

Paper tigers

Declining competition and increasing concentration in Australia's newspaper market

The Australian newspaper market is dominated by four big corporations. Competition between them is minimal, and services in regional areas are poor. Over ten million Australians live in a city without competition between two comparable print media outlets. Without change, Australians will continue to go without the expansive, competitive news industry that is vital to ensuring transparency and accountability in democratic institutions.

Discussion paper

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Summary

Great countries have great institutions, and the transparency provided by effective journalism helps ensure accountability. An expansive, competitive news industry operating in the public interest is vital to the proper functioning of Australian democracy. However, Australia's news industry is incredibly concentrated, with 84% of newspaper revenue going to one of four large conglomerates: Nine Entertainment, News Corp, Seven West Media, and Australian Community Media.

Even within this limited market, competition is rare. Out Australia's 20 largest cities, 18 lack competition between two comparable print media outlets. Ten million Australians, or 39% of the population, live in one of these 18 cities – that includes every capital city except for Sydney and Melbourne.

The situation is also dire outside of the big cities. Over a quarter of Local Government Areas, generally those in regional and rural areas, have no independent local news outlet. Some of have no local news at all. Hundreds of news outlets have shut down in the last five years, with the worst impacts being felt in the regions.

The disappearing newspapers have been diverse, including independent and smaller-conglomerate owned newspapers, but the biggest four owners were not spared. Australian Community Media has gone from publishing 170 outlets before the pandemic to just 62 today. In 2020, News Corp moved the bulk of its regional outlets to an online-only model. Out of the 119 News Corp titles listed by the Australian Press Council, 86 are now online only, and only 19 – less than one in six – are full, separate newspapers with their own websites and print editions. The vast majority have become little more than a social media page and subsection on the website of a larger newspaper in a state capital.

While some outlets have emerged to replace these gaps, they tend to be less regular and have fewer resources than their predecessors. And there are many towns that have been left with no news outlet since the local paper shut down.

Australia-wide, the newspaper industry is shrinking in its output and diversity. In a growing and diverse country, this may have dire consequences for Australian democracy.

Introduction

Journalism, and news more broadly, performs a vital role in any democratic society, keeping governments and institutions accountable to the people they represent. Great countries have great institutions, and the transparency provided by effective journalism helps ensure accountability. An expansive, competitive news industry operating in the public interest is vital to the proper functioning of Australian democracy.

The Australian news market is among the most concentrated and least competitive in the world, second only to Brazil.¹ The situation is particularly bad with its print newspapers. Four large conglomerates (News Corp, Nine Entertainment, Seven West, and Australian Community Media), control a collective 84% of the newspaper market by revenue.² The largest of these, News Corp, controls 54% of the market by itself. Between the biggest four owners, they own all of Australia's capital city daily newspapers, as well as many local, regional, and rural outlets, and the bulk of popular online news websites.

In many of the places where the conglomerates own newspapers, they have no print competition, or face only a much smaller rival. While print news is on the decline, it remains an important medium through which millions of Australians receive their news, especially in regional areas.³ While there are successful online news outlets in Australia, they tend to be dominated by the same companies that control the country's print newspapers. Those that are not generally operate on a national rather than local scale.

When newspapers cease printing and move online-only, it is almost invariably followed by wide-ranging cuts to employment and resources – the decline of print news corresponds with the decline of news in general.⁴ New online alternatives can be an invaluable tool for their communities, but they face the same economic pressures and will often have the same restraints on resources and staffing as the outlets that preceded them. They therefore do not represent a like-for-like replacement. In addition, the most popular online news source in any given city tends to be the website of the largest print newspaper. This makes the

¹ ; Flew, Fitzgerald, McTernan and Nicholls (2024), *Communications, media and internet concentration in Australia 2019-2022*, p 48, <https://gmicp.org/communications-media-and-internet-concentration-in-australia-2019-2022>

² As of 2022; Flew, Fitzgerald, McTernan and Nicholls (2024), *Communications, media and internet concentration in Australia 2019-2022*, p 28

