



NUJ briefing for the London Assembly economic committee session on local news provision in the capital

March 2017

Summary

- London, one of the world's greatest capitals, is poorly served by its local news provision following years of jobs cuts and lack of investment by newspaper publishers. This has had a severe impact on their ability to fully cover the Assembly, local councils, health authorities and other democratic organisations.
- Many titles in the capital are in a very vulnerable position; that is why the Assembly must act urgently to prevent a crisis in local news provision turning into a disaster.
- By the end of this month, Newsquest's titles in south London will have seven reporters, two sub-editors, one website editor, one content editor and a managing editor, who also manages the Brighton Argus, to cover 11 newspapers and associated websites.
- Local newspaper journalists are being priced out of the profession. Journalists who work for national newspaper titles, let alone local press, have told the union their poor salaries make it difficult to afford rent and impossible to secure a mortgage in London. The union has had to fight for certain members to receive the London Living Wage.
- The newspaper industry is 94 per cent white. This figure is a disgrace. At the 2011 census, London had a population of 8,173,941. Of this number, 44.9 per cent were White British. The capital must have a press which is representative of the communities it serves.

Recommendations to the committee

- The NUJ recommends that the Mayor's office, following the committee's report on local news provision, should set up a meeting with the main media organisations in the capital to discuss its conclusions. The union hope this will include the need for

proper pay and proper staffing levels for local newspaper and radio journalists, so they are able to do their job and afford to live in the capital.

- The Mayor should support the NUJ's Local News Matters Week from 24 March to 1 April and use his influence to call on the government to make local newspapers community assets, to prevent newspaper titles closing overnight and to give potential new owners, including local co-operatives, the time to put together a bid for a paper.
- The Assembly should commission research into the extent to which local newspapers in London are holding councils and other democratic institutions to account.
- The Mayor's office should work with the economic committee to set forward an economic stimulus plan and financial aid for start-up media companies in the capital, with particular regard to public interest journalism. London should be at the forefront of a dynamic digital media economy. Journalism should be providing opportunities for employment and digital innovation. The Assembly should foster the development of a digital journalism apprenticeship for the capital.*
- The Mayor's office should champion and find funding for bursaries to help low income and BAME journalist students get a foothold in the profession to encourage a more diverse and representative press in the capital. It must investigate diversity and equality in media employment in the capital across different organisations/media platforms – print, broadcast, online and photography.

Decline in the industry

1. According to the media trade magazine, the Press Gazette, London has fewer newspapers per million of population compared to other regions in the country.
2. The decline of advertising revenue, the move from print to digital, with newspaper groups making their websites free and then increasing the cover price of newspapers has had a deleterious effect on circulation. While digital traffic is growing, the advertising revenue is not following. According to the News Media Association the revenue of the vast majority of media organisations (81%) comes from print readership, with 12 per cent from digital. These organisations have squandered the opportunity to invest in digital. Instead, they have used it to cut jobs. These media organisations have largely run a model which expects 20 per cent profits, almost unheard of in other sectors. As the profits were squeezed (and they spent unwisely when the going was good), their only tool to appease shareholders was to cut staff without due care for the quality of the product they were producing. The media behemoths such as Facebook and Google are sucking up advertising and hoovering up content from media news organisations. A report by OC&C Strategy Consultants forecasts Facebook and Google will take a 71 per cent share of the total ad market by 2020. Their report stated: "The scale and speed is really a call to action for media companies. By the time [Facebook and Google] get to 70 per cent of the online ad market, that doesn't leave a lot of space left elsewhere." The Assembly should use

its influence to see how Google and the like can be persuaded to aid start-up ventures in the capital.

3. In 2016, circulation of UK local weekly newspapers audited by the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) fell by 11 per cent on the previous year, and local dailies by 13 per cent. In London, the Ilford Recorder and Romford Recorder were two of only four local UK paid-for weekly newspapers audited by ABC that saw circulation increase in 2016, by 25 per cent and four per cent respectively on the previous year. Other London newspapers fared less well: sales of the Waltham Forest Guardian fell by 20 per cent and the Barking & Dagenham Post 17 per cent.
4. The NUJ has reported cuts to newsrooms across the capital that have had a serious impact on their ability to fully cover the Assembly, local councils, health authorities and other democratic organisations. Research from Wales (Rachel Howells**) has shown there is a link between poor local news coverage and participation in local elections
5. Local newspapers enjoy a high level of trust from their readers and are the lifeblood of local democracy. At a time when people are getting their news via unregulated social media platforms, which has led to the growth of so-called fake news, it is crucial to have a properly-funded local press with journalists who follow the NUJ's code of practice.
6. By championing local causes and campaigns, the local press, whether saving a local pub from closure, promoting safety for cyclists or covering local events, supply part of the glue which holds local communities together.
7. It would be expected that London, as a political and cultural centre and with its vast population, would have a vibrant press. There is no shortage of stories and readers, but investment in journalism by the owners of the capital's newspapers is at an all-time low.

