

London Community Media Summit.

30th June 2017



A report by Social Spider CIC commissioned by the
Centre for Community Journalism

Community Media Summit 2017

Introduction

On the 30th of June 2017 Social Spider CIC and Howard Sharman ran a conference on London Community Media, with the support of Eastside Primetimers and the Centre for Community Journalism.

The conference was attended by those working in, or interested in, community media. The aim of the event was to raise awareness of the small and independent organisations who are taking the production of their community's local news into their own hands and to highlight the importance of community media as a tool for social cohesion and political engagement. During the course of the conference we heard from speakers working in community media, with a focus on editorial, design, funding and business models. The event had a particular focus on the production of print newspapers but also heard from community radio stations and online forums.

Our community media definition: a community focussed organisation which focuses on the production of news and media for the benefit of a specific locality.

Read about the Centre for Community Journalism's *hyperlocal* definition [here](#).

Overview of London community media

The decline of local news:

Local newspapers have traditionally been the first point of call for updates on a particular community, keeping local residents informed about changes and events in their area. They report on local developments, can scrutinise local powers, review events, champion local groups and signpost residents to activities and services in their area.

However, local newspapers are in dramatic decline. The Press Gazette reported that [198 local newspapers have closed since 2005](#) while a report from the Media Reform Coalition showed that of the remaining outlets [80% are accountable to only 6 organisations](#). This has led to a situation where, more often than not, communities have no local news source or have news created by journalists not living and working in that area but working remotely and [often across multiple newspapers](#). For more information on the decline of local news read this report [Mapping the Changes in Local News](#).

The rise of community media:

In recent years, a series of independent local publications and community media organisations have formed in a bid to fill the gap left by this decline. These new organisations operate at a grassroots level and seek to provide their communities with responsive, accountable and high quality local news and media. Our research identified around 40 community media organisations operating in London, ranging from print newspapers, to community radio stations, to online blogs and forums.

These organisations are still small in numbers and in size, but they offer a promising source of local news and journalism and are a valuable resource for their communities.

Our Speakers

Introduction: Howard Sharman - [Eastside Primetimers](#)

Overview of sector: Emma Meese - [Centre for Community Journalism](#)

Editorial panel: Eric Gordon - [Camden New Journal](#), Linda Quinn - [Brixton Blog & Bugle](#), James Cracknell - [Waltham Forest Echo](#)

Design panel: Dan Harder - [Peckham Peculiar](#), Keith Magnum - [Hackney Citizen](#)

Business models and funding panel: Lucinda Guy - [Community Media Association](#), Russell Hargrave - [Power to Change](#), Alec Saelens - [Bristol Cable](#)

Centre for Community Journalism

Emma Meese, Centre Manager of the Centre for Community Journalism (C4CJ)

The Centre for Community Journalism started five years ago as one of Cardiff University's five flagship projects. They believed that there was a need for better representation of local news outlets, and that the emerging landscape of hyper-local and local publications needed support and nurturing.

The Centre for Community Journalism exists to promote quality journalism, help address the democratic deficit in news poor communities and help create more jobs in journalism at the local and hyperlocal level." They are committed to providing training and outreach, research, networking and advice to hyperlocal publishers (online and in print) and to consulting with and responding to the needs of those publishers. You can find out more about their mission and strategy [here](#).

The Centre has recently announced that the [Independent Community News Network](#) (ICNN) – a representative body set up exclusively for community and hyperlocal publishers and run by the C4CJ, has just opened for members.

They are currently working on providing legal advice for publishers, and have recently recruited the services of media law specialist, David Banks.

They are also researching the potential for facilitating collective ad sales across the UK, and are in the process of getting funding to provide substantial, academic evidence on ABC statistics to strengthen the case for hyperlocal advertising.

They have set up an online discussion forum for community publications and have been working with the BBC to ensure that their [local democracy reporter scheme](#) takes community publications into consideration.

Finally, the Centre is working with the NUJ to find a solution that will secure press cards for qualifying community and hyperlocal publishers.

Emerging themes

Below are the key themes covered at our conference concerning community media in London.

Independent and responsive local journalism:

Our speakers were concerned about the decline in independent news sources and the subsequent monopoly held by large corporations such as Newsquest, Trinity Mirror and Archant (see the Media Reform Coalition's [report](#) for more information on local news ownership). They argued that these companies were detached from the communities they were reporting on, and that their journalists often worked remotely, and were not sufficiently representative of the communities they claimed to serve. This doesn't mean that there are no good local newspapers being run by larger organisations in London, but trends in local newspaper closures mean that their future is also uncertain.