³ Park, Fisher, McGuinness, Lee, McCallum, Cai, Chatskin, Mardjianto and Yao (2024) *Digital News Report: Australia 2024*, pp 79, 82, <https://www.canberra.edu.au/uc-research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia>

⁴ See for example: ACM's cuts in 2025, News Corp's cuts in 2020

state of print media a meaningful signifier of the state of the entire Australian news industry.⁵

Concern about centralised ownership and lack of competition has prompted numerous investigations and inquiries,⁶ but no major legislative action. In fact, since the turn of the century, governments have significantly loosened Australia's news market regulations on two separate occasions:

- In 2007 the Howard government scrapped foreign ownership limits and changed the 'one out of three' rule to 'two out of three', meaning that a single owner could control any two of three types of media (Print, TV, Radio).⁷
- In 2017 the Turnbull government removed the 'two out of three' rule entirely, as well as removing restrictions on television reach.⁸

Some, including former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, hoped that the emergence of online media would lead to additional news diversity and avenues for competition.⁹ In the ten years since then, the opposite has occurred; hundreds of local and regional news outlets have shut down, and those that remain have much fewer staff and much smaller budgets.¹⁰ At the same time, a series of high-profile acquisitions and mergers have created the high level of concentration that characterises the Australian news industry in 2025. More and more regional areas are left without news coverage, or with only one news outlet – usually owned by a conglomerate.

⁵ Park, Fisher, McGuinness, Lee, McCallum, Cai, Chatskin, Mardjianto and Yao (2024) *Digital News Report: Australia 2024*, pp 83-84 <https://www.canberra.edu.au/uc-research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia>

⁶ Such as the Finkelstein Inquiry (2011) <https://theconversation.com/the-finkelstein-inquiry-into-media-regulation-experts-respond-5675>; and the Senate Inquiry into media diversity in Australia (2021) https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Mediadiversity

⁷ Phillips (2015) *The history of media regulation in Australia*, <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/rearvision/the-history-of-media-ownership-in-australia/6831206>

⁸ Elton Pym (2017) *Explainer: How will the government's reforms change the Australian media landscape?* <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/explainer-how-will-the-governments-reforms-change-the-australian-media-landscape/zkyorfjal>

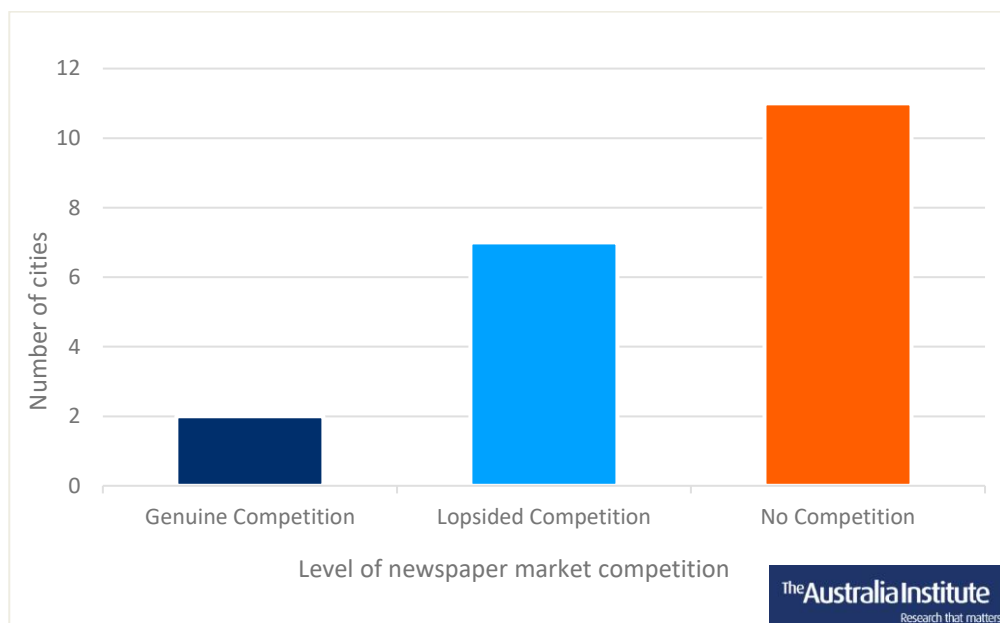
⁹ Brevini (2014) *Australia swims against the tide of democratic media reform*, <https://theconversation.com/australia-swims-against-the-tide-of-democratic-media-reform-24337>

