

Rural maternity and media discourse analysis: Framing new narratives

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Abstract

Introduction: Continued rural maternity closure across Australia has seen impacts on women and families such as financial pressures, quality and safety concerns, and emotional pressure. This review aimed at understanding how media coverage of rural maternity and closure are presented and what impact this may have on maternity service sustainability.

Objective: This research seeks to examine media discourse and characteristics of online newspaper articles related to rural maternity services.

Design: A narrative review was conducted using thematic discourse analysis to examine online newspaper content published in Victoria, Australia from 2010 to June 2021.

Findings: Local maternity services were a source of community interest for rural people. Coverage of negative outcomes for mothers and babies was highlighted by rural newspapers; however, increased content over the last 12-month period focused on community support for the sustainability of rural maternity services. Recent community support in newspaper articles coincided with maternity services reviews and retaining some of these rural services.

Discussion: Community support in media may provide a protective social pressure, leading rural health services to consider this when reviewing the sustainability or closure of rural maternity services.

Conclusion: Media attention about sustaining local maternity services by highlighting issues and representing community voices may influence health executive to consider opportunities to remodel and sustain high-quality and safe maternity care in rural settings. Knowing how rural health executives consider media, community pressure, and how it impacts expediency of maternity service closure decisions is unknown and an important gap in knowledge to explore and understand.

KEYWORDS

community, maternity, media, rural, sustainability

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1 | INTRODUCTION

For over 20 years, Australia has seen more than 250 maternity service closures.¹ These statistics are further supported by Sweet et al.² suggesting that 60% of maternity unit closures occurred in South Australia from 1991 to 2010. Expansive mapping of Australian maternity services occurred in 2011 with the objective to describe Australian maternity services available to women, their demographic distribution and level of service at that time.³ Findings indicated that women predominantly gave birth in a hospital setting and that birth rate and location of maternity service related to the ability to attract a maternity workforce and is directly related to the sustainability of maternity units.³ No Australian jurisdiction has been immune to rural maternity service closures. Victoria, despite its population and reduced geographical range, has documented 15 service closures or reduction in service capability to antenatal care between 2008 and 2020.^{4,5} A large body of research acknowledges barriers to rural maternity service sustainability in Australia.¹ Considerable concerns related to the continued reduction in rural maternity services and the subsequent impact on maternity well-being and safety have been highlighted. Recently, Bradow et al.⁶ undertook a systematic review considering the impacts of rural and remote maternity unit closures, identifying maternal risks relevant to travel, lack of access to services, financial costs, safety and associated emotional burdens. Further to this, Bradow et al.⁶ also suggested that while closure was often a decision justified due to safety and workforce issues, women indicated that access to local services would improve their perception of safety. The impact for mothers, babies and families in the wake of rural maternity service closure has been evident, as has the characteristics of the closure processes in these areas. Historic maternity service closure, in predominantly small rural maternity service areas, commonly occurred rapidly, with little consultation of local community members.¹

This article focuses on Victorian maternity service regions with online newspaper articles related to maternity service activity or closure. Victoria was examined independently due to the numerous maternity service closures experienced in the last 10 years, with some key cases highlighted in the media. Victorian maternity care is located within eight health catchments, three of which are designated as urban, the remaining regional and rural. The five regional/rural areas include Barwon South Western region, Gippsland region, Grampians region, Hume region and Loddon Mallee region.⁷ The Grampians region has undergone some adjustment since July 2021, with Djerriwarrh Health Services moving under the governance of Western Health in metropolitan Melbourne. Data will be reported in the catchment at the time of media publication. The

What is already known on this subject

- Sustaining safe rural maternity service is an ongoing concern in Australia.
- Rural maternity service closure creates risk for women and families across rural Australia.
- Local rural newspapers play a pivotal role in representing community views, enhance civic life and promote a sense of belonging in rural areas.

What this study adds

- Rural maternity service activities are important news coverage for rural communities.
- Community support featured in newspaper content is connected to sustaining maternity services.
- Community opinion applies positive pressure in rural maternity service sustainability decision-making.

rural health regions contain within them a variety of maternity services providing care from level one, antenatal or postnatal only to level four, that provide care across the continuum. Level 4 is the upper level of maternity care for rural woman and babies with some complexity (Figure 1).

