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# Local news coverage of Victorian council elections 2024

## **Local news coverage of Victorian council elections 2024**

Authors: Maia Germano, Gary Dickson and Pauline Ferraz  
Research assistance: Ilana Cohen and Jacob Wallace

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Correspondence

To discuss this report, please email Gary Dickson: [gary.dickson@piji.com.au](mailto:gary.dickson@piji.com.au).

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# 1 Background

Beginning in 2022, the Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) commenced the Australian News Sampling Project, an 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.

## 1.1 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.

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>2</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>3</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 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

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

<sup>2</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>3</sup> ACCC. 2019. p. 283.

- (b) current issues or events of public significance for Australians at a local, regional or national level.<sup>4</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.

PIJJ’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 PIIJ’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.

## 1.2 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 PIIJ’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>5</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. National news tends to report more on issues that are divisive or conflict-driven, while local media promoted social cohesion.<sup>6</sup> State and national news tend to receive far greater scholarly attention, local news, especially with their coverage of local governments, play a key role in keeping communities informed about the political life of their community.

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>7</sup> whereas metropolitan journalists tend to have a less local focus.<sup>8</sup>

Bowd has argued<sup>9</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

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<sup>4</sup> Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Act 2021, 52A Definitions.

<sup>5</sup> Dickson G. and Costa J. 2023. *Australian News Data Report: December 2023*.

<sup>6</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.

<sup>7</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>8</sup> Hanusch F. 2015. A different breed altogether? Distinctions between local and metropolitan journalism cultures.

<sup>9</sup> Bowd K. 2012. Considering the consequences: Australian country newspapers and news impact on communities. p.127

civic leaders believe local media does a better job of reflecting the needs of communities than state or national media.<sup>10</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>11</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>12</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>13</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>14</sup>

Focus group research in regional New South Wales found that audiences strongly prioritise local in their news diets.<sup>15</sup> Participants in Byron Bay, Wagga Wagga and Orange said that connection to community, usually through the presence of a journalist, was a key factor in their assessment of the legitimacy of a local news outlet. They were broadly dismissive of attempts by Sydney-based newsrooms to cover their communities remotely.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.2.1 Local news closures

PIJ's data suggests at least 180 news outlets have closed in Australia between 1 January 2019 and 30 September 2024, with a large percentage of this decline affecting regional areas.<sup>17</sup> Prior studies have shown that local news is not only an important source of information for communities but also works to strengthen communities ties and involvement, including participation in local organisations or politics.<sup>18</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>19</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>20</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>21</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>22</sup>

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<sup>10</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>11</sup> Bowd K. 2011. Reflecting regional life: Localness and social capital in Australian country newspapers.

<sup>12</sup> Bowd K. 2003. How different is 'different'? Australian country newspapers and development journalism.

<sup>13</sup> Hanusch 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Attard M., Dickson G., Jehangir A. and Newling N. 2024. *Regional News Media*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Dickson and Des Preaux 2024. *Australian News Data Report: September 2024*.

<sup>18</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>19</sup> Park, Lee and Fisher 2023. News closures, trust and community attachment among regional news audiences: a case study of Australia.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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>23</sup> places that lack coverage of specific critical information needs or, in some circumstances, any local coverage at all. As of September 2024, PIJ has identified five local government areas without a local print, digital or radio news producer, and 27 without local print or digital. All of these are in rural and regional Australia.<sup>24</sup> Even where local media remain, they may not always have sufficient resources to cover civic institutions.<sup>25</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>26</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>27</sup> while providing government institutions latter with a barometer of public opinion.<sup>28</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>29</sup> This sense of belonging and shared identity forms the basis of the civic role of the media, providing space for citizens to mobilise for common causes.<sup>30</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>31</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>32</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>33</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>34</sup>

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<sup>23</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>24</sup> Dickson and Costa 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Simons M. and Dickson G. 2019. *Availability of local news and information*.

<sup>26</sup> Magasic M., Hess K. and Freeman J. 2023. Examining the social, civic, and political impact of local newspaper closure in outback Australia.

<sup>27</sup> Bowd 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Magasic, Hess and Freeman 2023. p.49

<sup>29</sup> Bowd 2011.

<sup>30</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>31</sup> Barthel M., Holcomb J., Mahone J. and Mitchell A. 2016. *Civic Engagement Strongly Tied to Local News Habits*. p.4

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</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”.

Similar focus group research in Caroline County, Virginia after the closure of the Caroline Progress found six themes among responses: growing disappointment in the paper prior to its closure; a struggle to obtain information; decreased awareness of events; a fear of diminished pride in the county; a growing information void and difficulty filling it.<sup>35</sup> On the first theme, participants were aware of the deterioration of the paper in the years before it closed, as the number of pages in the print edition, the number of stories put online, and social media activity all dropped.<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.

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, deficits and financial waste in local governments.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, research conducted by the World Bank found a correlation between newspaper circulation and lower levels of political corruption.<sup>39</sup> Other research has suggested that monitoring by journalists improves corporate governance and exposes fraud.<sup>40</sup>

Local news ecosystems can also 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>41</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>42</sup>

A trend towards centralisation of resources and remote coverage has been described as ‘dispersion’.<sup>43</sup> Australian Community Media, for example, has increasingly consolidated its regional presence in New South Wales and Victoria around its largest regional city newsrooms, particularly those that still produce daily newspapers. The outlets that previously served towns near to those cities have been cut back to digital-only feeds.

The approach of centralising and prioritising digital reach over physical presence may be self-defeating. Research by McAdam and Hess concluded that ‘digital presence may complement physical presence, but it does not replace it’ – that sustainable news businesses are built by embedding within local communities.<sup>44</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>45</sup> The study found that regional and local newsrooms

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<sup>35</sup> Matthews N. 2020. Life in a news desert: the perceived impact of a newspaper closure on community members.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

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

<sup>38</sup> Gao P., Chang L. and Murphy D. 2018. Financing dies in darkness? The impact of newspaper closures on public finance.

<sup>39</sup> Adserà A. 2000. Are you being served?: political accountability and quality of government.

<sup>40</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>41</sup> Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Attard M., Dickson G., Jehangir A. 2022. *Regional news media*; Attard M., Dickson G., Jehangir A. and Newling N. 2023. *Regional news media*; Attard M., Dickson G., Jehangir A. and Newling N. 2024. *Regional news media*.

<sup>43</sup> Hess K. and Waller L. 2017. *Local journalism in a digital world*.

<sup>44</sup> McAdam A. and Hess K. 2024. Re-asserting the value of local “news presence” for small-town news outlets in a digital era.

<sup>45</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.

are relying on public relations submissions from local organisations for content because of a lack of resources. Consistent with other research,<sup>46</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.

Waller and Hess explored practitioner perspectives on the influence of local government media officers in information dissemination to communities through regional newspapers in Australia.<sup>47</sup> This study found that there is a symbiotic relationship between local governments and media structures, characterised by journalists' reliance on local government as a source of news and vital advertising revenue, and local governments' dependence on local media to communicate information to the public.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, the authors found that the frequency of media releases by media officers varied depending on the size of the council: smaller council media officers did not share media releases consistently as journalists were able to approach them directly. In larger councils, media officers described positive relationships with journalists, and viewed the use of their media releases positively.<sup>49</sup> Increasing reliance of young journalists on media releases has heightened the influence of media officers over information dissemination, diminishing the ability of news outlets to provide an alternative narrative.<sup>50</sup> Waller and Hess also found that regional newspaper journalists were not verifying media release material that they were using.<sup>51</sup>

A 2019 study by Simons and Dickson found that over a third of local government officials in both regional and metropolitan areas reported that no journalists attend their local government meetings, and around 10 per cent of respondents said that they had no contact with journalists at all. This figure was higher in metropolitan areas than in regional and rural areas.<sup>52</sup>

In Sweden, Djerf-Pierre and Pierre examined how local government officials' use social media and how this had impacted the role attributed to traditional news media. This study found that social media gave political officials an opportunity to bypass news organisations by directly interacting with citizens.<sup>53</sup> Like Australia, local government officials have received less scholarly attention in Sweden than their national level counterparts. The authors suggest that as there are fewer stories to be written about at the local level, journalists are often more reliant on the information shared by local authorities.<sup>54</sup> The study did not find that social media was filling any information gap in municipalities where local media were limited.<sup>55</sup>

Anecdotally, in its Australian News Sampling Project PIJ 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>56</sup>

The loss of news can also have a direct impact on local politics. After the closure of the Cincinnati Post, Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido found<sup>57</sup> that there were fewer people voting in city council, city commission and

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<sup>46</sup> In addition to studies previously discussed, Simons M., Dickson G. and Alembakis R. 2019. *The nature of the editorial deficit*.

<sup>47</sup> Waller L. and Hess K. 2008. An exploratory study of relationships between local government media officers and journalists in regional Australia.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 152.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 156.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. pp. 157-158.

<sup>51</sup> Waller L. and Hess K. 2008. An exploratory study of Australia's regional newspaper journalists' checks on validity and accuracy of sources.

<sup>52</sup> Simons and Dickson 2019. Availability of local news and information. pp. 23-24.

<sup>53</sup> Djerf-Pierre M. and Pierre J. 2016. Mediatized local government: social media activity and media strategies among local government officials 1989-2010. p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Barry P. 2022. Local news copy & paste.

<sup>57</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.

school board elections; fewer candidates for those seats; campaign spending dropped and the chances of incumbents improved. Similarly, Rubado and Jennings demonstrated a significant association between cuts to local newspaper staffing and reduced political competition in mayoral races across locations in California, and some evidence that cuts lead to lower turnout.<sup>58</sup>

## 2 Methodology

This study seeks to contribute to existing literature on the state of local news reporting on local government. It does so with specific reference to the 2024 Victorian council elections, using content analysis to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How much local government reporting is taking place in Victoria?

