

The Independent Community News Network—written evidence (FOJ0053)

The Independent Community News Network¹ is the official trade body for independent community news publishers in the UK and currently represents over 100 individual publications.

ICNN's parent organisation, the Centre for Community Journalism (C4CJ), has been supporting the development of the independent community news sector for the past eight years. It developed out of a long history of high-quality professional training and research, a commitment to local journalism, and a wish to support it in all its forms as it goes through major changes.

C4CJ and ICNN are both centres of excellence for the independent news sector and it is this capacity that we submit evidence to the enquiry specifically in answer to question one.

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

The decline of traditional journalism is well documented and its effects on communities widely accepted:

- The rise of the internet, hitting traditional business models of print journalism hard;
- Readership and advertising revenues in steady decline;
- Fewer opportunities for journalists because of cost cutting;
- Trust in journalism declining because of recent high-profile scandals.

Jobs are being cut and newspapers are closing. Those that remain are starved of editorial resources resulting in a deficiency in democratic reporting.

Where newspapers used to have heaving teams of local journalists based in villages, towns and cities across the UK they are now down to just one or two reporters who work remotely from satellite offices. There are huge gaps in the coverage of councils, NHS trusts, schools, hospitals, police forces, elections and courts. This doesn't just impact those that work for or publish newspapers. The loss of a respected local news outlet affects everyone.

There has been a net loss of well over 245 newspapers since 2005². Print circulations have halved and ad revenue has fallen by 75 per cent. The Media Reform Coalition recently reported that of the remaining outlets, 80 per cent are accountable to only six organisations.³

Without a journalist uncovering the stories that need to be told it makes it difficult for individuals to make informed decisions that impact their lives and communities. This leads to disengagement and increased distrust in public institutions.

Andy Williams wrote in 'The Value of Hyperlocal Community News': "The public-interest value of news is often viewed through the prism of its relationship to democracy."⁴

¹ <https://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/>

² <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/more-than-40-local-news-titles-closed-in-2018-with-loss-of-some-editorial-275-jobs-new-figures-show/>

³ <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/media-ownership/who-owns-the-uk-media>

⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/21670811.2014.965932>

Newspapers have always been mechanisms that strengthen community cohesion. Research carried out by Dr. Rachel Howells shows that there was a correlation between newspaper closures and journalists leaving the community, and a fall to below the national average in voter turnout.

This suggests that there is a link between democratic engagement (voter apathy) and locally useful journalism, "and is tentative evidence – along with other measures – of a tangible democratic deficit."⁵

The independent community news sector has been growing rapidly over the last two decades, to plug the gap left behind as local newspapers retreat or close, and does so with fewer resources, less money and smaller returns.

Across the length and breadth of the UK, community news outlets have reached parity, if not overtaken their traditional rivals in terms of readership, page views and circulation.

In answer to question one it is essential to differentiate between citizen journalism and independent community journalism.

The former are just citizens with cameras (although they provide a necessary role in a free and open media). Consequence, opportunity, civic duty and the potential of financial reward all play a part in this ad hoc cottage industry. Training and professionalism, while essential for traditional and modern news gathering operations, are superfluous.

The latter, however, are individuals who are passionate about representing their communities, holding power to account, and maintaining high professional standards of accuracy, transparency, inclusivity and integrity. This professionalism has long been apparent in the sector, however ICNN has made the recognition of this professionalism a key mission objective, and one that can be evidenced by ICNN's membership and its criteria.⁶

Independent news organisations are often run by journalists who have moved on from their roles with traditional publications. Others are run by highly experienced individuals who are engaged in journalistic activities as a profession, transferring those skills for the benefit of their communities. Those organisations that are run by individuals with little journalistic training and experience have access to numerous low-cost training opportunities, helpful online communities, and organisations like the NUJ, C4CJ, ICNN, Bureau Local etc. which provide advice and support.

The chronic lack of revenue available in community journalism does not deter from the quality. In spite of it, and coupled with its diversity, innovation is thriving and the sector is growing.

In many cases, independent community news journalists are the only reporters at council meetings, election counts, hustings, magistrates court hearings – regularly covering local democratic institutions.

⁵ <https://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/research/journey-to-the-centre-of-a-news-black-hole/>

⁶ <https://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/criteria-for-membership/>

Some independent publications are the only news providers in their communities. The Caerphilly Observer for example is the only news service dedicated to solely covering the Caerphilly County Borough area that has a population over 175,000.

Not only are there publications in areas that would otherwise be news black holes (areas of the country wherein there is no news provision whatsoever) but, even in areas with a lot of other news publishers, some are the most engaged with the local community.

Independent community news organisations are also responsive to the needs and nuances of their communities. In many cases, these platforms were set up in protest, on single issues, out of frustration at the lack of understanding of their local newspaper, in part because its journalists no longer lived or worked in the community, but from centralised 'editing hubs' in the next county over, or in the most extreme cases, another country altogether.

In recent years there has been a marked change in attitude to independent community journalism and ICNN actively works to dispel the tired clichés of bedroom bloggers, citizen journalists and keyboard warriors that still get applied to this sector.

There is an error in judgement thinking that the threat brought about by the rise of digital technologies as an enabler of plurality should be suppressed.

The shift to online has resulted in an upheaval of the traditional models of journalism. Jobs have been lost, revenues are in decline as advertising dries up, and public service journalism has been hit hardest as publications retreat from their traditional stomping grounds.

But this digital migration has also inspired individuals and communities to step up to provide an alternative source of information through social enterprises, businesses and voluntary services; delivering enormous civic value.

We believe independent community journalism, a movement which is still growing, helps promote social cohesion; connects and engages individuals to address local issues and affect positive change. A better-informed citizenry and increased local accountability mean stronger communities and a healthier democracy.

