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# Australian News Sampling Project

2023 Report

## **Australian News Sampling Project: 2023 Report**

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# AUSTRALIAN NEWS SAMPLING PROJECT

## 2023 Report

### Table of contents

1. Introduction/Executive summary	2
2. Context for sampling	3
Public interest journalism	3
The importance of local	4
3. Australian News Sampling Project	9
Sampling techniques	9
Coding	11
Methodology	13
Results	16
4. Comparative sampling in the Eyre Peninsula	26
November 2023 results	26
Comparative results	29
5. Sampling court reporting	33
Quantity of court reporting	34
Barriers to court reporting	39
Study: court reporting in regional New South Wales	41
6. Conclusion and future research	56
References	57
Appendix A: List of local government areas sampled in 2023	62
About the Public Interest Journalism Initiative	64

## 1. Introduction

This report presents an introduction to the Australian News Sampling Project, its methodology, and high-level findings across 2023. It also presents results of a comparative sample in the Eyre Peninsula, conducted in February and November 2023, and a new study of court reporting in regional New South Wales conducted in October 2023.

The Australian News Sampling Project launched in August 2022. It is part of PIJI's ongoing assessment of the state of public interest journalism through three projects:

- **Australian News Index (ANI)** is the national database of newsrooms and changes to news production.
- **Australian News Mapping Project (ANMP)** plots news producers according to their locations, coverage geographies and the characteristics of each business;
- **Australian News Sampling Project (ANSP)** assesses news output by specific geographic location/s to understand the local character and quantity of public interest journalism production and produces each as a case study.

These projects are part of PIJI's continued commitment to ensuring an evidence-based approach to building sustainable public interest journalism production in Australia. A catalogue of PIJI's previous reports and data is available [on our website](#).

The research conducted for this report found that:

- Moderate to high levels of public interest journalism is published in most sampled areas.
- Community coverage is frequently the largest category of public interest reporting while courts and crime coverage is almost always the least reported category.
- Regional titles publish a higher proportion of local stories, while publications based in capital cities cover fewer local stories compared to state and national stories.
- In the Eyre Peninsula there has been moderate change since the region's two newspapers were acquired and brought into the same editorial structure. Government reporting declined as community reporting increased.
- Geographies of coverage in this very remote region of South Australia remained remarkably consistent after the merger, however, with reporting occurring in every local government area sampled.
- Most court reporting in regional New South Wales locations sampled is conducted by major news media. There was little to no evidence of court reporting at the majority of independent media outlets.
- Court stories mostly covered plea hearings in Local Court. Most outlets primarily covered violent crime.
- In one region, Broken Hill, there were no court reports published across the entire sampled month.

PIJI will continue sampling in 2024 and will be regularly resampling local government areas in order to gain further insights into how local conditions have changed. We will also explore incorporating large language models into the sampling process. Future research into court reporting will include both resampling and qualitative research with court and editorial staff.

## 2. Context for sampling

### Public interest journalism

PIJI is focussed on public interest journalism due to its benefits to society. In its inquiry into digital platforms, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) stated that public interest journalism “provides benefits to individuals who consume it by improving their knowledge and understanding of issues and events that affect them”.<sup>1</sup> But, it argued, these benefits are not confined to just the individual news consumers: journalism benefits everybody, including those who do not access or pay for it. In this way, public interest journalism is a public good, benefitting society broadly.

In the 2012 report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation, the authors acknowledge that there is “almost unanimous agreement on the importance of a free press for the vitality of democracy”.<sup>2</sup> This is because uncensored, diverse and reliable journalism allows citizens to make well-informed decisions, which contribute to ‘healthy’ politics and life.<sup>3</sup>

Recognition of public interest journalism as a distinct product within broader news production has grown in international scholarship over the past decade. A comprehensive literature review<sup>4</sup> by Friedland et al. produced for the US Federal Communications Commission, has identified eight ‘critical information needs’ of communities. These are the subjects that must be reported on to ensure that citizens are well and fairly informed:

1. Emergencies and risks
2. Health and welfare
3. Education
4. Transportation systems
5. Environment and planning
6. Economic opportunities, including jobs
7. Civic information, including local events
8. Political information, especially local governance

In Australia, the broadly accepted definition of public interest journalism emerged through scholarship and was refined through policy reform. In its Digital Platforms Inquiry, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission defined it as:

Journalism with the primary purpose of recording, investigating and explaining issues of public significance in order to engage citizens in public debate and inform democratic decision making at all levels of government.<sup>5</sup>

This definition is narrower than that suggested by Friedland et al., being focussed on government activity to the exclusion of other sectors. Through the development of the News

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. 2019. *Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report*. p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> Finkelstein R. 2012. Report of the Independent inquiry into the media and media regulation. p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison J. 2019. Public Service Journalism.

<sup>4</sup> Friedland L., Napoli P., Ognyanova K., Weil C. and Wilson E. 2012. Review of the Literature Regarding Critical Information Needs for the American Public.

<sup>5</sup> ACCC. 2019. p. 283.

Media Bargaining Code, the ACCC's definition was adapted into the concept of 'core news content', defined as:

Content that reports, investigates or explains:

- (a) issues or events that are relevant in engaging Australians in public debate and in informing democratic decision-making, or
- (b) current issues or events of public significance for Australians at a local, regional or national level.<sup>6</sup>

The 'core news content' concept broadens the focus to include both 'current issues or events of public significance', capturing a wider range of potential impacts than the ACCC's narrow concern with 'democratic decision making'; as well as a consideration of scale – 'local, regional or national level' – which makes explicit that stories can be important even where they don't impact an entire state or the country as a whole. Combined, the additions in (b) recognise that coverage of local communities, the issues and events that are important to them, is an essential function of news.

PIJI's definition of public interest journalism is slightly different from either the ACCC or 'core news content', but informed by both:

Original content that records, reports or investigates issues of public significance for Australians; issues relevant to engaging Australians in public debate and in informing democratic decision making, or content which relates to community and local events.

The most meaningful difference is to exclude 'explains' as a relevant activity, as PIJI's focus is on the production of original reported journalism, not opinion or analysis content. Our interpretation of the relevant issues is informed by the eight critical information needs and grouped into four pillars of public interest journalism: government, courts and crime, community, and public services such as health, education and emergency.

## The importance of local

Local news is an important part of public interest journalism production, both in terms of its prominence within the sector and its impact. According to PIJI's data, there are at least 1,000 local print, digital, radio and television news outlets around Australia. Local-scale news producers are 88 per cent of all outlets.<sup>7</sup>

While state or national news outlets might cover public interest journalism topics at state or federal levels, as well as issues that affect a country or region more broadly, they are unlikely to address the critical information needs that will be unique community-to-community. Furthermore, national news has been found to report more on issues that are divisive or conflict-driven, while local media promoted social cohesion.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Act 2021, 52A Definitions.

<sup>7</sup> Dickson G. and Costa J. 2023. *Australian News Data Report: December 2023*.

<sup>8</sup> Viswanath K., Finnegan J. R., Rooney B. and Potter J. 1990. Community ties in a rural midwest community and use of newspapers and cable television.

Audiences particularly value local news. A 2017 study by ACMA found that 86 per cent of Australians consider local news important and 87 per cent were satisfied with its quality.<sup>9</sup> A February 2024 survey conducted by Essential Media for PIJI found that 33 per cent of Australians believe there is not enough reporting on local government affairs, 51 per cent think there is the right amount, and seven percent too much. 10 per cent of respondents were unsure.<sup>10</sup>

There is healthy scholarship on the difference in culture and civic function of journalism between metropolitan and regional newsrooms in Australia. Country newspapers tend to operate as the voice of their community, with journalists acting as advocates or promoters for their region,<sup>11</sup> whereas metropolitan journalists tend to have a less local focus.<sup>12</sup>

Bowd has argued<sup>13</sup> that regional and rural newspapers fill a special role in their communities that metropolitan papers do not: they're closer to their audiences and advocate for them; journalists and editors are more accessible and contribute to social and community cohesiveness. Other Australian research has shown that civic leaders believe local media does a better job of reflecting the needs of communities than state or national media.<sup>14</sup>

A strong preference for localism among journalists and readers in non-metropolitan outlets indicates that this is one of the defining features of regional papers, and at the centre of their mission. According to these practitioners, local stories reflect, define and strengthen a sense of regional identity.<sup>15</sup> It also suggests that the project of identity-building for a regional community is more central to the project of country journalism than transparency and accountability.<sup>16</sup> Hanusch identified attitudinal differences between regional and metropolitan journalists. Regional journalists were more likely to want to support government policy and convey a positive image of political leadership; and more reluctant to endorse journalism's investigative role (9.9 per cent) compared to their metropolitan counterparts (24.4 per cent).<sup>17</sup> When concerned with community coverage, however, local journalists were significantly more enthusiastic about creating a forum for their community and focussing on news relevant to it (40.4 per cent) than metropolitan reports (11.6 per cent).<sup>18</sup>

## Local news closures

PIJI's data suggests at least 150 news outlets have closed in Australia since 2019, with a large percentage of this decline affecting regional areas.<sup>19</sup> Prior studies have shown that local news is not only an important source of information for of communities but also works to

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Communications and Media Authority. 2019. Regional Australians' access to local content. Community Survey. p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Withers G. 2024. Community value of public interest journalism: February 2024. Forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> Bowd K. 2010. Local voice, local choice: Australian country newspapers and notions of community; Pretty K. 1993. Dusting off the grass roots: a survey of Australian community journalists.

<sup>12</sup> Hanusch F. 2015. A different breed altogether? Distinctions between local and metropolitan journalism cultures.

<sup>13</sup> Bowd K. 2012. Considering the consequences: Australian country newspapers and news impact on communities. p.127

<sup>14</sup> Carson A., Muller D., Martin J and Simons M. 2016. A new symbiosis? Opportunities and challenges to hyperlocal journalism in the digital age. p.137.

<sup>15</sup> Bowd K. 2011. Reflecting regional life: Localness and social capital in Australian country newspapers.

<sup>16</sup> Bowd K. 2003. How different is 'different'? Australian country newspapers and development journalism.

<sup>17</sup> Hanusch 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Dickson and Costa 2023.

strengthen communities ties and involvement, including participation in local organisations or politics.<sup>20</sup> Local media allows citizens to create personal connections to reported topics and facilitates their participation in public discourse by informing them of relevant issues.<sup>21</sup>

This decline of local news, Park, Lee and Fisher argue, has not only had an impact on the provision of local critical information needs, but also on the attachment a citizen has to their community.<sup>22</sup> The authors found that communities which did not experience a decline in their local news provision were significantly more likely to have a higher level of trust in local news, as well as a higher attachment to their community.<sup>23</sup> Further, alternative news sources had less of a positive effect on community attachment than traditional news sources, suggesting that these sources are not filling the same role that sources such as local newspapers previously did.<sup>24</sup>

The loss of professional journalists providing relevant, quality, and accurate information about localities where news outlets shut down has led to a rise of what are popularly known as “news deserts”,<sup>25</sup> places that lack coverage of specific critical information needs or, in some circumstances, any local coverage at all. As of December 2023, PIJI has identified five local government areas without a local print, digital or radio news producer, and 29 without local print or digital. All of these are in rural and regional Australia.<sup>26</sup> Even where local media remain, they may not always have sufficient resources to cover civic institutions.<sup>27</sup>

Research conducted by Magasic, Hess and Freeman in Lightning Ridge, an outback rural town in New South Wales, highlighted the role played by a local media outlet, suggesting that their function extends beyond information dissemination.<sup>28</sup> Instead, local outlets like The Ridge News – which shut down in 2015 - appear to have had an influence on political dynamics while fostering civic and social engagement within the community. Local outlets serve as platforms for intermediaries, shuttling between citizens and government institutions, giving the former a platform to voice their concerns on government and hold leaders accountable,<sup>29</sup> while providing government institutions latter with a barometer of public opinion.<sup>30</sup>

Bowd found that reading and reporting the stories of a specific locality enables the community to exist in both the public and mental spheres of individuals.<sup>31</sup> This sense of belonging and shared identity forms the basis of the civic role of the media, providing space for citizens to

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<sup>20</sup> Hess K. and Waller L. 2017. *Local journalism in a digital world*; Park S., Lee J. Y. and Fisher C. 2023. News closures, trust, and community attachment among regional news audiences: A case study of Australia.

<sup>21</sup> Park, Lee and Fisher 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Barnett S. and Townend J. 2014. Plurality, policy and the local: can hyperlocals fill the gap?; Ferrier M. 2014. The media deserts project: monitoring community news and information needs using geographic information system technologies; Gulyas A. 2021. Local news deserts.

<sup>26</sup> Dickson and Costa 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Simons M. and Dickson G. 2019. Availability of local news and information.

<sup>28</sup> Magasic M., Hess K. and Freeman J. 2023. Examining the social, civic, and political impact of local newspaper closure in outback Australia.

<sup>29</sup> Bowd 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Magasic, Hess and Freeman 2023. p.49

<sup>31</sup> Bowd 2011.



mobilise for common causes.<sup>32</sup> Magasic et al. show that the closure of The Ridge News resulted in a loss of community identity and the loosening of the social fabric, with citizens feeling denied the possibility to undertake civic actions and participate in the town's political and social activities.

In the US, a Pew Research Centre report found that about 20 per cent of adults who were 'highly attached' to their communities had much stronger ties to local news.<sup>33</sup> People who regularly used three or more sources of local news were more likely to be involved in political activity and local groups, and those who rated their communities favourably were also more likely to think their local media were doing a good job.<sup>34</sup> The report argues this reveals the link between a person's connection to an area and their desire to stay informed on that area.<sup>35</sup>

Smethers et al., studying the news ecosystem in Baldwin City, Kansas, found that the closure of the Baldwin City Signal impacted the availability of news in the community and interrupted advertising channels for local businesses. In focus groups, community members lamented the loss of a 'single source' of information about their community, and noted that other sources that emerged to replace the newspaper – listservs established by the local school and a community arts organisation, a newsletter from the chamber of commerce, expanded efforts by a newspaper in a nearby city, a digital news startup – led to piecemeal coverage of local issues and a fractured information environment.<sup>36</sup>

The importance of these findings is related to the intertwined function of local news providing citizens with a sense of community attachment, and the link between those who are highly attached to their communities trusting local news more, as well as consuming more of it. This gap is so significant that factors such as "a sense of belonging, the ability to share news with others, and the loss of a local news services" were more important to support for local news than the actual content the news outlet produced. Therefore, a gap in local news provision leads not only to a lack of critically informed citizens in a community but also a lack of community cohesion.<sup>37</sup>

The loss of local news has impacts beyond social cohesion and disruption to consumer preferences.

Schulhofer-Wohl found<sup>38</sup> that the loss of local news had a political dimension: following the closure of the Cincinnati Post there were fewer people voting in city council, city commission and school board elections; fewer candidates for those seats; campaign spending dropped and the chances of incumbents improved.

A study by researchers at the universities of Notre Dame and Illinois found a causal relationship between the closure of local newspapers and increased borrowing costs, wages,

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<sup>32</sup> Dahlgren P. 2003 Reconfiguring civic culture in the new media milieu; Ekman J. and Amnå E. 2012. Political participation and civic engagement: towards a new typology.

<sup>33</sup> Barthel M., Holcomb J., Mahone J. and Mitchell A. 2016. *Civic Engagement Strongly Tied to Local News Habits*. Pew Research Centre. p.4

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Smethers J. S., Mwangi S. C. and Bressers B. 2021. Signal interruption in Baldwin City: filling a communication vacuum in a small town "news desert".

