

Written evidence submitted by Notts TV

Response to the Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee Call for Evidence on the Sustainability of Local Journalism

Notts TV

Notts TV background

Notts TV, as an Ofcom-licensed, independently-operated part of the Local TV network, is a working example of a **model of sustainable regional journalism** for Nottinghamshire.

Available across Nottinghamshire on Freeview, BT and Virgin Media, Notts TV attracts an estimated 200,000 viewers monthly.

The Channel is also highly active on social media, primarily across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and has a website updated daily with local news in written and video format.

Notts TV News Provision

Central to the Channel's output is a **daily hour-long live, local news programme**, which is also provided free online, on demand. It comprises news updates, interviews and filmed reports from its team of four full-time journalists. There are also weekend bulletins, alongside discussion programmes and live broadcasts from key local events. Notts TV champions Notts – and holds decision-makers to account.

Since July 2021, Notts TV has also been **home to the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS)** for Nottinghamshire, a team of journalists funded by the BBC licence fee to cover local politics for Notts TV and other local media. Notts TV was the first Local TV Channel to secure an LDRS contract.

Together, these resources allow for a solid local news service for the County.

Income

Notts TV generates income from the following sources -and this mixed-funding approach is key to survival.

- Local advertising and sponsorship
- The funding channelled from the BBC specifically for the local democracy reporters.
- A subsidy from Nottingham Trent University (NTU).

In exchange for the university funding, the channel provides structured long-term work placements for undergraduates in broadcasting, journalism and a range of other technical sectors, supporting the hands-on training of dozens of young people. One of the challenges for journalism is recruitment of quality staff, and this arrangement is vital for sustaining an experienced workforce in the industry at large.

As such, Notts TV can afford the committee a 'real world' example of the challenges and solutions for sustainable local journalism.

How can the Government support local news outlets to develop sustainable business models?

1. If meaningful, professional, impartial local journalism is worth protecting, as a society we need to pay for it. Our structure confirms that **commercial revenues alone cannot support a high-quality service** even in sizeable cities. A mixed-model is required.
2. **Ensure the BBC commits to future funding of the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service.** The high-quality written and video content generated by LDRS funding has become a vital pillar of the channel's strategy to deliver a multimedia, professional service focused on local journalism that matters to communities.
3. **Expand the areas covered by the LDRS reporters into coverage of criminal courts and inquests.** This would help serve an increasingly under-reported sector.
4. **Encourage other universities to develop models like those of Notts TV** – to help sustain the news service and offer much needed training.
5. **Ensure that Local TV is re-licensed.** At present, there are no provisions in statute for new Ofcom Local TV licences when the current ones expire. This is now creating damaging business uncertainty for our channel and the network as a whole. News plurality is at serious risk in many cities.
6. **Ensure that Local TV is seen as an equal partner to local press as funding schemes are devised.** We have found application processes for public funding and for funding from social media companies appear press-biased.

What role does social media play in local journalism?

It is now vital to the speedy distribution of news. A meaningful news website or platform cannot be operated without using the popular networks to publicise stories.

In a wider sense, it is playing a damaging role in terms of public knowledge and discourse. The Meta products Facebook and Instagram, along with Twitter, dominate the market as people make use of the sources they have identified.

These platforms, however, are not designed to provide a duly impartial service. Sources aside, it is too tempting to feast on headlines rather than understand a story fully. Facebook comments illustrate the issue, many self-evidently written by those who have failed to read the story. Local news is competing with a vast galaxy of simultaneous other content – and detail can only be obtained by leaving the Facebook platform – exactly what Facebook does not wish to encourage.

Unless the local news organisation simply decides Facebook is now the publisher and not simply a distributor/platform, thereby simply posting all the text, video and pictures to their Facebook page. In doing so, of course, you effectively hand over all control of your business and content to it.

How Facebook works in terms of prioritising stories in people's feeds remains entirely opaque. Common trends we have spotted include posts 'falling down' or failing to take off if they have stock featured images, or if they have an image we have used before in the past. The story – the words – could be very important and local - but it will fail because of Facebook's algorithm

For many, the distribution and reach of local news is now effectively controlled by Facebook. (A position alluded to in the Cairncross Review).

By way of illustration, a local journalist writing a story about a library closure in a Nottingham suburb is reliant on the largely confidential strategy of a California software company to ensure their story is seen.

In return, local media outlets receive no financial recompense from Facebook for simply sharing their content, and this imbalance of editorial power and financial dominance must be addressed.

About the author Chris Breese, Channel Manager, Notts TV

Chris has been a regional journalist since 2005, obtaining a Post Graduate Diploma in Journalism with NCTJ preliminary qualifications from De Montfort University.

He then worked continuously in newspapers, online and broadcasting in the East Midlands. Firstly, as a reporter and correspondent for various regional weekly and daily newspapers (2005-2014), then as a news editor and later channel manager for Notts TV (2014-date).

Chris's career has spanned the emergence and rise of the internet and social media in regional journalism, and he has witnessed many of the widespread changes which have created the conditions which are now the subject of this committee.

He has experienced them both on the 'front line' as a reporter and correspondent, and latterly from the point of view of a manager/editor in charge of an independent regional media company trying to navigate the extremely difficult and fast-changing environment.