

BUSINESS COMPANIES MEDIA & MARKETING

News Corp defends print closures as upset Nats MPs blast 'absolute disgrace'

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May 28, 2020 – 5.07pm



Talking points

- Rupert Murdoch's News Corp will stop printing more than 100 smaller papers in rural and suburban areas
- The decision has been blasted by Nationals MPs in affected electorates
- The move follows a string of newsroom closures during the coronavirus pandemic

News Corp's Australian boss Michael Miller has defended the Murdoch-controlled publishing giant's decision to cease printing more than 100 regional and suburban newspapers, including the *Manly Daily*, arguing the media industry is more fixated on the move than audiences.

But a string of upset Nationals MPs serving electorates affected by the closures, including Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack, expressed disappointment with three urging the company to reconsider the move and one describing it as an "absolute disgrace".



News Corp is closing down more than 100 regional and suburban print titles, including the Leader Newspapers in Victoria AAP/JAMES ROSS

Mr Miller on Thursday confirmed reports that News Corp would [axe hundreds of jobs](#) as it ended print editions of a string of smaller papers, including one of the oldest mastheads in NSW, the *Parramatta Advertiser* and the *Mornington Peninsula Leader* and *Bayside Leader* in Victoria.

"The people who feel most aggrieved by not publishing print editions are those in the industry," Mr Miller said. "[The readers] are subscribing online more than subscribing in print."

Most titles will move to digital only editions but the company will also close 30 of its suburban and regional titles completely, including the *Progress Leader* in Melbourne and *Rouse Hill Times* in NSW.

The decision to stop printing the titles follows [a string of newsroom closures](#) triggered by the coronavirus pandemic and an already faltering advertising market.

The Sydney Morning Herald and *The Age* revealed in April that [News Corp was undertaking a major review of its business model and regional publishing business](#) to cut costs and consolidate editorial and commercial operations. Mr Miller declined to comment on how much money the company would save from the restructure.

From June 29 about 375 journalists will remain to cover local and community news, a figure considerably smaller than the 1200 that existed in the regional and community business before the closures.

Mr Miller, who grew up in regional NSW, said he understood the importance of news to local communities but argued that the business had been challenged for a long time. "These mastheads are not closing, we are moving them to the market where the readers are," he said.

Nationals lament 'major blow' for regions

Deputy Prime Minister and Nationals leader Michael McCormack, a former regional newspaper editor, said he wanted News Corp to deliver on its promise to keep providing local news online.

"Some century-old mastheads are ceasing to print and for those regional Australians who like to read a printed edition of their local paper this is particularly disappointing," he said.

Nationals MP Ken O'Dowd – whose regional Queensland electorate of Flynn takes in six News Corp publications that will go digital only or close – said the announcement was a "major blow" and called for more support to sustain local journalism.

"Six papers being knocked on the head, going from hard copies to digital and that's a blow because some of our people in regional areas, they haven't got internet services like they do in the cities," he said.

He said the government should step in with more industry support on top of the \$50 million public interest newsgathering fund announced earlier this year.

Michelle Landry, Nationals MP for Capricornia in Queensland, said she was "outraged" by News Corp's decision and was launching a petition urging the company to change course.

"I think it is an absolute disgrace. Papers like the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, the *Mackay Daily Mercury*, they have been there for generations. They are where people get their local news from," she said.

Nationals senator Matt Canavan called for News Corp to reconsider the "devastating" decision but acknowledged the business model of local journalism was under threat from tech giants.

"I do think it underlines the need to solve this Google and Facebook [advertising revenue] issue sooner rather than later ... It's hardly surprising we are losing regional titles like this in the current environment," he said.

He backed the development of a mandatory code forcing digital platforms to share revenue with media outlets and said regional publications should benefit from the money.

Communications Minister Paul Fletcher said it was a difficult day for News Corp staff and urged the company to honour its commitment to maintain digital presences in local communities.

"News Corp has expressed its commitment to maintain the bulk of its regional and community titles online, and the government is very interested to see that News Corp delivers on that promise," he said.

Selected publications moving to digital only : Queensland: *Mackay Daily Mercury*, *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, *Gladstone Observer*, *Bundaberg News*

Mail, Fraser Coast Chronicle, Gympie Times, Sunshine Coast Daily, Queensland Times, Warwick Daily News, Central and North Burnett Times, Central Queensland News, Chinchilla News, Dalby Herald. Gatton Star, Noosa News, South Burnett Times, Stanthorpe Border Post, Western Star, Western Times, Whitsunday Times, Whitsunday Coast Guardian and Bowen Independent; NSW: Tweed Daily News, Ballina Advocate, Byron Shire News, Coffs Coast Advocate, Grafton Daily Examiner and Lismore Northern Star; Northern Territory - The Centralian Advocate, Fairfield Advance, Penrith Press, Macarthur Chronicle, Blacktown Advocate, Canterbury Bankstown Express, Central Coast Express, Hills Shire Times, Hornsby Advocate, Liverpool Leader, Manly Daily, Northern District Times, Parramatta Advertiser, Inner West Courier, Southern Courier, Illawarra Star, Wagga Wagga News, St George Shire Standard, Canberra Star, Newcastle News, Blue Mountains News, Central Sydney, South Coast News; Victoria: Melbourne Leader titles - Stonnington, Mornington Peninsula, Knox, Whitehorse, Monash, Northern, Whittlesea, Maroondah, Moorabbin, Mordialloc Chelsea, Moreland, Lilydale and Yarra Valley, Frankston, Bayside, Caulfield Port Phillip, Cranbourne, Greater Dandenong, Moonee Valley, Maribyrnong, Wyndham

Selected publications closing down: NSW - *Coastal Views, Northern Rivers Echo, Richmond River Express Examiner, Rouse Hill Times*; Victoria: *Leader Titles in Manningham, Preston, Diamond Valley, Heidelberg, Sunbury Macedon, Progress and Northcote.*



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