

News map gaps –regional news coverage in the city.

“ Why isn’t my town on the map?” (Keillor 1985,p.90)

The lament of residents of the mythical Lake Wobegon, when fifty square miles of central Minnesota were mistakenly omitted by government surveyors.

Abstract: This content analysis of statewide television news reveals a number of Lake Wobegons missing from Queensland’s television news map. Distance from a newsroom (not from the capital) appears to be a major factor contributing to the ‘invisibility’ of certain cities and towns. A local news service appears to enhance a region’s chances of ‘balanced’ statewide coverage. Based on this study the hidden impact of local TV news closures could be a Lake Wobegon fate for regional Australia on the state and national news maps.

Introduction

Regional Australia lost eight local television news services last year (Brook 2001) and proposed new media ownership rules have raised bipartisan fears of further local news losses and increased syndication from the city. What happens when a regional area loses or has never had its own local television news? Do statewide news services compensate for the absence of local coverage? This study suggests they do not. This investigation found that while two major television networks in Queensland devoted between 15 to 23 percent of their news coverage to regional areas a few select regions were ‘favoured’. Instead of compensating for a lack of local news services, the statewide television news services reinforced the inequities by covering the regions that were served by strong, diverse local news media. Comparatively large regional areas without local television news received less attention on the statewide services rather than more.

Research by Larson (1982), Breen (1996) and Harmon (1998) found that Australia was a ‘blind spot’ for the US television networks which rarely sent crews to Australia to cover news. Australian news is gathered from wire services and the video of others and enters a highly competitive gate-keeping process where many ‘Australia stories’ aren’t on the agenda or available easily (Harmon, p.82).

A similar news creation and selection process appears to cause several ‘blind spots’ on Queensland’s news map. The findings from this content analysis of Queensland TV news suggest coverage of regional issues is dictated by the operational structure, rather than by the intrinsic news value of events throughout the state.

News from the regions: Does it matter?

Griffin (1999) says local place reporting is becoming more important as 'image and identity' are becoming essential for a region's economic growth and ultimate survival. He writes : " The few commentators who have considered the role of place in journalism ...have pointed to how the mere naming of a place can generate a host of images, meanings and ideologies."

Griffin argues that local issues, activities and identities are assuming greater significance even within the global news environment. And that journalists should become more involved in the reporting and representation of place as a 'localising' phenomenon in which media interact with their local communities.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority's recent investigation into the adequacy of regional TV news found there was significant community concern about declining levels of locally produced news and information. And the federal government's official policy indicates a sympathy for the retention of existing levels of regional news programming. "The government recognizes public concern about declining levels of local and regional news and information programs on both television and radio. Local services are important for developing community identity and ensuring that important information is relayed in a timely fashion." (*Hansard:Broadcasting Services Act Amendment (media ownership) Bill 2002, 2002*)

Brand and Pearson (2001) note concerns about the declining diversity of regional news coverage in areas of relatively high populations and the lack of research in the area. Local communities have an affinity with their local TV news service and with the TV news service they receive even if it does not adequately cover the local community. Tuchman (1978) provides the example of the New Jersey community that forced greater TV coverage of local issues by threatening the television stations' licences. The New Jersey mayor brought financial pressure to bear for the commercial television organizations to change what Tuchman and Fishman (1980) call the news services' 'geographic territoriality'. Tuchman says deciding 'where' to look for news is the most important factor impacting on how reporters are assigned. Journalists then are dispersed to cover specific organizations and topics within the nominated territory. The selection of the news territory has a major influence on the final news agenda. This study questions the equity of the 'geographic territoriality' of two metropolitan TV news organizations – the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Nine Network.

Measuring regional coverage

While this is primarily a study of the 'where' of news it also investigates the 'what' of regional news stories and attempts to answer the question of how regional Queensland is made into news for statewide consumption.

National Nine News was selected as it is the news medium of choice for the majority of Australians (ABA 2001). The national broadcaster was chosen because of its reputation for credibility and presentation of 'better, more issue-based news' (Turner 1996).

