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**‘The imminent death of**

**the British local press’**

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**Introduction**

**This paper takes a clinical look at the current state of one of Britain’s most treasured**

**artefacts – the local printed newspaper – and points the way towards the likely**

**future.**

The evidence is overwhelming: rapidly declining sales and radical cost-cutting exercises indicate

the daily local printed newspaper will soon be dead. The traditional audience is also literally dying

– and to most of our young people, the idea of getting news twelve hours after it has happened

in a form which dirties your hands and involves felling half a forest, looks as quaint as relying on

a carrier pigeon for the latest football scores. Not only that, but there has been a failure to both

prepare and then adapt to the new media landscape. Responding far too late to the online revolution,

the conglomerates, who hesitated to invest and now offer user-unfriendly, PR-dominated and

print-heavy online sites, face increasing challenges from a new breed of independent local journalism.

This does not mean that more considered printed assessments – perhaps a weekly digest

and analysis of the last seven day’s events – will not continue and perhaps even prosper. But those

who insist upon the continued health of the Evening Herald et al (and there are many within the

industry who do so) are ignoring the evidence. Given this, the insistence of the main training and

accreditation body on training future journalists according to the wishes of the representatives of

a dying industry might seem perverse, and this article will briefly assess the implication of this for

journalism educators.

**The evidence**

The printed local press is dying and the evidence is clear and compelling. In the second half of

2014, ABC figures show that all paid-for regional daily newspapers in the UK saw a continuing

decline in circulation. To stress, every single paid-for local daily audited by ABC lost readers and

the average decline was just over 10 percent in one year (Ponsford, 2104b).

Press Gazette reported that the Birmingham Mail (down 20.5 per cent to 30,597) and the Sunderland

Echo (down 16.8 per cent to 18,876) ‘were the worst performing titles year on year’. Even

the Belfast Telegraph, the best performing title, in terms of declining circulation change, lost 3.4

percent of its customers. The three biggest selling local newspapers did not escape the downward

trend: ‘the Express and Star (down 13.1 per cent to 72,072), the Manchester Evening News (down

4.1 per cent to 66,521) and the Liverpool Echo (down 11.7 per cent to 61,902)’ illustrate the depth

of the malaise (Ponsford, 2014a).

Just twenty years ago, the Express & Star sold 217,000 copies, the MEN was only just behind

with sales of 214,000 and the Echo sold 173,000 copies every day. So in two decades, three of our

most distinguished local titles have lost nearly two-thirds of their customers

It is not all bad news. One sector, the free local and regional newspaper, appears to be bucking

the trend. The biggest circulation regional newspaper, the free London Evening Standard,

increased its circulation by 21.9 per cent to 824,515. Notwithstanding this, within the paid-for

sector, there is not only a clear decline in readership; the decline is highest among younger read-

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ers, those who are potentially the future champions of local journalism. The younger you are, the

less likely you are to read a local newspaper (Newspaper Society, 2013). Those most committed

to buying a newspaper are, literally, a dying breed.

The decline in sales is not because of the technological revolution of the internet, although the net

has certainly accelerated the sickness. The fall in sales precedes the World Wide Web (Gentskow

2014). The reasons are complex. Briefly, they include changing work patterns, the rise in car travel

and the increasing reliance on relatively up-to-date television news. The arrival of commercial

television and later, commercial radio, also put great pressure on advertising revenues. The industry

has not been helped by the failure of local newspaper groups to invest when times were good.

Local papers were cash cows, with profit margins ranging from a minimum of 20 percent up to

almost 40 percent well into the 21st century: for example, as noted in a report by the National

Union of Journalists (NUJ):

‘Between the start of 2003 and the end of 2007, Media Wales’s profit margins

averaged 34 per cent, peaking at 38 per cent for the 12 months to the end of 2005.

These profits made Media Wales one of the most profitable companies in Wales of any

kind, let alone in the media industry. The profits were not invested in the businesses;

they were being creamed off by shareholders and used to pay newspaper executives

enormous sums’ (NUJ, 2103).

