

## **Chris Summers—written evidence (FOJ0002)**

I have been a journalist since January 1990. I worked in local newspapers in Hampshire, Gloucestershire and the West Midlands before moving to digital (online) journalism at the BBC in 1997. I have also worked for several national online news websites since leaving the BBC in 2015. I am a specialist crime reporter and have covered court cases all over the UK.

In 2009 I wrote an article (see link below) about how UK news coverage has changed since the 1970s and how "celebrity news" has taken up more space and coverage of courts and other factual news (including foreign news reporting) has declined. This shift has only accelerated since 2009 largely as a result of the reduction in the number of journalists covering courts which is a direct result of the economic woes facing local and national news providers and the staff shortages they face. There are now numerous courts (including murder trials) which are not covered by a single reporter and news providers usually report these cases only on the basis of press releases from police forces, without any means of checking the information therein.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7773014.stm>

In 1994/5 I worked for the Gloucester Citizen newspaper at the time of the Cromwell Street (Fred and Rose West) murder case. We had a well-staffed newsroom and our excellent team of reporters provided many exclusive stories on the investigation. Since then the Gloucester Citizen has been forced to close its Gloucester office (a decision made by accountants and executives) and is now based out of a shared office in Cheltenham. The number of reporters covering Gloucester is a small fraction of what it was in the mid-1990s and, no offence, but the quality of the journalism has nosedived as have sales of the Citizen, which is known online as This is Gloucestershire (see link). When I worked there the paper employed Hugh Worsnip as Local Government Correspondent. He attended every council meetings and committee meeting and scrutinised documents. He regularly ran front page exclusives in which he exposed dreadful decisions and even suspected corruption in Gloucester City Council. After he retired he was not replaced and nobody now attends these meetings. There is therefore no such scrutiny of local politics.

<https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/>

People still want news but the problem of course is that they would rather get it free rather than pay for a newspaper. There are numerous free news sources on the internet and these have all led to the demise of sales of local and national newspapers, which (accompanied by the shift of job, car and house advertising to the internet) has meant a massive decline in revenue for media organisations who have therefore laid off staff, which means fewer and fewer events (like court cases) are covered by journalists.

### **What can be done?**

The only answer, in my humble opinion, is for national and local media outlets to be given extra funding from the government, funded perhaps by the new digital tax on companies like Amazon and Facebook. This money could be distributed through an organisation similar to the National Lottery Fund. Media outlets would apply annually for funding for investigative journalism, or to specifically fund new jobs (like a court reporter, a local government reporter or a climate change reporter) and if they are awarded money from the fund it has to be ringfenced to pay that journalist's salary.

But it should not be just a pot of money for existing media outlets or the big corporations. It should be open to independent and citizen journalists who can prove they are covering a niche which is not currently being covered by any other news outlet. An example would be the 853 website which is providing public interest journalism for the Greenwich and SE London area following the demise of local newspapers which used to cover that patch properly:

<https://853.london/>

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