

## **Dr Rob Watson, Decentered Media—written evidence (FOJ0007)**

### **House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital - Future of Journalism Review**

The challenge of promoting sustainable and accountable journalism is too often viewed at the wrong end of the scope. With the level of engagement usually being viewed from a top-down perspective, as opposed to a bottom-up, community-participation perspective. There is, therefore, a need for a perspective shift that gives greater attention to the advancement of a developmental and capability-building model of the news economy, founded on recognised and tested community media principles: platform access, governance and editorial inclusion and participative content creation. This view starts at the grassroots of neighbourhood life, and is founded on a community development philosophy and set of practices that build and strengthen civic plurality and social capacity.

We should not listen to the siren voices that say that news reporting is set to vanish. News reporting will not disappear, as there is always a need for trusted and authentic stories that report about the lives of the people who live in a community, and which thus serves the needs of that community. However, as market and technological conditions change, little has been done to invest in the capacity of communities to meet these changes on their own terms and using resources that they own and control. Capabilities that would help them to develop independent and locally controlled news production and distribution organisations for themselves. There is too much reliance on centralised government and industry schemes and programmes, which are run by large national and international organisations. There is not enough being done to support and promote an independent civic media infrastructure that can facilitate a widespread and decentralised model of news. This alternative model of news needs to be based on the following principles: strong critical and independent media literacies; strong civic engagement and reciprocal accountability; and community and inter-community understanding.

News, media and information are too often in our present economic model, defined by their transactional and economic characteristics. They are seldom defined by their social value characteristics, and their contribution to the social good. If news, reporting and journalism could be redefined to incorporate an additional dimension of social value, in the way that SROI principles encourage ethical and sustainable business, then it would be possible to give a clearer indication of the social development needs and characteristics of different communities in different places. If the contribution of non-professional actors, volunteers and learners, as producers of social value-informed communications, is recognised, then the economic dynamic on which they are based will also change.

What does it take to each feel that we belong to our communities? What does it take for us to assess and recognise the collective wellbeing of our community? What do we each, in turn, experience that different about our lives between our communities? These are fertile grounds to cultivate a participative news culture and a sense of social cohesion and engagement. This would also alleviate many

the perceived problems at higher levels of the news supply chain, and would alleviate the economic narrowing that is bringing so much damage to the news industry itself.

There has been very little thinking, or capacity building, dedicated to work at the bottom rungs of the ladder. The neighbourhood level is where people should be able to gain access, experience and learn what it means to use and share media that is representative and accountable to their communities. When community media groups are independently run, and inclusively governed, they can be powerful drivers of change, cohesion and identification. These principles are well understood and supported in the social sector, with charities, not-for-profit social enterprises, community groups and public bodies, all using principles of localised self-governance to manage many thousands of community-focused groups and organisations. They act in accountable and transparent ways, for a clear public purpose. We should look to organisations like Locality, NCVO, Good Things Foundation, and many others, to learn how independent networks of mutual support are established. The principles can be applied to a new tier of media and news reporting.

Schemes like the Local Democracy Reporters Scheme, and the Audio Content Fund, however, offer very little support for training and capacity building at the lowest levels of engagement. Nesta is focussed on national strategies for new technologies, which unfortunately comes at the expense of established and legacy technologies. Analogue radio, for example, continues retain high levels of accessibility and engagement for many people despite the rise of digital platforms. The fact that there are now over two hundred and eighty licenced community radio stations in the UK, is testimony to the resilience of an established and tested medium. The problem is that it isn't fashionable or supported by instrumental expectations of policy change to maximise digital engagement.

In addition, there is a fundamental problem with use of the word 'journalism.' It implies a highly proscriptive and narrow form of professional reporting. The word 'journalism' implies the need for a specialist infrastructure which is dependent on a specialised rank of dedicated experts who understand the intricacies of regulation, media law and digital production practices. Increasingly, this means people who have attended university, or who come from family backgrounds that can sustain a high degree of precarious work, for extended periods, before finding regular employment with a large news outlet. The connotation of the role of the journalist is in danger of becoming exclusive, with a narrowing-down of the expectations of people who want to contribute to the development and production of news. Particularly news that is relevant to their local lives, and which is founded in their community experience. What does it take to be a local reporter? This is a different question to what does it take to be a professional, paid journalist?