**RQ2:** How much local government reporting relies on media releases?

**RQ3:** How does local government coverage change during elections periods compared to non-election periods?

This study takes samples of news coverage across nine council areas in two time periods. 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>59</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.

### 2.1 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 random sampling, census sampling, convenience sampling and varying probability sampling, although we have chosen to limit our focus here to stratified sampling as the most relevant to our research.<sup>60</sup>

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 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

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<sup>58</sup> Rubado M. E. and Jennings J. T. 2020. Political consequences of the endangered local watchdog: newspaper decline and mayoral elections in the United States.

<sup>59</sup> Krippendorff K. 2019. Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology. p. 115.

<sup>60</sup> Krippendorff 2019; Riffe D., Lacy S. R., Watson B. and Fico F. 2019. Analysing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research.

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.

### 2.1.1 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>61</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>62</sup> PIJ’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>63</sup>

### 2.1.2 Sample sizes

There is no uniform ‘perfect’ sample size in content,<sup>64</sup> instead, researchers must experiment with different sample sizes and techniques to determine the combination which produces answers to their research questions.<sup>65</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>66</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.

## 2.2 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 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>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> McAdam A. and Hess K. 2022. Navigating the terrain: a typology of mapping in journalism studies.

<sup>62</sup> Hess K. 2012. Breaking Boundaries. Recasting the “local” newspaper as “geo-social” news in a digital landscape; McAdam and Hess 2022.

<sup>63</sup> McAdam and Hess 2022.

<sup>64</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>65</sup> Krippendorff 2019.

<sup>66</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.

<sup>67</sup> Krippendorff 2019. p. 129

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>68</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>69</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>70</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.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Riffe D., Lacy S. R., Watson B. and Fico F. 2019. *Analysing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*. p. 99.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 100.

### 3 Sampling Victorian local council elections

In Victoria, local council elections are held every four years and voting is compulsory. In 2024, elections for 78 of Victoria’s 79 councils were conducted via postal ballots. Ballots were mailed out to voters from October 7, 2024, and voting closed on October 25, 2024. Results were declared for all elections on November 15, 2024.

This study takes a multistage stratified sampling approach, limiting the overall sample first by time and geography, then identifying the sources out of a subset of the news producers in the selected regions.

#### 3.1 Project design

##### 3.1.1 Time

Two time periods were selected for sampling: between 1-31 May 2024 and 17 September – 17 October 2024.

The first sampling period (S1) during May 2024 was selected as it was approximately six months prior to the local council elections in Victoria, allowing coders to collect data on local government reporting when councils are functioning as usual. This period was selected rather than April 2024 as the latter included both Victorian school holidays and the Easter public holidays, both of which were viewed as having the potential to disrupt usual news production.

The second period (S2), over September and October 2024, was selected to allow coders to collect data during an election period. As the local council elections in Victoria were held by post, there was no single ‘election day’. Instead, the dates of the caretaker period were used. Caretaker period is a set of special arrangements defined in the Local Government Act to ensure that council activities do not interfere with the election process – in particular, caretaker period prevents the production of material that may affect voting, including press releases. Caretaker period commenced on the last day on which nominations for candidature were received (September 17), and ended on the day that voting closed (October 25).

Caretaker period provided dates which could be used to establish sample period in the absence of a single election day. By limiting council activities, caretaker period also provided an opportunity to assess what would occur when access to media releases for local news outlets was greatly diminished during a period in which attention to local government would likely be higher. A sample end date of October 17 was selected for consistency between the samples.

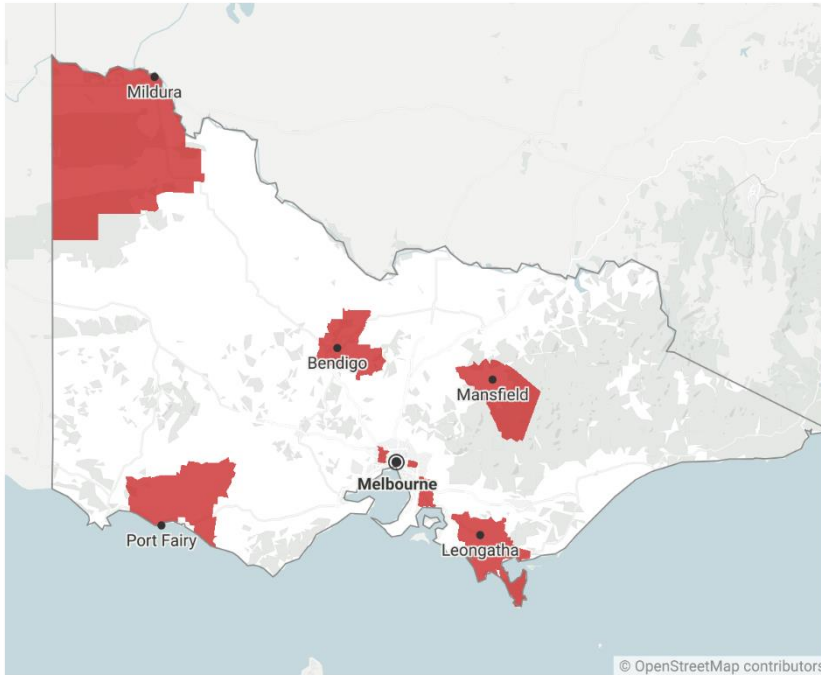
##### 3.1.2 Geography

Nine local government areas across Victoria were selected for the sample. These local government areas all held council elections in October 2024.

Local government area	Economic region	Remoteness
City of Brimbank	Greater Melbourne	Major Cities
City of Greater Bendigo	Loddon Mallee	Inner regional
City of Casey	Greater Melbourne	Major Cities
Shire of Mansfield	Hume	Outer regional
Rural City of Mildura	Loddon Mallee	Outer regional
Shire of Moyne	Barwon South West	Inner regional
Shire of South Gippsland	Gippsland	Inner regional
City of Whitehorse	Greater Melbourne	Major Cities
City of Yarra	Greater Melbourne	Major Cities

Table 1: Local government areas sampled, their region, and their remoteness.

This set of local government areas covers each of the economic regions of Victoria except Grampians, as well as each of the Australian Bureau of Statistics remoteness areas present in the state.



### 3.1.3 News sources

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

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 corpus was assembled through directly accessing the digital or digital print editions of the news sources.

Articles were coded if they were about local government. For metropolitan - scale publications (Herald Sun and The Age), articles were only coded if they were about at least one of the nine local governments included in the sample. For all other outlets, articles were coded if they were about any local government, even if they were not one of the nine local governments included in the sample.

From this set, 28 print and digital news outlets were identified. Coders were allocated local government areas and assessed every outlet identified as covering that area.

#	Outlet	Type	Council	Type
1	Bendigo Advertiser	Major	Bendigo	Regional
2	The Bendigo News	Major	Bendigo	Regional
3	Bendigo Times	Independent	Bendigo	Regional
4	Mclvor Times	Independent	Bendigo	Regional
5	Brimbank & North West Star Weekly	Independent	Brimbank	Metropolitan
6	The Local Paper (North-West)	Independent	Brimbank	Metropolitan
7	The Westsider	Independent	Brimbank	Metropolitan
8	Berwick Star News	Independent	Casey	Metropolitan
9	Cranbourne Star News	Independent	Casey	Metropolitan
10	Endeavour Hills Hallam Doveton Star Journal	Independent	Casey	Metropolitan
11	Leader South East	Major	Casey	Metropolitan
12	The Local Paper (Peninsula-Frankston-Greater Dandenong)	Independent	Casey	Metropolitan
13	Mansfield Courier	Independent	Mansfield	Regional
14	The Mildura News	Major	Mildura	Regional
15	Sunraysia Daily	Independent	Mildura	Regional
16	Mortlake Dispatch	Independent	Moyne	Regional
17	The Standard (Warrnambool)	Major	Moyne	Regional
18	The Bridge	Independent	South Gippsland	Regional
19	South Gippsland Sentinel-Times	Independent	South Gippsland	Regional

20	South Gippsland Voices	Independent	South Gippsland	Regional
21	Eastsider News	Independent	Whitehorse	Metropolitan
22	Leader East	Major	Whitehorse	Metropolitan
23	The Local Paper (Eastern Suburbs)	Independent	Whitehorse	Metropolitan
24	The Local Paper (Southern Cross Weekly)	Independent	Yarra	Metropolitan
25	The Melbourne City News	Major	Yarra	Metropolitan
26	The Rotunda	Independent	Yarra	Metropolitan
27	Herald Sun	Major	-	-
28	The Age	Major	-	-

Table 2: News outlets within the sample, their operating entities, the local government areas they cover, and the total number of articles assessed.

### 3.1.4 Coding

PIJI 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 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.

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

- Whether there is a media release associated with this news story, whether or not the story itself is based on that release.
- If so, the proportion of the story which is similar to the identified media release.
- Whether the article quotes current councillors, mayors or candidates for council elections, identified from a prefilled list of current councillors and prospective candidates.
- The local government that the story relates to, meaning the local government(s) which are the subject of the story, not the locations of the story itself.
- Whether the article was a syndicated piece, and if so, the source where it was syndicated from.

In addition to coding stories, PIJI coded media releases that were identified as being associated with news stories that were coded. In addition to descriptive details about the media releases, such as the date a media release was published, and the title of the media release, coders assessed the articles for the following content variables:

- The source of the media release, meaning the entity, business, group, individual or other which produced the press release.
- The local government that the media release relates to, meaning the local government(s) which are the subject of the media release, not the locations of the media release itself.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Type of content

Coders categorised each item into one of news, opinion, audience, or other.

News content includes both clear examples of journalism, such as reports and investigations; as well as content that is presented as news but which may not be journalism, such as media releases or community contributions. Opinion content includes editorials and opinion pieces, analysis, and reviews. Audience content was content which was not presented as news and which was clearly sourced from the audience – in practice, this meant letters to the editor. This last category was captured but excluded from assessment due to difficulty assembling a reliable corpus across all sources. The ‘Other’ category captured content which did not appear as either News, Opinion or Audience.

