

Australian Newsroom
Mapping Project Report :
June 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 June 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.

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Research & Projects Manager
30 June 2021

Suggested citations

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1. Changes made in June 2021

New entries into the database

New masthead, station or website	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2204, Marrickville, NSW
Increase in service	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strait Talkin', Thursday Island, QLD
Merger	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cape York News, Cooktown, QLD • Torres News, Thursday Island, QLD
End of print edition	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Spirit, Ravensthorpe, WA
Masthead or station closure	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Halls Creek Herald, Halls Creek, WA • Cape and Torres News, Cooktown, QLD
Total	7	

Seven new entries were made into the database this month.

A cluster of activity occurred in Far North Queensland. In October 2019, two papers owned by Regional and Remote Newspapers – *Torres News* and *Cape York News* – were merged to form the *Cape & Torres News*. That paper, which briefly suspended in 2020 due to COVID-19¹, itself closed for good in late May 2021. Editor Corey Bousen wrote in the final edition that his father Mark, the “editorial life-blood of our family newspaper business”, had decided to retire.² Each of these three changes – two mergers and a closure – are now reflected in the database.

Following the closure of the *Cape & Torres News*, the Weipa-based *Cape York Weekly* newspaper expanded its coverage. A new liftout called *Strait Talkin'* now covers the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula. It was first published on 15 June 2021. “A community without a newspaper is a community that is forgotten, so it was an easy decision to answer the call when the Torres Strait lost its only print publication last month”, editor Matt Nicholls wrote in the first issue.³

A new title also launched in Marrickville. Neighbourhood Media’s expansion in Sydney’s suburbs continued with *2204*, a hyperlocal quarterly magazine.

Two further contractions were also identified, both of which have been backdated.

Community Spirit, a small community newspaper published in Ravensthorpe, Western Australia, shifted to online-only in February 2019. The *Spirit* is among the few

¹ Moir C. 2020. CoVID-19 stops press for Torres Strait’s only local paper. *City Journal*. 25 May. <<http://thecityjournal.net/media/covid-19-forces-torres-straits-only-local-paper-to-suspend-publishing/>>

² Bousen C. 2021. It’s time for goodbye! *Cape & Torres News*. 27 May. p. 1. <https://issuu.com/capeandtorres.news/docs/2021-05-27_cape_torres_news_0057_web>

³ Nicholls M. 2021. A new era for news in the region. *Strait Talkin'*. 15 June. p. 3. <https://issuu.com/capeyorkweekly/docs/st_edition_001>

Australian newspapers to have obtained charity status,⁴ where they list their activities explicitly as journalism: “[w]e are a local newspaper keeping our school, hospital and medical facilities, local retailers and tradesman [sic], our Shire and everyone involved in our community informed and up to date on the latest news and events.”

The other change new to the database this month was also in WA. The Halls Creek Herald was a digital newspaper published in the Kimberley. The Herald appears to have published its final digital edition on 23 April 2020, and its final online article a few days later.⁵ An email to the editor was not returned.

Changed entries in the database

End of print edition	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Queanbeyan Age Chronicle, Queanbeyan, NSW
Decrease in service	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moorabool Online, Bacchus Marsh, VIC
Masthead or station closure	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highlands Leader, Emerald, QLD
Total	3	

Three changes to existing data were made this month.

One of these is a good news story: the *Queanbeyan Age incorporating the Chronicle*, an Australian Community Media newspaper in the Southern Tablelands region of NSW and the ACT, had been listed as a closed masthead following a content audit late last year. In the period since, it appears to have returned to full strength, and so its change has been downgraded to ‘End of print edition’, as the shift to digital-only publishing which occurred last April appears to remain in effect.

Moorabool Online serves the Moorabool Shire Council west of Melbourne. It had previously been listed as ‘New masthead, station or website’ since it first launched in May 2020. A year on, it has been changed to ‘Decrease in service’. Content on the site⁶ has decreased, with only two articles published between 3 May and 30 June 2021; the site’s social media activity is similarly limited. An email to the editor was not returned. PIJI will continue to monitor the outlet over the coming months.

Finally, the Highlands Leader was listed as closed. The Leader was launched in July 2020 in Emerald, Queensland, to cover the Central Highlands Region. It follows the

⁴ Australian Charities and Not-For-Profits Commission. 2021. Community Spirit Newspaper Incorporated. <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/charity/642195eb843074ea15784011a21b3021>>

⁵ Hunting group failed to return to Galanda Community (Fitzroy Crossing). Halls Creek Herald. 26 April 2020. <<https://hallscreekherald.com/hunting-group-failed-to-return-to-galanda-community-fitzroy-crossing/>>; also see its Facebook page. <<https://www.facebook.com/hallscreekherald/>>

⁶ Moorabool Online. <<https://mooraboolonline.com.au/>>

closure of the Callide-Dawson Leader, another Longreach Printing Company publication, in March 2021. The Board of the Company issued a statement announcing the closure in early June 2021, in which it said that the paper had “failed to gain the support of enough advertisers to make the business viable”.⁷ The final issue was published on 11 June.

