
Of and For Wales:

Towards a Sustainable Future for
Public Interest Journalism

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Our vision: Journalism as a public service

We want to live in a Wales where all citizens have access to trustworthy, high-quality information and healthy debate about their own communities, local and national institutions, as well as the wider world, so that everyone can play a full part in democratic culture and decision-making processes. We want a media that plays a vital part in helping to build and shape national and local identity, contributing to Welsh language, culture and a sense of shared history and a shared future, binding communities together, contributing to social cohesion and supporting the wellbeing of Wales' people, now and in future generations.

In order to realise this vision we need a thriving, diverse and editorially independent media landscape, accessible to every community in Wales - in both English and Welsh. Journalists providing content in the public interest will be well trained and well paid, and will be not only representative of the people and communities they serve, but fully engaged in local life. A diverse media also means a mixed ecology: providers of public interest journalism in Wales will range from large commercial operations to smaller independent outlets. Important public information will be widely disseminated throughout the entire information ecosystem in Wales.

Public interest journalism - our definition

Defining public interest news has become an area of engaged discussion in the policy sphere, academia and the media itself, with many debates about precisely what is meant. The Working Group was informed by Terms of Reference that used a broad definition of public interest news, as information that is produced and disseminated to the public according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism and which provides one or more of the following benefits to the public:

- informs members of the public about matters of relevance to them and their lives, as well as their role and responsibilities as members of the community.
- enables members of local communities to become aware of and understand matters of common concern and which promotes their involvement and cooperation in such matters and community cohesion accordingly.
- enables members of the public to participate in an informed manner in relevant democratic processes and, as a result, supports the legitimacy of the democratic process as a whole.
- benefits the public by promoting greater understanding of issues that affect everyone, for example health and medical matters or the conservation of the environment.

We believe:

Public interest journalism should be defined, understood and promoted as a public service, vital to the health of local, national and global democracy. In the light of the numerous challenges outlined in this paper, and the various precedents that exist in Wales, particularly in the Welsh language, and elsewhere, there should be no reticence about using public funds to support public interest journalism.

Public interest journalism must be able to operate independently, without fear or favour, and therefore separation between government and the fourth estate is vital.

Foreward: Journalism of and for Wales

Wales is not alone in grappling with the critical challenges facing public interest journalism in the digital age. The Cairncross Review was a comprehensive report focused on ‘a sustainable future for journalism’ commissioned by the UK Government in 2019¹ and a DCMS committee inquiry considered similar issues in January 2023². The global Forum on Information & Democracy published its New Deal for Journalism in 2021³. Scotland’s News: towards a sustainable future for public interest journalism made recommendations in the Scottish context that same year. And a Guardian editorial summarised the severity of the crisis as recently as March 5, 2023, opening with the claim that ‘there are probably fewer local newspapers in Britain now than at any time since the 18th century’⁴.

The digital age has revolutionised the information climate globally, with hugely significant effects – both positive and negative – at national and local levels. As a result, a small number of technology companies, primarily based in the United States, have become immensely rich and powerful. Amazon, Apple, Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, Meta (Facebook and Instagram), Twitter, and Snapchat between them generate revenue of more than \$900 billion, carrying market valuations of over a trillion dollars. As a result all democratic governments are grappling with issues of how to ensure ‘Big Tech’ can be regulated to ensure its positive effects are enhanced and promoted and its negative effects mitigated.

Meanwhile, long-term decline has accelerated in the printed newspaper industry with more than 320 local titles closed in the UK between 2009 and 2019 as advertising revenues fell by about 70%⁵. Meanwhile, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism reports just seven per cent of online adults in the UK currently pay for digital news services, while 50% have said that they would be unwilling to pay⁶. Where business models are broken, market failure follows. And while the challenges for public interest journalism are undoubtedly global, there are additional issues that pertain specifically to Wales, and therefore demand Welsh solutions. The 2022 Ofcom news consumption survey confirms two trends that have often been noted in recent years: the dominance of London-based titles, and low levels of readership for traditional newspapers generally. For example the Daily Mail / Mail on Sunday reaches 14 per cent of the Welsh population and the Western Mail / Wales On Sunday / WalesOnline app reaches 10 per cent, a figure that doesn’t include the circulation of the Daily Post, South Wales Echo and South Wales Evening Post⁷.