Even David Montgomery, the controversial CEO of Local World, agrees: ‘when times were

good, the newspaper chiefs squeezed profits, made unwise acquisitions, built up debts and failed

to invest in journalism’ (Hollander 2013).

**The industry response**

Despite the falls in circulation and revenue, the big newspaper groups remain bullish. The public

optimism of many local news organisations and their champions in the face of the evidence

is touching (see Mair et al, 2012). At a major conference on “local and regional journalism after

Leveson” organised by Chester University, Anthony Longden of the Society of Editors urged critics

to ‘stop being cynical’, arguing there were many positives to be upbeat about. If owners got

‘back to basics’ the ‘trusted, quick reference source’ that is the local paper would have a healthy

future (Longden, 2014). Tor Clark, a former journalist and now a journalism lecturer at De Montfort

University, maintains that the regionals remained ‘trusted and authoritative brands’ whose

digital audiences was growing (Clark, 2014). The independent newspaper owner Sir Ray Tindle

remains convinced of the traditional local paper’s continuing viability and maintain that those who

forecast its early demise are mistaken. Tindle argues that ‘most people still want it in its present

printed form’ (In Publishing, 2014). It is unarguable that many people may still have an emotional

attachment to their local newspaper but the circulation figures don’t lie.

The belief of owners (especially) that quality is being maintained in the face of declining circulation

has been challenged by a number of observers. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ),

admittedly with an axe to grind, brought out a detailed report on the future of local papers in December

2013 and argued:

‘Cuts in the numbers of journalists, the closing and mergers of titles, the move from daily to

weekly titles and the production of local newspapers many miles from the communities they serve

have all had a serious effect on the quality of local papers’.

For example, Newsquest has made a number of redundancies by moving the production of the

Oxford Mail and other titles to Newport in Wales, following similar moves by their papers in

York, Darlington and Blackburn (Snoddy, 2015, p.14). The growth of subbing hubs, with its loss

of experienced local journalists, arguably increases inaccuracies and can hardly be said to serve

the local public sphere. Indeed, while Anthony Longden (2014) was recently bullish about the

future of the local press, just one year earlier he had remarked how ‘one of the most bizarre things

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to have happened in this long period of decline is how such a pivotal newsroom role as that of the

sub editor could have collapsed so completely’ (2013). The NUJ agrees, arguing that the reality

increasingly means:

‘reporters sitting at their desks pouring press releases into pre-determined page grids. Sub-editors,

the people who check copy for accuracy, are seen as surplus to requirements’ (NUJ, 2013).

Sir Ray Tindle’s optimism about the future may reflect a short-term response to his company’s

similar acts of surgery. For example, “printing costs are pared by sticking firmly to weeklies,

which allows time for contracting out … the Tenby Observer, for example, is printed in Bristol’

(Wainwright, 2008).

Sir Ray is convinced that profits are ‘beginning the long climb back’. In contrast, Keith Perch

of IPSO argues the economics of the local press is ‘shot to pieces’. As he points out, there are not

enough staff to report properly in the public interest and some local newspapers are effectively

‘withdrawing from the public sphere’. Revenues are declining in real terms and the number of

reporters is rapidly decreasing. For example, the much admired Leicester Mercury has gone from

123 editorial staff in 2003 to 46 in 2014: in addition, instead of seven editions there is only one,

a pattern reflected elsewhere (Perch, 2014). The Stoke-on-Trent Sentinel is now a single edition

morning newspaper, printed overnight and with no updates during the day, and the number of

editorial staff has drastically declined in the last five years. These trends are repeated across the

country.

The NUJ’s belief that the crisis in the local public sphere is so grave that government intervention

should be sought to ‘shore up the local news sector by subsidies, tax relief or the support of

new ownership models such as co-operatives … and look to new models which provide funding

for newspapers in return for providing a public service’ (NUJ 2013) is highly unlikely to find favour,

especially with the current Conservative government.

**The impact on quality local journalism**

The decline in sales has been accompanied by accusations of a decline in ‘quality’ journalism

and of a failure to adequately serve the local public sphere. Readers providing local sports results

and photographs of fund-raising events do not hold local decision makers to account. The belief

that small numbers of journalists, supported by ‘reader-generated copy’ can continue to produce

high quality public service journalism receives short shrift from the NUJ.

