

Australian Newsroom
Mapping Project Report :
May 2021

[Public
Interest
Journalism
Initiative]

About this project

The Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) tracks indicators of changes to news production and availability through the [Australian Newsroom Mapping Project](#) (ANMP). The project launched on 1 April 2020 and tracks changes from 1 January 2019, with new data releases each month.

The map captures five *change types*, four of which can have either negative (contraction) or positive (expansion) attributes. The change types are ordered according to the seriousness of their impact on production or availability. Further detail is provided in section three.

Due to limited resources and the significant methodological difficulty in ensuring rigour, the project does not record any information about journalism job gains and losses. More explanation of the process and some guidance for interpreting the data can be found at the end of this report.

We do not presume that this is a complete database, but we do believe that this is the most comprehensive record of its kind. We regularly find changes that were missed or unreported at the time of the change, which therefore are added as backdated entries.

The data that informs the May 2021 report can be accessed [here](#).

This project benefits from contributions by the public and industry. To submit or correct data, or to discuss this report, please email: gary.dickson@piji.com.au.

Gary Dickson
Research & Projects Manager
31 May 2021

Suggested citations

This report: Dickson G. 2021. *Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: May 2021*. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/australian-newsroom-mapping-project>>

Project: Dickson G. 2020. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://anmp.piji.com.au>>

License

The Australian Newsroom Mapping Project, these reports and the associated data are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 \(CC BY-NC-SA\) International License](#).

1. Changes made in May 2021

New entries into the database

New masthead, station or website	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Loddon Herald, Wedderburn, Vic• Lilydale Star Mail, Lilydale, Vic• Nambucca Valley News of the Area, Nambucca Heads, NSW• 2230, Cronulla, NSW• The Rotunda, Fitzroy North, Vic
Total	5	

There were five new entries made into the database in May 2021.

Star News Group launched a new weekly newspaper in the Shire of Yarra Ranges in north-eastern Melbourne, the Lilydale Star Mail. The region already contains five other Star Mail papers. The first edition was Tuesday 4 May.

News of the Area, an independent local news media company in northern New South Wales, launched a new edition for the Nambucca Valley on 14 May. Other News of the Area titles cover Port Stephens, Myall and Coffs Coast, the launch of the last of which is also included in the database.

A new monthly print community newspaper, The Rotunda, launched in the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy North, in late May.

Also in late May Neighbourhood Media launched 2230, a new quarterly hyperlocal news magazine covering Cronulla. The title is the eighth in Neighbourhood Media's stable around Sydney.

In addition, one backdated entry was added to the database. The Loddon Herald launched on 28 January 2021 to cover the Loddon Shire region in north-western Victoria. Publisher Chris Earle told the ABC that the retreat of large media companies from rural and regional Australia led to his decision. He said, "we are seeing a resurgence in grassroots local newspapers in local communities because that's what keep communities connected."¹

¹ Field E. and Dalton T. 2021. Win News slashes more regional TV journalism jobs in Queensland, Victoria, parts of NSW. ABC News. 25 May.
<<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-24/win-news-job-cuts-tv-victoria-queensland-journalists-regional/100161978>>

Changed entries in the database

Masthead or station closure	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Orange City Life Newswatch, Orange, NSW
Total	1	

Orange City Life Newswatch, which launched in May 2020 as a local news-focused version of the existing Orange City Life magazine, was closed on 27 March 2021. In announcing the closure, publisher Bob Holland stated that the end of JobKeeper and sustained depression in advertising revenue contributed to the decision.² This entry has been changed from 'New masthead, station or website' to 'Masthead or station closure.'

Not included in the database

WIN Television announced on May 24 that it would end some local news bulletins in Victoria and Queensland.³ The following are the affected regions:

- Shepparton, Vic
- Bendigo, Vic
- Ballarat, Vic
- Gippsland, Vic
- Cairns, QLD
- Townsville, QLD
- Rockhampton, QLD
- Toowoomba, QLD
- Sunshine Coast, QLD

A new statewide bulletin will replace the local news bulletin and be broadcast in the same timeslot. These changes are set to occur on 1 July, which is also when a new affiliation agreement with Nine comes into effect. The ABC reported that in Victoria each bureau would be cut back to one journalist and one camera operator, meaning that up to 19 news workers could lose their jobs in the state.⁴

