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## New study shows worrying picture for journalism in regional Australia

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- **2019 *State of the Regions* report available under embargo**

A new study of the media in regional Australia has found fewer local journalists available to report on local government means communities are less informed, leading to public opinion being more easily manipulated by partisan interests, undermining social cohesion.

It was conducted this year by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, and forms part of the 2019 *State of the Regions* report released today by the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA).

“The picture that emerges is of a sharp and worrying decline in the amount of local news available to Australians,” guest authors, Margaret Simons and Gary Dickson wrote.

“Given that numerous pieces of research worldwide indicate a close relationship between journalism and the broader civic health of communities, this decline has serious implications for the agency, power and health of citizens in Australia’s regions.”

The study confirms that the broken traditional media model has led to advertising dollars going online to search engines and other platforms, rather than traditional media outlets. Shrinking newsrooms means fewer journalists covering local news for local communities.

The authors noted that regional and rural news media fulfil a need that metropolitan media cannot, and while the ABC makes an important contribution, it cannot address the overall decline.

The writers surveyed media managers employed by Local Government Areas (LGAs) in metropolitan, regional and rural areas. They found almost half of respondents from the metropolitan and regional and rural areas noted “some decline” or “significant decline” in local news coverage over the past five years.

“If we look at the basic news media function of reporting on local government, more than a third of LGAs reported that no journalists attended local government meetings,” the authors said.

“Although the figures suggest that some journalists follow up without attending the meeting, the indications are that a large part of local government business goes entirely unscrutinised and unreported.”

The authors concluded that fewer journalists means less public accountability of interest groups and institutions.

“Media is likely to become more partisan and selective, and increasingly controlled and manipulated by those who have the skills and interest to do so. This, in turn, is likely to lead to less social cohesion.”

Mayor David O'Loughlin, ALGA President and Mayor of the City of Prospect in Adelaide's inner north, said he hopes the study can spark a crucial national conversation.

"The authors have done Australians a great service in highlighting a problem that affects the way local communities are informed across the country, but especially in regional, rural and remote areas," he said.

"There are no easy answers to remedying the decline in journalists, but we need to discuss it and share ideas about possible solutions."

The *2019-20 State of the Regions: Population, productivity and purchasing power* was written for ALGA by National Economics and released at ALGA's [Regional Cooperation and Development Forum](#) in Canberra on 16 June.

Associate Professor Simons from Monash University and the Public Interest Journalism Initiative will be among a panel of experts discussing regional media at the Forum. Media are invited to attend.

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