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

Introduction

I moved to the United Kingdom in 2001 to study journalism at Cardiff University and aspired to work in the profession here. Since then, in nearly 18 years working in journalism in the UK, I have held the posts of reporter, investigative reporter, freelance reporter, sub-editor, news editor, editor, and now chief reporter of the Clydebank Post and acting chief reporter of the Barrhead News and Renfrewshire Gazette. I have written for three dozen publications and was named local/weekly features reporter of the year at the Scottish Press Awards 2019. My experience has been predominantly local and regional because of the opportunity to work with and report on local communities.

Throughout my time in the profession, I have focused on its future. I founded the news website Tomorrow.is based on core ethical principles, before the publication of the Leveson Inquiry report. The inquiry was a significant waste of time and money, containing just a few paragraphs on the internet, when it would ultimately help to the decline of journalism. The profession also failed to combat the conclusions and evidence by explaining the craft of reporting and the significant good and important public interest seen overwhelmingly in local newsrooms, even if absent amongst certain unethical and criminal practices at national papers. Local and national are very different, but local has been punished far worse. And the effects of communities without local journalism are far more critical.

From my first day as a working reporter, I have been exposed to the shrinking numbers of staff. I was the last editor of the print edition of The Glaswegian newspaper, a publication originally started with 25 members of staff, reduced to two by the end. I have been in newspaper offices in their local communities, in nearby communities and moved out of their communities.

It is with my experience in local reporting that I make this submission.

Note: Concluding recommendations are at the end of this submission

- **How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society? What is the difference between 'citizen journalism' and other forms of journalism?**

Defining journalism is one of the most important but nearly impossible challenges of my profession and of this age. In my gut, I define myself as a reporter, not a journalist; columnists and opinion writers might broadly be journalism, but I consider them to be apart from my work; and citizen journalism should be related but overwhelmingly is not.

I define journalism in different manners to different audiences. It can be reporting what happened in council meetings or court proceedings, and can be answering questions about a community or national events. It can be telling stories about the individuals that make up a community, as both education to others and entertainment. And it can act as mediators of disputes in the community. But most simply, as I have described to young primary school pupils, it is telling people about what happened.

In that context, and in the current environment of a global pandemic, I believe

journalism is memory. We are not just a collection of statistics, we are a living, breathing, changing history of who is suffering, mourning, helping, caring, loving. Yes, journalism has to hold "power to account", an overused and abused phrase, but it is also the documenter of communities in a way Facebook does not. While social media might be home to hundreds and thousands of photos of rainbows in windows, it is newspapers who collect them and define them as community. Social media does not go into court rooms or council chambers - reporters do. Social media is merely a tool or technology, like print. It is vital we define journalism by the craft, not the medium.

But, journalism cannot become gatekeepers to public information, thereby rendering a value to facts according to who controls or defines them. That is the advantage of free tools such as social media. But social media, unlike the business constraints or demands of a newspaper, does not hold the same professional responsibility. A newspaper must be printed, a news broadcast must be broadcast. A social media account does not hold the same expectation of a clockworked update or collection of moments of a community.

Equally, yes, those who claim to wear the cloak of journalism and its implied protections and dignity must ACT with a dignity to earn the protections which must exist for those holding power account. The printing of the paper each week does not guarantee that in and of itself. Meanwhile, citizen journalism has come to become a bastardised term in the UK. While the United States has examples of news organisations training the public to attend meetings and hold power to account, in the UK it is dominated by opinion bloggers able to raise significant sums of money to enable vitriolic, hateful or fictional campaigns and claim they're telling the real "truth".

Equally, they imply that, because they don't get paid by employers, that they are somehow more truthful. I have been told directly and seen many reactions on social media that journalism is a "noble" profession, implying we should do it for free. Some of the loudest denouncers of professional reporters are from those collecting vast, though largely unaccountable, sums through donations.

Any citizen should be able to deploy journalistic skills such as asking questions, deciphering government reports or court cases, and explaining to others what they have learned. But to do more than that, to sit through multi-day or multi-week trials, to attend six-hour budget meetings, to write thousands of words a week about what is going on in the community requires full-time salaries and professional standards. I have previously argued that rather than envisaging one field of journalism, we should distinguish two (at least) speeds or two lanes. Professional journalism is paced, self-regulated, and citizen journalism can be viewed as either more meandering and casual, or more immediate and reactive. Both can have roles, but they are different.

