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Australian Journalism Review, 2017; 39(1):63-76

http://hdl.handle.net/2440/114218

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Abstract

Local news is fundamental to the activities of most regional newspapers in Australia. While "local" is a contested term, it has traditionally been used in the Australian regional news media context to refer to issues, events and people occurring or situated within the primary geographical circulation area of a print newspaper. This emphasis on the local extends from what news outlets are reporting to how they report it – and the kinds of understandings they promote about what it means to be part of a regional community. The public-sphere role of such outlets means they are ideally placed to communicate to news audiences ideas about local identity and community. While understandings of community extend beyond geographical considerations, the ongoing emphasis on local news means that geographical location remains at the heart of what regional newspapers do, even at a time when many regional newspapers are becoming less localised because of cost cutting and resource sharing. This paper examines the front pages of a number of Australian regional newspapers over time to explore some of the ideas about regional community and identity that are communicated to news audiences.

Introduction

While newspapers outside major cities perform a crucial role in the provision of local news and information, they have also traditionally been "an integral part of local life" (Nielsen, 2015, p. 1) and their role within their communities has extended beyond information provision to broader public-sphere functions. As a key facilitator of discussion and interaction across and between individuals and groups within their news audience, and a central element of local communication networks, they have also played an integral role in building and maintaining social capital among their audience (Bowd, 2010) and the broader communities the newspaper serves. In this capacity they both set and respond to local news and information agendas and reflect back to news audiences key messages about regional life. This paper explores some of these messages by examining the front pages of a range of Australian regional newspapers over time. It highlights central themes in the coverage, and considers what these communicate about local community and identity, particularly in relation to notions of social capital. The front pages of each newspaper were selected for analysis because these are the most visible elements of a publication, and

the most likely to be seen by non-readers as well as readers. The findings highlight the ongoing importance of localness to regional journalism – an area often "taken for granted" (Nielsen, 2015, p. 1) and ignored or marginalised in journalism studies (Hess & Waller, 2017) – even at a time when newspapers are becoming less local because of cost-cutting and corporate consolidation.

Background

Regional newspapers have as a core mission the dissemination and communication of "local" news. While "local" is a contested term with a multiplicity of meanings and understandings across a range of fields (see, for example, O'Neill, 2014; Pangbourne, 2015), much of the journalism literature appears to assume a shared understanding (see, for example, Franklin 2006; Neilsen, 2015). In the Australian newspaper context it has traditionally been utilised to refer to issues, events and people occurring or situated within the primary geographical circulation area of a print newspaper (Bowd, 2010). Most regional newspapers in Australia have typically focused solely or primarily on "local" news (Funk, 2013, p. 577), with limited or no coverage of events or issues beyond the boundaries of their print circulation area. This local emphasis is at the heart of their relationships with their news audiences and a key point of distinction between regional publications and their metropolitan counterparts.

These long-standing newspaper/community relationships are, however, currently under challenge from the forces affecting the print industry more generally. Some regional newspapers have closed or been amalgamated, and most have been affected by falling advertising, cost-cutting, staff reductions or consolidations and reduction or consolidation of resources (23 jobs will go at your Mail, 2015; Fairfax to cut 35 jobs, 2015). One of Australia's major publishers of regional newspapers, Fairfax Media, in 2015 announced the streamlining of its community media operations, eliminating mastheads, reducing publication frequency and cutting staff (Fairfax cuts jobs from papers in regional SA, 2015; Fairfax Media to push ahead with job cuts, 2015; Lynch, 2015). Meanwhile, Australia's other main regional newspaper publisher, APN News & Media, has been purchased by News Corp Australia, the Australian arm of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (Burrowes, 2016). At the same time, online and mobile delivery of local news and information is becoming increasingly central to news organisations' strategies (Fairfax cuts jobs from papers in regional SA, 2015), and social media have further shifted the landscape by eroding journalism's monopoly over local information (Neilsen, 2015, p. 9). These factors have contributed to moving newspapers into the realm of what Hess and Waller (2017) term "geo-social" journalism (see also Hess, 2013). Geo-social journalism shifts understandings of relationships between news media and news audiences from one which assumes a connection between space and place to one in which newspapers are "engaged in the active construction of a certain sense of place as a 'locale' by virtue of its definition of what is relevant and an area for which it is relevant" (Neilsen, 2016, p. 843; see Hess, 2013). This both recognises that at least some elements of a newspaper's audience may be geographically removed from its print circulation area, and that location in itself is not necessarily a marker of a newspaper's audience.