² Holland B. 2021. Newswatch to cease. *Orange City Life Newswatch*. 20 March.
<<https://issuu.com/cwpn/docs/oclifenewswatch20210320>>

³ Perry K. 2021. WIN Television axes 9 local news bulletins for statewide editions. TV Blackbox. 24 May.
<<https://tvblackbox.com.au/page/2021/05/24/win-news-axes-local-bulletins-for-statewide-editions/>>

⁴ Field E. and Dalton T. 2021. Win News slashes more regional TV journalism jobs in Queensland, Victoria, parts of NSW. ABC News. 25 May.
<<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-24/win-news-job-cuts-tv-victoria-queensland-journalists-regional/100161978>>

WIN's announcement⁵ also says that some additional regions will benefit from the statewide bulletins. It also indicated that it would hire some journalists to cover these regions, though this was unlikely to offset the losses elsewhere in the business.

These additional regions are:

- Mackay, QLD
- Bundaberg, QLD
- Hervey Bay, QLD
- Orange, NSW
- Dubbo, NSW
- Wagga Wagga, NSW
- Griffith, NSW
- Albury Wodonga, Vic

There is a strong crossover between the additional regions and WIN newsrooms that were closed in 2019: Bundaberg, Hervey Bay, Orange, Wagga Wagga, Albury Wodonga.

Currently, WIN TV viewers these regions receive 1.5 hours of national news programming from Network Ten from 5.30pm. When that affiliation ends and the affiliation with Nine commences in July, both the affected regions and the additional regions will shift to a 30 minute statewide bulletin at 5.30pm, followed by an hour of National Nine News at 6.00pm.

WIN News local bulletins in Wollongong, Canberra, Tasmania are unaffected by the change and continue in their normal timeslot, followed by National Nine News. The company has also not said whether other regions within their broadcast areas that also do not have local bulletins, such as Lismore, Taree and Mildura, will be affected.

As was noted in the March ANMP report,⁶ Nine has also announced that its own statewide news bulletins in regional Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales will be axed in favour of WIN's new bulletins when the affiliation commences.⁷

These changes will be reflected in the database when they occur on 1 July.

⁵ WIN Television. 2021. New timeslot for WIN news statewide bulletins to commence from July 1. 24 May. Accessed on Twitter. <<https://twitter.com/kelfuller/status/1396699666822008832>>

⁶ In March when noting this forthcoming change we said that Southern Cross Austereo would cut TV news bulletins rather than Nine. This was incorrect.

⁷ Lawrence S. 2021. TV news bulletins to go in Queensland, Victoria, NSW as Nine drops Southern Cross for WIN. ABC News. 12 March. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-12/nine-network-to-cut-regional-news-bulletins/13241774>>

2. Cumulative data

The data suggests there have been 199 total contractions and 98 total expansions of news production and availability as of 31 May 2021. There are 297 total entries in the database for a net change of -101.

The data breaks down into the following change types.

New masthead, station or website	89
Newsroom opened	3
Increase in service	4
New print edition	2
Merger	10
End of print edition	102
Decrease in service	18
Newsroom closure	6
Masthead or station closure	63
Total	297

The data suggests that there have been more contractions in total than expansions but the nature of the changes differs across those categories. More than half of all contraction changes are of the ‘End of print edition’ category, suggesting a significant shift to digital-only publishing among newspapers. The majority of this change type – 96 entries – are from News Corp’s decisions in April and May 2020 to stop publishing print editions of its titles in capital cities and regional Queensland.

This reflects a trend in the data generally: News Corp’s activities account for almost half of all entries across both expansion and contraction categories. 139 of 297 entries are tagged as News Corp, including the 96 ended print editions, plus 21 new mastheads, 18 closed mastheads and 4 mergers.

As can be seen in Figure 2, in the period since significant contractions took place between March and May 2020 – the first few months of COVID-19-related lockdowns and associated economic downturn – the trend has been toward growth, particularly in regional areas (Figure 4). Nonetheless, there has been a net loss of news production and availability across the surveyed period.