	S1		S2	
	n	%	n	%
News	430	96	578	95
Opinion	14	3	31	5
Other	2	< 1	1	< 1
Total	446	100	610	100

Table 3: Type of content across both sample periods.

The overwhelming majority of content assessed – greater than 95 per cent – in both periods was ‘News’ (Table 4). This was true when splitting the sample between metropolitan and regional areas, and when looking at major media outlets compared to independent. There was little to no evidence of non-news content related to local government at almost every outlet in both sample period.

There are three exceptions to this general finding: South Gippsland Voices (South Gippsland), Eastsider News (Whitehorse) and The Rotunda (Yarra), each of which published a large proportion of opinion content compared to news in at least one period.

Across every category we also observed an increase in news stories about local government between the two periods. Overall, we recorded 446 items in S1 and 610 in S2, though this aggregate was spread differently.

Metropolitan news increased 60 per cent from 204 to 327 stories while regional news increased a more modest 11 per cent, from 226 to 251 (Table 4). Opinion coverage more than doubled in both city (100 per cent increase) and regional (143 per cent) outlets, though this reflects an increase from a low base.

Major media companies significantly increased their coverage of local government (Table 5) during the council election period, more than doubling their stories (from 46 to 101, 120 per cent increase) in the September-October sample. Independent media saw a more modest increase in news coverage of 24 per cent, though this should be understood against the comparably high level of coverage of council issues even outside of the election context among independent media.

The proportion of opinion pieces in independent media was broadly in line with the overall story: 82 per cent of all articles in S2 were in independent press, and 87 per cent of opinion pieces.

	S1				S2			
	Metropolitan		Regional		Metropolitan		Regional	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
News	204	46	226	51	327	54	251	41
Opinion	7	2	7	2	14	2	17	3
Other	1	< 1	1	< 1	0	0	1	< 1
Total	212	48	234	52	341	56	269	44

Table 4: Type of content across both sample periods, divided between metropolitan and regional local government areas.

	S1				S2			
	Major		Independent		Major		Independent	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
News	46	10	384	86	101	17	477	78
Opinion	0	0	14	3	4	1	27	4
Other	0	0	2	< 1	0	0	1	< 1
Total	46	10	400	90	105	17	505	83

Table 5: Type of content across both sample periods, divided between major and independent news outlets.

## 4.2 Content source

Every item was then assessed to identify whether there was an associated media release, whether or not the article itself was based on that release. An associated media release is one that has been produced within a few weeks prior to the news story; substantially concerns the same issue(s) as the news story; and involves at least one stakeholder in the news story. This assessment was conducted through three methods:

1. Searching key phrases from the item using Google, in order to identify other uses of that phrase. Key phrases were typically direct quotes from sources, but in some cases other copy that used an unusual or specific string of words was used.
2. Each coder additionally monitored the relevant part of the local government website where news releases were published. Where key phrases did not turn up a result, this step helped to identify whether there may nevertheless have been a release on the same issue.
3. Where necessary, direct contact was made with local government communications staff in order to access releases not otherwise available publicly.

Where a coder suspected a media release informed the content but could not locate the exact release, it was coded as 'No'. A database of media releases used in coverage was also prepared by the team, with each story coded linked to the relevant release.

This initial assessment was only whether there was a media release published substantially on the same topic as the coverage. The degree of similarity between the two is covered in the next set of results.

	S1		S2	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	244	55	104	17
No	202	45	506	83
Total	446	100	610	100

Table 6: Content associated with media releases across both sample periods.

We found a significant difference between the two periods on this initial assessment (Table 6). In S1, we identified a media release in more than half of all articles assessed (244 of 446, 55 per cent). After the caretaker period commenced with the beginning of S2, production of releases plummeted: only 17 per cent of articles were associated with a release in S2.

Dividing these results between metropolitan and regional areas (Table 7) suggests that media releases are most commonly (both overall and as a proportion of coverage) associated with metropolitan news stories in S1. Sixty-one per cent of metropolitan stories in this period, or 29 per cent of all stories, had an associated release. In regional areas in this period we identified a near-even split of 49 per cent stories with a release, 51 per cent without. By contrast, though both metropolitan and regional areas reflected the decline in associated releases in S2, the fall-off was much larger in the cities, which dropped from 61 per cent in S1 to only 13 per cent in S2, with 87 per cent of stories not having a clear link.

Independent media outlets were considerably more likely to have a media release associated with their coverage than major media companies in both sample periods. Among this latter category we identified

media releases in 56 per cent in S1 and 20 per cent of stories in S2, compared to 31 per cent and three per cent for major media companies.

	S1				S2			
	Metropolitan		Regional		Metropolitan		Regional	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	129	29	115	26	45	7	59	10
No	83	19	119	27	296	49	210	34
Total	212	48	234	52	341	56	269	44

Table 7: Content associated with media releases across both sample periods, divided between metropolitan and regional local government areas.

	S1				S2			
	Major		Independent		Major		Independent	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	18	4	226	51	3	< 1	101	17
No	28	6	174	39	102	17	404	66
Total	46	10	400	90	105	17	505	83

Table 8: Content associated with media releases across both sample periods, divided between major and independent news outlets.

Where a media release was identified as being associated with a story, the news article was then coded for its similarity with the release. Four options were available for coders:

- ‘Identical’ means that the story is the same as the identified media release, with any identified changes typically connected to the relationship between the content and the publisher (from ‘Our priority’ in a release to ‘Council’s priority’ in a news story) or correcting for time delay (‘Last night’ to ‘Last week’).
- ‘Rewrite, no reporting’ means all the details within the story are from the media release, but the release has been at least partially rewritten. Most often this meant that the lead was rewritten, but in some cases the entire story is restructured. The story may exclude details and still fit within this category, but if it adds any details not from the release, it is coded to ‘Additional reporting’.
- ‘Additional reporting’ means that part of the story appears to be based on the media release, but there is evidence that further reporting has been conducted. This will typically mean the inclusion of information not included within the media release, such as broader context, a counterpoint to information, or quotes from other sources. In some cases, the media release was only be used for quotes from relevant councillors, with other details entirely original.
- ‘Same topic only’ means that there is a media release related to the story, but there is no evidence in what was published that it has been used. The journalist may have used the release as a starting point for reporting, or not been aware of it at all – either way, the story suggests substantial original work by the reporter.

The results of this assessment are presented below.

	S1		S2	
	n	%	n	%
Identical	58	13	23	4
Rewrite, no reporting	116	26	40	6
Additional reporting	56	13	37	6
Same topic only	14	3	4	1
Subtotal	244	55	104	17
No release	202	45	506	83
Total	446	100	610	100

Table 9: Level of similarity between news stories and associated media releases across both sample periods.

This research found heavy use of media releases by the outlets studied (Table 9). Of the subset of news stories in S1 with an associated media release (244, 55 per cent) coders assessed that almost half of these (116, 48 per cent; 26 per cent of all stories in S1) were rewritten PR materials with no evidence of original reporting. Almost another quarter of this subset (58 stories, 24 per cent; 13 per cent of all in S1) were mostly or entirely identical to the media release. Nearly the same number of stories (56 stories, 23 per cent; 13 per cent of all in S1) showed evidence of additional reporting by the journalist, and we found few examples (14 stories, six per cent) where there was no evidence of a media release’s impact on a final story.

With the end of most media release production during the caretaker period, the overall numbers changed significantly, as did the trend within the subsets. In S2, the largest category of similarity was still ‘Rewrite, no reporting’, but it fell ten percentage points from 48 per cent of cases to 38 per cent. The ‘Identical’ category also saw a small fall (24 per cent to 22 per cent), with the difference largely in the number of stories that involved additional reporting, which saw a jump of 12 percentage points from 23 per cent to 35 per cent.

	S1				S2			
	Metropolitan		Regional		Metropolitan		Regional	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Identical	24	5	34	8	15	2	8	1
Rewrite, no reporting	74	17	42	9	18	3	22	4
Additional reporting	28	6	28	6	11	2	26	4
Same topic only	3	1	11	2	1	< 1	3	< 1
Subtotal	129	29	115	26	46	8	59	10
No release	83	19	119	27	296	48	210	34
Total	212	48	234	52	341	56	269	44

Table 10: Level of similarity between news stories and associated media releases across both sample periods, divided between metropolitan and regional local government areas.

The way that media releases were used also differed between metropolitan and regional areas (Table 10). Metropolitan news outlets were found to rewrite press releases to a greater degree than regional outlets, (57 per cent to 37 per cent), while regional outlets were more likely to run press releases verbatim as editorial copy than city newsrooms (30 per cent to 19 per cent). Both conducted original reporting at a similar rate (21 per cent of metropolitan stories, 24 per cent of regional), and media releases were identified but apparently not used more often in regional areas (10 per cent) than city (two per cent).

The overall proportion of stories with associated media releases dropped considerably in S2; in every category there were fewer stories identified despite an overall increase in the number of stories published. The trends in the second period should be understood with that context.

The growth in ‘additional reporting’ identified in S2 was driven by regional newsrooms, this data suggests, with a 20 percentage point jump from 24 to 44 per cent in the second period. This came particularly at the expense of running the releases as-is, which saw a 16 percentage point drop in the second period, from 30 to 14 per cent of stories. The proportion of rewritten releases remained consistent at 37 per cent. By contrast, identical stories were a greater share in metropolitan outlets, climbing from 19 per cent in S1 to 32 per cent in S2. Rewriting declined from 57 to 39 per cent, while additional reporting remained relatively stable at 23 per cent of metropolitan stories.

Finally, the use of press releases as editorial copy was found to be predominantly a problem at independent newsrooms, with few examples among major newsrooms (Table 11). Within the associated releases subset in S1 a quarter of independent newsroom stories were found to be identical to press releases and another 47 per cent rewritten releases. In 23 per cent of cases we identified additional reporting.

