

LODDON HERALD

FREE EVERY THURSDAY

18 February 2024

UPDATED SUBMISSION TO:

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development Communications and the Arts

News Media Assistance Program Consultation Paper

Newspapers in country towns and districts are the source of news and information that connects people – local stories about local achievements, events and people that will not be on the radar of media outlets based in regional capitals and metropolitan areas unless in the form of disaster or tragedy on the most part.

Country newspapers are about grassroots public interest journalism captured in word and image. These newspapers are in small towns or collections of towns within a geographic or local government area, independently owned and operated. They have a local circulation and readership/audience that far outstrips news outlets in the regional and state capitals. Why? Because the local newspaper is local and cares about what happens every day on the local patch.

These true local newspapers come in varying business models – something that Federal Government media buyers have failed to see, understand or appreciate. Our newspaper, the Loddon Herald, is one of the few new entries into the Australian newspaper industry (first published January 2021) in the last three years in what has been a time of contraction for the number of country (rural) newspapers in the nation.

We were born during COVID after our local communities were left without a newspaper. We chose the free model to ensure maximum connection and engagement with the residents of the Loddon Shire (population 7748 as at 2022 Census, the first increase in 20 years). Telephone and internet connectivity is poor at best in the Loddon Shire with not one improvement to telecommunications funded through Federal Government programs in the last decade. The free model newspaper for the Loddon is also a recognition that the Loddon Shire is the 10th most disadvantaged local government area (Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage - IRSAD) and in parallel, our advertising rates reflect an accessible level for local businesses and remain at the lower end of rates when compared with similar (paid) publications). We are an independent weekly newspaper with produced in its entirety for its first three years by one person

The free model, in our experience with the Loddon Herald, has meant a readership each week of more than 1000 people (based on formula for reader per copy plus online digital edition). The rural nature of our communities and people may not fit some contemporary advertising matrix where there is a push by metropolitan based media buyers and strategists to place messaging and information in major metropolitan and regional platforms, social media and other forms of advertising (shopping centres, bus stops – if only they existed in the Loddon Shire!).

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One size in the Federal Government approach to advertising does not, has not, is not fitting the readership area of the Loddon Herald.

There is the challenge of government to acknowledge that rural newspapers remain a creditable and practical conduit to effective communication and upon this being achieved, resume its place as a regular advertiser in small rural community newspapers where there is real connection with people. Since the last federal election (2022), the total spend by the Federal Government and its departments, agencies or independent entities with the Loddon Herald has equated to 26.5 cents per resident of the Loddon Shire. Hardly recognition that rural community newspapers are part of the communication mix, flying in the face of informing rural residents of decisions and information of relevance to them.

Public interest journalism through the model of newspaper produced by the Loddon Herald requires advertising to be sustained, even flourish. Advertising does not impinge on the independence of local journalism, rather it supports the freedoms of country people and ensures that have a platform to share a voice and have it heard. As a member of the Victorian Country Press Association, we acknowledge the commitment to the future of public interest journalism and rural newspapers shown by the Victorian Government with its commitment to placing the equivalent of one page of advertising per edition in our newspaper. Our editorial independence remains strong – we run relevant news stories on State Government issues that inform readers of government decisions and initiatives, likewise we run relevant local stories where organisations or individuals are unhappy with government decisions and policies and ask questions to delve deeper into local issues. The redefining of “support” for rural newspaper advertising to acceptance that our sector is a credible place for advertising would not impact editorial integrity and independence in the context of local news stories being researched, written and published.

Without regular Federal Government advertising in rural newspapers, the capacity of local independent publishers and journalists to tap into local stories and local issues is limited, even reduced, and therefore the voices of country people will be further diminished, media diversity further scuttled and that will lead to a further concentration of news story generation at a reduced level and overseen by newsrooms with a lesser connection to local communities. The Federal Government provides funding to the ABC to “provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services”. Has the integrity of editorial independence of the ABC been impugned? The ABC charter of editorial independence is in place to at least address that. Broadcasting is but one element of communications. Rural newspapers, too, are worthy and in need of recognition – local and independent.

Local independent newspapers in rural communities and areas should be recognised as essential organs in the communication of Federal Government decisions, information and for the purposes of community engagement. We say “support” be redefined as regular advertising and fully back the proposal of Country Press Australia for the Federal Government to follow the example of the Victorian Government with placement of paid advertising that will assist in securing the future sustainability of rural newspapers and contribute to growth of public interest journalism.

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We also support the other proposals of CPA and briefly offer the following observations and experiences:

- The Loddon Herald has just completed the exercise of recruiting its first member of staff (to work alongside the owner and editor). Being a rural-based community newspaper, one of the challenges that has emerged is enticing suitable applicants to work in community/ies that are not within a regional capital of metropolitan setting. In order for us to ensure filling positions now and in the future, additional assistance may well be required to assist with recruitment and placement of successful applicants. We therefore support a refundable tax credit of 35 per cent of eligible newsroom employee costs for publishers of public interest journalism up to a salary cap of \$85,000 per eligible newsroom employee per annum in line with the Canadian model. Supplementary funding to be implemented with one or both the above mechanisms.
- Cadetship funding to support the employment of young journalists. Our comments above reflect the need for government investment in skill training of future generations of journalists to sustain rural newspapers and public interest journalism. Specifically, we endorse the Country Press Australia for government funding of 70 per cent of first year wages for 100 cadet journalists per year employed in regional and local newspapers. In our view, this is vital to sustaining public interest journalism in rural communities where there are additional challenges in recruiting the next generation of local journalists either through engagement and recruitment within the local youth cohort and making them aware of careers in the newspaper industry locally, or making future career paths attractive for university graduates to leave capital cities or, certainly universities in cities with a population many times that of rural towns. Rural newspapers want to overcome the hurdles to recruitment and, no different to other industries, continues to face the daunting prospect of recruitment of staff that can and will at some time impede delivery of public interest journalism through lack of resources, burnout of existing staff and simply sustainability.



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ABOUT US

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The award-winning Loddon Herald is a free independent weekly newspaper and website with more than 10,000 readers connecting communities and businesses across the Loddon Shire in central Victoria. Communities include Bridgewater, Inglewood, Wedderburn, Newbridge, Tarnagulla, Korong Vale, Boort, Pyramid Hill, Serpentine, Mitiamo, Dingee and adjoining districts.

Heralding the achievements of business, people and organisations, the Loddon Herald is committed to the future of rural and regional communities, strengthening their vital place in the social and economic engine room of country Victoria and providing a forum for communities to advocate ideas and promote achievements.

Most of all, we're about local news from our local communities and celebrating life in the region.