

Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report : September 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, which then are added as backdated entries.

The data that informs the September 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 September 2021

Suggested citations

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1. September 2021 data

1.1 New records in the database

12 new records were added to the database in September, the majority of them contractions. One record has been backdated.

CHANGE TYPE	RECORD	#
New masthead, station or website	Greater Springfield Today, Springfield, QLD	1
Decrease in service	Bega District News, Bega, NSW	10
	Grenfell Record, Grenfell, NSW	
	Latrobe Valley Express, Morwell, Vic	
	Lithgow Mercury, Lithgow, NSW	
	The Macleay Argus, Kempsey, NSW	
	Manning River Times, Taree, NSW	
	Mudgee Guardian, Mudgee, NSW	
	Parkes Champion-Post, Parkes, NSW	
	South Coast Register, Nowra, NSW	
	The Young Witness, Young, NSW	
Masthead or station closure	The Somerset, Toogoolawah, QLD	1
TOTAL		12

Table 1: New records according to the change type, September 2021.

Continuing the expansion of the *Today* brand of newspapers that was also reported in the August 2021 report¹, Ipswich Media launched *Greater Springfield Today*, a new print newspaper covering the Springfield area in Queensland. The first issue was published on September 23.²

In mid-September Australian Community Media announced in some local newspapers that the publication frequency would drop from twice to once-per-week. A nearly identical article was placed in multiple papers³, which gave the ongoing financial impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns as the reason for the change.

¹ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: August 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/australian-newsroom-mapping-project>>. p. 2.

² Greater Springfield Today 2021. <<https://ipswichnewstoday.com.au/all-digital-editions/springfield-today-23rd-september-2021/>>.

³ See, for example, Fisher A. 2021. A stronger weekly edition. *The Young Witness*. 17 September. <<https://digital-print-edition.austcommunitymedia.com.au/YW/2021/09/17/3dissue/index.html>>

The company would not confirm to ABC News how many titles were affected⁴ but said that ‘its commitment was “unchanged” and the newspapers would “continue to cover essential local news on their websites between print editions”’.⁵ It did say that none of its regional daily titles were reducing their schedule.

PIJI undertook its own independent assessment of ACM’s print newspapers and identified at least nine that are affected, all of them in New South Wales:

- Bega District News, Bega, NSW
- Grenfell Record, Grenfell, NSW
- Lithgow Mercury, Lithgow, NSW
- The Macleay Argus, Kempsey, NSW
- Manning River Times, Taree, NSW
- Mudgee Guardian, Mudgee, NSW
- Parkes Champion-Post, Parkes, NSW
- South Coast Register, Nowra, NSW
- The Young Witness, Young, NSW

One further paper, the Glen Innes Examiner (NSW), we believe has also been reduced but we were unable to conclude that with the same level of confidence and so it has not been added to the database.

Most of these papers have been added to the database for the first time, as they were not affected in April 2020 when a large part of the company’s print output was suspended.⁶ The *Lithgow Mercury* and *Parkes Champion-Post* were returned to the database to reflect these changes, having been removed when they returned from suspension in August 2020.

Separately, *The Latrobe Valley Express* (Morwell, Vic) also reduced its print schedule from twice to once per week. Editor Bruce Ellen wrote that “the economic malaise inflicted on most local businesses and events during COVID lockdowns and restrictions has severely curtailed advertising”.⁷

The final new change also incorporates a changed entry and requires explanation.

DSX Publications is a newspaper company based in regional Queensland. At the end of last year it was publishing four papers: its flagship *The Somerset* (Toogoolawah, QLD) and three papers launched in 2020: *The Lockyer* (Fernvale, QLD), *The Crossing* (Dalby, QLD) and *The Chin Wag* (Chinchilla, QLD). Two further papers, *The Maranoa* (Roma, QLD) and *The Burnett*

⁴ Gorman M. 2021. Australian Community Media cuts back editions of some regional newspapers. ABC News. 1 October. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-01/acm-cuts-publication-regional-newspapers/100500826>>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Samios Z. 2020. Catalano’s Australian Community Media to suspend some print titles. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 14 April. <<https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/australian-community-media-to-suspend-some-print-titles-shut-print-centres-20200414-p54jom.html>>

⁷ Ellen B. 2021. The Express suspends Thursday print edition. *Latrobe Valley Express*. <<https://latrobevalleyexpress.com.au/news/2021/09/07/the-express-suspends-thursday-print-edition/>>

(Kingaroy, QLD), were announced but do not appear to have launched and were never added to the database.⁸

All four newspapers took an unannounced three-month break over summer 2020-21 and our emails to the editor at that time were not returned. Each was therefore listed as closed in the February 2021 report.⁹ *The Somerset* and *The Lockyer* returned to print in March 2021 and so those two changes were reversed.¹⁰

Both of these papers now again appear to be closed.

A story in the 26 May 2021 edition of *The Somerset* stated that due to a restructuring at the printer, the print format of both remaining publications would be changing.¹¹ No edition of either paper has been uploaded in the period since, and two emails to the editor have not been returned. One COVID-related report was published direct to *The Somerset's* Facebook in early August¹² but social media has otherwise been silent.

For the reasons discussed we have taken a cautious approach to again listing these two newspapers as closed, but did so in September. The change has been backdated to their final editions in May 2021. We will continue to monitor both publications in case they return to print in the future.