Independent newsroom use of press releases in S2 was consistent with overall findings, with a significant decline from 51 per cent of stories having a release down to 17 per cent in S2. The ways that releases were used also changed in this period, with shifts away from rewriting releases (47 per cent down to 38 per cent)

and running them without changes (25 per cent to 23 per cent) toward conducting additional reporting (23 per cent to 35 per cent).

	S1				S2			
	Major		Independent		Major		Independent	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Identical	1	< 1	57	13	0	0	23	4
Rewrite, no reporting	9	2	107	24	1	< 1	39	6
Additional reporting	4	1	52	12	1	< 1	36	6
Same topic only	4	1	10	2	1	< 1	3	1
Subtotal	18	4	226	51	3	< 1	101	17
No release	28	6	174	39	102	17	404	66
Total	46	10	400	90	105	17	505	83

Table 11: Level of similarity between news stories and associated media releases across both sample periods, divided between major and independent news outlets.

### 4.3 Content subject

Coders also assessed the subjects of each story. Each news article could be allocated to up to eight subjects from a list of 113 options. These subjects have been consolidated into six categories – community, council operations, environment & disaster, election, infrastructure and services – reflecting a crossover between the critical information needs framework and PIJ’s definition of public interest journalism.

As stories could be allocated to more than one subject, the total of these categories is higher than the overall number of stories.

	S1		S2	
	n	%	n	%
Community	88	20	51	8
Council operations	247	55	131	21
Environment and disaster	60	13	30	5
Election	21	5	410	67
Infrastructure	236	53	136	22
Services	35	8	21	3

Table 12: Number of unique stories in each subject category across both sample periods, divided between major and independent news outlets.

We found high coverage of ‘Council operations and ‘Infrastructure’ in S1, with far less attention to ‘Community, ‘Environment’ and ‘Services’. These results remained consistent in S2, though with a predictable surge in ‘Election’ related reporting and corresponding drop off in other topics.

The ‘Council operations’ category reflects the regular operations of council, including meetings, budget expenditure and funding initiatives, fines, fees and rates.

This was the largest subject of coverage overall in S1, the largest at regional outlets, and the largest at independent outlets. Within this category, policy and programs received by far the most coverage (120 stories), likely due to this subject reflecting council expenditure and having strong crossover with other categories such as infrastructure and services provision. A quarter of all stories in this category related to council meetings (62), and 17 per cent the budget. Very few stories were recorded about rates (11) or fines and fees (four).

Alongside the decrease in overall coverage in S2 we observed a change in the subjects being reported, likely reflecting the shift in council activities during caretaker period. As many council activities (or communications about them) were furloughed for the duration of the election, the proportion of stories related to policy and programs fell from half to 39 per cent, while the proportion of stories related to council meetings increased to 37 per cent. Budget-related stories fell to 12 per cent, in contrast to a hypothesis that candidates would

campaign on improving the budget position of local government and therefore there would be an increase in these stories.

'Infrastructure' stories cover the built environment, including across transport (road, rail, air), community facilities such as sports clubs and parks, energy, water and waste, as well as planning-related topics such as development approvals and zoning.

The highest proportion of stories in this category in both sample periods were on community facilities, particularly grants for local sports clubs, accounting for 42 per cent of 'Infrastructure' stories in S1 (100 stories) and 31 per cent in S2 (42). In S1 this was followed by roads, particularly a widely expressed view about the poor state of road maintenance (48), housing and zoning stories at similar levels (32 and 31), and street beautification (27). In S2 the same pattern was observed: facilities (48 stories), road (29), housing (18), zoning (15) and beautification (14), though at much lower proportions of overall coverage.

Predictably in S2, the 'Election' category was by far the largest set, with 67 per cent of stories in some way connected to it. This category includes specific subjects for candidates, campaign events and promises, polling and results, as well as apolitical information articles on how to participate in the election.

The largest subset of stories was on individual candidates (314 stories), accounting for 77 per cent of 'Election' stories and more than half of all stories in S2. This coverage was mainly profiles of candidates, which were widespread throughout the sample across all regions and outlet types. This was followed by promises (252 stories), meaning the priorities that a candidate declared they would take into their position on council. Many stories were simultaneously 'candidate' and 'promise' stories; 61 per cent of 'Election' stories concerned a promise. Information stories were third, with 106 stories (26 per cent). These stories were typically about how to vote, updates on the arrivals of ballot packs and reminders on deadlines. There was strong use of media releases in this subset – a single press release tracking the return of ballots from the Victorian Electoral Commission was identified among most of the outlets sampled.

There was strong 'Election' coverage across both metropolitan and regional areas, and in both major and independent media. Indeed, the number of stories about council elections by major outlets in S2 (80) is greater than the overall increase from S1 (46 to 105, difference of 59), suggesting that these outlets more than doubled their local government coverage.

	S1				S2			
	Metropolitan		Regional		Metropolitan		Regional	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Community	39	9	49	11	21	3	30	5
Council operations	105	24	142	32	38	6	93	15
Environment and disaster	38	9	22	5	8	1	22	4
Election	15	3	6	1	275	45	135	22
Infrastructure	117	26	119	27	55	9	81	13
Services	17	4	18	4	6	1	15	2

Table 13: Number of unique stories in each category across both sample periods, divided between major and independent news outlets.

	S1				S2			
	Major		Independent		Major		Independent	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Community	8	2	80	18	7	1	44	7
Council operations	24	5	223	50	18	3	113	19
Environment and disaster	1	< 1	59	13	7	1	23	4
Election	0	0	21	5	80	13	330	54
Infrastructure	26	6	210	47	28	5	108	18
Services	6	1	29	7	6	1	15	2

Table 14: Number of unique stories in each category across both sample periods, divided between major and independent news outlets.

## 4.4 Individual council case studies

### 4.4.1 City of Greater Bendigo

The City of Greater Bendigo is an inner regional local government area located in central Victoria administratively centred around the city of Bendigo.

Three print news outlets and one digital news outlet were identified as covering the City of Greater Bendigo and assessed: Australian Community Media’s daily Bendigo Advertiser, News Corp’s The Bendigo News website, and Times News Group’s two weekly newspapers, Bendigo Times and Mclvor Times.

Outlet	S1					S2				
	News		Opinion/other		Total	News		Opinion/other		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
Bendigo Advertiser	27	100	0	0	27	24	92	2	8	26
The Bendigo News	3	100	0	0	3	2	100	0	0	2
Bendigo Times	29	100	0	0	29	23	96	1	4	24
Mclvor Times	18	100	0	0	18	11	92	1	8	12
The Age	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Herald Sun	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>65</b>

Table 15: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

Local government reporting was fairly consistent between non-election and election periods, however, S2 saw less articles coded (65) compared to 77 articles in S1. All outlets, perhaps with the exception of Mclvor Times, were found to have little variation in the volume of articles published about local government between the two sampling periods. The election period saw a very small number of opinion articles published whereas only news articles were found in the non-election period.

Outlets in this sample demonstrated strong localism for the City of Greater Bendigo in S1. Of 77 stories related to local government published in S1, 70 across all outlets were about Bendigo City Council. Most of these (29 stories) were published by Bendigo Times, followed by Bendigo Advertiser (20) and Mclvor Times (18), although every article except two were internally syndicated from Bendigo Times. The other three articles were published by The Bendigo News.

Between the Advertiser, Bendigo Times and Mclvor Times (although republished from Bendigo Times), original coverage of Bendigo City Council included decisions made at council meetings, such as council’s rejection of a housing development and a councillor’s call to end the use of fireworks, as well as projects such as the conversion of a heritage site into a childcare centre. These outlets also reported on council’s adoption of a new budget, including potential rate rises, as did The Bendigo News.

Just over half of articles identified in the first sampling period were associated with a media release (41 of 70). Of these, most were rewritten from an identified media release with no additional reporting. Of Bendigo Times’ 29 identified articles, 20 were connected to a media release. The Advertiser used media releases less frequently with 7 of 20 identified articles about Bendigo Council found to be associated with a media release. Council press releases that were used by both outlets including the closure of a bridge while undergoing repairs, the installation of lights at a park, and the launch of an e-scooter trial.

The Advertiser, Bendigo Times and The Bendigo News all published an article on the same topic as a council press release but with no apparent use of content, which was council’s release of draft strategies to manage future growth. This was the News’ only article connected to a media release.

Of Mclvor Times’ two articles not syndicated from Bendigo Times, both were rewrites of media releases about the town of Heathcote.

Outlets continued to demonstrate strong localism for the City of Greater Bendigo in S2. Of 65 stories related to local government published in S1, 61 across all outlets were specifically about Bendigo City Council. Most of these stories were published either by Bendigo Advertiser (25) or Bendigo Times (23). Although 11 articles published by Mclvor Times were about Bendigo City Council, all except one were internally syndicated from Bendigo Times. One article was published by The Bendigo News, while the Herald Sun also mentioned Bendigo City Council in one article.

Unlike results from other case studies, we found that the council election was not the focus local government coverage in the second sampling period – of 60 articles about Bendigo Council, just 18 were about the election. Looking at the breakdown of reporting by individual outlets, The Advertiser lead coverage of the Bendigo Council elections (14 of 25 stories). This included reports on election results where candidates ran unopposed and were therefore elected, including an opinion piece on how democratic it is to have candidates elected by default without the need for ratepayers to vote. This outlet also conducted detailed interviews with candidates, wrote about vandalism of election signs, and discussed concerns such as the potential gender imbalance among elected councillors.

Additionally, the single articles from Herald Sun and The Bendigo News listed candidates for the entire state and for Bendigo City Council respectively, neither of which were connected to media releases.