'Citizen journalism' is therefore a problematic term that lacks reference and integration with the process of community development and engagement that prioritises access, participation and open governance. The process of community media development operates by a different set of principles than citizens journalism, which is often defined as the work of individuals or small independent proto-social enterprises. What they often lack, however is a civic accountability and governance structure that is focussed on training needs and capacity building. In a community context there needs to be ongoing and extended support for

people who would never dream that they might play a role in the local community news cycle. Journalism, in its present cultural context, is highly contested and problematic. Many people are suspicious of the motives of news organisations – fairly or unfairly. It is essential, therefore, to recognise, support and develop an alternative civic pathway. One that is grounded in social sector principles, such as social value, contributory volunteering, mutuality, civic engagement, community development and localism.

- 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?
  - Introduce a recognised alternative category of Social Value Communications that is aligned with SROI and social value indicators.
  - Promote and validate the role of the 'community reporter.'
- 2) How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?
  - Don't make assumptions that legacy forms of media have no value, they remain integral and should continue to be invested in.
  - Do promote training and life-long learning for media and new literacies as a civic-participation right and duty.
- 3) How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?
  - Respect the right not to engage digitally.
  - Continue to invest in legacy alternatives to ensure access to legacy media.
  - Provide alternative and trusted sources of news that is publicly supported on explicit Social Value principles.
- 4) How have digital technologies changed the production of journalism? Do journalists have access to the training necessary to adapt to the digital world?
  - Training has become monocultural, with narrow expectations of professional practice.
  - Support and invest in widening the process of training so that it takes account of alternative life practices, community needs, and models of engagement.
  - Invest in an independent civic and community tier of platforms and outlets that can be used to nurture and foster innovation, collaboration and distributed networks of engagement.
- 5) What qualifications do professional journalists need? How could public policy better support non-degree routes into journalism?
  - Provide support for community media and civic news focussed organisations.
  - Link civic news organisations with designated colleges and training groups
  - Foster a community media literacies model of open and collaborative

learning that is validated collaboratively and across platforms and networks.

- 6) What are the main challenges for freelance journalists? How could public policy better support them?
  - Promote a wider and more diverse range of viable social enterprises that produce and distribute social value communications and community news would ensure more paid opportunities.
  - Invest in Blockchain-based platforms that ensure economic value is recognised and retained by the individual originator and contributor of a communicated story or media form.
- 7) Why is the journalism profession not more representative of the population? How could this be addressed?
  - Establish a viable and sustainable network of self-governed and independent community media organisations and hubs that are able to offer practical support and engagement through inclusion, diversity and challenge.
  - Invest in, and ensure recognition for, non-traditional models of learning and practice, that assesses equivalence, competence and contribution, as opposed to social status and network capability.
- 8) 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?
  - Ensure that an active and engaged network of community media organisations are meeting Social Value objectives, and working with their communities effectively.
  - Public subsidy should be directed towards participatory and community development activities and approaches.
  - If people want better media, they have to be able to make it themselves.
- 9) 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?
  - Innovation will come through widespread training, capacity building and investment, not only at the top of the industry, but at the bottom of the industry.
  - Expectations of return on investment, however, have to be challenges. Encouraging funding bodies to accept asymmetric outcomes will be a challenge.
  - Expectations of timescales need to be challenged. These changes will only be implemented over decades, and not months.
- 10) 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?

- If the public is able to experience and relate to the challenges of being a community reporter, then they are more likely to understand the challenges of journalism, and will understand that it needs to be paid for.
- The funding model, however, has to be transparent and equitable.
- Distrust has been sown because the process of news production is opaque and hidden, which encourages suspicion and cynicism.

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