<sup>37</sup> Park, Lee and Fisher 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Schulhofer-Wohl S. and Garrido M. 2013. Do newspapers matter? Short-run and long-run evidence from the closure of The Cincinnati Post. p. 61.

deficits and financial waste in local governments.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, research conducted by the World Bank found a correlation between newspaper circulation and lower levels of political corruption.<sup>40</sup> Other research has suggested that monitoring by journalists improves corporate governance and exposes fraud.<sup>41</sup>

### Degraded local news coverage

Local news ecosystems can degrade without becoming “news deserts”. Well-documented challenges to traditional advertising-based news business models, exacerbated by a particular difficulty in monetising public interest journalism,<sup>42</sup> can lead to reductions in the quality, quantity and content of reporting and, as a consequence, audiences’ critical information needs not being met. Metropolitan newsrooms may not produce high quantities of local news, particularly in communities outside of capital cities.<sup>43</sup>

Perreault et al. interviewed 33 rural Australian journalists to explore the grey areas of original reporting and public relations content, and their attitudes towards it.<sup>44</sup> The study found that regional and local newsrooms are relying on public relations submissions from local organisations for content because of a lack of resources. Consistent with other research,<sup>45</sup> the authors also found that local newsrooms often reported favourably on events and news in their region because of pressures to participate in community building and social cohesion. Although almost all local journalists interviewed in the study believed there is a stark difference between public relations and journalism, there was an obvious reliance on repackaged content.

Anecdotally, PIJI has observed many instances of press releases from local government and business being reproduced as editorial content in local print and digital news, an issue that the ABC also identified in a 2022 Media Watch segment.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Gao P., Chang L. and Murphy D. 2018. Financing dies in darkness? The impact of newspaper closures on public finance.

<sup>40</sup> Adserà A. 2000. Are you being served?: political accountability and quality of government.

<sup>41</sup> Dyck A. 2008. The corporate governance role of the media: Evidence from Russia; Dyck A. 2010. Who blows the whistle on corporate fraud?.

<sup>42</sup> Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Attard M., Dickson G., Jehangir A. 2022. *Regional news media*; Attard M., Dickson G., Jehangir A. and Newling N. 2023. *Regional news media*.

<sup>44</sup> Perreault M. F., Fargen Walsh J., Lincoln L., Perreault G. and Moon R. 2023. “Everything Else is Public Relations” How Rural Journalists Draw the Boundary Between Journalism and Public Relations in Rural Communities.

<sup>45</sup> In addition to studies previously discussed, Simons M., Dickson G. and Alembakis R. 2019. *The nature of the editorial deficit*.

<sup>46</sup> Barry P. 2022. Local news copy & paste.

### 3. Australian News Sampling Project

The Australian News Sampling Project is PIJI's ongoing effort to monitor the production output of local news. Using a content analysis framework, this research attempts to establish whether local print and digital news in sample communities around Australia are publishing public interest journalism.

The research questions for this project are:

**RQ1** How much public interest journalism is produced in the selected region?

**RQ2** What types of public interest journalism are being produced?

**RQ3** How locally relevant is the news content being produced?

In content analysis, sampling is the process of limiting a set of texts in order to find answers to research questions and make analytically informed generalisations about a larger population of texts.<sup>47</sup> The need to sample usually arises out of the difficulty of analysing an entire body of texts in any given dataset, a task which may be too resource intensive to complete or too difficult to obtain all of the texts in a population, as well as potentially unnecessary to answer an analyst's research questions. However, sampling must be of an adequate size in order to be an accurate representation of the larger population's characteristics and sufficiently reduce the bias that may be introduced as a result of the limiting of textual units.

#### Sampling techniques

To address this issue, an analyst can use different sampling techniques or combinations of these techniques, to reach a point where their research questions can be answered while simultaneously addressing the bias introduced as a result of the sampling. Riffe, Lacy, Watson, and Fico, and Krippendorff, discuss a number of different techniques, including census sampling, convenience sampling and varying probability sampling, although we have chosen to limit our focus here to those relevant to our research.<sup>48</sup>

Random sampling is when texts are randomly selected from an entire population of texts, while systematic sampling is when texts are selected at a determined interval. While similar, because systematic sampling has a constant interval, it can create bias if the texts follow a pattern. For example, if the interval chosen is to sample a newspaper every Tuesday and Sunday, but for the particular newspaper sampled, Tuesday and Sunday are the days where the fewest articles are published, the sample will be skewed to appear much smaller than if it had sampled Mondays and Saturdays, which might be the paper's largest editions.

Stratified sampling is used when there are attributes within sample populations that allow them to be placed into distinct categories, or subpopulations, and then further limited through random or systematic sampling of those subpopulations. A subpopulation of texts could be categorised by the location they were produced in, the geographic area they were distributed in or how frequently they were published. Stratified sampling is useful when

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<sup>47</sup> Krippendorff K. 2019. Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology. p. 115.

<sup>48</sup> Krippendorff 2019; Riffe D., Lacy S. R., Watson B. and Fico F. 2019. Analysing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research.

analysing mass media because it makes use of the regular patterns and programming that the industry employs.

In larger sets of texts which also have a time dimension, a single sampling approach will likely be ineffective at answering research questions, which is why many analysts employ a ‘multistage’ approach. This allows analysts to continuously limit a sample at different stages, based on the most appropriate technique at that stage. For example, an analyst looking at the content of different news websites could first use stratified sampling to limit the sample to a set of texts produced out of a geographic area. This area would define which news sites would be sampled. The analyst could then use random or systematic sampling to determine on which days the news sites would be sampled. If this limited the sample sufficiently, the analyst could stop the process here, however if the number of texts was still too cumbersome to sample, they could take the homepage content of those news sites on those days as a cluster sample. This could be useful in answering broader research questions, but might introduce bias if, for example, the analyst was attempting to analyse the output of video news stories and the sampled homepages rarely displayed these types of stories, hosting it elsewhere instead.

### Geographic content sampling

A literature review conducted by McAdam and Hess highlighted a significant geographic turn in journalism studies, with a growing reliance on mapping techniques to decipher and document the rapidly changing media landscape.<sup>49</sup> The authors developed a four-category typology of mapping within journalism scholarship in order to address what they identified as a deficit in geographic methodological development. Each category relies on distinct interpretations of the concept of ‘place’, which often transcends its geographic dimension.<sup>50</sup> PIJJ’s research is deeply rooted in geography, and belongs to the ‘cartographic’ category, the other three have varying degrees of connection to places. A ‘network’ approach, for instance, focuses on interconnections and flows between elements that are linked to a physical location. The last two categories include projects that have weaker ties to the notion of space, although they may borrow from the vocabulary of geography. The authors distinguish ‘spatial cognitive cartography’, which relies heavily on visual maps to help conceptualise elements, and ‘metaphorical cartography’, which is used to “situate the size and scope of [research]” in a more figurative way.<sup>51</sup>

A brief review of other studies using news sampling with a geographic focus suggests a lack of standardised methods in academia. While this complicates the task, some cases provide insights towards building a more transparent methodological framework.

The Local News Map<sup>52</sup> project in Canada, which reports the evolutions of news outlets presence across the country in a similar manner to PIJJ’s Australian News Mapping Project, did not offer any methodological insight in its study of local news coverage of the 2015 Canadian federal election. The selection of eight communities where news media coverage was

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<sup>49</sup> McAdam A. and Hess K. 2022. Navigating the terrain: a typology of mapping in journalism studies.

<sup>50</sup> Hess K. 2012. Breaking Boundaries. Recasting the “local” newspaper as “geo-social” news in a digital landscape; McAdam and Hess 2022.

<sup>51</sup> McAdam and Hess 2022.

<sup>52</sup> The Local News Research Project. <<https://localnewsresearchproject.ca/>>

examined lacked clear criteria, beyond a brief mention of the sample comprising a mix of smaller cities as well as rural and suburban municipalities.<sup>53</sup>

In studies where selection criteria were more clearly defined, it appears that researchers' focus was on a particular phenomenon or event, which informed their choice of a locality. Some studies based their selection on a place's relation with a specific issue like a controversial mine opening,<sup>54</sup> or the presence of refugees in regional Australia.<sup>55</sup> In these instances, a case-study was considered to offer more in depth-analysis.<sup>56</sup> Selection criteria were rooted in the research objectives; for instance, Cooper and al. 'study of asylum seekers' regional media coverage<sup>57</sup> selected LGAs in News South Wales with at least 50 new residents from refugee backgrounds according to government statistics.

Finally, some studies opted for a single area based on the regional characteristics of its media market and the potential for extending the analysis beyond that territory.<sup>58</sup>

## Sample sizes

There is no uniform 'perfect' sample size in content,<sup>59</sup> instead, researchers must experiment with different sample sizes and techniques to determine the combination which produces answers to their research questions.<sup>60</sup> Sampling experiments allow analysts to more efficiently sample texts, as through this experimentation, they may find that increasing their sample size has no significant effect on the results. Furthermore, literature suggests that analysts must begin their content analysis by oversampling to establish a baseline for determining how confident they can be with different sample sizes, and to experiment with different sampling techniques to understand how these may affect their sample sizes or their accuracy.<sup>61</sup>

This experimentation allows analysts to create benchmarks, with standards of error, in order to determine what the most effective techniques and smallest sizes are, while maintaining their accuracy.

## Coding

Once an analyst has determined what to sample, they must then go through the procedure of recording that content and formatting it within a database, ready for analysis, in a process

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<sup>53</sup> Lindgren A., Corbett J. and Hodson J. 2017. Canada's local news "poverty".

<sup>54</sup> Somerville R. and Ames K. 2020. Framing development: Identifying dominant themes about the 'Adani project' in local regional media.

<sup>55</sup> Cooper S., Olejniczak E., Lenette C. and Smedley C. 2017. Media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in regional Australia: a critical discourse analysis.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Hendrickx J. and Van Remoortere A. 2021. Assessing News Content Diversity in Flanders: An Empirical Study at DPG Media.

<sup>59</sup> Riffe D., Aust C. F. and Lacy S. R. 1993. The Effectiveness of Random, Consecutive Day and Constructed Week Sampling in Newspaper Content Analysis; Lacy S.R., Riffe D., Stoddard S., Martin H. and Chang K. K. 2001. Sample Size for Newspaper Content Analysis in Multi-Year Studies; Douglas A. L., Caburnay C. A. and Cohen E. L. 2011. How Much Is Enough? New Recommendations for Using Constructed Week Sampling in Newspaper Content Analysis of Health Stories.

<sup>60</sup> Krippendorff 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Wang X. and Riffe D. 2010. An Exploration of Sample Sizes for Content Analysis of the New York Times Web Site; Connolly-Ahern C., Ahern L. A. and Bortree D. S. 2009. The Effectiveness of Stratified Constructed Week Sampling for Content Analysis of Electronic News Source Archives: AP Newswire, Business Wire, and PR Newswire.

called coding. This is because, even after narrowing down how many texts are to be analysed, methods of measuring and categorising sampled texts must be consistent and replicable, across different analysts, or ‘coders’, as well in other research activities.<sup>62</sup>

To achieve this consistency there must be strict rules that can be applied to all texts, especially complex ones, eliminating as much as possible “unrecognisable judgements”<sup>63</sup> that coders make, as these lead to datasets and results that are unable to be replicated by other researchers, or are of “dubious value”.<sup>64</sup>

These rules start with the definitions of variables and categories that a coder will record against each sample text, and are compiled into a coding guidebook. Generally, analysts should strive for simplicity within their defined variables and categories – not just in the definitions they provide, but in the ‘observable’ presence of those rules.<sup>65</sup>

The development of a coding guidebook must be an iterative process, in which coders are trained against the rules and then their feedback and processes are incorporated and developed on, until there is reliability among both coders and the rules that guide them. This process and reliability must also extend to coders not present in the initial development, as the reliability of the rules and coders must not be linked to participation in the development process.

## Reliability testing

Even with well-defined variables and very strict documentation relating to coding processes, other factors, such as a coder’s prior familiarity with and understanding of a subject, their subjective interpretations, ‘coding fatigue’, and their attention to detail, could still have a significant impact on the reliability of the results, especially in research projects with many coders or multiple different types of texts.<sup>66</sup>

Variance between coders can be minimised through reliability testing, a process through which analysts assess the stability, accuracy and reproducibility of the coding protocol.

- Stability relates to the consistent application of the defined variables, or coding protocol, to the same text at different points in time. Usually relating to a single coder, this tests if their understanding of the protocol has changed over time.
- Accuracy refers to testing whether or not coding matches an external standard, for example, comparing an expert’s standard against the content analysis data. This method can be difficult to test reliability against, as there are often not accepted standards in a particular field, nor can this process eliminate potential biases that may be present in an ‘expert standard’.

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<sup>62</sup> Krippendorff 2019. p. 129

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Riffe D., Lacy S. R., Watson B. and Fico F. 2019. Analysing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research. p. 99.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 100.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

- Reproducibility involves multiple coders applying the coding protocol to a set of the same texts. The agreement between the coders' categorisation of variables informs the reliability of the protocol.<sup>67</sup>

It should be noted that reliability testing should not just test the reliability of coders, but the reliability of the coding protocol as well, as substantial disagreements between coders might not be a result of poor interpretation but rather poor definitions of categories or procedures.

## Methodology

The Australian News Sampling Project takes a multistage stratified sampling approach, limiting the overall sample first by its geography, then identifying the sources out of a subset of the news producers in the selected region.

## Geography

Each month, PIJI selects a geographic area to sample. This could be a single local government area or group of LGAs identifiable as a region. In some cases, a region may be officially designated by a state government (such as the Great Southern region of Western Australia) or the Australian Bureau of Statistics (where a set of local government areas overlap with a Statistical Area 4 boundary). In other cases, commercial rather than political structures may define a region: in some cases, particularly in regional Australia, a group of local government areas may have a single 'anchor' newspaper, usually based in a regional city, with a large number of surrounding LGAs part of its coverage area. North West Queensland is an example, where the North West Star in Mount Isa is the main newspaper for a number of remote local government areas.

PIJI's selection of regions for sampling is driven by geographic, news market characteristics and major event factors.

- **Geographic:** Consideration of the local government area's remoteness area and the state or territory in which it is located. The goal is to sample local government areas proportionately to these factors. Where possible, PIJI avoids sampling local government areas in the same remoteness area or state in consecutive months.
- **News market characteristics:** Consideration of the density of news producers and the business entities that operate them. The goal is to sample local government areas that have no, low, medium and high levels of public interest journalism production, and to examine different news entities each month. Where possible, PIJI avoids sampling local government areas with largely identical news entity presence in subsequent months. The exception is the ABC, which has a presence across most of Australia and consequently appears in almost every sample.
- **Major events:** The goal of this project is to provide an assessment of a 'typical' month of coverage, though with the caveat that there will always be variability between the same outlets in the same place month-to-month. Regions are excluded from sampling if there is a foreseeable event that may lead to disproportionately greater or reduced public interest journalism production. Examples in this category

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

include a local election that may increase government coverage, or a major festival that may increase community coverage.

- For a similar reason, PIJI does not sample during December or January: the end of the school year and closure of business, government and courts, increase in community events for the holidays, and the reduced quantity of news production at many outlets, results in highly skewed data.
- Where an unforeseen event occurs that skews coverage, such as a natural disaster, PIJI would not present the results as part of its regular sampling but may present them as a topic-specific case study.

## Sources

Any print or digital outlet of local or metropolitan scale that the Australian News Index<sup>68</sup> lists as covering the selected local government areas is included as a source within the sample.

Beginning in 2024, community-scale print and digital outlets will no longer be included as sources within the sample. These outlets can be important sources of news in their local communities, particularly for towns and suburbs that are otherwise not served by reporters, but they are not equivalent sources to local news outlets and largely do not produce independent professional journalism.

Radio and television are not surveyed in the ANSP due to a lack of transcript data. We can remotely audit print and digital news content, but it is much more difficult to access broadcast news programming reliably and independently from outside of its broadcast area. PIJI will work with radio and television news entities to resolve this ongoing issue.

The ABC's digital local content is included in samples in this project, but not radio and television journalism. Digital local content may be different from that which is broadcast on ABC Local Radio or on television, and digital news results presented here may not be consistent with radio and television content.

As PIJI samples concurrently with news production – that is, samples October 2023 content in October 2023 – the corpus is assembled through real-time monitoring of content output. To avoid potential subject bias, PIJI does not announce which regions it is sampling until after the data collection and analysis has finished.

A target minimum sample size of 200 items per source outlet has been set. This target reflects the monthly output of a large weekly regional newspaper as determined through this project. Some titles publish far fewer or more than this amount. Where PIJI predicts that a news source will publish significantly more than 200 items a constructed week approach is taken. Where a source publishes fewer than 200 items, the entire month is coded. If the source publishes fewer than 25 items across the month, it may be excluded from commentary or the final results entirely.

