

Dr Carol Arnold, local journalist, academic researcher and lecturer— written evidence (FOJ0051)

I have been a local journalist since 1979 when I started as a trainee with the Kent Messenger Group. In 2019 I achieved a doctorate in media and cultural studies where my topic area was independent hyperlocal media. This covers ultra-local provisions, often one or two-man operations, set up in communities where traditional media no longer operates. I have therefore been an active participant and observer of UK local media for forty years. During this time I have seen the gradual collapse of the sector. There is no question in my mind that UK local media is currently in dire straits, with limited plurality and an insufficient number of local journalists to provide a verifiable supply of news for national media outlets. Before I address the questions a few reflections on the local media sector.

The Media Reform Coalition provides statistical evidence of the make-up of local media and the lack of plurality and I am sure that you have received a submission from them, here is a link to their report up until 2017 <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/mapping-changes-in-local-news-2015-2017-interactive-research-report-march-2017.pdf>. The consolidation of local media may have been a good business decision, but it has not worked for the audience. In some areas where traditional media presence has disappeared from communities, following newspaper closures, independent hyperlocal operations have opened. Very often opened by the journalists who had been made redundant, at least allowing some continuity. But these hyperlocal operations are not widespread enough to pick up the slack and they do not have adequate funding. They have the *Independent Community News Network* (ICNN) fighting their corner and the support of some philanthropic organisations but government support is, misguidedly I believe, not open to them apart from in Wales.

These independent operations were the subject of my doctoral study, several would come under the heading of 'citizen journalist' because they did not have formal journalistic training. However I grouped them under the term 'community journalist' alongside other participants who did have formal training, because essentially they were working in the same way. All, were operating in the community, connecting with the audience both digitally and face-to-face. Because of their genuine 'investment' in the community operators had built the trust of their audience and were able to access and verify breaking news stories at source. Stories of national interest were then fed to national media. Their contribution to their communities was invaluable, both in terms of community building in the locality and also being able to source verifiable news.

Their presence was even more important because, many of my participants said that they rarely saw reporters from mainstream 'local' media in their communities. There is a myth that digital communications can replace having physical reporters in a local environment and 'fake news' is the outcome. The Grenfell Tower fire is another outcome, that tragedy was as much a failure of local journalism in the area. There was no local media organisation covering that community to hold the local authority to account over fire safety fears.

Digital technologies work best when used alongside traditional reporting techniques. All of the independent outlets I studied interacted with their audience both online and offline. One of my participants, who also ran a social media marketing business, said: "Nothing beats speaking to people." They used digital technologies as part of a mixed strategy to connect with the audience. Importantly, not as a replacement for reporters going out into the community. This should be the future direction of local news, supporting journalists at the community level. Currently this is not happening because the most powerful trade body the *News Media Association* (NMA) has, I believe, overstretched itself. It claims to cover national, regional and local media, however the three have competing interests. When *The Newspaper Society* was absorbed into the

NMA in 2014 the regional and local media sector essentially ceased to exist. Now the regional media is bundled together in most people's minds with the national media. Meanwhile the legacy local media has retreated online because it's more cost effective. This break in the link with the community/audience is why the national media often appears to operate in a vacuum.

In terms of digital media literacy, I believe that 'necessity is the mother of invention'. As a result of the current national lockdown the digital literacy of a large part of the country will have improved. The bigger problem is that the internet is so poor in many areas of the country that carrying out essential tasks is hard enough, let alone accessing local news online. Fast, reliable, universally available broadband is how policy can improve the situation.

As a lecturer in journalism, media and communications, I think that there is too much emphasis on digital skills and not enough on the soft skills that make a good journalist. By that I mean skills such as being able to communicate with the public. Last year the editorial director of a group of a regional media group complained that students from journalism degrees often could not use the telephone... by that he meant they could not conduct a telephone interview. I heard a similar complaint from a senior journalist friend, who was aghast at the lack of social skills in work placement students. Too much training of journalists takes place in universities and there is too much emphasis on digital toys, which is partly because of the demands of the accreditation bodies. Entrepreneurial skills are another area which is neglected by degree courses. Many of the community journalists I studied needed to learn entrepreneurial skills.

At the World Journalism Education Congress last year I heard how in Germany students had to spend a fair amount of their course working in industry to gain their journalism degree. The time in the institution equipped them with the necessary core skills including digital skills, while the time in industry added the soft skills that employers actually required. This is a much better balance than the UK. Not that I believe holding a degree should be the only route into journalism. Trainee journalists such as myself used to be able to enter the 'profession' with A levels. A degree should not be necessary, especially in an industry where the pay is so low. The government should back an apprentice scheme whereby trainees work in local/hyperlocal media operations and access National Council for the Training of Journalists training courses for the necessary core skills, as used to happen.

There is going to have to be more public funding of journalism at the local level. Apprenticeship schemes for trainee reporters are a good start. This would mean that a greater number of journalists actually physically meet the audience at some stage in their career. Trust in journalism has declined and much of this is to do with the remoteness of reporters. There should also be a level playing field which allows access for the small and medium scale operations which my study revealed have developed this trust. At present clearly the NMA has the ear of the government hence the public health campaign which is being run via the regional press. It is debatable how much of the message will reach the communities, because small and medium sized news operations have been excluded.

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