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The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into the future of journalism

Introduction

I am a lecturer in journalism at the University of Portsmouth, a former NCTJ programme leader, and ex-deputy news editor at regional daily newspaper, *The News, Portsmouth*. I have a special interest in local newspapers, given that I spent my entire career in the regional press and many of my students and apprentices have gone on to work in the sector. I have also recently submitted a PhD proposal examining trust and misinformation in local news, with some of the initial research documented below.

7) Why is the journalism profession not more representative of the population? How could this be addressed?

1. The local and national press has historically been a white, middle-class profession. While several initiatives have been put into place to counter this - such as the NCTJ's excellent Journalism Diversity Fund - it is still a continuing problem. There's not just a lack of diversity in newsrooms amongst minority groups, but also working-class backgrounds. Newsrooms across the country currently do not reflect their communities, which impacts on audience reach, trust and the future of journalism.
2. Introducing elements of journalism-related studies into the national curriculum could increase trust in the media, deliver social and educational aims and also promote the journalism profession. Topics could include how to spot 'fake news', the dangers of online publishing (contempt, privacy and libel) and copyright. All would go towards the aim of promoting British values, as well as the use of English in lessons.
3. Finland is a recent example of a country introducing lessons to primary schoolchildren on tackling misinformation (Guardian, January 29, 2020).
4. One way of building a more diverse newsroom has been through the introduction of journalism apprenticeships. I designed a Level 3 NCTJ apprenticeship programme at my former employer, Highbury College, in Portsmouth, and worked with major local newspaper employers such as JPI Media and Newsquest as well as smaller media firms.
5. The apprentices taken on by employers have come from a diverse range of social class and educational backgrounds, many of whom would not have considered a career in journalism. Many of my former apprentices came fresh from college or sixth form after completing A levels. They didn't want - or couldn't afford - to go to university and saw an apprenticeship as an attractive option as they got paid while they trained.
6. The main advantage of these new members of staff to local newspapers was that most lived on patch. They had grown up in the area, had family and friends there and knew the places they were writing about, which can promote trust with the local communities.
7. They were also young - aged 18-25 - and had a voice directly to an audience that many local news media struggles to reach.

8. The concern is, as cuts continue to the local press, some young reporters have left the industry because of the demanding workloads and long hours, thereby impacting on the good work achieved in diversification.
9. While some media employers have embraced apprenticeships, others have either been slow or unwilling to come on board or to commit to taking on larger numbers. With fewer journalists in newsrooms, there can be the view that apprentices will just 'get in the way' or become an extra burden on existing staff. But that is far from the truth. For those companies who have embraced apprenticeships – such as JPI Media and Newsquest - they have considerably enhanced their business and newsrooms.
10. It can be argued that one of the main reasons for a relatively small uptake in apprentices since they were introduced is the lack of government incentives on offer. The big employers can use their apprenticeship levy to pay for the apprentice training. But taking on new recruits means increased overheads, even despite the lower wages paid to apprentices.
11. A cash-back scheme or a new journalism apprenticeship fund to pay for the wages of apprentices for the duration of their 18-month programme could entice more employers – small, medium and large - to take part and therefore play an important role in helping publications reflect their communities.

8) Why has trust in journalism declined? How could it be improved? How can journalists better understand and convey the concerns and priorities of people who do not live in London or other metropolitan hubs?

I have recently written a PhD proposal on trust in regional news. Some of the following points are extracted from this proposal, which I hope will provide some relevant background research and key thoughts on the question posed:

1. The question of trust in journalism has always been an issue, ever since the first newspapers rolled off the presses in the early 18th century. But, like never before, trust in news media is under assault (Usher, 2018). The assault is not just from populist politicians and a sceptical public, but the 'digital disease' of misinformation that threatens the very existence of the regional press (Mitchinson, December 11, 2019).
2. Historically, local newspapers have been classed as 'more trustworthy' than national news operators. Recent quantitative research continues to support this view. On a scale of 1-10, local newspapers scored a 6.4 trust rating – double that of most nationals, apart from the *Financial Times* (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). While these surveys can be a useful guide, it can be argued they only reinforce the lack of trust in nationals. As Knight Foundation (2019) argues, this trust advantage is more a sign of scepticism toward national media than of enthusiasm toward local news organisations.
3. As cuts to newsrooms deepen, it can be argued the relationship between local journalists and their communities grows further apart. These communities are subsequently relying on non-mainstream sources of 'news', leaving them exposed to misinformation.
4. The cuts to the industry over the past decade have, inevitably, led to the reduction in quality of some local newspapers. Firstly, many 'sub editors' - usually more experienced journalists who have a keen eye for proof-reading and layout - have been dispensed with by major local news publishers, in favour of

