

#LocalNews

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**Report on Sustainable Public Interest
Journalism Symposium, March 18, 2023**



‘We think everybody in the UK should benefit from high quality journalism that speaks to them’

By Una Murphy

The Public Interest News Foundation, a charity which supports independent providers of public interest news, has published a new report on Media Wealth Building.

Jonathan Heawood, the Executive Director of the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF), told the Sustainable Independent Public Interest Journalism symposium in Bristol that local news needs to be integrated and create value for local communities, using the concept of community wealth building which was pioneered in Preston, Lancashire.

He said: “Independent journalism exists to support communities.

“We think everybody in the UK should benefit from high quality journalism that speaks to them, for them and with them.”

Mr Heawood added: “Local news drives civic engagement. It gets people involved in local communities; voting, taking part in democratic processes, and also simply having conversations about what’s going on.”



Jonathan Heawood, Executive Director of the Public Interest News Foundation

PINF has developed local news plans, similar to neighbour plans developed by communities on issues such as building and

open spaces, he said.

The question to be asked of communities is: “What do people in that place want their local news to look like?” Mr Heawood said.

“The UK is a collage of nations and regions and communities and there is so much nuance and difference between places, which is why a top-down approach to local news doesn’t work. If it is not local it does not reflect the complexity and character of the places of our country.”

Despite differences between local communities, Mr Heawood said that similar themes in different communities included: “People said they used to know the local reporter, but they’ve gone now and there’s just a void where they used to be.”

The main findings of the PINF research were that local people believed that local news should be local, but people were struggling to meet this need sustainably, however local stakeholders were keen to support new funding models for local journalism.



Panel: Chris Brown, (left), Senior Lecturer in Online Journalism, UWE; with Linda Tanner, an editor with the Local Voice hyperlocal publications in Bristol; David Floyd Social Spider, community newspapers London; Brian Pelan, VIEWdigital, social affairs magazine and website, Belfast; Rachel Matthews, chair of the Local and Community Network at MeCCSA (The Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association); Nick Powell, Chair, Welsh Executive Council of the National Union of Journalists; and Una Murphy, Senior Lecturer in Journalism, UWE

Journalists and community media experts attend symposium on sustainability of public interest news

By Eliz Mizon and Una Murphy

A University of the West of England symposium has discussed the sustainability of independent public interest journalism. The event in Bristol's Watershed, in March, was attended by journalism industry professionals and community media experts.

The event followed a report by MPs on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) committee, which set out the threats facing local journalism.

Mr Donald McTernan, director of Ujima Radio in Bristol, was among those who participated in the symposium. He said that more collaboration was needed to make public interest journalism sustainable.

The *Sustainability in local journalism* report from MPs on the DCMS committee came four years after the Cairncross Review, an independent report which flagged up challenges facing high quality journalism in the UK.

The DCMS committee report on the Sustainability of local journalism proposed:

- Establishing a public interest news fund,
- Facilitating philanthropic funding to local news publishers,
- Ensuring that planned digital markets legislation allows smaller journalism publishers to develop fair commercial relationships with tech giants like Google and Meta.

The symposium heard from Emma Meese from the Independent Community News Network, (ICNN) which has brokered a deal for independent journalism publishers to get revenue by uploading stories onto the Google News Showcase. "We're the only country that has been able to broker this deal with Google" Ms Meese said.

She said the ICNN members were collectively the fourth largest news publisher in the UK. ICNN had worked with Omni Digital, based in Bristol, to develop a new tech platform, Ping News, a hyper-local news agency, she said.

A new approach to funding local journalism was outlined by

Jonathan Heawood from the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF), which has published a report on *Media Wealth Building – The Report of the Local News Plans Project*.

Mr Heawood said that six pilot events across the UK examined "media wealth building" within different communities, Bangor in Wales, Bristol, Manchester, Folkestone in England, Glasgow, and Newry, Northern Ireland.

The symposium heard that PINF would like to hold more community discussions throughout the UK on ways to guide the development of local news.

Symposium speakers alongside Jonathan Heawood and Emma Meese were, Francois Nel and Kamila Rymajdo from News Futures 2035; Rachel Matthews, chair of the Local and Community Network at MeCCSA (The Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association); and Eliz Mizon from the Bristol Cable.

François Nel from News Futures 2035 said there was not one vision but a number of possible pathways for the future of news. He said it was important to be innovative to show the high relevance of public interest news.

A panel of industry representatives from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland gave their views on making local journalism sustainable. They were: Linda Tanner, an editor with the Voice hyperlocal publications in Bristol; David Floyd, Social Spider, community newspapers London; Brian Pelan, VIEWdigital, social affairs magazine and website, Belfast; and Nick Powell, chair of the National Union of Journalists' Welsh Executive Council.

Linda Tanner told the symposium that the publishers of Voice magazines found that publications for less wealthy areas of Bristol had not survived. David Floyd said initial investment was needed to support public interest journalism for local communities, until the publications became sustainable.

