Article

Examining the Social, Civic, and Political Impact of Local Newspaper Closure in Outback Australia

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Abstract
Scholars across the globe have focused intently on mapping news deserts and gaps where public interest journalism is lacking or in peril. However, little attention is paid to understanding the impacts and changing media-related practices of people who live in communities that lose a designated news service—notably a local newspaper. This article draws on a focused ethnographic study of a small outback mining town, Lightning Ridge (population 2,284), in central New South Wales, Australia. The research was conducted over a two-month period and involved participant observation, 31 interviews with residents and relevant stakeholders, and examination of several media platforms relevant to the town. The article begins with an overview of Australian policy interventions to address the decline of public interest journalism. It then discusses the impact of a local newspaper's closure via three themes—social, civic, and political. This is important because much of the policy focus in Australia is on the threat "news gaps" present to democracy. However, it is also necessary to understand the nuances of local media's role in shaping everyday social connections and ritualistic practices and elevating issues to local networks of power. The article concludes by considering how current policy interventions can learn from failed attempts to fill the news gap in Lightning Ridge.

Keywords
local journalism; local newspapers; news gaps; news deserts; rural media

1. Introduction

For more than a decade, Australian local news outlets have grappled with the transition into digital spaces and battled the loss of advertising revenue (Abernathy, 2018), exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Hess & Waller, 2021). This has concerned academics, industry leaders, and policymakers alike because news and journalism occupy important places in democratic societies. The ongoing closures of local newsrooms have created what has been coined "news gaps" in many communities, where residents are left with sparse or no media spaces for local news (Gulyas, 2021). However, there is little research that comprehensively examines the impact of news closures on regional or rural communities, espe-

cially in Australia. This article draws on data gathered during a focused ethnography in the small Australian opal mining town of Lightning Ridge in outback New South Wales, which in 2015 lost its local newspaper, *The Ridge News*. *The Ridge News* was one of 106 local and regional newspapers that shut down between 2008 and 2018 because of economic challenges faced by its parent company Fairfax Media (Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2020). However, there has been little research that has examined everyday media practices in areas that have been deprived of public interest journalism.

This article divides its findings into three themes: political, social, and civic. While these terms are often used interchangeably—see Putnam's (1995) use of the terms social capital and civic, for example—in this article

they are unpacked to explore the nuances of how a newspaper's closure impacts people's lived experiences. The article begins with an overview of scholarship on news gaps, before outlining changes across the Australian local news landscape. It then explores Lightning Ridge's current media ecology to determine how residents receive their local news and information in the absence of a newspaper. It also discusses how people have attempted to replace *The Ridge News* during this time and the challenges that have prohibited their success such as time, resources, and journalistic experience. The article then shifts to examine the political functions of local news and its role in informing citizens about governmental institutions and affairs (McNair, 2012). This is followed by the impact within the broader social sphere, notably the loss of ritualistic practices that bind people together through a sense of community (Hess & Gutsche, 2018). Finally, we explore the civic impact through the lens of Dahlgren's (2003) civic culture, with a particular focus on how information sharing generates civic engagement at the intersection of political and social life.

1.1. Studying News Gaps

In this study, "news gaps" are defined as geographic areas where no professional journalists work to provide relevant, quality, and accurate information. While there is early literature on this phenomenon (Berelson, 1949), news gaps became of serious concern when the mass closure of newspapers threatened democratic models across the globe. Since then, they have been referred to as "news gaps," "news deserts," or "news deficits" (Barnett & Townend, 2014; Ferrier, 2014; Gulyas, 2021; Howells, 2015). However, there has been a lack of conceptualisation around news gaps, with the term largely used as a descriptor of poor information provisions. Ferrier (2014) for example, uses "news desert" to describe the lack of news in a community information ecosystem. However, she also uses "media deserts" to highlight a larger framework and delivery of content such as news, information, and conversation. Barnett and Townend (2014) and Howells (2015) position a "news gap" as populations being left with little information about their local communities, either in towns or cities with severely reduced journalistic presence. Gulyas (2021) summarises this as the diminished availability, access, or use of local news or media in a community in a geographical area. Furthermore, the platforms and practices that may step in to provide local news beyond traditional news outlets warrant consideration when assessing the full impacts of news gaps. This assists with understanding the challenges presented by people who seek to fill the void with alternate media (Barnett & Townend, 2014; Magasic & Hess, 2021).

