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The socio-local newspaper: creating a sustainable future for the legacy provincial news industry.

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Introduction.

The dominant prediction for the economic future for the UK-based provincial press is not hopeful. The twin drivers of the advent of digital technology and the post-2008 recession are such that traditional news brands are no longer able to count on the massive advertising profits they once enjoyed. Indeed, the majority of commentators argue that the once-great industry, dominated by a few huge corporations, is in a state of managed decline as established brands seek to maximize revenue from the residual value their products exercise. At the same time, however, this state of affairs has produced anxiety for those who see these titles as stitched into the fabric of community life; seen as pillars of local life, these titles are understood to perform a localized democratic function, acting as watchdogs to scrutinize those in power. This means the centralization or closure of titles is understood to have a detrimental effect on those areas who have looked to them as traditional sources of information and, in turn, brings a sense of urgency to the question of the sustainability of these titles.

These two positions reveal the duality which underwrites the understanding of the local and regional newspaperⁱ in the UK. On the one hand it is a free market product, which draws its profit from advertising; from this perspective the reader is little more than a target audience for that market. However, on the other is the social role which the newspaper has carved out for itself – a role which justifies its professional operation in terms of its democratic ideological value, refined from the national notion of fourth estate to the localized ideal of serving the good the community. This essay offers a critique of the dominant strategy of the corporate-owned industry to suggest that it is at odds with this

ideological value. It suggests that instead, the economic sustainability of the industry lies in its ability to revalue its social role and introduces the idea of the socio-local newspaper. The conclusion is that for the local and regional press, journalism which is economically sustainable must also have a social dimension because it is the placing of the professional value of serving the good of the community at the heart of the business which will enable newspapers to continue.

The established local newspaper in the UK is not as local as it used to be. Research conducted in multiple locations shows that increasingly local weekly and daily news, whether in print or online, is produced by centralized journalists and put together by production staff who may be based hundreds of miles away. These legacy companies were once the power house of localized information provision. More often than not, now these provincial 'news brands' – a moniker designed to reflect the prevalence of online editions – are increasingly remote from the readers they claim to serve.ⁱⁱ Keith Perch, former editor of *The Derby Telegraph*ⁱⁱⁱ, described these changes in April 2016. 'Daily newspapers used to have loads of editions which were geographically based. They were effectively producing lots of daily newspapers for smaller towns. *The Derby Telegraph* used to have six editions all with journalists based in their own offices.' (Ponsford, 25.4.16). Citing the example of the market town of Ripley, 18 miles from the Derby base of the newspaper, Perch described how the paper now carried no stories about the location, compared with the 30 to 40 which were included when the town had its own reporting staff. Similarly, my own research with newspaper workers has demonstrated that journalists feel increasingly cut-off from their readers and use other claims, such as local roots, to preserve their connections (Matthews, 2017a).

Neither, for these companies at least, is local news as profitable as it used to be. Between 1995 and 2004 advertising revenues in the United Kingdom grew from £2.7 million to more than £3 billion (Franklin, 2006: 8) for local and regional newspapers, which enjoyed profit margins as high as 40 per cent (Fowler, 2011).

Just five years later, the trend had reversed, made worse by the recession in the United Kingdom. Advertising revenue fell by nearly 19 per cent in 2008 and the rate of decline increased the following year. For Johnston Press, for instance, between 2008 and 2014 its revenue has fallen from nearly £900 million to just over £600 million (DCMS, 2016: 73). In 2009 alone the company reported a loss of £429.3 million, compared with a profit of £124.7 in the previous 12 months. Income from advertising, which accounts for around 80 per cent of a newspaper's profit, has always been cyclical, rising when times are good and falling when national belts are tightened. But this decline was different. In addition, advertising revenue had been fragmented by increased competition – not from other newspapers – but from alternative digital platforms such as eBay and Craigslist, which offered alternative markets to the classified sections of local papers. In the UK in particular, the reaction to this from the major owners has been cost cutting and mergers which has resulted in further concentration of the market. As I write, 78 per cent of provincial news brands in the UK are in the hands of four companies: Trinity Mirror, Newsquest Ltd, Johnston Press Ltd and Tindle Newspapers Ltd (Ramsay and Moore, 2016). The result is, as Nielsen eloquently surmises, that 'we cannot take the existence of local journalism for granted anymore' (2015: 4).

