

Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report : December 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 December 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
31 December 2021

Suggested citations

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Project: Dickson G. 2020. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://anmp.piji.com.au>>

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1. December 2021 data

1.1 New records in the database

Three new records were added to the database in December, all contractions.

CHANGE TYPE	RECORD	#
Masthead or station closure	The Great Southern Weekender, Albany, WA	2
	Roxby Downs Chronicle, Roxby Downs, SA	
TOTAL		2

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

The *Great Southern Weekender* was an independently-owned paper in Albany (WA), founded in 1993. According to *The Australian*, the newspaper ran into difficulty attracting advertising after a set of stories in 2018 and 2020 that challenged a prominent local business owner. These difficulties were exacerbated by COVID-19.¹ The *Weekender* published its final edition on 30 December.²

The other change added to the database is backdated to September 2020. The *Roxby Downs Chronicle* was established as a monthly newspaper produced by *The Transcontinental* (Port Augusta, SA) in May 2019.³ It follows the closure of the *Roxby Downs Sun* in August 2015. The *Chronicle* appears to have closed in 2020. Emails to the *Chronicle* editor and to the *Transcontinental* editor were not returned.

¹ Taylor P. 2022. Presses fall silent as Albany's former golden goose loses fight for survival. *The Australian*. 3 January. <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/presses-fall-silent-as-albanys-former-golden-goose-loses-fight-for-survival/news-story/1e09b5193991fa5ba541d3a232066647>>

² GreatSouthern Live 2021. Thank you & Goodbye. *Great Southern Weekender*. 30 December. <<https://www.greatsouthernlive.com.au/weekender/>>

³ The Transcontinental 2019. Sun hasn't set on publication. *Roxby Downs Chronicle*. 29 May. <<https://www.transcontinental.com.au/story/6129804/roxby-downs-chronicle-may-2019/#slide=1>>

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	#
Longreach Leader, Longreach, QLD	Removed	Masthead or station closure	03/12/2021	1
TOTAL				1

Table 2: Changed record, December 2021.

The other change made in December was the removal of the *Longreach Leader* from the change database. The *Leader* was closed by the Longreach Printing Company in October 2021, following the closures of its other titles in Emerald and Biloela, Queensland.

The *Longreach Leader* was subsequently purchased by Central Queensland Media Pty Ltd, the publisher of *CQ Today* (Rockhampton, QLD), and relaunched in December 2021.⁴

A limitation in the way that our database records changes means that only the latest and most significant change is captured. This is discussed further in section three of this report. Ideally, the data would reflect the closure of the *Leader* as well as its subsequent reopening; however, for the moment, this is not technically possible. This is why the entry has been removed from the database: to reflect the reversal of the closure.

We are currently looking at options to redesign the database to be able to reflect temporary outlet states or those that are later superseded by other changes.

⁴ Longreach Leader. 2021. Brilliant outcome for region, says mayor. *Longreach Leader*. 3 December. <https://leadertoday.com.au/all-digital-editions/longreach-leader-today-3rd-december-2021/>

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 31 December 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 many more expansions were identified in Q4/21 than in the previous quarter. As was discussed in the November report⁵, this is due to a systematic data collection process for a new research project⁶ which revealed a very large number of mastheads launched over the period of this project. 14 of the 15 new mastheads and all of the new print edition changes were identified in this process.

Note that this table assesses all records in the database at the end of the reporting period; it does not reflect when those changes actually occurred.

CHANGE TYPE	Q3/21	Q4/21	VARIANCE
New masthead, station or website	95	110	+15
Newsroom opened	4	4	-
Increase in service	9	9	-
New print edition	2	15	+13
Merger	15	15	-
End of print edition	101	106	+5
Decrease in service	40	41	+1
Newsroom closure	6	6	-
Masthead or station closure	70	78	+8
TOTAL NUMBER OF RECORDS	342	384	+42

Table 3: Number of records according to change type at 30 September 2021 and 31 December 2021.

