

Australian Newsroom
Mapping Project Report :
April 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 April 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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30 April 2021

Suggested citations

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1. Changes made in April 2021

New entries into the database

Increase in service	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Southern Argus, Strathalbyn, SA
Merger	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moruya Examiner, Moruya, NSW
Total	2	

There were only two new entries made into the database in April 2021, both of which are backdated to previous months.

The Southern Argus, which was acquired by the Leader Newspapers Pty Ltd, returned to expanded service in the Alexandrina Council region (SA) in March 2021.

The Moruya Examiner was an Australian Community Media newspaper that was merged into the Bay Post (serving Batemans Bay, NSW) early in 2020. Though the suspension of the combined Bay Post/Moruya Examiner due to COVID-19 had long been noted in the data, the merger of the two papers had not.

Changed entries in the database

Masthead or station closure	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advertiser Lake Times, Wollongong, NSW Avon Valley Advocate, Northam, WA Barossa and Light Herald, Nuriootpa, SA Bombala Times, Bombala, NSW Callide-Dawson Leader, Biloela, QLD Collie Mail, Collie, WA Esperance Express, Esperance, WA Eyre Peninsula Tribune, Cleve, SA Guyra Argus, Guyra, NSW Kiama Independent, Kiama, NSW Lakes Mail, Morisset, NSW Newcastle and Lake Macquarie Star, Newcastle, NSW Northern Argus, Clare, SA Riverina Leader, Wagga Wagga, NSW Walcha News, Walcha, NSW West Coast Sentinel, Ceduna, SA
Removed entries	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coastal Leader, Kingston, SA Dungog Chronicle, Dungog, NSW Flinders News, Flinders, SA
Total	19	

In mid-April, Australian Community Media (ACM) partially confirmed¹ findings that were included in the March 2021 ANMP report: that the Wingham Chronicle and Bellingen Shire Courier-Sun were being closed. The announcement states that ACM has closed “a number of websites” in communities where advertising support did not recover.

Checking the status of every ACM newspaper, we identified 14 mastheads that no longer have a dedicated web presence: 8 in NSW, four in South Australia and two in Western Australia. Most of those sites now connect instead to a regional daily newspaper; some, such as the Barossa and Light Herald, no longer connect to anything at all.

Looking at the Twitter traffic of a sample of these mastheads, it appears that the changeover occurred on 30 March. Links on the Kiama Independent Twitter feed went to the masthead’s old website up until 29 March, then there was no traffic on 30 March, and since 31 March the account has instead linked to the Illawarra Mercury. The same pattern is true of the Avon Valley Advocate, with links being redirected to Farm Weekly; and is true of other accounts as well.

The majority of these papers were already indexed in our database as the ‘Decrease in service’ change type. Two, the Bombala Times (NSW) and West Coast Sentinel (SA) were only listed as ‘End of print edition’. As of April, all have been changed to ‘Masthead or station closure’, with the change backdated to March.

The Esperance Express (WA) continues to have its own website, however, in covering ACM’s announcement the ABC reported that the Express has been closed.² A content audit that PIJ conducted on the newspaper in late 2020 suggested that no original, locally-relevant content was produced for an entire month. Based on the combination of these factors, we have also changed the Express from ‘Decrease in service’ to ‘Masthead or station closure’.

Including last month’s results, we have recently listed 19 ACM newspapers as closed.

Three other newspapers – the Crookwell Gazette (NSW), Nyngan Observer (NSW) and Yass Tribune (NSW) – were initially appearing as closed and were redirecting to other titles at the beginning of the month, before reopening their dedicated websites. The Gazette, like other ACM titles, began to redirect on 31 March³ and then reverted to its

¹ One year on, newspapers coming back in print. *Canberra Times*. 14 April.

<<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7209965/one-year-on-newspapers-coming-back-in-print/>>

² Smith E. 2021. Esperance marks one year without a newspaper, as absence of funeral notices takes toll. *ABC News*. 15 April. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-14/esperance-express-newspaper-one-year-funeral-notices-missing/13301290>>

³ See Crookwell Gazette 2021. Nationals MP accepts harassment apology. 10.12, 29 March. Twitter.

<<https://twitter.com/CGazette/status/1376311319075418116>>; followed by Crookwell Gazette 2021. Do you fancy some fungi? Find out what is safe to eat. 20.12, 31 March. Twitter.