Local journalists recognise the criticisms of ‘pouring press releases into pre-determined page

grids’ (NUJ, 2103) as an increasingly accurate description of much of their work. It may be cheap

journalism, but it does a disservice to the increasingly suspect notion (or myth) of the press as a

‘fourth estate’. In private, every local journalist will admit that lack of resources means council

meetings and court cases are not being covered, contributing to a declining local accountability.

This alleged local ‘democratic deficit’ arouses much concern among distinguished local journalists:

‘I wince when I hear people waxing lyrical on the vital role played by local papers in holding

authority and powerful individuals to account. Perhaps they *used* to, I like to think they did. But

they have shrunk to such an extent many can no longer hope to perform that essential journalistic

function to any valid extent. Until the early 1990s, there were enough reporters to attend courts

and council meetings. This could be worthy, often dull, but it was proper public scrutiny just the

same. With very few noble exceptions, this scrutiny of public bodies at a local level is not happening

now.’ (Longden 2013).

Arguably, local papers of the past, when editors were almost exclusively local men who shared

the same social circles, failed to hold local councillors and businessmen to account and they are

now far less deferential to local dignitaries (Temple, 2008: pp.182-3). Despite recent concerns

about the coverage of elections, the local dailies still cover local politics in some detail and their

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coverage is arguably ‘less sycophantic, less boring and … superior to the endless committee meetings

reported in the local press of old’ (ibid.: p. 112).

Keith Perch of IPSO noted the wholesale printing of police reports of court cases, with no interrogation

of those reports. In effect, the police view of cases and their outcomes was being published

(2014). Other criticisms are potentially even more serious. The Tindle press has also been

accused of perhaps a more disturbing failure in the local public sphere: the Guardian reported that

Tindles’s ‘strength of feeling about the services led him to ask his editors not to report anti-war

events once the 2003 invasion of Iraq was under way’ (Wainwright, 2008).

Many owners appear unconcerned about criticism. Local World publishes 83 weekly and daily

local newspapers; in evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport select committee, its CEO, David

Montgomery, foresees the future role of journalists as ‘harvesters of content’. As reported by Press

Gazette, Montgomery told the committee:

‘We are going to have to reinvent the model … we can’t keep taking costs out but employ the

same production techniques in print. We have to be truly digital, so that in three or four years from

now, much of our human interface will have disappeared. We will have to harvest content and

publish it without human interface, which will change the role of journalists (Hollander, 2013).

Chilling words to describe the consequence of sacking people: ‘much of our human interface will

have disappeared’. Earlier, Montgomery was reported as saying that he wanted to see a ‘20-fold

increase in content’ and a phasing out of sub-editors: sub-editing was ‘a twilight world, checking

things you don’t really need to check’. In such circumstances, the demands that will be made on

the few remaining journalists are many:

’The journalist will embody all the traditional skills of reporter, sub-editor, editor-inchief,

as well as online agility and basic design ability, acquired partly in training but

in the case of on-screen capability this is expected as a basic entry qualification as it

is now generally present in most 12-year-olds’ (Hollander, 2013).

All these skills demanded from current and future journalists, and for so little money. In 2013,

a survey by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) found that the average

salary for a newspaper journalist is £22,250 and starting salaries could be as low as £12,000 (http://www.

prospects.ac.uk/newspaper\_journalist\_salary.htm).

**Never mind, the future’s online ?**

In 2009, the online guru Clay Shirky noted that the problem was not that the newspaper industry

did not see the internet coming – they saw it miles away but believed that the original form of the

newspaper as ‘a general purpose vehicle for publishing a variety of news and opinion was basically

sound and only needed a digital facelift’. They failed to understand and get to grips with

social media and changing patterns of interaction. Their current attitudes indicate they may still

not have understood and faced those changes.

For some local newspaper owners and journalists the decline of printed copies doesn’t matter.

