

CONTRIBUTION TO THE CAIRNCROSS REVIEW

examining the sustainability of high quality journalism in the UK

from

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1. Introduction

1.01 I am as a journalist with more than 40 years experience. I was a Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of the West of England for 10 years and a Visiting Professor in Media Ethics at the University of Lincoln for 6 years. I have trained journalists in more than 40 countries, and from 2010-2014 I was the UK lead on a 14-nation research project on the Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe (MediaAct¹).

1.02 In 1992-3 I worked with Clive Soley MP on his Freedom and Responsibility of the Press Bill and organised the Special Parliamentary Hearings which took evidence from members of the public affected by inaccurate or intrusive press coverage, from journalists and from the Press Complaints Commission.

1.03 Subsequently I co-founded PressWise, set up by victims of media abuse in 1993, and became its Director in 1996. Having obtained charitable status (No. 1076002) in 1999, and changed its name to The MediaWise Trust in 2005 under the chairmanship of Sir Louis Blom-Cooper, the Trust continues to provide advice, information, research and training on matters of media ethics. In consequence I have spent the last 25 years providing advice and support to those with complaints about print and broadcast journalism. I now serve as its Honorary Director.

¹ See www.mediaact.eu

1.04 The charity's operating principles are that 'Press Freedom is a responsibility exercised by journalists on behalf of the public' and that 'The public has a right to know when inaccuracies have been published by the mass media'. The Trust has argued for reform of the regulatory system, open debate between media professionals and their public to engender trust, and provided evidence about media malpractice to numerous Select Committee inquiries and to the Leveson Inquiry.

1.05 In response to trends and levels of complaints the Trust has undertaken research and developed guidelines, working with journalists' organisations, non-governmental bodies and UN agencies, around some of the more problematic issues faced by media professionals, including coverage of asylum-seekers and refugees, children, ethnic minority and diversity issues, health and mental health, and suicide.²

1.06 I am a Life Member of the National Union of Journalists and received its Gold Badge for my work on media ethics. I have served on its Ethics Council for many years as its Vice Chair, and on its Professional Training Committee. I have also been a member of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) since its inception, and more recently have served on the Board of The Bristol Cable, an investigative journalism co-operative.³

² For example, our *Media and Children's Rights* handbook for UNICEF had been through 3 editions and multiple translations and is in use worldwide; as are the *Guidelines for Health Communicators* we produced for WHO Europe; UNHCR have reproduced our leaflet on *Reporting Refugees and Asylum Issues*; WHO Europe; and our succinct *Media and Suicide Guidelines* have been acknowledged as effective internationally. See the relevant sections our website <www.mediawise.org.uk

³ <https://thebristolcable.org/>

2. The commercial press

2.01 Sensational and intrusive stories have been the staple diet of popular newspapers for more than a century, and in the increasingly competitive atmosphere of recent decades, more and more risks have been taken with accuracy in the circulation wars. Often it has been 'ordinary' people and vulnerable groups who have borne the brunt. The 'hacking scandal' was just the latest in a long history of unethical behaviour that has developed particularly, but not exclusively, among the tabloids.⁴ This has led to cynicism about the purpose of tabloid journalism, and the efficacy of self-regulation, and contributed to a collapse in the trust that is vital if print journalism is to fulfil its proper purpose.

2.02 The consistently poor standing of print journalists in opinion polls seems to suggest that public confidence in their ability to deliver 'the truth' is not improving. This is a dangerous trend, especially in an era when 'fake news' is the taunt now levelled at anything people find unacceptable. Yet it has been the commercial imperative which drives most mainstream newspapers that has led to a reliance on 'clickbait' in the new environment of an on-line presence and a 24-hour rolling news agenda.

2.03 Often editors and journalists appear not to properly appreciate the human consequences of mistakes and intrusive copy. Their lawyers warn them that admissions of error might have financial consequences, which means they seem impervious to the view that a willingness to admit to mistakes, and alert the public to them, is the best way to earn trust and convince readers that their primary concern is to get facts right and provide reliable information.

