibid p. 144  
20 Carson 2014, p. 740  
21 Carson 2019, p. 61

Matt Deighton said that if he had more resources at the *Advertiser* he would prioritise the related pursuits of data journalism and investigations.

*In a perfect world you would love to send someone away for three months to just investigate. The old Spotlight team.*

While many newsrooms don't have dedicated investigative staff, they have the capacity to pursue it when the story calls for it. Jack Latimore said that NITV has recently established an investigative unit with two reporters. These journalists work with correspondents on their regular beats to develop stories. Lisa Markham said that a similar approach is in place at their newsroom.

Hugh Nailon said that in the Nine Melbourne newsroom reporters work with the features producer in order to develop stories over the long term.

*If a journo's got a particular story, we'll do it. I don't have a prescribed investigative reporter, if you like. It happens if a journalist has got the idea and I can get them off the daily diary to go and pursue some stuff. I always encourage it. It's just a matter of them I guess developing the idea themselves and not being pigeonholed as the reporters.*

Maddison Connaughton said that investigative journalism is an increasing focus of *The Saturday Paper*, but that it is still less regular than she would like it to be. She explicitly said that collaboration is beneficial to the process.

*What often happens at the paper is that reporters like our staff support each other and use the expertise to help each other on the research part of their stories. I think the more staff you have some, the more comradery or some sense of a team that you have, that's when investigative journalism can really happen. It does take a lot of resources and time and just, eyes, to read through numerous documents.*

She also highlighted job security as an important factor in conducting investigative journalism.

*There's a stability that comes with having full-time staff writers that enables you to do the kind of work that I don't think that you can always do with freelancers and for a number of reasons. One of them is that it is quite tricky to ask a freelancer to spend four weeks on a story because they have to manage their time and their resources as well. It's a lot to ask of someone. I think it's a lot more balanced when you're asking a staff writer who has quite a stable position to dig a little deeper and spend a bit more time on a piece.*

It's not that freelancers can't do investigative journalism, but that those on staff are at an advantage.

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Many editors who didn't already have investigative capacity nominated it as something they desired to start, and a high priority should more resources become available. This included local and regional media, such as the Taylor Group of Newspapers group editor Paul Mitchell:

*There are issues we'd like to tackle in more depth, to speak to more sources and get different angles. It's not practical though. Time constraints limit that quite severely.*

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*We'd weigh up a couple of factors – newsworthiness, impact on the readers, how accessible the information would be. If we knew we'd be able to access it relatively easily, we'd be more likely to do it. If it would be a major exercise that would take up too many hours then we couldn't. That's just the reality.*

As we have noted, a common response from interviewees was that while they may be adequately conducting the breadth of public interest journalism, resource constraints limited their ability to go deep. This was particularly true for local and regional newsrooms.

Genevieve Jacobs similarly said that while she would love to introduce investigative journalism to RiotACT, it's unclear how she could do so.

*Look, I've been a journalist for 30 years, and I have never in my life worked for news organisations that have had the capacity to do investigative journalism. The kind of news I've done all my life has been for small regional or rural papers, and things for the ABC here in Canberra as a news presenter. And now, heading up RiotACT. We just don't have, and never have had, that capacity. There's never been the luxury of people being able to develop stories, over days and weeks. There's always been the insatiable demand for, "Well, what have you got organised for 9 o'clock?"*

In all, investigative journalism was the type of journalism that was most lacking across the newsrooms studied. Those editors who lacked the resources to conduct investigations all said that they would prioritise it if they could, and all agreed that investigations are among the most important work that a journalist can do.

We pick up on this theme in our conclusions, below.

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## Courts

The courts are a reliable source of news about issues of public importance and interest, but the media coverage of the courts also serves an important democratic function. Public scrutiny is central to the essential to the concept open justice: that justice should not only be done, but that it should be seen to be done. It serves as a guard against arbitrary decision-making and facilitates trust in the system. Bosland has written that

*it is beyond doubt that reporting of the courts by the mainstream media has become an integral component of the practical operation of an open and transparent system of justice.<sup>22</sup>*

Court reporting can also be, however, a resource-intensive undertaking. It is a specialised area of public interest journalism, owing to the complexity of cases and the unique restrictions placed on information. The long timeframes over which court cases play out may not neatly accord with the demands of news production.

