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“Communal News Work” as Sustainable Business Model: Recent Print-Centric News Start-Ups in Regional Queensland

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Abstract

The Covid-19 emergency in Australia precipitated the closure of dozens of print newspapers across Australia but, conversely, the heightened state of anxiety of the early Covid-19 period amplified the need for local information and communality. This was the impetus for a wave of print-centric newspaper start-ups. We previously examined 22 Covid-19 era start-ups in Queensland (see Barnes et al., 2022, p. 21–34) and found that their editors/publishers universally “reassert(ed) and claim(ed) more vigorously the normative values associated with community journalism as ‘social glue.’” These proprietors deployed an “affective rationale” as the foundation of their journalism and their “lean start-up” business models. We called this a “community cohesion model.” Returning to these start-ups 18 months after the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted in Queensland, we find that about 60% of these newspapers have continued operating, still drawing on deep wells of community support. They are transitioning to more conventional “newsomics,” seeking—like the news organisations they replaced—to expand their advertising and raise other revenue, keep costs low, and expand their digital channels while remaining focussed on their core print offering. Drawing on in-depth interviews and editorial statements by editors/owners of these start-ups, as well as a close examination of advertising in the surviving newspapers, this study argues that adopting affective “hybrid” business models can be a basis for news organisations’ longer-term viability.

Keywords

Australia; business models; entrepreneurial journalism; funding models; local journalism; newspapers

1. Introduction

Within months of the Covid-19 shutdowns in mid-2020, News Corp Australia, Australia's largest news media company, permanently closed 15 community newspapers in Queensland and converted 42 others to digital-only publications. News Corp justified these closures by invoking not just steep pandemic-induced falls in advertising revenues, but by asserting that they would henceforth be "employing more digital only journalists and making investments in digital advertising and marketing solutions for our partners" (Meade, 2020). Dedicated news provision for small communities no longer made economic sense for News Corp but a slew of new start-up print publications began operating in regional Queensland, embracing what we identified as aligning with the "collaborative-facilitative" and "developmental-educative" role conceptions in terms of "political needs" of the community as identified by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018). These founders/editors also indicated that their newspapers would focus on areas of consumption, identity, and emotion—sometimes eschewing critical-monitorial role—which we aligned with Hanitzsch and Vos's "domains of everyday life." Through a study of 22 start-up newspapers in Queensland, we argued that these "lean start-ups" developed work practices that embodied an ethos of entrepreneurial journalism relying on passion and investment in the cause of community cohesion. With their hybrid news and business modes drawing on community volunteerism and support, "creating a sense of social belonging with journalists playing the role of 'mood managers' focusing on connecting the community and its wellbeing," (Barnes et al., 2022, p. 3) we concluded these start-ups employed a "community cohesion model."

From a business model point of view, the founders of these Queensland start-ups had all noted how the shuttered News Corp publications had long histories of reducing staff numbers, and centralising services such as sub-editing, which saw these mastheads losing touch, in their view, with local audiences and advertisers. They became "local in name only" (Hess et al., 2023). The publishers and editors in our study were determined to avoid this fate. The impact of this dispersion of local journalism (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020), including the centralisation in some cases of advertising sales in urban centres, was especially keenly felt. The loss of local reporting too, and the reduction of what Hess and Waller (2016, p. 267) capture as "practical, embodied" knowledge surfaced and shared via that reporting, also impacted small-town businesses, particularly those in retail, real estate, trade, hospitality, and tourism sectors who relied on local news outlets to advertise their wares and services. Many of the newspaper start-up founders argued both audiences and advertisers were clamouring for ways to stay in touch and communicate in ways not provided by the News Corp digital substitutes (Barnes et al., 2022).

For many people living in regional and rural communities, in the uncertain times of strict lockdowns, their newspaper felt "essential" just as the Covid-19 era notions of "essential services"—areas of work too important to be shut down—were coming into vogue (Hess & Waller, 2021a). Many felt the pressing need for information and updates about local Covid-19 restrictions, for example, including Covid-19 testing and management protocols and a more general need to share local information to enhance communality. The "loyal tie to the medium" (Tsao & Sibley, 2004, p. 780) to print that many older residents felt, and the perceptions of the affordances of printed newspapers, in terms of accessibility and convenience, propelled the print offering overall. Both the journalism and the advertising carried in these local newspapers are implicated in creating a sense of place-based belonging. Nevertheless, according to News Corp's reported public statements, the closure or conversion to digital-only of 57 regional Queensland newspapers by News Corp in May 2020 was ostensibly precipitated by the non-viability of their advertising-centric business models (Mason, 2020).