⁵ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: November 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/anmp/anmp-data/>>. p. 3.

⁶ Dickson G. and Arturi S. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project: Local news producers. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://localnews.piji.com.au>>.

CHANGE CATEGORY	Q3/21	Q4/21	VARIANCE
Expansions	110	138	+28
Contractions	232	246	+14
QUARTERLY CHANGE, NET	(-122)	(-108)	+14

Table 4: Number of records according to change category and overall net change at 30 September 2021 and 31 December 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 138 total expansions and 246 total contractions of news production and availability from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2021. There are 384 total entries in the database for a net change of -108.

The net change has improved since Q3, with a positive variance of +14 to -108. The same net change was observed in Q2 2021 when the data contained 98 expansions and 206 contractions.

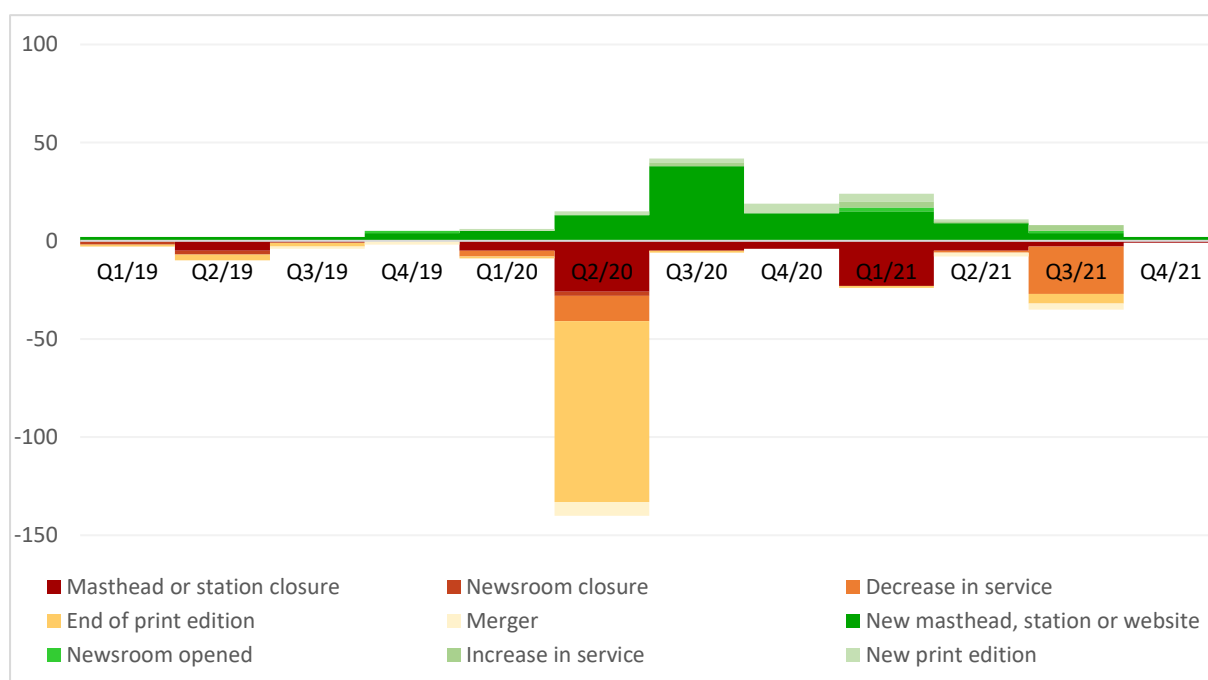


Figure 1: Change types, data at 31 December 2021.

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.⁷
- 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.⁸
- 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.

⁷ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: April 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/anmp/anmp-data/>>. pp. 2-3.

⁸ Dickson G. 2021. Australian Newsroom Mapping Project Report: July 2021. Melbourne: Public Interest Journalism Initiative. <<https://piji.com.au/research-and-inquiries/our-research/anmp/anmp-data/>>. p. 4.

