

When the heart hardens, the community hurts



Severe cuts by Fairfax to its regional newsrooms has seen the loss of experienced hands like Peter Collins and Peter Fletcher who, between them, had 80 years' experience at The Standard.

By Jim Clarke, former editor and general manager of The Standard.

[dropcap style="font-size: 35px; color: #8cc7d0;"] A [dropcap]s Australia's two major publishers continue along their death-by-a-thousand-cuts policies in the bush, it was heartening that the ABC announced it would create 80 new positions in regional areas within 18 months.

ABC regional editor for Victoria and Tasmania Mark DeBono told me most of the regional positions would be for reporters and there would be a small number of digital producers. ABC managing director Michelle Guthrie said the appointments would increase the ABC's digital and video output from rural and regional Australia.

In making this commitment, our national broadcaster has recognised that communities beyond the metropolitan borders have particular needs and also represent significant markets; a recognition that has long escaped News Limited and Fairfax Media.

The two publishing giants bought their way into the regions and, despite many talented staff's commitment and empathy with their communities, their presence always was a matter of dollars – and never more so than today.

Newspapers were considered to be essential for the communities born of our earliest settlers. The first Australian newspaper, Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, was printed in 1803.

The oldest newspaper in Victoria is the Geelong Advertiser, which was founded in 1840 and also is the second oldest in Australia. In the south-west, the Portland Observer was launched in 1842 as the Portland Guardian, while its now-partner the Hamilton Spectator was established in 1859 as the Hamilton Courier.

Along the track, the Colac Observer appeared in 1866 and later became the Colac Herald. The Standard began informing the Warrnambool community in 1872 and the Camperdown Chronicle began publication in 1874.

Each of these newspapers has made a major contribution to their communities. Indeed, to varying degrees they have become an active part in the community, some more positively than others.



The future: ABC South-West journalist Brigid Judd was last Friday named Young Journalist of the Year by the Melbourne Press Club.

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athryn Bowd, of the University of South Australia, summed up their role in a 2003 study: "Australian country newspapers demonstrate a focus of their local community or communities which appears to be much stronger than that of their metropolitan counterparts," she wrote.

"This focus is generally reflected in an emphasis on local news and the promotion of local concerns, individuals and achievements."

Bowd's research involved non-daily papers. It excluded newspapers such as The Standard and the Ballarat Courier, but her conclusions can be equally applied to the regional dailies.

“Country newspapers are a central part of the news and information network in towns and regions,” Bowd concluded.

“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.”

And of course they are different.

With restructuring and cutbacks at The Standard and reduced local coverage by 3YB and regional television, the Warrnambool community is being short-changed.

Fairfax Media closed its Melbourne printing plant and moved production of several publications to Ballarat. Now, The Standard is slotted into a daily production schedule that includes The Age, Ballarat Courier, Bendigo Advertiser, Australian Financial Review and a host of other titles.

This means The Standard’s daily production deadline has been brought back to about 10.45pm. I understand that if an event such as the Grand Annual Sprintcar Classic is pencilled in in advance, then The Standard can arrange a swap with another publication to secure a later deadline to allow fuller coverage.

But staff cuts and other cost savings have a more profound impact on The Standard’s ability to serve its community.

No longer are there sub-editors – those pedantic journalists who check, correct and tweak reporters’ copy and compose headlines – so there are more errors appearing in print and online.



Broadcaster Jeremy Lee, left, does what he does best on the ABC Morning Show in Warrnambool. Image: TimeTwins/ABC

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ith repeated redundancies, the depth of the newsroom has diminished. In last year's round, The Standard farewelled many veterans, including Peter Fletcher and Peter Collins, who must have shared 80 years' experience at the paper.

Fletch and PC were local encyclopaedias, involved in their community and were just a call across the desk when a reporter needed a gap filled or a point clarified. I am sure the current team is dedicated and skilled, but nothing can replace the knowledge and the understanding of community nuances that Fletch, PC and a host of other experienced locals gave The Standard over the years.

I requested a discussion with Fairfax Media but my approach was declined.

Meanwhile, as News and Fairfax closed and integrated newspapers across the country, the ABC put new money into regional centres.

The people of Warrnambool and the Southwest were beneficiaries. Over the years, the ABC's presence in the region has expanded. Jeremy Lee presents the daily 6.30-7.45am Breakfast program from the Warrnambool studio he shares with award-winning reporter Bridget Judd*.

Interestingly and a sign that not only newspapers are evolving with more sophisticated technology, Mark DeBono does not refer to ABC regional journalists. They are *reporters*.

"Most are graduates and are switched on technically," he said. "They come to us this way and we adapt their skills. They do much more than write."

So, what can regional communities expect of their traditional, mainstream media in the future? Sadly, not much I am afraid, except for the ABC. (Which leaves a gap for nimble, grassroots websites like what you are reading now.)

