

Ryerson in the Post-2020 Newspaper Environment

2020 will go down as arguably the most dramatic year in Australian newspaper publishing history. No other year has seen the mass closures which took place in the second quarter of 2020, with upwards of 150 newspapers ceasing publication.

While COVID-19 provided publishers with a convenient scapegoat, the seeds of the shutdown were planted some years before, when publishers became aware that the “rivers of gold” provided by income from their classified advertising had peaked, and this income was in serious decline.

Many smaller country newspapers had, by 2020, become either unprofitable, or only marginally profitable. Even some larger country centres, such as Armidale and the Sunshine Coast, with populations able to support a local paper, saw the profitability of their local paper diminish rapidly.

The major metropolitan dailies were not immune. Fairfax’s former CEO Greg Hywood had flagged on more than one occasion that the weekday print edition of both the SMH and The Age would cease.

In 2012 he had stated *“Fairfax would move to a digital-only model in “three years, or five or 10 or 15 years”*.

In 2016 he followed up with *“Exactly when we move towards implementing a new model for our Metro titles depends on the view we form about trends in consumer and advertiser behaviour, but all the signs indicate it is inevitable – although some time away,”*

Of course, a lot has changed in the media world since those statements. Fairfax is no more, with Nine, News Corp and Australian Community Media (ACM) being the major players on the east coast. And it was two of these publishers, News Corp and ACM, which oversaw most of the newspaper shutdowns.

The Impact of the Closures on Ryerson

Ryerson, as most of you know, has for 22 years been an index to notices published in newspapers. Nothing very complicated there – we tell you in which paper you should look to find the notice you require.

Our whole premise relies on the fact that almost every issue of every newspaper ever published in Australia, from the Sydney Gazette in 1803 onwards, is available on microfilm to anyone who needs to consult them. Other sources of notices, such as funeral directors and social media, are much more transient – and so we have not included these sources because we could not guarantee we would be able to point a researcher to a surviving notice some years after publication.

Over the years, we have seen a declining trend in the number of death and funeral notices published in Australian newspapers. From a peak in the mid-1960s, when approximately 65% of deaths registered in NSW were accompanied by a newspaper notice, the numbers have declined until in 2017, only approximately 15% of NSW death registrations were recorded in an SMH notice, and approximately 7% recorded via a notice in the Daily Telegraph. These are very approximate figures – we have not attempted to match duplicate names across both papers because of the amount of work involved – but we believe that the decline in Sydney Metro notices had been partly offset by an increase in notices published in regional papers.

That means, of course, that quite a large chunk of Ryerson’s yearly input has disappeared in 2020, with the closure of so many regional newspapers.

Fortunately we have been able to adapt, to the extent we believe that, by the end of this year, we will be recording as many contemporary notices as we were pre-2020.

We have identified two reliable sources to fill the gap in regard to the notices no longer being published.

The first of these sources is the News Corp “My Tributes” database, at www.mytributes.com.au. This database was created by News Corp to encourage Funeral Directors, particularly those from regions which have lost their local paper, to submit an online notice. It is a mixture of notices published in the print editions of the surviving News Corp papers and notices submitted online which have never appeared in print. The latter group are those of particular interest to Ryerson.

Ryerson took the view that these online-only notices did not have the permanency of the print notices (which continue to be microfilmed). While

News Corp suggests there is no intention of “ever” culling this database, common sense suggests it will not be around forever. We therefore took the view that we had to save each of the online notices as well as index them. Fortunately our team of indexers could see the benefit of doing this, and happily took on the extra work.

The second source of data we are now using is funeral directors’ websites. We analysed a small sample of funeral directors whose websites contained historical notices, and compared the notices to our newspaper indexing for the same geographical area and time period. The results were quite surprising – we found that between 50% and 80% of the funeral director notices we looked at had never appeared in print.

Let’s think about that for a moment. If more than half the deaths in a town did not appear in print, and this figure is constant throughout the state, this goes a long way to explaining the reduction in the number of printed notices from the mid-1960s peak.