Efforts have been undertaken across the globe to identify and map news gaps across rural regions where communities more heavily rely on local newspapers (Gulyas, 2021). In the US, more than 24,000 journalist jobs and 60 local newspapers were lost during the Covid-19 pandemic (Claussen, 2020; Hare, 2021). Preceding this, The Media Deserts Project (see http://www.mediadeserts.com) was created to provide an interactive map that showcases areas lacking access to local news and information (Ferrier, 2018). In Canada, newspaper closures are tracked by the Local News Research Project. It found that approximately 215 newspapers closed between 2008 and 2020, and another 28 closed in the first four months of 2020 (Lindgren et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community in the UK found more than 200 local newspapers closed since 2005, with many others reducing the number of issues printed (Ramsay et al., 2017). Once again, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the closure of several more (Evans, 2020). However, these studies lack a detailed exploration of the effects of local news closures on people's lived experiences.

1.1.1. The Australian Context

The Covid-19 pandemic also exacerbated the dire media landscape in Australia. From April 2020 dozens of local and suburban newspapers closed (some temporarily), unable to remain viable without advertising revenue (Dickson, 2020). Australia's two biggest newspaper publishers, News Corp and Nine, stopped or suspended the printing of more than 100 local newspapers (Dickson, 2020). This followed a 10-year period from 2008 to 2018 when 106 local and regional newspaper titles closed across the country (Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2020). These closures left 21 of Australia's 537 local government areas without local newspaper coverage. Of these 21 local government areas, 16 were in regional Australia (Dickson, 2020). This includes the newspaper at the centre of this study, *The Ridge News*, which was operated by the now-defunct Fairfax Media. The newspapers that survived the transition to the digital era and the Covid-19 pandemic also had to contend with rising production overheads. In 2022, rising freight and energy costs along with paper supply issues led industry leaders to speculate that production costs could nearly double for some local newspapers (Young, 2022).

The Australian policy response to this economic situation has lacked a cohesive strategy. The first initiative was rolled out in 2018. The AU$60.4 million package of subsidies, grants, and scholarships was designed to support local journalism projects, hire cadets, and fund digital innovation (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 2021). Eligible publications had an annual turnover of between AU$150,000 and AU$30 million and were unaffiliated with a political party or lobby group. It funded 200 cadetships and 60 regional journalism scholarships but was criticised for not addressing news sustainability or assisting publications making below the required turnover (Hess & Waller, 2020).

Another government attempt to raise funding was to force companies such as Facebook and Google to pay legacy media companies for news searched through their services (referred to as the Mandatory Bargaining Code). In response, Facebook temporarily blocked users from sharing and posting news, which forced the Australian Government to renegotiate the legislation (Snape, 2021). The bill was legislated in February 2021, with media companies negotiating confidential payments from the social media giants to compensate for the news people search and share online. These conditions favour Australia's big media companies because it is only available to established publications with annual revenue above AU$150,000 (Snape, 2021). While the long-term impacts of these initiatives on local news are unknown, they have so far failed to prevent further closures of rural news services. This makes it important to interrogate what the consequences are for communities that are left in a news gap.

2. Understanding the Impacts of News Gaps

This article views the impact of a newspaper's closure through the prism of three key themes: political, social, and civic. This is necessary to provide fine-grained insight into the various roles a local news outlet has in a community to encourage evidence-based interventions among policymakers and those interested in investing in local news ecosystems.

2.1. The Political

Political impact refers to actions that influence government decisions and political outcomes (Ekman & Amnå, 2022, p. 384). Here, political practices relate directly to government institutions like parliaments, police and courts, the people elected to and employed by them, and the prescribed channels for engaging with them. These channels can include voting, writing to elected representatives, or signing petitions to enact political change. Through its fourth estate function within the public sphere, the media scrutinises powerful institutions through an objective and balanced account of issues and political affairs (Nielsen, 2015). Nielsen (2015, p. 9) contends that journalists see this as their most important role in a liberal representative democracy. On a local level, without local news, constituents may feel unrepresented and trust in local government diminishes (Freeman & Hutchins, 2016). Howells (2015, p. 80) describes the reduction in political engagement experienced in a news gap as a "democratic deficit," which is characterised by "the inability of the people either to give their mandate, or to have their will carried out." In rural and metropolitan contexts alike, local newspapers with reduced financial resources lead to fewer local journalists being hired to report on politics. With smaller budgets, the news they produce is not of sufficient quality and quantity to perform the fourth estate function

(Carson et al., 2016). Carson et al. (2016, p. 132) write that publications increasingly depend on official sources rather than "shoe leather" journalism.