Simons and Bosland conducted a recent case study of court reporting in the state of Victoria and found that<sup>23</sup>

- There has been a long-term decline in the number of journalists reporting the courts;
- Court reporters are less likely to be present in court for the entire duration of a case they are covering. Sometimes they do not attend at all;
- The level of experience and knowledge among court reporters has fallen as senior journalists have been made redundant or retired;
- Civil cases and suburban Magistrates' Courts are rarely reported;
- The digital environment is affecting story selection and presentation, for example, CCTV footage is popular on social media and sought out by reporters. Live updates of cases can strip the context from a nuanced argument;
- There is no longer a dedicated 'law reporter' (as opposed to courts) in Victoria, leading to diminished legal commentary;
- Judicial officers noted the decline of post-sentencing wrap-up articles, and lamented the missed opportunity to educate the public about how the system operates.

The courts have responded to these trends in different ways: some are positive, like making more information available, including transcripts and judgments, in order to ease the pressure on time-poor journalists. On the other hand, it appears that the courts are compensating for the drop in experienced reporters by controlling information through the issuance of suppression orders.

<sup>22</sup> Bosland and Townend 2018. pp. 183-184.

<sup>23</sup> Simons and Bosland 2019.

Importantly for considering the opportunities of the new media environment, none of the informants for Simons and Bosland's study could name an instance where a citizen journalist stepped in to file independent reports. The authors suggest that the accreditation processes of the court might be discouraging to non-professional reporters.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the editors we interviewed said their outlets did cover the courts to some degree, but they acknowledged that it was resource intensive. Most felt they should do more court reporting. This is an example of where the distinction between breadth and depth, mentioned earlier, begins to dissolve. Newsrooms may well still cover the courts, but they are not covering as many cases, and those they do cover are not reported in depth.

E1 noted that this question was very pertinent as of the time of this research paper's writing. At the time of interviewing, representatives of a local company are facing charges in the capital city. The newspaper has been unable to cover the trial, which is of significant public interest in the area, because the paper does not have resources to put a staff journalist into the city for the duration, E1 said.

*We simply do not have resourcing to put somebody into [the capital]. In the past we may have used resources of Fairfax or something like that to get that coverage. But it's challenging to get coverage even from them at the moment.*

E1 explained that a writer did approach the paper about covering the trial from the city, but the editorial staff declined to hire that person because they felt the writer "had an agenda".

*Of course, if we weren't in court, we could not have known whether that agenda was being projected in the story because we didn't know whether what we were being told was true or false ... We're trying to get what coverage we can from other sources, obviously with acknowledgement, but we don't have any sources to cover that.*

Court reporting is time and resource intensive for any newsroom, but particularly for one based hundreds of kilometres away from the venue. It is a specialised skill and carries significant legal liability for both the journalist, their editor and publisher if things go wrong. It is notable that E1's editorial judgment was to not take that risk with a freelancer who may not have been a reliable reporter. Without drawing too big a lesson from one anecdote, it perhaps an indication that some fairly routine newsgathering activities may become more difficult in an increasingly casualised industry, due to the legal and reputational risks associated with them.

This example also counters the assertion that media is still able to "cover the field". Here, in a story of intense interest and relevance to local people, even basic coverage is outside the paper's

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24 Simons and Bosland 2019, p. 9

reach. The combined factors of legal difficulties, the need for specialised skill and geographic distance defeat the endeavour.

Some of those outlets that did not report from the courts identified this as an area into which they would like to expand. Genevieve Jacobs highlighted the courts as a future priority for RiotACT, and said that planning is underway to facilitate this.

Lane Sainty covered the courts as part of her reporting at BuzzFeed before she became editor in August 2019. She reflected that the courts are a kind of local journalism unto themselves: it's often impossible to report them from a distance, and instead requires a reporter being in the room.

