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Investigating the changing ontology of local British  
journalism.

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## Abstract

*The nature of this study is to investigate the changing role of the journalist in British local news media. It has been argued in academic literature that the rise of digital media, and the subsequent decline in daily newspaper circulation has impacted the news making processes for journalists throughout the industry. Also as a result of industry developments, local news media have been devastatingly affected, with regards to tight budget cuts, closures and redundancies, and the consolidation of titles. The role of the local journalist is in question and the future of local journalism remains unclear and unstable. The local newspaper once sat at the heart of the local community as an authoritative and trustworthy establishment. With the diminishing of the local press, the rise of 'fake news' and the vast amount of stories available online, public trust in news media sources appears to be diminishing. The approach of emotional personalisation in news stories has been presented as a way for local journalists to assert their authority as informers through a news reporting style that encourages public engagement in local matters. Through a series of four in-depth interviews this study found that local journalists do agree their role is changing but there is still a worthy place for a local newspaper within a community. Despite tensions within the industry and worries for the future, this dissertation highlights that local journalists overcome these concerns everyday in order to perform their social responsibility to the highest degree.*

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## **Introduction**

In the United Kingdom more than 200 local newspapers have shut down since 2005 and there are now no daily local newspapers for approximately two-thirds of local authority areas (Hutton, 2018; Elgot, 2018). This assessment of the industry is problematic because the public still need and want to be informed of the news and information that generates within their local area (Hess and Waller, 2017; Clark, 2013). Prime Minister Theresa May has stressed that the loss of local newspapers is dangerous for British democracy as ‘when trusted and credible news sources decline, we become vulnerable to news which is untrustworthy’ (2018; cited in Elgot, 2018). If the local press, as institutions for maintaining a healthy democracy, are not able to serve normative functions this will result in ‘less engaged citizens, less scrutiny of authorities, poorer representation of shared concerns, less community cohesion, a sense of powerlessness and a lack of connectedness’ (Ramsay and Moore, 2016, p. 14).

Journalists are expected to fulfil normative functions such as holding public authorities and powerful institutions to account, informing and educating the public of issues, representing the voice of the public and advocating campaigns concerning matters of public interest (Deuze, 2009; Firmstone, 2016; Hawkes, 2013; Hess and Waller, 2017; Ramsay and Moore, 2016). However, the digital developments of the media landscape have challenged the notion of what a journalist is and does (Hess and Waller, 2017, p. 10). For example, the rise of social media has meant that audiences can take control of news values and at the same time allow journalists to place themselves at the centre of audience social circles (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015; Hawkes, 2013, p. 235). Yet, despite the

belief that journalism is becoming more inclusive of public participation, new online channels of communication are not seen as adequate platforms for public debate nor encouraging a sense of community and cohesion (Ramsay and Moore, 2016, p. 13).

The concerns regarding the unceasing transformation of journalism demonstrate there is a continuous need to investigate how journalists are renegotiating their role within a very competitive environment. Journalists need to adapt their professional abilities to anchor their authority amongst a mass of voices that have the ability to spread inaccurate and unreliable information (Hess and Waller, 2017). This research aims to contribute towards the on-going discussion regarding the meaning of local British journalism against a backdrop of rapid decline in local newspaper titles and a widespread public distrust in mainstream media. The emotional personalisation of news will be encouraged as a means to restore public engagement with local issues in a manner that presents local journalists as empathetic and committed figures of the community. These factors are the driving force of this research, as local journalists are key communicators and represent the voice of the communities they serve. Therefore, in order to investigate the changing ontology of local British journalism, interviews will be conducted with local journalists in order to answer the following research questions:

**R1** What do local journalists perceive their roles to be in the new digital media environment?

**R2** Can the emotional personalisation in news help local journalists fulfil their social responsibilities?

Twenty years ago, Franklin and Murphy predicted the future of the local press as investigators and informers of the public as unstable and bleak (1998, p. 19). Despite such warnings, local British journalism is in crisis and a framework for a sustainable future is unclear. However, the daily commitment of local journalists to their role should not be underestimated. In a digitally driven and globalised nation the responsibility to bring local communities together remains a struggle. In the era of 'fake news', the need for local journalists to guide audiences to trustworthy information and to facilitate public engagement and discussion of local issues is greater than ever.

## **Literature Review**

### *Emotional personalisation in news*

The focus of this study is to investigate the role of the local journalist within a community and to provide a solution to help restore and encourage public engagement with local issues. This will be achieved, through an exploration of emotional personalisation in news. Emotional personalisation of news is 'giving a non-expert face to social issues through the emotional testimony of ordinary citizens who experienced them personally' (Bas and Grabe, 2015, p. 165). The line of argument throughout this next section is that when journalists use emotional personalisation within their stories they present themselves as a trustworthy, representative voice as well as an empathetic and committed member of the community. Additionally, this method is accepted as a solution for reviving public engagement with local issues as this has been proven through a number of well-documented experiments.

Today, information is available at our fingertips, in practically unlimited volumes, all hours of the day and so it has been suggested that retaining informative details of news may have become less important (Bas and Grabe, 2015, p. 176). However, Bas and Grabe (2015) argue that in order to be comprehensive and aware of issues as they evolve, it is necessary to retain such information in the long-term. Their experimental study demonstrated that the use of emotional personalisation of news 'increased encoding, storage, and retrieval of news information for citizens positioned at both higher and lower educational segments of society' (*Ibid*, p. 176). Therefore, the results of their study present a clear justification for further investigation into the use of

emotional personalisation in news as a means to increase civic participation and discussion of the news.

Bas and Grabe (2015) highlight that within academic scholarship it is often perceived that elements of emotion enter news messages through the flashy packaging of sensationalist news style and the use of arousing content. They argue that the emotional personalisation of news is distinct from sensational and arousing news content and reporting style. However, it is understood that when testimonies of personal experience with issues are delivered with a high level of emotional poignance they have the ability to provoke a sense of identification and empathy in viewers (*Ibid*, p. 163). This ability to provoke a response from audiences is a problem as it potentially interferes with the process of audiences becoming rationally informed citizens (Bas and Grabe, 2015, p. 164). Nonetheless, it is arguably more challenging to suggest audiences are entirely passive consumers. Hence, their study rejects the traditional notion that emotion is the enemy of an informed citizenship. Bas and Grabe's (2015) research demonstrates that emotion and reason are two human affordances, complicatedly entangled with one another (p. 178). This statement questions the concept of an informed citizenship as being merely consumers of traditional hard-cold-facts news practises.