On the other hand, only one of Bendigo Time’s 23 articles was about the Bendigo Council elections, a ‘meet the candidates’ style article presenting questionnaire responses from candidates. Interestingly given the caretaker period and limits on council communications, Bendigo Times continued using council press releases throughout the election period, with 19 articles found to have been rewritten, used with additional reporting, or be of the same topic as media releases. Stories earlier in the second sample period continued to provide updates from council meetings, such as the decision to keep fireworks celebrations, the postponement of a decision on a future organic waste processing facility, and the adoption and policies on future growth, public asset management, and heritage strategy. Later in the sampling period, the Times shared announcements from the City of Greater Bendigo that were far more community-focussed, such as a call for nominations for ‘citizen of the year’ awards, festivals for seniors and children, and a reminder to prepare properties for the upcoming bushfire season.

Similarly, eight of 11 articles published by Mclvor Times were associated with media releases, however, almost all (10 of 11) were syndicated from Bendigo Times. This outlet published one original article, which could not be connected to a media release, and was the only article about the election, providing information on the candidates running for Bendigo Council and nearby Mitchell Shire.

Overall, half of articles about Bendigo City Council (30 of 60) were associated with a media release, either as rewrites or with some additional reporting. Only three of these were published by The Advertiser.

Results suggest outlets demonstrated strong localism for the City of Greater Bendigo. Unlike results from other case studies, the council election was not the overall focus local government coverage in the second sampling period, though this varied across outlets. We found that the Bendigo Times continued its use of media releases from the first sampling period into the election period despite restrictions around the content that councils can share during this time. Also of note, S2 saw less local government reporting compared to the first sampling period, whereas results from other case studies tend to show an increase in reporting during the election period.

#### 4.4.2 City of Brimbank

The City of Brimbank is located in the western suburbs of Melbourne’s metropolitan area. Since February 2024, municipal monitors have been working with Brimbank City Council and will remain in place until December 2024, after the election. Monitors are appointed by the Victorian State Government to observe and help improve council’s governance and performance.

Three print news outlets were identified as covering the City of Brimbank and assessed: Brimbank & North West Star Weekly, The Local Paper (North-West edition), also published weekly, and The Westsider, published once a month. The Age published three articles about the City of Brimbank and Herald Sun published one in S2.

Outlet	S1					S2				
	News		Opinion/other		Total	News		Opinion/other		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
Brimbank & North West Star Weekly	18	100	0	0	18	7	100	0	0	7
The Local Paper (North-West)	21	100	0	0	21	18	100	0	0	18
The Westsider	3	100	0	0	3	82	99	1	1	83
The Age	0	0	0	0	0	3	100	0	0	3
Herald Sun	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>112</b>

Table 16: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

Of 42 stories related to local government published in S1, just under half (20) across all outlets were specifically about Brimbank City Council. Most of these (16 stories) were published by Brimbank & North West Star Weekly, and two each by The Local Paper and The Westsider.

Original coverage by Star Weekly included reports of council meetings where a proposal for accessible parking was rejected, a housing development was approved, as was a plan for an urban parkland. Both identified articles by The Westsider were not associated with media releases. One article was a detailed summary of recent council meetings, while the other profiled a member of the community who volunteers to clean up litter and has been in contact with council.

Seven of 16 stories identified from Star Weekly in S1 were connected to a media release, with and without additional reporting. These stories were presented as editorial content and were seeking engagement with council plans and programs, such as a community grants opening for applications, a survey asking residents about their favourite places in Brimbank, and a plan to guide the development of a street into a community-focused commercial hub.

Star Weekly and The Local Paper rewrote two media releases announcing the opening of facility upgrades to a reserve and a future housing plan. These two articles by The Local Paper represented this outlet's entire output in S1 specific to Brimbank. Beyond Brimbank, this outlet covered other councils across Melbourne's north-west, and continued its use of media releases, with 19 of its 21 articles found to be associated with a media release.

The volume of coverage increased significantly in the second period compared to the non-election period, with a total of 112 articles coded in the second sampling period – of which 41 were about Brimbank City Council. This increase in output was largely driven by one outlet, The Westsider, which published a total 83 news articles in October 2024. Additionally, this trend was not true at all outlets, with Brimbank & North West Star Weekly publishing less local government articles specific to Brimbank in the election period.

Of 41 stories about Brimbank City Council in S2, 27 of these were published by The Westsider, five each by Star Weekly and The Local Paper, three by The Age and the other one by the Herald Sun. Most articles published by The Westsider were candidate profiles published in partnership with first year RMIT journalism students who contacted all candidates across four councils, including Brimbank, with a questionnaire as part of their assessment. Brimbank was mentioned in a Herald Sun article listing every candidate in Victoria, while The Age surveyed candidates about their alliances to political parties and priorities if elected.

In each weekly edition, The Local Paper included an aggregated list of councillor nominees for every council in metropolitan Melbourne, constituting all identified articles published by this outlet in the second sampling

period. Original coverage by Brimbank & North West Star Weekly included some election reporting, such as an article about vandalism of a candidate’s campaign signs.

Almost no stories were dependent on media releases in S2 – of 41 stories about Brimbank City Council, only three were connected to releases, all published by Star Weekly with additional reporting. Articles included one about the commencement of a train station rebuild, funding from the Australian Renewable Energy Agency to assist local councils transition to electric vehicles, and a VEC announcement about the arrival of election ballots to households.

Results from Brimbank City Council suggest all outlets covered broader geographical areas beyond the City of Brimbank, particularly the north-western suburbs of Melbourne. Significant original coverage by Brimbank & North West Star Weekly in S1 provided readers with recounts of council meetings, as did original coverage by The Westsider in S2 informing voters of candidate views and promises. Of the few articles published by The Local Paper about Brimbank City Council, we found little original reporting, either through undisclosed use of media releases with no additional reporting, or through aggregated lists of council nominees for local council in Melbourne, republished across its network of various editions across Greater Melbourne

### 4.4.3 City of Casey

Casey, located in Melbourne’s south east, is Victoria’s most populous local government area, with major hubs including council seat Narre Warren, Berwick, Cranbourne, Clyde, and Endeavour Hills. In February 2020, the council was sacked by the Victorian Government due to governance failures and was operated by administrators from that point until the October 2024 election.

Four local print news outlets and one digital news outlet were assessed: The Local Paper (Peninsula-Frankston-Greater Dandenong edition), News Corp’s digital community website Leader South East, and three weekly Star News Group papers: the Endeavour Hills Hallam Doveton Star Journal, the Cranbourne Star News, and the Berwick Star News. In addition, the Herald Sun and The Age were assessed.

Outlet	S1					S2				
	News		Opinion/other		Total	News		Opinion/other		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
Berwick Star News	22	100	0	0	22	27	100	0	0	27
Cranbourne Star News	28	100	0	0	28	29	100	0	0	29
Endeavour Hills Star Journal	22	100	0	0	22	36	100	0	0	36
Leader South East	0	0	0	0	0	6	100	0	0	6
The Local Paper (P-F-G)	18	100	0	0	18	15	100	0	0	15
The Age	1	100	0	0	1	3	100	0	0	3
Herald Sun	0	0	0	0	0	1	50	1	50	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>118</b>

Table 17: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

Overall, most local government stories published in the non-election sampling period were about Casey City Council (60 of 91). This was led by Cranbourne Star News, of which 26 of 28 stories were local to Casey City Council. Although 19 of 22 articles by Berwick Star News were about Casey City Council, only four were not internally syndicated. Star News Group’s third newspaper covering this local government area, the Endeavour Hills Hallam Doveton Star Journal, focussed less on Casey (9 of 22), most of which was also internally syndicated from Berwick or Cranbourne Star News. Additionally, of the 18 articles by The Local Paper, five were about Casey City Council. Neither New Corp’s Herald Sun nor Leader South East published any articles about Casey City Council in the first sampling period.

Articles from Berwick Star News and Cranbourne Star News with no identified media release covered policies such as the end to free extra rubbish bins for large households, and infrastructure projects such as the delays

with the construction of a roundabout and a planning application to convert a building into a childcare centre. Notably, a handful of articles between these two outlets (5) were about the upcoming local council elections, introducing candidates who are set to be running for Casey City Council in October 2024.

Of 60 stories identified, 26 were connected to a media release, though the use of media releases differed between outlets. The Local Paper relied heavily on media releases for its coverage of Brimbank City Council, with four of five articles identical or near identical to an identified media release. A media release about the funding for a dog park was reported on by the Journal. Another media release about the opening of an upgraded reserve was also used by Cranbourne Star News with additional reporting, though this only constituted one of the 10 articles associated with a media release out of a total 26 articles by this outlet. The Age’s single article was also associated with a media release, however, no evidence of its use beyond being about the same topic, a plan to adapt to sea level rise, was found. This media release was also used by Cranbourne Star News as a starting point for additional reporting.

Of 118 stories related to local government published in S2, 74 across all outlets were about Casey City Council. The election was the main focus of local government reporting by far during the council election period (65 of 74 articles).

Star News Group newspapers provided the highest volume of election coverage - Cranbourne Star News published 27 articles about Casey, Berwick Star News published 18, followed by 3 from the Journal, excluding internally syndicated duplicates between these three outlets. Election coverage from these outlets mostly featured candidates running for election and their promises if elected, with a mix of articles focussed on one candidate or multiple candidates’ views on a particular topic.

The Age, Herald Sun, and Leader South East also presented ‘meet the candidate’ style articles. Herald Sun was the only outlet to publish an opinion piece mentioning Casey City Council across both sampling periods, covering topics from state government politics to spelling errors in the names of candidates on how-to-vote cards for Casey.

In each weekly edition, The Local Paper included a list of nominees across metropolitan Melbourne - all five identified articles published by this outlet in the second sampling period were of this type.

Almost no stories were dependent on media releases in S2 – of 74 stories about Casey City Council, only two were connected to a media release, an article published by Cranbourne Star News and duplicated in Berwick Star News. It involved additional original reporting based on a council press release announcing the adoption of a budget for 2024/25.