While the place of regional newspapers in their communities – whether these are defined geographically or by shared interests – may not be as secure as in the past, they retain a unique role within these communities. As often the primary source of local news and information, and usually with a long-standing historic association with their town or region, they are ideally positioned to benefit from "a special connection with local readers and local audiences" (Funk, 2013, p. 577). This connection can be seen in their historic emphasis on local interests and local advocacy in reporting. Kirkpatrick's extensive research into Australian regional newspaper history has identified local advocacy as a key driver of the growth of such newspapers (see, for example, Kirkpatrick, 1984; 2001). While this advocacy may be less clearly evident in an era dominated by corporatised news publishing, promotion of local interests remains closely linked to the emphasis on local news.

This in turn points to newspapers' role within the public sphere – by highlighting issues, events and people perceived to be of importance and relevance to the news audience, they position themselves at the centre of local discussion and debate and provide a point of connection for people within their communities. This locates news media as promoters of social capital – the "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" described by Putnam (2000, p. 19). Halpern suggests that social capital has three basic components – a network, a cluster of norms, values and expectations, and sanctions (Halpern, 2005, p. 10) – and newspapers contribute to all of these: they provide a network that facilitates interaction, communicate norms, values and expectations and demonstrate sanctions associated with "inappropriate" behaviour. While social capital is not unproblematic (Putnam, 2000; Halpern, 2005), it has been suggested that it can strengthen communities (Putnam, 2000).

News agendas and decisionmaking

One of the ways that newspapers support the development and maintenance of social capital is by reflecting ideas of what it means to be part of a regional community to those both inside and outside that geographical location. Ewart points out that newspapers "play a central role in constructing and cementing the identity and culture of communities and their publics" (2000), and decisions made in newsrooms about which news to include and how to portray it are integral to this. News is the outcome of a process in which "decisions must be made to funnel many news events down to a few" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 119), placing news workers in a crucial "gatekeeping" role, described by Shoemaker, Vos and Reese as "the process of selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news" (2009, p. 73). While social media can be seen as having undermined the news media's gatekeeping role, Singer suggests that audiences still rely on journalists to "serve as the initial gatekeepers", even though they may then go on to refine journalists' choices (Singer, 2014, p. 58). Editorial staff are not the only influence on media decisionmaking – media owners, politicians, interest groups, advertisers and audiences also play a part (Stromback & Karlsson, 2011, p. 644) – but they have the greatest direct day-to-day impact. Decisions on what to include and what to exclude as news are based on factors such as perceived audience interest, commercial considerations, personal preference, news conventions and "news sense", positioning news workers as "the ones who decide what the public needs to know, as well as when and how such information should be provided" (Domingo et al., 2008, p. 326).

Closely linked with this are both agenda-setting and news framing. Coleman et al. (2009) argue that there is debate about whether agenda-setting and framing are the same thing or different, but both "call attention to the perspectives of communicators and their audiences, how they picture topics in the news and … the special status that certain attributes or frames can have" (p. 150). Agenda-setting is "the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others" (2009, p. 147). In other words, "the more coverage an issue receives, the more important it is to people" (Coleman et al., 2009, p. 147). News framing refers to the organising of discourse such as news stories through selection, emphasis and exclusion (Ryan, Carragee & Meinhofer, 2001, p. 176). Frames "highlight some aspects of the events behind a story and downplay others, often with the effect of supporting a certain way of looking at the world" (Baresch, Hsu & Reese, 2010, p. 637): a process that is informed by factors including routinized decisionmaking in newsrooms (Baresch et al., 2010, p. 638; Becker & Vlad, 2009, p. 69). Johnson-Cartee suggests that: "Journalists see themselves as taking a web of complex and often convoluted workings of government and governmental decision making, and simplifying these processes and actions into an understandable form …" (2005, p. 77).