They argued that the community media organisations they represented provided a responsive alternative to these news sources, claiming that they are actively engaged in the communities they represent.

“It's written by local people who have something to say. They email me with a problem – we're worried about air pollution, a development being built on land – I email them back and say, why don't you write an article. They didn't have that before. They had reporters in Essex...”

- James Cracknell, editor, Waltham Forest Echo

*“Corporate media is owned by companies in the business of asset management
- cost cutting to increase profit.”*

- Alec Saelens, co-founder of The Bristol Cable

*“People are starting to question whether 'big media' is working for our
communities.”*

- Lucinda Guy, Chair of the Community Media Association

A democratic deficit:

Speakers warned of the decline in local newspapers resulting in a democratic deficit. A multiplicity of independent news sources is integral to a healthy and democratic media; if the production of news and information is concentrated in the hands of a small number of large private companies then these companies have a monopoly over the production and dissemination of news.

Community media organisations wish to bring the production of the news back to smaller, independent and accountable organisations. Many community media organisations began because they saw a lack of independent news sources which could uphold high standards of ethical journalism and accountability.

"We know there's issues with our media, we know there's issues with social media, it's not accountable"

- Lucinda Guy, Chair of the Community Media Association

"The concept of the Bristol Cable originates from a critique of local media."

- Alec Saelens, co founder of the Bristol Cable

The role of community media in holding local powers to account:

Fundamental to community media organisations is their ability and willingness to hold local powers to account. In areas where they have sufficient funding and capacity, they can do this by attending local council meetings and consultations, investigating decisions that will affect the community and spreading important information to local residents through a trusted and respected platform. This function is enhanced by the fact that these community media organisations are independent and are accountable only to the communities they serve.

Community media organisations not only have the ability to hold local powers to account, they also give the community an effective platform to voice and record their concerns.

Without a committed local news source, communities are at risk of being unaware of important information which affect them, and are without leverage to voice their concerns and challenge local powers.

"We're often the only reporters at council planning meetings"

- Linda Quinn, editor, the Brixton Bugle

Our event took place in the same month as the Grenfell Tower fire. There were questions from the floor enquiring whether a local newspaper could have played some role in preventing the tragedy by offering a public platform for residents' concerns around fire safety.

In response, speakers stated their concern that online hits were fast becoming the primary measurement of success for many larger news organisations. As a result, less 'exciting' events, such as local council meetings, were being seen as less profitable and were receiving little coverage. It was thought that a committed community media platform could fill that gap, but only if it had sufficient funding and capacity to do so.

Representatives of community media organisations present at the event all stated a desire to have a presence at local council meetings, but not all could afford to do so and the number that were able to make this time and resource commitment were in the minority.

"You don't get journalists going to sub-committee meetings because they're not seen as profitable"

- James Cracknell, editor, Waltham Forest Echo

"I can see why some reporters don't want to go to [committee meetings] they're boring... we're the only ones going."

- Eric Gordon, editor and founder of the Camden New Journal

Access into journalism:

Jobs for local journalists are being [cut dramatically](#). It was thought that community media could restore meaningful jobs for journalists.

"It's saved my journalism career working for the Waltham Forest Echo"

- James Cracknell, editor, Waltham Forest Echo

"I'm ancient. I went into journalism in the mid-50s when it was possible to start."

- Eric Gordon, editor and founder of the Camden New Journal

Beyond this, many organisations prioritise accessibility, and are committed to opening their platform to all members of the community. This includes some organisations which are specifically training members of their community in journalistic skills, and bridging the gap between professional and citizen journalism. The Community Media Association especially felt it was important to ensure local people could learn media skills through their local stations.

"We need to keep media skills alive in our communities and radio licenses are part of that."

- Lucinda Guy, chair of the Community Media Association

Education is a key part of the *Bristol Cable's* work. They have received funding to host training sessions in journalism and host regular public meetings, consulting the community on what they want from the paper. They wish to increase their accessibility and reach beyond 'politicos' to cover a wide range of topics not usually covered by the local press and to encourage a diverse group of contributors.

"We aim to cover as wide a range of topics as possible, and use simple language that everyone can understand."

- Alec Saelens, co founder of the Bristol Cable

Many community media organisations also report conducting educational outreach work with local schools, colleges and community groups, including workshops and talks.

