

Australian Newsroom
Mapping Project Report :
March 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 March 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 March 2021

Suggested citations

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1. Changes made in March 2021

New entries into the database

New masthead, station or website	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armidale Times, Armidale, NSW • 2075, St Ives, NSW • 2066, Lane Cove, NSW • 2074, Turramurra, NSW • 2042, Newtown, NSW • 2037, Glebe, NSW • 2010, Surry Hills, NSW • 2099, Dee Why, NSW • Local Ipswich News, Ipswich, QLD
Increase in service	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fassifern Guardian and Tribune, Ipswich, QLD
Masthead or station closure	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HuffPost Australia, Sydney, NSW • View News, Buddina, QLD
Total	12	

12 new entries were added in March 2021, four of which occurred this month.

Local Ipswich News launched as a free community newspaper on 24 March. In an editorial the publishers wrote that COVID “was a blow to millions of Australians who lost their local paper” and that the Local Ipswich News will fill that gap.¹

BuzzFeed Inc. finalised a deal to purchase the internet news site HuffPost from Verizon Media in February. Within a month it announced a plan to lay off 47 employees in the US newsroom while also closing the Australian and Canadian editions.² Two local staff were affected. Editor Alicia Vrajlal said that she was proud of her work refocussing the site to focus on race and diversity stories, and that “there aren’t enough places in Aussie media that provide a platform to elevate underrepresented voices”.³

In an editorial posted online on 4 March, View News editor Charles Hodgson announced that he was ending the publication which has covered Maleny and the Sunshine Coast since 2008. He pointed to the difficulties of monetising news online as the primary factor behind his decision to close. “[The] tech giants use posts by news media as a continuous stream of traffic-generating content around which to place advertising with scant regard for the cost of producing this original content in the first

¹ Here to support Ipswich community. *Ipswich Local News*. 24 March. p. 4. <<https://www.paperturn-view.com/ipswich-local/local-ipswich-news-issue-1?pid=MTU152113>>

² Gabbatt A. 2021. BuzzFeed lays off 47 HuffPost workers less than a month after acquisition. *The Guardian*. 9 March. <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/mar/09/huffpost-layoffs-buzzfeed-jonah-peretti>>

³ Vrajlal A. 2021. Twitter thread. 17 March. <<https://twitter.com/LeeshieV/status/1372058946119245824>>

place,” he wrote. “Yes, media also use these platforms to drive views to their online offering, but it only serves to further erode their core product and entrench the new news habit.”⁴

The final change that occurred in March was the launch of 2099, a new hyperlocal news magazine published in Dee Why, NSW, by Neighbourhood Media. The Neighbourhood Media stable now includes seven magazines, each published quarterly. The other magazines – based in St Ives, Lane Cove, Turramurra, Newtown, Glebe and Surry Hills – are all backdated new entries into the database this month.

Two further backdated entries were added. The Armidale Times is a community newsheet published by former Fairfax journalist Rod and researcher Virginia Wise. The Times launched in October 2020. Fassifern Guardian & Tribune editor Drew Creighton also contacted PIJI to alert us that back in September 2020 the publication expanded its coverage area to include Ipswich, QLD.

Changed entries in the database

New masthead, station or website	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Lockyer, Fernvale, QLD
Masthead or station closure	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wauchope Gazette, NSW Wingham Chronicle, NSW Bellingen Shire Courier-Sun, NSW Nambucca Guardian, NSW
Removed entries	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Somerset, Toogoolawah, QLD
Total	6	

Australian Community Media suspended dozens of newspapers in April 2020 due to the economic downturn caused by COVID-19. The company did not publish a list of affected titles, so our data has always been the result of ongoing tracking of different indicators: missed digital print editions; content audits to assess levels of original local content v. regionally syndicated coverage; the presence (or removal) of a publication from different archives and databases; as well information that we receive from industry and community. Our research suggests that some of the suspended papers returned to publication in July-August 2020, while many others shifted to digital-only publication of mostly syndicated content. There are 21 newspapers in this second group and they are marked as ‘Decrease in service’ in the database.

In March 2021 two papers from the ‘Decrease in service’ group – the Wauchope Gazette and the Wingham Chronicle, and two that we had marked as only ‘End of

⁴ Hodgson C. 2021. I’m done. *View News*. 4 March. <<https://viewnews.com.au/im-done-4516089/>>

print edition’ – the Bellingen Shire Courier-Sun and Nambucca Guardian – appear to have now been permanently closed. Information provided to PIJI suggests that the publications were closed on March 26, and their change types have been updated in the database accordingly. Nothing suggests the remaining newspapers in the ‘Decrease in service’ group have been closed or that other ACM publications in the North Coast region have been affected.