<<https://twitter.com/CGazette/status/1377186921156239362>>

own site on 13 April.⁴ The paper does not appear to have resumed original local news production, however, and so it remains unchanged in our database under the 'Decrease in service' change type.

The announcement from ACM also contained the news that five newspapers would be restarting their print editions in April: the Armidale Express (NSW), Dungog Chronicle (NSW), Goondiwindi Argus (QLD), Coastal Leader (SA) and Flinders News (SA). Three of these were in our database as 'Decrease in service': the Chronicle, Leader and News. The returned digital print editions of the paper suggests that each of these is back to full strength, and so their entries have been removed to reflect this. The Express and Argus were not in our database and so no change was necessary.

In addition to these Australian Community Media changes, the Callide-Dawson Leader, a newspaper based in Biloela (QLD) and published by the Longreach Printing Company, has been changed from 'New masthead, station or website' to 'Masthead or station closure'. The masthead was launched in July 2020 as a print supplement to the Highlands Leader before being spun off as a standalone print title. In late March the newspaper announced⁵ that due to a lack of advertising support it would suspend its print edition but continue online; however, the paper did not publish any articles during April and appears to have been closed.

⁴ See Crookwell Gazette 2021. Council releases proposed fees for performing arts centre. 16.12, 13 April. Twitter. <<https://twitter.com/CGazette/status/1381852850343514112>>; followed by Crookwell Gazette 2021. ACM to seek talks on media rules after bigger stake in Prime TV approved. 17.12, 13 April. Twitter. <<https://twitter.com/CGazette/status/1381867911153905665>>

⁵ Callide Dawson Leader 2021. Goodbye... for now. 26 March. Facebook. <<https://www.facebook.com/CallideDawsonLeader/posts/228113898713589>>

Not included in the database

On 29 April at least 17 News Corp Australia newspapers ceased to exist as standalone websites and were merged into the websites of their metropolitan stablemates. The list of titles as collected by PIJI is:

- Ballina Shire Advocate (Ballina, NSW)
- Byron Shire News (Byron Bay, NSW)
- Central and North Burnett Times (Gayndah, QLD)
- Chinchilla News (Chinchilla, QLD)
- Dalby Herald (Dalby, QLD)
- Fraser Coast Chronicle (Fraser Coast, QLD)
- Gatton Star (Gatton, QLD)
- Gympie Times (Gympie, QLD)
- News-Mail (Bundaberg, QLD)
- Noosa News (Noosa, QLD)
- Northern Star (Lismore, NSW)
- South Burnett Times (Kingaroy, QLD)
- Stanthorpe Border Post (Stanthorpe, QLD)
- Tweed Daily News (Tweed Heads, NSW)
- Warwick Daily News (Warwick, QLD)
- Western Times (Charleville, QLD)
- Whitsunday Times (Whitsundays, QLD)

In researching this set of changes, we also found that the Daily Examiner (Grafton, NSW) and the Coffs Coast Advocate (Coffs Coast, NSW) were merged into the Daily Telegraph in late March 2021. Archive.org captured the Examiner site on 21 March⁶ and by 26 March⁷ a redirect was in place. The Advocate was also seen on 21 March⁸ and was gone by 24 March⁹. It is highly likely that both papers were merged at the same time.

Our decision not to include these 19 newspapers warrants explanation, particularly due to how similar this action by News Corp appears to be to the action by Australian Community Media.

News Corp told the Guardian Australia¹⁰ that no journalists' jobs would be lost as part of this change. The papers also continue to exist as dedicated verticals within the websites of the Courier Mail and the Daily Telegraph, acting as an ongoing hub of local news. PIJI interprets this to mean that there will be no change in the amount of localised, original news produced about the affected towns, and that that news will remain available in an easily accessible way.

According to the rules developed for categorising changes (available on pages 12-13 of this report), where two titles are combined without a decrease in production it is classified as a 'Merger'. Mergers are a contraction event, but are the lowest level of

⁶ Archive.org, The Daily Examiner. Capture at 21:24:29, 21 March 2021.

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20210321212429/https://www.dailyexaminer.com.au/>>

⁷ Archive.org, The Daily Examiner. Unsuccessful capture at 10:01:29, 26 March 2021.

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20210326100129/http://dailyexaminer.com.au/>>

⁸ Archive.org, The Coffs Coast Advocate. Capture at 15:22:39, 21 March 2021.

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20210321152239/https://www.coffscoastadvocate.com.au/>>

⁹ Archive.org, The Coffs Coast Advocate. Unsuccessful capture at 02:38:25, 24 March 2021.

