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News Closures, Trust, and Community Attachment among Regional News Audiences: A Case Study of Australia

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ABSTRACT

Local media play a critical role in providing information and opportunities for citizens to participate and feel attached to their local community. In recent years, there has been a decline in local news outlets and the provision of local news, which can impact residents' sense of community. Findings from an online survey of 2,038 Australian regional news audiences conducted in 2019 reveal that local news consumption and engagement with local organisations are positively related to feelings of community attachment. On the other hand, closures of local news outlets have had a negative impact on news audiences' attachment to their community. Trust was found to play an important mediating role between news consumption, engagement with community organisations, and community attachment. These findings highlight the importance of the provision of local news and information, and audiences' trust in them, in engendering community attachment. The study provides valuable theoretical and practical implications regarding the impact of news outlet closures on community wellbeing in the absence of credible alternatives.

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Closure; community attachment; local news; local organisations; trust; news audiences

Introduction

The shift of news audiences and advertisers from print to online has been affecting the viability of traditional news media, particularly, local newspapers. In Australia, local newspapers have been closing at an accelerated pace during the Covid-19 pandemic. This has been pronounced in regional Australia, with more than 200 local news contractions or closures since 2019 and the majority of which were in non-metropolitan areas (Dickson 2022). This comes at a high social cost, especially in areas where local newspapers were the main source of news.

Local news is not only an important source of information for citizens, but also a venue for people to engage with current issues relevant to their community. Studies in the mass media era show that newspaper reading is significantly related to community attachment and involvement (Rothenbuhler et al. 1996). The closure of a newspaper in the community weakens these community ties and the decline in news provision can have a negative

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impact on the democratic system by reducing accountability in local communities (Ferrier, Sinha, and Outrich 2016; Gao, Lee, and Murphy 2020).

Community attachment is a function of multiple factors. People feel they belong to their local area based on their interactions with neighbours, involvement in local organisations, and the belief that they have influence over what happens in their community. The feeling of social connectedness is a combination of understanding what others think and feel, the volume and quality of interaction, a sense of togetherness and reciprocity, plus shared interests and ideas (van Bel et al. 2009). Accordingly, local media can play an important role in strengthening these community ties.

When there is a deficit in local news and information, people turn to alternative sources of news, such as social media or direct access to local government or community organisations (Park, Fisher, and Lee 2020). However, these alternative sources are often not produced by professional journalists, and may not deliver the same quality news, which can lower the overall trust in the news.

In this study, we explored the relationships between local news closures, the trust people have in local news, and the impact on local residents' sense of community attachment in regional Australia. In particular, we examined this in relation to how trust in local news mediates people's consumption of local news and their community attachment.

Literature Review and Research Questions

Local News and Community Attachment

Community attachment is an identification with the community combined with an affective tie. Community attachment refers to the feeling of being part of a community, being involved, and having a sense of belonging, all of which are associated with positive emotions (Leonard, Stevens, and Light 2016). According to McMillan (1996), community involvement is a combination of cognitive and active interaction between the self and the community. McMillan (1996) outlined four components to having a sense of community involvement: membership, mutual influence (opportunities for participating in community life, wherein one's decisions are affected by the community), fulfilment of personal and collective needs of the community members, and the sharing of emotional connections between members.

The concepts of sense of belonging and community identity have a long history in communication research and have been found to be related to media use (Friedland 2001; Rothenbuhler 1991; Shah 1998), particularly to newspapers (Rothenbuhler et al. 1996). When compared with national news, which is often conflict-driven and sensationalist, local media provides news pertinent to the local community and is linked to community cohesion (Stamm, Emig, and Hesse 1997; Viswanath et al. 1990). A study of local news audiences found that community connection was a driver of local news consumption; the top reasons for consuming local news were to know what is going on in their local area (87%) and understand how things may affect them (86%) (Park, Fisher, and Lee 2020).

