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Select Committee on Communications and Digital. Future of Journalism inquiry

Introduction.

This submission is made by the Local and Community Media Network of MeCCSA (Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association), which represents around 60 academics working in the area of local and community media in the UK. Many of our members have moved into academia from journalism; this generates particular insights into the current landscape and the future of Journalism. This contribution draws on that expertise and makes the following contribution in relation to the questions set by the enquiry.

The research on which it draws clearly pre-dates the Covid-19 pandemic and the concurrent catastrophic impact on advertising revenues streams for the newspaper industry, and the local newspaper industry in particular. At this time the significance of robust information is paramount and the crisis has promoted the debate about the funding of information which is in the public interest; the reaction of the industry has been to furlough staff, including editorial workers, cut wages and suspend printed publication. One reasoned estimate puts potential job losses in the regional news industry at 5,000¹. This response is not wholly the preserve of the corporate owners, but has extended to titles in alternative forms of ownership, including the UK's oldest co-operatively-owned newspaper, the *West Highland Free Press*. How, or if, these titles recover, has yet to be seen.

It is to be welcomed that there is some sign of intervention in this crisis in the UK in terms of Government advertising and schemes from Google², Facebook and the European Journalism Project³. The NUJ has published its own recovery plan, *From Health Crisis to Good News*, and earlier this year the Public Interest News Foundation⁴ was created. The UK is behind other countries, particularly the US, in terms of the levels of philanthropic and research funding into the value, purpose and sustainability of local journalism. The current crisis will only accelerate the need for intervention if the local news industry is to survive. This submission suggests key areas for investigation which will contribute to a robust evidence base to direct that work going forward.

¹ <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/more-than-2000-newspaper-jobs-hit-as-hundreds-of-publications-across-uk-face-covid-19-cuts/>

² <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/journalism-emergency-relief-fund/>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/grants/coronavirus-european-news-support-fund>

⁴ <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/>

Question 1. How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society?

The Network suggests that the 'local' is worthy of consideration as a subsection of journalism because of its continued significance in terms of audiences, policy makers and revenues. There has been a renewed focus on the value of news in the UK in the wake of the Brexit debate, and now the Covid-19 crisis, and associated concerns over misinformation. Evidence suggests local journalism, and local news in particular, has a significant role to play because it is more trusted, builds community cohesion and reduces polarisation, particularly among marginalised groups (Bell, 2019; Stearns, 2018). The largest provider of this information is the local newspaper industry, whose future has been widely understood to be imperilled as titles struggle with the disruption by digital technology to the established advertising-led business model. Even before the events of the past few weeks, it seemed certain that the market could no longer support the type and range of local journalism which a healthy democratic society needs (Pickard 2020). Anxiety about the impact of this on communities has already contributed to the Cairncross Review and taxpayer funded interventions, including business rate relief and the Local Democracy Reporting Service⁵. The Covid-19 crisis will only add urgency to calls for action and intervention. However, the Network contends that, despite these good intentions, the mechanisms by which local news contributes to communities are poorly understood and often assumed. It identifies the need for further research to advance understandings which can be shared with policy makers and practitioners in order to impact on public interest news practices.

Local news consumption remains relatively high in the UK, at least on aggregate levels. While the readership of printed local newspapers has declined, local news consumption online has expanded significantly. Local news brands reach 40 million people weekly, 28 million of whom read local media via print or online at least four times a week (Local Media Works 2016). Furthermore, 48% of British adults access local news via social media platforms (Ofcom 2018). The challenges to journalism in the last decade in the UK, including declining advertising revenues and unstable business models, have been explored by a number of studies (e.g. Nielsen, 2015; Mair et al. 2012). The sector has also diversified with the introduction of new forms of local news and new ways to distribute local news, such as hyperlocal provisions and Facebook community groups. The sustainability of these alternative providers is though, far from assured and many hyperlocal outlets may not survive the pandemic turn down; a fact recognised by the Welsh government's emergency grant scheme⁶.

Additionally conceptions and expectations of what is local news and who provides it have remained very much focussed on those legacy news providers – particularly the local and regional newspaper industry. This has shaped interventions, such as the Local Democracy Reporting Service and the Facebook-funded Community Journalists scheme, launched in 2018⁷ – both of which put staff into the newsrooms of this industry - and the extension of

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/lnp/ldrs>

⁶ <https://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/welsh-government-provides-emergency-funding-to-welsh-hyperlocals/>

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/facebook-uk-community-news-project-year-in-review-2019>

Business Rate relief for local newspapers until 2025 (DCMS 2020: para 41) and most recently the Chancellor's extension of VAT exemption on printed publications to digital publications in the April 2020 budget⁸.

