

**“This place...!” Challenge and  
change to journalistic identity in  
a digital age. A study of three  
London local newsrooms**

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**September 2016**

## **Abstract**

This research takes three local newsrooms in London in the years 2011-2013 as the setting within which to explore and examine the nature of journalistic identity in a changing economic, technological and cultural environment. It identifies elements of this shared culture, using a combination of non-participant observation and interviews. A newsroom culture emerges which is collaborative and supportive for journalists operating within it, but also fundamentally cautious and conservative and reluctant to ask core questions about how its newspapers operate, who its readers really are, how to attract new readers and how to engage with others outside mainstream local journalism who have entered the arena of local news and comment. In other words, local newspaper journalists are in some ways their own worst enemy.

## **Note on interviewee name referencing**

I conducted the interviews on condition of anonymity. Throughout the thesis, interviewees are therefore referenced with three or four letters plus a date. This disguises individual identity while preserving information about the relevant newsroom and year of interview. Journalists are designated either E (editor - all the newsrooms had a number of journalists with editor in their title) or R (reporter) plus the initials of their newspaper and the date of fieldwork. The system works as follows:

ESLP2011: Editor at South London Press 2011

RSLP2011: Reporter at South London Press 2011

ESC2012: Editor at Surrey Comet 2012

RSC2012: Reporter at Surrey Comet 2012

ETI2013: Editor at Times and Independent Series 2013

RTI2013: Reporter at Times and Independent Series 2013

### **Note on the thesis title**

The first part of the thesis title: "This place...!" was chosen because the phrase was frequently used in exasperation by my editor when I was a journalist on The Times. When management or another editor made a particularly stupid decision, she would exclaim: "This place..!" and run her hand defiantly through her hair. The expression seemed to me to sum up accurately the combination of feelings of pride, despair, tension and anxiety experienced by journalists in the case study newsrooms trying to shape and determine their own identities in a changing media world.

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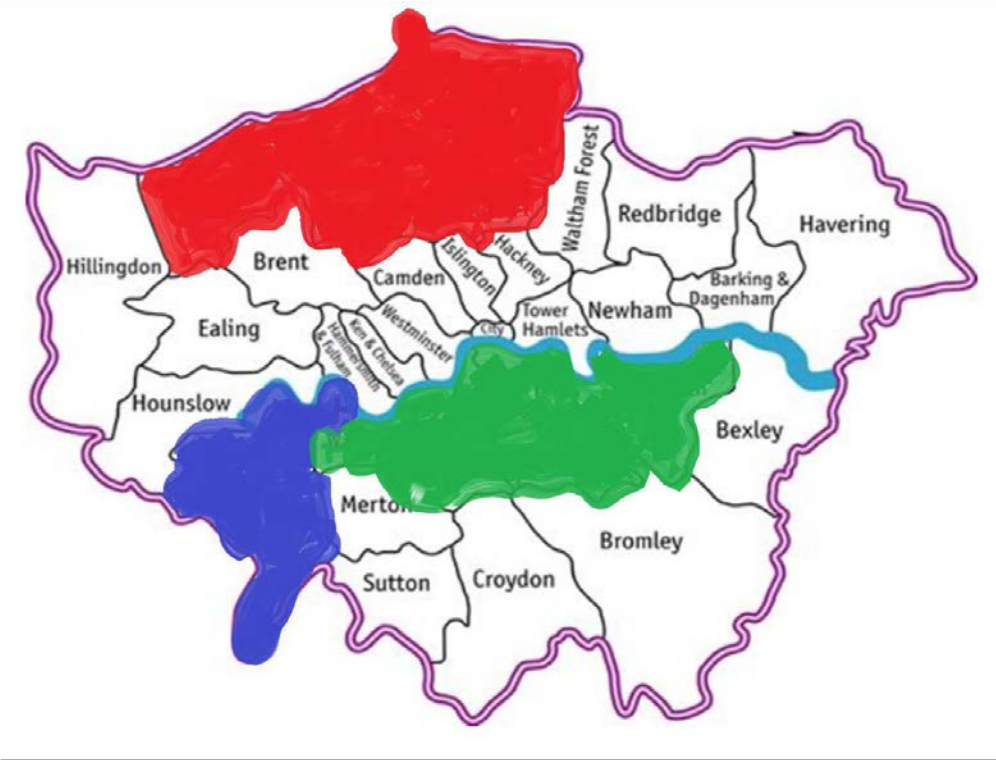
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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

This research takes three local newsrooms in London in the years 2011-2013 as the setting within which to explore and examine the nature of journalistic identity in a changing economic, technological and cultural environment. The three newsrooms chosen are the South London Press/Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury; the Surrey Comet and Kingston Guardian; and the Times and Independent Series.

The aim of the research is to explore the question of how local journalists see themselves, not only in an occupational and organisational context but also as part of a shared culture of local journalism. The research aims to identify elements of this shared culture and whether it can be said that a specifically local newsroom culture exists and is being maintained or redefined in a time of change.

The areas covered by the three newsrooms are shown on the London boroughs map below, with the South London Press and Mercury in green (covering the boroughs of Wandsworth, Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham and Greenwich); the Surrey Comet and the Kingston Guardian in blue (Kingston and Richmond); and the Times and Independent Series in red (Harrow, Barnet, Enfield, Haringey).



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The last 20 years have seen significant changes in the way news is produced by journalists and consumed by readers in the UK. The spread of online news sites means that journalists are no longer working to a single deadline but are constantly under pressure to update their web pages. Technologies such as video and audio have brought new ways of telling stories and new 'upskilling' opportunities, but also new stresses for journalists predominantly trained in a print environment, who are having to learn to use these new technologies within tighter deadlines than they ever faced in print. Newsrooms have been reorganised to bring print and online operations together in a way the industry describes as "converged".



Previous research has suggested that these changes are forcing journalists to forge new working relationships and develop new routines, both with each other and with their readers, who are able to interact with and comment on news in a way alien to traditional journalism (Hermida and Thurman 2008; Singer et al 2011).

Other commentators (see Anderson 2013) argue that journalists working for traditional news organisations have become just one element in a complex ecology of social media, user-generated content (UGC), hyperlocal websites and blogs.

This research explores the nature of journalistic identity in three London local newsrooms through detailed observation and in-depth interviews. It examines the elements of a local newsroom culture and how this influences training, news agendas, content and source choice. It looks at the changing news environment through the eyes of the journalists who are experiencing it and explores the impact of change on identity and self-image.

As far as can be ascertained, this is the first ethnographic study of UK local newsrooms in a changing news environment, although a number of in-depth studies of US local newsrooms have been conducted in the last few years (see Ryfe 2012; Anderson 2013).

Anderson's study of the news ecology of Philadelphia followed a study of local papers in the same city by Kaniss (1991). Many of the much-cited newsrooms ethnographies of the 1960s and 1970s (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979) focused on high profile news organisations. In the UK, other ethnographies and explorations of journalistic culture within organisations (Schlesinger 1979; Harrison 2000; Born 2005) focus on the BBC, a high profile and unique organisation.

This study uses a number of theoretical perspectives to analyse ways in which journalists create and sustain their individual and collective identity. It attempts in part to fill an empirical gap identified by a number of researchers (Singer 2003; Dickinson 2007; Örnebring 2009) into the roles played by

concepts of professionalism in shaping and sustaining a journalistic identity in a time of change. Örnebring (2009:1) calls for “a future programme of research on occupational change within journalism that goes beyond general arguments of decline and also incorporates current research from the sociology of work and occupations (as journalism cannot be understood as separate and isolated from other occupations and general trends affecting all occupations).” Dickinson (2007:1) suggests that “an empirically grounded understanding of the way members of an occupation act in relation to external and internal regulatory ethical codes and how they are socialised into their work roles can reveal a great deal about that occupation and the way it is adapting to changing circumstances.” Singer (2003:157) says: “Additional empirical investigation of the perceptions of online journalists regarding their professional role and status is needed.”

Focusing on the impact of online news on journalistic identity, Singer (2003:157) argues: “If online journalism is to be incorporated within that community [the community of traditional journalists], there will need to be either considerable accommodation in the self-perception of what a journalist does or considerable change in the way that online journalism is carried out.”

She concludes that a “thorough exploration of the sociology of online news would be valuable, not only because it would enhance our understanding of online journalism but also because it would enhance our understanding of the profession as a whole and its changing role in our society.” (2003:157)

This research moves beyond existing research on specific issues like UGC to look at structures, routines, interactions and decision-making, and specifically how these affect individual journalists’ self-perception, in an attempt to contribute to the “sociology of online news” that Singer outlines. It attempts to move beyond sociological concerns of routines and organisations to an examination of journalistic culture, both spoken and unspoken, and journalists’ self-perception and understanding of their role.

Culture is defined throughout this thesis as a “process of meaning-making” (Spillman 2002:2) in each of the newsrooms, in which journalists connect with each other through a number of shared experiences but also through

this process shape their own individual identities. Spillman (2002:7) argues that defining culture as a fluid process of meaning-making “creates theoretical space for understanding the importance of culture in structural change , since variant and shifting interpretations may be the mechanisms of conditions of change in structural patterns.” This is an important theoretical framework for this research which examines how newsroom culture shapes journalistic identity in a changing media environment.

The research focuses on journalists working on local papers, often seen as dull and mundane. They “are not a sexy topic” (Kleis Nielsen (2015: xi). They have long been regarded as “something of a Cinderella of the press world” (Cox and Morgan 1973:5). Local newspapers are the unsexy Cinderellas of the media world because they chronicle the small mundane stuff of local life rather than dramatic political upheavals or world changing events.

As a result, local papers have been ignored by many researchers, as other scholars have noted (Aldridge 2007; Singer 2010). Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2009: 12) say: “Studies of news organisations have tended to focus on journalism as produced in large, often national television and newspaper newsrooms in elite nations.....Journalism studies has tended to ignore the work that goes on in less glamorous journalistic workplaces which are nonetheless dominant in terms of both the number of news workers employed by such organisations, the quantity of content output and the audiences for their output.”

Likewise Kaniss (1991:8) notes: “Relatively little has been written about the local news media and the important role they play in the life of their cities and regions.”

But local newspapers still have a significant social, cultural, political and economic role, which is why this research focuses on this sector. Local journalism, as Kleis Nielsen (2015:1) says, is both “frequently terrible and also terribly important.”

Local newspapers are still a key training ground for journalists starting their careers with a National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) diploma (Franklin and Murphy 1991). This exam is a prerequisite for working in local papers and plays a significant role in the socialisation of journalists and their inculcation into journalistic culture.

The House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport select committee (2010:11).says in its report on the future of local media: “Regional and local newspapers perform an important role in the UK. They provide more coverage of local news, local events and local people than any other medium. The vast majority of local newspapers are politically independent, something which is partly driven by financial common sense since alienating large sections of a local community could be commercially unwise.

“However, this independence and objectivity is one of the most significant features of the local press, as local newspapers are the primary source of reporting of local politics and public bodies facilitating independent scrutiny and accountability.”

The local paper is, in theory, “a forum where the electorate can tell those in authority precisely what it thinks about the decisions they make.” (Freer in Anderson and Ward 2007:89). The ability of the local press to play a watchdog role and call local authorities and others to account has diminished by journalists’ own admission as resources and jobs are cut (Williams and Franklin 2007; Singer 2010). But local newspapers still attempt to play this role and as one editor said (interview ESLP2011), if local papers did not challenge the decisions of councils, developers, landlords, planners, schools and businesses, who would?

The fieldwork for this research took place between 2011 and 2013. According to the industry website Hold the Front Page (HTFP), 61 local newspapers closed across the country between 2008 and 2010. The pattern of staff cuts, mergers and closures continued as a backdrop throughout the fieldwork period, albeit at a slower rate, with a further 34 titles closing between 2011

and 2013. Of these, two continued online only (HTFP June 2014). Both of these, the Streatham Guardian and the Enfield Gazette, were competitors to newspapers in two of the fieldwork newsrooms – the South London Press and the Enfield Independent respectively. This backdrop of closures and retrenchment allowed an examination of the impact of wider economic changes on journalistic identity and newsroom culture.

The activities of the press in general were also under the spotlight as never before as witnesses from across the industry gave evidence to the first part of the Leveson enquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press following revelations at the beginning of the period of fieldwork in 2011 of widespread phone-hacking by journalists. The enquiry, set up by then prime minister David Cameron, was led by senior judge Lord Justice Leveson, who, between November 2011 and June 2012, heard evidence from 337 witnesses in person, with a further 300 written statements. Amid revelations of such illegal activity in national newspaper newsrooms, editors of regional and local newspapers were at pains to stress in their evidence to the enquiry that their own publications should not be tarred with the same brush. Their core concern was that at a time when local papers were struggling with falling circulations, they could face expensive adjudications and financial sanctions of up to £1 million under Leveson's proposals for a strengthened regulatory environment. An editorial in the Sentinel in Stoke-on-Trent expressed these concerns: "The fact that the new regulation may well bring expensive adjudication panels and time-consuming third-party complaints is equally frightening. In his infamous report last November, Lord Leveson wrote warmly about the important role local papers play at the heart of their communities. Unfortunately there appears to be little sign of fine actions to match the noble lord's fine words" (Sentinel 2013).

Like the majority of national newspapers, local and regional publications were regulated pre-Leveson by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) and journalists were required to abide by the PCC code. When Leveson reported in November 2012, he stressed that his concerns about journalistic culture and

ethics did not extend to the local and regional press. Leveson (2012: executive summary 7) said: "Although accuracy and similar complaints are made against local newspapers, the criticisms of culture, practices and ethics of the press raised in this inquiry do not affect them. On the contrary, they have been much praised." Statistics from the PPC in 2011 show that local newspapers collectively attracted far fewer complaints. Of the 7,341 complaints requiring a response from an editor because of a possible breach of the code, 54.4 per cent involved national newspapers, 31.2 per cent regional and local newspapers, 8.4 per cent Scottish newspapers and 1.1 per cent northern Irish newspapers (Greenslade 2013).

Leveson (2012 volume 1:151) further urged the government to find ways of safeguarding and supporting the local press. "I suggest that the Government should look urgently at what action it might be able to take to help safeguard the ongoing viability of this much valued and important part of the British press. It is clear to me that local, high-quality and trusted newspapers are good for our communities, our identity and our democracy and play an important social role."

The following sections of this chapter aim to set the research outlined above in its wider context and to explore changes experienced by local as well as national newspapers, particularly over the past 15 years. An underlying theme of these sections is that there has been change in the local press but that many of the trends considered worrying by commentators are long-term in origin (for example, circulation downturns and concentration of ownership).

However, the arrival of the internet has forced a renewed focus on the health and future of the local press which is arguably why long-term trends are being thrown into sharp new relief. Developments in online journalism and social media in particular are forcing local journalists through a long transitional period in which they are having to re-evaluate and adjust not only their working practices but their whole role and value as journalists.

The focus of the first two sections will examine the recent economic and political position of local newspapers, including the spread of the internet and

its impact on working practices. The last two sections will explore the rise of the converged newsroom and developments in new media, including social media, and will highlight the impact of these on journalists' occupational self-identity and the importance of this identity for this research.

### **1:1 The local press**

Redundancies, management refusal to replace staff who were leaving, out-of-date technology, low pay and lack of funds for training and upskilling (in other words learning and applying new skills important for a changing industry) have become characteristic of the local press sector in the UK (Franklin 2006; Williams and Franklin 2007; Aldridge 2007).

Today's journalists are just the latest in a long line of local reporters feeling the pressure resulting from a long-term decline in circulation. This peaked in the 1960s (Freer in Anderson and Ward 2007:91) and has been falling off ever since, as a result of social as well as economic and technological changes. Between 1972 and 2009, paid-for weeklies' circulation fell by around 2.1 per cent a year (Ofcom 2009). The UK's local weekly newspapers (both free and paid-for) lost sales at an average rate of 6.6 per cent in the first half of 2013, in the last year of the fieldwork for this research, according to figures released by ABC (Press Gazette August 2013).

However, despite years of cut-backs and closures, according to the industry's own figures, local papers are a success story. Their economic significance is still considerable. They still attract a collective readership across the country of 40 million people (JICREG 2015), with websites getting 97 million hits (Local Media Works 2014). Even with closures, there are 1,100 local newspapers and 1,700 local websites. The sector has advertising revenues of £1.3 billion in 2014 (Local Media Works 2015).

But little of this profitability has made itself felt in the newsroom. Local newspapers were badly affected by the post-2008 downturn. Publishers reacted by closing titles, cutting jobs, and turning daily newspapers into weeklies and paid-for papers into frees. As Aldridge (2007:41) notes: “To keep making profits in a declining industry requires active, even aggressive, management.”

It should be noted that the existence of free newspapers is not new. They were introduced by local news publishers in the 1960s and 1970s for the same reason that they exist now – to generate advertising without significant editorial expenditure (Franklin and Murphy 1991; Franklin and Murphy 1998; Franklin and Murphy 2006; Freer in Anderson and Ward 2007).

There has been growing official concern about the future of the local press and the adverse effect a failing sector could have on local democratic accountability. In 2010, the House of Commons Culture Media and Sport Select Committee took evidence for its enquiry into the future of local news media, and in opening remarks (CMS 2010:8) stressed the importance of local news as “a source of independent, local information produced to high journalistic standards, and news plurality. We believe that wide availability of news at all levels, national, regional and local, is at the core of public service content.” It added: “Research carried out as part of Ofcom’s public service broadcasting (PSB) review showed very clearly that people trust and value the provision and choice in news services in this country, and they trust and value local and regional news in particular.”

The regional and local press can be defined by timing and frequency of publication and by the geographical area they serve rather than whether they are upmarket or downmarket, broadsheet or tabloid (Cole and Harcup 2010: 48). As Cole and Harcup point out, there is a difference between regionals and locals, with daily regionals, as their name suggests, serving larger areas such as Yorkshire or the West Midlands, or even devolved parts of the UK like Scotland or Wales. Daily evenings typically cover big cities such as



Manchester or Birmingham. Local weeklies predominate in towns too small to support a daily. The local weekly sector, with both paid-for and free titles is the largest element of the local and regional press.

Ofcom (2010:3) said in its report to the Select Committee: "Local and regional newspapers play a particularly important role in informing, representing, campaigning and interrogating and thus underpinning awareness and participation in the democratic process."

The government has since been exploring a range of options on how to support the local newspaper sector, including tax breaks. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) began a Local News Matters campaign in 2015, saying that "cuts pose a threat to local democracy because local politicians are not being held to account, voters are not being given a range of views and voters are deprived of the information they require to make judgements when voting in elections." It added that journalists were struggling with increasingly heavy workloads for no extra pay.

Alongside fears for the future of local news in an economic downturn came continuing concern that ownership of both local and national media was increasingly being concentrated in the hands of a few large companies. In the regional and local sector, five large companies (Trinity Mirror, Johnston Press, Newsquest, Northcliffe and Tindle) dominate the market (Media Reform Coalition 2014).

This also is not a new phenomenon. The process has been going on since the 1960s, when family-owned newspapers started to sell out to large London-based corporations (Cox and Morgan 1973: 8). By 1991, Franklin and Murphy (1991:54) could write: "In terms of its ownership and its business strategy, it [the local and regional press] is a massive corporate enterprise based on the elimination of territorial competition and a system of local regulated monopoly." The 1990s onwards saw an increase in mergers and acquisitions in a newly profitable age following the technological upheavals of the 1980s, which brought computerised

typesetting and ousted the print unions which had forced up production costs (Freer in Anderson and Ward 2007).

Local newspaper publishers took full advantage of the cost savings resulting from journalists setting their own stories on screen and launched into buying and selling sprees which consolidated local monopolies.

In the current paid-for weekly market, Johnston Press has just over 30 per cent of the market, with Newsquest on 15 per cent. In the free weekly market, Newsquest has nearly a fifth of the market, 24.3 per cent, with Trinity Mirror second on 15 per cent. In London, Trinity Mirror, Newsquest, Tindle, Northcliffe and another large publishing company, Archant, together own all but one of the capital's paid-for weeklies and all but three of London's free weeklies. In developing the methodology for this research, it was all but impossible to find newsrooms which were not owned by the big five publishers. Only two publications, the Southwark News and the Camden New Journal, were independently owned at the time of fieldwork.

Concern over the potentially damaging effects of concentration of ownership resulted in an inquiry by the House of Lords Communications Committee in 2009 into the ownership of news. The committee rejected the argument put forward by Rupert Murdoch and others that a proliferation of websites and new media meant that concern about concentration of ownership was out of date. The committee wrote: "We do not accept that the increase of news sources invalidates the case for special treatment of the media through ownership regulation. We believe that there is still a danger that if media ownership becomes too concentrated the diversity of voices available could be diminished." (House of Lords 2009 volume 1:63)

Journalists expressed concern to the committee over the potential damage to quality local journalism with newspapers owned by companies whose priority was profit. The NUJ's submission to the Lords committee (House of Lords 2009 volume 2:143) said: "The big PLCs see local newspapers only as another business existing as a vehicle for profit making for shareholders. This

has transformed the traditional trade-off between profits and the provision of service and need to engender a sense of community in the areas they circulate in ... Crucially, this new ethos has allowed company chiefs to take the decision to make deep cuts in editorial budgets—especially cuts in staff ... For regional newspapers, this has meant a widespread cutting back on formal reporting of time consuming news opportunities"

Since the House of Lords published its report, nothing has changed significantly. In its report on media plurality published in 2014, the Media Reform Coalition analysed statistics provided by the industry body the Newspaper Society (now Local Media Works) and concluded (2014:2): "We have a serious problem with plurality in the UK. We view it as crucial to the health of the press, and therefore of a functioning democracy, that the news and views consumed by the public are spread across a sufficient range of independent providers. As we will see, however, this is rarely the case in Britain's media market."

Researchers interviewing journalists on local papers found that working on a paper owned by a large company meant not only cutting back on news gathering but also heavier workloads as management converged newsrooms and required journalists to work across print and online. Operations, including offices, sub-editing, production and newly introduced websites, were centralised, reducing the local character of individual titles (Franklin 2006; Williams and Franklin 2007). Pay, always low in the local news sector, continued to lag behind National Union of Journalists recommended pay levels (Williams and Franklin 2007).

As with other issues concerning the local press, problems of poor pay and conditions are long-standing, stemming partly from the fact that many journalists are trainees in their first job and do not have sufficient industrial muscle to make demands. Fewer journalists are members of a union and in the post-Wapping deregulated industrial landscape of the 1990s, fewer companies recognised a union. Franklin and Murphy (1998) say of this

period: “Job cuts and union de-recognition have had predictable consequences for local journalists’ salaries.” (1998:16).

The salaries of newspaper journalists have continued to lag behind inflation. The average newspaper journalist’s salary in 2012 was £22,500 (NCTJ: Journalists at Work 2012). This figure is for all newspaper journalists surveyed including those on local newspapers. In the same year, the average UK salary was £26,500 (Office for National Statistics 2012). Of journalists surveyed by the NCTJ, 70% were dissatisfied with their pay (NCTJ 2012:75).

## **1:2 The arrival of the internet**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the idea that newspapers could be under threat from online news seemed a distant prospect. Just 13 per cent had internet access through a home computer in 1999-2000 (Office for National Statistics 2004) and access was through a dial-up connection. Without a broadband connection, accessing news websites online was very slow and difficult and without a critical mass of readers able and willing to access news online, the incentive was not there for publishing companies to experiment with online news. Although newspaper readerships were falling, 53 per cent of people were still reading a national newspaper regularly in 2001 (ONS 2010).

National newspapers in the UK experimented with electronic journals as early as 1994 when the Telegraph launched the Electronic Telegraph. It was followed by the-times.co.uk (later Times Online) and Guardian Unlimited (later guardian.co.uk) in 1999. However, these websites were more electronic versions of print newspapers than the multi-media, interactive pages they would become 10 years later (McNair 2009).

As many commentators have argued (Zelizer and Allan 2002; Allan 2006; McNair 2009), the events of 9/11 became the first of a series of events in which online news showed its potential for immediate, rolling coverage of rapidly changing events, coupled with blogs, video, photographs and

comments provided by members of the public as well as journalists. Other global events (the US attack on Iraq in 2003 and the Asian Tsunami in 2004) and UK events (the London bombings of 7/7) further demonstrated the potential power of the internet to provide multi-layered, multi-dimensional reporting. As Allan (2006:105) comments: "Online journalism at its best brings to bear alternative perspectives, context and ideological diversity to its reporting, providing users with the means to hear voices from around the globe."

Local newspaper publishers, many of whom had initially been sceptical of the internet and reluctant to invest in websites, started to recognise that they could not ignore these developments, particularly if they wanted to attract younger readers who were starting to get more of their news online.

They were also being forced to fight for advertising revenue as classified advertising in particular moved online and threatened their bottom line (Guyllas in Mair et al 2012:28). As growing numbers of people had access to broadband and grew accustomed to going online for all their services, local newspapers saw their classified advertising disappearing as advertisers moved online to access their customers.

However, there was considerable uncertainty among publishers as to how they should react to the spread of online news and the emergence of new forms of story-telling, such as video journalism. Williams and Franklin's 2007 study of Trinity Mirror showed a company which launched its online strategy without sufficient thought or research in the middle of the dot-com boom of 2000-2002, and was forced to withdraw a year later nursing heavy losses (Williams and Franklin 2007:45).

Trinity Mirror, along with other local newspaper publishers, did not completely recognise the changing landscape until Rupert Murdoch made his influential speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 2005. The self-styled "digital immigrant" said: "We need to recognise that the next generation accessing news or information, whether from newspapers or any other source have different expectations about the kind of news they will get including when and how they will get it, where they will

get it from and who they will get it from.”

Murdoch’s speech was a “wake-up call” (Williams and Franklin 2007: 50). “There was now a general consensus amongst regional and local press owners that falling print circulations and the prospect of losing advertising revenue to online competitors, as well as changing patterns of media consumption, meant that the move to digital news was inevitable.”

Recent research into the correlation between newspaper circulations and the internet (Chisholm 2010; Page 2011) suggests that publishers’ fears that their own websites would adversely impact on their print editions are misplaced. Chisholm argues that threats to circulation come more from external news sources using models such as the Huffington Post in the US and potentially from organisations like the BBC than from publishers’ own websites.

Local news publishers shared the caution of their national counterparts about the risks of cannibalisation of their print products by their websites

However, publishers have been focusing on building up their online presence as the print market continues to struggle. Figures from the independent industry body the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) show that they are having some success in this area, with all publishers posting double digit rises in traffic (the figures, however, came from a low base). Newsquest, owner of two of the news operations studied for this research posted a 28.9 per cent rise in daily browsers and a 24.6 per cent rise in monthly browsers in figures published in August 2013 at the end of this fieldwork (Press Gazette August 2013).

However, making money from local news websites is not an easy task. Gulyas in Mair et al (2012:31) notes that “local news and information is difficult to monetise online, partly because there are often issues with originality and distinctiveness of these types of content and partly because of strong resistance from audiences to pay for online content.”

### **1:3 The growth of the digital newsroom**

Management and journalists alike took time to assimilate web-based news pages into their news gathering and output processes. The concept of “web first” publishing was frowned upon, for the apparently contradictory reasons that firstly, no-one got their news from the internet and secondly, that publishing news on the web immediately a story broke would take sales away from the print editions.

Editorially, when online operations started in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, print editions always took precedence over web pages, with online reporters mostly uploading stories from the paper unchanged onto the website (Salwen et al 2005). Reporters continued to consider that having a by-line in a print edition was more valuable than having one online. As McNair (2009:143) commented: “Digital journalism still suffered from low status and from the presumed superiority of print and the broadcast media ‘of record’.”

The growth of online operations in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century at almost all newspapers - both a response to and a reason for, falling circulations – meant that the nature of newsroom work changed, as many commentators noted (Pavlik 2001; Bozcowski 2004; Singer 2004; Quinn and Filak, 2005; Deuze 2007; 2008; Domingo et al 2008). Different organisations experimented with a range of structures for which the new industry buzzword was “convergence”.

In UK newsrooms, the term convergence was used mainly to apply to the integration of print and web operations (although in the US convergence often meant working across television and radio as well as print, following the dismantling of cross-ownership restrictions). Newspaper journalists’ responsibilities expanded from simply producing text to being expected to work online and produce stories through a range of media, for example video, audio, slide shows, SMS or, most recently, iPhone apps. Staff resources became shared across platforms and the distinction between

media platforms blurred. Journalists were increasingly expected by editors and publishers to develop and respond to readers and others using a range of social media, such as Twitter, Flickr and YouTube, as such media grew towards the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Journalists came under pressure to maximise audiences and to work with new media developments such as user generated content (UGC) and comment forums.

Such changes presented significant challenges for many journalists, who were concerned that their role risked being devalued by an influx of amateurs. In many cases, mainstream journalists responded to the rise of UGC, blogs and other types of "citizen journalism" by re-asserting their own claims to quality and ethical responsibility to their audiences, and by continuing a gatekeeping role (Hermida and Thurman 2008; Domingo et al 2008; Newman 2009; Harrison 2010; Singer 2010).

The end of a tumultuous decade up was marked in 2010 by the long-heralded decision of Rupert Murdoch to put his UK newspaper websites (The Times, the Sun and the newly created Sunday Times site) behind paywalls. Many saw this as a retrograde step, against the spirit and the reality of free information generated by the growth of the internet, and thus doomed to failure (Jarvis 2010). From the point of view of journalists on the Times and the Sun, the move was a mixture of the depressing (how many readers would pay?) and the heartening as Rupert Murdoch argued the move was to protect quality journalism. "Quality journalism is not cheap, and an industry that gives away its content is simply cannibalising its ability to produce good journalism" (Murdoch 2009).

The significant changes in the newspaper industry outlined above would not have come about without the huge changes in technology over the past 15 years. The spread of fast broadband connections to 73 per cent of UK households by 2010 (Office for National Statistics 2010), up 28 per cent since 2006, was a key factor in the growth of online news sites and their increasingly complex multi-media offerings. By the first quarter of 2015, 80 per cent of households had a fast broadband connection (ONS 2015).



Alongside broadband came hardware and software developments which enabled journalists and members of the public to build websites and set up blogs for free, accessing the internet with small portable laptops and uploading content created with lightweight camcorders and mobile phones with camera, video and internet access. Most recently, the arrival of iPhones, with their easy-to-read screens, signalled new possibilities for news dissemination and income generation through iPhone apps. The Apple iPad, launched in 2010, was greeted enthusiastically as a “game changer” by publishers such as Rupert Murdoch as the ideal medium for readers to access the Times’ paid-for website (Murdoch 2010).

In theory, new technology opened the way to fundamental changes in which news was generated, processed and consumed. In practice, just because the technological capacity was there did not mean that journalists would use it. Previous researchers have noted the apparent reluctance of journalists to use the technology available. Steenson (2010) asked: “Why is use of multimedia, hypertext and interactivity still so rare?” Quandt et al (2008:735) similarly found in their comparison of 10 news websites that “Online journalism, as it is offered by the market leaders in the respective countries, is basically good old news journalism, which is similar to what we know from “offline” newspapers. This research supports Quandt et al’s findings to an extent although different newsrooms had different experiences. Other practical reasons could include the unanticipated complexity of getting untrained print journalists to produce good video packages (Franklin 2007; Smith 2009).

Across the industry, however, publishers gradually realised as the 21<sup>st</sup> century went on, that the internet was not a passing fad and started setting up online operations alongside their print operations. News broke and was updated in a series of constant rolling deadlines rather than once or twice a day, as web technology and the development of content management systems (CMS) enabled instant uploading.

In 2006, the Guardian broke with the dominant orthodoxy of print first and became the first national newspaper to run breaking news on the web immediately without waiting for the print edition. Editors realised that holding back news in a 24 hour rolling news environment made no sense.

Guardian foreign editor Harriet Sherwood (2006) said of the change: "Once there is the means to get news to your audience on a rolling 24-hour basis, there's no logic to holding it back for a once-a-day newspaper deadline. Consumers of news increasingly expect to be able to access news at a time which suits them, rather than times determined by newspaper deadlines or fixed TV/radio news broadcasts. I do indeed think that web-first will become the norm. Once you start publishing web-first there is no going back. That's not to say it is not an evolving policy - we are learning what is possible all the time, and refining and reviewing our processes -- but the idea of abandoning web-first is unthinkable."

Demarcation lines in newsrooms were blurred as tasks which had initially been carried out by separate desks in print operations, such as sub-editing or picture editing, were increasingly done by the same journalist who had written the story. In the latter part of the decade, what had started as two separate operations, in most cases with the print publication prioritised, converged into one news hub, from which editors allocated stories to the most appropriate news platform and medium. In theory, at least, journalists were expected not just to write a story for the paper but to upload breaking news to the web, write headlines designed for search engine optimisation (SEO), provide online packages of text, video and hyperlinks and possibly provide further analysis via their blog. At the same time, they were supposed to be monitoring and moderating comments to their pieces. This was, in a physical sense, a converged newsroom.

