NEIGHBOURHOOD NEWS
THE TIME IS NOW
“Local news connects people to place and each other.”

**WHY DOES LOCAL NEWS MATTER?**

It has long been established that good quality local journalism is essential to our democracy and to our personal and collective wellbeing. Local news creates a hub of civic engagement and connects people to place and each other. The most common way we receive community news is through our local newspaper, and 73% of people believe that their local media is the best medium for making them feel a part of their community. At its most effective, local journalism holds those with powerful interests to account.

The large volume of data that is available on the expenditure, decisions and performance of our local councils, NHS and other public services can be analysed and used by local media in a way that is not possible, or made a priority, by national titles. Political trends towards devolution of power to a more local level make local accountability even more important. By providing a voice and support for citizens’ concerns, local media can lead on community campaigns, such as cuts to local services, school closures, and local environmental standards.

**SO WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?**

The traditional business model for local news is increasingly unviable. There has been a significant decline in newspaper advertising revenue in recent years, with almost £400 million forecast to be lost from the UK market by the end of 2014. More than two hundred and forty local newspapers closed between 2005 and the end of 2011, while all but two UK regional daily newspapers saw a year-on-year decrease in circulation in the second half of 2012. Local news websites have carved out a vital role, with over 400 such sites across the UK producing more than 2,500 stories a week, but geographic coverage remains patchy and making such sites sustainable in the longer-term remains a key challenge.

UK Government and charitable interventions into local news in the UK are worth more than £250 million per annum – supporting local newspapers, community radio and local TV. This includes an estimated £45-50 million which local newspapers receive from local government and statutory advertisers for the mandatory advertising of statutory notices on, for example, planning, licensing and traffic orders. However, there is currently no form of assessment to ensure that news outlets receiving mandatory advertising funding carry out at least some news reporting which is defined as being in ‘the public interest’ such as council meetings or court reporting.

**SO WHAT’S NEIGHBOURHOOD NEWS?**

The Carnegie UK Trust has a remit to address the wellbeing of people throughout the UK and Ireland. We are interested in democracy, transparency and accountability, citizen empowerment to solve local problems, and community ownership of assets.

We launched Neighbourhood News in 2013, as a £50,000 competition and a contribution towards solving the problems facing local news. Five Carnegie Partners, Brixton Blog, Cybermoor, Port Talbot Magnet, WHALE Arts, and Your Harlow, were selected to take part in the project, from nearly 80 applications from across the UK and Ireland. Each Partner is receiving £10,000 from the Trust in 2013-14 to develop a new local news
initiative. Talk About Local is evaluating Neighbourhood News on behalf the Trust, examining the impact of the intervention and what it might mean for the future of local news.

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WHAT HAVE WE FOUND OUT SO FAR?

The Highlights
Neighbourhood News funding has enabled the Carnegie Partners to produce a good range of news and information for their communities for a relatively low level of expenditure. Your Harlow for example published 850 stories and 90 videos from July to November 2013. Combined with the number of applications for and high interest in Neighbourhood News funding, this suggests that there is a demand for small-scale funding to be made available and, when these opportunities are provided, local news projects can deliver a high level of output and good value for money.

The projects have successfully supplemented paid wages with volunteer time and pro bono input from professional journalists. Brixton Blog for example has levered 112 volunteer hours (£1,557 at national average hourly rate) with £1,400 of paid labour. This ratio of volunteer hours is likely to increase in the latter half of the projects’ lifecycle, as they move beyond their intensive build phase. By expanding the number of contributors, the projects are providing a range of public interest news and information about their place at a rate comparable with other local news providers.

The Carnegie Partners have had success in using local news as a tool of community engagement, action and cohesion. Port Talbot Magnet has surveyed local residents to find out what type of content they would like. Stories run by the Partners to date have included articles on benefit cuts, street lighting, crime rates, library closures and beach access. The projects have demonstrated that local journalism is a community activity and that providing and consuming both serious civic content and lighter news and information can create bridging social capital in communities with no or limited local news provision. The public interest news produced by the Carnegie Partners is improving democratic accountability and community engagement, often in interesting and locally innovative ways. There may be opportunities for the policy levers and interventions used in community development more widely to be applied to improve the provision and sustainability of local news.

The Challenges
The Carnegie Partners have experienced some challenges in delivering local news, and sustaining the rate at which it is produced. The time constraints of the core teams, which largely consist of part-time, free-lancing or volunteer contributors, to deliver the projects have been a challenge. Competing demands on the teams’ time, such as employment, family, and pre-existing commitments naturally impact on the production of local news. In supporting projects like these, it is important that funders and policymakers respect these real life pressures in order to achieve the community benefits which they seek in improving local news provision.
“The public interest news produced by the Carnegie Partners is improving democratic accountability.”

The Carnegie Partners have also experienced challenges in recruiting the correct staff or volunteers with skills other than core journalism skills, such as advertising sales and technical skills, which are necessary to sustain the projects. These issues can impact on news production, but we note that the issues have largely been resolved by each Partner, given time and a little support. The tolerance and understanding of policymakers and funders to the time and energy involved in finding people with the correct skills to help sustain local news projects is important in improving provision long-term.

Finally, it is important for local news projects to have the right structure for them in their community setting that allows them to balance competing demands of partner expectations, quality control and the need to produce a sufficient level of content in good time. We have seen several models in Neighbourhood News and achieving this balance is not always straightforward, particularly in the start-up phase.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Why do we see so little support for local news projects by grant making foundations, charities and grant makers, who are interested in the wellbeing of communities and individuals? What role could such organisations play?

2. Would the approach adopted in Neighbourhood News – of spreading risk by supporting a small number of well-organised community media projects with small pots of funding and using an independent expert advisory group to help select winners – be attractive to other funders?

3. Could government interventions in the local news market, such as the Community Radio Fund, be adapted or expanded to provide opportunities for local news providers who operate on other platforms, including web-based providers?

**“What is the best strategy for supporting start-up local news projects?”**

4. In the debate on regulating media plurality, which is largely about managing market exit of independent outlets, is there a role for encouraging market entry by many small web-based providers?

5. What scope is there for amending the regulations relating to the advertising of statutory notices to ensure that the outlets awarded such contracts meet clear requirements in relation to population reach and provision of at least some ‘public interest’ content, irrespective of the platform used?

6. What is the best strategy for supporting start-up local news projects? Can traditional community development structures play a role or is a new infrastructure required? How can local news projects be supported to learn from each other?

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1 YouGov Sixth Sense, CSR and the Local Community, Havas PR UK: Manchester, 2013
2 The Newspaper Society (online) Recession has Increased Importance of Community in Britain, 2011 http://www.newspapersec.org.uk/16/jun/11/recession-has-increased-importance-of-community-in-britain
6 Sweny, M. (online) UK newspapers’ print ad revenue ‘to shrink by £500m by the end of 2014’ , 2013 http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jun/19/uk-newspapers-print-ad
7 Press Gazette (online) PG research reveals 242 local press closures in 7 years, 2012 http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/node/49215
8 Hold the Front Page (online) ABC figures: How all the regional dailies performed, 2013 http://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2013/news/abc-figures-how-all-the-regional-dailies-performed/
The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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