Typically, in areas where there have been local media closures, there is less news reporting on local government activities, courts, health and education issues relevant to the community (Albernathy 2020). This decline in news provision weakens the democratic system because local communities are devoid of critical information and there is

less accountability (Simons and Bosland 2019). Therefore, citizens have fewer opportunities to engage with the community and participate in public discourse. Eventually, this lack of exposure can lead to people losing a personal connection with the topics that are important to them (Ferrier, Sinha, and Outrich 2016). This leads to the first set of hypotheses related to local news closures and the impact on the community:

H1. Closure of local news media will be negatively related to local audiences' community attachment.

H2. Closure of local news media be negatively related to local audiences' trust in news.

The Role of Engagement with News in Community Attachment

Access to local news and information is critical to a person's sense of belonging. However, rather than a direct effect, the use of informational media is mediated through discussions about the information with other community members (McLeod and Sotirovic 2001).

Communication is the essential ingredient of community cohesion, wherein the integration occurs at both the macro level, through media consumption, and the individual micro level, through interpersonal conversations, which are reinforced through the social ties in the community (Rojas, Shah, and Friedland 2011).

It is important what people do with the information, rather than the volume of consumption. Thorson et al.'s (2020) study found that news consumption is mediated by conversations about the local area, and these conversations motivate participation in the community. They explained that the increased participation is not because of the news consumption or the interpersonal connections but the potential increase in the engagement with the information flow through larger networks, such as community groups and workplaces.

Furthermore, studies have found that those who pay attention to news and engage in political discussion are more likely to participate in civic activities (Rojas, Shah, and Friedland 2011), emphasising the role of connected networks where people share information and opinion. Through discussions, people become aware of collective problems, and discover ways to involve themselves and solve these problems. Therefore, people are more likely to engage in civic participation once they engage in conversations (McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy 1999). Awareness and empowerment (agency) are significant outcomes of having these interpersonal discussions.

Conversations serve as a catalyst for community integration and cohesion as well as for mediating the influence of media on an individual's community participation. However, depending on how people engage in these conversations, the process can either result in increased political participation or erode trust in institutions, because these discussions enable citizens to self-reflect (Shah et al. 2017).

How communication plays a role in mediating participation is well explained by communication mediation models such as O-S-O-R and O-S-R-O-R. Media use engenders the cognitive outcomes, which determine participatory behaviours (Cho et al. 2009; Shah et al. 2007). The O-S-O-R model focuses on how existing orientations (O), such as demographics or civic interest, influence media use and subsequent political discussions (stimulus, S). These activities result in orientations (O) such as increased political knowledge, trust, and efficacy. These cognitive outcomes then function as mediators that lead to

behavioural responses such as civic participation (R, response) (McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy 1999; Shah et al. 2007). The O-S-R-O-R framework inserts “R (reasoning)” before the cognitive outcomes, to emphasise the mediating role of discussions (see Cho et al. 2009; Jung, Kim, and de Zúñiga 2011; Reichert and Print 2017).

The central notion of the communication mediation model is that people who are exposed to information (via news media) have the basic ingredients to engage in political and social discussions. By consuming news, people engage in an elaborative process of making the connection between the information and their existing beliefs or attitudes (Eveland 2002; Mutz 2001). These interpersonal connections are amplified if a person is connected to others through organisations and institutions in the community, because they can provide opportunities for discussion. Participation in the community can be enhanced if a member of the network is an active member of a community organisation and discusses local news with other people via those networks. Local organisations that aim to link local residents, such as community media or community organisations, can improve the infrastructure of an individual to participate in those discussions (Kim and Kim 2021).

Therefore, local news consumption is one ingredient of community participation and attachment. These are enhanced when people have the infrastructure to discuss the news and issues with others. This study aims to explore the relationship between participation in local organisations, which indicates engagement in discussions about local issues, and a sense of community attachment. Accordingly, the third hypothesis is as follows:

H3. Audiences’ participation in local organisations will be positively related to their community attachment.

