

Australian Newsroom
Mapping Project Report :
February 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.

Due to the significant methodological difficulty in ensuring rigour and limited resources, 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.

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
28 February 2020

Suggested citations

This report: 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>>

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 February 2021

New entries into the database

New masthead, station or website	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bendigo News, Bendigo, VIC • Cape York Weekly, Weipa, QLD • The Geelong Times, Geelong, VIC • Collie River Valley Bulletin, Collie, WA • Bridgetown Star, Bridgetown, WA • Burdekin Local News, Ayr, QLD • Cairns Local News, Cairns, QLD • Western Downs Town & Country, Dalby, QLD • The Bendigo Times, Bendigo, VIC
Newsroom opened	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australian Associated Press, Darwin • Australian Associated Press, Townsville
Masthead or station closure	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Crossing, Dalby, QLD • The Somerset, Toogoolawah, QLD • The Lockyer, Fernvale, QLD • The Gwydir News, Bingara, NSW
Total	15	

15 new entries were added into the data in February 2021, most of them backdated.

Changes that occurred in this month include the launch of The Bendigo News by News Corp Australia and the launch of The Bendigo Times by the Times News Group.

Additionally, the announcement that the Australian Associated Press has opened new bureaux in Darwin and Townsville was made in February, and so those entries are also dated for this month.

The remaining entries are backdated. Four of this month's closures – The Crossing, The Somerset, The Lockyer and The Chin Wag (discussed below) – were the product of DSX Publications in Queensland, and all appear to have ceased publishing in December 2020.

The Times News Group, which has a large publishing footprint south and west of Melbourne, launched The Geelong Times in October 2020.

Another four changes are dated to September 2020 – the launches of the Cairns Local News, Burdekin Local News, Collie River Valley Bulletin and Cape York Weekly.

The Bridgetown Star launched in Western Australia and the Western Downs Town & Country launched in Dalby, Queensland in July 2020.

Finally, The Gwydir News is a new entry this month and deserves explanation. The newspaper was the effort of an individual publisher in Bingara, New South Wales, and covered the Gwydir Shire Council. In July 2019 the publisher attempted to sell the

paper and was unsuccessful,¹ and so in August 2019 the local government took over the paper and pledged to continue it for a period of 12 months or until a buyer could be found.² They too were unable to find a buyer, closed the paper in December 2020³ before announcing in February 2021 that it would return as a digital-only product operated by the Council.⁴

Mayor John Coulton said at the time that the paper was “an important part of building a strong community, without it we lose an important asset and part of our identity”.⁵ There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of this statement, and the Council should be commended for stepping in to save the paper from closure. That said, in my view, when the paper was incorporated into Council’s communications infrastructure it lost its independence, and therefore its ability to practice journalism. For that reason The Gwydir News is listed as having closed in August 2019 when it was taken over by the local government.

Changed entries in the database

Masthead or station closure	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">The Chin Wag, Chinchilla, QLD
------------------------------------	---	---

The Chin Wag launched as a weekly newspaper in Chinchilla in July 2020 and had been listed as ‘New masthead, station or website’ in the database since August 2020. As of December 2020, the newspaper appears to have stopped publishing. An email to the editor regarding the status of all four DSX Publications newspapers was not returned.

¹ Bingara.com.au 2019. Shock announcement from Gwydir News. 3 July.
<<https://www.bingara.com.au/shock-announcement-gwydir-news-prints-final-publication/>>

² Bingara.com.au 2019. The Gwydir News continues.... 17 August.
<<https://www.bingara.com.au/the-gwydir-news-continues/>>

³ King R. 2020. Gwydir News’ last print. *Bingara’s Local Magazine*. 23 December.
<<https://bingaramagazine.com.au/2020/12/gwydir-news-last-print/>>

⁴ Bingara.com.au 2021. Status update on the Gwydir News. 16 February.
<<https://www.bingara.com.au/status-update-on-the-gwydir-news/>>

⁵ Bingara.com.au 2019. The Gwydir News continues.... 17 August.
<<https://www.bingara.com.au/the-gwydir-news-continues/>>

2. Cumulative data

The data suggests there have been 199 total contractions and 83 total expansions of news production and availability as of 28 February 2021. There are 282 total entries in the database.

The data breaks down into the following change types.

New masthead, station or website	76
Newsroom opened	3
Increase in service	2
New print edition	2
Merger	9
End of print edition	106
Decrease in service	35
Newsroom closure	6
Masthead or station closure	43
Total	282

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 suburban Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide 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 282 entries are tagged as News Corp, including the 96 ended print editions, plus 21 new mastheads, 18 closed mastheads and 4 mergers.

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.

