How different is 'different'? Australian country newspapers and development journalism

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How Different Is ‘Different’?
Australian Country Newspapers And Development Journalism

Australian country newspapers demonstrate a focus on their local community or communities which appears to be much stronger than that of their metropolitan counterparts. This focus is generally reflected in an emphasis on local news and the promotion of local concerns, individuals and achievements. The limited literature on country newspapers suggests this emphasis has contributed to country print journalism developing in directions significantly removed from those of contemporary urban journalism. This paper argues that while country newspaper journalism incorporates elements of conventional journalism, it has also evolved in ways which appear to have more in common with non-Western forms of journalism than with the journalism practised in major Australian cities.

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Country newspaper journalism has been described as the “forgotten sector” of journalism in Australia (Woolford 1980: 17). It is an area frequently ignored – or, at best, mentioned in passing – in the literature. Yet country newspapers play an important role in providing news and information to people in regional areas, and employing early-career journalists. “Country newspaper” in this paper is defined as those published in country towns or minor cities, produced less frequently than daily, but with an issue at least once a week. Frequency of production has been chosen as the defining factor because of the imprecision of terms such as “town” and “city”. Newspapers in large centres such as Mount Gambier, Portland and Port Macquarie would be included, but those in cities such as Ballarat, Newcastle and Townsville excluded. While community is a contentious term, in the context of this article it refers to the people living within the newspaper’s circulation area.
Country newspapers are a central part of the news and information network in towns and regions. Not only are they a key, and sometimes the only, source of local news, they also provide a wide range of local information, from birth notices to weather reports and sports results. This local focus raises questions about whether such newspapers fulfil the same roles as their metropolitan counterparts or whether they are different in some fundamental way.

Ewart (2000) claims regional media have their own “place, space and role” in a community, while Pretty (1993: 76) argues that one of the features of country newspapers which has ensured their continued viability and vitality is their “uniqueness”. She claims that: “The country press exhibits a myriad of differences from the daily press ... (it is) well-read, fulfils a different role in society from the much-studied metropolitan press, and has been, historically, instrumental in the political, social and economic development of many countries including Australia” (Pretty 1993: 78).

Newspaper management views seem to support this idea. Country Press Association of NSW executive director David Sommerlad claims: “Community newspapers are parochial. This is why they exist and mostly prosper” (Sommerlad 2000: xiv). Pretty’s survey of Australian country journalists in the early 1990s – the first extensive national survey of Australian journalists outside metropolitan areas – found an overwhelming perception that country newspapers were different from city newspapers because they covered only local news, had a close relationship with their readers and were oriented towards a cohesive force in local communities (Pretty 1993: 113).

Country newspapers are also different to suburban publications, although they are often jointly designated as the “local” or “community” press (Alysen, Sedorkin and Oakham 2003: 9; Mowbray 1988: 49; Kirkpatrick 2001: 17). They have many common values (Kirkpatrick 2001: 17): they tend to have closer relationships with their audience than those of metropolitan media, are the media most likely to mark the achievements of ordinary people and are often the only papers in their area (Alysen et al. 2003: 9, 11). However, unlike most country newspapers, suburban newspapers generally do not have a cover price, so are solely reliant on advertising as a source of revenue (Hippocrates 1988: 191; Cafarella 2001: 10), which may affect the way they report news.

The literature suggests that key features distinguishing country newspapers from metropolitan publications are their “localness”, their relationship with their audience, their role in
advocating for and promoting their community and their approach to news. While these features may also be characteristic of the suburban press, this discussion will focus solely on country newspapers.

The local news function of country newspapers is seen by many as central to their role: “The demands of country newspapers differ from those of the capital cities in that local news is the highest priority …” (Hurst and Provis 2000: 2). Most local newspapers’ coverage is focused primarily, or completely, on local news:

“The annual events that shape the community’s traditions are newsworthy and readers expect to find them mentioned in the newspaper … they want to know who is getting married this week, who has died, and, yes, they want to read obituaries on the ordinary as well as the extraordinary” (Kirkpatrick 2001: 20).