As a corporate entity, newspapers are not restricted to specific jurisdiction or regions; however, most are connected to towns or local areas in rural Victoria. Some larger online news media are based in a central online publication repository such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) news or published in a metropolitan online site such as The Herald Sun in metropolitan Melbourne. By comparison, smaller localised news outlets, owned in many circumstances by a primary corporation (i.e. Fairfax), also exist in Victoria maintaining a physical and online presence.⁸ Local rural newspapers, commonly discussed as community media, play a vital role in representing community views, enhancing civic life, and promoting a sense of belonging in rural areas.⁸ With approximately 570 rural and regional newspapers in Australia, Victoria has 89 rural newspaper providers.⁹ Regardless of this, rural newspapers continue to be affected by the centralisation of print media to an online presence or local level closure.¹⁰ Rural newspaper outlets are challenged to provide relevant content to rural people in an under-resourced and time poor environment.⁸ Key priority areas for local news is suggested in the literature as breaking news, roads and traffic, weather, community events, crime and social



FIGURE 1 Victorian system of maternity and newborn care.⁴⁵

welfare issues.¹⁰ Local issues, community matters and good news are suggested as areas of coverage rural patrons seek when accessing rural newspaper content.¹⁰ Rural news coverage of health service activities are issues of local interest for rural populations. The coverage of conflict in rural communities is less frequent than urban counterparts, with coverage of social issues more commonly a call for community involvement, emphasising negative social effects should this not occur.¹¹

The decision to sustain or close rural maternity services has considerable social effects and is fundamentally made by the local health service board of management who are balancing a variety of pressures. In the context of historic maternity service closures, there is no Australian literature considering external pressures such as media coverage, as an impact on decision-making. A study of media representation of birth centre closures in England demonstrated that arguments in press were often framed to 'improve safety'.¹² These authors also discussed concern that media commentary was not informed by evidence-based information and were largely guided by backgrounding media releases.¹² Quality reporting by local media was said to be limited due to a lack of time and resources.¹²

Media coverage of rural maternity service safety and sustainability has been prominent in Victoria over the past decade. Over the same period, Victorian maternity care has undergone considerable investigation into identified failures in the delivery of services, which were deemed avoidable.¹³ This produced a panel review commissioned by the then Minister for Health, Jill Hennessey, which advocated for maternity service reform and the generation of Safer Care Victoria. Since this time, improved safety governance, maternity standards of care, and maternity and neonatal framework implementation has occurred.¹⁴ Increased governance has brought with it improved instruction towards safer birth in Victoria; however, over this time, considerable media coverage reported these events, with a strong focus on maternity 'risk'.¹⁵ For these reasons, this analysis will focus on Victoria to examine how these developments have been documented in the

media and what influence this may have on rural maternity service sustainability.

A specific gap in literature is identified when considering media as a potential, and unseen factor when considering the sustainability of rural maternity services. This research seeks to examine media discourse and characteristics, specific to the area of online newspaper reports in Victoria. This article will outline a thematic discourse analysis on this subject that examines how rural Victorian maternity service concerns and issues pertaining to closure are represented in online newspaper content.

2 | METHOD

The narrative review was conducted with an aim to understand 'How rural Victorian maternity services are represented in online newspaper content?' Thematic discourse analysis was used to examine the data based on the method described by Braun et al.,¹⁶ which encompasses a six-phase process.

1. familiarisation with the data;
2. coding;
3. generating initial themes;
4. reviewing themes;
5. defining and naming themes; and
6. writing up.

Researchers Braun et al.¹⁶ explain thematic analysis as a flexible method, which aimed at identifying patterns of meaning in the data. A criticism of thematic analysis is that it does not provide a method for a fine-grained analysis of language practice; however, Braun et al.¹⁷ suggest the implementation of a critical lens to analysis that offers a pattern-based discursive approach, often described as thematic discourse analysis.¹⁸ The use of thematic discourse analysis as an approach to analyse data was based on Braun et al.'s¹⁸ guide to assessment of thematic analysis research quality. Thematic discourse

analysis supports the assessment of language, however, further enables the interpretation of imagery as a symbolic communication medium.¹⁷ This is again a valuable justification for the use of thematic discourse analysis in this review that examined online newspaper articles for representation of key titles, tone, concepts and associated imagery.

2.1 | Search strategy

The media search was commenced using a snowballing approach in which key search terms were entered via the Google search engine. The adapted media search strategy (Figure 2) outlined (1) the preferred search engine; (2) targeted health service websites; and (3) search terms as recommended by Adams et al.¹⁹ Rural Victorian maternity services were used as the focus of the search that enabled the researcher to refine articles to relevant content. The media search was limited to Victoria as it is comparable with many other states and territories in Australia with similar rural maternity pressures and produced a manageable amount of data. A list of Victorian maternity services were sourced via the Victorian perinatal service performance indicators from 2010 to 2021⁵ that provided a timeline of rural Victorian maternity closure activity. These data were loaded into an Excel spreadsheet, and maternity service currency or closure year was mapped. A total of $n = 52$ rural health services were identified, $n = 49$ maintained a current form of maternity service between Level 1 (antenatal care only) to Level 4 (full maternity care, some risk). Victorian maternity services, including those closed in the last 10 years, were used as reference terms in the media search. This Excel database of rural Victorian maternity services was then used for mapping sourced online media articles.