⁸ See The Maranoa Newspaper 2020. <<https://www.facebook.com/The-Maranoa-Newspaper-107287561043629/>>; The Burnett Newspaper <<https://www.facebook.com/The-Burnett-Newspaper-112057607228425/>>

⁹ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: February 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/australian-newsroom-mapping-project>>. pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: March 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/australian-newsroom-mapping-project>>. p. 4.

¹¹ The Somerset 2021. Exciting changes coming for The Somerset Newspaper. *The Somerset*. 26 May. <<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/65670139/the-somerset-may-26>>. p. 5.

¹² The Somerset Newspaper 2021. REPORT FROM TOOGOOLOWAH and ESK POLICE NEWS. 2 August. <<https://www.facebook.com/thesomersetnewspaper/posts/225918809534306>>

1.2 Changed records in the database

The following records which already existed in the database were changed due to new observations or information.

RECORD	NEW CHANGE TYPE	PREVIOUS CHANGE TYPE	CHANGE DATE	#
Wellington Times, Narromine, NSW	Decrease in service	End of print edition	15/04/2020	1
Nyngan Observer, Nyngan, NSW	Masthead or station closure	Decrease in service	23/08/2021	1
The Lockyer, Fernvale, QLD	Masthead or station closure	New masthead, station or website	27/05/2021	1
TOTAL				3

Table 2: Changed records, September 2021.

Two further changes were made to Australian Community Media titles in September. The *Wellington Times* has been downgraded from ‘End of print edition’ to ‘Decrease in service’, and the *Nyngan Observer* from ‘Decrease in service’ to ‘Masthead or station closure’ in September. The changes were made after information was provided to PIJI while we were researching the frequency changes that were described above.

The *Observer* website and Twitter account appear to have begun to redirect to the *Daily Liberal* (Dubbo, NSW) in August, reflecting a pattern that we first discussed in the April 2021 report.¹³ The *Observer* was discussed in that report as a paper we initially thought had closed but which appeared to restore its own services within the month. On that basis we held off listing it as closed, but have now made that change.

PIJI has been told that the *Wellington Times* has also been closed by ACM, but we have not been able to verify that through our research process. Unlike the *Observer* the newspaper retains its own website.¹⁴ An assessment of articles published on the site in September reveals that the *Times* is not publishing original local news and is only republishing syndicated and wire content. Consistent with other ACM titles in our database that are in this situation we have decided to downgrade the site but have not yet listed it as closed. We will continue to monitor.

Separately, as discussed above, we have also listed the DSX Publications newspaper *The Lockyer* (Fernvale, QLD) as closed. It was previously listed as ‘New masthead, station or website’, having launched in the reporting period of this project.

¹³ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: April 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/australian-newsroom-mapping-project>>. pp. 2-3.

¹⁴ Wellington Times. 2021. <<https://www.wellingtontimes.com.au>>

2. Quarterly report

Comparative data is reported on a quarterly basis to assist with analysis and identification of key trends. This report shows data up to 30 September 2021.

2.1 National data

The following analysis compares the total and net changes of the previous two quarters.

Every record in the database is coded with a **change type**, which reflects different kinds of commonly observed change to news production and availability. Further details about change types and the process for recording them can be found in section 4.

Table 3 compares the number of records contained within the database according to their change type. It suggests that changes over Q3 2021 have tended to be at higher levels of importance, with nearly even numbers of new and closed outlets, a doubling of the records coded as 'Decrease in service'. A small reduction in the number of records coded as 'End of print edition' can be explained as a shift down to the 'Decrease in service' type.

CHANGE TYPE	Q2/21	Q3/21	VARIANCE
New masthead, station or website	89	95	+6
Newsroom opened	3	4	+1
Increase in service	5	9	+4
New print edition	2	2	-
Merger	12	15	+3
End of print edition	104	101	(-3)
Decrease in service	20	40	+20
Newsroom closure	6	6	-
Masthead or station closure	65	70	+5
TOTAL NUMBER OF RECORDS	306	342	+36

Table 3: Number of records according to change type at 30 June 2021 and 30 September 2021.

CHANGE CATEGORY	Q2/21	Q3/21	VARIANCE
Expansions	98	110	+12
Contractions	206	232	+24
QUARTERLY CHANGE, NET	(-108)	(-122)	(-14)

Table 4: Number of records according to change category and overall net change at 30 June 2021 and 30 September 2021.

Change types are also collected into two **change categories** depending on the nature of the change: expansions and contractions.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of the records in the database according to their change category. It suggests there have been 110 total expansions and 232 total contractions of news production and availability from 1 January 2019 to 30 September 2021. There are 342 total entries in the database for a net change of -122.

