

# **What's new in newspaper? Reconnecting with Readers**

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## **Abstract**

Declining circulations and a lack of reader interest in newspaper content are not news to the newspaper industry, but the underlying causes of these problems appear to remain somewhat of a mystery to many in the business. Few Australian newspapers have been willing or able to devote the resources needed to comprehensively address these important issues. The international newspaper group APN News & Media, which employs more than 400 hundred journalists in Australia and New Zealand, has instituted a wide-ranging program among its editorial and marketing employees called *Readers First*. The program is a result of management recognition that circulation and reader disengagement are at a critical point in the company's 14 Australian regional daily newspapers and its nine New Zealand titles. This paper provides an overview of APN's *Readers First* program, which focuses on renewing content and changing journalistic culture.

## Introduction

Stories of newspaper circulation declines and reader disengagement are not news – in the past three or so decades these stories have increased in frequency in many countries including Australia. Attempts to address the issues of falling circulation and an apparent disconnection between journalists and their publics have included measures such as civic or public journalism, the creation of public discussion forums in online environments and the establishment of reader panels, to name a few. Many newspapers have tried to deal with these problems through approaches that focus on marketing and circulation (Green, 1999; Cleghorn, 1999). These solutions often undervalue content and the importance of relationships between newspapers and their publics. They also largely fail to address the role newsroom culture has played in the disengagement of readers from newspapers. In many ways Australian newspapers have lagged behind in attempts address the aforementioned issues. For the most part, these newspapers have tried to increase circulation by directing their efforts towards repackaging their products (Green, 1999; Ewart, 1999a, 1999b), rather than concentrating on content. This approach has largely overlooked the need to change the relationship between news producers and receivers.

This paper examines one Australian newspaper corporation's efforts during the past 12 months to address some of the above-mentioned issues. Australian Provincial Newspapers (APN) is implementing a wide-ranging long-term project, which stems from a recognition that circulation and reader disengagement are at critical points. The project, called *Readers First*, is designed to put into place a framework through which these issues can be addressed. *Readers First* has three key aims: to increase circulation and advertising revenue; to make APN newspapers more responsive to and reflective of readers; and to change the way APN journalists think about and do their jobs. This paper presents an overview of APN's *Readers First* project. As well, it outlines the philosophy behind the project and discusses the potential impact on newspaper content and journalistic culture. Finally, it touches on the implications for those teaching journalism at the university level.

APN owns 14 regional daily newspapers and dozens of community weeklies in Queensland and New South Wales, along with nine regional dailies in New Zealand. In mid 2004 the company established a new position to oversee changes in content and corporate culture throughout its Australian and New Zealand newspapers. Terry Quinn, who previously worked in senior editorial positions in the UK and the USA including with the Thomson group in the USA, was hired to fill the position of APN's editor-in-chief. The move was in direct response to circulation declines in almost all of the group's regional dailies. Some of its daily mastheads had, in the ten years prior to 2001, experienced declines of up to 40 per cent in circulation, while average circulation losses were around 15 per cent (Ewart & Massey, 2004; Ewart & Tickle, 2002; ABC, 2001; Kirkpatrick, 2000). A more recent analysis of Australian Bureau of Circulation figures by Kirkpatrick (2005, pers comm.) shows that between 1990 and 2005 the circulation of APN regional dailies in Australia fell by 11.2 per cent, from 185,938 in 1990 to 165,112 in

2005. He found that sales of Australian metropolitan newspapers (Monday to Saturday papers) fell by 15.38 per cent, while metro Sunday newspaper sales rose by 10.24 per cent, in the same period.