It should be said when I meet someone for the first time and say I'm a reporter, the reaction is almost always, "Oh, cool." It continues to hold weight. And as such, people claim title of "journalist" for legitimacy while both denouncing all other practitioners and thereby undermining it from two different directions. Examples such as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, Ezra Levant, Craig Murray and others don the cloak of "journalist" and claim they are defenders of "free speech", while openly promoting hate speech, conspiracy theories and flouting laws designed to protect rape victims, public safety, court proceedings and more. Their interest is naked self-promotion for income, and as such requires them to denounce all other voices - journalistic or otherwise - as invalid. They design themselves to provoke fears and reactions that already exist in the community. Any facts contained within their writings or broadcasts are used only to enhance the reactions and ensure continued financial donations. There is, as such, little difference between these voices and most political parties in the globe, who openly thrive on denouncing journalism as "not real journalism" while publishing absolutely none of it themselves. If any of this is "citizen journalism", it is not journalism of a citizenry or a

body of citizens; it is a journalism of one. But there are proper examples of citizens practicing the craft of journalism, predominantly in the US and I shall cite one in a later question.

- **How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?**

Digital technologies have made consumption of journalism easier in some senses, but also lessened attention spans and vastly increased the volume of information and ease with which it can be dismissed or ignored. When information is necessary for public safety or the public good, we can get it out immediately. That is vital and is embraced by my profession.

The moral question is how do we ensure that information is free to communities, particularly when they are deprived, but also ensure our work is valued and paid for? I have been struggling with this question for the past decade in particular and I have no answer. The public is clearly, largely, unwilling to pay. And so, journalism producers in corporate settings, are equally unwilling to pay for producers of journalism.

- **How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?**

If there were a single lesson I wish every person, from politician to publican, could learn, it is that there is no such thing as "the media". It is an easy dig to make against "the media" or "the press", but there is no single entity. Each organisation is different, each region, each reporter. For every accusation of "the media isn't covering there", the story invariably already has been reported, they just didn't look, or read, to see what they wanted to see. However, more broadly we need media literacy rolled out to all age groups throughout school.

I have previously spoken in primary schools about my job and we have written pages of the newspaper together so they see what the job entails. But that requires teachers interested in engaging with the local paper, or in some cases an education department that doesn't restrict all contact with the press as is the case in West Dunbartonshire Council, for example.

I would offer two examples of journalism education in schools, one good, one bad.

Good - Edinbarnet Editors. Edinbarnet Primary a few years ago launched a journalism club with two pupils from each year group meeting once a month. They submit a collection of photos and about 300 words on what they have been up to in the past month and it is published by the Clydebank Post. It remains very popular with pupils and parents, I have had very positive feedback from the teacher and those in the community. If I could relocate it in every school, I would. It is one of the most important accomplishments I've witnessed in my time at the paper.

Bad - Knightswood Secondary and "fake news". This high school invited me in 2018 to address S1 pupils within the context of a module on "fake news". I cautioned them on this approach and, in one classroom, I found a board filled with fake headlines pupils had invented. One of the questions asked by pupils was whether I write whatever I want or only what people tell me. That told me that pupils were either poorly educated or miseducated by teachers to disbelieve what newspapers print. Yes, I want pupils to be critical, but I need them to recognise what basic ethics and codes we apply to.

Their invite to me stated: "I am a Modern Studies teacher at Knightswood Secondary

School. S1 are currently doing a topic on Media, News and Fake News. This topic includes, how to detect fake news, the rise of social media etc. I was wondering if you had a journalist who would be willing to come to speak to some of the pupils about life as a journalist, issues they experience and fake news stories."

