

Engaged Journalism

A Vision for Closer Connections



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

NEWS AND MEDIA
RESEARCH CENTRE



RMIT
UNIVERSITY

News, Technology,
& Society Network



DEAKIN
UNIVERSITY

ENGAGED JOURNALISM:

A VISION FOR CLOSER CONNECTIONS

**Sora Park
Kristy Hess
T. J. Thomson
Jee Young Lee
Janet Fulton**

Suggested citation: Park, S., Hess, K., Thomson, T. J., Lee, J. & Fulton, J. (2026). *Engaged Journalism: A Vision for Closer Connections*. University of Canberra, Deakin University, RMIT University. apo.org.au/node/335830

DOI: 10.60836/85hj-2m37

This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's LP220100121 Heartbeat of Australia: Tracking, understanding and engaging audiences; DE230101233 Addressing the Crisis of Local Visual News in Regional and Remote Australia; LP250200566 Exploring philanthropy to enhance the quality of civic discourse in Australia's 'news deserts' and local communities.

This report and accompanying workshop were supported by the Social Change Enabling Impact Platform at RMIT University, the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra, and the Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University.

Engaged Journalism: A Vision for Closer Connections is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License.

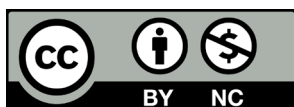


Table of contents

4	Background
8	Key findings and focus areas
10	Future vision and planning
11	Sampler of engaged journalism approaches
14	About the projects
16	About us
17	Selected further reading
18	Workshop program