## **Readership and Circulation Research**

Declining newspaper circulation was first identified as an issue in 1967 (Sommerville, 2001, p.24), when newspapers in the USA recognised and tried to halt the flow of readers away from their products. While a few newspapers have been able to reverse declining circulations (Garneau, 1992), the majority continue to experience significant difficulties in this area (Gleick, 1996, p.66). The situation was encapsulated by The World Association of Newspapers (1997, p.8): "By whatever criteria one may choose to measure it – advertising levels, circulation, time spent reading – newspapers are in decline and have been for decades." A variety of factors appear to have contributed to the downturn in circulation including: fewer young readers (Peiser, 2000); the death of afternoon newspapers and consequent loss of blue collar readers (Morton, 1992); the threat from online news sources (Snoddy, 2000; Gleick, 1996; Green, 1999); an economic downturn (Garneau, 1992) along with spiralling costs; and reader dissatisfaction with content (WAN, 2000, p. 8). While some believe there are ways of recovering from the various problems facing the news media (Bain, 1990) others, including Compañie (cited in WAN, 1997, p. 8) are not so positive about the print news media's future. Compañie suggests that: "Newspapers are a mature product that will continue their decline" (WAN, 1997, p.8). In Europe, declining readership of newspapers has attracted increasing attention during the past few decades (Peiser, 2000, p.11). A key issue there is the increasing age of readers (Peiser, 2000), as is the case in the USA (Strupp, 2000). Efforts in Europe and the USA to revive newspaper circulation are now centring on the creation of youth readerships, while trying to retain the bulk of readers, most who are over 50 years of age. A related problem has been the closure of many newspapers throughout the world. In the USA (Gleick, 1996) and Australia (Chadwick, 1999) the number of daily newspapers has declined in the past three decades and in Australia (Ewart and Cokley, 2004) small community newspapers have also closed as a result of competition, economic pressures and population declines.

Australian newspapers face many of the same issues as their USA counterparts in relation to circulation declines and reader disengagement. Here, metropolitan and regional newspapers have been struggling with circulation since the late 1980s and while some titles have made small gains in the past few years (Simper, 2001) these have failed to make up for the significant losses of the past two decades. At the regional level, newspapers that boasted of circulation improvements of more than 17 per cent in the mid-1970s (Kirkpatrick, 2000, p.75), struggled in the 1990s with the loss of readers and revenue (Kirkpatrick, 2000, p.82-83). Metropolitan newspapers experienced similar problems during that period (Chadwick, 1996).

From 1990 to 2000 APN also experienced circulation losses in many of its regional daily newspapers including Bundaberg, Gympie, Ipswich, Mackay, Maryborough, Rockhampton and Toowoomba. APN newspapers have experienced some circulation gains in the past two years or so. In the six months, to December 2004, circulation increased at six APN dailies including *The Daily Mercury* (2.6%), at *The Daily Examiner* (4.7%), at *The Gympie Times* (4.2%), at *The News-Mail* in (3%), at *The Sunshine Coast Daily* (3.8%), and *The Fraser Coast Chronicle* (3.2%) ([www.apn.com.au/fileRep/rad2D623.pdd](http://www.apn.com.au/fileRep/rad2D623.pdd)). In the first six months of this year (Jan-June 2005) circulation increased for nine of APNs regional dailies including *The Daily Examiner* (2.4%), *The Daily Mercury* (3.1%), *The News-Mail* (2.9%), *The Gympie Times* (2.2%), *The Northern Star* (1.9%), *The Fraser Coast Chronicle* (0.9%), *The Daily News* (0.9%), *The Sunshine Coast Daily* (0.8%), and *The Morning Bulletin* (0.2%). During that time circulation decreases were experienced at *The Toowoomba Chronicle*, *The Tweed Daily News*, *The Gladstone Observer* and *The Queensland Times*. *The Daily Mercury*, *The Daily Examiner*, *The Gympie Times* and *The News Mail* are the four fastest growing APN daily newspapers in relation to circulation ([www.apn.com.au/fileRep/radP9402.pdf](http://www.apn.com.au/fileRep/radP9402.pdf)). The Australian situation has attracted international attention, with the WAN reporting that, overall, Australian newspapers experienced a decrease in circulation of 1.9 per cent in 2000 (<http://www.wanpress.org/ce/previous/2001/congress.forum/wpt/circulation.html>).

The reasons for circulation declines are many and complex as Green (1999, p.18) explains:

Reasons proposed for falling circulation range from competition from other media (most recently the Internet), to declining levels of literacy among the population in general, to the proposition that newspapers represent a "mature" industry approaching its sunset.

Kirkpatrick (2000) adds that circulation losses are caused by population declines in some areas, closure of major industries in regional areas, cover-price rises and reductions in editorial space. A consequence of declining newspaper circulations, both internationally and in Australia, can be seen in the reduction of the number of mastheads on newsstands. In Australia, this has been most noticeable in the past two decades during which time fewer newspapers were published both in regional and metropolitan Australia (MacLean, 2004, p.17; Ewart & Cokley, 2004, p.98; Cokley & Capel, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2000a; Green, 1999; Chadwick, 1996). While daily metropolitan and regional newspapers perform different roles (Kirkpatrick, 2000a; McDougall, 1995; Killiby, 1994a, 1994b), the distinctions between them can be seen in the way audiences perceive and use these newspapers. In exploring these differences Kirkpatrick (2000a, p.219) highlighted an important, but often overlooked, point:

Provincial or "regional" daily newspapers, as they are now promoted, play a different role from metropolitan dailies, and even from country weeklies. They have different audiences with different needs and values.