Many journalists, for example in the Florida-based Tampa Tribune newsroom which became one of the early converged newsrooms, saw the change as a positive step, allowing collaboration between different sections and platforms (Singer 2004; Dupagne and Garrison 2006). But others in the same

newsroom said the requirements of a converged newsroom added to their workload (Singer 2004; Dupagne and Garrison 2006) both in terms of learning to use different technology and in producing multi-media news packages. Similar concerns were expressed in the UK by journalists working for the Trinity Mirror Group (Williams and Franklin 2007), where journalists were expected to produce video packages with little training and no extra pay, although the process added significantly to their workload.

By the time fieldwork for this research started in 2011, the concept of a converged newsroom was acknowledged by journalists interviewed as the way forward. However, actually implementing a converged newsroom was a complex process which proceeded at different paces in different newsrooms but which was also slowed by the conservatism of journalists as well as management. There was a tension between the acknowledgement that newsroom practices generally were changing and a reluctance to change themselves.

For consumers, it was also open for the first time to non-journalists to set up their own means of communicating and commenting on news, independent of the traditional publishing structures of journalism (Gillmor 2004; Keen 2008; Kelly 2009; Singer et al 2011). But there was reluctance among many journalists to allow readers and non-journalists access to the news agenda through participation. This was one of the areas in which journalists asserted their claims to professionalism and being “real” journalists most clearly, drawing a boundary between themselves as trained journalists and others as amateurs (Singer 2015). Some journalists were more excited about the possibilities of participatory journalism than others, excited at the new possibilities which would “empower a growing army of citizen journalists, bloggers and readers wishing to post comments online, to construct a more pluralist and democratic debate about matters of public interest.” (Franklin 2008:307). As Singer (2015: 26) comments: “...the construction efforts of growing numbers of journalists shifted from fences to bridges.”

#### **1:4 The professionalization of journalism**

The debate about the future of the industry, technological change and the role of journalists in this changing media landscape, as outlined in the above sections, is often framed in terms of paid journalists as “professionals”, whose professionalism is being enhanced, enriched or challenged, by industry developments. The question of what professionalism means in a journalistic context has taken on a new urgency over the past decade as journalists face significant challenges to their working patterns and routines from non-journalists moving in on journalists’ traditional territory (Paulussen and Ugille 2008; Kelly 2009; Lewis 2010; Singer 2010; Singer 2015). Establishing boundaries between journalists and non-journalists have become increasingly important as journalists reassert control and defend their patch, primarily by continuing to use existing gatekeeping methods to keep amateurs at bay unless and until they become useful as sources or story-tellers with a different angle.

A key question for this research was the extent to which journalistic identity in the local newsrooms studied was linked to journalists’ idea of themselves as “professionals”.

Journalists do not fit well into a sociological template of professionalism, which takes a narrow view of what constitutes a professional occupation, focused on formal structures of entry requirements, licensing and regulation. Journalism has never succeeded in developing training and entry methods which limit entry to people trained in certain skills or with specific experience, despite efforts on a number of fronts. It has no system of licensing which controls standards and which has the power to strike people off and prevent them from working, as say, for example, doctors and teachers have (Snoddy 1992; Marr 2004).

As Anderson (2013:7) noted in his observation of US local newsrooms: “Reporters and editors still worked to build news stories in an assembly line fashion, and news organisations struggled to collaborate with people and groups outside their formal institutional walls”

Journalists’ continuing adherence to journalism as a craft occupation in local newsrooms is heavily influenced by the content and emphasis of the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) Diploma which was (and is) a pre-requisite for working on a local newspaper. The local newspaper sector is unique in requiring trainee journalists to have an initial qualification, which, is the closest the journalism industry comes to a standard body of knowledge and restrictive entry requirements which are a key marker of occupational professionalism.

The NCTJ Diploma is a skilled-based, craft-oriented set of exams, developed by local news editors in 1953 and is a remnant of the system of journalistic apprenticeships through which journalists used to learn their craft. Originally, the NCTJ made attempts to restrict entry to control numbers entering training to match them to numbers needed on local newspapers and remained opposed to journalism courses in universities (Hanna and Sanders 2007). This was part of the reason why journalism training was either on the job or, later, through apprenticeships or FE colleges. The first postgraduate university journalism course in the UK did not start until 1971. The first UK undergraduate journalism courses started at City University, Lancashire Polytechnic (now the University of Central Lancashire) and the London College of Printing (now the London College of Communication) in 1991 (Gopsill and Neale 2007; Association of Journalism Educators 2012).

As journalism courses at universities started to multiply, the NCTJ became a commercial training provider, accrediting undergraduate and postgraduate university courses and losing its role as a “lead provider” (Gopsill and Neale (2007: 239). Fierce competition to enter what many see as an exciting and non-routine profession (Hanna and Ball 2006; Hanna and Sanders 2007)

has meant a raising of bars to entry so that now the minimum acceptable qualification for many jobs, even ones paying low salaries, is a degree. For journalists on local newspapers, this means an undergraduate or postgraduate degree and an NCTJ qualification. Because postgraduates have to fund themselves and a year of study means a year out of the workplace, the majority tend to be middle class with parents in the professions (Cole 2003; Hanna and Sanders 2007; Deuze 2008; NCTJ 2012).

This introduction has sought to explain the approach of this research, explain its significance in relation to previous research, and to set its subject matter of local newspapers in an economic, political, technological and sociological context.

## **Chapter 2 Literature review**

The rapid changes to the journalism industry since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are presenting a challenge not just to journalists trying to assimilate change but also to commentators attempting to analyse and write about these changes. The aim of this review will be to examine both newer and more established perspectives on journalism which shed light on this rapidly changing industry, especially those changes which directly affect local newspaper journalists and their journalistic identity.

### **2:1 Recent literature trends**

The years from 2000 to the present were marked by a revival of interest in qualitative research carried out through interviews with front-line journalists in newsrooms as well as longer-term observational research and newsroom ethnographies. Following on from the long term ground-breaking ethnographic work of the 1970s and 1980s (Tuchman 1978; Schlesinger 1978; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980), there has been a revival of interest in the reactions and attitudes of individual journalists in the newsroom generated by equal interest in the changing industry environment in which they are working. In the UK, researchers have focused on the workings of the BBC (Harrison 2000; Born 2005). Notably for the purposes of this research, there has been a return in the US to in-depth ethnographic study of US newspapers in which the authors (Ryfe 2012; Anderson 2013) examine how journalists who previously operated in a print environment are adapting to a news ecology which is increasingly digital. Both authors spent significant periods of time observing the work of newsrooms and interviewing journalists.

Both Anderson and Ryfe conclude that local newspapers are struggling to remain relevant to media consumers partly because a journalistic culture which prizes autonomy, professional standards and distance from readers prevents journalists from fully appreciating the environment changing around them and engaging with a new brand of what Beckett (2008:46) calls “networked journalism”. The work of Anderson and Ryfe identifies a process of boundary creation in the newsrooms they observed, as journalists sought to protect their occupational territory.

However, the US local newspaper industry is different from that of the UK in that many powerful newspapers are regional rather than national and have traditionally had an influential role in large cities in particular (Kaniss 1991). These newspapers are for many Americans the primary source of news (Ryfe 2012: x). Aldridge (2007) notes that a country’s geography and political/administrative set-up have a significant influence on the development and structure of the newspaper sector. The print sector (print editions and their websites) in the US and Canada, for example, is almost entirely regional rather than national, because of the country’s size and time zones, and the political independence of individual states and individual cities (Aldridge 2007:22).

Ethnographic studies in the US have tended, therefore, to explore newsrooms whose journalists were used to having an influence on decision-makers. The focus has been on what Kaniss (1991:9) calls the “metropolitan news media”. Examples of this include Kaniss’s own study of news media in Philadelphia, Anderson’s more recent study of the news ecology of the same city and Ryfe’s study of newspapers in and around Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Earlier ethnographic studies include Fishman’s study of the Purissima Record in California, which at the time of study had a monopoly position in its circulation area and a daily circulation of 45,000 (Fishman 1980:18).

By contrast, in the UK, local newspapers have to fight hard to carve out a role for themselves, particularly in an economic downturn. This is particularly the case in London, in which the three case study newsrooms for this research



were based. National newspapers and broadcasters based in London are the main source of media influence. Aldridge (2007:22) notes: "... the small size and centralised nature of the UK has driven a powerful national news market. ... the UK is small, with a relatively large population which has been predominantly urban-dwelling since the mid 1800s, all of which provided a national mass market for newspapers once the technology to produce and distribute them became available."

Relatively recent research in newsrooms has also provided important insights into how journalists initially responded to a fast-changing new media landscape. Studies highlighted interestingly conflicting attitudes to organisational and occupational change, particularly in converged newsrooms (Singer 2004; Boczkowski 2004; Dupagne and Garrison 2006; Huang et al 2006; Thurman and Lupton 2008; Harrison 2010; Robinson 2010), and used a range of theoretical frameworks, for example Singer's use of the framework of diffusion of innovation (Rogers 1995) to analyse journalists' acceptance of change, or the use of gatekeeper theory by Hermida and Thurman (2008) and Harrison (2010) to analyse the extent to which user generated content was becoming acceptable as news in mainstream newsrooms. These newsroom interviews and observations shed light on how different organisations structured converged newsrooms and attempted to introduce multimedia journalism (see for example Quinn 2003; Deuze 2004; Quinn and Filak 2005; Grant 2008).

Convergence could be structural (changes in working practices, tactical (to develop partnerships and content sharing arrangements with other companies); information gathering (in which reporters were multi-skilled); story telling; or a convergence of ownership (content-sharing and cross promotion with companies), suggest Quinn and Filak (2005:4).

Convergence could also be cultural, an acknowledgement among journalists that they were no longer working in discrete parts of the operation. Deuze (2008:9) says: "From an institutional perspective convergence comes in

different shapes and sizes strongly influenced by both internal (practices, rituals, routines and cultures) as well as external (regulation, competition, stakeholders, publics) factors.”

The process of blurring of hierarchies and changing routines, which challenged existing journalistic cultures, had potentially significant implications for newsroom organisation and routines identified through a number of ethnographies in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (see for example Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980; Schlesinger 1985). Contrasting the traditional newsrooms described in these ethnographies with the online newsroom, Pavlik (2001:99) says the traditional newsroom was “organised almost along the lines of a military unit” and was a “relatively rigid hierarchical organisation”. By contrast, the online newsroom was “decentralised and flexible”.

The debate about the meaning of convergence had faded in intensity by 2010 as it became evident that converged newsrooms were here to stay and that there were many different models of convergence across Europe and the US. The question became not whether, but how, converged newsrooms were going to work and how journalists were going to work within them. Researchers raised questions about resources, training, employment, quality control and organisation (Singer 2004; Klinenberg 2005; Huang et al 2006; Williams and Franklin 2007; Davies 2008) and found that journalists were ambivalent about convergence, on the one hand recognising the possibilities of multimedia for new ways of storytelling and relating to readers, and on the other, expressing concern that core journalism skills would be lost.

The issue of quality, closely allied to issues of money and resources, was a key concern in another linked debate about “old” media versus “new” media and the potential for the new to destroy the values of the old. The underlying framework for earlier debate was that old and new media were in conflict and that traditional media, with their trained journalists, access to powerful sources and understanding of professional ethics, needed to preserve their distinctiveness. The response from old media was initially characterised as negative and fearful, concerned not only about specifics of how their jobs were changing but also how the western ideal of a free press in a democratic society and the media as an important, if flawed, component in the generation and dissemination of public opinion was changing as more non-journalistic voices were added to the debate, with the potential dangers of distortion and difficulties of verification.

This debate was described by commentators as “sterile” (Newman 2009:50) and “a boring zero sum game” Beckett (2009, cited in Newman 2009:50). Newman and Beckett argue that the initial argument that traditional journalism would be replaced by new media and new networks had proved to be unfounded. Instead, they were continuing to evolve together and complement each other. There was, notes Allan (2006:179), a blurring of dividing lines between journalists and “citizen journalists” in which what counts as journalism in the connected, always-on society is open to negotiation, with fluidly changing points of convergence and divergence between its practice in the mainstream and in the margins.”

Robinson (2006) argues that mainstream journalists were also increasingly using new forms of media such as blogs to liberate themselves from a straitjacket of “objective” reporting and to communicate more directly with readers but at the same time they are “reclaiming journalism – and its standards- online” (2006:16) by criticising the standards of independent blogs via their own work published under their name on mainstream sites.

Other authors suggest that mainstream journalists were seizing the opportunities offered by blogs but on their own terms. Bivens (2008:115) notes : "...elite groups are adapting hastily and will continue to find ways of shaping news output."

Former BBC City Editor Robert Peston (2009 in Newman 2009:35), who had broken substantial stories on his blog including the demise of Northern Rock Bank, says: "If you are an investigating journalist as I have been for 25 years, you always find out more stuff than you can get into your broadcasts. Your ability to put out ideas, facts, scoops that won't quite work on bulletins or TV and radio is fantastic – because I feel I'm making more use of the stuff I've found out."

By the time of the fieldwork for this research, however, the novelty of the longer blog had somewhat receded, to be replaced by the microblogging platform of Twitter. Twitter had much more potential as an important journalistic tool for addressing new audiences, finding new sources and promoting journalists' own work (Hermida 2010). McNair (2009:155) argued that new forms of media and interaction were a positive development. "Established print and broadcast news organisations can, as they currently do, rise this wave and emerge intact, even strengthened if they learn to harness the democratising power of the internet, as well as preserving the normative standards and ethics with which journalism has traditionally been associated, and on which their brands have been built over decades and sometimes centuries."

The first decade of the twenty first century saw a flurry of articles and books questioning the future of journalism (see for example Beckett 2008; Franklin 2008; Franklin 2009; Currah 2009; Rusbridger 2009; Curran 2010) as the certainties of print gave way to the blurred boundaries of the internet age, circulations fell and publications closed. This opened up a new area for debate framed in economic and political terms, focusing on the business of print and online journalism and the media's wider role and function in a networked environment in which access to information appears infinite and members of the public can get news and information from websites, blogs or social media sites like Twitter as well as, or instead of, than traditional media.

Some commentators (Gillmor 2004; Benkler 2006; McNair 2006; Beckett 2008) saw this expansion as positive. McNair (2006:134) said: "The web has become a knowledge resource of unprecedented depth and richness, not just for journalists but for the public in general, who now have access not merely to the thousands and millions of independent news sites and bloggers crowding the net but to official documents of government, think tanks and campaigning and lobbying organisations."

Others suggested that on closer examination the power of the internet as a democratic resource was limited by a range of factors such as search structures (Hindman 2009) or filtering (Sunstein 2007). In his study of the limitations of digital democracy, Hindman (2009:18) says: "Again and again [this study] finds powerful hierarchies shaping a medium that continues to be celebrated for its openness." These hierarchies are structural, economic and social, he argued.

The debate about the nature of the internet is important because it raises central questions about the continuing importance of the media's role as interpreter and commentator in a democratic society and, consequently, journalists' sense of their political role, which is arguably one of the cornerstones of their journalistic identity.

Much of this debate, and the connected discussion about the economic viability of current business models, the search for new ones and the emergence of the "entrepreneurial journalist", is anxious in tone, questioning the future for the "professional" journalist at a time when the dividing lines between journalists and audiences seem to be disappearing, the civic function of journalists appears diminished and the financial underpinning long considered necessary to produce quality journalism is shrinking (Franklin 2009; Kelly 2009).

Kelly (2009:16) comments: "The speed and direction of the digital revolution raises fundamental questions about the future of our news – its quality, its economic underpinning and its long term civic function in modern democracies."

There is an underlying assumption among some of the more pessimistic commentators like Keen (2008), Franklin (2009) and Davies (2008) that changes in the journalism industry are necessarily for the worse and that there used to be a “golden age” of journalism in which journalists were brave independent truth seekers, who were never in the office but always on the road getting stories. Davies (2008:54) approvingly quotes crime correspondent George Glenton recalling the activities of Fleet Street correspondent Ian Mackay in the 1960s: “He travelled immense distances doing his job. Often his editor only knew where he was by reading the current day’s paper to find Mackay’s last dateline.” Davies contrasts this with today’s reporters, stuck in the office churning out rewrites of agency copy and concludes: “There are still journalists who check their stories and publish the truth. But what the Cardiff research [a content analysis commissioned by Davies from academics at Cardiff University] suggests is that the “everyday practices” of journalism are now the exception rather than the rule.” (2008:53).

This is arguably a generalisation. However, recent research in UK local newsrooms confirmed the trend towards rewriting press releases, with interviewees in Williams and Franklin’s study of the impact of Trinity Mirror’s online strategy (2007) and Singer’s study of the growth of user generated content at Johnston Press (2010), expressing concern about the effect of cut-backs on quality.

However, other commentators argue that the growth of the internet and 24-hour news have given journalists renewed political influence because these new platforms enable them to probe behind the façade of those in power.

In his examination of the role of the media in the Obama campaign and election of 2008, Alexander (2010:290) says: “A new level of media reflexivity has recently emerged. The earlier model of independence took a naturalistic stance. Journalists often came into conflict with politicians and power but they generally refrained from publicly and directly questioning the realness of political presentations. Things are different today. Sophisticated print, television and online journalism deconstruct the political image, refusing to accept the authenticity of front-stage performances, they publish backstage,

behind-the-scenes narratives that reveal them to be constructed.”

An evolving question, with core relevance to this study, is that of the concept of professionalism, what this means in the context of journalism and how it shapes journalistic identity and working practices. The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a revival of interest in professionalism as it applied to journalism, especially against a backdrop of uncertainty in the journalism industry, as journalists were being challenged by organisational, technological, economic and social change (Aldridge and Evetts 2003; Singer 2003; Deuze 2004; O’Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Dickinson 2008; Örnebring 2009). The debate about whether journalists can be considered “professionals” is long running (Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933; Tunstall 1996; Bromley 1997; Marr 2005). Recent commentators are building on what they acknowledge is a well-developed theory of the professions and the nature of professionalism (Larson 1977; Macdonald 1996; Freidson 2004). There has been a renewed interest in the sociology of work and how journalists are functioning in the new digital economy where old certainties about structured employment and job security are disappearing (Bauman 2006; Deuze 2007).

Researchers examining modern newsrooms (Machin and Niblock 2006; Dickinson 2007) were also re-examining earlier sociological theories of how newsrooms functioned, as a breeding ground for conflict (Bantz 1985) or as a forum where internal cultural pressures from colleagues forced conformity to particular journalistic norms (Breed 1955), as an arena of control (Soloski 1989) or reinforcement of existing power structures via strategic ritual, source choices, news beats routines and news as constructed reality and purposive behaviour (Molotch and Lester 1974; Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980).

## **2:2 Traditional theories of news production: still relevant?**

Recent empirical research has highlighted clearly the continuing relevance of a number of key theoretical positions in the sociology of journalism, some first outlined more than half a century ago. This section explores theories of gatekeeping, news selection, shaping of news, control of the news agenda, newsroom organisation, journalists' relationships with sources and the role of the media in society, and analyses how useful they are for this research into the nature of journalistic identity in local newsrooms.

### **2:2:1 Gatekeeping, selection and control**

The theory of how journalists decide which stories to choose and which to reject, the so-called "gatekeeping" theory, was one of the first news media studies. The original journalism gatekeeping study was carried out by Manning White in 1950 (although he did not coin the actual term gatekeeping). Manning White (in Berkowitz 1997: 67) examined the reasons why a wire editor at the Peoria Star in Illinois, nicknamed "Mr Gates", rejected 90 per cent of the stories which arrived in his copy basket. The reasons turned out to be as subjective as "lack of space", "waiting for more information" and "style". The significance of this was that it showed for the first time how subjective news choices were and how much power newsrooms had over the final stories which made it into the public domain. White concluded that his study showed "how highly subjective, how reliant upon value judgments based on the gatekeeper's own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations the communication of "news" really is."

This was not only a challenge to journalistic "objectivity", further challenged by others such as Tuchman (1978) but also a precursor to the idea developed by Tuchman and others that news was a social construct, that stories were manufactured rather than being factually objective accounts of events and that access to news was dominated by the powerful (Hall 1978).



Manning White's original work was taken up by many other commentators and subsequently criticised as simplistic by authors such as Shoemaker (1991), who pointed out that the process of news selection and rejection was more complex than individual choice, involving a complex relationship between individuals, organisations and the outside world.

It is relatively easy to identify methodological shortcomings in Manning White's original work. As Reese and Ballinger (2001) argue, wire copy from press agencies (in this case AP and UPI) tends to be quite similar and quite limited. In other words, a first selection of news has already been made so the choices of the copy editor are in turn limited. Reese and Ballinger (2001:647) argue that "by selecting a wire editor, White over-emphasised the power held by news gatekeepers. Making the gatekeeper the focal point of the process assumes he has before him the entire range of the world's daily happenings."

However, the simplicity of gatekeeping theory, regardless of its detailed shortcomings, proved to have an enduring attraction for generations of commentators, because it provided a framework for analysing the process by which journalists not only make choices but also by which they defend their professional interests. In the internet age, gatekeeping theory continues to have relevance, specifically as a model for examining the way journalists control news processes and agendas, not only in the realm of story selection but also their relationship with readers, sources and amateur contributors.

One of the themes which emerges clearly from a review of the literature and particularly from the relatively small amount of recent empirical research carried out in digital newsrooms is that we are witnessing more of an evolution than a revolution in the way journalists work and relate to readers and sources.

A succession of commentators has used gatekeeping theory to explain why journalists are continuing to keep control of processes and agendas in the face of technology-enabled changes in relationships between professionals and amateurs, the growing use of social media by amateurs and professionals alike to shape the news agenda and changing internal newsroom priorities and hierarchies.

Despite apparently big changes in the way journalists do their job, researchers argue, the underlying process of newsgathering and reporting and the underlying organisational structures of newsrooms, journalists' professional relationships and routines appear to be still largely intact because they are continuing to "guard the gate". Research into the way journalists are handling moderation of blog comments (Hermida and Thurman 2008); UGC at the BBC (Harrison 2010); story comments (Robinson 2010); or how journalists respond to metric tracking information on who is reading which stories on their websites (MacGregor 2007) suggests that journalists are determined to maintain control over their operation and their brand. Hermida and Thurman (2008:354) conclude for example in their study of how UK news websites are incorporating user generated content (UGC) that "in the longer term, established news organisations are shifting towards the retention of a traditional gatekeeping role towards UGC. This fits in with the risk-averse nature of newspapers and reflects editors' continuing (concerns about reputation, trust and legal issues."

The boundaries journalists set themselves were not static but shifting. Carlson (2015:12) says: ".the boundaries that develop should not be construed as temporally static. Instead, different participants, norms or practices move across the cells [of the matrix of boundaries] over time." Carlson uses blogging as an example of the process by which new forms of media have moved from being suspect to being acceptable to the mainstream.

What is interesting about current use of gatekeeper theory is that its frame of reference has shifted from a simple focus on one individual and his subjective news choices (acceptance/rejection of stories) to a more overarching narrative of control of brand (news values) and access to mainstream news websites on the part of journalists who want to maintain what they see as their professional credibility and authority in the face of commercial pressures to increase audience numbers and potentially panders to the lowest common denominator. Credibility, authority and authenticity are key elements in journalists' perception of themselves as professionals (Singer 2003; Singer 2010; Singer 2015). These insights into gatekeeping suggest that journalists use this as part of a process of boundary creation, which in turn creates a closed newsroom culture.

The idea that user generated content, "citizen journalism" and other types of technology- enabled reader participation in the journalism process are the key to revitalising a civic space in which journalists and the public are equal participants would seem in the light of these findings over-optimistic. Attempts to create a "civic journalism" movement in the US in the 1990s (Rosen 2001) struggled in the face of scepticism from journalists who resisted the idea that they should embed themselves in their community rather than standing apart as objective outsiders. Although UK local newspapers see their community involvement as central to their role (Machin and Niblock 2006; Aldridge 2007), local journalists still resist the idea of the equality of UGC contributions (Singer 2010) with journalists' own work. In general, researchers found that journalists reacted to the growth of reader involvement on their websites by using the material as complementary to their own stories rather than as a way of saving time for themselves or opening up new areas of investigation. Editors developed blogs and comment boxes on UK national newspapers more through fear of being left behind than through active enthusiasm (Hermida and Thurman 2008) and kept control of the news agenda and news content (Bivens 2008) even while taking account of new information about reader preferences and activity through web page metrics (MacGregor 2007). However editors refused to let

their brand be compromised by shaping their news agenda round reader demand ( MacGregor). Readers were seen as audiences rather than creators, observed Heinonen in Singer et al (2011) adding that his interviews with journalists “suggest that a prevailing tendency among professionals thus tends to be towards inertia, or at least conservatism.” (2011:52)

Technology exists but the way journalists and readers use or reject it is shaped by much larger cultural, social, organisational and economic considerations. Bozcowski (2004:178) argues: “New media emerge from merging existing infrastructures with novel technical capabilities in an ongoing process shaped by initial conditions and local contingencies.”

In his work on how UK journalists use information from metrics (statistics showing patterns of readership, generated in real time on websites), MacGregor (2007:293) quotes a Guardian journalist as saying: “The information is there if we ask for it. The questions lie around should we ask for it? And if we do, how should we act on it? To what extent should we allow our decisions to be influenced by that information? Because it is also the question about to what extent are we a product looking for as big as possible a market versus having a set of values which we accept appeal to only a small, or smaller, part of the population.”

Harrison (2010:250) argues that at the BBC the use of UGC has expanded and given new dimensions to stories, enabling the channel to run stories which may previously not have been newsworthy but become so with the addition of UGC. However she adds: “There remains however, either through territoriality or guardedness from various news domains, a very real and quite genuine worry about the threat UGC poses to editorial values and ultimately to news standards.”

These findings suggest claims that there have been revolutionary changes in the way journalists operate are wide of the mark. Franklin (2009:334) says that “while readers’ contribution to news has expanded considerably, it has

been “absorbed” into traditional journalism practices with journalists retaining their gatekeeping editorial roles. “Business as usual” offers a better description of the implications of UGC for news reporting than journalistic “revolution”.

In other recent work, Harrison in Allen (2009) widens out the concept of gatekeeping still further, beyond ideas of decision-making and control, to suggest that the process of news selection “operates according to the relationship between the “background” and the “foreground” of the newsroom” (2009:191). In the foreground, a process of gatekeeping and news selection occurs in the newsroom underpinned by “daily journalistic rules, rhetoric and practices”. In the background are two contrasting understandings of the role of news, firstly how it operates positively as part of a civic and public sphere generating debate and secondly how it distorts the public sphere by “actively contributing to its intellectual limitations, its ordinariness and ultimately to its homogeneous character” .

In other words, there is a constant interplay in journalists’ decision-making between the conscious and the unconscious, the spoken and the unspoken, and between what is happening to news selection on the surface and contrasting understandings of the role of news. Harrison acknowledges this is in part a return to the model of subjective decision-making outlined by Manning White rather than the “structures, processes and forces “ emphasised by Shoemaker. But in suggesting that selection processes are much more complex than they appear on the surface and linking these processes to a wider understanding of the role of news outside the newsroom, Harrison provides potential valuable insights into how journalists’ understanding of their role and actions inside and outside the newsroom is not always articulated or recognised by journalists themselves.

In her analysis of journalistic “news-talk”, Cotter (2010:109) notes a similar unspoken, unconscious understanding in newsrooms underneath the rituals of news conferences where decision-making takes place. Analysing the process of a story meeting (editorial conference) Cotter says: “Story

meetings serve a gate-keeping function within the profession as well as a place to negotiate and reinforce journalistic identity through discussion of news stories and their placement. They are a crucial site for the emergence of values that pertain to the news media context.”

Gatekeeping theory has provided a framework for a wide range of studies and has moved on from its original narrow focus on individual choices to allow researchers to theorise about much wider and arguably more significant issues of control, defence of professional values and the interplay between the newsroom and the wider world, and how these are being challenged in a digital age. In this way, gatekeeping is an important concept for this research in analysing journalists’ self perception of themselves as professionals, particularly in its most recent and sophisticated interpretations as part of the interplay between conscious and unconscious.

### **2:2:2 Social control and change in the newsroom**

Breed (1955) was one of the first sociologists to try to analyse how journalists interacted with each other in newsrooms and in particular what made them conform to news policies which were often against journalists’ sense of their own professional ethics to avoid conflict with publishers. Using a frame of functional analysis, which emphasises patterns of behaviour within structures, Breed argues that journalists came under strong pressure to conform to policies or their newspaper’s agenda through “osmosis” and a series of unwritten rules and signals. Journalists who find all their work “blue pencilled” or dropped from the paper soon get the message that they are not conforming to the paper’s policy. Breed suggests (1955:331) that journalists conformed partly because there were sanctions against doing so but also because they respected their superiors and liked their jobs.

The production of news also became a “value, with the need to get news outweighing ethical considerations and the need for “objectivity”, considered by many commentators and journalists alike to be a key measure of a journalist’s professionalism. Where they “do talk about ethics, objectivity and the worth of various papers but not when there is news to get.”

The value of Breed’s analysis for this research is that he provides an initial framework for trying to understand the internal, unspoken policies of the newsroom and the social controls which prevent journalists protesting or leaving even if their publication’s policies and agendas offend their sense of their own professionalism. Unspoken understandings are a powerful part of the social and cultural glue binding journalists together as a group, as are social controls between different newsroom power structures. The social controls identified by Breed are an important means of minimising tensions between what journalists believe they should be doing and what they actually do. This tension has a particular resonance for local journalists, who are often at the beginning of their careers, after spending significant amounts of time and money on training (Hanna and Sanders 2007, Frith and Meech 2007).

More recent newsroom research acknowledges the importance of previous studies for understanding the newsroom as a system. Singer (2004:18) says: “Newsrooms are complex social structures with distinct cultures, routines and norms. More than half a century of research into the sociology of news work details how the newsroom as a social system shapes what journalists do.”

In her study of converged newsrooms in Tampa, Florida, Singer (2004) focuses on the way journalists were persuaded or not to accept new ways of working and how they were reacting to challenges to the routines and structures identified by earlier researchers. She set the findings of her research within a framework of diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers 1995), a theory which analyses the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a

social system” (Rogers 1995:5).

She applies the criteria of diffusion of innovation to the process of convergence at the Tampa News Center: the innovation itself (convergence); its compatibility (with existing newsroom experience and values); its complexity (using new technology and routines); trialability; observability and time (watching other journalists and deciding when or whether to join in); communication channels (working collaboratively across traditional boundaries) and the social system (working within existing hierarchies and evolving new ones by consensus rather than conflict). She concluded that short term cultural conflicts and blocks would give way to a positive acceptance of convergence.

Diffusion theory is a potentially useful way of clarifying and analysing the different stages of the process of persuading journalists to adopt new working practices. However, Singer points out that her study was not longitudinal and so it was not possible to adequately assess the innovation-decision process through which an individual “passes from first knowledge of an innovation to confirmation of an adoption decision” (Singer 2004:13).

### **2:2:3 Beats and routines**

As Zelizer (2004) notes, US sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s first questioned the convention that news was just “out there”, reported as a series of objective facts by journalists. On the contrary, commentators (Gieber 1964; Molotch and Lester 1974; Cohen and Young 1973; Fishman 1980; Gans 1980; Schlesinger 1987) argued that events were shaped to fit journalists’ idea of what “news” should consist of, and that this shaping process allowed journalists to control the amount of information they were receiving and made sure they had enough news to fill their paper.

Researchers observing newsroom practice in the 1970s and 1980s (see Tuchman 1973; Molotch and Lester 1974; Tuchman 1978; Schlesinger 1979; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980) argue that in order to control and categorise the continuous flow of information coming into the office and to manage the



process of putting a paper or broadcast together in a short time, newsrooms adopted a number of routines.

These routines were fundamental to the process of creating news, the researchers argued, because they enabled journalists to choose and structure stories and to organise the resources in the newsroom to respond to the unexpected. Fishman (1980:14) suggests that journalists' routine methods were "the crucial factor which determines how news workers construe the world of activities they confront."

One routine identified by researchers was the process of news conferences, and the application of news values to news choices. A second was the choice and use of sources. A third was the way in which newsrooms were structured around "beats" or "patches", whereby reporters were assigned to particular areas of coverage. Beats varied depending on the media organisations being observed but as the focus of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers was mostly on high profile newspapers and national news networks, most identified a similar list of beats to that of Tuchman who observed: "One or more New York dailies have reporters responsible for covering the United Nations, the City Council, the Mayor's office, the police, the Board of Corrections and the state government such as the police and the justice department." (1978:26). The system of beats was closely linked to source choice as reporters quickly got to know the significant sources on their beats and developed a mutually symbiotic relationship (Gans 1979).