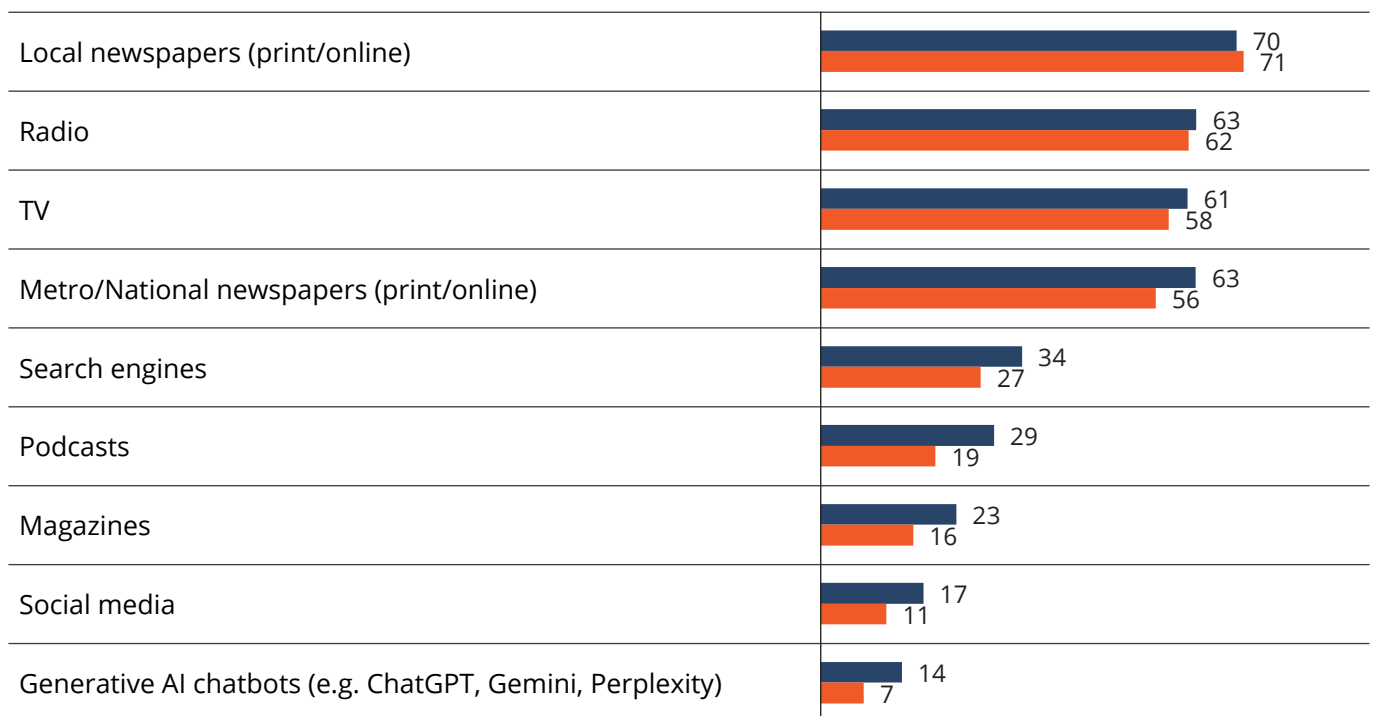
Background

In many regional¹ communities, local news is more than a source of information. It informs citizens, holds power to account, and provides a shared space to discuss and make sense of matters affecting the community. Yet just as trusted information is needed most, local news is disappearing from many parts of Australia. Newsrooms are shrinking, resources are stretched, and fewer journalists are available to cover the issues that matter to regional communities.

Regional audiences feel the lack of local news provision, and they are turning to alternative sources (i.e. social media), but are not satisfied with its quality and are concerned about misinformation. As a result, many are disengaging from news altogether, weakening the public conversations that underpin community cohesion.



FIGURE 1: Trust in news by platforms 2026 (%)

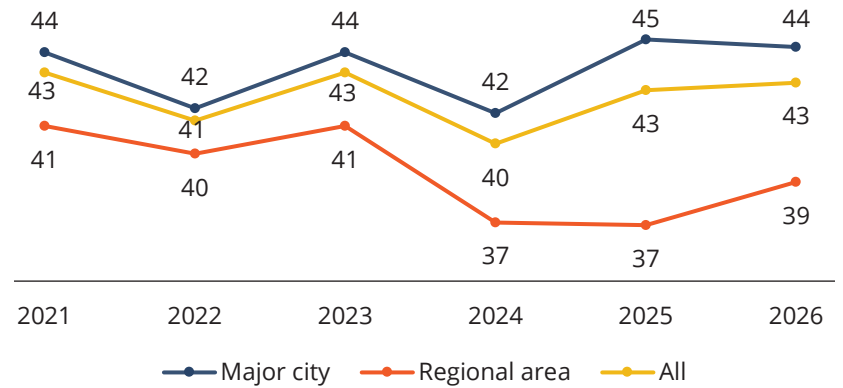
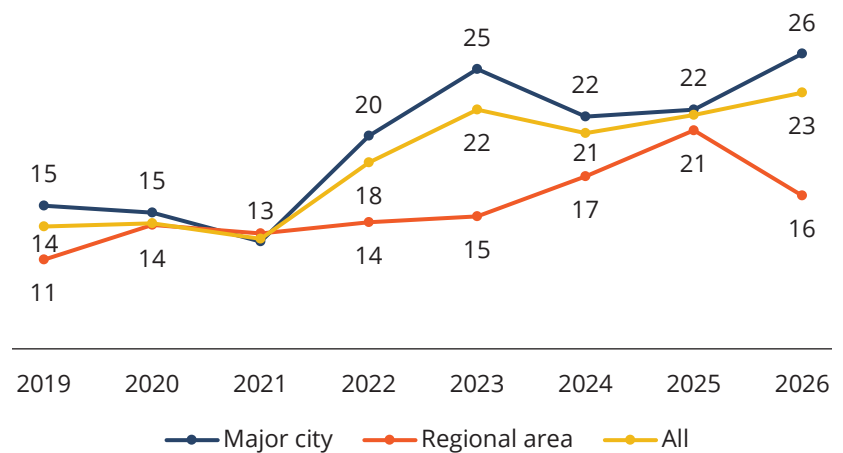