This essay suggests that the links between these trends goes beyond the causal; instead, such is the ontological interdependence of community and profit in the established local news business that undermining the one will inevitably affect the other. The disruption to the process of connectedness between journalist and location is significant because of the impact it has on a core value for the operation of legacy local and regional news providers – that of serving the good of the community. Not only can this value be seen as key to the meaning of provincial news work for those within and without the industry, it can also be understood as a central pillar of the established business model for the industry, which constitutes the community as a commodified unit in order to yield advertising revenue. The difficulty is that this results in a largely adventitious relationship between community and newspaper, built as it is on a commercial

principle. This apparent unintentionality means the social role of the newspaper can go unrecognized in a business strategy which prioritizes profit. But this strategy in effect kills the goose that lays the golden egg; by removing the social aspect from its function, it removes the reason the reader has to invest in the newspaper.

Therefore, it suggests that the sustainability of the legacy local newspaper rests on its continued ability to function in way which recognizes the centrality of that social dimension. This then necessitates an understanding of sustainability which goes beyond the mere ability to yield revenue, particularly in the context of the dominant understanding of the local newspaper, dependent as it is on the normative understanding of its relationship to communities. The socio-local newspaper does not just commodify the audience but exercises its community role. In this way it increases those who have a stake in its future from those who hold an economic interest, to those who value the process for the social benefits it affords. Thus this socio-local newspaper enacts that form of journalism which can be considered a community benefit and so the newspaper can be understood as a community asset. In turn this may have implications for its financial structure.

The good of the community and the business of newspapers.

The good of the community is central to the ideology of local and regional news work and can be traced back through the history of the provincial newspaper. It may be understood as a refined notion of the fourth estate, where by the local paper acts as a watchdog, scrutinizing those in power on behalf of its community. As such it serves as a justificatory ideology for those who work in the provincial news industry and has influenced normative expectations of the role of this sector from those without it. It dictates working practices, such as covering local politics and institutions and, to this end, it is also embedded into journalism

training standards which provide the knowledge required to meet those obligations. Therefore, the good of the community is a discursive position, which justifies a range of action negotiated between the journalist, the public and a commercially viable business model (Conboy, 2004).

However, despite its centrality, the notion of serving the good of the community is neither fixed, nor absolute. An historic analysis of the political economy of the provincial news industry suggests that the provincial newspaper only began to intervene in the local community when it had become established on a firm financial footing (see Matthews, 2017b). When the allied notion of the fourth estate gained ascendancy for the newspaper industry in the UK in the mid nineteenth century (Hampton, 2004),^{iv} the provincial newspaper refined this position by localizing it and claimed allegiance with a defined geographic community. This process was largely commercial because that community was packaged as an audience for advertisers, but at the same time had the effect of creating a form of civic consciousness. This process intensified as the mass press, epitomized in the evening newspaper, emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. These titles prioritized the coverage of local institutions and elites and constituted themselves as significant institutions, alongside those they claimed to scrutinize, signified by landmark buildings at the heart of those communities. In this way they legitimized their business and reinforced their centrality to those communities. This position has developed into the notion that these titles are watchdogs, scrutinizing local elites on behalf of their readers. As such they are able to claim a role in the democratic process which is enshrined in British legislation, for instance by the admittance of reporters to local authority meetings and courts when the public might be excluded.