Sociological interpretations of newsrooms suggest that journalists take control of their news environment by constructing a system of beats and routines (Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980). Newsrooms were set up with a structure which replicates bureaucratic structures, said Fishman (1980). Observing journalists over a substantial period of time in a California newsroom, Fishman (1980: 51) concludes: "The journalist's view that society is bureaucratically structured is the very basis on which the journalist is able to detect events." What Fishman meant by this was that journalists had a mental map of the sources which would be able to help with stories and that those sources (for example, the emergency services or City Hall) were organised so

that they could respond to journalists' requests for information. He used the example of a breaking story about a warehouse fire, in which the reporter covering the story would immediately be able to turn to the fire department for information.

Following her own newsroom observations Tuchman (1972 in Tumber 1999:299) concludes that journalists took control of their environment partly by using the concept of "objectivity" as a "strategic ritual" to cover their backs against criticism and libel suits. The "strategic ritual" of objectivity identified by Tuchman comprised a number of actions. These included writing a story which presented "conflicting possibilities", to give an appearance of balance; providing supporting evidence so that the reader could judge the truthfulness of claims for themselves, rather than the journalist interpreting claims and thus getting involved with the story; the "judicious use of quotation marks", in which journalists injected the opinions of others into a story and thus remove themselves, structuring a story as an "inverted pyramid" with the most important material facts at the top; and choosing sources at the top of organisations who should have the most facts at their disposal. All these "strategic rituals" are part of a vital process for journalists of distancing themselves from what they are reporting. Tuchman goes on to suggest (1972 in Tumber 1999:305) that other professions (she implicitly counts journalism as a profession) employ similar rituals of damage limitation.

Tuchman (1972 in Tumber 1999:304) suggests that the importance of being able to say "I am an objective professional" (was seen by journalists as a vital element of boosting their own claims to accuracy and truth.

#### **2:2:4 Relationships with sources**

One of the key elements of the ritual of "objectivity" identified by Tuchman, Gans and others is the use of a narrow range of official sources by beat journalists, from local councils and town halls, to the police, councillors and

members of national government. Being able to justify following up and running a story by quoting an official source is part of the way journalists appear “objective” both to their immediate colleagues in the newsroom, to other journalists and to readers, Tuchman argues that quoting an official source in a story which is otherwise critical of the official cited is perceived as giving all-important balance to a story, which can then be described as “objective”. But it can also result in news told from the perspective of the powerful and a lack of what journalists in democracies are supposed to be doing according to the liberal pluralist model – challenging and exposing.

More recent work referencing cultural analysis to examine power relationships between journalists and sources uses the idea of the fundamental ritual of “telling the story”, in which journalists share an unspoken understanding of what constitutes a “news story” and who the key sources will be. Cottle (2000) suggests that an understanding of journalism as narrative and performance (Zelizer 2004; Bogaerts 2011) allows a more nuanced analysis of how journalists choose sources. Quoting Berkowitz (1992), Cottle says: “news workers develop a mental catalogue of news story themes, including how the plot will unravel and who the key actors are likely to be.” (Berkowitz 1992:83 in Cottle 2000: 438).

Relationships with official sources are an important part of a local newspaper journalist’s job, for example regular calls to the emergency services to find out what is going on, contact with local councillors and local MPs. As Innes notes in his study of police/journalist relationships (1999), local newspapers are much keener than nationals to use a co-operative and responsible approach to the police when big stories break because they know they will still be in the locality when the nationals have left. Harrison (2006:143) comments of Innes’ findings: “Quite simply local journalists are more dependent upon local police for stories and briefings (on and off the record) than national journalists, hence their co-operative relationship.”

However, Franklin (2006:13) notes that there is a thin dividing line between co-operation and collaboration with politically or economically powerful local sources. “Contemporary low-paid journalists on short-staffed and under-resourced local newspapers are less likely to be “attacking” than “supping with” the devil. The established local newspaper groups have little ambition to disrupt the local networks of economic and political power into which they are so closely integrated.”

Local reporters interviewed by Machin and Niblock (2006:78) also say that recent time and resource constraints have reduced their ability to develop contacts. “There was much more time to develop a range of sources in the local community not only to provide stories but to verify information and give different angles on a story; all of which changed with huge reductions in staffing at both the news gathering and editorial level.”

Many stories in the local press come from direct contact with readers, and the ability to “make a difference” to local people is what Aldridge (2007:142) describes as a “powerful source of satisfaction” not available in the same way on national newspapers. This is part of what gives local journalists status in the eyes of their readers as well as bolstering their self-image of journalists as campaigning and crusading. Aldridge suggests that “editors share [a] sense that regional newspapers operate on a different, and preferably moral plane” in which journalists tell a story accurately and fairly and with a view to how the story might affect the people concerned. The distinction made by journalists interviewed by Aldridge between the “morally superior” local journalist and the perceived cynical opportunism of national newspapers is a useful one for this research, identifying as it does a facet of how local journalists would like to see themselves.

But the question is whether local newspapers have in reality ever been really “campaigning” or whether they have always had to “sup with the devil”, as Franklin (2006:4) puts it, in the form of advertisers who want to influence editorial content or local politicians who want their version of a story to appear. This research suggests that the important issue is that most

journalists want to see themselves as independent watchdogs rather than willing collaborators, and the reality of writing puff pieces for councillors and advertorials for local companies is a challenge to this self-image because it removes their ability to act autonomously.

Longer-term ethnographies like those of Tuchman (1978), Gans (1979) and Schlesinger (1978) are important for developing an understanding of the essentially artificial nature of news and the rituals journalists develop in the newsroom. The work of these scholars is also important for understanding how appearance and reality differ and how journalists work within the constraints of their environment against their own understanding of professional norms. Born's ethnography of the BBC (2005) shows the effect of these constraints very clearly, with interviews and journal entries highlighting how journalists' idea of themselves as independent professional operators is restricted and distorted by centralised and politicised structures, frequent changes in managerial priorities and morale-sapping management generated "competition" between departments in order to encourage an internal market.

### **2:2:5 What is news? News agendas and news choices**

Closely linked to questions of source choices, newsroom routines and selection is the question of what constitutes "news". This question is perplexing for journalists, who like to claim they just know news when they see it. Hall (1973:181) says: "Journalists speak of the news as if events select themselves. Further, they speak as if which is the most significant news story and which is the most salient angle are divinely inspired." The theme of a God-given skill to recognise news is echoed by Tuchman (1972:672) when she says "News judgment is the sacred knowledge, the secret ability of the newsman which differentiates him from other people."

However the question of why one story makes it into the paper or, more

recently, onto the website, has pre-occupied many commentators since social scientists Galtung and Ruge (1965) published their list of criteria of what makes a story newsworthy (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Hall 1981; Harcup and O'Neill 1991; Brighton and Foy 2007) Galtung and Ruge's list recognised the importance of a story being relevant to an audience, timely, clear and straightforward, unexpected, about famous people or elite nations; part of a longer running story or part of a package. Bad news and events which affect unexpectedly large numbers of people were also on the list. The original list has been poured over and pulled apart by many commentators since, criticised for its narrowness and its focus on foreign news. Harcup and O'Neill, (2001) in revising and updating Galtung and Ruge argued, for example, that entertainment and celebrity were key drivers of news agendas. This omission more than any other highlights Galtung and Ruge's role as social scientists rather than journalists. Some criticised Galtung and Ruge's failure to recognise pragmatic journalistic realities. Gans (1979) argued that news choices were shaped by journalistic judgement and wider external events such as technology and the economy as well as such factors as the availability of sources. Brighton and Foy (2007) argued that Galtung and Ruge did not take account of the "quasi-political manoeuvring" between editors and increasingly powerful PR people, or the need to keep advertisers onside.

These could be assessed as part of a background/foreground process in news choice identified by a number of scholars (Hall 1981; Harrison 2010; Cotter 2010) in which a straightforward, foregrounded set of news values hides an ideological backgrounded set of values, designed to achieve particular goals. One example of this is news coverage in newspapers which have a proprietor who is attempting to steer the news in a direction to benefit his own interests, either by not covering certain stories or covering them in a particular way.

Another focus of attempts to answer the question “What is News?” focuses on the importance of myths and narratives in news., Cohen (1972) popularised the phrase “moral panics” and identified types of “folk devils” which became the objects of “moral panics” in the media. In the introduction to the third edition of his study in 2011, he identifies seven clusters of social identity which are the modern focus of moral panics (2011: viii): young, working class, violent males as rioters and football hooligans and murderers of James Bulger and Stephen Lawrence; school violence, bullying and shootouts at schools such as Columbine in the US; wrong drugs used by the wrong people in the wrong places, such as the case of Leah Betts, the 18-year-old who died of a drug overdose in 1995; child abuse, satanic rituals and paedophiles; sex, violence and blaming the media; welfare cheats and single mothers; and refugees and asylum seekers, who have suffered from a “virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection” (Cohen 2011:xxiii)

Lule (2001) identifies the most commonly found archetypal myths, including Victim; Scapegoat, Hero; Good Mother and Trickster and explored how journalists fitted stories into these categories, using examples such as Leon Kinghoffer, the wheelchair-bound victim of the Achille Lauro shooting (Victim), and the sanctification of Mother Teresa (the Good Mother).

Geography and locality are also recognised as important shapers of news agendas (Tuchman 1978; Allan 2004; Cotter 2010). On local newspapers, the local is arguably the core news value. If it is not local, it is not interesting to local news editors.

## **2:2:6 Outside the newsroom: the wider context**

What happens inside a newsroom is important. However, in exploring notions of journalistic identity, it is necessary to move outside the confines of the newsroom and look at the wider political, economic, social, technological and cultural forces shaping journalistic identity.

A dominant theoretical framework for analysing the position of the news media in relation to wider economic and political structures was its wider context relationships throughout the latter half of the twentieth century was a Marxist-inspired political economy approach which sees the news media as part of an economic and political structure dominated by elites (for example, Herman and Chomsky 1988) and media ownership as a means of control and a source of conflict between management and unions (Marjoribanks 2000; Bagdikian 2000; Curran and Seaton 2003). The focus of this approach was on structures rather than individuals, and on the economic and political power relations of capital and labour. The central questions were of which institutions had influence, power and control. Journalists were seen mainly as a tool of the establishment, with little or no professional autonomy, their news agenda shaped by external economic and ideological forces, especially the values of the ruling classes. This sweeping interpretation of institutions in a capitalist society through a series of power relationships could be seen as a backdrop against which smaller-scale hierarchical power relationships are played out as routines within newsroom structures.

More recently, some commentators (for example, McNair 2006) have argued that the emergence of a new global media world and new communication networks makes such twentieth century theoretical frameworks redundant, or at least inadequate. McNair argues that a control paradigm can no longer be applied to today's global media. The explosion of different voices on the internet, the growth of social media such as blogs, Twitter or Facebook where parallel public debates take place without reference to



traditional news hierarchies, declining deference towards elites and the increasingly adversarial nature of journalism are part of a new paradigm of chaos, not control. The old theories assume linear patterns of hierarchy, class, left versus right – the patterns of the early twentieth century and the cold war, McNair argues.

Unlike some commentators (for example, Franklin 1997), McNair (2006: xxi) rejects the cultural pessimism of control and considers chaos to be a positive and liberating state, “a world in which, in that state somewhere between order and chaos which best describes the times in which we live, top-down control is eroded, bottom-up creativity flourishes and the struggle for human freedom can be advanced in new ways.”

Like McNair, Silverstone (2007) suggests that the emerging chaotic globalised world offers unrivalled opportunities to create a new public sphere, the mediapolis, “in which the world appears and in which the world is constituted in its worldliness and through which we learn about those who are and who are like us.” (Silverstone 2007:31). Taking as his starting point the central role of the media in shaping shared understanding of events, he argues that the media have a unique role to play in the new world order as a “moral force” (2007:10).

For the purposes of this research, it is arguably more useful for a study of maintaining journalistic identity in a time of change to look at a paradigm of chaos rather than control. Analysing a society’s workings purely through a prism of power, control and class conflict ignores subtle cultural understandings and pressures by which identity is shaped and understanding of individual roles established for example. Journalists working in and for newsrooms, especially local newsrooms, are not working against a backdrop of certainty in which different power factions can be assumed to operate according to their class interests but in a state of what Bauman (2006) calls *unsicherheit* (insecurity, uncertainty) in which progress at work, or even a job at all cannot be assumed.

Bauman says: "Work has drifted from the universe of order-building and future control to the realm of a game; acts of work become more like the strategy of a player who sets himself modestly short-term objectives reaching no further than one or two moves ahead." (Bauman 2006: 139)

### **2:3 Theories of professionalism and occupational identity**

A key question for this research is the extent to which concepts of professionalism influence and shape journalists' identity. This section aims to assess some of the key literature about the nature and importance of professionalism for those claiming to be professionals and for wider society. It focuses particularly on the recent revival of interest in this question as journalistic identity is challenged in a digital age. To put this question into a historical context, sociologists have been debating the nature, impact, role and power of "the professions" and how professionalism can be defined since the early twentieth century. The growth of the state and the emergence of complex bureaucracies and stratifications of occupations in a modern industrial society stimulated a new interest in the growing importance of work structures and the analysis of the relationship of professions to the state on one hand and to individuals on the other (Larson 1977; Freidson 1994; Macdonald 1995).

Early sociological studies (see for example Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933) suggested that the professions had a special importance in society and that their role was a positive and important one, to which routine occupations should aspire.

According to Durkheim (1957:11), the role of the professional is to establish economic and social order in a dangerously expanding society and impose “moral discipline”, using the structure of mediaeval guilds as a model. As Freidson (1994:106) notes: “Until very recently, it was common for some of the most notable scholars of the day to emphasize the importance of professions in modern society and to consider professionalization to be a major social movement, transforming both society and the nature of work.”

In an attempt to identify what made one occupation “professional” and another not, scholars focused on listing the functional traits which defined “professionals” and differentiated themselves from other sections of society, then attempted to determine the extent to which occupations fitted these traits. From a range of different analyses, Schudson and Anderson (2009:89) identify the traits which generally feature in some form: “work based on scientific or systematic knowledge, formal education, self-governing associations, codes of ethics, a relationship of trust between professional and client.” To this could be added the establishment of a legal monopoly on delivering services (for example, in medicine or law), with the accompanying requirements of licensing and restricted entry (Larson 1977; Macdonald 1995)

In answer to the underlying question of the “trait” approach, “Is this occupation a profession?” the answer with regard to journalism would appear to be generally no. Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1964: 266) argued that journalism could not be considered a profession on the ground that the production of a newspaper is a joint enterprise which does not require intellectual effort. “They [journalists] are employed in reporting, writing up, interviewing, sub-editing and though these are not jobs which anyone can do without a considerable amount of experience, no specialised training is an indispensable prelude.”

As Macdonald (1996) notes, much of the sociology of the professions in the 1960s and 1970s emphasised the structural role of professionals in society (not surprisingly at a time when ideas developed by Marx and Weber about structures and functions were one of the dominant paradigms through which

academic sociologists analysed social action). The focus was the processes at work in the relationship of professionals such as doctors, accountants or lawyers and their relationship to the state, particularly with regard to their regulatory position, where the state has ultimate control.

However, as Schudson and Anderson (2009:89) note, sociologists in the 1960s and 70s abandoned the functionalist listing of traits approach to defining “professionals” in favour of what the authors suggest is a potentially much more fruitful analysis asking “What are the circumstances in which people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession and call themselves professional people?” (Hughes 1963:655 quoted in Schudson and Anderson 2009). This analysis still has as its underlying assumption that a professional is a desirable and special state to which to aspire for a number of economic, social and cultural reasons, because being defined as a professional brings with it status, independence and privilege.

However, Hughes’ definition is still a useful one in today’s work and social environment because it allows examination of the key question of the extent to which journalists want to be defined as “professionals” in a sociological sense and what journalists in the three case study newsrooms mean when they describe themselves as “professional” .

Schudson and Anderson (2009:90) suggest: “Rather than outlining the traits that best characterise professionals and then assessing the degree to which journalists attain them, we can analyse the social process through which journalists struggle to claim professional status.”

More recently, researchers have started to revisit work on the sociology of professions, especially in a changing journalistic landscape in which the notion of journalistic professionalism is being challenged by digital developments (Singer 2003) The central question is how journalists fit into this theoretical framework and use a discourse of professionalism to define themselves ( Soloski 1989; Aldridge and Evetts 2003; Singer 2003; Tunstall 2006; Deuze 2007, 2008; Örnebring 2009). What becomes clear from work on professions is that journalists’ claim to professionalism is ambivalent both from the point of view of commentators considering

journalists and professionals and from that of journalists themselves.

As Bromley (1997:330) says: "As an occupation, journalism has always been difficult to categorise. While strictly speaking neither a profession nor a craft, it has displayed many of the characteristics of both. Organisationally it could be classified as either routine white collar work or a largely autonomous creative process." More recently, researchers have defined two types of professionalism, organisational and occupational. Evetts (2003) argues that journalists' employers are using professionalism as a set of values and identities as a form of self discipline, which is used as a form of management control to force change and standardisation of work practices, accountability and targets. This revisits the theme of management control outlined by Soloski (1989:207) who suggests that "professionalism is an efficient and economical method by which news organisations control the behaviour of reporters and editors". He argues that rather than controlling newsrooms through a ruled- based bureaucracy, management asserts control through a combination of setting standards and norms of behaviour and reward systems.

Evetts contrasts this management control with "occupational professionalism", which provides a more traditional understanding of self-regulation, shared authority and control of entry by practitioners. Professionalism is seen by those who seek to be seen as professional as a desirable state to achieve. Professionals have control over their own working lives (autonomy), achieved because they have status, born of the acquisition of a body of knowledge and an ethic of public service. They are "arbiters of their own work performance" (Freidson 2004:71) and have freedom from state regulation (although it could be argued that this freedom is illusory in centralised states like the UK, as governments have ultimate power to create and fund regulatory bodies for professions like teachers, and in practice ministers have wide powers to circumscribe the independence of professionals to regulate themselves).

Professionals are not mere cogs in a wheel but are able to work independently in a range of sectors or become self-employed, using the knowledge and status they have acquired, says Freidson (2004:41).

“When a profession’s body of knowledge and skill is such that it can characteristically provide a personal service to individual clients, its members have more leeway to find work than would otherwise be the case.”

Unlike medicine, law or accountancy, entry to journalism generally is porous, there is no agreed definition of what journalism actually is, especially in a digital age, there is no licensing system, there is no body of knowledge which has to be acquired to be a journalist, and journalists do not have clients who pay them for their services. Commentators (see for example Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1964; Soloski (1989)) argue that journalists have less control over their work situation than, for example, doctors or lawyers, because they depend on large business organisations for their employment (although it could equally be argued that salaried doctors and lawyers also work for large private or public sector organisations and that their freedom and autonomy are today as limited as those of journalists).

Work on re-evaluating theories of professionalism and their application to journalists provides important if not wholly satisfactory analysis of the nature of professionalism and its importance to journalists’ self image in a digital age. The idea of deliberate control by management by appealing to journalists’ sense of professionalism assumes that all journalists consider they are in a profession rather than a trade. . It also raises the question of whether journalists have to think of themselves as professionals in the sociological sense in order to take pride in their work.

Being able to describe themselves as “professional” can also be seen as an important status-building and protection exercise when facing an onslaught of closures and redundancies, with journalists finding that they have to produce more stories in a shorter time, with fewer resources. Organisational professionalism also seems to over - emphasise one element of journalists’ newsroom relationships (with management) while ignoring more subtle cultural relations between equals who have a shared understanding of what it

means to be professional in a journalist's terms, in other words a professional attitude where high standards are important. As Revers (2014:41) found in his examination of source journalist relations at the state house in Albany, New York, journalists are sensitive to unprofessional conduct from fellow journalists, against which they draw boundaries. "Besides other recurring themes, such as factual inaccuracy, unethical unfair and lazy journalism, that is lacking effort and reporting initiative, reporters drew boundaries toward insufficient autonomy from politics."

A distinction needs to be drawn between having a professional attitude (having high standards and gaining the respect of peers), and working within an occupation which professionalises itself by setting barriers to entry, licensing and regulating members and if necessary, striking them off and depriving them of their livelihood. A further distinction should be made between these two understandings of professionalism and professional status. Even though journalism has no formal entry requirements and is only loosely regulated, journalists themselves have a clear idea of their social status in the pecking order of professions.

This is not a new phenomenon. Delano and Henningham (1994:9) found that "67 per cent do not appear to believe journalism could be organized as a profession, even a semi-profession such as architecture or accountancy. Just the same, a clear majority of journalists regard their social status as equal to that of accountants, engineers, solicitors, teachers or university lecturers although not of dentists, barristers or surgeons."

From the answers they have given researchers in a number of newsrooms across different countries, journalists' concept of professionalism lies in attitudes rather than formal structures. They equate being "professional" with being able to tell a story accurately, use a balance of sources, verify information before publishing, understand the needs of readers and balance this against preservation of the news organisation's "brand". There is also a strong ethical dimension to journalists' understanding of themselves as professionals (Singer 2009; Singer and Ashman 2009), although not belonging to any formal organisation, with journalists stressing values of

authenticity, accountability and autonomy (Hayes et al 2007).

Frequent references to training and experience suggest that these are also considered part of being professional. However, again, training does not mean formal exams but rather, familiarity with a newsroom and the ability to accept change and take the opportunities it offers (Singer 2003). These are some of the early adopters identified by Rogers (1995) in his work on diffusion of innovations, especially the time it takes for innovations to be accepted by a certain percentage of an organisation. In her work on the process of convergence through the framework of the diffusion of innovations, Singer (2003) suggests that the characteristics of early adopters “include a perception that it offers an avenue for upward professional mobility and a generally favourable attitude towards change.” (Singer: 2003:16).

Although they may consider their social status to be on a par with a range of professions with formal entry requirements and regulatory structures, many journalists reject the idea that journalism should be brought within similar structures. Former shadow media spokesman Ivan Lewis’s call for a state licensing scheme for journalists as part of a tightening up of standards following the phone hacking scandal of the summer of 2011 was withdrawn within a day after widespread denunciation. Much of the criticism came from journalists themselves, concerned about the potential for curtailing freedom of expression and their ability to stand apart from state regulation, vital for a free and ethically responsible press free from bureaucratic interference. Journalists, particularly on the national press, have also strenuously campaigned against calls for statutory regulation following the Leveson enquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press in 2011-12.



Journalists stressing their professional credentials like to highlight their role as watchdogs and investigators in a democratic society. Again, this is not a formally sanctioned and licenced role but part of having a professional attitude.

The problem with the discourse of occupational professionalism is that many journalists do not want to be seen as “professionals” in a narrow sociological sense. Aldridge (1998) draws attention to the image of the journalist depicted in many editors’ autobiographies of the self-made iconoclastic loner who made it onto a newspapers with a mixture of luck and cheek, then rose to the top. (The fact that this is possible throws further doubt on claims to journalism as a profession). A key theme of these autobiographies is the need for journalistic autonomy, not as a professional attribute but as a symbol of rugged individualism, seen also in the competitiveness of the newsroom. Aldridge (1998:115) says: “Reporters are required to compete at every level: to be given worthwhile assignments; to have their story used at all; to escape evisceration at the subediting stage; to have their piece given reasonable space and position in the paper; to have a by-line on it.”

This very competitiveness also creates an atmosphere that is inward looking and obsessive, as well as loving to talk about itself, often in admiring terms about its own disreputability and disorderliness (the opposite of the discreet professionalism of a doctor or solicitor). Many journalists delight in relationships with the rich and famous and love to be indiscreet (Bromley 1997). When writing about their own experiences, they have “tended to emphasise and often exaggerate their closeness to and familiarity with power, celebrity and the exotic and to gloss over the day-to- day relative powerless of employment in the newsroom.” (Bromley 1997: 332).

But their self-image is not necessarily in line with their public image. As Aldridge (1998:111) suggests, on the one hand: “Being a journalist is held to be a vocation, to which practitioners have a passionate, almost compulsive - even if ambivalent - attachment”. The attachment is ambivalent, says Aldridge, because “...journalists do not feel themselves to be held in high

public esteem. It is a very marginal occupation, its outsider qualities intensified [...] by the lingering attachment to “impartiality” and “objectivity” and in daily behaviour by having to carry out unpopular tasks.” (Aldridge 1998:111). Journalistic unpopularity has not improved much in the years since Aldridge wrote this paper – a YouGov poll in 2010 (the year before fieldwork for this research started) found that trust in quality journalists had fallen by 21 per cent since 2003, with mid market tabloids down 14 per cent and red tops down 4 per cent. According to the survey, just 41 per cent trust the quality press, 21 per cent the mid-market press and 10 per cent the red-tops (YouGov 2010).

This sits uneasily with the idea of the professional as outlined by sociologists like McDonald (1995) and Freidson (2004), where concepts of prestige and status (and by extension trust) are central to a definition of professionalism (see also Larson 1977). Such status is acquired in a number of ways, notably through acquisition of a body of knowledge or training leading to a recognised qualification or accreditation, the ability to control occupational entry (Max Weber’s idea of “social closure”) a commitment to service (although not necessarily public service – professionals such as accountants work in profit-making organisations) and an ethical dimension to work which allows for a code of self regulation.

## **2:4 Perspectives on journalistic identity: performance and interaction**

Journalism scholars have shown an increasing interest in examining questions of journalistic identity through a cultural prism (Schudson 1989; Schudson 1991; Zelizer 1994; Ettema in Allan 2012). Much of this work focuses on the way output is shaped by cultural assumptions and power relations between media and audiences, how the media relates to wider society and how various groups in the news are defined and visualized (Cottle 2000; Couldry 2003). Couldry uses anthropological ideas of ritual first developed by Durkheim to look at the way the public are willingly drawn into media-created rituals such as reality TV and self-disclosure on talk shows and how these create a social bond and connection between viewers via the media.

Couldry's ideas are arguably less relevant to the approach taken in this research, focusing as they do on audiences rather than on journalists as the creators of output. However, examining journalists' unspoken assumptions about news values and "knowing what's news" is valuable for this research. Schudson (2005:188) says: "A cultural account of news is also relevant to understanding journalists' vague renderings of how they know "news" when they see it. The central categories of newswriters themselves are "cultural" rather than structural." Journalists, adds Schudson (2005:190) breathe "a specifically journalistic, occupational cultural air as well as the air they share with their fellow citizens."

The nature of identity is complex and in a constant state of flux. Zelizer (2004:175) says "The world of news, approached here as more than just reporters' professional codes of action or the social arrangements of reporters and editors, is viewed in the cultural analysis of journalism as a complex and multi-dimensional lattice of meanings for all those involved in journalism." Swidler (1986:274) suggests that these meanings create a "toolkit of symbols, stories, rituals and world views". Cottle (2000:438) suggests that seeing journalism as story-telling sheds interesting light on how journalists

collectively see themselves. “Story-telling has long provided the means by which society can tell and retell its basic myths to itself and in so doing reaffirm itself as collectivity or “imagined community” (Cottle 2000:438).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in exploring the interaction of journalists in newsrooms as a form of performance, in which individuals’ interactions in settings such as news conferences are key to shaping identity (Cotter 2010; Bogaerts 2011).

The idea of analysing social interactions as a series of performances was first outlined by Goffman (1959), who used the concept of theatrical performance to show how people present themselves to others in social and professional situations and shape the impression that others have of them. Goffman was one of a number of mid-twentieth century sociologists who helped shape the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, which moved away from an emphasis on structures and constraints as key shapers of relationships between individuals, and instead focused on how face-to-face interactions shaped identity and social relationships. Carter and Fuller (2015:1) say: “Rather than addressing how common social institutions define and impact individuals, symbolic interactionists shift their attention to the interpretation of subjective viewpoints and how individuals make sense of the world from their unique perspective.”

Defining “performance” as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a set of observers and which has some influence on the observers”, Goffman (1990:34) argues that everyone has his or her own “front”, which is presented to the world. The “front” includes personal characteristics which observers come to associate with that individual, including “insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex; age and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures and the like.” Although some elements of “front” are fixed, others are selected and adapted to give a desired impression depending on the audience and the circumstances. Sometimes, individuals are taken in by their front and in other cases, they are fully aware that they are

acting a part. In team situations, Goffman (1990:88).

further argues, individuals are “related to each other by bonds of reciprocal dependence and reciprocal familiarity”

Goffman’s idea of human interaction as performance is useful for understanding how journalists present themselves to each other in internal settings such as news conferences and informal discussions in the news room, as well as in the wider world to sources and readers. As Aldridge has noted (1998:110), “journalists are enthusiastic (auto) biographers, mythmakers and myth-feeders.” Occupational myths of competitiveness, ruthlessness and refusal to play by the rules for the sake of getting a scoop could all be said to be part of playing the role of the journalist. Similarly, journalistic ideals of truth, accuracy, objectivity and autonomy can be advanced in newsrooms as being collectively desirable fronts, with the credibility of individual journalists and the collective newsroom at stake. It may be that journalists sincerely believe this front, it may be that they are cynical about it or it may be a mixture of both, but they are constrained from showing cynicism in public settings.

It could be argued that journalists presenting their stories at news conferences are putting forward both an individual and a team “front” in the theatrical setting of the conference room. The success of the “front” depends on how well the individual journalist argues his or her case in terms of what is most newsworthy: “..the news is prioritized by the editorial collective (the editors) according to who can argue better on the grounds of news values, or what can most convincingly be said about the value of the news at issue.” (Cotter 2010: 92).

## **2:5 The role of the local newspaper**

A review of the literature on the local newspaper needs to acknowledge that there are really a number of different bodies of literature, because local newspaper markets in different countries are operating in different media ecosystems. This review will focus mainly on the UK press, which is the subject of this research.

The predominance of national newspapers in the UK is unusual in the context of Western Europe and the US. According to Chisholm in Mair et al (2012), three quarters of daily newspaper circulation in the UK is national, compared with just 6% in the US, 8% in Germany and 28% in France (Chisholm in Mair et al 2012:8)

As a result, the local press in the UK has played a subordinate role to national newspapers in the public mind and public discourse for more than a century. It is partly for this reason that research on the local press generally in the UK has been relatively scant compared to that in the US.

As Kleis Nielsen (2013:2) notes with regard to recent literature on the changes faced by the journalism industry, “the emphasis has been overwhelmingly on national media, on the most prominent newspapers, the biggest broadcasters and the most successful digital start-ups.”

A number of researchers include chapters on the local press as part of wider ranging explorations of newspaper history, practice and theory (Temple 2008; Williams 2008; Cole and Harcup 2010; Conboy 2011). However, fewer books have focused exclusively on the local press in the UK, with some notable exceptions (Cox and Morgan 1973; Murphy 1976; Franklin 1998; Franklin 2006; Aldridge 2007; Mair et al 2012). Kleis Nielsen (2012)'s volume on the local press in a number of countries includes work by UK scholars.

It is also noticeable that researchers who do focus on the local press in the UK feel compelled to justify themselves for their choice of research area and to brace themselves for what they imagine to be the negative attitudes to local

papers among their readers. Murphy (1976:12) says in his introduction: "No-one who has been involved in local newspapers can have escaped noticing that many people regard them as unsophisticated, parochial and over-full of births, deaths and marriage announcements, not to mention advertisements for second hand paraphernalia." Cox and Morgan (1973:5) begin their examination of the role of the local press on Merseyside with the comment: "The local press has been regarded as something of a Cinderella in the press world, and has been neglected by students." More recent work on the local press also plays on the theme of the perceived comical nature of the local press. Fowler in Mair et al (2012:4) comments: ".. as for the industry, the media has always found it more interesting to discuss the Manchester Guardian rather than the Winsford and Middlewich Guardian."

### **2:5:1 The civic role of UK local newspapers in a democratic society**

A core focus of work on the local press is one the sector's role as a watchdog in a democratic society. Temple (2008:108) says: "The local press performs one of the most local functions in the public sphere: they connect the national to the local and they provide their local communities with information which no other medium has come remotely near matching."

As local newspapers appear threatened, supporters of the local press have laid increasing stress on the "local community" and its relationship with its local paper as evidence of the value of the local press. This positive view of the role of the local press is shared by local newspaper editors (see Machin and Niblock 2006; Williams and Franklin 2007), who see their links with readers as a core part of their professional identity.

Some commentators argue that the concept of "community" is flawed and distorted. Schudson in Glasser (1999:128) suggests that models of journalism which seek to link journalists more closely to "communities", such as the US public journalism movement of the 1990s, are driven by a nostalgic idea of community, "the stable, secure, homey world located back

somewhere in immigrant ethnic neighbourhoods of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century or in the settled communities of 19<sup>th</sup> century cities. But urban life is not like that today.”

Journalists interviewed by authors and writing in their own words have identified close relationships with readers as one of the main reasons which their job is meaningful. (Hadwin in Franklin 2006; Machin and Niblock 2006; Aldridge 2007). However, the extent to which local newspapers actually succeed in fulfilling their role also preoccupies commentators in this area, Coupled with an acknowledgement of this traditional role of the local press is an exploration of the ways in which local newspapers fall short of the ideal of a role of challenger of local government and powerful.

