

Saving the local news media: what Matt Hancock's review needs to know



Local news must be seen as a public good rather than as a profitable commodity, argues [Julie Firmstone](#). It is this idea that must guide the new government review of UK press sustainability, so that the focus is on rethinking the conditions needed to produce local news rather than merely on the profitability of the sector.

The focus of the [government review](#) of the sustainability of the local press is long overdue. But its current focus on the market risks avoiding the stark reality of what is being lost: local journalism in the public interest. Local news needs to be treated as a public good if we want it to operate in the interests of citizens rather than media companies.

Warnings of a crisis in local news have grown louder and louder. The National Union of Journalists' campaign 'Local News Matters' warned of the inability of the local press to adequately cover the 2015 general election and has supported journalists' strikes over 'poverty' pay. Following the [Grenfell Tower](#) tragedy, introspective journalists drew attention to an 'accountability vacuum' left by the decline of the local press. The Media Reform Coalition has long campaigned for a reduction in the concentration of ownership to increase the plurality of local news. Academic research, including [my own](#), tells a story of local news in a context of perilous uncertainty, struggling to fulfil the crucial roles of fostering civil engagement or to hold power to account.

These warnings recognise the [vital role](#) local news plays in communities and for citizens. In contrast, the review appears to be fuelled by fear of the dominance of the new (tax avoiding) kids on the block, Google and Facebook, and the government's manifesto promise to ensure that "content creators are appropriately rewarded for the content they make available online" (a.k.a the five dominant publishers who together own 81% of local newspapers).

Whatever has tipped the balance the review is welcome, but its terms of reference must benefit the public interest. The current focus on finding sustainable business models and ensuring they receive a fair share of advertising revenues is crucial, but such models must recognise that local journalism is not any old product, it is a public good. Far more is at stake than the profitability of a market sector. Ensuring a local media ecology that is fit to serve the interests of the public in the digital era requires a reassessment of what constitutes local news. If the review's recommendations are to move us any closer to the stated aim to ensure "high quality" journalism which underpins "democratic political discourse" it cannot overlook research which exposes the realities of the dynamics of the crisis in local news.

Research [mapping changes](#) in local news shows that a decline in resources has resulted in an increase in desk-based journalism and churnalism, a lack of scrutiny at council meetings, fewer resources for investigative journalism, and a severe reduction in the ability of the press to serve as a watchdog. In addition to concerns about democratic quality, the plurality, diversity, and relevance of local news to communities is also under threat. Reductions in resources are shifting the geography of the places that are served, resulting in local news that is less local. Many newspapers have either closed or moved from daily to weekly publication creating news 'black holes' and leaving the majority of the UK [not served](#) by a local daily newspaper. The market is [highly concentrated](#) and the organisational strategies of the five dominant publishers to merge operations have resulted in [major job losses](#), office closures, and the physical relocation of staff to places away from the localities they cover. Creating such deep cultural and professional [distances](#) increases the likelihood that journalists will get things wrong or miss them altogether – e.g. Grenfell.



[Research](#) also points to the demand for joined up policy and regulation which considers the future of the local press in the context of the broader local media ecology. Although [Matt Hancock](#) says the review does not intend to intervene with public subsidies, reconsidering the role of public service media at a local level may be unavoidable. News is no longer consumed or produced in distinct silos of newspapers, radio, and TV. The combination of a free press, television news with public service broadcasting obligations and commercial radio is already failing to meet the needs of local citizens. The BBC and ITV regional television news are not set up to address any of the failings of the local press. They are not local news providers. Their regional remit along with restricted airtime limits the stories they can cover. Their valuable provision of impartial news prevents them intervening in debates and providing the opinions necessary to inform public deliberation.

Of course, other new sources of local information and news have emerged. Yet [my research](#) shows new entrants online tend to be hyperlocal, serve niche audiences, have aims and values that differ from professional journalists, and face far greater threats to their sustainability than the press. The value of the 23 new local TV stations is questionable. Many have already retreated from requirements to provide local news and add little by way of plurality or diversity, with news that replicates that already provided by the BBC and ITV. New entrants [cannot yet fill the gaps](#) left by a declining legacy news media and while they make a “genuine contribution to [local plurality](#)” they are not currently a replacement for the core functions of the mainstream media.

These dynamics remind us that the challenges encountered by the local press were palpable long before Google and Facebook made a grab for advertising revenue. Any interventions which serve to protect the interests of newspaper groups should come with a regulatory obligation to provide local news of the quality needed by local citizens and communities. There is already concern because contracts for over 130 of the 150 local democracy reporters funded by the BBC have been awarded to the dominant newspaper groups. This does nothing to support the diverse and, in some cases highly innovative, offerings of new online providers and uses public money to fund journalism that newspapers should already have been providing.

Finally, if the government is serious about its aims, the panel should include representatives who feel strongly about promoting the democratic quality of news on behalf of the citizens who consume it. The voices of academics, campaigners, and newly emerging small community publishers must be a counterbalance to those with “experience of the sector”.

About the Author



Julie Firmstone is an Associate Professor of Media and Communication at the School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds. Her publications include *Mapping Changes in Local News* in *Journalism Practice*, 2016; *Rethinking local communicative spaces* with Stephen Coleman in Nielsen, R (Ed.) *Local Journalism: The decline of newspapers and the rise of digital media*. I.B.Tauris, 2015; and she is a co-author with Coleman S and Thumim N, Birchall C, Firmstone J, Moss G, Parry K, Stamper J, and Blumler of *The Mediated City: The News in a Post-Industrial Context*, Zed, London, 2016.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image credit: [Pixabay](#) (Public Domain).