Not included in the database

Community Newspaper Group is a business that operates 13 community newspapers around the suburbs of Perth. It is owned by Seven West Media. In late June, SWM announced⁸ that it would be closing the Group and that it would relaunch the local newspaper titles within it under the banner of PerthNow, its digital news site, though the titles will continue to be published in print. The relaunch is scheduled to occur on 5 August 2021.

The announcement stated that PerthNow would be launched with ten new local editions, with the *Sound Telegraph* (Rockingham, WA) and *Mandurah Coastal Times* (Peel, WA) unaffected by the changes. This seems to suggest that some consolidation will occur: 11 community newspapers will become ten localised PerthNow editions. PIJI will continue to monitor these changes and, if any changes to news production can be identified, will include them in the database when they occur in August.

Further changes were announced as part of shifts in affiliation agreements between metropolitan and regional broadcasters. The probable impact of affiliation between WIN and Nine was discussed in the May 2021 Report and the affiliation between Network 10 and Southern Cross Austereo was mentioned in March 2021.

This month, Network 10 and WIN announced⁹ an affiliation agreement in the Northern NSW broadcast area. The impact of this agreement on the production of journalism is yet to be seen.

Separately, a deal that will see both Southern Cross Austereo and WIN broadcast Sky News on a dedicated regional channel¹⁰ is not included in the database, as there is no indication that Sky will either increase or decrease its news production in regions where it will be broadcast. Rather, it appears to be the case that the channel’s existing schedule of news and opinion will reach regional viewers in the same form as for metropolitan viewers. The channel will launch on 1 August.

⁷ Post by the Board of the Longreach Printing Company on Facebook, 3 June 2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/HighlandsLeader/posts/300235775111731>

⁸ Mumbrella 2021. Seven West Media to retire Community Newspaper Group brand. 29 June.

<https://mumbrella.com.au/seven-west-media-to-retire-community-newspaper-group-brand-690136>

⁹ Cheik-Hussein M. 2021. Network 10 and WIN sign affiliation deal for northern NSW. AdNews. 23 June.

<https://www.adnews.com.au/news/network-10-and-win-sign-affiliation-deal-for-northern-nsw>

¹⁰ Perry K 2021. Sky News finds a rural lifeline as regional bulletins get slashed. TV Blackbox. 31 May.

<https://tvblackbox.com.au/page/2021/05/31/sky-news-finds-a-rural-lifeline-as-regional-bulletins-get-slashed/>

2. Cumulative data

The data suggests there have been 206 total contractions and 98 total expansions of news production and availability as of 30 June 2021. There are 304 total entries in the database for a net change of -108.

The data breaks down into the following change types.

New masthead, station or website	89
Newsroom opened	3
Increase in service	5
New print edition	2
Merger	12
End of print edition	104
Decrease in service	19
Newsroom closure	6
Masthead or station closure	65
Total	304

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 304 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.