The core question for studies of the local press in the 1960s and 1970s (Cox and Morgan 1973; Murphy 1976) was the effectiveness of the local press in its watchdog role and the difficulty the local press experiences in being independent from local government, local businesses and others whose activities the newspapers are reporting. These studies were written against a backdrop of local councils with more power than those of today, with even more of a culture of secrecy (Murphy 1976:24). These earlier commentators suggested that the local press was fairly toothless as a watchdog, for a number of reasons. These included problems of a lack of resources and journalistic experience. The tension between a local newspaper as a commercial organisation and local newspaper as watchdog are also highlighted.

Murphy (1976:22) notes that journalists have much more incentive to write a quick superficial story than to carry out a probing investigation, firstly because speed is an organisational requirement and secondly because investigations risk alienating the very people who are their best sources. “This prying and checking could put up the backs of all concerned, since it would be taken as a sign of distrust. It would also mean that a reporter might be involved in investigative work for days, and with no guarantee of any results .”



But, importantly, the authors also identify elements of journalistic culture and a process of inculcation into a particular culture as barriers to journalistic independence. Cox and Morgan (1973:122) note: “Each generation of new reporters is inducted into the routine of news gathering, the whole business of editing verbatim reports of council meetings, extracting snippets from reports, getting quick telephoned quotes from leading people... Fleet Street might be a “fourth estate” but the local press is too weak and too close to the other estates in the local scene to be capable of joining them.”

More recent work on the democratic role of the local press has focused on the increasing complexity of the media ecosystem within which local newspapers now work. Readers are able to interact and express their opinions in comment boxes without (necessarily) intervention by editors.

The arena of news, information and comment has become crowded with new players (“citizen journalists”, providers of content, producers of hyperlocal websites) or existing players who want to extend their reach. These last include (much to the fury of local journalists) local councils themselves, through the medium of publications putting a positive gloss on their achievements (Morrison 2011). But there are people who could potentially play a watchdog role in an era of well-documented under-resourcing of local newspapers.

Most of the authors of research on the changing media ecology focus on the national press or broadcasting organisations (see for example Hermida and Thurman 2008; Hermida 2009; Harrison 2010), rather than the UK local press. However, researchers focusing on the local press found similar patterns of reluctance and scepticism among mainstream journalists to cede control of their core activities in any meaningful way to those they perceived to be amateurs. From initial suspicion of the activities of bloggers and amateur participants in the news agenda, journalists have moved to a polite scepticism

In their analysis of the media ecology of Leeds, Firmstone and Coleman in Kleis Nielsen (2015:125) comment: "In principal, citizen journalism could play a part in reshaping the local media agenda. Mainstream local news organisations could incorporate contributions from citizen journalists as a new element of news production." However this has not happened in reality. Firmstone and Coleman continue that "... although the journalists we interviewed did not consider CJ (citizen journalist) producers as competitors, they had not nurtured working relationships with hyperlocal news sites and blogs, and did not see CJ producers as a regular or reliable source in newsgathering. The core reason for this was that using amateur news could "violate professional norms of objectivity and impartiality."

Singer (2010), who carried out research into the attitude of local journalists on Johnston Press titles to user generated content (UGC) and its use as an additional source of information, also found journalists concerned about violation of professional norms if they used content generated by readers. They criticised much of this content of being of low quality, which in turn meant an increased workload for journalists in checking and verification.

### **2:5:2 The economy of UK local newspapers: narratives of decline**

More recent work on the local press was written against a backdrop of intensifying economic difficulty on local newspapers and an increasing concentration of ownership as the family-owned newspapers described by Murphy sold out to large conglomerates. If the Wright family, owners of the fictitious Littletown Independent described by Murphy (1976:85) existed today, they would almost certainly have sold out to one of the big four local newspaper publishers.

The tone of much of the literature on the economics of the local press is quite despondent and downbeat. Dominant themes include closures, mergers, centralisation, redundancies and the remorseless attempts of publishers to squeeze profits out of their remaining local papers (Franklin 2006; Williams

and Franklin 2007; Currah 2009; Clark in Mair et al 2012; Schlosberg in Mair et al 2012). Sad titles abound. A chapter in Mair et al (2012:18) is entitled: "Autumn leaves: the sad and fast decline of the British regional press". Words like "crisis" are heavily used. Commentators are searching for solutions to the "crisis" There is nostalgia and regret for a perceived "golden age" in which "typically under local family management, newspapers were there to serve the community. In some years they made a good profit, in lean years they might not. It didn't matter." (Clark in Mair et al 2012:121).

Much of this commentary is written by academics who have been local journalists, or local journalists themselves (see for example the edited collections of chapters in Franklin 2006 and Mair et al 2012). These commentators love journalism and perceive the business of journalism, personified by distant publishers making decisions about downsizing and centralising, as an enemy rather than as a facilitator. The idea of journalism as a business is something that many journalists are reluctant to acknowledge. There is a continuing tension between journalism as an independent and objective voice with a public service role, and newspapers as a profitable business (Franklin 2006; Coddington in Carlson and Lewis 2015). The "Chinese wall" between editorial and advertising is a core element in maintaining a journalist's identity, although the difficulty of preserving this separation is becoming ever more difficult as newspaper publishers scramble to keep advertisers in a difficult business climate. For Coddington (2015: 68), this is because there is a power imbalance between journalists and the commercial activities which sustain them. "Journalists have worked exceptionally hard to maintain a strong boundary against commercial influence, making it a core element of their professional values. But despite those efforts, the boundary has been extremely susceptible to encroachment by those commercial influences because of their overwhelming advantages in power."

The point is frequently made that local newspaper publishers are still posting strong profits but these profits are made at the expense of editorial. Franklin (2006:7) says that the overarching strategy of local newspaper publishers is

to “maximise revenue, especially advertising revenue, while minimising production costs.” This is a process which has been going on for decades but which has accelerated since the recession of 2008. From a management point of view, it makes sense to rationalise those elements of the business which cost most. These include editorial staff costs and office space. Aldridge (2007:41) says the result can be demoralising. “For those working in the industry, the process can be alienating: ‘We could be producing baked beans for all it matters’ according to a reporter at a DMGT paper.”

Social changes which meant that fewer people automatically picked up an evening paper on their way home from work in factories or shops, or had it delivered, were part of the reason why the death knell sounded for many evening papers. (Aldridge 2007). Economic realities have meant that growing numbers of daily newspapers have turned into weekly newspapers, and weekly print papers have gone online only (Currah 2009).

The arrival of the internet, and its challenge to the long-established business model of newspapers funded by advertising have received substantial attention from researchers and commentators. Exploring the “crisis” (his word) in the local and regional press, Currah (2009:3) says: “Although they have access to an audience of millions, publishers of local and regional news are finding that the web does not pay. The principal challenge is two-fold: consumers now expect news content to be free while advertisers expect much lower rates around the news because of the transient and fragmented character of web traffic.”

The confused response by publishers to reshaping their businesses in the light of the online challenge has had a significant effect on journalists on the receiving end as their working practices change. Williams and Franklin (2008) found in their study of Trinity Mirror’s online strategy in local newsrooms in Cardiff, Newcastle, Middlesbrough and Liverpool that implementation of the strategy was incoherent. The authors conclude (2008:53): “As is usually the case, the rhetoric from senior managers differs somewhat from the experience of media workers on the ground.” Journalists quoted in the study were critical of what they saw as

accountant-led decisions to dispense with sub-editors and require reporters to do this work.

A phenomenon of the local market from the 1970s onwards has been the spread of freesheets, many put together in the same newsrooms as paid for papers, and many by the same staff (Franklin 2006; Aldridge 2007). All three of the local newsrooms studied for this research had a mixture of paid-for and free newspapers. These are commercially driven, and criticised by many commentators for what they perceive as bland advertorial content, driven more by attracting advertising than by journalistic public service ideals.

They are cheap to produce because a lot of the content is recycled press releases. Readers of free newspapers have become a commodity to be served up to advertisers, says Franklin (2006:151). Franklin suggests that in free papers “advertorial is rampant” (2006:152) and because of this, “the link between journalists and readers is ruptured since free newspapers do not have to win a readership by publishing relevant, high quality stories.” Franklin claims that in the free sheet sector, the deciding factor on whether to run a piece or a section is whether it continues to attract advertising rather than generating reader interest.

The aim of this chapter was to review relevant literature on: newsroom organisation; the nature of news and news agendas; the culture of journalism; theories of how identity is shaped through relationships with others; questions of professionalism and the role this plays in creating journalistic identity; and the role and shortcomings of the local press in the UK.

### **Chapter 3 Methodology**

The aim of this research is to explore the nature of journalistic identity in local newsrooms in a changing media environment. It takes three local newsrooms as the setting within which to explore the way local journalists perceive themselves and the extent to which concepts such as professionalism shape and influence their self-image. I spent three weeks in each of the three London-based local newsrooms. These newsrooms, were the South London Press/Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury; the Surrey Comet and Kingston Guardian; and the Times and Independent Series.

Fieldwork for this research was carried out between 2011 and 2013. I spent three weeks in December 2011 at the offices of the South London Press, followed by a further three weeks at the Surrey Comet's offices in January 2012. The final three weeks of fieldwork took place at the Times and Independent Series in June and July 2013. During each of my periods of fieldwork, I observed journalists in the newsroom, talked to them informally, listened to them on the phone and negotiating at the news desk, and attended news conferences. In tandem with this observation,

The research was designed and conceived at a time of continuing upheaval in the newspaper industry generally and the local news industry in particular. Narratives surrounding the future of local news were gloomy and the prognosis for their future poor. Newsrooms were under close examination through the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press (Leveson 2012). My interest was in what was actually going on in local newsrooms, how journalists there were managing change, and the impact

that change was having on their occupational identities.

Questions of self-identity and how journalists perceive themselves in their occupational role have become increasingly pertinent as the industry fragments and as local newspapers close and contract. As noted in the Introduction, culture is defined here as a process of shared “meaning-making” (Spillman 2002:2) in each of the newsrooms, in which journalists connect with each other through a number of shared experiences.

To explore these questions of identity and culture, the research uses an ethnographic approach, combining non-participant observation in each of the three newsrooms and in-depth interviews with reporters and editors. The advantage of such an approach, says Schlesinger (1978: xxxii) is that “the ethnographic approach permits the observation of how specific problems [in producing news content] are dealt with which are otherwise concealed from the analysts of texts or content who are confronted with the products of action but denied access to the processes which lie behind them.”

However, a limited quantitative content analysis was also done of the print newspapers produced during the weeks of observation, in order to examine the types of story covered, and the number and range of sources used. Although the main focus of the research was on what Schlesinger describes as “problems” and “processes” of journalists’ newsroom work and how this shaped identity, it was also important to examine how issues discussed and observed in fieldwork such as choice of news agenda and relationships with sources shaped output.

### **3:1 Research questions**

Interviews and observation were carried out within the framework of five research questions, outlined below.

*RQ1: What do local journalists understand by “professionalism” and to what extent does it shape their journalistic identity?*

This question explores what journalists understand by “professionalism” and whether this manifests itself more in the idea of profession as attitude (for example observing high standards of accuracy and independence) than in traditional understandings of occupational professionalism.

*RQ2: What shapes journalism culture and how does this manifest itself in the case study newsrooms? To what extent is “professionalism” part of a wider local newsroom culture?*

This question explores how journalists “make meaning” (for example in formal settings such as news conference and in informal settings such as discussions between reporters at neighbouring desks or feedback from editors on stories). It further explores how these processes create a journalistic culture.

Zelizer (1993 in Berkowitz 1997:403) suggests that conceptualising journalists as an “interpretive community” rather than a profession allows examination of journalists’ “shared collectivity” and goes beyond narrow conceptions of the idea of professionalism.

“ An alternative frame [to journalists as professionals] is needed to address the relevance and function of so-called pack journalism, media pools, briefings, membership of social clubs, and other ways that reporters absorb rules, boundaries and a sense of appropriateness about their actions without ever actually being informed of them by superiors. “



Berkowitz and Terkunst (1999:128) suggest that as part of an “interpretive community”, journalists relate not just to the wider geographic community but also gain understandings of interpretations through colleagues: “Journalists also learn about a community’s preferred interpretations through regular interaction with their journalistic colleagues (Rock 1981). For example, journalists learn common typifications of community occurrences which they subconsciously deploy to routinize work and make it predictable.”

*RQ3. What significance does the idea of a local (as opposed to a national) newspaper have for the journalists who work there and how does this shape their idea of the role of a local journalist?*

This question explores the way in which journalists in the case study newsrooms perceive their role as local news journalists and the importance they place on local newspapers’ role as champions of their readers and challengers of those in a position of power in the areas they cover.

For some journalists, local papers are a stepping stone to the nationals (House of Commons Select Committee 2010:12). But others have no desire to move onto nationals, deriving job satisfaction from being closely connected to the community they are serving. Aldridge 2007:143 quotes one journalist as saying: “In the regionals you have to live among the people you are writing about. I think that leads to the opportunities to get more satisfaction out of the job...because when you do things for the good...it’s immensely satisfying, it’s got to be one of the biggest buzzes around.”

*RQ4. How do local journalists conceptualise the idea of “community” in London and what is the importance of “community” to local journalists?*

This question explores issues of what London local news journalists understand by the term “community” in the context in which they are working, and the challenges they encounter in identifying who their readers are. Hadwin in Franklin (2006:141) suggests that the relationship between a newspaper and its readers is “up close and personal”), and more intense than the reader/journalist relationship on a national paper. However, local news journalists working in London have a more difficult task than their colleagues outside the capital. Firstly, London is characterised by a transient and constantly shifting population, and the concept of a “community” with common interests is difficult to apply in London. The capital is home to all the UK’s national news organisations, as well as most of its broadcasters. National journalists tend to be London- centric in their views because they live in London but this does not necessarily translate into reporting on issues of importance mainly to London residents.

*RQ5: What is the new nature of newsroom work, what impact does this have on daily work organisation and newsgathering processes and how does this impact on journalistic identity?*

This question explores the extent to which journalists’ collective cultural understanding of themselves specifically as local journalists is challenged by changes in working practices. The new newsroom is convergent. A basic working definition of convergence is the technical and economic restructuring of organisations so that parts of the operation like news desks and production are merged for reasons of efficiency and cost saving: a newsroom in which journalists work across both print and online platforms co-ordinated by a single news desk (news hub); in which journalists are expected to be able to tell stories using not just text but video and audio, selecting the most appropriate medium; in which journalists interact with

readers.

In the local context, moves to centralise newsroom functions have resulted in some cases in a distancing of journalists from their readers as newsrooms are moved out of town centres. Franklin (2006) says: “Local newspapers [...] are literally moving out of their local patch as their original town centre newspaper offices have become increasingly costly to maintain [...] compared to purpose built offices on the edge of the town centre. A serious consequence here is the loss of the routine contact with the local community in which the paper circulates.” (2006:xxi).

The importance of a free press in holding power to account and the freedom to act autonomously is taken very seriously by many journalists (Hargreaves 2003; Randall 2007). A perceived challenge to such autonomy (for example, having less chance to go out and get stories and being forced to produce “churnalism” to satisfy rolling deadlines) (Davies 2008) can lead to resistance as journalists see their jobs being redefined. This links to the issue of how journalists see themselves (as investigators, challengers, informers) and how they perceive their place in the newsroom structure.

### **3:2 Aims**

To analyse the workings of three London local newspapers serving a range of areas, with different newsroom cultures, in order to assess changes in organisational patterns (changes in hierarchies, departmental roles, reporting lines) and working patterns (multi-skilling requirements, working hours, learning to use new technology, new tasks monitoring and moderating user generated content and engaging with social media for sources, campaigns).

To reach beyond the spoken and overt actions of journalists as they confront a changing industry, to the unspoken assumptions and

understandings which shape their internal and external self-image and together form a collective culture.

To explore how this culture shapes journalists' ability to respond to change.

To assess whether and to what extent patterns of adoption and resistance developed/are developing throughout the newsroom, from trainees to editors, and how these patterns shaped/are shaping news production in the specified period.

### **3:3 Objectives**

To situate the analysis of newsroom working and organisation within appropriate sociological and cultural theoretical frameworks. In its examination of culture, this term is used in the sense employed by Spillman (2002) as a shared "process of meaning making". Spillman (2002:4) says: "Such processes may operate in different sorts of social locations (in more specialist areas or more generally) and may be evident in all sorts of social practices and social products."

Part of the process of meaning making for journalists in the local newsrooms studied is the maintenance of their image of themselves as journalists. As Schudson in Curran and Gurevitch (2005: 190) comments: "Journalists at work operate not only to maintain and repair their social relations with sources and colleagues but their cultural image as journalists in the eyes of a wider world."

To carry out observations in all three newsrooms for a sufficient period to gain an understanding of each organisation's culture/structure/hierarchies/organisation and to use non-participant

observation to try and identify the unspoken understandings of newsroom cultures and how these are being challenged by economic, technological, social and cultural changes within the journalism industry.

To contact and set up interviews with a representative range of reporters and editors at each newspaper. To carry out a series of semi-structured interviews with journalists to gain information about the working and set-up of the different newsrooms and their individual response to their changing work environment and job patterns.

To use these methods of observation and interviews to gain information about how individual and collective journalistic identities are constructed and maintained, and how these identities shape continuity and change in newsrooms.

### **3:4 Choice of case studies**

Local newspaper journalists as a whole have the advantage for researchers of being “a relatively understudied group” (Singer 2010: 127) who are nonetheless experiencing significant upheavals in their working patterns and seeing traditional assumptions about the nature of journalism overturned. Some commentators are writing off the local press as dying and irrelevant. This research aims to uncover some of the real underlying processes at work in this sector.

My decision to focus not only on local newspapers, but on London local newspapers, opened up some important questions about the role of the local press in the capital (research question 4). London is home to all the UK’s national newspapers and broadcasting operations and their coverage of London predominantly reflects the city’s position as a global financial

centre and a world city with significant political and cultural influence. The role of London local newspapers is, or should be, to inform readers of what is going on in the area in which they live and/ or work. However the dominance of national newspapers over local newspapers in the UK and the London-centric coverage of the nationals meant that local newspapers were overshadowed by national newspapers to an extent not necessarily seen in the rest of the UK. I wanted to see how journalists on London local papers managed their relationship with the national media, how they carved out a niche for themselves and how they defined and imagined “community” in a city with a multitude of overlapping groups and communities.

Together the case study newsrooms covered a large geographical section of London but with very different readerships. This meant that it was possible to examine the role of the different newspapers in their communities and to identify ways in which journalists related to their readerships.

On a more personal level, I have never worked in local newspapers, having arrived on national newspapers via the specialist press. The choice of local newspapers as an object of study meant that I was able to approach local newsrooms as a comparative stranger with the detachment necessary to observe behaviour and interaction, without being so much of an outsider that I would have to spend weeks working out what everyone was doing. The benefit of being a comparative stranger meant that I arrived in each newsroom knowing no-one except the editors with whom I had set up the observation weeks in the first place (and even here the meetings were brief, limited in one case to an exchange of emails). I was able to start observing and testing my starting hypotheses without being influenced by personal contacts or friendships. As Bell (2000:158) says: “It is difficult to stand back and adopt the role of observer when all the members of the group or organisation are known to you. If you are researching in your own organisation you will be familiar with the personalities, strengths and weaknesses of your own colleagues and this familiarity may cause you to overlook aspects of behaviour which would be immediately apparent to a non-participant observer seeing the situation for the first time.”

But at the same time, I could observe interaction in the newsrooms and recognise how the different editorial roles worked together, because of my previous experience as a journalist. This provided a good starting point for observation.

Local newsrooms had the advantage of being smallish, contained units. The contained nature of the newsrooms was helpful in the context of this study because it meant that I could make contact with all the reporters and editors in each newsroom over the three-week period of observation in each newsroom and arrange interviews easily as part of the working day. I had easy access to a range of reporters and editors at different stages in their careers who were all working in the same newsroom (which would not have been the case at a national newspaper, for example).

Research into a number of media organisations (see for example Born 2005) suggests that there is a rich seam of cultural understanding and knowledge to be mined at all levels of the hierarchy. From the point of view of my research, which emphasises cultural relationships and collective understanding of what it means to be a “professional” journalist, observing and interviewing as wide a range of people as possible provided valuable insights.

The outcome of this research was naturally influenced and shaped by the newspapers chosen as case studies. Case studies are a valuable research method insofar as they allow an in-depth examination of particular organisations and findings can then be used to draw some more general conclusions. Singer (2009:194) says that “a key strength of the [case study] method is that it enables the researcher to probe deeply for meaning in a particular real-world environment.”

However she goes on to warn against the dangers of generalising from one case to another. Discussing the use of case studies in research using ethnographic methods, Singer (Singer 2009:195) says that observations made in one case study can point to useful questions to be asked in another case study but that the first set of

observations should not be applied to subsequent cases. “Researchers should be very, very cautious with claims that what was encountered in one environment conveys more than the merest suggestion of what might be encountered in another (or worse, in all environments)”.

Taking Singer’s warnings about the dangers of generalisation into account, I ensured in my findings that I drew distinctions between the different newsrooms where appropriate. I have not tried to claim that all three newsrooms shared the same work organisation and the same culture, as this was not the case, and the differences between the three newsrooms provided important perspectives about the pace and nature of change and the way different newsrooms handled change.

However, the case studies were partly chosen because they had a number of operational similarities which potentially allowed for comparisons. Each of the newsrooms had a number of paid for and free local weekly newspapers, with one “flagship” paper and a number of smaller satellite papers. They all had websites which were updated with greater or less regularity. They were all owned by publishers which had large numbers of local newspapers and were attempting to work out in different ways what the balance should be between still-profitable print and unprofitable web.

### **3:5 The strength of ethnography: non-participant observation**

Over the past decade, researchers have gone into newsrooms and used a range of methods including interviews and questionnaires to analyse the reactions and responses of different sections of the journalism industry to the changing media landscape. They have collectively built up a valuable picture of economic and organisational tensions and pressures, opportunities and excitement.

However, what journalists say in response to interviews and questionnaires (important though these are) does not tell the whole story. This has been



recognised by generations of scholars who have carried out ethnographic studies which involved spending months or even years in newsrooms observing what journalists did, as well as what they said in interviews that they did. It was from these ethnographies (see Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980; Schlesinger 1978; Kaniss 1991; Harrison 2000; Born 2005; Anderson 2012; Ryfe 2012) that researchers gained valuable insights into journalistic routines such as beats, routines, source relationships and news choices, and also the unspoken connections and understandings which journalists develop with each other and which form a core part of this research.

This research therefore uses a combination of newsroom observation and interviews with individual journalists to explore its core question of the nature and role of journalistic identity in local newsrooms.

Observation allowed a study of a number of themes linking the three case study newsrooms, as well as a study of how journalists related to each other in individual newsrooms and developed an individual and collective identity.

Research methodologists (see for example Rugg and Petre (2007), Bell (2000) and Wisker (2008)) outline various different types of observation: disclosed and undisclosed; participant and non-participant; structured and unstructured. My approach to observation in my research was disclosed (in other words, journalists in the newsroom knew why I was there and I had not obtained access through subterfuge), and structured (I had formulated research questions and had decided a range of categories of behaviour and events to look for). I was a non-participant in that I was observing and interviewing rather than carrying out journalistic tasks. I was learning by observation how local journalists operate and seeing their reporting patches through their eyes. This was a particularly interesting process at the South London Press as I live in Lewisham and the South London Press is my local paper. As Agar (1980:6) says, ethnography is a method which “always involves long term association with some group, to some extent in their own territory, with the purpose of learning from them their ways of doing things and viewing reality.”

An unexpected strength of non-participant observation was that I became a familiar presence in the office, and more than once was asked in interview to advise on career development or personal dilemmas. More than one journalist asked me for feedback on stories, saying that they did not get enough feedback from their editors in distant Watford. I met up with one journalist more than a year after finishing my fieldwork in his office, to have a drink and advise on his CV.

I do not believe that developing these relationships was detrimental to my status as a non-participant observer. I would argue on the contrary that they gave journalists the confidence to know that I was approachable and understood their industry. They arguably told me a lot more than they would have if I had just arrived in their office as a stranger.

The main advantage of observation as a research method in these three newsrooms was that it allowed me to understand the unspoken and underlying attitudes of journalists to each other and to their readers, as well as the attitudes they expressed openly in interview. As Born (2005:15) says: "It is by probing the gaps between principles and practice, management claims and ordinary working lives –between what is implicit and what is explicit – that a fuller grasp of reality can be gleaned." Observation helped me to draw my research conclusion that the newsrooms shared to varying extents a culture of support and collaboration but that this helped to create a conservative culture which was reluctant to change.

It was true, however, that observation took practice. In the first week of my first observation, it took me some time to work out what I was looking for, especially as journalists were just sitting at their desks plugged into emails. As Nisbet (1977) quoted in Bell (2000:156) says: "Observation is not a natural gift but a highly skilled activity for which an extensive background knowledge and understanding is required, and also a capacity for original thinking and the ability to spot significant events. It is certainly not an easy

option.” In this respect, my own experience as a journalist helped because I was able to show that I understood what the journalists were doing and what the pressures were. This meant that I could ask the right questions informally, avoid asking questions at times when journalists were stressed, such as on press days or during production crises and show understanding of the impact of lack of staff and resources on newsrooms.

Observation as a methodology also has its limits. As Schlesinger (1978: xxxiii) says “although observational studies have strengths, they also have inherent limitations. Most crucially the means of access are controlled by those that are being observed.” It was certainly true that access for my research depended first of all on initial agreement by editors to allow me to spend time in their newsrooms. Such access is not always easy, and depends on contacts. My contacts with local news editors came from our mutual attendance at my university’s bi-annual NCTJ accreditation meetings (the South London Press and the Times and Independent Series) or from contacts made through student work placements (the Surrey Comet).

It was also true that my observation depended once I was in newsrooms on access to news conferences and production meetings. It also depended on the co-operation of journalists below editor level to provide informal commentary on the stories they were doing and to explain processes which were not obvious to the naked eye. In all cases, my initial access was facilitated by the editor with whom I had negotiated the observation but after that the process took on its own momentum as I started to develop working relationships with the journalists.

Schlesinger (1978: xxxiii) goes on to say of the limitations of observation that “no sociological study, as far as I know has been published on the higher reaches of policy making and corporate planning by media owners and controllers.” It was true that I did not examine policy making and managerial decisions except through the prism of the editors who were the link between the publishers and the newsroom. However, this was because this was not part of my research plan. I believe that I would have been able to interview

publishers had I wanted to, once the initial access had been facilitated. It is worth noting that Born's ethnography of the BBC, *Uncertain Vision* (2005) included substantial study of management and policy making but nonetheless some insights from this work helped me particularly in understanding the initial negotiations necessary to gain access to the study newsrooms in the first place, and the use of material from observation to produce compelling insights into areas of activity normally invisible to members of the public.

### **3:6 Interviews**

During my fieldwork, I carried out lengthy semi-structured interviews with a total of 25 journalists across the three newspapers. This figure comprised almost all the reporters on each of the three news desks, the group editors of all three newsrooms, the news editors of all three newsrooms and the web/content editors of all three newsrooms. Interviews were carried out during my periods of observation, and arranged by word of mouth during informal chats with individual journalists in newsrooms.

The interviews themselves took place in a number of venues. At the South London Press, we used a sofa in the corner of the newsroom. At the Surrey Comet, we used a separate meeting room next to the newsroom. At the Times and Independent, interviews with the group editor, the deputy editor, the news editor and the web editor took place in the boardroom at the Watford office. Interviews with reporters took place in cafes on their respective patches, in Harrow, Finchley, Hendon and Wood Green, all in North London. These interviews provided important insights into some of the negative aspects of being out on patch, in particular the difficulty of finding a place to work which had wi-fi and plug sockets, and was not overwhelmed with noise from children and coffee machines. The task of finding a suitable place consumed a fair amount of the journalists' energy until they had settled on somewhere to which they could return and which was prepared to let them occupy a table all morning.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between three quarters of an hour and an hour and a half. The questions I asked were based on themes driven by my research questions, but I also used my observations to add to the themes I had started with. These themes are listed in Appendix 1.

All the interviews were recorded and journalists were interviewed on condition of anonymity. Although many of them said they were happy to go on the record, I believe that the promise of anonymity gave them more confidence to speak freely, especially when they were criticising their editors or managers or discussing the work and attitudes of their colleagues. All the journalists interviewed signed University of Sheffield-approved forms confirming that I had explained the purpose of the interview and how the information would be used.

All the interviews were later transcribed by me. I used these transcripts to identify the overarching themes which emerged across the interviews, and colour coded them for use in my findings chapters. These transcripts, copies of all the print editions produced during my fieldwork and conference schedules comprised the original material for my findings chapters, alongside a detailed field diary, and an observation checklist (noting what I was looking for and when and where I had observed events). I observed certain set events (for example news conferences) but I also spent quite a lot of time observing and noting the rhythm of the newsroom, who went in, who went out, where they were going, who said what to whom and where the apparent tensions were. It was clear from the first day at the South London Press for example that there were tensions between the editor and the chief reporter when he answered her query dismissively in front of the whole newsroom.

The interviews were a vital source of both factual information and critical opinion about the nature and role of local journalism, the impact of change, the way news agendas worked, the way people interacted with each other, who had the power to make decisions and control over processes and content, and most importantly, how their identity as journalists had been shaped and reshaped through change during their careers. Some interviewees, particularly at the South London Press, had worked on other

local newspapers outside London, which gave them valuable perspectives on the challenges of working on London local newspapers.

As Wisker (2008:193) says, interviews are useful for gaining “information based on emotions, feelings, experiences; information based on sensitive issues and information based on insider experience, privileged insights and experiences.” The interviews were also important for providing historical context to the current state of the newsroom. Observation alone could not provide me with this.

### **3:7 Content analysis**

Although my main methodological focus was on observation and interviews, I also did a small quantitative content analysis of the news story sources in the editions of the newspapers produced during my time of observation. I was particularly looking to find patterns in the types of stories covered and in the number and type of source used. I was not originally planning to carry out a content analysis but as interviews and observations took shape, such an analysis appeared to be a useful tool for assessing journalists’ output against what they said and did in interview and observation. In particular, a content analysis was useful for examining the extent to which journalists relied on a narrow range of sources and the number of stories in which there was only one source.

One of the values of content analysis as a methodology is that it allows us to identify problems which might need to be addressed. (Priest 2010:84) says: “Media content analysis can help evaluate and sometimes improve media performance, provide input that is relevant to media policy decisions, and help assess the effectiveness of information or advertising campaigns.” The coding framework was based on that used by O’Neill and O’Connor (2007) in their study of local journalists’ use of sources and the way that sources shaped the news agenda. The analysis for this research covered 117 news stories in the South London Press and the Greenwich and Lewisham

Mercury; 68 news stories in the Surrey Comet and Kingston Guardian and 118 news stories across the seven papers of the Times and Independent Series. The analysis covered only news pages and did not cover features, editorials or letters pages. Stories were categorized under their primary source in 18 categories: police; court/tribunal; local government; charity/other 'feel good'; education; quirky; commercial; culture/sport; public bodies; readers; action groups/residents' associations; fire service; councillors; Greater London Council; health service; transport; MPs; national government.

### **3:8 Theoretical framework**

The research draws on a number of sociological and cultural theoretical frameworks, building on previous ethnographic work in newsrooms, to underpin its findings on journalists' image of themselves as journalists, newsroom work, the nature of news, newsroom culture and how these are shaped by their perceptions of the role of the local press and the nature of "community". These are set within a context of a changing news environment and the way journalists in the case study newsrooms manage change and relate to each other.

A core theoretical focus is on what Schudson (1989) calls the "culturological" analysis of journalistic activity, where sociological theories of organisation, norms and structures intersect with ideas of individual identity and group solidarity, implicit and explicit action and shared understandings of what it means to be a journalist, and specifically a local journalist. It uses Spillman's definition of culture as a process of shared meaning making to examine what Schudson (1989) in his analysis of the sociology of news production of calls the "cultural givens" of journalism – "a given symbolic system, within which, and in relation to which reporters and officials go about their duties (Schudson 1989: 27).

A culturological focus allows for analysis of what Zelizer (2004:194) calls "the collective mindset of journalists – the establishment of certain ways of

knowing, or how journalists came to think both of themselves as journalists and of the world around them.” Within this culturological focus, the research uses theories of gatekeeping and boundaries to analyse how journalists draw a distinction both consciously and unconsciously between themselves as “real” journalists, with training and responsibilities, and non-journalists moving into the news arena and starting to set news agendas. It explores concepts of professionalism and the extent to which journalists use claims of professionalism to assert their independence and autonomy and set boundaries, but also to develop a shared culture and identity. Following Schudson in Schudson and Anderson (2009:92) this research links the emergence of journalistic professionalism to “questions of group cohesion, professional power, social conflict and the cultural resonance to claims of occupational authority.”

This work also uses a number of sociological theories of the way journalists organise themselves in newsrooms to gain control over their work, including beats, routines, and building source relationships. Theories of what makes news and how news agendas are created were used to analyse news choice in local newsrooms and put into perspective discussions observed on the newsroom floor and in conference. Since the aim of this chapter was to explain the reasons for my choice of methodology, and to explain my choice of newsrooms for study, it is time to turn to the case studies in more detail, since they form the core of what is being studied and analysed.



