

Report for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

The value of non-profits to the field of local journalism

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Overview

This report considers:

- 1) The reason local news reporting is in crisis (pgs 1- 2);**
- 2) The specific value non-profits, such as the Bureau Local and The Bristol Cable, bring to the field of local journalism (pgs 2-5);**
- 3) Why and in what ways they should be funded (pgs 5-6); and**
- 4) How this funding can strengthen and improve the quality of local reporting (pgs 7-8).**

1) The reason local news reporting is in crisis

- Local news reporting has been in crisis for over a decade in the UK.
- Research has shown that the UK:
 - has a growing number of news deserts – more than half of parliamentary constituencies in the UK are not covered by a daily local newspaper;¹
 - lacks media plurality – four publishers account for 73% of local publications, with one monopolizing the market in 165 local authority districts;² and
 - lacks diversity, representation and relevance – 92% of journalists are white and 75% come from the highest social class.³ Many audiences report feeling that the media cover them unfairly.

¹ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/cmcp/local-news.pdf>

² <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/cmcp/local-news.pdf>

³ <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/nctj-diversity-journalism-number-journalists/>

- The consequence of these news deserts for the general public is that high quality news about their local communities is not a priority for the organisations that produce them.
- Most of the non-profits in the United Kingdom have been set up to address this crisis in local journalism. Their work is not for profit - it is not driven by commercial consideration but by serving communities, consulting with them and reporting on issues that concern local people and are in the public interest. They also aim to address wider social issues, like a lack of diversity in newsrooms, by forging links with marginalised communities, giving them a voice and ensuring as wide a range of perspectives as possible is reflected in their work.
- In the next section, I identify the four key ways in which the non-profits are changing local journalism and why this kind of reporting is a viable and sustainable form for the future of local journalism:

2) The specific value non-profits, such as the Bureau Local and The Bristol Cable, bring to the field of local journalism

Reporting with, for and by communities

- **Non-profit journalism cannot define its success in material terms beyond balancing its books. Success therefore has to be judged against the goals of the organization, and for local non-profits like the Bristol Cable, this means working with, for and through the communities they cover and draw income from.**
- When The Bristol Cable was set up in 2014, the aim of its three founders was to make sure that their journalism was community-centred, that they were telling stories their communities believed were important. They did this by combining a traditional approach of going into communities and finding out what stories they should be telling, with sharing power with those communities through their co-operative model (with paying members who collectively own the paper) and, in some cases, training citizens to take part in reporting their own stories. As Alon Aviram, one of the founders, told me:

“We did two things by setting up the Cable in this way. One was to feed information to mainstream journalists, who might not be aware of what is going on across the city. The other was being

able to draw on community members to source story ideas and investigation leads. These were stories that we might not, if it had just been us, have chosen to tell.”

- The Bureau Local, meanwhile, supports local news organisations through a network that includes journalists, bloggers, coders, academics, lawyers, community leaders and activists. The community it serves are local journalism organisations, but it is driven by its self-stated purpose (to support those communities) and not by profit.

Representing marginalised and stigmatized communities more positively

- **One of the key aims of public interest non-profits is to represent people of colour and other marginalised communities more positively.**
- Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, there was a large outcry about media representation of people of colour and other marginalised or scapegoated communities. Criticism focused on:
 - lack of diversity in newsrooms;
 - lack of local knowledge by journalists, causing them to continue to tell stigmatising narratives about communities; and
 - lack of contacts in communities, leading to same voices being privileged.
- In 2020, the Bureau Local launched an initiative called ‘Change the Story’, to find out from communities what they actually wanted and needed from local news. One of their key findings was that **marginalised communities believed themselves to be constantly represented negatively in local and national news in the United Kingdom and that, as a result, they avoided mainstream news.** One Muslim woman said that she felt a sense of dread when anyone from the Muslim community appeared in the news for any reason, and she said she couldn’t remember when it was last beneficial. As Rachel Hamada from the Bureau Local notes:

This stark illustration of how poorly served some people in the UK feel by the news should concern all of us involved in journalism.

- The Bristol Cable, meanwhile, has focused on the Traveller community, with stories focusing on a lack of sites for housing, health and education inequalities, racist policing – all of which aims to bring the wider community closer together by helping its constituent parts understand each other.

Bringing causes and effects of social harm into the conversation

- **Another key criticism of local and national mainstream news is that it rarely addresses causes and effects of crime or social harms.**
- The style of community reporting used by the Bureau Local means that these issues are also addressed. For example, when investigating for ‘Make Them Count’, members of the Bureau Local travelled across the UK, visiting soup kitchens and homeless shelters to talk to sources and understand these issues through first-hand accounts.
- The team was able to understand the causes and effects of homelessness and to bring these wider issues, such as cuts to mental health provision and drug and alcohol services, a benefit cap and lack of housing, into their reporting.
- Its comprehensive nature also created a **social impact beyond their readers**: the Office of National Statistics and National Records of Scotland both adopted the bureau’s methodology when recording homeless deaths. As Rachel Hamada from the Bureau Local notes:

This was a concrete victory as this data will allow patterns to be identified and help government, national and local, to understand where services are failing people.⁴

Sharing resources with other journalists – and increasing trust in the media

- **The Bureau Local shares resources with local - and national reporters.** For each investigation undertaken by the Bureau Local, open data is published on the website. There are four main resources available for each investigation undertaken by the Bureau Local:

⁴ Hamada, R. (2021) ‘Grassroots operations’, in H. De Burgh and P. Lashmar (eds) *Investigative Journalism* (3rd edn), Abingdon: Routledge, p 117

- Data or evidence behind each investigation;
 - A how-to guide to use the data and develop the story;
 - Code or technological tools to interrogate or visualize data;
 - Other resources used as part of the investigation.
- Research has also shown that this practice of transparency by outlets in terms of evidence and methods can also be linked to increased trust in the media by the public.