It has been previously identified that emotion fuels engagement with news, and that information is a powerful motivator of behaviour (Beckett and Deuze, 2016, p. 2; Bas and Grabe, 2016, p. 1722). In a separate experimental study, Bas and Grabe (2016) demonstrated that the personalisation of social issues through the



use of audio-visual emotional displays of ordinary people encouraged potential civic engagement in politics. There are prevalent discernments within the academic literature that suggest when the news places greater emphasis on human tragedy it can distort political and economic issues and result in a poorly informed citizenry (Bennett, 2003; cited in Bas and Grabe, 2016, p. 1730). However, the results of their study contradict these statements, and so reinforce the need to examine the concept of an informed citizenship. Although this is not an explicitly new phenomenon, it is becoming increasingly understood that 'informed and active citizenship might require emotional involvement and personal identification with social issues' (Bas and Grabe, 2015, p. 160). Nevertheless, there is an on-going resilient and simplistic assumption that 'emotion invariably compromises impartiality' (Richards and Rees, 2011, p. 860).

Impartiality is defined as the ability to present a broad range of views and weight of opinion surrounding a topic of discussion (Wahl-Jorgensen *et al*, 2017, p. 783). As impartial constructors of narrative, journalists are required to present a range of opinions that reflect on the diversity of the public(s) they represent and bind these opinions together in a way that forms a collective climate of rational opinion (Hendy, 2013, p. 38; cited in Wahl-Jorgensen *et al*, 2017, p. 783). From this definition, and an understanding of journalistic process, it can be argued that the use of emotional personalisation in news could add depth to a story and broaden the range and weight of opinion on a particular topic. Impartiality has been at the core of journalistic practice since the turn of the twentieth century (Boudana, 2016, p. 602). During this time, journalism was merely 'a trained professional delivering objectively validated content to a reader (or viewer, or

listener)' (McNair, 2009, p. 347). However, this dominant model for journalism broke down during the latter half of the twentieth century (*Ibid*) and has continued to do so through the early twenty-first century given the transformation of the new media environment. Although the industry is constantly evolving, journalism is being held back by traditional practises that exclusively avoid emotion in news.

Furthermore, impartiality is referred to as being objective (Cushion, 2011; cited in Wahl-Jorgensen *et al*, 2017, p. 783). Objectivity is understood as a 'correspondence between the content of the news report and the events that are reported' (Edgar, 2013, p. 81). However, the reporting of all newsworthy events entails a degree of selectivity and organisation by the reporter. Therefore, 'it may be suggested that the true nature or meaning of an event may typically be contested by those directly involved' (*Ibid*). There is a growing belief that objectivity in journalism is a myth (Broersma, 2013; Hess and Waller, 2017) and conventions of objective reporting were created 'as part of an essentially utilitarian-capitalist-scientific orientation towards events' (Carey, 1997; cited in Hess and Waller, 2017, p. 141). It is proposed that the emphasis on objectivity restricts the journalism industry from breaking boundaries and actively bringing people together (Hess and Waller, 2017, p. 191). If journalists, especially local journalists, were less concerned about being objective they would be able to 'fully appreciate and embrace their roles as key connectors and drivers of news and community issues' (*Ibid*, p. 88). As long as the interests of the community were always put ahead of the interests of the journalists, there should be no apparent reason why journalists could not maintain ethical standards and

provide fair and balanced accounts (*Ibid*). Once again, the use of emotional personalisation within news reports could be presented as a means to add depth to a story and to anchor the meaning of a narrative. The testimonies of those directly involved provide greater evidence of the nature of the story and emotional engagement of events. Despite arguments to the contrary, it is still the widely held assumption that the use of emotion in news reports threatens traditional values that remain at the core of journalistic practise.

Emotional personalisation, as the inclusion of emotional testimonies of ordinary citizens who have personal experience of events or issues at the core of a news story (Bas and Grabe, 2015, p. 165), has been explored throughout this section. Emotional personalisation within news stories has been presented as a means to increase public awareness and understanding as well as encourage public engagement with social issues (Bas and Grabe, 2015; Bas and Grabe, 2016; Hess and Waller, 2017). Counter arguments have been challenged that propose the use of emotion within news stories would interfere with audiences becoming rationally informed citizens and threaten the traditional values of objective and impartial news reporting. With regards to local news media, it is imperative for journalists to demonstrate a high level of dedication to the community they serve. The use of emotional personalisation within news stories could present a more truthful version of events by reflecting on the wider scope of a story as well as reinforcing the notion that local journalists are empathetic and committed members of their community.

## *Rise of Digital Media*

Local journalism evolves with the wider structural transformation of news media and therefore faces similar challenges to journalism on a national and international level (Hess and Waller, 2017, p. 2). Transformations of the industry have been digitally driven, and include the changes in which people access news, source news, communicate with one another and share information (*Ibid*). According to some scholars, the rise of digital media has revolutionised the journalism industry, disrupted the traditional business model and triggered a 'crisis' surrounding the future of the industry (*Ibid*). News journalism has irrevocably transferred to the digital sphere (Joseph, 2016, p. 18) and despite beliefs that local journalism is most prone to innovation, instability and structural change (Franklin and Murphy, 1998, p. 5) this transition has been a struggle for the entire industry.

Primarily, this is because the rise of digital media has meant the circulation of newspapers as vehicles to deliver content and advertorial revenue is in annual decline and subsequent crisis (McNair, 2009, p. 348). It is apparent that the decline of traditional practises is more prominent within developed capitalist societies, most notably those within North America, Europe and Australia (McNair, 2009; Joseph, 2016). The decline in the circulation of newspapers is not considered to be absolutely detrimental to the journalism industry; however, the future of journalism is often conflated with the future of print (McNair, 2009, p. 348).