However, the extent to which the operation of the dominant newspaper groups supports this function has been open to criticism since the middle of the last century. The dominance exercised by these corporations is based on chain ownership, which is also a long-established principle for the provincial newspaper in the UK. Consolidation increased at the turn of the last century as

companies sought to benefit from the market for the highly-profitable, mass-circulation evening paper. This process was interrupted only by World War Two when demand outstripped supply and thus normal trading conditions were suspended. By the 1960s and 1960s these corporations had developed into multi-interest conglomerates for whom the newspaper was just one profit center among many, held alongside interests as diverse as oil and wallpaper (Royal Commission, 1977). Then, as now, the profit lay in advertising (which is why the free distribution newspaper model works) so that editorial content was viewed as a functional part of the business, aimed at building a circulation which justified the prices charged for those adverts; in this view editorial content is a cost to be controlled like any other. It is no coincidence that the Audit Bureau of Circulation, which verifies newspaper sales, was created during the pitched battles for advertising revenue of the early twentieth century. It is this principle which has led to the second defining factor of the provincial newspaper market – that of monopolistic circulation areas. In order to maximize profitability, newspapers do best in areas where there is no competition for the advertising spend. To this end, the period of dominance by corporate owners was marked first, by fierce newspaper wars, and then by increasing co-operation and consolidation as companies sought to establish monopolistic mastery of an advertising market (see Matthews, 2017b).

Once that monopolistic mastery is established, the next phase of maximizing profits can begin. For these corporations this has been achieved by an unremitting process of centralization. By the time of the 1977 Royal Commission on the Press,^v newspaper production was increasingly organized around publishing centers, which aggregated costs in shared areas, such as printing and distribution. Since then this process has expanded and intensified so now editorial staff are habituated to working across multiple titles. At the extreme end is the cited example of a proposal by Local World to bring eight newspapers in the Midlands of England under the purview of one editor; this rationalisation extends to closing offices identified with named titles, cutting staff and relocating the others to a remote working base (Sharman, 12.5.16). It is this process which

has resulted in the process of removal described above as production costs are minimized to maximize profits. Newspapers made out of this process become “local in name only: the town or city emblazoned on the newspaper’s masthead may be one of the few remaining local features of a newspaper (Franklin, 2006: xxi).

Therefore, criticism of the extent to which the corporate news industry is able to meet those normative expectations of serving the good of the community is long-standing, if diffuse. The notion of community itself is contested, and, in Anderson’s conception ‘imagined’. The traditional local newspaper in particular, is a powerful instrument in imagining a community with the act of mass readership, governed by production deadlines and mass sales, producing a ‘temporal coincidence’ in this process (1991: 24). Thus critics have engaged with the continued anxiety about the relationship between newspapers and communities on different terms, at different times. The Royal Commissions of the last century framed the debate around concerns over the impact on democratic engagement; the Parliamentary motion calling for the first inquiry recalls the modern complaint. MP Haydn Davies, who was also a journalist, said, “We have watched the destruction of great papers. We have watched the combines come in, buying up and killing independent journals, and we have seen the honorable profession of journalism degraded by high finance and big business. Worst of all, as a result of this, we have watched subservience replace judgment, and we are worried about the position.” (Hansard, 1946: 452). Academic analyses which focused on the good of the community also concluded that it was ill-defined (see Jackson, 1971; Cox and Morgan, 1973). More recently it has been considered in relation to the political economy of the provincial newspaper, which has increasingly reduced it to a functional principle where by dependable sources which provide regular editorial content are prioritized for the convenience of the production process (Franklin and Murphy, 1991). These criticisms are now reinvigorated by the acceleration in the cost-cutting strategies of the dominant groups in the wake of the disruption to newspaper finances caused by the twin drivers of digitization and the recession.

Laying claim to community benefit while undermining that role.