In February 2021 we added four DSX Publications newspapers into the ‘Masthead or station closure’ category. We can now reverse that designation for two of them: after a three-month break, both The Lockyer and The Somerset returned to publication in March. The Lockyer has therefore been changed to ‘New masthead, station or website’, reflecting its July 2020 launch.

The Somerset, which has been published since 2008, has been removed from the database. The database only captures changes to news production and availability since the beginning of 2019, meaning that The Somerset now falls out of scope.

Two other DSX Publication papers – The Chin Wag (Chinchilla QLD) and The Crossing (Dalby QLD) – still appear to be closed. An email to the publisher was not returned.

Not included in the database

Late in March News Corp advised some regional Queensland newsagents that it will stop delivering its titles to them in September, citing the “very high cost” of that distribution.⁵ Though the database does track changes to news availability, it is limited to the beginning and end of print editions; expansions and contractions in print distribution areas are outside the project scope and are not reflected in the data.

It was also reported that Southern Cross Austereo will end news bulletins in regional Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales after its affiliation agreement with Nine finishes on 30 June 2021.⁶ These reported changes will remain out of the database until they occur, but PIJI is monitoring the issue.

⁵ Grounds E. 2021. News Corp Australia to stop distributing newspapers to much of regional Queensland. *ABC News*. 29 March. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-29/news-corp-to-stop-distributing-newspapers-to-regional-queensland/100033124>>

⁶ 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 94 total expansions of news production and availability as of 31 March 2021. There are 293 total entries in the database for a net change of -105.

The data breaks down into the following change types.

New masthead, station or website	86
Newsroom opened	3
Increase in service	3
New print edition	2
Merger	9
End of print edition	104
Decrease in service	33
Newsroom closure	6
Masthead or station closure	47
Total	293

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 293 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.

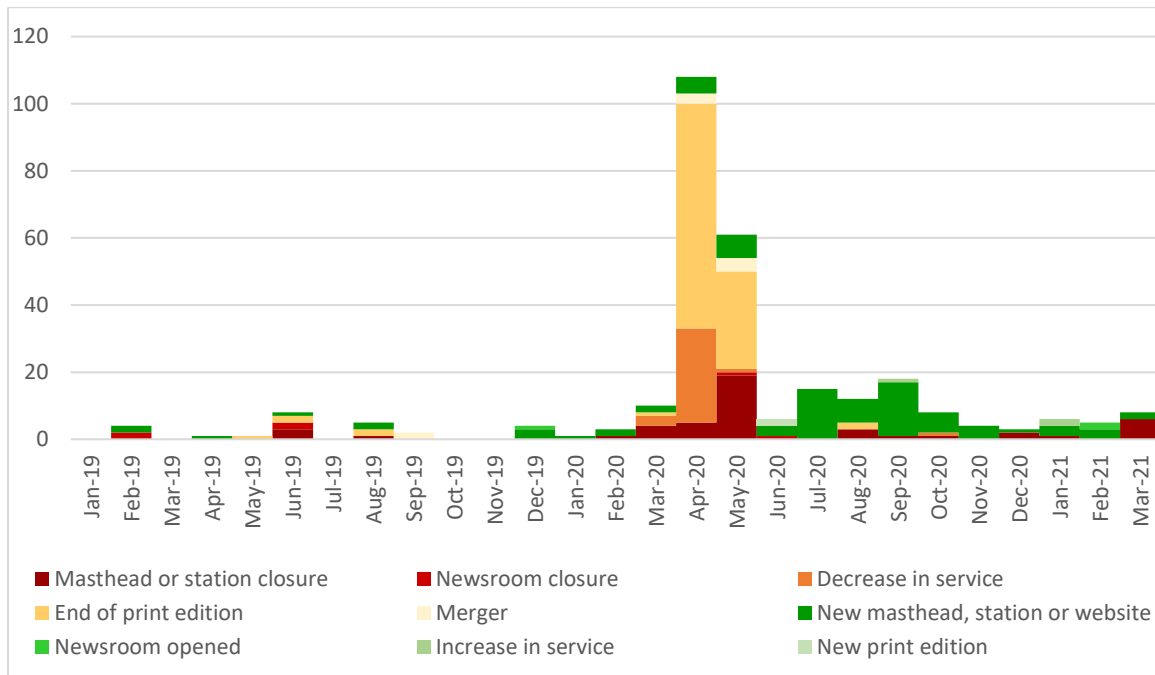


Figure 1: Change types by month since 1 January 2019, data as at 31 March 2021.