The below terms were generated and trialled via Google in combination with the list of rural Victorian maternity services, critiqued for productivity and refined. The following search terms were used to source media articles:

‘Pregnancy complications’ + individual maternity health service.

‘maternity’ + individual maternity health service.

‘maternity risk’ + individual maternity health service.

‘birth’ + individual maternity service.

‘rural’ + ‘Victoria’ + ‘birth’ + individual maternity service.

‘rural’ + ‘Victoria’ + ‘maternity’ + individual maternity service.

The Google search tool *news* was activated, which presented only news items pertinent to the search topic.

2.2 | Inclusion criteria

The literature searches were restricted to online newspaper articles relevant to all Victorian rural maternity health services. Newspaper articles focused on Victorian rural maternity service closure or sustainability discourse, and available in English.

2.3 | Exclusion criteria

The search was restricted using the date range of 2010–2021 as this period of time relates directly to statistics indicating rural maternity service closure.⁵ Articles were excluded from the literature review on the following grounds:

Literature that did not consider the Victorian maternity context.

Search strategies (20)	Results
1) Preferred search engine	Google search engine
2) Targeted maternity services	Victorian rural maternity services
3) Search terms “Pregnancy complications” + individual maternity health service “maternity” + individual maternity health service “maternity risk” + individual maternity health service “birth” + individual maternity service “rural” + “Victoria” + “birth” + individual maternity service “rural” + “Victoria” + “maternity” + individual maternity service	n=37

FIGURE 2 Media search strategy.

Literature that was not focused on maternity risk or maternity service closure.

Duplicate search results.

2.4 | Study screening and data collection

The search results yielded 37 media articles (Figure 3). Once screened for duplication and inappropriate results ($n = 2$), the articles were then individually reviewed with the removal of those that did not fit the inclusion criteria ($n = 5$). These articles were excluded as they did not relate to news media, or upon full review, did not relate to rural maternity service discourse, leaving $n = 30$ included in this review. Both screening and analysis were reviewed by two members of the research team.

2.5 | Data synthesis and analysis

Coding is a form of qualitative analysis used in thematic discourse analysis and was used to find common themes within research sources.¹⁷ To begin the coding process, the literature was read and familiarised.¹⁶ Once read, the media articles were summarised into an Excel spreadsheet. The database identified the related Victorian health region, the date the search was conducted, retrieved articles and a broad overview of content. When this was completed, further full-text analysis was conducted, and the articles were charted (Table 1) and analysed with a focus on the use of language (i.e. tone and inference) and visual communication. The media articles were then again read in full text in which dialogue was again digested and meaning considered and codes were generated.

3 | FINDINGS

Themes generated from the analysis included: (1) media influence and the Victorian maternity system and (2) community response and reopening. Imagery used in newspaper articles was analysed separately.

3.1 | Media influence and the Victorian maternity system

Of the Victorian newspaper articles analysed, one-third of the articles ($n = 11$) were representative of media commentary reflecting maternity services within the Loddon Mallee region, followed by media related to the Barwon South Western region ($n = 6$), and the Hume region ($n = 6$). A lesser amount of newspaper media coverage

related to the Grampians region ($n = 3$), and Gippsland region ($n = 1$). Three articles related to the Victorian rural context generally and were not specifically connected to any maternity health service,^{20–22} resulting in the remaining articles specifically relating to maternity service concerns, closure or reopening of services in the Victorian rural sector. Of the articles attributed to the Loddon Mallee region, two articles focused on concern for care of women during labour, safety breaches and avoidable harm.^{23,24} One article highlighted the rise in homebirths where women were cared for by private practicing midwives.²⁵ The remaining articles highlighted the confirmed closure of two rural maternity services,^{26,27} and the suspension of one service under a maternity service review, the latter leading to subsequent reopening.^{28–33} Of the articles related to maternity closure or suspension, the majority ($n = 6$) related to Castlemaine's service review or resumed maternity service, featuring community advocacy for continuation.^{28–33} Similarly, Barwon South West newspaper articles ($n = 6$) primarily focused on the closure of one rural health service.^{34–39} The series of articles ($n = 5$) followed the decision-making of board of management at the Terang and Mortlake Health Service and the community response to potential closure over several years, from 2016 to 2020.^{34–38} Community opposition to closure aligned with the sustained maternity service in 2016, with locals calling for the health minister, MP Jill Hennessey to support the service to continue.^{36–38} Two articles published in 2020 discussed the decision for closure.^{34,35} One article was represented by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) indicating women would have '*the best of both worlds*' being cared for in a larger regional centre.³⁵ One article featured a three times generational bond to the rural hospital in which all members of the one family had birthed their babies.³⁷ Only one article focused on issues separate to this health service, which was to identify the progressive birth rate in the region.³⁹ Articles attributed to the Hume region identified the service closure of one small rural maternity service. In the Hume region, the majority of media coverage related to a sentinel event a maternal death during perinatal care,^{40–43} with one further article discussing a rise in twin births.⁴⁴

