When the heart hardens, the community hurts

Description

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.

[author] [author_image timthumb='on']http://www.the-terrier.com.au/wp-content/uploads/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]

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