2.1.1 Change categories by quarter

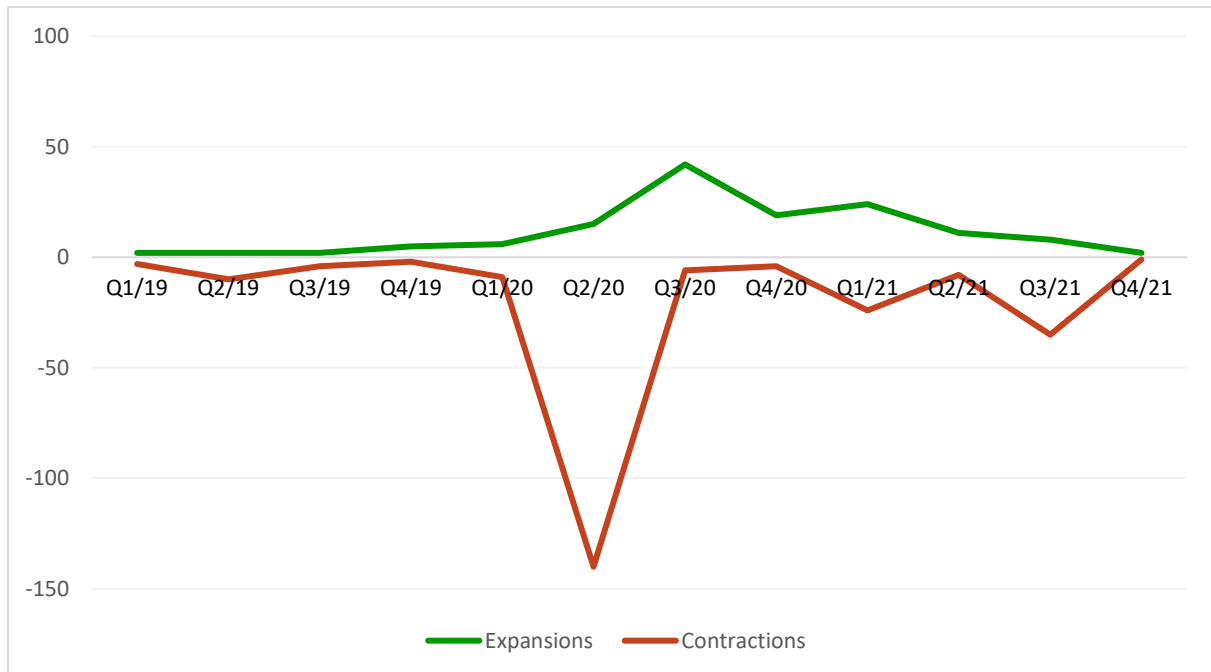


Figure 2: Quarterly records according to their change category and change date, data at 31 December 2021.

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 overall decline for the news media market, the ratio of expansions to contractions has steadily improved since Q4 2020. On 31 December 2021 expansions made up 35.9 per cent of all records, and contractions 64.1 per cent; a positive change from 32.2 per cent to 67.8 per cent at 30 September 2021.