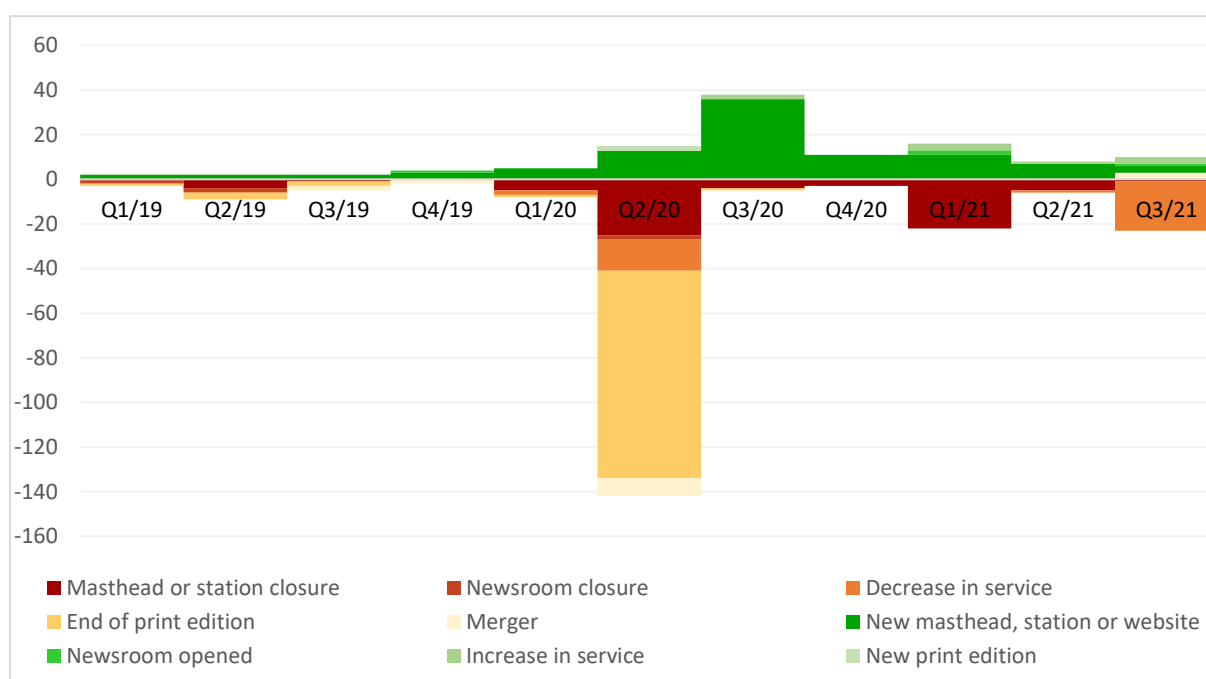


Figure 1: Change types, data at 30 September 2021.

Plotting the records according to the quarter in which the change occurred (Figure 1), the impact of the onset of COVID-19 is immediately apparent. We have recorded 25 March 2020 as the beginning of the economic impacts of COVID-19, being the date that non-essential businesses were first ordered closed across the country. This project does not systematically collect information about the causal factors that lead to changes, but in the immediate aftermath of that order we observed significant decreases in news production and availability before the sector stabilised and began to rebound in June 2020, and more strongly in the following quarter.

There are some key events that group together large numbers of changes.

- In Q2 2020, News Corp Australia significantly accelerated its shift to digital-only publishing by ending its print newspapers for 96 community and regional news titles across Victoria, New South Wales and particularly in Queensland, where it also closed more than a dozen papers.

- Also in Q2 2020, Australian Community Media announced that it would temporarily suspend the majority of its regional non-daily newspapers. Many of those papers only partially returned; some without a print edition and many that no longer conduct original, local news production. Those titles are reflected in the ‘Decrease in service’ changes.
- Some Australian Community Media papers did not return from suspension at all, remaining online but relying on syndicated material for coverage. In Q1 2021 we observed that ACM seemed to retire nearly two dozen of its mastheads, closing their individual websites and social media presences.¹⁵
- Regional and metropolitan television reaffiliation came into effect in Q3 2021, which resulted in the closure of a large number of WIN and Nine local news bulletins in Queensland and Victoria. A small expansion of news bulletins also occurred in New South Wales. These records are tagged as ‘Decrease in service’ and ‘Increase in service’ respectively.¹⁶
- Also in Q3 2021, we listed further Australian Community Media newspapers as ‘Decrease in service’ following reductions to the publishing schedule, as described in this report.