Because of the emphasis on journalism's political functions, studies that do examine the impact of news gaps mostly focus on measuring voter turnout and knowledge of political issues (Hayes & Lawless, 2015, 2018). Hayes and Lawless (2018) for example, analyse more than 10,000 stories about US House campaigns in 2010 and 2014 to link a decline in the volume of political news to reductions in citizens' political knowledge and voter turnout. Howells (2015), meanwhile, combines content analysis, interviews, and focus groups to argue that when a Welsh local newspaper shut down the town's residents lost an outlet to have their mandate heard and felt uninformed about local political news, which is corroborated in this article.

2.2. The Social

While the public sphere is associated with how people engage politically, it is one aspect of the broader social sphere (Hess & Gutsche, 2018). Hess and Gutsche (2018) argue journalism scholarship on the "social" is at times overshadowed by research on the role of social media, at the expense of fully extrapolating news media's social function. They build on Durkheim (1982), who defines the social as the conventions and rules that exist outside of legal and political institutions that bind people into a society (Durkheim, 1982, p. 50). It is from this that local media shape rituals and practices that bind people together and connect them with each other (Bowd, 2011). These rituals and practices can be banal like meeting people at the news agency to buy the weekly paper, or to do with life and death rituals such as placing a death notice in the classifieds (Couldry, 2003; Hess, 2016b).

In the digital era, local newspapers still construct social conventions in the rural and regional towns they operate (Hess & Gutsche, 2018). Ali et al. (2018), for example, list the local newspaper's functions that fall outside its democratic roles such as acting as the symbolic community centre, telling the community about itself, and setting standards and norms. Without a local newspaper performing these roles, people perceive their community as weaker because they are disconnected from their peers and neighbours (Mathews, 2020).

2.3. The Civic

While the civic is often associated with the political (Hess, 2016a; Putnam, 1995), it intersects with social and cultural elements and creates the foundation for political participation to occur (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Ekman and Amnå (2012), for example, list volunteering to improve conditions in the local community as civic engagement because volunteers are needed to plug the gap that government services cannot fill. The authors also use legal and illegal protests to distinguish the civic

from the political. While a legal protest is a political act because it exists within the confines of the law and other governmental structures, illegal protests are born from communities and movements that exist adjacent to these institutions (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Journalism scholars have also used the term "civic" to describe participating in politics, a person's duty to society, or furthering the common good (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). The cultural shift in media studies, meanwhile, also adopts the "hunch" that studying people's conversations and practices can tell us much about civic participation (Hess, 2016a). Dahlgren (2003) views the civic as a social storehouse that is drawn upon to enact political participation. The media's role in Dahlgren's (2003) concept of civic culture is central to understanding the impacts of news gaps in this article. For a civic culture to exist people need a shared identity and set of values and to share a historic precedent of action. Binding these all together is a shared source of information. News or information shared through local newspapers or other media can instigate a population to sign petitions, fundraise, or protest (Dahlgren, 2003). In the sections that follow, we will provide an overview of Lightning Ridge's existing information ecosystem, before outlining the methods adopted to explore the political, social, and civic impact of *The Ridge News*' closure.

3. Lightning Ridge's Information Ecosystem

Lightning Ridge is a remote town in outback New South Wales, approximately nine hour's drive from both Sydney and Brisbane (715 km and 721 km, respectively) and located near the Queensland border. It is the only place in the world where black opal is mined and many people live in the surrounding opal fields. While the population was recorded as 2,284 in the 2016 census, it can swell to 5,000 during the milder months of winter when people return to mine opal (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016; Moritz & Thompson, 2009). Lightning Ridge's newspaper, *The Ridge News*, started in 1991 as an independently-owned weekly publication before being bought by Rural Press in 1995 and then sold to media giant Fairfax in 2006. Like many local newspapers across Australia, it was shut down in 2015 as the company undertook a major restructuring effort.