The number of articles retrieved per maternity service region provided striking results when considering the quantity of articles by year of publication (Figure 4). An increase was identified in 2016, and again in 2020. This is of particular interest as these dates also correlated with a 12-month period after revision of the capability framework for Victorian maternity and newborn services⁴⁵ (Figure 5). This may indicate a link to rural population interest, however, may reflect the focus of health service decision-making and governance in this area leading to media coverage. On average, rural articles published per

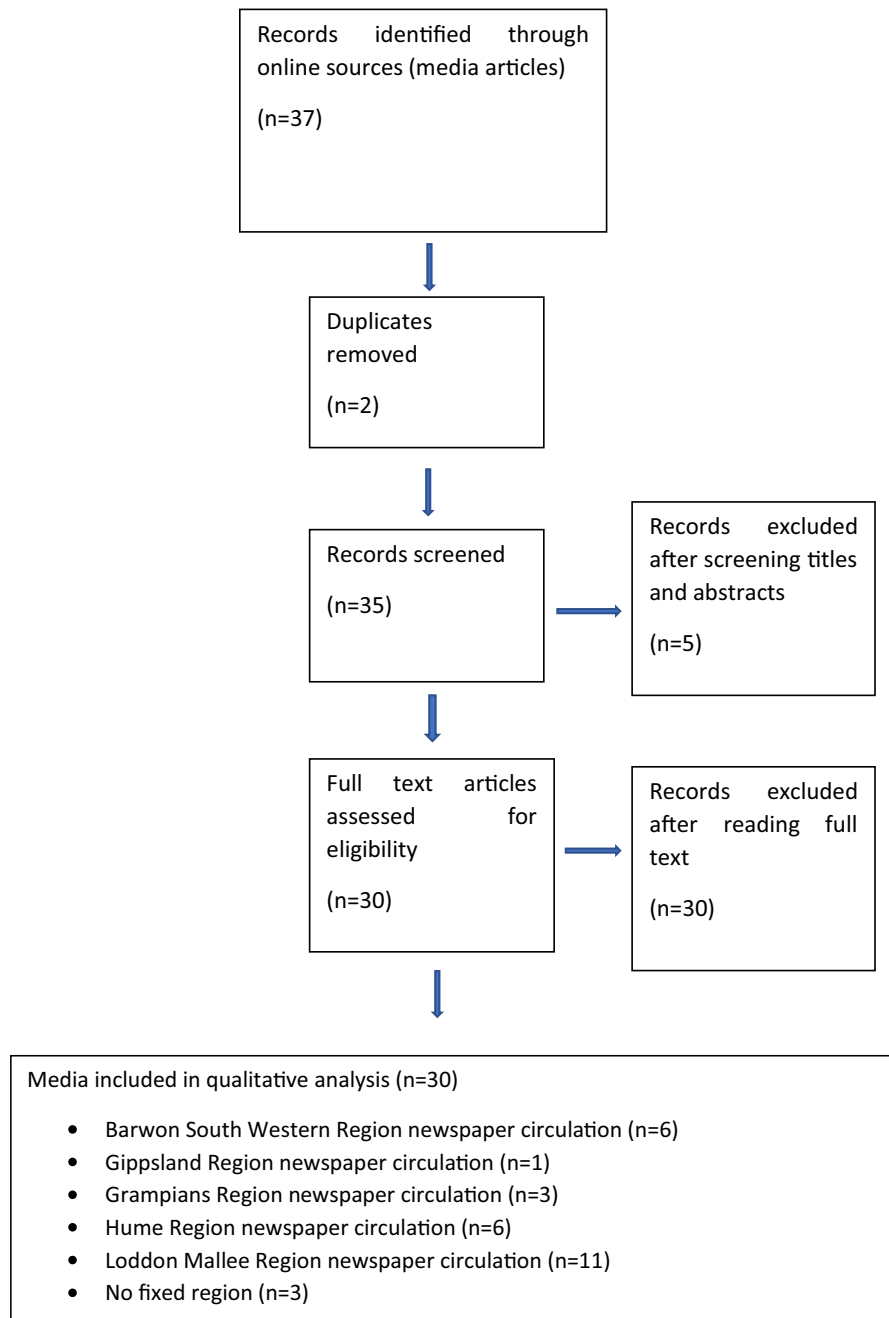


FIGURE 3 Media screening chart.