¹⁰ Dickson and des Preaux (2024) *Australian News Data Report: September 2024*, p 19, <https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2409-AND-Report-Sep-2024.pdf>

The dire state of news competition

Out of Australia's largest 20 cities,¹¹ which are home to over three quarters of the country's population, 11 have only a single daily or weekly print newspaper.¹² Those 11 newspapers face either no alternative newspaper, an alternative newspaper that publishes so infrequently that it isn't a true second option (such as a monthly newspaper 'competing' against a daily one), or local newspapers that only cover small areas within a city. This means that they hold an effective monopoly: they face no competition in city-wide print news. A further seven cities have lopsided competition, with a daily newspaper competing against a weekly one.¹³ Only two cities, Sydney and Melbourne, have genuine competition between two daily newspapers (between Nine and News Corp).

Figure 1: Print news competition in Australia's top 20 population centres



Five of Australia's eight capital cities have no competition in their print news, with all of those owned by either News Corp or Seven West Media (Seven). News Corp owns the only printed newspapers in Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart and Darwin and Seven in Perth. Australian Community Media (ACM)'s *Canberra Times* faces only weekly alternatives in the nation's capital. In eight of the 11 areas with only one print newspaper, that newspaper is owned by News Corp, followed by ACM with two, and 7News with one.

¹¹ From the ABS's "Significant Urban Area" Definition; when areas cross state lines, the larger part is taken as the relevant portion (for example in Gold Coast-Tweed Heads, Tweed Heads is excluded)

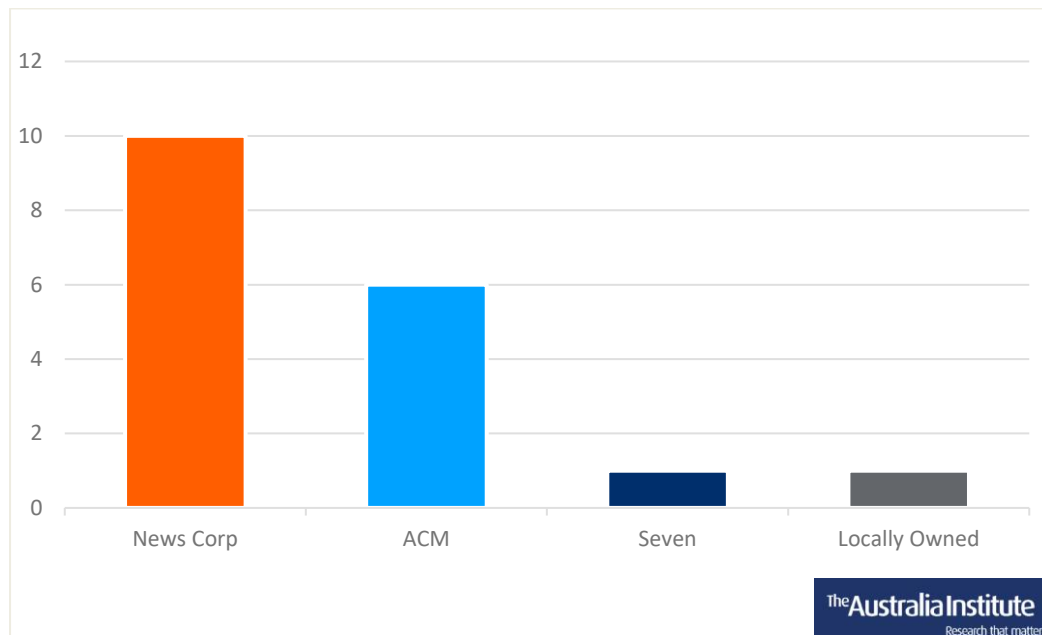
¹² Does not include lifestyle-oriented or magazine-style publications.

¹³ Includes one area (the Central Coast) where a weekly newspaper competes against a monthly alternative.