McNair (2009) reinforces the idea that digital journalism should be encouraged as the future of journalism. However, he also raises the issue that the great amount and wide variety of cost free information produced and distributed online poses a challenge for audiences to sift through mass content to find reliable sources and decide for themselves what quality journalism is (*Ibid*, p. 349). Beckett and Deuze describe this challenge as audiences drowning in a sea of stories on a daily basis (2016, p. 2). Whilst Gillmor uses the metaphor, 'drinking from a fire hose' (2009, p. 9). The message is clear, with the sheer amount of instantly accessible information available online across a variety of sources, how can we recognise the reliable and useful material and separate it from the unreliable and the useless (McNair, 2009, p. 349; Gillmor, 2009, p. 9)?

Technological change and the creation of new online channels for communication allow active public participants to freely create and distribute news online and directly interfere with media agendas (Joseph, 2016, p. 9; Papacharissi, 2009, p. viii). Additionally, citizens have the ability to decide what stories are most popular through viral circulation within these peer-driven communities (Meraz, 2009, p. 125). The rise of public intervention and participation in the digital sphere demonstrates a shift in journalism from a one-way communication system to a more democratic process (Joseph, 2016). It is believed this interference has caused some tensions between traditional news producers and their audiences (Picard, 2014, p. 507). Historically, news organisations and journalists held the power as the 'educators of the uneducated' and 'protectors of social order by steering the unkempt masses away from dangerous ideologies and undesirable actions, and as guiding their

minds through authoritative commentary and directional information' (*Ibid*). Today, although news making practises are now more inclusive of the public, journalists still play an essential part in this process and provide a valuable societal function as gatekeepers of information (Broersma, 2013; Josephi, 2016).

Much public participation is channelled through social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and content sharing platforms such as YouTube. The public react to news stories through tweets and retweets, blog and Facebook posts and other visually related user-generated content (Hess and Waller, 2017, p. 104; Josephi, 2016, p. 18). Social media has impacted the news making process for journalists, as it is no longer sufficient for news organisations to only be a trustworthy source. There is a growing understanding that news stories should be produced in a way that ensures sociability, too (Phillips, 2012). One of the major roles of audiences online is to share stories via social media and to spread their message (*Ibid*, p. 669). The perspective of online media as being socially driven demonstrates these platforms are able to support the individual need to be a part of meaningful conversations, engage in collaboration and attach to a sense of community (Meraz, 2009). Firmstone and Coleman (2015) classify participatory activity of individual citizens as a form of citizen journalism. However, their research demonstrates that, despite some optimism in academic literature, journalists as key communicators with the public rarely or do not engage at all with citizens through these platforms, if at all (*Ibid*, p. 126). They suggest 'at best, [comment threads] are horizontal conversations between the audience, and at worst they are "on-off" comments thrown into a black hole which is unlikely to convince anyone that their voices are being heard' (*Ibid*).

This implies that there is a missed opportunity for journalists to engage with their audiences and to further establish a relationship between the newspaper and the wider community. This study explores whether local journalists are embracing their roles as facilitators of conversations with audiences through online platforms and have the intention to encourage public engagement. This all must be achieved while journalists are at the same time renegotiating their role as local journalists within the new digital media environment.

Furthermore, the rise of digital journalism has shifted the industry in a way that has opened up new spaces for the emergence of more emotional and personalised forms of expression in public discourse (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016, p. 128). For example, citizens now have greater autonomy of the production and distribution of opinion in online practises; often these voices are used alongside content provided by professional journalists (*Ibid*, p. 133). However, emotional engagement with news in this sense has been criticised. As ‘emotionality typically represents a decline in the standards of journalism [...]; while “quality” journalism informs and educates citizens by appealing to reason, other kinds of journalism focus on pleasing their audiences by appealing to the emotions’ (Pantti, 2010, p. 169; cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016, p. 130). Such arguments align with concerns regarding sensationalist news reporting. News stories that contain elements of drama, sensationalism, affect and emotion are often spread via social media sites (Josephi, 2016, p. 15). Sensationalism is the dramatisation and exaggeration of events in order to attract attention and increase circulation or audience share (Chandler and Munday, 2016). Although the intention of including emotion in news stories would be to attract audiences and increase

circulation, the role of the journalist is understood to be as objective and impartial constructors of a narrative. Therefore, the emotions conveyed in news stories should be seen as accurate representations of emotions expressed by those directly involved in a story. However, emotion is often seen to be sensationalist and therefore reduced to a negative scrutiny rather than discussed as a new form of journalistic practises (Peters, 2011, p. 300). Sensationalist news may prove to be popular amongst audiences, but is not regarded as quality journalism. There is an abundance of journalist and academic criticism surrounding the erosion of news standards but this is often oversimplified and neglects the multidimensional nature of journalism (*Ibid*).

It has been noted that there is space online for commercial and non-commercial news enterprises to thrive (Picard, 2014, p. 506). However, given the digital news environment tends to be dominated by only a few large general, commercial news providers, the voices that will dominate online are often the ones already being heard (Fenton, 2010, p. 13; Picard, 2014, p. 506). The already well-established news organisations will dominate, duplicating traditional practises through online platforms and therefore local news providers may continue to struggle in the new news environment (Fenton, 2010; Picard, 2014). As a result, the transformation of the industry into the digital realm may result in anything but increased diversity (Fenton, 2010, p. 13). With these arguments in mind, it is imperative that local journalism anchor authority online in a way that presents itself as providing a different service to that on a national level and distinguishes itself from substandard journalism.



Throughout this section, the concerns regarding the rise of digital media have been explored given the importance of the challenges local British news media face within the new media industry. Ultimately, until the traditional business model for newspapers is stabilised within online practises local news media will continue to suffer because of it (Hess and Waller, 2017). The other issues raised regarding the rise of digital journalism have demonstrated that it is vital for local news media to assert its authority online. There is a vast amount of competition online and this can cause local news media to be overlooked. It is imperative for local news media to be sociable online and to engage audiences with local issues. However, the quality of journalism cannot collapse under the pressure so as to be popular online. Misinformation can be easily spread online and so audiences need to be guided to reliable and trustworthy voices and it is integral local news media continue to provide this public service.