Alternative Sources of Local News

With the decline in local news provision, people are beginning to rely on alternative sources to get local news. The relationship between this phenomenon and audiences’ community attachment and engagement is largely unknown. There is an indication that these alternative sources of news may have a similar function to that of traditional local news. Thompson (2021) found that those who use local channels of communication to get news about their communities are more likely to engage in civic activities. In his definition of “local news”, Thompson considers all sources of information, including interpersonal networks, traditional, and digital sources of news.

In an online environment, people have a mixed diet of local news and information; therefore, it is important to examine all types of local news and information sources, traditional (TV, newspaper, radio) as well as online, and non-news sources of information (Park et al. 2021). In this study, we examined whether these alternative sources of local news can compensate for the loss of traditional news provision and help maintain community attachment among residents. Accordingly, the first research question is formulated as follows:

RQ1. What is the relationship between local news consumption (traditional and non-traditional news sources) and community attachment in regional areas?

Trust and Community Connection

Studies have found a relationship between local news consumption, community attachment and trust in news. Those who distrust news are less likely to connect with news outlets and are more likely to rely on alternate and informal communication resources.

Trust is an essential element of community attachment (Manzo and Perkins 2006). The lack of trust and its consequences on disengagement from news and the community, imply that trust is an important mediator between individuals who participate in the discussions about news and current affairs, and community attachment. Those who use media for information tend to have higher social or interpersonal trust (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012; Himelboim et al. 2012). Informational uses of media have an impact on trust, which is related to a stronger community connection. Additionally, trust in news is correlated to community attachment and social cohesion (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018; Park et al. 2021).

Studies indicate that trust in local news is often greater than that in national news (Mitchell et al. 2016; Park, Fisher, and Lee 2020). This is why local news often acts as a pathway to strengthening relationships between the news media and local communities (Stearns 2018). Wenzel and Crittenden (2021) confirmed that the absence of trustworthiness factors in local media was a barrier in participating in local discourse.

Other studies have found that motivation is more important than the medium. Kwon et al.'s (2021) study found that people who used localised social media for both informational and social purposes experienced an increase in trust in community organisations and were more actively engaged in civic activities. The positive role of localised social media use confirms that a sense of belonging as well as interpersonal networks are critical elements in maintaining a healthy community. Engaging in community issues and being involved in community action may be related to the degree of trust people have in information they find about their area (Kwon, Shao, and Nah 2021). In other words, trust in news may be the link between accessing local information, and the willingness to participate in the community.

Moreover, research has found connections between trust and political participation (Fennema and Tillie 1999) and trust and community participation, such as volunteering or donating (Evans and Stoker 2016). These links are related to a strong sense of community and community attachment.

However, trust in news has mainly been studied in the context of journalism rather than in a broader context of communication (Fan et al. 2021). Wenzel and Crittenden (2021) recognised this gap in understanding the concept of trust and explored its affective and relational dimensions in the context of local media and communities. In this study, we examined the role of trust in local news in audiences' community attachment. The second research question was set up as follows:

RQ2. What is the relationship between trust in local news, community engagement and community attachment?

Methodology

Data Collection

Following a pre-test, an online survey of N = 2,038 Australian regional audiences was conducted from November 25 to December 20, 2019 by a national research company, McNair yellowSquares. We targeted areas with populations between 25,000 and 135,000.

We used a quota for gender, age, and education, reflecting the Australian Bureau of Statistic's Census 2016. This resulted in a sample comprising 50% males and 50% females; 12% aged between 18–24 years, 24% between 25–34 years, 17% between 35–44 years, 12% between 45–54 years, 16% between 55–64 years, and 19% aged 65 years and above; and 19% with a low level of education, 37% with a medium level of education, and 44% with a high level of education. Almost half of the respondents (43%) had medium incomes, earning AUD \$40,000–\$99,999 per annum, 26% earned under AUD \$39,999, and 23% earned AUD \$100,000 or more.