## Coding

PIJI has developed a guidebook which describes the coding rules. Codes are entered on a shared Google Sheet, with each row representing one article, and each column a variable. The

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<sup>68</sup> Australian News Index. <<https://newsindex.piji.com.au>>



variables available for coding are broken into two groups: descriptive variables and content variables.

**Descriptive variables** are akin to article metadata: the outlet that published the article, the date it was published, the title of the article, the body text of the article, and a preliminary assessment of the type of content (News, Audience, Opinion), whether it appears to be reported content, whether it is promotional content, and whether the content has been syndicated from another source.

**Content variables** answer the research questions and are concerned with the subject(s) of the article, whether the article could be considered part of a larger, ongoing discourse (such as an election or natural disaster), the scale(s) at which the stories take place, and the local government area(s), region and state or territory in which the story takes place.

Stories are defined as containing public interest journalism if they are, on balance, focussed on an issue relating to government, crime and courts, community individuals, events and sport, or public services such as health and education.

Other subjects which are not considered public interest journalism include stories about lifestyle, real estate, and recreational activities. These are nevertheless available for coders to use as necessary.

Articles can be tagged against up to four subjects, meaning that while some subjects may not be considered public interest journalism on their own (such as 'arts and culture'), a story about the federal government's funding for the arts would be simultaneously coded against the 'government, federal' subject and therefore be counted.

Coders assess the geography of the story, both against a 'scale' framework and the specific places where that story takes place, where relevant. Every article is coded against up to three of six available story scales (local, regional, state/territory, national, international, not applicable).

The localism of a story is both whether the story is local in nature – that is, affects a small and identifiable geographic community, such as a single town or local government area – and whether it is local specifically to the local government area(s) being sampled, to a nearby LGA, or to a distant LGA. Where stories are tagged as being local, a coder then assesses which local government areas (up to four) the story is relevant to. This data can then be used to determine whether the 'local scale' story is relevant to the local community. For example, an article about a community event in Brisbane that is published in a newspaper in Adelaide might be a local story in its content, but it is not local to a South Australian audience.

Finally, coders can document any other observations or information about the story in the 'notes' section found against each coded story.

## Reliability testing

Reliability testing is undertaken at two milestones:

- For new coders, after completing training using sample data and before they commence a live code, and
- For all coders, every six months.

Reliability testing is completed using a sample corpus, not project data. Reproducibility is tested through independent coding. This is analysed by the project lead and presented to the group in a training workshop. This workshop presents as an opportunity to test stability and accuracy, to reinforce approaches to coding, and update the guidebook to resolve disagreements and describe undefined situations.

## Results

Every month, PIJ publishes the results of its sample in the Australian News Data Report. These reports present the data gathered on the region's news market, each outlet's coverage of four public interest journalism pillars (community, government, public services, and courts), how local the coverage is to the audience, and rates of syndication. Specific stories are used as examples to illustrate the manner in which public interest journalism pillars are covered.

This section presents high-level observations drawn from samples conducted in 2023.

We observed moderate to high levels of public interest reporting in most sampled areas. Community coverage is frequently the largest category of public interest reporting while courts and crime coverage is almost always the least reported category. In terms of localism, regional titles publish a higher proportion of local stories, while publications based in capital cities cover fewer local stories compared to state and national stories.

This section compares consistent and unusual results across the period as a whole.

Two comparative studies are presented in subsequent sections of this report: an analysis of panel data assembled through February and November 2023 samples in the Eyre Peninsula, and a study of court reporting undertaken in regional local government areas across New South Wales in October 2023.

## Scope

Between February and November 2023, 13 samples were conducted, incorporating a total of 64 local government areas. The sampled areas were:

- Eyre Peninsula, SA
- Sunshine Coast, QLD
- Horsham and West Wimmera, VIC
- Cairns, QLD
- Adelaide Hills, SA
- Inner West Sydney, NSW
- Great Southern, WA
- Albury-Wodonga, NSW & VIC
- Darwin, NT
- King Island, TAS
- Sunraysia, NSW & VIC
- North West Queensland, QLD
- Inner South Melbourne, VIC

A full list of local government areas sampled within these regions is available as Appendix A.

The sampled areas reflect an effort to represent a diverse mix of states and territories and remoteness across Australia. Areas from each state and territory, except for the Australian Capital Territory, have been sampled, as have LGAs from all remoteness categories according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics structure.<sup>69</sup> The structure categorises LGAs as major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote or very remote according to their relative access to services. The subsequent tables present the geographic spread of sampling in 2023. In reading these results, it is important to note that the project commenced in mid-2022, and some states – particularly New South Wales, Tasmania and Western Australia – were also subject to assessments in that year, which lift their overall proportion within the results.

	ACT <sup>70</sup>	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Total
<b>Number of LGAs</b>	1	131	17	78	74	29	79	137	546
<b>Number sampled</b>	0	8	7	15	11	1	11	11	64
<b>Number unsampled</b>	1	123	10	63	63	28	68	126	482
<b>Proportion sampled</b>	0	6	41	19	15	3	14	8	12

Table 1: Local government areas sampled by state.

Table 1 presents the number of local government areas sampled and unsampled within each state, as well as the overall proportion of each state that was assessed in 2023.

In absolute terms, the highest number of local government areas were sampled in Queensland, followed by South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia. The fewest were in the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania.

As a proportion of all local government areas, the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia have seen the highest attention, and Tasmania, New South Wales and Western Australia the lowest.

	ACT <sup>71</sup>	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Major cities</b>	0	13	-	13	5	-	12	0	8
<b>Inner regional</b>	-	2	-	0	0	0	6	0	2
<b>Outer regional</b>	-	6	100	28	0	0	39	20	16
<b>Remote</b>	-	0	67	25	67	0	-	11	26
<b>Very remote</b>	-	0	0	53	36	50	-	0	15
<b>Proportion sampled</b>	0	6	41	19	15	3	14	8	

Table 2: Local government areas sampled by state and remoteness areas.

Table 2 tracks the areas sampled in 2023 against the state or territory they are located in, and their remoteness area category. Each value is presented as a proportion of the total number of local government areas of that remoteness area and in that state or territory. A nil value (-)

<sup>69</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. Remoteness Areas: Australian Statistical Geography Standard (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

<sup>70</sup> The Australian Capital Territory is treated as a single local government area, despite the territory itself not containing any.

<sup>71</sup> The ABS classifies the entire ACT as a 'Major City'.

indicates that there are no local government areas of that remoteness area category in that state or territory.

This table suggests that high levels of remote, outer regional and very remote LGAs were sampled, followed by major cities. Only three inner regional areas, representing two per cent of all in this category, were assessed in 2023.

Over the course of 2023, a total of 66 print and digital news outlets were sampled. Print outlets sampled ranged from metropolitan publications such as The Sydney Morning Herald, NT News, The Advertiser and The Local Paper, major local publications such as Cairns Post, Great Southern Herald and The Border Mail, and independent local media like the King Island Courier and Sunraysia Daily. Digital outlets sampled include suburban and regional hyperlocal titles within the News Corp network, as well as other titles such as the NT Independent. In every area sampled in 2023, an ABC newsroom was present in the news market and was therefore sampled.

The sampled areas represent a cross-section of different news markets, ranging from high news density regions to regions where very few news outlets provide coverage. Sampled areas also represent various levels of news output; some sampled regions saw a low volume of news output where others saw higher volumes or articles published.

## Macro observations

	≤ 65%	66-75%	76-85%	≥ 85%
Sunshine Coast, QLD				86
Eyre Peninsula, SA				95
Horsham and West Wimmera, VIC				91
Cairns, QLD		75		
Adelaide Hills, SA		72		
Inner West Sydney, NSW	65			
Great Southern, WA				85
Albury-Wodonga, NSW & VIC			82	
Darwin, NT	64			
King Island, TAS				93
Sunraysia, NSW & VIC			84	
North West Queensland				88
Inner South Melbourne, VIC	62			

*Table 3: Public interest journalism as a proportion of reported content in sampled regions.*

This section presents high-level observations relating to public interest journalism, the four public interest journalism categories (community, government, services and courts), localism and syndication.

## Public interest journalism

We found that public interest journalism was a moderate to high proportion of reported content in most of the regions sampled each month. The lowest proportion was in Inner South Melbourne (62 per cent) and the highest was in the Eyre Peninsula, South Australia (95 per cent).

It should be noted that this PIJI's method overrepresents the proportion of public interest journalism produced in any particular area. Because each sample is based on PIJI's data about local news producers, it has been pre-filtered to exclude any news producers that don't produce public interest journalism as the majority of their content. A holistic local market

assessment that included non-public interest journalism producers, which might include local magazines dedicated to arts, real estate or lifestyle, would be expected to reduce the overall proportion of PIJ.

The types of public interest journalism produced differ across outlets. Table 4 provides the proportion that each subcategory – community, government, courts and crime and public services – within the total amount of public interest journalism produced during the sample period. Stories can simultaneously be in multiple categories – a story about the federal government funding a new health clinic might simultaneously be ‘government’ and ‘public services’, for example – and as such, these numbers may not equal 100.

Community is the category of public interest journalism that was found to consistently receive the highest levels of coverage, followed by government, services and lastly, courts and crime coverage.

Exceptions to this overall trend include the sampled areas of Inner West Sydney, Inner South Melbourne and North West Queensland where government was considerably higher subcategory of coverage at most outlets, and Adelaide Hills, where the difference was marginal.

	Comm.	Govt.	Court	Serv.
	%	%	%	%
Sunshine Coast	54	27	14	19
Eyre Peninsula	67	26	4	16
Horsham and West Wimmera	70	18	3	15
Cairns	42	28	7	15
Adelaide Hills	29	30	16	16
Inner West Sydney	22	31	18	10
Great Southern	57	28	5	11
Albury-Wodonga	51	28	11	14
Darwin	23	37	17	17
King Island	47	44	19	26
Sunraysia	49	28	10	16
North West Queensland	34	47	15	28
Inner South Melbourne	27	32	14	18
<b>Average</b>	44	31	12	17

*Table 4: Subcategories of public interest journalism as a proportion of all public interest journalism in each sample region.*

Though at some individual outlets the proportion of services coverage was occasionally the second highest category of coverage, this was not true in any overall region, where it was consistently in third position.

In every region, courts and crime reporting was the lowest overall proportion of coverage. In a few cases it was equal to services coverage – in Adelaide Hills and in Darwin – but almost everywhere else it lagged far behind other categories.

## Community

	Sport	Indiv.	Event
	%	%	%
Sunshine Coast	13	31	20
Eyre Peninsula	53	23	19
Horsham and West Wimmera	49	12	24
Cairns	25	25	29
Adelaide Hills	2	27	19
Inner West Sydney	8	25	17
Great Southern	43	25	30
Albury-Wodonga	49	21	10
Darwin	2	25	25
King Island	25	32	21
Sunraysia	49	22	19
North West Queensland	10	25	23
Inner South Melbourne	13	18	11
Average	26	24	21

Table 5: Community-focussed public interest journalism by sampled region.

Of LGAs with high community coverage, local sport is often mentioned as an area of particular focus. This was particularly true in regional areas: the Eyre Peninsula, Horsham and West Wimmera, Great Southern, Albury-Wodonga and Sunraysia, local sports were the largest proportion of community coverage. Urban areas all had low levels of community sport coverage, the lowest being Adelaide Hills, and Sydney, Melbourne and Sunshine Coast all sitting well below average. This is complicated by Darwin, however, which is classified as 'Outer regional' by the ABS, the same category as Horsham or Albury, and yet had almost no local sport coverage. It was similarly low in North West Queensland, a combination of Remote and Very Remote areas.

Stories about community individuals were almost on par with local sport overall, and the distribution of results was far narrower. These stories tended to be hyperlocal and may not fulfil traditional news values, but were of immense personal significance for people among the audience: wedding anniversaries, birthdays and awards. This was lowest in Horsham and West Wimmera and Inner South Melbourne and highest in King Island and Sunshine Coast.

Finally, event coverage was highest in Great Southern and Cairns, and lowest in Albury-Wodonga and Inner South Melbourne. Again, no clear trend emerges.

Other community categories, such as organisations, health, facilities, history and local businesses received consistent coverage across the sampled areas, however these were always notably lower than other community categories. Obituaries are also in this category – though few of this story type were identified, this is an important function of local news.

Community stories include community sport, individuals, events, with minor focusses on local organisations and business, facilities and history. Overall, there was a near even spread across these three main categories.

The lowest overall proportion of community stories was in Inner West Sydney and Darwin. The highest was in Horsham and West Wimmera.

Of LGAs with high community

## Government

Government is usually the second largest focus of news outlets. However, there is variation between how news outlets cover the different levels of local, state and federal government. Overall, state governments tended to be the largest proportion, followed by local and federal.

The lowest overall proportion of government stories was in Horsham and West Wimmera. The highest was in North West Queensland.

A general trend can be observed that the more urbanised a region, the less focus on local government: the lowest proportions of local government reporting were in Adelaide Hills, Inner South Melbourne and Inner West Sydney. Caution should be taken, however, as the data offers counterexamples as well: Sunshine Coast, a Major City by the ABS classification, had the third highest proportion of local government reporting.

The observation also does work in reverse, where more remote leads to more local: though the Eyre Peninsula is a combination of Remote and Very Remote areas and had the highest overall proportion of local government coverage, King Island and North West Queensland are Very Remote and both are below average. Similarly to findings about community, Darwin bucked the trend and had the least stories about local government overall and the sample region included some Remote and Very Remote communities.

These results may be partially affected by the outlets present in a region. In Sunraysia, for example, the two ABC newsrooms (ABC Mildura-Swan Hill and ABC Riverina) showed a strong preference for state stories (15 state government stories, four federal, three local combined), whereas the local independent outlets (Sunraysia Daily, Robinvale Sentinel, Swan Hill Guardian and The Riverine Grazier) each covered significantly more local government. In most cases the public broadcaster had a stronger focus on state and federal government issues than local.

A similar dynamic emerges in metropolitan areas. In Inner West Sydney the ABC, Daily Telegraph and The Sydney Morning Herald split their attention between the state and federal governments, while the local titles (The Torch, Inner West Courier and Canterbury-Bankstown Express) all leaned towards covering local. Again, however, the data suggests the opposite can be true: in Inner South Melbourne, which has a similar local market – an ABC newsroom, metropolitan papers published by News Corp (Herald Sun) and Nine (The Age), and a News Corp local presence (Leader Inner South) – the local Leader published almost no government coverage at all – only eight stories across the month, and leaning toward national issues.

	Local	State	Federal
	%	%	%
Sunshine Coast	26	26	7
Eyre Peninsula	52	31	7
Horsham and West Wimmera	33	16	12
Cairns	14	13	13
Adelaide Hills	7	22	8
Inner West Sydney	8	18	14
Great Southern	20	22	11
Albury-Wodonga	21	13	18
Darwin	2	25	13
King Island	11	32	6
Sunraysia	15	21	18
North West Queensland	13	29	9
Inner South Melbourne	8	20	19
Average	15	22	12

Table 6: Government-focussed public interest journalism by sampled region.

## Courts and crime

Courts and crime stories are categorised according to the type of crime - non-violent, violent, organised, mass casualty and civil action, and/or court level - lower, intermediate, superior or other.

Overall, courts and crime coverage is found to be particularly limited, with a few exceptions. It is always the lowest category of public interest journalism output in the areas sampled, in many cases being entirely absent from an outlet's output. The lowest proportions of court and crime coverage were in Horsham and West Wimmera, the Eyre Peninsula and Great Southern. The highest were in King Island, Inner West Sydney and Darwin.

Within the low proportion of court coverage, cases from lower courts – Magistrates' Courts, Local Courts – were the most common. There was far less coverage of trial courts, with superior courts and intermediate courts entirely absent in some regions.

In almost every region, violent crime coverage was a greater proportion than non-violent crime coverage. The exceptions were Albury-Wodonga and Sunraysia.

The results of a study of court reporting in New South Wales are provided in Chapter 5.