There is a similar dynamic in the seven areas with lopsided competition, ACM owns the major newspaper in four areas (the *Canberra Times*, *Newcastle Herald*, *Ballarat Courier*, and *Bendigo Advertiser*) and News Corp in two (the *Geelong Advertiser* and *Cairns Post*). Only the Central Coast in NSW has an independent, locally owned newspaper, *Coast Community News*, as the main news source in the area. Nine Entertainment is the only one of the four conglomerates which does not own any newspapers that dominate a city’s media market, with its print papers competing with News Corp in Sydney and Melbourne.

This lack of diversity means that a majority of the 19.6 million people in Australia’s twenty largest cities have either lopsided or no competition in their print media. Almost ten million Australians (39% of the population) live in one of the eighteen cities that lack a competitive market between two print media outlets of the same size. All but one of the dominant newspapers in those cities are owned by one of Australia’s media conglomerates.

Figure 2: Owner of the dominant newspaper in cities with lopsided or no competition



Although four large companies dominate Australia’s media landscape, the existence of so many one-sided media environments means that they rarely compete with each other. Competition between the four conglomerates exists in only two of Australia’s 20 most populous urban areas, with the six cases of lopsided competition all being against independent or smaller publishers.

Seven West’s newspapers all serve Western Australia, and since News Corp sold *The Sunday Times* to Seven West in 2016 these papers have had only online or local competition. ACM was owned by Nine before being sold off in 2019, with ACM taking all regional newspapers and Nine preserving its ownership of its flagship urban dailies. Since then neither has attempted to expand into the other’s markets, meaning competition between the two is minimal. Aside from the offering of some online-only alternatives (such as Nine’s *Brisbane*

Times and *WAToday*, or News Corp's digital-only local news sections), print media competition has been largely relegated to Australia's two largest cities.

In Canberra (ACM), Queensland (News Corp), and South Australia (News Corp), only one conglomerate owns any print news, with the only alternatives being independent or smaller publishers. That situation is not much better in Western Australia (Seven) and the Northern Territory (News Corp), where a handful of ACM outlets continue to publish. In an environment where news has become much less profitable than it once was – especially in print – it seems unlikely that the trend towards less competition will reverse.

The slow demise of local news

When reforms to Australia's media sector were introduced in 2017, Seven West's chairman said that they would provide a "better future for local news and Australian stories".¹⁴ As part of these changes, the Turnbull government agreed to create a fund for small and regional news publishers, which was labelled a "down payment for the future of journalism in this country".¹⁵ The reality for local news in the eight years since has been far less rosy.

The number of local and regional newspapers in Australia has been declining for decades. In 2008 there were just over 500 newspapers in the country, but a decade later 106 of those had been shut.¹⁶ In 2015 nearly a third of regional areas did not meet the then minimum legal requirements for media diversity.¹⁷ While the trend was already bad, the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020 was a mass-extinction event. According to the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, the second quarter of 2020 alone saw well over 100 closures, with a net decline of 184 outlets from 2019 to 2024.¹⁸ Swathes of both independent and conglomerate newspapers were shut, leading to a less diverse market, especially in local and regional news.

Local news outlets are vital for information on local governments, politicians, businesses, and other public interest stories in the area they serve. However, in the news industry's transformation towards online distribution, local journalists and the stories they tell have often been left behind. Particularly in regional areas, the local paper has often been a central element of communities, and filling the space left behind after it disappears can be extremely difficult.¹⁹

In 2024, 29 Local Government Areas lacked a single local news outlet, either in print or online, while a further 111 were serviced exclusively by conglomerate-owned outlets.²⁰ This means over a quarter of Local Government Areas have no independent local news. That

¹⁴ ABC News (2017) *Government's media ownership law changes pass Senate with help from NXT, One Nation* <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-15/media-law-changes-bill-passes-senate/8946864>

¹⁵ ABC News (2017) *Government's media ownership law changes pass Senate with help from NXT, One Nation*

¹⁶ Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (2019) *Digital Platforms Inquiry – Final Report*, p 321, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf>