2.1.1 Change categories by quarter

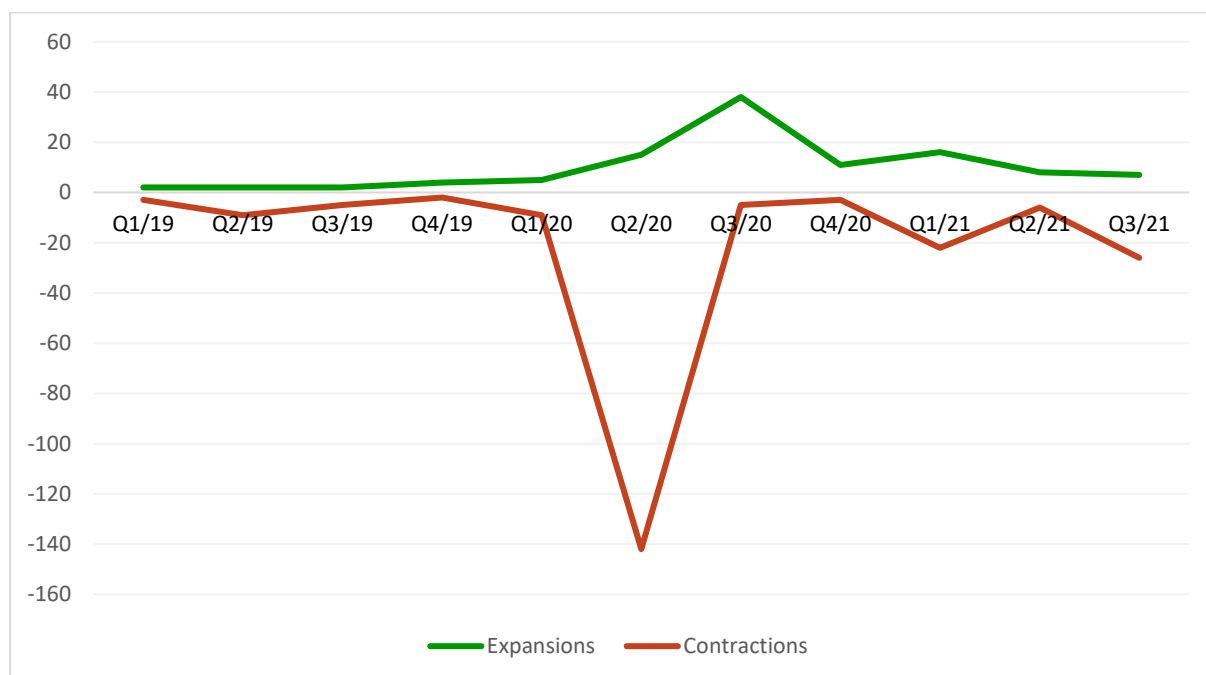


Figure 2: Quarterly records according to their change category and change date, data at 30 September 2021.

¹⁵ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: April 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/australian-newsroom-mapping-project>>. pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: July 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/australian-newsroom-mapping-project>>. p. 4.

These charts show the total number of records contained within the database according to their change category (Table 4) and records plotted according to the **change date**, being the date that the observed change came into effect (Figure 2).

Though both suggest continued decline for the news media market, the percentage of expansions to contractions has remained relatively stable since Q4 2020. On 30 September 2021 expansions made up 32.2 per cent of all records, and contractions 67.8 per cent; a slight positive change from 32 per cent to 68 per cent at 30 June 2021.

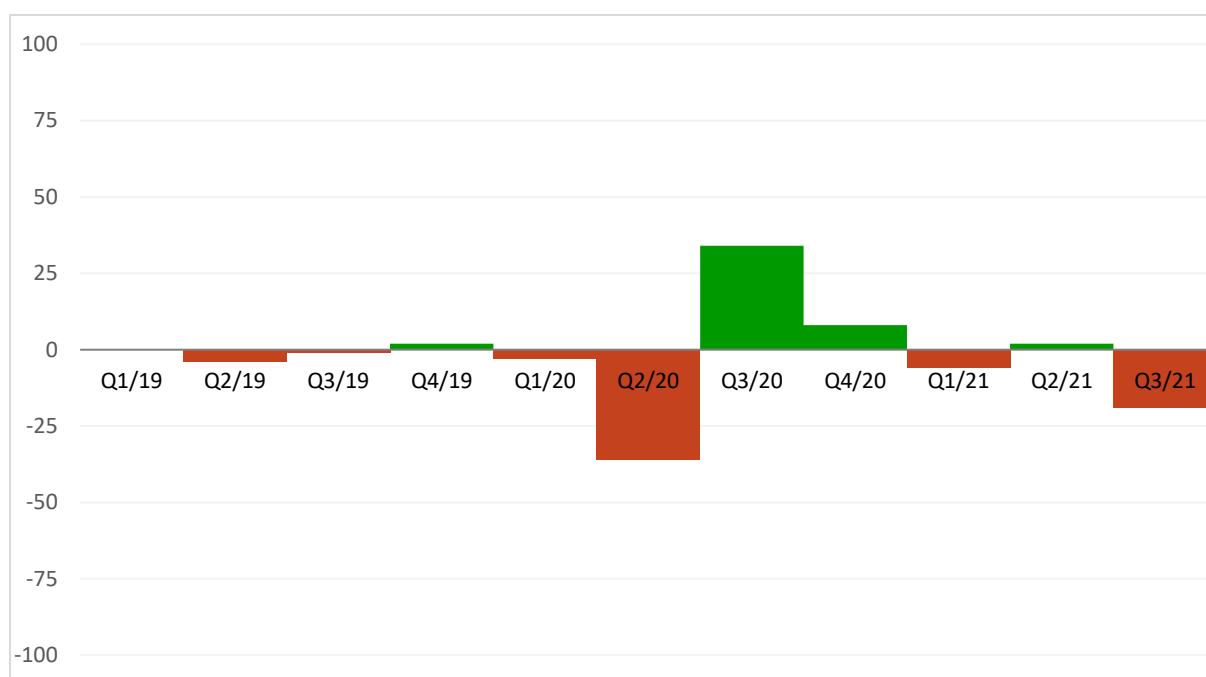


Figure 3: Quarterly net change of news production according to change type and change date, data at 30 September 2021.

More than half of all records from Q2 2020 are of the of ‘End of print edition’ change type. This change is recorded as a contraction event, but it could reasonably be argued that the transition from predominantly physical to predominantly online news distribution is a sign of positive change for an industry still in the process of digitising. Acknowledging that ambiguity, Figure 3 removes both the ‘End of print edition’ and ‘New print edition’ change types so as to assess only those records that reflect a change in news production.

This data subset suggests a relatively stable news media market over the life of the project. The percentage of expansions to contractions at 30 September 2021 is near even, at 45 per cent to 55 per cent.