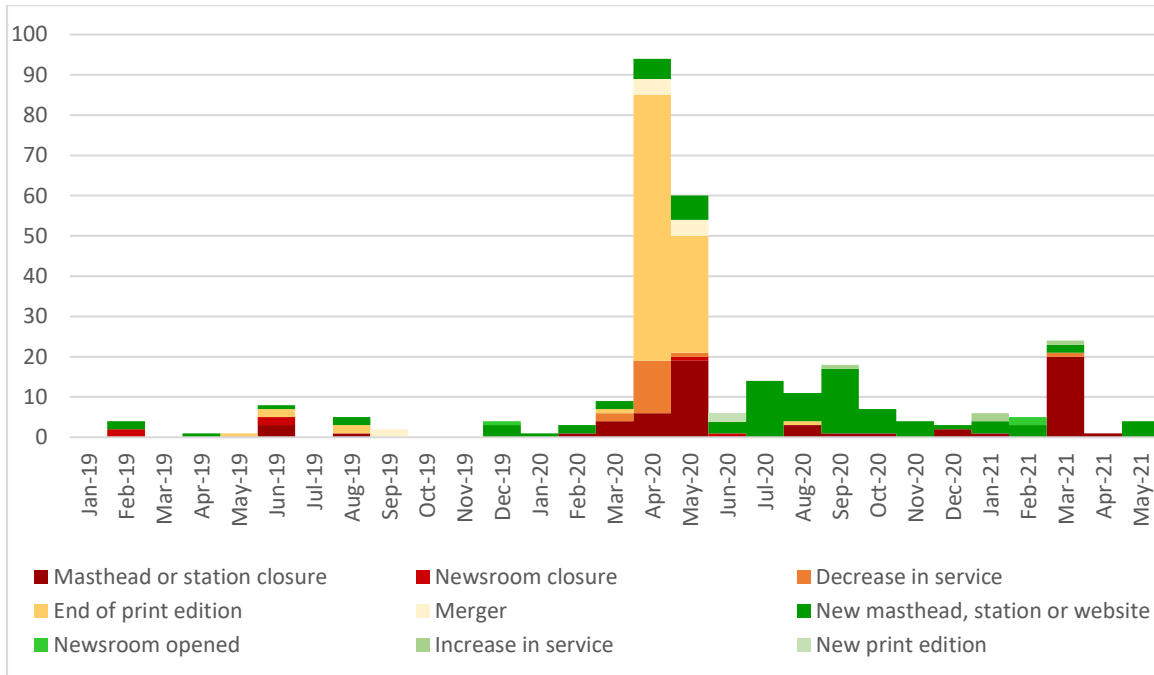


Figure 1: Change types by month since 1 January 2019, data as at 31 May 2021.