During fieldwork Lightning Ridge residents expressed that there was still strong demand for a local newspaper and a need for a dedicated and independent local news service. There have also been attempts at replacing *The Ridge News*. However, these attempts have either failed or do not adequately fill the gap left by *The Ridge News*. One example was a short-lived A4 newsletter that generated revenue through a cover charge and advertising space. The owner launched it the year after *The Ridge News* shut down and printed it from their garage before distributing it to various shops and sometimes selling them door-to-door. The owner did not have journalistic experience and the newsletter eventually folded because of economic reasons, notably the lack of time needed to produce a regular publication. Lightning Ridge residents also have access to several Facebook pages that circulate information. This includes one titled The Northwest News which was also started to fill the void left by *The Ridge News*. It is operated by a local woman who balances family life with working at the local school and other volunteering commitments. She started the Facebook page to bring together the information she wanted to know but could not find in one convenient location. However, again because of time constraints she mostly collects and shares press releases relevant to Lightning Ridge. This means that while the Facebook page is somewhat useful to Lightning Ridge residents, it does not adequately provide original news content. Compounding this problem is the fact that like other remote Australian towns (Freeman & Hutchins, 2016), Lightning Ridge's isolation and distance from capital cities means digital connectivity is poor and use of the internet is low, particularly among the town's older population. Only 57% of Lightning Ridge homes are connected to the internet and approximately 44% of residents are aged over 55. The national averages are 82.5% and 28%, respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Along with Facebook pages, Lightning Ridge residents make use of passing on local news via word of mouth and through flyers and notice boards found around town. While typical in small towns, these two methods have significant drawbacks. Word of mouth is only effective for residents who can rely on their personal connections. This meant information would not travel on the grapevine to people who had just moved to town or did not hold prominent positions. The flyers pinned up around town and on notice boards mostly provided a classifieds service. They were put up at the whims of residents, so the information was not timely and sometimes out of date. Older residents confined to their homes also found it difficult to travel into town to read them. Furthermore, residents do not have access to a relevant local TV news service and the community radio station plays a regional bulletin produced in Bathurst, approximately 550 km from Lightning Ridge.

While *The Ridge News* was the community's only reliable and dedicated local news service, it is important not to glorify the publication as a shining example of public interest journalism—it consisted of six pages of news, produced by one journalist. The journalist was unable to attend council meetings and news coverage subsequently relied heavily on press releases. Regardless, fieldwork revealed that the local newspaper was an indispensable tool for spreading social and political news, something the other communication channels have not replicated.

4. Methods

A two-month focused ethnography was undertaken in Lightning Ridge between July and September 2019 (Knoblauch, 2005; Maggs-Rapport, 2000). Focused

ethnographies are grounded in phenomenology and make use of the participants' and researchers' individual experiences. Like traditional ethnographies, focused ethnographies capture the social meaning and cultural context. However, they are guided by research questions and examine niche issues rather than capturing the workings of an entire culture or society (Knoblauch, 2005; Maggs-Rapport, 2000). The research questions that guided this study were:

- What social, cultural, and political impact does a local newspaper's closure in rural Australia have within the geographic spaces it once served?
- What communications channels replace the loss of a local news outlet and what do people's media-related practices tell us about their effectiveness in providing local news and information?

In focused ethnographies, the researcher actively participates and engages within the setting to gain a similar shared experience to those they are studying. This is different to traditional ethnographies, where the researcher does not have an active role in meaning-making and knowledge creation and more commonly observes how things are done (Knoblauch, 2005). Because focused ethnographies are grounded in phenomenology, the researcher is interpreting the participant's experience. They bring forward and unpack a more detailed meaning that lies behind their interview subject's narratives and make it available to an audience (Maggs-Rapport, 2000).

Within this focused ethnography, the lead researcher spent more than two and a half months living in Lightning Ridge, attending events, shopping, talking regularly with locals and observing day-to-day life. The researcher engaged in participant observation by volunteering at a popular gem and jewellery trade show, attending church services and council meetings, and going to social events such as a weekly pool competition. Data for this article was gathered from 31 semi-structured interviews, two discussion groups held in a church hall and at a Rotary Club meeting, and participant observation. The participants who took part in the interviews and discussion groups and who were spoken to during participant observation were demographically diverse. They included people ranging in age from their early 20s to late 70s, working in a variety of professions and trades, and with mixed durations of residency in Lightning Ridge. This was done to gather the widest range of experiences possible of how people were impacted when *The Ridge News* shut down. People who held community leadership positions, such as councillors, former journalists, and heads of volunteer organisations, were interviewed for their knowledge of how *The Ridge News* interacted with political, social, and civic institutions. Other participants were recruited through chance encounters in the field.