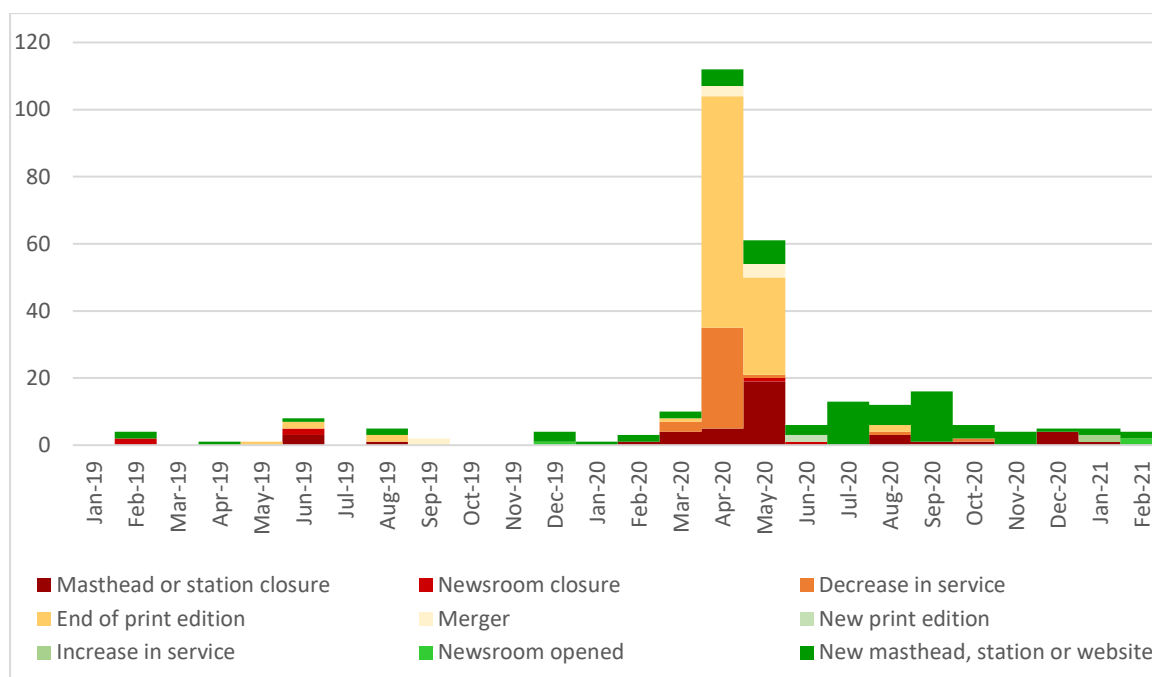


Figure 1: Change types plotted according to the date the change occurred, 1 January 2019 – 28 February 2021.

As can be seen in Figure 2, different states have been disproportionately impacted. Queensland has been the worst affected by news closures, reflecting particularly News Corp’s historically strong presence there and the impact of its decision to close many of its regional titles.

Queensland is also the only state that has had more news outlets close over the studied period than open. This is partially a reflection of the moment: 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, Dalby and the Lockyer and Somerset regions, 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. Almost all entries of this type are linked to Australian Community Media, including 21 of the 22 entries in New South Wales. ACM initially suspended many of its papers in April 2020, and then slowly restored them after June of that year. Many of these papers do not appear to have returned to their pre-pandemic publishing levels.

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.

Finally, it can be seen in Figure 3 that rural and regional Australia has borne the majority of contractions, including the overwhelming majority of closures, but has also been responsible for most of the new growth that has occurred over the period.