The ideas of gatekeeping, framing and agenda-setting promote understanding of news selection and presentation processes, and provide pointers to the ways news decisions may impact on

audiences and communicate ideas about community and identity (Davis Mersey, 2010, p. 531). The decisions made in newsrooms are multi-layered in their impact, carrying embedded social meaning (Baresch et al., 2010, p. 638) and documenting a common history that establishes connections between readers (Funk, 2013, p. 576). Baresch et al. claim that news frames "lay the foundation on which we citizens build our collective understanding of the world" (2010, p. 638), while Shen, Ahern and Baker suggest that they can profoundly affect opinions and attitudes on social and political issues (2014, p. 91). Johnson-Cartee similarly argues that news media can influence people's daily lives by affecting "what we know, what we feel about what we know, and how we act on both what we know and what we feel" (2005, p. 9). She suggests news framing is likely to have greater influence when people either have no strong beliefs about an issue or "face cross-pressures, leaving themselves confused and/or ambivalent" (2005, p. 26).

If, as Anderson suggests, all communities larger than villages are imagined, then "communities are to be distinguished … by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). The news that is included in regional newspapers and the ways it is framed thus contribute to the style in which regional communities are imagined. The decisions made by journalists and editors that influence newspaper content contribute to understandings of what is important to people in a region and how people are expected to respond to news events and issues. This may be the case even for non-readers, as newspapers' contribution to local debate and discussion may impact on those who do not directly engage with the newspaper. Thus the news that is included in regional newspapers and the ways in which it is framed help contribute to understandings of what it means to be part of a regional community.

Method

To explore these understandings, the front pages of newspapers based in four Australian states were analysed. The front page was chosen as the site for analysis because it is the most immediately visible element of a print newspaper, and the one most likely to influence purchasing decisions. It is also the most likely to be seen by non-readers of the publication, who may encounter it in other ways (for example, in a newsagency or cafe). Thus it is the part of a newspaper likely to have the widest impact in a paper's geographical circulation area, and often beyond through the newspaper's website or social media presence. A hard-copy page is a valuable site for analysis because it is a discrete and static picture of news at a specific point in time and news convention generally dictates the front page as the location of the news considered most important on that day. In addition, while all of the newspapers in this study have a web presence and are active on one or more social media platforms, the earliest data gathered for the study pre-date the arrival of online news.

Newspapers were chosen to reflect a mix of publication frequencies and ownership. Included were: NSW – *The Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga); *Port Macquarie News; Moree Champion; The Northern Star* (Lismore); Queensland – *Beaudesert Times* (known as *Logan and Albert Times* in 1974 and 1984; *The Observer* (Gladstone); *Whitsunday Coast Guardian* (known as *The Proserpine Guardian* in 1974, 1984 and 1994 and *The Guardian* in 2004); *North-West Star* (Mount Isa); South Australia – *The Border Watch* (Mount Gambier); *Naracoorte Herald; The Bunyip* (Gawler); *The Recorder* (Port Pirie); Victoria – *The Ararat Advertiser; Sunraysia Daily* (Mildura); *Castlemaine Mail; Moyne Gazette* (Port Fairy – not all years available). Data collection focused on editions of each of the newspapers at 10-year intervals – 1974, 1984, 1994, 2004 and 2014. In each decade, April 1 (or the closest publication date) was the starting point, and front pages from 10 editions of each newspaper were collected – sequential editions for non-daily papers, and a constructed series for dailies. Daily newspaper front pages were collected on the basis of one day a week – Monday one week, Tuesday the next, and so on. Because of the variation in publication frequencies, the time span included ran from early to late April for some newspapers

and through to late May or early June for others. The coverage period included two regular occurrences – Anzac Day on April 25 and Easter in some years.

