

European Union of Women

Mass media and Information Commission

Leigh Mendelsohn,
Chairman

THE DECLINE OF THE LOCAL PRESS AND ITS REINVENTION

All commission contacts were sent the topic but unfortunately the only response has been from the British Section. This therefore forms the current report. The Commission intends to broaden this analysis across Europe and complete the work for the Autumn Council meeting.

BACKGROUND

In late Victorian times there were several local daily papers, centered on the large urban areas - the Manchester Guardian, the Newcastle Chronicle and the Leeds Mercury, as examples. The development of the railways helped greatly with speedy distribution.

By the latter part of the 20th century a large city often had one morning, one evening and a Sunday paper, all operating from the same headquarters. Sheffield had the Sheffield Telegraph, and the Star came out late afternoon for those homeward bound, which was typical. Smaller towns had one weekly paper, although most of the local press was owned by a handful of large national companies. The British loved their local papers, which had an enormous circulation. They were written by professional journalists who lived locally and were seen to be fair and reliable when reporting contentious matters in the Council chamber or the Courts, and were less combative than the national papers.

DECLINE AND FIGHT-BACK

With the arrival of multimedia, home computers and highly sophisticated mobile telephones, advertising revenue was dropping, newspaper groups were amalgamating and therefore fewer journalists were being employed.

However over the last 5 years particularly, the Industry has fought back. Selling advertising space to generate revenue for papers is a problem, but by broadening their activities with online and broadcasting platforms to back up the printed paper, matters have improved. By working together the groups within the Industry have encouraged advertisers by one really innovative scheme where it is now possible for the advertiser to simultaneously place advertisements in all 74 daily regional press titles in the UK, thereby at a stroke reaching 6.6 million adults. A varied range of consumer sectors have taken part including 02, Marks & Spencer, NPower, the Institute of Chartered Accountants and B&Q, and have been very satisfied with the result.

POLITICIANS AND THE INDUSTRY

There has been discussion among politicians, and Members of Parliament in particular, as to whether there should be a Government subsidy for local weekly newspapers to assure their continuation as guardians of local democracy – recognising the big role they play in scrutinising Councils and other local officials like Hospital Managers. However, the newspaper industry values its genuine independence. Peter Barron of the Northern Echo spoke for the majority of Editors by stating that they did not want to be in the pocket of the Government but felt the industry's position could possibly be helped by creatively constructed tax breaks and benefits, while still remaining independent.

TECHNOLOGY SPEARHEADS THE ADVANCE

Up-to-date research brings to light the following facts: Britain's local media businesses are currently delivering news and information across print, online, mobile and broadcast channels comprising 1,100 plus core newspapers; 1,600 companion websites; hundreds of niche and ultra local publications and a range of other digital and broadcast channels. The Industry has invested heavily in the best available technology and is now benefiting from new, online advertising revenue, besides using innovative ways of opening up public bodies to scrutiny by the use of live webcams, Twitter and blogging. Local media has increased over the past year with its monthly online audience growing by 16%, publishers citing increased access through smartphones and tablets. Now news travels faster for the benefit of us all.

One of the most interesting schemes is that of the Yorkshire Post under Editor Peter Charlton.

They have a new 'app' for iPad and iPhone, sponsored by East Coast which runs the railway between Yorkshire and London. Also there is a glossy quarterly business magazine, Yorkshire Vision, launched by some 40 of the Yorkshire Members of Parliament and 30 businesses and Councils at the House of Commons to support the Fair Deal for Yorkshire Campaign in an effort to narrow the North-South divide.

WHO BUYS THE LOCAL PAPER?

One of the first rules of marketing is to know the target audience. The Newspaper Society, the professional body for local newspapers and the other fields in which the Industry is now involved, reckons to have 10,000 professionals focussed on local news. 80% of the people whom they are serving spend at least half their time within 5 miles of home and 76% spend at least half their money within that 5 mile area. Research tells us that local media, led by the printed paper is more trusted by 45% of people, ahead of national TV at 37%.

Looking a little closer, and at research in other forums, the predominating purchasers are women. They are those with young children or caring for elderly relatives, who shop locally and socialise with others who are likewise constrained by their responsibilities. All these women, including older ladies, will be part of the 11.5 million regular purchasers of a local paper, but not a national one as the local one is more relavent to their life. Post Office closures, retail bargain advertising, new parking restrictions, changes in Library hours, Council planning decisions or a new playground figure importantly in their lives, especially at a time of economic downturn. What is in the Local fosters conversation and helps people feel part of the community. Once the newspaper is in the house, statistics tell us that it is likely to be read by others, often the motoring or sports pages! The organisation Crowd Research tells us that 60% of local paper readers act on the advertisements. This is good for the local economy and is convenient for the reader: a win-win situation.

MODERN TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTS DEMOCRACY

The facts covered in this report demonstrate that although the British local press has been in decline, over the past 5 years it has made immense efforts to make itself fit for the 21st century by embracing modern technology which it is honing to offer a wider range of information opportunities to its existing audience and fresh recruits.

The way forward must be to expand the base across all the possible media fields which will increase advertisers and sales, leading to greater revenue. If the Industry is financially secure it will be better able to contribute to maintaining and advancing our Democracy.

Philippa Williams Leader Media and Information Commission British Section with Azi Ahmed.

Leigh Mendelsohn
rivierapress@sfr.fr