

On the outer Barcoo: Sources of independence?

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This paper explores the idea that community newspapers are the voice of the people. The authors suggest that one measure of a community newspaper's value is its ability to ensure the voices of non-elites are not only represented but given equal access to the news as news sources. The authors believe one test of this idea is the extent to which such newspapers reflect the voices of ordinary people. The authors examine the range and types of sources used by a recently established community newspaper, *The Barcoo Independent*, in Blackall, Queensland, Australia. Our aim is to determine the extent of access provided to non-elites by this newspaper. In particular, the authors want to identify whether this newspaper exhibits sourcing patterns which are typical of most newspapers in relation to the use of elites and non-elites, or if differences are evident in the range and type of voices heard within it.

Our paper explores this issue through an analysis of sources and source usage in the first five editions of *The Barcoo Independent*. This newspaper was established collaboratively in the latter part of 2003 by one of the authors of this paper, John Cokley, lecturer at James Cook University, Townsville, in Queensland, and a community group of three Blackall residents. The authors believe there are similarities between community media such as *The Barcoo Independent* and emerging community media in countries other than Australia and the authors hope that this paper will bring into focus the very important issue of source usage and access to community media for those considering starting a newspaper or reinvigorating existing community media outlets.

The closure of local newspapers in many small rural towns in Australia has had a significant impact on those communities. In the 1980s and 1990s the ownership of many small local weekly, bi-weekly and monthly newspapers shifted from independent operators to major newspaper corporations. Some of these titles ceased production because of poor economic returns or competition with other titles owned by the same companies. One community affected by the closure of its local newspaper was Blackall, in the central-western region of Queensland. The town's only locally produced newspaper, the *Blackall Leader*, had been published weekly by Australian Provincial Newspapers, a large media corporation which owns a range of newspaper titles in Queensland and New South Wales. However in 2001, the *Blackall Leader* was closed. That left a situation in which the nearest newspapers were controlled and produced from the towns of Longreach, 200km to the north-west, and Charleville, another 300km to the south-east.

¹ The listing of authors is intended to reflect their contributions to this study.

In the latter part of 2003 (Coats 2003:1), a community group located in Blackall, in conjunction with students and staff at James Cook University, launched "a new community newspaper" entitled *The Barcoo Independent*, as a means of providing local news to residents of Blackall and the surrounding region. In fact, the "new" paper was a revived version of an historic mast-head first published in 1889 as *The Barcoo Independent and Blackall, Tambo and Isisford Observer* (Cripps 2003) which had replaced the town's first newspaper, *The Western Champion*, (launched in 1879, see Coats 2003). However, after publishing for just short of a century, *The Barcoo Independent* ceased publication in 1983 when its office was destroyed by fire (Coats 2003).

Cokley and Capel (2004) described the objective of resurrecting a local newspaper in Blackall as "meaningful operational control of content (in pilot) by representative citizens of Blackall". Journalism students from James Cook University worked with the community, initially via the Association for Blackall Community Development (ABCD), and later with a derivative group known as the Blackall Newspaper Project committee, to identify, gather, write and produce stories for the newspaper. The committee and Cokley established the newspaper's editorial policy/direction which focuses on stories that reflect the interests and activities of residents of Blackall town and the surrounding rural shire area (a sheep and cattle grazing district).

This study examines the range and types of sources used in *The Barcoo Independent* between 2003 and May 2004 (the first five editions). The authors do so because the literature on community and rural newspapers suggests that they are more aware of their readers (Pretty 1993, 1995; Bowd 2003). As well, research indicates that community newspapers focus on local issues of importance to local people and that they should reflect the activities of local people (Kirkpatrick 2000a, 1995). Bowd (2003:118) also said that such newspapers are distinguishable by "their relationship with their audience, their role in advocating for and promoting their community and their approach to news". She also identified that country newspapers and journalists are much more accessible to the public because of their physical location in the centre of town and because the journalists are well known and recognisable within the community. Alysen, Sedorkin and Oakham (2003:9) suggest that a sense of "ownership" of the local newspaper by local people is created by the coverage of news stories which involve readers and provide recognition for their achievements.