However, we know relatively little about how communities are impacted by changes in local news provision and the implications of these changes for people and processes, including those perceived to be linked with citizenship and democratic participation.

Firstly, there remains a gap in understandings of what constitutes local journalism practice in the UK and the geographic areas where it does – and does not – happen. In addition to industry databases, such as Jicreg, Local Media Works and Ofcom, there have been some attempts to catalogue and scope local journalism and local news provision in particular (for instance the ICNN's hyperlocal map⁹; Ramsay et al 2017). These studies face basic challenges posed by the lack of comprehensive data sets to work with, definitional issues in relation to the extent to which named platforms may actually engage with a locality in a material sense and the ephemeral nature of emerging platforms and publications which may be short-lived because of the precarity of the business model. A promising attempt to literally map provision can be found in a pilot project¹⁰ developed by Professor Agnes Guylas at Canterbury Christ Church University which uses the ArcGIS mapping program and UK postcode districts to understand which localities are best served by local news provision and which are effectively local news deserts (Abernathy 2018). This attempt to identify gaps in a provision is a significant step if we are to be able to understand the implications of those gaps and also the impact of crises on the provision of basic information at a local level.

Any research in this area also needs to be able to take account of platforms and ownership of local media in order to understand the relationships between purpose, profit and sustainability. Extant research suggests that ownership has a significant impact on the relationship between local news provider and its audience (Matthews 2017).

Methodologically, one area for further research could be the development of a typology which moves away from platform to focus on the local journalism itself, its purpose and, perhaps, its utility to audiences. At the moment definitions are confusing. Where does hyperlocal end and local begin? What is community journalism? What is a weekly newspaper now that most titles are digital first? A useful debate, therefore, might be to think about the role of these practices in relation to local journalism and the value of these to society and to the economy.

This leads into our second observation, that there is a lack of consensus about the purpose of local journalism, and, as a corollary, its value. The previous focus of this debate has been on the contribution local journalism makes to civil society or a sense of community; the current crisis only lends urgency to the need for a deeper engagement with how local journalism functions in relation to these issues, and so a robust debate which shifts our understanding of local news beyond a commercial product towards a public service role. This requires moving beyond traditional notions of what local journalism should be and do¹¹

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/budget-speech-2020>

⁹ <https://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/find-a-hyperlocal/>

¹⁰ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/837bd6f8e374480f86f41a9bbc34bc23>

¹¹ Expectations, such as covering councils and courts, are formed by the practices established

, in order to recognise the increasing number of alternative providers who are moving into the local journalism landscape, to understand their contribution and to fully recognise that contribution in policy decisions. This is particularly significant as policy moves into the area of supporting public interest news – evident in Nesta’s Future News Fund¹²; simply, what is in the public interest needs to be clearly evidenced and understood in order to assure the value of interventions.

The Government’s response to the Cairncross Report has already recognised the need for more research into the impact of local news provision on communities (DCMS2020: para 53), and the Network would suggest that this is supported as a priority. Methodologically, this can be challenging because of the diffuse way in which community benefit is understood so that research often relies on proxies for democratic involvement, such as the participation in local elections (ref). An alternative approach is to understand how journalism contributes to active involvement in a community, drawing on the work of Studdert and Walkerdine (2016). Community is here understood to be an active process made up of social interaction and shared meaning – and as such become something which can be quantified by working with people in a given community. This offers a way of assessing the extent to which local journalism is – or isn’t – significant to communities and so has the potential to feed into policy decisions and into the ways in which local journalism can be understood as a public good. In this way the future for journalism can move beyond the status quo towards something which is of value and valued, and therefore, sustainable.

Case study

This development of local journalism as a public good, supported by sustainable revenue streams is exemplified by research by David Baines into the approaches taken by several successful independent community-based publications in the Scottish Borders and North East England. The research indicates that diversion from the established corporate approach to a community-centred approach develops reconceptualisations and renegotiations of both professional practice and professional identity.

The monthly print and online publication *The Jed Eye* was established in 2010 in Jedburgh, Roxburghshire, as a community initiative supported with a National Lottery grant. It is distributed for free, has a saturation circulation in Jedburgh, and is widely read in surrounding communities and by expatriates from the area around the world. It is profitable and, before the Covid-19 crisis, has developed sustainable and resilient revenue streams from advertising, contributions from readers through collecting boxes at distribution points and online subscriptions for the digital version. Two permanent members of staff receive a small stipend but the paper is primarily a product of voluntary endeavour.

and entrenched by the local and regional newspaper industry (Matthews 2017b). As this has been largely concentrated in one form of homogenised, corporate, ownership, this has led to the favouring of a certain set of practices and relationships over other alternatives, which might be argued to be more of value.