year reflecting maternity issues show a rate of 2.8 articles published per year. During 2019, articles were predominantly covering maternity service closure. A sharp rise is demonstrated in 2020 with the majority of coverage focused on maternity closure, positive outcomes associated with local maternity care and positively framed maternity models of care. The remaining articles described a woman's discontent with maternity care and followed previous poor perinatal outcomes. The following articles captured in 2021 all positively focus on the sustained Castlemaine maternity service remodelled to a midwifery group practice (MGP).

During analysis, media articles retrieved were examined based on the tone of language used, particularly in article headings. These were separated in to either neutral, negative or a positive tone. The percentage attributed to each was similar. Neutral statement headings were identified in 23% of articles.^{22,26,27,34,39,44,46} Titles classified as neutral tone provided an explicit and clear statement that did not attempt to bias the reader in any direction. The majority of neutral articles reflected the closure of a rural maternity service such as 'no more babies born at Kyneton Hospital',²⁶ or 'no more births at Terang Hospital'.³⁴ Negative language and tone was attributed

TABLE 1 Summary table of media articles.

Author	Date published	Region at time of publication	Summary of key concepts
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Ballarat ²³	24/6/2020	Loddon Mallee Region	Victorian mother describes birth at Maryborough District Health Service as 'torture'.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Central Victoria ²⁸	19/6/2020	Loddon Mallee Region	Castlemaine Health maternity service suspension leaves Victorian community anxious.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Central Victoria ²⁹	11/3/2021	Loddon Mallee Region	Maternity services to return to Castlemaine after review prompts overhaul of care model.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Gippsland ⁴⁷	2/6/2020	Gippsland Region	Family wants answers after death of baby boy during forceps birth at Latrobe Regional Hospital.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation News ¹⁵	8/6/2016	Grampians Region	Bacchus Marsh stillborn scandal: Second review finds 11 baby deaths potentially avoidable.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation ⁴⁸	13/10/2016	Grampians Region	Baby deaths: Victorian overhauls health services after damning Djerrivarrh review
Australian Broadcasting Corporation News ⁴²	24/10/2018	Hume Region	Coroners court delay leaves mother waiting for answers 4 years after her daughters death.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Shepparton ⁴¹	18/3/2020	Hume Region	Sommer Warren's death during childbirth could have been prevented, coroner says.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation News ⁴⁰	18/03/2020	Hume Region	Sommer Warren's mother says 'I will not set foot in the hospital for any reason' after daughter dies during labour.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation News ²⁴	17/05/2020	Loddon Mallee Region	Maryborough hospital alleged maternity safety breaches linked to potentially avoidable death of unborn baby.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation ²⁰	17/11/2020	No fixed region	Urban myth about rural maternity services has driven closures.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Riverland ²²	16/8/2018	No fixed region	Call for senate inquiry into reduced maternity services in rural and remote areas.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Rural ²¹	17/11/2020	No fixed region	Premature birth rates in remote areas can be halved, says rural health commissioner Ruth Stewart.
Ararat Advertiser ⁴⁹	23/9/2015	Grampians Region	Quality obstetric care a high priority for East Grampians Health Service.
Bendigo Advertiser ³²	4/12/2020	Loddon Mallee Region	Midwives at the heart of Castlemaine Health's new maternity service model.
Bendigo Advertiser ³⁰	11/3/2021	Loddon Mallee Region	Castlemaine Health maternity services set to resume.
Bendigo Advertiser ³¹	2/5/2021	Loddon Mallee Region	Castlemaine Health birthing resumption welcomed by advocates.
Bendigo Advertiser ³²	4/6/2021	Loddon Mallee Region	Castlemaine Health's midwifery Group Practice model welcomes two babies.
Herald Sun ²⁷	15/11/2017	Loddon Mallee Region	Cohuna hospital has closed its maternity unit indefinitely.
Herald Sun ²⁶	21/8/2019	Loddon Mallee Region	No more babies born at Kyneton hospital.
Kyabram Free Press ²⁵	7/8/2020	Loddon Mallee Region	Home births on the rise in Goulburn Valley.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Shepparton ⁴¹	23/3/2020	Hume Region	Death of a young Shepparton woman during childbirth "could have been prevented"