The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution [Table 1](#).

Variables

Dependent Variable

Community attachment: We adapted the Sense of Community Index (Community Science n.d.), which is based on McMillan and Chavis's (1986) four elements of community attachment: reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connections, to measure the sense of connection to the community. We used a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)", to measure the following five statements: "I feel I belong to my local area", "I can get what I need in my local area", "If there is a problem in the local area, residents can get it solved", "I feel hopeful about the future of this community", and "I feel connected to others in my local area." The measures were reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.8.

Table 1. Summary of respondents.

	Variables	N	%
Gender	Male	1016	50
	Female	1022	50
Age	18–24	243	12
	25–34	484	24
	35–44	345	17
	45–54	254	12
	55–64	316	16
	65+	396	19
Education	Low	387	19
	Medium	747	37
	High	904	44
Income	Low (under AUD \$39,999)	528	26
	Medium (AUD \$40,000~99,999)	877	43
	High (AUD \$100,000 and over)	478	23
	Don't know/Prefer not to answer	155	8
Region	Major city	297	15
	Inner regional area	1493	73
	Outer regional area/remote	248	12

Independent Variables

Closure of news outlets: Respondents were asked if any local newspapers, radio, or TV outlets in their local area went out of business or merged with other media in the past five years. A dummy variable was created wherein “closed” was coded as 1, and “not closed/don’t know” was coded as 0.

Local news consumption: Respondents were given a list of local news sources (i.e., TV, newspaper, radio, and websites of traditional news), and asked to select sources they had used for news within the last week. For each media, a dummy variable was created wherein “use” was coded as 1, and “non-use” as 0. Four dummy variables—newspaper, TV, radio, and news websites—were entered in the regression model.

Consumption of non-traditional local news: Respondents were given a list of non-traditional local sources (i.e., local newsletters, local council newsletters or websites, local social media sites, other websites with local content, local organisations such as churches or school groups, and community or neighbourhood newsletters/bulletin boards/websites) and asked to select those they had used. The number of respondents accessing these non-traditional local sources for news was small—5.1% for local newsletters, 8.7% for local council newsletters or websites, 22.5% for local social media sites, 3.9% for other websites with local content, 11.2% for local organisations such as churches or school groups, and 18.5% for community or neighbourhood newsletters/bulletin boards/websites. Instead of using this information separately, we merged the variable to compare those who accessed one or more of these sources with those who did not access any at all. A dummy variable was created, wherein those who used one or more of the listed sources were coded as 1 and those who did not use any of the non-traditional sources to get local news were coded as 0.

Engagement with local organisations: This variable was measured by counting the number of local organisations respondents belonged to or worked with, based on five options: a community group or neighbourhood association that focused on issues or problems in the respondents’ community, local sports club, local social club or volunteer organisation, local religious group, or other local organisation ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.69$).

Trust in local news: We used a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, to measure trust based on the statement, “I think I can trust news from local media most of the time” ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.94$).

Demographic variables: Age, gender, income, education, and region variables were included as control variables.

Results

Local News Consumption, Trust and Community Attachment

To answer the first two hypotheses, we compared community attachment and trust in local news between those who had experienced a closure or merger of a news service in their area in the past five years and those who had not. [Table 2](#) shows that those who did not experience the closure or merger of a local news outlet were significantly more likely to have a higher level of both community attachment ($M = 3.62$) and trust in local news ($M = 3.61$), compared to those who did experience a loss in local news (community attachment $M = 3.47$; local news trust $M = 3.5$).

Table 2. Community attachment and trust in local news by local news closure.