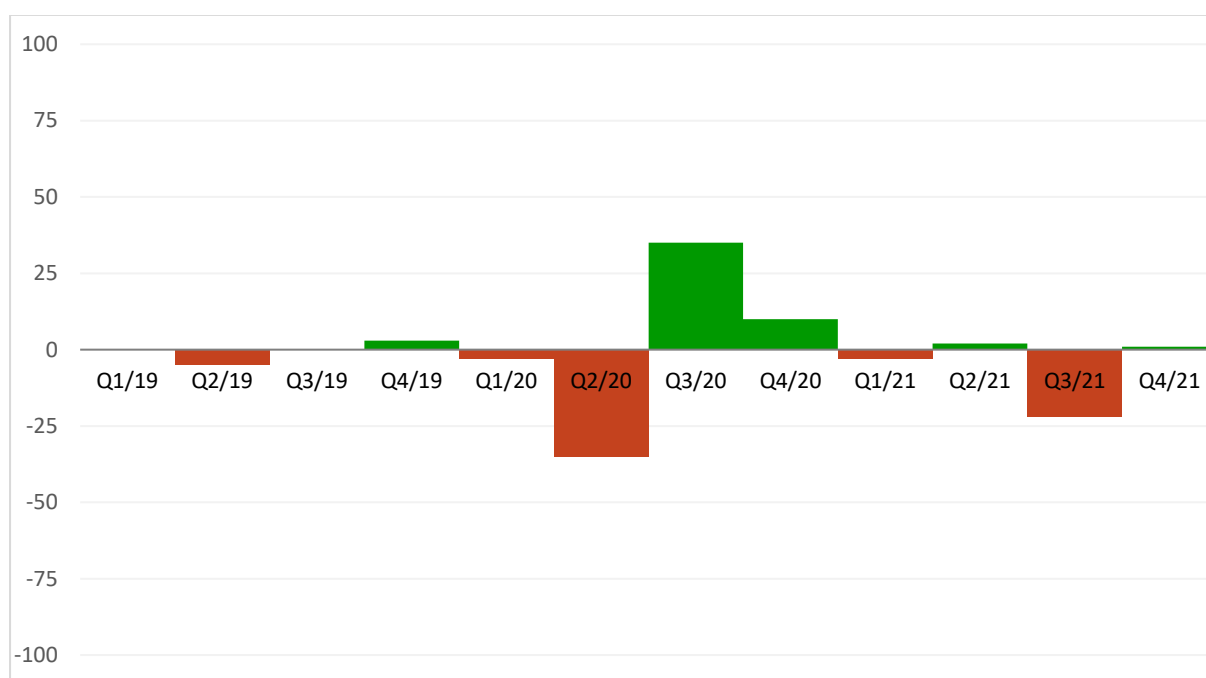


Figure 3: Quarterly net change of news production according to change type and change date, data at 31 December 2021.

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 31 December 2021 is near even, at 46.7 per cent to 53.3 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 +17. 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	49	2	35	11	2	34	4
Contractions	1	89	1	79	16	-	48	12
CHANGE, NET	-	(-40)	+1	(-44)	(-5)	+2	(-14)	(-8)

Table 5: Number of records according to change category and overall net change at 31 December 2021.