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20210324023825/http://www.coffscoastadvocate.com.au/>>

¹⁰ Meade A. 2021. News Corp Australia merges more than 20 regional newspapers with capital city mastheads. *Guardian Australia*. 29 April 2021. <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/apr/29/news-corp-australia-merges-more-than-20-regional-newspapers-with-capital-city-mastheads>>

concern in our database. The 19 changes identified above have been allocated to this category. This approach is consistent with the Moruya Examiner entry also made this month; with the combination of the Atherton Tablelander, Northern Miner and Port Douglas and Mossman Gazette into the Cairns Post and Townsville Bulletin; and with the Taylor Group of Newspapers' merger of the Loxton News and River News into the Murray Pioneer in April 2020.

The stability of news production is the major difference between these mergers and the changes made by Australian Community Media in March 2021, where jobs were lost and where the mastheads no longer exist as hubs within the websites of the remaining papers.

Having recognised News Corp's changes as mergers within our project rules, it is worth noting that the changes are not still in the database. This is because of the technical limitations of the project, which have also been described in previous months' reports. The database is structured so that every news outlet is entered only once, with only the most serious change type reflected. The hierarchy of change types can be viewed on pages 12-13 of this report.

All of the affected News Corp papers are already in the ANMP database, having had their print editions ended in late May 2020. That change type – 'End of print edition' – is a more serious category than the 'Merger' type, and so that continues to be the change that is reflected in the data.

The mergers have been captured in the narratives attached to the entries, however.

This system of recording data is clearly imperfect. PIJI is exploring ways to reform the project so as to be able to capture and visualise multiple changes made over time to the same news outlets. These discussions are ongoing, and any reform is contingent on securing further funding for the project.

2. Cumulative data

The data suggests there have been 198 total contractions and 94 total expansions of news production and availability as of 31 March 2021. There are 291 total entries in the database for a net change of -104.

The data breaks down into the following change types.

New masthead, station or website	85
Newsroom opened	3
Increase in service	4
New print edition	2
Merger	10
End of print edition	102
Decrease in service	17
Newsroom closure	6
Masthead or station closure	62
Total	291

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 291 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.

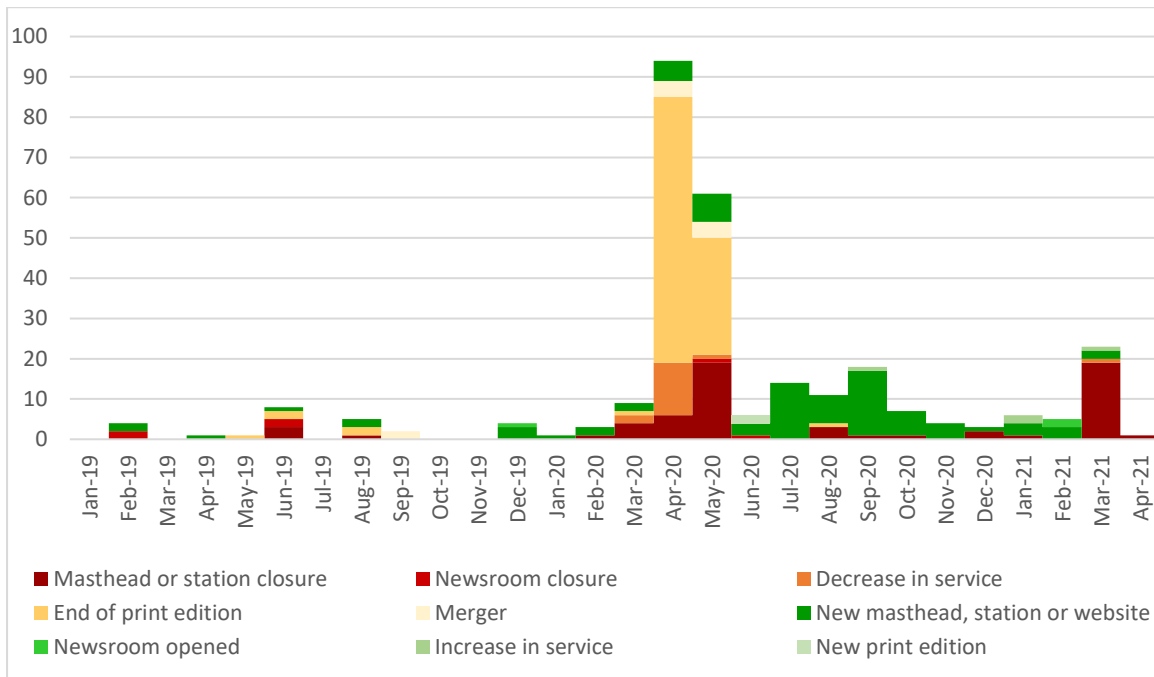


Figure 1: Change types by month since 1 January 2019, data as at 30 April 2021.