These factors help shape a different product.

Regional Australia has been hit hard by the loss of newspapers, which is most noticeable in small country and regional areas where newspapers have been forced to cease publication, or have been bought out by large media corporations, in the face of

increasing commercial pressure, declining circulation and limited resources. The reduction in the availability of local news and information, the availability of which underpins the social fabric of many small towns, has had a significant impact on rural and regional communities, (Cokley & Capel, 2004; Ewart & Cokley, 2004). Local newspapers in non-metropolitan areas, as O'Toole discovered (1992, p.87), are "a fairly important cog in the wheel" because of the interest that communities and their members have in local news. More importantly, such media are often the only source of local news and information within a community. Some small communities, including Bruthen in East Gippsland Victoria and Blackall in Central Western Queensland, have responded to the withdrawal of commercial news media by establishing their own community owned and operated newspapers. These two towns provided some evidence that communities want to be involved in the production and dissemination of news and information, debate and discussion, and that reader and community involvement is one way of helping newspapers to survive.

### *Readers First*

In mid 2004 APN implemented a project called *Readers First*, designed to rebuild the relationship between its regional daily newspapers and their readers. Quinn (2005, pers comm.) said the introduction of *Readers First* was a direct response to the falling circulations, and subsequent loss of advertising revenue, experienced by many of the group's daily newspapers. In Australia, the average circulation loss across APN's 14 regional daily newspapers during the past decade was around 15 per cent. Quinn said (2005, pers comm.) that while *Readers First* aimed to increase circulation and advertising revenue, it also aimed to make APN newspapers more reflective of their readers and the communities in which they were based. For APN, achieving this involves a focus on two key elements: changing content to reflect the needs of readers and changing the way journalists think about readers and their approach to news gathering and writing. Quinn this required a philosophical change amongst journalists. In the past Australian newspapers have rarely paid attention to these areas, instead focusing on design and layout, frequently repackaging existing content and redesigning pages in an effort to win readers or halt circulation declines (Ewart 1999a, 1999b).

*Readers First* is being gradually implemented across APN's 14 regional Australian dailies<sup>1</sup>. Quinn (2005, pers comm.) said some newspapers had been more responsive to *Readers First* than others. He said early indications were that the newspapers that had already put the philosophies of *Readers First* into action had experienced circulation increases. He explained (2005, pers comm.) that in introducing the project, APN was taking a long-term approach to ensuring the sustainable economic growth of newspapers, while ensuring its newspapers were reflective of the communities in which they were located.

## **The philosophy**

While *Readers First* focuses on increasing circulation through reconnecting with readers, it requires that journalists re-conceptualise their roles. *Readers First* shifts the emphasis on news, from traditional styles of journalism where hard news and elite sources dominate, to styles of journalism that are inclusive of readers, their interests and needs. Rather than concentrating on practical journalistic skills and routines, which reinforce and preference news criteria established by journalists and editors, the approach involves journalists becoming more attuned to readers' interests and reflecting those interests in the newspaper content. Quinn (2005, pers comm.) describes the approach to content as "useful, relevant and compelling journalism attuned to readers' interests". *Readers First* involves creating two-way, interactive relationships, in particular through the creation of an emotional bond, between newspapers and readers. This involves putting 'real people' at the heart of every story. In other words, it should result in news stories which use more non-elite sources and fewer elite sources. Quinn said (2005, pers comm.) another part of the *Readers First* philosophy involved newspapers taking up a leadership position in their communities, championing the interests of their readers and reflecting the character, personality & idiosyncrasies of those communities. This is a move away from the usual approach whereby many newspapers value detachment and avoid lobbying or championing issues.

## **Implementing *Readers First***

While the implementation of *Readers First* has involved each newspaper developing its own readers' action plan, which puts into practice the philosophies of *Readers First*, some common approaches have emerged. These include newspapers campaigning on public issues on behalf of their communities, the introduction of projects designed to identify and connect with specific reader groups, reader involvement in the newspaper through reader panels and the inclusion of content designed to be more inclusive and reflective of local people and places.