The study involved a content analysis of ABC TV and the Nine Network's Queensland nightly news bulletins during February 2002.

More than 120 non-metropolitan television news stories were classified by region of origin and subject category (crime/court, accident/emergency, new venture/initiative/awards, major event/promo, economic/social issue or bizarre/novelty).

Television news content was also coded as either positive or negative. For the purposes of this study the positive stories were defined as 'good news'. For example the positive stories included the entire new venture/initiative/awards category. Negative stories were defined as 'bad news' and included the two categories of crime/court and accident/emergency. The stories were coded on content only. The categorization did not consider audience reaction and whether the news story resulted in a positive or negative perception of the region of origin. For example the Childers' backpacker hostel fire was a 'bad news' story even though the coverage may have resulted in audience sympathy and empathy for the town's residents.

A second part of the study was to establish a link between the coverage content and news gathering methods. The news production process consists of two levels – creation and selection. If TV news is 'created' (Fishman 1980) at a local level it is then available to be 'selected' by other news organizations. The selection of news stories from established regional sources becomes routine. In comparison the 'creation of news', by the capital city news crews, is more time-consuming, usually more expensive and only instigated for a high priority, newsworthy event usually 'bad news'. The routine stories from the regular source (local TV news source, locally-based crew) need not be of the same level of newsworthiness and often include 'good news'. The region, which has local newsrooms creating news, has a much greater chance of 'balanced' coverage by state and national news programs.

Statewide television coverage

Regional news stories received an average 18.8 per cent of the television news coverage (excluding sport) on the two Brisbane-based television news bulletins. Channel 9 news devoted 22.7 per cent of its news stories to regional areas while on ABC television news, regional stories represented only 15 per cent of news content (Table 1). The ABC ran 53 regional stories in 353 news stories and Channel 9 broadcast 69 regional stories in 303 news stories.

Of the regional stories 27.2 per cent (ABC) and 26 per cent (Channel 9) were about the Gold Coast followed by 23.6 percent (ABC) and 24.6 per cent (Channel 9) about the Sunshine Coast. More than 50 per cent of Queensland regional news coverage was devoted to the two coasts on both networks during February 2002.

The third most popular regional centre on both networks in February was Childers.

However due to the dominance of one major news event the figures are not considered a valid indication of the general level of news coverage of the Central Queensland town. All the Childers' news stories related to the backpacker hostel fire in June 2000. The murder trial began in Brisbane's Supreme Court on February 18, 2002 and eight stories on ABC and Channel 9 covered the court case and included file footage from the Childers' fire. The ninth story was run the week prior to the trial when demolition of the hostel started. Coverage on the two networks was almost identical.

Table 1: Number of television news stories during February 2002 (regions/cities covered by both news organizations)

City/region	ABC - 7pm news	Channel 9 - 6pm news
Gold Coast	13	18
Sunshine Coast	13	17
Childers *	9	9
Whitsundays	3	5
Toowoomba	3	3
Cairns	2	3
Gympie	2	3
Logan	2	3
Stanthorpe	2	1
Bundaberg	2	1
Amberley	1	1
Ipswich	1	1

*The nine stories by each network were coverage of the Childers' backpacker fire aftermath. Murder trial began 18/2/02.

NB: Some stories included more than one region. These stories were included in each region's news story tally.

Table 2: Number of news stories from other Queensland regions/cities covered by ABC television news and Channel 9 news during February 2002

City/region	ABC - 7pm news	Channel 9 - 6pm news
Townsville	nil	2
Rockhampton	2	nil
South west Queensland	2	nil
Warwick	nil	2
Boonah	1	nil
Lockyer Valley	nil	1
Brisbane Valley	nil	1
Bribie Island	1	nil

Tables 1 and 2 show inequality of recognition of various regions. It is a shared bias. The two news operations presented very similar coverage of regional news.