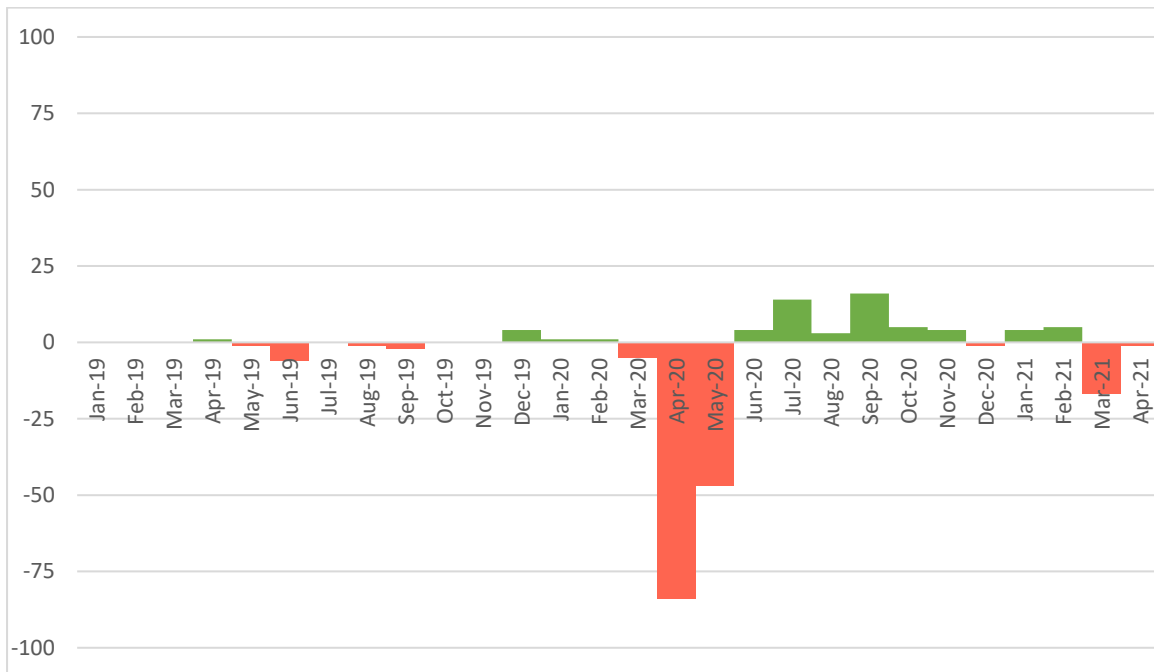


Figure 2: Net changes by month since 1 January 2019, data as at 30 April 2021.