	Lower	Int.	Sup.
	%	%	%
Sunshine Coast	32	1	5
Eyre Peninsula	20	0	13
Horsham and West Wimmera	6	19	6
Cairns	12	3	6
Adelaide Hills	17	11	13
Inner West Sydney	10	6	3
Great Southern	56	6	0
Albury-Wodonga	31	2	4
Darwin	18	0	19
King Island	22	0	26
Sunraysia	56	2	5
North West Queensland	22	6	22
Inner South Melbourne	7	7	20
Average	24	5	11

Table 7: Courts-focussed public interest journalism by sampled region.

## Public services

	Police	Health	Fire	Care	Other
	%	%	%	%	%
Sunshine Coast	11	27	6	5	13
Eyre Peninsula	7	27	25	5	5
Horsham and West Wimmera	15	34	7	11	1
Cairns	20	28	3	7	13
Adelaide Hills	21	20	1	9	9
Inner West Sydney	27	14	0	2	20
Great Southern	9	21	12	14	7
Albury-Wodonga	25	34	5	12	15
Darwin	30	11	7	5	25
King Island	19	22	0	4	25
Sunraysia	23	26	10	3	7
North West Queensland	46	21	24	6	18
Inner South Melbourne	37	16	5	3	10
Average	22	23	8	7	13

Table 8: Public services-focussed public interest journalism by sampled region.

Public services is a broad category that includes emergency services such as police, health and fire, care services including aged, disability and child care, and an 'other' category that broadly captures state emergency services, search and rescue, prisons and other services as required. This category also includes education, which is presented separately.



Public services were generally found to be the third-largest category of public interest overall. The lowest proportion of public services stories was in Inner West Sydney, and the highest was in North West Queensland.

Health and police made up the highest overall proportion of these stories, and care and fire services were the lowest. This makes implicit sense: incidents involving crime are frequent and are more likely to be covered, while fires are rare.

Coders are instructed not to tag any story involving an injury as involving health services; instead, these stories are usually about the system itself. Coverage of these health services is particularly common outside the capital cities – the highest proportions are in Horsham and West Wimmera, Albury-Wodonga and Cairns, and the lowest are in Darwin, Inner West Sydney and Inner South Melbourne. The poor quality of healthcare, including facility closures and staffing shortages, was a frequent topic across most regional samples. There was frequently an additional community aspect to these stories, as the retirement or relocation of a local GP could have serious consequences for the health of a town.

Stories about crimes or accidents could be tagged as ‘health services’ stories where the relevant individuals were active participants in the narrative of the story: the fact that somebody was taken to hospital would be insufficient, but paramedics arriving to treat somebody would be. This story element was less common than an equivalent action by police or fire services, but was seen after a serious bus crash in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, where many stories described the triage and transport process, and the impact of that incident on the capacity of local hospitals.

Police were nearly as common across the whole project as health services. This, too, is predictable: police are a frequent presence and a common source for news stories. Similarly to health, police need to be an active participant in the story to be tagged, meaning an active investigation, appeal to the public for information, or arresting or charging an individual. This standard was met much more frequently than for health services. By contrast, there were far fewer stories about policing as a system.

Stories about fire and care services were rare. In the first, this was likely because sufficiently newsworthy incidents that involve fire services are uncommon. Both of the highest proportion of fire coverage, in the Eyre Peninsula and North West Queensland, were linked to bushfire coverage: outside of Port Lincoln in February, and in the Northern Territory in October.

Care stories were the least common. Like health services, these stories tended to be about the poor quality, availability or affordability of aged, disability and child care, but they featured much less frequently in coverage.

On the whole, education stories were among the most common public services coverage in most sampled regions. Table 9 breaks down this category into subcategories for primary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as an ‘other’ category which typically involved job training or other community education programs that took place outside of a formal education setting.

	Prim.	Sec.	Ter.	Other
	%	%	%	%
Sunshine Coast	9	9	6	4
Eyre Peninsula	9	7	9	14
Horsham and West Wimmera	4	10	5	10
Cairns	14	9	7	6
Adelaide Hills	7	11	3	5
Inner West Sydney	5	9	6	7
Great Southern	5	5	7	9
Albury-Wodonga	3	3	3	11
Darwin	3	1	3	8
King Island	6	13	3	3
Sunraysia	11	12	6	7
North West Queensland	0	0	0	6
Inner South Melbourne	5	8	1	5
Average	6	7	5	7

Table 9: Education-focussed public interest journalism by sampled region.

Across all four categories there was a near even split, with the highest focus on secondary schools and the other category, and the lowest on tertiary education. For primary and secondary schools, these stories often involved achievements by students, including school sports, drama and participation in community programs. Tertiary stories often involved profiles of university researchers who were conducting their work within the sample region – this was particularly common at the ABC, and often involved environmental, agricultural and biological sciences.

## Localism

	Local	Regional	State	National
	%	%	%	%
Sunshine Coast	87	2	17	8
Eyre Peninsula	84	28	10	4
Horsham and West Wimmera	83	15	5	5
Cairns	73	8	8	17
Adelaide Hills	49	2	26	29
Inner West Sydney	40	4	18	42
Great Southern	69	21	19	20
Albury-Wodonga	63	11	15	20
Darwin	32	4	38	35
King Island	69	3	36	12
Sunraysia	66	14	14	17
North West Queensland	55	20	30	13
Inner South Melbourne	35	12	15	37
Average	62	11	19	20

Table 10: Story scale of public interest journalism by sampled region.

The second benchmark assesses the relative localism of news output. It measures the scale of a story – whether it concerns local issues, issues relevant to a wider region, an entire state or territory, or the country as a whole.

It also measures the localism of a story; that is, its geographic proximity to the community being sampled. These results are presented in Table 11.

The majority of stories in most regions were coded as local scale. The highest overall local results were in the Sunshine Coast, Eyre Peninsula and Horsham and West Wimmera, and the

lowest were all in capital cities: Darwin, Inner South Melbourne and Inner West Sydney. In these areas, national and state issues were more prominent. Here, the composition of the local media markets is likely impacting results: these areas are dominated by major daily metropolitan newspapers published by News Corp and, in Melbourne and Sydney, Nine. These newspapers have high daily output and focus more on state and national issues than local.

The ABC was also generally found to be less local in regional areas than independent local news or, where they were present, newspapers published by Australian Community Media and Seven West Media. An exception to this trend was the February sample of the Eyre Peninsula. The percentage of local stories was higher at the ABC and lower at the two local newspapers. A reason for this could be that a large number of stories were coded as ‘regional’ and concerning the Eyre Peninsula as a whole rather than a single LGA.

Among regional outlets, King Island had an unusually high proportion of state and national stories.

Finally, the project assesses whether each published story at least partially occurs within the region being sampled (‘This’) or outside of it (‘Other’). This seeks to recognise that while an outlet can contain a lot of local news, it may not be local to the expected audience of the title, and therefore of low relevance.

The highest levels of localism were found in Sunshine Coast and Eyre Peninsula, followed by Great Southern. The lowest levels again in capital cities were in Adelaide Hills and Inner South Melbourne.

	This	Other
	%	%
Sunshine Coast	75	19
Eyre Peninsula	75	12
Horsham and West Wimmera	48	38
Cairns	58	19
Adelaide Hills	4	42
Inner West Sydney	18	28
Great Southern	61	10
Albury-Wodonga	39	31
Darwin	23	11
King Island	34	38
Sunraysia	41	30
North West Queensland	30	29
Inner South Melbourne	5	30
Average	39	26

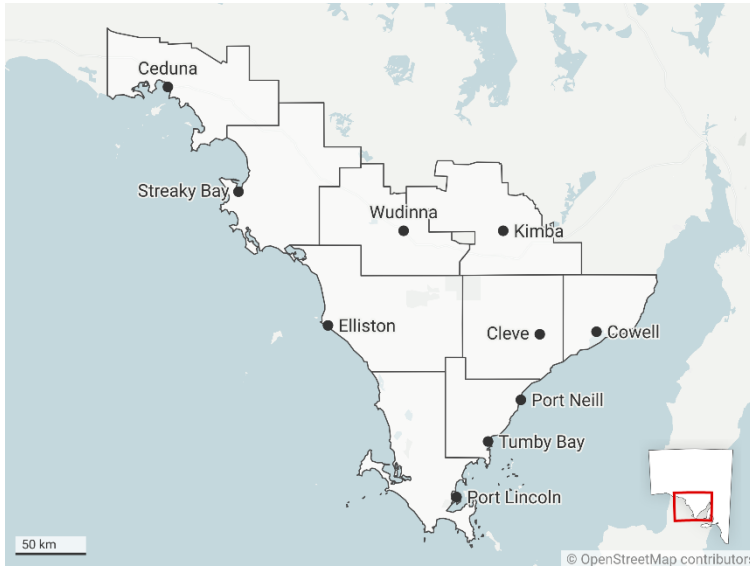
Table 11: Localism of public interest journalism by sampled region.

The largest gulfs between local and localism – that is, those regions where local news was published but it was less local to the audience – were in Adelaide Hills, where 49 per cent of stories were ‘local’ but only 4 per cent within the LGA (a difference of -45 percentage points), Horsham and West Wimmera (-35), King Island (-32) and Inner South Melbourne (-30). The highest proportions of localism to local stories – that is, where more local stories were about the sample region – were in Great Southern (-8), the Eyre Peninsula (-9), Sunshine Coast (-12) and Cairns (-15).

Stories can, of course, be relevant to a local audience without being set within their local government area. The monthly results include this consideration of neighbouring and nearby areas that may be considered locally relevant, but it has not been possible to prepare the data to include this distinction for these results.

Overall, the sampling project has demonstrated that public interest journalism coverage can be vastly different across regions, and that few clear trends emerge. Of those that do, community issues are frequently the largest category of public interest journalism output, followed by government and public services. Courts and crime coverage is rare. Capital city-based titles publish proportionately fewer local stories than state or national, and the inverse is true for regional titles.

## 4. Comparative sampling in the Eyre Peninsula



In November 2023 PIJI conducted its first content resample. The Eyre Peninsula, which was first sampled in February 2023, is a region of South Australia stretching from the Spencer Gulf to the Great Australian Bight. Its major population centre is at Port Lincoln, with a smaller hub in Ceduna.

Ten of the local government areas that form Eyre

Peninsula – Ceduna, Streaky Bay, Elliston, Lower Eyre Peninsula, Port Lincoln, Tumby Bay, Cleve, Franklin Harbour, Kimba and Wudinna – share a relatively homogenous local media market. Though the local government areas of Whyalla and Port Augusta are within the formal region, they have been excluded from this sample as there is little overlap between media in those markets and this region.

The Eyre Peninsula was chosen for resampling due to major changes in its print news market. When PIJI sampled in February 2023, two companies operated newspapers in the region: Australian Community Media with the Port Lincoln Times, and Papers & Publications with the Eyre Peninsula Advocate. In April 2023, both titles were acquired by SA Today, making that company the only print publisher in the region and reducing the overall ownership diversity. Both papers are produced by a team spread across Port Lincoln, Cleve, Streaky Bay and Ceduna.<sup>72</sup>

The ABC maintains a newsroom in Port Lincoln and operates ABC Eyre Peninsula. News Corp has a digital hyperlocal title, The Port Lincoln News, though the initial sample found that this title produced very little content. Other broadcasters include 5CC 93.9 FM, CAAMA Radio, Magic 89.9 and the Nine, Seven and Ten Spencer Gulf television stations.

For the resample, the two newspapers and the ABC were assessed. A total of 567 articles are in the sample. The ABC sample only includes articles published to the ABC Local website and may not be representative of news content on local radio.

### November 2023 results

Overall, very high levels of public interest journalism were found across the region, with a large focus on community issues and far less attention to civic institutions.

The two local newspapers published the most stories, led by Eyre Peninsula Advocate (279) and Port Lincoln Times (169). The public broadcaster had a relatively low output (20 stories

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<sup>72</sup> Kurlmelovs R. 2023. "The story of us": News on the Eyre Peninsula.

over the month), however it should be reiterated that PIJI cannot capture radio and television news in its sampling process and thus the number of stories produced by the ABC on other platforms is likely higher.

Outlet	Public interest journalism											
	Government			Courts and crime			Community			Public services		
	All	U	% U	All	U	% U	All	U	% U	All	U	% U
ABC Eyre Peninsula	7	5	25	0	0	0	26	13	65	6	6	30
Eyre Peninsula Advocate	62	44	16	5	2	1	272	224	80	39	34	12
Port Lincoln Times	26	22	13	6	3	2	192	138	82	35	31	18
<b>Total</b>	95	71	15	11	5	1	490	375	80	80	71	15

Table 12: Public interest journalism by subcategory

Stories can be allocated up to four subjects each. As such Table 12 provides both the total number of subjects coded within each category (All) and the number of unique stories identified within each group (U), as well as the number of unique stories coded to that category as a percentage of all reported stories sampled from that outlet (% U).

Community stories were the overwhelming majority across the month, representing between 65 and 82 per cent of output across the three titles. This was followed by public services and government stories and a negligible amount of court and crime reporting.

The Advocate is structured into headline events from the Eyre Peninsula as a whole — such as how state government policy might affect people in the Eyre Peninsula, a telecommunications upgrade for the region, or the announcement of a new desalination plant to be built in a local town — followed by sections designated to each LGA. In these, it prioritised community reporting, with a large focus on social groups and events, as well as individuals across the region.

This structure led to very high levels of coverage of Remembrance Day, which occurred during the sample month: the paper dedicated a story to each service held per LGA, resulting in 6-8 pages of back-to-back stories on almost identical events.

Other community stories in the Advocate demonstrate its commitment to local issues, including a school formal in Streaky Bay, an RSL in Tumbly Bay being transformed into a community hub, an Elliston football club volunteer receiving a high-profile state award and the reopening of the Port Neill jetty for summer.

Local and small businesses were also featured consistently, particularly after the Eyre Peninsula tourism awards and after a new state government policy on fishing licences that affected small-scale fishers.

The Port Lincoln Times featured similar coverage of the tourism awards and local business, however had a larger focus on community organisations. Stories about local clubs and charities were common, with notable examples being a story about the closure of the local lifesaving club and a local youth group working with Foodbank to distribute hampers to those in need.

At the ABC, individuals, facilities and history were the most prominent community subcategories, including stories such as the Community House organisation buying its

premises after 26 years, the re-opening of the Ceduna ocean pool for summer and the RSL cemetery turning to crowdfunding to stay afloat.

Public services is a broad category that includes emergency services such as police, health and fire, disaster relief like the state emergency services, aged, disability and child care, as well as education.

The Port Lincoln Times covered services stories across these subcategories, including a new helicopter added to the fire response fleet, the revival of a popular social program bringing younger children to an aged care facility, and delays in wait-times for state-subsidised healthcare transport for those living in remote parts of the Eyre Peninsula.

The Port Lincoln Times covered two stories about the reduction of services that were not covered by the other two outlets: the closure of a lifesaving club and the reduction of bank branch opening hours. Jobs were a theme in stories about services, such as the youth training program for cadets in the local fire service and a police recruitment drive.

The Advocate had a strong focus on local government, with state and national policy stories only featuring where they had relevance to the Eyre Peninsula community. Local government stories included stories about council rulings and decisions, campaigns, elections and spending on facilities. Federal and state government were mentioned in stories about transport infrastructure (such as regional taxpayers paying higher rates for lower quality roads), water infrastructure (South Australia's plans for a desalination plant) and overseas companies setting up space tech and manufacturing outposts in the state.

At the Port Lincoln Times there was little reporting on local or federal government. The most notable trend of reporting on government was how new state policies would affect the local community, such as fishing industry regulations and invasive pest control measures on local beekeepers.

Government stories at the ABC Eyre Peninsula were few. The only story featuring local government was a syndicated story about a meeting of local councils around the state. A decision by the state government to extend its existing policy around wheelchair accessible taxis to the regional areas of the state was also covered.

As is consistent with sampling around the country, courts and crime was the most underrepresented PIJ category by a large number. This was not due to lack of opportunity as there is a Magistrates Court for the district and a newly established Nunga Court, a specialist court for Aboriginal people, in Port Lincoln. The extent of crime coverage at the Eyre Peninsula Advocate was a story about the shooting of a policeman who had ties to the Eyre Peninsula community in a neighbouring area. The Port Lincoln Times published a few more stories on crime, notably a break-in at the elderly care centre and a stolen car. The public broadcaster published no stories on courts and crime.