In Scotland, UK titles often have a different front page story to their ‘England and Wales’ editions, and report on Scottish stories, including sports stories, and have reporters based in Scotland. In Wales, the ‘democratic deficit’ is acute. Of the British daily newspapers produced from outside Wales only the Morning Star employs a reporter in Wales. None of the mainstream ‘national’ UK papers employs a journalist

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf

² <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33635/documents/183838/default/>

³ https://informationdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ForumID_New-Deal-for-Journalism_16Jun21.pdf

⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107475/html/>

⁵ https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107659/html/#_ftnref4

⁶ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

⁷ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/242704/wales-report-2022.pdf

based in Wales, and this inevitably leads to a lack of coverage of news from and about the country, even by comparison with Scotland and Northern Ireland. In addition, the Press Association (PA) has only one reporter to cover the whole of Wales and carries very little Welsh news on its dashboard for media outlets to use. For example, PA Media included Sir Keir Starmer's speech to the 2023 Welsh Labour conference (which was sent out to the media by the UK Labour Party's press office) but did not cover the First Minister of Wales' speech an hour later at the same conference. PA Media rarely cover proceedings at the Senedd, despite covering developments at the Scottish Parliament. At 2.30pm on March 13, 2023 PA Media had 18 stories listed for Scotland, including a daily diary schedule, compared to just two stories from Wales. There remain six daily print newspapers produced in Wales, one Sunday title and more than 30 local weekly titles. In some cases print circulation decline has been offset by digital readership growth as well as a proliferation of newer online-only providers. However, print revenues are declining and online operations are less profitable, meaning that there are fewer journalists working across all of these publications, and less journalism about Wales and its communities being done.

We must also acknowledge that while the primary focus of the Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group has been news provision via traditional newspapers and online, there are also a range of significant challenges for the broadcasting sector in Wales. Under the Cooperation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru, an Expert Panel was set up to look at the issues here, and we anticipate that our findings will strongly align with those of this panel.

The public London-based news sources often reported developments in England and English Covid-19 restrictions, which were sometimes different to Welsh Government restrictions, confusing media users in Wales. In one instance in May 2020 the UK Government paid for advertising in the Wrexham Leader in the paper edition and on its website which included guidance and restrictions for England, but which were different at the time to the restrictions in Wales⁸. The Covid-19 pandemic was a very challenging time to report in Wales but the Welsh media made huge efforts to report clearly the announcements from Cardiff Bay and Westminster and the impact these had on Wales.

Our report sets out recommendations for strategic, systemic interventions to build a sustainable public interest journalism sector in Wales. News provision should ensure all citizens have access to trustworthy, high quality information and healthy debate about their own communities, local and national institutions, as well as the wider world, so that everyone can play a full part in democratic culture and decision-making processes as part of our diverse Welsh society. Our recommendations are also intended to complement the proposed creation of a shadow Broadcasting and Communications Authority for Wales, to address wider concerns about the fragility of the Welsh media.

The Welsh Government has already shown its commitment to grip the challenges outlined in this report by facilitating the creation of the Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group, as well as its commitment to 'fund existing and new enterprises to improve Welsh-based journalism to tackle the information deficit' as part of its Cooperation Agreement with Plaid Cymru. These challenges are well documented, and many of the solutions are not easy to implement - but the consequences of failing to support the flow of reliable information in our society are too dire to contemplate. The time for action is now.

⁸ <https://record.assembly.wales/Committee/6409>

Summary of recommendations

The Welsh Government should declare public interest journalism as defined in this report as a public service and establish a Wales Media Institute. The Institute should have a broad remit to engage citizens, serve audiences and support and improve public interest journalism in Wales, and be the vehicle for a series of specific strategic funding mechanisms to ensure the long-term sustainability of the sector in Welsh, in English and multilingually.

- (i). Support the development of a **diverse, resilient journalism workforce** in Wales at all levels by developing training programmes through further education and apprenticeships; supporting innovation including co-creational models for local communities; and offering advice and support to journalists.
- (ii). Commission robust, evidence-based research to better **understand the needs of media users in Wales**.
- (iii). Initiate research and development to identify the specific needs of public interest journalism in **the Welsh language**, making further recommendations accordingly.
- (iv). Work with providers and users of public interest journalism to develop healthy levels of **media literacy** for all citizens of Wales.
- (v). Be set up as a body that could **raise funds** in support of the above objectives, and **administer grants**.
- (vi). Set up a **contestable fund** for new and existing news outlets, administered at arms-length, with clear criteria based on the needs of citizens and communities.
- (vii). Prioritise coverage of **'news deserts'** in Wales.
- (viii). Guarantee that providers of public interest journalism can bid for **public advertising and marketing campaigns**, with commitment to a minimum spend.
- (ix). Ensure that **statutory public notices** are disseminated via a range of appropriate providers of public interest journalism in Wales.
- (x). Support and confer **'asset of community value'** status on local newspapers to ensure titles are preserved.

Next step

Welsh Government should support a robust and transparent process to appoint a steering committee to oversee the establishment of a Wales Media Institute, and commit to a budget of at least £1m a year to arms-length support for public interest journalism.

Wales Media Institute

Context

Given that the Welsh Government's work on strengthening the media in Wales also involves exploring 'the establishment of a shadow broadcasting and communications authority for Wales', we believe there is considerable merit in considering how the functions of such a body might overlap and dovetail with the aims of a public interest journalism Wales Media Institute.

The establishment of a public interest journalism Wales Media Institute would be at arm's-length from the government, allowing it the ability to invest directly in local news and innovative journalistic projects.