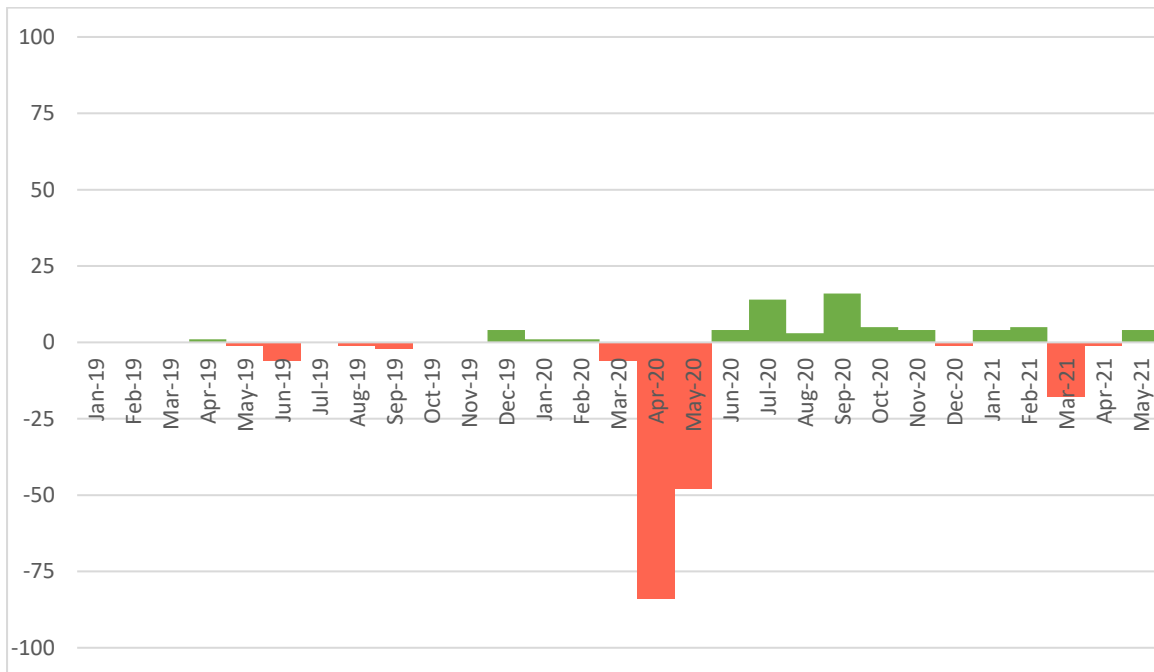


Figure 2: Net changes by month since 1 January 2019, data as at 31 May 2021.

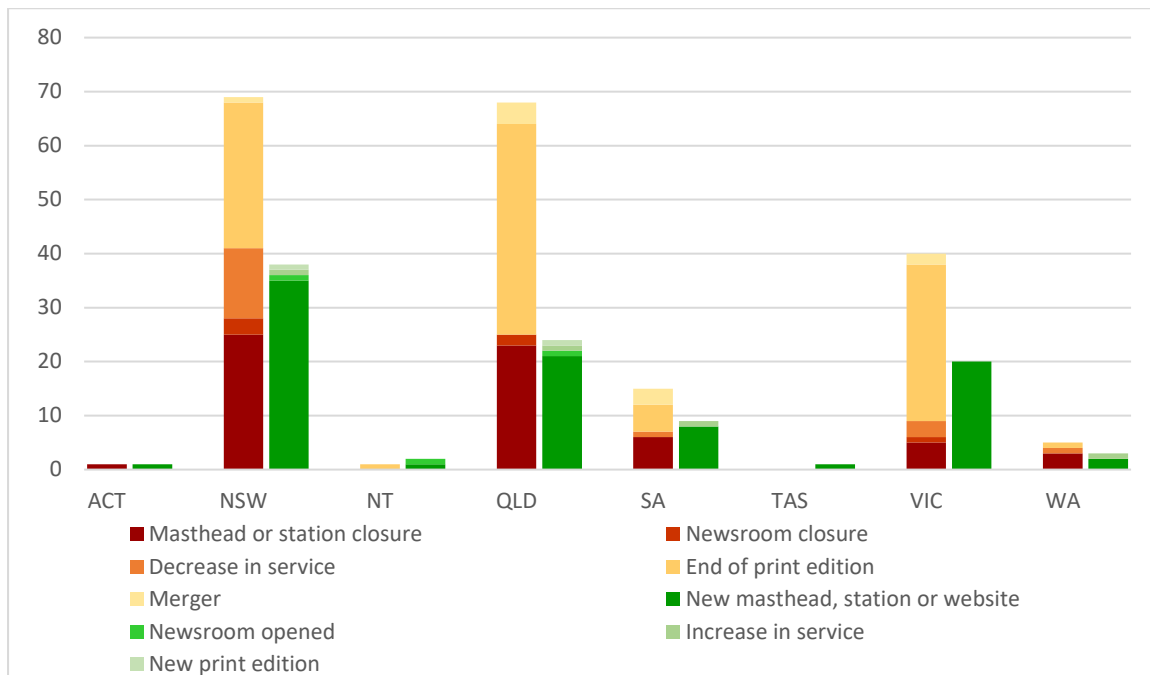


Figure 3: Change types by state, cumulative data as at 31 May 2021.