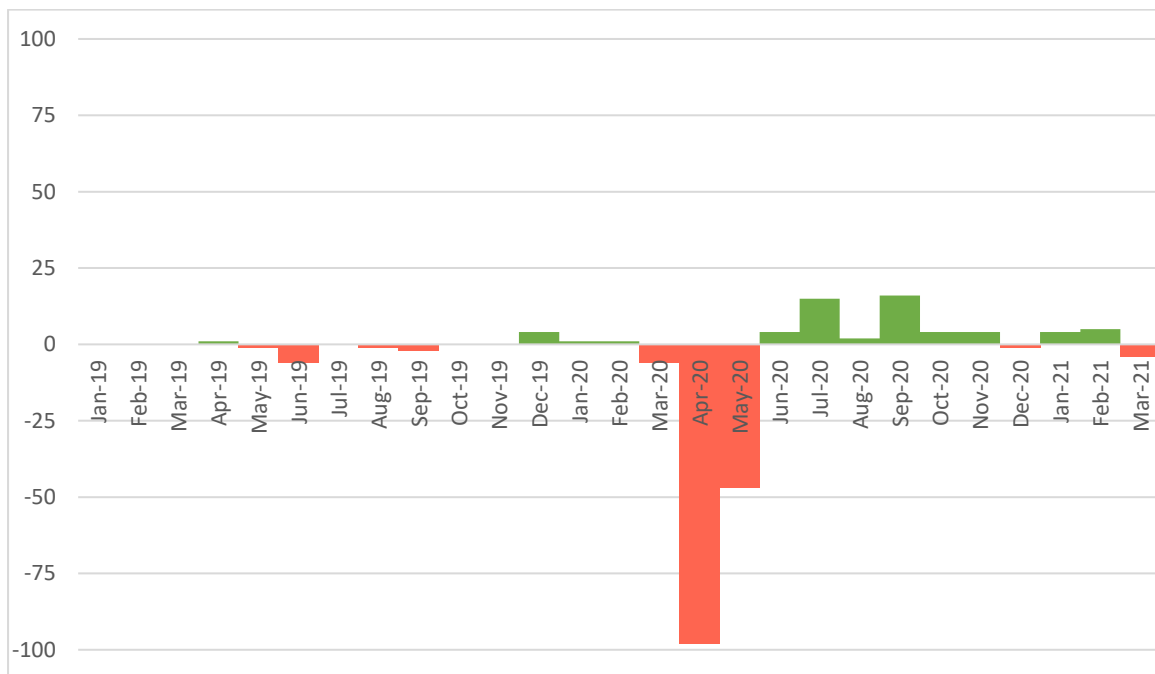


Figure 2: Net changes by month since 1 January 2019, data as at 31 March 2021.