		N	M	SD	t
Community attachment	Not closed	388	3.62	0.73	3.601***
	Closed/don't know	1650	3.47	0.72	
Trust in local news	Not closed	388	3.61	0.92	2.182*
	Closed/don't know	1650	3.50	0.94	

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Then, we compared the community attachment between those who belonged to one or more local organisations with those who did not belong to any. Those who belonged to one or more local organisations experienced a significantly higher level of community attachment ($M = 3.7$) compared with those who did not belong to any local groups ($M = 3.39$) (Table 3). This confirms the third hypothesis.

For the first research question, we compared the mean scores of community attachment between users and non-users of traditional local news media. We compared those who accessed traditional local news media, such as TV, newspapers, radio, and online news with those who did not. Those who used traditional local news were significantly more likely to feel attached to the community compared with non-users (Table 4). Among users of traditional local news, newspaper readers experienced a greater sense of community attachment ($M = 3.75$) than all other types of local media users.

We then compared community attachment among those who accessed non-traditional news sources and those who did not. Those who used non-traditional sources to get local news had a higher sense of community attachment ($M = 3.59$) than non-users ($M = 3.42$) (Table 4). Those who accessed non-traditional forms such as newsletters still had a higher sense of community attachment than non-users, indicating the importance of local information itself rather than the source.

Factors that Influence Community Attachment

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to predict community attachment, controlling for demographics including age, gender, education, income, and size of the region. In Step 1, the demographic variables were entered. In Step 2, variables that reflect local news engagement factors were entered (i.e., TV, newspaper, radio, online, and non-traditional news sources, number of local organisations, and experience of local news closures). In this step, the total explained variance was found to improve by 8.1% and the adjusted R squared was 0.116 ($F = 16.903$, $p < .001$). The trust in news variable was entered in Step 3, and in this step the total explained variance was increased by 14% to 0.26 ($F = 40.954$, $p < .001$) (see Table 4).

In general, news consumption variables were found to be significant predictors of community attachment, except for radio news. The radio news coefficient was positive but not

Table 3. Difference in community attachment by membership in local organisations.

	N	M	SD	t
Local organisation membership	No	1294	3.39	-9.420***
	Yes	744	3.70	

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Differences in community attachment by access to local news and information.

		N	M	SD	t
TV	Do not use	975	3.39	0.74	-7.491***
	Use	990	3.63	0.68	
Newspaper	Do not use	1412	3.42	0.71	-9.417***
	Use	553	3.75	0.68	
Radio	Do not use	1087	3.40	0.76	-7.058***
	Use	951	3.62	0.67	
Online news	Do not use	1564	3.47	0.72	-3.957***
	Use	474	3.62	0.74	
Non-traditional news source	Do not use	1110	3.42	0.72	-5.376***
	Use	928	3.59	0.72	

*** $p < .001$.

statistically significant. Newspaper consumption had a higher standardised coefficient than that of TV, online news, and other non-traditional news sources, which means that newspapers have a greater positive impact on community attachment, compared to TV, online news, or non-traditional news sources.

Participating in local organisations was a significant predictor of community attachment, and it had a greater impact than that of the news consumption variables. This implies that those who participate in more local organisations are more likely to feel attached to the community and this was more important than where they access news.

Most importantly, we found that trust in local news was the strongest predictor of community attachment. Furthermore, in Step 3, the contribution of access to local news and information to community attachment was reduced. In particular, the effect of radio use was significantly reduced by the inclusion of the trust variable, which means the relationship between radio use and community attachment is mediated by trust in local news. Those who use radio as their source of local news are more likely to be trusting of news, and those audiences are also more likely to feel connected to the community.

The relationship between other news sources and community attachment were partially mediated by trust in local news. Additionally, the relationship between participation in local organisations was found also to be partially mediated by trust.

The result confirms the mediating role of trust in local news in the relationship between news consumption, community participation, and community attachment. Local activities such as consuming news, engaging with local organisations and getting news from alternative news sources, lead to a stronger community attachment among those who have higher trust in local news.