The era of Covid-19 restrictions that started in 2020 exacerbated the instability and disruption of news media (Bowd, 2021) but also opened spaces for the newcomers who did not agree with New Corp's prognosis. We revisited the 22 newspaper start-ups examined in 2020 to evaluate their sustainability. We explored surviving publications' strategies to secure, in particular, advertising income and how they went about this given the shuttered newspapers' declarations that such business models had run their course, at least in these areas.

1.1. Solidarity, Affect, and Embodied Community in the Microeconomics of Small Market Newspapers/News Organisations

In 2020, Olsen et al. (2020) responded to the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on local newspapers by proposing a model of "communal news work" for funding the provision of local journalism in ways that are not entirely rational in neo-classical economic frames of reference. Concerned with the longer-term democratic deficits, Olsen et al. (2020, p. 674) propose that communities prioritise news as a "public service" protected from the vagaries of the market, urging that "the burden of supporting this service must be shouldered by all of society."

To do that—assuming particular communities agree that their local news is a valuable "public good" for their community—they suggest a structured approach to how communities can assist with the funding of news work. This includes combinations of membership structures, where locals can pay directly for, or otherwise contribute to, the funding of journalism production. The model also suggests the introduction of more versatile advertising structures which create space for those businesses affectively moved to support the news as a public service that transcends "individual cost-benefit analyses" to embrace its value for society as a whole (Olsen et al., 2020, p. 676). Additionally, Olsen et al. suggest that this ability to attract community-minded advertising income should also be paired with easy-to-use donation channels, and the setting up of government support structures to create internal capacity to apply and use state or federal grant funding or attract funding from private philanthropic sources and local audiences. Olsen et al. round out their model with a call for the more systematic creation or enhancement of "long-tail structures" to generate income from the by-products of journalism, such as photo-selling portals, or using the infrastructure of journalism production to offer, for example, printing services (Olsen et al., 2020).

There is a well-developed scholarship that explores attempts by smaller community print newspapers to broaden and deepen their income and garner other forms of support, but these have mostly focussed on these organisations' "digital transition" strategies. Radcliffe and Ali (2017, p. 4) argued—pre-pandemic—that for small market newspapers, "financial survival is dependent on income diversification" given the smaller size of the local economies of these areas and the proliferation of digital news and advertising. Here, we examine the business models of regional print start-ups in Queensland with their implied commitment to making print "work" and ask: Is the model of community cohesion and the affective rationales we have found to be inherent to this model sustainable?

1.2. Advertising and Affect

Although Olsen et al.'s (2020) conceptualisation of communal news work has been criticised for overemphasising the "feel good factors and noble appeal" and underestimating the "degree of goodwill...involved at all levels of investment" (Hess & Waller, 2022, pp. 87–88), suggesting that greater

consideration be given to the roles of emotion and “affect” in audiences’ and advertisers’ support for local media. Olsen et al. (2020) state that communal work dates back centuries, and literally means helping or supporting via collective action. They see this work as being important to saving institutions that are valuable both to individuals and local communities.

Recent studies have explored the part played by emotion and the meta-theoretical concept of “affect” in journalism studies more explicitly (Lünenborg & Medeiros, 2021; Papacharissi, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). Affect is conceptualised as neither entirely emotional nor cognitive processes, but a state of being that is both pre-feeling and pre-thought and sensed in embodied ways that “can be understood as the link between how we think and how we act” (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 12–13). Affect can be seen as that which moves people and connects them to others (Clough, 2010) via a sense of, for example, loyalty to a community or sense of place. It also concerns the social dimensions of journalism. As Hess and Gutsche (2018) note, small market or community newspapers provide information that shapes both collective and individual sensibilities (Hess & Gutsche, 2018).