Source: Heartbeat of Australia 2026²

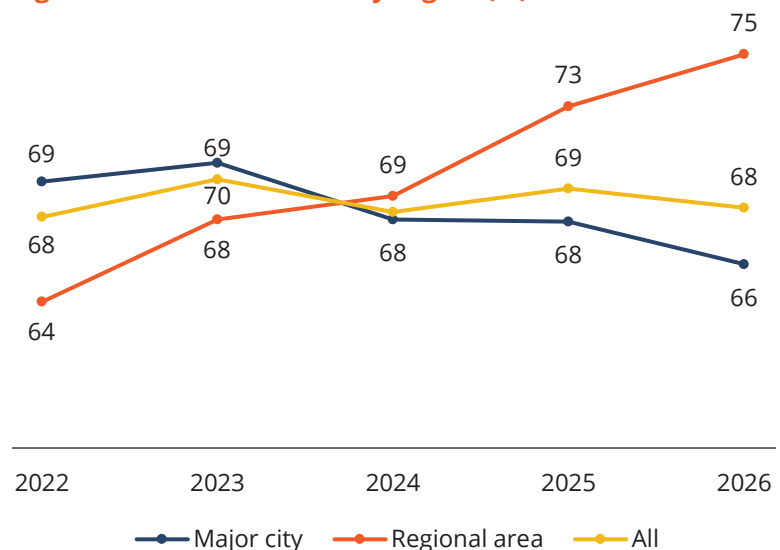
■ Major city ■ Regional area

¹ We use the term "regional" as an umbrella for any non-metropolitan parts of regional, rural, or remote Australia.

² For more information on the Heartbeat of Australia project, see: heartbeatofaustralia.co

Figure 2: Trust in news by region 2021–2026 (%)Source: Digital News Report: Australia 2021–2026³**Figure 3: Paying for news by region 2019–2026 (%)**

Source: Digital News Report: Australia 2019–2026

Figure 4: News avoidance by region (%)

Source: Digital News Report: Australia 2022–2026

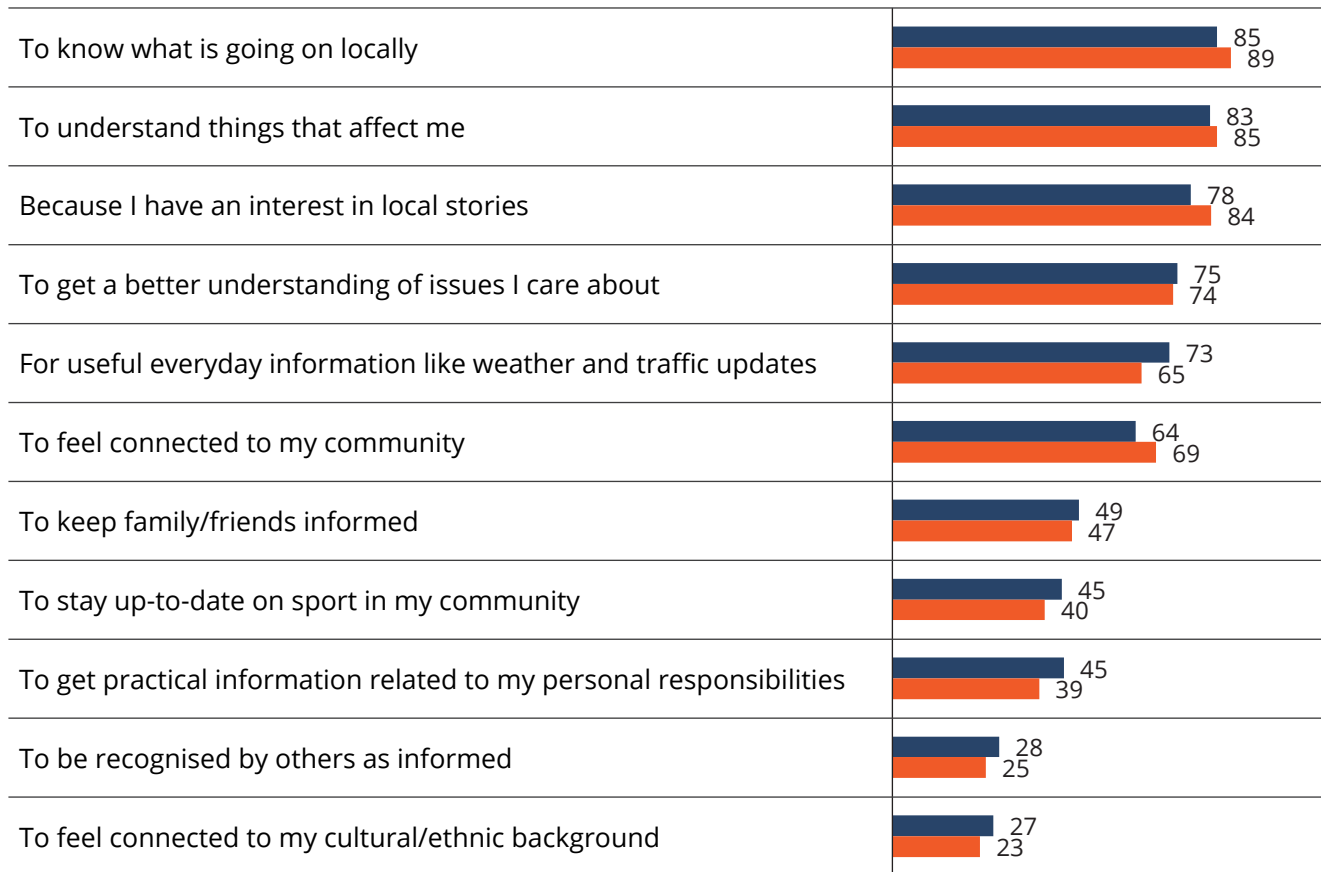
The challenge is not a lack of demand. Where it is available, trust in local news remains high, and people continue to express high interest in local news. However, the trust gap in news between city and regional audiences is widening, regional audiences are avoiding news at a higher rate, and they are less likely to pay for news. These news gaps reflect the decline in news provision in regional areas and the dissatisfaction among audiences.

