**Libby Drew, Founding Director, On Our Radar—supplementary written evidence (FOJ0095)**

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

**Community representation**

When communities see themselves misrepresented they are less likely to trust journalism as a tool for change. Media houses are often seen to be occupying an ivory tower, looking in from outside at the realities of civic life, cherry picking concerns and stories, and in doing so overlooking huge swaths of people's experiences. When people look for representation within the media and find it is absent, they turn towards other spaces where they feel heard and better reflected. This in turn weakens the media and makes it less relevant to us all. This is an urgent concern at a time when public trust in national and global media is at an all-time low and local media houses are facing huge challenges. The rapid shift from news 'consumers' to 'creators' triggered by digital and mobile adoption offered a golden opportunity to collaborate with communities, improve public conviction and increase the relevance and richness of the press; and, on the whole, we've failed to make the most of that.

When we explore this issue with communities it is clear that there is a cycle of distrust that is hard to break. A lack of diversity within professional journalism is one thing but even more damaging is young people growing up and seeing people they identify with routinely demonised in the press. It's humiliating and frustrating and fosters hostility towards those platforms. They may actively push back from engaging with the media - as both consumers and creators - and without their input the media becomes increasingly irrelevant to them and a weaker public service as a result. Public audiences lose out of the valuable insight held by those communities and that impacts on the way we design and manage our political and social spaces.

Turning it around is not always as easy as extending an invitation to engage. It is possible that, even with the best intentions, a potential offer of collaboration from a media house may be viewed with suspicion by someone who has seen their community misrepresented in the past. Attempts to address this balance too often border on tokenism. It takes a sustained effort to rebuild burnt bridges and the necessary time and permission to achieve that isn't often woven into editorial strategies or budgets. Reticence may also come from a lack of self-confidence from individuals that they are the right messengers or that their voice, their way of articulating their experiences, is welcomed and valued. It takes time and cross-discipline approaches to invest in collective confidence across a group or population and journalists often lack access to both.

**Taking a more collaborative approach.**

Communities are wonderfully noisy spaces, full of stories and commentary. People's ability to tell their own stories with context and colour can be harnessed if they are paired with professional journalists who can be responsible for the legal, ethical and technical aspects of the story, as well as help direct the depth and scope of the story. There is a need to think more flexibly about these kinds of 'bridging' roles in journalism; rewriting job titles and responsibilities so that the right permissions and visibility are there to encourage public engagement. Our work within On Our Radar has never been about displacing journalism. As

journalists ourselves, we are excited about professional alliances - where the rich access and assets that communities have are paired up appropriately with professional media skills and privilege. This can lead to a better spectrum of collaboration - from communities initiating coverage to co-directorship to communities leading on their own storytelling. Alongside that, journalists can adopt a richer mix of editorial and curatorial roles to help ensure those stories are given the best possible platform to be heard. These broader roles will suit the new generations coming into the profession, who will be digitally native and better understand the benefit of lateral, portfolio roles.

Despite more invitations for community engagement from the media in recent years, neat UGC opportunities are not always going to be enough. Reaching marginalised groups need to be deliberate - it can take time and resources - but is an investment in trust-building in order to shift power and perception. It may require pre-emptive investment, particularly with regards to overlooked and under-represented populations and geographies, but it pays off. The communities we work with lead on their own investigation, research and narration, bringing newsrooms with them into the spaces where traditional journalism can't reach. They remain actively engaged beyond single stories and can become an asset to the media community, acting as early-warning in areas that might be at-risk of harm, or alerting the press to hidden success and community celebrations that we so desperately need to hear. It helps to move on from a call for vulnerable groups to have the 'right to speak'; this is not all about warm-hearted liberal drive for inclusion, but about the fact that we are all missing out on vital public knowledge when we fail to meaningfully include insight from our social margins.

**Sierra Leone**

In Sierra Leone in 2012, we trained a group of 40 young people to cover their national elections. They were all first time voters, predominantly offline, and the majority were disabled. We deployed a virtual phone number for them to use to share SMS micro-reporters from across the country during the election period, curating and sharing their incoming reports on Twitter. Their collective coverage was colourful and compelling and helped to flag a major oversight in the provision of tactile voting cards for visually impaired voters: an issue which was then picked up by the EU observation team. When the elections ended, we continued to support their hyperlocal reporting until, in May 2014, we got a concerning report about a new disease that was affecting one of the border communities. The Ebola outbreak had reached Sierra Leone. Soon after that the country went into lockdown. That first message sparked a two-year collaboration with the community reporters we had trained. Using a mix of SMS and WhatsApp they covered the human stories behind the quarantine lines, including their own losses and hardships. Their coverage helped to feed global media reports and flag issues such as food scarcity, increase in teen pregnancies and the harrowing leap in stigma around disabled people. After the outbreak receded and the lockdown was lifted, our film team worked with them to select a series of their stories and co-produce an interactive documentary on the loss of human contact called Back in Touch. It won a run of industry awards and was broadcast on world news channels. This was a great affirmation of the fact that an increase in collaboration doesn't necessarily mean a loss of quality.

**Dementia Diaries**

Those living with dementia can face significant communication barriers resulting in their exclusion from mainstream dialogue whilst others speak on their behalf. On Our Radar was

asked by a UK dementia network to support people living with dementia to capture and share their firsthand experiences with mainstream media – with the goal of boosting public understanding.