The need for a clearer conceptualisation of the social sphere as a vital foundational concept for journalism studies is strongly advocated for by Hess and Gutsche (2018) and by others (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Hanusch, 2017; Hess & Waller, 2016). Hess and Gutsche (2018, p. 490) note that the relationship between news and daily social order through what they describe as “banal news items” is an area of journalism studies that requires more scholarship.

In this article, considering the business models, we argue that the comparable banality of the advertisements in small market newspapers is also under-researched in terms of how they might present and represent aspects of the life and commerce of communities and embody and promote rituals of “buying local,” arguably a key part of the affective response to “being local.” Hess and Waller (2016) note how pivotal the buy, sell, swap, and other classified notices and advertisements were to pre-social media era newspapers; we argue these add weight to the contention that these marketing communications of various formats—display, classifieds, advertorial, and so on complement the role of news in readers’ everyday lives, and the impact journalism may reassert in the digital age (see Hess & Gutsche, 2018, p. 490).

This chimes with Picard’s (2006, p. 131) prescient proposition, early in the digital transition that as print could no longer deliver consistently large audiences, news providers need to “specialise or localise” to provide value to advertisers and audiences. In addition to their vital public sphere roles, small market newspapers play important roles in the social sphere, facilitating the sharing of information that underpins many aspects of social interaction and much of the commerce that takes place in local economic ecosystems. These news organisations’ connecting (Bowd, 2021) and linking roles (Hess, 2015) are enacted primarily through the kinds of news covered and the way those stories are framed, but also through the provision of various forms of advertising, including display ads, classified ads, and/or business directories, and “advertorial” forms of advertising. We argue these are not merely transactional and facilitative of regional commerce, but also help create these forms of bridging capital, a component of the broader social capital that Hess (2013, 2015) and others (Bowd, 2011; Campante et al., 2022; Hess & Waller, 2021b) suggest are key to understanding the role of smaller market or community newspapers in the socio-economic and political life of non-metropolitan towns and villages.

These advertisements, sponsorships, and marketing features also arguably reinforce a sense for audiences of living in a relatively successful locale, i.e., a place that “works.” They also can provide a sounding board role that likewise “lets people know...how their community is ticking” (Bowd, 2011, p. 86). Advertising is often tied to forms of local newspaper “boosterism” (Olsen et al., 2021, p. 814) and assertions, pertinent to pandemic start-ups, that audiences require reassurance that they are living in a place where at least “nothing terrible has happened in the last week” (Kirkpatrick, 2001, p. 20).

2. Research Questions and Method

To address the research question of whether the community cohesion model employed by the Covid-19 era regional newspapers in Queensland is a sustainable model, we applied a range of approaches. We thematically analysed data from semi-structured interviews with founders and editors of 22 regional Queensland start-ups between May 2020 and August 2020. This start-up data was supplemented with a close examination of the newspapers between January 2023 to July 2023, specifically examining editorial statements, advertising rate cards or advertising/media kits and statements on “advertorial advertising.” Four consecutive issues of 12 of the 14 still-operating publications (from the 22 examined in the initial study) were examined to review the types of advertising content, the ratio of local ads to national advertisements, the ratio of ad space to editorial space, and the presence of classified ads including business directories, community noticeboards, and property advertising. Data was also collected on the cover price, total printed pages, and whether the newspapers published advertorials. The ratio of local to non-local advertising content was also quantified. Terms were defined, and data was collected and examined by all members of the research team, which also undertook collective analysis to ensure consistency of interpretations across the advertising elements. Data was then organised thematically to determine the final categories outlined below.

As we sought to examine not just news provision in local newspapers’ role in creating a sense of place-based belonging, but also the commercial and advertising components of their content, we evaluated the goals articulated by the founders and editors in 2020 to better understand their business models as they relate to the longer-term sustainability of the community cohesion model.