The purpose of the Institute would be to serve citizens and media users in Wales by scrutinising the quality, reliability and sustainability of media outlets operating here, and it would be tasked with delivering the majority of the recommendations contained within this report.

Considering our report together with that produced by the Expert Panel on the devolution of broadcasting has the added benefit of supporting the stated ambition to 'bring together and coordinate in a structured way the Welsh Government's existing efforts to strengthen the media in Wales and innovations to support the Welsh language in the digital sphere'.

Actions

- Appoint a steering group to work toward the establishment of the Wales Media Institute, fully funded on an ongoing basis by the Welsh Government. It could also be set up as a body with the ability to raise its own funds.

(i) A diverse, resilient journalism workforce

The Wales Media Institute should support the development of a diverse, resilient journalism workforce in Wales through training programmes, further education and apprenticeships; supporting innovation including co-creational models for local communities; and offering advice and support to journalists.

Context

Public interest journalism has faced a number of significant challenges in recent years, including declining newspaper circulations, an increase in alternative news sources, the challenge of tech firms both as sources of content and as vehicles for advertising, and ongoing questions about the reliability and objectivity of news sources. Many are long-term problems, but the pandemic also deepened and accelerated the challenges faced by the sector.

The number of positions in traditional mainstream journalism in Wales is declining (with the BBC newsroom cutting jobs and many newspapers in Wales reducing their staff), while journalists are increasingly faced by precarious working conditions.

Addressing diversity requires concerted action to reduce barriers for minoritised groups to train for and progress careers in journalism. Studies undertaken by the industry itself, including the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), demonstrate that the industry at a UK level is not representative of the people and communities it serves, particularly in relation to class and ethnicity⁹. Although there is a widespread assumption that this is true for Wales, there is a scarcity of data, and, in response to these challenges, Creative Wales used some of the pilot funding made available to the Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group to commission a research project, ‘Mapping the Welsh Journalism Sector:

Understanding the barriers and enablers for successful Public Interest Journalism in Wales’.

Led by researchers from Cardiff University, the project will be supported by the Institute of Welsh Affairs and Inclusive Journalism Cymru and the study is due to be completed by December 2023. It will provide comprehensive baseline data to help us:

- Understand the sector landscape.
- Identify strengths, weaknesses and areas where we can make the most difference.
- Focus on inclusion by mapping the diversity of journalists and relevant organisations across Wales, including the diversity of commissioners and decision makers, as well as identifying ‘news deserts’ within Wales.
- It will provide understanding of the range of content created, who is making it and who is consuming it, as well as the user experience of journalism in Wales, assessing the extent to which content is meeting user needs.
- It will map working conditions, contracts, pay, seniority, recruitment, retention and progression routes and processes and evaluate the efficacy of schemes and funding programmes in diversifying talent.

Actions

- The Wales Media Institute should be resourced to use the results of ‘Mapping the Welsh Journalism Sector: Understanding the barriers and enablers for successful Public Interest Journalism in Wales’ as a baseline for further research and concerted action to address recommendations arising, including education, skills development and training.

⁹ <https://www.nctj.com/publications/diversity-in-journalism-2022/>

(ii) Understanding the needs of media users

The Wales Media Institute should regularly commission robust, evidence-based research to better understand the changing needs of media users in Wales.

Context

Although it is clear that the journalism industry itself needs support in order for public interest journalism to flourish in Wales, there has also rightly been a growing focus on the needs of the audiences for whom the journalism is produced: citizens who rely on news sources to gain the understanding they need and to have the day-to-day life of their community reported. It has been widely documented that in many respects media users in Wales are not being served with the information they need to understand society, democracy and the opinions of others¹⁰. At the heart of many of these challenges lie issues with trust and engagement, with growing polarisation, a preponderance of mis- and disinformation and high levels of ‘news avoidance’. Ofcom surveys repeatedly show a low level of knowledge within Wales of devolved and reserved decision-making powers. The Covid-19 pandemic helped redress the lack of knowledge about health as a devolved area as national broadcasters and news outlets began to recognise there was a story in the different rules and approach taken by the devolved nations and the UK Government. But this was a double-edged sword as the majority of London-based newspapers sold in Wales failed to distinguish between English and Welsh Covid regulations, sowing some confusion. Although these problems are complex and multifaceted, one of the key issues in relation to ‘underserved’ media

users is the phenomenon known as ‘news deserts’, described by the Charitable Journalism Project as a ‘slow burning crisis’¹¹ (see vii). ‘News deserts’ are not only geographical. Certain communities or interest groups can also be characterised as ‘news deserts’ due to being chronically underserved by existing media; in Wales, these might include Welsh speakers, those whose first language is neither English nor Welsh, Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and socio-economically deprived communities among others. However, more research is required in order to broaden the evidence base in this area.

