



## **NUJ briefing for the Westminster debate on Local News Matters**

30 March, 2017

The National Union of Journalists' **Local News Matters** campaign aims to reclaim a vital, vigorous press at the heart of the community it serves and to build a campaign with the public to promote the role local news plays in democracy and holding power to account.

Local newspapers, websites and associated apps are read by 40 million people a week and enjoy a high level of trust from their readers. According to the Press Gazette, there has been a net loss of almost 200 newspapers since 2005 and the number of journalists working on remaining titles has more than halved. Numerous daily titles have been converted to weekly publication and many weekly titles no longer have dedicated editorial teams.

The NUJ is asking you, as an MP, to:

- Speak up for your local media at the Westminster Hall debate on local news matters at 13.30-16.30 on Thursday 30 March, 2017.
- Sign the local news matters EDM 1109.
- Call for a sharp, sharp national inquiry into the future of local news provision in the UK.
- Lobby for local newspapers – as for local pubs – to be made community assets.
- Sign and share the NUJ and TUC public pledge calling for investment in quality local journalism and for the UK government to launch a public inquiry to examine the local media crisis. <https://campaign.goingtowork.org.uk/petitions/local-news-matters-address-the-local-media-crisis?source=nuj>

## **Celebrating local journalists**

- This debate is partly to celebrate all that is good in local news— there is still plenty of crusading journalism, tackling difficult issues in our communities and holding power to account, as well as celebrating our local heroes. For many, it is their local

newspaper, radio or TV reporter to whom they go when they see an injustice. Last year's regional press awards highlighted campaigns such as the Liverpool Echo's fight for the truth about Hillsborough and its unswerving support of the friends and families of 96 innocent people who died needlessly and shamefully. The Birmingham Mail's Jeanette Oldham was commended for her brave and outstanding reports which shone a light into the dark areas of sexual abuse, race and police corruption. And Sophie Doughty's story in the Newcastle Chronicle about the assault on disabled pensioner Alan Barnes and his local community's generous response to his plight touched many hearts.

### **Newspaper closures and cuts**

- Local newspapers, websites and associated apps are read by 40 million people a week and enjoy a high level of trust from their readers. Democracy depends on voters being informed, so local media has a vital role to play in reporting on their local democratic institutions and by holding politicians and quango chiefs to account.
- But crusading, award-winning journalism is becoming harder to maintain given the year-on-year cuts to newsroom budgets and the failure of the big news organisations to invest in quality journalism.
- Research commissioned by the NUJ, found that the majority of people in the UK (58%) no longer have a local daily newspaper, 45 per cent of local authority districts are served by a single publisher and more than 418 journalist jobs have been cut in the past 17 months. The report, *Mapping changes in local news 2015-2017: more bad news for democracy*, by Dr Gordon Ramsay, deputy director of King's College London's, Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, showed a net loss of nine titles between November 2015 and March 2017, with 22 titles closing and 13 launching.
- Newsquest shed the most jobs, with the loss of 139 posts in the past 17 months. Trinity Mirror cut 102 in total; Johnston Press announced projected losses of 100 jobs, while Archant announced 68 cuts. Other losses added up to a total of 418. However, this is thought to be the tip of the iceberg. The figures were obtained from reports in NUJ press releases, Press Gazette and Hold the Front Page website. There will be cases where announcements were not made or where vacancies have not been filled.
- According to the Press Gazette, there has been a net loss of almost 200 newspapers since 2005 and during this period the number of journalists working on remaining

titles has more than halved. Numerous daily titles have gone to weekly publication and many weekly titles no longer have dedicated editorial teams.

### Media Plurality

- Four publishers account for almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of local newspaper titles across the UK (Trinity Mirror, Johnston Press, Newsquest and Tindle Newspapers). The purchase of Local World by Trinity Mirror in October 2015 led to a substantial reduction of plurality across the local press. Six Local World newspapers have closed, including one daily, the Nuneaton News. More than 60 jobs have gone and Local World offices have been closed in Hertfordshire and Leicester. **This is why an inquiry into the local press must consider the lack of media pluralism – this lack of choice and loss of voices is the legacy these mergers and buy-outs have created.** A healthy democracy needs as many voices as possible. These media giants are closing local offices and concentrating journalists into hubs – taking them away from the local communities they are supposed to be reporting on.
- *Monopolising local news* concluded: “The present newspaper market cannot provide what society needs in sufficient quality or quantity. What is required, we argue, is a set of local news policy interventions that can stimulate independent, pluralistic, local news.”

