Book Section:

Local political journalism: systematic pressures on the normative functions of local news
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Abstract
This chapter considers how changes to the political economy of local journalism are reconfiguring and constraining its ability to contribute to the reporting of local politics. Grounded in a normative perspective that assigns a crucial role to the news media in the healthy functioning of local democracies, the chapter explores the current context of the UK, setting out the systematic pressures that threaten the future of local journalism. Focussing on local newspapers, we establish what is at stake and what stands to be lost from their decline. Based on research which shows an increasing focus on digital news production practices, we identify two key trends and discuss their consequences. First, the move to digital distribution and social media platforms has seen a decrease in the gatekeeping authority of journalists with audience preferences via social and online networks driving the news agenda. Second, these changes in newsroom practices have reduced opportunities for audiences to engage with the type of political and public interest news that facilitates political engagement. Digital practices dilute the local relevance of news, prioritise shareable or breaking non-political news, resulting in blander, softer and less geographically focused content.

Introduction

Local newspapers have traditionally provided local publics with a reliable source of news, a champion to shout about their needs and campaign on their behalf, and a watchdog to hold power to account about local administrative decisions and services such as housing, bus times, hospitals, parking, schools and libraries. However, many local areas now find themselves without a local newspaper or other source of local news. Over the last decade, the ownership of UK local newspapers has become increasingly oligopolistic, with multiple closures, buyouts and mergers within the sector. The major publishing companies continue to absorb their smaller rivals, often with job losses and restructuring resulting in a significant increase in cross-product working. Shared content produced for use across titles by journalists located in centralised regional hubs has resulted in a dilution of geographic focus. At the same time a reduction in the number of journalists employed combined with a rising demand online for 'shareable content', has led to a decline in the scrutiny of local politics once provided by such newspapers.

The gradual restructuring of local news organisations over the last two decades is evidence of a "multiplicity of minor processes" (Foucault, 1977, p.138) made in response to the increasing demands of digital news production and expectation of an increasingly online audience. The growing societal focus on online content and advertising has resulted in a major loss of print-advertising revenue and newspaper sales, decimating the funding model. Whilst accessing content for free, digital audiences have also not yielded the same revenues as print audiences. With Google and Facebook accounting for 68.5% of the UK digital advertising market in 2019, local newspapers face intense competition for a chunk of the remaining advertising spend (He, 2020). This, combined with the rising use of social media as a vehicle to access online local news (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andı, & Nielsen, 2020), has pushed publishers to increasingly rely on major external organisations such as Facebook and Google for support in terms of funding journalism and providing a platform for audience access. It has also created a growing focus on how to monetise content online that, as we shall see, pushes news values to be reconfigured to maximise user engagement.

Drawing on our own and others' research, this chapter asks two questions to explore the implications of the current context and political economy of local journalism. First, what is at stake and stands to be lost from the continued decline of the legacy local press? Second, what are the implications of the increasing focus on digital news production practices? We identify two key trends and discuss their consequences: 1) changing relationships with audiences; 2) a spiralling decline in the provision of the type of political and public interest news that facilitates political engagement. Last, we reflect on the consequences of these changes for the normative function of local news.

The political economy of local news in the UK

At least 265 local newspapers closed between 2005 and August 2020 (Tobitt, 2020). With many already on the brink of collapse, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/21 added extra pressure, especially on publishers whose funding models were reliant on digital advertising, with some advertisers unwilling to have their products placed alongside online content including negative language related to Coronavirus (Sweney, 2020). The rate of closures has been tracked by several studies (Lavender et al., 2020; Ramsay, Freedman, Jackson, & Thorsen, 2017) and continued at pace into the second half of 2020, with publishers announcing the shutting down of 'non-viable' local newspapers on an almost weekly basis (Sharman, 2020). Well before Covid accelerated the trend, the warning bell had been sounded about local news 'black holes' in the UK (Harte, Howells, & Williams, 2019) and local news 'deserts' in the USA (Abernathy, 2018, 2020). Whilst we focus on the UK, similar changes and their consequences are causing concern in other democracies including Australia, Sweden and the USA (Benton, 2020; Hess & Waller, 2017; Karlsson & Rowe, 2019).