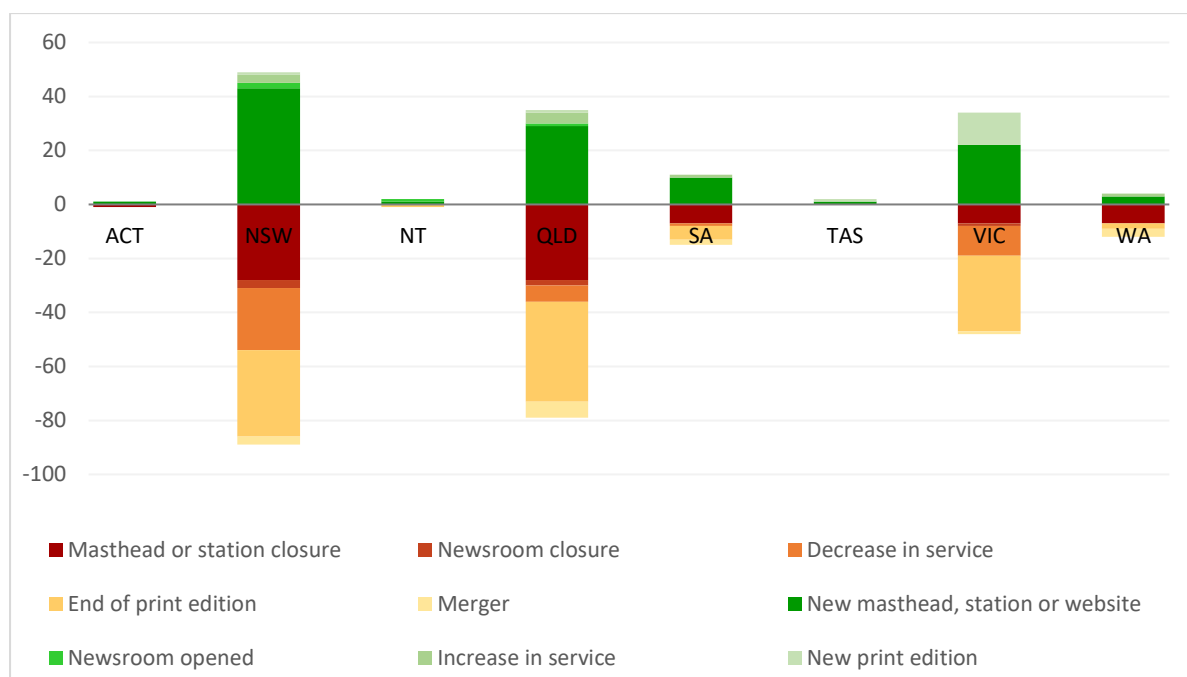


Figure 4: Change types by state or territory, data as at 31 December 2021.

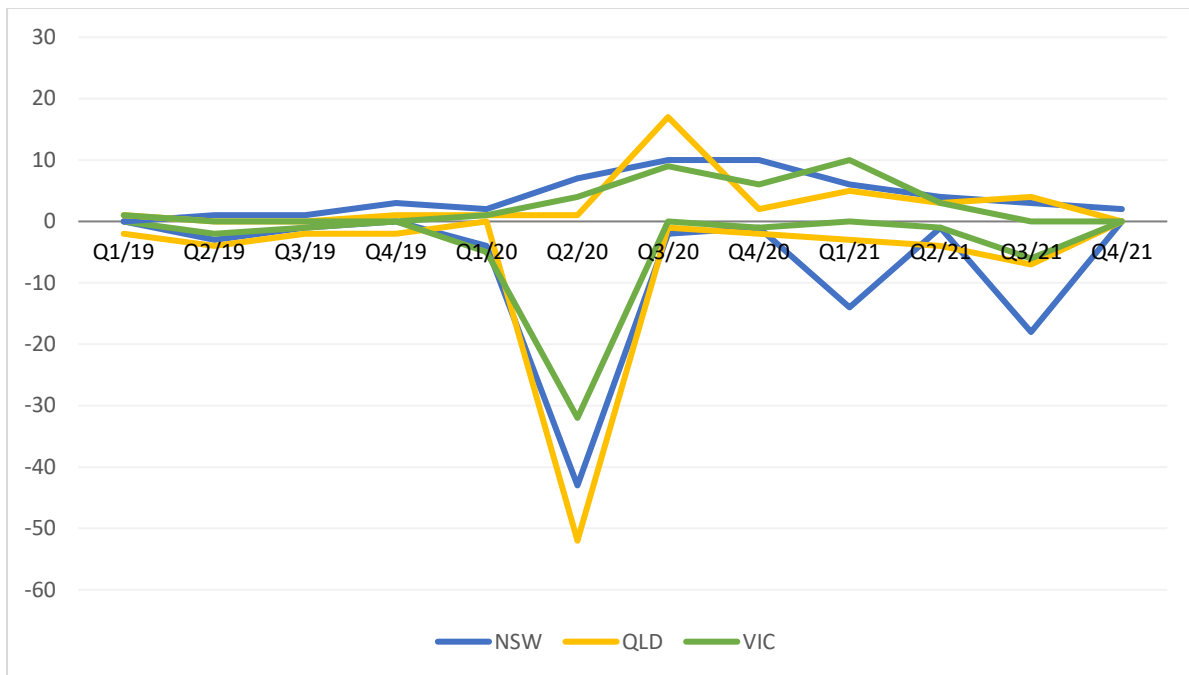


Figure 5: Records according to their change category and change date in three states, data at 31 December 2021.

