

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales
Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee
Newyddiaduraeth Newyddion yng Nghymru / News Journalism in Wales
CWLC(5) NJW15
Ymateb gan Rachel Howells, Port Talbot Magnet / Evidence from Rachel Howells, Port Talbot Magnet

I am a journalist, academic and trade unionist with almost twenty years' experience in journalism. Most recently I was a founder director and editor of the *Port Talbot Magnet* news service, which operated in Port Talbot from 2010, but which is currently in the process of closing, primarily in the face of advertising revenue decline. I also have a doctorate gained in 2016 from Cardiff University's Journalism school. The focus of my PhD research was the democratic deficit in towns that lose their local newspaper, with Port Talbot as my case study. I would therefore like to submit evidence to the committee in two separate, but related, strands:

- 1) My experience of running a successful hyperlocal news service
- 2) The results of my PhD research into news black holes and the democratic deficit

1. The Port Talbot Magnet

The *Magnet* started life at the end of 2009, a proactive response by the local branch of the NUJ to a series of redundancies at the *South Wales Evening Post* and other cuts. We recognised a crisis in our local journalism industry and we established a workers' co-operative for our members. Shortly afterwards, Trinity Mirror announced the closure of two long-standing weekly newspapers in neighbouring Neath and Port Talbot. We were keen to try to fill the gap left by these newspapers. With help and support from the Wales Co-operative Centre, the *Port Talbot Magnet* was born.

Much of the first year of the project was spent filling in forms in the hope of gaining grant funding for the *Magnet*. This proved to be fruitless. A number of meetings with Welsh Government ministers showed there was moral support for our plans, but no money. Several grant applications to funders including the Big Lottery and the Coal Regeneration Trust came to nothing. Much of the advice we were given revolved around us changing our plans. We hoped to establish good quality fourth estate local journalism for the whole town, but we were advised many times that we could gain access to funding if, instead, we provided training or worked with disadvantaged people. Though both these strands were incorporated into our plans, they were very much secondary to our desire to

provide good quality journalism and scrutiny for Port Talbot, and we did not feel it was helpful to compromise on these ideals.

By then, four of the seven founders were in employment elsewhere, three in PR and one in radio journalism. Of the remaining three, two were retired, and I – the other – was able to apply to Cardiff University to undertake a funded PhD.

Successes

Around the end of 2010 we decided to stop pursuing grant funding and instead focus on our core aim to produce a local news website. Our first success came in the shape of the National Theatre Wales production *The Passion*, which took place over Easter 2011. We were a community partner of the production, and were the only news service to follow the production from its first call for participants to full live coverage of the three-day play, and a year later produced our first publication in print – a souvenir programme for the *Passion: Memory* event that happened in 2012, funded by advertising.

In 2013 we successfully applied to Carnegie UK for £10,000 under their Neighbourhood News scheme. This funding enabled the launch of our tabloid newspaper, which was delivered quarterly to 20,000 homes in Port Talbot. Residents responded enthusiastically to our newspaper, and the *Magnet's* name became well-known in the town. Many businesses supported us by advertising and the website and social media channels gained thousands of likes, shares and followers, with many of our online stories being read by 5–6,000 people. We were also shortlisted in the Wales Media Awards as the Community News Service of the year in 2015, and many of our stories were picked up by other media outlets. We were also successful in campaigning, becoming a trusted voice for local people about important and contentious issues.

But...

We are proud of the *Magnet's* success but it is important to acknowledge that the news service was never sustainable, for the following reasons:

- We were not able to offer consistent pay or contracts to the people who worked for us. Most of the people who made the *Magnet* possible did so as volunteers. Our freelancers often charged less than the going rate, or put in a proportion of their time for free in order to support us.

- Sales staff were incredibly difficult to find as we were not able to fund the incentives that would normally be expected. Our first ad sales rep scammed us out of several hundred pounds; our second worked amazingly hard and brought in revenues but stress made her very ill; and our third had to take a second job as a supermarket delivery driver to top up his commission.
- We reluctantly concluded that there was insufficient wealth in the local economy in Port Talbot to support a news service. Many of our advertisers were not able to spend money regularly, or were not able to pay our rates, even reduced to cost prices.
- Online advertising revenues were not enough to sustain us. The newspaper brought in revenues of between £2.5k and £5k per edition. The website, in the entire seven years it ran, brought in £1.5k – an average of £215 per year, not even enough to cover our insurance bill. We found advertisers far preferred the hard copy newspaper.
- Volunteers were difficult to find and a burden to manage, support and train. Volunteers were plentiful at first, but sustaining their numbers became increasingly difficult.
- Engaging with public bodies was difficult. It took five years of nagging for South Wales Police to add us to their mailing list. We made several requests to the BBC for them to link to us as a news provider but we did not receive a reply. There was no systematic way to approach schools – each had its own system and a different policy for dealing with the media. The local council took a long time to add us to their mailing list for press releases, and often took days or weeks to respond to queries. Only latterly were we invited to openings such as the new superschool at Baglan. The local college did not engage with us. Tata Steel were very reluctant to engage with us until the last months of 2016. We felt the door of institutions was usually closed to us, and it took many repeated requests for it to be – reluctantly – opened, and often only to a narrow, one-off, crack. We found most public bodies and businesses only acknowledged our requests and took us seriously after we had written critically about them.