3. Findings

The optimistic view, articulated by the editors and founders in 2020, that there was a viable gap in their local markets after the exit or switch to digital-only editions of long-established but corporate-owned newspapers, has mostly proved correct in the publications examined. By mid-2023, 14 of the original 22 start-ups were still publishing in print. Five of the 14 had become part of a regional publishing group that now operates 11 community newspapers in Queensland, and three newspapers in other states. This affiliation appears to have provided these five newspapers with some shared resources such as backend classified ad receiving systems, and some centralised selling capacity. Due to the change in format of one of the surviving publications to a glossy tourism-focussed quarterly magazine, and another to a limited monthly free distribution also in a magazine format, we collected and collated additional data from 12 newspapers publishing at least fortnightly. Of the 12 newspapers examined, six are published weekly, and five are published fortnightly. One is printed twice weekly (Table 1).

Table 1. Circulating, frequency, cost, size, ad ratios, and other data: Covid-19 era newspaper start-ups in Queensland (measured across four consecutive editions June/July 2023).

	Circulation	Frequency and price	Average total pages	Average advertising ratio (proportion of ad space compared to editorial content, in percentages)	Average number of pages classified style ads (e.g., community notices, business directories, etc.)	Local to non-local advertising ratio
Paper 1	2,480	Weekly, free	28	18%	3–4 pages	90%–100% local
Paper 2	14,000	Fortnightly, free	36	50%	6–8 pages	95%–100% local
Paper 3	5,000	Fortnightly, free	32–36	30%	1–2 pages	100% local
Paper 4	2,000	Fortnightly, \$2	32	21%	1–2 pages	100% local
Paper 5	22,600	Fortnightly, free	84	>50%	3–4 pages	90%–96% local
Paper 6	15,000	Weekly, free	48	>50%	6–8 pages	96%–100% local
Paper 7	4,000	Fortnightly, free	32	32%	5–6 pages	100% local
Paper 8	21,900	Weekly, \$3	64–80	28	1–2 pages	90%–100% local
Paper 9	32,665	Twice weekly, \$3	56	18%	1–2 pages	94%–100% local
Paper 10	19,185	Weekly, \$3.50	80 (with property guide)	41% (about 15% without property guide)	1–2 pages	94–100% local
Paper 11	14,882	Weekly, \$3	48	24%	1–2 pages	94%–100% local
Paper 12	24,434	Weekly, \$3.50	60	28%	2–3 pages	94%–100% local

3.1. Subscription Income

Six newspapers—including all five newspapers affiliated with one regional publisher—charged a cover price for both print and digital access in 2023. The other six newspapers in this sample are free in both physical and online formats. The five newspapers in the regional stable have increased their cover price in 2023 to between \$3.00 and \$3.50 and distribute at least 15,000 copies per week of their respective publications. The subscription incomes of these large print runs may be an important part of their financial sustainability, even when distribution costs of sales are factored in. The only other paper to charge a cover price/subscription fee has kept its \$2 price since its 2020 inception; its small circulation of 2,000 suggests, by contrast, that its subscription income is likely to be less significant to its overall sustainability.

3.2. Advertising Income: Substantial, but Sustainable?

Although scholarship on the optimal advertising ratios, i.e., the proportion of ads to editorial content is underdeveloped, the 12 newspapers examined here range from about 18% of ads to editorial content in the smallest weekly free paper to more equal proportions of ads and editorial. All but two newspapers in the sample achieve advertising ratios in the 30% to 50% range. Those newspapers with closer to a 50% advertising-to-print ratio have larger volumes of property advertising, sometimes in clearly delineated property sections.

For most of these newspapers revisited in 2023, the amount of advertising is impressive. This is not entirely surprising, as all the editors/publishers interviewed as their start-ups were getting off the ground, felt that there was a good deal of advertising income that had “nowhere to go” once the News Corp newspapers in their areas closed/went online only. One proprietor acknowledged that their paper’s advertising income model and metrics were like those of the departing News Corp newspapers, but contended that they were able to raise revenue more sustainably by drawing on deeper connections with the community through the work of local journalists and ads sales representatives familiar with local business:

We will be the same model News Corp used by running a print edition at basically 50% advertising [to news ratio]. We won’t run it any heavier than that...and we’re getting very close to the community and giving the community content that they want....People [thus] read our product and buy the product or service that people are advertising. It’s not rocket science: we’ve been doing it for 50 years—why change the model now? (Editor/Proprietor, Paper 6)

The success of this model in generating realisable, reliable income may be attributable to how these newspapers seek to ensure loyalty by offering discounts for longer advertising contracts. Although not an uncommon strategy in retail media advertising, most of these regional newspapers also offer discounts to those taking out small displays or regular classified ads, such as local tradespeople and small-scale service providers. Indeed, one paper even mandates that small advertisers buy a six or 12-pack of ads, i.e., securing a longer-term commitment from smaller advertisers, and doing so by offering a steeply discounted rate. Certainly, over 2023, the advertising ratios shown in Table 1 appear to hold steady across four sequential editions of each paper examined, despite the pressure on consumer discretionary spending as inflation spiked briefly to 7.8% and interest rates were increased on 12 occasions across 2022 and 2023 in Australia.