Regional news: It's a crime

How are the regional areas of Queensland covered by the Brisbane-based television news operations? The main category for regional news stories was crime and court stories. Of the ABC's 53 regional news stories 18 or 33.9 per cent were court or crime stories.

Similarly on Channel 9 the major news category for regional stories was court/crime with 28 stories or 40.5 per cent of the 69 regional news stories in this category.

Table 3 shows that following court and crime stories the news categories from highest ranking to lowest were accident and emergency stories, new venture/initiative and award stories, major event or promotion, bizarre or novelty stories and finally economic or social issues.

Table 3: Regional news coverage classification.

News category	ABC news Number of regional stories	ABC news % of regional stories	Channel 9 news Number of regional stories	Channel 9 news % of regional stories
Court/crime	18	33.9 %	28 (1 story also included in accident/emergency)	40.5 %
Accident/emergency	14	26.4 %	26 (2 stories also categorized as novelty)	37.6 %
New venture /initiative/awards	11 (1 story also included in social category)	20.7 %	8	11.5 %
Major event/promo*	7 (1 story also categorized as novelty)	13.2 %	5	7.2 %
Bizarre/novelty	2	3.7 %	4	5.8 %
Economic/social	3	5.6 %	1	1.5 %

*CHOGM preview stories dominated this category.

Surf's up

ABC TV and Channel 9 Queensland news bulletins during February 2002 'favoured' the Gold Coast in regional coverage (Table 1).

The Gold and Sunshine Coasts were regional news 'hot spots' for both networks. The two coastal regions received more coverage and a different style of coverage in comparison to the majority of regional Queensland (Table 4).

The Gold and Sunshine Coasts not only received more coverage but the news stories included a greater number of positives stories (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 4: News coverage categories for the coasts during February 2002.

News category	ABC Gold Coast coverage	Channel 9 Gold Coast coverage	ABC Sunshine Coast coverage	Channel 9 Sunshine Coast coverage
Crime/court	3	5	1	5
Accident/emergency	3	6	3	4
New venture /initiative/awards	7	6	2	3
Major event/promo			6 *	4*
Bizarre/novelty		1	1	1
Economic/social				

* The Sunshine Coast's selection as the venue for CHOGM dominated the region's television news coverage during February 2002.

The Gold and Sunshine Coasts monopolize the positive regional coverage with the two regions receiving 81.8 per cent of the new venture/initiatives/awards category on ABC television news and 100 per cent of the Channel 9 coverage in this category.

Tables 5 and 6 show the Gold and Sunshine Coasts produced more 'positive' than 'negative' stories.

Table 5: Classification of Gold Coast television news stories

Positive	Negative
Two new legal brothels (ABC)	Two teenagers charged with arson (ABC)
Cycle safety summit (ABC)	Murder suicide (ABC)
New art gallery exhibition (ABC)	Business fraud (ABC)
Sunday trading to start (ABC)	Three men injured in boating accident (ABC)
Bravery award for local men (ABC)	Motorbike rider falls over cliff (ABC)
Release of rescued dolphin (ABC)	Police critical of cyclists on the motorway (ABC)
Cycle safety summit (9)	Three men injured in boating accident (9)
New seahorse breeding business (9)	More charges against fatality driver (9)
Two new legal brothels (9)	Resident fined for building in National Park (9)
New Hear and Say centre (9)	Police object to cyclists on motorway (9)
Cycle safety summit 2 (9)	Murder suicide (9)
Bravery awards (9)	Couple lose court action against state (9)
Toddler saved from pit bull by cat (9)	Firefighter loses house to fire (9)
Two-year old saved from house fire (9)	Two teenagers charged with arson (9)
Missing woman found safe near Hinze Dam (9)	
Vaccination time for tiger cub at Dreamworld (9)	

Table 6: Classification of Sunshine Coast television news coverage during February 2002.