The reporting of events and issues which involve the readers, and the marking of achievements of ordinary people, helps contribute to a sense of “ownership” of a local paper by its readers (Alysen et al. 2003: 9). Allied with the focus on local news is the newspaper’s local information role. Country newspapers generally incorporate a range of information, from weather forecasts to bus timetables to stock prices. Even advertising can be seen as a form of local information – classified advertising tells readers who has died or is getting married, while display advertising provides more commercially oriented information. This local focus is in contrast with metropolitan newspapers, which have a much greater proportion of national advertising.

Country newspapers that go beyond local news coverage to present state, national and international news often incorporate this as a secondary component of their coverage. A story of limited significance according to conventional “news values”, but involving a local person, issue or debate, is likely to be accorded greater space and prominence in a country newspaper than a story of greater overall significance without any local perspective. Even a story of national or international significance may be covered only if there is a local angle, or a local angle may be taken in preference to a more general one (see, for example, Walsh 2003; Lloyd-Smith 2003; “Rebuilding Iraq” 2003). The recent visit to Australia of Chinese President Hu Jintao was reported in Victoria’s Ararat Advertiser of 4 November 2003 under the headline “Councillor a guest for PM”, in a story which began: “Ararat Rural City Councillor Peter O’Rorke has returned from a trip to Canberra where he was a guest at a dinner for visiting Chinese President Hu Jintao.” (“Councillor a guest for PM” 2003) President Hu’s visit to Australia was reported widely from a variety of angles in the
metropolitan Australian media, but the Ararat publication chose to focus on an angle of direct relevance to its community.

Such an approach is reflected in the way country newspapers tend to complement, rather than compete with, media from outside their area: the local newspaper is the primary source of local news, while the task of reporting non-local news falls to television and larger newspapers (Pretty 1993: 80). A typical consumption pattern in towns and regions in Australia is for readers to buy their local newspaper for local news and a state-based or national paper (or in some places a regional daily) for state, national and international news.

The “local” nature of country newspapers is further emphasised in the relationship between publication and readership. A frequent theme in the literature is the “closeness” of country newspapers to their communities of circulation (see Kirkpatrick 1995a; Kirkpatrick 2001; Pretty 1993). Kirkpatrick (2001: 18) also notes that many community newspapers have survived over a long period because of the closeness of this relationship. Pretty’s survey of country journalists shows that journalists felt they knew their readers’ wants, likes, dislikes and interests, with most claiming a high level of such knowledge: “Several respondents said they thought country journalists had a much better knowledge of their readers than metropolitan journalists” (Pretty 1993: 108).

Alysen et al (2003: 10) claim closeness to the audience can give local reporters a better appreciation of what a community is thinking than is possible in a larger newsroom. Several factors make it likely that country journalists are closer to their readers than city journalists, and are in a privileged position when it comes to understanding their interests and concerns. One factor is journalists’ level of community involvement. Pretty’s survey shows that country newspaper journalists were involved in groups in their local communities and had a greater knowledge of and higher regard for their readers than other newspaper journalists (Pretty 1993: 112). The smaller the community, the closer that involvement is likely to be. If there is only one medical clinic in town, for example, the journalist’s interest in it will be personal as well as professional. On another level, country editors are commonly seen as community leaders, and are often members of groups frequented by other leaders, such as service clubs.

A second factor in the relationship between journalist and audience derives from the notion of accountability. While the notion of independent practitioners serving individual clients (Carey 1987: 46) does not apply in journalism, country journalists
may have more of a sense of being answerable to an audience than metropolitan journalists because they are more accessible. Readers can usually walk into a country newspaper office, which is often in the centre of town, and immediately speak to a journalist, or sometimes even the editor. By contrast, metropolitan newspaper offices are usually in inner cities or non-residential inner suburbs, and journalists and editors are separated from readers by “front office” staff and security personnel, part of whose job is often to limit access to editorial staff.