Isolating the data further to only the outlets that have opened or closed over the period (that is, the ‘New masthead, station or website’; ‘Merger’ and ‘Masthead or station closure’

change types) shows a positive variance of +10. We strongly caution, however, that this research project does not take into account the productive capacity of news outlets that are gained and lost; only the fact of their opening or closing. A newspaper with deep community ties, strong editorial structures and half a dozen full-time journalists that closed would look identical in this data to a replacement website employing one volunteer. As close observers of the industry since 2019 we believe that considerably more has been lost than gained, however, it is beyond the scope of this project to demonstrate that.

2.2 State & territory data

The following figures provide a total and quarterly breakdown of changes observed in each state and territory in Australia, both of the change types observed and of the overall change categories and net position.

CHANGE CATEGORY	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA
Expansions	1	43	2	32	9	1	19	3
Contractions	1	79	1	78	15	-	47	11
CHANGE, NET	-	(-36)	+1	(-46)	(-6)	+1	(-28)	(-8)

Table 5: Number of records according to change category and overall net change at 30 September 2021.

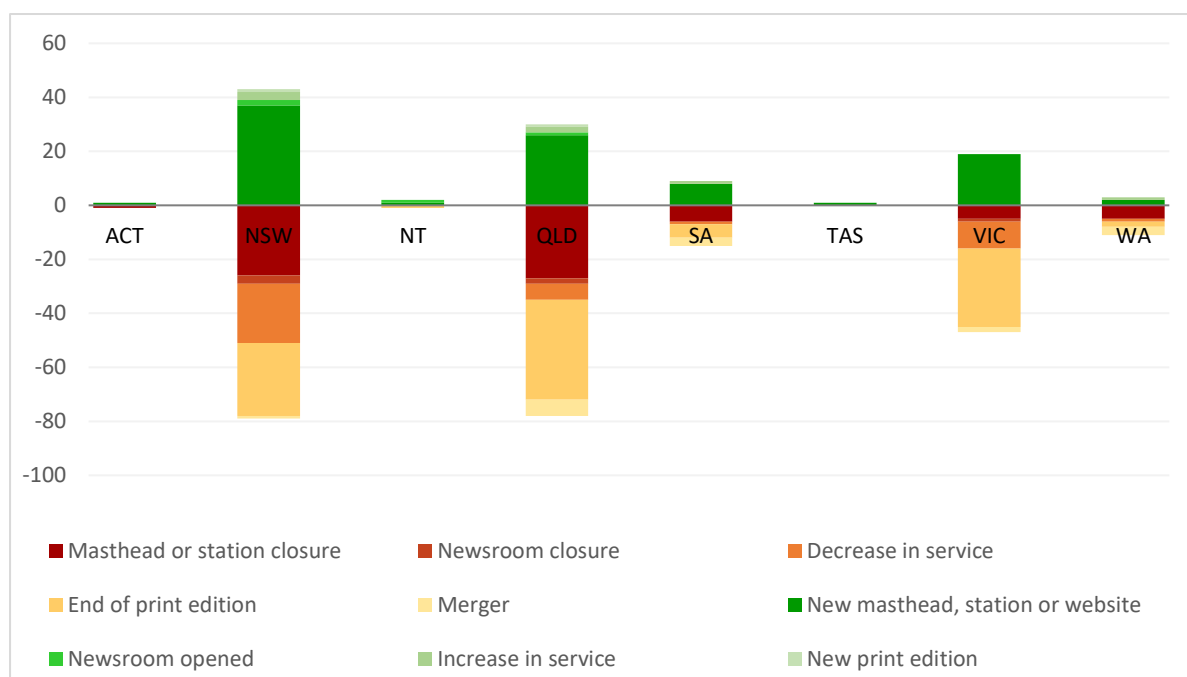


Figure 4: Change types by state or territory, data as at 30 September 2021.

