

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Cardiff University		
Unit of Assessment: Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management (34)		
Title of case study: Fostering and developing local community news in the UK		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2005 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Justin Lewis Andy Williams Karin Wahl-Jorgensen	Professor Senior Lecturer Professor	15/08/2000 – present 01/01/2009 – present 01/08/2012 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Independent community news outlets play an important democratic role in UK communities left behind by the decline in traditional print media. Cardiff researchers identified challenges faced by this sector, including economic precarity and a lack of training and support. Through the Centre for Community Journalism and the Independent Community News Network (the UK's only formal body representing the sector), the research led to: changes to Scottish and Welsh Governments' funding of hyperlocal publications, including new sustainability funding during the pandemic; the development of key resources for community news outlets; and growing media literacy across all Welsh primary schools. The team's training on sustainable community journalism was used by more than 32,000 learners from 131 countries.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Work on community journalism stems from the School of Journalism, Media and Culture's longstanding research on media and citizenship [e.g. 3.1], tracing the way in which the decline of local and regional newspapers has created a democratic deficit [3.2]. More recent work explored the potential of a new generation of independent local community news outlets (currently around 260 across the UK) to counter this trend. Some of the key research in this case study was funded through the £1.1M AHRC-funded 'Media, community and the creative citizen' project [G3.1, 2012-2015] led by Cardiff. Williams was Co-Investigator (with Harte from Birmingham City University) on a project strand on hyperlocal news, where he led on large-scale content analysis, interview and survey design.</p>		
2.1 Value of hyperlocal news		
<p>Cardiff research – including the largest content analysis to date of hyperlocal content – established the high civic, community and political value of community news outlets [3.3]. The team also found evidence of community news playing important social roles, including: providing a route to participation in the public sphere; supporting everyday active citizenship [3.4]; and directly encouraging and facilitating both online and offline interactions and mutual aid [3.5].</p>		
2.2 Economic challenges faced by the sector		
<p>The research team found that hyperlocal outlets struggle to generate income, making their existence and potential growth precarious [3.5]. Most are sustained by volunteers and lack the support to expand or professionalise. Only around one in four generate enough income to cover their costs and only a small proportion can pay editors or contributors. Local advertising spend is the dominant form of income generation, but in a competitive and shrinking market [3.4].</p>		

2.3 Supporting the sector

Williams highlighted the need for systemic intervention to sustain this emerging sector [3.2, 3.4]. He recommended:

- public subsidies for non-profit local and community news. Once established with initial start-up funds, outlets could then run on hybrid business models, part-supported by public money and by targeted hyperlocal advertising [3.2];
- levelling the playing field in terms of public/government subsidy, which largely shut out newer community outlets in favour of legacy local newspaper companies [3.4].

Community journalists also lack non-financial support. A survey (Williams & Harte for the Media, Community & Creative Citizen project, alongside colleagues from the University of Westminster) produced the most comprehensive empirical analysis to date of the practices, funding, staffing and outlooks of those who run hyperlocal sites [3.6]. It showed that:

- 79% of hyperlocals surveyed would like to expand the size and scope of their site;
- 63% would like help generating revenues;
- 42% wanted more technical support;
- 9% would appreciate legal support when reporting legally sensitive issues;
- 23% wanted to be able to access training.

Wahl-Jorgensen further investigated – through in-depth interviews and a survey of practitioners – the sector's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic [G3.2]. She found that the pandemic represents an existential challenge to outlets as they lost significant local advertising revenue and were unable to benefit from government schemes, including furlough and advertising support.