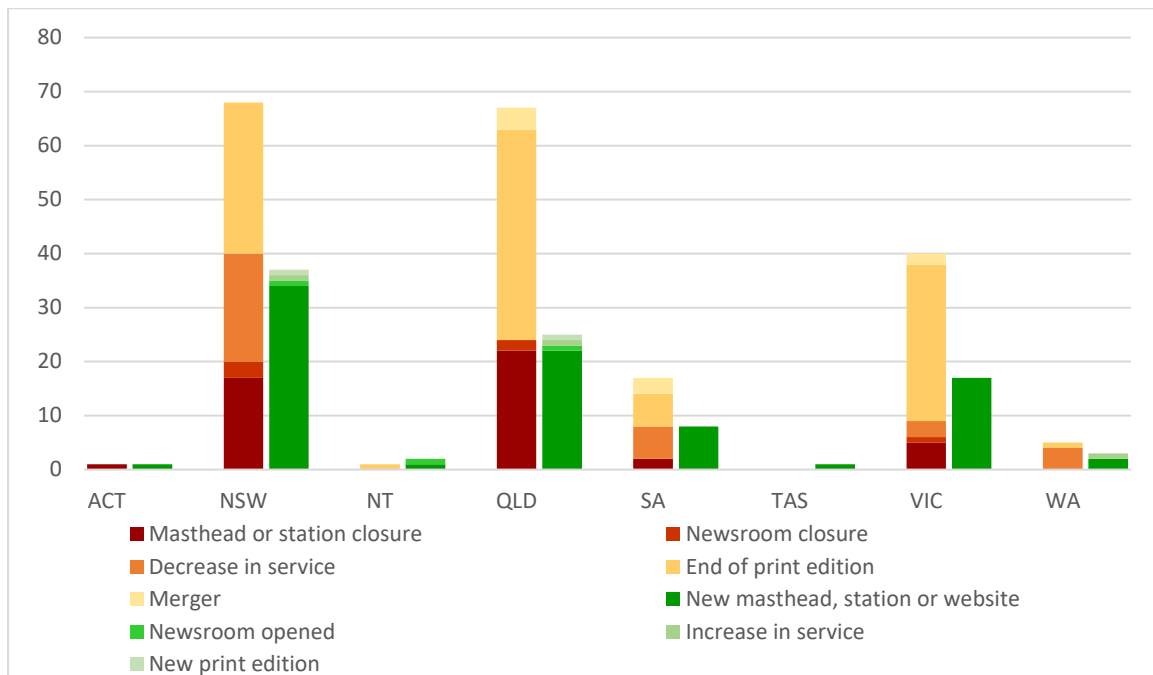


Figure 3: Change types by state, cumulative data as at 31 March 2021.

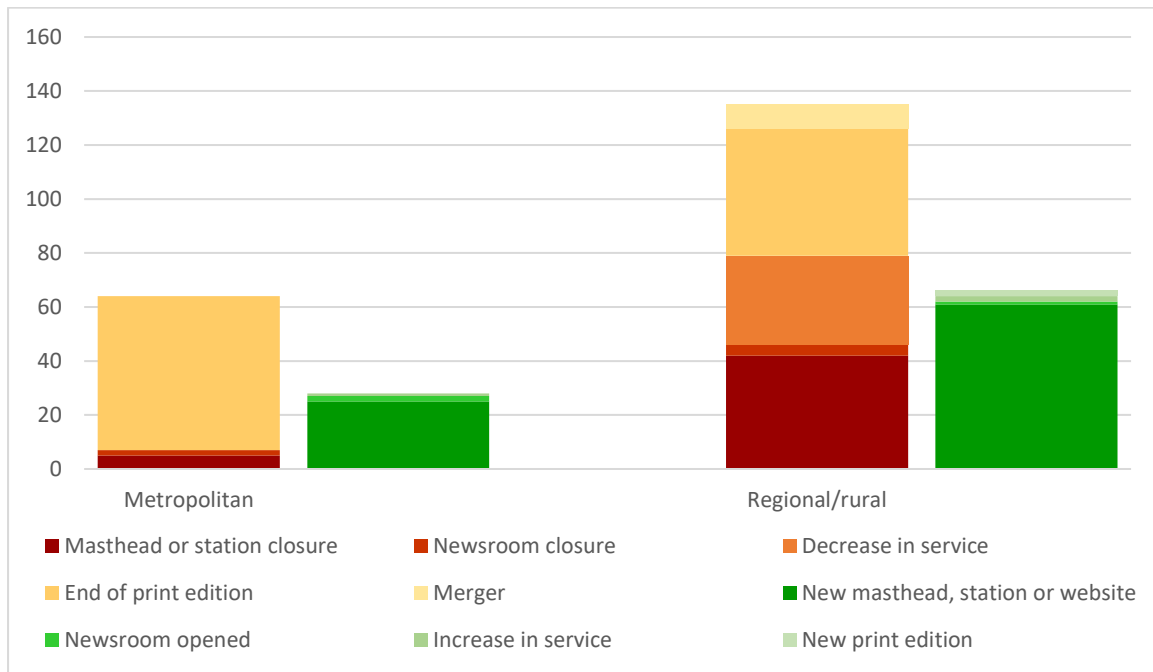


Figure 4: Change types by local government area classification, cumulative data as at 31 March 2021.

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 March 2021, Queensland has also seen an equal number of outlets open and close (22 entries in each category), where most other states have seen openings far exceed closures. 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 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 (20 out of 33 entries). Almost all entries of this type nationally are linked to Australian Community Media (29 out of 33 entries), including 19 of the entries of this type in New South Wales. ACM initially suspended many of its papers in April 2020, and then slowly restored them after June of that year. Content audits conducted by PIJI suggest that many of these papers have not returned to their pre-pandemic publishing levels. Some of these may in fact be closed, but absent confirmation from the company we have been cautious about allocating entries into the 'Masthead or station closure' change type.

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.

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.

JobKeeper, the Federal Government's wage subsidy scheme for businesses affected by COVID-19, ended on 28 March 2021. It remains to be seen whether the end of that program will lead to further contractions among news providers. PIJI will closely monitor the impact.

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.
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 moving 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. 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)

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