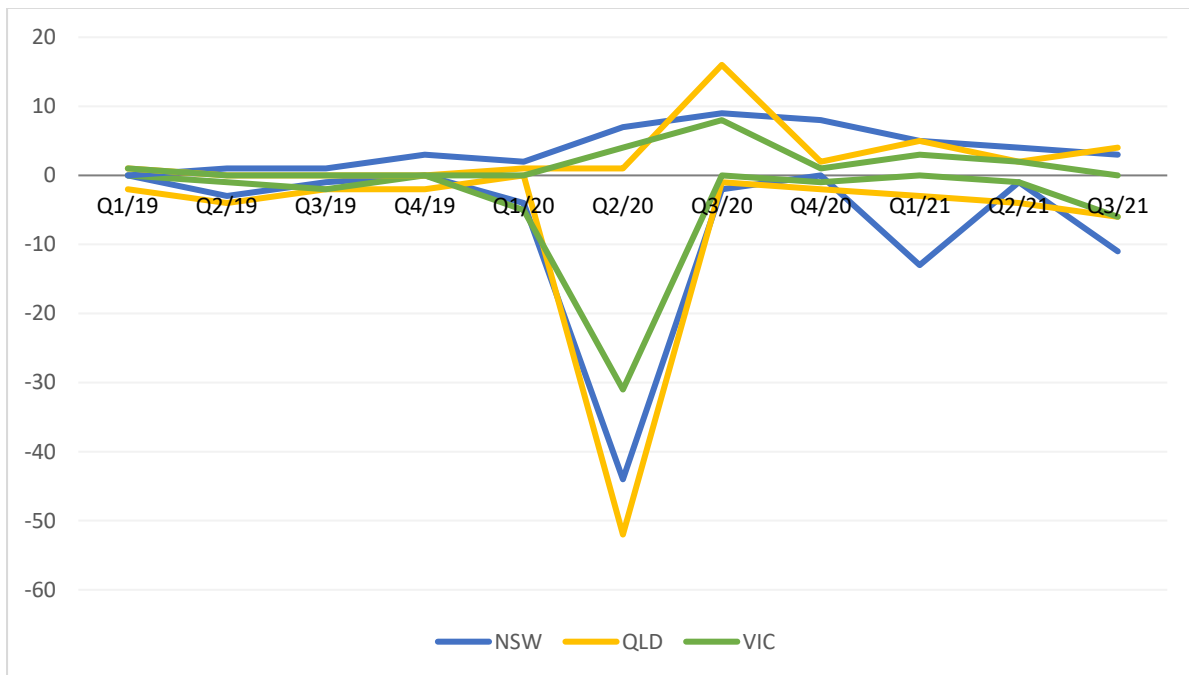


Figure 5: Records according to their change category and change date in three states, data at 30 September 2021.

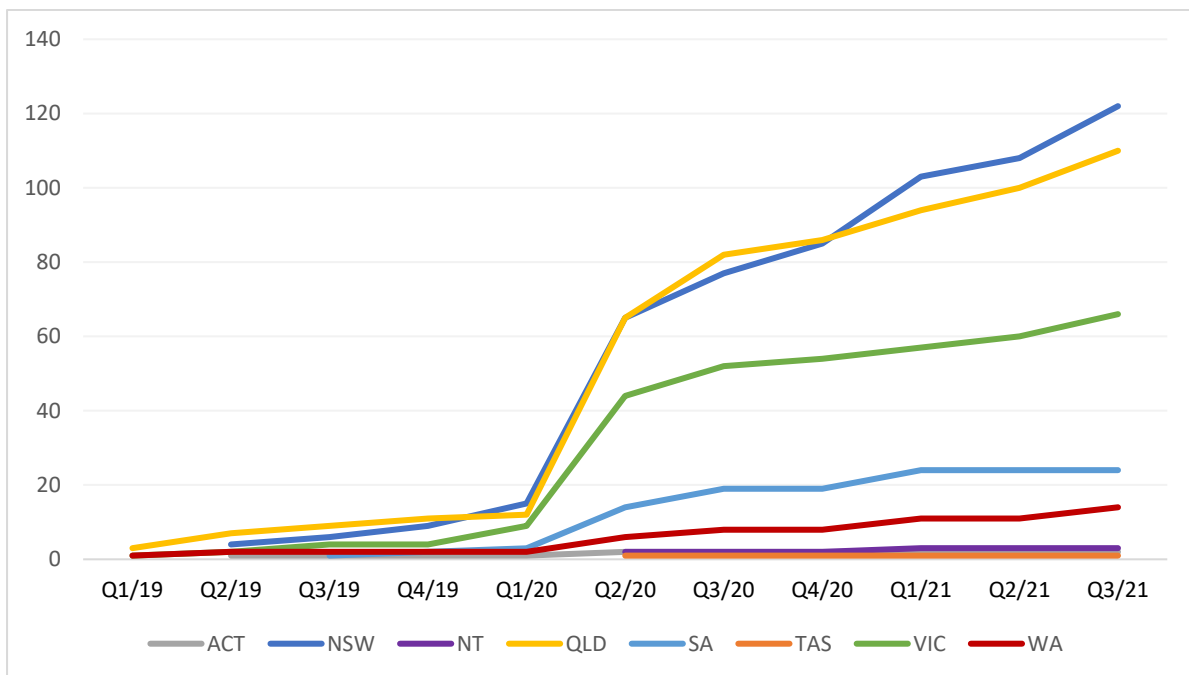


Figure 6: Cumulative entries recorded in all states and territories, data at 30 September 2021.

As can be seen in Figure 4, states have been disproportionately impacted, both in the volume and the types of change. New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria together account for 87 per cent of all records in the database while the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Tasmania have jointly recorded fewer than two per cent.

Queensland is arguably the state worst affected by news closures, having lost considerably more outlets than have emerged. This particularly reflects News Corp's strong presence there and the impact of its April 2020 decision to close many of its regional titles. In many communities News Corp's exit was followed by the establishment of a new independent publication or the expansion of a nearby regional paper. In some places, such as Chinchilla and Dalby, multiple community and small publisher efforts launched nearly simultaneously. This is reflected in the spike of expansions in Q3 2020. Over time many of these independent and small publisher outlets have closed, possibly reflecting the natural capacity of local news markets to sustain multiple outlets.

Victoria has endured longer and more significant lockdowns than the rest of the country. The data does not suggest that state-level lockdown has had any standalone impact. Only one contraction was recorded in the state across the entire second lockdown (July-October 2020), as compared to nine expansions. Six contractions were recorded in its second major lockdown (sixth overall, August-October 2020), all but one of which are the result of affiliation agreement changes and not COVID-19. The other, the reduction of the print frequency of the *Latrobe Valley Express*, was explicitly due to the lockdown's impact on advertising revenue. Across the entire life of the project, Victoria has gained far more newsrooms than it has lost: only five newsrooms were recorded closed in the state, most of them in regional Victoria, while 19 were found to have opened.