³ Digital News Report: Australia reports can be found here: canberra.edu.au/research/centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia

News-seeking motivations

We need to pay attention to why regional Australians might seek local news. The key reasons are because they want to know what is going on in their area, have a forum for public debate on locally important issues and feel connected to community.

Figure 5: Why people seek local news 2026 (%)



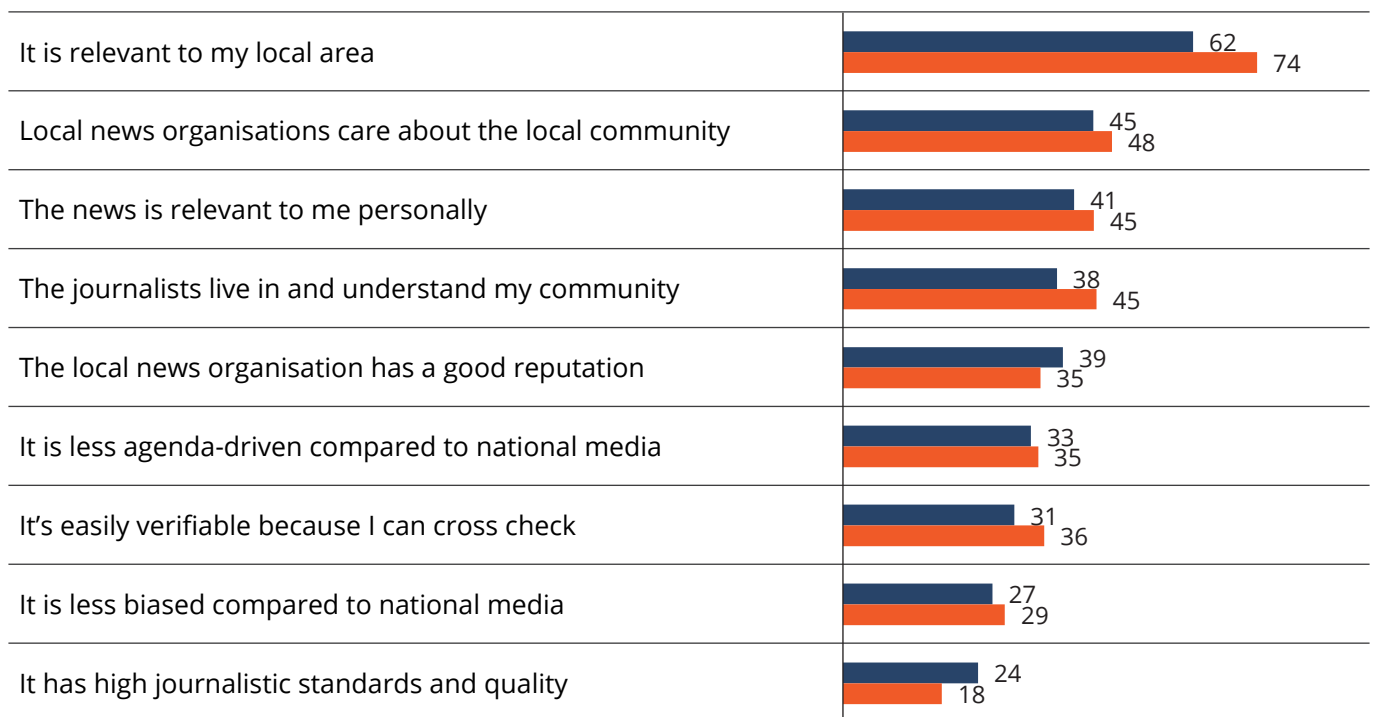
Source: Heartbeat of Australia 2026

■ Major city ■ Regional area

Unpacking reasons for audience trust

Regional audiences are much more likely to trust news when it is relevant to their local area, and to them personally. They also trust news when they believe the news organisation cares about the local community.