## **Chapter 4 Research findings: case study newsrooms in focus**

This chapter aims to examine the three newsrooms in detail. The first section gives a short historical background to the newspapers and their publishers, showing how the core newspapers were launched in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by individuals wanting to provide local news with a campaigning edge and gradually became part of a process of buyouts and concentration of ownership in the hands of a small number of large corporate publishers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The next two sections focus on circulation and newsroom location, showing how economic decisions by publishers to centralise operations and sell off newsrooms had a significant impact on journalists' working practices and in turn, their occupational identity. The final three sections focus on staffing structures, newsroom organisation and the journalists themselves in terms of age, gender and qualifications.

### **4:1 Historical background**

The Surrey Comet was launched in 1854 and is one of the oldest weekly paid-for newspapers in London. Its founder, Thomas Philpott, a Surbiton printer, wanted to produce a newspaper which would "expose the bad and promote the good" (Duggan 2004). In its early years it covered important subjects like the Crimean War and the 1854 cholera epidemic, but also fought campaigns for better conditions for the poor of Kingston. The paper remained in family hands until 1982 when it was acquired by Argus Press, which in turn sold the newspaper to Reed Regional Newspapers in 1993. The current owner, Newsquest, was formed from a management buyout of Reed Regional Newspapers in 1995, then acquired Westminster Press in 1996. In 1997, it floated on the Stock Exchange and was bought by US media company Gannett in 1999 for £1.57 billion. (Newsquest 2016). The group's website lists acquisitions including Romanes Media Group, SMG plc, Newscom plc, Westminster Press, Contact-a-car, London Property weekly

titles, Kinsman Reeds Ltd, Review Group, Horley Publishing, Dimbleby Newspaper Group, Surrey & Sussex Publishing, Exchange & Mart, and Auto Exchange.

Writing on the paper's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the then-editor, Sean Duggan (2004) outlined the paper's high ideals: "It [the Surrey Comet] has fiercely guarded its political independence and maintained high standards of accuracy and balance. It has provided a vital voice piece for the "little man" as well as being a vigilant watchdog on those in power." The Surrey Comet serves a large swathe of affluent south west London from its offices in Twickenham, stretching out to Kingston and East Surrey and into Wimbledon and Wandsworth.

The South London Press was founded in 1865 by James Henderson, a Scottish radical who had previously been prosecuted for campaigning against stamp taxes imposed by governments on newspapers until 1855. The first edition of the South London Press carried the masthead "A family local newspaper and literary magazine." Henderson sold the paper in 1907 to three journalists, Herbert Norman, Robert Hayes and G.A.N Jones for £1,500, and by the 1960s, the paper was the biggest local weekly in Britain, with a circulation of 114,608 a week in 1965 (South London Press 1965). It had a reputation for hard-hitting crime stories and for being a spring board into Fleet Street for its reporters. One reporter, Caren Meyer, at the SLP between 1945 and 1955, remembers: "The paper, champion exposé and debunker, backed its reporters, relished a good fight and had a go at everything" (Meyer 1965).

The newspaper remained in family hands until the 1990s when it was taken over by Trinity Mirror, which subsequently sold the SLP and its sister papers, the Lewisham Mercury and the Greenwich Mercury, to Tindle in 2007 as part of a package of 27 newspapers for £18.75 million (Tindle 2016). Tindle was founded by Sir Ray Tindle when he bought a newspaper in Tooting, south London with his £300 demobilisation money after the Second World War. The company now has more than 220 titles and a turnover of more than £50

million. Tindle emphasises the company's family origins and local roots, and is a keen proponent of print newspapers. The South London Press serves four inner London boroughs south of the river with significant social problems amid pockets of affluence.

The Times and Independent Series is comprised of seven newspapers, of which the oldest is the Hendon and Finchley Times, founded in 1875 as the Hendon Times and Finchley and Hampstead Advertiser. The paper was split into two separate papers, the Hendon Times and the Finchley Times in 1964, before the two papers were reunited in 1985. The other six papers were launched throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the Borehamwood and Elstree Times launched in the 1940s as the Boreham Wood and Elstree Local; the Edgware and Mill Hill Times in 1961 as the Edgware, Mill Hill and Kingsbury Times and Guardian; the Enfield Independent in 1981; the Haringey Independent in 1982; the Barnet and Potters Bar Times in 1985 and the Harrow Times in 1997 (British Newspapers Online 2013). The newspapers were bought by Newsquest in 1998. The Times and the Independent Series covers a mixed patch of relatively affluent suburban north London in Barnet and Finchley with large Jewish and Asian communities, shading into areas of poverty and deprivation in parts of Haringey and Enfield.

#### **4:2 The economics of the case study newsrooms 2011- 2013**

In the years 2011-2013 during which fieldwork for this research was carried out, local print newspaper circulations generally were continuing to fall and the case study newspapers were no exceptions to this pattern. Falling circulations obviously had economic implications in the newsrooms because lower circulations meant less advertising, which in turn meant fewer pages and a tightening of budgets and resources and staff numbers.

The figures in Table 1 show the total print circulations for each of the newspapers published in the case study newsrooms just before the beginning of fieldwork in August 2011 and again after the end of fieldwork in

February 2014. The figures come from the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC). Until 2013, local weekly newspapers reported circulations twice a year in February and August. From August 2013, publishers could elect to publish figures annually in February.

All the case study newspapers chose to do this, which is why the figures for the end of fieldwork come from February 2014 rather than August 2013. The figure given in the third column of the table below is an average of the whole of 2013 rather than just the second half of the year. The figures are therefore not an exact comparison but can provide an indication of circulation trends and the relative size of the circulation of each newspaper.

The South London Press and the Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury have not chosen to have their figures audited by the ABC since August 2008, so the figures for these papers come from that audit and the most recent figures supplied to the Local Media Works database in July 2014.

The focus of Table 1 is on print circulations rather than measurements of digital performance such as number of unique page visits, because at the time of fieldwork, ABC's digital measurement methodology was not fully developed and the focus of newspaper publishers was very much on print rather than digital, as print was where they were making their money.

All three newsrooms produced a range of weekly paid for and free newspapers, a common pattern in the local newspaper sector. In Table 1, these are designated P/F (paid-for), F (free) or P/F/F (mostly free but also available in shops). Both the Surrey Comet and the South London Press were the paid-for flagships of their respective newsrooms, taking a significant share of newsroom resources, with reporters on the free papers struggling to cover patches on their own and trying to keep up with the demands of print and web. The Times and Independent Series differed from the other two newsrooms in that there was no flagship paid-for newspaper. Most of their printed papers were delivered free through doors or picked up

from supermarkets or public libraries, but also all available to buy from local newsagents. The figures in Table 1 come from the Audit Bureau of Circulation, Local Media Works and [holdthefrontpage.co.uk](http://holdthefrontpage.co.uk)

**Table 1: Print circulation figures for case study newspapers**

Newspaper title	Average print circulation six months to August 2011	Average print circulation 2013 (published February 2014)
Barnet and Potters Bar Times (T&I Series, Newsquest, P/F/free)	25,871	25,321
Edgware and Mill Hill Times (T & I Series, Newsquest, P/F/free)	12,464	12,204
Enfield Independent (T & I Series, Newsquest, Free)	60,359	58,131
Haringey Independent (T & I Series, Newsquest, Free)	18,659	18,154
Harrow Times (T & I Series Newsquest, P/F/free)	43,011	35,716
Hendon and Finchley Times (T & I Series, Newsquest, P/F/free)	26,050	25,601
Kingston Guardian (Newsquest, P/F/free)	29,896	32,283
Surrey Comet (Newsquest, P/F)	7,129	5,153
South London Press (Friday) (Tindle, P/F)	18,942 (six months to December 2008)	15,400 (year to July 2014)
Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury (Tindle P/F/Free)	78,567 (six months to December 2008)	48,812 (year to July 2014)

The figures show a clear downward trend. With the exception of the Kingston Guardian, which put on circulation at the expense of its paid-for sister paper, the Surrey Comet, all the titles showed a drop. However, what is interesting is that the drops in most cases are relatively small, no more than a couple of hundred copies a week in the case of the Barnet and Potters Bar Times and the Edgware and Mill Hill Times over a period of two years and four months. A clue to the reason for this comes in looking at what happened before August 2011. The table below shows the percentage drops in circulation which the August 2011 figures represent. It shows that there were substantial drops in the first half of 2011, from which circulations were gradually starting to recover over the next two years to the end of 2013. The table's figures come from ABC figures of August 2011 and exclude the South London Press and the Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury, which were not audited.

**Table 2: Drops in newspaper circulation August 2011**

Title of newspaper	Average print circulation 6 months to August 2011	Percentage rise/fall from February 2011
Barnet and Potters Bar Times	25,871	-11.7%
Edgware and Mill Hill Times	12,464	-16.3%
Enfield Independent	60,359	-9.4%
Haringey Independent	18,659	-22%
Hendon and Finchley Times	26,050	-20.7%
Harrow Times	43,011	-12.5%
Kingston Guardian	29,896	-6.7%
Surrey Comet	7,129	-5.5%

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation; holdthefrontpage.co.uk

These figures show the lingering impact of the 2008 downturn on the case study titles, which all suffered to varying extents. Paid-for titles like the Surrey Comet suffered especially badly as readers became more reluctant to pay for local news (Ponsford, 2013).

But circulations were starting to recover. The sector as a whole had advertising revenues of £1.3 billion in 2014, the year after fieldwork finished (Local Media Works 2015). Initiatives such as the South London Press's apparently counter-intuitive strategy in a digital age to launch seven paid- for hyperlocal news editions in addition to the main South London Press in June 2012 were also pushing up circulation.

Managing director Peter Edwards reported a 35 per cent rise in net sales at a time when bank holidays and other holidays would normally contribute to a 25 per cent fall (Edwards 2012). Digital traffic was also improving, albeit from a low base (Hollander 2013).

As commentators have pointed out (Franklin 2006; Aldridge 2007), the reason local newspapers are successful despite downturns in circulation and readerships is because they spend as little as possible on editorial. The large newspaper groups, say Franklin (2006:7) adopt a business strategy "designed to maximise revenue, especially advertising revenue, while minimising production costs."

This is why journalists in the case study newsrooms perceived the financial positions of their newspapers as worse than they actually were. The journalists felt a financial squeeze through redundancies, not replacing staff when they left, the shrinking and centralisation of news operations to save on office costs and the increase in workloads created by having to work across print and web. Staffing levels in all three newsrooms were lower at the time of research than they had been within the memory of senior reporters and editors who had been with the titles even a couple of years, confirming the findings of previous recent studies of local news journalists (for example Williams and Franklin 2007; Guylas 2012 in Mair et al 2012; Marsden in Mair et al 2012).



It was obvious from interviews and from observing news conferences that any absences or holidays meant stretching remaining resources to the utmost and requiring journalists to cover patches with which they were not very familiar, with subsequent challenges to working practices and continuity of links with contacts. All these reductions, however, allowed companies to save on production costs and maintain their profit margins.

The trend towards money-saving centralisation of subbing functions (Franklin 2006) had taken root at all three newsrooms to varying extents, with only the South London Press maintaining a subs' desk in the newsroom, with a full production team in the same room as the reporters. The weekly pages of the Surrey Comet, Richmond and Twickenham Times and Guardians were passed [approved for publication] by the editor and assistant editor in the group's main newsroom in Sutton, with reporters in contact only by phone. The pages of the print editions of the Times Series and Independents were passed in Watford by the deputy editor and the content editor, working with a centralised team of subs. There were no reporters in the office on press day, and it was in this newsroom that the traditional print routine of press day with everyone in the newsroom had all but disappeared.

The process of centralising newsroom operations and selling off offices to save costs had an impact on journalists in all three of the case study newsrooms. The areas covered by the three newsrooms are shown on the London boroughs map below, with the South London Press and Mercury in green (covering the boroughs of Wandsworth, Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham and Greenwich); the Surrey Comet and Kingston Guardian in blue (Kingston and Richmond); and the Times and Independent Series in red (Harrow, Barnet, Enfield, Haringey).



As can be seen from the map, each of the newsrooms needed to cover a wide geographical area. This meant that journalists were not necessarily close by when stories broke, which created practical difficulties in travelling to where the news was happening and made journalists more inclined to cover stories from the office instead of getting out and seeing what was going on for themselves. It also meant that their offices were physically often not in the geographical patches that they covered, which made them more distant from some of their readers.

Distance was a particular issue for journalists on the Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury, who were based in the SLP office in Streatham (Lambeth), nearly an hour's drive away from their patch. It was also an issue at the Surrey Comet and the Kingston Guardian, whose news patch was the Royal Borough of Kingston (Kingston, Surbiton, Tolworth, New Malden and surrounding areas) but who had been moved from their office close to their patch the year before fieldwork took place to share the

offices of the Richmond and Twickenham Times in Twickenham, (Richmond) again the best part of an hour's drive away.

The Times and Independent journalists had recently moved to Watford, well outside their patch and outside the Greater London boundary, following Newsquest's decision to sell their office in Hendon for £1.2 million to Tesco and move the Times and Independent in with the Watford Observer, also owned by Newsquest. The loss of the Hendon office was a big blow to Times and Independent journalists and at the time of fieldwork with this news team, they were adjusting to working on patch via laptops after having moved out of Hendon in March 2013.

Although there was nothing to stop them going into the Watford office, distance made this impractical for most of them.

#### **4:3 Newsroom organisation**

##### **4:3:1 South London Press and Lewisham /Greenwich Mercury**

The South London Press newsroom was the most traditionally organised of the three. The group editor had overall responsibility for the paid-for bi-weekly South London Press, published on Tuesdays and Fridays, and its free sheet weekly sister papers, the Lewisham Mercury and Greenwich Mercury. The South London Press had its own deputy editor and news editor, working alongside a chief reporter and three full-time reporters, all of whom had their senior reporter's National Certificate Examination (NCE) qualification from the industry training body, the National Council for the Training of Journalists. (The NCE has now been replaced by the National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ) but this thesis will refer to the NCE as this was the exam taken by journalists during the period of fieldwork). Journalists obtaining their NCE were trained and

entered for the exam by their employer after working for minimum of 18 months. In addition, there was a senior reporter covering arts news and features. Working part-time were four more reporters working on the Greenwich and Lewisham Mercury. Day-to-day editing of the Mercury series was the responsibility of the content editor, who also had responsibility for the websites of all three papers. The website was an afterthought, consigned to carrying quirky stories which would not scoop the South London Press's print editions and jeopardise sales. Proprietor Sir Ray Tindle confirmed his attitude that the internet was not at the core of his strategy. "We have all taken a caning in the regional press but we are fighting back and winning. The local newspaper industry will survive this current recession and it will live with the internet" (Tindle 2013).

As in all the newsrooms, newsgathering was divided into "patches" corresponding to the five London boroughs covered by the papers. The best staffed were the most newsworthy patches of Southwark, Lambeth and Lewisham, which also happened to be the closest geographically to the newsroom. The outer boroughs of Greenwich and Bexley had fewer resources. Although there was a crossover between the Lewisham Mercury and the SLP, and stories sometimes ran in both papers, reporters on the Mercury complained of feeling out on a limb. They had no news conference of their own and their news stories were not discussed at the main South London Press conference.

An oddity at the South London Press was that there was no regular reporters' conference, with reporters instead telling the news desk what stories they were working on. The SLP conference was attended only by the editor, production editor and news editor, who had circulated the newsroom before the meeting getting lists of stories from each reporter.

The South London Press differed from the other two newsrooms in that its journalists were almost all seniors, having passed the NCE. Passing this exam gave journalists a salary rise and more responsibility. South London Press journalists had been in the job for much longer than the majority of journalists in other newsrooms (between four and 10 years). In a sector of the industry characterised for its quick turnover, this was a surprise. It

arguably also accounted for some of the feelings of demoralisation expressed by some of the reporters and their marked reluctance to move far away from the most traditional print routines.

Of the three newsrooms, journalists here were most conscious of how their ideal of local journalism differed from the reality and there was an element of defensiveness in some journalists' comments that they were no longer able to go out and find stories. This was partly because most of them had been there long enough to be able to compare the present with memories of a "better time" five years previously, when the paper had been double its present size, and in their memories a paper which did "real journalism". One journalist commented: "We're no longer a paper of record." (RSLP2011).

#### **4:3:2 Surrey Comet/Kingston Guardian**

Like the South London Press, reporters and editors sat in a traditional newsroom, with desks arranged roughly in "departments" (the news desk, the Surrey Comet reporters' desk and the Kingston Guardian desk). The Richmond and Twickenham Times reporters occupied a square of desks on the opposite side of the room. Although they were part of the same company, the RTT had its own journalists and news operation and shared only an editor-in-chief with the Surrey Comet. Research focused on the weekly Surrey Comet and its sister paper, the Kingston Guardian, because this was the larger of the two news desks, a flagship paid-for paper. The Comet offered the opportunity to explore a number of key themes such as the difficulty of being based off-patch, the need to cover patches for a number of different papers and questions of reader relationships in an affluent metropolitan community whose first choice of media would not seem naturally to be the local paper.

The editor had overall responsibility for all the newspapers based in the Twickenham office (the Comet, the RTT and the Guardians). The Comet had an assistant editor, who was also responsible for the Kingston

Guardian, a chief reporter and three reporters (one a senior). One of these reporters was also responsible for the Kingston Guardian.

In addition, there was a web content editor based in the main office in Sutton, who shared with the reporters and the editor/assistant editor responsibility for updating each paper's website. In interview, the web editor confirmed my observation that there was no single system for editing web copy. The amount of editing and supervision depended on how much the assistant editor felt she could trust individual reporters. There was more emphasis on web-first than at the South London Press, (where the emphasis had been firmly print first). As at the South London Press, the Comet reporters were assigned to specific patches (Surbiton, Kingston town centre, Tolworth, New Malden). The patches were smaller than at the SLP or the Times and Independent Series because the Comet's area of operation was essentially just one borough, the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames. A small staff meant that reporters had to cover other patches when people were absent or ill.

Reporters at the Comet had a weekly conference with the assistant editor, which allowed the sharing of ideas but also the opportunity for reporters (most of whom were younger and more inexperienced than at the SLP) to absorb the requirements for a good local story and a shared understanding of journalistic standards. The routines and rhythms of the week were clear-cut, as at the SLP, with the print operation and regular press days a priority, although reporters were also keen to use the web and upload regularly, and to make use of social media like Twitter. Again, this was reporter-driven and the amount of Twitter use depended on the interest of individual reporters.

Morale was generally high, although as in all the newsrooms there were questions in all the journalists' minds about career progression in a small newsroom in which opportunities were limited. Two of the journalists were still trainees and there was an atmosphere of enjoyment and a feeling of privilege that they had got a job in what they recognised was a very

competitive industry.

#### **4:3:3 The Times and Independent Series**

The organisation of this newsroom was the most outwardly radical of the three, in that reporters never all met in a newsroom together. At the time of observation, the new working arrangements had only been in place for a few months, and editors admitted that they were still working out the best way of running and enthusing the news team when they were rarely all together.

Staffing structures were, however, still fundamentally those of a traditional newsroom. There was still clear evidence of traditional routines at the Watford office, with press days for all the papers and a weekly editors' conference. The major departure from traditional routine was that there were no reporters in the newsroom on press day and their involvement in the print editions was minimal. Having uploaded their stories to the web, reporters left editors at the office to choose how to use the stories for the paper. Stories went into the paper exactly as they had been written for the web. The group editor had overall responsibility for all print and web editions (the three editions of the Times series, the Haringey Independent and the Enfield Independent, and also the Borehamwood and Elstree Times, which covered part of Hertfordshire). The group deputy editor and the web content editor shared responsibility for the seven weekly print papers and the corresponding websites. On the news desk were a chief reporter, a senior reporter and five junior reporters. One of these reporters was about to be promoted to "senior by default", having been working at the company for two years but not having yet acquired the 100wpm shorthand required for the NCTJ Diploma, which in turn was required to move onto the NCE. .

The emphasis for the reporters was explicitly web-first and reporters working almost exclusively out on patch admitted they had not seen a copy of the print edition of the papers they were working on for several

weeks. One reporter said the only reason she had seen a copy was because she lived on patch and received one through her door (RTI2013).

However, despite extensive use of new media platforms on patch, in a move to create a familiar routine even without an office, reporters had recently instituted a weekly conference for themselves, attended by the deputy editor and the web content editor. These meetings in a café in East Finchley were described by one reporter as the "highlight" of their week, their only opportunity to meet up, share information and informal discussion, communicate and connect with each other.

Morale was generally high because reporters felt able to get to stories happening on their patch more quickly than their more office-bound rivals from other papers. All agreed in interview that web-first was the only way to work, especially in London, where there was competition from other media. But some, especially those who had been in the job only a few months, experienced frustration that they had fewer opportunities for feedback and the acquisition of journalistic culture by osmosis that they recognised was part of being a journalist in a newsroom. They also experienced some loneliness working on patch on their own and stress that they had a large geographical area to cover, in some cases without a car. Of particular significance for this research was the increased difficulty being out alone on patch created for transmitting unwritten journalistic cultural understandings, not only of content, story choice and news agenda but also the acquisition of language, style and a specifically journalistic way of reporting (Cotter 2010).



This examination of the organisation of each of the three newsrooms shows that there were superficial differences in approach to organisation in terms of newsroom set-up. However, the fundamental structures of a traditional newsroom (editor, news desk, reporters, sub-editing functions, production functions) remained in all three newsrooms, suggesting, as this research argues, that newsroom change was a matter of evolution rather than revolution.

Journalists stuck to the processes and routines with which they were familiar. Even though the traditional pattern in which sub-editors worked alongside reporters in the same office had blurred and the role of the copy editor in inculcating journalistic habits of accuracy, clarity and brevity of expression in less experienced journalists now fell to editors, news editors and chief reporters, newsroom hierarchies were fundamentally intact, even at the Times and Independent Series, where reporters uploading stories to their web pages on patch acted as their own sub-editors. Stories were still edited once up on the website by the content editor and corrected as necessary.

Newsrooms moved at different paces to incorporate changes such as online news and use of social media to gather, share and disseminate news. There was no single model of convergence of web and print. Use of the web and the organisational structures emerging to deal with uploading and updating of web content (such as who would be able to upload, how stories were prioritised, who, if anyone, would edit the copy) depended to a large extent on the inclination and enthusiasm of individual editors rather than management edicts (although Tindle Newspapers' determinedly print-first policy restricted editorial action at the South London Press). The use of social media like Twitter depended to a large extent on individual reporters. There was no evidence of a carefully thought-out strategy but rather of an emerging set of processes to accommodate web editorial into existing routines.

Although the attitude of management had some influence, as did practical issues such as resources, these arrangements would again seem to support the findings of Ryfe (2012) that journalists are inherently conservative and are challenged by change to routine.

#### **4:4 Journalists in the case study newsrooms**

This section aims to identify key personal and occupational characteristics of the journalists working in the three case study newsrooms and put these in a wider industry context.

Table 3 below gives a break-down by job title of the journalists interviewed. The aim of the choice of interviewees was to talk to as wide a range of journalists at different levels in the hierarchy as possible. The numbers below represent all the editors and reporters in the newsrooms during observation periods. Three reporters across the three newsrooms were unavailable because they were on holiday, off sick or away taking their senior exams.

The focus was on editors and reporters rather than production staff because editors and reporters were the journalists in the office who were in the best position to answer the key research questions about journalistic identity on local newspapers, how this was shaped by concepts of professionalism and how this manifested itself in relation to the local community, sources and amateurs challenging journalistic hegemony.

One sub-editor was interviewed on the South London Press because she was able to provide useful insights into attempts by the paper's previous owner, Trinity Mirror, to centralise features sub-editing of the South London Press in Uxbridge, on the other side of London. She was also one of only two journalists across the three offices not to have an NCTJ qualification (see table 4 below). Both of these two journalists (one on the South London Press and one on the Times and Independent Series) had been employed as sub-

editors, who do not require an NCTJ qualification. But the journalist on the Times and Independent Series had taken on the job of reporter on the Hendon and Finchley Times, and so was being required to work towards her NCTJ Diploma (and pay for it herself), despite having an MA in Journalism from City University. The reason for this, according to the journalist, was that she could not be entered for the NCE by her employer without an NCTJ qualification. This was an interesting insight into a system of qualifications which is closed in on itself and unable (or unwilling) to adapt to journalists who have trained outside the local newspaper industry's expected parameters.

**Table 3: Breakdown of journalists interviewed by job title**

Job title	Number interviewed
Group editor/editor	3
Deputy editor/assistant editor	3
Section editor	2
Web editor	3
Chief reporter	3
Senior reporter	1
Reporter	9
Production	1

Journalists in all three newsrooms were highly qualified, in line with the industry trend towards an increasingly well-qualified workforce as editors raise entry bars to control entry to a competitive industry. Of the 25 journalists interviewed across the three newsrooms, 20 (80 per cent) had a first degree (see table 4). This is a slightly higher proportion than noted by the National Council for the Training of Journalists' Journalists at Work (JaW) survey carried out in 2012, which showed that 73 per cent of the 1,067 journalists surveyed were educated to first degree level (JaW).

2012:30). The NCTJ survey included national as well as local journalists and freelancers as well as employees. The Labour Force Survey of 2012 noted that 82 per cent of journalists across the country were educated to first degree or postgraduate level (Labour Force Survey 2012).

The NCTJ, developed by local newspaper publishers and introduced in 1951, is designed to provide local newspapers with “newsroom ready” trainees, trained at their own cost, who have taken and passed their NCTJ Diploma. Uniquely in an industry characterised by its porous entry and lack of formal entry requirements (Singer 2003; Frith and Meech 2007; Conboy 2013) local newspapers still universally insist on possession of an NCTJ diploma as a pre-requisite of employment for reporters.

The requirement to hold a formal industry qualification for a job on a local newspaper provides a clear focus for examining how important this qualification, and qualifications in general, are as part of a journalist’s identity and whether they form part of journalists’ “professionalism”. It also allows consideration of the extent to which NCTJ exams contribute to a culture of cautious conservatism in the three case study newsrooms in such areas as news agendas, news writing styles, choice of sources and the privileging of print products over digital products.

This thesis argues that the NCTJ plays an important part in inculcating “taken-for-granted” news practices (Ryfe 2012) and the ability to produce large amounts of copy written to an acceptable formula, an economic necessity in times of budget cuts and shrinking newsrooms but which can lead to bland, predictable story choice and style.

NCTJ exams are functional rather than academic and their explicit aim is to train new journalists in skills rather than analysis or critical questioning about the nature and role of journalism. Their implicit aim is to mould new journalists into producing stories which conform to journalistic norms of balance and “objectivity”, separating facts from comment, written in the inverted triangle style which creates an appearance of distance (Tuchman, 1972; Conboy 2007) and generally replicating the writing style of previous

generations of local newspaper journalists. The exams are structured so that trainees are presented with a series of quotes from different perspectives and gain high marks for writing a story which includes all these perspectives and thus counts as “balanced”. This moulding process at the beginning of local journalists’ careers sets in train a process of shared meaning-making in which trainees absorb a culture of local news reporting and join colleagues who have already been through the same process of taking and passing the NCTJ Diploma.

Unlike other industry bodies such as the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) which do not set their own exams, the NCTJ is deliberately interventionist and, some providers argue, “overly prescriptive” (Conboy 2013:40), creating detailed syllabuses and marking guides with which accredited courses at colleges and universities need to comply to keep their accreditation.

Because journalism is such a competitive industry, NCTJ accreditation is an important marketing tool for providers, despite the qualification’s shortcomings. Despite attempts to adapt the content to a multimedia age, the NCTJ exams are predominantly print-oriented and determinedly local and small-town in the subject matter of their news tests. Subject matter in recent sample exams includes the theft of champion racing pigeons, funding for a new playground and community centre in a deprived area, plans for a giant waste disposal unit in a residential area and the discovery of a pensioner battered to death in his home (NCTJ sample exams 2013). All of these storylines reflect the news values of local papers but the continuing dominance of these exams, set by local editors, also helps to shape and perpetrate local news values.

As Frith and Meech (2007:142) note: “The paradox here is that while the nature of journalism has changed sufficiently for it to become a graduate occupation with much of its training done by the academic sector, the content of that training is based on the training needs of the industry as it used to be, rooted in the craft of the local reporter.” The essential skills-based emphasis of the NCTJ is summed up on the Want to be a journalist? section of its

website: “Accuracy at all times is the journalist mantra. If you spell a name wrong, print a different [legal] charge or even take down an incorrect quote, it could lead to serious legal trouble. Learning how to take a good shorthand note will instil discipline and ensure accuracy in a fast-moving environment. Knowing the workings of government and public service will help you report the communities you serve as a professional journalist.” (NCTJ 2014). This is followed by a couple of sentences on the need to be flexible and work across platforms in a digital age but the central importance of long-established skills in the NCTJ’s view is clear.

**Table 4: Qualifications of journalists in the case study newsrooms**

Qualification	Number of journalists possessing qualification (total across three newsrooms)
First degree (BA/BSc)	20 (25)
Non-graduate NCTJ Diploma	4 (25)
Postgraduate NCTJ Diploma	17 (25)
MA Journalism NCTJ accredited	2(25)
MA Journalism not NCTJ accredited	1 (25)
Other qualification (Art Foundation)	1 (25)

As can be seen from Table 4, journalists achieved their NCTJ Diploma in a number of different ways. The most usual way, chosen by 17 out of the 25 interviewees, was to take a first degree in a subject other than journalism and then take a fast track (20 week) postgraduate NCTJ qualification at a further education college or through a commercial training provider such as News Associates in London. This path had the effect of emphasising the craft-based nature of local newspaper journalism training because it divorced postgraduate training from a university setting and focused completely on gaining the skills local newspapers wanted when their trainees arrived in the newsroom.

Another option, taken by four out of the 25 journalists, was to go straight into training for an NCTJ Diploma, bypassing university. The number of journalists taking this route included two of the three editors interviewed, a chief reporter and a reporter who had moved into journalism after a career as a picture researcher. All four journalists had been in the industry for between 10 and 20 years and trained at a time when journalism training was much more likely to be carried out in-house (one editor did his NCTJ while working at a news agency) or in a further education college, than at university. Both the editors and the chief reporter had actually been offered places at university but decided to go straight into journalism training, believing that gaining the skills and qualifications necessary for their chosen career was more important than getting a degree. This tallies with NCTJ research, which noted that the younger journalists were, the more likely they were to have a degree (2012:30).

A less common (and more expensive) path to an NCTJ qualification in the newsrooms was to do a full university MA in Journalism accredited by the NCTJ. The advantage of this for students is that they gain two qualifications (an MA and an NCTJ Diploma) in a single year. Two of the 25 journalists in the newsrooms achieved their NCTJ Diploma through this route, one at De Montfort University and one at Kingston University. Journalists on university-based MA courses like these are required to study journalism in its academic

context as well as acquiring the skills necessary to pass the NCTJ's exams. None of the journalists interviewed had a BA in Journalism, either accredited by the NCTJ or unaccredited. One journalist had an MA in Journalism from City University, whose postgraduate journalism course was not accredited by the NCTJ. As explained above, she joined the Times and Independent as a sub-editor rather than as a reporter.

There is some evidence to suggest that obtaining an NCTJ qualification as part of a university degree rather than at a further education college or private provider is growing in popularity. Research carried out by the NCTJ in 2015 shows that of 205 journalists surveyed six months after achieving their Diploma, 47 per cent had undertaken their training at a university, 26 per cent at a FE college and 27 per cent at a private training provider (NCTJ 2015:8). The shift towards acquiring a skills-based qualification in a university setting could have the effect of pushing local journalism further towards "professionalism" and further away from its craft-based roots. However, in the case study newsrooms, journalists with MA Journalism qualifications were in a clear minority. This was partly because the 15 out of 25 journalists who were aged between 30 and 40 (see Table 5) had acquired their Diploma at a time when NCTJ-accredited MAs were less common.

The competitiveness of the industry was cited by journalists interviewed as the reason for obtaining qualifications and being prepared to pay for pre-entry NCTJ training rather than expecting employers to pay. Journalists accepted that the price they paid for a job in local newspapers was to pay for a course leading to an NCTJ qualification, which was a requirement for a reporter's job on a local newspaper.

Once they got their first job, their employer took over the cost of training and journalists worked towards their National Certificate Examination (NCE) in-house. The NCE was the key to promotion and pay rises. But some expressed irritation that there was no money forthcoming for new media training, which they felt was necessary not only for doing their present job but for professional development.



The industry appears happy to accept a state of affairs in which individuals rather than employers pay for training. Joanne Butcher, chief executive of the NCTJ, remarked on this shift in her forward to the NCTJ's Journalists at Work survey (2013:5): "There is a move away from training being related to the current job, being paid for by an employer and being undertaken at work, to training being more related to a job that might be wanted in the future, to being paid for by individuals themselves and being undertaken, in essence, privately and on a voluntary basis outside work."