In reorienting newspaper content one of the key issues APN newspapers face is the lack of information about reader needs. In the past year APN has introduced reader surveys designed to assess reader needs and reader focus groups provided more indepth information to complement the survey data. As well, moves are underway to create a central database combining various disparate sources of reader data for all APN newspapers. The aim here is to provide a more comprehensive picture of the people who are currently reading APN newspapers. This information will then be used by journalists and staff at each site to ensure content more adequately reflects readers' interests. Research (Green, 1999) has indicated that journalists typically do not get access to data and research about their readers, and given that APN's move to do so should be seen as a move in the right direction. Another aspect of *Readers First* is the establishment of a dialogue with readers about their needs and the issues that concern them. Methods used to do this include reader panels, email panels, web site forums, public meetings, surveys and public morning teas hosted by the editors of some of the newspapers. As

well each publication had established a regular column that explained to readers the changes being made to the newspaper.

One of the key aims of the AON project is to get newspapers to campaign on issues of significance to the communities in which they are based. Several APN newspapers have campaigned on key issues on behalf of their communities. Editors at the newspapers which have used this approach say the campaigns have been successful in bringing important issues to the attention of the public, politicians and experts, while facilitating public debate and discussion and seeking solutions to the issues. Quinn (2005 pers comm.) said this approach had been successful at *The Daily Mercury* and *The Northern Star* where campaigns had focussed on reducing the road toll among young people and winning back an axed rail service. These campaigns involved public meetings, petitions, and a protest train ride. At the *Daily Mercury* in Mackay a 2004 campaign called 'Keep Our Teens Alive' was prompted by a string of fatal road accidents involving younger drivers, including two fatalities. Editor Lindsay Saunders (2005 pers comm.) said the goal of the campaign was to prompt debate and provide a forum for readers as well as interest groups to have their say on ways to curb these deaths. He said the campaign began with a front-page editorial that included a number of suggestions on measures to stop the deaths. Readers were then invited to tell *The Daily Mercury* what they thought of these suggestions and add their own. He said (Saunders 2005, pers comm.):

The article obviously struck a chord and over the next few weeks we ran pages of readers' thoughts, sent via email or the post, as well as articles from a range of interested groups - teenage drivers, road safety committees, driver training groups, emergency services, etc.

Following the stories and feedback, a Mackay radio station invited Saunders to take part in a talkback segment. It was originally programmed for 30 minutes - and ran for more than two hours. Saunders also attended a number of meetings of Mackay's road safety committee and the newspaper made a commitment to do what it could to publicise the committee's work and programs, which it continues to do. Saunders explained (2005 pers comm.):

This campaign was a hard one to make a finite end to - and to be able to judge what it achieved in some ways. What the campaign did achieve was open lines of communication more freely between our readers and ourselves. It showed them that we are genuinely interested in their opinions and thoughts and we continue to canvass them on a range of topics. It also showed our staff how successful and popular such ideas are with readers and [it got] them thinking more about future campaigns - big and small. We learnt lessons from the campaign and formed an action plan for future campaigns - things we would do differently and steps to take.

The campaigns were complementary to another aim of the *Readers First* project, which was to involve readers in the stories produced by journalists. Quinn said (2005, pers comm.) at some APN newspapers the emphasis in news stories had shifted from a heavy reliance on experts and elite sources, to ordinary people. Correspondingly, the

focus of news had change to the impact of issues on the lives of readers and the various publics served by the newspapers.

Quinn (2005 pers comm.) said a key goal of the project was to change the approach of journalists to reporting, getting them more involved in the communities in which they work and live, rather than the journalists being disengaged and dispassionate. A new approach to in-house training had been devised to facilitate cultural change among journalists. Training is about developing ways of helping journalists translate the ideas behind *Readers First* into practice. This has involved, to some extent, a move away from the traditional focus of training on skills-based activities towards a more philosophical approach, which is the basis of *Readers First*. The new training is primarily aimed at engendering a cultural change among journalists. Training aims to give journalists the chance to share information about how they are implementing *Readers First* and any difficulties they are experiencing. Quinn (2005, pers. comm.) said 350 of APN's Australian journalists and 250 of APN's New Zealand journalists had been exposed to the new training.

Also worthy of note is the formation of a research partnership with Queensland academics, which is evidence of APN's long-term commitment to the reinvigoration of regional newspaper readership and journalistic culture. It is noteworthy that this is the first time APN has committed funding to this type of research.