Figure 6: Reasons why people trust local news (%)



Source: Heartbeat of Australia 2025

■ Major city ■ Regional area

Key findings and focus areas

Across our combined research, we found a common thread—that audiences want more engagement with news and the ability to engage with each other through news media platforms. The future of local news will depend on finding new ways—and rediscovering tried and traditional approaches—to reach and engage audiences in the digital age, while securing sustainable funding needed to support quality journalism.

At the heart of this challenge, we found the three Cs⁴—community, commitment, and continuity—to be a useful frame. By working collaboratively with local communities, delivering relatable news, and maintaining a close connection to local issues, news providers can strengthen audience trust, engagement and long-term organisational sustainability.

The key takeaways across our combined research include:

1 Diversifying news formats

Audiences appreciate a variety of news formats, especially those that resonate with their connection to the community. Simply re-publishing content on an outlet's website from the print edition isn't making use of the affordances of different channels to best engage audiences across different demographic cohorts.

2 Co-creation of news

It is also important to leverage the willingness of community members to participate in the production of news. Participatory approaches, including arts-based methods such as photo voice activities and poetry competitions, can play an important role in this process. These activities can engage different demographic cohorts to identify the topics that are relevant to them and that they want to discuss with the community (for examples of participatory approaches, please see *Sampler of engaged journalism approaches* on page 11).

3 Paying and sharing

News paywalls are considered as one of the key barriers to accessing quality news among many Australians. Knowing this, many are willing to share content that they purchased with others. Some are willing to pay so that others can access news for free. Others—what might be termed 'latent' news audiences—indicate they would be more engaged with news content if it was available free.

4 Relational trust

Trust, legitimacy and the reputation of local news providers develops through ongoing relationships and a shared sense of place along with the belief that journalists have the community's best interests at heart. We have termed these ideas as 'relational trust', 'mediated social capital' and 'news presence'. Local journalists are often part of the community they cover, reporting on issues that directly affect residents' daily lives, with a shared sense of identity.

⁴ Gulyas, A., & Hess, K. (2024). The three "Cs" of digital local journalism: Community, commitment and continuity. *Digital Journalism*, 12(1), 6–12. doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2211639



5 Social media undermine trust

There is also growing concern that social media are becoming an increasingly toxic environment and a breeding ground for misinformation, leaving many people without access to trusted, reliable local news and information.

6 Local media are about community connection

Local and national news organisations are responding to digital transformation in different ways. National media tend to prioritise scale and reach, using multi-platform distribution, audience analytics and diversified content strategies to serve increasingly fragmented audiences. Local media—especially place-based news providers—tend to prioritise relevance, focusing on community connections, hyperlocal content and building audience trust.

7 Revenue diversification

To ensure access to news for all, news organisations may need to diversify their revenue models. Local journalism can be supported through a mix of subscriptions, advertising, philanthropy and public funding. There is also growing potential to harness the goodwill and local knowledge among members of the community and organisations through participatory models. By engaging audiences not just as consumers, but as stakeholders, local news can strengthen both its financial sustainability and its connection to the communities it serves.

Future vision and planning

The discussions held during the *Engaged Journalism* Workshop will provide an important foundation for our future research agenda. In particular, they will inform the development of new approaches to audience engagement and local news sustainability.

Our application for an Australian Research Council Discovery Project “The News Futures Lab: An audience engagement model for thriving local news” is currently under review and we will know the outcome in January 2027. We have proposed a four-year project that will examine a deliberative audience engagement framework that facilitates a reciprocal relationship between news organisations and audiences. This involves a continuous dialogue between journalists and audiences to recognise the issues audiences want addressed, and also includes audiences in the production and distribution of local news.

Working with remote, rural, regional and suburban news outlets, we will test the deliberative audience engagement framework, through an implementation of engaged journalism initiatives co-designed with practitioners and the community.