An historic concentration of ownership exacerbated by the consolidation and closures of publishers in the UK means 77.1% of local newspaper titles are owned by five local newspaper publishers, and in 43% of local authority districts there is a monopoly of coverage by a single publisher (Ramsay et al., 2017). Many daily papers have reduced to weekly publication, leaving only 46% districts in the UK with a daily newspaper (Lavender et al., 2020). In some areas served by legacy print titles a wider choice has been offered to local audiences since 2018 with the roll-out of 'Live' online-only news sites provided by Reach Plc (one of the big five). However, territorial encroaches have generally been made in areas already served by newspapers owned by the other major publishers.

In many areas that do still have a local paper, there are issues with staffing centralisation and a withdrawal from local communities which, combined with stretched resources, mean local reporting is often not 'local' at all (Firmstone, 2018; Harte et al., 2019; Napoli et al., 2018; Whittington, 2018). One of the most recent and monumental changes is the collapse in 2018 of the publishing company, Johnston Press, which owned more than 200 titles across the UK. Its buy-out by JPI Media was followed by sale of national title *the i* and the closures of thirteen papers (Tobitt, 2020b).

In recent years efforts have been made to plug the gaps being left by the retreat of local newspapers; including the BBC's local democracy scheme (BBC, 2019) and widening collaboration between local news organisations (BehindLocalNews, 2018a). Hyperlocal news has also become more widely recognised as an officially emerging market with the potential for genuine public service (Harte et al., 2019). Although these in initiatives give hope, we should not forget that doubts about the quality of local journalism were raised long before the collapse of its business model, suggesting that future efforts need to support journalism

that strives to be even better than in the past: 'Local newspapers are increasingly a business success but a journalistic failure' (Franklin, 2006, p. 4).

Amidst this upheaval, it should not have come as a surprise in the aftermath of June 2017 when Grenfell Tower in North Kensington set on fire, killing 72 people, one of the fingers of blame was pointed at a dysfunctional, distant and disinterested local press (Bell, 2017). Shortly afterwards a government inquiry into the sustainability of local news provision was launched. The Cairncross Review identified a decline in public interest journalism, specifically coverage of local government. It also identified a decline in public engagement with local politics and public institutions and linked this to the retreat in journalistic coverage (Cairncross, 2019). More recently, the Covid-19 crisis has heightened public awareness of the need for reliable local information (Roberts, 2020) and reminds us that audiences trust local newspapers more than their national counterparts (Newman et al., 2020).

Reflecting on the structure of the local news ecology in UK demonstrates how much of the responsibility for trusted local political and public interest news lies at the door of newspapers. As broadcasters the BBC (TV and radio) and ITV are not set up to plug the gaps left by any decline newspaper journalism due to their regional (not local) remits and the valuable yet limiting broadcast regulatory requirement for impartiality. The thirty-four local TV stations created from 2012 onwards must also be impartial and nearly one third (ten) of the stations have reduced the quantity of local news they produce with Ofcom's permission (Tobitt, 2020a). Changes to the structure of local radio (BBC and independent stations) mirror the pattern of consolidation, centralisation and the resultant loss of local content seen in local newspapers (Radio Today, 2020; Waterson, 2020) leaving radio an unlikely site for an increase in public interest news.

These examples highlight some very specific and potentially devastating consequences of recent changes in the landscape of local news provision for local communities and local democracies. From here, we go on to evaluate the established normative functions of local news before considering what impact the changes discussed have had on those definers and the resulting societal value of the evolving local news product.

What is the value of local news and what stands to be lost from its decline?
Local news plays a critical role in the reporting of local politics and beyond, positioning it as a valuable and vital resource within geographic communities. From a normative perspective, this journalism should inform citizens about local issues, be representative of the opinions and voice of citizens, hold governing bodies and organisations to account on behalf of citizens, and proactively campaign on matters of public interest (Barnett, 2009). As such, local news is considered vital to the functioning of local communities and the engagement of citizens in local democracies (Firmstone, 2016; Nielsen, 2015). The Cairncross Inquiry's

final report cited "public-interest news" as being that which matters most to a healthy democracy, defining it as investigative and campaigning journalism which holds power to account and reports on the activities and local decision-making of institutions (Cairncross, 2019, p17).