## Comparative results

Resampling provides an opportunity to identify whether there are statistically significant differences between the two periods.

### Method

The 2 X 2 contingency chi-squared test of independence was used to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the February and November Eyre Peninsula samples. The chi-squared test is non-parametric, meaning that it does not rely on the same assumptions about the data as parametric tests, for example that the population from which the data was drawn are normally distributed. This makes the chi-squared test a good fit for the data which is generated in the course of coding.

The test is used to examine the relationship between two categorical variables, variables which cannot be ordered or measured. For example, 'public interest journalism' is a binary categorical variable, as each story within a sample must either be public interest journalism or not.

The data is organised into a contingency table, a cross-tabulation of the observed frequencies for each combination of the categorical variables. The difference between the observed and expected values in each cell are taken, and the sum of these differences produces the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test statistic. From this statistic a  $p$ -value can be calculated to determine whether the relationship between the two variables is statistically significant. A  $p$ -value of less than .05 is commonly regarded as significant, suggesting that there is less than a five per cent chance that the observed relationship occurred by random chance alone, with lower values indicating a lower chance. In these tables a statistically significant result at  $p < .05$  is denoted by an asterisk (\*),  $p < 0.01$  by two asterisks (\*\*), and  $p < .001$  by three asterisks (\*\*\*)

One weakness of the chi-squared test is the requirement for each expected value to be more than five. In cases where expected values fell below this threshold Fisher's exact test, a similar, more stringent test, was used to avoid false positives.

Statistical significance does not imply the strength of a relationship, however, so the phi coefficient ( $\phi$ ) was used as a measure of association. This statistic ranges from 0, indicating complete independence, to 1, a perfect positive relationship. Though negative values indicate a negative relationship between the variables, they have been removed here for clarity. The phi coefficient is expressed as a decimal following a statistically significant result.

This study compared the February,  $n = 346$ , and November,  $n = 567$ , samples of the Eyre Peninsula, from three outlets: ABC Eyre Peninsula, Eyre Peninsula Advocate, and Port Lincoln Times. ABC North and West SA and The Port Lincoln News were included in the February sample, but were excluded from November due to low output, and were therefore left out of the comparative statistical analysis.

## Public interest journalism

	Public interest journalism								
	February				November				Change
	PIJ		Other		PIJ		Other		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	%
ABC Eyre Peninsula	22	81	5	19	20	100	0	0	+19
Eyre Peninsula Advocate	210	88	29	12	262	75	89	25	-13*** (.16)
Port Lincoln Times	71	89	9	11	165	84	31	16	-5
<b>Total</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>447</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>-9*** (.17)</b>

Table 13: Comparison of public interest journalism as a proportion of reported content.

Table 13 provides detail of how the total sample breaks down into public interest journalism and other journalism, and how this changed between February and November 2023. We found high levels of public interest journalism output across all three outlets in February, with a significant overall decline in November. This change came as a result of the Eyre Peninsula Advocate's lower public interest journalism output, despite rates remaining relatively high. The effect size of both these relationships was small, however, indicating little association.

The Eyre Peninsula Advocate's smaller proportion of public interest journalism showed a greater effect on the region as a whole due to the outlet producing the majority of November's sample, at 351 stories, compared to ABC Eyre Peninsula's 20, and Port Lincoln Times' 196. Both ABC Eyre Peninsula and Port Lincoln Times did not show a significant change in overall public interest journalism production.

	Public interest journalism					
	Government					
	February		November		Change	
	n	%	n	%		
Outlet						
ABC Eyre Peninsula	10	45	5	25	-20	
Eyre Peninsula Advocate	54	26	44	17	-9* (.13)	
Port Lincoln Times	16	23	22	13	-9	
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>-11*** (.13)</b>	
Courts and crime						
	n	%	n	%		
ABC Eyre Peninsula	2	9	0	0	-9	
Eyre Peninsula Advocate	5	2	2	1	-2	
Port Lincoln Times	0	0	3	2	+2	
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>-1</b>	
Community						
	n	%	n	%		
ABC Eyre Peninsula	6	27	13	65	+38* (.38)	
Eyre Peninsula Advocate	178	85	233	89	+4	
Port Lincoln Times	51	72	148	90	+18*** (.23)	
<b>Total</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>+11*** (.14)</b>	
Public services						
	n	%	n	%		
ABC Eyre Peninsula	8	36	6	30	-6	
Eyre Peninsula Advocate	17	8	34	13	+5	
Port Lincoln Times	16	23	31	19	-4	
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>+2</b>	

Table 14: Comparison of public interest journalism subcategories as proportions of public interest journalism content.



Government reporting saw a significant decline overall, with significantly less produced by the Eyre Peninsula Advocate in November. Though government appears to have fallen from its position as the ABC Eyre Peninsula’s most covered PIJ pillar, the ABC’s small sample size makes achieving a statistically significant result more difficult. Government is now equal to public service reporting as the second most covered public interest journalism pillar in the region, above courts and crime and below community.

While courts and crime coverage saw no significant changes between the February and November samples, it remains the least reported pillar by far, representing around 1-2 per cent of the sample. Public service coverage was also relatively unchanged, with no significant results observed.

Community is the only pillar to show a significant increase overall, with significant increases also seen from ABC Eyre Peninsula and the Port Lincoln Times. Community reporting remained the primary focus of both the Eyre Peninsula Advocate and Port Lincoln Times, representing nearly 90 per cent of all public interest journalism produced in November for each of the two outlets, as well as in the region overall. ABC Eyre Peninsula’s community output, meanwhile, over doubled from its February proportion of around one quarter of stories, demonstrating a moderate association.

The trends of declining government reporting alongside increasing community suggests changing editorial priority in the Eyre Peninsula. The trends are not isolated to any one outlet, remaining consistent overall as well as for each outlet individually, even in instances when specific outlets’ changes did not reach statistical significance.

## Localism

Scale	Story scale				
	February		November		Change
	n	%	n	%	%
Local	262	83	397	85	+2
Regional	102	32	83	18	-14*** (.17)
State	26	8	36	8	-1
National	8	3	22	5	+2

Table 15: Comparison of scale of stories as a proportion of reported content.

The scale of news coverage amongst all outlets in the Eyre Peninsula was highly consistent between the February and November samples, with the exception of reporting across the broader region. Local-scale coverage remained at high levels, representing the vast majority of included stories from both months.

Outlet	Story scale				
	February		November		Change
	n	%	n	%	%
Ceduna	29	9	37	8	-1
Cleve	19	6	32	7	+1
Elliston	11	3	17	4	0
Franklin Harbour	12	4	27	6	+2
Kimba	18	6	26	6	0
Lower Eyre Peninsula	32	10	51	11	+1
Port Lincoln	121	38	159	34	-4
Streaky Bay	20	6	27	6	-1
Tumby Bay	28	9	54	12	+3
Wudinna	12	4	11	2	-1

Table 16: Comparison of location of stories as a proportion of reported content.

local scale stories, state government stories implicitly state scale and federal government stories implicitly national scale, regional scale stories have no reliable source in the same way. These stories tend to arise more sporadically, for example where a natural disaster impacts a large part of a state, in coverage of a district-wide sport event, or in a government initiative announced for a large area. Because this story scale is heavily input-dependent, the reduction is statistically significant, but not a concerning finding.

Both state and national issues received relatively little attention, and did not see any significant change between February and November.

The local government areas that received the most and least frequent coverage was practically unchanged between the two samples. No significant differences were observed in the coverage of any local government area, with Port Lincoln receiving the largest proportion of coverage, at roughly one third of stories. The degree to which the entire peninsula was covered – even very remote and sparsely populated areas – was an important finding from the February sample, and these results suggest that the new owner of the two newspapers has maintained this high level of service.

The localism of each story is presented in Table 16.

Overall, these results suggest that the output of the two newspapers has moderately changed after the significant market change of merging both under the same editorial structure. Government reporting declined as community reporting increased, and though this was also true at the ABC, it was far more statistically significant at the Advocate and the Times. Geographies of coverage in this very remote region of South Australia remained remarkably consistent after the merger, however.

The high degree of variability in regional scale coverage can't be explained by these results, but is consistent with other samples outside the Eyre Peninsula. One potential explanation is that where stories about communities, crime or councils are implicitly

## 5. Sampling court reporting

In conducting monthly sampling, PIJI has consistently found that court reporting is the lowest category of public interest journalism content, with many titles producing none across an entire month. This was found to be particularly true in regional areas.

Court reporting is an important historical function of journalism, and is central to the concept of the newspaper of record.<sup>73</sup> In part, this is due to news media's role in enabling open justice, the goal that Lord Hewart described as 'justice must not only be done, it must be seen to be done'.

Open justice is a means to an end, not an end itself.<sup>74</sup> Rodrick identifies open justice as having three functions for the court system:<sup>75</sup>

- **Oversight function**, the 'bastion against the arbitrary exercise of judicial power'.<sup>76</sup> Public view, it is argued, facilitates good behaviour among participants in a proceeding – not just jurists, but litigants and witnesses as well.
- **Educative function**, providing public confidence in the rule of law and, by extension, legitimacy, authority and submission to the courts.
- **Free speech function**, in the public's right to receive information about the court, and the media's right to transmit that information to the public.

The free speech function, Rodrick argues, is the function that media companies tend to prioritise, even as they may have an impact on all three.<sup>77</sup> Australian courts have tended to be more reluctant than similar jurisdictions to accept that open justice is an aspect of free speech.

Though courts remain open to the public, few attend – likely because most don't have the time or interest, and because those that do have the interest can satisfy it through the media. "The modern public relies heavily – often exclusively – on the news media to provide it with information about the courts."<sup>78</sup> Bosland has written that it is "beyond doubt that reporting of the courts by the mainstream media has become an integral component of the practical operation of an open and transparent system of justice."<sup>79</sup> The media are not there to be defenders of the court though, they are somewhere between independent educator and news disseminator.

Hess and Waller have argued that the media additionally plays a 'shaming' role: "a potent form of punishment across history and cultures."<sup>80</sup> Beyond just court reporting but relevant to

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<sup>73</sup> Simons M. and Bosland J. 2020. From Journal of Record to the 24/7 News Cycle: Perspectives on the changing nature of court reporting in Australia.

<sup>74</sup> *West Australian Newspapers Ltd v Western Australia* [2010] WASCA 10 [30], quoted in Rodrick S. 2014. Achieving the aims of open justice? The relationship between the courts, the media and the public.

<sup>75</sup> Rodrick S. 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 129.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 132.

<sup>79</sup> Bosland J. and Townend J. 2018. Open Justice, Transparency and the Media: Representing the Public Interest in the Physical and Virtual Courtroom. pp. 183-184.

<sup>80</sup> Hess K. and Waller L. 2013. News judgements: a critical examination of reporting non-convictions for minor crimes. p. 60.

it, Hess has argued that the media operate as ‘keepers and conferrers of civic virtue’, defining the ‘in’ community and the ‘out’ community and thereby constructing social meaning.<sup>81</sup>

## Quantity of court reporting

Court reporting has not been the subject of significant scholarly attention in Australia. In 1998 Stephen Parker identified<sup>82</sup> that the relationship between courts and the public was ‘incompletely theorised’ in Australia; in 2005 Jane Johnston<sup>83</sup> reiterated that finding. Johnston identified that communication was a missing theoretical perspective in study of the court system.<sup>84</sup>

The most significant contributions have come from Hess, Waller and Johnson.

Hess and Waller<sup>85</sup> have looked at reporting of non-convictions in Victorian newspapers, meaning people who committed minor offences and may be fined but are not given criminal convictions. The study involved a content analysis of 1060 articles across 16 newspapers in Victoria:

- The Age
- Herald Sun
- The Courier
- The Standard
- The Border Mail
- South Gippsland Sentinel-Times
- Wimmera Mail-Times
- Bendigo Advertiser
- Swan Hill Guardian
- Heidelberg Leader
- Stawell Times-News
- Gippsland Times and Maffra Spectator
- Benalla Ensign
- Sunshine, Ardeer and Albion Star
- Colac Herald
- Cobram Courier

These newspapers were chosen because they represent places with Magistrates’ Courts. Stories were identified if they used the phrase “Magistrates’ Court” across a three-month period from June to August 2010. Coding identified convictions and non-convictions reported in each of the newspapers, and whether non-convictions were named.

The authors provide rich data on their findings, which includes their total number of stories in each title. Their results suggest that while the Herald Sun had the highest number of Magistrates’ Courts stories overall (180), it was not significantly higher than two regional publications – the Standard (Warrnambool, 171) and the Border Mail (Albury-Wodonga, 170). These two and the Ballarat Courier (139) all published a higher number of stories than The Age (99). The Bendigo Advertiser (85), South Gippsland Sentinel-Times (67) and Wimmera Mail-Times (64) also published moderately high numbers of stories. The Swan Hill Guardian published a low number of stories, especially given its thrice-weekly frequency (35), while the remaining regional titles all published fewer than 10 Magistrates’ Court stories over the three month period.

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<sup>81</sup> Hess K. 2016. Power to the virtuous? Civic culture in the changing digital terrain. p. 932.

<sup>82</sup> Parker S. 1998. Courts and the Public. Melbourne: Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration.

<sup>83</sup> Johnston J. 2005. Communicating courts: a decade of practice in the third arm of government. p. 78.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>85</sup> Hess and Waller 2013. p. 60.

The authors found that 52 of 1060 court stories involved non-convictions. 44 of these named the individuals. Of the eight with no naming, four were due a legal restriction around naming underage offenders.

Hess and Waller's data suggested that the Magistrates' Court is a popular source of news, "particularly for regional daily newspapers that have court rounds."<sup>86</sup> The authors say that courts that hear summary offences "could represent the most valuable use of a metropolitan journalist's time because they can return to the newsroom with several story ideas rather than sit through a day of legal argument in a higher court that might not result in a report".<sup>87</sup>

Hess and Waller suggested that court reporting may also be out of reach for some smaller newspapers.<sup>88</sup> This finding was echoed by metropolitan and regional editors in qualitative research conducted by Simons, Dickson and Alembakis.<sup>89</sup> Most of the editors interviewed said that they covered the courts but wanted to do more. They also said that it is a resource-intensive beat. The authors found that while newsrooms cover the courts, but they are not covering as many cases, and those they do cover are not reported in depth.

At the time of the study, representatives of a company within one editor's community were on trial in the state's capital city. The editor reported that their newsroom "simply [did] not have the resourcing to put somebody into [the capital]" for the duration of the trial, and that they couldn't use a freelancer due to the legal risks involved with court coverage and the concern that one freelancer who did reach out and offer to cover it "had an agenda". As such, an event of major public interest to the community was unable to be covered by its local newspaper.<sup>90</sup>

While some study court reporting as journalistic practice, other scholarship comes from attention to a specific issue. Reporting on family violence has received particular attention since the release of the 'Change the story' prevention framework in 2015.<sup>91</sup>

Ringin et al.<sup>92</sup> studied family violence reporting in the Geraldton Guardian, Western Australia, across all of 2019. In addition, the study included a comparison between the Guardian and the Albany Advertiser, Western Australia, across the months of September, October and November in 2015, 2017 and 2019. The study identified 66 articles about family violence in the Geraldton Guardian in 2019, of which 47 were court reports. For the comparative study in September-November across three years, the authors identified a combined 69 articles that met their criteria. Only 27 of these were court reports: the Geraldton Guardian published six in 2015 and nine each in 2017 and 2019, and the Albany Advertiser published zero in 2015, one in 2017 and two in 2019.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. 67

<sup>89</sup> Simons, Dickson and Alembakis 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Our Watch 2015. *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*.

<sup>92</sup> Ringin L., Moram M and Thompson S. C. 2022. Analysis of reporting of family violence reporting in print media in regional Western Australia.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p. 259.