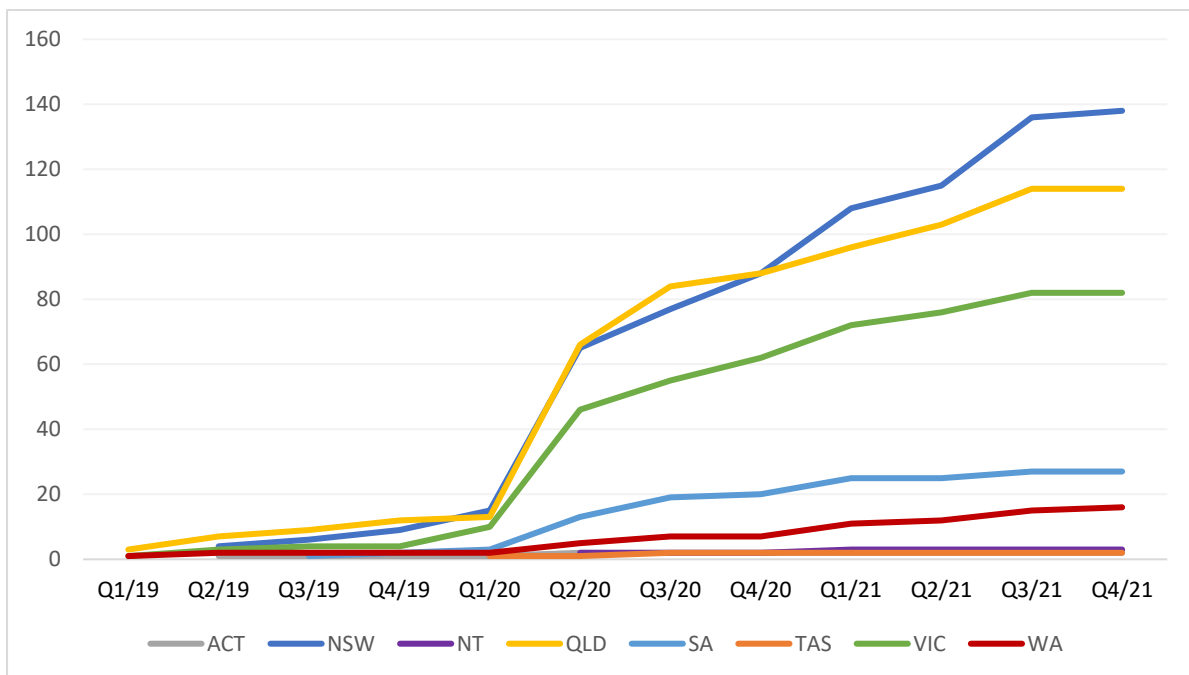


Figure 6: Cumulative entries recorded in all states and territories, data at 31 December 2021.

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 (43) and more than it has lost (28) 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 (26 of 28) 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	50	88
Contractions	72	174
CHANGE, NET	(-22)	(-86)

Table 6: Number of records according to change category and overall net change at 31 December 2021.