Analysis of front-page content was based on news story placement, emphasis and tone, as indicated primarily by the headline and the first few paragraphs of each story. News convention emphasises the main news points and "angle" in the opening paragraphs, so this element of a news story could be considered a reliable indicator of overall direction. News stories were coded using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) as guidance. The coding reflected topic area; local or non-local content; commonly used news values (such as conflict or human interest) and overall positive or negative tone. The focus of this paper is not quantitative analysis of trends and patterns, but qualitative discussion of news topics and their presentation.

Findings – news themes

Several dominant news themes emerged, and these were relatively consistent across publications and over time. The key theme throughout was "localness", suggesting an overarching narrative for regional newspapers and reflecting a recurring topic in the literature on regional news media. The exception was the daily papers, which in some years (predominantly 1974 and 1984) provided a mix of national, state, local and world news on their front pages. This reflected common practice for larger regional publications at that time, with the newspaper being widely regarded as a "paper of record" covering a variety of news of relevance to the readership. For the most part, though, the coverage was framed as almost entirely local in content and/or emphasis. Most newspapers provided little or no non-local front-page content, with news stories either specifically local or representing local angles on broader topics. This suggests localness as central to regional newspapers' news agendas, and establishes local issues, people and events as a priority for local engagement. Within this overarching theme, several sub-themes were evident.

Conflict

"Conflict" is frequently highlighted as a central pillar of Western news (Grundy et al., 2012), and a common framing device for news in countries such as Australia. This study indicates that conflict remains key to news coverage, but that the emphasis is on conflict between local and broader interests. Vine argues that rather than ignoring conflict, regional newspapers interpret it in a way that promotes the interests of their town or district: "… those (conflicts) internal to the community were downplayed in comparison to … external issues" (Vine, 2012, p. 159), a finding reflected in this study. This "us vs them" frame is frequently depicted through the lens of the needs and interests of regional communities being ignored or disadvantaged by big government or big business, and the widespread use of this frame over time and across publications suggests it is a staple of local newspaper coverage. From a fishing fleet being stranded by a sandbar that the State Government refused to dredge (Fishing industry is at a standstill, 1974) to BP failing to reopen a town's only 24-hour petrol station (Bromhead, 2014), the "us" vs "them" frame was widely evident. Regional newspapers' historic role as champions of local interests (Kirkpatrick, 1984) may be a key driver of this, but it also plays into long-running narratives of conflict between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia (Brett, 2011). The "us vs them" frame makes clear who is "inside" the regional community and who is "outside" (see, for example, Campaign gathers speed, 2004; Govt under fire, 2004), with state and federal government and big business often depicted as an external threat (see, for example, Brady, 2014; Fuel price hurting farmers, 1994; Highway's upgrading under threat, 1994; Jack & Easton, 2004; Rossi, 1984; Sprinter trial wanted, 1994). By unifying those "inside" around a common narrative, newspapers both provide a space for local debate and discussion and indicate to news audiences how they are expected to respond, reflecting one of Halpern's three characteristics of social capital – norms, values and

expectations. For example, the proposed replacement of a local hospital by a newer facility in a nearby town (Keep hospital in Beaudesert, 1994) was framed as a threat to a long-standing institution rather than an efficient reallocation of services, while a story about proposed changes to bus-stop rules (Enever, 2014) was depicted as a threat to rural school-bus stops rather than a safety move. The "us vs them" frame sets a news agenda that seeks to unify the news audience against a common threat, and in so doing provides an opportunity for newspapers to bolster their position as community connectors. For newspapers heavily reliant on local advertising, it is also a means of engaging audiences without antagonising local business and risking withdrawal of advertising.