Results suggest mixed use of media releases by different outlets – from heavy undisclosed use of media releases with little original reporting by The Local Paper, to moderate use with some additional reporting by Cranbourne Star News in the first sampling period. Election coverage dominated local government reporting in S2, focussing on candidate profiles and election promises with varying detail – from detailed reports on the campaigns of Casey City Council candidates by Star News Group newspapers, to lists of candidates across Victoria and their survey responses by the metropolitan-scale newspapers.

#### 4.4.4 Shire of Mansfield

The Shire of Mansfield is an outer regional local government area located in north-east Victoria. The Shire is administratively centred around the town of Mansfield. The alpine region also supports the town of Mount Buller, a large ski resort.

One print news outlet was identified as covering the Shire of Mansfield and assessed: Mansfield Courier, an independent weekly newspaper published by North East Media.

	S1	S2
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Outlet	News		Opinion/other		Total	News		Opinion/other		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
Mansfield Courier	20	95	1	5	21	26	93	2	7	28
The Age	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Herald Sun	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>29</b>

Table 18: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

All 21 stories related to local government published in S1 were specifically about the Shire of Mansfield and published by Mansfield Courier.

Original coverage by this outlet included updates from council meetings, such as an amendment to reduce harsh pruning of nature strip trees and an approval for a lavender farm planning permit. All articles except one quoted councillors, four of which quoted Mayor Stephen Rabie. The single opinion piece was also written by the mayor.

However, the majority of articles published by the Courier were associated with media releases (15 of 21). Most appeared to be identical or near identical to identified media releases, while some involved additional original reporting by journalists. Most were related to policy or infrastructure - council released a proposed budget seeking feedback, and provided updates on the redevelopment of a kindergarten, the construction of a shared walkway, and the completion of road upgrades. 12 of these articles quoted Mayor Stephen Rabie.

Slightly more articles about local government were published in the election period compared to the non-election period, with a total of 29 articles coded in S2. Again, all were about Mansfield Shire Council, 28 of which were published by the Courier. A single story by Herald Sun mentioned Mansfield, along with election candidates running in every council across the state.

In S2, the Courier continued its local government reporting of policy, such as council's endorsement of a tourism plan, and updates on works such as concrete path renewal and road sealing. The Mansfield Shire Council elections were a focus of 13 of 28 stories, largely featuring candidates and their visions for council. A candidate forum for the public as reported on, as was general information such as a reminder about council's caretaker period in the lead up to the election.

Of 28 articles identified from Mansfield Courier, six were related to a media release, one of which was an identical reprint of a council press release announcing that nominations for 'citizen of the year' awards are open. The remaining articles used media releases in some way to communicate that ballot packs have been mailed to voters, funding for disaster recovery to assist storm-impacted communities, and delays to the construction of a heavy vehicle bypass. Overall, less articles contained quotes from councillors or candidates (13 in S2 compared to 17 in S1), with less emphasis on the current mayor, given the interviews conducted with other candidates.

Results demonstrate strong and consistent localism for Mansfield Shire from the Courier. The election period saw less reliance on council press releases compared to the first sampling period, with original reporting of candidates running for council and outcomes of council meetings. This outlet heavily quoted the current mayor in S1, often reflecting the inclusion of quotes from the mayor in the associated media releases, which reduced during the caretaker period.

#### 4.4.5 Rural City of Mildura

The Rural City of Mildura is an outer regional local government area located in north-west Victoria. It is administratively centred around the city of Mildura, located on the Murray River and New South Wales border.

One print news outlet and one digital news outlet were identified as covering the Rural City of Mildura and assessed: an independent newspaper, the Sunraysia Daily, and News Corp's hyperlocal The Mildura News.

Herald Sun produced one article mentioning Mildura, with no coverage from the Age in either sampling period.

Outlet	S1					S2				
	News		Opinion/other		Total	News		Opinion/other		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
The Mildura News	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
Sunraysia Daily	43	98	1	2	44	30	100	0	0	30
The Age	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Herald Sun	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>32</b>

Table 19: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

Similarly to the Bendigo case study, local government reporting was fairly consistent between non-election and election periods - S2 saw less articles coded (32) compared to 44 articles in S1. One opinion or other content was found in the first sampling period.

Of 44 articles related to local government published in S1, 36 were specifically about the Rural City of Mildura.

As we have also found in previous sampling as part of the Australian News Sampling Project, Sunraysia Daily covers neighbouring local government areas such as the Rural City of Swan Hill, as well as area across the border in New South Wales – Wentworth and Balranald.

Original coverage by Sunraysia Daily included community and council reactions to events such as the closure of a budget airline company, and the state and federal government budgets. The progress of council infrastructure projects, such as a new sporting precinct, was reported on throughout the first sampling period.

16 of 36 identified articles in S1 were connected to a media release. We found that most media releases appeared to be used as a starting point for additional reporting or were about the same topic as an article without any similarity in content. Only five media releases were reprinted as identical or rewritten. Sunraysia Daily published multiple articles about council-led community events celebrating National Reconciliation Week and IDAHOBIT (International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia), community grants available for community organisations, and a trial of a new speed limit. Additionally, a draft budget for Mildura Rural City Council went out for public feedback.

During the non-election period, 16 articles were found to contain quotes from councillors. Most (10) articles quoting councillors were associated with a media release and quoted either Mildura Rural City council Mayor Liam Wood, Cr Jason Modica, Cr Helen Healy, and Cr Glenn Milne. However, articles not found to be associated with a media release continued to quote the mayor and current councillors.

S2 saw less articles about local government overall, with 32 articles published – of which 22 were about Mildura. During the election period, local government reporting was heavily focused on the council elections (19 of 23 stories). There was much less overall reporting on council programs and community events compared to the non-election period. The second sampling period also saw local government reporting, albeit minimal, from News Corp’s The Mildura News and Herald Sun, which published no local government stories during S1.

Similarly to outlets sampled in other local government areas, Sunraysia Daily provided election coverage in the form of detailed candidate profiles and general promises if elected to council, usually focussing on one candidate per article. The Mildura News’ single local government article also focused on this, featuring candidates running for Mildura Rural City council who responded to the outlet’s questionnaire. A single story by Herald Sun mentioned Mildura, along with election candidates running in every council across the state. This article appeared in samples of other local government areas.

We found that the volume of articles containing quotes from councillors or candidates increased to 21 in the election period. None of these articles were found to be associated with a media release. Most of the quotes came from nonincumbent candidates running for Mildura Rural City Council.

Just one article in S2 was found to be connected to a media release – an article by Sunraysia Daily which provided additional reporting to a media release published by the VEC (not a council press release) about the commencement of voting.

Although local government reporting by Sunraysia Daily showed some use of media releases in the first sampling period, the proportion of reprinted and rewritten content was low, instead articles associated with media releases contained additional or entirely original reporting. Mildura Rural City Council was frequently reported on in the non-election period, with a slightly lower overall volume of local government reporting in S2. Election coverage drove local government reporting in the second sampling period, demonstrating this outlet’s engagement with candidates with only one article connected to a media release from the VEC with additional reporting.

#### 4.4.6 Shire of Moyne

The Shire of Moyne in south-west Victoria is administratively centred around the town of Port Fairy but with its population also spread across Koroit, Mortlake and many smaller localities across a largely rural area. The Shire surrounds the city Warrnambool, which has almost twice the population in a fraction of the space and is the economic and tourism hub of the region. Two print news outlets were identified as covering the Shire of Moyne: independent title the Mortlake Dispatch, and Australian Community Media’s daily newspaper The Warrnambool Standard. The Herald Sun published one story involving Moyne in S2.

Outlet	S1					S2				
	News		Opinion/other		Total	News		Opinion/other		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
Mortlake Dispatch	21	100	0	0	21	15	100	0	0	15
The Standard (Warrnambool)	12	100	0	0	12	40	98	1	2	41
The Age	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Herald Sun	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
Total	33	100	0	0	33	56	98	1	2	56

Table 20: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

Of 33 stories related to local government published in S1, 15 across all outlets were specifically about Moyne Shire Council. Most of these (13 stories) were published by the Dispatch, the other two by the Standard.

Original coverage by the Dispatch included an extensive article on the council’s budget, covering both the process by which it was adopted and some of the funding priorities. Another article went through the recipients of council funding for community facilities – a media release could not be identified for this story, but it seems likely that council was at least partly involved in providing this information to the paper.

Indeed, the Dispatch relied heavily on press releases for its council coverage, and frequently reprinted them verbatim. Of the 13 stories identified in S1, 11 were connected to a media release, and eight of these were identical or near identical. These stories were presented as editorial content and were almost entirely about council programs, such as a carbon offset funding stream and the development of a youth strategy with Warrnambool City Council. Both the Dispatch and the Standard republished the same release about the appointment of a new Chief Executive Officer at Moyne Shire Council. This was the Standard’s only use of a media release in S1; its only other story in this period was coverage of a court case involving the council.

Beyond Moyne, both titles covered other regional councils, particularly Warrnambool for the Standard and Corangamite Shire for the Dispatch, likely syndicated from other titles at the same publisher.

The volume of coverage increased significantly in the second period compared to the non-election period, with a total of 56 articles coded, of which 30 were about Moyne Shire Council. 20 of these were published by the Standard, nine by the Dispatch, and one by the Herald Sun.

The election drove coverage at all outlets, being a feature of 23 of 30 stories. The Standard profiled most local candidates and produced issues-based stories on candidates' positions, such as a view that Moyne residents should receive discounted power bills due to the increasing presence of offshore windfarms in their region, whether an incinerator should be built to tackle illegal rubbish dumping, and the poor state of local roads.

Both the local newspapers attended and covered a town hall event at which candidates took questions from voters, published how to vote pieces, and both produced 'farewell' pieces to the retiring mayor, Ian Smith, and other long-serving councillors. The single story from the Herald Sun was a list of names of every individual running for local government across Victoria.