Without any clarity of the exact curriculum to tailor my talk to, I was given a 20-minute window to address dozens of pupils. So I presented an exercise where all pupils closed their eyes and covered their ears. There were four volunteers. One, like their classmates could hear nothing and see nothing. A second could see and hear, but from the back of the room. A third could hear but not see. A fourth could directly see and hear a video of a clip from The Simpsons. I asked each volunteer to write down what happened in the clip. Not a single answer correctly identified what happened in the clip. But one of the volunteers at the back said: "I don't know what happened because I couldn't see or hear." And I said: "That is the right answer. If you don't know what happened, that's ok - tell me that." I felt this exercise was ideal for showing just how difficult it is to describe accurately what you see, but then also what my job is when collecting those memories into a report. The school seemed less than impressed and, after my visit, never acknowledged my visit or contact and never spoke to me again. It was not the lesson they wanted, clearly. They clearly wanted a journalist to say, "we make up headlines like those on your classroom wall".

- **How have digital technologies changed the production of journalism? Do journalists have access to the training necessary to adapt to the digital world?**

Digital technologies make production easier, but there is no continuing professional development (CPD) and the technology is not centred within the craft, professional or within an ethical frame or context. I have never been given training in new technologies, only introductions to platforms and content management systems used by respective companies. I am self-taught on most of the platforms and software allowing me to diversify my skill set. I have taken courses in mediation, which I believe should be part of the journalistic toolbox. I have also taken courses in podcasting and investigative journalism - but they are from American journalism institutions, not British. Any conferences are limited to England, not Scotland, and generally reporters would not be given time to attend, in my experience. Equally, I have had to keep my own legal skills up as there has never been an opportunity within any company I worked for to refresh those skills. It was frequently talked about, but never came to fruition. My last formal media law assessment was in 2003. The last in-house company training on data protection was an online assessment based on US law, with no mention of GDPR.

I would caution the narrative that the newspaper world is full of old hacks who haven't adapted. That is not what's happening here. It is that technology has been used to cut back on employing actual reporters. It has devalued our work through providing the means of income generation to Google and Facebook. We have handed all our power to companies over which we have no control. If Facebook goes down, we can't share our stories, and then we don't get clicks. And if the clicks don't meet the corporate targets, it is the reporters who are blamed, not Facebook. All the social media training in the world doesn't give you the means of controlling your income and influence if that power is held by someone else entirely.

- **What qualifications do professional journalists need? How could public policy better support non-degree routes into journalism?**

I am an advocate of the foundations I received during my post-graduate diploma in journalism studies at Cardiff University in 2002. This included (defined broadly)

shorthand, media law, reporting on government, media ethics and writing practice. The course was accredited by the National Council for the Training of Journalists. At the time I was an advocate of the concept, but I have since moved away from it as a strict dogma for this profession.

One recent problem was the 2017 problem created when 19-year-old student Kyle Gunn was told he couldn't pass his journalism diploma because he couldn't do shorthand - because he had cerebral palsy:

<https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/nctj-says-disability-no-barrier-to-job-in-journalism-as-case-of-student-with-cerebral-palsy-told-he-wont-pass-diploma-draws-widespread-criticism/>

Absolutely, shorthand is a vital skill to me but I would never say someone could not be a reporter because they physically could not do it. That error was thankfully corrected but it should not have taken to 2017 to realise there was such a structural barrier to entering this profession.

Apprenticeships should be allowed in journalism, and skills recognised without the need for NCTJ recognition. That requirement is used by companies to limit pay and restrict progression. I know of at least one former colleague who was threatened with termination because they could not pass a particular exam. They were a very capable and committed reporter, and their editor wanted to keep them, but the company said no. That reporter quit before they could be fired and has left the profession entirely. At a time when finding people willing to do this job for near minimum wage, after getting a post-graduate degree, we should be doing everything possible to encourage their skills, not using the NCTJ as a way to keep pay low or drive out reporters before they can earn more.

The NCTJ training is predominantly externally determined, with limited connection to the reality of reporting today. It is almost entirely couched in English politics and justice, not Scottish, leaving Scottish reporters to decipher what is required for logbooks and senior exams. Since an editor friend once told me many years ago she was informed, as an examiner, that she was passing too many people, it has been difficult for me to take the NCTJ seriously as a process. What I would respect more is apprenticeships to encourage the practice and craft of journalism, and also CPD. Other professions require proof of CPD on an annual basis. In nearly 18 years as a reporter, no employer has ever put me on CPD. I have paid for some myself, and sought out programmes from the US, as mentioned earlier. I firmly believe this should be an annual requirement of all reporters going forward.