Training and career development were important for the journalists in the case study newsrooms. As can be seen from Table 5, all three newsrooms were young and focusing on getting on in their careers. Only two of the journalists were over 40, one of whom (52 at the time of interview) had moved into journalism in her early 40s. The youthfulness of the newsrooms was not surprising - local newspapers remain the largest single training ground for starting journalists (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 2010). It was also not a new trend. In their study of the local press on Merseyside in the 1960s, Cox and Morgan (1973:117) say: "The youth of many of the journalists was striking on all the papers." Cox and Morgan also remark on the high turnover of staff, a trend also observed in the case study newsrooms. Most reporters stayed only two or three years, before passing their NCE and then moving onto a senior job elsewhere. The exception to this was the South London Press, where some reporters had been there 10 years.

**Table 5: Age of journalists in the case study newsrooms**

Age	Number of journalists (total)
20 - 30	7 (25)
30 - 40	16 (25)
Over 40	2 (25)

Of the seven journalists aged between 20 and 30 during fieldwork, five were in their first paid job after obtaining their NCTJ Diploma. Four of these journalists were on the Times and Independent Series and one on the Surrey Comet. They had all done unpaid work placements as part of the NCTJ Diploma and two of the trainees (one at the Comet and one at the Times and Independent) had done their placements at the papers where they ended up getting their first staff job. This was an important element in the process of inducting trainee journalists into the culture of the local newsroom.

Of the remaining journalists, 17 were aged between 30 and 40. As the table suggests, this was the dominant age group in the newsroom, and one which contained all but one of the journalists at the top of the editorial hierarchy. (The exception was one editor over 40). The age group included the editors of the Surrey Comet and the Times and Independent Series, the deputy editors in all three newsrooms, and the web editors in all three newsrooms, as well as the chief reporters in all three newsrooms. The important point here is that once journalists had passed their NCE exams in their first 18 months on the job, promotion to senior jobs could be rapid, as turn-over in the newsrooms was fast.

Since this research was carried out, all the reporters interviewed in the three newsrooms have moved on, with the exception of one reporter on the South London Press. Destinations include the national press (the Daily Mirror and the Mail on Sunday), news agencies, specialist publications (Estates Gazette and Police Oracle) and jobs in public relations. One of the three editors remain in post, as does the web editor of the Times and Independent Series. These journalists unsurprisingly, tend to be vociferous supporters of the importance of local papers. Editors are active in training student

journalists, offering work placements and inculcating journalistic culture to forthcoming generations of journalists through NCTJ accreditations.

As well as being young, the journalists lived locally to the patches they were covering. It was initially surprising to find this degree of localism, which is rarer in London than elsewhere because of the high cost of housing relative to incomes, pushing people further out of the capital and forcing them to commute an average of 45 minutes into work in London (Department for Transport (2015)).

Trainee journalists unencumbered by family or mortgage chose to settle on their own news patches because they valued the links this gave them with the people they were writing about. All but one of the 25 journalists interviewed lived on or near the geographical patches they or their newspapers covered. Apart from the obvious reasons, such as convenience of commute, this was considered important for gaining an understanding and knowledge of the area they were writing about, which was part of being a professional local news journalist. Two out of the three editors lived on patch and had done for a long time, while the third lived locally to the Watford office of the Times and Independent Series, although that was off patch.

Those who lived off patch were often apologetic about it and stressed that they were only a quick commute away. The reporter whose patch was in north London but who lived unapologetically south of the river (“I like my “me” time” (interview RTI2013) was rare. Local knowledge acquired by living locally so was so valued by editors that it was often a deal-clincher in job interviews. Both on the Times and Independent and the Surrey Comet, editors quoted cases of applicants emerging successfully ahead of hundreds of competitors because they lived on patch, and even more important, knew about stories and issues that the editors did not.

Some journalists were so local they had been born and brought up in the areas they were now covering, and this was a source of professional pride because they were able to use their contacts and local knowledge. As one

editor said of one of his reporters: "She is a very good example. One of her friends is a friend of the girl who died on the train [a story being covered in that week's paper] so she got onto that profile, we've got tributes, we've got pictures, we got onto the family immediately and that's true of a lot of people here...former girls who've been to Twickenham schools and when you're engaging with readers, if you can say I know that, I did that, people immediately warm to you and they're going to give you more stories" (interview ESC2012).

Local knowledge, journalistic "flair" and the possession of an NCTJ qualification were the key requirements of editors in the newsroom. There was no evidence of sexual or racial discrimination on the part of editors choosing employees.

However, just one out of the 25 journalists was non-white, confirming industry trends and similar findings at other newsrooms, both local and national. The majority of trainees who can afford to pay for journalism qualifications are white, as journalists in the case study newsrooms explained in interview. This perception was confirmed by the NCTJ survey of 2012, which found that 94% of journalists were white. This was just two percentage points lower than the 96% recorded in the same survey 10 years earlier (JaW2002:28). This is even more significant in London than elsewhere, given that only 59 per cent of the population is white (2011 Census; JaW 2012:28).

Journalists expressed concern that this was the case, particularly at the South London Press, which had the most multi-ethnic readership of any of the three newsrooms. "We represent an area with people all over the world but you come into this office and all you'll meet is white people. That's wrong. If half our readership is black then half the editorial staff should be black as well" (interview RSLP2011).

As Table 6 shows, there was more equal gender representation than racial representation in the newsrooms. Although at the time of fieldwork 17 of the journalists in the newsroom (68 per cent) were men and only eight (32 per cent) were women, nothing during observation or interview showed that this was deliberate.

It is also important to note that women were sometimes working in powerful positions. The editor of the South London Press was a woman, as was the assistant editor of the Surrey Comet and the Kingston Guardian, with overall news editing responsibility for both papers. The category of senior journalist includes editors, section editors, web editors and chief reporters.

**Table 6: Breakdown of genders in case study newsrooms**

Title	Total number men	Total number women	Senior journalists	Reporters/ production
South London Press/Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury	5	4	4 men 1 woman	1 man 3 women
Surrey Comet/Kingston Guardian	6	2	4 men 1 woman	2 men 1 woman
Times and Independent Series	6	2	4 men	2 men 2 women

The gender make-up in the newsroom was more unequal at time of fieldwork than that of journalists in general. Data on the gender breakdown of journalists show that the sexes are roughly equal.

According to the 2012 Labour Force Survey, the breakdown was 54% men and 46 per cent women. The NCJ's Journalists at Work survey 2012 recorded a breakdown of 52 per cent men and 48per cent women (JaW 2012: 28).

The authors of the NCTJ survey comment that "there appears to be no difference in the distribution of jobs on a sex basis – women appear to be as

likely to occupy the more senior roles of editorial management and section heads as men.” (JaW 2012:8).

However, the extent to which journalism is as egalitarian as it appears from these statistics continues to be debated. Chambers and Steiner in Allan (2010:49) say: “Women journalists now appear well-established in a profession that, until two decades ago was a male enclave... Yet at the very top rungs of the journalism hierarchy, the percentage of women remains small. They continue to be concentrated in areas considered to be low-status or “soft news” sectors, such as small-town or regional news organisations and community weeklies.”

There was some evidence that journalists interviewed perceived that the gender make-up of the news desk influenced the news agenda. One female journalist on the South London Press suggested that softer stories and longer features lost out to “hard” news because the majority of the journalists making news decisions were men. “It was considered, because it was a male-dominated news desk, that you have hard news and you have soft, fluffy news, which has always driven me crazy because I think soft news is just as valid. Features go first [they are dropped from the paper]. And the hard news about councils and bus services being axed stays, and it’s important but it’s of limited interest in many ways” (interview RSLP2011). However, it should be noted that her view was a minority one. There was plenty of criticism of news desks and news agendas but these criticisms were not framed in terms of the gender balance of the news desk. They were framed as criticisms of the news judgement of one set of journalists to another.

The aim of this chapter has been to describe the workings of the newsrooms and the backgrounds of the journalists in those newsrooms in the wider context of industry trends as a whole and of this research. It sets the scene for the analysis of research findings in the next five chapters.

## **Chapter 5 Research findings: professionalism as a shaper of identity**

### **5:1 Local news journalists: profession or trade?**

Debates about the extent to which journalism is a profession, a trade or a bit of both have preoccupied a number of researchers (see for example Soloski 1989; Aldridge 1998; Aldridge and Evetts 2003; Tumber and Prentoulis 2005; Singer 2007; Schudson and Anderson 2009). The important question for this research is the extent to which journalists see being “professional” as a core part of their identity and therefore the extent to which it is useful to draw on concepts of professionalism to help to explain and interpret the actions and attitudes of journalists in the newsroom.

This research argues that a “discourse of professionalism” is part of (although by no means exclusively) local newspaper journalistic identity. A key question for this research is the extent to which journalists in the newsrooms observed wanted to claim “professional status” and what this meant in practice as part of their self-image as journalists. In the three case study newsrooms, journalists distinguished between journalism as a profession and themselves as “professional” in the sense of possessing knowledge and standards. The possession of skills and the application of these in doing their job was seen by local newspaper journalists as a core professional attribute.

This distinction between skills, which are essentially craft-based, and “intellectual effort”, which marks out the territory of a “professional” is still at the core of the professionalism debate today and is one reason why journalists in the case study newsrooms were reluctant to identify with the label of professionalism.

One experienced reporter said: “I don’t think of journalism as a profession in that there isn’t a clear advancement. And there isn’t an ongoing assessment.

It's about standards and creativity. You've got to be precise but also creative. But you can have someone who walks out of school and is just as good" (interview RSLP2011).

"I was told at college that journalism is a trade. It's a very badly paid profession if it's a profession. But being a professional journalist – yes. We have legal knowledge, we have shorthand, we have public affairs, we check our facts" (interview ETI2013).

This ambiguity comes out strongly in interviews where labels of "professional" and "professionalism" are rejected or qualified. The words "professional" and "professionalism" were deliberately included in a question with no definition or discussion in order to gain a clear view of the journalist's response. Some rejected the label altogether. One senior reporter said: "It's not a profession, it's a trade. It's not like being a doctor or a lawyer. Sure you have to learn the craft and there's a bit of training involved but really this job is just about how you interact with people and how you communicate" (interview RSLP2011).

Others were less dogmatic and more ambivalent about using professionalism as a description. One said: "I don't dispute that [professionalism] but it's not how I'd describe myself. I think as a local journalist you're just a member of the community with a platform to express what people are thinking. In terms of professional, it's not like being a doctor or a lawyer" (interview RTI2013).

There is a consistent reluctance, not only from journalists but also from commentators, to admit to a definition of "professional" for journalists. In his study of specialist journalists, Tunstall (1971:69) asks: "Can a non-routine, indeterminate and segmented occupation like journalism ever be a profession?" He goes on to answer his own question: "It is extremely improbable that journalism could ever acquire the professional attributes to the extent of, for instance, medicine." He reluctantly concedes that journalism could become a "semi-profession", in the way that teaching is a semi-profession.

However, there are a number of reasons why concepts of professionalism have become a potentially useful framework for examining journalism



practices (Aldridge and Evetts 2003), particularly in times of change. One is that sociological approaches and models of professionalism have moved beyond what Aldridge and Evetts (2003:549) describe as “an occupational project of market closure and occupational enhancement” (in other words emphasis on professionalism as a mechanism for deliberately restricting entry and creating economic and social advantage for small numbers of people operating autonomously) to a “new interpretation of professionalism as a means of occupational change and control” (2003:548). This widening and changing interpretation allows a re-examination of the “multiple meanings [of professionalism] in journalism’s own occupational ideology.”

These multiple meanings include adherence to norms like balance and “objectivity” as a mark of professionalism; preserving journalistic autonomy and observing ethical standards of accuracy and truth-telling.

Part of this process of change has been that journalists are becoming much more highly qualified (Tunstall 1996; Aldridge and Evetts (2003) Frith and Meech 2007, NCTJ 2012) and almost all journalists who have joined the industry in the last 20 years are now graduates, or, in a more recent trend, have a postgraduate qualification. This was clearly the case in all three case study newsrooms. This has contributed to making journalism an increasingly professionalised occupation understood in the latter sense. Frith and Meech (2007:138) say: “In becoming a graduate occupation, British journalism has moved away from a craft apprenticeship system, from recruiting school leavers and educating them on the job.”

However the local newspaper sector still retains a substantial element of craft in its training requirements. The National Council for the Training of Journalists exams are essentially craft-based exams which can be taken and passed by level 3 (A level) students. They have a substantial influence on the occupational socialisation of new journalists.

The local news sector is where the old journalistic identity of training on the job and succeeding by hard work and flair intersects and collides with a

newer model of highly qualified and trained journalists who can point to their “professional” standards to defend themselves and differentiate themselves in a changing landscape in which non-journalists are increasingly taking advantage of the web and social media to steer the news agenda.

It is possible to argue that the local newspaper sector is where ambivalence about claiming a “professional” identity is most acute because of the craft-based content of the training and the influence this has on news agendas, newsroom work and relationships up and down the editorial hierarchy. The word “professional” also carried connotations of caution and convention which journalists in the case study newsrooms rejected as a mark of identity. As Aldridge (2007:141) argues: “Consonant with the concept of the craft worker, news journalism’s occupational value system has always exhibited a strong vocational dimension that no amount of intellectual agility or formal training can substitute for innate “news sense”.

Underlining this, a reporter said: “I think there’s a difference between being a good journalist and a professional journalist. My feeling is that to be a good journalist, you have to be very good with people, sources of information. The best stories are off-diary exclusives which come from other people so to be good at your job you have to be good at talking to people” (interview RSC2012).

Journalists in all three newsrooms believed that being a good journalist required flair and instinct, attributes which pushed them beyond the realms of “professional” into “vocational”. The idea of the journalist as creative and maverick persisted in the minds and attitudes of journalists in interview, despite the reality that much of their job was desk-bound and routine, just as in the “professional” jobs they affected to despise. One reporter says: “I was attracted by the romance of journalism, you know racing back to the office to file a story, the cut and thrust of that world” (interview RSLP2011). The myth of the journalistic maverick was a vital element in sustaining journalistic identity and in sustaining a gap between an exciting ideal and a much more prosaic reality.

Some of the journalists interviewed were surprised to be asked what it meant

as a journalist to be professional. One exchange went as follows:

SM If I asked what does it mean to you to be a professional, what would you say?

Editor: Gosh, what sort of answer do you expect?

SM I don't expect any specific answer – I want to know how you'd respond.

Editor: I suppose it means someone who's balanced...It's a really good question, actually because it's not something you really think about. You just come in and do your job...." (interview ESLP2011).

The significance of this exchange is in the last sentence. Journalism, for journalists in all three newsrooms, was not an occupation that could be fully trained for. Good journalists were born not made, and journalists learnt on the job. A senior reporter said: "You can teach people how to do journalism but you can't teach them to be a good journalist....It's the way you speak to people, getting quotes from people and just having general nous about what's newsworthy. I think that's difficult to teach. I've sent trainee reporters to big incidents and they've come back without a story at all. One said, oh no, I got there and the police said there wasn't much going on so I left. You have to be nosy and push yourself to be a bit uncomfortable in places where you're sticking your nose in" (interview RTI2013).

There is nothing new about this characterisation of journalism, especially when journalists are writing about themselves. In a famous phrase, journalist Nicholas Tomalin (1969 in Bromley 1997:174) wrote: "The only qualifications necessary for real success in journalism are rat-like cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability." Journalist James Cameron (1967 in Bromley 1997:170) wrote: "Journalism is not and has never been a profession; it is a trade or a calling that can be practised in many ways but it can never be a calling since its practice has neither standards or sanctions." However, it was not true in the newsrooms studied that journalists had no standards. On the contrary, there was a very clear shared understanding of the standards that journalists should strive for and pass on to upcoming generations.

Although many journalists rejected or questioned the label of professional, it

became clear that they identified being “professional” with journalistic values such as neutrality, lack of political bias, ability to structure a balanced “objective” report rather than an opinion piece and having access to the right people. It is in this sense that “professionalism” can be seen as a core part of journalistic identity. It was also important to journalists in the case study newsrooms to distinguish themselves from the activities of journalists on national newspapers, which were being exposed by the Leveson enquiry during periods of fieldwork for this research. As part of a discussion about the importance of high standards, accuracy and autonomy as part of being “professional, it might have been expected that journalists would mention the Leveson enquiry and the future of regulation. However, the proceedings of the enquiry were almost never mentioned. One reason for this could have been that Leveson himself made it clear that his main focus was on the national press. The two journalists who did talk about phone-hacking and the Leveson enquiry in interview wanted to make a clear distinction between local newspapers, which they saw as upholding journalistic standards, and national newspapers, which, they believed, did not. They saw the need to defend local newspapers. One reporter said: “The first thing people ask is, do you phone hack? Journalists don’t have a particularly good reputation but when people ask me that question, I find myself trotting out the argument that local newspapers have an important democratic role” (interview RSC2012). A reporter in another of the case study newsrooms argued that people still trusted local papers. “Whether any of the [phone-hacking] scandals have damaged faith in journalism, I don’t know. But I still think that people will have some degree of trust in the local paper and will seek it out to learn about an issue” (interview RSLP2011).

## **5:2 The use of “objectivity” as professional protection and separation**

“Objectivity” and the ability to be “objective” have been core behavioural norms for journalists since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when journalism emerged as an occupation in its own right and reporters began to be considered a core part of the democratic process. Writing about the origins of objectivity in the US press, Kaplan (2010:25) says: “Considered a crucial tool for democracy, objectivity supposedly secures a space for neutral, factual information and public deliberation outside the corruption, rancour and partisan spin that normally characterises public discourse.”

Claims to “objectivity” became a key part of journalists’ claim to professional status (Tuchman 1978; Soloski 1989; Deuze 2005; Kaplan 2010). Journalists in the case study newsrooms used the word “objectivity” frequently but their understanding of its meaning was less about a pure separation between facts and values and more in line with Soloski’s definition of objectivity as balance (1989:213). “For journalists, objectivity does not mean that they are impartial observers of events – as it does for the social scientist but that they seek out the facts and report them as fairly and in as balanced a way as possible.” Journalists in interviews frequently used the word “objectivity” when it was clear that they meant “balanced” or “unbiased”.

However, for the purposes of this research, the important question is journalists still considered “objectivity” such an important attribute. It became clear that journalists claimed it as a mechanism for promoting themselves as “real journalists”, differentiating themselves from other non-journalists on

social media and blogs. They were creating protective boundaries to preserve their identity as journalists (Singer 2015) and were invoking the idea of “objective” reporting by themselves as real journalists as part of this process of boundary creation.

The importance of “neutrality” and “distance” were frequently cited by journalists in the three case study newsrooms as key markers of being a “real” journalist as opposed to an amateur blogger. “A professional journalist can take themselves out of it, distance themselves. It’s about reporting the facts, not reporting what you think should happen, your opinion” (interview RTI2013).

A similar concern was not only to be balanced but to be seen to be balanced. Getting confirmation from official sources was seen as a vital part of being a responsible journalist. “A lot of the time they [non-journalists on social media] will put stories up [on Twitter] before they’ve even checked them. One of the stories they did was about a woman being beaten up outside Sainsbury’s in Surbiton. We heard about it at the same time, but they just stick it up there. They don’t bother to phone the police. It was a genuine story but we can’t put it up until we’ve got a police line” (interview RSC2012).

Stories criticising the council without a quote from the council were spiked or became down page stories. A journalist with a story for the South London Press about a pensioner who died in a council flat fire because smoke alarms were allegedly not working said: “I need a quote from the council to be able to write the story.” The council was refusing to comment (observation December 2011 SLP). Editors put reporters under pressure at news conferences to get detailed responses. A reporter covering a story about councillors not paying council tax protested that he had already called the council for a comment, only to be told by the editor: “We need to know names – don’t take no for an answer” (observation, news conference Times and Independent July 2013).

These attitudes were for journalists a marker of standards but they can also be seen as a further move to use claims of professionalism to emphasise the difference between traditional journalists and users of social media. In addition, such claims were a protection against come-backs and complaints from official sources and challenges from critics on social media. Even when a comment from a police or council spokesman was anodyne (as in many cases) and added nothing to the story, the quote needed to be there.

This supports the findings of Tuchman (1972) that claims of “objectivity” are used by journalists as a protective device to absolve themselves from blame and potential libel actions. As part of a “strategic ritual” of objectivity, Tuchman (1972 in Tumber 1999: 304) argues, a journalist, like other professionals such as doctors or lawyers, “must be able to protect himself, to state ‘I am an objective professional.’ He must be able to develop strategies which enable him to state ‘This story is objective, impersonal, detached’.” One key element of the strategic ritual is the presentation of supporting evidence in a story. This is particularly important on the local stage in which local journalists recognise the need to nurture good relationships with regular contacts and any mistakes are instantly noticed and pounced on. As Aldridge (2007:57) says, there are sound commercial reasons for journalistic back-covering. “Inaccuracy of any kind is immediately obvious and promotes an adverse response, whether it is carelessness with spelling of names, factual errors in the account of a major event or casual condemnations of people or behaviour.”

### **5:3 Professionalism as a discourse of control**

The sections above have focused on ways in which journalists in the case study newsrooms use a discourse of professionalism as a means of controlling and protecting their traditional role and territory against non-journalistic newcomers, while at the same time challenging and rejecting the label “professional” as a description of their own position.

For many of the journalists interviewed, the label “professional” implied caution and conventionality, the opposite of the image they liked to have of themselves as journalists. Despite the reluctance to accept the label of professional, however, there was an acceptance of the existence of what Evetts (2006:140) calls “occupational professionalism” , which involves “discretionary decision-making in complex cases, collegial authority, the occupational control of the work... it is operationalised and controlled by practitioners themselves and is based on shared education and training, a strong socialisation process, work culture and occupational identity, and codes of ethics that are monitored and operationalised by professional institutes and associations.” There was certainly a shared understanding of what professionalism meant to journalists in the context of the case study newsrooms, and it was self-policing. Journalists knew the standards that were expected of them and expected the same of others.

In the newsrooms studied, there was less evidence of the use of a discourse of what Evetts (2006:140) calls “organisational professionalism” or use of professionalism by management as a means of controlling behaviour. Claims that professionalism is used by organisations as a means of controlling the behaviour of journalists (an unstable and unpredictable occupation) in the workplace were put forward by commentators such as Soloski (1989: 212): “To facilitate control in the workplace, management has come to rely on professionalism to control the behaviour of its key employees. Professionalism, then, must be seen as an efficient and rational means of administering complex business organisations.”

Evetts (2006:140) advances this argument by appearing to suggest that an element of negotiation is developing in this discourse of control and that an “appeal to professionalism” is now being used by managements across workplaces as a discourse of control in a changing work environment generally.



Core elements of “organisational professionalism” include the standardisation of work practices, accountability, target setting and performance review. (Evetts 2006: 140). Many of these elements are now commonplace (more commonplace than when Evetts outlined them a decade ago) in private and public sector white collar occupations.

A problem with Evetts’ concept of “organisational professionalism” when applied to newsrooms generally, and the case study newsrooms in particular, is that the definition of “management” was complex. There was a management hierarchy but it depended on the perspective of various people within the hierarchy as to whether people were management or not.

Local newspaper editors studied for this research were in a particularly ambiguous position. For news reporters, the editor was an experienced and (mostly) respected journalist who had been responsible for employing them in the first place and subsequently worked with other senior journalists to build up portfolios of stories and train them to pass the NCE to become a senior journalist. Target setting was informal and part of a more general approach to providing feedback. The editor was on their side, against “management”. Management, from the point of view of journalists, (including editors) meant the publishers, who were responsible for money and the strategic direction of the company as a whole.

However from the point of view of publishers, editors were part of management and were required to implement difficult decisions such as making people redundant or moving them to an office far away from their reporting patch. When journalists went on strike, as they did at the Surrey Comet in 2011, the editor was expected by the publisher to bring out the paper rather than stand on the picket line.

Editors’ power to act was circumscribed by financial and strategic restrictions imposed by publishers. Although editors had the power to fire people who were not performing, this was arguably less of an “organisational” than an “occupational” action, motivated by desire to make sure the rest of the team and the reputation of the paper were not let down by an under-performer.

There was certainly evidence of management control over both process and output but there was no evidence in observation that any of the publishers were interested in dialogue about change with reporters on the newsroom floor, in terms of appealing to journalists' professionalism or in any other way.

(Observation of discussions between editors and management were beyond the scope of this research, so it is possible that management appealed to editors' professionalism to help implement changes).

Management generally achieved what it wanted because it held the purse-strings and the power to sack people (including editors). Reporters were expendable, however good they were, and represented a cost. In such a competitive industry, there were always a large number of keen (and cheaper) trainees waiting to step in. When the editor of the Times and Independent Series revealed that he had had 140 applicants for one trainee reporter's job on the Enfield Independent, this was not unusual.

Although journalists like to think they have autonomy over what they write and how they write it, this autonomy is limited by a number of factors. In the case study newsrooms (as in most other newsrooms) the titles themselves were owned by large companies which had control over budgets and resources. In common with other newspaper publishing companies, the focus over the past decade has been on cost cutting in newsrooms and generating large profits for shareholders. Currah (2009:4) comments: "It is unclear at what exactly what point the industry will start to put quality before cost. Executives often profess a serious commitment to remaining local. But over recent decades, they have progressively de-layered newsrooms, pursued unsustainably high profit margins while also indebting themselves to levels that now make long term investment in training staff and technology less feasible."

The process identified by Currah was continuing and, arguably, intensifying. Journalists in the case study newsrooms had little control or influence over decisions which made a substantial difference to their working environment and practices.

These included the imposition of corporately designed website templates which left no room for local initiatives, moving of journalists from one title to another and moving of whole teams to centralised “hubs” far from their communities and reporting patches in the name of efficiency and cost savings. There were attempts to force people to work from home. Section editors were made redundant and their workload added to that of other reporters.

There was definitely plenty of antagonism (Örnebring 2009: 6) towards management, particularly at reporter level, in all three newsrooms, fuelled by an environment of cost-cutting and budget constraints, which curtailed the ability of journalists as they saw it to do their job properly, which in turn had a negative impact on their identity as journalists, which they acknowledged, and which dulled their enthusiasm for change, which they did not. “You know a few more pages are going to get axed. Every time somebody leaves, it takes away the lifeblood of the paper. And I spend time thinking about composing letters to, like, management, top management, Tindle, or even, like, daubing graffiti on their offices” (interview RSLP2011).

The only way for journalists in newsrooms to express their anger at management decisions was to go on strike. Journalists at the Surrey Comet, owned by Newsquest, had gone on strike in 2011 in protest at management’s actions in making journalists on the paper’s leisure section redundant and cutting pagination [the number of pages on each week’s paper]. The cuts meant that all journalists on the paper were now expected to cover leisure, which meant heavier workloads and less time to get original stories. “It [leisure] is soaking up all the time we have to get off our own backs and find news stories, make contacts. The quality of the news is suffering. We’re not able to find those things which would never have come to light if we hadn’t had a coffee with someone” (interview RSC2012).

The journalists who went on strike became members of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), the main journalists' union in order to strike. Striking journalists needed to be members in order to have some protection against being sacked by management for breach of contract but some of the reporters joined up only because of the strike. "I wasn't a member of the NUJ when I first joined [the paper]. But it became apparent – become a member or be the only one sat in the office. I thought, OK I'll join" (interview RSC2012)

This young reporter was one of many journalists for whom membership of the NUJ only became a priority in the face of strike action. Membership of the NUJ is by no means automatic in today's newsrooms and the union is no longer able to exert pressure through operating a closed shop as it could before Rupert Murdoch made a decisive move to break the power of unions, including the NUJ, by moving his news operations to Wapping in 1986. Before 1986, the key aim of the NUJ was to control entry to the industry by imposing a closed shop, then using the power of their universal membership to exert pressure on management to improve pay and conditions or face all-out strikes (Gopsill and Neale 2007). Now, the NUJ has a patchy membership in an economic and political environment which is much less favourable to traditional trade unionism

Faced with this loss of power and influence, the NUJ (2015) has moved to assert the claims of its membership to "professionalism" and to link claims for better pay and conditions much more explicitly to the importance of maintaining quality journalism, preserving press freedom and upholding ethical standards through its code of practice. It identifies "professionalism" as a core attribute of its members: "We strive to improve the pay and conditions of our members and protect and promote media freedom, professionalism and ethical standards" Like the majority of its members, the NUJ uses "professionalism" in the sense of occupational professionalism rather than in the sense of the possession of a particular set of traits.

NUJ membership is now seen by many journalists as a marker of a professional identity, in which journalists are bound by the union's code of conduct, and through which strike action is a defence of the ability to maintain high journalistic standards, as well as better pay and conditions.

As a senior reporter on the Surrey Comet said: "It [the strike] was a sense of sending a really clear message to the company that we value the newspaper and we want to work for a newspaper that we think is professional and that we're able to write original copy and feel good about ourselves as professionals" (interview RSC2013).

## **Chapter 6 Research findings: the culture of the local newsroom**

The last chapter explored the importance of concepts of professionalism in shaping the identity of local news journalists. It was argued that professionalism, defined as having high standards of accuracy and adhering to journalistic norms of balance, neutrality and ethical responsibility, was a key element of journalistic identity, even if many journalists were ambivalent about the label of “professional”. It was suggested that shared ideas of what constituted professional standards formed an important part of local news journalists’ identity. The chapter also argued that journalists used concepts of professionalism both to differentiate themselves from amateur bloggers and users of social media, and also as a protective mechanism to bolster reputations and defend themselves against potential criticism.

However, professionalism is only a part of what constitutes journalistic identity. This chapter focuses on the question of how processes of shared meaning-making within newsrooms influence and shape identity. It was possible to identify elements of a shared culture, in the sense of shared meaning-making, across the three newsrooms. These elements included the shared NCTJ training process which introduced trainee journalists to local news values; a shared belief in the continuing importance of local newspapers and their distinctive relationship with their communities; the importance of creating and preserving boundaries, and a desire to keep control of news gathering and news creation. In addition, journalists in the case study newsrooms shared what journalists in general share - a love of competing for stories, the desire to get a scoop and a front-page by-line, the longing for a career full of variety and excitement.

However, each newsroom also had its own culture, shaped by its history, its collective journalistic memory of how things used to be, its newsroom relationships and its newsroom organisation.

## **6:1 Competitiveness: a key motivator**

Journalism is an intensely competitive job, both internally and externally as Aldridge (1998:113) notes: “Most news journalism not only takes place in an environment of intense commercial competition but the job is constructed to pit colleague against colleague.” After competing with rival aspiring journalists to get a job in the first place, they spend their time at work competing with each other for space and by-lines (Tunstall 1971; Aldridge 1998) and with rivals to get the story first. When their stories are not used, they are irritated and stressed.

Competitiveness is an important part of a journalist’s identity: positive, active and autonomous, part of the “myth” of the journalist as a daring operator, getting the stories others do not get and making their own luck rather than relying on others. Aldridge (1998:115) says: “The sense of creating one’s own fate is reinforced in much of news gathers’ daily life – quite apart from the rampant political individualism of many newspapers.”

Competitiveness is clearly not unique to local newsrooms. Traits of competitiveness and desire for individual success are visible in every newsroom: national, regional and local. They were clearly present in all three newsrooms studied and were prime motivators of journalistic activity. Everyone in the newsrooms shared the understanding of the need to compete and the excitement of succeeding (or if they didn’t, they didn’t admit it). They knew that others felt the same way as they did. They did not necessarily need to express this understanding. The understanding was part of the process of shared meaning-making, in which journalistic culture was shaped and developed by mutual recognition of shared goals. Many of the journalists at all levels in in the three newsrooms studied were proud to describe themselves as competitive as a core part of their identity.

One editor said: “I’m very competitive and when a rival beats us to a story it really, really ruins my day” (interview ETI2013).

In free papers as in paid-for papers, journalists in the newsrooms observing treated journalism on a free newspaper with exactly the same seriousness as a paid-for. Observations in news conferences suggested that editorial battles against advertising pressure took place just as frequently on free sheets as on paid-for papers. When questioned about this in interviews, journalists said it was part of being a professional to produce well-researched and accurate copy relevant to readers, regardless of whether a paper was free or paid-for

Getting a by-line, a key outcome of competition to get stories and beat others, was a powerful and exciting motivator for many of the journalists. One web editor who had started his career as a news reporter said: “I’ll always be honest about this – how good is it to walk up to a newspaper in a shop and it’s your name on the front and it’s the greatest feeling in the world. All reporters are egotistical” (interview RSC2012). Another reporter agreed: “I love the thrill of it. I love the thrill of a headline, a scoop. I like to be out in front, my name in lights” (interview RSC 2012). “It’s a big ego thing. I’ve got every by-line, every article. I’ve got 11 scrapbooks at home” (interview ETI2013).