The end...

The crisis in the local steel industry was what eventually took its toll on our already precarious news service. From January 2016, when the first job cuts at the

steelworks were announced, our advertising revenue halved, and unfortunately it never recovered. This is understandable, as business is precarious for many small businesses in Port Talbot. Tata had never advertised with us, but many families in Port Talbot are affected by the steelworks' fortunes. One café owner who had regularly advertised with us, told us she could no longer do so, as she feared for her business since many of her customers worked at the steelworks, and so did her husband. Had the works closed, she knew her own income stream would be damaged and her husband's would vanish.

We worked for most of 2016 without pay in the hope things would change. In this time we broke an important story about the safety concerns of workers following the reductions in manpower on shifts because of the redundancies. This story was not picked up in the mainstream press. It caused some in the trade unions to try to uncover the identities of the whistleblowers by underhand tactics, and it caused our team to be harassed by steelworkers. We did not have the institutional muscle and legal advice we needed, and we felt exposed and stressed. This was certainly a contributory factor in our closure, but at the root of all our problems was the lack of a reliable income stream.

2. The democratic deficit in towns with no newspaper

In conjunction with my work at the *Magnet*, I also researched the news black hole in Port Talbot following the 2009 closure of the *Port Talbot Guardian*.

Methodology

My research was funded by the Welsh Government's KESS fund, the Media Standards Trust and Cardiff University and used five methods:

- i. I analysed a large sample of local newspaper stories published between 1970 and 2015 by the two main Port Talbot newspapers, the weekly *Port Talbot Guardian* and the regional daily, the *South Wales Evening Post*. This enabled a long-term historical analysis of the change in news content and quantity over time.
- ii. I interviewed 11 local news journalists who had worked as reporters or subeditors on the Port Talbot patch between these dates about their jobs and how the nature of newsgathering had changed in that time.
- iii. I surveyed 364 residents about their news reading habits and their knowledge of current issues and politics in Port Talbot.

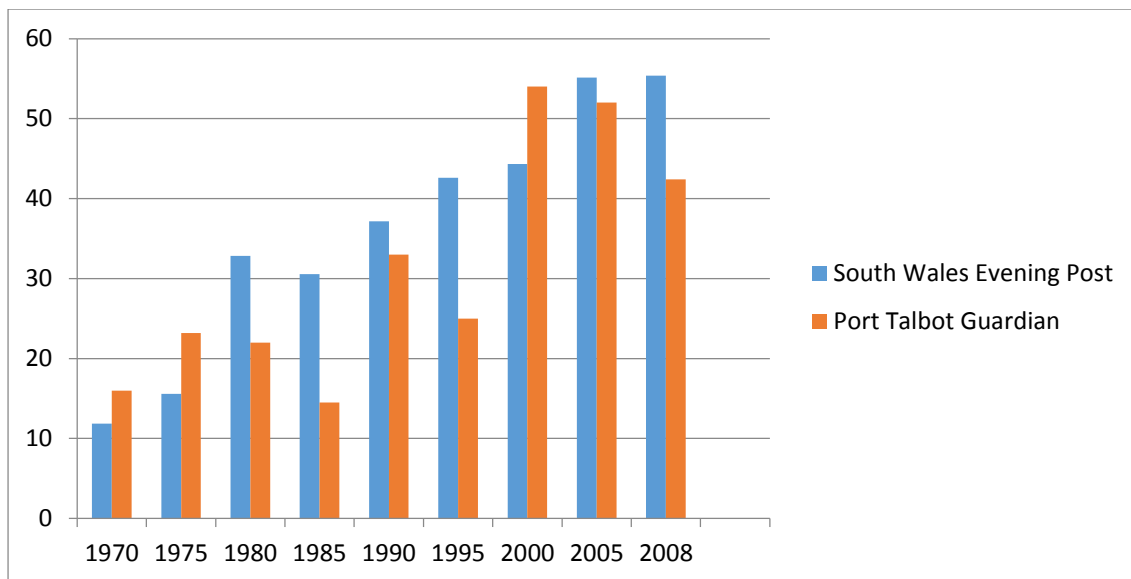
- iv. I carried out four focus groups to determine how local people were accessing essential information and gaining representation post–newspaper–closure.
- v. I analysed documentary evidence, statistics and polls from the sample period to gain a deeper understanding of any changes in engagement and civic and democratic behaviour by Port Talbot residents.