Country journalists’ accessibility is further increased by their public profile. They are usually well-known in the region in which they work, and it is not uncommon for readers or sources to stop a journalist in the street to comment on something they have seen in the paper, which suggests such journalists are likely to develop a greater awareness of the ramifications of their reporting than journalists working in larger population centres: “At a community paper, news is not events happening to inanimate objects. News is people, your people, and how the changing world affects their everyday lives.” (Lauterer 2000: 38)

A third factor is the high level of job satisfaction, despite low pay and high stress levels: “Country journalists may feel they are achieving more in their work by serving their readers than journalists on bigger, more ‘impersonal’ daily newspapers” (Pretty 1993: 112). However, it is difficult to determine the accuracy of journalists’ claims of knowledge of their communities’ wishes and interests. Ewart (2000) cautions that journalists’ understandings of their audience are based largely on presumption, but given that country journalists live and work within the communities for which they write, and deal regularly with members of those communities as sources of information, news consumers and on a personal level, claims of a close relationship appear to have some validity. It could be argued that country journalists are more likely to have an understanding of their community of circulation than are metropolitan journalists – whose “community” may encompass several million people – and possibly a greater concern for the consequences for that community of their reporting.

Widely accepted conventions of journalism suggest journalists should strive for fairness and balance in their reporting, but local newspapers are often fierce advocates for their communities and strong promoters of their town or region. This community-building role dates back to the earliest days of newspapers in countries such as Australia and the United States. In these countries, with a relatively recent pattern of Western settlement characterised by distance and isolation, the task of
helping the community develop and prosper has been central to the small newspaper’s role. In the white settlement of America, as new communities were founded, among the first enterprises established were community newspapers (Altschull 1990: 212), and the sprawling nature of such communities meant the newspaper became a bulletin board for the community, to the extent that without it there was no community (Altschull 1990: 212). In Australia, the pattern was in many ways similar, and the press played a crucial part in building a nation where the “tyranny of distance” was one of the greatest challenges (Pretty 1993: 77).

From the early days of newspapers in Australia, “a town without a newspaper was a community without a voice to make itself heard in the wider world, a community unable to tell its collective story” (Kirkpatrick 1996: 159). The community advocacy role of country newspapers generally includes favouring local perspectives over wider viewpoints. It may also extend to supporting or advocating a particular stance or course of action if it is perceived as benefitting the community.

Community advocacy in country newspapers often crosses traditional barriers between editorial and advertising content, although it has also been claimed that these barriers are being broken down generally (Grattan 1998: 1). Country newspapers frequently highlight achievements by local businesses or entrepreneurs, and “are not shy of doing stories which are obviously promotional, if the story can be seen as benefiting the community” (Alysen et al. 2003: 11). For example, Victoria’s Stawell Times-News combines a positive news story with promotion of a local business in its story of 31 October 2003 headlined “Glenorchy school greens up with Mitre 10’s help”. While traditional reporting conventions would suggest the commercial link be minimised, the Times-News story mentions Mitre 10 and/or the name of the business five times in the first five sentences (“Glenorchy school greens up with Mitre 10’s help” 2003).

Country newspapers’ community advocacy role can affect how they employ the news value of “conflict”. In some instances – for example, the reporting of a dispute between a local builder and the district council (“Roof row may end” 2003) – country newspapers generally address issues involving conflict in the much same way as their city counterparts. However, an alternative interpretation of conflict is also used by local newspapers. News stories are often framed from a perspective, which seeks to unite the newspaper’s community of circulation in its opposition to an outside “threat”. Use of “our”, “us” or other terms denoting ownership or unity are often apparent in such stories, which may also incorporate criticism of “them” (the outside individual or agency) (see, for example, Simmonds 2003; “Taxi cutback
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condemned” 2003). The perceived divide between city and country which has been mythologised throughout much of Australia’s history is frequently utilised and perpetuated in country newspaper reporting: “… country newspapers have been seen by historians to generally share a view of the city as immoral, parasitic, and selfishly appropriating country-produced wealth for itself.” (Pretty 1993: 77) By emphasising an “us versus them” perspective through the news value of conflict, local newspapers may attempt to reinforce their position as community advocates.