- **What are the main challenges for freelance journalists? How could public policy better support them?**

Pay. I was a freelance reporter for eight years and the way I mostly paid bills was through doing shifts for newspapers because it was concrete income, until they would inevitably run out of money, sometimes after just two weeks.

Shift or casual reporting is a frequent option for colleagues who have left full-time employment, either voluntarily or forced redundancy. But when I was editor of The Glaswegian, I would have to stop using casual reporters after 12 weeks, then effectively fire them for three months, then hire them again, all to prevent them being on the books long enough to earn additional employment rights.

For selling individual stories to newspapers, the scale rewards commentary and national papers over locals. One past example was I could earn £200 for a 1,000-word feature in

specialty pages of the Scotsman. But the Scotsman could offer £400 to an expert for 300-400 words of analysis to sit with a news story.

A news exclusive to the Mail on Sunday could earn me £600, but £30-40 in a local evening paper. Both editors would expect the story to be exclusive, but there was no incentive to produce local reportage. I would do my own photos to allow me to charge extra, but then the budget disappeared for both. There is little prospect for any freelancer now without an existing relationship with a news desk, and even then, for minimal amounts. I am uncertain how to tackle this, particularly in light of the very changed landscape we all face when (or if) the pandemic threat passes.

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

As well as the limits imposed by the NCTJ, as discussed earlier, there is institutional bias and racism at play. An individual doesn't need to be knowingly racist to benefit from a racist system. Arguably the diversity within Scottish journalism, to which I can most easily speak, is more limited by the demographics compared to, for example, London. However, the number of non-white colleagues I have personally had in 18 years would amount to fewer than the fingers on one hand. There are others out there, thankfully, but I have not had the chance to work with them. And I have never been in a position to make employment decisions (beyond, for example my time assigning shifts at The Glaswegian, which was limited and relatively brief).

Putting more journalism education into every level of public schooling, so that primary and secondary schools develop what is called scholastic journalism in the US, could help create the wider interest. There is no point in changing training opportunities alone if an initial introduction to journalism isn't made as well.

- **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?**

Part of the blame lies with my profession. During the Leveson Inquiry, the debates each evening on Newsnight were between wronged celebrities such as Steve Coogan or Hugh Grant, and a former News of the World or Sun employee. Those are perhaps the worst extremes. They might have made for occasionally good arguments for social media clips, but they didn't explain the craft of actual journalism, the process of reporting, or the day-to-day practice of ethics in newsrooms. It also made no distinction between the tabloid press and the hundreds of local daily and weekly papers who had nothing to do with phone hacking or illegal and unethical activities. But "the press" was defined as ill, and that stuck. Similarly, people regularly cite "Woodward and Bernstein" as the great journalists we are not, likely without ever having seen read the book or seen the film, and despite it being more than 40 years old and from a foreign country.

Then came Donald Trump and his "fake news" jibe. That has become so mainstream around the globe, that we must accept the world is at ease with insulting, or at extremes even killing, journalists. Trump doesn't use the term to mean genuinely fake news reporters - he uses it to denounce anything he doesn't like. And that's how it is largely deployed in the UK.

Yes, individuals within journalism have done illegal and unethical things. And yes, we make mistakes, increasingly because there are so few of us expected by owners and the public to output the same or more content as years previously. But the public has also

come to treat subjectivity as the new objectivity. True objectivity doesn't exist because each word choice is subjective. But now an individual will consider their experience as objectivity truth of a situation, and all other perspectives are invalid. A traditional journalism approach renders reports which the individual therefore concludes must be "fake" simply because they don't recognise it. If I report a court proceeding accurately, the accused will claim "it's all lies" on our Facebook page, others will agree, and the truth of the crime narration to which Crown and accused agreed, will be invalidated.

- **How can innovation and collaboration help news providers of all types to maintain sustainable business models and adapt what they produce to audience demand? What lessons can be learnt from successful innovations, including in other countries?**

I have not experienced any collaboration in my professional career. I understand it is present in London and small pockets, but it is not widely encouraged within corporate news organisations. A particular example I would like to highlight is City Bureau in Chicago (<https://www.citybureau.org>). Their Documenters programme (documenters.org) is an excellent example of involving citizens in practicing public interest journalism. Their basic introduction states:

"Local government bodies hold thousands of public meetings every day—but the vast majority receive no media coverage and produce minimal records.