The contemporary debate about the future of the local newspaper is largely polarized and pits the commercially-structured news brand against the value which stakeholders ascribe to the watchdog function. On the one side of the argument are the corporations who seek to influence the structural environment in which their industry operates in order to preserve their domain in the wake of the fall in print revenues. They continue to draw on their centrality to communities, while following a strategy of cost cutting which is withdrawing resources, and even entire titles, from that process. The annual Local Newspaper Week is an industry-led initiative designed to 'highlight the important role play by local papers in communities across the UK'; central to this is the 'vital role local papers play in our democracy' (Local Media Works, 2016). Trinity Mirror's articulation of this position is typical, '... newspapers are integral to the lives of their readers and, in the case of our regional titles, are an important part of their local communities. Put simply, engaging with communities is what newspaper do, so it's not surprise that this should be an area of significant and varied activity.' (Trinity Mirror, 2014: 69) But in the same document the company said it continues to 'challenge the appropriateness of the regional newspaper portfolio and this has led to a rationalization of our newspaper titles ... with the closure of seven newspapers at the end of the year.' (ibid: 13) and the company says its structure facilitates the implementation of on-going efficiencies in the face of falling print revenues. Similarly, Ashley Highfield, chief executive of Johnston Press, has called for increased efficiencies, including cross-company co-operation in respect to content and infrastructure as a way of achieving sustainable growth and 'keeping at the heart of our communities', while recognizing that 'we may have fewer journalists today – and that is unlikely to change' (Linford, 22.6.2015).

This attempt to protect the existing market environment extends to calling for further deregulation of the rules governing media ownership to allow further consolidation. The arguments in favor of this move are partially persuasive. At the heart of this perspective in the UK is a commitment to the Liberal view of the press, which inextricably links the freedom of the press to the industry's economic freedom. Therefore, Government policy is traditionally averse to interference in the regulation of newspapers. This argument has been at the fore of the debate over the future of press regulation in the wake of The Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press and has been widely employed by the editors and owners of newspapers to defend their practice on the grounds of public interest rather than self-interest (Kuhn 2007). More recently it has been employed to criticize the current limits on cross-platform ownership, which prevent a newspaper group with a market share of more than 20 per cent from holding a licence to provide a regional Channel 3 or Channel 5 service (Department for Business and Innovation, 2013: 6); this seems outdated when as much competition comes from new media as old, a perspective which was supported by MPs who considered the future of local papers in 2010 (Culture Media and Sport Select Committee, 2010: 23). Significantly those within the industry argue that relaxing the rules would extend opportunities for economies of scale, thus former editor Neil Fowler concluded that 'consolidation and title swapping should be made easier, especially geographically. Plurality is a red herring with the competition for both advertising and comment created by the Internet and should not be used to hold up further mergers. These changes will not necessarily produce vast savings – but will help.' (2011: 44).

The existing industry has also been successful in protecting its interest against what it says is unfair competition from the publicly-funded BBC. A proposal to expand local news coverage was shelved in 2008 after intervention from these newspaper companies, who found support in the then shadow secretary of state for Culture, Media and Sport, Jeremy Hunt (Newspaper Society, 30.10.08). They were backed by the industry broadcast regulator Ofcom which concluded that the proposal would have a 'significant negative impact on commercial providers'

and would particularly stifle innovation among local news websites (Ofcom, 2008: 1). However, subsequent analyses suggest that such innovation has not been forthcoming and the result has been a continuing gap in local news provision. Professor Steve Barnett told a parliamentary enquiry that there had been no 'evidence of new initiatives or investment from commercial operators' to the detriment of the public (House of Commons select committee, 28.4.14). Similarly, research by Fenton et al showed that 'the gap in local news provision that prompted the BBC local proposals has not been filled' (2010: 18). Despite this, the legacy news industry continues to complain of unfair competition, for instance from local authority publications but particularly from the BBC, and in May 2016 a radical proposal for a Local Public Service Reporting Service was unveiled (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2016: 73).

Rethinking newspaper funding to shore up the good of the community.