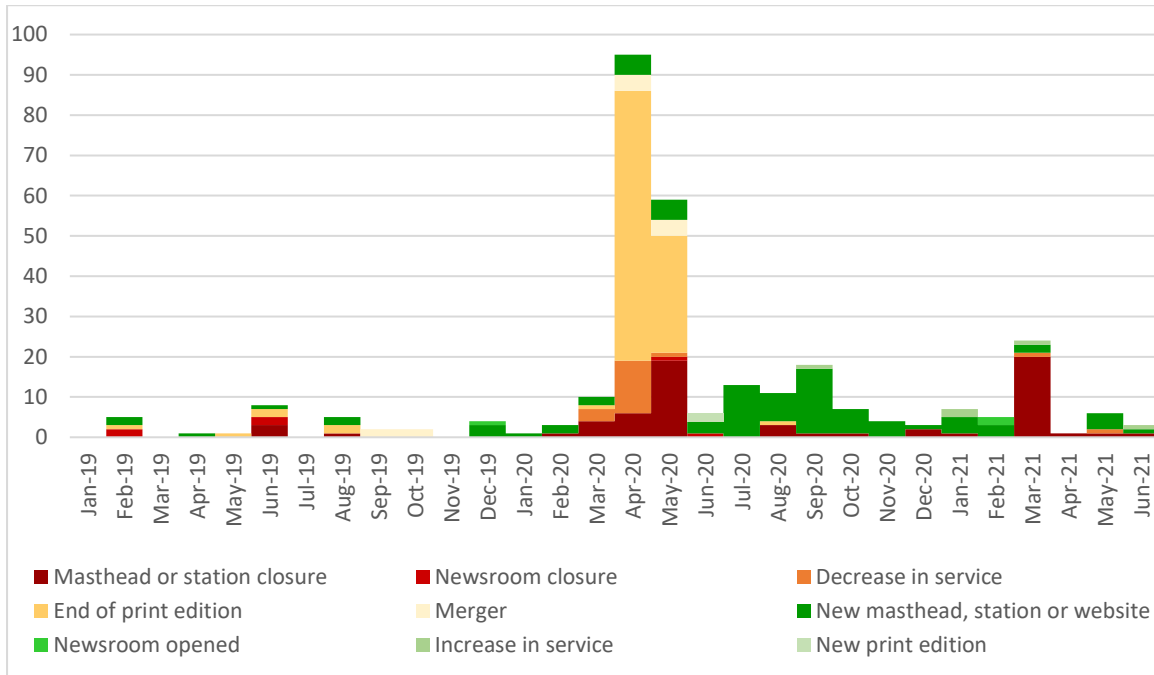


Figure 1: Change types by month since 1 January 2019, data as at 30 June 2021.

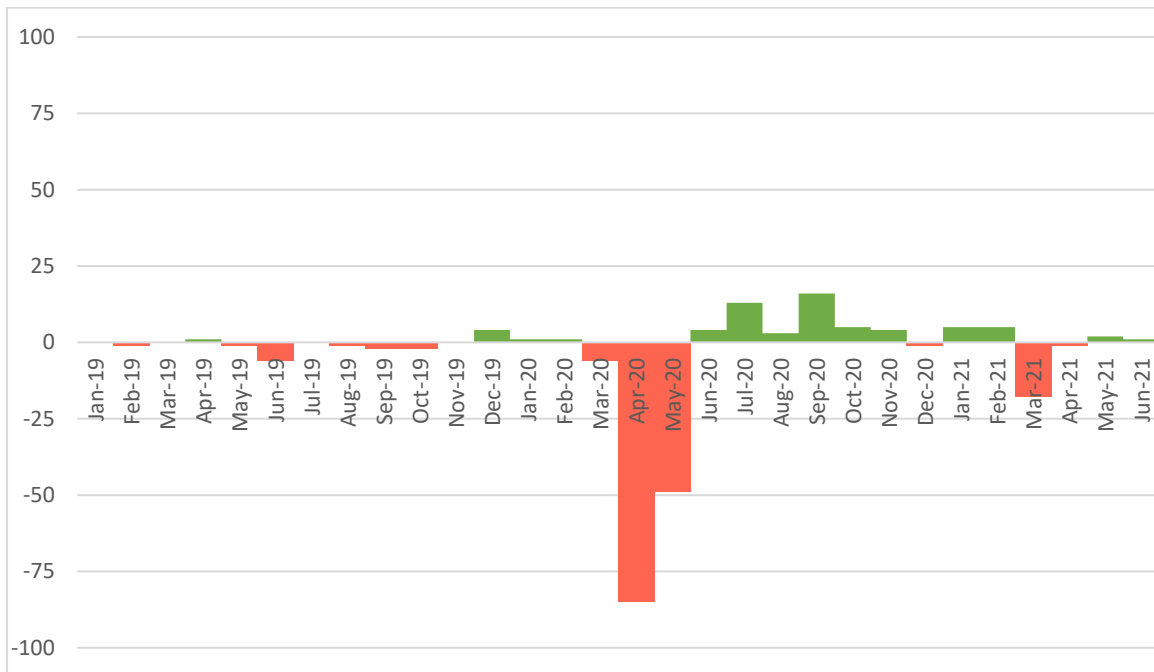


Figure 2: Net changes by month since 1 January 2019, data as at 30 June 2021.

