

# How hyperlocal journalism can restore trust in the media



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It is a critical time for public interest journalism. Trust in the mainstream media is a [major problem](#) as fake news spreads unabated on social networks.

One of the key issues is the disappearance of local newspapers which could prove to be “[catastrophic](#)” for some areas of the UK, according to a new government report. The report warns that the decline of the local press reduces scrutiny of democratic functions and that this is “unlikely” to improve without intervention.

So it has never been more important to support the scores of [independent community publishers](#) up and down the country. They amplify the issues that are important to their readers. Their stories could help restore public trust in journalism – but only if the government puts its money where its mouth is, and helps to fund them.

According to the [Independent Community News Network \(ICNN\)](#) – which has more than 120 members throughout the UK – a “hyperlocal” news service is one which typically pertains to “a specific geographic area such as a town, neighbourhood, village, county or even postcode”. Among their members are titles as diverse as The Edinburgh Reporter, [Shetland News](#) and [Cornish Stuff](#).

*Great interview with Luchia Robinson from Tottenham Community Press (@tottenhamcp) on Public Interest News by @behindlocalnews <https://t.co/gGHcjFv4CH>*

– @ICNNUK #saveindependentnews (@ICNNUK) [October 7, 2020](#)

The ICNN website states that the shift to online has resulted in an upheaval of the traditional models of journalism. Jobs have been lost, revenues are in decline as advertising dries up and public service journalism has been hit hardest as publications retreat from their traditional stomping grounds. It continues:

**But this digital migration has also inspired individuals and communities to step up to provide an alternative source of information through social enterprises, businesses and voluntary services – delivering enormous civic value.**

At a recent [conference](#) hosted by Coventry University, senior academics argued that the sustenance of this sector was vital to ensure local communities were aware of the nuances of

issues like COVID-19 and Brexit. This aligned with recent evidence from the [Edelman Trust](#), which showed that there has been a resurgence in public trust in local journalism over the past decade – and an [erosion of trust](#) in mainstream outlets.

In the UK, the BBC emerged as the most important news source for coronavirus information during the first few months of the pandemic. But survey data shows that only 45% of respondents rate news media as [trustworthy sources](#) of such information – a decrease of 12% between April and August.

## Cash needed

To do their work in helping to restore public trust, these fledgling independent community publishers need money. A £2m government-backed [Future News Fund](#) was launched in England in 2019 to boost local public interest journalism. This was a good start. But the government has resisted the innovation fund for public interest journalism that was recommended by the [Cairncross review](#) last year.

[\*Government rejects institute for news proposed by Cairncross Review to help save UK journalism\*](#)

The review [also called for](#) tax reliefs and a new Institute for Public Interest News.

The £35 million “[All in, all together](#)” campaign, set up by the government during the pandemic, was spent on advertising in national and regional newspapers – but no cash was allocated to independent publishers.

Matthew Abbott, the ICNN community project officer, said: “Unfortunately, 95% of ICNN members haven’t been able to access any of the government’s 11 support measures, including furloughing staff, VAT exemption on e-publications and the £35m that was allocated to save the newspaper industry via a

public health advertising campaign. If the UK government continues to do nothing to address this imbalance, media plurality in the UK will disappear altogether, along with many hundreds of jobs and vital community resources.”

ICNN did, however, secure funding for independent community publishers from the Welsh government and Public Health Scotland, which have set the benchmark for Westminster to follow.

A [News Recovery Plan](#) set out by the National Union of Journalists has called for “strategic investment in government advertising, including the hyperlocal sector”. Tech giants, including Google and Facebook, as well as philanthropists and charitable trusts [are intervening](#) with increasing frequency to support local journalism.

But in the era of fake news – when it is so important for the public to understand the issues around COVID-19 and Brexit – the government needs to do more to help these independent community publishers spread the truth and to keep their readers informed.

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