Declines and cuts

The declines in newspaper circulations and revenues are well documented and I will not repeat them here. At a local level, declines have resulted in a contraction of newsrooms, with staff numbers at Trinity Mirror and the former Local World/ Northcliffe dropping by 60–90 per cent in Wales in the last two decades (Howells, 2016).

In Port Talbot, I established that, in 1970, five newspapers employed 11 reporters between them, based in offices in the town itself. Now, there are none. The *South Wales Evening Post* employs one reporter, based in Swansea, to cover the Neath Port Talbot patch, and to write the daily stories for the Neath Port Talbot edition as well as filling the weekly *Neath Port Talbot Courier* insert. Even as recently as 2010, there were four reporters employed by the *Post* to cover this patch, constituting a 75 per cent drop in this element of the workforce.

Alongside these cuts, workloads have increased. Graph 1 shows how paginations of both the *Port Talbot Guardian* and the *Post* increased over time. Additionally reporters are now expected to provide breaking news online and to post and respond to social media.



Graph 1: Average pagination of the South Wales Evening Post and Port Talbot Guardian

The closure of district offices has also been a blow. Reporters from the 1960s to the 1980s describe offices operated by both the *Guardian* and the *Post* which were open to the public and in which three or four members of staff were the norm. Reporters were able to leave the office regularly to uncover, investigate or report on nearby stories. The offices were credited with being a source of news stories, a way to filter out those with “a bee in their bonnet” (1990s–2000s *Post* reporter) and an important and regular point of contact between the journalists and the communities they served.

These closures and other cuts and structural changes in newsrooms have resulted in:

- The power of rivalry and competition between newspapers becoming diminished, and fewer voices, angles or issues being covered
- Journalists becoming more office-bound and less visible to the community, also more reliant on press officers as sources rather than being on the scene
- Reporters’ main focus becoming about “filling shapes” (templates on a pre-designed page) and getting through a large volume of work each shift
- Local communities having less access to journalists, and less leverage in getting their voices heard

Quantity, quality and localness

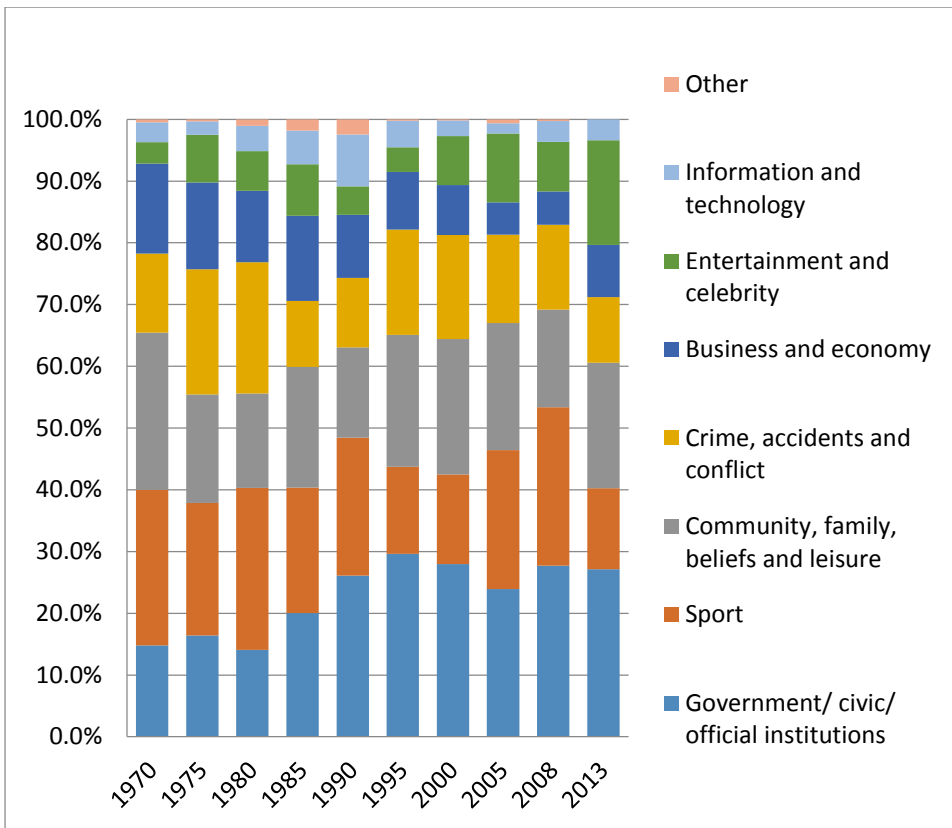
In Port Talbot, and very likely elsewhere too, cuts to staff and the closure of district offices meant the quality of the news was gradually eroded in several key areas.