Waterhouse-Watson studies coverage of sexual assault cases involving footballers through a feminist lens.<sup>94</sup> In one study, Waterhouse-Watson examined reporting on the trial of Brett Stewart, an NRL player who was charged with sexual assault in 2009 and acquitted in 2010.<sup>95</sup> Through a discourse analysis of 53 articles published in three Sydney newspapers and *The Australian* across the course of the trial, the author's intent was to study how journalists frame sexual violence cases and advance a feminist ethic of court reporting.

Internationally, a 1980 study by Drechsel, Netteburg and Aborisade remains widely cited in recent literature and contains relevant findings. The authors summarised that most coverage of the US Supreme Court and state courts tended to be 'superficial' because it was primarily focussed on "spot coverage" of decisions, rather than trial proceedings.<sup>96</sup>

In their own study, they suggested that smaller newspapers would "protect the social order by reporting less court news than newspapers in larger communities and to report court news in a way which does not emphasise the disruption". Their hypotheses were that:

1. there would be less local court reporting in smaller communities than large,
2. that the social disruption inherent in local litigation would be emphasised less by local newspapers in small communities than large. "That is, when newspapers in smaller communities do report local court news, they will do so in a way which does not emphasise the disharmony or deviance which the litigation represents, but newspapers in larger communities will use reporting techniques which emphasise that social disruption".
3. that social disruption inherent in litigation involving persons from outside a small community will be emphasised more than that solely inside of it, and that the difference would disappear in larger communities.<sup>97</sup>

They assessed 80 newspapers across Minnesota excluding major cities for a month in 1978. All issues of weeklies and semi-weeklies, eight issues of each daily selected at random. Total corpus of 331 articles across 220 issues. Of the 331, 138 were just court lists. The remaining 193 were report-written local court stories, appearing in 134 of 428 sampled. Only 30 per cent of sampled issues therefore contained any local court news.

They found that previous complaints about spot coverage were valid regardless of community size. Only 14 stories were not spot news coverage. 20 per cent of communities had no court information at all, and papers in another third of communities reported nothing but lists. A large percentage of court items reported only one side of the story, though civil cases tended to be more balanced.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Waterhouse-Watson D. 2016. News media on trial: towards a feminist ethics of reporting footballer sexual assault trials; Waterhouse-Watson D. 2019a. Who Is the "Real" Victim? Race and Gender in the Trial of an Elite Australian Footballer; Waterhouse-Watson D. 2019b. Football and Sexual Crime, from the Courtroom to the Newsroom: Transforming Narratives.

<sup>95</sup> Waterhouse-Watson 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Drechsel R., Netteburg K. and Aborisade B. 1980. Community Size and Newspaper Reporting of Local Courts. p. 71.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. pp. 75-78.

## Barriers to court reporting

Studies sometimes fail to consider to the influence of legal restrictions on court reporting. Blatchford and Morgan identify four primary restrictions that journalists encounter:

1. A limited amount of information is made available by police during early investigations;
2. In some jurisdictions, journalists are unable to identify a suspect until they have been charged, arrested and/or committed to trial;
3. Sub judge contempt prevents the inclusion of contextual information or relevant information that has not been presented at trial;
4. Rules of evidence limit the information that can be presented to the jury.<sup>99</sup>

Though there is often room for improved court reporting, Blatchford and Morgan conclude that ‘much criticism ignores the legal restrictions placed on the media’ and that ‘there are good reasons to provide for restrictions on reporting’.<sup>100</sup>

This failure to consider legal restrictions was evident in some of the reviewed studies. Ringin et al. found that family violence court reporting in Geraldton and Albany lacks broader social context; that quotes ‘removed blame’ from alleged perpetrators and that justice personnel, particularly defence lawyers and police, were the most common sources. The authors conclude:

Arguably, court reports could be accompanied by some general information that educates about the nature of FV without prejudicing the outcome of any trial.

[A journalist] commented that the obligation of the newspaper was to be “balanced” through reporting both sides of prosecution and defence arguments. However, unfortunately, court reports often reinforced common beliefs about FV, where individuals blamed their violence on alcohol or drug use”.<sup>101</sup>

In practice, this advice does not account for the legal environment in which journalists work. The authors’ suggestions that a journalist should provide ‘general information’ would risk sub judge contempt. The inclusion of information that ‘reinforced common beliefs’ about family violence, where that information is provided to the jury as part of trial proceedings, is a requirement for the journalist to maintain a ‘fair and accurate report’ defence. Neither of these critical legal considerations are discussed in the study.

In their research on the changing nature of court reporting in Victoria, Simons and Associate Professor Jason Bosland found that<sup>102</sup>:

- There has been a long-term decline in the number of journalists reporting the courts.
- Court reporters are less likely to be present in court for the entire duration of a case they are covering. Sometimes they do not attend at all.
- The level of experience and knowledge among court reporters has fallen as senior journalists have been made redundant or retired.
- Civil cases and suburban Magistrates’ Courts are rarely reported.

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<sup>99</sup> Blatchford A. and Morgan J. 2020. Making violence against women (in)visible? Restrictions on media reporting of intervention orders.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p. 129.

<sup>101</sup> Ringin, Moran and Thompson. 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Simons and Bosland 2019.

- The digital environment is having an effect on story selection and presentation. CCTV footage is popular on social media and sought out. Live updates of cases can strip the context from a nuanced argument.
- There is no longer a dedicated ‘law reporter’ (as opposed to courts) in Victoria, leading to diminished legal commentary.
- Judicial officers noted the decline of post-sentencing wrap-up articles, and lamented the missed opportunity to educate the public about how the system operates.

None of those interviewed could name an instance where a citizen journalist stepped in to file independent reports. The authors suggest that the accreditation processes of the court might be discouraging to non-professional reporters.<sup>103</sup>

The courts have responded to these trends by making more information available, including transcripts and judgments, in order to ease the pressure on time-poor journalists. At the same time the courts are spending more time controlling information flows through the issuance of suppression orders.

Johnston conducted 32 interviews between 2001 and 2004 with individuals from both the courts and the media. Of the media group, 13 were from TV and seven from metropolitan daily newspapers. There were no interviews with radio, nor with non-metropolitan newspapers.<sup>104</sup>

Court interviewees reported that they were improving their accessibility to media by appointing communications professionals, providing timely access to judgments to media and standardising requests for transcripts and evidence. The communications professionals were seen by the media to improve access to information, and judges saw their role as helping media report more accurately.<sup>105</sup> Media echoed this: in Queensland, which didn’t at the time have these professionals, a reporter lamented their absence.<sup>106</sup> The research found that these staff were also facilitating greater access to courts for television cameras, particularly at the Federal Court.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p. 200.

<sup>104</sup> Johnston J. 2005. Communicating courts: an Analysis of the Changing Interface Between the Courts and the Media. p.83.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



## Study: court reporting in regional New South Wales

Results from PIJI's sampling in 2023 suggest consistently low levels of court reporting across most sampled local government areas and outlets. With very few exceptions, court reporting was the lowest category of public interest journalism coverage produced by news outlets, regardless of whether they are independently owned or part of a large media business, or whether they serve city or regional audiences.

During regular sampling, however, PIJI was not able to determine whether the low levels of court reporting are a consequence of external factors. Some local government areas that were sampled do not have courts within them, and it is possible that some of the courts that were present in the sampled areas – particularly in remote and very remote locations – have few sitting days each year and only a very limited number of cases, which may or may not have news value.

## Research questions

This study seeks to answer two research questions.

**RQ1:** How much court reporting is taking place in regional New South Wales communities?

**RQ2:** What types of cases are covered?

## Methodology

These local government areas each contain a Local Court and a District Court, the latter of which was sitting for a minimum of seven sitting days across October 2023. Fifteen local government areas across regional New South Wales fit these criteria, 11 of which were selected for sample:

- Albury
- Broken Hill
- Dubbo
- Lismore
- MidCoast
- Newcastle
- Orange
- Shoalhaven
- Tamworth
- Wagga Wagga
- Wollongong

The remaining four local government areas (Bathurst, Central Coast, Clarence Valley and Griffith) were not chosen due to resourcing constraints and because they were close to other local government areas in the sample: Bathurst is close to Orange, Clarence Valley to Lismore and Central Coast to Newcastle. Though further from Wagga Wagga, Griffith also sits in the Riverina and is covered by some of the same outlets (ABC Riverina and Region Riverina).

From this set, 50 print and digital news outlets were identified (see Table 17). In addition, regional NSW court coverage of Australia's largest national wire service, the Australian Associated Press, was also sampled across the month.

Coders were allocated local government areas and assessed every publication in those areas. This allowed coders to become familiar with the nuances of their publications and the cases being heard in each area's courts.

#	Outlet	Entity	Local government area	Total
1	ABC Goulburn-Murray	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Albury	0
2	The Albury-Wodonga News	News Corp Australia	Albury	1
3	The Border Mail	Australian Community Media	Albury	98
4	ABC Broken Hill	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Broken Hill	0
5	Barrier Truth	Barrier Industrial Council	Broken Hill	0
6	ABC Western Plains	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Dubbo	1
7	The Daily Liberal	Australian Community Media	Dubbo	28
8	The Dubbo News	News Corp Australia	Dubbo	2
9	Dubbo Photo News	Panscott Media	Dubbo	0
10	Wellington & District Leader	Sharon Wilson	Dubbo	0
11	Wellington Times	Australian Community Media	Dubbo	0
12	ABC North Coast	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Lismore	4
13	Dunoon & District Gazette	Dunoon & District Gazette	Lismore	0
14	The Lismore App	N.S.W. Local App Company	Lismore	1
15	Lismore City News	Australian Community Media	Lismore	2
16	The Northern Star	News Corp Australia	Lismore	41
17	ABC Mid North Coast	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	MidCoast	3
18	Forster Fortnightly	Mary Esther Yule	MidCoast	0
19	Gloucester Advocate	Australian Community Media	MidCoast	0
20	Great Lakes Advocate	Australian Community Media	MidCoast	0
21	The Manning Community News	Manning Community News	MidCoast	0
22	Manning River Times	Australian Community Media	MidCoast	5
23	The Mid-North Coast News	News Corp Australia	MidCoast	23
24	Myall Coast News of the Area	Myall Coast Communications	MidCoast	0
25	News of Our World	Lions Club of Hallidays Point	MidCoast	0
26	ABC Newcastle	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Newcastle	9
27	Newcastle Herald	Australian Community Media	Newcastle	68
28	The Newcastle News	News Corp Australia	Newcastle	32
29	Newcastle Weekly	Pepper Publishing	Newcastle	8
30	ABC Central West NSW	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Orange	0
31	Central Western Daily	Australian Community Media	Orange	42
32	The Orange App	N.S.W. Local App Company	Orange	0
33	Orange City Life	Orange City Life	Orange	0
34	ABC Illawarra <sup>108</sup>	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Shoalhaven	1
35	Berry Town Crier	Berry Small Town Alliance	Shoalhaven	0
36	Kangaroo Valley Voice	Kangaroo Valley Voice	Shoalhaven	0
37	Milton Ulladulla Times	Australian Community Media	Shoalhaven	6
38	The South Coast News	News Corp Australia	Shoalhaven	13
39	South Coast Register	Australian Community Media	Shoalhaven	5
40	ABC New England North West	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Tamworth	0
41	Manilla Express	Martin Family Trust	Tamworth	0
42	Northern Daily Leader	Australian Community Media	Tamworth	33
43	ABC Riverina	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Wagga Wagga	1
44	The Daily Advertiser	Australian Community Media	Wagga Wagga	16
45	Region Riverina	Region Group	Wagga Wagga	8
46	The Wagga News	News Corp Australia	Wagga Wagga	4
47	ABC Illawarra <sup>108</sup>	Australian Broadcasting Corporation	Wollongong	1
48	Illawarra Flame	The Word Bureau	Wollongong	0
49	Illawarra Mercury	Australian Community Media	Wollongong	63
50	Illawarra Star	News Corp Australia	Wollongong	20
51	Australian Associated Press	Australian Associated Press	National	17
				555

Table 17: News outlets within the sample, their operating entities, the local government area they cover, and the total number of articles coded.

<sup>108</sup> ABC Illawarra covers two of the identified local government areas: Wollongong and Shoalhaven.

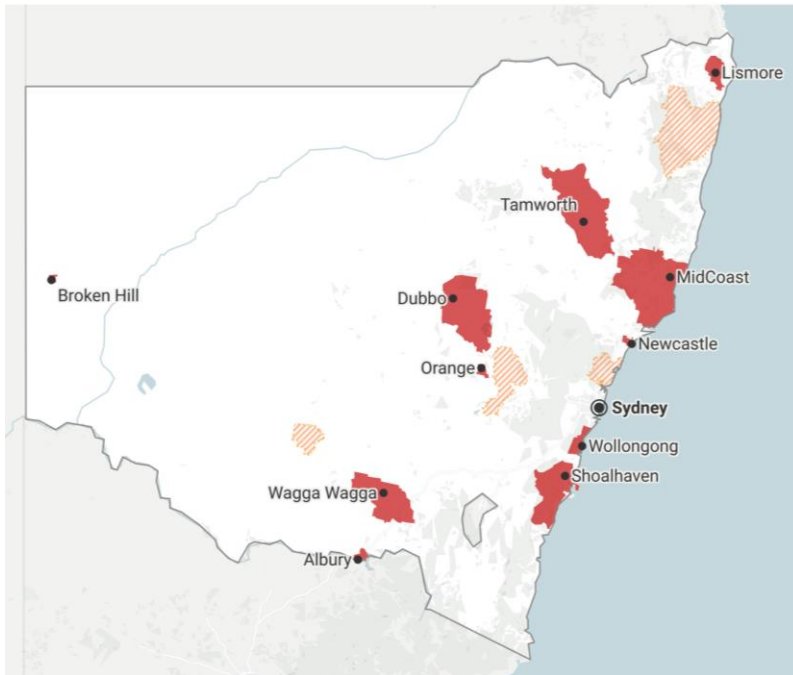


Figure 1: Sampled regions (red) and additional regions that fit the criteria (orange stripe)

One additional news outlet, Nimbin Good Times, was identified in Lismore. PIJI was not able to access the title in time for inclusion in the study, but retroactive assessment suggests it did not cover the courts in the period.

The entire month of digital publishing output was assessed for each of these titles. For outlets with both a print edition and a website, this included cross-checking the digital print against articles published online. Samples from the ABC outlets were limited to their written digital news output, not radio broadcasts.

Radio and television outlets were not included within the sample as PIJI does not have reliable, independent access to transcripts of broadcast news content. This exclusion is only a logistical issue and is not a reflection on these outlets or their news output. Broadcast outlets are an important source of local news, particularly in regional areas, and prior research has suggested that television outlets are prominent producers of court reporting. PIJI will work with broadcast outlets to resolve this issue.

Articles were coded if they were about criminal court proceedings. Articles were not coded if they were about a crime but had not yet reached the courts, including reporting after a potential criminal incident or police appeals for information. Stories about a person being charged were only included where the person also appeared in court within the same article. Fewer than ten civil cases were identified within the corpus, and these were not coded.

News Corp's hyperlocal digital titles post daily court lists each day, which are automatically generated content. These have not been included in the sample, as they are not reported stories.

In addition to descriptive details about the articles, such as the date an article was published, the outlet it was published in and the byline of the reporter, coders assessed the articles for the following content variables:

- The case name, generated each day from a search of New South Wales court daily lists for each of the Local and District courts in the sampled locations.
- The type of proceeding, identified from the court daily lists.
- The charges, as described by the article.
- The location of the court, where it was one of the sample locations.
- The level of the court, meaning whether it was a Local, District, Supreme or Other court.
- The scale of the story, meaning whether the story concerned issues of local, state, national or international relevance.
- The location of the story, meaning where the place(s) where the incident took place, not the location of the court.

Charges were categorised according to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ANZSOC).<sup>109</sup> At the time of coding, the 2011 classification was the current edition, however, on 30 November 2023, after data collection concluded, a new edition was released. The results here are presented under the 2011 framework.

In addition to coding stories, PIJ downloaded daily case lists for the Local and District courts in the sampled locations and limited to the Bail, Committal, Hearing, Judgment, Mention, Sentence and Trial listing types. 10,998 unique case numbers were listed across 15,034 hearings between 1 - 31 October.