This will likely generate locally relevant, high-quality journalism, bringing diverse perspectives into Australian communities and at the same time transforming the ways journalism can coexist—and thrive—with technological developments and shifting audience behaviours. The outcomes will strengthen public dialogue and social connection and combat misinformation for the benefit of the news industry and communities across Australia.



Sampler of engaged journalism approaches

Local news ecosystems are made up of more than news outlets, particularly in the age of social media and generative AI. The community plays a crucial role in the creation, dissemination, and consumption of news. The key is to leverage the community's willingness to contribute and

participate in the news-making process. This *Sampler of Engaged Journalism Approaches* is based on our and others' research and is designed to support the development of tailored programs for news organisations.



1 Facilitating

connections among community members

- ◆ Hosting social gatherings including conferences, cultural or sports events
- ◆ Facilitating town halls or political debates before elections
- ◆ Convening a “readers board” that regularly meets to provide audience feedback on specific stories or broader coverage patterns
- ◆ Connecting people with resources for positive change
- ◆ Identifying problems and proposing solutions



2 Including

the community in journalistic processes and decision-making

- ◆ Newsroom tours
- ◆ Open editorial meetings
- ◆ Behind-the-scenes programs
- ◆ Eliciting community voting on stories
- ◆ Exclusive Q&A sessions with journalists and editors
- ◆ Upstream contributions such as submitting ideas



3 Documenting

a community's goings-on and sharing that with news organisations

- ◆ Creating and supplying user-generated content (UGC)/Citizen Journalism, such as written guest columns, photos, or videos
- ◆ Co-production of stories
- ◆ Recording local memories through oral histories
- ◆ Paying community members to attend and document what happens in local council meetings



4 Commenting

about one's areas of expertise or interest

- ◆ Not just posting content and allowing comments but actively soliciting these about coverage or community issues
- ◆ Inviting feedback about particular elements of stories (use of sources, perceptions of bias, relevance, etc)
- ◆ Editorials that promote further audience opinion
- ◆ Celebration spaces to enable community members to share and comment on personal milestones, rituals and positive/negative community experiences such as a 'buckets and bouquets' pages



5 Sensemaking

what something means for a community

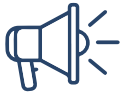
- ◆ Translating stories into different formats (social media graphics, explainer videos, theatre performances, stand-up comedy, poetry, artwork)
- ◆ Translating or summarising stories into different languages to make them more accessible
- ◆ Competitions encouraging place-focused poetry, art, or photography, such as images of weather and landscapes
- ◆ Engaging students in news and opinion writing



6 Enabling

more consistent, quality, local, positive news or community initiatives

- ◆ Financial support campaigns such as crowdfunding or membership drives
- ◆ Fundraising for social good, including volunteers, charity and donation
- ◆ Establishing partnerships with community foundations to help support local news
- ◆ Providing training on particular skills, such as how to take quality photos or how to fact-check information



7 Amplifying

underrepresented voices of the community

- ◆ Promoting under-represented stories to marginalised parts of the community
- ◆ Curating the news of the day to a subset of the community
- ◆ Recontextualising the news for various demographic cohorts



8 Valuing

the community members who are invested in local news

- ◆ Subscribers-only benefits including offers, previews, discounts
- ◆ Loyalty or referral rewards
- ◆ Reader panels or surveys



9 Entertaining

various portions of the community in addition to keeping them informed

- ◆ Marketing events such as contests, games
- ◆ Quizzes
- ◆ Guess the photo (crop a photo very tightly and see if community members can identify where it was taken or what it depicts)



10 Representing

community members to participate in governance

- ◆ Member-owned or co-op structures for democratic decision-making
- ◆ Crowdfunding of news cooperatives
- ◆ Drive community-based media innovation

Note: This sampler of engaged journalism approaches is drawn from our own research and brainstorming and through aggregating ideas from Pignard-Cheyne & Amigo's list⁵ of audience-inclusion initiatives that we've organised through some of the Journalism+Design Lab's community news roles⁶ alongside other roles we propose.

