



NUJ briefing for Westminster Hall debate on Local News Matters, Wales

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 gone 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.
- 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 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>

In its media manifesto for Wales, the National Union of Journalists called for a publically-owned, fee-funded BBC and greater oversight and scrutiny of public service broadcasting in Wales by the Welsh Government and Assembly, plus a vibrant and properly-resourced S4C funded and managed in Wales. ITV in Wales must be committed to public-service provision of news and current affairs and play a central role in shining a light on Welsh life.

The manifesto reported a crisis in the media in Wales with cuts to journalist posts which has resulted in less coverage of democratic institutions. It said: "A Wales where government

operates, unreported and unchallenged, is a weaker Wales. A Wales where courts pass judgements that affect individuals and society as a whole, untroubled by the critical presence of the press, is a weaker Wales. A Wales where sporting triumph, eisteddfodau crowning or community campaigning goes unheralded is a weaker Wales."

The union recently renewed its call for the establishment of an expert news advisory group by the Welsh government after it emerged that £340,000 had been paid to Newsquest to set up a subbing hub in Newport which is now closing. Newsquest which owns the Newport-based South Wales Argus, opened the sub-editing hub in 2013. It once employed 70 staff and was set up to take on the production of 100 daily and weekly newspapers across the UK as sub-editors on local titles were made redundant. Numbers at the hub were reduced following rounds of cuts and the last 14 members of staff are to go. Newsquest reported profit of £69m on turnover of £279m in the year it received this Welsh government handout. The Welsh Government confirmed Newsquest also received support under the Skills Growth Wales programme in 2013/2014, claiming £95,226.72. The NUJ said: "Is there another company as incompetent and brutal in equal measure? The company has shed many of its experienced and talented sub-editors on titles across the UK and has now ditched the dedicated editing team in Newport."

Trinity Mirror, Media Wales, is the most prominent local news publisher, owning the daily Western Mail, Daily Post and South Wales Echo and a stable of more than 10 weekly publications covering areas in both south and north Wales. Trinity Mirror has taken over Local World titles of the daily South Wales Evening Post and two weekly titles – the Carmarthen Journal and Llanelli Star. This has led to the merger of the Swansea-based South Wales Evening Post website with its Wales Online platform. In 1999 there were almost 700 editorial and production staff at Media Wales.

At the end of 2015 Media Wales employed 100 production staff, plus 57 in sales and distribution and 11 in administrative roles. As in the rest of the newspaper industry, the company is struggling to replace lost print revenue, from sales and advertising, with new digital revenue. Huge increases in the number of website clicks have not been matched by anything like an equivalent increase in digital advertising revenue, with the consequence that the company imposes cuts on a seemingly never-ending basis.

Trinity Mirror makes no secret of its practice of cutting what it describes as "traditional roles" and replacing them with more digitally-focused roles. The NUJ is concerned that this is leading to a loss of reporting specialists who are experts in their field. Trinity Mirror's business model is based on increasing the number of visitors to its websites, and the concern is that this is leading to a greater emphasis on lighter, lifestyle-type material at the expense of more traditional coverage of councils. With greatly-slimmed down newsrooms, our members have noticed an acceleration in this trend, which is very worrying in the context of wanting a better-informed electorate.

The union also has concerns that despite having taken over Local World titles such as the South Wales Evening Post, inferior pay and conditions persist at former Local World centres. In a recent redundancy round, for example, Media Wales Cardiff journalists and South Wales Evening Post journalists were in the same redundancy pools, yet while Media Wales employees were entitled to two weeks' pay for every year of completed service, ex-Local World employees were entitled only to the statutory minimum of one week's pay for every year of completed service. In the event, the matter didn't go to selection because two Media Wales journalists took voluntary redundancy.

People are doing their best with ever-diminished resources, but it becomes increasingly difficult. However, due to the dedication of our members and the long hours they put in, quality journalism still exists, for example the widely-praised coverage of the Aberfan Disaster around its 50th anniversary last October.

Last year, NUJ members at Trinity Mirror North Wales voted to ballot for industrial action over the company's plans which moved Daily Post's political reporter to North Wales, resulting in no specialist based in Cardiff covering the Welsh Assembly. The plans resulted in unfilled roles, including the newspaper's executive editor, and the abolition of one digital reporter. This followed two former Daily Post reporters being transferred within Trinity Mirror and not being replaced.

As part of the BBC's local democracy reporters' (LDRs) scheme, which is using £8m of licence-fee payers' money to fund reporters to work for commercially-owned local newspapers covering councils, Wales has been given an allocation of 11 so-called LDRs. During correspondence with Welsh Assembly AM Simon Thomas over the sacking of the Daily Post's political correspondent covering the Assembly from Cardiff, Trinity Mirror's CEO, Simon Fox, said: "It is worth you knowing that we remain in discussions with the BBC about synergistic working. It may be, emerging from this, that further improvements to our political coverage may be possible." The NUJ needs to have assurances that vacancies are not plugged by these LDRs. This would be a very cynical use of the scheme.

