

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -
Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

1-1-2014

The news we lose when we cut local newspapers

Shawn Burns

University of Wollongong, shawn@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

The news we lose when we cut local newspapers

Abstract

I remember the day I started work at what was then The Imlay Magnet in Eden. It was 1991 and I had taken the job straight out of my journalism degree at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra). The desk was clear, all but for the IBM and the flashing green cursor on its otherwise blank black screen

Keywords

we, lose, news, newspapers, when, local, cut

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Burns, S. (2014). The news we lose when we cut local newspapers. *The Conversation*, (13 May), 1-4.

13 May 2014, 12.37pm AEST

The news we lose when we cut local newspapers

Author



[Shawn Burns](#)

[Journalism lecturer at University of Wollongong](#)

Disclosure Statement

Shawn Burns does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

UNIVERSITY OF
WOLLONGONG



Provides funding as a [Member](#) of The Conversation.

uow.edu.au



Rural and regional newspapers are training grounds for young journalists – and they tell the stories that really affect local communities. AAP Image/Alan Porritt

I remember the day I started work at what was then [The Imlay Magnet](#) in Eden. It was 1991 and I had taken the job straight out of my journalism degree at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra). The desk was clear, all but for the IBM and the flashing green cursor on its otherwise blank black screen.

I found myself understudy to one of the hardest working people I, still to this day, have worked for or with, long-term Magnet editor Leanne Abernethy. I had sought the job on the advice of a former college mate who was now in the sports chair in Eden. When I was offered it, I marked the words of my college broadcast lecturer Pru Goward, then ABC correspondent, now state pollicie, who always said “take the chance when it presents itself” – or something along those lines (time has not been kind to my memory).

The words may not be exact but the message is as clear as if it was delivered yesterday – rural and regional publications provide a perfect start for young journalists.

Therefore, it’s with anxiety I read of the [Fairfax “watchlist”](#). The Australian reported that global consulting firm Bain & Co recommended in a 2013 report (which isn’t available online) that a smorgasbord of regional newspapers be potentially chewed up by Fairfax: “... as the company continues a series of aggressive cost-cutting measures that could affect local communities and threaten the quality of the company’s journalism.”

The list includes another paper I once worked on, [The Cooma Express](#) – its demise would also cause personal angst. However, the impact of cutting the papers on the watchlist would stretch well beyond those who work or have worked on the papers.

To me, if the papers on the list were given the chop, the loss would be twofold; the loss of these papers would reduce the chance of journalism graduates to find work and, perhaps more importantly, the demise of the publications would reduce the capacity for local people to read THEIR stories – the stories about them, sometimes by them, but always for them.

The local rag is a constant of regional and rural life. It provides the community with a go-to when a story needs to be told, funds need to be raised, memories need to be shared, and lives need to be honoured.

Where young journalists cut their teeth

The watchlist includes The Wollongong Advertiser, The Kiama Independent, The Lake Times, The Cooma Express, The Magnet, and The Illawarra Mercury. All these papers have hired University of Wollongong journalism graduates and, ironically, our current journalism students last week reported on our former journalism students at [The Illawarra Mercury striking about the job cuts at Fairfax](#).

Regional and rural newspapers, and radio and television for that matter, are, for so many, the place where journalism graduates enter “the real world”. It is under the governance of the likes of Leanne Abernethy that the knowledge young journalists have acquired at university is nurtured and propagated.

However, it is its role as the “go-to” that sees the local newspaper rightly situated at the heart of local communities. We need look no further than The Magnet to illustrate the point.

A Wollongong journalism graduate named Blake Foden earlier this year followed a familiar path to the NSW Far South Coast town Eden to start [his first fulltime job as a reporter](#).

The Magnet is now a once-a-week, two-journalist operation (including the editor). However, for Blake it was his big break. He was one of our award-winning journalism graduates and, to be honest, he could have turned his nose up at the local paper option and held out for something better to come along. No one would have blamed him. But, much to my pleasure, Blake jumped at the option to work on The Magnet. It wasn't a surprise. Blake was determined to get his start and he wasn't about to play the waiting game.

As is often the case with local papers, Blake was thrown in the deep end. His editor was away his first week, they were down the one and only advertising rep, and the admin officer was off sick. Blake was running the show.

The paper came out.

Not too long after, tragedy struck the Far South Coast. Tathra surf lifesaving stalwart Christine Armstrong, 63, was killed in a shark attack at Tathra Beach. Blake covered the story, and did so with the poise of a journalist that defied his employment history. [The coverage was accurate, informed and sensitive](#).

He did what all local news reporters must do - tell the story, and do so knowing his story meant something to the community of which he was now a part. The shield of anonymity that surrounds many metropolitan journalists does not exist for local reporters. The words and images they publish impact locally. They are accountable – locally.

Blake covered the tragedy and subsequently reflected on it, under the headline “[That first, big story](#)”. The editorial he wrote again defied his on-paper experience.

He ended the editorial with this:

Over the last week, we’ve heard more and more stories about Christine’s life, and her selfless nature in her work as a volunteer surf lifesaver.

We’ve seen Rob, a man who has just been through the most traumatic of times, go out into the community to offer his support to others, even speaking to Nippers on Saturday to ensure that Christine’s passion of swimming is not lost because of her death.

And that’s the real story here.

That’s why we report on these things, because these stories need to be told.

Because whether you’re a 21-year-old journalist or a 70-year-old retiree, I think we can all learn something from Rob and Christine Armstrong.”

His writing and coverage drew praise for its “[sensitivity](#)” in a Letter to the Editor:

Blake Foden’s sensitively written article managed to convey the beautiful life that Christine Armstrong had lived, and the courage that her husband Rob has shown since her tragic death.

Lois Katz

Tathra.

This, more than anything, is what will be lost if local newspapers disappear - local people telling stories for and about local people. I anticipate Blake Foden has a future in journalism beyond The Magnet, but he will no doubt look back on his time in Eden as formative and invaluable – it is an opportunity that should not be denied those who would follow him and the community that benefits.