A sizable body of research supports the connection between community integration and newspaper use (Pretty 1993: 81) (see, for example, Stamm 1985; Janowitz 1967), and at the community press level it is claimed newspapers facilitate individual and group assimilation into the community structure (Greenberg cited in Kirkpatrick 1995a: 220) and act as a socialising medium (Jackson 1971: 277). Ewart (2000) argues that a community comes to know and recognise itself through its representation in local media, with “norms” for behaviour, appearance and characteristics played out through the texts of regional newspapers. Country newspapers may unite and promote their communities of circulation at a number of levels; at one level by acting as agents of community integration and socialisation, and at another by actively advocating for and promoting the community as a whole.

The community advocacy role of local newspapers also plays a role in their financial well-being: the more prosperous a community, the greater its newspaper’s revenue-raising opportunities. Local newspapers have traditionally had healthier circulation trends than their capital city counterparts (Kirkpatrick 1995b: 120), but with a smaller consumer and advertiser base than metropolitan newspapers their fortunes are closely linked to the commercial life of their circulation area. This may place pressure on them to report news in a way that offends as few people as possible, representing a shift away from the Fourth Estate “watchdog” tradition. Woolford (1980: 20) argues that “the smaller the paper, the smaller the community it serves and the slimmer its resources, the greater will be the pressures towards timidity and conformity”, while Pretty (1993: 82, 83, 107) suggests smaller newspapers are more concerned with maintaining consensus than are larger publications, and place greater emphasis on the newspaper’s information function. Such a viewpoint is indicative of the environment in which country journalists work: they have the benefits of close links with their readers, but these links also impose limitations and create pressures.

From the preceding discussion, Australian country newspaper practice could be seen to deviate from standard democratic press
theory in a number of ways. The typical Western approach to journalism encompasses a tradition of concern with notions such as “objectivity” and “balance”, and with the journalist as bystander, reporting on events and issues in an unbiased, impartial manner, although all of these notions are highly contestable. While country newspaper journalism incorporates elements of this model, it could also be seen to incorporate substantial differences. In some respects, it may have more in common with forms of journalism that do not fit the mainstream Western pattern than with the journalism practised in Australian cities.

One such form is development journalism, widely practised in African, Asian and Pacific countries. While primarily seen as a product of the Third World, development journalism – identified under various names by Hachten (1981), Altschull (1995) and McQuail (1994: 131, 132) in their theorisations of media models – had its genesis in the educative agricultural extension programs of the United States and Canada in the early to mid 20th century (Stevenson 1994). These aimed to promote development in rural areas by providing information to farmers and other rural dwellers, utilising the mass media as a multiplier (Stevenson 1994: 232). Similar programs were later implemented in a number of newly independent African and Asian countries, and from these emerged the notion of development communication and its offshoot, development journalism (Stevenson 1994). Development communication utilises the mass media as an agent of social change (Stevenson 1994: 232), based on a foundation of respect for traditional, indigenous and local knowledge (Loo 1994: 2). It emphasises “the primacy of the national development task (economic, social, cultural and political); the pursuit of cultural and informational autonomy; support for democracy; and solidarity with other developing countries” (McQuail 1994: 131).

As with development communication more broadly, development journalism has social change as central to its mission. It sees the press as belonging to the people whose right to know and express their thoughts is respected – a right delegated to the journalist as an agent of social change and as an expert in developmental communication (Loo 1994: 3) – and it does not hide its partisan approach (Loo 1994: 2). As it grew out of the struggle by many former colonies to negotiate their own form of media and government – informed by their colonial past, but also encompassing their individual social, economic and cultural characters – it draws on elements of Western journalism, but also has significant differences:

The road to a flourishing press system throughout the Third
World has been rocky. Journalists and editors have had to find new pathways through those rocks, discarding along the way as best they could the colonial heritage that had taught them all they knew about the press. (Altschull 1995: 240)

In part, the growth of development journalism reflects the frustrations and anger of many Third World nations (Hachten 1981: 73) over issues such as the growing gap between rich industrialised democracies and poorer nations (Stevenson 1994: 308) and the Western dominance of global news flows (Stevenson 1994: 7). These concerns came to a head in the UNESCO New World Information and Communication Order and New World Economic Order debates of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Loo 1994: 2), with Western media criticised as too monopolistic and powerful, as imposing an alien viewpoint on nations trying to build their own identities and as weapons of domination (Hachten 1981: 74).

One factor which complicates any discussion of development journalism is the wide range of alternative interpretations of it, resulting in part from variations in understandings of development and from differing socio-political situations (Romano 1998: 66). Romano argues that the term encompasses at least three differing understandings of the appropriate relationship between journalists, the people and the state (Romano 1998: 80), and Gunaratne points out that no concrete definition of it has emerged since the term was coined in 1968 (Gunaratne 1996: 68). Generalised discussions of development journalism “often involve an inventory of exalted objectives … rather than an achievable or already-developed system of press operations” (Romano 1998: 66).

However, a number of key concepts are commonly associated with it, most of them in contrast with widely accepted Western ideals, although this contrast relates more to journalists’ attitudes to and perceptions of news, news values, source and issue selection and social objectives than techniques or styles of reporting (Loo 1994: 4). First, while the Western media model is concerned with journalistic rights and freedoms, development journalism places greater weight on journalistic responsibilities (McQuail 1994: 131). Second, the objectivity often considered central to Western journalism is de-emphasised, replaced with “a concern for the consequences of news reports” (Romano 1998: 64), and third, the Western emphasis on adversarial journalism is seen as an “unaffordable luxury” (Stevenson 1994: 34).

At a broad level, the differing interpretations of development journalism locate the media as anything from “instruments to bring about a growth of democratic institutions” to “weapons to further a thirst for personal power” (Altschull 1995: 230, 231). More liberal
interpretations utilise the press as a medium of news, an instrument of education, a “multiplier” in the communication process, a social and cultural influence and a channel for the flow of ideas between people and government (Sommerlad 1966: 66). Journalists from India and the Philippines who pioneered development journalism saw it as a way of reporting that encouraged close interaction between journalists and society, in which journalists were not neutral observers but communicators who “share the sentiments of the people in social situations and are changed to some degree as well as changing the situation in which they are a participant” (Loo 1994: 2, 3). However, in some countries, legal and cultural systems combine to create a media environment that is restricted and restrictive, and in which the principles of development journalism are used to control media operations. In its most regimented form, development journalism may be a smokescreen allowing dictators to subject their press to iron controls and strict censorship (Altschull 1995: 236).

Parallels between development and country journalism

Any general consideration of development journalism cannot account for its many interpretations and variations. Neither is it within the scope of this article to examine the criticisms of this form of journalism (see, for example, Stevenson 1994; Hachten 1981). Instead, this discussion will focus on some of the broad concepts and ideals commonly presented in the literature, generally representing more liberal, less restrictive interpretations of development journalism. From this perspective, the approaches to news and news reporting that development journalism embodies appear to have much in common with the journalism practised by country newspapers.

The country newspaper emphasis on “localness”, for example, is similar to the development journalism focus on domestic news which has resulted from efforts to move away from and reduce reliance on the global media “machine”, and which reflects the centrality of the nation and its development in the news agenda.

Closeness to audience is another factor characterising both development and country newspaper journalism. Development journalism emphasises the media as a partner in the task of nation-building, alongside the people and the government. The journalist is part of the process rather than a disinterested bystander, from which arises a concern with the consequences of reporting – how it affects news sources and the news audience. Country newspaper journalists, too, have a stake in their community: they live and work within that community, often participate in community
organisations and are accessible to their audience in their professional environment. Their personal and professional involvement with their community of circulation is also likely to create a concern with the consequences of their reporting – a concern which may flow through to a greater emphasis on journalistic responsibility.

A major similarity between development journalism and Australian country newspaper journalism lies in the media’s role in advocating for and promoting its community or society. Both country newspapers and development journalism media promote the interests of their readers through their reporting, by highlighting local concerns or celebrating local achievements (see, for example, Morello 2003; “Dream gets closer to reality” 2002). It could even be claimed there are similarities in the way this advocacy role has come about: self-determination has been central to the growth of both development journalism and country journalism. As development journalism represents to at least some extent a reaction against colonialism and First World dominance, so too the advocacy practices of country journalism are closely linked to concerns about metropolitan dominance and colonisation by the “metropolis”.

Some of the common Western criticisms of this aspect of development journalism could also be levelled at country newspaper journalism, although possibly not to the same extent. For example, development journalism has been criticised as being “subjective and propagandistic” and focused on positive developments, in conflict with free and fair journalism (Loo 1994: 2). Country newspaper journalism could also be seen as “subjective and propagandistic”, inasmuch as it is focused on the positives within its community and advocating for that community. Such an approach to journalism has been part of the mission of many Australian country newspapers since their inception. In the early days of regional newspapers, districts were seen as lacking an essential weapon until represented by a journal of their own: “The introductory editorials of 19th-century provincial newspapers brimmed over with pledges to represent or to advocate, advance, forward, even agitate the interests of the community in which the new journal was established.” (Kirkpatrick 1998: 87, 88). The emphasis on the positive may not just be for the benefit of people within the news outlet’s community, but may also reflect concerns about “outside” views of a region or nation. As technology increases access to information – particularly in industrialised countries – limits to the potential news audience decrease. Even many small weekly newspapers in Australia have websites allowing their news to be accessed globally (see, for example, http://www.ypct.com.au/ or http://www.euroa-
Perceptions of a region or nation can be influenced worldwide via its news media.

The Western criticism that development journalism involves the media in co-operating with or working in partnership with government, at variance with the Fourth Estate tradition, also has parallels in country newspaper journalism. While such newspapers are often fierce critics of government at any level, many will work with local government to respond to a threat from or opportunity for the community if they perceive an advantage to the community in doing so. This situation generally arises where the perceived threat or opportunity comes from outside the region, and where community unity could be seen to be desirable and effective in dealing with it. The paper may use its role within the local information network to actively promote such unity.

Notions of community integration and “consensus” journalism could be seen to have relevance to both development journalism and country newspaper journalism. The community integration role of country newspapers may be magnified by the relative size of and closeness to the community; in development journalism, working toward national unity is a fundamental part of the media’s role, and the media supports this by promoting “acceptable” and “appropriate” values and behaviours in its news pages. Similarly, if, as has been claimed, country newspapers are more likely than metropolitan papers to practise “consensus” journalism, this parallels one of the primary Western criticisms of development journalism – that it focuses on positive news and does not tackle “hard”, and potentially divisive, topics.

Summary

For more than a century and a half, country newspapers in Australia have been primary vehicles for disseminating news and advertising in regional areas, and have “chronicled the aspirations, fears, difficulties, complaints and achievements of (their) people” (Sommerlad 2000: xi). While country journalism remains closely allied with the mainstream Western tradition, it also demonstrates a number of significant differences. From the preceding discussion, it can be seen that there are parallels between these differences and the characteristics of some interpretations of development journalism. These parallels suggest that, in Australia at least, journalism as practised on country newspapers may have, in many ways, more in common with Third World countries than with metropolitan Australia.
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