Recordings from the interviews and discussion groups were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis and discussed in relevant sections and subsections. Thematic analysis was deemed as the most efficient method for understanding the dozens of personal experiences captured in the several data-gathering methods.

5. Findings

This section discusses how participants were impacted when *The Ridge News* shut down using the theories and concepts relating to local news's political, social, and civic functions. Scholars commonly consider these themes (see Table 1) as representing the most important functions of news and journalism (Carson et al., 2016; Hess & Gutsche, 2018).

5.1. Loss of Political Engagement and Voice to Power

Existing literature on news gaps demonstrates that when a local newspaper shuts down, people become less informed about local political issues and the candidates who represent them (Hayes & Lawless, 2018; Howells, 2015). Lightning Ridge resident Richard Coen lives in an opal field camp about 3 km from town and used to rely on the local newspaper for political information. With no local news bulletin on the radio or TV, nor internet connection at his camp, he has struggled to adapt to Lightning Ridge's fragmented media ecosystem and missed a town hall meeting:

Table 1. Political, social, and civic impacts Lightning Ridge residents experienced when *The Ridge News* shut down.

Political	Social	Civic
Missed town hall meetings	Missed social events	Difficulty in distributing drought relief
Loss of voice to lobby for political power	Lower sporting match attendance	Drop in volunteer numbers
	Lower funeral attendance	Difficulty for civic institutions to promote themselves
Damaged relationship between council and citizens	Sense of isolation and loss of social connection	Decline in civic discussion and participation
	Loosening of the social fabric	

They had a [townhall meeting with] the politicians on the other day….The only reason I found out about it was because of a white bit of paper on a telegraph poll outside the newsagents….I looked at the date and I [had] missed it. (Interview, July 9, 2019)

Residents also lamented losing an outlet to express their opinions about governmental decisions (Nielsen, 2015). For example, in 2019, government funding was cut to the local charity Food For Families, which provides cheap food, fuel vouchers, and other essential services for up to 50 socially disadvantaged families per day. Without *The Ridge News*, residents said they did not have a reliable and credible outlet to discuss or challenge this decision (Nielsen, 2015). Another example was the closure of the local Centrelink office in 2018, which left the closest office an hour's drive away in the town of Walgett. Centrelink is an Australian governmental organisation that distributes social welfare payments and services, an important institution in Lightning Ridge which has a disadvantaged and elderly population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Reflecting on these decisions, Catholic Church committee member Candy Tape commented:

> People are making decisions about the town from out there with no input from us and there is no avenue of reply when things like that happen. People would be writing letters to the paper and we would all know about it, or writing to ministers or local members. (Interview, August 25, 2019)

This demonstrates the important role a local newspaper plays in speaking up to political power and advocating on behalf of a local community (Bowd, 2011). The loss of important government and social services demonstrates the information that falls through the cracks within a news gap.

While it is important to highlight that some residents suggested *The Ridge News* did not comprehensively cover political news, local governments still need journalists to maintain their relationship with the public (Freeman & Hutchins, 2016). In Lightning Ridge, councillors said *The Ridge News* was a barometer of public opinion. In particular, the "Letters to the Editor" section informed councillors about what issues most concerned the public. Deputy Mayor Ian Woodcock said:

> It's harder for people to get the issues that they want addressed in front of councillors….You could write into the editor and they'd publish your letter if it had to do with council or roads or mining or anything at all. Well, now there's no conveyance for any of that, which is a shame. (Interview, August 6, 2019)

As is the case in other Australian localities, councillors prefer local media over other communication channels such as Facebook to maintain relationships with the public (Carson et al., 2016). This is despite an increasing num-ber of municipalities investing in their own information channels and advertising on social media (Freeman & Hutchins, 2016).