2.04 Ironically they get away with a cavalier attitude because, however much the public claim to be sceptical about what we read in the papers, especially the popular tabloids, we all tend to retain a sneaking suspicion that if it's in the papers it must have some basis in truth. Nonetheless circulation figures continue to drop and as the internet scoops up advertising, the business model on which the mainstream press has operated for 150 years is being eroded.

2.05 The terms of reference of the Review appear to be skewed towards seeking solutions to perpetuate a business model that may have had its day. As advertising revenue has dropped so have journalistic staff levels, and mergers and rationalisations - for example the virtual disappearance of sub-editors and reliance on regional hubs rather than town centre offices among regional and local newspapers - have both reduced true journalistic content and increased the likelihood of errors.

⁴ See for instance the 2006 reports by the Information Commissioner: *What Price Privacy?* and *What Price Privacy Now?*

2.06 The most important feature of the Review terms is its emphasis on 'a sustainable future for high-quality journalism'. That requires investment in people rather than just technology, and a true appreciation of the value good journalism adds to maintaining an open democratic society.

2.07 It is a pity, but perhaps significant, that the Review refers to 'consumers' when it presumably means the citizens for whom journalism is produced. This adds to the impression that the Review is seeking answers for failing commercial empires rather than seeking to enhance the knowledge and engagement of the citizenry in what we hope will remain an open democratic society.

2.08 One of the areas in which UK journalism has faltered has been in international coverage. As the cost of in-country resident correspondents is regarded as prohibitive, there has been increasing reliance of a limited number of expert journalists expected to cover huge swathes of world affairs or to be parachuted in when crises emerge. Once again concern with the bottom line has affected the extent and depth of information about the world available to UK citizens at a time when international affairs, including global warming, global business, migration, regional instability and wars raise important issues about which all citizens need not be informed.

2.09 UK journalism has long been celebrated as representing a 'liberal democratic model'⁵ where the public interest rather than state security or party politics had been the focus of journalistic endeavour. This has been rather cheapened by the exploits of sensationalist journalism. In 2001 this gave rise to a PressWise project 'Journalism and Media Ethics in a Democracy' centred around a call for a 'Compact of Trust between Journalists and the Public'. Despite a Journalism and Public Trust initiative organised with NUJ in 2004 and research which went into Nick Davies' seminal work *Flat Earth News*, there has been little improvement.

2.10 Even the wake-up call that was the Leveson Inquiry failed to stem the tide of a journalism predicated on the 'interests' of the public' rather than the public interest. And this is largely because most national papers are primarily commercial concerns. The pursuit of a healthy bottom line has meant pandering to lowest common denominators in terms of content, a process which has extended into online versions where 'clickbait' is all.

⁵ See Hallin D C & Mancini P, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (2004) and Eberwein t, Fengler S, et al *The European Handbook of Media Accountability*

2.11 Now hoist in large part by their own petard, commercial newspaper groups find their profits diminishing along with their journalism and staff levels, and those who once disparaged the very notion of public subsidies suddenly have their hands out. Many are already benefiting from the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), funded from the broadcasting licence fee. That scheme itself is the outcome of a long process of attacks, especially from Murdoch titles, on the ubiquity of the BBC as a news source at local, regional, national and international levels. 'Unfair competition' was the cry of the free marketers who managed to cut short the BBC's hyperlocal TV news service. Instead the license fee was top sliced to support commercial 'independent' hyperlocal TV stations.

2.12 By paying for staff to cover the work of public bodies at a local level, the LDRS scheme reduces costs on local papers, and may even be the cause of yet more redundancies. It is also reviving the function of the local press to hold public bodies to account, a public service abandoned over recent years as newsrooms were culled to reduce overheads.

2.14 In short commercial newspaper groups have been the authors of their own difficulties. Most are just one element in business empires through the profits of which it would be perfectly possible to invest more in journalism, but they choose not to, and now look elsewhere for support.