As the use of technology can be very difficult for people living with dementia, we worked with those with dementia to design a solution using 3D printed mobile handsets which were customised to be as simple as possible. They had a single button on the front that said 'report' and this connected each person to a dedicated voicemail inbox without any charge. By calling in to their inbox, participants avoided having to speak directly to anyone, which they flagged as daunting in the co-design phase. Instead, they could record an audio diary entry that captured their thoughts and experiences as they occurred, without interruption. The audio diaries came into our system as digital audio files and our editorial team were able to listen to them, check for safeguarding concerns, and edit and curate the diaries into participants' own diary pages and thematic media packages. This was all backed by an intensive mentoring and support process, which allowed the editorial team to ensure the participants were comfortable and informed, develop media stories from diary entries, and hold a professional space for human connection.

Diary entries were reviewed and then posted on a dedicated website, which became a vital space for those with new and recent diagnoses to hear firsthand others with experience. It also offered a space for editors to listen and connect with those with dementia and this led to collaborations with Buzzfeed, Sky News, BBC and by European media outlets. The #DementiaDiaries hashtag trended nationally on Twitter in the UK when the project was launched. An independent evaluation of the media coverage and social media responses showed that content shared directly by and presented in the words of people living with dementia generated a greater sense of positive connectedness and empathy.

The Dementia Diarists have now had over 2000 audio diaries published and, as well as reaching the general public, the Diaries have contributed to the way local authorities, the NHS and other services manage and care for people with dementia, with some of the audio diaries used by the NHS to train nurses and new hospital staff. In the project evaluation the diarists said they felt that they had been able to contest predetermined ideas of dementia in society.

Beyond the audio diaries, we co-produced a film for the Guardian with three of the Diarists and are now working with a broader group to produce a flagship documentary for the BBC. The thing we are most proud of is the sustainability and legacy of the project - we handed it over in 2017 and Dementia Diaries is continuing to grow and thrive, now led and managed by the dementia community.


**Our business model**

On Our Radar was started as a journalistic experiment and the organisation grew organically around the success of that experiment. It was always intended as a not-for-profit organisation and yet there was a desire to avoid being grant-dependent. While our early focus was on the media, there was little media investment in reaching and collaborating with marginalised communities. At the same time, we were realising that there was need and demand for collaborative tools and frameworks for community insight across charities, social organisations, government departments and and services. We saw the value in supporting those with influence to listen and learn from the communities they represent and for those community voices to be embedded into different forms of public and institutional

communications. This helped us to diversify our revenue streams and extended our social mission.

We applied to the charity commission twice in our first few years and were turned down. While we were not able to get clear feedback from them as to their rationale, the suggestion was that investing in community reporting fell outside of the scope of what was deemed charitable, and that the stories shared by those communities may not be directly related to charitable issues. It felt like a set-back at the time, however it strengthened our resolve to diversify our business model and build conviction in our work through our values and track-record instead. It also allowed us to create some distance from the charity sector, which has suffered from its own mismanagement and identity crisis in past years, and lost a lot of public trust. An awareness of power sits at the heart of our work and the traditional idea of charity was always at odds with our collaborative model. We are excited about shifting the power within society towards a fairer and more productive balance and we feel we can continue to do that outside of the charity sector. We have remained a small female-led organisation largely due to our interest in remaining nimble and breaking new ground, while pushing scale out through influential partnerships. We have enshrined our social purpose and non-profit status in our Articles of Association which has helped to reassure partners and communities. We keep our overheads low while continuing to deliver relevant work by drawing on cross-discipline associates who form distinct time bound teams around projects and challenges where they can add genuine value.


**The need for a movement, to invest in innovation and promote 'citizen journalism'.**

The significant challenges being faced by media houses at the moment are painful but productive. Defining a new era for media requires accepting the end of old structures and binaries, and the adjustment of strategies and policies, roles and tools, relationships and languages. It is interesting that it has been hard to even define the right terminology around the shift to include more community voices - is it engaged journalism, collaborative or participatory media, community reporting, citizen reporting? We could benefit from some clarity and leadership in general around the shifting sands of the current media landscape, but in particular around the emerging importance of civic engagement and drawing in a broader range of voices and experiences.

To get this leadership right, it cannot copy past mistakes. It must be a co-production in its own right - perhaps better defined as a movement than a strategy, with devolved powers and space for adaptation within different community contexts - the north of england is likely to call for a different set of initiatives than south Wales for example; and within every locality there will be people and populations who have experienced the media in different ways.

The BBC as our national media outlet can and should play a role here but the call to shift power is a global one and there can be great international cooperation in sharing ideas and initiatives. Journalists, across media fault lines, urgently need to work together to persuade the public that they represent a valuable and relevant public service; a service worth saving and worth investing in when other priorities and needs loom large. Rebuilding that trust will require media houses to bring communities closer to both their storytelling and their strategies. But there is a blueprint emerging that is exciting and productive: by coupling together influential platforms with brave independent funding, combining genuine community access with professional skills, and promoting access through a diversity of

formal and informal channels and social spaces we can draw out media from its ivory tower and open up a richer more relevant public dialogue.

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