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Restructuring the newsroom will pave the way for improved public interest news

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In September 2020 the closure of the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* newspaper was announced. The newspaper, which had served its namesake former mining towns and villages in the surrounding area for more than 100 years, was one of 14 'no longer viable' titles being closed by JPI Media. No jobs were lost in the closure and the paper retained a website. With increasing online news consumption and the consumer downturn caused by Covid-19, the closure was a sign of the times, perhaps.

The path of this title towards print closure is typical of the decline of local news in the UK. Prior to 2012, reporters, a news editor and a receptionist who took classified advertising sales were in a small office in South Elmsall. Part of Wakefield District but closer in community identity to Barnsley, it was a town where everyone knew everybody and where family members of those who had stood on the picket-lines would still cross roads to avoid those related to 'scabs'. The newspaper was part of the fabric; the reporters were well-known to traders, residents, schools and regular attendees at town council meetings.

In 2012 it all changed when the office closed and the editorial staff moved into the offices of the *Pontefract and Castleford Express*. Pontefract was only a 15-minute drive away, but it had a significantly different community identity. There were no more 'walk-ins' from the public and every story had to be planned in advance.

At the same time, Johnston Press titles were trying to respond to the growing online demand. News was published 'digital first' except front page stories, which were kept back for the paper. Facebook was starting to be a space for promotion and audience discussion. Nobody seemed to know how to make money from publishing online and there was mistrust and scepticism about the digital future.

The Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express was overseen by the editor of the *Pontefract and Castleford Express* and eventually the editorial team merged and the newspapers began to share editorial content on all pages except the first five.

In 2014 editorship became the responsibility of the *Wakefield Express*. The office in Pontefract closed and the editorial team took redundancy or moved into Wakefield, where they covered stories across West Yorkshire, mainly based from their desks, with little 'on patch' work. So, when the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* announced its closure in 2020, it was a shell of the newspaper it had been; with stories mainly unconnected to a patch that journalists rarely visited.

Johnston Press, which became JPI Media when it was brought out of administration in 2018, is not alone in closing, centralising and merging production. News "black holes" – a phrase coined by Rachel Howells in her research into the democratic impacts on the town of Port Talbot in Wales following the closure of its local paper – have sprung up all over the UK and have involved all of the 'big three' publishers in the UK; JPI, Reach Plc (formerly Trinity Mirror) and Newsquest.

In 2019 the government's Cairncross Review into the sustainable future of local news identified a general decline in public interest journalism and a synchronous decline in public engagement with democracy. When I investigated the causes more rigorously I identified a digital divide within newspaper newsrooms across the UK as companies tried to converge digital news production with traditional print processes. Often one editor and their team would oversee multiple titles sometimes covering vast geographic locations. There was evidence of a digital divide within newsrooms with separate factions within newsrooms dedicated to differing types of news production.

These distinct groups were print-focused journalists, who were often the reporters with traditional specialisms such as health, council and education, and digital journalists, whose job it was to grow the online audience. Analysis of job advertisements suggested investment in specialist digital roles was on the increase and traditional specialisms were declining. The divide between digital and print was replicated by middle-management on the newsdesk.

The focus on digital meant popular content was shared widely across titles, often diluting the geographic identifiers and relevance of "local" online news. Pressure to meet analytic targets pushed journalists into following soft and breaking news content which had little impact or relevance to the geographic audience. Digital journalists were excellent at identifying content which would perform well online and adept at engaging with the online

audience to grow engagement, clicks, likes and shares. But, specialist reporters were not generally considered to be producing content which would perform well analytically and as a result their journalism was often given only basic digital promotion, so it became lost in the flood of well-promoted soft and breaking news content.

Ultimately this resulted in news about schools, hospitals and local government failing to reach the geographically-relevant audience online. This exacerbated the likelihood of the content performing poorly with digital audiences. It also diminished the identities of the individual news titles and changed the purpose of the products, which had been to offer geographically relevant content to local readerships.

But recently, a series of Tweets from those working within local journalism has suggested potential positive change. “This is the front page of today’s @shftelegraph – the brilliant weekly newspaper for #sheffield I am so proud, privileged and just plain chuffed to become the Editor of from today” tweeted Ellen Beardmore.

“Delighted to announce that I have taken the role of editor of the @donnyfreepress as of today. Even more delighted to say we're bringing the paper back to Doncaster to be produced by dedicated, tight-knit group of people who have this brilliant borough firmly in their hearts” announced Liam Hoden.

These were two of the many JPI Media titles to be reinstated with their own dedicated and titled leadership following the buyout of the company by the former Local World chief executive David Montgomery in December 2020. According to a report in *Press Gazette* the company would return to its roots of local journalism, “rejecting clickbait and “irrelevant” stories in favour of a more localised news offering”, which included, where necessary, reopening newspaper offices within previously deserted communities.

Mr Montgomery, with a track record as a ruthless operator, has to reassure his employees that his intentions for JPI titles are good. He is unlikely to be taking a role as the saviour of the printed newspaper, but his initiative could start to reverse the problems created by the digital divide. It most likely will not save lost newspapers like the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, but it has the potential to reinstate the value of local public interest journalism both in print and online.