3. The new local press

3.01 One positive phenomenon that has developed with the making redundant of experienced local newspaper journalists has been the arrival of new hyperlocal print and online papers providing an identity to neighbourhoods which rarely got coverage in the existing local paper unless a 'major' event occurred there. In many way these replicate rural independent village magazines that have existed for many years. Run by a single person or a small group of friends, they rely entirely upon advertising from the corner shops and local business, and free distribution. This tends to soften their journalism since anything too controversial is likely to upset the business model.⁶

3.02 This revival of a truly local press of this sort which exists as self-sustaining editions - able to meet minimal staff costs - would no doubt benefit from modest subsidies to cover set up costs and distribution. Unlike the commercial local papers most have been unable to take advantage of the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme, which is unfair since they are providing a genuine public service which would be much enhanced if they could provide their readers with valuable additional information about the operations of their local councils and public services.

3.03 More adventurous networks of investigative journalism have also developed in recent years, using a variety of different models all of which are unsustainable without some form of subsidy which has tended to include crowd-funding as well as grants from charitable trusts and foundations. Recent initiatives like Byline⁷ with its website and annual festival, and the Media Fund⁸ which helps to subsidise independent media outlets are evidence that there is healthy public interest in alternatives to the mainstream.

3.04 One of the most successful examples is The Bristol Cable co-operative⁹ which has 2,000 members playing a small monthly subscription. Although it too has had to rely upon grants, it has recently been able to move its staff onto PAYE, and is seeking to cover basic costs from membership fees. Advertising revenue is hard to come by for a quarterly publication whose stock-in-trade is to expose injustice and help readers to understand how the world works locally. Distributed free by volunteers across the city, it would certainly benefit from subsidies.

3.05 As with some of the flagship collaborative investigative scoops at an international level - the Panama and Paradise Papers - publications like The Bristol

⁶ The Local Voice Network based in Bristol with 18 editions based is an excellent example fo this model.

<https://www.localvoicenetwork.co.uk/>

⁷ <https://www.byline.com/>

⁸ <https://themediainfund.org/>

⁹ <https://thebristolcable.org/>

Cable collaborate with other like-minded outlets in the UK as part of The Bureau Local,¹⁰ part of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, looking into public interest issues. This is indicative of a whole new approach to journalism which should be the focus of this Review.

3.06 Back in the 1970s and 1980s there was a similar upsurge in alternative news media, from investigative magazines to local and community papers. For the most part it was a short-lived flowering of journalistic talent. In the 1980s I was editor of a weekly local paper run as a readers' and writers' co-operative with widespread support in East London.¹¹ Set up after several of us were made redundant by existing local papers, its early success was curtailed when our commercial rivals undercut rates to the corner-shop advertisers we relied upon for sustenance. We staggered on, reliant upon personal cash injections and volunteers, but although some of our contributors went to success in the mainstream media, like others its fate was sealed because the commercial press was determined to put out of business anyone daring to challenge its local monopoly of news and advertising revenue.

3.07 There was resistance from the mainstream to the very idea of public subsidies for 'alternatives', whether in the form of grants, a national public printing corporation to help non-commercial publishers or subsidised distribution networks. Yet all these are tried and tested methods to encourage diversity and plurality in news outlets. But the mainstream does not object to the various forms of indirect subsidies they enjoy - from which their alternatives cannot benefit - like 0% VAT on sales, acting as a gazette for public notices, etc.

3.08 Meanwhile mainstream commercial newspaper publishers object to local authorities producing their own newspapers, and pressured the government to shut them down, even though some were being published because councillors felt that local residents were poorly served by existing commercial press.

3.09 In 2013 Eric Pickles as Minister for Communities and Local Government insisted that if councils were to produce newspapers it must only be four times year, claiming: *"The spread of the town hall Pravda [is] manifestly unfair because they offer cut price local news, but mixed in with council propaganda that pours taxpayers' money down the drain. These freesheets are often confused for the real thing by residents. I want our news [sic] to be told and sold under the masthead of an independent and free press, not through a knock-off Rolex imitation."* His decision was welcomed by the News Media Association, the industry's trade body. *"It is good to see action finally taken to stop this damaging unfair competition,"* commented NMA deputy chief executive Lynne Anderson.

¹⁰ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/local>

¹¹ *East End News*

3.10 Yet there is no such outcry in Sweden, where for the last 50 years there has been a system of subsidies which benefits all publications. Rivals share a subsidised distribution system which ensures readers have a fair opportunity to choose. Loans are available to facilitate joint production facilities, and a tax on advertising revenue provides finance for weaker publications which have achieved certain levels of penetration into their distribution area. The system has been extended to include online publications.