Cardiff's research identified the importance of community journalism and highlighted the challenges facing the emerging sector. Following these findings, Cardiff made two externally-facing investments to strengthen the sector:

- The Centre for Community Journalism (C4CJ) was established in 2014 to provide training, support and capacity for the sector, and is a focus for collaborative action-research with sector stakeholders. As one of the University's three flagship engagement projects, it was part of a wider strategic investment in transforming communities. C4CJ has since attracted additional external funding (£300,000) from the AHRC, Welsh Government and Google.
- The Independent Community News Network (ICNN), run through C4CJ, was established in 2018 as a formal entity to advocate on behalf of UK community publishers. It is the only representative body for the sector and represents 125 titles (as of November 2020) across all four UK nations. Current estimates put the online reach of ICNN membership at over five million people per month across the UK, with a collective circulation of 150,000.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[3.1] Lewis, J., Inthorn, S. and Wahl-Jorgensen, K., 2005. *Citizens or consumers: What the media tell us about political participation*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Available from HEI on request.

[3.2] Williams, A. 2013. Stop press? The crisis in the Welsh media and what to do about it. *Cyfrwng: Media Wales Journal* 10, pp. 71-80.

[3.3] Williams, A., Harte, D. and Turner, J. 2015. The value of UK hyperlocal community news. *Digital Journalism* 3(5), pp. 680-703. (10.1080/21670811.2014.965932)

[3.4] Harte, D., Howells, R. and Williams, A. 2018. *Hyperlocal Journalism: the decline of local newspapers and the rise of online community news*. London and New York: Routledge.

[3.5] Harte, D., Williams, A. and Turner, J. 2017. Reciprocity and the hyperlocal journalist. *Journalism Practice* 11(2-3), pp. 160-176. (10.1080/17512786.2016.1219963)

[3.6] Williams, A., Barnett, S., Harte, D. and Townend, J. (2014) *The State of Hyperlocal Community News in the UK: Findings from a Survey of Practitioners*. <https://hyperlocalsurvey.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/hyperlocal-community-news-in-the-uk-2014.pdf>

Selected grants:

[G3.1] Hargreaves, I. & **Williams, A.** ‘Media, Community and the Creative Citizen’, Arts and Humanities Research Council (Feb 2012 – June 2015), AH/J005290/1. £1,142,330.

[G3.2] Wahl-Jorgensen, K. ‘The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community journalism start-ups in the UK’, British Academy COVID-19 grant scheme (June 2020-June 2022), COV19\201302. £9,932.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Through the Centre for Community Journalism (C4CJ), and the Independent Community News Network (ICNN), the research led to: increased advocacy for the sector, resulting in additional income and resource; capacity building for the international hyperlocal sector, leading to new and more sustainable outlets; and critical support to sustain the sector throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

4.1 Advocacy for the sector

a. Funding for hyperlocals in Wales

The news industry crisis has particular implications for Wales, where a high penetration of London-based news creates a serious democratic deficit. Williams and the C4CJ team gave evidence (2017-2018) to the Senedd Cymru - Welsh Parliament’s year-long inquiry into News Journalism in Wales **[5.1]**. Drawing on our research **[3.2, 3.5]** contestable public funding was recommended to help Wales’ hyperlocal sector become sustainable. As a result, Welsh Government provided funding of £200,000, over two years, for hyperlocal publications **[5.2]**. The C4CJ team co-authored a report (funded by Welsh Government) on delivering the scheme. ICNN membership was used as a qualifying criterion for access to the Independent Community Journalism Fund and the ICNN team were expert advisors on the application panel. The seven successful applicants are spread across Wales. Their feedback was strongly supportive, including **[5.3]**:

- *“[ICNN’s work with Welsh Government] has been invaluable to me ... I had no funding to advertise / promote Inksplott, update the website, update the brand or professionalise the service. With the grant funding received through ICJF, I have achieved all of this... making revenue from advertising more likely in future” – Lynne Thomas, editor of Inksplott;*
- *“The funding went directly to improving our internal IT infrastructure through the employment of a software developer ... [it] also went on training, a move to a larger office space and marketing materials” – Richard Gurner, editor and publisher of Caerphilly Observer.*

b. Ensuring access to the BBC’s Local Democracy Initiative

In 2016, the BBC’s planned investment of £8m in employing 150 local democracy reporters focused on traditional news providers, taking little account of the community news sector. C4CJ’s advocacy in planning discussions led the BBC to include community-owned publications in the initiative. Matthew Barraclough, Head of Local News Partnerships at the BBC, confirmed that *“C4CJ was able to represent the needs of the smaller independent news providers to ensure that they could take full advantage of the content generated and - where possible - become suppliers themselves”* **[5.4]**.

