

# Is it time for a TV-like licence for local papers?

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*WE happily pay tax to watch mundane and questionable content on TV, but begrudge paying a penny for the intelligent written word. How do we ensure our struggling local journalists continue to guard our democracy and champion a free society? Is it time to rethink the model?*

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With TV licence fees we give £3.7billion a year (£147 per home) to the BBC to supposedly entertain and inform us. That is a tax to watch telly. Why does newspaper journalism miss out on that deal? Why is the written word less worthy than Strictly, Bake Off, or any other light entertainment?

With the rise of fake news and the continuing loss of newspapers, along with their journalists and printing presses across Britain, it is time we acted on this never-resolved debate about how to fund and save local journalism. Last week saw the axing of another 40 jobs and print production closures in north west England by Trinity Mirror Group, the UK's biggest regional newspaper publisher. It has been reported that they plan to replace quality local reporting with more generic pooled content, because that it is cheaper.

Cheap news substitution will feel stale, not be as well appreciated, not perform the same service, not be as well read, and so undermine the fight for journalism. Cheap, homogenised content is like being offered a Happy Meal in place of a roast dinner, a Cup-a-Soup when you hungered for a casserole.

## VITAL TO DEMOCRACY

This important traditional industry is vital to democracy, and it continues to slide further into crisis, further towards being obsolete, as readership and advertising fall, and more and more editions are erased.

We've lost more than half of Britain's local journalists and 200 local newspapers in the past decade. Meanwhile, local councils pretend to fill the gap by publishing propaganda disguised as news, and all publicly funded.

There are a few ultra-local start-up newspapers, doing sterling work and bucking the big trend, but possibly only because they are free, often bedroom businesses on a skeletal budget, delivered through people's doors. Yet they prove people do still want local news.

These papers perform a public good, an essential information service, in monitoring democracy and keeping a free society in check. They are the original news fountains, largely the source from where digital and national media fill their vessels. Once these sources dry up, these secondary sources will become somewhat parched of regional content too.

#### NEW MODEL?

The written word needs a new funding model. I think we may need something akin to a TV licence equivalent, to subsidise the funding of local newspapers. We subsidise plenty of other essential services. The question is, can public funding be achieved without editorial compromise?

A trial about to start will pay salaries for BBC reporters to work for local papers, to fill in some of the void. It may be a strong option, when the consequences of not trying an alternative funding model are serious.

Look how our world is now dominated by social media, without checks and guards in place to ensure trustworthy, critical, accurate, high-quality, balanced content. Traditionally, well-funded newspapers have always had editors, whilst academic journals have peer reviewers, to perform this role, and with good reason.

I can foresee a future where self-publishing independent writers are tomorrow's brands, not the long-lost independent newspapers.

There are grave concerns with that. Who will train tomorrow's writers, and ensure quality and integrity? Who will authenticate and differentiate them from fake news sources? Who will sustain the important role that journalism plays in upholding a viable democracy, holding society to account and monitoring governance?

## PUBLIC FUNDING DEBATE

Research by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that the internet is not solely to blame for wiping out newspaper profitability. It found British newspapers depend too highly on advertising revenue, compared to some other countries where newspapers are less reliant on this and fare better.

Both the Guardian and the London School of Economics and Political Science have previously given voice to the idea that public funding of private media is the answer. The eternal reply is that newspapers are nervous of accepting anything that resembles state funding.

History has shown that countries with state-funded media are less likely to have a free society and democracy, and be more likely to suffer higher frequencies of human rights abuses, with more arrested and harassed journalists, fewer independent media, less press freedom and less journalistic objectivity.

Yet the BBC has a Charter in place to ensure independence and prevent state interference, even though it is publicly funded, so why not the same model for funding newspapers? Unless someone dreams up a better idea, public subsidies could ultimately determine whether local news can thrive into the future.

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