Almost no stories were dependent media releases in S2 – of 30 about Moyne Shire Council, only three were connected to releases, all published by the Dispatch. None of these were assessed as being 'Identical', a significant change from the previous period. One was a rewrite of details from the media release about the council's Annual Report, the others involved additional reporting on funding for local sport groups and a release from the Victorian Electoral Commission previewing the arrival of ballots.

Results from Moyne present a mixed picture. During the election period sample, both local newspapers provided significant original coverage of the local candidates, their views, and important civic information on how to vote. However, outside of this context, the results suggest comparatively little attention to Moyne by The Standard, and very high and undisclosed use of council press releases as news content by the Mortlake Dispatch.

#### 4.4.7 Shire of South Gippsland

The Shire of South Gippsland is a local government area located south-east of Melbourne. Its council seat and largest town is Leongatha, with additional large populations in Korumburra, Mirboo North and Foster. In addition to the two metropolitan - scalepapers, three local print outlets were assessed: the South Gippsland Sentinel-Times, South Gippsland Voices and The Bridge, both published fortnightly. All are independently operated.

Outlet	S1					S2				
	News		Opinion/other		Total	News		Opinion/other		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
The Bridge	3	100	0	0	3	13	100	0	0	13
South Gippsland Sentinel-Times	38	93	3	7	41	53	98	1	2	54
South Gippsland Voices	12	80	3	20	15	10	50	10	50	20
The Age	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Herald Sun	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
Total	53	90	6	10	59	77	88	11	12	88

Table 21: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

Around half (28 of 59) of articles in the first period were specifically about South Gippsland Shire. These were split nearly evenly between Voices (14 of 28) and Sentinel-Times (13), with only a single story at The Bridge.

Coverage by the Sentinel-Times included council meetings about a planning permit for a supermarket and a proposed residential development. The Sentinel-Times reported on bushfire assessments for Foster and Mirboo North, as did South Gippsland Voices, which commented on a range of council policies and projects and reported on a public-facing council-run Facebook Q&A session discussing the budget. Of the 14 articles

published by Voices about South Gippsland in S1, three were opinion pieces about council governance, management of funds, or the removal of a council advisory committee.

The Bridge’s single story about South Gippsland council was an identical reprint of a media release from the Victorian Member of Parliament for the broader South Gippsland region, calling for fairer rates for ratepayers in response to a parliamentary inquiry into local government funding. Of the 13 stories identified in S1 at the Sentinel Times, three were identical to a media release. Similarly, two of the identified 14 articles by Voices in S1 were found to be associated with a media release – one identical and the other with additional original reporting.

Beyond South Gippsland Shire, The Bridge covered nearby Wellington Shire, while Sentinel-Times provided coverage of Bass Coast Shire.

The volume of coverage increased in the second period compared to the non-election period, with a total of 88 articles coded, of which 50 were specific to South Gippsland Shire. Over half (29) of these were published by the Sentinel-Times, 20 by Voices, and one by the Herald Sun. The Bridge published 13 articles about local government in S2, all local to Wellington Shire.

Just under half of the local government reporting in S2 focussed on the council elections (22 of 50 stories). Election reporting was largely driven by the Sentinel-Times, with around half of its coverage (15 of 29) dedicated to candidate profiles describing their backgrounds and key priorities if elected or sharing information such as candidate positions on ballot papers and in-person and online ‘meet the candidates’ events. The remaining stories that were not about the election were mostly found in an edition published early in the election sampling period. This edition of Sentinel-Times also contained all four of the identified articles in S2 that were found to be associated with media releases, which apart from one, contained additional reporting.

South Gippsland Voices published considerable opinion content – half (10 of 20) of local government stories published in S2 specific to South Gippsland were identified as such. Articles were clearly labelled as opinion pieces in by-lines, particularly in the second sampling period. Similarly to the non-election period, opinion pieces tended to question council’s management of funding and decisions, with additional commentary on particular councillors running for re-election in S2. Nevertheless, Voices published a special edition dedicated to the election, re-publishing candidate responses to questionnaires provided by the VEC (with full disclosure).

South Gippsland Shire Council was mentioned in a Herald Sun article which provided a full list of candidates for every council in Victoria.

Results suggest minimal use of council press releases in both sampling periods - of 28 about South Gippsland Shire Council in S1, six were connected to releases and only four out of 50 articles were connected to releases in S2. South Gippsland Voices was an exception to the general finding that the majority of content assessed – in both periods was ‘News’, with considerable opinion content published.

#### 4.4.8 City of Whitehorse

The City of Whitehorse is a local government area in eastern metropolitan Melbourne, with major suburbs including Box Hill, Burwood, Blackburn and Mitcham. Two print news outlets and one digital news outlet were identified as covering the City of Whitehorse and assessed: The Local Paper (Eastern Suburbs edition), Herald Sun affiliated Leader East, and Eastsider News, a community newspaper usually published once every two months. However, in 2024, Eastsider News published an additional special edition in October dedicated to local government elections. The Age published three stories about Whitehorse City Council across the sampling periods, and Herald Sun published one story in S2.

	S1			S2		
	News	Opinion/other	Total	News	Opinion/other	Total

Outlet	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
Eastsider News	3	27	8	73	11	39	80	10	20	49
Leader East	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
The Local Paper (Eastern Suburbs)	31	100	0	0	31	15	94	1	6	16
The Age	1	100	0	0	1	2	100	0	0	2
Herald Sun	0	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
Total	35	81	8	19	43	58	84	11	16	69

Table 22: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

Of 43 stories related to local government published in S1, just 8 across all outlets were specifically about Whitehorse City Council. Four of these were published by The Local Paper, three were published by Eastsider News, and one was published by The Age.

Original coverage by The Local Paper included notices of a council survey on customer feedback and council seeking submissions from the public on a plan for recreational open space at a site in Forest Hill. Though media releases were not identified for these articles, information was likely sourced from the Whitehorse City Council's website or communications. Eastsider News reported on the opening of a redeveloped oval in Vermont and an expo about reducing pollution in waterways in Blackburn. The Age reported on a newly adopted policy by the City of Whitehorse allowing residents with hedges at the front of their property to pay to extend the footpath, rather than trim their hedges or risk a fine.

Of the eight stories specific to Whitehorse published in S1, three were connected to media releases, all rewritten with no additional reporting. Both The Local Paper and Eastsider News published a rewritten version of the same media release produced by a group of five local governments in Melbourne's East, including Whitehorse, encouraging residents to participate in a Victorian Government consultation 'A Plan for Victoria'. While Eastsider News disclosed its use of the media release, The Local Paper did not.

The majority of local government reporting by outlets in S1 covered other councils across Melbourne's eastern suburbs such as Manningham City Council, Boroondara City Council, Maroondah City Council and Knox City Council.

The volume of coverage increased in the second period compared to the non-election period, with a total of 69 articles coded. This increase in output was largely driven by one outlet, Eastsider News, which published a special local government election edition in October 2024. 36 of the 69 articles coded were specific to the City of Whitehorse and over half (27) of these were published by Eastsider News, six by The Local Paper, two by The Age and one by the Herald Sun.

No stories were dependent on media releases in S2.

The Whitehorse City Council election dominated local government reporting in S2 with every identified article except two coded to an 'Election' category. Most stories featured profiles of candidates and their election promises. Again, this was largely driven by Eastsider News which invited candidates from Whitehorse and other neighbouring councils to provide responses introducing themselves. Election reporting by metro titles The Age and Herald Sun summarised information on candidates. In each edition, The Local Paper included an aggregated list of councillor nominees for every council in metropolitan Melbourne, constituting five of six articles published in the second sampling period.

Results from the non-election period suggest Whitehorse City Council received comparatively low levels of original coverage that was not connected to a media release. However, the election period saw an increase in volume, largely driven by one outlet Eastsider News, and an increase in original reporting with no articles found to be connected to a media release in this period.

#### 4.4.9 City of Yarra

The City of Yarra is a local government area in Melbourne’s inner north-eastern suburbs. Two print news outlets and one digital news outlet were identified as covering the City of Yarra and assessed. The Local Paper (Southern Cross edition) and News Corp’s hyperlocal The Melbourne City News covering Melbourne CBD and surrounds, while The Rotunda is a community newspaper based in the suburb of Fitzroy North. This outlet publishes infrequently, though it did publish an edition in both May and October 2024. Melbourne-wide titles The Age and Herald Sun also published articles local to the City of Yarra.

Outlet	S1					S2				
	News		Opinion/other		Total	News		Opinion/other		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
The Local Paper (Southern Cross)	32	100	0	0	32	26	100	0	0	26
The Melbourne City News	0	0	0	0	0	4	100	0	0	4
The Rotunda	2	100	0	0	2	2	67	1	33	3
The Age	1	100	0	0	1	5	100	0	0	5
Herald Sun	1	100	0	0	1	4	100	0	0	4
Total	36	100	0	0	36	41	97	1	3	42

Table 23: Articles by whether they are news, opinion, or other content as a total (n) and as a percentage of all articles assessed (%) in May 2024 and October 2024.

Of 36 stories related to local government published in S1, just 10 across all outlets were specifically about the City of Yarra. Six of these were published by The Local Paper, two were published by The Rotunda, and one each published by The Age and Herald Sun.

Original coverage by The Rotunda included a detailed report on the repeated graffiti and damage of a memorial of James Cook and council’s next steps, as well as an article about the upcoming Yarra City Council election and a new alliance of candidates challenging Greens party-aligned candidates.

The Local Paper relied heavily on media releases - all local government articles published by this outlet in S1 were associated with a media release, either reprinted verbatim or rewritten with no additional reporting. These were often about council facilities such as a kindergarten and a golf course. A media release about a new 30km/h speed limit trial in Yarra City Council was used by The Local Paper (identical), The Age (same topic only) and Herald Sun (with additional reporting). These were the only articles identified in the sample from The Age and Herald Sun.