The quantity of news halved when the *Guardian* shut, but it had already fallen by 23.9 per cent before that – an aggregate loss of 66.3 per cent.

Quality was also impacted:

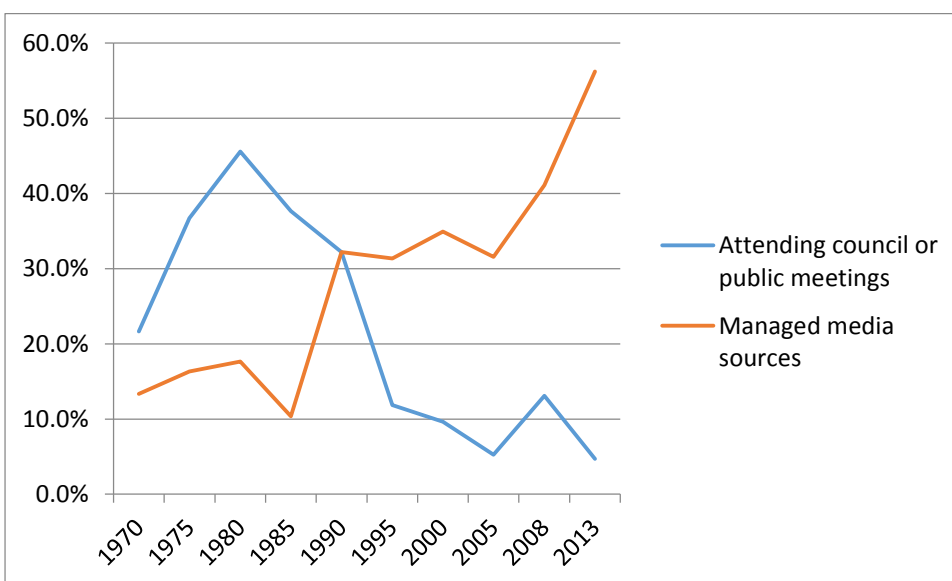
- Localness: the localness of stories diminished, in particular in the number of Port Talbot voices that were quoted, but also in the coverage of certain topics of news that are linked to community cohesion or democracy. Local sports coverage, in particular, fell dramatically, and this can be linked to a community's sense of its own identity.
- What triggered the news: my research found an increasing tendency for stories based on PR or press releases rather than attendance at meetings or interviews
- Representation: representation of local people fell – sources were less local, but also more likely to be high-status, and community reporters were abolished.

Graph 2 shows the coverage of various news topics over the sample period.



Graph 2: The coverage of news topics in Port Talbot 1970–2013

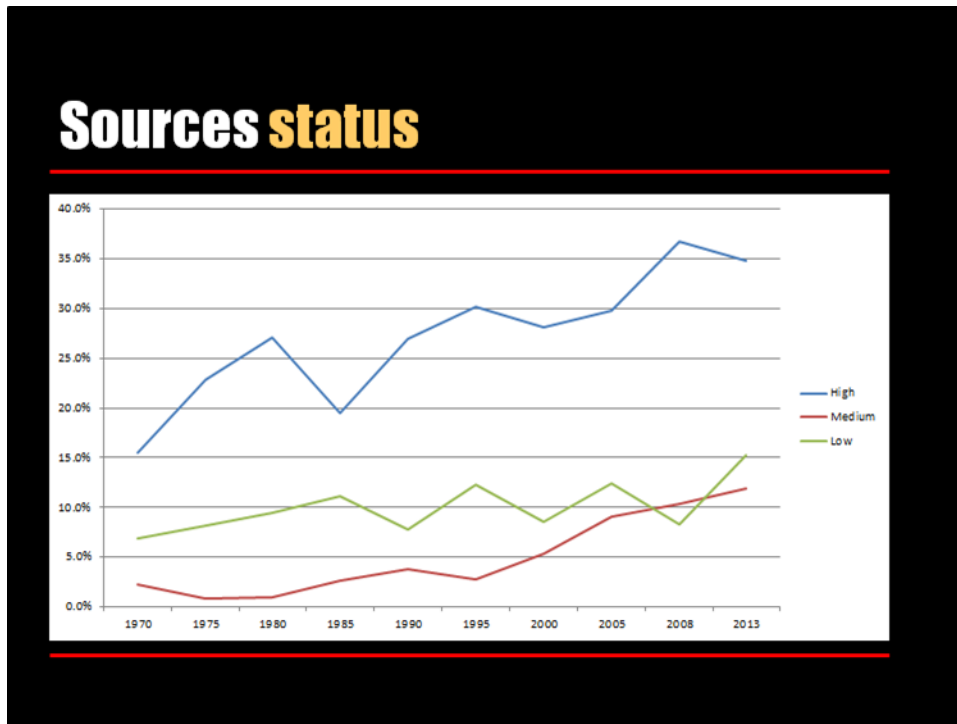
While it is perhaps encouraging to note the increase in the coverage of public interest and democratic reporting such as local government stories, it should also be noted that data suggests this coverage was increasingly based on press releases and meeting agendas rather than attendance at council meetings or face to face encounters. Graph 3 demonstrates this tendency.