### Democratic deficit

- Other research has shown that there is a link between the quality of local news and election turn-out. Journalist Dr Rachel Howells of Cardiff University’s Centre for Community Journalism doctoral thesis, *Journey to the centre of a news black hole, June 2016* analysed the effect of the 2009 closure of its weekly newspaper, the Port Talbot Guardian, on the local community. She found that when journalists were removed from the community, civic engagement declined. Local people became reliant on rumour and speculation, even depending on graffiti for information. A significant discovery was that election turnout averages in council, Welsh Assembly and general elections, which had historically been above national averages in the local Aberavon constituency, fell and subsequently remained below the national average around the time of the closure of the newspaper’s district offices. This suggests in stark terms the likelihood of a serious democratic deficit following the withdrawal of local print journalists from the community.

### Digital journalism ... and clickbait

- The drop in advertising revenue and the move from print to digital, with newspaper groups making their websites free and then increasing the cover price of newspapers, have had a deleterious effect on circulation. While digital traffic is growing, the advertising revenue is not following. 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, Marketing 20:20 (December 2016), 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.”
- **That is why an inquiry should examine ways these companies can make amends by funding a levy to help start-up media companies and encourage public interest journalism.**
- Digital journalism allows newspapers to track which stories and topics are popular with readers. This can be a useful tool, but NUJ members are concerned that it is being used in a crude fashion to increase clickbait – stories with teasing and often celebrity-led headlines to hook readers in and offered as a lure for advertisers. This makes quick-hit stories more attractive as a way of scoring reader “hits”, rather than long-term investigations, council reports and public interest journalism.
- The NUJ research report launched in Parliament this week, showed that the Newcastle-based Northern Echo published 992 articles mentioning Kim Kardashian (2.3 articles per day) – she may be a canny lass, but can hardly be described as a Geordie – leading the report’s authors to say “there are serious grounds for concern about the extent to which digital local news is performing the traditional – essential – role in their local communities”.
- Following concerns raised by the NUJ about the future of quality journalism at Media Wales (Trinity Mirror), all four parties in the Welsh Assembly pledged their support for the union’s campaign against clickbait targets. When Trinity Mirror started a trial at the Manchester Evening News to measure reporters’ work by the “click-ability” of their stories on the web, NUJ members in Merseyside, North Wales, Newcastle, Birmingham and Coventry opted to ballot for industrial action. They were followed by their colleagues at the Manchester Evening News. Management, after negotiation with the union, agreed to back down on setting individual targets.

### **Commercial pressure**

- The desperate newspaper market is having an effect on editorial freedom, research has shown. Dr Rachel Matthews, principal lecturer in journalism at Coventry University, found that, based on interviews with journalists and editors on publications in the Midlands, pressure of advertising meant they concentrated on certain readers and readers in certain areas who were more likely to be attractive to advertisers. She said this undermined the idea that most local journalists have, that newspapers exist for the good of the community. “The position of editorial independence is challenged by the need to secure a revenue stream so that advertisers are favoured in editorial columns and the line between advertising and editorial becomes ‘blurred’,” she noted. The latest edition of Private Eye (number 1440) maintains that Archant’s New European failed to run a story about a number of its property section advertisers.

### **Pay & Newspaper profits**

- Many local paper journalists are on poverty wages, often unable to live in the area they are reporting on. A survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Journalists in the UK, by Dr Neil Thurman, Professor of Communication, LMU Munich; Dr Alessio Cornia, Research Fellow at the Reuters ISJ, University of Oxford, and Dr Jessica Kunert, postdoctoral researcher, LMU Munich (2016), found that one in five earns less than £19,200, close to the living wage and nowhere enough to save for a deposit on a flat.
- Journalists at Johnston Press have been told they face a six-month pay freeze – this means many will not have their next pay review until 2018. Ashley Highfield, the company’s chief executive, received £1.65 million in 2014, with £645,000 awarded as a bonus, half of which was paid in shares. His salary and bonus package fell to £581,000 in 2015. Women journalists will find themselves worse off than their male colleagues, more than half of women earned less than £2,400 a month compared with 35 per cent of men.
- Despite the loss of revenue since the switch to digital, many publishers are still making healthy profits. Johnston Press profit margins have averaged between 15 per cent and 20 per cent in recent years, while profit before tax in 2015 was £31.5 million. Trinity Mirror’s operating profit in 2016 was £137.5 million and its annual statement forecast savings from the Local World integration would be £15 million.