

# Members' Business S4M-15408 Graeme Day: The Importance of Local Newspapers

Parliamentary Briefing S4M-15408

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland. The Trust has a long-standing interest in the relationship between the media, civil society and democracy, and has a history of advocating the need for news media to be of a high standard to improve community wellbeing. Please visit our website for further information [www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk).

## 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. 73% of people believe that their local media is the best medium for making them feel a part of their community.<sup>1</sup>

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 performances of our local public services can be analysed and used by local media in a way that is not possible for national outlets. 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.

## The 21st century local news landscape

Consumption of news across online platforms has increased significantly in the last decade, with [69% of UK internet users](#) having visited websites or downloaded apps for news about or events in their local community. Trust in and use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter for local news has also increased since 2013, with [27%](#) now naming Facebook as their top source of local news. As advertisers have followed audiences to online platforms, the business model traditionally used by local news providers has become increasingly challenging, resulting in a net loss of more than [180 local newspapers in the UK since 2005](#) and producing gaps in local newspaper coverage across Scotland and the rest of the UK.

However, this only partly explains the change to the local news landscape. The focus of the debate on local news provision has largely been on the market exit of local newspapers and the democratic deficits left behind – with the presence or absence of a local title often seen as the critical factor in determining if a community is covered by local news. In reality, the local news landscape of the 21st century is more nuanced

<sup>1</sup> The Newspaper Society (2011) *Recession has Increased Importance of Community in Britain*

than if the traditional press continue to be based in our towns and cities. While newspapers closures, title mergers, moves online and job losses have made headlines, journalists and individuals passionate about the provision of quality news and information have been increasingly working out-with traditional media organisations. In particular, Scotland's hyperlocal media sector has been growing and thriving.

### **A growing sector addressing news gaps**

Hyperlocals range from individual bloggers to small businesses, but they have in common the aim of improving the provision of local news and information and increasing opportunities for members of their communities to connect with each other. The [content produced by hyperlocals](#) includes community news and events, articles holding local authorities to account, supporting or leading community campaigns, covering elections, providing opportunities for civic engagement and coverage which contributes to a local identity. With hyperlocal sites in the UK collectively producing around [2,500 stories news stories a week](#), grassroots news groups based in the communities they serve are making a significant contribution to the local news landscape by working on the ground in these neighbourhoods.

[Local Web List](#), a free, online directory of hyperlocal news providers across the UK and Ireland funded by the Trust, shows that there are at least 63 active hyperlocal news organisations working in communities across Scotland. The credibility and professional standards adhered to by hyperlocals is such that the BBC is currently using Local Web List to [link to stories on hyperlocal news sites](#) in 24 areas in the UK, with expansion to the service planned throughout 2016.

### **Our contribution – Neighbourhood News**

In 2013, the Trust launched [Neighbourhood News](#) as a £50,000 competition to deliver local news in new and interesting ways and a contribution to the problems facing local news. We supported

local news groups in [Wester Hailes](#), Brixton, Port Talbot, Alston, and Harlow with £10,000 in 2013-14 to develop a new local news initiative. These five 'Carnegie Partners' have provided vital lessons into the importance of local news organisations to their communities and how local news might be delivered in the future:

1. Local, grassroots news organisations can deliver a significant range of community news and information, in return for quite a low level of investment. For example, in just four months our partner in Harlow alone published 850 stories and 90 videos. This suggests that the local community news sector has the capacity to deliver projects that can deliver a high level of output in a short period of time, and can provide good value for money for both citizens and funders.
2. Local news organisations are often successful at attracting volunteer time and pro bono input from professional journalists to supplement paid wages. The local news organisation in Brixton, for instance, has levered 112 volunteer hours (£1,557 at national average hourly rate) with £1,400 of paid labour.
3. Local news can be used as a tool for community engagement, action and cohesion. The Carnegie Partner projects featured stories that matter to their communities, such as poor street lighting, library closures and the local impact of benefit cuts, often in new and locally innovative ways. For example, our partner in Wester Hailes held a chat with local police and fire services on Twitter, asking a range of questions on topics from knife crime to noisy neighbours to the number of police officers on their streets.
4. Grassroots community news organisations made up of freelancing and volunteer contributors are subject to competing demands on their time, such as employment, family and pre-existing commitments. These real-life time pressures can cause disruption in delivering consistent output,

but they are pressures which funders must respect in order to improve long-term local news provision and deliver community benefits.

5. Recruiting individuals with skills which supplement core journalism skills, such as advertising sales and IT know how, which help to sustain local news projects can be a challenge. These issues can impact on news production, and it is important for funders to take a long-term perspective and show understanding and tolerance to any delays incurred.

6. Taking the time to ensure that the correct structure is in place is important for the success of local news organisations. This will allow local news organisations to balance competing demands and volume and quality of output on schedule, but can be an ongoing challenge. Getting this balance right is not always straightforward, and needs careful consideration.

The success of the organisations we worked with and others [we wrote up as innovative case studies](#) in improving the quantity and quality of local news suggests that there is an opportunity to re-evaluate existing business models and government interventions into the local news market. Our [package of measures](#) to support the growth of community-led local news therefore ask if government interventions, such as the Community Radio Fund, the fund for local television licences or the rules around advertising of statutory notices, could be adapted or expanded to provide opportunities for local news providers who operate on other platforms, and help deliver new and improved neighbourhood news.

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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February 2016



Carnegie United Kingdom Trust  
Scottish charity SC 012799 operating in the UK and Ireland  
Incorporated by Royal Charter 1917