Graph 3: How public interest news stories were covered

The danger here, of course, is the erosion of balance or alternative viewpoints in the news, and of the views and agenda of institutions being given undue weight, with the views of local campaigners or residents potentially sidelined or ignored.

This finding is underlined when the status of sources is measured, as demonstrated in Graph 4. In general, it is more common to find individuals quoted in the news now than it was in 1970, but the figures showing the status of sources show disproportionate increases.



Graph 4: the status of sources quote in Port Talbot news

Increasingly, the trend is in reporting the concerns and voices of high status voices (such as politicians and government spokespeople), with those of lower (members of the public) or medium (celebrities or sports people) status given less prominence. The use of high status sources increased 22 per cent over the sample period, while the use of low status sources rose only 7 per cent.

The news also became less local, as Graph 5 demonstrates. Over time, people who lived in Port Talbot became less likely to speak in stories about their town.

Sources localness



Graph 5: How local were news sources?

Scrutiny, representation, information

Journalism is generally defined as offering a 'fourth estate', scrutinising role in public life, ideally enabling the public to become well informed about important issues, to have their views and concerns represented to those in authority, and to be assured that those in authority are given adequate scrutiny.

My results showed that local people are not well enough informed about local issues, that they do not feel represented, and that scrutiny is impaired.

Detailed findings are laid out in full in my thesis, but here is a selection of the main points:

- The scrutiny role has increasingly fallen on the shoulders of local residents, who attend council meetings and read detailed reports and documents, but who lack the power to obtain answers to questions, and to disseminate their concerns or viewpoints to a large enough audience
- Many such activists or "armchair auditors" testified that they found it difficult to obtain information or speak to the correct staff member, and institutions were found to be opaque and difficult to penetrate

- There was abundant evidence of confusion, lack of fore-knowledge of important issues or changes (meaning local people felt powerless to act or have their voice heard), and the use of rumour and speculation was high
- Results suggested that most local people are not actively engaged in seeking news and information. Of those who do (35.7 per cent), they mostly look for information about sport (33 per cent) and cultural events (25 per cent), and few people seek out information about the local council (10 per cent) or politics (3 per cent). The serendipity effect, of readers being exposed to information they have not sought out for its own sake, is diminished by current news consumption habits.
- Audiences now rely on a varied mix of media when actively seeking out particular information. Newspapers form 7.4 per cent of this share, online sources including social media 17.9 per cent, and broadcast media 8.9 per cent. But significantly friends and family made up 15.3 per cent, and companies or direct providers of information (eg a theatre, sports club or local council phone line) made up 26.2 of news-seeking sources.
- The data suggest significant numbers of residents are finding out about important issues by stumbling across them in physical spaces. These include planning application signs, protest notices, campaign stalls, barriers on thoroughfares and graffiti.
- Residents seem relatively adept at questioning news sources and looking in more than one place for verification of a story. However this is often motivated by an underlying lack of trust in official and media outlets.
- There is significant evidence that news is going unreported. Activists told me they found it difficult to gain the ear of journalists. Residents told me they knew of issues that had not received coverage and that information was difficult to find.
- There is anger and despondency among residents, with focus group respondents feeling that they were not represented and not listened to: "What the point? Nobody ever listens to us anyway"
- My findings suggest that even basic knowledge was relatively low among survey respondents. Only 56.6 per cent of people were able to answer correctly the political persuasion of their local MP as Labour – the party has