## Results

### **RQ1: How much court reporting is taking place in regional New South Wales communities?**

We identified 555 court reports were published across the entire corpus. Australian Associated Press produced 17 of the total stories. As AAP is a national wire service and unlike the 50 local news outlets in the sample, these are discussed separately, leaving a total of 538 court stories published in local regional news across October 2023. Some of this total are duplicates, discussed below.

Titles in Newcastle published the most court stories (117), followed by Albury (99) and Wollongong (83). No court reporting was published in Broken Hill. In those local government areas that did see court stories, the lowest number were published by Shoalhaven outlets (25), followed by Wagga Wagga (29), and both MidCoast and Dubbo (31 each).

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<sup>109</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. Numerical Index: Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ANZSOC).

Content origin by region

LGA	Original articles (o)			Syndicated articles (s)			All articles	
	n	% total o	LGA % o	n	% total s	LGA % s	n	% total
Albury	92	21	93	7	6	7	99	18
Broken Hill	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dubbo	26	6	84	5	4	16	31	6
Lismore	27	6	56	21	17	44	48	9
MidCoast	17	4	55	14	11	45	31	6
Newcastle	95	22	81	22	18	19	117	21
Orange	27	6	64	15	12	36	42	8
Shoalhaven	12	3	48	13	10	52	25	5
Tamworth	31	7	94	2	2	6	33	6
Wagga Wagga	18	4	62	11	9	38	29	5
Wollongong	68	16	82	15	12	18	83	15
Subtotal	413	96	77	125	100	23	538	97
AAP	17	4	100	0	0	0	17	3
Total	430	100		125	100		555	100

Table 18: Content origin by sampled region.

This result can be broken down further into original content - stories which PIJI identified were published for the first time in the sampled outlet - and syndicated content, which has been licensed from an external source such as a newswire or internally republished from another outlet operated by the same news business entity. By splitting the results in this way, we can separate outlets that are investing in court reporting from those that are licensing it. This also eliminates double-counting within the sample: in some cases, articles were produced by one outlet (ACM's Border Mail in Albury) and republished by another outlet (ACM's Daily Advertiser in Wagga Wagga).

We identified that a total of 413 articles (77 per cent of the total) were original content, and 125 (23 per cent) were syndicated from another source. Similar to the overall publication results, the highest number of original court reports were produced in Newcastle (95), Albury (92) and Wollongong (68) and lowest in Shoalhaven (12), MidCoast (17) and Wagga Wagga (18). The greatest difference between overall publication and original content production was in Albury: 18 per cent of all court stories were published in Albury, but 21 per cent of original production occurred there, suggesting a below average level of syndication in the border city.

Syndicated articles were of mixed relevance to their communities: some were likely of high relevance, such as coverage of cases at Bathurst Local Court that ACM syndicated from the Western Advocate into its Dubbo and Orange papers. Others were less locally relevant, such as reporting from Sydney's Downing Centre Local Court.

We assessed the proportion of original to syndicated court coverage within each local government area. The highest proportions of original local coverage were in Tamworth (31 of 33 articles, 94 per cent), Albury (92 of 99, 93 per cent) and Dubbo (26 of 31, 84 per cent). The lowest proportion of original content was in Shoalhaven (12 of 25, 48 per cent). This was also the only local government area where we identified more syndicated court stories than original court stories. MidCoast (17 of 31, 55 per cent) and Lismore (27 of 48, 56 per cent) were also low in original production.

Content origin by entity

News entity (e)	Original articles (o)			Syndicated articles (s)			All articles	
	n	% total o	e % o	n	% total s	e % s	n	% total
<b>Major entities</b>								
AAP	17	4	100	0	0	0	17	3
ABC	15	4	79	4	3	21	19	3
ACM	288	67	79	78	62	21	366	66
News Corp	93	22	68	43	34	32	136	25
<b>Subtotal major</b>	<b>413</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>538</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Independent entities</b>								
NSW Local App Co.	1	< 1	100	0	0	0	1	< 1
Pepper Publishing	8	2	100	0	0	0	8	1
Region Group	8	2	100	0	0	0	8	1
<b>Subtotal independent</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>430</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>555</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 19: Content origin by entity.

The 555 total court stories were published in 29 outlets, which were operated by seven news entities, four of which are defined as ‘major’ news entities with national reach (Australian Associated Press (AAP), Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Australian Community Media (ACM) and News Corp), and three of which are ‘independent’ news entities with a primarily local presence (NSW Local App Company, Pepper Publishing and Regional Group).

Court stories were overwhelmingly published by the major media entities, which combined published 97 per cent of articles in the sample. Within this group, most coverage was produced by Australian Community Media (66 per cent of all stories) and News Corp Australia (25 per cent). Court reporting in regional New South Wales is a very minor focus at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Australian Associated Press (three per cent each). Seven outlets operated by major media companies did not publish any court reporting across the month.

By contrast, independent news outlets published almost no court coverage across New South Wales in October 2023. Only 17 stories were identified in independent news outlets across the entire sample, all of which were produced by three outlets: Newcastle Weekly (Pepper Publishing, eight stories), Region Riverina (Region Group, eight stories) and The Lismore App (NSW Local App Company, one story). All of these are newer outlets without a long history in print: the Newcastle Weekly was established in 2015, the Lismore App in 2017 and Region Riverina in 2021.

At 15 independent local news outlets sampled in October no court stories were published at all. No court coverage was published in regional newspapers.

Major news entities were responsible for the bulk of original court story production (96 per cent) and ran all of the syndicated stories that PIJI identified. Australian Community Media produced two thirds of all original court stories in the sample, News Corp 22 per cent and the AAP and ABC four per cent each.

Predictably given its position as a wire service, Australian Associated Press was found to have produced only original stories across the month, with no syndication identified. Australian Community Media (288 stories) and the public broadcaster (15 stories) both had around 79 per cent original production and 21 per cent syndication, while News Corp (93 stories) had the lowest proportion of original production overall with 68 per cent.

It is worth stating that the majority of all syndication identified (96 of 125 stories, 77 per cent) was internal: outlets running content produced by other outlets operated by the same entity, such as News Corp’s Northern Star newspaper in Lismore running stories from other News Corp titles in the region like the Ballina Shire Advocate, or ABC local outlets sharing stories. The remaining 23 per cent was syndicated from the Australian Associated Press and was overwhelmingly content from Sydney-based courts.

### Original production and court localism by region

LGA	Local Court		District Court		Total, LGA courts		Other Court	
	n	% total o	n	% total o	n	% total o	n	% total o
Albury	37	40	0	0	37	40	55	60
Broken Hill	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dubbo	19	73	0	0	24	92	2	8
Lismore	9	33	7	26	16	59	11	41
MidCoast	8	47	2	12	10	59	7	41
Newcastle	23	24	17	18	54	57	41	43
Orange	19	70	0	0	51	78	6	22
Shoalhaven	5	42	0	0	5	42	7	58
Tamworth	19	61	7	23	26	84	5	16
Wagga Wagga	3	17	1	6	4	22	14	78
Wollongong	42	62	15	22	57	84	11	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>39</b>

Table 20: Number and percentage of original stories (o) by localism to sampled area.

Table 20 breaks down the original story production by its localism: whether each outlet’s original production was about the Local Court or District Court within the sampled local government areas, or whether stories were about another Court entirely, either in a different area or a different Court, such as a Children’s Court. It excludes AAP, which is not local to any particular local government area.

Most original court coverage (254 stories, 62 per cent) occurred within the local government areas being sampled. Of this, the majority of reporting (184) took place in Local Court, with far less (49) in District Courts. In around half of local government areas sampled saw no District Court coverage at all.

Here PIJI found significant differences across local government areas. At the high end, 92 per cent of original stories in Dubbo and 84 per cent in Tamworth were about either the Local or District Courts in each of these local government areas, a very high degree of localism. Conversely, only 22 per cent of original stories in Wagga Wagga were from those courts.

Low levels of localism are explained by a higher degree of regionalism across most outlets. Both the Daily Advertiser and Region Riverina in Wagga Wagga also published stories from the Griffith, Federation and Greater Hume LGAs, and Region Riverina, which does not have a presence in Albury, nevertheless covered a story there. This was similar to results in Shoalhaven, where around half of all original reporting took place at Batemans Bay Local Court in Eurobodalla Shire, and in MidCoast, which also featured reporting from Port Macquarie Local Court in Port Macquarie-Hastings Council. In these results, lower levels of original court reporting within the sampled LGAs reflect editorial interests that include surrounding areas.

Results from Albury are partially due to this same regionalism - court cases were reported in Wangaratta and Shepparton - but are particularly due to the unique nature of that LGA: the

Border Mail was simultaneously providing court coverage in the twin cities of Albury (37 stories) and Wodonga (28 stories). 71 per cent of the Border Mail’s original court stories were from one of these two local government areas.

Lismore had a higher degree of ‘Other Court’ stories due to ongoing coverage of a murder trial taking place in the Sydney Supreme Court; the incident in question took place in the city, as well as stories from Casino Local Court and the Children’s Court.

### Unique cases by region

LGA	Total, LGA courts		Unique case numbers (c)	
	n	%	n	% total c
Albury	37	15	771	7
Broken Hill	0	0	531	5
Dubbo	24	9	1022	9
Lismore	16	6	774	7
MidCoast	10	4	732	7
Newcastle	54	21	2091	19
Orange	51	20	548	5
Shoalhaven	5	2	925	8
Tamworth	26	10	846	8
Wagga Wagga	4	2	882	8
Wollongong	57	22	1876	17
	254	100	10998	100

*Table 21:  
Comparison of  
location of  
stories as a  
proportion of  
reported content.*

This table provides an overview of the volume of unique cases heard by courts across the period, as well as the number of original articles published in the Local and District courts of each local government area. The highest number of cases were listed in Newcastle (2091), Wollongong (1876) and Dubbo (1022), and the lowest in Broken Hill (531) and Orange (548).

These results reveal differences in the number of cases heard - which PIJI uses as a proxy measure for the number of opportunities for court reporting - and the number of court articles produced. It is likely that there is at least a weak causal relationship between the number of court hearings and number of court reports in a community, at least insofar as there cannot be court reports without court hearings. This study does not attempt to assess that relationship, and its strength beyond the starting point should be the subject of future research. Absent that work, we can only observe that in some local government areas the proportion of court reports exceeds the proportion of cases (Albury, Orange, Wollongong), in some the proportion of cases is higher than the proportion of reports (Wagga Wagga, Shoalhaven), and in others the proportions are similar.

No court coverage was identified in Broken Hill across the sample period. This was not due to a lack of opportunity: the Broken Hill District Court sat for 14 days across October 2023 and the Broken Hill Local Court for the entire month. Daily lists for the criminal division of those two courts suggest 531 unique cases were heard in the sample period. Rather, court reporting does not appear to be within the editorial focus of either the ABC’s local station or newspaper the Barrier Truth. Indeed, searches for the terms “District Court” and “Local Court” on the Barrier Truth website returns only three court reports over the past three years.

As a unique identifier, case numbers are likely to be the most reliable measure of the number of hearings, but caution should still be taken with interpreting these numbers. The same individual can be listed against multiple unique case numbers for the same case, which inflates the overall number of unique case numbers over and above the number of hearings.



For the same reason, unique case numbers are not a measure of the number of individuals who appeared before the sampled courts in the period. Determining the number of unique individuals is complicated by multiple factors: the name of the accused is not a field provided by the court and data contained within the most similar field to that, Case Name, can be structured in multiple ways. The names of parties to a case are removed where the hearing is taking place in closed court. PIJI also identified multiple instances of the same individual being listed with and without their middle name and, in some instances, spelling errors. There is also no guarantee that a case being listed for a particular day means that the case was actually heard.

A large proportion (between 13 - 23 per cent) of hearings in each court were applications for apprehended violence orders. NSW Local Court confirmed in an email to PIJI that there are no automatic limitations on reporting of these hearings, but there is always the possibility that suppression orders may be made in the course of proceedings, preventing media reporting. New South Wales, like other Australian jurisdictions, prevents the identification of victims of certain sexual offences in publications without authorisation of the court or the victim. These offences could be a factor in many application hearings and therefore additionally impose a limitation on reporting.

We did not find a single example of a media outlet reporting on an apprehended violence order application hearing, suggesting that regardless of whether such limitations exist in every case, outlets are not attempting to cover these hearings.

Despite these caveats, the overall number of cases in every local government area across the month is sufficient to establish that there were many opportunities available for the production of court stories. The overall lack of court reporting at most outlets studied is not due to a lack of options and must therefore be explained by other factors.

### Bylines by entity

	Bylines	Bylined	Unbylined	Generic bylines	Total
News entity (e)	n	n	n	n	n
<b>Major entities</b>					
AAP	10	17	0	0	17
ABC	6	15	0	0	15
ACM	22	145	95	48	288
News Corp	16	92	1	0	93
Subtotal major	54	269	96	48	413
<b>Independent entities</b>					
NSW Local App Co.	0	0	1	0	1
Pepper Publishing	1	5	0	3	8
Region Group	2	8	0	0	8
Subtotal independent	3	13	1	3	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>430</b>

Table 22: Unique bylines, bylined stories, unbylined stories and generic bylines, by entity.

PIJI recorded the bylines of reporters against each court story during assessment. Across the 430 original articles, we identified 57 unique individual bylines. 282 stories had a reporter byline, including all stories produced by Australian Associated Press and Region Media. Across these stories, bylined reporters at AAP and ABC produced far fewer stories on average (1.7 and 2.5) than those at News Corp (5.8) and Australian Community Media (6.5).

Another 97 stories did not have a byline - the overwhelming majority of these at Australian Community Media, both in print and online. The only story published by NSW Local App Company in the sample did not have a byline; this is true of everything published by this entity, whether court reporting or not.

Finally, 48 stories, again mostly at ACM titles, had generic bylines such as ‘Staff reporter’ or ‘Court reporter’. Three stories at the Newcastle Weekly (Pepper Publishing) used the name of the publication as the byline, these have also been recorded as generic.

A large number of stories published by ACM’s Border Mail in Albury were attributed to the court, rather than an individual journalist: 26 to Albury Court, five to Wangaratta Court, and three to Wodonga Court. These have been recorded as ‘generic’ bylines, but this practice invites the interpretation that the article copy was provided by court staff, rather than a journalist. If so, these stories could not be considered independent reporting. There were no other indications on these stories that they were supplied content. Separately, the Border Mail attributed a single court story to a reporter, and 56 stories were not attributed at all. We did not observe this at any of the 13 other Australian Community Media titles assessed. If stories are being externally produced it could explain the disproportionate levels of court reporting observed in Albury across this sample. PIJI will continue to review this in future research.

### RQ2: What types of cases are covered?

This question was addressed through coding three content elements of each story: the type of proceeding being covered; the offences alleged to have been committed; and the location of the incident. Due to very low data at the following levels of analysis, independent outlets have been excluded from further discussion.

#### Proceeding type by entity

Proceeding type	AAP		ABC		ACM		NCA		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Bail	0	0	0	0	8	3	4	4	12
Committal	1	6	0	0	13	5	8	9	22
Hearing	0	0	2	13	19	7	8	9	29
Judgment	0	0	1	7	5	2	2	2	8
Mention	4	24	1	7	77	27	21	23	103
Sentence	0	0	1	7	76	26	23	25	100
Trial	0	0	9	60	12	4	6	7	27
Other	1	6	0	0	1	< 1	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>303</b>

Table 23: Number and percentage of stories of each proceeding type, by entity.

Each article coded could be allocated against one of six proceeding types. During testing, coders found that it was frequently difficult to identify from the article text what type of proceeding was being reported. This information was rarely stated and instead had to be inferred from facts given in the story. To reduce variance among the coders, proceeding types were instead allocated according to the court listing of the case being heard, rather than the text of the article. As a consequence, where the case being described in the article could not be matched against a case on the daily list, the data is missing. A total of 303 of the 413 original stories published by major outlets coded have proceeding type allocated against

them. Despite this missing data, we believe that this is a more robust approach than inferring from the article text.

The two most common hearing types by far were Mentions and Sentences, each accounting for around a third of all article types. These proceeding types were most common at Australian Associated Press, Australian Community Media and News Corp Australia publications. For the latter two each hearing type accounted for around a quarter of coverage. AAP did not cover any regional New South Wales sentences in the sample, though only six of 17 of the wire service's stories were able to be matched to a case on the daily list.