These independent community news publishers are active in supporting or starting local campaigns. More than half engage in investigative reporting, which has helped uncover new information about local civic issues. Almost half of those publications are run by individuals with journalistic training or experience working in the mainstream media. The most common topic covered by independent community news publications is community activities e.g. local councils and the services they provide, festivals, events, and societies.⁷

Innovation and experimentation are vital if this sector is to thrive, and some publications have taken advantage of technological developments to produce highly functional content. The modern digital media ecology means that the majority of these publications are online. However, we are seeing a growth in the number of outlets taking their publication to print, to complement and broaden their digital offering, and to attract local advertisers.

⁷ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3045571

As local newspapers close and long-standing titles are merged with regional titles, community and hyperlocal news publishers step in to fill the void, succeeding with fewer resources and smaller revenues where corporate models have failed. The traditional local press still has a positive and essential role to play in helping inform, engage and scrutinise communities. We believe communities can benefit from both models of journalism and that each should be treated equally and held to the same standards.

At the other end of the spectrum, where there are no economies of scale and where profit margins are non-existent, individuals struggle day in day out to keep their publications viable. Chief among these struggles is economics.

The Cairncross Review stated that 'hyperlocals, are likely to be amongst those most at risk, and may also demonstrate the most commitment to locally specific, public-interest journalism, [and] should be supported'.

The full impact of the Coronavirus pandemic is so far unknown; however, evidence is emerging that the news media ecosystem will look vastly different than it does today.

The brunt will be taken by those with zero to little infrastructure, corporate support, contingency; social enterprises, small businesses, volunteer operations, individuals. The communities these news services cater to will be equally unprepared for life in a news black hole.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is our recommendation to this inquiry that Independent community journalists should be recognised for the vital role they play producing high quality public interest news, addressing the democratic deficit, and bringing communities together - before it is too late.

Institutional recognition and accreditation is crucial in preserving the valuable work that is done by these publications.

Recommendation 1.

Exploring access to statutory public notices is an essential first step in levelling the playing field.

Currently the system acts as a direct subsidy to traditional news organisations. However, with print circulations declining year on year it is no longer an effective means of advertising public notices or an effective use of public money.

The Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2019 reported that 66 per cent of adults (16+) used the Internet as a platform for accessing news, compared with just 38 per cent of adults (16+) using newspapers.⁸

A similar audit to that which was recommended by the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee of the National Assembly of Wales, on the public spending effectiveness of current statutory public notice legislation should be carried out by UK Government.

⁸ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/157914/uk-news-consumption-2019-report.pdf

This should include an investigation into the effectiveness of online publications as a vehicle for public notices.

Recommendation 2.

Access to public health advertising has proved to be a valuable partnership between the Government and the newspaper industry during the current COVID-19 crisis. However, to date, the Government's first tranche of financial aid as part of this package has benefitted only traditional news organisations. No independent news organisations have been included in the 'All-in, all together' campaign.

The newspaper industry, as used here, refers to titles represented by the News Media Association such as Reach plc, JPIMedia Ltd, and Newsquest, and does not include small and medium-sized independent news organisations.

As ICNN and other organisations are lobbying Government to include independent news organisations in the scheme, it is to this point that the Inquiry should attend. The scheme in its current form will simply not reach many communities.

Some national newspapers have not been included in this public health campaign and it has not been extended to independent community news organisations, native or specialist news services, but they would all add powerfully in the delivery of the messaging. These, and many more, serve communities and need to be included, with new funding. They require the most urgent intervention of all. As Enders Analysis reported recently 'many of them will fall in the coming weeks without support'.⁹

Recommendation 3.

In recent years industry collaboration has flourished. Organisations across the world have coalesced around the shared realisation that local news is a vital organ of society. The European Journalism Centre, Google, Facebook, the NUJ, the BBC's Local Democracy Reporter Scheme, the Bureau Local and ICNN and the Public Interest News Foundation have collaborated on initiatives that help promote local news as a public good. As an organisation, ICNN is privileged to have excellent working relationships with all of the above, and more.

This should be supported by Government to increase high quality journalism and to tackle the challenges of misinformation.

Recommendation 4.

As the Cairncross Review found, the market cannot deliver all that is needed to help sustain the local journalism ecosystem. Direct Government support, similar to what was provided by Welsh Government, is an option. The Independent Community Journalism Fund supported existing publishers with revenue expenditure business resilience grants. While the fund is yet to be evaluated, and its impact diluted by the Coronavirus outbreak, anecdotal evidence suggests the fund was hugely successful in aiding Welsh hyperlocals fortify their business model, and avoid almost certain collapse during the early days of the Lockdown.

⁹ <https://www.endersanalysis.com/reports/historic-news-media-collaboration-government-campaign-reinforces-value-trusted-news-media>

Another option would be to scope out a potential replication of OfCom's Community Radio Fund. Currently the Department for Culture, Media and Sport provides £400,000 per annum to help fund the core costs of running licensed community radio stations. Core functions include: management, fundraising to support the station (e.g. grants, commercial funding), administration, financial management & reporting, community outreach, volunteer organisation and support.

Many independent organisations are falling through the gaps in terms of private sector funding due to their business structure which does not reflect their professionalism, integrity, value or reach. This includes, but is not exclusive to, the COVID-19 support packages currently available by the Government and Google.

Recommendation 5.

Finally, ICNN supports the recommendations of the Public Benefit Journalism Research Centre (PBJRC) and urges the Inquiry to heed their arguments for a more flexible interpretation of charity law than is currently applied to journalism organisations wishing to benefit from registered charity status to raise funds.

The risk to our democracy and to a free press is too great if we do not act now.

April 2020