These functions may well differ from the types of journalistic outputs that guarantee commercial success and, as our overview of the systematic pressures that currently threaten local news demonstrates, it may be necessary to define local journalism in the public interest as a public good in order to sustain its future (Coleman et al., 2016; Firmstone, 2018; Pickard, 2020). On the basis that local news in the public interest is a necessary part of a healthy democracy that benefits all citizens, the current threats to local news require a rethinking of the conditions needed to ensure its continuing availability. As with other public goods such as national defence, without high quality local journalism to hold local institutions to account and inform local citizens, the entire community stands to suffer, not just news consumers (Allern & Ester, 2017).

Another way to evaluate the value of local journalism is by considering what distinguishes local journalism from other types of journalism. With the exception of the *Financial Times*, audiences consistently report higher levels of trust in local newspapers than in national newspapers (Newman et al., 2020), a precious status in the context of the well documented decline in trust in news in the UK, where a new low of only 28% of people trust news overall (Newman et al., 2020). Journalists are aware of this qualitative difference, and local journalists across Europe have described how their interdependence with readers sustains a more positive relationship than that of their national counterparts (Firmstone et al., 2022). High levels of trust in local newspapers may well be linked to their rather unique status. In contrast to the national partisan press in the UK, most (though not all) local newspapers are politically neutral (Hetherington, 1989). Local journalists identify with a specific role that is not common among national journalists: in addition to perceiving an important role for themselves as information providers, they identify as champions and campaigners for the locality (Firmstone, 2016; Firmstone et al., 2022).

We can also gauge the value of local journalism by looking at what happens to citizens' engagement and participation in local politics when the local media disappear. Evidence of a correlation between the absence of local newspapers and falls in civic engagement is mounting (Hayes & Lawless, 2018; Shaker, 2014). The decline in public interest journalism is linked to a "reduction in community engagement with local democracy (such as voter turnout) and the accountability of local institutions" (Cairncross, 2019, p7). A connection between declining local newspaper circulation and a decline in democratic engagement has also been shown (Lavender et al., 2020). If the example of the USA is any indication, the closure of local newspapers also leads to increasingly polarised voting (Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway, 2018). Furthermore, local journalism is not only valued and needed by local

citizens. Local authorities face challenges in engaging with the public in the fragmented media environment and, despite a widely used rhetoric concerning digital engagement, still place great value on legacy local news media as the most trusted and dominant way of communicating with citizens (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015).

Aside from these normative democratic roles, local journalism performs another valuable function that whilst perhaps less explicitly politically orientated, ultimately contributes to the health of local democracies by strengthening social cohesion. The idea of adding value to a locality is a fundamental function which sets local news aside from its national counterpart. Grassroots local journalism is of value and "social importance" (Morrison & Svennevig, 2007) to the communities being reported upon, and builds solidarity in those spaces (Schudson, 2020). In addition to holding power to account and enabling public deliberation, local news should allow publics to see themselves and their life worlds represented, and access to content which helps diverse publics make sense of each other (Coleman et al., 2016).

While campaigning, reporting and having the capacity and resources to rigorously challenge those in power at a local level is clearly of societal importance, so is the reporting of, for example, the village flower show, because such local events help to define and galvanize a community (Franklin & Murphy, 1998; Matthews, 2017). Local news recognizes and reflects the markers of that locality (the people, places, geography, history, culture and economics) may make it significantly different from another locality just miles away (Glover, 1998; Leupold, Klinger, & Jarren, 2018). Prior to digital convergence, the local newspaper in the UK was a "steadfast pillar of the community" (Matthews, 2017, pp3) and "a weekly bible" (Harte et al., 2019, pp69).

The digital shift in audience position and power
Research suggests that the move to digital distribution and social media platforms has seen a decrease in gatekeeping authority of local newspaper journalists, with audience activity online often being the source of news (Canter, 2013a), and driving the news agenda via audience metrics (Currah, 2009a; Ramsay & Moore, 2016; Whittington, 2020).Social media significantly amplifies journalists' capacity to represent the interests of their audience as a means of gathering public opinion, connecting with their audience, encouraging audience participation, and measuring the popularity of stories far more efficiently than was possible pre Web2.0 (Firmstone, 2016). Never before has the audience attention, opinion and role been as highly valued by local newspaper publishing companies (Canter, 2013b). Audience preferences via social and online networks drive the news agenda and the position of the journalist as gatekeeper has shifted (Currah, 2009b); instead the audience has a significant influence over editorial decision-making (Whittington, 2020).