Less than ten per cent of stories in the sample (27 of 303) were Trial hearings. Australian Community Media produced the greatest number of Trial stories overall, though it made up a tiny fraction of its court coverage: only four per cent. The ABC, which did not produce a significant amount of court coverage in the period, had a far greater proportion of court stories (60 per cent), though this is of a very small sample (14). AAP was not found to cover any Trials in the sample.

There were very few examples of ongoing coverage: there were only 16 instances across the entire sample of the same case being reported more than once. The most significant of these was at the Illawarra Mercury, which produced six stories across the month following the trial of a man who was accused of receiving over 300 grams of cocaine.<sup>110</sup> Stories about this case alone make up half of all Trial proceeding coverage at any Australian Community Media outlet, and almost a quarter of all stories.

Committal hearings, which occur after a plea has been entered and determine whether the case will proceed to trial, were uncommon across the board. The data suggests that editorial resources are being allocated to the very beginning (Mention) and very end (Sentence) of cases, while any steps along the way - Bail, Committal, Trial - are not being covered to any meaningful degree.

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<sup>110</sup> The case ended in a hung jury in October 2023. At time of writing, there have been no further proceedings against the man.

Story location by region

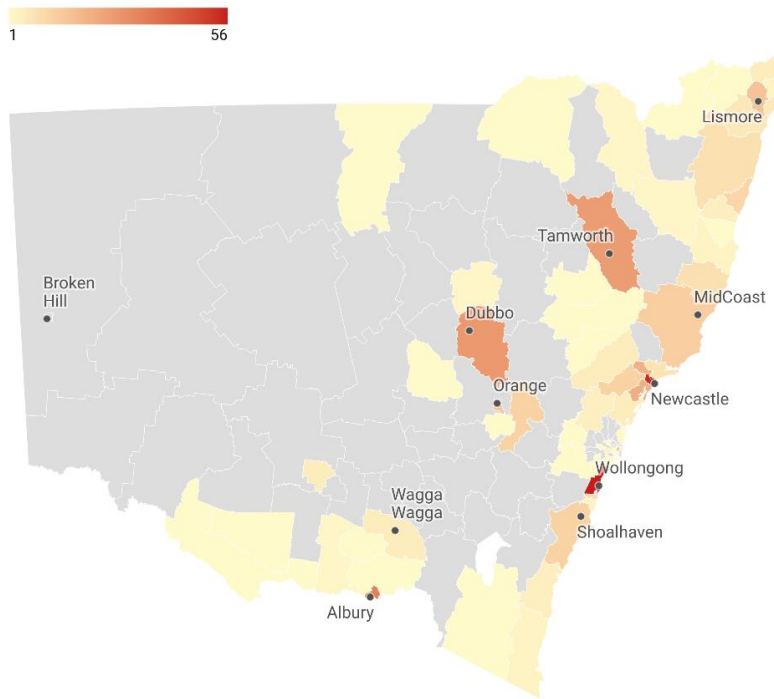


Figure 2: Number of stories that occurred in each local government area.

Coding also captured the location of the events of each story. Note that this is not the location of the court where the matter was heard, but where the incident(s) were alleged to have taken place: an event that occurred entirely in the Maitland local government area, for example, may be tried at the District Court in Newcastle; this story would only be coded to Maitland.

Unsurprisingly, we found that the majority of stories were located within the same local government area as the court. The LGAs with the highest number of stories accorded with the courts that received the most coverage: in Wollongong (56 stories) and Newcastle (54), followed by Albury (34). The most common locations outside of those within the sample were Wodonga (adjacent to Albury, 28 stories), two LGAs adjacent to Newcastle: Lake Macquarie (22 stories) and Maitland (21 stories), the City of Sydney (18 stories) and Wangaratta in northern Victoria (17 stories).

Within the sampled regions, the fewest number of stories were located in Wagga Wagga (five). Outlets in Wagga produced as many stories about incidents that occurred in Griffith.

### Offence division by entity

Offence division	AAP		ABC		ACM		NCA		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
01 Homicide and related offences	7	41	14	70	40	11	13	10	74	14
02 Acts intended to cause injury	2	12	3	15	72	20	30	22	107	20
03 Sexual assault and related	0	0	0	0	22	6	31	23	53	10
04 Dangerous or negligent acts	1	6	1	5	53	14	17	13	72	13
05 Abduction, harassment	0	0	1	5	13	4	3	2	17	3
06 Robbery and related offences	0	0	0	0	13	4	2	1	15	3
07 Unlawful entry and burglary	0	0	0	0	21	6	4	3	25	5
08 Theft and related offences	0	0	1	5	50	14	20	15	71	13
09 Fraud and related	0	0	0	0	18	5	4	3	22	4
10 Illicit drug offences	2	12	2	10	49	13	27	20	80	15
11 Weapons offences	0	0	1	5	22	6	14	10	37	7
12 Property damage	1	6	2	10	30	8	10	7	43	8
13 Public order offences	1	6	0	0	35	10	14	10	50	9
14 Vehicle regulatory offences	0	0	0	0	33	9	15	11	48	9
15 Offences against justice	2	12	1	5	56	15	19	14	78	14

Table 24: Offences covered in stories, by entity

The offences detailed in every story were coded according to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification framework. Each offence is allocated against one of 15 ‘offence divisions’, which group similar types of offence: ‘Murder’, for example, is allocated the code 0111 and grouped alongside ‘Murder, attempted’ (code 0121) in the ‘01 Homicide and related offences’ division. In most cases, the story clearly stated the charges and the appropriate categorisation was clear. In instances where the story clearly described a particular offence without stating any charges, it has been allocated at the coder’s discretion. Where the charges were not stated and a clear identification of the offence was not possible, it has been left out.

Where a story included charges and additionally described an action that may also constitute an offence but where no charges were brought, the latter has not been coded. For example, in a hypothetical story about a man who was charged with murder and who, it emerges during the course of the trial, also stole their victim’s car but does not face auto theft charges, the story would only be coded against the ‘0111 Murder’ offence.

Note that Table 24 lists the number of charges allocated to each division in stories published by each news entity, not the number of stories that contained those charges. As it is common for individuals to face multiple charges in the same case, and for those charges to be simultaneously within the same offence division and across different divisions, the overall number of charges is far in excess of the number of sampled stories.

The largest category of reporting overall was the ‘Acts intended to cause injury’ division, which includes acts which cause non-fatal harm to another person and where there is no sexual element. This category includes assault and threats to assault if there is a belief that the threat could be enacted. This category was the largest focus at Australian Community Media, constituting a fifth of all crime stories.

Violent crime categories were the highest divisions of coverage at all major news entities. News Corp outlets focussed nearly equally on the ‘Acts intended to cause injury division’ and the ‘Sexual assault and related’ division, the latter of which includes threats, assault and rape.

By contrast, Australian Community Media produced far less coverage of sexual offences: these stories were 23 per cent of News Corp's output, and only six per cent at ACM.

Both the AAP and the ABC produced more stories about Homicide than other categories, with 41 per cent and 70 per cent of stories overall about murders and attempted murders.

Drug offences were the second highest category of coverage overall and were present in output of every major entity across the sample. Australian Community Media produced the most stories in this category overall (49, 13 per cent), but they were a smaller proportion than at News Corp, where its 27 stories made up 20 per cent of overall court coverage.

Both News Corp and Australian Community Media produced coverage in every category of offence, though there was a clear weighting toward violent crimes, crimes of negligence including traffic offences, and drug offences.

## Discussion

These results suggest that court reporting is occurring across regional New South Wales, but that scope of this coverage is narrow. Regional cities are receiving far more court coverage than smaller areas - large centres like Albury, Newcastle and Wollongong are the sites of the bulk of court reporting. In the case of Newcastle and Wollongong, this reflects the higher case load in these locations. The picture is far more complicated for Albury, which had fewer cases than many other locations assessed, but where journalists can also look across the border to cases in Wodonga and further afield in northern Victoria for stories.

By contrast, some regional cities - particularly Wagga Wagga, but also Nowra (Shoalhaven) and Taree and Forster (MidCoast) are seeing far less coverage than the caseloads in their courts would suggest.

Audiences in Broken Hill do not appear to receive any court coverage from their local newspaper or the public broadcaster. The local government area has the smallest population of any assessed for this study (17,000 people at the 2021 census, far below the next smallest, Orange, at 40,000), but is not the smallest local government area with a Local Court in New South Wales: the four smallest LGAs in the state, Brewarrina (1600), Central Darling (1800), Balranald (2200) and Bogan (2600) all have courts that sit at least a few times a month. Future research could assess these very small areas to determine whether court coverage is occurring in them, whether there is a relationship between the population of a place and its court coverage, and, if so, whether there is a 'floor' population below which coverage does not appear to be occurring.

This study also found that the overwhelming majority of court reporting is produced by major media entities, and in particular the two newspaper publishers with the greatest footprints in regional New South Wales: Australian Community Media and News Corp Australia. Independent local news publishers are a negligible source of court coverage overall, with a few - Region Media and Pepper Publishing in particular - producing a small amount of coverage, and the majority none.

Consistent with previous Australian research, we found that most court reporting was conducted at the Local Court level, with very little coverage of District Courts. Reporters are also prioritising covering Mention and Sentence proceeding types at the expense of ongoing coverage of trials.

Both of these proceeding types are of potentially high editorial value, as they can condense a large amount of information into a short timeframe. Mention proceedings, which typically involve pleas, are the first stage of the trial process. If an accused pleads guilty, across a short hearing a reporter can receive the details of the incident; the plea of the accused; and potentially orders imposed by a Magistrate.

Similarly, where a case has gone to trial and a guilty verdict has been reached, a Sentence hearing will summarise the incident, impose a sentence, and provide detailed reasoning including legal analysis and the circumstances particular to this case. It is not surprising that time-poor reporters would prioritise attending hearings that will be more concise and are more likely to have news value than a Trial hearing, though it is likely that this will affect the public perception of crime in their communities by disproportionate coverage of guilty pleas and verdicts; and the inclusion of the facts provided by the (successful) prosecution at the expense of those from the (unsuccessful) defense.

These findings are consistent with prior research on court reporting of lower courts in Victoria by Hess and Waller, who summarised that Magistrates Courts could represent the most valuable use of a metropolitan journalist's time because they can return to the newsroom with several story ideas rather than sit through a day of legal argument in a higher court that might not result in a report.<sup>111</sup>

Violent offences are the overall highest focus of coverage, particularly assaults, sexual offences and homicides. Non-violent offences, particularly drug, traffic and some theft offences were a particular focus at News Corp but not other entities.

These findings suggest an interpretation of the editorial priorities of each major news entity studied: the AAP and ABC had far less court coverage overall, their reporters produced fewer stories, but they were more likely to cover Trial proceedings, in District and higher-level courts, and both prioritised homicides, suggesting an approach that overall prioritised less but deeper reporting. By contrast, the volume of coverage at ACM and News Corp was far greater, reporters produced more stories each, predominantly from Local Courts, across every offence division but with particular priority for non-fatal violent crime, traffic and drug offences, and mostly covered Mention and Sentence hearings - suggesting a consistent, day-to-day commitment to the courts as a source of stories.

This assumption will be tested through qualitative research that PIJI will undertake in 2024.

Regional New South Wales is heavily dependent on two media entities - Australian Community Media and News Corp - for court reporting in news publications. This appears to be a unique vulnerability not replicated across other pillars of public interest journalism - local government, public services, community - which are subjects of coverage by a mix of the ABC and independent local news. In markets without ACM and News Corp - of which there are an increasing number since 2020<sup>112</sup> - it remains to be tested whether another outlet steps into the gap or if no court reporting occurs at all.

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<sup>111</sup> Hess and Waller 2013. p. 61.

<sup>112</sup> Dickson and Costa 2023.

## 6. Conclusion and future research

This report has presented high-level results from the Australian News Sampling Project across 2023. It has presented a comparative study within one region, the Eyre Peninsula, and a developing statistical methodology that is made possible by multiple samples across a period of time. Finally, it has presented the results of a specific study of court reporting in regional areas.

All of these will be ongoing focusses for the Public Interest Journalism Initiative in 2024 and beyond. PIJI will continue to conduct samples in new regions; will conduct further resamples in select regions across Australia; and will develop its research program in court reporting through further regional content sampling and qualitative research with editors, journalists and judicial personnel in order to understand the barriers and opportunities in court coverage. We will continue to develop this work alongside academic partners.

Future research will also involve greater consideration of generative AI, as a tool that may assist with coding, reducing the labour involved in the sampling process, and as an area of research interest as it increasingly impacts journalism.



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## Appendix A: List of local government areas sampled in 2023

A total of 64 local government areas were sampled in 2023.

### February

Sunshine Coast sample, one local government area

- Sunshine Coast Region, QLD

Eyre Peninsula sample, ten local government areas

- Ceduna District Council, SA
- Cleve District Council, SA
- Elliston District Council, SA
- Franklin Harbour District Council, SA
- Kimba District Council, SA
- Lower Eyre Peninsula District Council, SA
- The City of Port Lincoln, SA
- Streaky Bay District Council, SA
- Tumby Bay District Council, SA
- Wudinna District Council, SA

### March

Horsham and West Wimmera sample, two local government areas

- The Rural City of Horsham, VIC
- West Wimmera Shire, VIC

Cairns and surrounds sample, five local government areas

- Cairns Regional, QLD
- Cassowary Coast Regional, QLD
- Douglas Shire, QLD
- Tablelands Regional, QLD
- Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire, QLD

Adelaide Hills sample, one local government area

- Adelaide Hills Council, SA

### April

Inner West Sydney sample, five local government areas

- Burwood Council, NSW
- Canada Bay Council, NSW
- Canterbury-Bankstown Council, NSW
- Inner West Council, NSW
- Strathfield Council, NSW

### May

Great Southern sample, 11 local government areas

- City of Albany, WA
- Shire of Broomehill-Tambellup, WA
- Shire of Cranbrook, WA
- Shire of Denmark, WA
- Shire of Gnowangerup, WA
- Shire of Jerramungup, WA
- Shire of Katanning, WA
- Shire of Kent, WA
- Shire of Kojonup, WA
- Shire of Plantagenet, WA
- Shire of Woodanilling, WA

## June

Albury-Wodonga sample, four local government areas

- Albury City Council, NSW
- Indigo Shire, VIC
- Towong Shire, VIC
- City of Wodonga, VIC

## July

Darwin and surrounds sample, seven local government areas

- Belyuen Shire, NT
- Coomalie Shire, NT
- Darwin Municipality, NT
- Litchfield Municipality, NT
- Palmerston Municipality, NT
- Tiwi Islands Region, NT
- Wagait Shire, NT

## August

King Island sample, one local government area

- King Island Council, TAS

## September

Sunraysia sample, four local government areas

- Balranald Shire Council, NSW
- Rural City of Mildura, VIC
- Rural City of Swan Hill, VIC
- Wentworth Shire Council, NSW

## October

North West Queensland sample, nine local government areas

- Burke Shire, QLD
- Carpentaria Shire, QLD
- Cloncurry Shire, QLD
- Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire, QLD
- Flinders Shire, QLD
- Mckinlay Shire, QLD
- Mornington Shire, QLD
- City of Mount Isa, QLD
- Richmond Shire, QLD

## November

Inner South Melbourne sample, four local government areas

- City of Bayside, VIC
- City of Glen Eira, VIC
- City of Port Phillip, VIC
- City of Stonnington, VIC

## About the Public Interest Journalism Initiative

The Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) is a specialist think tank advancing a sustainable future for public interest journalism in Australia.

Through our original research and advocacy work, we seek to stimulate public discussion and establish optimal market pre-conditions in investment and regulation that will sustain media diversity and plurality in the long term.

PIJI is a registered charity with tax concession charity (TCC) status. It is a philanthropically funded, non-profit company limited by guarantee (ABN 69 630 740 153) governed by a Board of independent directors, advised by an Expert Research Panel and Policy Working Group and regulated by the ACNC, ATO and ASIC.

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# [Public Interest Journalism Initiative]

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