### *Trust in News Media*

In accordance with a recent report conducted by the Reuters Institute, it was revealed that there was an annual decline in trust in the UK media from 50% to 43% in 2017 (Newman *et al*, p. 55). It has been suggested that this significant fall of trust is related to the growing use of social media as a means to circulate news stories (*Ibid*). Only 18% of participants believed social media can be relied on to separate fact from fiction (*Ibid*). Additionally, a connection has been made between distrust in UK news media and high levels of political polarisation exacerbated by media bias (Newman *et al*, 2017). With regards to political communication, politicians and journalists often amplify a spiral of mistrust

concerning each other's reliability and ability to perform (Brants, 2013, p. 16). When politicians and the media, as representatives of society, are more concerned with listening to each other rather than the needs of society, the public is left feeling cynical and forced to turn away (*Ibid*, p. 15). Frequent streams of negative news reports that do not provide audiences a way to help or make a change, can lead to increased feelings of public inefficiency (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 298). Although it is the role of journalists to hold politicians to account, and to inform citizens of news, there is a need to strike a balance between informers and empathisers.

Brants (2013) suggests that to bridge the gap and build trust between the media and the public by restoring trust, journalists must induce more responsive measures that take into account the interests and needs of the public. To some extent the growing use of social media in news production has created a more participatory news environment that increases the bonds between journalists, audiences and sources (Brants, 2013; Lee, 2015). Yet, the professional autonomy of the journalist is threatened by the public's growing ability to have their demands met online. However, in a climate of general dissatisfaction and low levels of trust towards representatives of society in both government and media, this could be detrimental to a democracy in which the public is either forced to give up all hope or to call for change. When there is a persistent low level of trust within societies the prospects for a civil society diminishes (Botan and Taylor, 2005, p. 687).

Such a call for change suggests the need to highlight the voice of ordinary citizens within news stories. However, this does not mean that fact and opinion in news should be given equal weight. It is beyond the scope of this study to suggest expert knowledge should be overtaken by personal experience for the sake of pleasing audiences. Instead, the emotional personalisation of news adopted on a local level demonstrates a shift in values that places greater emphasis on encouraging discussions and participation with audiences regarding social issues and so successively gaining more trust in local journalists. News provides a common ground, enabling people to connect with each other through the engagement of public issues encountered in everyday life (Swart *et al*, 2017, p. 902). However, because news is evolving from a lecture into a conversation (Gillmor, 2009, p. 5) it is no longer enough for journalists to only report the news, they are also needed to guide conversations, especially online.

Hess and Waller (2017) refer to the concept of 'social capital', a term also associated with 'civic participation', 'community' and 'volunteerism' (p. 113). They stress social capital is the glue that holds communities together, supports collective work and relationships to fulfil social, cultural and economic needs (*Ibid*). In particular, news media and local journalism are essential to the development of social capital as they are the providers of information for the accumulation of social capital (*Ibid*). Mediated social capital takes three forms: bonding, bridging and linking (*Ibid*, p. 114). Firstly, bonding refers to the media's ability to raise a sense of community (*Ibid*). Bridging concerns the media's unique ability as a legitimate source to share information with the notion of creating a connection between individuals and the source (*Ibid*). Lastly, linking of

social capital is the ability of media to connect individuals with those in a position of authority and power (*Ibid*). These concepts demonstrate the importance of local media in terms of facilitating social capital. It is important that the public places trust in the media in order for social capital to thrive. Local journalists have social responsibilities to uphold and digitally driven changes in the industry have applied more pressure on them to be more engaged with the public and to facilitate social cohesion.

Trust in news media is intrinsically complicated and Lee (2015) sheds light on the idea that the participatory digital news environment increases economic and competitive pressures for journalists to build and maintain brand loyalty online by boosting web traffic as a demonstration of understanding the public (Paulussen, 2011; Vujnonvic, 2011; cited in Lee, 2015, p. 211). Part of this pressure stems from concerns regarding the urgency for journalists to produce and deliver high quality news stories online. The priority of print newspapers was to provide in-depth analysis and to thoroughly fact check information provided in a story (Lee, 2015, p. 219). Now, it is expected that newspapers also update their websites around the clock and spread breaking news through social media (*Ibid*). The issue here is that such an obsession with speed comes at the expense of accuracy (Reinardy, 2010; cited in Lee, 2015, p. 217).

Lee's (2015) study investigates the way journalists use social media and how this has affected current journalistic practises. The results suggest that local newspapers do not keep up with the social media standards set by those on a national level (*Ibid*, p. 226). This is supposedly due to the traditional expectation

that audiences should come to local news, rather than the other way round (*Ibid*, pp. 226- 227). However, the factor of resources needs to be addressed. There is no doubt that local British news outlets are under-resourced, with editorial staff being paid relatively low salaries while being expected to work long hours to cover a wide number of stories concerning the community (Nielsen, 2015; Pilling, 1998). This becomes an even greater concern when journalists are expected to keep up with time pressures by competing with other sources that quickly meet these deadlines. It is important to recognise that although the transformation has created a more participatory news environment (Lee, 2015) that presents the production of news as a more democratic process (Joseph, 2016), local news media is under-equipped but journalists are still expected to perform beyond their traditional tasks (Lee, 2015).

Overall, there is a prevalent public distrust in media (Newman *et al*, 2017, p. 55) and the use of social media is considered to be both the cause and solution of this problem. There is the belief that in order to restore public trust, news media need to induce more responsive measures in a way that presents the interests of the public at the heart of news media actions (Brants, 2013). To some extent, this has been met through the use of social media within the production of news (*Ibid*), but it is recognised that local news media do not take advantage of these new methods to communicate with audiences (Lee, 2015). It is essential for local news media to maintain social capital by demonstrating a high level of dedication to the community (Hess and Waller, 2017). However, because local British news media is under resourced (Nielsen, 2015; Pilling, 1998) it is challenging for journalists to keep up with the high expectations set by those

outlets with more resources. Such concerns were raised with journalists during the interviews in this study, to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by local British news media.

## **Methodology**

This research is focused on the changing ontology of local British journalism, in particular on how journalistic practise could encourage public participation with local issues in the digital media environment. To have a better understanding of the kinds of issues and opportunities surrounding the developments of the industry, and how journalists classify their responsibilities, it was necessary to explore first hand perspectives. Therefore, I decided to use interviews as my research method because 'they are an excellent means of finding out how people think or feel in relation to a given topic' (Darlington and Scott, 2002, p. 50).