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author	Date published	Region at time of publication	Summary of key concepts
The Border Mail ⁴⁴	10/2/2017	Hume Region	Albury Wodonga Health sees high number of twin births
The Standard Newspaper ³⁹	12/7/2015	Barwon South Western Region	20 births per week in the South West.
The Standard Newspaper ³⁸	18/10/2016	Barwon South Western Region	Community stands up to save Terang's maternity service.
The Standard Newspaper ³⁶	19/10/2016	Barwon South Western Region	Health Minister called on to visit Terang Hospital over fears for maternal services
The Standard Newspaper ³⁷	18/10/2020	Barwon South Western Region	Hospitals baby bond with one Terang family
The Standard Newspaper ³⁹	17/2/2020	Barwon South Western Region	No more births at Terang Hospital.
The Standard Newspaper ³⁵	8/10/2020	Barwon South Western Region	No more births at Terang Hospital will see "best of both worlds" for mums says CEO
Yarrawonga Chronicle ⁴⁶	9/10/2019	Hume Region	No more local births.

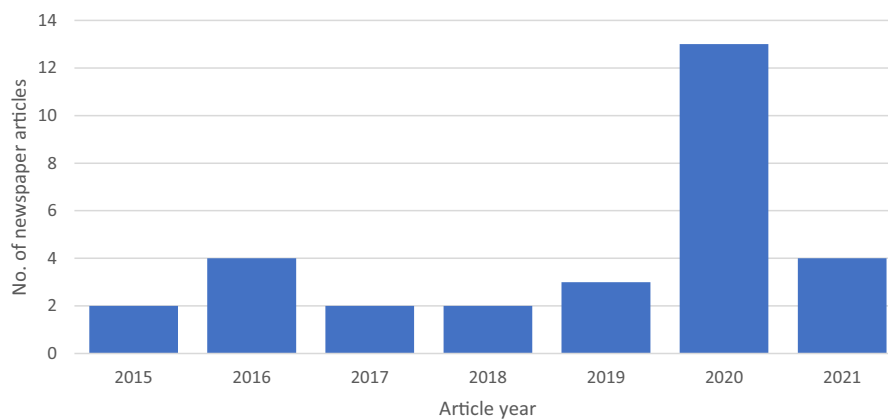


FIGURE 4 Victorian maternity service newspaper article coverage.

to 44% of articles that used emotive language commonly referring to criticism of maternity care, women or families.^{15,20,28,29,36,40-43,47,48} Key phrases were used such as ‘fears for maternity service’,³⁶ ‘stillborn scandal’,¹⁵ and ‘torture’.²³ These articles were particularly related to the Loddon Mallee region, suggestive of community fear associated with potential closure of Castlemaine maternity service during 2020. Hume region articles related to a perinatal death that was considered preventable according to coroner findings.⁴¹ Another key focus with a negative tone was activity related to maternity service review of the Djerriwarrh Health service in the Grampians region

during 2016.^{15,48} The newspaper coverage related to the ministerial review into poor perinatal outcomes from the Djerriwarrh Health Service. The maternity review activity stimulated the development of Safer Care Victoria (SCV) and clinical advisory committees from 2017. Positively toned articles made up 33% ($n = 10$) of the retrieved newspaper articles.^{21,25,30-33,35,37,38,49} Of this proportion, half related directly to the reopening of Castlemaine maternity services (2021), located in the Loddon Mallee region.³¹ The Castlemaine articles largely reflected community support using phrasing such as ‘resumption welcomed’.³¹ Language also changed, particularly the term