As with News Corp’s online notices, permanency was considered an even more pressing issue with funeral director’s notices. Discussions with funeral directors elicited the information that most didn’t plan on keeping notices on their website forever, and that family had the right to determine how long the notices remained online – usually by way of a small fee. Hence we went down the same path as with the News Corp digital-only notices, and we are saving every funeral director’s notice that we index.

We see considerable scope in expanding the coverage of funeral directors’ notices – initially to complete as good a coverage as we can of areas which have lost their local paper, but subsequently to also cover areas where the local paper is still in print.

So far I have avoided mentioning those papers, particularly in NSW, published by Australian Community Media. This is not for want of trying to obtain the information – but ACM is a private company (unlike News Corp, which is publicly listed) and as such has no obligation whatsoever to release ANY information regarding the “suspension” of any of their mastheads. And this is the path they have chosen to take – say nothing to anyone.

To really complicate the issue, ACM appears to no longer handle print subscriptions to their papers. If you look at the website for any ACM paper that you know is still in print (Tamworth’s *Northern Daily Leader* is a good example),

you will find lots of information on how to take out a subscription to the digital edition, but no mention anywhere of how to take out a print subscription. It appears that print subscriptions are now to be covered by local newsagents.

To get around this, I have phoned newsagents in most NSW towns where ACM is the publisher of the local paper, to confirm the current status of the paper. This information is reflected in the tables on the Ryerson website.

In the latest development, ACM last week returned to print five suspended papers after a 12-month absence – two in NSW (Armidale and Dungog), two in SA and one in Queensland. We can only hope that more will follow.

Unlike News Corp, ACM has not provided an online database for funeral directors to place notices. This makes Ryerson's move into indexing funeral directors' notices all the more important for these particular towns impacted by the closure of their ACM-owned newspaper. Additionally, we hope that some of the funeral directors in those towns will have decided there is nothing stopping them submitting notices to the News Corp database.

The Proliferation of Digital-Only “Newspapers”

With a good proportion of now-defunct print newspapers being replaced by a digital version, generally in .pdf format, the question arises as to how to access historical digital-only issues. Fortunately the National Library, in conjunction with all the State Libraries, has been pro-active in this regard, with the National eDeposit scheme (NED) already in place pre-Covid.

Under NED, the legal deposit requirements pertaining to printed newspapers have been extended to include those existing in digital-only format. NED acts as the primary contact point for legal deposit, and then supplies digital copies of the files to the various State Libraries, and the NLA.

Access conditions vary, and are set by the publisher. At this stage, ACM is the only major publisher which has signed on to NED (discussions are continuing with the others), and all ACM publications have the restriction that they can only be accessed on-site from any of the state or national libraries. This is a serious handicap for anyone not living close to one of these libraries, and it is hoped that this restriction will be removed to allow online access from home.

We consider it likely that the number of digital-only publications will increase, as publishers find that some of their current mastheads have lost profitability. While this might not happen overnight, it will happen – as predicted by Greg Hywood nine years ago.

Ryerson has yet to seriously start indexing notices from digital-only publications, other than those produced by News Corp. Fortunately we have a very good working relationship with News Corp – they provide a free online sub to Ryerson covering all the print editions, and even altered the search method on their Tributes site to make it easier for us to save the digital-only notices. But we do not index digital-only notices from other publishers because we cannot guarantee a reliable supply of issues, given that almost all are behind a subscription paywall. Off-site access to the NED publications in the various State Libraries would make all the difference to our ability to index these publications.

We do index some smaller digital-only publications, those where we have access to a free version of the .pdf. As with the other digital notices we index, we are saving any of these digital-only notices for posterity.

To summarise:

- Newspapers as we knew them are changing dramatically
- Ryerson is generally keeping up with the changes, but still has room for improvement
- The community needs to see more positive action from all publishers to ensure their digital heritage is not lost.