Grassroots:

Most community media organisations were created because a group of people saw a gap in what was being offered and what their community wanted or needed from their media. Therefore, the community media movement is primarily made up of grassroots organisations. As a result, community media organisations are more likely to be responsive to the needs of their community, and to be engaged in and knowledgeable of their community. They are known for developing relationships of trust with their readerships.

"We didn't start the paper to provide jobs, we started it to be a special paper for local people (...) If local people don't want us, there's not much point in existing... the reader is the true owner"

- Eric Gordon, founder of the Camden New Journal

Community media organisations often run with very small teams and rely upon volunteers to keep going. They often struggle financially but are driven by their social purpose to continue and find ways to make ends meet.

"We're 'free' because we want to reach as many people as possible (...) and partner with other organisations in the community."

- Keith Magnum, founder and editor of the Hackney Citizen

"We certainly believe that print isn't dead. It's a tool to help connect people across the city."

- Alec Saelens, co founder of the Bristol Cable

"For the Community Media Association, it's the process of creating media that matters - community radio is defined by being locally owned."

- Lucinda Guy, Chair of the Community Media Association

Business models for community media:

Our conference ended with an overview of different business models used by community media organisations and a discussion on new models which could be developed going forward.

Most of the community media organisations had small staff teams and many relied upon volunteers from the community to help with content, distribution, photography etc. Many made their income through selling advertising space, although almost all organisations admitted that this was becoming

more of a struggle and that finances were tight. A handful of the community media organisations present were being run as social enterprises.

The role of crowdfunding was touched upon as a way to get community media organisations off the ground while also raising awareness of their values and purpose. For example, the *Peckham Peculiar* and the *Dulwich Diverter* both began with crowdfunding campaigns where the larger donors were rewarded with advertising space.

Russell Hargrave, a contributor to the *Waltham Forest Echo* and employee of *Power to Change* charitable trust, spoke about different funding models which have been used in the past. He gave *Positive News* as an example, which used Crowdfunder to launch a community share offer. This is a more democratic form of ownership where everyone is welcome to buy a share of the organisation. This allows the member shareholders equal say on important matters to do with running the organisation. A similar model is used by the *Bristol Cable*, which runs as a cooperative with over 1,700 members. The average amount paid by members each month is £2.50, with £1 being the minimum amount for membership.

As part of their membership, meetings are held each month for members to discuss financial and membership updates as well as strategic and political discussions about the future of the paper. Not only does this give members a say in how the paper is run, it also gives them an opportunity to socialise and connect with members of the community to discuss local issues; contributing to a more connected and informed community.

"What's really important is to flip the pyramid of ownership. We're hoping to develop a new, sustainable form of business model that can be replicated."

- Alec Saelens, co-founder of the Bristol Cable

Russell Hargrave also discussed the role of Trusts paying for independent journalists for newspapers - such as the 'Voice of a generation' youth journalist scheme run by the Trinity Mirror. He suggests this as a model that could be developed for community media.

With the traditional route of advertising sales proving to be less profitable with print sales falling with the rise of the internet and competition from corporate owned publications, community media organisations are beginning to look for new models for generating income.

Conclusions

- Community media outlets are engaged in and knowledgeable of their community; this commitment allows them to be responsive to the needs of their community in a way that a detached local news organisation, run remotely from a large corporation, cannot be.
- They are independent news sources, adding multiplicity of voices to an increasingly monopolised media landscape
- They aim to give coverage to a diversity of voices in their community
- They prioritise the practice of ethical journalism and see their role and purpose as serving their communities
- Community media has the ability to hold local powers to account by investigating and reporting on decisions which will affect that community. They are an effective platform for disseminating information to different demographics in the community (in the case of community newspapers they are especially efficient in reaching less digitally active groups).
- Furthermore, they provide a public platform for citizens to voice their concerns
- They aspire to educate their community in journalistic skills, and frequently conduct outreach work in schools and community groups. They aim to be accessible.
- Community media organisations can provide meaningful work for journalists and can bridge the gap between professional journalism and the communities they serve by engaging them in the production of their news.
- Community media organisations often operate at the grassroots and have been created in response to a perceived need or demand from their community.
- In most cases they are guided by their social purpose and not by profit, with many running as not for profits or social enterprises.
- The market for community media is a challenging one. They are often find it difficult to secure traditional funding but many are struggling to gain income from selling advertising space.
- Community media organisations in London should be brought together to capitalise on their proximity and shared values. Our aim is to create a network of formal and informal support for this group of organisations, where knowledge and experience can be shared.