Our aim

The authors aimed to determine the extent of access provided by *The Barcoo Independent* to the news for non-elites. In particular, the authors wanted to identify whether this newspaper exhibited sourcing patterns considered typical of most newspapers in relation to the use of elites and non-elites, or if differences were evident in the range and type of voices heard within it. The authors consider *The Barcoo Independent* to be out of the ordinary in the Australian media market because of its ownership by the community, rather than by a media corporation or even an independent operator. There are notably few of the latter remaining.

Our paper explores the aforementioned issues through an analysis of sources and their treatment in the first five editions of the new *The Barcoo Independent*. Of particular interest is the involvement that one of the authors of this paper, John Cokley, has had in facilitating similar projects which have involved creation of independent news media outlets. Of note was his involvement in the design and delivery of a course at the Queensland University of Technology, in Brisbane, Australia, which culminated in the development of a website run by journalists at the *Timor Post* newspaper in Dili, East Timor, 3000 km to the north-west of that university (Cokley *et al*, 2000).

Following its initial development by Cokley and his students during 2000-2001, QUT academic Sharon Tickle and a group of students visited East Timor to train staff at the *Timor Post* and then hand over ownership and operation of the website (www.easttimorpress.com) in 2002 (Tickle 2002). Dili staff have continued to operate the site since then. The site includes a Portuguese language component, because of East Timor's history as a Portuguese colony until 1975. The island's national language is now also Portuguese, even though the indigenous language, Tetum (Hull 1999:ix), is gaining a following again. Cokley is also the founder and inaugural convenor of the Australian Convergent Journalism Special Interest Group, a collaboration between James Cook University and the University of Tasmania, Hobart. This group was the first of its kind in Australia to be admitted as an affiliate to the NewsPlex project at the University of Southern Carolina in the United States, an international collaboration of US, European and Asian journalism researchers and colleges (<http://www.newsplex.org/>).

Literature

Newspapers in Australia continue to face circulation and readership difficulties (Kirkpatrick 2000b:75). While major metropolitan titles survive, despite circulation problems (MacLean 2004:17), many newspapers have closed in the face of increasing production costs and declining circulations (Cokley and Capel, 2004; Chadwick 1996). Whereas small country Australian newspapers were typically family-owned, there are now fewer independently-owned titles, with major newspaper corporations buying up family and independently-owned mastheads. Evidence indicates that Queensland regional newspapers² have been struggling with declining circulations during the past decade or so (Kirkpatrick 2000b:82-83).

Kirkpatrick suggests metropolitan newspapers have also faced similar problems. He notes the factors which have contributed to declines in circulation include, but are not limited to, population declines in some areas, closure of major industries in regional areas, cover-price rises and reductions in editorial space. While regional newspapers throughout Australia boasted of circulation improvements of more than 17 per cent in the mid-1970s (Kirkpatrick 2000b:75), in the 1990s most experienced circulation declines. Regional newspapers have tried various methods to improve circulation, focussing on marketing devices such as give-aways, competitions and price reductions for regular subscribers.

However, country or small-town newspapers have not had the luxury of being able to focus on such marketing devices. Indeed, many independent newspaper operators have had to sell their titles to major corporations in the face of increasing competition for advertising dollars, rising production costs and declining circulations. In some instances, major corporations have also purchased and later closed small community titles (Cokley and Capel 2004).

The importance of country and community newspapers in Australia has been recognised by a number of researchers. However, what has been less thoroughly explored is the impact of the closure of a small country newspaper on its community. Cokley and Capel (2004) identified the considerable impact of the removal of local media from a rural community. In particular,

² Regional newspapers refer to those newspapers published daily which are located in regional areas, usually based in a small city or large town, serving a wide surrounding geographical area