5.2. The Social Fabric Loosens

Lightning Ridge residents felt their social engagement with other community members had weakened since *The Ridge News*' closure (Hess & Gutsche, 2018). Participants missed social events that would have been advertised in the local newspaper and could no longer read about activities and events within the wider community, such as sports (Ali et al., 2018). Ashlee Brown used to manage the local rugby team and noticed older people stopped turning up to matches when the paper shut down:

> To get the word out about home games we would always put an ad in the paper and it would reach a huge audience. And when that wasn't available to us, [members] of the older community who didn't have Facebook wouldn't get reached. It would limit our numbers at football games. (Interview, September 2, 2019)

Participants felt that missing and not hearing about events gave them a sense of isolation and eroded their social connections. Scholars suggest the practice of reading the local newspaper creates a connection and familiarity with their town and community (Bowd, 2011). For example, an elderly man interviewed in the main street said he just "had to know" what was happening in the town to feel connected to others. He could not pinpoint what he wanted to know, rather that he wanted to be "in the know." Similarly, Melvin Samuelsson said he valued being in contact with parts of the population that were not immediately within his social circle:

> It was pretty bad because I guess you couldn't keep up with, like, the people from the golf club. The people who ran it are from an era where everything was written out on paper. They haven't got contact through Facebook or social media. I guess that connection to the golf course is gone. (Interview, September 2, 2019)

Samuelsson's experience is similar to the above examples because his world has become smaller and is not in contact with parts of the town he once was. The interviews reveal a clear theme of people drifting apart from each other and a perception that the unique spirit of the town is slowly changing.

People who live in a community need regular contact for that community to exist, whether it is reading about it in the pages of a local newspaper or being directed to events or happenings where people gather as community members (Ali et al., 2018). This was summarised by Sally Weeks who grew up in Lightning Ridge and used to run the news agency:

I think especially in small communities it's not like there's a lot happening. So the opportunity for everyone to get together, just catch up and enjoy each other's company is what small communities are built on. Everyone pitches in and it doesn't matter what you do or who you are. And when you don't have access to that information I think the fabric of your community loosens. (Interview, August 24, 2019)

One implication of the local newspaper's closure is the impact on information about funeral details (Hess, 2016b). Several participants reported personally missing a funeral they would have attended if *The Ridge News* was still in circulation, demonstrating how entwined the local newspaper is with rituals surrounding death (Couldry, 2003; Hess, 2016b). Nick Lohse is 32 years old and grew up in Lightning Ridge and lamented missing a neighbour's funeral: "I've actually been surprised. Old Pissant Tommy died, well his funeral was last week and that's one I would have gone to if I knew about it" (interview, August 6, 2019).

Local undertaker Ormond Molyneux said in 2019 four people had approached him to say they had missed a funeral. He also noticed a drop in attendance since the newspaper's closure. He said: "You think you're going to get 50 at a funeral but you get 10 or 15. Which is a bit sad" (interview, September 5, 2019).

5.3. Lightning Ridge's Civic Culture

As noted earlier, Dahlgren (2003) lists factors such as shared identity and affinity with institutions that lay the foundations for a civic culture to exist. For these practices and actions to happen, his model requires a shared information source and in Lightning Ridge, *The Ridge News* was the medium for these discussions. With its closure participants found there was an absence of civic discussion and participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Consider this comment from Lightning Ridge resident Dot Thompson:

I'd really like to have a go in the newspaper about a [invasive] vine that's killing our gumtrees….If we made people aware of these things in our newspaper maybe we could get rid of it….In our newspaper years ago I organised a working bee to tidy up the cemetery. I bring the coffee and you bring the gloves. Because of that effort…our cemetery is spick and span. (Interview, August 1, 2019)

Thompson said that over 20 people answered her call through the local newspaper to clean the cemetery. Another way in which *The Ridge News* contributed to civic culture was by enlisting volunteers, something Kimbo Field did more often when *The Ridge News* was in circulation:

I've heard of things that have happened and thought I would have been there to help or contribute to

[them]. So if I read the paper I could say ok, next week there is a charity for someone's kids, or Daffodil Day or Pink Ribbon Day. (Interview, August 24, 2019)

Local newspapers typically boost initiatives that benefit their town and reinforce what is considered good (Bowd, 2011; Hess, 2016a). In small towns, not-for-profit civic institutions play a large role in filling the service gap that government is unable to provide. They rely on local media for fundraising and to rally volunteers. The Australian Opal Centre (AOC) is a volunteer-run museum focused on the natural history of Lightning Ridge. At the time of fieldwork, it was fundraising to build a multimillion-dollar research and museum facility which would be one of the main tourist attractions in Outback Australia. Former volunteer coordinator Vicki Bokros spoke of the broader impact that *The Ridge News* had on volunteer numbers: "I had no way of finding [people] that are retired that could volunteer….Whereas with the paper, our ad would say volunteers needed for 'this'" (interview, August 28, 2019).