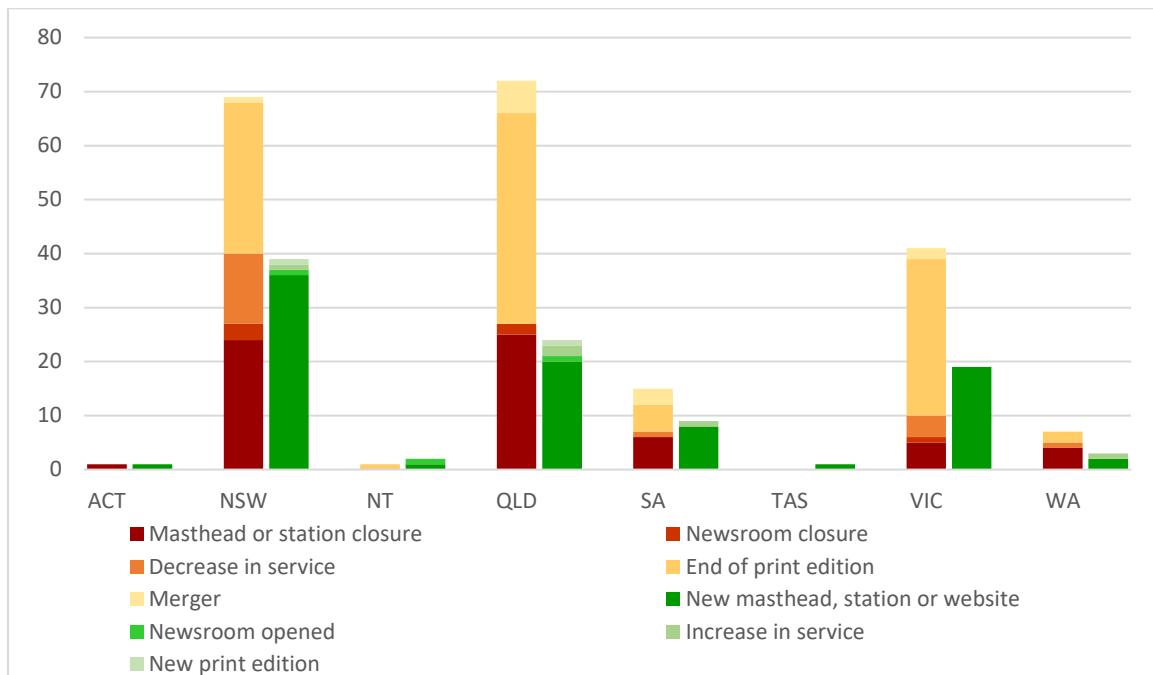


Figure 3: Change types by state, cumulative data as at 30 June 2021.

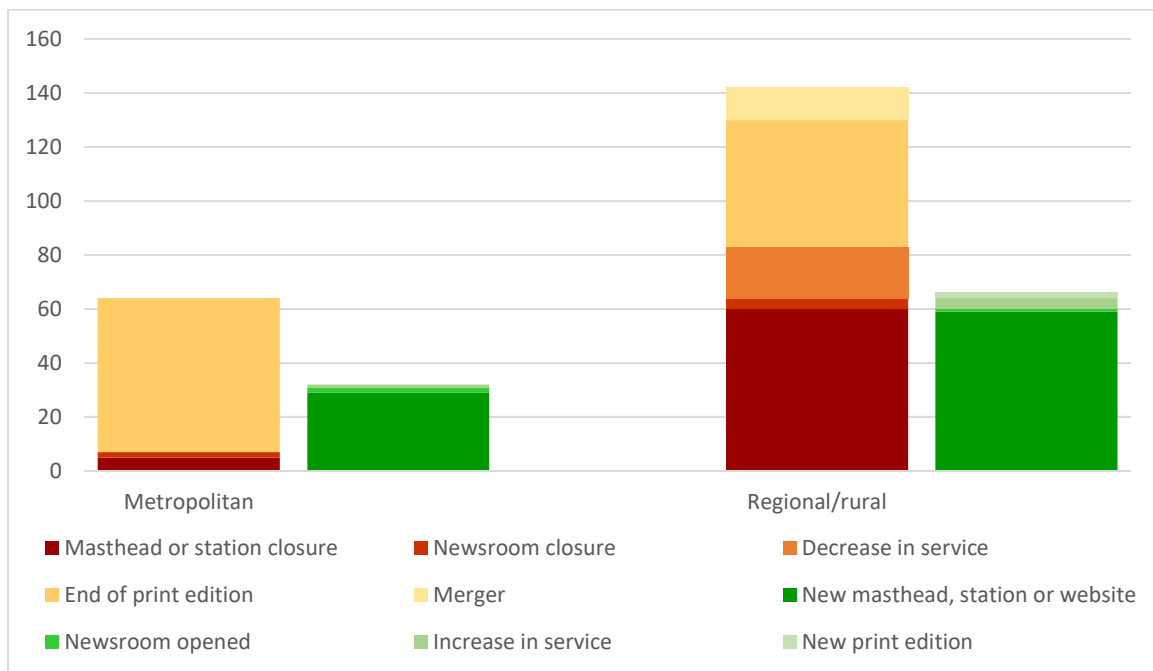


Figure 4: Change types by local government area classification, cumulative data as at 30 June 2021.

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 19 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 19 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. As of June 2021, the number of new mastheads has been again exceeded by the number of closed mastheads.

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.

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