Positive	Negative
CHOGM preparations (ABC)	Double shooting at Eumundi (ABC)
CHOGM preparations (ABC)	Shark attack at Sunshine Beach (ABC)
Sunday trading to start (ABC)	Teenager injured at Moffat Heads (ABC)
Bravery awards to locals (ABC)	CHOGM – navy officers disciplined over sex romp (ABC)
Snappy couple (crocodiles) have a new home at the Australian woolsheds (ABC)	Beaches closed due to stingers (9)
CHOGM security (ABC)	Greens claim pelicans mutilated (9)
CHOGM security (ABC)	Man struck by lightning (9)
CHOGM (ABC)	Police detain woman after car chase (9)
CHOGM (ABC)	Double shooting near Noosa (9)
Wiggles team up with Steve Irwin- the crocodile hunter (9)	Go-kart track sued by paraplegic (9)
Kangaroo on menu for CHOGM (9)	Woman loses case against go-kart track (9)
Bravery awards (9)	Student killed on highway (9)
CHOGM security (9)	16-year-old hurt in Moffat Heads fall (9)
CHOGM security (9)	
School introduces plastic to promote healthy eating (9)	
CHOGM ready (9)	

Coverage for the rest of regional Queensland was different. The regional centres of Stanthorpe and Boonah received only positive coverage (Table 9). Stanthorpe's three news stories related to the state cabinet meeting in the city. The promotional news story for the local Apple and Grape festival on ABC TV was run in the 'leave them laughing' final slot because of the marketing ploy of placing Premier Peter Beattie and local National Party member Lawrence Springborg in barrels competing in a grape crushing contest. The Premier's presence for the state cabinet meeting made the novel promotional activity possible. The one Boonah story was about a local man receiving a bravery award.

Toowoomba received equal positive and negative coverage. Channel 9's positive coverage consisted of two bizarre/novelty stories. A toddler was rescued after getting her finger caught in the bath plughole and an escaped steer was recaptured after a chase through city streets. Both events involved footage provided by a Toowoomba-based crew.

If the extensive coverage of the Governor-General's handling of the child sexual abuse cases at the Toowoomba Preparatory school and its ramifications had been included in the local news story tally the Toowoomba coverage would have included three positive and 24 negative stories. These stories were not included in the Toowoomba category as the stories included a brief passing mention to the Toowoomba school or usually just a brief shot of the school's front gates. The focus of the stories was the Governor-General's refusal to resign rather than the events at the school.

The ABC's positive story from Toowoomba was one of the few regional stories that covered a local social issue; in this case, the impact of drug addiction in the community and local attempts to overcome the problems. The only other regional social issue stories were also carried on the ABC news and were produced by the Rockhampton-based crew. One story covered the economic and social impacts on the city of the meat work's closure and the other dealt with the effects of a tick chemical ban on the local rural industry. The one economic/social issue regional story covered by Channel 9 was the impact of the rising land valuations in southeast Queensland. This story was not assigned to a region as it covered mainly Brisbane and included a brief mention of neighbouring councils.

Table 7: Number of 'positive' and 'negative' news stories during February 2002 on ABC TV and Channel 9 in regions other than the Gold and Sunshine Coasts.

Region	Positive stories / major category	Negative stories/ major category
Childers		18 – crime/court
Whitsundays		8 - accident/emergency
Toowoomba	3 - various	3 - various
Cairns	2 – bizarre/novelty	4 - accident/emergency
Gympie		5 - crime/court
Logan		5 – crime/court
Stanthorpe	3 – promo	
Bundaberg	1 – bizarre/novelty	2 – crime/court
Amberley	1 - promo	1 – accident/emergency
Ipswich		2 – accident/emergency
Townsville		2 – accident/emergency
Rockhampton		2 – economic/social
Southwest Queensland	1 – new venture	1 – accident/emergency
Warwick		2 – crime/court
Boonah	1 - award	
Lockyer Valley		1 – accident/emergency
Brisbane Valley		1 – accident/emergency
Bribie Island		1 – accident/emergency

Gold Coast media

The Gold Coast has a plethora of local news media. The area is the state's exception when it comes to cutbacks in regional TV news with Public Broadcasting Limited's introduction of a regional television news bulletin in 1995. There are three ABC radio services, two commercial radio stations, four community radio stations, two national television stations ABC and SBS, community TV service CTV31 and six commercial television stations – BTQ 52, QTQ58, NRN55, NEN64, TVQ46 and NBN67 (Australian Broadcasting Authority, 2002) and a thriving daily newspaper.