London press

8. Under a new structure for Newsquest's titles in south London, there are supposed to be 12 reporters covering news, sport and leisure across 11 newspapers and associated websites; however because of vacancies there will be only seven at the end of March. The poor pay and conditions on these newspapers have led to many staff leaving. The titles include: The Croydon Guardian, Sutton Guardian, Epsom Guardian, Wimbledon Guardian, Wandsworth Guardian, Balham and Tooting Guardian, Mitcham and Morden Guardian, Kingston Guardian, Surrey Comet, Elmbridge Comet, the Richmond & Twickenham Times and The News Shopper - for Lewisham, Greenwich, Bexley and Bromley. The Assembly and local politicians have previously supported the chapel when it has taken strike action over redundancies and obtaining the London Living Wage. Newsquest recently announced a plan to invite readers to write and publish their own stories online. In a column, Andy Parkes, the group editor for Newsquest's south London titles, invited readers of free weekly papers such as the Croydon Guardian and the Richmond and Twickenham Times to

send in articles “as close to the style of a news story” as they can. In the column he states: “We think this new simplified process will make it easier for you to let us know all your great news.” But the NUJ described the move as “embarrassing” and “farical” and said “we should be telling people what is happening in their local community. Instead we are asking readers to do our jobs for us.”

9. In north London, Newsquest recently announced yet another round of cuts. The staff photographers have been cut from two to one, a sports writer made redundant, and the number of content editors reduced from four to two. A decade ago the news team had a group editor, an editor per title, a community editor, two news editors and at least two reporters per paper though the Watford Observer and the Bucks Free Press had at least four on each title. There were seven features staff: two features writers, two commercial features writers, one features deputy, one designer and one features editor. There were six on the picture desk: three staff and two freelance photographers, plus a picture editor. The sports desk had an editor and four staff. The subs desk had one chief sub-editor and four subs. Previously, the high turnover in news was because reporters used their experience as a springboard for their career; now they are just desperate to move on as soon as possible. The drastic cut backs occurred between three and six years ago, with the head count for editors moving from three to one, the subs desk disappearing, the features team reduced and the picture desk went down to one photographer per area. Now there is only one photographer covering all of Herts, north and east London. The resulting workload has led to illness and stress.
10. Photographers have been hit hard. It has been the policy of all the major newspaper groups to drastically cut or do away with staff photographers in the hope of replacing professional photographs with free pictures from readers. This obviously has an effect on the visual impact of the newspaper/website.
11. Job cuts have meant experienced journalists have been lost from newspaper in the capital. It has also led to fewer specialist journalist roles, or specialists are expected to cover a range of beats. This inevitably has had an impact on investigative journalism.
12. An analysis of the Evening Standard website in the report, *Monopolising local news is there an emerging local democratic deficit in the UK due to the decline of local newspapers?* by the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, King’s College London, indicated that a large number of London boroughs are the subject of fewer than one article per day. Gordon Ramsay and Martin Moore, authors of the report, analysed the amount of choice and found that of the 32 boroughs in Greater London served by a local newspaper:
 - 20 Local Authority Districts (LADs) had a publisher with greater than 70 per cent share of the market.

- 13 had a monopoly publisher – these were mainly in west London and included Hounslow, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Richmond upon Thames and Kingston upon Thames.
- Trinity Mirror had a monopoly in four Greater London LADs (Hillingdon, Ealing, Hounslow, Hammersmith & Fulham).
- Newsquest had a monopoly in four Greater London LADs (Harrow, Richmond upon Thames, Kingston upon Thames, Wandsworth).
- Archant had a monopoly in three Greater London LADs (Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Newham).
- Tindle had a monopoly in one Greater London LAD (Kensington and Chelsea).

13. In 1890, London had six half-penny and three penny newspapers.*** When Alexander Lebedev bought London's only capital-wide newspaper, the Evening Standard, in 2009 it was a paid-for publication with five editions a day. Despite recently announcing pre-tax profits of £3.4m, it has moved to a single daily print edition with staff told that their hours would be cut in half. Management said the paper would be produced overnight with a later "slip edition" published only on days when there is major breaking news.

14. This lack of plurality and choice adds to the democratic deficit in the capital. When the NUJ has challenged media monopolies (elsewhere) in the past, it has found the Competition and Markets Authority slow to act and largely toothless.

15. Journalists working on Croydon Advertiser, Crawley News, East Grinstead Courier & Observer and Surrey Mirror will be moved from Trinity Mirror's Redhill office to the Guildford home of the Surrey Advertiser. This means the Courier & Observer will be based 38 miles from its East Grinstead patch, while the News and the Advertiser will be produced almost 30 miles from Crawley and 35 miles away from Croydon respectively. The move affects more than 20 staff currently based in Redhill, where the Mirror was first published 138 years ago.