held the Aberavon constituency since 1922, and Labour also controls the local council. More detailed political knowledge was even less abundant: at the regional political level (i.e. the Welsh Assembly), only 14.7 per cent of people were able to name a local or regional AM, while 11 per cent named someone incorrectly, and 74 per cent said they did not know. Meanwhile, at the local political level (i.e. the local council), 27.5 per cent were able to name council leader Ali Thomas's job, while 0.5 per cent got it wrong and 72 per cent did not know. The high proportion of 'don't know' responses, which, as Page and Shapiro (1983) found, has been shown to correlate with low government responsiveness to public opinion: or put another way, "policy moves in harmony with opinion changes more often when 'don't know' survey responses are few" (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. 393).

- In focus groups, all the age groups showed signs of frustration, some even outright anger. The participants of FG3, the 18–30 focus group, appeared to be least engaged with traditional media, most negative about the town as a place to live, and were the most volatile and outwardly angry of all the groups. They spoke at some length about taking potentially illegal, impulsive, direct action against the closure of Junction 41 of the M4, as the following exchange demonstrates:

Male Speaker 1: I'd be very tempted to go up there with a disc cutter and just open it [the barrier] up myself and then drive on it.

MS2: Need a revolution really but it's going to take violence for people to listen to it.

Female Speaker 1: It doesn't always take violence.

MS2: A bit of a riot.

MS1: Yes, but in London there was all this big hoo-ha, they caused riots but they got what they wanted. They won't let that happen again.

Interviewer: What did they want, what do you mean they got what they wanted?

MS2: The government listened, and they got a free telly
[laughter]

MS2: The town's upset, they're just going to riot one day, everyone's just going to blow. I think everyone's going to get so angry they're just going to go...

FS: It is going to get to that stage.

FS: I can see it getting to that stage very soon.

MS1: I'm going on Facebook after. I don't use Facebook but I'm going to have a go after, I'm going to start a riot.

(Focus Group 3)

In summary, I found evidence of problems with the flow of information to citizens both through traditional news outlets and other channels such as those established by organisations for direct-to-public communication. Even where the quality or quantity of news might be relatively high, this is not always enough to enable people to participate in local democracy. Information must be *useful* and *timely* in order to enable citizens to react.

When people did know about local issues only the most basic knowledge was prevalent, with rumour and speculation about important details being common in focus group discussions.

Each of the three most basic tenets of fourth estate journalism – informing, representing and scrutiny of the powerful – appear to have been compromised by the withdrawal of journalists from the town. Local people appear less knowledgeable, and find information difficult to access, while word of mouth is a prevalent information source. Representation is difficult when journalists are difficult to access and institutions difficult to approach through opacity. Equally scrutiny is compromised when institutions are opaque and information difficult to obtain. All of these difficulties have direct consequences for residents.

Participation and engagement

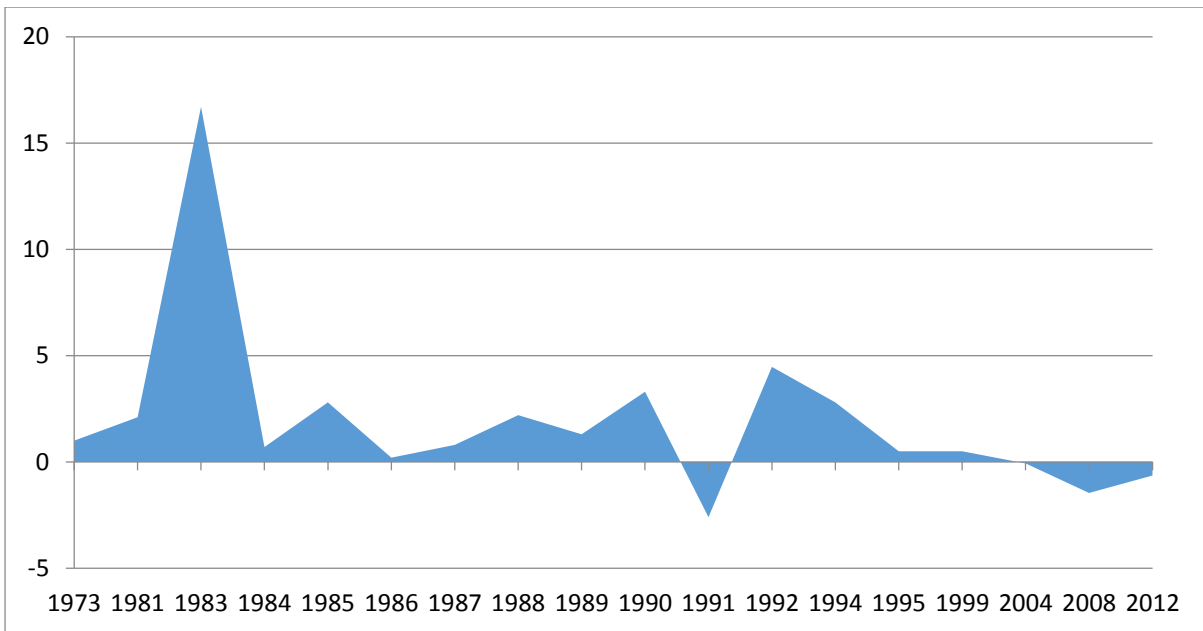
Studies into newspaper closures are few, but a handful of studies into newspaper closures in America have found effects on democratic and civic markers. Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido's 2009 study of Cincinnati examined, among other effects, voter turnout in the years leading up to, and immediately following, the closure of Cincinnati's second newspaper, the *Cincinnati Post*. They found that the states that were served by the *Cincinnati Post* showed lower election turnout rates, fewer candidates standing for office, and that incumbents were more likely to be re-elected following the closure, concluding that "newspapers – even underdogs such as the *Post*, which had a circulation of just 27,000 when it closed – can have a substantial and measurable impact on public life" (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009, from abstract). Second, Gentzkow, Shapiro and Sinkinson also found election turnouts in Presidential elections were affected by the presence, or lack, of newspapers (2009).