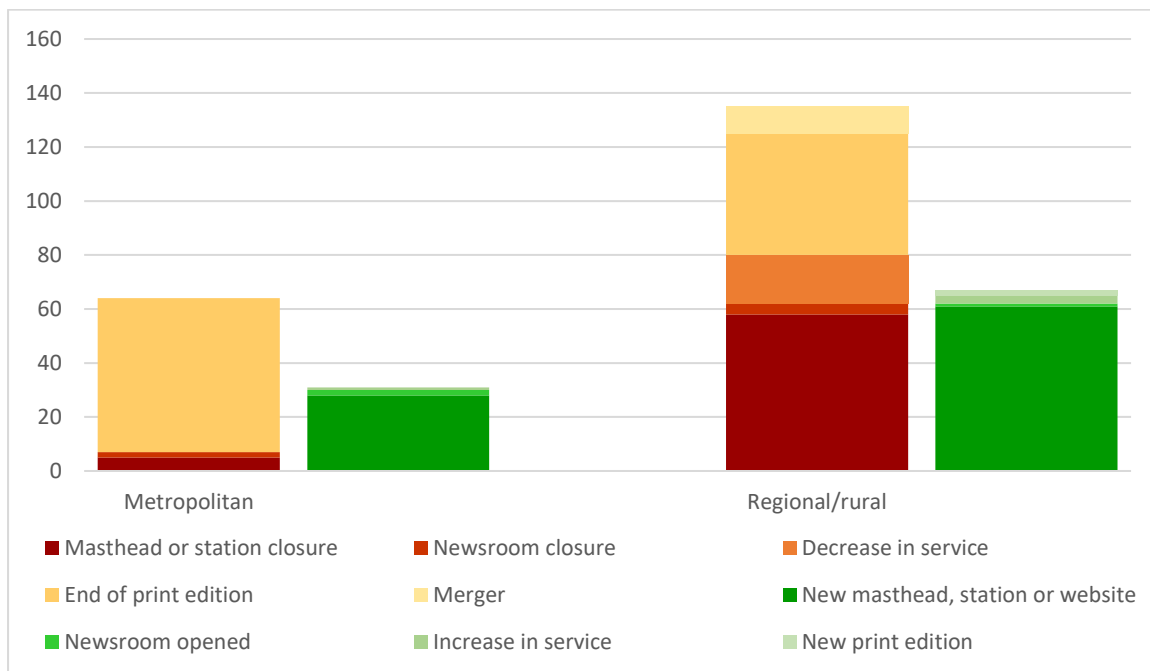


Figure 4: Change types by local government area classification, cumulative data as at 31 May 2021.

As can be seen in Figure 3, different states have been disproportionately impacted. Queensland has been the worst affected by news closures, reflecting particularly News Corp's strong presence there and the impact of its decision to close many of its regional titles.

As of May 2021, both Western Australia and Queensland have had more outlets close than open across the surveyed period, where most other states have seen openings exceed closures. In Queensland, when News Corp closed most of its regional titles in the state, many communities responded by launching new independent titles. In some places, such as Chinchilla and Dalby, multiple community and small publisher efforts launched nearly simultaneously. Over time, some of these have closed while others continued publishing, possibly reflecting the natural capacity of local news markets to sustain multiple outlets.

New South Wales accounts for the majority of the 'Decrease in service' change type (13 out of 18 entries). These entries have been strongly linked to Australian Community Media, reflecting that company's strong presence in NSW. ACM initially suspended many of its papers in April 2020. As discussed in the April 2021 ANMP report, some of those papers have been confirmed closed by the company, while other indicators collected by PIJI suggest that many more have been merged into other regional papers, with a corresponding drop in original, local news production.

Uniquely in Australia, Victoria endured two significant periods of COVID-19-related lockdown: between March and May 2020, in line with the rest of the country, and again between July and October 2020. The data does not suggest that the second lockdown had any standalone impact: only one contraction was recorded in the state in that period, as compared to nine expansions. Across the entire life of the project, Victoria has gained far more newsrooms than it has lost: only five newsrooms were reported closed in the state, while 20 were found to have opened.

It can be seen in Figure 4 that rural and regional Australia has borne most contractions, including the overwhelming majority of closures, but has also been responsible for most of the new growth that has occurred over the period.

3. Using this data

It is worth discussing some caveats around this project to avoid misinterpretation of this data.

The first caveat is to acknowledge that the changes captured are broader than ‘closures’ and ‘openings’ of news outlets. ‘Contractions’ is not a synonym for ‘closures’; it is a broader category of negative changes to news production and availability. This report is updated regularly in order to demonstrate the difference.

The data is likely to be an undercount of the changes that have occurred. It is actively maintained by PIJI and contributions are received from news organisations, from civil society and academia, and from the public. Even then, we do not have visibility into all news production and availability around Australia, and we do not presume to have a complete log of all changes that have occurred over the past two years.