Conflict within communities was not ignored, but was less frequent and/or prominent, although it is not possible to determine from the data whether this reflects a lower incidence of internal conflict or the outcomes of news decisionmaking processes. Conflict within regional areas was often noted as occurring between individuals/small groups and institutions such as local government (see, for example, Canham 1984; Council "spin" attack, 2004; Elliott, 2004; Kaurila, 2004; Satherley, 2004). Councils were a particular focus of the reporting of localised conflict, while conflict between individuals or groups that could be considered similar in status was limited (see, for example, Club pulls out in centre dispute, 1984; Crawford, 2014; Lloyd, 2004).

Local people

Local people – those living and/or working within the circulation area of the print newspaper – featured prominently on the front pages in the dataset. Even in the years when the front pages of the daily newspapers incorporated little or no local content, photographs generally retained a local emphasis, and frequently highlighted people. For example, p. 1 of Lismore's *Northern Star* newspaper on April 10, 1974, included 10 state, national and world stories as well as one photo – taken at a local school during a visit by a Polynesian dance troupe. There was an emphasis throughout the dataset of coverage – particularly in photographs – of local people. Some of this was of arguably limited news significance (see, for example, Drum whiz has rhythm, 1984; High fashion at high school, 1984; Who's [sic] footy? Mine, of course!, 1994), but it highlighted local people and their activities.

The achievements of local groups and individuals were widely recognised. Those who had helped others were noted for their work (see, for example, Keeping the Pacific peaceful, 1994; Ward, 2014), but even day-to-day achievements were recognised – from the administration officer clocking up 30 years of service to the local high school (Noelene's 30 years, 2004) to the success of a working bee (All hands make light work, 1994). Formal awards were also noted – at state, national and international level (see, for example, At state swimming, 1984; Australian C grade championship to Thompsons Foundry Band, 1974; Honoured, 1994; Kirkman, 2014a; Lanzon, 2004) and locally (see, for example, Citizen award kept in family, 1984; Connolly, 2004).

This extended to the reporting of the deaths of prominent local citizens (see, for example, "A ray of sunshine", 2014; Gordon, 2014; Lucindale's "magnificent contributor" dies at 88, 2004; Pretorius, 2014). Such individuals were frequently referred to using terms such as "long-serving", "stalwart" and "lifeblood (of the community)" – indicating that they were people recognised at a local level as having made significant contributions to regional life. Significant personal milestones were also drivers for news stories (see, for example, 60 years of memories for Dudley, 2004; Dennis, 2014; Ivy's 100, 1984). Even local businesses were sometimes recognised in this way; when they reached an anniversary or closed after many years of operation (Long business association to end, 1994).

Community participation and contribution were common themes. Fundraising activities were widely reported, particularly where the emphasis was on benefit to the broader community (see, for example, Please dig deep for 3MA hospital appeal, 1994; Sharing a cuppa for a cause, 2014).

For example, of the 10 editions of *The Ararat Advertiser* in the 2014 sample, half included a photo that related to a fundraiser, from a school fete (April 1, 2014) to the Royal Children's Hospital appeal (April 17, 2014; April 25, 2014) to the Mother's Day Classic run for the National Breast Council Foundation (May 2, 2014). This extended to broader examples of community support for individuals or families (see In memory of Kash Longmuir, 2014). This theme of helping people directly or indirectly emphasises the links between local newspapers and social capital, reflecting Putnam's norm of generalised reciprocity – "I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road" (2000, p. 21).