A third study analysed civic newspaper closures in Denver and Seattle looked at data from the 2008 and 2009 Current Population Survey carried out by the United States Census (Shaker, 2014). The study found a decline in civic engagement after the closure of two newspapers in Denver and Seattle compared with civic

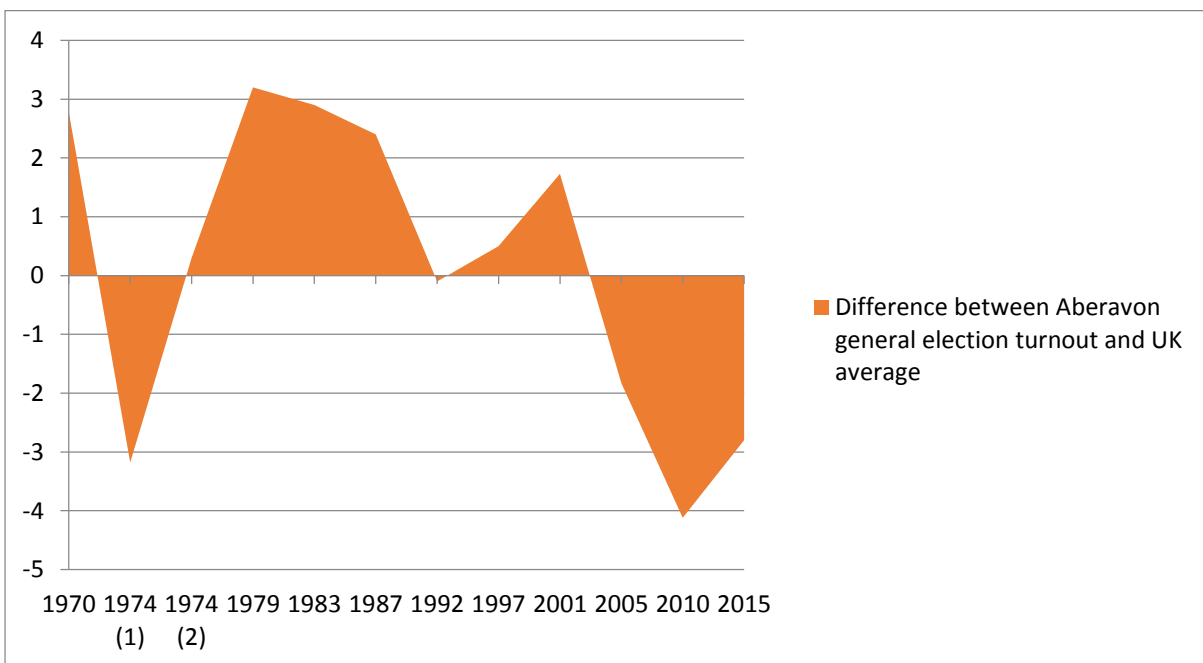
engagement in other major American cities. Again, the focus was on cities that had formerly had two newspapers, and its findings were within the context of one of these newspapers closing while the other continued to publish. Still, it found a measurable decline in civic engagement in the two cities following the newspaper closures compared with similar cities which had not lost newspapers. To measure civic engagement, the study analysed responses to questions about whether respondents had contacted a public official or bought/ boycotted a product or service because of social or political values in the previous 12 months, asked whether they had attended particular groups including a PTA or neighbourhood watch or civic organisation such as a Lions group, or whether they had been an officer or served on a committee in any groups or organisations.