The way that data is recorded in the database also leads to undercounts in two subtly different ways: in changes that occur over time, and in multiple changes that occur simultaneously as part of one event. Each news publication is entered in the database only once, and only the most recent and most serious change type is represented. Where an event involves multiple change types it is logged as the highest ranked category to which it fits. This means that:

- If a news website was founded in January 2019; launched a print edition in April; closed that print edition in September and closed entirely by December, only the most serious (and, secondly, most recent) change – the ‘Masthead or station closure’ in December – would be recorded, despite the multiple other positive and negative changes to production and availability across the period.
- If the closure of a print newspaper was logged, the event would have necessarily involved the end of a print edition; a decrease in service and the closure of a newsroom, but it would be only logged as a ‘Masthead or station closure’, as that change type ranks highest on the hierarchy.

The change types that we collect, listed in terms of the hierarchy, are:

1. **Masthead or station closure / opening;** meaning an entire news outlet closing or opening. In most cases this means a publication within a larger organisation, but rarely it can mean a whole news company.
2. **Newsroom closure / opening;** meaning a news company removing or adding a base from which to conduct news production, that having an impact on its coverage area. This change type only captures instances where there is an assumed change to the amount of localised news production (such as AAP opening a new bureau in Darwin); it does not include an outlet moving into new premises without a probable reduction in content (for example, when The Age’s Melbourne CBD newsroom moved into Nine Entertainment’s Melbourne CBD studios).

3. **Decrease / increase in service**; meaning changes in the amount of content that is produced, or, rarely, the availability of that content. Most often this category has captured observable reductions in locally-relevant, original content, but it can also include the launch of a new access point for existing content (such as a new radio bulletin produced in partnership with the local newspaper, as in Harvey WA). It can include changes to print publication frequency, but does not include print distribution area changes.
4. **End / start of print edition**; meaning changes in availability without a corresponding change in production. A newspaper that transitions to digital-only publication without reducing its coverage is an example.
5. **Merger**, meaning the coverage and/or content area of one news outlet being absorbed into another without a corresponding change in production. This change type is treated as a contraction but is the lowest level of concern.

The data also flattens the complexity of what is being gained and lost by not having any assessment of the output, institutional characteristics or content of the news companies: the closure of a newspaper with ten working journalists would be presented as equivalent to the opening of a website of one. Clearly these two events would have very different impacts on the production and availability of news, but it is beyond this project's scope to make this assessment for every change that occurs.

For these reasons caution must be taken in drawing conclusions about the general health of the news media ecosystem from only this project data.

Two further hypotheticals provide reasons for caution:

1. A news media ecosystem in which many news entrepreneurs had the confidence and the capital to establish organisations and outlets, the majority of which might fail, could be a healthy environment of public interest journalism production and competition but might appear in our data like a failing system due to the high number of closures.
2. A news media ecosystem in which all journalism was produced by a single company could be an uncompetitive environment or be failing to meet community need for diverse and locally relevant content, but would look healthy in our data if that one company was stable or growing.

Finally, we also note that this project does not identify news deserts. Research projects seeking to identify news deserts track news availability and/or production and look for locations where there is none. The ANMP tracks changes, meaning that a news outlet that has been stable across 2019-21 or a place where there has been no production for longer than that timeframe is invisible to this project.

Despite these caveats we do believe that the Australian Newsroom Mapping Project offers information that, in combination with other research, can provide insight into the changing nature of journalism production and availability in Australia.

About the Public Interest Journalism Initiative

The Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) is a specialist think tank researching how Australia can secure the future of public interest journalism. Established in 2018, PIJI's work informs practical policy solutions and public conversation on the importance of an effective, pluralistic news media of all sizes.

As a registered charity (ACN 630 740 153), PIJI is governed by a [Board of independent directors](#) and guided by an [Expert Research Panel](#) and [Policy Working Group](#). PIJI is a limited shelf-life initiative, due to cease operation in June 2023 in line with achieving its intended impact. It operates as a major research project of the newDemocracy Foundation.

[Public Interest Journalism Initiative]

CONTACT US

Public Interest Journalism Initiative


ABN 69 630 740 153

info@piji.com.au

www.piji.com.au

 [@piji_journalism](https://twitter.com/piji_journalism)

 [linkedin.com/company/public-interest-journalism-initiative](https://www.linkedin.com/company/public-interest-journalism-initiative)

 [/publicinterestjournalisminitiative](https://www.facebook.com/publicinterestjournalisminitiative)