In terms of demographics, age, income, and region remained significant after entering the variables of news consumption, participation in local organisations, and trust in local news. Older people were more likely to feel an attachment to their community. Low-income earners were less likely to feel attached, than medium- or high-income earners. Those who lived in outer regional or remote areas were less likely to feel attached, compared with those who lived in inner regional areas or in major cities. Gender was not significantly related to participants' sense of community attachment [Table 5](#).

Table 5. Hierarchical linear regression results (Dependent variable: community attachment).

Model	Variables	B	SE	Beta
Step 1	(Constant)	3.176	0.071	
	Age	0.007	0.001	0.165***
	Gender (Dummy: Male)	0.026	0.037	0.018
	Education (Dummy: Low)	-0.127	0.048	-0.068**
	Education (Dummy: Medium)	-0.051	0.038	-0.034
	Income (Dummy: Low)	-0.143	0.041	-0.088***
	Income (Dummy: Medium)	0.018	0.042	0.011
	Region (Dummy: Major cities)	0.117	0.065	0.056
	Region (Dummy: Inner regional)	0.109	0.051	0.066*
	F	10.076		
	Adjusted R Square	0.038		
Step 2	(Constant)	3.072	0.082	
	Age	0.003	0.001	0.080**
	Gender (Dummy: Male)	0.023	0.037	0.016
	Education (Dummy: Low)	-0.059	0.046	-0.032
	Education (Dummy: Medium)	-0.020	0.036	-0.013
	Income (Dummy: Low)	-0.109	0.039	-0.067**
	Income (Dummy: Medium)	0.016	0.040	0.010
	Region (Dummy: Major cities)	0.137	0.063	0.065*
	Region (Dummy: Inner regional)	0.115	0.049	0.070*
	Local TV	0.148	0.034	0.102***
	Local newspaper	0.209	0.038	0.130***
	Local radio	0.082	0.034	0.056*
	Local news websites	0.076	0.038	0.045*
	Non-traditional news sources	0.092	0.034	0.063**
	Participation in local organisations	0.149	0.024	0.142***
	Closure	-0.102	0.041	-0.055*
	F	16.903		
Adjusted R-squared	0.116			
Step 3	(Constant)	2.071	0.092	
	Age	0.003	0.001	0.084**
	Gender (Dummy: Male)	0.040	0.033	0.027
	Education (Dummy: Low)	-0.080	0.042	-0.042
	Education (Dummy: Medium)	-0.022	0.033	-0.015
	Income (Dummy: Low)	-0.123	0.036	-0.076**
	Income (Dummy: High)	0.005	0.037	0.003
	Region (Dummy: Major cities)	0.145	0.057	0.069*
	Region (Dummy: Inner region)	0.114	0.045	0.069*
	Local TV	0.096	0.031	0.066**
	Local newspaper	0.157	0.035	0.098***
	Local radio	0.030	0.031	0.021
	Local news websites	0.076	0.035	0.045*
	Non-traditional news sources	0.076	0.031	0.052*
	Participation in local organisations	0.131	0.022	0.125***
	Closure	-0.077	0.038	-0.042*
	Trust in local news	0.299	0.016	0.387***
	F	40.954		
	Adjusted R-squared	0.260		

* < .05, ** < .01, *** $p < .001$. VIF scores were all under 1.8.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between local news consumption (both traditional and non-traditional news sources), engagement with local organisations, trust in local news, and community attachment. We aimed to capture the diversity of news audiences' news practices that include both traditional and alternative sources of news as well as an individual's engagement with the local community (Coleman, Thumim, and Moss 2016). We found that local news consumption, particularly through newspapers, plays an important role in

regional news audiences' sense of community. In contrast to previous research (Rothenbuhler et al. 1996), TV was found to be a significant factor in community attachment. In this study, we specifically asked respondents about their use of TV to get local news, which may explain this difference, since TV is usually considered to be viewed for national news.