¹⁷ Johnson (2015) *Heartland: Why the bush needs its ABC*, p 7, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/heartland-why-the-bush-needs-its-abc/>

¹⁸ Dickson and des Preaux (2024) *Australian News Data Report: September 2024*, p 19, <https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2409-AND-Report-Sep-2024.pdf>

¹⁹ Loftus (2024) *Regional news media's decline a 'threat' to democracy and social cohesion* <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-10-11/regional-news-media-decline-threat-to-democracy-social-cohesion/104443042>

²⁰ Angus, Ackermann, Kreitmeir and Raschky (2023) *Socio-economic determinants of Public Interest Journalism in Australia*, pp 10-17, https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SoDa_PJI_report4.pdf

does not include outlets with lopsided or online-only competition, meaning that even that likely understates the dominance of those conglomerates over Australian news.

NEWS CORP'S PAPER TIGERS

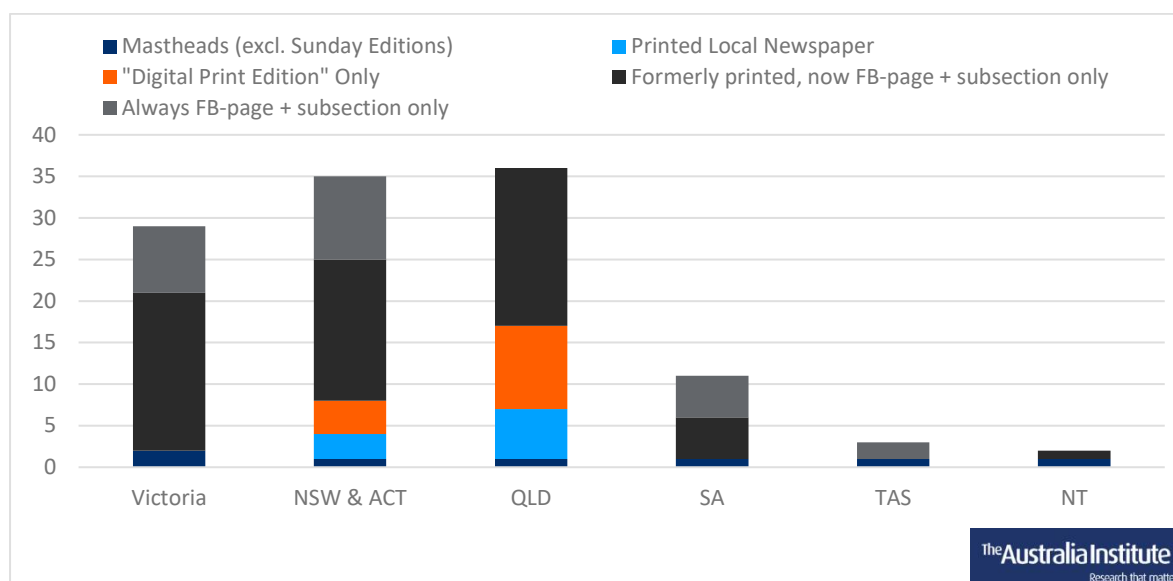
With its acquisition of Australian Regional Media (ARM) in 2016, News Corp gained 102 local and regional news outlets, almost doubling the number it held previously.²¹ In 2020, it initially suspended, then ended, printing 112 of its newspapers. Out of these, 36 were shut altogether and 76 were to become online-only. A further four have seemingly become online-only since then.

Looking at the list of newspapers which News Corp has registered with the Australian Press Council (APC), or the list on the part of News Corp's website that describes the audiences that a potential advertiser might be interested in, that would seem to be the end of the story. However, a search of some of these 'online-only' newspapers online reveals that many of these publications exist in little more than name only.

Take for example the *Manly Daily*, a newspaper that had been in print for 114 years before it was shut during the COVID-19 pandemic. Searching for the *Manly Daily* reveals an active social media presence, but posts link to articles published in the *Daily Telegraph*. On the *Telegraph's* website, a section with articles about the (broadly) local area carries the *Manly Daily's* old logo, but that is the only trace of its identity as a separate newspaper. Of the 80 newspapers that have been moved online since 2020, 61 have suffered the fate of the *Manly Daily*. Some were not even lucky enough to retain their logo, and have been reduced to an unbranded 'local news' subsection for the area they formerly served.