Actions

- The Wales Media Institute could support pilot projects exploring co-creational media models, e.g. The People’s Newsroom run by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism¹².
- The Institute should engage with the findings of the local news plan project run by the Public Interest News Foundation in Bangor¹³.
- The Institute should scope and commission further research as necessary to better understand and support media users and providers in Wales¹⁴.

¹⁰ www.iwa.wales/wp-content/media/IWA-OU_Citizens-Voice-Peoples-News_ENG.pdf

¹¹ www./publicbenefitnews.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/local-news-deserts-in-the-uk.pdf

¹² [Peoples' Newsroom](https://www.peoplesnewsroom.com/)

¹³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107475/html/>

¹⁴ https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107659html/#_ftnref4

(iii) The Welsh language

The Wales Media Institute should initiate research and development to identify the specific needs of public interest journalism through the Welsh language, and make further recommendations accordingly.

Context

The Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group has overwhelmingly conducted its business through the medium of English and primarily focused on issues facing English language publications in Wales. We are very aware that although there is significant overlap, many challenges affecting the production, dissemination and consumption of public interest news in Welsh are specific to the language and its overall context. For example, the Welsh Government's own research on social use of the Welsh language shows that just under a half of Welsh speakers (48%) 'mainly or always use English' on Twitter and other social media, demonstrating the scale of the challenges posed to 'normalised use' of the language by the dominance of English in the digital sphere¹⁴.

Conversely, there are also areas where the distinct culture and heritage around the production of Welsh language journalism can be instructive for the whole ecology of public interest journalism in Wales, such as the strong tradition of papurau bro, hyperlocal community newspapers that often perform many of the key functions of public interest journalism.

Much of the precedent for public purse intervention in journalism in Wales comes from the funding received by Welsh language newspapers, magazines and news websites through the Books Council of Wales, as well as their English language equivalents. We believe there is scope and good reason to expand the funding available for such schemes, and that in addition to the benefits for public interest journalism and participatory democracy, there would be additional added value for the Welsh-medium education sector and the Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 target. As more people are able to understand Welsh, an enhanced Welsh-language media landscape must be supported to meet their needs.

Actions

- In determining the process to appoint a steering group for the Wales Media Institute, Welsh Government should set a quota of group members who are Welsh speakers and have appropriate experience and expertise in relation to public interest journalism in the Welsh language.
- The Institute should prioritise issues related to the Welsh language sector and a specific R&D budget to further work on identifying the primary issues and areas for intervention in relation to journalism in Welsh (including training and workforce issues as detailed below).

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.wales/social-use-welsh-language-july-2019-march-2020-html#109587>

(iv) Media literacy

The Wales Media Institute should work with providers and users of public interest journalism to develop healthy levels of media literacy for all citizens of Wales.

Context

At the same time as allowing a new generation of public interest news publishers into the market, the digital revolution has also made unreliable information readily available. So-called ‘fake news’, promoted by self-interested or destructive groups makes it all the more essential that open societies find ways of supporting genuine journalistic activity that keeps the public properly informed.

The rise in understanding about the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation has led to a wave of research and initiatives aimed at educating the public, and particularly young people, about the dangers of misinformation – particularly online. In Wales these include the Digital Competence Framework embedded into Curriculum for Wales; Ofcom’s Making Sense of Media network¹⁵, and its research that shows a higher level of trust in television news compared to that of news websites¹⁶; online safety workshops run by SWGfL in partnership with TikTok¹⁷; and the rise of charities devoted to promoting digital literacy, such as Newport-based WISE KIDS¹⁸.

However, there is also a need to rebalance the concept of media literacy by shifting the onus, from media users being ‘trained to decode’ content and identify misinformation, biases etc. to media literacy and transparency for producers. In line with our vision for journalism in Wales, The Wales Media Institute

should support initiatives which allow journalists working in Wales the opportunity to produce accessible, high-quality content that relies much less on putting users in a position where they have to ‘work out’ whether they can trust what they are reading, seeing or listening to, and instead instil them with the confidence to engage confidently and have their own voices heard.

Actions

- The Wales Media Institute could become a hub for a nationwide transparency and media literacy strategy to mitigate the effects of mis/disinformation and fake news.
- The Institute should work with appropriate partners to develop resources to be disseminated via a range of appropriate methods.
- The Institute should work with journalists, news outlets and appropriate regulatory bodies (e.g. IPSO and IMPRESS) to ensure content produced in Wales adheres to the highest standards of transparency, reliability, accessibility and accountability.

¹⁵ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research>

¹⁶ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/32651/wales_doc_section_6.pdf

¹⁷ <https://hwb.gov.wales/news/articles/1da6e86b-057f-4d4c-ab144f059d686a03>

¹⁸ <https://wisekids.org.uk/wk/about-us/>

(v) Raise funds and administer grants

The Wales Media Institute should be set up as a body that could raise funds in support of the objectives outlined in this report and administer grants.