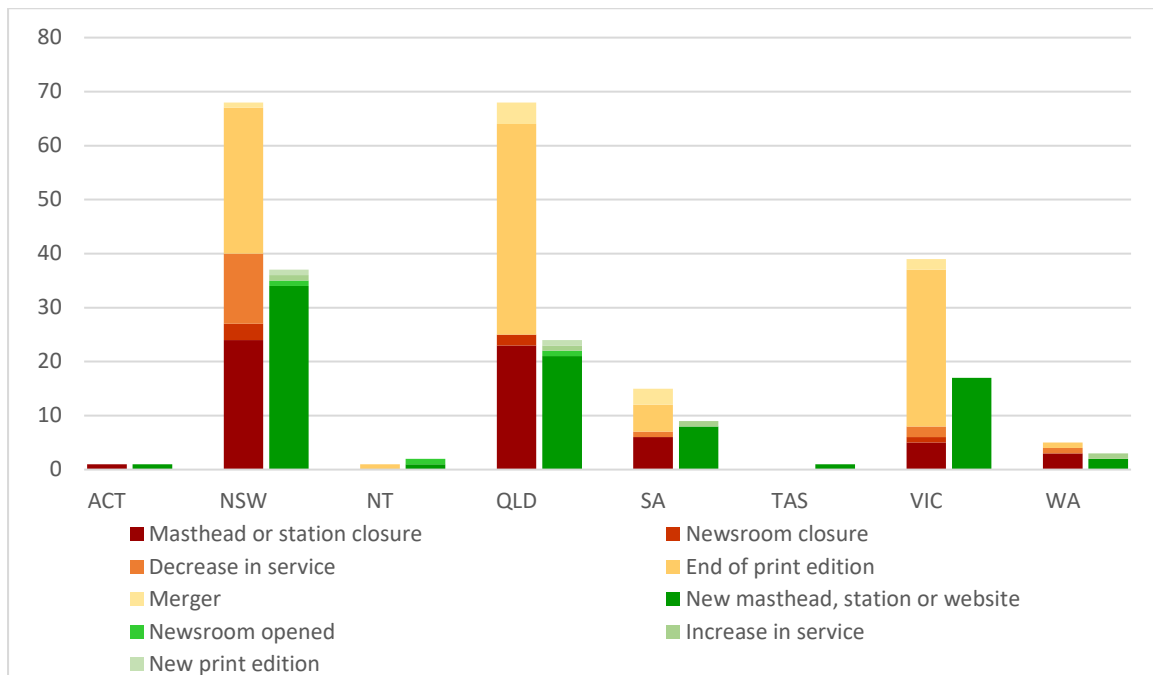


Figure 3: Change types by state, cumulative data as at 30 April 2021.

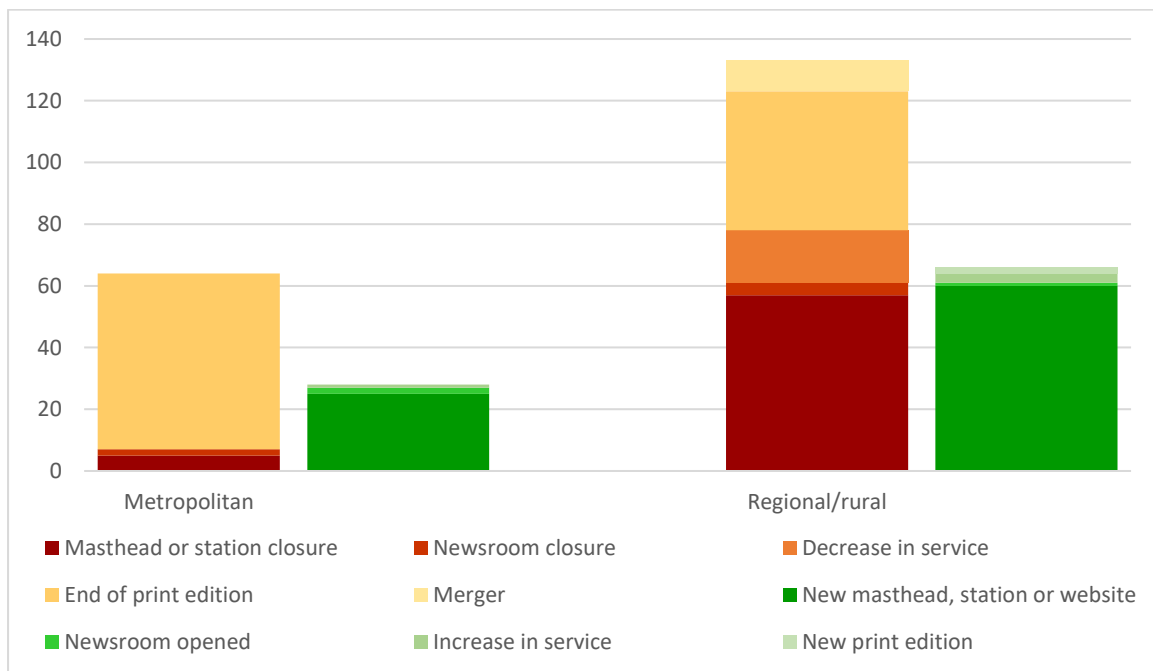


Figure 4: Change types by local government area classification, cumulative data as at 30 April 2021.

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 April 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 17 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 this month, some of those papers have been confirmed closed by the company, while other indicators collected by PIJI suggest that many more are also closed.

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.

3. Using this data

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two further hypotheticals provide reasons for caution:

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

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

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

About the Public Interest Journalism Initiative

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

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

[Public Interest Journalism Initiative]

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