The *Gold Coast Bulletin* is among just five regional dailies in Queensland that made circulation gains in the decade to 2000. In the 90s the *Gold Coast Bulletin's* circulation jumped more than 20 per cent (Kirkpatrick 2000). Going against a trend of declining circulation for regional dailies the Gold Coast daily in 2000 had a higher circulation than two metropolitan dailies, the *Canberra Times* and the *Northern Territory News*.

The number of media outlets keeps on growing. In August 2002 the Hot Tomato company bid \$26 million for a new commercial FM radio licence to serve the Gold Coast and the ABA made licences available for three new community radio services (ABA 2002).

No other region in the state is served by such a diversity of local media.

Regional news 'blind spots'

A map of regional news coverage by both television networks would show a concentration in the southeast coastal areas and coverage scattered along the coastal strip to Cairns, with isolated spots west of the Darling Downs and Granite belt.

Most of regional Queensland has slipped through the ABC and Channel 9 Brisbane television newsrooms' nets.

Pastoral and agricultural issues were not covered at all on the commercial Channel 9 news. Channel 9 did not cover any stories from west of Toowoomba. ABC television ran two stories from southwestern Queensland. The rabbit eradication strategy story was based in St George and a fatal ultra-light accident in Goondiwindi was a read story.

In the state's north the inland was invisible. No stories originated west of the coastal centres of Cairns and Townsville. Cairns received three stories from each network while Townsville had two stories on Channel 9.

The ABC's acting general manager has asked the federal government for an additional \$2 million for a television news operation based in Townsville (Leech 2001). However during the month of February 2002 there were no local issues from Townsville included in the ABC statewide television bulletin.

Inland and remote Queensland isn't the only 'blind spot'. The cities that circle Brisbane received minimal coverage. The cities of Logan, Ipswich and Redcliffe do not have their own ABC regional newsrooms or local commercial television stations.

Redcliffe city (51,096 pop Census 2001) was not mentioned in the February television news bulletins. Ipswich city (128,658 pop Census 2001) was the home to two 'negative' stories. Each news bulletin covered the milk tanker crash that disrupted south-east

Queensland's rail system. Logan city (169,167 pop Census 2001) attracted five 'negative' crime and police stories.

The cities of Logan, Ipswich and Redcliffe were either invisible or the site of 'bad news' on the two news services. These cities are all closer to the Brisbane newsrooms than the Gold or Sunshine Coasts but they do not possess local TV newsrooms.

Yet the comparatively small city of Toowoomba (88,284 pop Census 2001) at a greater distance from the capital received greater exposure because of the presence of local television news operations providing visually entertaining local news stories.

These regional cities on the capital's outer rim have a combined population of 348,921 (Census 2001) and coupled with their neighbouring shires of Caboolture (113,163), Pine Rivers (120,015), Esk (14,354), Gatton (15,528), Boonah (8,260), Laidley (12,936), Beaudesert (53,686) and Redland (118,408) the arc stretching from Logan and Redlands in the south east through Ipswich to the west and north east to Redcliffe and Caboolture has a population of 805,271 almost double that of the Gold Coast (418,491).

Yet statewide news coverage, by the two television news services in this study, has a coastal bias.

The outer rim area that houses the state's third and fourth largest cities (Logan and Ipswich) misses out on local TV news programming and also statewide news coverage. The area appears to suffer because of its proximity to Brisbane. It is too close for the establishment of regional newsrooms and yet too far from the Brisbane newsrooms for routine coverage.

Why coverage differs?

Why do some regions gain more statewide coverage than others?