3.3. Advertising Income “not Just Scrolling Past”: Very Local, Very Often

Surprisingly, most of the newspapers feature very little non-local advertising, at least not across the four consecutive issues examined in our 2023 sample period. We defined non-local as ads for any product or service that was not based in the area covered by the newspaper, to the extent that we could discern that information. Even advertisements for national products such as automotive brands or banks, for example, were localised to focus on the local branches or franchises. In most newspapers, close to 100% of all the ads featured are from local businesses and service providers—local government, electricians, plumbers, dentists, lawyers, hairdressers, and, notably, local property ads. Interviewees emphasised how important it is for local advertisers to be tangibly in people’s homes, and many tried to articulate the importance of the presence of a hard-copy newspaper edition kept in a local home until the next edition is published. As one proprietor put it:

Sometimes you can read things online, and it won't sink in. [With our newspaper] you have that in front of you...you know you can go back to it. I've had advertisers who have said to me, "It is an advertisement that sits on someone's table for seven days. They don't forget it. They don't just scroll past it—it's there on their kitchen table." (Editor/Proprietor, Paper 8)

3.4. Advertorials: Adding Value for Local Advertisers

Out of the 12 newspapers examined, 11 offer advertorials of one kind or another. Advertorial—a term that describes "a print advertisement where the execution, and in particular the copy, is in the editorial style of the host publication" (Goodlad et al., 1997, p. 73)—is an advertising format that appears to have grown in importance for these local newspapers: They allow local businesses to publicise their products and services in some depth and emphasise their local credentials in a more detailed manner. One newspaper, which didn't originally offer advertorials, now offers either a full-page ad or a full-page advertorial at the same price (\$325 at the time of writing; Rate Card, Newspaper 3). Another newspaper's editor shared that they had made advertorials part of the offering from the start:

If they book like a quarter-page or a half-page ad, they get the same size editorial about their business. They can put whatever they want about their business in this and include a photo...You get a lot of bang for your buck. (Editor/Proprietor, Newspaper 8)

Another newspaper in our sample shared a "media kit" on their website that provides more granular guidance for what they call "light advertorial" to distinguish it from display ads and their non-acceptance of standard advertorial:

A "light advertorial" is assessed by the editor of that issue as consisting of at least 80% content that is useful and/or interesting community information and a maximum of 20% "advertorial" messaging. Frequency is limited and only open to repeat advertisers and local new starts. (Media Kit, Newspaper 4)

In all the newspapers in our sample, advertorials are clearly designated as such, as one newspaper explains in their rate card: "The word 'advertisement' is printed in small letters at the top or bottom of your advertorial"; other newspapers mark them explicitly as "advertorial."

3.5. The Return of Property and Classified Advertising

Of the newspapers in our sample, 10 also carry at least two pages of property ads, but many of the newspapers in this sample have far more pages featuring suburban homes, flats, or farms/rural property for sale. Only one of the newspapers carries no property ads. At least two of the start-ups in our sample are owned by publishers who also have interests in local property estate agencies: one was explicit that their main motivation in starting the newspaper was an outlet for their real estate ads that were not just virtual. Another argued that local property guides were very interesting to residents, even those not necessarily in the market, and worked well "in our market because our property doesn't move fast. Our turn around (time) is somewhere between 36 and 41 days average time on market" (Editor/Proprietor, Newspaper 6). Having a printed paper that is also available digitally allows for various kinds of explorations of property markets in these local areas.