The quality of news has been improved by interactions with audiences via social media in some ways but undermined in others. On the plus side, journalists have described social media as being an access point to the title's community and see it as a physical extension of their journalistic presence within that virtual geographic space; this results in improved communication between audience and journalist and makes richer information from a more diverse community available for journalistic coverage (Whittington, 2020). Other advantages enable journalists to be held to account by audiences, receive valuable feedback and ultimately feel closer to their audience, although social media often exposes journalists to unsubstantiated audience criticism (Firmstone et al., 2022).

On the other hand, some practices such as allowing news values and agendas to be shaped entirely by audience preferences can potentially result in news of a lesser democratic quality. The influence of the audience on news production is perhaps felt most keenly in the way 'clicks', 'likes' and 'shares' compound the popularity of a story and, in turn, suggest to the publisher that such content is successful and engaging with their audience (Currah, 2009b). While ten years ago Singer (2011) found the influence of audience engagement was not a focal point for local journalists in terms of the value they placed on their output or the following news agenda, national and international studies have increasingly identified a link between audience preferences and editorial decision-making (Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2014; Welbers, van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok, & Schaper, 2016).

Recent ethnographic research in the UK and North America found significant pressure for journalists to produce content which would prove popular with the online audience and which could be monetised (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018; Usher, 2018; Whittington, 2020). This pressure was exerted via big screens within newsrooms which displayed audience analytics, communications celebrating the most popular online content, news meetings which measured online success as a measure of content value and monthly publishing company audience metric targets; an amplification of the situation uncovered in UK national newspaper newsrooms almost a decade earlier (Currah, 2009a). The shift in editorial control has resulted in a softening of the news agenda and a turn away from public-interest reporting (Justel-Vázquez, Micó-Sanz, & Sánchez-Marín, 2016; Whittington, 2020), an outcome which has clear implications for the quality of political journalism available to citizens.

A self-perpetuating cycle? The supply and demand of political and public interest news
Despite increasing audience contact and engagement overall, changes in newsroom practices appear to reduce opportunities for citizens to engage with local political news by diluting the local relevance of news and prioritising shareable or breaking non-political news. The pressure to build digital viewing figures, the increase in common content across geographically diverse titles (Whittington, 2020), and the centralisation of staffing (Harte et al., 2019) has diluted the focused identity of the local news product. The retreat of local

newspapers from the localities which they serve has also resulted in a decline in grassroots community coverage (Harte et al., 2019). While possibly not as important to society as the repeated reliance on the same powerful sources and the decline in rigorous interrogation of information and decision-making at a civic level, research suggests the deterioration in reporting other types of community-based news is a significant problem for local pride, identity, cohesion and inclusivity.

One result of these conditions is a blander, softer and less geographically focused content production in local newsrooms (Whittington, 2020) with, as also found in US studies of news production, an increasing value in fast-breaking online news which fails to have long-term value or meaning to an audience soon after the story is broken (Usher, 2018). Examples include a non-local news story about a national charity's social media campaign and a report including photos of a couple having sex in a takeaway in a town far outside the circulation area (with the only connection being a local sports team t-shirt worn by one of the pair) (Whittington, 2020). Both examples were also circulated by the company's other titles throughout the country irrespective of local connections or with slight adjustments made to 'localise' the story. Not only does this type of news dissolve the jurisdiction of the product from a geographic perspective, but it also means the competition to have the content engaged with and endorsed by the online audience increases – so while the pool of possible audience members grows, the niche elements that should have made the content popular with a geographically connected audience are lost; resulting in less geographically focused content being promoted to a wider, but less invested audience network.