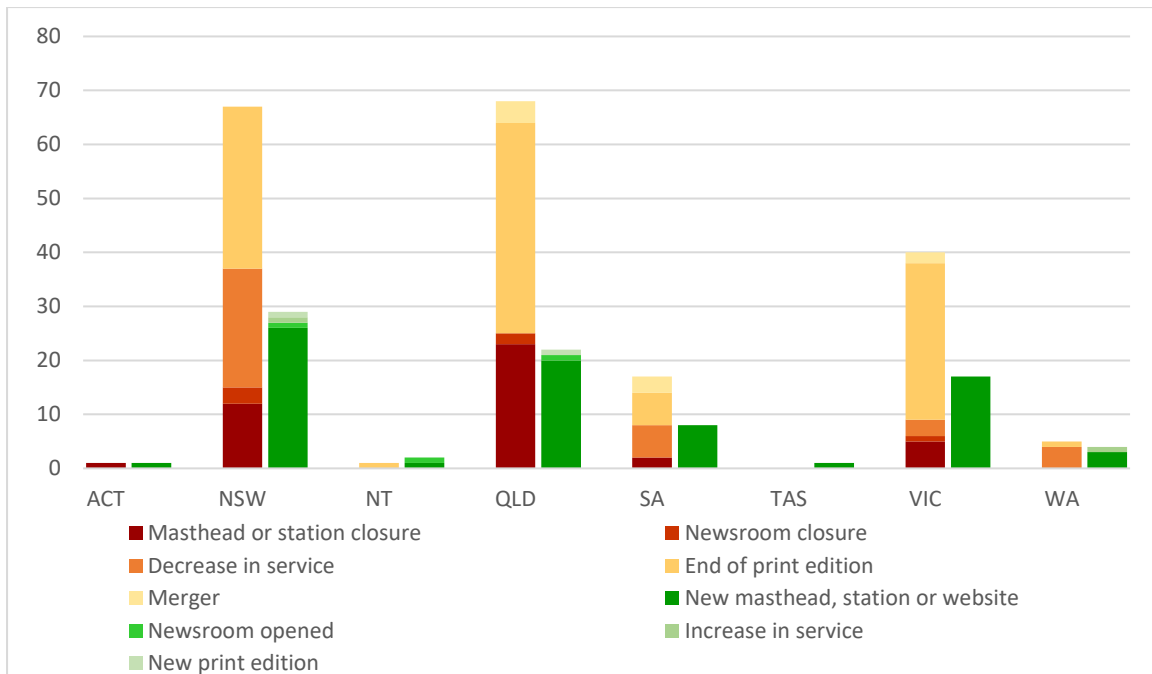


Figure 2: Change types broken down by state, 1 January 2019 – 28 February 2021

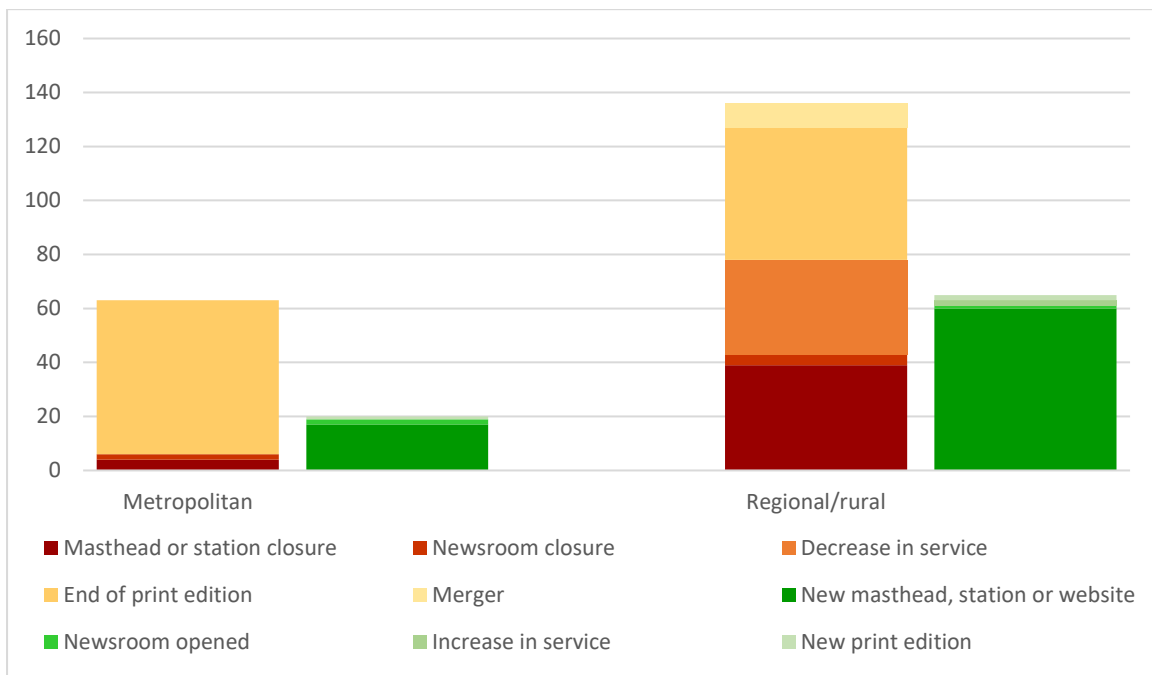


Figure 3: Change types broken down by local government area classification in which the change occurred, 1 January 2019 – 28 February 2021.

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 the end of the year, only the most recent and serious change – the ‘Masthead or station closure’ in September – 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, e.g., Vice Australia.
2. **Newsroom closure / opening;** meaning a news company removing or adding a place from / to its coverage area while otherwise maintaining local news production. There are few examples in this category; the closure of the WIN TV newsroom in Albury is one, as the company could continue to meet its broadcast license obligations from its newsroom in Shepparton.
3. **Decrease / increase in service;** meaning changes in availability with a corresponding change in production. Most often this has captured changes to

the publication frequency of a printed newspaper, but can also capture reductions in news programming schedules.

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. 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 50 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. Our project tracks changes, meaning that a news outlet that has been stable across 2019-20 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 non-partisan organisation established to ensure that Australia develops a sustainable ecosystem of independent journalism. It conducts research to inform practical policy solutions and public conversation on the importance of an effective, pluralistic news media of all sizes.

As a non-profit company limited by guarantee (ACN 630 740 153), PIJI is governed by its [Board of independent directors](#) and guided by its [Expert Research Panel](#) and [Policy Working Group](#). Established in December 2018, it is designed as a limited shelf-life entity of no more than five years. It operates as a major research project of the newDemocracy Foundation and [a registered charity](#) with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

PIJI's research focuses on the three themes in public interest journalism: assessment of media diversity; community value and support; and investment and financial sustainability.

[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)

