

Max Taylor, Editor, Crail Matters—written evidence (FON0011)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry: The future of news: impartiality, trust and technology

This submission draws on the experience of publishing Crail Matters,¹ a hyper local newspaper, for the past 8 years.

I am writing to support the value and significance of local independent newspapers (sometimes referred to as hyperlocal journalism) in the context of local democracy. As our society becomes increasingly interconnected and reliant on distant digital platforms, the role of local journalism has emerged as a critical component in fostering transparency, engagement, and informed decision-making at the local level and as an important factor addressing the democratic deficit which is very evident at local levels.

Introduction:

Local independent journalism represents an evolution of traditional journalism, often provided by volunteer and community groups, focusing on news about and relevant to local communities. Many leverage digital technologies to deliver real-time links, interactive, and multimedia-rich content, but others use more traditional means such as hard copy or .pdf copy accessed through internet. The common theme evident in all is that local democracy thrives on active citizen participation, and independent local journalism plays a pivotal role in facilitating this engagement by providing timely, locally relevant, trusted and accessible information to communities.

- Local journalism enables the dissemination of local news and updates, allowing citizens to stay informed about local government activities, decisions, and events. This immediacy fosters a more engaged and educated citizenry, and contributes to the empowerment of local communities, which in our view is a necessary element in addressing at a local level the democratic deficit and weaknesses of local democratic representation.
- Through features like live streaming, interactive maps, and multimedia content, local journalism enhances the interactive experience for readers.

¹ Crail Matters overview
Crail Matters is a weekly, free-issue newsletter that mainly covers Crail, a village in the East Neuk of Fife but also encompasses the village of Kingsbarns (The Kingsbarns Eagle). In addition, in collaboration with Pittenweem Community Library, we have developed (on a monthly basis) the Pittenweem Post. Past and current copies can be found on our website (www.crailmatters.com) We have been operating Crail Matters since 2016 and are a Scottish Private Company, limited by Guarantee (SC553502), with two Directors. We pay no salaries and distribute profits to the Crail community.

We have over 800 online subscribers for our downloadable .pdf (with around 1400 recorded clicks), and we have somewhere in the region of 2-300 clicks to our flip issues, and around 200/week access to our website. We publish the online newsletter on Friday mornings; we also provide and deliver a free hard copy for some in the community who, for one reason or another, are unable to access the electronic version (they are mainly elderly residents who can be rather isolated). We make no charge for adverts, and depend on donations for income.

This not only captures attention but also allows citizens to actively participate in discussions and decision-making processes.

- By providing a platform for community voices to be heard, independent local journalism empowers citizens to actively contribute to the democratic process. This inclusivity is essential for fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility for local affairs.
- Local journalism allows for the integration of data analytics, providing in-depth insights into local issues. This data-driven reporting helps citizens and policymakers make more informed decisions, contributing to the overall improvement of local governance.
- The transparency afforded by local journalism ensures that the actions of local authorities are subject to public scrutiny. This transparency, in turn, promotes accountability and ethical governance, as officials are aware that their decisions are being observed by an informed public.
- Local journalism places a strong emphasis on hyperlocal reporting, addressing the unique needs and interests of specific communities. This localized approach is crucial for building trust and addressing the diverse concerns within a given area.

In light of the above, I suggest the House of Lords consider the following actions:

- **Support for Independent Local Journalism Initiatives:** Encourage and support initiatives that promote independent local journalism at the local level through funding, training programs, and partnerships between appropriate media organizations and local communities.
- **Digital Literacy Programs:** Invest in digital literacy programs to ensure that citizens have the skills needed to navigate and engage with local journalistic content effectively.
- **Regulatory Framework:** Support and develop the existing regulatory framework provided by IMPRESS that balances the freedom of the press with ethical standards, ensuring the responsible use of local journalistic tools and technologies.

In conclusion, local journalism stands as a powerful tool for promoting transparency, community engagement, and informed decision-making in local democracy. Embracing and supporting this evolution in journalism will undoubtedly contribute to the vitality and resilience of democratic processes at the grassroots level.

Thank you for considering this submission. I am available for any further clarification or discussion on the subject.

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