The majority of local government reporting by outlets in S1 covered other councils across Melbourne’s inner suburbs such as Bayside City Council, Boroondara City Council, Glen Eira City, Kingston City Council, and Port Phillip City Council.

The overall volume of local government reporting was consistent between non-election and election periods, with slightly more articles coded in S2 than in S1. Of 42 stories related to local government published in S2, a higher proportion were local to the City of Yarra (25).

The election drove coverage at all outlets, being a feature of 20 of 25 stories. In each edition, The Local Paper included an aggregated list of councillor nominees for every council in metropolitan Melbourne, constituting six of 10 articles published in the second sampling period. The Rotunda wrote about Council’s policy on graffiti and interviewed candidates running for election, while The Melbourne City News focussed less on the candidates’ key promises and more on a candidate who had been disqualified and called for transparency for around another candidate’s campaign.

Yarra City Council received the most coverage from The Age and Herald Sun compared to other sample areas.

Almost no stories were dependent on media releases in S2 – of 25 about Yarra City Council, only three were connected to releases, all published by The Local Paper. Two were rewrites of a press release issued by the VEC about disqualified candidates, while the other contained additional reporting about rules for e-scooters.

The results suggest comparatively little attention to Yarra City Council, and very high and undisclosed use of council press releases as news content by The Local Paper during the non-election period. This is perhaps with the exception of The Rotunda which published two detailed reports on council activities and the upcoming election during the first sampling period. The election drove original coverage at all outlets during the second sampling period. Overall, Yarra City Council received the most coverage from The Age and Herald Sun compared to other samples.

## 5 Discussion

### **RQ1: How much local government reporting is taking place?**

Overall, we identified an increase in stories about local government between the two sampling periods, with 446 articles in S1 and 610 articles in S2.

This increase was not uniform across the state, with a larger increase in metropolitan news (60 per cent) compared to a more modest increase in regional news (11 per cent). Nor was this increase uniform across outlet types, with major media companies significantly increasing their local government coverage during the election period. These outlets more than doubled their stories from the non-election period (120 per cent). However, this should be understood in the context of a relatively low volume of output, apart from Bendigo Advertiser, The Bendigo News, and The Standard (Warrnambool). News Corp's digital hyperlocal and Herald Sun-affiliated websites Leader South East, The Mildura News, Leader East and The Melbourne City News produced no local government coverage in S1. Independent media saw a more modest increase in news coverage (24 per cent), though this should be understood against the comparably high level of coverage of council issues even outside of the election context among independent media.

Metropolitan-scale outlets The Age and Herald Sun also increased their local government coverage of the nine councils in the sample in S2 from low levels of coverage in the non-election period, noting that metropolitan-scale outlets cover an entire city with no dedicated attention to a single place, as opposed to local-scale outlets. Of the nine local governments sampled, Yarra City Council received the most coverage from The Age and Herald Sun, most of which was in the election period.

Some outlets increased their output in S2, impacting the overall volume. Both The Eastsider and The Westsider produced special monthly editions in October dedicated to the council elections.

There were exceptions to this trend – results at the individual case study level suggest similar levels, or a decrease, in local government reporting between the sampling periods for some councils. For example, Mildura Rural City Council was frequently reported on in the non-election period, with a slightly lower overall volume of local government reporting in S2. The City of Greater Bendigo also saw less local government reporting in S2 compared to the first sampling period.

Some metropolitan councils such as Whitehorse, Yarra, and Brimbank which are served by outlets with broader coverage areas, for example The Local Paper, received lower levels of consistent, dedicated coverage. Some regional outlets reported on more than one council, for example, The Standard (Warrnambool) focussed on Warrnambool with additional coverage of nearby Moyne, Corangamite and Glenelg, and The Bridge split its attention between South Gippsland and Wellington Shire. Other areas, particularly regional, saw strong localism and dedicated coverage of their local council, for example, the Mansfield Courier in Mansfield, Star News Group's titles in Casey, the Bendigo Advertiser and Times News Group in Bendigo, and the Sunraysia Daily in Mildura.

### **RQ2: How much local government reporting relies on media releases?**

While the volume of local government reporting increased from S1 to S2, association with media releases decreased.

In S1, we identified a media release in more than half of all articles assessed (55 per cent). This varied among metropolitan and regional areas. Of all metropolitan stories related to local government, 61 per cent were associated with a media release, whereas of all local government reporting in regional areas, 49 per cent were associated with a media release. By contrast, though both metropolitan and regional areas reflected the decline in associated releases in S2, the fall-off was much larger in the cities, which dropped from 61 per cent in S1 to only 13 per cent in S2, with 87 per cent of stories not having a clear link.

Looking at the results by outlet type, independent media outlets were considerably more likely to have a media release associated with their coverage compared to major media companies across both sample periods.

We found heavy use of media releases by the outlets studied. Of the subset of news stories in S1 with an associated media release (55 per cent of articles coded in S1) coders assessed that almost half of these were rewritten PR materials with no evidence of original reporting. Metropolitan news outlets were found to rewrite press releases to a greater degree than regional outlets. Almost another quarter of this subset were mostly or entirely identical to the media release. Regional outlets were more likely to run press releases verbatim as editorial copy than city newsrooms. This finding is consistent with previous research by Waller and Hess<sup>71</sup> that found that regional journalists heavily relied on local government as a source of news. The use of press releases as editorial copy was also found to be predominantly a problem at independent newsrooms, with few examples among major newsrooms. The remaining articles showed evidence of additional reporting by the journalist (23 per cent), plus a few examples where there was no evidence of a media release's impact on a final story (six per cent).

Results from individual case studies suggest that the reliance on media releases is driven by particular outlets and is not necessarily representative of all outlets in a particular local government area. For example, of the articles published by various editions of The Local Paper in Brimbank, Casey, Whitehorse, and Yarra, there was little original reporting with heavy undisclosed use of council press releases as news content. Similarly, Moyne saw high and undisclosed use of council press releases as news content by the Mortlake Dispatch. In contrast, outlets such as Brimbank & North West Star, The Westsider, and Cranbourne Star Weekly provided significant original coverage of these councils. Additionally, although local government reporting by Sunraysia Daily showed some use of media releases in the first sampling period, the proportion of reprinted and rewritten content was low, instead articles associated with media releases contained additional or entirely original reporting. Moreover, results suggest minimal use of council press releases by all outlets sampled in South Gippsland in the first sampling period.

After the caretaker period commenced with the beginning of S2, and therefore most media release production by councils ended, the proportion of stories with association media releases plummeted: only 17 per cent of articles were associated with a release in S2. In S2, the largest category of similarity was still 'Rewrite, no reporting', though we saw less of this relative to S1. 'Additional reporting' increased in S2 which came particularly at the expense of running the releases as-is, which saw a small fall compared to S1. The increase in additional reporting is possibly due to 'limited' nature of release content in caretaker necessitating further work.

Little to no stories in the election period were dependent on media releases in all local government areas sampled except one - Bendigo City Council. Despite a decrease in the use of media between the two sampling periods, half of the articles in S2 were associated with a media release, with Bendigo Times and Mclvor Times continuing their use of media releases into the caretaker period.

### **RQ3: How does local government coverage change during election periods compared to non-election periods?**

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Aside from changes in the volume and source of local government content between the two sampling periods discussed already, the content subject of local government coverage also changed during the election period compared to the non-election period, likely reflecting the shift in council activities during caretaker period.

We found high coverage of council operations and infrastructure in S1, with far less attention to community, environment and services. These results remained consistent in S2, though with a predictable surge in election related reporting and corresponding drop off in other topics.

Council operations was the largest subject of coverage overall in S1, the largest at regional outlets, and the largest at independent outlets. Within this category, policy and programs received by far the most coverage, likely due to this subject reflecting council expenditure and having strong crossover with other categories such as infrastructure and services provision. A quarter of all stories in this category related to council meetings.

The highest proportion of infrastructure stories in both sample periods were on community facilities, particularly grants for local sports clubs. In S1 this was followed by roads, particularly a widely expressed view about the poor state of road maintenance, housing and zoning stories at similar levels, and street beautification. In S2 the same pattern was observed, though at much lower proportions of overall coverage.

Predictably, council elections drove local government coverage in S2, with 67 per cent of stories reporting on it in some way. This coverage was mainly profiles of candidates, which were widespread throughout the sample across all regions and outlet types. Profiles of candidates were often presenting questionnaire or survey responses to questions posed to candidates, and included the priorities that a candidate declared they would take into their position on council. A Herald Sun article appeared in multiple case studies as it listed every candidate running for council election across the entire state. However, stories simultaneously coded as 'candidate' and 'promises' mostly involved detailed original reporting dedicated to one or two councils local to readers.

There were a few exceptions to this trend. The City of Greater Bendigo, where council activities, such as updates from council meetings earlier in the sample period and community-focussed announcements later in the sample period, continued to be the focus of local government reporting in the election period. This was led by the Bendigo Times and Mclvor Times, whereas Bendigo Advertiser followed other outlets and provided more coverage of the Bendigo Council elections than any other category in the election period. The Courier in Mansfield Shire split its attention between the council elections and other local government events, with just under half of stories published in S2 focussed on the Mansfield Shire elections. Similarly, just under half of stories about South Gippsland Shire published in S2 were focussed on the election.

Finally, the overwhelming majority of content assessed – greater than 95 per cent – in both periods was 'News'. This was true when splitting the sample between metropolitan and regional areas, and when looking at major media outlets compared to independent. There was little to no evidence of non-news content related to local government at almost every outlet in both sample period. There were three exceptions to this general finding: South Gippsland Voices (South Gippsland), Eastsider News (Whitehorse) and The Rotunda (Yarra), each of which published a large proportion of opinion content compared to news in at least one sampling period.

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## 7 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.

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# [Public Interest Journalism Initiative]

[info@pji.com.au](mailto:info@pji.com.au)

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