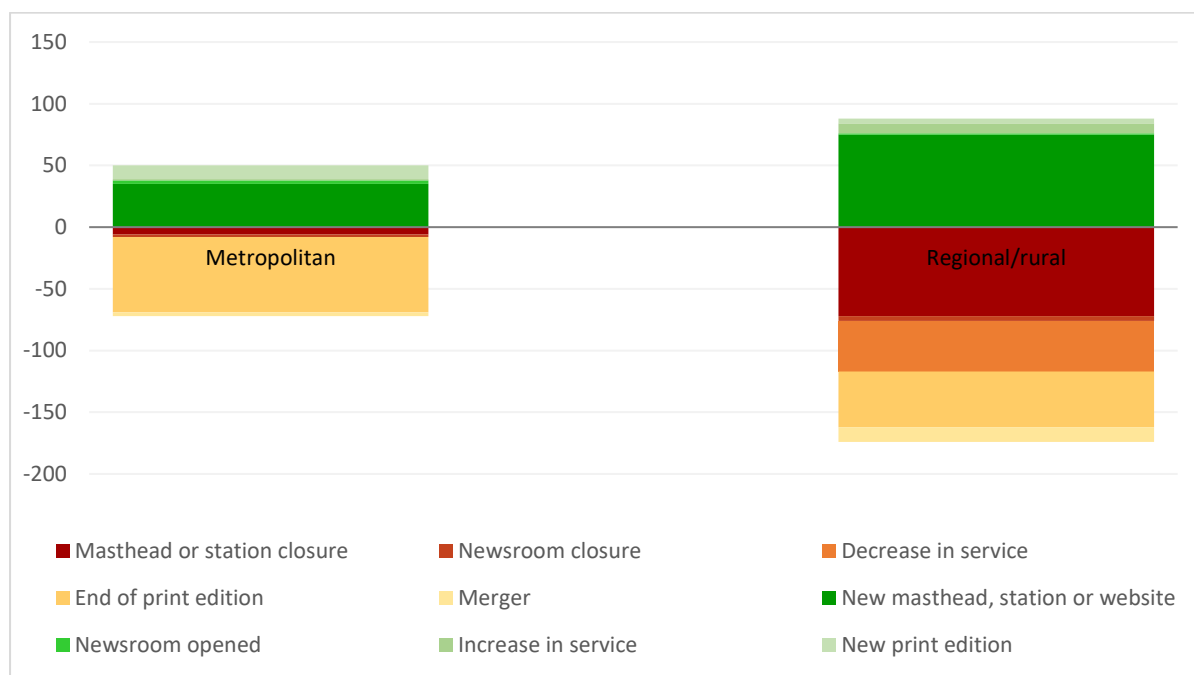


Figure 7: Change types by local government area location, data at 31 December 2021.

Table 6 shows that regional and rural Australia has experienced the greatest change, accounting for 70 per cent of all contractions and 63 per cent of growth. The overwhelming majority of outlets that have either closed (92 per cent) or decreased their service (100 per cent) are from regional areas. A nearly even number of outlets have opened (75) to those that closed (72), while the capital cities have gained 29 more outlets than we identified as having closed (35 compared to 6).

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.