This theme extended to news coverage of people involved in a wide range of local events, again often accompanied by photos. While this reflects a widely used news technique of balancing "light and shade" on front pages, it also sends a message to news audiences about the importance of participation in community activities – a message further reinforced by reporting emphasising the negative effects of lack of community involvement, such as warnings about organisations being at risk of folding (see, for example, Chamber faltering says president, 1974; Neighbourhood Watch may fold, 1994). These kinds of negative messages can be seen to reflect the notion of sanctions as an element of social capital, something also evident in coverage of Anzac Day. Almost all of the coverage of the April 25 commemorations was positive, emphasising the importance and solemnity of the occasion (see, for example, Baggoley, 2004; Kirkman, 2014b; Lest we forget, 2004; 2014; They remembered, 1974) and ongoing public commitment to it. However, where this was missing, it was reflected in news coverage that noted disruption by "bikies" (Sawyer & Battersby, 2014) or "drunks and louts" (Booth & Lynch, 2004), sending clear messages in both content and tone about expected behaviour.

Promotion of local interests

Local interest was another theme at the heart of the front-page coverage, and one that was presented in a variety of ways, from an emphasis on protecting the broader interests of a regional community (see, for example, Jensen, 2004) to promotion of local businesses (or local branches of larger companies). Historically, news convention favoured separation of the editorial and advertising functions of newspapers – although the growth of "native advertising" and other shifts in the media landscape are breaking this down – but the barrier has always been more porous in regional areas than in metropolitan publishing. Most regional newspapers have traditionally been heavily dependent on local advertising, and thus willing to promote local business; something that may also serve to promote local interests (Alysen et al., 2011).

This can be seen in *The Ararat Advertiser*'s reports – in editions a decade apart – of the local "Crazy Day" sale in the town's main street (Crazy for a bargain, 1994; Crazy sights on a crazy day for businesses, 1994; In Crazy Day spirit, 1994; *The Ararat Advertiser*, 2004a; 2004b). Other publications noted the opening of new premises or new ventures: the opening of a gas showroom merited front-page coverage in 1984 (New gas showrooms, 1984), while a new shopping centre (Pattison-Sowden, 2014), shoe store (Thompson, 2014) and childcare centre (Childcare centre opened, 1994) were also highlighted. In 2014, the *Sunraysia Daily* reported on the reopening of Mildura's original lolly shop (Sweet! Original lolly shop returns, 2014). Projects that would or might create jobs were noted (see, for example, 350 jobs in $47m Port centre; August start, 1994; Big plans for 315ha vineyard, 1994; Bold ambition, 2014; Ore-some prospects, 2014). It was not possible to determine from the data the extent to which the coverage was linked to ongoing newspaper-advertiser relationships and commercial pressures on newspapers, but the analysis suggests newspapers support the idea of local interests being closely linked to the wellbeing of local business.

Local interest can also be seen in coverage of campaigns aimed at improving regional life, such as road safety, bushfire preparedness or health campaigns (Quit the killer habit, 1984; Rog-

ers, 1994; Lanzon, 1994b; Morello, 2004). While there may be a diversity of interests within regional communities, many of the campaigns promoted by the newspapers could be seen to be of broad benefit to people living in an area. Where campaigns were effective, communities were praised (Lanzon, 1994a; Police commend Easter drivers, 1994), but disapproval was expressed towards people who did not or might not "do the right thing". Such moral judgements can be seen as indicative of both the norms and sanctions associated with social capital.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, the data show a high degree of thematic consistency over time and across publications. While this was a qualitative rather than quantitative study, there are clear trends across the dataset that suggest that the emphasis of regional news on newspaper front pages has changed relatively little in recent decades, and that localness is still the dominant narrative. Even at a time when regional news is increasingly shared across publications and where resources for generating local news are decreasing, this study suggests that the front pages at least retain an overwhelming focus on local news. This is likely to flow through to news websites, as the main stories on a website tend to reflect the stories featured most prominently in print. However, it is beyond the scope of the study reported here to consider the extent to which this emphasis on localness was carried through to subsequent pages of the print newspapers. Generic or shared content – news stories of general interest to regional communities and available to all publications within a regional newspaper company – is more likely to appear on pages other than p. 1. The reduction in localism that results from shared content is a growing issue amid ongoing consolidation and centralisation of news resources (Hess & Waller, 2017, p. 4), but its impact on the front pages even in the later years of the dataset appeared to be minimal. This may suggest that local news resources are concentrated on what are seen as key stories which are most likely to appear at the front of a newspaper.