A key part of the journalists’ identity was the thrill of the chase, the need to get to a story before their rivals and to get it into the public domain first. This confirms earlier findings (Delano and Henningham 1998; Weaver et al 2003). Even those journalists who didn’t explicitly describe themselves as competitive often identified the thrill of finding out something that other people didn’t know and getting the story first as a key motivator. These trait of curiosity about others and nosiness, rather than more altruistic ideas of local journalists as the “eyes and ears” of the public (see detailed discussion in subsequent sections) was what had attracted them to journalism in the first place. “I do like to get the right story. I don’t want people to pull the wool over my eyes. I like to get to the bottom of things. Find out something other people



don't know" (interview RSLP2011). "I like knowing what's going on, I like telling my friends what's going on, talking to them in the pub. I like knowing things other people don't know"(interview RSC2012).

The industry's accrediting body, the NCTJ, encourages this attitude in aspiring journalists. In an extension of the idea of having a "nose for news", frequently cited as essential in job advertisements for reporters, the NCTJ (2014) tells new journalists: "Journalists, photographers and photojournalists have to be confident. They have to be ready to knock on doors and talk to strangers in the street. They must be inquisitive and they have to be ready to get the most out of their working day."

Competitiveness was collective as well as individual. In news conferences, a key reason for running a story was either that the competition wouldn't have it or that they needed to get in before the competition. At the South London Press, a council rent rise in Southwark had to go into the next edition of the South London Press otherwise their big rival, the Southwark News would get it. Funding of £7million for a new square in Peckham went in because the Southwark News didn't have it (conference observation November 2011). At a Times and Independent conference, an already strong story about a Harrow councillor who had changed party allegiance four times was even more attractive as a front page because of the belief that the competition would not dare to run it as strongly and Times journalists were able to tap into the mythology of daring crusading journalists challenging the powerful (in the shape of the council). The group editor asked: "Shall we have a headline "Harrow Council in disarray?" This won't be something the [Harrow] Observer will do" (news conference, July 2013). Competition was still seen primarily as being mainly with other mainstream local media rather than non-traditional forms of media such as blogs or hyperlocal websites.

Because the purpose of conferences was to discuss news coverage, journalists openly affirmed competitiveness as a motivator. However, they did not need to spend time explaining to their colleagues why beating the competition was a reason for running a story. Everyone already shared this

understanding. Conference discussions were a continuation of a process of shared meaning-making and a process of performance in which journalistic identity was shaped through interaction with others and in which individuals put on a more or less sincere “front” in the sense used by Goffman (1990).

Individual competitiveness was, however, blunted in newsrooms where journalists felt less motivated and felt defeated by budget cuts, staff cuts and competition from rival news organisations and hyperlocal websites. There was still a process of meaning-making going on but journalists were sharing feelings of demoralisation rather than motivation. Shrinking numbers of print pages which mean fewer by-lines and more copy spiked [rejected] or cut down are a blow for journalists because they strike at the core of journalistic ego and identity. Like all journalists, local journalists felt this acutely and it was a core reason for journalists to feel occupationally and personally diminished. In an informal conversation at the South London Press, the journalist at the next desk got off the phone and said: “I’m trying to find stuff to do but there’s a stage when I think, why bother? I write about six leads a week but a lot of them aren’t used. There’s no space. We should be getting more into the web – everyone else is updating their websites and we’re about 10 days behind” (observation November 2011).

But competitiveness was tempered in all three newsrooms with a strong altruistic streak in which many journalists expressed or demonstrated a strong duty and enjoyment in helping readers even if this obviously wasn’t going to lead to a story. For example, one journalist on the South London Press had a long conversation with a reader about a broken washing machine and gave her contact details for Trading Standards, although it clearly was not a story (observation November 2011). If it did lead to a story, there was pride in being able to shortcut bureaucracy and officialdom to help a reader with whom they were likely to have future contact.

This was part of what constituted a specifically local newsroom culture, stemming from the stronger community ties local journalists had with their readers compared with nationals. (Franklin 2006; Aldridge 2007). Readers

clearly saw the local paper as a source of help and advice. One editor said: "We act as a resource for the community. Someone rings us because they're homeless and we can give them a contact number or give them a number for the Citizens' Advice Bureau." (discussion during South London Press observation).

Another editor said: "The number of times someone's phoned up about a problem they've been having, you phone the council press officer and it's sorted before deadline which they'd never have had with out your help and input. Then they phone back and thank you. If you're on a national you'll do the story and move on. If you're working on a local paper, you're going to see that person again" (interview ESC2012). Reporters got high job satisfaction from close reader contact: "I really like it when people email me and say thanks a lot for your article and what you've done" (interview RTI2013).

Altruism was, however, tempered with realism and the recognition that a journalist needs a constant flow of readers with stories. "It's just a case of you have to remember that you need these people to call and they might be a nightmare and take a heck of a lot of your time. However, politeness really does pay off" (interview RSLP2011).

Case study newsrooms were also collaborative and to a varying extent mutually supportive. There is always a tension in journalism between individual competitiveness and ego and the need to subsume individual egos and work as part of a team to bring out a paper or update a website. However, three months of observation yielded no evidence of editors visibly losing their tempers or yelling at reporters to bring in stories. There was no culture of bullying, unlike in many national tabloid newsrooms such as the Sun or the News of the World (Chippendale and Horrie 2005; Lance Keeble and Mair 2012). There were of course tensions between individual reporters and disagreements with the news-desk and news choices (voiced in interview rather than directly to the news desk).

Journalists in all three newsrooms independently and without prompting from the interviewer commented on how much they liked their colleagues. “I feel really happy at the moment. I feel like we’re a team and everyone’s helping each other, which is vital” (interview RTI2013). “We have a great atmosphere here. The editor’s a great boss. And we have great journalists. I like every single person in that room” (interview RSC2012).

But levels of collaboration varied in proportion to the amount of stress and tension in the newsroom. Where journalists had been in a job for a long time and felt trapped and unable to move on because of lack of jobs elsewhere (particularly the case at the South London Press), there was more criticism of news desk decisions on story selection, and more fallings-out and refusals to speak to others. It was noticeable that those newsrooms which had larger proportions of trainees to seniors (the Surrey Comet and the Times and Independent Series) had a more obviously mutually supportive culture, possibly because there was more obviously a collective need to induct trainees into the mix of competitiveness, community awareness and teamwork, identified in this chapter as part of the culture of local news journalists.

## **6:2 Introduction to a local news culture**

The initiation of new journalists into the mindset of local newspapers starts not with their first job in a newsroom but up to a year before that, when they are studying for their National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) diploma. Editors in all three newsrooms, who were all themselves graduates, said they would not consider any applicant without an NCTJ diploma, which they used as an indicator of basic competence, but also of “professional” attitude.

One editor said: “The NCTJ is important. Training is important. And it goes right down to whether the work placement person turns up in a tie or not, how careful you are about your copy, what checks are made” (interview ESLP2011).

However, the NCTJ is also important to local newspaper editors because it is familiar. The news values of the NCTJ both shape and reflect the news values of local newspaper editors who have gone through the NCTJ training process and are now accepting and training new journalists in the same mould. Not only have they all gone through the process of obtaining NCTJ qualifications themselves but they also have a big hand in designing the syllabus and regulating its provision through sitting on NCTJ accreditation panels. Editors are in a position to insist on the inclusion of syllabus elements which will give them the most confidence in journalists out on the job. For example, in a digital age in which journalists can record interviews on smartphones and are becoming increasingly focused on Tweeting and live-blogging news, some have questioned whether all journalists should continue to be required to take shorthand notes at 100 words per minute (wpm) (Higgerson 2015 in Dyson 2015). But more editors argue that it is not only important but, vitally, gives the editor the security of knowing a journalist is going to get the job right (Whitlock 2015 in Dyson 2015).

A journalist already trained in shorthand is from this point of view more valuable than one who is not, and arrives in the newsroom work-ready, at no cost to the employer. The NCTJ Diploma is used by editors as a sign that a trainee journalist has reached a certain standard. But it is also used in newsrooms as a method of controlling entry to a very competitive industry. Although 80 per cent of the journalists in the case study newsrooms were graduates, in line with findings of previous research (Frith and Meech 2007; NCTJ 2012) this was not as important to editors as the NCTJ. In one newsroom, the Times and Independent, the newest journalist was a non-graduate, aged 19 who had beaten 150 other applicants because he had all the components of his NCTJ diploma, as well as living locally, considered to be of key importance in understanding and developing relationships with

readers and sources on a news patch.

All applicants for local newspaper jobs have also carried out periods of work placement prior to getting paid jobs and this helps put into practice the socialisation of local news journalists begun on training courses. A number of the journalists in the case study newsrooms had got their jobs in this way. As one junior reporter explained: "I did my training at News Associates in Wimbledon and I did my Friday placement here at the Surrey Comet... a couple of weeks before the end of my course the editor and assistant editor asked me in for a chat. Which was actually a job interview. And they offered me a job" (interview RSC2012).

However, the success of the NCTJ in persuading journalists of the importance of its qualifications could be described as patchy. Journalists were ambivalent about the idea that the possession of an NCTJ qualification was part of what made them "professional" and they hesitated to accept that it was an appropriate restriction on entry in the way that professional exams for lawyers and doctors were. One reporter said: "I think about journalistic professionalism is that it's about experience and professionalism comes with experience. I don't think having an NCTJ makes you a better journalist. I've known people who've passed their NCTJ and are in my opinion terrible journalists" (interview RTI2013). An editor in another newsroom (who was not responsible for recruiting journalists) said: "Someone who doesn't have an NCTJ but who's worked their way through a newsroom – I count them as a professional. I'd rather a work experience person came in and worked with us in the holidays and I'd take them on tomorrow on the paper and put them through training as they were doing it. I don't think you need a piece of paper to be a professional journalist" (interview ESC2012). This supports the argument that journalistic identity on local papers is as much about a shared culture of learning on the job, flair and people skills as it is by concepts of professionalism in which qualifications play a key part. The NCTJ is used as a device for controlling entry but its usefulness to editors is as much in its nature as a craft-based qualification which indicates basic acquisition of skills as in its ability to control numbers.

Once new journalists have been offered a job, they continued to be supported by the other members of the team, both informally and formally through supervision and guidance. Such support was seen as vital for inculcating an understanding of journalistic norms such as accuracy and “neutrality” for the career development of the new journalist (Breed 1955). But from the point of view of preserving journalistic routines (Tuchman 1972, 1978), for the sake of the rest of the team and smoothness of output, it was important that new journalists could work productively and co-operatively as soon as they started. This was important in newsrooms which were running on a shoestring in terms of staff numbers and could not afford to have anyone underperform. The attitude was instrumentalist) but ultimately seen to benefit both the individual journalist and the news team.

Support took a number of forms, both informal (supplying contacts, discussing stories, encouraging new trainees or those on work placement) and formal (editing stories, copy clinics, helping trainees put together portfolios and gain experience to pass their senior exams). When a journalist working for her senior exams needed experience of covering an inquest for her portfolio at the Times and Independent, for example, the editor put her on a suitable story. “Yeah, we try and identify that... three months before she did her exams she still hadn’t done an inquest, so it was like, actively, let’s get you out on an inquest” (interview ETI2013).

### **6:3 The importance of the newsroom**

Central to journalistic activity was the newsroom, a space in which new journalists absorbed news culture and senior journalists passed it on to trainees. It was a backdrop against which journalists interacted with each other and shaped their identity. The newsroom was also the physical manifestation of the local newspaper's presence in the community, which is part of the reason why moves by local news publishing companies to centralise titles in locations far removed from the patches they serve had a negative effect on journalistic identity in the newsrooms studied.

Zaman (2013:824) suggests that the news room as a physical space exerts an important influence on journalists' interactions with each other and readers: "The newsroom is at the same time a material and a symbolic space epitomising complex interactions among different groups in news media. Journalists live and breathe in the newsroom, they work in it, defend it and criticise it, imagine it and experience it in so many different ways."

The existence of a newsroom was seen by journalists as both a trap and a necessity - a tension of identity. It was a trap to those journalists in the newsroom who felt unable to go out and do the job they were trained to do and felt was their professional role, because of shrinking staff numbers, and instead found themselves rewriting press releases.



It was a necessity to those whose newsroom was so far off patch that few of them were ever able to go there. In the absence of a convenient newsroom in which to meet, journalists created their own meeting space in a north London café. The new media ideal of a roving journalist with a laptop did not take into account the intense sociability of a shared journalistic culture.

But whether the newsroom was actual (at the South London Press and the Surrey Comet) or virtual (at the Times and Independent Series), the newsroom was where journalists connected, found shared meaning and absorbed attitudes from their colleagues around them.

It was, of course, true that journalists in the newsrooms studied engaged with readers over social media, spent time emailing and talking to contacts on the phone, going to courts, covering inquests and meeting readers face to face. However, in the case of local newsrooms, the focus on the newsroom as the centre of activity was still relevant. Even if there was no practical newsroom, journalists created one, as at the Times and Independent, because this is where they were socialised, where they learnt what was acceptable and what was not, where they developed an ideology of “professionalism”, (even if they did not want to call it that) but also learned to compete, go for scoops and get by-lines which are a key part of the culture of being a journalist, over and above narrower considerations of “professionalism”.

The need among journalists to absorb a shared culture as well as professional attitudes was very strong and they recognised the importance of learning by what journalist Harold Evans (2000:3) describes as “the College of Osmosis” through watching others work in the newsroom and getting feedback from more experienced journalists on a regular basis. At the South London Press, where everyone, including editors, production and sub-editors were in the same room, this happened informally, with casual discussion and questioning about stories. At the Surrey Comet, there was also constant casual interaction and informal feedback from editors to reporters on stories.

But journalists at the Times and Independent who found themselves working alone on patch from the start found it difficult to develop and sustain a journalistic identity as part of a team after their Hendon office was closed and they had no newsroom on patch. Key elements of local journalistic identity such as maintaining a competitive edge with colleagues and rivals but at the same time supporting colleagues and absorbing the culture of the newsroom were made more difficult.

One Times reporter said: "I very much like everyone I work with and it used to be great when we were in the office in Hendon; we'd all share jokes and the subs as well. And the reporters would come in and out – we all felt very connected, you know? You'd pick up things really quickly because the subs were right there and the editor would come and talk to me about what I'd done" (interview RTI2013).

Working alone for large stretches of the day was particularly difficult for new journalists who complained that they were not able to benefit from feedback because they rarely saw others on the team, especially more experienced editors and senior journalists from whom they could learn. "One of the areas of this job that I find very frustrating is that there is very little feedback, what you're doing wrong, what you could do better. On one hand it's good because you're able to do your own thing, there's no pressure... but I just wish someone would say something or tell me if...in terms of how I've improved" (interview RTI2013).

Editors at the Times and Independent were aware they had to counteract the problem of a potential feedback and support vacuum. "We [editors] have to work harder to make sure that the values, the culture is communicated. It extends to everything from the style book to – it does happen – when press officers or councils lean on reporters. If you're not there to back them up and reassure them, reporters can get a bit scared" (interview ETI2013).

Journalists in all newsrooms needed routines of newsgathering and production and they wanted to see others involved in the same routines. A pattern emerging during the research was that the more the whole team was involved in story discussion and evaluation in conference, for example, the more positive the collective outlook was. In the newsroom where reporters were never all together in one room discussing the news agenda or what stories others were covering was the most noticeably negative.

Some commentators have described the newsroom as a battleground (Zaman 2013) where people had to fight for desk space in a system of hot-desking, working in an atmosphere of chaos and noise. In newsrooms studied where journalists were all together (the South London Press and the Surrey Comet) the opposite was the case. The sense of calm and order was palpable, quite startling to an observer used to a newsroom of ringing phones and loud editors.

There were a number of reasons for this, not all positive, and these served as a physical reminder to journalists of how their paper had changed, in their view for the worse. At the South London Press, journalists reported that fewer people called the paper because journalists did not have time to follow up stories (observation December 2011), alienating contacts when stories they had supplied or helped with were not used.

There were also fewer journalists in the newsroom because of Tindle's policy that journalists should not be replaced when they left. This mean empty desks and less newsroom action, including ringing phones and colleague interaction. During a coffee break at the local café, one reporter on the South London Press said: "We used to get people coming in on work experience and we wouldn't know where to put them. Now there's plenty of space " (observation December 2011). Emails had replaced phones, which explained why phones didn't ring but journalists sometimes felt overwhelmed with the numbers of emails they received.

A calm office was not necessarily considered to be a good thing. “It’s not really a very aggressive environment here. You don’t get people shouting. It’s quite relaxed – almost supine. And it all feels a bit depressing” (interview RSLP2011).

Journalists on all three newspapers but particularly the South London Press as the most demoralised newsroom of the three, tended to blame external factors, such as shortage of pages or shortage of time, for a lack of pace. This was of course an economic issue, as pagination shrank because of the downturn in advertising, in common with the local newspaper sector generally and budget cuts meant fewer reporters in newsrooms.

However, a conservative culture in which innovations such as sustained use of social media and networking with bloggers and creators of hyperlocal websites was not encouraged, and journalists were focused on remembering how things used to be, meant that newsrooms became a retreat from the reality of an increasingly complex media ecology.

The findings discussed in this chapter suggest that the development of a shared newsroom culture is a complex and delicate process, which goes beyond analysis of structures, organisations and occupational roles. The processes of shared meaning-making can create a culture that is by turns positive (competitive, determined, collaborative) and negative (demoralised, bitter, inward-looking, conservative), driven by internal newsrooms relationships and competing priorities as well as by external factors such as economic downturn. Individual journalists can and do reject the prevailing newsroom culture at times, anxious about their own careers and development. But they need and crave connection with colleagues in the setting of the newsroom, or failing that, in a substitute gathering place, in which they can sustain and shape a journalistic identity.

## **Chapter 7 Research findings: the local newsroom in a digital age**

### **7:1 The local newsroom in a digital age: evolution, not revolution**

The previous two chapters have explored ways in which journalistic identity is shaped through the prisms of professionalism and the shared creation of a newsroom culture. This chapter will consider the impact on journalistic identity in the case study newsrooms of changing technologies and an evolving news ecology (Anderson 2012) in which non-journalists use websites, blogs and social media both to produce their own news and comment and also to comment on stories produced by “professional” journalists. Key challenges in all newsrooms, not just the three observed, include the need to produce more copy faster and more frequently as the demands of web updating grow, the need to work across print and online platforms and develop new skills, and the handling of changing relationships with readers and sources.

It appeared to many commentators (Gillmor 2006; Beckett 2008; Shirky 2008; Singer et al 2011; that they were witnessing the emergence of a new media landscape, in which traditional journalistic roles of gate-keeping, and news agenda-setting were blurring and that what was emerging was a new type of “networked journalism” (Beckett 2008:46) “which takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now; professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers ideas, perspectives.”. Journalism was no longer linear (journalist to audience) but networked (journalist as one element in the newsgathering and news telling process).

At the same time, commentators were starting to grasp the potential and power of the internet for online journalism and multimedia websites which

told stories not just textually but through “packages” of still images, video, graphics and hyperlinks, opening up to reader and wider public interaction (Deuze 2005; Bivens 2008). Later studies (for example Currah 2009; Hermida 2010; Singer et al 2011) explored the role and potential for journalism of social media such as Twitter. To be able to create multimedia, journalists were having to learn a new set of skills and divest themselves of the idea that print and online journalism were separate and should not be handled by separate teams within the newsroom.

Reporters were increasingly expected to work across both print and online platforms as part of a process of newsroom convergence and web and print should work together to break news and put it into context. As social media developed into a tool for members of the public to break news and comment on events, journalists experimented with new story-telling methods like Liveblogging, becoming more like curators of content than journalists (Bruns 2006).

As this chapter will show, journalists in the case study newsrooms were ambivalent about digital changes and the impact this had on their working practices and environment. This ambivalence was closely linked to the impact of change on their self-image as journalists and their journalistic identity. Technological developments such as online news, video story-telling and multimedia were in principle strongly positive developments as they allowed journalists to perform their professional task of breaking news and telling stories. New(ish) technologies such as laptops and mobiles, which allowed journalists to operate on patch were positively viewed for the same reason. Interaction with readers and members of the public was in principle good because it allowed journalists access to the “community”, vital for local news journalists.

However, when changes were implemented in a way which prevented journalists from behaving as journalists, in other words producing accurate and challenging stories fast, changes were viewed negatively.

Over the three years this fieldwork took place, it was possible to see a process of working out the relationship between print and web going on in the three newsrooms, shaped by factors such as management attitudes and pressures but also shaped by the tension between journalists' innate conservatism (Ryfe 2012; Anderson 2013) and their desire to develop the skills to work competently in a digital environment. The print/web relationship was very much a work in progress, as evidenced by the confusion over newsroom roles and who had responsibility for uploading copy to the website.

## **7: 2 Print v web: an unresolved tension**

By 2011, local publishing companies had accepted that the internet was not a flash in the pan and that their titles needed websites as well as print editions. What publishers were looking for was a flow of income from advertising revenue, which was becoming more and more difficult to achieve following long-term downturns in revenue and circulation exacerbated by the recession of 2008, and the migration of lucrative classified advertising to the internet which were decimating local newspapers' traditional business model (Franklin 2006; Franklin 2008; Curran 2010; Guylas (2012) in Mair et al 2012). At the time of the fieldwork, advertising revenue from websites was much more elusive, with print editions still bringing in most of the money, a pattern which had been identified as a long-term problem (Franklin 2009).

Local news journalists saw the web, as well as new media technologies such as video, and social media such as Twitter as positive developments. As O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008: 367) found in their study of European journalists: "Journalists as a group are not only more than comfortable with the internet, having adopted it with relatively little difficulty but now view it as

essential. There is little technophobia in evidence.” The desire among reporters was that print and online should work together in what Fenton (2010 in Allan 2010:558) called “the continuum between the online and offline words that exist in a relationship of mutuality and interdependence.”

Opportunities offered by enabling technology like laptops, mobiles and an accessible content management system and the opportunity for generating more money from web hits were being absorbed into work routines.

However, there was continuing tension in all three newsrooms about the extent to which there should be a policy of “web first” and the extent to which print editions should have priority. Some of this tension was management-driven and some was editorial, driven by cultural conservatism. The very same reporters who expressed enthusiasm for the web, for example, then went onto admit that getting a piece in the print paper was much more important to them. This tension remained unresolved to various degrees depending on newsroom organisations and priorities. It had a significant impact on journalists’ view of themselves as swift and accurate providers of information, which was in turn a core part of their identity.

The impact was particularly acute at the South London Press, owned by Sir Ray Tindle, who made no secret of his belief that print was his first priority, because print papers were profitable. As a result, thanks to this management-induced tension in which the website was seen as a necessary evil, the website was under-resourced and updated infrequently, with management instructing journalists not to scoop the paper with the website.

An editor at the South London Press explained “The thing about our website is that our publishers have a print-first policy. The exception might be that there’s something that’s so widely known anyway that we should put it up there. That aside, when Friday’s paper comes out we’ll probably put the five best stories from Tuesday’s paper [on the website] and that decision – to decide which stories they could be, there has to be an element of them not being time-sensitive” (interview ESLP2011).

It was an indication of the relative powerlessness of local newspaper editors that they felt unable to object to this restriction on their ability to do their job



and provide online news to their readers. Part of the reason for this acceptance of the status quo was practical, in that they feared for their jobs in a recession. But at a deeper level, the poor standard of their website affronted the professionalism of both editors and reporters because they were not able to deliver the news as it happened, keep up with mainstream competitors and fulfil the core journalist's role of not only knowing what is going on but appearing to know what is going on. This inability to produce a good website was a challenge to their self-image as journalists. Ryfe (2012: 85) says: "In journalism, identity and practice are tightly fused."

The South London Press editor did not believe Tindle's argument that if people could read something online, they would not buy the paper. "There might be two different audiences. The thing about the online audience is that you get a view of what they think very quickly and if it's critical or despairing about the fact that you don't appear to have your nose to the ground as to what's going on, that can be a bit deflating" (interview ESLP2011). Admitting that he was "gutted" by having to work in this way, he added that he was concerned about the publication's reputation suffering from its poor web presence. "There's a feeling out there...probably an unfair assessment of how good a newspaper we are, because I think we do get judged. Because in terms of a younger audience, the under-40s, I'm sure they judge us by our digital online presence. And that's very weak compared to our print presence" (interview ESLP2011).

But because there was little professional pride in the website, the site did not receive the same care and attention as the print editions to make sure pages were accurate. In a telling episode during observation in the South London Press newsroom, a picture of a man standing in front of a burnt out Hindu temple was mistakenly used to illustrate a lead web story about an alleged abduction by a "white van man", and this went unnoticed the whole morning until this researcher pointed it out. The whole story was then taken down and changed to a story about station closures during the forthcoming Olympics, in a haphazard choice of putting up any story vaguely relevant. During observation, the main news pages of the website sometimes went

unchanged for up to five days, while competitor websites such as the News Shopper and the Southwark News, which also had print editions, updated their sites daily (Observation December 2011).

The weakness of the website was clearly a result of management decisions. But it then became perpetuated by reporters who were embarrassed about it as a poor reflection of their professionalism and all but ignored it on a daily basis. As part of the newsroom setup at the South London Press, only one person was responsible for choosing and uploading stories so the reporters had little investment in the website compared with the print editions.

At the Surrey Comet, there was a patchy compromise, depending on how confident the editor was about the reporter and his or her copy, and the website was updated regularly. But again the tension between print and web manifested itself in the attitudes of the reporters. An editor commented: "We have this much vaunted thing, when I first arrived, which is, web first. In theory, it means reporters write a story and upload it. In practice it means very little because it doesn't happen. There's an element of, I want to see my name in the paper first. It doesn't feel like a real story until we've seen it in the paper" (interview ESC2012).

Noting a similar phenomenon during a newsroom observation in 2008, Ryfe (2012:86) suggests that this was because news reporters knew that online journalism did not make money and therefore journalists were not prepared to invest the resources of experience and skill they had built up in a pre-internet age. "Journalists face a situation in which they have invested a great deal of time and energy in acquiring professional skills [...] like everyone else they realise that the future of news lies in online journalism. But from their perspective, they see no reason to embrace that future too soon." Ryfe (2012:25) argues that the culture of journalism in newsrooms "increasingly represents the biggest stumbling block to change in journalism".

Three years after Ryfe observed this, the media landscape had changed to the extent that journalists recognised the importance of investing time in online skills and were prepared to act on this, even though print editions continued to be the main money spinners. For journalists, online was where they needed to make the "investment" in themselves identified by Ryfe and<sub>201</sub>

other earlier research (see for example Singer 2004; Dupagne and Garrison 2006). The opportunity for “upskilling” was seen as an important advantage of cross-platform working and part of a continuing process of “investment”. Ryfe’s idea of investment in resources is a powerful one: “Habits engrained in practice are not simply *rules* that journalists follow, they are *resources* that journalists compete with one another to acquire.” (2012:85, italics in original).

One reporter had resourced himself by paying for an online course out of his own money. “I understood the basics but I thought, I’m not getting any practice doing it here. I don’t have anything on my CV saying I can do it. It’s about gathering professional skills” (interview RSLP2011).

Reluctance of management to invest in resources because of their focus on profits, and particularly the profits from print, meant that journalists were expected to learn new skills on the job if they were not prepared to pay for their own training. As previous research into local newsrooms suggests (Williams and Franklin 2007; Singer 2010), newspaper publishers were not inclined to invest in editorial skills. This angered journalists who recognised not only that their investment in themselves was being limited by management but also because what they produced was not of the standard with which they were happy to be associated.

One senior reporter at the Times and Independent said: “Unfortunately local newspapers could make themselves a lot more popular if there was a bit of investment. We don’t do any video which I think is criminal because that’s what gets web hits. We’ve had no training whatsoever, and it winds me up when the news desk says, well get your iPhone out and record a video and we’ve had no training. As if we can just pull it out of our bloody backside” (interview RTI2013).

### **7: 3 “Give me five stories a day”**

By 2013, when the final fieldwork was carried out at the Times and Independent Series, web-first was accepted practice across many national and local newsrooms. The importance of social media for breaking stories had also become clearer than it had been during the first period of fieldwork in 2011. The case study newsrooms were adjusting to these changes at varying speeds and with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

The Times and Independent had been operating a web-first policy since 2008, partly driven by its owner, the US media company Gannett, which owned Newsquest in the UK. Like other publishing companies, it wanted to “make more money from digital” (Interview ETI2013). A web-first policy, which would work by sending all the reporters out of the newsroom onto their reporting patches armed with laptops and mobiles, would fulfil the editorial requirement of speed and being first with the story, and the management requirement of making money by generating traffic, which would in turn generate advertising.

In many ways the policy worked. Financially, digital advertising was drawing level with print advertising (interview ETI2013). Editorially, journalists had some significant successes in getting stories first. “The [London 2011] riots were key, we were so far ahead of our rivals; we broke it before the BBC. Haringey Independent broke the story of the riots outside Tottenham police station. Bruce was on work experience. There was just a nib, then a bus was set on fire and we put the live blog on. I remember sitting on the liveblog at 12.50 Sunday morning from home then we operated a 24 hour news desk to cover it. That week we got 1.8 million hits and we normally achieved 900,000 a month” (interview ETI2013).

Reporters shared in the excitement of this immediacy, which fulfilled all their hopes of “flair” and being in a position to break news, core elements of journalistic identity. There was general agreement in the newsroom that web-first was the only way to operate. One reporter said: “I think it’s a trick a lot of

newspapers are missing – they're not doing web-first. In terms of revenue, the website isn't as important as the paper but in terms of news.... If you spend an hour in the newsroom, an hour going out, an hour typing it up, you're already behind the competition" (interview RTI2013).

With each reporter responsible for their own web pages, there was a strong feeling of professional pride in doing a good job. Unlike journalists on the South London Press and the Surrey Comet, Times and Independent Journalists saw their web pages as the core of their job and the focus of their journalistic identity. They were out on patch and they, rather than the editors, made editorial decisions about what to cover and what to upload. "In terms of news choice, we're sort of editors ourselves because we decide whether or not to do a story. We don't have time to tell the news desk" (interview RTI2013). Reporters uploaded stories with no prior editing, with editors back in the newsroom taking stories down later to correct them if necessary. Print editions were not a priority for reporters, as editors in the Watford newsroom put these together from copy which had mostly already gone up on the website.

On observation at the newsroom, it took some asking around and some effort to get hold of the latest print editions, the complete opposite of the South London Press and the Surrey Comet where piles of papers were stacked in the newsroom. When papers were available at the Times and Independent newsroom, they were often on the desks of the advertising team, suggesting that one of the print editions' principle roles was as an advertising vehicle.

However, because each reporter was effectively putting together a daily website for their patch, there was a lot of pressure to produce copy. At Friday news meetings, reporters round the table would be finishing their first story of the day by 9am. An editor outlined his expectations: "In my ideal world, I like one good quality lead, one picture story, a decent downpage and one or two nibs which will keep the wolf from the door" (observation discussion ETI2013).

There was little time to check stories and stories on websites checked during observation were short, often without a quote, with some typos and clumsy phrasing. Sometimes overworked editors missed these and they also went into the print edition, which reporters found embarrassing. “I mind about grammar and spelling. There are stories I’ve written which have gone in under the wrong by-line. It’s no-one’s fault – there just aren’t enough people” (interview RTI2013).

As previous research has found (Franklin (ed) 2006; Williams and Franklin 2007; Aldridge 2007; Davies 2008 Phillips in Fenton et al 2010) pressure on a few journalists to produce a lot of copy meant more reliance than editors liked to admit on press releases. There was a constant tension between the achievable and the desirable but also a tension between what journalists believed happened and what actually happened. The day after an editor said: “We’re pretty good on that... You’ll get press releases on the big issues but we’ll very rarely just get a press release and plonk it in the paper (Interview ESC2012), another journalist on the same team said: “What [editors] do is they’ll focus on a story but in the last 10 minutes they’re finding gaps to fill and they’re all press releases” (interview ESC2012).

However, there was little evidence during fieldwork of journalists desperate for stories “cannibalising” stories from other websites, as other research has shown (Philips in Fenton 2010).

In the case study newsrooms, as in any newsroom, journalists followed up stories from rival publications but they did not lift stories without any additional research or checking. This supports research from other newsroom observations (for example Anderson 2012) that journalists engaged in a constant process of gathering, checking and updating, which became more complex as journalism became more networked. This is different from lifting stories wholesale and passing them off as your own.

If anyone was cannibalising stories it was the London Evening Standard and other organisations such as the BBC which regularly cut and pasted copy from local news websites into their own, with minimal changes and no credit to the local paper they got the story from making the local news journalists who had originated the story victims rather than perpetrators.

#### **7:4 Enter the amateurs**

Claims to professionalism in the sense of standards and values has become increasingly important as the traditional role of mainstream media is challenged by new participants in a digital age. As Singer (2003:147) notes: “Traditional journalists have watched the growth of computer-mediated communication warily for years. As the web entered their consciousness in the mid 1990s, [journalists’] immediate reaction was to distinguish between their skills and values and those of the people producing content online.”