The legacy news industry continues to draw successfully on the justificatory ideology of serving the good of the community – even though this claim has not been subject to independent scrutiny. The position holds sway in the highest quarters; Lord Justice Leveson summed up this perception of these titles during the course of his enquiry into press standards by saying, 'their demise would be a huge setback for communities (where they report on local politics, occurrences in the local courts, local events, local sports and the like) and would be a real loss for our democracy' (Leveson, 2012: 6-7). This ideological position can then justify support for what is a free market enterprise from a publicly-funded body, such is the BB – even though the legacy news industry itself has long decried its need for subsidy. According to Geraldine Allinson, chairman of the KM Group, which owns newspapers, websites and radio stations in the South of England, companies see themselves as 'very much commercial organizations and we want to remain commercial organizations, and any idea of any sort of subsidy I think would fill all of us with horror' (House of Commons select committee 28.2.14). However, indirect subsidies have been, and are currently, enjoyed by the industry. In the United Kingdom, newspapers are currently exempt from paying

Value Added Tax (Currah 2009: 145). Local authorities are also required to advertise public notices in local papers, providing an income valued at £67.85 million in 2012; this also financially binds local watchdogs to the authorities they claim to scrutinize (Local Government Information Unit, 2012: 1). In the 2015 budget the Government also announced that newspaper companies which kept local offices open would receive benefits in the form of reduced taxation, although this has yet to be implemented.

One argument in favour of subsidy is that the benefits of good journalism in producing informed citizens, go beyond the quality of the product produced. But because these benefits are indirect, they are hard to monetize because they do not offer an incentive to readers to pay the higher rates for the product which would ensure the future of that content (Entman 2010: 106). As such, those who support the public benefit of local news have put forward ideas aimed at promoting plurality rather than leaving it at the mercy of what has always been an 'opportunistic' relationship with advertising (McChesney, 2012: 619). In 2009 the Institute for Public Policy Research (2009) proposed a levy on the major media corporations to finance public service. A further idea to use part of the BBC licence fee to pilot three 'independent news consortia' to enhance local journalism content across a range of platforms was also suggested as part of the 2009 Digital Britain report produced by the Labour-led administration, but was subsequently shelved by Coalition culture minister Jeremy Hunt. Academic Andrew Currah has proposed Government intervention – for instance in the form of tax breaks on revenue associated with content which may be defined as in the public interest and a simplification of the charitable giving regime to promote a philanthropic engagement with journalism. The aim would be to create a 'pluralistic ecology of news production', with the Government pulling 'legislative levers' to accomplish this (2009: 145).

Is it right, though, that these subsidies should be given to those established companies who are 'guilty of decades of neglect' (Engel, 2009: 61)? Those at the extreme argue that these commercial organizations will always distort the

relationship between content and reader; firstly, the quest for a mass market, promotes a press which minimizes difference in favour of a middle-of-the-road consensus (Curran and Seaton 2003: 90); secondly, content is 'dumbed-down' to promote lifestyle and human interest stories over political and 'hard' news to attract advertisers (Kuhn, 2007: 40); thirdly, proprietors may influence editorial content, either directly or more subtly by emphasizing the 'bottom line' (ibid: 38) and fourthly, the necessity to service shareholders results in the pursuit of profit over investment in editorial, at a time when what is needed is 'more emphasis on editorial quality, diversity, independence and robustness' (Barnett, 2010: 17).

Alternative beneficiaries could be the hyper local news providers, who are seen as the 'ground-up renaissance' of community reporting. (Ponsford, 22.1.2016). This movement has attracted attention from both those interested in the democratic purpose of local news and would-be funders. These sites are fairly easy to establish, using low-cost, entry level technology such as blogging templates, and most cover content which has 'civic and cultural values, including news about local community groups and events, and local government issues (particularly planning)' (Williams et al, 2014: 8). However, their economic sustainability is more open to question; while more than half of those surveyed in the 2014 study identify as local journalists, 57 per cent work fewer than 10 hours a week on their sites. Additionally, just one in six of those questioned actually made a profit from their work, and only one third attempted to generate revenue which has 'implications for the medium-to-long-term viability of these nascent online publications'. What ever the intention of those who produce them, the ability of these sites to reach communities is also in question with almost 40 per cent of sites surveyed reaching less than 10 per cent of their potential audience (ibid: 23); while a few attract between 10,000 and 100,000 unique visitors a month, the median audience was 5039.