New South Wales experienced a similarly long lockdown (July-October 2021) though the impact of it is harder to assess. A large number of contractions (11) were recorded in that period. As discussed in this report, these are primarily Australian Community Media titles that have reduced their publication schedule. These titles are in areas of regional New South Wales that did not experience lockdown to the same degree as in Sydney, but the company blamed the erosion of advertising revenue in the COVID-19 era for the change.

New South Wales has seen considerable growth, adding the most new outlets of any state or territory (37) and more than it has lost (24) over the scope of the project. These outlets have been more weighted to the capital than in the country as a whole, with 41 per cent of new outlets being founded in Sydney and 59 per cent in regional areas, compared to a national average of 33 per cent and 66 per cent. The new outlets are also disproportionately metropolitan compared to those that have been lost in NSW, where over 92 per cent of outlet closures (24 of 26) have occurred in the regions.

2.4 Metropolitan and regional data by quarter

The following figures provide a total and quarterly breakdown of changes according to whether the affected outlet is located in metropolitan or regional / rural Australia. Both the change types observed and of the overall change categories and net position are provided.

CHANGE CATEGORY	Metropolitan	Regional / rural
Expansions	35	75
Contractions	67	165
CHANGE, NET	(-32)	(-90)

Table 6: Number of records according to change category and overall net change at 30 September 2021.

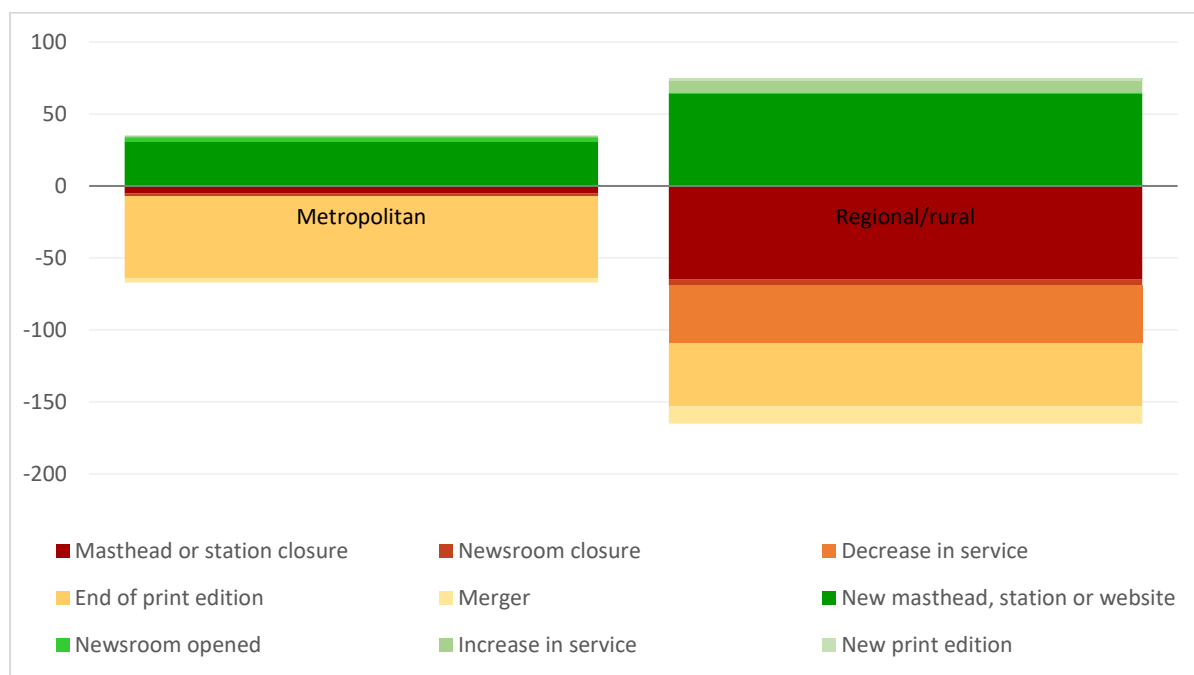


Figure 7: Change types by local government area location, data at 30 Sep 2021.

Table 6 shows that regional and rural Australia has experienced the greatest change, accounting for 71 per cent of all contractions and 68 per cent of growth. The overwhelming majority of outlets that have either closed (93 per cent) or decreased their service (100 per cent) are from regional areas. A nearly even number of outlets have opened (64) to those that closed (65), while the capital cities have gained 26 more outlets than we identified as having closed (31 compared to 5).

Figure 9 isolates the data to only the outlets that have opened or closed over the period (that is, the ‘New masthead, station or website’; ‘Merger’ and ‘Masthead or station closure’ change types). It shows that the total number of news outlets has declined in regional and rural Australia over the studied period, while it has increased in metropolitan areas.