As a result, 58 community outlets across the UK now have access to a free daily democracy news wire and four employ a Local Democracy Reporter **[5.4]** and news editorial resources can be directed elsewhere **[5.3]**. Barraclough further noted that *“the establishment of the ICNN was also very helpful to the BBC’s project as, by bringing in common editorial standards and*

practical support for members, it made it “*easier for a large news organisation such as the BBC to interact and consult with a dispersed and diverse part of the news eco-system*” [5.4].

4.2 Capacity building for the hyperlocal news sector

C4CJ worked throughout the REF period to establish, support and build local news outlets through a sustained programme of training, resource development, advice and outreach. Some examples of impacts from this programme of work include:

a. Web resources: C4CJ and ICNN resources have helped hyperlocal outlets to survive and grow. For example, access to a suitable web template is a barrier for many wanting to set up a digital news publication. C4CJ created the world’s first free, bilingual, Community Journalism WordPress template. It has been used approximately 100 times to date and over 50% of these uses have been by new start-ups needing an online platform. Eirwen Williams, publisher of *Pobl Y Fenni*, confirmed that the web template is “*one of the most significant resources we have used*” and that WordPress training provided by C4CJ “*upskilled our volunteers and saved us thousands of pounds on paying a web designer*” [5.5]. C4CJ’s advice and digital resources made *Pobl Y Fenni* “*a leading example of how the rest of the Papurau Bro (Welsh language community newspapers) can follow in our footsteps...which will help keep this valuable network alive*” [5.5].

b. Legal advice: C4CJ’s free legal advice service for ICNN members has been used approximately 100 times since the network was established in 2018. *The Guildford Dragon* said that by using the service “*we have saved money by not having to source costly external legal advice*” and “*settled legal threats before they escalated*” [5.6].

c. Training for the community news sector worldwide: C4CJ provided training to over 38,000 individuals since 2015. For example, its MOOC on community journalism taught more than 32,000 learners from 131 different countries including India, Brazil, Nigeria, Australia, United States, Russia and Spain. *Inksplott* was one of at least 11 new hyperlocals established as a direct result; its editor confirmed that the course taught her “*both journalism skills...and the technical skills required to set up a hyperlocal news website and social media platforms*” [5.3]. Ken Skates, then Wales’ Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, wrote: “*the high number of international learners reached through the C4CJ’s Community Journalism MOOC helps to enhance Wales’s reputation in this field*” [5.7].

d. Toolkit to develop media literacy in pupils: C4CJ and ICNN have also contributed to capacity-building for future generations of journalists in communities across Wales, which “*has been crucial in forming the strategy for boosting Media Literacy across Wales*” [5.8]. Following a pilot project in a socially deprived community in south Wales, C4CJ developed a media literacy resource for teachers. This toolkit, created with the National Education Union (NEU) Cymru, was launched across all primary schools in Wales in November 2019. It is a train-the-trainer pack of ten hands-on sessions. Beth Roberts, NEU Cymru, confirmed that the toolkit “*equips pupils with the basics for news reporting, teaches them to examine news critically, and creates the next generation of engaged citizens*” [5.8].