templated pages reporters can write directly into. This has led to accusations of papers failing to critically analyse events and reporters simply cutting and pasting press releases into shapes.

5. Secondly, the consequence of local newspapers cutting costs is the loss of newspaper offices. The brands are no longer a visible presence on the streets and, in many instances, journalists have been removed from their communities. Usher (2018) argues newspaper buildings are ways that journalists have historically made an argument to be trusted, but that this has been 'substantially weakened' as these buildings have disappeared. In their case study of a Welsh town left without a newspaper office, Harte et al (2018) argued the distance of journalists from their local patch did not go unnoticed by the community.
6. This raises an argument that central and local government could do more to facilitate low cost town/city centre retail and office hubs by slashing or axing business rates and so enticing local publishers to move back into the heart of their communities.
7. Thirdly, with a much-reduced workforce, editors are finding it hard to justify time and money spent on investigative features or covering public authorities and the courts. At a time when public interest journalism is desperately needed to make local news relevant to their local communities, Pickard (2020) argues it is that kind of reporting which is failing economically.
8. The introduction of the BBC's Local Democracy Service - which hires journalists to cover local councils - has been welcomed by the industry, with 150 journalists employed and 100,000 stories published since it started (BBC, November 4, 2019). The need for such a focus on public interest journalism was reflected in the government-funded Cairncross Review (2019) which said all the areas where intervention to support high-quality journalism is justified, local democracy reporting is the most urgent and important.
9. Another scheme - the Facebook-funded community journalists programme in conjunction with the NCTJ - has seen up to 80 new reporters being employed by local newspapers in the past year to report on underserved communities. But, like the BBC-funded Local Democracy Scheme, there are no assurances this will continue in the long-term.
10. It has also been argued that another underserved area of news - the courts - should also be included in any new reporting scheme.
11. Given that local newspapers need stability, a **public interest news** fund needs to be created which will fund all these types of reporting schemes covering councils, courts and underserved communities, as well as journalism apprenticeships.
12. Where should the funding come from? This would be a matter for the government, but a digital tax on social media companies, public funds/grants, a share of the BBC licence fee as well as investment from the local newspaper industry itself, could produce a significant amount of funds.
13. Cairncross (2019) called for an Institute for Public Interest News but, so far, the government has rejected calls (Press Gazette, January 27, 2020). It is time for ministers to reconsider this decision.

14. Time is fast running out. Local newspapers are fighting to remain relevant as the business model its foundations were built on - print advertising - is replaced with digital strategies that are failing to generate the same revenue.
15. What is clear is that many more newspapers will fold and there will be significant consolidation amongst the major publishers in the coming years if no firm solution is found. As Cairncross (2019) argues, the combination of more efficient online rivals for advertising and the success of social media to provide a sense of local activities means that a traditional local paper has a limited future. Cairncross concluded this made the search for sustainable new business models for local news all the more urgent. This has led to calls for greater involvement of public money in the delivery of local news.
16. Local news is so important in holding authority to account, promoting democracy and providing trusted news, that one could argue it should be put alongside other publicly-funded local services.
17. Innovative solutions have got to be explored. There could even be an argument that part of local news funding could come from local taxpayers in the form of a council precept or local news licence fee. Clearly this would be contentious and difficult to administer, but it is an option worth exploring. It would re-connect people with their local news provider as they would feel they have a stake in the output. Local news providers would, in turn, be accountable to the very community who would be funding them.
18. Many readers have turned to their local newspaper for information during the coronavirus crisis, but some have been left frustrated at paywalls blocking their access. The concept of paying for local news online is a battle that is yet to be won. It is not clear if that it will ever be a viable option for local news.

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1 April 2020