Matt Deighton said that the Adelaide Advertiser already covers the courts, but he nevertheless highlighted them as a place he'd like to put more reporters.

*The courts are really interesting, both civil and criminal. Civil court is a big driver [of traffic] for us, as is the Environment, Resources and Development Court and some of those peripheral courts that look at planning applications or capital disputes. There's a lot of interest in those areas for a city like Adelaide and if I could add resources to those, I would.*

Lane Sainty also noted that though she felt she was covering the courts adequately, there's far too much happening there on any given day for it to be covered in its entirety.

*I would say that even the ABC or News Corp or any huge company struggles to cover the courts well, because you just need so many reporters and so much bandwidth to be able to do that.*

Her response as a court reporter was to specialise in covering media defamation, #metoo-related and immigration cases. Since becoming editor, however, she has decided not to hire somebody to fill the dedicated court reporter role that she vacated.

While discussing police and crime news, Hugh Nailon said that Nine covers that beat particularly well, and noted that the availability of CCTV impacts the amount of coverage that it gets.

*It has always been a staple of local news, but I think that with the prolific nature of CCTV and police reporting it becomes kind of an easy default position. We've got to challenge ourselves a little bit more about the impact and the social relevance of reporting that.*

It was clear that in court reporting, the wire services are particularly important. Some editors isolated their use of wire copy to court reporting. Jemillah Dawson said that as well as covering criminal cases in the local courts, her papers will use AAP stories if a case in Perth has a local connection. She said that it is rare that wire copy is included in the print version of the paper, but it can help to overcome the geographical challenge of reporting from the capital.

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## Staffing

An issue that emerged from our conversations with editors was adequate staffing. There was a general view among editors that, alongside the financial constraints, it was difficult to find reporters with adequate skills to fill roles when they do become available.

Data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics<sup>25</sup> suggest that the overall number of journalists in Australia declined by nine per cent in the decade to 2016, with enormous falls occurring particularly in print (-39.3 per cent) and radio (-30.3 per cent).

The same data also indicates an increasing number of journalists are working across multiple companies or only partially within the media sector. A 2016 study provides more detail: of 225 Australian journalists who were made redundant between 2012-14, 31.1 per cent continued to work entirely within journalism, and almost as many (29.8 per cent) were working in a combination of journalism and other industries.<sup>26</sup> Of those who left journalism (22.2 per cent), most went into strategic communications in either the private sector (30 per cent) or in politics (26 per cent).<sup>27</sup>

It has been suggested that casualisation of the workforce is taking place as well. The share of full-time work in journalism in 2017 was 69.3 per cent according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics<sup>28</sup>, well-below the OECD's all-jobs average for Australia of 74.3 per cent.<sup>29</sup> The same 2016 study found that 174 respondents were working full time when they were made redundant, and of those who continued working only 72 (38.5 per cent) attained full-time employment afterwards. Those who left journalism were more likely to find full time employment (48 per cent) than those who remained in the industry (35 per cent).<sup>30</sup>

Redundancies also have an effect on those who stay behind. 51 per cent of those who were made redundant had at least 25 years of experience in journalism, a significant loss of expertise.<sup>31</sup> That drain of senior staff further impacts the ability of already financially-stretched newsrooms to train new hires.

There has been a longer-term shift away from industry cadetships and toward university degrees as the primary form of professional education. This is largely the result of an increased

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25 Australian Bureau of Statistics nd.

26 Zion et al. 2016. p. 125

27 Zion et al. 2016. p. 125

28 Australian Government nd.

29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nd.

30 Zion et al. 2016. p. 128

31 Zion et al. 2016. p. 124

emphasis on professionalism in journalism, a trend that goes back at least three decades. Journalism, media and communications degrees are now the normal, though far from the only, means of entering the profession. Thirty years ago, it was rare for cadets to have university degrees. It is now the norm.

In more recent times, the capacity of newsrooms to train recruits has been reduced, due to the resource constraints. As a result, many editors reported not being able to run cadetships, or not having time to adequately train early career journalists in the skills that are gained through vocational experience.