Given the high degree of visibility of the front page to both readers and non-readers of a newspaper, the narratives about regional life it presents are particularly pertinent to consideration of the messages being conveyed about community and identity. The themes evident in this study across the newspapers and over time highlight a number of ideas associated with regional life: that communities need to work together in the face of external threats; that the achievements, participation and involvement of local people in local life are valued; and that the interests of regional communities should be promoted and protected. Their prominence on front pages suggests these are elements of regional life that are valued in Australian towns and districts – or at least that this is the perception in regional newsrooms.

Whether the picture of regional life that newspaper front pages convey reflects lived experience for people in a region – or resonates with those outside – is a question that requires further research. However, the dominance of the key themes over time suggests this is a picture that is embedded in the decisionmaking processes of regional newsrooms and replicated on a regular and ongoing basis. The choices of news stories, the topics on which they focus and the ways in which the stories are told – the gatekeeping, agenda-setting and framing practices of newsrooms that are part of the routines of news (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Gans, 1979) – reinforce this narrative of regional Australia. This can be seen to reflect Anderson's idea of "imagined communities", with the geographical communities highlighted on the front pages of the newspapers in this study imagined in ways that support an emphasis on the people and interests of a region.

This study indicates that ideas of localism remain central to regional news coverage – at least on newspaper front pages. News on these pages is predominantly local in focus across publications and over time, contributing to audiences' capacity to "imagine themselves as part of a community, connected in part through their shared local news medium, bound together by more

than geographic proximity or politically defined administrative boundaries" (Nielsen, 2015, p. 1). This imagining is closely linked to social capital, as "local media help 'orient' us towards each other within a shared geography" (Nielsen, 2015, p. 16). The emphasis on local people, issues and events that is evident across the newspapers in this dataset supports newspapers' contribution to the three elements of social capital identified by Halpern (2005): in facilitating communication they provide a network; in reporting on achievements and participation they demonstrate norms, values and expectations; and in reporting on responses to "inappropriate" behaviour they demonstrate sanctions. This provides messages to regional communities about what it means to be part of these communities, and the expectations that flow from this.

These ideas of social capital and community engagement are not necessarily uniformly positive, and there are complexities associated with them that a survey of newspaper front pages cannot reveal. For example, while the term "community" has wide currency in regional Australia in describing people co-located within a town or region, "to describe geographic spaces simply as 'communities' can mislead us into thinking their inhabitants exist together harmoniously for the sake of the collective" (Hess & Waller, 2017, p. 8) – despite the dominance of geography as a marker of community in regional Australia (Bowd, 2010), it is not in itself a guarantee of community. It also does not consider changes in understandings of community over time. Further, analysis of newspaper coverage cannot take into account the influence of local power relationships on news agendas and framing. Internationally, studies have identified politicians and government officials as the most frequently cited local sources, followed by local business (Nielsen, 2015, p. 13), and Bowd has similarly identified authoritative sources as disproportionately influential on local news coverage in Australia (2015) This points to one of the negative elements of social capital – that not everyone has equal access to networks (Halpern, 2005, p. 24).

Nonetheless, the extent of the dominance of the narrative of localness detected on the front pages of the newspapers in this study indicates its centrality to the ways in which news topics are selected and framed in regional newsrooms. The ongoing place of localness in news agendas across publications and over time suggests that it is fundamental both to the ways in which newspapers contribute to the imagining of regional communities and to newspapers' role in the development and maintenance of the elements of social capital outlined by Halpern (2005). Even at a time when the localness of many newspapers is being reduced by decreasing newsroom resources and increasing copy sharing, the emphasis on front pages of narratives that promote local interests and local people indicate the extent to which these narratives are embedded in newsroom decisionmaking. This in turn shapes the understandings of community and identity that are being communicated to regional newspaper audiences.

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