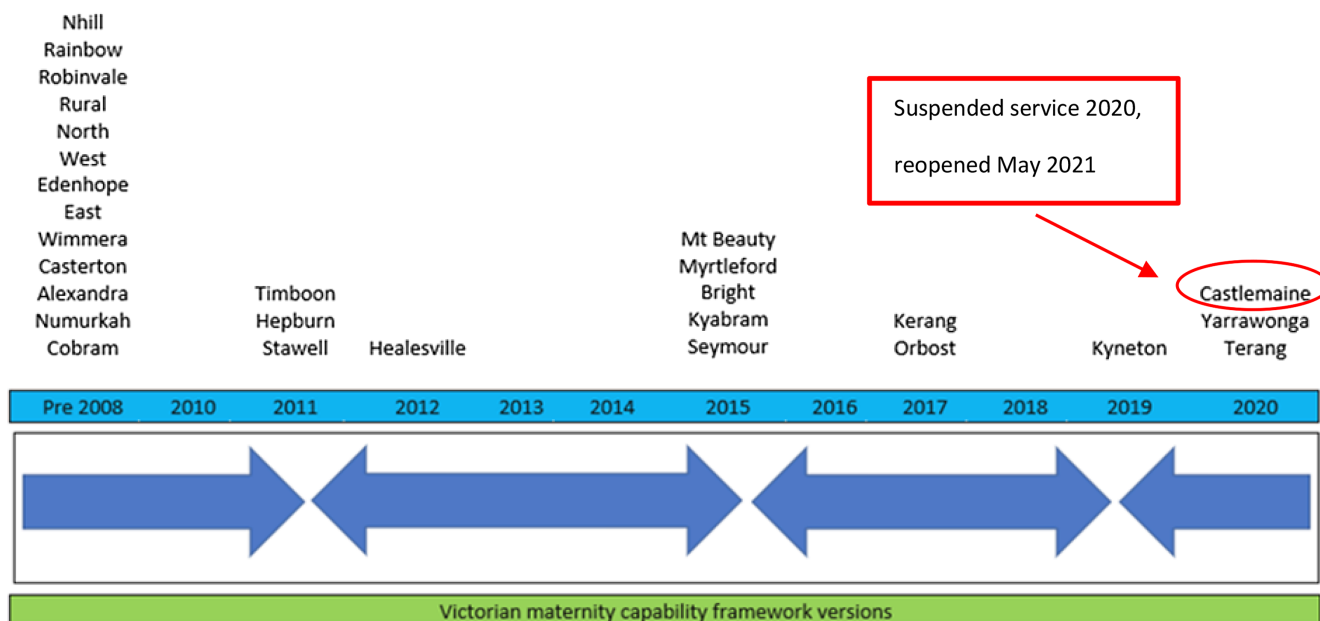


FIGURE 5 Victorian maternity closure or reduction to Level 1 capability timeline.

'community', used during the period of suspended service to describe women and families protesting to sustain maternity services. The group description 'community' shifted to a more formal term 'advocates' when describing the same group of maternity service supporters.^{30,32} A singular separate article from the Australian Rural Health Commissioner addressed health executive support for MGP models of care, citing research supporting the benefit of this model of care on premature birth statistics and neonatal outcomes.²¹ Articles reflecting community support to sustain maternity services in the Loddon Mallee region accentuated the MGP model of care as describing the reopening of maternity service as having 'midwives at the heart' of the new maternity model.^{32,33}

3.2 | Community response and reopening

The concept of community connection to maternity services was strongly represented within the analysis. Community dissatisfaction was identified in concerns related to rural maternity service sustainability, represented in articles focused on pregnant women and families.^{28,38} Additionally, community was represented in articles as those connected to family network activities such as playgroup and kindergarten,³⁸ showing a town network of childbearing families concerned with local health service issues independent of the maternity service. Grandparents were also represented as a sector of community lobbying to sustain rural Victorian maternity services.³⁷ Articles specific to the Barwon South Western region described a 'family bond' in connection

to a maternity service as three generations of women in the one family had birthed at the rural service, demonstrating an intergenerational importance of local maternity service survival.³⁷ Community members advocating to sustain the maternity services were often described as a considerable factor which enhanced the continuation or reopening of a rural maternity service. This was indicated in phrasing such as 'their [community] commitment ... has matched our own'.³⁰ Rural community members representing support for the retention and reopening of rural maternity services was also depicted by midwives and obstetricians focused on language such as 'strong professional relationships' and 'shared decision making'.³²

3.3 | Imagery

Images used in newspaper articles were duplicated in publications during coverage of two rural maternity issues. Repeated images were used in articles related to the Barwon South Western region.^{35,38} Images of smiling mothers published initially in 2016 in favour of sustaining rural maternity service in Terang, were again used out of context in a later article in 2020 which indicated the closure would mean women would travel to Warrnambool.³⁵ Visually, the article indicated community support for closure; however, the original image was used in support for the maternity service to remain open.³⁸ The 2020 article prompted the CEO comment that women would have 'the best of both worlds' by receiving care at a larger regional centre after local service closure.³⁵ Another repeated

image was used showing community members in support for Castlemaine maternity service. This shot correlated with the same issue with the same intent. The first time it was published the community members were demonstrating their support for sustainability of the service and the second time it was published, it was related to the outcome of the maternity service review.