⁵ Pignard-Cheyne, N., & Amigo, L. (2023). (Re)connecting with audiences. An overview of audience-inclusion initiatives in European French-speaking local news media. *Journalism*, 24(12), 2612–2631. doi.org/10.1177/1464884923117

⁶ Journalism+Design Lab (n.d.). Community News Roles: A Framework of How People Keep Their Communities Informed. journalismdesign.com/our-work/community-news-networks/community-news-roles

About the projects



LP220100121

Heartbeat of Australia: Tracking, understanding and engaging audiences

This three-year Linkage Project generated new evidence on the evolving relationships between local news, advertising, and audiences, while identifying critical gaps in local news provision across regional Australia. Drawing on the longitudinal *Heartbeat of Australia* survey (2022–2026), qualitative interviews and focus groups with 84 regional audiences, a diary study of 34 urban and regional audiences, and interviews with 40 industry stakeholders—including media executives, editors, advertisers, local leaders, and digital platform representatives—the research provides a comprehensive evidence base to inform sustainable digital adaptation strategies for news organisations that are integrating their online and offline news services.

Partner organisation

Australian Community Media

Project team

Professor Sora Park | University of Canberra
Dr Jee Young Lee | University of Canberra
Professor Kerry McCallum | University of Canberra
Dr Janet Fulton | University of Canberra
Jarrah Petzold | Australian Community Media
Laura Allen | Australian Community Media



DE230101233

Addressing the Crisis of Local Visual News in Regional and Remote Australia

This project provides a national perspective on local visual news in regional, rural, and remote areas and has advanced a news audience-informed framework for quality visual news. Drawing on rich empirical data from regional, rural, or remote parts of all Australian states and territories, this project uses creative, visual research methods as a way to understand news audience experiences, expectations, and reactions. In this case, more than 100 community members across the country ranked news photos from least to most engaging and a subset of these kept a diary about news visuals that were surprising, interesting, or remarkable. A subset of these community members also showed us through their eyes using the photo voice method which stories in their communities they thought were under-represented or were covered poorly.

Overall, DE230101233 enabled more than four months of on-site newsroom observations in regional, rural, or remote communities; interviews with 29 journalists and editors who worked for 20 news outlets; an analysis of more than 7,000 news visuals (photographs, videos, screenshots, data visualisations, and the like) that were published alongside more than 3,000 news articles; and conversations with 129 community members to understand how they experienced and regarded the local visual news that was on offer.

Project team

Associate Professor T. J. Thomson | RMIT University
Dr Rachael Anderson | RMIT University
Dr Caroline James-Garrod | RMIT University
Dr Nicolette Snowden | RMIT University



LP250200566

Exploring philanthropy to enhance the quality of civic discourse in Australia's 'news deserts' and local communities.

This three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project, beginning in late 2026, will provide Australia's first comprehensive examination of the role philanthropic networks play in enhancing civic and deliberative discourse in local settings and support the flow of news, information and public interest journalism. It will also address an urgent knowledge gap by *critically examining* the role of philanthropy in local information ecologies and identify and support key stakeholders who can amplify the social, cultural and economic needs of communities. Drawing on a deliberative co-design methodology, the research will explore, co-create and test partnerships and innovations in communities across Australia, including regions vulnerable to becoming, or already considered, 'news deserts'. As part of this it will examine and roadtest the value of approaches to engage and inform communities and enhance quality civic discourse. The research builds upon a 12-month pilot project led by Deakin to examine the role of a community foundation in helping to re-establish a local newspaper in a region overwhelmed by negative national and international media attention and social disorder. This research documented and evaluated the unique model adopted to attract a commercial news producer and found the return of the newspaper had played a role in quelling community negativity. The research recommended further investigation of the value of commercial and not-for-profit funding models and the role of foundations in working with media to shape quality civic discourse.

Partner organisations

Community Foundations Australia
Mparntwe Alice Springs Community Foundation

Project team

Professor Kristy Hess | Deakin University
Dr Alison McAdam | Deakin University
Professor Matthew Ricketson | Deakin University
Dylan Smith | Community Foundations Australia
John Huigen | Mparntwe Alice Springs
Community Foundation



About us



Sora Park is a Professor of Communication and Director of the News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. She is lead author of the *Digital News Report Australia*, and is leading an Australian Research Council Linkage Project 'Heartbeat of Australia: Tracking, Understanding and Engaging News Audiences'.



Kristy Hess is a Professor of Communication at Deakin University. She has been involved in five Australian Research Council grants focused on local news sustainability and rural and regional communities as well as other national projects on disaster resilience.



T. J. Thomson is an Associate Professor of Visual Communication at RMIT University, where he co-leads the News, Technology, and Society Network. He is the author of a number of books, including *Everyday Visual News* (Routledge, 2026), *Generative AI and Journalism* (Routledge, 2026), and *Living with Misinformation* (Routledge, 2026).