3.11 Numerous European countries provide a variety of subsidies to the print media in support of pluralism, from tax breaks and reduced tariffs for basic services from postal rates and electricity supplies to grants for news agencies and journalism training.¹² In some post-Soviet countries a variety of the other systems of support exist - from subsidised premises to state backing for journalists' organisations - not the best way to guarantee independent journalism.

¹² Schweitzer, Puppel, et al *Public Funding of Private Media* LSE Media Policy Brief 11 (2014)

4. Recommendations

4.01 The Review is concerned with sustainable 'high quality journalism', although it does not attempt to define its terms. If the emphasis is indeed to be on securing high quality journalism that is where the focus of its recommendations should be, rather than seeking to stabilise failing commercial models.

4.02 Since sustainable high quality journalism means journalism that is fit for purpose in a multi-cultural society, there must also be an emphasis on diversity and pluralism. And since we may be entering an era when the UK cuts itself off from the European Union, which has done much to encourage diversity and pluralism in media and cultural exchanges, it is important that thought is also given on how to protect and expand international journalism.

4.03 The creation of a Media Development Agency (MDA), independent of government, could be a first step in planning for the future of high quality journalism. This could be organised on a national (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and regional (North East; South East, North West; South East; South West; West Midlands;, East Midlands and East Anglia) basis to avoid the London-centric focus of so many media institutions.

4.04 These hubs might best be linked to universities with facilities for the training of print, broadcast and online journalists, and with Boards reflecting the media in the constituent area, including and importantly journalists' organisations and the non-commercial/alternative sectors.

4.05 Subsidising journalism is unlikely to be regarded as an appropriate use of public funds unless emphasis is placed upon the essential watchdog role of independent journalism. Nonetheless, while initial funding might have to come from the public purse, the Agency could be financed through a modest levy on all forms of print, broadcast and on-line advertising.

4.06 The MDA should be open to applications from all media sectors but at least 50% should be focussed on enterprises that seek to tackle unmet needs. It could disburse a variety of grants and loans, for example:

- modest start-up grants for non-profit publications on the basis of thorough business plans;
- short term grants for staff to conduct specific investigations in the public interest;
- distribution subsidies for non-commercial publications plans;
- intern bursaries to allow young journalists to gain experience in the mainstream media without having to work for nothing;

- training grants to subsidise summer schools for mid-career journalists to re-hone or redirect their skills;
- assistance for minority groups seeking to develop their own non-party political media enterprises, on the proviso that mother-tongue services should also be available in English.

4.07 The MDA could enter into partnerships with universities to provide mid-career summer training schools, and with digital service providers to run training schemes on new developments in communications technology. It might also consolidate standards of journalism training at further and higher education levels by partnering with or incorporating the existing validation agencies such as the National Council for the Training of Journalists, the Broadcast Journalism Training Council and Skillset.

4.08 The MDA could also seek to encourage diversity in newsrooms by working with the NUJ George Viner Award Scheme and the Journalism Diversity Fund to help bring on a new generation of media professionals from minority ethnic communities in the UK.

4.09 The MDA could encourage media organisations to include information about their policies and practice as regards accuracy, accountability, complaint resolution and staff development in their annual Corporate Responsibility Audits, and share best practice as a means of general improving conditions within the media industry.

4.10 In addition to recommending the creation of the MDA or its equivalent, it would be helpful if the Review were to recommend that non-profit media enterprises (those which reinvest surpluses in the enterprises) should be granted (the equivalent of) charitable status with all the benefits that accrue. They should also have access to public service notice advertising, relevant to their constituency and circulation.

4.11 Meanwhile if there is genuine concern about the future of high quality journalism in the mainstream, it would be good to see evidence of cross subsidies within media conglomerates to maintain well-staffed and resourced newsrooms. Perhaps reducing the vast salaries of senior executives and editors and their redistribution to provide support services for staff - including training and retraining bursaries and assistance with psychological stress experienced by those dealing with the most traumatic stories - might be an additional guarantee to sustainable high quality journalism.