The evidence also suggests that audiences continue to want the relationship with their legacy local newspapers that these titles purport to provide, and it is this conflict between a desire for a local newspaper as a public service in the face of

declining quality in the service provided which is perhaps at the heart of the dichotomy facing the newspaper today. Research carried out by the Media Trust in 2010 revealed strong support for a model of local journalism which is associated with traditional local newspapers; professional journalists, based in a locale, reporting on matters of public interest despite increased access to digital technology and its concomitant impact on notions of place.

People feel a genuine loss of independent reporting that provides information, investigation, analysis and community knowledge in the coverage of local affairs. Reporting the local news means telling citizens a little of what they know and a lot of what they would not otherwise know about an area that they know well. Independent reporting ...should dig deeper and provide people with insight that takes time and resources to reach. This is the watchdog function of news and it is a function that is still at the heart of what people want from their local news service. (Fenton et al, 2010: 25-6).

The relationship between newspaper and community is complex, often based on years of tradition and familiarity. Though digital formats have disrupted this relationship, they have not displaced it and the concepts of locality and connectedness remain significant. Despite structural changes to the way people live and work, facilitated by digital technology, research suggests that locality continues to be significant (Hess and Waller, 2014). Increasingly the legacy newspaper industry is 'web first', focused on an analytics-based approach to delivering targeted content at targeted audiences. While laptops and smart phones may facilitate remote working practices, research suggest that 'nearness to people' is important to journalism which focusses on communities, whether near in physical terms, or connected technologically (Reader and Hatcher, 2012). The link to that locality may no longer be actual, but a sense of place helps to 'provide news and commentary on their audiences' place in a highly connected world' (Hess and Waller, 2014: 130). Even though the news brand commodifies the audience, it continues to 'play a multifaceted role in building networks and maintaining connectivity, generating and reinforcing representations of place

and community' (Baines, 2012: 154) so that any loss is keenly felt. Additionally, Nielsen has theorized these traditional providers as central to the information ecosystem, so that even as audiences diminish, the fact that these may be the only sources of any kind of information on such issues as politics, means they retain a wider influence because of the impact they have on that ecosystem.

'Many citizens ... do not consider the local newspaper a particularly important source of information about local politics. But they would have to live with the ecological consequences as the media they do rely on for information ... would have to make do without the steady stream of local news coverage provided by the local newspaper' (Nielsen, 2015: 69). Even if that 'stream' is now reduced to a trickle, it would still be missed.

The economic sustainability of the socio-local newspaper.

Problematizing news in the market place, Jackson (2009) suggests it is a 'contested commodity' because the additional value it claims socially makes it more than an object for sale; yet the current corporate structure of the news industry tries to simplify news by demanding it be produced as cheaply as possible, as it strives to maintain a level of profit which enables payments to shareholders and debtors. This social value of news is further obscured by the fact that the reader is not the primary customer of the newspaper. Traditionally paid-for local newspapers have yielded at most 20 per cent of their revenue from cover prices. This means the advertiser has always had the upper hand in the financial power game. Here lies the contradiction between the amorality of the profit-making newspaper, and the normative conception that the product should serve a community. However, by understanding that the relationship between the industry and the community is essentially commercial, it becomes necessary to consider their inter-relatedness, and so the distance between the polarized positions outlined in the opening sections of this essay can begin to close. The

good of the community *proceeds* the commercial structure of the provincial newspaper; it is a value born of the need of the business to establish a relationship with an advertising market. As such, the notion of its community is constructed to serve that market. What this means is that the market does not need to be antithetical to the community benefit but is able to sustain that value and indeed, for much of the history of the local newspaper has done so to a greater, or lesser, extent. What is at issue in the current landscape for the provincial news industry is not incompatibility, but the unequal balance of power between the two elements which has led to the community being exploited to the extent that, as Meyer (2009) suggests, these established companies are in the process of 'harvesting' this residual value as they manage a path of decline which ends in closure.