Journalists at the Daily Post discovered their office was closing in a press release from Lidl supermarket, which is planning to take over the site for redevelopment. The newspaper staff is to move to new facilities five miles away in Colwyn Bay later this year after 16 years at its office in Vale Road, Llandudno Junction, Wales. The title has an average daily circulation of 21,802 copies and records 99,963 unique daily visitors to its website, according to the latest ABC figures. The Post team will share space with staff on the North Wales Weekly News, the Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald and the Bangor and Holyhead Mail series in the new office – making up about 30 journalists in all. The Press Gazette said the staff had not been consulted and knew nothing about it until they read the Lidl press release.

There are substantial Welsh towns that do not have a local newspaper or professional journalists covering them, such as Neath and Port Talbot (combined population 88,000) since their newspapers were closed by Trinity Mirror in 2009. The population of Neath-Port Talbot county borough, the eighth largest local authority in Wales, was 141,000, according to the 2011 census.

The Port Talbot Magnet, a not-for-profit community co-operative, was set up seven years ago with a £10,000 grant from the Carnegie Trust. Despite breaking many stories and being popular with readers, the economic pressures on all businesses in Port Talbot following the steel crisis made it impossible to support a local news service through advertising alone and in September 2016 the paper was closed.

In April 2015, more than 100 people, including council leaders and local MPs gathered at Turf Square, Caernarfon, to protest against Trinity Mirror's proposal to close its Caernarfon office. Once dubbed the Welsh capital of ink, Caernarfon had long been associated with journalism and the Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald has existed in various guises since 1831. The chapel said it would also take journalists further away from the communities they are meant to serve and would affect the Welsh language service the company would be able to offer customers and readers should the office close.

The NUJ has been reporting problems in the industry for some time. Wales has a long, strong and proud newspaper industry, but its future is in crisis, Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, told the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on the media in Wales in July 2012: "As local newspaper groups are bought up by large conglomerates with headquarters in London and the USA, Welsh newspapers have found they are losing their distinctive voice. The industry is being hit by the UK and worldwide crisis – in the past seven years, 20 per cent of the UK's local papers have closed with only 70 new launches.

"The blame has been put on the transition to the internet with a lot of content being made free, the drop in advertising revenue caused by the recession and falling circulations. But it is not as simple as that. 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. But these profits were not invested in the business. When Sly Bailey, Trinity Mirror's chief executive, left the group last month year, she had pocketed more than £14 million, despite the workforce being cut by a half and a share price that plummeted by 90 per cent during her tenure."

A common response of owners such as Trinity Mirror is to point to their substantial gains in digital audience share, but this belies the loss of journalists from newsrooms and, just as importantly, from local communities as newsrooms have become centralised. Hard copy newspapers remain important resources for many communities, but more important are

the journalists they employ, and the duties of information provision, representation and scrutiny they provide in the service of local democracy. Recent research into the impact of so-called 'news black holes' on audiences has recently been carried out at Cardiff University. The study examined the town of Port Talbot following the 2009 closure of its weekly newspaper, the Port Talbot Guardian. Its findings include:

- Local people were heavily reliant on word of mouth for their news, meaning rumour and speculation were key features of any public debate or discussion.
- Local institutions were opaque and it was difficult for members of the public to navigate them, to obtain information, get answers to their queries, or complain.
- People were falling back on unconventional means to obtain information, including protest graffiti.
- Frustration and anger was common and it was most marked in the youngest members of the community. They spoke at length about their willingness to riot to make their voices heard.
- News provision by traditional media had been diminishing in quality for many decades as resources were withdrawn from newsrooms, but important markers of quality deteriorated more rapidly when journalists were dislocated from their communities at the closure of the last two local newspaper district offices.
- A significant finding 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 newspapers' district offices. This suggests in stark terms the likelihood of a serious democratic deficit following the withdrawal of local print journalists from the community.

In November, 2016 Trinity Mirror announced plans to close its Cardiff printing press with 33 jobs affected.

There have been more than 100 job cuts at BBC Wales since 2012, with £10m slashed from programming budgets in the same period. Investment in English language programming has fallen by 32 per cent in real terms in the past decade. Despite this, the BBC in Wales continues to play a central role in the lives of the people of Wales.

BBC Wales has two reporters and a producer covering Westminster.

The most popular regular programme is BBC Wales Today's 6.30pm bulletin which attracts an average audience of 293,000 an episode. BBC Radio Wales has an average of 384,000 listeners each week with BBC Radio Cymru attracting 104,000 weekly listeners. Almost 3.5m people use the BBC Wales English language website each week with 89,000 using the Welsh language online service on a weekly basis. [2015 figures]

Funding for S4C has been cut by £18.2m since 2009. Its Newyddion 9 news bulletin is watched by 18,000 viewers per episode while the political debate programme Pawb a'i Farn attracts 13,000 viewers per episode. S4C regularly attracted audiences of above 20,000 for eisteddfodau coverage in 2014/15.