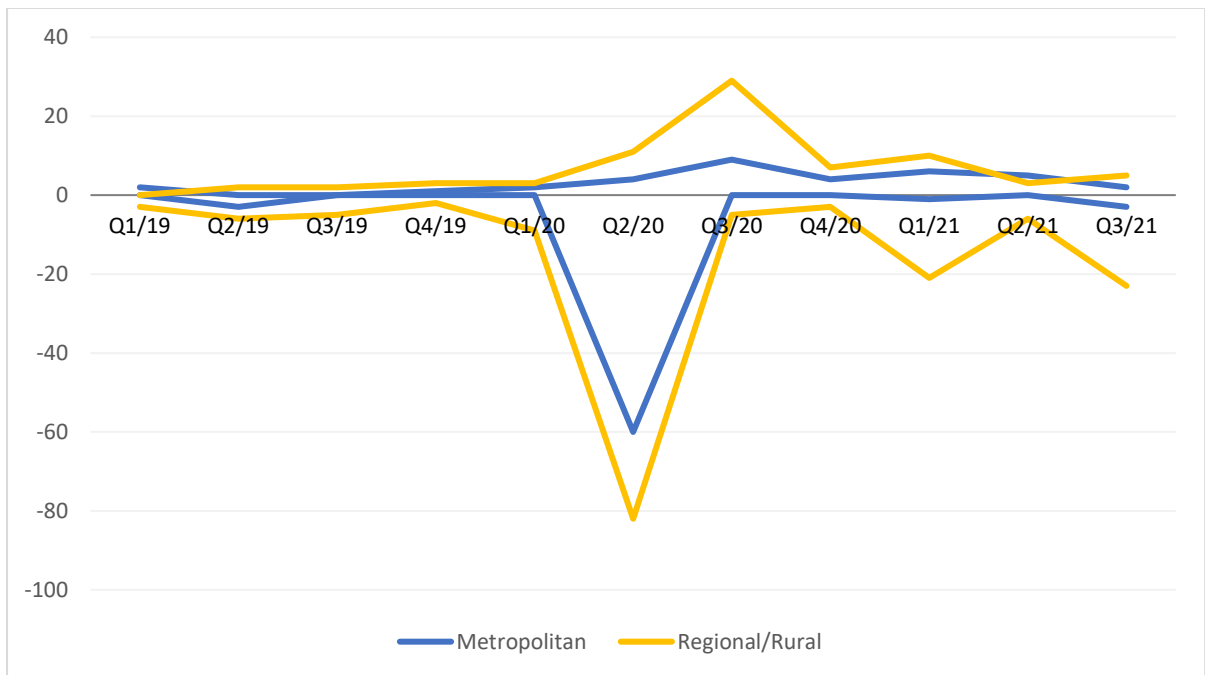


Figure 8: Change categories by local government area location, data at 30 Sep 2021.

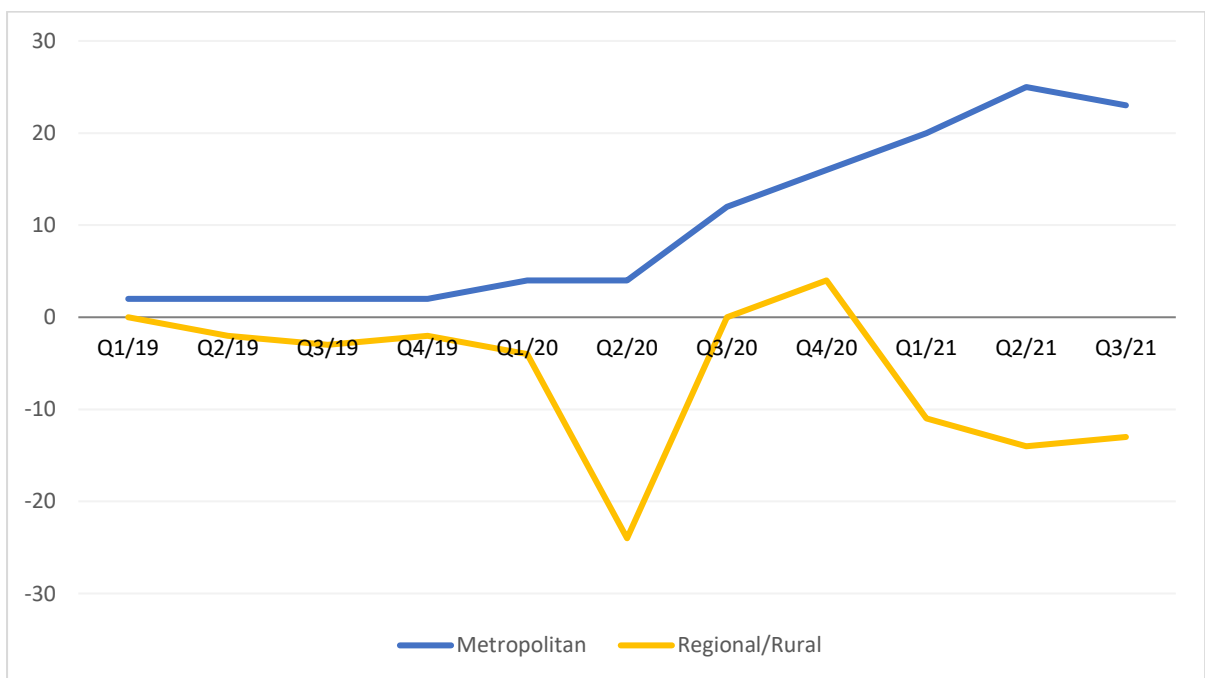


Figure 9: Net change in outlets by local government area location, data at 30 Sep 2021.

3. Using this project 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.

[Public Interest Journalism Initiative]

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