²¹ Ong (2016) *APN News and Media to sell regional media division to News Corp for \$36.6m*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-21/apn-news-and-media-divests-regional-media-division-arm-to-news/7528884>

Figure 3: The News Corp ‘local news’ network by state



Australian Press Council (2024) *Australian Press Council Mastheads by Publisher Member*
<https://presscouncil.org.au/about-us/who-we-are/>

A further fourteen have ‘Digital Print Editions’ available for subscribers, and five local newspapers have since made a limited return to print. Those five include three newspapers covering inner-Sydney suburbs (the *Mosman Daily*, *North Shore Times*, and *Wentworth Courier*), which returned for weekly print editions in 2020, followed by the *Sunshine Coast Daily* and *Mackay Daily Mercury* the following year. Neither those with ‘Digital Print Editions’, or the weekly printed newspapers have their own websites, and their online presence is limited to social media. Four regional newspapers – in Cairns, Townsville, the Gold Coast and Toowoomba – retain both a daily print edition and separate website.

As shown in Figure 3, the vast majority of the newspapers listed by the APC exist only as a social media pages, with their website redirecting readers to a subsection of their state’s capital city daily (either the *Daily Telegraph*, *Herald-Sun*, *Courier Mail* or *Adelaide Advertiser*).

Out of the 29 newspapers listed in Victoria, only two – the Geelong Advertiser and Herald Sun – remain as stand alone publications. The remaining 27 have all been stripped down to News Corp’s ‘digital-only’ model. The situation in the other states and territories is similar: in South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory only capital city daily newspapers (*Adelaide’s Advertiser*, *Hobart’s Mercury*, and Darwin’s *NTNews*) remain. Queensland, where more regional outlets have been preserved than in any other state, seems to have been spared from the worst impacts. Even there, though, the majority of newspapers are ‘digital-only’, and only seven out of 36 have their own websites or print editions.

There are also newspapers listed with the APC which are not, and have never been, in print, nor have they ever had a separate website. These were established as online-only

newspapers, beginning in 2019, as part of a planned long-term transition to a digital only model. The pandemic accelerated those plans, and News Corp has established 25 such ‘newspapers’ in total. Just like those that were moved online however, they appear to be little more than a subsection of the big capital city dailies. Most, such as the *Illawarra Star* and *St George Shire Standard*, only had a single reporter covering their respective areas when they launched.²² In fact, all of the digital-only outlets offered by News Corp by July 2020 only launched with one journalist.²³

The only local News Corp outlets that survived the past half-decade serve large regional hubs and affluent inner-city suburbs, with the rest of their suburban, regional and rural output relegated to the digital-only ‘newspaper’ model. This seems to be a unique arrangement to News Corp – the other conglomerates have an increasing focus on online news, but their outlets all seem to have retained individual websites and identities.

News Corp currently has 132 outlets listed by the Australian Press Council. Seven are ‘prestige/lifestyle’ magazines, and six are Sunday editions of other newspapers, leaving 119 news outlets. Of those 119 titles, 86 are only social media pages and a section of the website of a capital city daily. If those with “Digital Print Editions” are excluded, only 19 – less than one in six – remain as full, separate, newspapers.

THE DECLINE OF ACM AND OTHER ALTERNATIVES

Australian Community Media currently stands as the largest regional newspaper publisher by number of outlets, but it has been in steep decline ever since its separation from Nine in 2019. At its peak, it owned and published 170 local and regional newspapers titles.²⁴ By 2024, four years after the start of the pandemic, it had just 62 listed by the Australian Press Council. In 2025 ACM shuttered more outlets, and announced a plan to move all its remaining daily newspapers to a weekly format.²⁵

²² Crittenden (2019) *Welcome to the Illawarra Star: a new digital news platform*, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/illawarra-star/welcome-to-the-illawarra-star-a-new-digital-news-platform/news-story/f9cd1f12b465259e9c2fd7fe2d50159b>; Barr (2018) *St George Shire Standard: a new local digital news platform*, <https://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/st-george-shire-standard-a-new-local-digital-news-platform/news-story/91926a98149b632c63413d09f8c91e0d>