Conley says as a general rule, newsworthiness diminishes with distance (1997). Tuchman says there is a reluctance to take the news mirror further than a 10 kilometre radius outside the newsroom for fear 'the mirror' will be broken (1978).

The distance to many Queensland regional areas from Brisbane-based news organisations is a considerable barrier to equitable coverage. News organisations have attempted to overcome this problem by placing journalists at major centres throughout the state. This has led to the news from the pre-selected areas being 'favoured' and inequitable coverage for several regions.

Regional news coverage in statewide bulletins appears to be also influenced by a number of factors.

1. Ease of access to stories from a regional office, affiliated newsroom or stringer service.

The availability of stories from these sources cuts the cost of long-distance coverage. News organizations are also more likely to use stories from their internal staff than external sources. For example Channel 9 has a ready supply of news stories prepared for its Gold Coast television news bulletin. It also can access news stories from its affiliated regional WIN newsrooms in Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Townsville and Cairns. News producers have a positive incentive to take news stories, at least 'nonmandatory' ones from some cities rather than others (Epstein 1973) – the base city and those with network newsrooms.

2. A belief in the intrinsic news value of some areas over others.

News decision-makers believe that certain locations hold interest for viewers. The Gold and Sunshine Coasts are the holiday and weekend destinations of many southeast Queenslanders. The regions have a combined population of almost one million people and the areas gain relatively clear reception of the Brisbane-based television signals. The news producers appear to believe the two coastal regions have a big 'appeal' factor for the nightly television news audience. And as a central measure of success is securing large audiences, even for the ABC (Tiffen 1989), the news producers are attempting to increase their audience in these population growth areas.

3. Media competition – if one news organization is covering the story then others believe it should be covered.

'Stories that will never be missed' are not covered to save cost. Instead of blanketing the world by their independent efforts, the news media and the news services leave the same sorts of hole in the news net, holes justified by a professionally shared notion of news (Tuchman 1978). Almost identical news selection reinforces their news value justification (Altheide 1976). Where one news organisation has an office or reporter another will usually follow. Then the news organization is predisposed to use local news from that area.

Conclusion

This study raises the question can the level and style of coverage on statewide media be used as measure of the state of a region's own media community. Should the quest for comprehensive, proportional, balanced coverage focus on revitalizing local journalism?

New South Wales independent federal member Peter Andren blames aggregation for capital city based programs increasingly replacing local content, with regional stations becoming 'slaves delivering network programs' (Leech 2001).

According to the findings of this study capital city based television news programs do not adequately compensate for decreasing local news services.

Inland and remote Queensland centres receive very little coverage on the statewide bulletins which devote the majority of the regional coverage to the 'sexy' coastal growth areas in the south-east corner. These centres, such as the Gold Coast, often have thriving local news communities.

The existence of local television news coverage of an event enhances the chances of inclusion in a statewide television bulletin. This can result in duplication of the news presented to the local community. For example some news stories run on the 5.30pm Channel 9 Gold Coast bulletin are rerun in the statewide bulletin at 6pm. Some areas get a double dose while others get nothing.

Criteria for inclusion in a statewide television news bulletin appears to include proximity to the news headquarters, in this case, in Brisbane, the presence of an affiliated local television news operation, the network's own bulletin or locally based news crew and a significant population base.

Queensland's Gold and Sunshine Coasts are now home to more than 660,000 people, comprising 243,000(Sunshine Coast) and 418,000 (Gold Coast). But the rest of the state houses the bulk of the state's regional population. The majority (2.7 million) of the state's 3.6 million population live outside of Brisbane, which has a population of 899,604 (Census 2001). More than two million people live in Queensland regions other than the Gold and Sunshine Coasts. On a proportional basis the residents in several major regional centres could call for more equitable representation on their statewide news bulletins. As Kovach and Rosenstiel argue : "If we think of journalism as social cartography, the map should include news of all our communities, not just those with attractive demographics or strong appeal to advertisers. To do otherwise is to create maps with whole areas missing." (2001)

To be continued: In the next episode of 'Are you being served by your TV news?'

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