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<https://www.nesta.org.uk/news/government-backed-pilot-fund-innovate-public-interest-news-protect-democracy/>

Passing control of the narrative to the community / audience in this way represents a reversal of established ideological constructions of journalism work in which part of the concept of professionalism is held to be the ability to identify what is and is not significant and deliver to the audience (Nibloc, 2005). A local paper's content is also determined by the commercial interests of the paper's owner (Matthews, 2017b pp5-6). In this instance, the paper is facilitating the community's ability to hold a conversation with itself, rather than assuming to tell it what it ought to know. The *Jed Eye* sustains a sense of community belonging, in part by sharing information, but also by enabling the community members to engage in those 'processes of community' by writing for it, taking photographs, attending the weekly café conference, doing the accounts, distributing the printed copies to distribution points. In so doing they are creating and sustaining a sense of belonging to that community and that locality. This approach has shaped the *Jed Eye*'s coverage of the pandemic. The news agenda has concentrated on supplying vital information to the community and the activities of local resilience groups and support services .

Similar approaches to sharing with a community control over the narrative, facilitating 'processes of community' and a sense of belonging, also emerged from interviews with Rachel Norris, editor of the weekly paid-for *Eskdale and Liddesdale Advertiser*, and Jason Marshall of *The Hawick Paper*, also a weekly paid-for title. Both are published in the Borders: the former was purchased from Cumbria News Group by the community and run as a Community Interest Company. It was launched by a journalist who recognised a news desert was emerging as the local paper, owned by Johnston Press, subsequently JPIMedia, had become 'local in name only', with little relevant local content. Interviews at the *E&D Advertiser* and *The Hawick Paper* were undertaken in February 2020 when the communities each of them served were severely impacted by extreme flooding, and those editors were able to point to the manner in which their papers not only provided their communities with critical information at the time, but were preparing to give their communities a voice in holding to account local, regional and national bodies to support recovery and restoration and progress flood defence work.

Question 10: Are there any other ways in which public policy could better support journalists and news organisations, now and in the future? Are there examples from other countries from which the Government could learn?

Local papers - local brewers

There are possible parallels to be drawn between local journalism and the local brewing industry. Like independent local newspapers, independent local brewers were bought by larger national brewing businesses, and many of these were in turn bought by international corporations. But a resurgence in local independent breweries was facilitated in 2002 when the government led by Gordon Brown halved beer duty for companies that make less than 5,000 hectolitres (3,055 barrels or 880,000 imperial pints) a year and simplified the payment process. Changing the environment for small brewers allowed them to compete on more equal terms with larger companies which enjoyed economies of scale.

A similar change of the regulatory environment for independent local news and media start-ups could help to develop sustainability and resilience in that field.

Research currently being undertaken by David Baines among independent local news organisations has identified two policy-changes which would be of immediate assistance.

- 1) Cash-flow can be a significant problem for organisations awaiting payment from other businesses. One interviewee said a legal requirement for businesses to pay bills promptly.
- 2) Grants are often unavailable to small organisations because they stipulate that the funds be spent before they can be reclaimed.
- 3) Lending bodies often demand personal assets as security on a loan. "They wanted all four of the directors to put up their homes as security, but three of us do not own our own homes. Our assets are our people. We have all worked hard for three years, taken much less than a minimum wage, proved we can build success, but such loans are out of our reach." So greater access to loans to develop such businesses would help to develop sustainability.
- 4) VAT is not levied on printed publications and since the April 2020 Budget, digital publications are VAT-Free. But one interviewee said they have to charge advertisers 20% VAT. This generated substantial paperwork, and also meant that they made a very narrow margin on advertising, which in the case of this publication was its only source of income. So extending the concessions on VAT would be of considerable benefit, and might be achieved through an adjustment to charity law to allow local news publishers to obtain charitable status.
- 5) One interviewee highlighted the increasing difficulty of gaining direct access to interview or MPs, MSPs and even councillors. Instead, gatekeepers such as public relations officers or spokespeople issue prepared statements. Similar problems arise

with access to police forces and senior investigating officers. If the democratic function of local journalism is to be effective, public figures and public services should be accessible to journalistic enquiry as a matter of course.

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