Looking more closely at Whittington's study of two local daily newsrooms we can see exactly how a divide in editorial structures exacerbates the success of soft and transient breaking news online (Whittington, 2020). This is due to digital journalists being overseen by digitally-focused managers, while specialist subject journalists are overseen by print-focused managers. Experts in identifying trending stories, the digital team share popular content across titles, cover breaking news and engage the audience with potentially popular content at the start of its production, during its development and in the aftermath of the story being published online. In contrast, specialist subject reporters work independently, with only minor interaction with colleagues and the audience during the development of reports and often only promote online content on social media at the point of publication, if at all.

This means that content perceived to have less potential for online popularity is given much less opportunity to connect with audiences, while 'popular' soft and breaking news is amplified in its potential connectivity. As a result, public interest stories about local politics, health and education, are buried in a sea of soft and breaking news content, creating a spiral of declining engagement with 'public interest news'. Furthermore, such digital production practices clearly influence the type of content prioritised in print versions. Digital before print strategies adopted by many publishers mean that the content that is produced

and pushed out online then informs the content of the printed product (MacGregor, 2014; Whittington, 2020).

The printed product is also altered because the physical act of buying or holding a printed product has been changed into content which may, or may not, be accessed and viewed by an audience untethered by geographic boundaries (Olmstead , Mitchell, & Rosenstiel 2011). Therefore, the tone and presence and, ultimately, the purpose of the newspaper and its journalists changes in a digital format. No longer can it position itself with a masthead. While newspapers are designed to be read in a linear fashion, online content is fragmented – elements of it playing parts in myriad individual networks which are personalised to individual audience members (Mukerjee, Majó-Vázquez, & González-Bailón, 2018).

Conclusion

Until now, academic concern and interventions into local journalism such as the BBC Local Democracy scheme have focussed on the loss of the watchdog role in relation to holding local authorities to account and court reporting. This chapter has demonstrated that debates about the quality of local political journalism must now expand to consider the implications of digital production practices on the provision of public interest news, and capacity of local newspapers to represent local publics. Basing understandings of the needs of local audiences entirely on digital measures of engagement and participation runs a very real risk of misrepresenting local communities and excluding the preferences, interests and needs of non-digitally active audiences. Although there may be a greater level of engagement with the public than previously, the nature of the engagement and inequalities in opportunities for participation raise questions about whose voice is heard and which members of the public have power in the production of local news.

It is difficult to conclude anything other than that the outlook for local newspaper journalism looks bleak and that the implications of the continuing decline of local newspapers have multiple negative outcomes for local democracy and public engagement with local politics. However, there are "green shoots" (Curran, 2010, pp469) emerging from the devastation. Increasing collaboration between rival news publishers has united titles across the UK in nationwide campaigns with a local focus (BehindLocalNews, 2018b) and has strengthened the position of local news in national media and government discourse. The ownership of local journalism and the descriptors that define it are expanding, with independent local news start-ups aiming to fill some of the 'black holes' left by newspaper closures. In some cases, journalism in the public interest is being produced by those without journalism training or legacy industry experience, often with community or collaborative agendas and with backing from government and organisational funding (Mayhew, 2020b). Furthermore, a growing network of hyper-local news websites and funding to support such projects has prompted speculation around the potential to increase trust in local news media and audience engagement with public interest news (Murphy, 2020).

Within local newspaper newsrooms there is hope of success with paywall trials and subscription models which have prompted a thirst for unique and exclusive content such as court and council reporting relevant to specific localities (Mayhew, 2020a). Recipients of funding following recommendations made by the Cairncross Review are creating an increasingly varied news ecology, offering increased plurality both in the way local news journalism is produced and accessed, and legacy news organisations are finding competition for such funding in new start-ups, hyperlocals and collaborative projects (Mayhew, 2020b).

Now is the time for academics and policymakers to consider the future of local newspapers holistically amidst these and other changes in the local news ecology. As forecast by research conducted when digital convergence within local newspaper newsrooms in the UK and elsewhere had only just begun, the only certainty in the future of local news is its unpredictability, with the fluctuation of the industry being "a constant feature of editorial life" (Franklin, 2008, p637). Therefore, in identifying how normative functions of local news journalism may be shifting, we do not decree a permanent and solidified change, but instead document a moment in time captured between digital convergence, the Cairncross Review and Covid-19.

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