Context

The myriad challenges outlined in this report are by no means unique to Wales; the crisis facing public interest journalism is global. Big Tech companies like Meta and Google have disrupted advertising revenue from news providers, while benefiting themselves from the journalism produced. As a result there are many useful precedents and examples of initiatives that democratic governments around the world are trialling and adopting to support public interest journalism in the face of the twin threats of market failure and mis/disinformation. Some of these are designed through direct market intervention, others through arm's length arrangements to avoid any suggestion of political interference. Wales can observe international models, where it is recognised that a viable media is essential to a healthy democracy:

- Norway: public subsidies for the press were introduced in 1969 for editorial production, distribution and innovation, distributed through the Norwegian Media Authority.
- Denmark: provides subsidies for editorial production and innovation through the Danish Media Board, with a focus on small and local media.
- The Netherlands: provides subsidies for local journalism, investigative journalism and innovation through the Dutch Journalism Fund.

- New Zealand: government launched a subsidy for 'at risk' journalism in 2021.
- Australia: government launched a News Media Bargaining Code, which aims to compel Google and Meta to negotiate fair terms with publishers for the news content they host on their platforms.
- Canada: government launched a range of fiscal measures to support journalism, including an income tax credit for journalists and a digital news subscription tax credit.

Actions

- Welsh Government should prepare a statement of support for the principle of public interest journalism as a public service, and provide funding for a Wales Media Institute, appointing a steering committee capable of establishing it as an independent body.
- The Wales Media Institute should constitute itself drawing on best practice globally and a robust evidence base within Wales to set clear priorities for action to support public interest journalism in the Welsh context.
- The Wales Media Institute and the Welsh Government could broker conversations with 'Big Tech' companies such as Meta and Google around potential funding for the Institute to use or specific projects.

(vi) A contestable fund

Welsh Government should ringfence part of its funding allocation for public interest journalism to be distributed via an arm's-length contestable fund.

Context

If public interest journalism in Wales is to serve all audiences and citizens, it is essential for the choice of media available across Wales to be as wide and varied as possible. Strengthening public interest journalism should be about protecting established publishers, with their strong record of serving audiences and employing journalists, and also enabling a plurality of diverse new publications to thrive, even where their target audiences are small. The working group believes that a dynamic market, sustaining differing voices, perspectives and business models, will enrich Welsh society by increasing access to informed debate. The Books Council of Wales already administers funding to magazines, websites and newspapers that deliver public interest news and content of cultural value in both Welsh and English. Funding decisions are made on the basis of a four-year cycle by an independent panel of experts, and grants administered by a small team of staff. New and existing publications are supported through the application process and through the funding period, with annual monitoring, reporting and appraisals to ensure delivery against targets. The Independent Community News Network, based at Cardiff University's Centre for Community Journalism, supports a number of hyperlocal news providers across the UK (with a high number of these in Wales). The initial tranche of pilot funding made available through the Working Group was distributed via Ping! in three key areas: (i) a small seed-funding pot

to stimulate the sector by supporting people with new ideas for sustainable community news sites; (ii) support for established independent publishers who produce public interest news; (iii) emergency support¹⁹. Such schemes offer precedent, opportunity for evaluation and a clear direction for a contestable news fund to become a permanent feature of the Welsh media landscape.

Actions

- Welsh Government should ringfence part of its funding allocation for public interest journalism to be distributed via an arm's-length contestable fund.
- The Wales Media Institute should be responsible for bringing together stakeholders with relevant expertise in administering contestable grant-funding programmes to design criteria and a distribution mechanism for the public interest journalism fund for Wales.
- The fund should be open to applications from anyone wishing to produce public interest journalism in Wales (new and existing; print and digital; national, regional and local).
- The priorities of the fund should be in line with the other recommendations made by this report: Welsh language, bilingualism and multilingualism; diversity and workforce conditions; meeting the needs of users through innovation, etc.
- Funding should be attached to robust impact tracking and appraisals to ensure accountability and to identify best practice.

¹⁹ <https://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/ping-launches-public-interest-journalism-fund-for-welsh-independent-publishers/>

(vii) Prioritise coverage of ‘news deserts’ in Wales

Welsh Government strategic funding for public interest journalism should include a fund to identify and address ‘news deserts’ in Wales.

Context

There has been a collapse in public interest journalism in many communities across Wales, with ‘news deserts’ forming as local newspapers close, move offices away from an area, or remove journalists from the locality. Especially in remote or rural areas, this can be hidden because major titles remain in place and journalists continue to work in traditional roles. However, there are also examples of ‘news deserts’ in many sizable Welsh towns. An acute example of this can be found in Port Talbot, as outlined in the extensive work of Rachel Howells, whose PhD examined the democratic deficit in a town with no newspaper²⁰. Howells showed how ‘zombie newspapers’²¹ (with scaled back staff numbers and a much smaller amount of locally relevant content) and ‘news black holes’ lead to a decline in scrutiny of local institutions and of national policies and issues with local consequences.