Jee Young Lee is a Senior Lecturer of the News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. She has contributed to the analysis of the *Digital News Report: Australia* for more than ten years and is a co-investigator on the Australian Research Council Linkage Project 'Heartbeat of Australia: Tracking, Understanding and Engaging News Audiences'.



Janet Fulton is a research fellow at the News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. Janet is currently working on ARC projects, including 'Heartbeat of Australia: Tracking, Understanding and Engaging News Audiences' and 'New approaches measuring Australia's creative workforce', as well as projects on political misinformation in the news and media literacy.

Selected further reading

Journal articles

-  Diprose, K., Hess, K., & Hawley, E. (2026). Beyond chat: Reclaiming the art of conversation for journalism practice. *Journalism Practice*, (online first), 1–16. doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2026.2720748
-  Hess, K., McAdam, A., & O'Connell, B. (2026). 'I want my town back': Exploring community efforts to resurrect a local newspaper in Alice Springs. *Media International Australia*, (online first). journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1329878X251413619
-  Lee, J., Park, S., & Fulton, J. (2026). News for connection, status and belonging: Exploring the social currency of local news. *New Media & Society*, (online first). journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14614448261477944
-  McAdam, A. (2025). Rethinking "sustainability" as a multidimensional conceptual framework for local journalism studies. *Journalism Studies*, 26(10), 1208–1223. doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2492738
-  Olsen, R. K., & Hess, K. (2024). 'It's new to us': Exploring authentic innovation in local news settings. *Media and Communication*, 12(7444). doi.org/10.17645/mac.7444
-  Park, S., Lee, J., Fulton, J., Hess, K. & Thomson, T. J. (2026). Towards engaged journalism: Strengthening the future of local news by focusing on audiences. *Mass Communication and Society* (online first). doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.32978519
-  Thomson, T. J. (2025). Picturing a quality local news visual: Perspectives from non-specialist journalists. *Journalism*, 26(6), 1163–1180. doi.org/10.1177/14648849241253136
-  Thomson, T. J., & Anderson, R. (2025). Audience perceptions of engaging news photos: A picture-sorting and interview study. *Journalism Practice*, (online first), 1–18. tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2025.2499882

Book

-  Thomson, T. J. & Anderson, R. (2026). *Everyday Visual News: Audience Expectations, Engagements, and Meanings*. Routledge.

Reports

-  Park, S., Thomson, T.J. & Lee, J. (2025). *Engaged journalism in the heartland: Understanding regional news audiences*. University of Canberra and RMIT. apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2025-08/apo-nid331538.pdf

The above is a sample of publications that will be of interest. For a full list, please visit Engaged Journalism Publications on the Heartbeat of Australia site: heartbeatofaustralia.co/engaged-journalism-publications/

Workshop program

As regional news outlets across Australia continue to decline, the need for new or refined models of local journalism is becoming increasingly important. *The Engaged Journalism* in workshop, co-sponsored by Australian Community Media, addresses the critical challenges facing Australia's news ecosystem. As news organisations adapt to changing economic and audience conditions, sustainable, audience-centred approaches to journalism are becoming increasingly important for serving regional audiences.

The workshop brings together leading researchers from three universities—University of Canberra, Deakin University and RMIT University—and industry stakeholders to explore how engaged journalism can help rebuild relationships with regional audiences.

Date: Thursday 8 October 2026, 13:30–16:00

Venue: Deakin Downtown, Tower 2, Level 12/727 Collins St, Melbourne VIC 3008

Time	Session	Speakers
13:30–13:35	Introduction and welcome	MC: Jacinta Parsons
13:35–13:50	Session 1 Research findings	Sora Park Jee Young Lee Janet Fulton Kristy Hess T.J. Thomson
13:50–14:30	Keynote address Engaged journalism in practice	Andrew Eales
14:30–14:45	Coffee break	
14:45–15:20	Session 2 Panel discussion	Facilitator: Jacinta Parsons Panel: Mark Philips Will Hayward Sue McVay Daniel Dulhunty
15:20–16:00	Session 3 Best practices breakout group discussion	MC: Jacinta Parsons
16:00–	Drinks	

Workshop organisers

Sora Park, Jee Young Lee, Janet Fulton | University of Canberra
 Kristy Hess | Deakin University
 T. J. Thomson | RMIT University