Even when framed by the disruption caused by digital technology the decline described above is not, therefore, inevitable; it follows as much from the failure of the operation of the dominant model of corporate business to enact its service to the good of the community, as from any structural shift in revenue streams. In this reading a failure to innovate and the need to service huge debt burdens are as much an issue for these companies as technological challenge (Shaver, 2010: 19). That is why some legacy news providers refuse to see the business as fatally flawed. Indeed, they see the traditional model of providing news as a way of selling readers to advertisers as having a firm future. One obvious example is Tindle Newspapers, one of the big four holders of titles in the UK. Owned by Sir Ray Tindle, this company has expanded its print newspaper business in recent years via a focus on 'local newspapers, local people, local names, local events, local places' and highly localized editions – full of stories about that place – and largely produced by the groups within it (Adamson, 2013: 81). In July 2014, Sir Ray Tindle himself forecast a return in the fortunes for the weekly newspaper industry, saying advertising revenues at a local level were beginning to make up for the loss in national revenues. Throughout the recession, though profits have fallen, his company had never made a loss and that in the past six years he had launched 19 new titles and bought an additional 21. 'We believe we have safely

reached the turning of the tide and the beginning of the recovery. Forecasts of the early demise of us were certainly mistaken. The public still want their 'local' and most people still want it in its present printed form' (Turvill, 9.7.14).

The socio-local newspaper is, therefore, not simply an abstraction but may be understood to exist in practice. The *County Press*, for instance, on the Isle of Wight is among those legacy news companies which operates in way which makes their relationship with the community a pillar of their business. A weekly newspaper company, which also has an associated website, attests to the position that the business operates very much with the good of the community at its heart to the extent that supporting the community is a principle of that business. In the course of my research, company chief executive Robin Freeman expressed this position. 'I am very keen on the concept that we serve the community. That's a very important thing for the company, it's a way of us fulfilling a responsibility we have for doing business on the Isle of Wight.' This translates to maintaining staffing levels and facilitating staff involvement in the community; additionally, staff, including the editor, are required to live on the island. Similarly, the KM Media Group, which is also independent and family-owned, has an explicit corporate social responsibility policy which includes 'providing a valuable contribution to the community' (KM Group, 2016). This notion of corporate social responsibility enables businesses to reconcile the contradiction inherent in the commercial production of news, and, suggest Wilenius and Malmelin (2009), promotes sustainability by moving away from a results-driven environment which undermines that production.

More radically, envisioning a socio-local newspaper can shift the balance of power between revenue and production in the direction of alternative business models. This includes not-for-profit models, which maintain the capacity to yield revenue from advertising, but does so with the purpose of supporting editorial content, rather than exploiting it. This moves away from the dominant model which 'creates management imperatives and expectations regarding the size and consistency of earnings growth that have had an inverse impact on resources

devoted to news'; instead, non-profits 'reinvest earnings in the quality of the news operation' (Shaver, 2010: 17). One such organization in the UK is the *The West Highland Free Press*. The independent title, which has a background in campaigning for the rights of those living in the Scottish islands and highlands, is an independent title which was bought by its employees in 2009 and which is run as a co-operative business. Managing director, Paul Wood, believes this model offers a future for local newspapers; with a turnover nearing £1 million, co-operative ownership has 'kept the newspaper firmly rooted in the community it serves, secured its long-term future and legacy through practicing what it so passionately preached, and importantly, kept the newspaper independent and out of the hands of many of the much larger, predatory, circling publishers' (Wood, 2013). More recently the *Bristol Cable*, which has a quarterly magazine and a website, has been created using a crowd-funding model which enables people to buy into co-operative ownership for just £1. These people are able to join in the decision making process for the organization and also pledge on-going monthly financial support. By March 2016, the organization had more than 900 paying members.

Conclusion: we all have a stake in the socio-local newspaper.