### *Interviews as a research method*

Similar to an everyday conversation, an interview allows the opportunity for an interviewer and an interviewee to have an in-depth discussion around a topic of interest. This qualitative method is the most appropriate way for this study to gain an inside perspective of the industry and to understand how local journalists perform within such a competitive environment. Additionally, these interviews explored interviewees' attitudes and beliefs towards the nature of their work to highlight how they perceive their responsibilities.

Berger outlines that responses from an interviewee can allow for the collection of detailed information (1998, p. 57). May adds to this understanding by proposing that interviews as a research method 'yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings' (2011, p. 131). However, such responses may not come easily during an

interview and it is the responsibility of the interviewer to encourage such outcomes of rich and detailed information.

Berger reinforces the idea that the more an interviewee talks, the more information they are willing to reveal (1998, p. 57). Therefore, each interview began by asking straightforward questions such as, 'how long have you worked as a journalist?' As the interviews progressed and the conversations began to flow I asked questions that allowed the participants to be more responsive.

During a semi-structured interview, in acknowledgement of the responses of an interviewee, the interviewer has the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and probe topics of interest. Probing encourages the participant 'to give an answer, or to clarify or amplify an answer' (Hoinville and Jowell, 1987, p. 101; cited in May, 2011, p. 142). Asking follow-up questions and probing can focus the conversation on the objectives of the interview (Berger, 1998, p. 57). Follow up questions were asked during the interviews to direct the conversation to the objectives of the study.

The interviews were conducted one-to-one, as this environment allowed for each participant to be more honest with their responses. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, which allowed some control over the topics of conversation as well as giving interviewees the ability and the freedom to explore certain areas that may be of considerable value to the project (Bernard, 2000, p. 191). Ten questions were prepared prior to the interviews (Appendix IV), ranging from 'how would you describe your role as a local journalist', to 'how



has the rise of digital journalism impacted the news making process for you?'. Follow up questions were then asked such as, 'how would you increase civic involvement with local news?'. In this interview environment, the journalists were able to confidently relay their opinions and past experiences.

### *Ethical considerations*

As with all forms of social research there are ethical considerations to be taken into account. The risk of breaching ethical guidelines was minimised by conforming to professional standards. Each journalist was contacted through email and an information sheet was included, which provided the basic outline of the research without revealing so much information that it would impact the data collected. The participants were informed of their rights to anonymity and the fact that they could withdraw from the research at any time (Darlington and Scott, 2002, pp. 25-26). A hard copy of the information sheet was printed out and handed to each participant to look over before the interview (Appendix III). As part of my ethical considerations all participants were made anonymous within the findings, with initials being used to dictate who said what.

### *Participants*

A total of eight journalists were contacted, all of who currently work for a different local newspaper. The contact details of each journalist were available through their newspapers' website. Four journalists agreed to participate, which was a positive result given journalists tend to be very busy. Given four journalists were interviewed for this study, it is important to recognise the limited nature of the data collected. However, the journalists interviewed all

worked for different local newspapers, in different areas, for different lengths of time and so naturally had different experiences of the industry (Appendix II). All participants offered a range of insights into the industry. However, some responses were the same and were presented as widely held industry views.

### *Data Collection*

Each participant was made aware before the interview that it was going to be audibly recorded, as this enabled each conversation to be referred to later in the research process. Interviews were fully transcribed and the data collected was then categorised thematically. As observed by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is flexible, accessible and an excellent starting point for first-time researchers. The themes raised during the interviews are explored in the findings and discussion sections.

## **Findings**

### *The importance of relationships with the community*

When the participants were asked to describe their role as a local journalist, it was a widely held view that not only do they work on the behalf of the community, but more importantly, as part of the community. Local journalists work as the eyes and ears of the community as most people do not have the time to attend council and committee meetings, press conferences and other newsworthy events concerning their local area. It was the perceived responsibility of the journalists to be aware of such events and to communicate the information gained to their audiences. JA stated that 'I know [people] are going to be affected if a seventeen-story tower block is built on the sea front. So it behoves me to properly relay the story' together with the intention of determining 'whether or not people are pro or anti'. JA feels part of the community he writes for and therefore has an understanding of what news concerns his audience. He believed it is his responsibility to be a gatekeeper of information. PB said that 'readers identify better with people that they know are local and living in the area and part of the area and understand what is important'. He went on to say, 'the longer you work for a local newspaper in a particular area the better known you become and the more trusted you become'. This presents the notion that the more trusted a journalist becomes; the more they are obliged to deliver up to date and relevant news.

The participants agreed that people within communities want to know who their local reporter is. PB compared this to 'seeing bobbies on the beat' in the sense that people want to see journalists out of the newsroom. The same way they want to see police patrolling the streets. JL understood that her strong ties with the wider community were the reason why she has no problem finding content to write about each week. In JL's case, her well-known reputation has meant that the public and local authorities come to her with local news and events. However, TH suggested 'it's very easy to get news stories from your district councillors and the great and the good. The trick is to go out and speak to people who would not normally come and knock on our door'. This implies that local journalists need to ensure they are in tune with all voices that make up the community, not just those in power.

It is evident that journalists are relied upon to be an empathetic ear to communities in times where citizens need representation. TH reinforced this belief, saying:

*It's a sign of a good newspaper that you hear a person getting angry and saying 'I'm going to go to the so and so newspaper about this' and they feel there is someone they can go to that will give them a hearing and at least think about taking their side.*

These findings suggest that trust in local British news media goes hand in hand with the reputations of, and relationships held by journalists. PB addressed this matter, 'local newspapers are fundamentally more trusted than national newspapers, because the people writing the articles are part of the community and they get to be sort of known and identified with part of the readership'.

JL referred to the story of the 2015 Shoreham air crash and asserted that it was the responsibility of the local paper to 'report sensitively and correctly'. Despite the fact that 'the nationals were able to get information out there first' she strongly believed that the local news media was 'the trusted source, so [the paper] needed to get it right'. A local journalist has a more significant role when tragedy occurs on their 'home patch' as local news media has the ability to lead a community through a crisis (Hess and Waller, 2017). PB's view on the matter aligned with this statement. He said 'you are much more accountable as a local journalist than if you are a national journalist who visits a location for a one-off story and then is back to London the next day'. It is apparent that local news media are able to more accurately depict and contextualise a story because they have a greater knowledge of the area and a better relationship with the community when compared to the national media. Despite the fact that in times of emergency national press are able to cover a story more quickly, local journalists pride themselves on being more accurate on coverage and analysis. Although this finding presents an expectation to compete with speed-driven journalism, the level of trust placed on local journalists to provide an accurate account of events is crucial and demonstrates the different kind of service local media provides.