A lack of public interest journalism to hold authorities to account and provide a voice for local communities can have catastrophic consequences, with the decline of local press cited as a factor in the Grenfell disaster, which claimed 79 lives. In the year before the disaster, just one journalist served 160,000 people in the borough²². News deserts also create a hindrance to active citizenship and studies conducted in the United States and Scandinavia show a decline in voter engagement and turnout in elections following the loss of local sources of news²³.

In the wake of these structural collapses, a patchwork of solutions has developed, with one positive development in Wales the rise of community based ‘hyperlocal’ journalism: the country has twice the expected number of outlets relative to the UK average, perhaps partially as a result of the Independent Community News Network²⁴ being based at Cardiff University. However, community news publishing may depend on individuals: working from home, often part-time and reliant on other work for income. These publishers struggle to provide training or the full-time paid work that is essential for attracting new entrants from the whole range of our diverse society.

A notable success story is the advent of the Local Democracy Reporting Service²⁵, funded by the BBC as part of its latest Charter commitment. The scheme employs 165 reporters across the UK, allocated to organisations ranging from broadcasters to online media companies to established regional newspaper groups. LDRs cover local authorities and other public service organisations, essentially to backfill some of the ‘black holes’ or ‘news deserts’ outlined above. However if a town such as Port Talbot does not have a local newspaper then the news about its council provided by LDR reporters will not reach the town’s citizens.

Despite the best efforts of hyperlocal community news organisations and LDRs, many villages, towns and regions across Wales continue to be underserved by public service journalism, and other ‘news deserts’ exist for communities marginalised by poverty, ethnicity, language or other circumstances.

²⁰ <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/87313/>

²¹ <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s64669/Paper%205%20Port%20Talbot%20Magnet.pdf>

²² <https://theconversation.com/grenfell-tower-warnings-might-have-been-heard-if-not-for-the-collapse-of-local-journalism-117427>

²³ https://moody.utexas.edu/sites/default/files/Strauss_Research_Newspaper_Decline_2019-11-Jennings.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/about-icnn/>

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/lnp/ldrs>

(vii) Prioritise coverage of ‘news deserts’ in Wales

The Senedd itself suffers from a paucity of dedicated reporters deployed by media organisations to cover decision making at the heart of our devolved institutions. To redress this, the Working Group agreed that pilot funding be used to directly recruit a reporter whose specific role is to report on the Senedd. This is for a 12-month appointment with content generated by the reporter available to anyone. This initiative will help determine whether using public money in this way is a positive step towards better coverage of Welsh democracy.

Actions

- The Wales Media Institute should evaluate the strengths and areas for development of the Senedd Reporter pilot, and produce a best practice framework against which future interventions can be monitored and developed.
- The Wales Media Institute could explore potential interaction between papurau bro and English language hyperlocal outlets in order to support cross-fertilisation between journalism models in English and Welsh.
- Specific strategic funding should be allocated to support areas identified as ‘news deserts’ – including institutions, geographical locations and specific community or interest groups within Wales – with dedicated reporters.

(viii) Public advertising and marketing campaigns

Welsh Government should guarantee that providers of public interest journalism can bid for public advertising and marketing campaigns.

Context

One of the most devastating results of the digital revolution for providers of public interest journalism has been the sudden collapse of key revenue streams. Lucrative classified advertising quickly migrated to free, non-news related, online alternatives, and display advertising became dominated by social media and search²⁶. Although news publishers have responded to the technological challenge with new digital services, and content that now reaches far more people than their print editions ever did, maintaining advertising revenue in local and regional titles has proved virtually impossible in the face of the growing power of technology companies based overseas, which benefit from free user-generated content and data, unencumbered by editorial costs or regulatory concerns.

Where local media remains strong, it is an extremely effective way to reach people. Along with the provision of statutory public notices (see ix, below), advertising and marketing spend by public sector bodies is the most frictionless method by which the public purse can financially support public interest journalism while simultaneously promoting factual information in the public domain. This approach is also inclusive of smaller publishers who often work together to support advertising across their collective networks.

In its report, the Scottish working group on public interest journalism ‘strongly encourag[ed] the UK Government to introduce advertising tax incentives and accelerate the legislative framework necessary for the Competitions and Markets Authority’s new Digital Markets Unit to create a fairer and truly competitive digital publishing landscape’²⁷. While we note the negative response of the Scottish Government to the idea of a spend quota that must go to news providers, we suggest instead a guarantee that any Welsh Government marketing and advertising campaign will at least give news publishers an opportunity to pitch or bid for the contract.

Actions

- Welsh Government should publish an annual report detailing advertising and marketing investment through communications teams within Welsh Government, the Senedd, local authorities and other public bodies and assess where these investments could be better spent through providers of public interest journalism.
- Welsh Government should guarantee news publishers the opportunity to pitch or bid for the contract of any public advertising or marketing campaign.

²⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/785547/unlocking_digital_competition_furman_review_web.pdf

²⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-news-towards-sustainable-future-public-interest-journalism/>

(ix) Statutory public notices

Welsh Government should ensure that statutory public notices are disseminated via a range of appropriate providers of public interest journalism in Wales, in print and online, and to include both larger regional titles and smaller community-based ‘hyperlocals’.

Context

The publication of statutory notices in newspapers provides vital information to the community on a wide range of subjects, such as licensing applications, road closures and planning. At the same time such notices provide a vital revenue stream for news publishers, supporting coverage of national news, politics and current affairs, for example in the Western Mail. It should be noted that some local print titles in Wales, particularly smaller weekly titles, would no longer be viable if public notices were removed.

Legislation around public notices is complex. Notices of applications under the Licensing Act 2003 are allowed to be published online because of guidance issued by the relevant professional body. For planning, the requirement for public notices in newspapers is laid out in Welsh Statutory Instrument 2012 No. 801 (W.110). However the legislation around Traffic Notices to apply road closures is not so clear cut as the Statutory Instrument governing newspaper notices (The Secretary of State’s Traffic Orders (Procedure) (England and Wales) Regulations 1990 and The Local Authorities’ Traffic Orders (Procedure) (England and Wales) Regulations 1996) were issued before devolution. Temporary England-only guidance was issued during the Covid-19 pandemic allowing traffic notices to be published on newspaper websites²⁸.

As implied in the dates of the statutes, the system of public notices has not been adjusted to the digital era and requires significant modernisation. A key question is what constitutes ‘a newspaper circulating in the area’. The fortnightly Caerphilly Observer experienced the ambiguity here when Caerphilly County Borough Council initially refused to accept the publication as an appropriate outlet for public notices based on an antiquated dictionary definition which stated a weekly or daily publication, and was only satisfied after intervention from Wales’ Minister for Local Government.

Actions

- The Welsh Government should audit the spend from the public sector on public notices, as well as evaluating their impact.
- The Welsh Government and the Wales Media Institute should convene a conversation with the journalism industry to reform eligibility criteria for statutory public notices, as well as the distribution mechanism, with time built in to allow news providers to adjust to any changes, which should be executed carefully and gradually and signposted well in advance.

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/making-traffic-regulation-orders-during-coronavirus-covid-19/traffic-regulation-orders-guidance-on-the-traffic-orders-procedure-coronavirus>

(x) Community assets

Welsh Government should confer ‘asset of community value’ status on local newspapers to ensure titles are preserved; this should be coupled with financial and business support for local social enterprises and journalistic cooperatives taking over titles.

Context

This is a recommendation from the National Union of Journalists’ Media Recovery Plan²⁹ for Wales previously presented to the Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport, and based on a similar scheme for community takeovers of public houses. The Glamorgan Gem series of weekly newspapers closed during the Covid-19 pandemic and never restarted. The journalists and staff at the Gem have now started a fortnightly newspaper based on the Gem but retitled the Glamorgan Star. We believe that with the prospect of further newspaper closures, there should be a simple mechanism through which anyone wishing to resurrect titles that have been completely closed should be able to leverage the heritage and reputation of those most trusted by the communities they serve.

This fits with the community empowerment agenda which has broad support across the Senedd. While a 2022 IWA report, *Our Land: Communities and Land Use*³⁰, focused on land and buildings, conferring ‘asset of community value’ status on providers of public interest journalism would be a simple and effective way for Welsh Government to demonstrate commitment to the principle underpinning this report, that of public interest news as a vital public service for Welsh people and communities.

Actions

- Support communities who seek to confer ‘asset of community value’ status on local newspapers to preserve titles.

²⁹ [NUJ Media Recovery Plan for Wales](#)

³⁰ https://www.iwa.wales/wp-content/media/IWA_Our-Land-Communities-and-land-use_v5.pdf

Conclusion

The Working Group examined a range of issues impacting public interest journalism in Wales and how this has affected the larger news organisations, as well as those in the smaller independent sector. There was a wide range of views, but all members were concerned to improve and sustain public interest journalism in Wales.

The problems facing public interest news providers in Wales have been well rehearsed over the years, along with concerns about the British newspapers produced in England and sold in Wales containing very little news about the country. A nation needs a vibrant news sector to reflect the diversity of its communities and to help the country understand the issues affecting it. The cultural life of Wales, its language and the nation's understanding of its devolved government needs a news sector that is able to provide this to a majority of the population.

The group also examined questions around the diversity of journalists working in Wales and has commissioned research to better understand this. This is aimed to help improve the diversity of journalists entering the media in Wales to better reflect the rich complexity of all its citizens and communities. The Working Group has recommended that a Wales Media Institute be set up and as part of its remit use this research to help widen pathways into journalism in Wales.