## Discussion

APN's move to change journalistic culture and reorient the content of its regional daily newspapers has implications for both of the aforementioned areas as well as journalism education. Attempts to change journalistic culture have often been associated with conflict between newsroom management and newsroom staff (Gentry, 1997). That conflict does not usually revolve around the issue of change, rather it has focused on the processes involved in introducing change (Gentry, 1997). Another issue to emerge from the research is that the introduction of change in newsroom environments has sometimes failed because of poor planning and communication prior to and during its introduction (Gentry, 1993). The need for good communication and planning during the introduction of change in newsrooms was highlighted by a 2003 study by Gade and Perry. They investigated journalists' attitudes towards the introduction of change at the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* over four years. They surveyed journalists working in that newsroom annually from 1996 to 2000, finding that the journalists were initially excited about the proposed changes, but during the course of the four-year study their optimism towards change diminished significantly (Gade & Perry, 2003, p.338). While in 1996, journalists at the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* were enthusiastic about the proposed changes to news-gathering, processing, organisational development and newsroom structure, by 2000 this had changed to "broad-based dissatisfaction". Importantly, studies in this field suggest that approaches to managing newsroom change are multi-faceted and in order for change to be truly accepted those involved in the process have

to be able to see connections between the changes introduced and the quality of the product being produced.

The issues identified by the research into newsroom cultural change present some unique challenges for APN in its efforts to change the culture of the 400 journalists employed by its 14 Australian and nine New Zealand regional daily newspapers. In the past, Australian newspapers attempting to introduce cultural change among journalists (Ewart, 2004) have not fully met the challenges involved. Research has provided some indication that Australian journalists "seem to be much more tied to a certain function" (Deuze, 2002, p.139). Deuze argues this impacts on the type of culture operating within a newsroom, making it flexible and open in the case of European journalists and rigid in the case of Anglo-American journalists. Importantly, any move to affect a cultural change among regional journalists here will need to take account of the unique Australian journalistic culture. If Deuze is correct and this rigidity extends to regional newsrooms such as those operated by APN, then the task of engendering a cultural change among journalists will be complex and difficult. It will be interesting to see whether APN is able to meet those challenges and affect a cultural change that is ultimately viewed as positive by most of the journalists at the newspapers involved. A key challenge will be altering the relationship between news producers (journalists) and receivers (readers), which for the most part, has been passive. This will involve a philosophical change for journalists where the power relationship between them and their publics will be challenged. If this change is successful, the production of news at these newspapers will involve more negotiation between journalists and their publics. This will require a commitment by both journalists and their publics, which will involve significant challenges and change for both groups.

Moves to reorient content in newspapers will no doubt meet some resistance both within the newsrooms and other newspaper departments, and perhaps in the wider community among some readers and publics. APN will have to implement strategies to deal with resistance at these levels. Noticeable, lasting and accepted change in the content of newspapers will not happen overnight. While these transformations may be gradual, they will require concerted planning and support at the management and resource levels. Regular measurements of the scale and success of these changes will need to be built into the *Readers First* project. Proposed measures of the project's outcomes include: surveys of journalists to determine the influence on *Readers First* on their attitudes and philosophies; content analysis before and after the introduction of *Readers First* to reveal what effect if any it has on the use of ordinary people or non-elite sources in stories; and reader surveys and focus groups to identify the impact of the project from their perspectives.

Finally, the scale of the *Readers First* project and its potential impact on the culture of a large group of journalists living and working in regional Australia may have considerable ramifications for journalism education. Many of the graduates of Australian journalism courses find their first job in regional journalism and if the APN project is successful, other news media corporations could be expected to implement

similar projects. While most journalism courses in Australia do not have a particular focus on regional journalism, consideration may have to be given by journalism educators to the type of culture change that occurs in APN's regional newsrooms, if any, as a result of *Readers First*. Those changes may have to be reflected in journalism courses. At the minimum this will involve exposing students to the changing expectations that regional newsrooms have of new employees and reorienting teaching approaches to incorporate the kinds of activities being undertaken by regional newspapers. This may involve a cultural change for journalism educators that may be just as challenging for them as the changes faced by APN journalists. Journalism educators should monitor these developments and identify how they can be reflected in teaching. While the medium and long term outcomes of the *Readers First* project will attract the attention of many in the academic community, the success or failure of APN's *Readers First* will no doubt determine whether other newspaper chains in Australia follow suit with similar projects.

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<sup>i</sup> The 14 titles include: *The Daily Mercury*, *The Morning Bulletin*, *The Gladstone Observer*, *The News-Mail*, *The Fraser Coast Chronicle*, *The Advocate*, *The Daily Examiner*, *The Warwick Daily News*, *The Queensland Times*, *The Toowoomba Chronicle*, *The Sunshine Coast Daily*, *The Northern Star*, *The Tweed Daily News*, *The Gympie Times*.