#### *Observations regarding the lack of resources*

Although providing a sense of community is crucial for a local newspaper, this has been hindered by operational changes and a lack of resources. Local journalists are not always able to get out of the newsroom and engage with the

wider community. TH believed that there is a growing 'distance' between the newspaper and locals and without more resources it would be challenging to narrow this gap. The newsroom TH writes for is not based in the local area he writes for. The newspaper's office in the town was shut several years ago and he stressed that not having a presence in the area is damaging the reputation of the newspaper. He believed there is a need for human interaction in the area that the Internet does not provide. PB shared the same concerns of editors and journalists not being able to have the opportunity to participate in local activities, which ultimately resulted in him stepping down as editor of his newspaper. PB stated, 'I think engagement, the relationship between readers and newspapers is in danger of becoming less personal. I think there is therefore going to be an impact on civic engagement in local issues, and potentially that would undermine local democracy'. However, JL did not share these concerns to the same degree as she often spends time out of the newsroom. JL offers a monthly surgery for readers to meet with her and discuss local issues or potential stories. She also has weekly slots on regional and local radio stations where she delivers the top news reports. JL is an active member of her community; her dedication to being part of local activities that promote the newspaper clearly demonstrates there are still opportunities for journalists to be fully involved with their community.

### *The impact of social media in news production*

The question was posed to participants as to whether the use of social media, as a seemingly effective two-way communication channel, can help maintain a

healthy relationship between journalists and their audiences. This question was addressed with the intention of presenting social media as a potential solution to the problem of journalists having fewer opportunities to engage directly with audiences. It is understood social media can allow journalists to place themselves at the centre of local audiences social circles (Hawkes, 2013, p. 235). However, TH asserted that although social media does provide an efficient means for journalists to interact with their readers, local news media have not adopted this method to its greatest advantage. PB has just fewer than 20,000 followers on Twitter and accepted the notion that it is a means to build relationships. However, he also stressed 'you can never substitute the relationship that can be built on the more personal, face-to-face level'. It is important to highlight that a lack of resources in local news media has altered the way in which journalists engage with the wider community. The research findings suggest audiences want to know who their local reporters are. Therefore, there is a need to present a manageable solution and using social media can narrow the 'distance' between journalists and their audiences.

It was discussed in the interviews how social media can be used for public participation with local issues. TH suggested Twitter and Facebook are platforms for 'shouting contests'. TH was concerned that he usually found the person who shouted first was often seen as the person who is right. This is why he believes rumours are spread easily online, forcing people to jump to conclusions. JA said, 'most news that is broken by social media is oversimplified or unverified'. It was interesting to note that the participants drove the conversation towards raising concerns of false rumours spreading through social media. PB told a story of the

last general election where one polling station in his constituency had made a mistake on the polling paper and was missing the name of one candidate. The story grew out of control on social media; rumours claimed all polling stations in the constituency were affected and the elections would draw to a halt. The chief executive of the council called upon PB to set the matter straight and to inform the public of the true situation. Once PB had released the story, the information was then quoted in national newspapers. PB reflected on this story to express that when fake or misunderstood news spirals out of control on social media, the public turn to the local newspaper to set the story straight.

One major concern was that journalists are finding it harder to leave the newsroom, meaning it is becoming more difficult for journalists to hear the voice of local people through face-to-face engagement. JA believed journalists are 'lazy' when they seek opinions online. He found that his comment threads were filled with 'ignorant vitriol', which reinforces the idea that these platforms are not appropriate spaces for public debate or encouraging a sense of community and cohesion (Ramsay and Moore, 2016, p. 13). JA did not feel it was his place to respond to reader comments or questions. TH addressed this issue and said, 'a journalist will copy and paste someone's message on Twitter or Facebook, which is a perfectly valid way of working, but sometimes people don't care for it or think it's a cheap way of going about getting a quote'. However, TH went on to say, 'it is actually far more practical to glance at social media, see the opinions of perhaps a dozen people and try to glean some sense of the reaction to whatever is going on'. JL actively uses this method to obtain the voice of the community for news stories.



JL's newspaper is published weekly and so initially all stories are uploaded to the newspaper's website and then shared on social media. It was discussed that depending on what kind of a reaction a story receives online dictates how the story is then written and modified for print. JL explained that this routine was implemented for the purpose of presenting the print version of a story as a different service. This demonstrates that JL is able to prioritise communicating online as well as conform to the traditional use of print to provide a version of a story that includes in-depth analysis and information that has been thoroughly fact checked (Lee, 2015, p. 219). In conclusion, there were mixed reactions concerning how social media has affected the news making process for journalists. Although some participants were critical of journalists using social media as a means to obtain the voice of the people, it was generally recognised that this method is an effective way of working within a digitally driven environment.

#### *Insights into emotional personalisation in news*

The participants' responses towards emotional personalisation in news stories were generally positive given the notion was conveyed that as a journalist it is vital 'to capture the emotion of the scene' (JA). As previously highlighted, participants believe it is important for local journalists to live within the area they write for. Part of this understanding is being aware of the attitudes and emotions of the community towards news worthy events or issues. Therefore, it is important for journalists to accurately convey this within their news stories in

accordance with the notion that news production now places greater emphasis on meeting the needs of the readership.