Imagery was used to denote the tone of articles. Negatively framed newspaper articles related to detrimental perinatal events prior to 2021 commonly used a serious visual or a headshot of the CEO in the article.⁴⁶ In articles that did not use a CEO image, the hospital was depicted with a visible emergency or urgent care entrance sign in the foreground.^{15,23} The orientation of the camera angle also differed in negatively framed newspaper articles. Several images showed a maternity service, with the angle tilted to depict the building looming towards the camera.²³ Conversely, positive imagery related to the reopening of rural maternity services showed smiling community and staff in brightly lit and sunny surrounds.³³

4 | DISCUSSION

As rural maternity services grapple with the pressure of service consolidation and centralisation, so too do rural newspapers. Issues pertinent to the rural maternity sector have been demonstrated as significant newsworthy content for local people. Whilst maternity service issues such as a government commissioned maternity service review were reported on as an issue of public interest, so too have the impact of rural maternity service closure and community response in support of sustainability. Some significant newspaper coverage occurred in the Grampians region during 2016, located within a 45-min travel distance to metropolitan Melbourne. The level of newspaper coverage in the rural sector on this subject indicates a level of public interest in maternity safety beyond metropolitan news outlets. This is an interesting consideration, with an understanding that newspaper content, focused on conflict is more predominantly reported on in urbanised media,¹¹ suggesting that rural people view maternity safety as significant. Certainly, the neutral coverage of maternity service closure and coverage of community members support for the access to maternity service, review and establishment of MGP care correlates with a rise in publications, from 2 in the year 2015 to 13 in the year 2020. Articles published in 2020 which related to negative perinatal events prior to 2019 highlighted the work undertaken on safe maternity governance in Victoria. These events occurred prior to adjustment to the 2019 capability framework for Victorian maternity and newborn

services,⁴⁵ in which the requirement for maternity and neonatal capability were linked, supporting safe care. This meant the skill set and resources required for the level of complexity in pregnancy and birth also aligned with the postnatal and neonatal complexity, in effect improving safety throughout the continuum of care. The rise in publication during 2020 may suggest supporting safe care, and sustaining rural maternity services is considered an important news story and community priority for rural people. Notably, the language used towards maternity services and healthcare professionals changed when newspaper articles covered community members supporting the sustainability of rural maternity services. Midwives and General Practitioners (GPs) were described using language that conjured affectionate images (i.e. 'at the heart'). This suggests community value of maternity care and maternity service providers. In addition, this adds depth to the influence of community voices has on issues such as maternity sustainability when it is enacted. This analysis suggested that media narratives are becoming reframed to reflect positive community attitude and support. Community may have an influence on rural health executive and board decision making around sustaining maternity services, as significant coverage of suspension and closure of maternity services, community activity and subsequent reopening aligned in the examples found. The narrative expressed in the media is driven by the tone set by those engaging with rural news outlets. The neutral tone of service closure often aligned with CEO representation. Articles featuring the topic of rural maternity sustainability were emotively characterised, often representing the views of local community seeking safe access and security in local services. The reframing of narratives by media outlets to positively support maternity services, may perpetuate a positive cycle of community support leading to more coverage. A positively perpetuated news cycle may create a social barrier around maternity service closure, challenging health executives to consider deeply their decisions about the sustainability of their local service.

5 | LIMITATIONS

This analysis of newspaper articles was focused on Victoria; therefore, the generalisability of the findings is limited. To improve the context of discussion related to community influence, a national review on the coverage of maternity services is suggested. Our results are up to date as of July 2021. This analysis is part of a larger PhD research project, considering influence on health service executive decision-making and rural maternity sustainability. Further analysis on the influence of media on decision-making is not yet completed.

6 | CONCLUSION

Victorian maternity service evaluation has steered a review of maternity governance with a priority on safety. Coinciding with this process, rural maternity closures continue to occur. Online newspaper article content indicates an adjustment in dialogue around rural maternity services, from fear-based language to a focus on community responsiveness to rural maternity closure. Media attention to maternity sustainability issues and representation by community may necessitate health executives to consider opportunity to remodel and sustain safe maternity care in rural settings. Social pressure facilitated by the media may act as a protective barrier for maternity service sustainability and is an important consideration for further research. Knowing how rural health executives and board members consider media, community pressure, and how it impacts expediency of maternity service closure decisions is unknown and an important gap in knowledge.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kath Brundell: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; validation; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Vidanka Vasilevski:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; supervision; validation; writing – review and editing. **Tanya Farrell:** Conceptualization; supervision; validation; writing – review and editing. **Linda Sweet:** Conceptualization; methodology; supervision; validation; writing – review and editing.

FUNDING INFORMATION

No funding is associated with this work.




CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The submitted manuscript is part of backgrounding analysis completed as part of doctoral research study and as such no research ethics approval was required.

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How to cite this article: Brundell K, Vasilevski V, Farrell T, Sweet L. Rural maternity and media discourse analysis: Framing new narratives. *Aust J Rural Health*. 2023;31:395–407. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12978>