4.3 Sustaining community news outlets throughout the Covid-19 crisis

Community outlets struggled during the pandemic in 2020 as local businesses – their main source of advertising income – closed down. C4CJ and ICNN worked to deliver resilience and sustainability for the sector.

a. Proving status during lockdown

ICNN enabled its members to work unobstructed during lockdown by quickly providing them with letters of verification and membership cards (most members are ineligible for press cards). Editor and publisher of the *Guildford Dragon*, Martin Giles said: “*Without this verification, I have no doubt that many journalists would not have been able to perform their roles, this will have been particularly true during the COVID-19 lockdown*” [5.6].

b. Protecting hyperlocals from loss of advertising income

i. Wales: At the beginning of the lockdown, C4CJ lobbied Welsh Government to release the remaining money in the Independent Community Journalism Fund. Consequently, all Welsh members of ICNN received £8,000 in emergency grant revenue funding. Richard Gurner, *Caerphilly Observer*, confirmed that “without ICNN the COVID-19 funding would not have existed, let alone been reallocated, and without it I believe Wales would have seen some independent media shrink, or even close” [5.3].

In July 2020, Emma Meese (C4CJ Director) gave evidence to the Senedd Cymru – Welsh Parliament’s Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee’s inquiry into the pandemic’s impact on news media. The Committee’s report cited her recommendation to allow hyperlocal and online news outlets to publish statutory notices [which are currently only required to be published in printed newspapers] - a significant source of income [5.9]. This directly influenced the Committee’s subsequent recommendation that “*The Welsh Government should urgently identify the changes necessary to enable statutory notices to be published by hyperlocal and online providers*” [5.9].

ii. Scotland: Meese, on behalf of ICNN, made similar recommendations in Scotland to ensure that community titles benefitted from Government advertising campaigns. This led to the Scottish government’s agreement to place public health adverts in eight ICNN titles. Following a successful first phase in August/September 2020, ICNN secured a second round of advertising to run for two weeks in November 2020. Edinburgh Reporter editor Phyllis Stephen said that this money “*is absolutely crucial to us as an independent news publisher. We have watched the ‘big boys’ getting support in the form of advertising all across the UK, and thought all was lost until ICNN stepped into lobby on our behalf*” [5.10].

iii. England: ICNN worked to get members access to funds under the Government’s £35m ‘All-in, all together’ public health advertising campaign. *Wokingham Today*, the only ICNN member publishing a physical newspaper, was partnered with the scheme as a result. The title’s publisher, David Riley, confirmed that: “*This regular stream of income helped us to avoid making any redundancies during the pandemic and to ensure that we could continue to publish in both print and online... [ICNN’s] campaigning work over the last six months has been a lifeline to ours and to so many publications across the UK*” [5.3].

In summary, the Cardiff team developed research findings on community journalism in tandem with vehicles (C4CJ and ICNN) designed to maximise their impact, through advocacy, representation, training, advice and resources. This has allowed Cardiff research to play an integral role in ensuring both the survival and the ongoing development of this valuable emerging sector.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[5.1] *Read all about it: Inquiry into News Journalism in Wales*, Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee (National Assembly for Wales), May 2018

[5.2] Welsh Government’s response to the Inquiry into News Journalism in Wales

[5.3] Testimonials from hyperlocals who received funding as a result of ICNN advocacy: Lynne Thomas (editor of *Inksplott*), Richard Gurner (editor and publisher of *Caerphilly Observer*) and David Riley (publisher, *Wokingham Today*)

[5.4] Testimonial: Matthew Barraclough, Head of Local News Partnerships, BBC

[5.5] Testimonial: Eirwen Williams (publisher, *Pobl Y Fenni*)

[5.6] Testimonial: Martin Giles (editor and publisher of *The Guildford Dragon*)

[5.7] Letter: Ken Skates MS (as Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, 2017)

[5.8] Testimonial: Beth Roberts, Wales Union Learning Fund Coordinator, National Education Union (NEU) Cymru

[5.9] *Impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on journalism and local media*, Welsh Senedd’s Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee report, September 2020

[5.10] ‘Eight ICNN hyperlocals launch new government ad deal’, Hold the Front Page (21/08/20)