TH suggested 'a well-written news story will almost always contain a quote from someone who was involved in it just in the way of livening it out. Otherwise you end up with an extremely dry copy'. This reflection supports the argument that the inclusion of emotional personalisation in news increases the scope of a story. JA referred to a past experience where he used emotional personalisation to capture the scene of a story:

*The top quote I used for the school story, and I interviewed 6 or 7 parents, said 'I can't believe we've done it, I'm almost in tears'. Now, 38 sets of parents weren't balling their eyes out but I get to write 'tears of joy as parents win council battle'. I don't think for a moment I'm a sensationalist journalist, but what you are trying to do is convey the emotion of the scene. You're trying to get the story across in the most interesting way.*

Overall, it was stressed that it is important for journalists to use quotes in a story to accurately explain to audiences what was felt by those directly involved. JL highlighted the importance of setting the right tone of a story, 'rather than writing [name of town], I'll write 'our town' so our readers know that we're supportive'. The simple use of language is very important because it demonstrates how journalists use this to reinforce a sense of connection between the newspaper and the locals. The strategically placed 'our' adds meaning to a place that anchors a sense of belonging for a local newspaper. Although this is not an explicit example of the use of emotional personalisation,

it does highlight that the local journalist and newspaper are part of the community.

It was argued that the language of a story is what lures readers to continue reading a story. JA discussed the importance of language: 'if somebody has never read a newspaper you're not going to draw them in with, *council U-turn on secondary catchment policy*. You might draw them in with, *man miraculously escapes fall from scaffolding*'. This statement addresses the idea that sensationalist news is popular as 'man miraculously escapes fall from scaffolding', provokes a sense of drama (Joseph, 2016). JA went on to say, 'what you would hope is, is that the quality of the journalism and the quality of the writing is such that when people read the scaffolding story they turn the page and read, *hospital trust in special measures*'. Maintaining a high level of quality writing is critical. If a reader were to be drawn to a human-interest story they may also be encouraged to continue to read a story of significant social interest. Overall, it is suggested that emphasis is placed on journalists as informers to engage readers with stories of different interests with the hope to encourage public participation with local issues.

JA discussed that sometimes including the opinions of the community does not always add more meaning to what the narrative already encapsulates. He suggested that in some cases it is more appropriate to focus the narrative from an elite perspective, by 'talking to the head of the watchdog, [or] talking to a campaigning boss'. TH shed light on the matter and said his newspaper was relying more on quoting statements from authority figures. TH recognised there

was value in reporting these voices, but suggested more attention needs to focus on the voices of the community. However, JA also stated, 'sometimes all that really matters is the man on the street. If you don't go out on the street and ask, "what do you think", what's the point?' In this case the underlying argument JA makes is that sometimes there are better voices to explain matters than simply the opinion of the public. This perspective confirms the argument that in news, opinion should not always be given equal weight to fact. Although this study suggests emotional personalisation in news stories can be used to add depth to a story by reflecting on the responses of the public, there are cases where other voices are better.

#### *Thoughts on objectivity and impartiality*

When participants were asked to discuss their thoughts on the value of impartiality and objectivity in news, the participants widely agreed these were highly valued standards that should be maintained. JA asserted 'local news reporting is almost exclusively unbiased and impartial'. In the city JA writes for, '40% of the councillors are Tories, 40% of the councillors are Labour, 20% of the councillors are Greens' and therefore it is important to reflect the values of the wider audience. Emphasising a political bias in some cases could be detrimental to excluding a majority of the audience and journalism should reflect the interests of a wide public (Coward, 2013, p. 31). JL agreed with this notion and believed that it is the duty of the journalist to be fair and accurate. TH suggested that there is room in journalism to be both accurate and opinionated, but the presumption still remains that local journalism should be as unbiased as

possible. It was expected to find that local journalists still believe it is their principle to report objectively and impartially. The work of the journalist has the ability to directly emotionally affect audiences outside of the workplace (Richards, 2007, p. 65). Therefore, it is understandable that precautions are maintained that allow audiences to form their own opinions without being manipulated by an authorial voice. However, the question remains how can a journalist stay at such a distance to events when they claim to be so tied to the community.

### *The future of local British journalism*

JA hoped 'in communities, which consider themselves communities, a local paper would continue to exist in some form'. JA predicts that the days of printing daily news are limited and local newspapers will continue to transition online. He believes people continue to recognise there is a value in news and the convenience of sourcing information online enforces this. However, he highlighted the digital advertising model and online pay walls do not work as yet, but strongly believed they would work in the future. He added, 'people are happy to spend money and people respect value for money. The problem is, if you're getting nothing for your money in a number of places it's hard to be convinced to pay for it'. TH agreed with this notion and stated, 'the problem with expecting people to pay for things on the Internet is that they usually get it somewhere else for free. Unless what you're offering is measurably better than what everybody else is, very few people will pay'.

JL stated, 'it's a battle everyday. We have targets we try to constantly meet to survive'. These targets include: the number of videos uploaded to the website, the number of faces in the newspaper and how many clicks a story gets. PB shared his concern with the rise of 'click-bait' journalism and how this is being used to judge the work of a journalist. PB stated, 'I understand that [the number of clicks] has to be some kind of measure, but if it is the only measure then we are going to be naturally inclined towards sensational stories, stories involving sex, stories involving gossip and celebrity'. It is apparent that the abundance of low quality news stories is beginning to overshadow true campaigning journalism that makes a difference to communities. PB stressed it is imperative local news does not lose sight of what is important as; 'if our industry is going to survive on a local level it can only survive on quality'. It is crucial for British local news media to present itself as a trustworthy and credible source. Maintaining a high level of quality journalism throughout the newspaper and online will only enforce this argument.

## **Discussion**

Insights into the industry have contributed to understanding what journalists perceive their roles to be in the new digital media environment. It was highlighted that rumours are easily spread through social media and local journalists are able to inform the public of the truth as a reliable source, which demonstrates local journalists achieve mediated social capital (Hess and Waller, 2017). Journalists recognised that the stories broken on social media are often oversimplified or unverified. It is therefore the responsibility of the local journalist to provide context to a story and to inform and educate the public. Additionally, social media does allow local journalists to attain the voice of the public, but this seemingly effective method is not always regarded as professional practise. Journalists' use of social media varied throughout the sample, but it was found that they do not use these means to inform or educate the public by answering questions or comments posted by readers. This finding aligns with Firmstone and Coleman's (2015) research that concludes journalists do not tend to directly engage with the public through these means. Despite concerns that the public are becoming less involved with community issues, local journalists do not assert their knowledge by facilitating public engagement and discussion. This is even more concerning seeing as journalists are aware such comment threads may be filled with 'ignorant vitriol', demonstrating a lack of public knowledge. Transformations of the industry have meant that local news media are less able to serve democratic functions. Due to economic and time pressures, journalists are becoming more remote from their audiences (Hawkes, 2013, p. 233) because there are fewer opportunities for journalists to leave the

newsroom. It was also the general assumption amongst the participants that social media can help build relationships during a time where it is difficult to maintain them, but such activity is not the overall solution.