These non-profit news organizations have foregrounded the community to the extent that its wellbeing is put before profit. This does not mean that they cannot raise revenue – and indeed need to do so in order to be economically sustainable – but the emphasis is shifted to raising revenue for the benefit of the community purpose to which they ascribe, which then, opens up alternative revenue streams. In turn this begins to shift the terms of the debate about the shape of the socio-local newspaper in two significant ways: firstly, towards the emphasis on the community-as-audience in the troika of audience, advertiser and content, which in turn necessitates a formalization of the valuation of news beyond monetary terms, and, therefore, secondly towards the consideration of alternative sources of funding to sustain that product and relationship. Digital

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technology means that the form of the vehicle – in this case the newspaper – is no longer important. The focus is instead on the content and the journalism which survives as ‘a service, a process, an organizing principle’ (ibid) which enables the relationship with the community to be sustained. By placing an emphasis on the relationship with the community, this vision of the future of the socio-local newspaper opens the door to new structures. Richard Watson suggests that, therefore, the time has come for newspapers to ‘divorce themselves from their old business models. Either accept that you are an advertiser-driven business and become a free or low cost ‘newszine’ or remove yourself from the fence and become publicly funded or find a committed benefactor who is interested in something beyond quarterly results.’ (2007: 37).

This essay has sought to reframe the current debate about the sustainability of local journalism in the UK which swings between the entrenched discourses of legacy value and imminent death. Specifically, it has highlighted that during the course of its development as a sophisticated industrial product with diverse constituents differentiated for varying markets, the provincial press has cemented a particular relationship with its audience by constituting it as a community which can be served by a local paper. During the era of the highly profitable mass-market newspaper, this relationship was established as a professional value and leveraged for commercial purposes so that for much of its history, the local paper has been funded through advertising revenue with the audience bearing little of the production costs. It is this process which has created the normative expectations we have for the purpose of the local newspaper, that of serving the public interest by prioritizing the good the community, and in turn it has been this conception which has sustained the newspaper by embedding within it a value which justifies its existence.

This means that these products cannot be understood wholly in commercial terms and this is where the discussions about their future which dominate within the industry flounder. They focus on the technological drivers of digital technology and the economic context of revenue streams as outlined above. But

in doing so their engagement with their community benefit is also largely reduced to an economic instrument so that the ideology of the market hampers discussions and explorations of alternatives. The concept of the socio-local newspaper redresses this balance and offers a vision for its future sustainability which recognizes the community dimension to the economic sustainability of this form of journalism. I suggest that the future of the local news business in particular lies in its perceived role and relationship with its community because that is what is valued by the audience it seeks, and the cultural context in which it currently operates.

As Jane Singer prosaically proposes, 'journalism needs to claim – or reclaim – both its role and its soul. The role is the normative position the industry has claimed for itself in a democracy – providing the information that citizens need to be free and self-governing' (2008: 129). This suggests that sustainable local journalism will be produced by those who continue to promote that value as a core part of their existence. Conversely, those who exploit it will inevitably fall by the wayside, or no longer be able to claim to produce local journalism as it is normatively understood. The dominant corporate strategy of cost-cutting applied to the local newspaper industry in a time of falling revenues is, therefore, counter-productive if it undermines that relationship and the product itself; news businesses are left trading on their residual worth as businesses enter the 'harvesting' phase of reaping every last penny of profit, as identified by Philip Meyer (2009: 13), without sowing the seeds for future years – and so, bereft of the quality of serving the good of the community, the business withers and dies.

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ⁱ The term 'newspaper' is used here, despite the increasing migration of titles from paper to digital formats. This usage recognizes the historical legacy of those paper products which are increasingly disrupted by alternative platforms.

ⁱⁱ Provincial is a useful term for describing newspapers in the UK, which is dominated by the nationally circulating London newspapers. In this definition, provincial refers to those titles based outside of London.

ⁱⁱⁱ In common with the overwhelming majority of newspapers in the UK, The Local World-owned daily newspaper, which is based in the Midlands region of England, also has an associated website, <http://www.derbytelegraph.co.uk>

^{iv} See Matthews, R (forthcoming 2017b) for a full analysis of this process.

^v The anxiety about the direction of travel for the newspaper industry was such that there were no fewer than three Royal Commissions into its operation, in 1947-1949, 1961-62 and 1974-77.

Biography.

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