

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee
Inquiry into the Scottish local newspaper industry

Second session: January 20, 2010

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MSPs Present:

Karen Whitefield (Lab, Convener)
Kenneth Gibson (SNP, Deputy Convener)
Claire Baker (Lab)
Aileen Campbell (SNP)

Ken Macintosh (Lab)
Christina McKelvie (SNP)
Elizabeth Smith (Con)
Margaret Smith (Lib Dem)

Witnesses:

- Professor Neil Blain, Head of Film, Media and Journalism Department, University of Stirling;
- David Hutchison, Research Fellow in Media Policy, Glasgow Caledonian University;
- James Thickett, Director of Market Research and Market Intelligence, Ofcom;
- Alan Stewart, Head of Broadcasting and Telecoms, Ofcom Scotland.

Chain ownership:

The Convener opened the second evidence-taking session by seeking views on the observation that, while the BBC and STV might cover an issue of local importance their coverage would not be as sustained or as in-depth as one would find in a local newspaper. Here it was noted that:

- STV/BBC would not be able to cover the nuances and developments of a local story as well as a local newspaper. Broadcast media would be more concerned with outcomes rather than any lead up to or aftermath of any localised event.
- Commercial concerns, for example, might result in a purely locally-owned newspaper hesitating to or be reluctant to cover certain issues. In contrast, a local newspaper – which was part of a wider newspaper chain – would benefit from the financial and journalistic support offered by the wider organisation meaning that it could afford to pursue stories that might appear contentious.
- One can romanticise the idea of a locally-owned newspaper, however, chain ownership has its benefits, offering greater journalist numbers, cheaper newsprint/printing costs, for example.
- One should also make the distinction between what is meant by the terms “local” and “regional” early on in any discussion. *The Herald*, *Daily Record* and *The Scotsman* are national newspapers, although in a UK context they are seen as regional ones. Likewise, STV is a national broadcaster in Scotland – not a regional one.
- “National”, “regional” and “local” are terms that definitely mean different things to different people – depending on where they are in the UK. They are terms that Ofcom does grapple with, but the organisation does try to understand localities and regional/geographical sensitivities.
- Local newspapers are an essential training ground for those who go on to work for the national press and national broadcasters.
- BBC had applied for license to host approximately 60 local video links, however, this had been rejected by the BBC Trust. Video is something that local newspapers might like to harness.
- Ultimately newspapers and newspaper groups are interested in the bottom line: money – and this accusation has been levelled time and again at the likes of Johnston Press and Trinity Mirror.

Youth readership:

As in the previous session, it was observed that the youth of today are more interested in the internet than local newspapers. The idea mooted by President Sarkozy of France - giving newspapers to people when they reach the age of - was also discussed.

- Local news does not interest youth. This applies also to local news broadcast on TV. If anything, young people tend to be more attracted to local radio.
- High proportion of young people use the internet – as well as networking sites and mobile telephony. Those using such technology *might* settle into local readership. One cannot assume that they will, therefore if one wishes to attract such readers – then on-line and off-line marketing are crucial.

- US research shows that among the under-30s local news/newspapers in general are not that important; among the over-30s they become increasingly important.
- If President Sarkozy's idea were to be replicated in Scotland it would have very definite cost implications. One would also have to decide whether the newspapers distributed were local or regional ones; Scottish or UK titles; daily or weekly publications; collected or delivered.
- Mainland Europe has definite interventionist policies when it comes to the media, with the subsidising of local newspapers an attempt to ensure plurality. The UK, however, takes a more hands-off role – as intervention raises the spectre of interference with the "freedom of the press".
- If such a policy were to be introduced, then one should perhaps provide Scottish papers first; Sunday papers might be more effective than a daily route – but one must also consider the provision of UK-wide newspapers which would also raise the question of whether or not the Scottish Government would be expected to subsidise those.

Concluding this section, it was also noted that there had been a remarkable shift towards English-based newspapers offering a Scottish edition; this is surprising as with the maturation of Devolution the opposite would probably have been expected.

Educational policies:

The next issue to be discussed was media literacy. Here it was widely agreed that acquisition of interest and engagement with the media should occur as early as possible.

Advertising:

It was observed that one of the of the newspaper industry's most pressing worries was the loss of advertising. Again it was noted that local authorities have started to transfer recruitment advertising to websites, while the Scottish Government is in the process of allowing public information notices (PINs) to be advertised electronically too.

Witnesses were asked for their opinion on the migration of notices to the internet – and whether anyone actually reads them.