‘Online is the future;’ they maintain. Local media groups talk up their increasing online traffic

which is, at least superficially, impressive. For example, Johnston Press, Newsquest and Local

World all reported increase of up to 90 percent in terms of monthly unique browsers in 2014: press

releases lauded this ‘surge in online readership’, proudly declaring that the South Wales Evening

Post has increased online traffic by an impressive 61.5 percent in the previous six months. (Turvill,

2014). But all online media are increasing traffic: what is more pertinent is whether that surge can

be maintained and what users feel about their online visits. The belief that with only a fraction of

the previous staff they can continue to maintain their unique selling points to readers (for example,

locality, brand name and trustworthiness), overlooks the nature of the current online experience.

A visit to the South Wales Evening Post’s online site in November 2014 dispelled any notions

that the surge in views will result in consistent traffic. Within two seconds, unbidden, an ad for

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Chicago Deep Dish Pizza whooshes across and fills the screen. Close the ad and another immediately

appears for Vodaphone, blaring loud music into my ears. A video ad then appears with a

voice declaring ‘It’s A Boy’ which I close without knowing (or caring) what it’s selling and click

on the sports section. I start to scroll down the page and as I scan the stories the audio for a loud car

advert blasts out – where is it? Before I can find it, it ends and a video interview with then Queens

Park Rangers manager Harry Redknapp (of doubtful relevance to South Wales) begins which I

eventually locate at the top of the scrolled page and close. The only video content on the site are

advertisements and irrelevant PR material, presumably distributed to all the newsgroup’s outlets.

I repeat the process on the Leicester Mercury site with similarly depressing results.

Astonishingly, journalists who complain about this to management are told that readers enjoy

‘pop-ups’: where they get the evidence for this assertion is not known. The increase in online

traffic for local papers is unsurprising: almost every online news site’s audience is rising as the

online migration accelerates, but customers for local news will not return if this is their repeated

experience.

By contrast, most hyperlocal/citizen journalism sites are clear and clean. They don’t tend to

bombard the viewer with unwanted ads and they also welcome very local content. If the concept

of a local public sphere is important for the maintenance of democratic legitimacy then citizen

journalism sites should be seen as an essential complement to mainstream sites. Instead, some

citizen journalists believe that their larger local newspaper sees them as rivals and their content as

‘fair game’, frequently helping themselves to stories without crediting the source. The Nantwich

News hyperlocal site, run by one former local journalist, has almost as many unique users and

page views per month as its commercial rival the Crewe Chronicle (with six reporters and a news

editor). Perhaps they would gain from utilising and acknowledging the contacts and stories of

their smaller ‘rival’. The relationship could be mutually beneficial rather than antagonistic.

The traditional local brand names argue that the future is online but appear to just push out the

same stuff as before, only with fewer reporters and less subbing and fact-checking. The other key

imperative seems to be get it out there quick. ‘Be first’ is increasingly the key mantra. Lily Canter,

a former local journalist and now a journalism tutor at Sheffield Hallam University, recently called

the current ‘Digital First’ approach suicidal and told of her recent ‘workout’ experience at Derbyshire

Times (updating her technical skills to ensure her students receive up to date advice). She

told Holdthefrontpage how being first with the story resulted in cutting and pasting, cutting legal

corners and writing straight to the web with no checks (Hudson, 2104: see also, Canter, 2014).

Her reward for noting this drew hostile comments to the Holdthefrontpage comments feed. Instead

of her points being addressed, the majority response was personal attacks of the sarcastic

‘tell me something I don’t know’ variety. What such comments miss is that perhaps the most

important asset of the local newspaper is that, unlike their view of national journalists, the public

trust their local rag. How long will this continue with few if any checks on their online content,

a continuing reliance on press releases, PR and syndicated material and cut and paste from other

sources? The response of a Johnston Press spokeswoman to Canter’s concerns was that ‘consumers

expect immediacy when it comes to their news consumption and journalists today don’t

always have the luxury of time as they strive to get online quickly’ (Hudson, 2014). The spokeswoman

added that their journalists’ NCTJ pass rate of 88 percent in journalism law was proof that

the lack of proofing was not a problem with regard to libel or contempt. One worries about the 12

percent who fail and who are posting content without a sub-editor’s watchful eye.