There is no published separate budget for ITV Cymru Wales, though estimates based on Ofcom sources put it at about £7 million. The overall budget for all ITV's English regional and Welsh output is £64 million, down from more than £100 million and now frozen in cash terms. The gap between the programme makers' ambition and their financial resources is sometimes apparent, for example ITV Cymru Wales rugby world cup programmes lacked pitch-side presentation, unlike ITV network (and S4C).

Across the sector, public service broadcasters remain key providers of quality employment for creative talent and further cuts will only hit content and reduce opportunities in the creative sector in Wales.

The NUJ has been campaigning for a number of years for an economic stimulus plan for the media. The union supports the need for government subsidies and tax advantages for local newspapers. The NUJ has called for the strategic use of central and local government advertising and tax credits and tax breaks for local media that meet clearly defined public purposes. It has also called on the Welsh government to hold an inquiry into the future of the media.

Our campaign demands:

- A short, sharp, national, parliamentary inquiry into the state of local news in the UK & a separate inquiry into the Welsh media.
- Local papers should be treated as community assets.
- New rules to prevent local media outlets from closing overnight – they should be offered to potential new owners, including local co-operatives, with the time available to submit a bid for alternative media ownership in advance of any closure.
- Action by government and employers to stem the relentless job cuts.
- Increasing investment, from a range of sources, for quality local journalism.

Our campaign aims to reclaim a vital, vigorous press that is at the heart of the community it serves and is owned and operated in the public interest.

There has been support for the NUJ's Local News Matters Week from the Welsh Assembly, including a statement of opinion (OPIN-2017-0033 – Local News Matters Week) which called for local papers to be treated as community assets; new rules to prevent local media outlets from closing overnight – they should be offered to potential new owners, including local co-operatives, with the time available to submit a bid for alternative media ownership in

advance of any closure; action by government and employers to stem the relentless job cuts; and increasing investment, from a range of sources, for quality local journalism.

Local BBC reporting – online news in North Wales:

In 2018, BBC Wales News Online will be celebrating 20 years of delivering online news services for Wales, rising from the analogue glory of BBC Ceefax through to its interactive, omnipresent incarnation on your desktop, tablet and mobile smart phone.

Not surprisingly, it is not the online service it was two decades ago – it has evolved and adapted.

But what has that meant for local news coverage, grassroots journalism serving all areas of Wales? Has the evolution of online news and the BBC mantra of digital first seen a growth in local news services online?

The simple answer is no.

About 10 years ago in north Wales, the online offering was being served by both a dedicated news service and a magazine operation, in the guise of the Where I Live teams. BBC Bangor and BBC Wrexham each had a producer, researcher and news reporter dedicated to serving the north-west Wales and north-east Wales regions. These services were put to the sword in a reorganisation prompted by complaints of the newspaper industry that the BBC was over-stepping its remit, and hitting local newspapers.

It resulted in one producer role in north Wales merging into the general news online services, along with the two reporters. The researcher posts were lost entirely, while another producer took voluntary redundancy. The Where I Live sites were closed and local news need was supposed to be met by the regional news indexes.

So what is the position today?

The English language, News Online in north Wales is now covered by three posts – half the number of 10 years ago. But not a single member of this north Wales online team is dedicated to covering north Wales stories. They are in the general online shift mix, working rotas to maintain the site and stories from a Wales-wide perspective.

Of course, they do cover north Welsh stories, and will be the go-to people when a story demands and when they are able to be freed from their wider Wales briefs and rotas. But, that tends to be the exception, rather than the norm. It is not uncommon for individual journalists to find they have only a single shift in a week where they are free to be deployed to north Wales stories, or working on original journalism in their region of Wales.

The regional indexes for the areas are poorly populated with stories, often no more than seven items at a time, and too often just two or three changed each day.

It is worth noting that the Welsh-language Cymru Fyw offering is also now in the mix – with about four posts in north Wales contributing to its output. Again, though, this is a Wales-wide brief – not a north Wales remit. There is no doubt that BBC Wales online news in both languages has benefitted from considerable investment in recent years. But there is clearly a question on whether this has filtered down to a regional level in terms of local news coverage.

All this is in a back drop where the dominant media player across north Wales, Trinity Mirror has closed many of its weekly newspaper offices and centralised operations for its daily news operations of the Daily Post.

Reorganisation of BBC Wales services to meet complaints from the newspaper industry has worsened that position, while the response of the newspaper industry was not to invest in the perceived local hole being left by the BBC – but to actually accelerate cuts to its local reporting. But, should public bodies, such as the BBC, be investing licence-fee cash in the private sector, rather than back into its own local services? Past recent history of local newspapers investment in its own local journalism here in north Wales does not fill you with confidence.

- Journey to the centre of a news black hole: examining the democratic deficit in a town with no newspaper, Rachel Howells <https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/journey-to-the-centre-of-a-news-black-hole-examining-the/>