Some skills, our interview subjects agreed, could only be taught on the job”, but it was increasingly hard to find the time to provide support and training for new recruits. Genevieve Jacobs recalled:

*I was a cadet and I walked into the newspaper office with a fantastic old editor, who had started at the newspaper as a paperboy at the age of 14. He ended up as the managing editor across five rural newspapers. He trained me in going around to the police station and forming relationships there, and doing the court coverage, and turning up at the sports matches, and how to knock on doors, and how to do a story, and what precautions there were about everything. All of those things.*

*I just think that journalism is one of those things that you learn a lot by doing. You need to be a certain kind of person. I think that the journalism courses don't necessarily recognise that.*

E1 said that their newspaper built training of young journalists into its staffing strategies:

*We find that most journalists aspire to go on to bigger and better things and good on them. We expect that we'll have a flow of staff because of career aspirations and that's fine. We generally try to employ cadets who have done their degree at university or another institution, so they've got a tertiary degree in writing and hopefully journalism. We put them through our cadet course; from there they're mentored by the editor and other more senior staff. We employ a reasonable number of cadets and we're paying them for probably two or three years after they finish their cadetship. And then they'll probably move on and we replace them with another strong cadet.*

Jack Latimore said that the staffing challenges at NITV are particularly acute because, in addition to the difficulties in quality and geography faced by others, he is seeking his recruits from a much smaller pool of Indigenous journalists and graduates.

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So is the gap in funding or is it really in finding people?

*Finding people. As far as I know the budget went up a little bit in this financial year, which allows us to do more projects, but then we have far more struggles finding appropriate people. A lot of our journos are really young, unexperienced, and if it was up to me they'd be doing a lot more training before they got posted as corros.*

This is impacting the types of stories that NITV can do. Latimore says that he would like to introduce more data journalism to their stories but that there are very few Indigenous journalists with that specialty. He also said that cadetships, if they were properly tailored for Indigenous people, could help to solve that problem.

A related challenge faced by Latimore and others is staff retention: he said that NITV has a lot of staff who come through, skill up and then move on to the ABC and elsewhere. Specialty and regional newsrooms serve an outsized role in training young journalists, many of whom graduate straight from university degrees into local newsrooms. In this they hold additional importance to securing a sustainable future for public interest journalism, despite the smaller size of their audiences.

Geography can be an additional problem. Newsrooms in the regions can find it difficult to attract young journalists, particularly when they are far from a metropolitan area or university campus. Lisa Markham from ABC Bega said that it can be difficult to find sufficient casual labour to fill the gaps – there are far fewer freelancers available for irregular work than in the cities. Jemillah Dawson said that graduates pass through her newsrooms, but with few staff it can be difficult to train them. She also identified the isolation of working for a small regional newspaper as detrimental to job satisfaction and retention.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* still runs cadetships, but retention is a problem there too, particularly among the middle band. Lisa Davies highlighted financial constraints as a reason for that: the newspaper can't compete with wages paid by the corporate communications sector and when people reach the stage of life where they're having families and buying houses, they go looking for opportunities outside of journalism. For Davies, keeping a steady stream of journalists moving up through the cadetship program is one solution to that problem.

Maddison Connaughton noticed a similar thing when she was hiring for a position at *The Saturday Paper*. She said that she was surprised by the lack of applications from mid-career journalists.

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*The thing that emerged to me was that it was really stratified. There were really ambitious young journalists who offered one great option, and there were multiple senior journalists who were interested in stepping away from daily and going to a weekly.*

*There wasn't really that mid-career applicant, someone who had had five to ten-years' experience and had experience writing big stories and maybe has worked across a few different publications in a few different mediums, which was something we were looking for. It did surprise me. I thought that that would be the bulk of the applications, but it was quite clear that there was sort of these two distinct groups: emerging and established or later-career journalists. The mid-career journalist wasn't there. There were a few, but there weren't as many as I expected.*

## Where would additional resources be deployed?

We asked each editor where they would put a new journalist if one started tomorrow.

