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# THE CONVERSATION

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## Without local papers, regional voices would struggle to be heard

### AUTHORS



**Lisa Waller**

Senior Lecturer in Journalism at Deakin University



**Kristy Hess**

Senior Lecturer in Journalism at Deakin University



If Kiama residents want to know what's happening in their town, the local newspaper is generally the only place they'll be able to read about it. Gavin Anderson/Flickr , CC BY-NC-SA

After residents in the NSW coastal town of Kiama woke to the sound of emergency sirens earlier this week, chances are they grabbed a copy of the local newspaper, the Independent, to find out about the house fire in a nearby street.

In the same edition, locals discovered a man had held up a cafe with a screwdriver and that kingfish weren't biting off the coast – but that the impending full moon should soon change that. Back a few pages, in births, deaths and marriages, were funeral and sympathy notices for a great-grandmother, 87, who had died peacefully.

That kind of news is available only in the local paper. It's not the type of journalism that topples governments or uncovers the latest celebrity scandal, but the role of the local newspaper is arguably just as important.

Local news outlets help connect people and keep them in touch with the places and events where they live(d) or work. Importantly, they keep an eye on councils, courts and police in the interests of democracy.

## Death toll of titles soars

But the digital era is taking its toll on regional and rural media. Newspaper sales and advertising revenues are in parlous health in many countries, including Australia. The Finkelstein inquiry identified a need to protect, or bolster, the types of news and information channels available to people across regional and rural Australia.

Hundreds of local British papers have bitten the dust since 2006 and the signs are that small newspapers in Australia could suffer the same fate. This week it was reported that two consultancy reports for Fairfax Media had put between 30 and 65 of the company's regional and rural papers on a watch list for closure. The Kiama Independent is one of them.

Fairfax dismissed the article as "speculative hype". The ABC reported that its spokesman said The Australian was "comprehensively misinformed" about Fairfax's commitment to its regional mastheads and the story was based on outdated material.

The company's response provides some reassurance. However, Fairfax owns such a big slice of Australia's regional press that reports it has considered shedding scores of mastheads underline the need to take stock of the health and future of the rural and regional media ecosystem.



The Fairfax-Rural Press merger of 2007 expanded the media giant, but also left many small, local papers vulnerable to cost-cutting and even extinction. AAP/Sergio Dionisio

The Finkelstein report noted that a particular concern was that many local newspapers had limited resources and consequently low capacity for in-depth coverage of local issues. It suggested regional media could benefit from financial support from government to help overcome the "shortcomings in journalistic surveillance and the richness of the media environment felt most at local levels, outside the major cities". Finkelstein noted:

*There is some evidence that both regional radio and television stations and newspapers have cut back substantially on their newsgathering, leaving some communities poorly served for local news. This may require particular support in the immediate future, and I recommend that this issue be investigated as a matter of some urgency.*

## How can we sustain diverse, local voices?

The UK is arguably at the forefront of research in this area. The Media Plurality Project is reviewing changes to media-ownership rules at the local level to consider what policies might address the growing news gaps across the country. It is looking at the nature, efficacy and democratic potential of local online initiatives for answers.

UK academics such as Natalie Fenton have called for the introduction of local news hubs. Supported with funds from local authorities and foundations, these could bring together communities and professional journalists. The hubs would provide training, volunteer mentors and technical support for communities to identify, investigate and report local news. Fenton suggests local government advertising could support such hubs.

In the US, as newspapers and newsrooms get leaner, some scholars and commissions have called for the government to play a bigger role in ensuring the information needs of communities are met and accountability journalism is not neglected. Without local news services, the scholars argue, the very nature of American democracy is jeopardised.

Which brings us back to Australia. Researchers from Deakin University and the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra are developing a framework for investigating the state of the nation's regional media. We believe there is an urgent need to answer Finkelstein's call to identify potential "news gaps" and examine the quality of news provided outside metropolitan areas.

While papers such as the Kiama Independent appear safe for now, the local newspaper story in the UK presents a cautionary tale. Communities, policymakers and news industry bodies would be wise to heed the warning signs to ensure diversity and quality in Australia's regional media scene.