A decade later, Singer’s observation is supported by the findings of interviews and observation for this research. In interviews and news conferences, journalists frequently contrasted a perception of their own high standards with that of local bloggers, hyperlocal websites and non-journalists tweeting about local issues, a finding backed up by other research (Singer 2010; Firmstone and Coleman 2014; Singer 2015).

Journalists’ professional self-image was enhanced by what they saw as evidence that good journalism is a skill which has to be acquired through training and practice. It was considered “professional” in the sense of change, outlined by Aldridge and Evetts (2003) to be able to harness new media and social media and incorporate it into existing routines.

One reporter said: "If anything, we use these assets [social media], use them to our advantage to make sure our stories get out more. To create round two of a story, as it were. We're still learning. There are always things we can start to play with and I don't see how this would challenge us. The way we work is to use all the professionalism of an old print paper which is easily transferable to the web because we've got a paper which people rely on which rounds up all the news of the week, transfer that to the web and keep these stories coming day by day" (interview RTI2013).

There was some anxiety in newsrooms which were overstretched and under-resourced that they were being beaten to stories by assiduous hyperlocal websites. There was also some resentment that hyperlocal websites made negative comments on their pages about what they saw as the inability of the local press to cover stories on their patch.

A reporter said: "Over the years, it [the paper] has been criticised on blogs and things for not covering all the stories, not going to the meetings" (interview RSLP2011).

But this resentment was outweighed by confidence that local newspaper sites were a trusted source and that readers wanted reliable information for which they would go to local news websites.

"I don't like the perception of journalists that you can just walk into a room and be one, that you can write a blog and take a photograph and be a journalist. I think that's a worrying trend and that citizen journalism is a paradox, completely. You're a journalist or you're not" (interview ESC2012).



It is here at the intersection of “traditional” media and “citizen journalism” the concept of professionalism as control (Aldridge and Evetts 2003) is useful. The idea of professionalism as control was not so much employer-led, as Soloski (1989) suggests, but more in the sense of the power of professionalism as a form of self discipline (Aldridge and Evetts 2003:549) which was used to help create an identity which separated mainstream journalists from amateurs by their standards and approach.

However, much depended on the quality of non-mainstream media in each of the local areas. In some cases, hyperlocal websites such as the Barnet Bugle operating on the Times and Independent’s Barnet patch, or Surbiton.com, run by a local councillor, had a clear political agenda, and their output was opinion rather than news. Sites were not updated regularly and they disappeared quickly. Mainstream journalists’ caution about such sites would seem to be justified. “It was interesting to us – that Surbiton.com was a hyperlocal website being run by someone who’s political – an interesting juxtaposition. It’s not advertised that it’s a political website” (interview ESC2012).

A reporter on the Times and Independent Series was dubious about the ability of bloggers to cover council meetings given the generally low standard of blogs on his patch: “If there was a big meeting, I’d definitely go to it. Because that’s part of the job [...] And even if they [bloggers] went –maybe this is professional pride – I think they’d make a mess of it. There’s a skill to reporting council meetings because they’re so long and a lot of what they say is like, who cares?” (interview RTI2013).

For all their desire to draw distinctions between themselves and non-mainstream writers, though, journalists did not necessarily dismiss all the hyperlocal websites competing with them for news. In a number of cases, journalists’ reservations about the standard of competing websites were unfounded, and journalists admitted this. In the South

London Press's local area in particular, there were a number of hyperlocal websites run by ex-journalists, such as Greenwich-based 853, Lewisham-based Brockley Central and Borough-based SE1, which were well respected in the SLP newsroom. "There are bloggers round here who cover more council meetings than we do and there's nothing wrong with them. They're informed, they're accurate, well-written, well-annotated so that you can see where they're getting the information. If I lived in Brockley, Brockley Central is far more useful than anything we can do. He [the editor] is an ex-journalist and it's written to those sorts of exacting standards" (interview ESLP2011). It would seem that bloggers and hyperlocal websites were acceptable as long as they adhered to the same journalistic standards as journalists in mainstream newsrooms.

But admiration for Brockley Central did not extend to consideration of any kind of mutual collaboration of coverage of meetings or other stories. Instead, there was despair. "You just have to accept that these people are beating us in our own back yard, which is demoralizing. Purely because of the number of people we have here" (ESLP2011).

Unwillingness to consider collaborations or other information sharing means that local newspapers are missing opportunities to work with others outside the mainstream to provide news to overcome problems of shortages of resources, says Radcliffe (2015). Writing on the Online Journalism blog, he says: "Much of it lies, I believe, in erroneous perceptions about the quality of work being done by ultra-local publishers; and outdated views that local content can only be produced by trained journalists. Such views are a disservice to hyperlocal practitioners. This snobbery overlooks the quality of work produced by many outlets, and ignores the fact that many of these publishers *are* trained journalists or media professionals."

Suspicious about the reliability of social media platforms such as Twitter is arguably more justified than suspicion about hyperlocal websites, given Twitter's ability to fuel and amplify rumours. Many journalists cited coverage of the 2011 riots in London as an example of where they had been able to check and correct wrong information on social media.

In Kingston, for example, there were rumours on Twitter that rioters had set the Benthalls Centre [the main shopping centre in Kingston town centre] alight. This was not true. "On riot night there were a lot of people making comments about what was going on in the riots and I got in the car and drove up to Kingston at 10am and I was collaborating with the readers in terms of finding out what was going on, retweeting. But what I did was professional and there was a BBC guy doing the same thing, which was that everyone was saying Benthalls was on fire, we took a photo and said here's this, it's not on fire. So we're very up for collaborating with the readers but it's collaborating with the right readers." (Interview RSC2012)

Use of user-generated comment and other forms of "participatory journalism" identified by commentators (Deuze et al 2007; Paulussen and Ugille 2008; Singer 2010) was minimal on the websites produced by the case study newsrooms, partly because readers did not make much use of the opportunities offered on the websites for participation, meaning that potential challenges to journalists' gatekeeping role did not really arise in the context of comment boxes. Other research has highlighted similar experiences on other local papers (Machin and Niblock 2006).

Some interviewees admitted that their stories did not get that many comments, with one reporter saying: "You don't get nearly as many comments on the website- you do sometimes put a story up and wonder if anybody has read it" (interview RTI2013) One editor said that when the letters page of the print editions did not have enough letters, editors looked to see if there were any usable web comments. During observation, when

comment boxes were regularly checked, it emerged that most of the time comments were either dull or offensive. Comment on stories was more likely to be made on social media such as Twitter, where bloggers and others felt free to criticise journalists of being biased.

This section has focused on journalists' incorporation of online news and social media into newsroom working practices, and it has suggested that, although individual journalists were keen to upskill and adapt to a digital working environment, a combination of factors made this a complex process. An obvious barrier was management decisions which favoured print and declined to invest in staff training but a less obvious barrier was journalists' continuing cultural attachment to print bylines and reluctance to invest time in websites which were below the standards of their rivals. Another barrier were journalists' boundary setting practices which made them reluctant to make the imaginative leap from admiring the content of a hyperlocal website to collaborating with it in certain areas where they could be sure that quality would be maintained.

## **Chapter 8 Research findings: story choices, news agendas and sources**

This section focuses on processes involved in story finding and story choices, the role of the news conference in the development of journalistic identity and questions of shared understandings of what makes a “good story” for a local paper. Brighton and Foy (2007:34) say of the news meeting process: “Most working journalist and editors would recognise the vital role that these meetings play, not only on a daily, operational level but also in giving a news culture to their organisation, giving its own distinctive news value system that sets it apart from its rivals.” It was clear from observing news conferences at all three newsrooms that they were a vital environment for absorbing and developing a distinctive newsroom culture, which was absorbed by trainee journalists. The conference was also a showcase for journalists to demonstrate to editors that they understood what a good story was.

### **8:1 The news conference**

The news conference is a well-established routine in which journalists collectively establish the news agenda and shape in discussion what they consider local news priorities (Cotter 2010). As such it is a useful starting point for examining the persistence of routines which are common to all journalists, not just local journalists. But the news conference is also a window on local journalism which allows consideration of how a specifically local news culture manifests itself in newsroom routines.

The significance of these meetings, observed in what many commentators have characterised as a time of change ( Bruns 2006, Beckett 2008, Shirky

2008) was also to show that long-established routines were still very much in evidence in local newsrooms. As Zelizer in Allan (2010: 181) says: "Journalists have responded to their changing circumstances by doing what they have always done – crafting adjustments to both their news making routines and their interpretive strategies so as to keep the journalistic community intact."

News conferences at all three newsrooms were a key part for both reporters and editors of being a member of that "journalistic community". Cotter (2010:88) notes: "The story meeting [conference] creates the context for negotiation among the editor-participants, which in itself is both patterned and fixed, as well as dynamic and emergent. Story meetings can thus be viewed from two perspectives; as a fixed, routinized or unmarked setting [original italics] for newsroom decision-making, whose patterns, goals and participant relationships formulate a type of predictability and uniformity in the everyday; and as a context of communicative exchange [original italics] that highlights the dynamic and emergent functions of talk and interaction in the newsroom."

As a setting, all four news conferences were used partly as a forum for decision-making in which the senior editor present made a series of decisions about content after hearing the story ideas of reporters in the newsroom. The decisions were based on a number of shared understandings: of their area, and their readers, combined with more general news values of "surprise and twist" and balance of hard and soft news.

News conferences at the three newsrooms provided a physical forum for interaction (in that all the reporters were gathered together, not separately at their desks or filing stories in cafes). Reporters were able to demonstrate to their editors and each other that they understood what made a "good" story for their paper.

Reporters' performance at conference was part of the process of shared meaning-making which shaped individual and collective newsroom culture. Journalists at conference were playing a part, the part of journalists who know a story when they see one and want to be taken seriously. "When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them." (Goffman 1990:28). Although the editor's decision was final, it was the case, as Cotter (2010:92) says, that "decisions are not necessarily made according to who says what, instead they are made according to what gets said about the story, what gets said about the news."

Part of being a local news reporter was to understand what news values were, to know the background to what was happening on your patch, to be able to set your stories in context but also to help other, often newer reporters with background to stories. Knowing which parts to highlight when pitching a story to an editor in conference was also seen as part of a journalist's "professionalism". News values were never consciously outlined to new recruits (Breed 1955). They were absorbed through talking to editors and other reporters, observing how others acted at news conference, and through the influence of readers and sources.

This is not to argue that all reporters agreed with the news desk's decisions. Many did not, for a variety of reasons to do with how they saw themselves as journalists and what their personal priorities were. Sometimes their stories were "blue pencilled" (Breed 1955:332). However, it was not the case, as Breed argued, that "rarely does the staffer persist in violating policy"; reporters felt strongly enough about their approach to continue to offer stories against the dominant priorities of the news desk. This suggests that Breed's ideas of social control in the newsroom as a top-down phenomenon from editor to reporter do not go far enough in explaining the multiple motivations and attitudes influencing newsroom behaviour. Newsroom observations for this research showed that reporters considered it an important part of their role to attempt to influence story choice and news agenda, and to push for their stories to be accepted.

Journalists' idea of themselves as professionals in the sense of having high standards applied not only to themselves but also to the actions of others. Reporters were prepared to challenge the news desk when their own standards, and just as importantly, what they saw as the standards of the paper, were being threatened. One reporter said of her newspaper's focus on crime stories: "I'd go to public events and people would say your paper's full of crime and we don't want to read about that. And since I've been here, it's changed and I think I'm one of the people who's helped change it. Because I've insisted they take the community stuff more seriously" (interview RSLP2011).

But another reporter on the same paper criticised the news desk for not being daring enough in tackling the sort of hard stories he believed should be in the paper. "I know from bitter experience that I've taken good stories in there [the newsroom] which have got knocked back because they're too difficult, too controversial. Hard stories get cut down to shorts. I'd say it's a reluctance to take hard decisions. I don't know what's in our paper today but inevitably there'll be some touchy-feely nonsense in the first five pages and that's just not worth paying for"(interview RSLP2011)

Another reporter said: "Of course there should be balance but the problem is we've gone so far the other was that we're in denial of the bad stuff which happens round here and there's too much fluffy stuff like a charity gets a cheque and didn't the school kids do well" (interview RSLP2011)."

Many journalists were acutely aware that there was a difference between their expressed ideals of finding out things other people did not know and the reality of their daily work, much of which consisted of making routine calls and writing up press releases.



Journalists argued that budget cuts, staff cuts, pagination cuts and shortage of resources had reduced journalists' ability to write in depth. "I could write several different stories in depth and speak to various people and do a proper job. Now I'm reliant largely on press releases or snippets of information that have come from elsewhere. So I wouldn't say I was doing as fully an in-depth job as I was as a writer six months ago" (interview RSC2012).

## **8:2 News conference in action**

The previous section discussed the role of news conferences in the three newsrooms and their importance in shaping journalistic culture as a process of shared meaning making and performance. This section expands on these themes by showing in detail the process of decision-making in each of the three newsrooms in turn and using the observation of conferences to identify the news priorities of each of the three newsrooms and their attitudes to news gathering.

A significant finding during observation was that at the South London Press and the Surrey Comet, there was no discussion at all about how to take advantage of the web to tell a story in different ways, through using elements such as video or hyperlinks, rather than as pure text. The focus was entirely on the print edition, in terms of what would make a front page lead, other page leads, which pictures should be used to anchor stories and potential headlines. Discussion of which stories were already with the news desk and which ones should be held over to the next edition were framed entirely in terms of the print editions. Even at the Surrey Comet, which was more enthusiastic about its website than the South London Press was about its site, the focus was on the print edition.

This was a stark demonstration of the slow speed of change in these newsrooms and the conservative culture of journalists who did things the way they had always done them. The mental maps the editors and news editors held in their heads about how they wanted the product to look were of print pages, not of web pages.

At the Times and Independent Series, there were two separate weekly conferences, one for the reporters focusing on stories for their web pages, and one for the senior editors at Watford to decide the contents for the print edition. However, even at the reporters' conference, where web-first journalism was the rule, there was almost no discussion about ways of telling stories which were not textual. The focus was on the content and relevance of the stories to their audiences.

This is not to say that there was no innovative use of the web and social media at all. There was live-blogging of David Cameron's visit to a school in Barnet on the Barnet Times's website and the use of Twitter during the riots (before fieldwork but remembered as a high point in all three newsrooms). But these were not the primary concern of journalists and were the initiative of individual reporters rather than being central to editorial decision-making.

### **8:2:1 South London Press (November 2011)**

Present are the editor, the production editor and the news editor. No reporters are present which was different from the experience in the other two newsrooms. The meeting takes place in the editor's office and the atmosphere is purposeful. A printed news list has been drawn up from previous individual discussions with reporters in the newsroom. It is the day before the midweek paper goes to press. The list is long, the subject matter a mixture of planning disputes with public bodies ("Deptford campaigners hand 800-word petition to Thames Water"); individual problems with councils ("Case study: home care charges left high risk pensioner in need"), neighbourhood battles ("Ladywell travellers' site objectors put wheelie bins

across street”). These hard news stories are mixed with feel-good stories and campaigns (“Our Heroes”), and the quirky (“Singing nurse joins TUC public sector band”). The list is written in headlines, the way the journalists think. The editor is not satisfied with the list. “We’ve got lots of on-diary stories and pictures stories, not enough hard news. We’re struggling with getting off-diary stories. We’re missing good leads.” She likes the case study on care problems because it has human interest. But she is happy to have interviews with the care providers rather than the old lady – “it’ll be more objective”. A key concern of journalists keen to appear “professional” is to use the appearance of being “objective” by interviewing protagonists on both sides of the story. But other things are missing from the news list. “We’re missing quirky, funny stuff.” Sources to call about stories include local MPs, press officers, police, tenants’ groups, the council, in other words the predictably limited range of sources identified by other commentators observing newsrooms in action (Gans 1979; Fishman 1980). There is discussion of pictures and the need for a balance of hard and soft news. The agreed list fulfils all the requirements of a local print edition. There is no mention of what stories could go on the website. This is a decision for the web editor, who does not attend conference.

### **8:2:2 Surrey Comet (January 2012)**

Conference is attended by all the reporters from the Comet and the Kingston and Elmbridge Guardians, and chaired by the assistant editor responsible for these three papers. The meeting takes place in the boardroom and atmosphere is brisk and business-like. Editions are small because it is the first week of the New Year.

There is no written schedule but the reporters bring their own news lists and talk in headlines because they need to keep the attention of the assistant editor and convey the story angle sharply (as they will later be expected to do when they write the story up).

The assistant editor wants stories with an “element of surprise and twist” with a local link but also acknowledges the need for “bread and butter” stories name-checking people in the community. Locals named in the New Year’s Honours List and babies born on New Year’s Day are tried and tested formulae for community stories and their mention generates knowing nods and some groans among reporters at the journalistic cliché of this ritual.

A reporter elicits more groans at what the others recognise as the corny non-story “localness” of his news list: a Battersea Dog he reported lost before Christmas has returned home; the new president of the Women’s Institute is the same as the old one. “I stuck it on because I didn’t have much on my news list”.

Stories are again a mix of hard news (the death of a media studies teacher at a local school, the results of a freedom of information request to Kingston and Tolworth hospitals on breaches of patient confidentiality) and softer stories. Although the atmosphere is friendly, journalists say later in interview that any reporter’s failure to come up with a good list of stories would result in things getting “very icy” (interview RSC2012).

As at the South London Press, there is no discussion of online coverage on the papers’ own web pages and potential ways of telling a story differently. The assumption is that the stories from the print edition will be uploaded unchanged to the web and that reporters will add to web pages with breaking stories as and when they happen. However, Twitter plays a more important part in news gathering and shaping the news agenda than it does at the South London Press. A soft story of the engagement, marriage and childbirth of two minor celebrities is playing out on Twitter. The attraction is that that they live in Kingston and they will make a good picture. Reporters are keeping an eye on Twitter rumours that McDonalds in Surbiton is going to open 24 hours a day. The work placement student is dispatched to do some vox pops and the assistant editor immediately thinks of the headline: “Supersize Surbiton”, a suggestion greeted enthusiastically by the others who recognise the instincts of a good print journalist.

No-one comments that this is the opposite of a good web headline as it has almost no key words to bring it up to the top of a search engine page. Again, this shows the print mindset of journalists in the news room. The front page lead is shaping up to be a story first carried in the Daily Mail about a man with an electronic tag who was allowed to go to Kingston nightclub Oceana on New Year's Eve. The assistant editor likes the twist and likes the local angle.

### **8:2:3 Times and Independent Series reporters' meeting (July 2013)**

The meeting takes place in the Chorak Café, East Finchley in north London, and is attended by all the reporters (except whoever has been on duty the previous weekend as they have a day off) plus the deputy editor and the web editor. The reporters favour the café because they can arrange themselves conference-fashion round three tables at the back of the café where there are plugs for charging their laptops. "We're looking for the Holy Trinity of free parking, plugs and wi-fi", says one reporter (Observation 2013). They have a well-established routine for swapping chargers to make use of two plugs for six people. The atmosphere is chatty and jokey (the reporters have not seen each other all week and they need the socialisation of this news conference). The deputy editor fills in a pre-printed schedule grid and the reporters again talk in headlines, with brief, brisk explanations.

As in the other two conferences, stories are a mix of hard and soft, or some would suggest, important and banal. A woman is complaining that her daughter has fallen into a sludge pool which hadn't been fenced off by Haringey council. The deputy editor likes this story: "Can we get a pic? A good Haringey story". Other reporters produce court stories (an orthodox rabbi in a sex case answering bail), a new college campus - "Get some local business reaction as well so it's not so straight" - stories of charity-fund raisers, festivals and school successes.

Summer holidays mean small editions and shortage of reporters, so there is logistical discussion of who is to cover which patch.

Here, web-first is default mode because this is how the Times and Independent work. There is more recognition of the importance of Twitter and journalists have their Twitter feeds up on screen so that they can keep an eye on unfolding news as they discuss news stories. A live-blog is considered the best way to cover David Cameron's visit to the Barnet school. But the focus is still on telling stories textually.

### **8:2:4 Times and Independent editors' meeting (July 2013)**

The meeting takes place in the group editor's office in Watford. It is attended by the group editor, deputy editor and web content editor and its purpose is to agree the content and leads for the print editions. They already know what the reporters are working on from the previous week's news meeting and from discussions with individual reporters. Stories uploaded by reporters on their websites will not be rewritten for the paper but editors need to make choices about page leads, pictures and layout.

Choices are influenced by levels of dramatic interest, evidence of reader interest in stories as they appeared on the website and picture possibilities. The group editor says: "That story of the north Finchley fire is the most read on the web and it's a great picture taken by an amateur. We could do a poster front [full front page photo] for Finchley [the Hendon and Finchley Times]" (observation, 2013).

Editors at the Times and Independent are keenly aware of their web traffic and this is the only conference attended where the importance of web traffic is acknowledged. It is the only one of the three print journalism conferences in which the newsroom's own website is mentioned at all.

A key reason for this was that this was the most converged of the three newsrooms, where print and web worked most clearly together rather than being an afterthought to the print edition.

### **8:3 Core local news values**

From the conferences above and from observation and interviews, it is possible to identify a list of core news values common to all three news desks and what makes one story more likely to run than another. This list includes the following: localness; council conflict; David v Goliath (locals against powerful groups); feel-good stories; quirky stories; business-boosting stories; stories which balance out others on a page or in an edition; stories with social media impact.

News values are the unwritten rules which enable journalists to choose between one story and another, to relegate a potential story to the “hold” section of the news schedule and to push another one up to the top. As Brighton and Foy (2007:1) comment: “It is news values which give journalists and editors a set of rules – intangible, informal, almost unconscious elements – by which to work, from which to plan and execute the content of a publication or a broadcast.” A number of academic studies (for example Galtung and Ruge (1965); Gans 1979; Harcup and O’Neill (2001); Harrison (2006); Brighton and Foy 2007)) have tried with varying amounts of agreement to identify what these news values are in different media.

These include such values as relevance, timeliness, surprise, as well as more practical considerations such as picture availability, ease of reporting and dramatic content, all of which were relevant in conference- decision-making processes observed for this research. Gans (1979:81) narrows down the values list; “Story selection is essentially composed of two processes: one determines the availability of news and relates journalists to sources; the other determines the suitability of news, which ties journalists to audiences.”

It could be argued that some values (or more accurately, “considerations” as Gans suggests (Gans 1979, such as picture availability have become more important since the academic studies were done. Journalists commonly have instantly access to images taken by amateurs posted on social media sites like Twitter. This trend is obvious in the case of the Finchley fire picture mentioned above. However the focus of previous news selection studies has mostly been on national media and broadcast media rather than local media. The following sections explore the news selections of the local newspapers studied.

### *Localness*

This is the top core value and the one which distinguishes local papers from nationals. As Ekstrom et al in Allan (2010:257) suggest: “spatial proximity represents an important news value [for local news journalists].” Citing Kaniss (1991), the commentators discuss “how local journalists define what should be understood as local, namely by emphasising issues which can be regarded as symbols of local identity.” The remark by the Times and Independent deputy editor in conference that a story was “a good Haringey story” is a clear indicator of this priority (see also Cotter 2010: 99)

Stories in the newsrooms studied only make it into print or onto the website if they had a local link or angle. This is similar to what other studies have called “relevance” or “consonance” but it is at the core of the identity of local newspapers, local journalists and the relationship they have with their communities. It was an ideological as well as a practical value in that it was reinforcing and emphasizing the publication’s on-going role as a shaper of local identity, which in turn gave it relevance to its readers. If there were national stories (for example, the public sector strike in November 2011), journalists need a local angle. If stories were picked up from the nationals, like the Daily Mail story about the man with the electronic tag going clubbing in Kingston, they became a story because of the local link.

However, the obsession with localness could also have a distorting effect on the news agenda, as one editor stresses: “It’s not a story just because it’s



based in New Malden or Kingston, it's a story because it's got x, y and z ingredients and to write it just like that, not a New Malden man, yawn.." (interview ESC2012).

### *Council conflict*

Conflict is not just a local news value. Previous research (Galtung and Ruge (1965); Harrison (2006)) identifies the value of negativity, which includes violence, conflict and confrontation, as a core news value (for journalists, bad news is good news). But in the case of local papers, stories which pit local people against the local council, cast as uncaring, incompetent and faceless, were particularly important in establishing the papers' role as protector of the public and challenger of the powerful. In their role as provider of services such as housing, planning social care and rubbish collection, and amenities such as parks and libraries, councils have power over people's lives (albeit more limited than most people imagine). They are therefore a particular focus of disaffection among local people if things go wrong. Stories which showed councils in a bad light such as the story about the planned Ladywell travellers' site (a proposal from Lewisham Council's planning department) and the child in the Haringey sludge pit were ideal council conflict stories. In both case, these stories were presented at conference from the point of view of the local person as victim and the council at fault.

### *David v Goliath*

These stories play a similar role to council conflict stories in that they allow the local paper to side with "local people" against large organisations such as developers, energy companies or water companies. They differ in that the villain is usually a privately owned company rather than an elected body like the council. (The NHS, although a public body, is not an elected body and plays a David v Goliath role in stories about people spending hours on trolleys in A & E, for example). Deptford residents' petition against Thames Water's plan to build a super-sewer was a good example of a David and

Goliath story because it featured local people (the Davids) versus the Goliath of Thames Water, which, as a privately owned monopoly, provided a useful villain for the local press. Similarly, the pensioner suffering high home care charges could be cast as the victim of a profiteering private care home provider, even if her fees are paid by the council.

An interesting facet of both council conflict and David v Goliath stories is that delivery of services has become much more complex in an era of outsourcing and privatisation and the local council is just as likely to be a victim of funding cuts or forced to agree to unwelcome developments in its area as it is to be the villain of the piece. But these complexities are routinely ignored in favour of other news values such as “clarity” (Galtung and Ruge (1965) and “capable of simple reporting” (Harrison (2006)). Such stories are also capable of being written in a supposedly “balanced” way, insofar as they include quotes from both sides of a conflict, allowing journalists to show that they are “objective” (Tuchman 1972).

### *Feel-good stories*

Feel-good stories such as school successes, New Years’ Honours’ for local people and charity fund-raisers were a vital part of local story selection, described rather dismissively by journalists interviewed as “bread and butter” stories. They have a number of different functions. On one level, they provided a counter-balance to the more negative tone of council conflict and David v Goliath stories. They had a practical value in that they often provided excellent opportunities for pictures and the inclusion of local people in a positive light, named in the paper, drove readers to buy the paper. A key element of local identity was embodied in the determination of editors to mix the good with the bad, reflecting “the community” back to itself as a good place to live.

One editor said in interview: “It’s about caring for the community and being interested in people and being able to give them a voice, whether it’s fund-raising, to protest, to campaign. It’s a tool. I think every area should have a

newspaper like this” (interview ESLP2011).

On a less obvious level, feel-good stories played an important ideological role in that they provide an opportunity for the local media to make a choice to portray a community positively and play down negative stories about crime. This choice is driven as much by local people as by local news desks, according to reporters. One reporter said: “It [positive coverage] isn’t something that’s coming from the newsdesk, it’s more from the community” (interview RTI2013).

On the SLP and the Times and Independent, which covered areas with a lot of crime, there was a conscious effort to look for positive stories. One editor at the Times and Independent said later in interview: “I don’t say we wouldn’t cover crime but I’m very conscious that if we have good stories good news, stories about schools, positive stories, we should run them. There’s a difference between going and looking for crime and reporting it” (interview ETI2013)

### *Quirkiness*

Stories with an element of quirkiness or “surprise and twist” are important part of the story mix in local papers, partly because journalists and editors want to convey the message that their publications have a sense of humour. The singing nurse in the public sector band and the celebrity Kingston couple on Twitter were potentially a gift, especially if the pictures were good, which they were. A story about a woman who had her first bite of chocolate after not being able to chew for 20 years because of rheumatoid arthritis made the front page of the South London Press (“Mum’s first chew for 20 years”, December 6 2011).

An editor at the Times and Independent series said: “So many local newspapers and nationals are just a bit boring, I think and it’s because a lot of editors have forgotten about the fun and they just see their jobs as printing bad news. It doesn’t have to be like that” (interview ETI2013).

### *Business boosts*

Stories which act as boosters or cheerleaders for local businesses are staples of local newspapers for a number of reasons. One is that these businesses may also be advertisers, although during observation and interviews there was no evidence that this influenced journalists. On the contrary, journalists would argue that the opposite is the case, with one editor breaking off in mid-conference to berate the advertising team for selling a double page spread and thereby forcing the editorial team to drop stories. Attempts by PR people to get coverage (and so free advertising) are rebuffed. A reporter at the Times and Independent came off the phone from Sainsbury's press office trying to get her to cover the opening of a new store saying scornfully: "As if that's a story!" However, it was also the case that hostile coverage of local businesses was rare.

A more compelling reason to run stories about local businesses from journalists' point of view is that like feel-good stories, business boosts are meant to demonstrate the local news organisation's deep connections with the community and support for independent businesses. At a Times and Independent reporters' news conference, a story about the closing of a long-established Hendon hardware store because of car parking pressures caused by council-imposed parking zones was judged "a good story". It had many elements of a good local story, including struggling small business, pernicious council parking regime and final failure.

### *Balance*

As previous studies have noted (see particularly Gans (1979) and his discussion of important/interesting stories), balance of coverage is a key consideration and stories will make it into the paper not necessarily because they are earth-shattering news but because they work with other stories on a page or in an edition. Editors want to achieve a balance of "hard" and "soft" news (Tuchman 1978:47) or in the terms used above, a council conflict,

David V Goliath or other factually based news story with feel-good, quirky or business booster stories.

Balance as a value is mentioned here in the context of local papers because editors in conference observation linked it explicitly as a value to feel-good stories and quirkiness. In conferences at the South London Press, for example, editors recognised the need to balance crime stories (of which there were many) with feel-good stories. At one conference, a discussion took place about whether the paper should cover the Damien Hirst exhibition at Tate Modern. The editor was doubtful. "What do our readers care?" The production editor countered: "It's not crime, so it's a bit of a relief." The editor agreed: "We don't want it too gloomy," to which the production editor replied: "There's a battle to tell people they don't live in a hell-hole." (observation November 2011)

A story about a Lewisham burglar who wrote a letter to police telling them which types of house he would not burgle over Christmas ended up on the front page under the headline "Burglar's break-in checklist: Repeat offender reveals tactics in letter to cops" (South London Press, November 25 2011) because it had quirkiness and countered negative stories about crime elsewhere in the paper.

In newsrooms where the main print product covered several geographical areas, editors also wanted a balance of stories between areas. This was particularly the case at the South London Press, which covered four boroughs. Fieldwork was carried out here before the company introduced hyperlocal print versions of the SLP covering each area.

### *Impact on social media*

How readers respond to stories on social media is an increasingly important consideration and has become significant since the academic studies mentioned at the beginning of this section were completed. Editors increasingly follow web traffic and stories which have the potential to generate a lot of hits are an important part of the selection process. At the

case study newspapers, this process was most pronounced at the Times and Independent, where the North Finchley fire was the ideal story for the cover of the print paper. It had a dramatic picture, taken by a member of the public, demonstrating the interest in the story from readers. But even more importantly, the story has already been uploaded on the website the previous day and has generated a large number of hits. This is confirmation of a high level of interest. The danger of website analytics is, of course, that journalists let themselves be seduced into selecting the popular rather than the important.

#### **8: 4 Practices and ideologies of news choice**

As suggested in the analysis above, news choices work on a number of levels. On one level, the choices are practical, says Harrison (2006:20).reflecting “the range of skills, training regimes, practices, norms and values within which news journalist work and which are used to explain and justify their activities and to define news.”

From a journalist’s point of view, as the quote from Harrison suggests, the idea of analysing what makes news and what news values are is an odd one, because knowing what is news is an intrinsic part of being a journalist. A core part of a news journalist’s identity is the ability to spot a good story, a skill which journalists like to believe is instinctive and part of the flair required to be a good operator. Journalists learn, both consciously and unconsciously to understand the unwritten rules of news values.

The idea that journalists “know what the news is” runs very deep in and is a core part of journalistic mythology and identity. It is captured neatly on the introduction page of the NCTJ’s website (2015): “Journalists know the news before anyone else and they have reports filmed and stories written before most people are even aware of the event.”

On another level, however, news choices have another, not always unspoken purpose, which in the case of local papers is to position themselves in

relation to their readers and the wider “community” as their representative and protector against councils and other often unaccountable organizations which have control over aspects of people’s lives. The frequent choice of council conflict and David v Goliath stories is designed to emphasize to readers the important role that local newspapers still play in challenging authority and getting results. News choices at this level could be described as “ideological” (Hall 1973), in that there was an underlying agenda to the news choices in the three newsrooms.

Although each of the three newsrooms had its own readership and its own culture, there were also similarities in the way news decisions were made across the three newsrooms, suggesting that there is a specifically local type of news agenda which serves to produce and perpetuate a consensus of what counts as news in a local context. As Harrison (2010) in Allan (2010) argues, news choices had what she calls a “foreground”, or practical reasons for choosing news stories, which journalists could readily explain, and a “background”, which was used ideologically. