

Submission by the Forster Fortnightly news service

We are submitting feedback to the Federal Government News MAP consultation paper with the aim of encouraging more support for regional newspapers and news services.

Our 'Forster Fortnightly' newspaper is a great example of a regional news service whose community of readers would benefit greatly from targeted Federal Government Intervention.

Forster Fortnightly News Service

Three and a half years ago Mary Yule started this local family-owned newspaper business in regional NSW (now run by Mary and Geordie Yule), during the Covid lockdowns as there was no quality newspaper in our region. Our aim has always been to inform, entertain and care for our local community and environment. We made the decision to be a free newspaper, in hardcopy and online, so everybody has access.

Our website at www.forsterfortnightly.com.au has all 89 editions (and counting) online. We deliver 7,000 copies ourselves to all the local shops and major supermarkets in the Forster Tuncurry region. It has become a major source of news for approximately 14,000 – 15,000 people and is highly respected. Over three and a half years it has become very popular and in great demand. We have to refill the main newspaper stands a few days after the first delivery (for the weekend shoppers) as all the shelves are empty within days.

We do everything ourselves and work very hard from our home office to save costs. Our roles include journalism, photography, editing, graphic design, administration, marketing and deliveries (with help from the whole family). The only thing we don't do is the final proofread and printing!

What we want the Australian Government to do

A regular full-page Federal Government advertisement, like the successful Victorian model, would greatly improve the sustainability and strength of news services like ours, as well as providing our region with important Government campaign information.

This is a win-win situation for many reasons.

- Many of our readers do not have access or reliable access to the internet and miss important Government information but have access to our free newspaper.
- Most of our readers prefer to read from print and rely on us as a trusted source of local news. This makes it a successful platform for any Government campaign.
- We have found that our community loves reading a genuine local newspaper that has been carefully edited and designed to be read from cover to cover with prioritised news coverage and local stories in a bright and attractive format.
- Our newspaper is designed to be kept and shared in a household for a long period of time (with better quality paper used) so any important messages or information are retained and referred to again.
- We are often the only news service that turns up at news events in our region, so it is vitally important that we are supported to keep up our coverage of real local news.
- If you look at our website you will see that we have created a community hub that brings together a whole variety of news from our local Council, local MPs, local organisations, as well as many local businesses. Our newspaper makes a real difference in our region and is well worth supporting.

Targeted Government Intervention

We strongly believe that Government support needs to be targeted so independent community news services like ours can be easily sought out.

We have two important suggestions:

- It would make a big difference if the Government demanded regular evidence of newspaper circulation numbers. This was standard practice for many years and worked beautifully. Many truly local newspapers (like ours today) continue to miss out on regular Government campaigns as our regional areas are 'covered' by larger news networks. These networked businesses receive most funding and do not have to show how little they are actually printing or distributing. If the existing networked newspaper business in our area was doing a good job, we would not have started our business. This is a very common problem across regional Australia and NSW and can be easily solved with mandatory circulation numbers required.

Also, we believe our free fortnightly newspaper receives little Government support as we are free! Please be aware these are exactly the sought of news services that need support the most. We rely solely on advertising to finance our dependable news service. We spend an enormous amount of time sourcing advertising and educating people to support us. This has been successful as our wonderful local advertisers tend to stick with us because it is so well received in our community. Some regular Government support would really help us get on with the important job of covering local news and connecting our community, rather than trying to stay viable.

- Please provide more funding for all news services – not just digital. More funding has been promoted recently, for digital based services only. This is admirable, but again could be better targeted. It is very hard for news services (who provide hardcopy and digital like us) to compete for funding that is only focused on the digital side. There is so much competition, and again, many of these businesses are very good at attracting what they want and perhaps are not as vital as regional news services (online lifestyle platforms and the like). We have found our digital side needs support, but it is the publishing of newspapers that is the most expensive side of our business. It doesn't help that there is only one paper mill left in Australia – in Tasmania. There are also not many print shops left after Covid (at present there are 2 available for us in NSW). The print shops struggled during Covid to stay afloat, and our printing costs went up by 20% in the first year of our business. We just managed to hold on until we had enough local advertising to continue.

Being strictly 'digital' funding also doesn't solve the problem of having enough finances to attract and hire journalists in the regions. Personally, this will become a big issue for us down the track as we cannot afford to even start looking for one. We only bring enough in to cover one and a half wages - so we will continue to cover all roles needed for now.

We are actively trying to improve our situation

Mary is on the Council for Country Press NSW and has regular meetings with other Council members. Our news service also belongs to Country Press Australia and Regional Media Connect. These organisations are currently seeking better relations and support from State and Federal

Governments. Our family actively attends the yearly Country Press conference, and we like to converse with other newspapers around NSW. We abide by their principles of journalism. Mary is also on the Conference & Awards committee for 2024.

Geordie has started a digital course this year with Digital News Academy, to help us expand our digital news service with potential daily posts, interviews, and more room to publish stories and photos of local issues and events. With a bigger digital and website service we hope to encourage some local readers to become patrons to help with our high production costs.

What we do for our community

We continue to inform our community with important information and promotion whether we are supported with paid advertising or not since we started in August 2020, including: -

- Continued equal coverage of every candidate at Local, State and Federal elections to serve our readers.
- Ongoing Covid information during the lockdowns and after, with updates and where to access vaccines.
- Promoted many local entertainment events, fundraisers and local organisations seeking volunteer numbers after Covid lockdowns.
- Provide the latest information on big local issues such as the need for an updated Manning Base Hospital, the need for more infrastructure for our growing town, sand build up in the channel (that affects the fishing and tourism industry), a new slipway for the local fishing industry, and the cost of living affecting local families.
- Environmental updates and events from local groups (Mid Coast 2 Tops Landcare and One Mile & Tuncurry Dune Care) to encourage more volunteers and awareness of action needed (we have never been paid for our ongoing promotions).
- Provide coverage on emergency events, such as the fires of 2020/2021 and floods of 2021, with information on where people can access help, where they can donate goods, financial grants and how to support our local FRS, SES, Westpac Helicopter Rescue Service and Marine Rescue services into the future.
- Provide coverage or very low-cost advertising prices for local organisations and local events that are run by volunteers. Many have little technological knowledge.

Diversity & Engagement with our readers

- We aim to be inclusive and publish stories/photos of people and organisations from many different backgrounds. For example, we regularly publish stories to support: -
Young people – where to find free HW tutoring, free library activities, free activities every holiday, their own stories/illustrations from school, school updates and awards.
Elderly people – local medical support, activities around town, volunteer groups to join.
People with disabilities – stories on disabled athletes, local vision impaired group with dogs.
Women – Girls Only Triathlon, Walk Against Violence, Award nominations.
Indigenous – Naidoc Day Celebrations, Art Festival, Forster Neighbourhood Centre events and services, Elders Olympics.
People struggling financially – Free community meals, access to support, where to give donations.
- Geordie, Mary and family constantly engage with our community when we deliver the newspaper ourselves to over 40 outlets. We also attend many local Council and local MPs

media events as well as community events like Anzac Day ceremonies, art exhibition openings, fundraising days, sports events, special school events, etc.

- We continue to provide a Letter to the Editor feature so anyone can have a say. We make sure every letter is validated and then make the effort to provide the opportunity of a response from the other party (if required) before we publish both. This has helped with many local issues such as deteriorating roads, sand build up in the channel, the buildup of noxious weeds, new housing developments and trip hazards, etc. This is sometimes a difficult feature to include and can be quite stressful, but we believe it is important for members of our community to have a voice. It can be very satisfying when better outcomes are reached or an opportunity for more information to be discussed.

In Conclusion

The newspaper industry has been greatly challenged financially and many newspapers have closed in the last decade due to the rising cost of printing, the competition for advertising support with the event of digital news and Covid lockdowns, particularly in regional areas. Government support has been limited and does not effectively target the news services that need it most. Please support regional news services that are working hard to serve their communities. More independent local community newspapers are popping up across Australia to help address this decline. News services, such as the Forster Fortnightly, are genuinely serving their community and are in great demand for covering their own local news. Regular targeted Federal Government support, with important advertising campaigns, will help us inform, strengthen and expand.

We are happy for this submission to be made public and to be contacted.

Mary Yule - Publisher, Editor & Owner

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www.forsterfortnightly.com.au

Geordie Yule – Sales Team Manager

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