3) Why and in what way non-profits should be funded

- Although I have focused on the Bureau Local and The Bristol Cable, there are similar organisations across the country with similar aims, such as The Ferret in Scotland, the Manchester Meteor and the newly established Great Central Gazette, **all with the same aims of improving the quality of content of local journalism.**
- Non-profits that are committed to public service journalism and community engagement have the following characteristics:
 - Journalists on these outlets seek to report with their communities instead of on them, and to tell the stories that matter most to communities.
 - In the case of The Bristol Cable and The Ferret, their organization is directly accountable to its members in the community through a co-operative model. Journalists are not working at a distance from the areas they cover and so are not helping to perpetuate negative representations of marginalised groups in their communities.
 - Journalists are seeking to tell stories about systemic wrongs in their communities and to bring causes and effects of these harms into the conversation.
 - Journalists are seeking to represent marginalised communities more positively and to include a wider diversity of perspectives in their reporting.

- Journalists on non-profits are carrying out their Fourth Estate role and informing citizens of issues in their communities, enabling them to become active and informed participants in society.
- **In short, the non-profits are fulfilling their democratic role in society and succeeding in areas in which legacy local news outlets are failing.**

What kind of funding – innovation grants or structural support?

- Over the last month, I spoke to Megan Lucero, Shirish Kulkarni and Rachel Hamada from the Bureau Local to get their views on what kind of funding should be given to non-profits. The overall consensus was that **long-term funding was more beneficial than innovation grants for the following reasons:**
 - The idea of innovation grants might be appealing to funders but is generally given for a short-term project. For smaller non-profits struggling to deliver core reporting, time spent trying to think of innovative projects within the field would be better spent on growing the core functions of the non-profit.
 - The work of the non-profits is innovative in its own right – both in terms of working practices and in the kind of public service reporting they provide.
 - **The kind of long-term investigative reporting undertaken by outlets such as the Bureau Local has never made a profit for legacy media – which is in part why it has fallen by the wayside in legacy media reporting.** Long-term, no-strings funding would ensure that outlets such as the Bureau Local could continue to undertake this essential work.

4) How this funding can strengthen and improve the quality of local reporting.

- The Bureau Local are already improving the quality of local journalism by sharing stories and resources with other mainstream newsrooms.
- **However, they believe that rather than pumping more money into model that is failing and does not provide quality reporting,**

money should be going into the establishment of more public interest non-profit newsrooms.

- Their aim is to create what they term a **People’s Newsroom, responding to key needs in the local journalism sector and build a shared infrastructure that would allow more community newsrooms to start up and thrive.** The objective of this infrastructure would be:
 - To create a new pipeline into journalism entrepreneurship, supporting those ill-served and under-served by the media industry to kickstart more diverse, community-led journalism entrepreneurship.
 - To provide business, design and startup support to build new sustainable journalism non-profits. They may have different ownership models – from cooperatives, to charities, to nonprofits. What would be important is that the newsrooms, journalism and models match the specific needs of the communities they are created by. In order to do this, the Bureau Local would be building on an existing design partnership with the design consultancy PDR and their team’s work in Product Immersion for Small Newsrooms and Business Design for Social Impact.
 - To share a back-office infrastructure. Working with community leaders to understand needs, they would build a collaborative infrastructure to pool expertise and share back-office costs (e.g. HR and legal) and technology (e.g. content management, customer relationship management and monetization software).
- They also note that a small but growing number of organisations around the world are building long-term civic news infrastructure. The Bureau Local are currently collaborating with three of these organisations – Tiny News Collective (US), Beabee (Europe) and Public Media Stack (UK) – to learn from and partner on shared business and technology platforms that put communities first.
- These practices have already started to be put in place as the Bureau Local has formed an ongoing partnership with the Ethnic Minority and Youth Support Team in Wales (EYST), Lankelly Chase and Clwstwr, to design and build a community newsroom in Swansea – this is an ongoing and viable initiative but needs funding to expand.

Conclusion

- Mainstream local journalism has been in crisis for some time. Its business model has collapsed but more crucially it is no longer – and has not for some time been – providing the kind of public service news that citizens need to engage in a democratic society.
- Such reporting has also been harmful to marginalised and stigmatised communities, who are often demonised or scapegoated and rarely have a voice in mainstream reporting.
- The non-profits such as the Bureau Local and The Bristol Cable are addressing these problems in their work:
 - **through working with communities and reporting with them, not on them;**
 - **through providing news that communities actually want to read; and**
 - **repairing harm to those communities scapegoated or marginalised in mainstream media.**
- By funding this important work, investment will be going into organisations that have a clear view of what journalism can be, how it might look in five or even twenty years' time and have viable and clear plans for improving the quality of local journalism in the UK - journalism that is truly in the public interest.