²³ Rigby (2020) *News Corp to launch more than 50 digital-only regional titles*, <https://mumbrella.com.au/news-corp-to-launch-more-than-50-digital-only-regional-titles-634523>

²⁴ Meade (2020) *Dozens of Australian newspapers stop printing as coronavirus crisis hits advertising*, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/14/dozens-of-australian-newspapers-stop-printing-as-coronavirus-crisis-hits-advertising>

²⁵ Holdsworth (2025) *Australian Community Media flags future further reduction in print editions*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-07/acm-newspapers-print-editions-saturdays/104908300>

While some of these newspapers were sold off to smaller publishers, the vast majority are entirely gone. This decline comes mainly from its offerings in smaller regional towns, including all its holdings in Queensland, and most in Victoria.

In the gaps left by both ACM and News Corp, some towns saw new alternatives emerge, however many of those shut down in the months and years after.²⁶ Where they have endured, they often have not been able to reach the level of resourcing afforded by their predecessors. The *Centralian Today* in Alice Springs publishes half the number of issues of its News Corp owned predecessor. The same is true with Stanthorpe's *Today*, and with other regional Queensland papers.

Despite a stark decline in the number of individual news outlets published by the four largest media owners in Australia, this has not led to a noticeable loosening of their collective hold on the market. Instead, it has often meant a decline in the volume and diversity of local news, or the absence of genuinely local news entirely.

²⁶ Dickson and des Preaux (2024) *Australian News Data Report: September 2024*, p 19, <https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2409-AND-Report-Sep-2024.pdf>

Conclusion

Four large conglomerates control 84% of the Australian newspaper market.²⁷ Despite this, 18 of the 20 most populous urban areas in Australia, where 39% of Australians live, do not have a competitive market between two print media outlets of the same size. While most Australians now get their news online, the lopsided dynamics of print media competition are invariably mirrored with their digital counterparts, with online alternatives offering little reprieve. When online news first began appearing, many heralded it as an opportunity for new independent voices to diversify Australia's media. While new alternatives have appeared, the same key players have maintained their dominance through to the internet age, and with mergers and acquisitions they have become more influential than ever.

The situation is similarly grim outside of the 20 most populous areas of Australia. The decline of News Corp and ACM's local and regional holdings have not led to a broadening of the Australian media market, with over a quarter of Local Government Areas having no independent local news. Maintaining regular news coverage of regional areas was not profitable for big corporate newspapers, and other entrants have found it difficult to change that dynamic. Where the reach of the big conglomerates has receded, they have been replaced either by smaller, less regular outlets, or by nothing at all.

While more Australians get their news online than from the print editions primarily discussed in this paper, the newspapers that dominate in print also tend to dominate on the web, meaning that the rise of online alternatives is no panacea for media competition.²⁸ Although new online alternatives can be an invaluable tool for their communities, they face the same economic pressures and will often have the same restraints on resources and staffing as the outlets that preceded them. They therefore do not represent a like-for-like replacement. National online news services, such as the ABC, News, Nine, Seven, and Guardian websites, may offer some level of competition where print media is lacking. For example, 24% of Australians read ABC News online country-wide, roughly equal to the digital reach of the four largest News Corp capital city broadsheets combined. However, it seems unlikely that national news services can offer the same focus on area-specific news that a local alternative would, making their ability to fill gaps in competition questionable.

²⁷ Flew, Fitzgerald, McTernan and Nicholls (2024), *Communications, media and internet concentration in Australia 2019-2022*, p 28

²⁸ Park, Fisher, McGuinness, Lee, McCallum, Cai, Chatskin, Mardjianto and Yao (2024) *Digital News Report: Australia 2024*, pp 83-84, <https://www.canberra.edu.au/uc-research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia>

From Australia's biggest cities to its smallest towns, news is less local, written by fewer journalists, that live in fewer places, than ever before. And almost all of it is owned by the same handful of companies that have controlled the market for decades.