

# GOODBYE MURDOCH

## News Corp closures a boon for local independents

by Bob Dooley

On 28th May, News Corp announced that across Australia more than 100 mastheads will become totally digital publications.

All the ex-APN newspapers in the Northern Rivers will be affected: *The Lismore Echo*, *Richmond River Express Examiner*, *Rural Weekly* and *Seniors* will cease publication from 29th June.

*The Northern Star*, *Grafton Daily Examiner*, *Tweed Daily News*, *Ballina Advocate* and *Byron Shire News* will be available in digital subscription form only from that date.

Australia-wide, some 16 community and regional papers are already online, with News Corp now planning to publish a total of 92 papers in the same way.

35 mastheads will cease publication altogether and 13 papers will merge with other titles in the News Corp brand.

In announcing News Corp Australia's decision, executive chairman Michael Miller explained: "I said in April that we were passing a tipping point of the impact of migration of digital advertising from print.

"We were also passing a tipping point in terms of the number of Australians that are willing to pay for content online," he said.

The closure of newsagents and other distribution outlets during the pandemic restrictions is believed to have played a part in the timing of the decision, as is a recent breakdown in negotiations for the sale of the News Corp mastheads.

The announcement has met with condemnation from across the political spectrum.

Former editor of *The Northern Star*, Russell Eldridge was one of many who commented on facebook: "Today's decision by News Corp should dispel anyone's notion of what the mainstream media is. It is a business.

"During my 50-odd (sometimes very odd) years in the media, I can honestly say that almost to a woman and man, the journos I worked with believed in what they did. Same goes for many of the people in the other departments.

"But at higher levels of management and ownership it was all about the bottom line. Newspapers were and are part of the glue that

binds communities. But that means nothing when the commercial return becomes unsatisfactory to the shareholders.

"My heart goes out to those whose jobs are under threat; to the aspiring journos facing a diminishing job market, and to the communities abandoned by the billionaires and equity funds. All the more reason now to support independent media."

Associate Professor (Communication) at Deakin University, Kristy Hess wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald*: "The research across Australia and internationally is clear – local news matters for both a healthy democracy but also to enhance the social fabric of society.

"When it's done well, a local newspaper holds the powerful to account, advocates for its audiences and creates shared meaning and social connection.

"Less important to local audiences is the rise of "zombie" publications – newspapers often owned by major conglomerates that tend to be local in name only. They are largely full of advertising and syndicated content without news of relevance or meaning to their



local audiences.

"News Corp certainly produced a few of these types of publications after years of cost-cutting and centralising resources."

National party MPs serving electorates affected by the closures have roundly criticised News Corp's decision, with Michelle Landry, Nationals MP for Capricornia in Queensland

saying "I think it is an absolute disgrace".

The local Member for Page, Kevin Hogan said: "I am very saddened by News Corp's decision not to print our local papers anymore. There are people in our community who still rely on print to receive their news.

"I am also concerned about the job losses on our regional community. Thank

you to all the staff at our local papers. Journalists, photographers, editors and advertising staff continue to play an important role in our community."

Local independent newspapers, *The Nimbin GoodTimes*, *The Byron Shire Echo* and *The Tweed Valley Weekly* will continue to serve the communities of the Rainbow Region.

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