- Everyone in Scotland requires access to public information and one is still most likely to come across this in local newspapers. It should also be remembered that in Scotland some 32 per cent of people are not online.
- In contrast with Scotland, the UK Government plans to continue advertising in local and regional newspapers.
- It is a myth that readers will get carried away by the digital world. Some areas of Scotland had poor internet cover; lack of internet access "cuts people out of the loop" with the elderly most likely to become disenfranchised. Once again, it was pointed out that Glasgow had poor access to broadband compared to the rest of the UK.
- It should be remembered that a high percentage of Scots read their local newspaper. North of the Border: 61 per cent of Scots read their local newspaper compared to 41 per cent in the rest of the UK. If one transfers the local newspaper onto the internet, then you are losing your audience.

- Broadband statistics find that Glasgow's uptake is low compared to the UK average. Discrepancies can also be found in rural areas too with uptake or access high in some and low in others.
- Local newspapers contain a package of information that allows readers to pick up and absorb information that they might not otherwise seek out. Local newspapers are a package of information – and people might pick up things that they would not otherwise seek out. (This again raises the spectre of “serendipity” referred to in the Jan 13 meeting).
- If fewer than two per cent of people obtain information from PINs, then what are the other 98 per cent of the population doing, where are they getting their information from? The fact that one or two people can obtain information from a local newspaper source, could lead to a campaign and that is more important than the percentage of the population who actively read and seek out such notices.

Local authority newspapers:

The next issue to be discussed was the whether or not it was possible to quantify the threat local authority newspapers have on local newspapers. Here it was observed that:

- It is possible to exaggerate the threat, for it must be remembered that local authority newspapers are writing things from their perspective, they are not purporting to be/should not be taken to be sources of authoritative investigative journalism.
- Local and community newspapers are no substitute for professional journalism training which provides: knowledge of libel laws/investigative journalism processes.
- Message should be that free sheets are disappearing; a well-produced local newspaper will always survive.
- Community radio sector is offering training. Though training places are few in number they do offer extremely good experience.

IFCNs:

The next issue to come under scrutiny was the *Digital Britain Report* and proposals to create independently funded news consortia (IFCNs) to ensure the continuation of quality regional broadcast news. Here it was stated that:

- DC Thomson; Johnston Press and an independent consortium had all passed the first stage. The preferred bidder will now be made known in March.
- It is a pilot and only time will tell whether or not the winning consortia will make a difference to local audiences.
- Doubtful if the winning consortia will, however, have much impact on local newspapers and way local news is reported. It cannot compete with a winning system that successfully reports, for example, local court stories.
- It should also be remembered that BBC/STV might report five or six regional/local stories. A local newspaper will carry 15 to 20 such stories. Local newspapers might maintain that TV news providers are using their headlines however, there is no evidence to show that this is affecting circulation.
- As for advertising in news bulletins - ITV and STV did not really use that slot.

- Local newspapers have not picked up on wider skills which could use on website

Balance and bias:

The panel was then asked to provide their views on the role local newspapers play in regional as well as national democracy; whether or not it was felt there was bias in the local media. Once again it was observed that:

- Local newspapers play a vital role in local democracy. While in the 19th century papers might have been very political and partisan, today local newspapers have to be centrist otherwise they would lose readers.
- Some newspapers do irritate elected representatives, however, this is more a case of holding the person in authority to account rather than a display of any innate bias.
- It would be commercial suicide to alienate readers; "being partisan is not good for business".
- If it is felt that an angle or a point has been omitted, then the elected representative/political party representative should at least be able to write a letter to ensure their view was published too.
- On a national level there is a plurality of voices, so readers naturally look for balance or a newspaper that represents their point of view. On a local level partisan politics would make survival extremely difficult for a local paper.

Journalism quality:

One of the final issues raised once again was the question of the industry attracting new talent as well as retaining quality journalists/journalism at local level – following recent redundancies. Again it was observed that:

- The industry may be developing a reputation for "cut and pasting", however, it should be borne in mind that while contact-building and investigative journalism are important, a journalist today would be foolish not to use other information sources at their disposal.
- Many young people still had "a terrific desire" to become journalists.
- New media trends also provided different routes into the industry - with graduates opting for jobs in magazines as well as public relations. Jobs might be difficult to obtain, but at the same time, the expansion of new careers does mean that there are different opportunities for graduates
- Students interested in a career in the media usually know what they want to achieve earlier than others, a career in the media is almost akin to a vocation with students.