Unfortunately UK studies of social attitudes and civic behaviour do not offer sufficient sample sizes at the local level to replicate this American research – with one exception: election turnout figures. I examined turnout in all three election types – general, local and Welsh Assembly elections measured against UK or Wales turnout averages. However this analysis reveals the declines did not happen (as might have been expected) after the closure of the *Guardian*. Instead, the analysis reveals a drop in election turnout figures after 2000, not after 2009. I have already identified this as a significant turning point in several key areas of news production, quantity and quality, and concluded these declines were associated with the closure of district newspaper offices and the withdrawal of journalists from the community.

It may be that the same effect is in evidence here. Graph 6 **Error! Reference source not found.** and Graph 7 show the percentage point difference between the Aberavon constituency turnout and the UK average for local and general elections.



Graph 6: Percentage point difference in turnout average for local council elections compared with Wales average. Source: Rallings (2006).



Graph 7: Percentage point difference in turnout average for general elections compared with UK average. Source: Kimber (ca 2015).

Between the 1970 and 1999 local elections, turnout for the seats within the Aberavon constituency was an average of 2.45 percentage points above the UK average, but dropped from the 2004 elections onwards to 0.72 percentage points below the UK average. For general elections, the turnout for Aberavon was an average of 1.17 percentage points above the UK average until the 2001 election:

for the 2005–2015 elections this dropped to an average of 2.91 percentage points below the UK average.

Similarly, Aberavon's turnout figures were 0.5 per cent above the Welsh average in the first Welsh Assembly election in 1999 (Morgan, 1999), but since then have dropped below the Welsh average by 0.35 per cent in 2003; 3.66 per cent in 2007 and 4.66 per cent in 2011.

I began the research by questioning whether local newspapers were crucial to the functioning of local democracy, and whether they are missed if they close down. Similar research into newspaper closures in America suggested I would find changes in civic and democratic behaviours such as election turnouts in the years following the newspaper closure, and I anticipated I would find a similar effect in Port Talbot. However, data suggests the turning point in journalism and Port Talbot's democratic deficit happened much sooner, around the year 2000. This is when the decline in certain markers of quality in news stories appeared to worsen, when sources became less local and journalists began to rely more on PR and high status sources and less on local contacts and personal attendance at meetings and events. It is also when Aberavon's election turnout, which had almost exclusively been one or two percentage point above the national average since the 1970s, first fell below average, where it has remained.

Together, the data suggest newspaper closures are not necessarily the crucial moment in any democratic deficit that may arise. Instead, it seems likely that the withdrawal of journalists from local communities may be the marker of a democratic deficit. Redundancies and widespread district office closures therefore point to a problem that is much bigger in scale than we might have realised. There is likely to be a large network of news black holes caused by the withdrawal of local journalism and masked by the continuation of local newspapers that resemble "zombie newspapers" with scaled back staff numbers and a much smaller amount of locally relevant content.

I conclude therefore, that local journalism does matter to communities, and that its withdrawal from the heart of those communities causes damage to the fabric of those communities. I conclude, too, that the problem that needs to be addressed urgently.

It is worth underlining that it is not necessarily local newspapers that need to be saved, but a plurality of local journalists, working within, and accountable to,

communities. The advertising revenue model that allowed this kind of journalism to flourish in past years has proved that it is no longer able to support the required level of journalism in the midst of the structural changes and challenges of the digital age that have emerged in recent decades. Entrepreneurs have attempted to fill the gap in many places with small independent or hyperlocal offerings – our own *Port Talbot Magnet* is an example – and though there have been many successes, only a handful have found sustainability. Many of them continue to rely on advertising revenue for support. However, towns like Port Talbot, which have suffered from the decline and automation of its traditionally industrial economy, much of it centred on steelmaking, is a good example of a community that is in dire need of good quality local journalism, but which is unable to sustain the required level of advertising revenue in its currently weakened local economy.

It is time to change the conversation. The evidence I have presented here shows that local journalism is needed by local citizens and that local democracy suffers where journalism is weakened. Now is the moment to acknowledge the extent of the problem, discuss it widely, and reach a consensus about how we as a society are going to pay for it.

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