Without *The Ridge News*, more hours are spent on promotion through Lightning Ridge's fragmented media ecosystem and the day-to-day running of civic institutions was more difficult. While turnout to AOC events has not dropped, more hours have to be devoted to informing Lightning Ridge residents about them. The AOC uses social media, printout notices, direct email, and letter box drops. Speaking from her position as AOC special projects manager Jenni Brammall said:

Sometimes we provided copy for the newspaper and they would run the copy as provided and photographs and so on, maybe to report on an event or a new acquisition for the fossil collection, or to talk about our volunteer program and put a call out for new volunteers….It's become much more difficult for us to really infiltrate parts of the community that the paper used to. (Interview, August 5, 2019)

At the time of fieldwork, the Lightning Ridge Rotary Club had also undertaken considerable fundraising for drought relief, which in the past would have been distributed using the newspaper. Now Rotary members raise awareness through their Facebook page and the local high school, approaches that do not have the same reach as *The Ridge News* (Carson et al., 2016). Consider this comment from Rotary Club member John Bevan: "It's harder to raise money for drought relief without the newspaper and distribute it to where it needs to go. Farmers have no idea we are doing it so if they don't put their hand up, they miss out" (interview, September 2, 2019).

6. Conclusion

This article uses a focused ethnography to demonstrate the multifaceted ways residents living in Lightning Ridge were impacted when *The Ridge News* shut down. It uses

the political, social, and civic (see Table 1) to explore the different functions of a newspaper and to tease out the implications of its closure. This approach has illuminated that while local newspapers play an important role in maintaining a town's public sphere, it is one that encompasses many aspects of everyday life (Hess & Gutsche, 2018). Participants listed a myriad of impacts such as missing funerals and volunteer opportunities, a drop in local sporting matches, and being unaware of people who require assistance. They also missed political events or were denied the chance to participate in processes. These examples led participants to say they felt voiceless in response to decisions made by governmental organisations and that the social fabric had loosened since *The Ridge News*' closure. This also meant that information did not flow to institutions and individuals that held positions of power in Lightning Ridge. Council members and local politicians are now less exposed to criticism and also lack an important avenue to gauge public opinion on issues affecting Lightning Ridge. Residents also had more difficulty elevating information to the wider community to take advantage of the town's civic culture, which was seen to be an important avenue for addressing issues that existed alongside and were separate from Lightning Ridge's political institutions. A commonality woven through the three themes presented in this article was that something was missing or had declined and that the community was weaker without a local newspaper. This is an important point because while the results examined in this article are specific to Lightning Ridge, more than 100 local and regional newspapers have shut down in the past decade indicating how widespread the issue of news gaps is (Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2020).

Despite there being clear public demand and the need for a dedicated source of local news in Lightning Ridge, a successful replacement has also not yet been found. This is not from a lack of effort as attempts have been made by individuals to start either print or online sources of local news. The research shows that cost, funding support, and lack of journalistic expertise prohibit people from replacing the local newspaper, as seen with the small amount of time a community member was able to dedicate to the Northwest News Facebook page. It should also be noted that although Facebook is celebrated as being central to facilitating mediated social connection, people still felt the local newspaper was superior in enhancing their social connection over the many Facebook pages operating in Lightning Ridge. This suggests that journalists, policymakers, and academics must appreciate the various ways that local news outlets benefit a community when adequately resourced. It is also an important consideration given Australia's Media Bargaining Code and the fact that the recent round of subsidy support does not recognise new start-up enterprises. This was also a broader criticism from media commentators, that the code favoured bigger and established media conglomerates and subsidies provided to

the sector have so far ignored support for start-up ventures (Hess & Waller, 2020; Snape, 2021).

An area that policymakers should look to address in future is where and how they can best support new start-ups in areas identified as being in news "deserts" or especially vulnerable to information gaps. This could be via support for journalism training or funding for production or wages. Policymakers could also look to successful local newspapers to understand what differentiates them from *The Ridge News* and the attempts made by individuals to plug the news gap in Lightning Ridge.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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