That is not because of lack of effort, skills or commitment of staff in Warrnambool and elsewhere, but because of cash/profit driven senior executives in Sydney.

The community heart of the likes of Bruce Morris in Warrnambool, the Beks in Hamilton and the Gannon family in Colac has long faded in the corporate headquarters.

It is unfortunate that those executives in Pyrmont and Surry Hills do not understand that their decisions are transportable and will have an impact well beyond the bush.

* Bridget Judd was named Young Journalist of the Year last Friday by the Melbourne Press Club. Her prize is return flights to the US, accommodation and registration at this year's Investigative Reporters and Editors conference in Phoenix, Arizona.

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/2017/03/jim-clarke-1.jpg[/author_image] [author_info]Jim Clarke is a former senior journalist at Fairfax Media. He was editor of The Standard 1980-85 and returned as general manager for another three. Jim later became chief executive of Fairfax's BRW Media. He won a Walkley Award for a follow-up of the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires he wrote for The Age and The Standard. Together with a dozen Standard journalists, Jim was highly commended in the 1983 Graham Perkin Australian Journalist of the Year Award. [/author_info] [/author]

When scrutiny is sub-standard, democracy suffers



Image: The Florida Times-Union.

Something very troubling is happening in our community when it comes to the local media's scrutiny of those in power.

Since returning to Warrnambool in January, I have watched with growing disbelief at the apparent reticence of our once-proud local newspaper, The Standard, to go in hard and ask the tough questions of our leaders.

This is what journalists do. This is the role of the so-called 'Fourth Estate' – to be the watchdog of the powerful and give voice to the powerless.

It is an essential part of our democracy and ensures that we retain an open, transparent and accountable government – on all levels.



This past week, we saw national scrutiny of MPs' spending, sparked by revelations that Prime Minister Abbott had claimed allowances for trips to weddings, triathlons and cycling events.

Was our local federal MP **Dan Tehan** asked by our paper to detail the \$873,992.35 that he spent from 2010-12? No, instead this figure was not even mentioned, but rather [the paper's story \(10/10\)](#) reassured us that he had claimed \$321,000 in 'legitimate government entitlements'. End of story.

There is no suggestion that Mr Tehan used his allowance improperly, but nor is it improper for a journalist to forensically examine this spending. This is exactly what independent journalist **Margot Kingston** did when she [broke the story](#) about Tony Abbott claiming more than \$9000 in taxpayer funds to promote his book.

It is only by drilling down into the detail that all the facts can come to light.



Mayor Michael
Neoh. Image: ABC.

Earlier this year, Warrnambool Mayor **Michael Neoh** visited China as part of a Sister City relationship with Changchun. Shortly after his return, [The Standard ran a story \(29/6\)](#) about Mr Neoh visiting his ancestral home in China and catching up with relatives.

Was this part of the official tour for which ratepayers paid \$3500 for both Mr Neoh and Council CEO **Bruce Anson**?

Did Mr Neoh pay for this portion of the trip himself? Again, there is no suggestion of impropriety by Mr Neoh, but we don't know the answer to these questions because, it appears, they weren't asked.*

And when others *do* ask the prickly, difficult questions, the response is sometimes extraordinary.

Last month, **Cr Peter Sycopoulis** and several council colleagues questioned whether Mayor Neoh and Mr Anson needed to attend a Sister City function in Japan – expected to cost ratepayers \$4000 – given they had just been to China.

For this, the councillors were chastised by the newspaper as [being 'party poopers'](#) (11/11). What?

And let's not forget the infamous '[Wilma Wright](#)' [letters to the editor](#). These were published by The Standard for four years – four years – without anybody apparently checking the identity of the author, who was revealed as Mr Anson's son and who at one point used the cover of his pseudonym to openly attack several councillors, including Cr Sycopoulis, in the lead up to a council election.

(Mr Anson, it must be noted, was cleared of any involvement in his son's activities).



Cr Peter Sycopoulis

The names in this column – Mr Tehan, Mayor Neoh, Mr Anson – are irrelevant: it is the public, important positions that they hold that makes them open to scrutiny and a higher standard of accountability.

This is the hard work of journalism.

It is much harder, more time consuming and nerve-wrecking than writing story after story about courts and crime (ie. the powerless) where all of the leg work has been done, yet it is critical if we are to have faith in our media as the watchdog it is intended to be.

If it fails in this task, it is nothing less than our democracy which suffers.

* *The Warrnambool City Council has since confirmed to Bluestone that Mayor Neoh did fund this portion of his travel.*

Disclosures:

- I began my journalism career as a cadet at The Standard in 1989.
- I was an open supporter of ALP candidate Michael Barling during the last federal election because I thought he was the best option for Wannon. It was the first time I voted Labor in many years: I normally vote Green.
- I know Cr Sycopoulis through his family: his older sisters and I went to school together.

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