It was strongly believed journalists' relationships with the community are vital for the production of local news. A normative function of journalists is to represent the voice of the public (Deuze, 2009; Firmstone, 2016; Hawkes, 2013; Hess and Waller, 2017; Ramsay and Moore, 2016). The findings of this study present the concept of emotional personalisation of news as reinforcing a journalist's ability to represent the voice of the public. However, the ability to do this is becoming more challenging for journalists through face-to-face engagements. Journalists did reinforce the importance of representing the voice of the public. However, this importance stems from journalist's abilities to accurately explain a story, rather than to encourage public engagement with local issues. This supports the view that local journalists are concerned with performing normative roles.

Journalists are trained professionals, and in the era of rapidly vanishing local newspapers and increasing public distrust in the media, there is need a to proclaim the rightful role of journalists within a community. Reporting objectively and impartially is a professional standard. However, if other sources are able to get the story out first, then there is the opportunity for the local media to analyse a story more fully and to reflect on the human emotion involved. Being well known and trusted members of the community are just as important as being a trained professional, as it helps local journalists produce



news stories that are accurate, informative, sensitive and meaningful. If there is an issue within a community that needs to be overcome, using journalistic methods that enhance public engagement can help achieve social justice.

## Conclusion

It is without doubt that local journalists strive to fulfil social and professional roles on a daily basis. When interviewing journalists about their experiences and responsibilities there was a strong sense that they believe what they do matters and makes a difference to their communities. The high level of dedication for journalists to hold public authorities and powerful institutions to account, inform and educate the public of issues, represent the voice of the public and be advocates of public interest campaigns (Deuze, 2009; Firmstone, 2016; Hawkes, 2013; Hess and Waller, 2017; Ramsay and Moore, 2016) is reflected when speaking with local journalists.

However, the new media environment and operational changes has limited the ability of local journalists to fulfil normative roles. These issues have been explored throughout this study and potential solutions were suggested to journalists, but were somewhat rejected. This was partly because of the very limited time journalists have during the news production process.

It is important for journalists to create a sense of community, but more can be done in terms of journalists encouraging the public to be engaged with local public issues (Nielsen, 2015). Misinformation is very easily spread online and there is a widespread public distrust in media in the UK. Audiences need to be guided to reliable sources and trustworthy voices, and it is essential local news media continue to provide this public service (Newman *et al*, p. 55). It has been suggested that if local journalists induce more responsive measures that take

into account the interests and needs of the public, the distance between the local news media and the community it serves will narrow (Brants, 2013). Nevertheless, putting this into practice is challenging, given journalists are expected to fill holes in the newspaper, update websites around the clock, and monitor the numbers of videos being uploaded to the website, and how many clicks their stories attract. The transformation of the journalism industry has changed what a journalist is and does (Hess and Waller, 2017, p. 10). There is a growing concern that the quality of local journalism is diminishing under such pressures. Therefore, there is an opportunity for future research to investigate how these news responsibilities are affecting local journalists abilities to perform their roles. Future research could focus on the rise of 'click-bait' journalism in local news media and to what extent the number of clicks a story achieves is an appropriate measurement of journalistic credit.

Overall, the interviews showed that local journalists still have a clear sense of their role within their local communities. The role continues to evolve and largely will be driven by trends in digital media. Journalistic techniques such as the use of emotional personalisation in news are seen to be valid methods to encourage engagement with local issues. Although the future remains uncertain, the rise of 'fake news' and inaccurate information spread through social media means local communities will place greater reliance on local journalists to provide accurate and unbiased reporting.

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## II. Information of Participants

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Experience (Years)</b>	<b>Type of Publication</b>
<b>JA</b>	Local government and political reporter	2.5	Daily Tabloid
<b>PB</b>	Columnist, former newspaper editor	34	Daily Tabloid
<b>TH</b>	Content editor	16	Weekly Tabloid
<b>JL</b>	Reporter	1.5	Weekly Tabloid

\*Acronyms of names have been used in order to ensure confidentiality of participants.

### **III. Interview Information Sheet**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research project for the University of Leeds. This information sheet is designed to highlight the importance of the research project and to outline the purpose of the proposed interviews.

I am currently researching the changing nature of local journalism in the United Kingdom. It is my belief that the rise of digital journalism, and the subsequent decline in newspaper circulation has impacted the news making process for journalists. I am also exploring the possible role of emotive news reporting in local journalism as a means to encourage public engagement. Through a series of interviews I hope to gain a better understanding of the role of local journalists and the services they provide for their communities.

Your participation in the research project will help me demonstrate the extent to which arguments and debates raised in academic literature are prominent in current journalistic practises. Your first-hand knowledge of the industry would be incredibly valuable in assisting me to answer these questions for my Communications Dissertation.

Should you decide to assist me with the research project, I would like to you to take part in a one-to-one interview. The semi-structured interview should only take an hour. During the interview, I will ask your opinions on a number of topics and for you to reflect on your industry experience. I may also ask questions based on other areas of interest to you. The interviews will be audio recorded so that I can later transcribe your answers. Any information from the interviews will be strictly confidential and your contributions will be anonymous. Please be assured that you can decide to withdraw from the research project at any point.

I would greatly appreciate you considering supporting the research project. Should you have any questions, then please do not hesitate to contact me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,



#### **IV. Interview Questions**

1. How long have you worked in journalism for?
2. How would you describe your role as a local journalist?
3. News is often broken by social media now, how has the rise of digital journalism impacted the news making process for you?
4. Do the stories you write get published in print and online equally?
5. Do you encourage the circulation of your stories on social media sites?
6. What are your thoughts on news reporting as being unbiased and objective?
7. It has been argued in academic literature that emotionally driven news reports add context to individual stories and encourages public engagement with stories. What are your thoughts on journalists using emotive language or including an emotional angle within stories?
8. Discuss other ways civic participation could be increased.
9. How would you suggest journalists maintain ethical, social and professional standards in a digitally and emotionally networked environment?
10. What do you think is the future of local British journalism?