Supplementing existing activities such that reporters weren't spread too thin, both in terms of geographic and topic areas, was a priority for some editors, particularly those in regional areas. Ben Taylor said that he would allocate a new journalist, if funding were available, to The Bunyip in order to pick up some of the suburbs that aren't currently being covered. Jemillah Dawson, similarly, said that she'd put a reporter into Busselton.

Civic fora were also a priority. Genevieve Jacobs said that if the person was right, she'd ideally put them into either the legislative assembly of the ACT government or the courts. Matt Deighton said that he would put a journalist into urban affairs, and had a very clear view of how he'd spend any extra budget he was given.

*Anything I'd do now would be pure reporters. That's the only way we'll survive long term, having people breaking stories that no one else can get. That's the whole thing, and being a watchdog as well, because you don't want a situation where the councils aren't being held to account. Where nobody is doing all the scrutiny on different levels of government. So if you give me a million bucks tomorrow, I'd spend it on however many journalists I could get.*

Some nominated specialised coverage, either by restoring lost capacity or adding more capacity where there is a demand for it.

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Hugh Nailon isolated consumer affairs as an area of specialist coverage that Nine is currently undertaking, but where the resources are stretched quite thin.

*I think consumer and tech probably two rounds that we probably need to look at establishing somebody in those areas to provide some expertise because tech touches everybody's lives and we need to make it relatable.*

...

*People sort of thumb their nose a bit at consumer stories, but they, if told well and told with context, they're very important.*

## Findings

The data drawn from these interviews suggest that the decline in journalistic resources available to newsrooms is seriously undermining the quantity and quality of information available to Australians. It is also altering the relationship of local media, in particular, to audiences. This is a direct result of their clearly evident incapacity to report some stories of clear relevance and importance to their communities.

With inevitable differences given the breadth and diversity of the outlets represented in our interviews, some general observations can be made:

- Outlets nearly uniformly feel that their reporting lacks desirable depth.
- In some cases, particularly reporting of courts and local government, both breadth and depth have suffered.
- Investigative reporting is hanging on in national media outlets, but has become out of reach for smaller and local publications.
- Where local news outlets are unable to serve their communities, it tends to undermine their position, and thus their ability to gather news in the future.
- Local outlets are more likely to have their news agenda driven by advertising considerations

On a more optimistic note, all of our respondents said that any increase in journalistic resources would be spent not on lifestyle or entertainment journalism, nor on editing or promotions, but on increasing the breadth and depth of public interest journalism – both journal of record functions and also investigative work.

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A lack of depth and investigatory capacity are the main areas in which editors perceive they are failing their audiences. It is the main reported impact of declines in resources, and is the highest priority for action should more newsroom resources become available.

One final issue that emerged from these interviews is of human capital – the talent available to newsrooms. This was expressed in two ways:

1. Newsrooms in urban settings described the challenge of retaining skilled staff in the middle part of their careers; a time when reporting, writing and research skills are honed and developed and could be turned to producing the investigative and public interest journalism that newsrooms would like to publish.
2. Rural and regional newsrooms noted a lack of journalists to fill positions at all. Where newsrooms are able to sustain the investment of training young journalists and factor in attrition rate as those journalists move on to larger, urban settings, they report satisfaction in their ability to train future journalists.

The training and career paths of journalists merits further investigation, as do ways to support cadetship programs.

## Conclusion

The case for journalism as an important public good has been made by others – most recently in the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry Report.

The research described here casts further light on the ways in which this public good is being compromised and eroded by the collapse of the business models that have traditionally supported most public interest journalism.

It also suggests that newsroom managers, at least, see increasing public interest journalism as a high priority should more resources become available. This adds to the case for additional public support for newsrooms, with the options for providing this canvassed in the other reports released with this research.

Furthermore, the material on training and personnel issues suggest a gap in our knowledge of contemporary career paths in journalism, and the ways in which this affects the quality and quantity of public interest journalism. This is an area of likely future research emphasis by PIJ.

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PIJI operates as a Major Research Project of the newDemocracy Foundation.

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