16. Twelve years ago, Enfield Gazette, owned by Tindle Newspapers, had a staff of 17, including three photographers, and a healthy freelance budget. Today, there is a staff of seven full-time and two part-time journalists, including one photographer. The journalists have had two pay rises in the past decade and do not receive London weighting as part of their salary. They have had to double and treble up on roles and whereas there had been real pride in the newspaper, the imperative now is to just get it out. The paper covers three London boroughs and parts of Essex and Hertfordshire. Readers have noticed and ask: "What's happened to the paper?" Staff have been made ill by stress and high workloads. One said: "Despite it all, I love my job, but find it frustrating that the management don't seem to care about having a quality product and investing in its staff."

17. The NUJ has carried out stress surveys with members in London and asked them to describe the situation in their newsroom. Typical responses included: "I have had no

support from my editor or those above throughout my time at Newsquest, despite being given an unrealistically large and high-pressure workload in my first job as a trainee, and being the sole trainee expected to complete a large paper alone. Changes are agreed behind closed doors with no consultation with reporters and apparent total disregard of how it will affect them.” And: “The company’s strategy of managed decline has created a pervasive negativity in the office. Staff are expected to produce a lot of work in little time. The opportunity to produce quality, in-depth journalism is lacking for that reason, which gnaws at reporters who know they are capable of better journalism than they produce. That said, their attitude in the face of all this is generally good and good work is still done here, but Newsquest’s approach has soured the collective attitude to the point that even trainee reporters are leaving the company in disgust.”

18. London does have a number of hyperlocal publication and websites such as the Brixton Bugle, City Matters and Mayorwatch. Many hyperlocals are finding success combining funding streams such as online and printed newspaper advertising, grants, sponsored advertorials, and crowdfunding. But these publications are mostly run by volunteers and research has shown them to be fragile and difficult to sustain.
19. The BBC, in an agreement with the News Media Association (NMA), has top-sliced licence fee payers' money to fund a "local democracy reporters (LDRs)" scheme at an annual cost of £8m. The NUJ is in discussions with the BBC to find out how this scheme will work. As part of the plans, 12 LDRs have been allocated to London. The union asks the Assembly to seek assurances from the BBC and NMA that these reporters will not be used to plug gaps following redundancy rounds. It is iniquitous if licence-fee money is used to prop up newspaper groups which have failed to invest in local journalism.
20. Despite all of the above, most of our members are dedicated to their jobs and want to produce the best possible journalism.

Diversity

21. A survey of 700 journalists by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that 94 per cent of all UK journalists were white. The 2011 census revealed that 87 per cent of the UK population was white and 44.9 per cent of Londoners were white British.
22. Alan Milburn's Cabinet Office report Access to Professional Careers concluded that journalism was one of the most socially exclusive professions. The NUJ's submission to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility inquiry into Access into Leading Professions said too many people are being priced out of the profession. The Reuters Institute report found that one in five journalists earn less than £19,200 a year, putting many below the living wage; 83 per cent of journalists in their mid- to

late twenties earn less than £29,000, an income that makes buying a property a significant challenge, particularly in London and the south east.

23. Wages, even on some national newspapers, are not enough to keep up with the cost of living in London, members have reported. The proportion of people who live in low-income households is 20 per cent for white people; 30 per cent for Indians and Black Caribbeans; 60 per cent for Pakistanis; and 70 per cent for Bangladeshis. This means for many young people, black and white, journalism is increasingly beyond their reach owing to the scale of inequality and entrenchment of power and influence of a growing few. If journalism is the lens through which we view society, this trend will have profound consequences if the pool of people holding power to account is so narrow.
24. The NUJ's charity the George Viner Memorial Fund provides bursaries for BAME journalism students and its scholars say without this financial support a job in journalism would remain a dream. But bursaries do not address the structural and cultural barriers in the industry.

- *Journey to the centre of a news black hole: examining the democratic deficit in a town with no newspaper, by Rachel Howells
- **The NUJ in Scotland has developed a digital journalism programme with the Sector Skills Council, Creative Skillset, facilitated by Skills Development Scotland. The union can provide more information.
- ***The Echo, Evening Argus, Evening News, Evening Standard, Star and Sun for a half-penny and the Pall Mall Gazette, St James's Gazette and the Globe for a penny.
- *Journalists in the UK*, by Neil Thurman, Alessio Cornia and Jessica Kunert, analysed a survey of more than 700 UK journalists in December 2015.
<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publication/journalists-uk>
- *Monopolising local news: Is there an emerging local democratic deficit in the UK due to the decline of local newspapers?* by Gordon Ramsay and Martin Moore, the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, King's College London. March 2016. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/CMCP/local-news.pdf>
- *Fair Access to Professional Careers*, May 2012
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61090/IR_FairAccess_acc2.pdf
- NUJ code of conduct <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code/>

- NUJ Local News Matters Week <https://www.nuj.org.uk/campaigns/local-news-matters-week/>