It should be noted that local television news, including PBS in the U.S., often report the same news covered in local newspapers, which is consistent with Pew's Baltimore study that confirmed the vast majority of local news that appears in all types of local news media, originated from newspapers (Pew Research Center 2010). This likely explains why local television is related to community participation.

Research suggests that audiences are shifting to community-based social media sites as sources of information; this is especially the case for those who live in rural areas where there is a lack of local news sources (Nah and Yamamoto 2017; Park, Fisher, and Lee 2020). Non-traditional news sources, such as social media, can enable citizens to participate in the local community, especially where there are gaps in the provision of local news (Beaudoin and Thorson 2004). However, the findings from our study suggest that non-news sources, such as local social media groups, may not be adequately filling the gap created by local news closures. Those who reported a closure of a local news outlet in their community lacked a sense of community attachment even though they were turning to alternative local news and information sources, such as social media.

Local news contributes to maintaining community identity and cohesion by keeping citizens informed about local matters and providing a venue for participation. News in regional areas can be differentiated from suburban local news, as the former tends to have a closer association with its audience and is often the only source of local information (Bowd 2003). Therefore, a gap in the provision of local news in regional areas is critical to community cohesion especially in regional areas.

The present study highlights that it is not merely the volume and frequency of news consumption that matters, but also how people use the information, and whether they engage with community issues. This explains why engagement with local organisations is an important factor that influences the level of community attachment. This finding is consistent with that of previous research that highlights the role of localised information in elevating community attachment (Liu and Nah 2020; Mesch and Talmud 2010).

Further, we found that trust in local news was the most influential factor in determining community attachment. Trust in local news acted as a mediating factor between local news consumption and engagement with local community organisations. The role of participation in local organisations was found to be reinforced by trust in local news. While consuming local news or participating in local organisations can individually contribute to a person's sense of community attachment, this feeling is amplified when a person trusts the source of local news. Specifically, when people trust the local news they consume, their discussions about local issues with their social networks can further enhance their participation in the community. For those who consume and have high trust in local news, the sense of community attachment is likely to be stronger. Similarly, those who engage with local organisations and have trust in their local news are more likely to express higher levels of community attachment.

The above findings have important implications in an age where the local news media environment is contracting, particularly in regional areas. News outlets in the regions are more vulnerable and have been experiencing closures, resulting in fewer journalists in

local communities. Many regional communities are without original local reporting. This affects the wellbeing of local communities (Bucay et al. 2017). Local journalism is, by nature, a merit that needs social intervention for its provision (Ali 2016). The fact that consumption of and trust in local news are closely linked to regional audiences' community attachment confirms the importance of ensuring local news provision.

Nonetheless, this study has some limitations. We used a variable of engagement with local organisations as a proxy for having micro level conversations about the local community with local community members. However, we did not directly measure the amount or type of conversations and the amount of local news information shared in those conversations. Future research could augment survey research with qualitative methods to explore the link between news access, engagement with organisations, and daily conversations, and shed light on how people use the information they find through local news sources, and how this relates to their perception of community.

Another limitation is its cross-sectional nature, which precludes the establishment of a causal relationship between closure of local news media and other variables. Future studies could test the causality and explore the temporal impact of local news media closures through a longitudinal design or time-lagged approach. It is also important to note the data collection occurred prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic began, the media industry, particularly in the regional areas, have experienced further contractions, which have not been accounted for in this study.

Despite these limitations, this study makes an original contribution to deepening our understanding of community attachment and local news. This study highlights that not all sources of local news are equal when it comes to strengthening community attachment. By revealing the mediating role of trust in local news to a person's sense of community attachment—particularly in communities that have lost local news outlets—this study underscores the importance of not only local news for a community, but also trusted and credible local news. When a news outlet closes, such as the local newspaper, community attachment is likely to be eroded if this outlet is not replaced by an alternative source offering what the local community trusts.

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