The recommendations contained in this report follow the discussions the Working Group has had. Broadcasting is not devolved, but the problems facing public interest journalism and its impact on the life and understanding of Wales and its institutions are within the remit of the Welsh Government. The recommendations the Working Group has made are positive and reasonable solutions that are within devolved competence. We believe that if these modest proposals are enacted they can secure and sustain the long-term future of public interest journalism in Wales.

Appendix 1: The Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group

Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport and Chief Whip Dawn Bowden instructed setting up the Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group in November 2021. This followed a recommendation from the National Union of Journalists, based on its News Recovery Plan for Wales and developed as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The group's remit is to improve communication and coordination of actions on issues relating to journalism in Wales, to focus attention and advice on supporting the long-term sustainability of Welsh and English language journalism, and to address issues for public interest journalism created by the digital revolution and fast-evolving communications environment. Under the secretariat of Creative Wales, the working group represents the news publishing sector, including small community-based media outlets, larger media organisations, union representation and academia.

Members of the Working Group

Matt Abbott - JOMEC / Independent Community News Network (ICNN)
 Hussain Bayoomi - Newsquest (November 2021 - August 2022)
 Sally Griffith - Media Cymru
 Richard Gurner - Caerphilly Observer
 Natasha Hirst - Wales Trades Union Congress (WTUC)
 Rachel Howells - NUJ Training Wales (November 2021 - February 2022)
 Helgard Krause - Books Council of Wales
 Marlen Komorowski - Cardiff University / Media Cymru
 Shirish Kulkarni - The Bureau of Investigative Journalism / Inclusive Journalism Cymru
 David James - Reach / WalesOnline
 Huw Marshall - Newsquest (November 2021 - August 2022)
 Ifan Morgan Jones - Bangor University / Nation.Cymru (June 2022 - January 2023)
 Emma Meese - JOMEC / ICNN
 Dylan Moore - Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA)
 Pamela Morton - National Union of Journalists (NUJ)
 David Nicholson - NUJ
 Frances Rafferty - NUJ
 Gavin Thompson - Newsquest

Secretariat

Gerwyn Evans - Creative Wales
 Matthew Perryman - Creative Wales

Appendix 2: Terms of Reference.

Wales Public Interest Journalism Work Group.

Aim

The aim of the Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group is to improve the communication and co-ordination of action on issues relating to the journalism sector in Wales.

Public Interest Journalism Definition

By ‘public interest news’, we mean information that is produced and disseminated to the public according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism and which provides one or more of the following benefits to the public:

- Informs members of the public about matters of relevance to their role and responsibilities as citizens or
- Enables members of local communities to become aware of and understand matters of common concern to them as members of their community and which promotes their involvement and cooperation in such matters and community cohesion accordingly or
- Enables members of the public to participate in an informed manner in relevant democratic processes and, as a result, supports the legitimacy of the democratic process as a whole or
- Benefits the public by promoting charitable educational outcomes, such as improving public understanding of health and medical matters or the conservation of the environment

Remit

The Working Group will focus its attention and advice on actions to support the long-term sustainability of Welsh and English language public interest journalism in Wales. This will include advice on actions that could be taken in the sector to:

- Improve communication between the Welsh Government and relevant stakeholders on issues relating to journalism in Wales;
- Support innovative journalism and local and hyperlocal news initiatives, as well as mainstream media;
- Increase education about the role of public interest journalism and identify steps in helping young people better understand their active role as media consumers;
- Support drivers and initiatives to improve and support diversity and inclusivity within the sector in Wales including initiatives to increase journalistic opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds.
- Support drivers and initiatives to improve and support the use of the Welsh Language within public interest journalism in Wales.
- Highlight initiatives to help support investigative journalism in Wales;
- Support mechanisms and initiatives for traditional newspapers to assist them to adapt to changing consumer habits;
- Address the impact of the internet and the dominance of tech firms on public interest journalism;
- Scrutinise available research on public sector journalism to help shape discussion around potential future intervention.

Appendix 2: Terms of Reference.

Wales Public Interest Journalism Work Group.

Recommendations will be made to the Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport, and Chief Whip as the working group sees fit and will include the production of an end of term report on findings from discussions.

The Working Group should indicate how its recommendations can be taken forward, including where industry can take the lead in implementing recommendations. Recommendations will be made in the context of the importance of the independence of public interest journalism from government and recognising the non-devolved nature of many of the key levers for change.

It is important that public interest journalism should be independent of the Government. As such, there will be a limit to how the Welsh Government might be involved in particular activities. The group should bear this in mind and, where possible, should seek to ensure that recommendations can be developed and implemented with a wide range of partners without the need for Welsh Government involvement where that would raise questions of partiality.

Reporting Structure

The Working Group will report to the Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport, and Chief Whip via Creative Wales.

Chair

Gerwyn Evans, Deputy Director, Creative Wales will act as Chair of the Working Group.

Meeting Frequency

The Working Group will meet monthly.

Review

The remit of the group is open to review on an ad hoc basis, with activity of the Working Group reviewed in December 2022.