**The consequences for our students**

Dr Canter says that her multi-tasking duties included ‘shooting video, taking photos, uploading

content to the paper’s website and to social media, importing photos, writing captions and

headlines, laying out pages, editing video and creating photo-slide shows’ (Hudson, 2014). One

wonders where this multi-media content appeared. Despite the insistence of local and regional

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newspaper groups that students on accredited journalism courses are taught multimedia skills, local

or regional news stories with video or audio content on local newspaper online sites are very

much the exception rather than the rule.

The lack of such content, and the low levels of salary offered to our highly-skilled journalism

graduates, leads me to question why we are continuing to guide our student into local print journalism.

Talking to journalism tutors, the anecdotal evidence is that fewer of our graduates are

entering the local press. Given the decline in jobs this is inevitable, but the reasons also include

student reaction to their work placement experience. Their range of skills is often barely utilised.

Weeks of cutting and pasting press releases and generic content mean many are disenchanted

by the prospect of working in a local newsroom, and more attractive and better-paid jobs in the

booming PR industry (and even producing content for private and public sector online sites) look

more alluring.

The inevitable question that must be addressed is why are we still producing journalists largely

according to the dictats of the owners and editors of a local press whose future is uncertain and

who undervalue the tremendous skills our students bring? This is not to deny the value of accreditation

– NCTJ and BJTC accreditations continue to demonstrate to students, parents and the

industry that accredited centres are providing courses with high standards. Nor is it to deny the

value of traditional subjects like shorthand. Some broadcasters now insist on 100 words a minute

shorthand for successful applicants: that level of achievement demonstrates commitment and

shorthand is still a potentially valuable skill. It goes without saying that the need for students to

have good writing skills and be competent in media law is still essential.

But undergraduate journalism students are emerging with online and broadcasting skills – and

increasingly, skills in data manipulation (Long, 2014) - which the local press is underutilising. So,

given the widely-acknowledged poor practices, we need to ask if we serve the best interests of our

students, especially those on NCTJ accredited courses, by stressing the local newspaper as a good

place to seek a placement or to start your journalistic career.

**Conclusion**

So, what’s the future of the local press? Briefly, who knows, but it is increasingly inconceivable

that it will be in a daily printed format. There is not one future, like the monolithic newspapers of

the past and the future cannot be churning out copy, or more accurately ‘churnalism’. Many new

and independent sites are setting alternative news agendas which challenge the hegemony of the

traditional press (Temple, 2013). The online Chronicle, Sentinel, Post, etc., will not dominate the

local news agenda and they will have to cooperate with this growing network of ‘citizen journalists’

in order to survive. They may also need to swallow their prejudices and cooperate with other

long-time ‘enemies’, and perhaps respond to the recent overtures of the BBC with regards to the

offer of free licence-fee funded content and the BBC ‘picking up the tab for local court reporting’

(Plunkett, 2014). There is an increasing understanding among some industry voices that they have

to find new ways of doing things which do not simply involve reducing their work force.

Despite Anthony Longden’s optimism about the future for the local press, he recognises that

unlike in previous transitions, the experiences of the past provide little guidance to the ‘future of

journalism in general, and local news provision in particular’. Change has been ‘fast, dramatic,

widespread and, in its earlier stages, it was completely unpredictable’. Many would disagree with

his assertion that ‘we have now got used to living with the problem’ but totally agree that the

funding of all journalism ‘remains the Holy Grail [but that] once we’ve figured out how to pay the

bill, the journey can continue’ (Longden 2013). Unfortunately, the industry has not yet figured out

how to pay the bill while maintaining a high quality contribution to the public sphere.

To paraphrase Clay Shirky (2009), society does not need local newspapers, but it does need local

journalism. If local newspapers fail to provide this in sufficient depth and quality, the public will

go elsewhere for their local journalism, perhaps to the new breed of independent citizen journalPage

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ism sites. Like the News Chronicle, the Daily Sketch and the Daily Graphic, our local Heralds,

Posts, Sentinels and Echoes have no divine right to exist. And unless they up their game, especially

online, these much treasured local brands will follow the town crier and cinema newsreel

into the footnotes of journalism history.

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