

The NUJ's economic stimulus plan for local media

Local media is being undermined by the sapping away of resources from local newsrooms and a failure by major companies to invest in quality journalism. The following plan could be implemented by government as a strategic and coordinated response to the decline in local media. Any action must focus on improving investment in local journalism – ensuring communities get the quality of news they deserve.

The reform of cross-media ownership rules with a strengthened public interest test. This would enable organisations to fully exploit the benefits of digital technology by working across print, digital and broadcast platforms. A new public interest test must ensure newsgathering will not be damaged by any cross-media merger.

A hard and fast commitment to ring-fence licence fee funding for the BBC. The corporation must continue to be the cornerstone of public service broadcasting and that means it needs a secure, foreseeable and guaranteed funding stream. Any sharing of the licence fee would undermine quality and could jeopardise editorial integrity by creating a de facto competitive funding model.

A levy introduced on commercial operators who benefit from quality public service content – including local news – but do not contribute to its production. This could encourage media organisations to increase their investment in local news and proceeds from the levy could be ploughed back in to public service media. Such money could be used to support local/regional news on channel 3.

Tax breaks for local media who meet clearly defined public purposes. Media organisations already benefit from a number of tax breaks and exemptions. The current tax regime for media organisations should be reviewed to examine how it can create incentives for investment in quality local journalism that is rooted in our communities.

Tax credits for individuals who buy quality media. Credits should be targeted, via subscription based models, at people buying newspapers that meet specified criteria around original journalism.

Direct support to help establish new genuinely local media organisations. Particular focus should be placed on establishing new ownership and business models that are firmly planted in our communities. Media organisations should be required to sell on the names of titles they close down to community trusts for a nominal fee.

Strategic use of central and local government advertising. In many cases government information campaigns can reach their target audience whilst simultaneously supporting local media. An assessment of investment in quality journalism should be made when identifying appropriate targets.

Support for training opportunities that open access to journalism. Direct support for training to give media workers the skills they need for modern newsrooms. Such support should directly challenge the financial and cultural barriers currently blocking equality of access to the profession.

Quality criteria – the only way to identify targets for support

To ensure that public intervention is made for the public good, any action by government to support local media must be tested against its ability to improve the quality of local journalism. This means that conditions will need to be placed on any state support. These could include:

- requirements to invest a specified proportion of profits into editorial resources
- requirements over staffing ratios
- ratios for originally produced content
- commitments to maintain titles, offices and pagination
- obligations to monitor employee workloads and stress