• UWE Bristol's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Impact Acceleration Account funded the symposium.





UWE event: Eliz Mizon from the Bristol Cable at the journalism symposium in the Watershed

‘It is up to us now to make sure that we can no longer be ignored’

Ten years ago journalists working in the independent sector were dismissed as “bloggers in the bedroom”, Emma Meese, the director of the Independent Community News Network (ICNN) told the Sustainable Independent Public Interest Journalism symposium.

“I’m really, really, glad to say we’ve come a long, long way from being described as ‘bloggers in the bedroom’. We still have a long way to go. I sit at DCMS meetings and still hear loads of nonsense being spouted by large publishers, but I think it is really important that when we look at any ecosystem, you don’t just have big players, you have small players too and everybody has a role to play in the ecosystem and the news ecosystem is no different. We all have a role to play. But what we need to do now, is we need to have respect,” she said.

“Sometimes it’s a one-man band but equally that size makes it very agile and offers a lot more opportunity for them to be robust and they can weather the storm. We



Independent news: Emma Meese

didn’t lose any titles or any members during lockdown and since then we’re finding that small independent newsrooms are continuing to thrive. They’ve not just surviving they’re thriving.

“More independent publications are opening up and there’s a lot to be said

about that. We need to have confidence. We know that the larger titles are taking content from smaller titles. We know that is happening for a fact. And that is happening for a reason because we’re got people on the ground who are producing excellent quality journalism.”

ICNN has brokered a deal that 45 independent publishers in the UK will provide stories to the Google News Showcase, Ms Meese said.

ICNN is also launched a new tech platform in May called PING (Public Interest News Gateway) which will act as a hyperlocal news agency, which, she said, would create “a continuing, evolving repository of news stories across the UK

“Independent public interest news is created at a local level by people who are on the ground walking the beat like we used to do as journalists years ago,” Ms Meese added.

“It is up to us now to make sure that we can no longer be ignored”.



Independent journalism sector has a vital role to play, says chair of community network

Local public interest journalism is a vital part of the social infrastructure and creates social capital which binds community together, Rachel Matthews, chair of the Local and Community Network at MeCCSA (The Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association), told the symposium in Bristol.

“Local journalism is part of social infrastructure; we want good roads, we want a good transport system, so why should we not want good local journalism that actually reports on the way we live, in the same way that we want to get from a to b on the bus?”

“We do know that local journalism is valuable, but I think, for me, that concept is really muddled because of the local newspaper industry.

“The local newspaper industry has said for years that it existed to benefit local communities and would still say that. The ‘Making a Difference, Journalism Matters’, is the annual campaign of the News Media Association, which represents local newspapers. But actually when you look at how those newspapers operate in detail, you know, they say that they benefit communities, often what they mean is they benefit a community that is equivalent to the commercial market for that newspaper, which is why we get the gaps in coverage people are talking about and communities that aren’t served, which many of you are trying to counter by the work you are doing in the independent news sector.

“The problem is, as we’re already said, those



They would have rung up when they needed to ask you about something, they would have come to you with stories if things weren’t working right ...

newspapers have a big voice and in many ways for many policy people in those high-level discussions, it’s that model of community benefit which kind of dominates their understanding. So, one of things it’s good for us to do, is to suggest different ways to retell that story about the benefit of community news, or what happens in local journalism.”

She said that while many big newspaper offices had closed offices, others in the independent journalism sector, such as Greater Govanhill magazine and The Ferret in Scotland had opened a new community space, where people can meet.

“It’s more than information that matters to people. So, when you think about why people care about local journalism and the organisations who produce local journalism, for me, it’s not just about the information that is being shared, it’s not just about that community thing, it is also about the social role that these organisations serve. I think that increasingly we can see this role of journalism is coming to the fore.”

Dr Matthews who is an academic at Coventry University, said that when the local newspaper closed its doors and was turned into a hotel, it left citizens without an important ‘third space’ in the community.



Rachel Matthews, chair of the Local and Community Network at MeCCSA (The Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association)

“There is lots of evidence around the information that local journalism supports, how that benefits people by increasing the financial scrutiny of local authorities and increasing voter turnout, but it is also worth considering the wider social benefits of local journalism in terms of thinking about the provision of third spaces”, she said.

“When you had a newspaper like the Coventry Evening Telegraph in the city, people would have gone to that building for all sorts of reasons.

“They would have rung up when they needed to ask you about something, they would have come to you with stories if things weren’t working right, for example poor housing has been a staple of local journalism for years and years. So, you’re part social service, you’re part open space. When people know the journalists, when they have that daily contact, you’re part of the community, you’re on the street and you’re visible, then you perform a much wider service than just sharing information.”

Dr Matthews said the independent public interest journalism sector must speak the language of policy makers, so they understand the tangible and intangible benefits the sector delivers to support the social infrastructure within communities.

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