"And these important spaces for democracy go unwatched.

"We train and pay people like you to attend these meetings and publish the results in collaboration with local journalists."

That is a simple and excellent example of training the citizenry to practice journalism.

- **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?**

There have been proposals to expand the local democracy reporters (LDR) scheme to include courts, recognising there is a dwindling focus on seeing justice is done within local journalism resources. But LDR uses taxpayer money through the BBC to absolve corporate media firms for years of journalism cuts and an unwillingness to commit their own resources to news. To expand the idea to courts only further exacerbates the problem of local news. The LDR scheme also demonstrates the undervaluing of news within corporate structures.

A basic LDR salary is £22,000 a year, in many cases for those with 2-3 years experience. My initial chief reporter salary was also £22,000, for 15+ years of experience. LDR workload is two page leads a day. Other local reporters would be required to file two leads, two downpages and five fillers. So, for a typical council meeting, an LDR worker would need to file the two best stories, but another reporter would be required to report almost everything from the meeting, usually enough to fill two full pages of content. But the salary is the same.

Taxpayer money is also being used to fund press officers in local authorities and public agencies to control information or limit access to it through FOI or Data Protection legislation. Though journalists are frequently berated on social media for failing to hold "power to account", that ability is limited by taxpayers who don't realise they are funding the obfuscation of power, while also refusing to pay for the journalism aiming to cut

through that.

Government then, also, pays corporate newspapers through public notices and, just this month, full wraps around all papers emphasising the “stay at home” public safety message. Governments are, therefore, funding both the controlled release of information, and the industry that deciphers, interprets and unpicks that information. But the balance is overwhelmingly on the side of controlling and limiting information. Press office staff numbers and salaries far outstrip those of local newsrooms. To rebalance that, I would advocate a salary cap of £30,000 on press officers. To know that I can never reach a salary of even £25,000 as a local news reporter, but I could easily get £10,000 more, minimum, but crossing to PR, is a balance that seems wildly inappropriate to a responsible democracy. It might be predictable that power re-enforces power, but there should either be limits, or governments should be more transparent that they fund both sides of the information equation, but to unequal amounts.

If governments are comfortable with the lopsided funding of both barriers to journalism and journalism itself, then it should consider three changes.

Concluding recommendations

- 1. Expand Freedom of Information.** Rather than the Scottish Government’s recent and abhorrent legislated three-month delays to FOI replies under broad changes to meet the pandemic crisis, FOI should expand to cover any organisation, body or entity receiving taxpayer cash, including newspaper advertising. It should expand to cover the text or social media messages from public officials, as in other countries. And the default should be, as originally intended, for public disclosure of all information. The current default is to obscure, limit and deny.
- 2. Make it easier to have local news offices.** Too many communities have lost their connection to local news, particularly as corporate media firms centralise offices to save money. Rather than funding LDR schemes, it would be more beneficial to provide business rate reliefs or tax credits for news organisations with a physical presence in their communities of primary reporting. There can be a requirement to report on local court and council proceedings. This, for example, would benefit the Clydebank Post, but not Clydesider magazine, a social enterprise that does only positive local reporting but not court or council. Similarly, there should be no financial benefits or relief for companies who base multiple newspapers in a central location and none in local communities.
- 3. Expand access to journalism training.** This should have two aspects: bringing age-appropriate journalism training to all school levels; ensuring apprenticeship options for training not tied to the NCTJ. The first should be developed by reporters in discussions with educators. The second should be developed by reporters in discussions with external groups and bodies to ensure a widening of access and diversity of those working within journalism. It is not the place for either editors or corporate owners to include either of these aspects.

Conclusion

Journalism was already on its knees before the pandemic. Staff disappear through redundancy schemes by the dozen, shrinking expertise, capacity and quality. That newspapers make it out each week is down to commitment of the remaining reporters, despite ever increasing workload, public abuse on social media and pay cuts in real terms against the rate of inflation. The pandemic has cost us hundreds and thousands of

print sales, many of which will not return. Without structural changes to education and to the economic and anti-democratic limitations against journalism, proper reporting will not recover.

Thank you for your time in examining journalism and considering this submission.

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