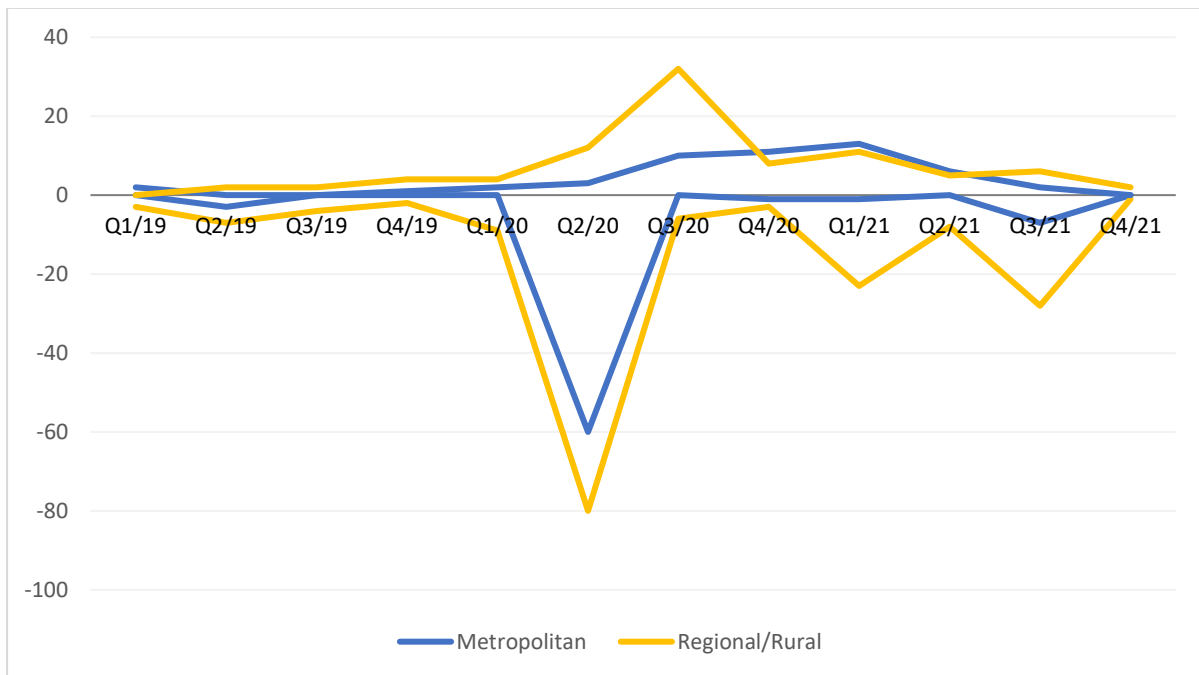


Figure 8: Change categories by local government area location, data at 31 December 2021.

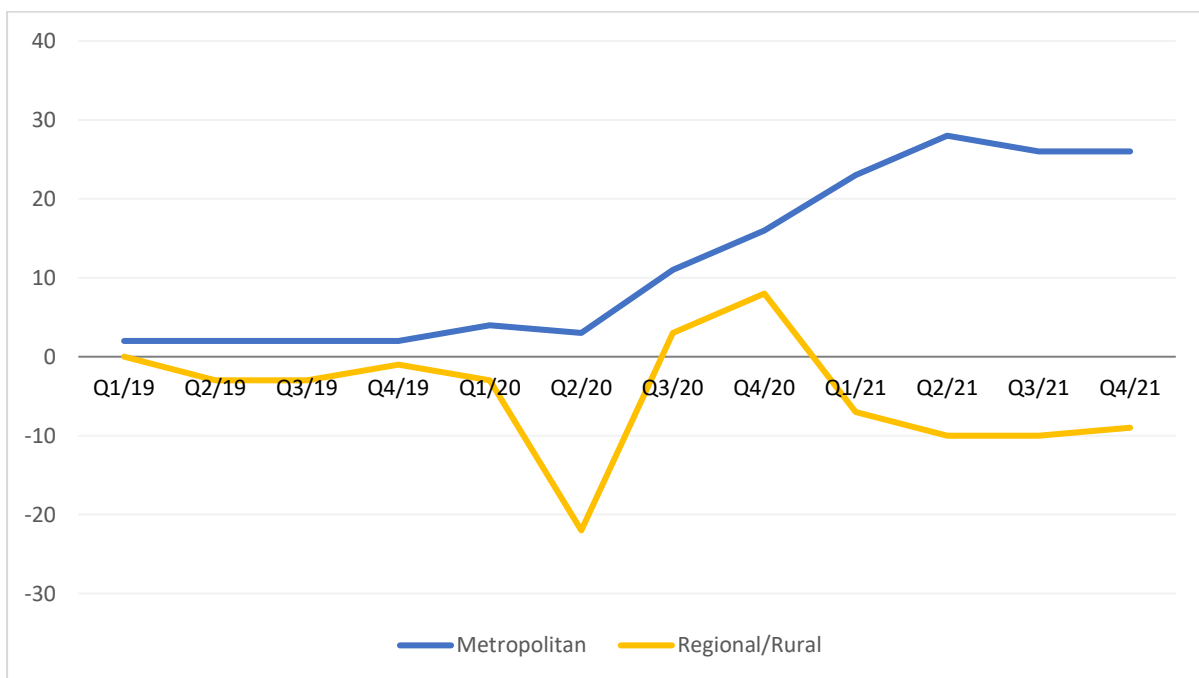


Figure 9: Net change in outlets by local government area location, data at 31 December 2021.

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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