All the newspapers feature substantial (relative to size) classified ads, arranged in sections labelled “classifieds,” “community notices,” “community noticeboard,” or “business directory.” Some newspapers also have “buy & sell” sections separate from classifieds. Most of the newspapers have a range of classified advertising in different formats, that can include small-sized ads for very local businesses including artisanal services, funeral notices, memorandums, job vacancies, community meetings, church and other religious organisation services, etc. These appear to have been popular even when the newspapers were starting up in 2020, with one editor reporting, “It’s growing and growing every week. We’re turning away advertisers” (Editor/Proprietor, Newspaper 5). In terms of the number of pages per edition, across all the newspapers in our sample, it is clear that these “smalls” are becoming a substantial feature of all the newspapers.

3.6. Long Tail Structures and Tributary Streams of Incomes

Outside of conventional advertising structures, tweaked to accommodate an affective sense of locality, many of the newspapers are exploring additional sources of income and digital enhancements, mostly through their own websites and Facebook pages. But the newspapers’ social media are all still geared towards promoting the print product, aiming to remind local audiences that a new edition is coming out, or just about to come out. Many have well-functioning websites too, and while some are selling advertising on their websites, this appears to be a very limited source of income, as these websites only feature a small number of banner ads. The websites of these newspapers all offer a full digital edition of the printed newspaper, or a link to it, for free or, in the case of those charging a cover price for the print product, for a small monthly subscription fee. This allows those not receiving a printed copy to read the newspaper online. This gives advertisers greater reach, and it also allows those who still feel connected to the area to “keep up,” i.e., it extends the inclusivity of these communities beyond geographical boundaries.

Other forms of “long-tail” revenue include the five newspapers now part of the regional publishing house offering the sale of photographs through a common backend gallery and sale service at a price point of \$25 per high-resolution photo. The service advises it offers tens of thousands of photos and promises to post new images from any event covered in the newspaper within 48 hours of the events they cover. At least two other newspapers in our sample also sell photos in a similar fashion.

One newspaper offers a service making digital invitations including video production (weekly, free, 2,400 circulation). Another publication sells marketing support services, explaining:

The business itself has changed to adapt to meet the needs of the community, with the emergence of...the graphic design and printing arm of the company...(we) provide marketing support to small, local businesses. We are all about keeping our business as local as possible and responding to the needs of the community. (Editor/Proprietor, Newspaper 7)

Many of the publications generate income via structures in the Olsen et al. (2020) model to solicit and accept local donations and variants of crowd-funded type support or to facilitate the application of grants. One publication has a well-supported “club,” along the lines of Olsen et al.’s (2020) membership structures inviting audiences; membership is facilitated via regular or once-off donations. Those contributing “join and contribute directly to local independent news and help give our community a voice” (Editor/Proprietor, Newspaper 7).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Our research suggests that the energy of key start-up players was key to bringing together those willing to support these different kinds of “collective funding” that Olsen et al. (2020) suggest is the outcome of the successful marshalling of communal news work. Those newspapers in our sample that have endured now appear to be sustainable through their ability to garner ongoing support from local businesses and from a wide range of social organisations including local councils, sports clubs, schools, religious bodies, NGOs, and voluntary associations. As the communal news work model suggests, these businesses and community institutions/organisations sometimes had to go beyond immediate cost/benefit analysis and get involved in “giving a gift to the local newspaper in the form of an advertising investment” (Olsen et al., 2020, p. 677) especially when the newspapers were in their early start-up phases. To encourage this and operationalise this kind of contribution, most of the newspapers in our sample offer keen discounts to local advertisers if they enter longer-term contracts. As the editor reported, this was financially and logistically crucial as “we have got (our advertisers) hooked in for three or six months depending on what they wanted. And that’s what’s kept us going...because I knew I didn’t have the time to keep going out every week and selling them” (Editor/Proprietor, Newspaper 4). More generally, all the newspapers incentivise loyalty across three-, six-, and 12-month periods, which in turn might be reflected in the dominance of local advertising in all the newspapers that have endured through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although this might have translated into a relatively small contribution for individual advertisers, these longer-term commitments appear to make a difference in terms of longer-term sustainability for these surviving newspapers. Another founder shared that local estate agents were loyal supporters, but:

They aren’t going to sell through these ads. Most of the properties are already sold by the time [the newspaper] comes out. But I think they want to be seen to be supporting the local paper and by extension the local community. (Editor/Proprietor, Newspaper 1)

Businesses that advertise regularly with local newspapers are also often featured in both advertising and news sections of the publication often through advertorial formats. Although not as explicitly transactional as the Olsen et al. (2020, p 677) suggestion that “new publishers should recognise such advertisers,” it is discernible from editorial comments and stories about local business that there is an emerging sense of a mutual symbiosis between community, business, and newspapers. This exemplifies the community cohesion model that prioritises very local news. As one editor put it when giving evidence to the parliamentary inquiry into Australia’s regional newspapers:

Locals want to read about locals, local stories and local events....We had a core group of local business who have supported us wholeheartedly from our first edition, to not generate their own business but to show support for another local community business. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, submission 7, p. 1)

This echoes Yun et al.’s (2018, p. 529) argument that an added benefit of local advertising is “not only because readers will be exposed to their advertisement, but also because readers will perceive the advertisements as supporting a local newspaper, that in turn is perceived to be crucial to the local community.”

This reliance on social solidarity and a given community's sense of collective responsibility for supporting the provision of the "public good" of news journalism, can arguably inhibit critical inquiry and lessen the amount of journalism that holds local power to account. Although we've focussed more on Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) journalistic roles that centre around meeting public needs in the "domain of everyday life" and the "seven capacities" (Standaert et al., 2021) or roles that journalists can play in this regard—"guide, inspirator, marketer, service provider, friend, connector, and mood manager," most of the newspapers that have survived still cover substantial amounts of local news and operate, to some extent, in the "political arena" in every edition (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 147). Although our study does not include a content analysis of political coverage per se, just through informally scanning a few months of the 2023 editions of the surviving newspapers suggests many regularly cover "hard news" stories with a discernible critical stance.

Additionally, the community cohesion or communal news work models that we identified as propelling these 2020 Covid-19 start-ups in regional Queensland don't necessarily differ all that much from older pre-digital community journalism practices that also relied on local advertising, this article has argued that there is, across all the newspapers, a commitment to creating a closer and more authentic connection between audiences, advertisers, and the newspapers, compared to the more corporatised newspapers that started to emerge in smaller towns and communities in the 1990s. This partly manifests in most of our sample publications carrying local ads almost exclusively, with very little national advertising.

The proprietors/editors of the newspapers set up in 2020 wanted to repair what they saw as a loss of connection, with all interviewees expressing a strong desire to be "in and among" the community which they felt they were better able to do as they were not beset with corporate exhortations to be profit centres. This might lead to uncritical forms of "boosterism" in their journalism, which we have not explored here, but these commitments also allowed for deep cost containment as these very lean start-ups relied not just on wide community support but also, to a certain extent, on their own unpaid "emotional labour."

To mix metaphors, advertisements for local businesses and organisations help "lubricate" local commerce, just as the newspapers themselves act as a "social glue" in terms of promoting community cohesion. Both work to reweave the social fabric of communities frayed by the tumultuous first few years of the 2020s. There is substantial evidence to suggest the initial affective rationales and business ethos that inspired the business setups have continued to inform their revenue generation in ways that augur well for their longer-term sustainability. The newspapers in this sample have focussed on getting as many local enterprises as possible to, in effect, commit to the communal news work model's solidarity effort. This sense of solidarity appears to have contributed to these regional Queensland newspapers' survival three years on, a notable milestone given that in Australia approximately 60% of business start-ups fail in their first 36 month of operation.

5. Limitations

There are several limitations to the study, as it focused only on newspapers that started in 2020 after the Covid-19 accelerated News Corp closures of newspapers in regional Queensland. We have not interviewed advertisers, nor analysed in any systematic way the content of the advertisements. Future studies could explore both advertiser motivations and gratifications more directly, and/or do a systematic content analysis of, for example, the regional vernacular (Wahl-Jorgensen & Boelle, 2023) of inclusion that so many

advertisements habitually invoke. Additionally, some form of reception analysis, focussing on the audiences of these and other newspapers would be valuable to assess whether the outlets are effectively promoting senses of social belonging, for example, and having the impact that the proprietors/editors believe they are having.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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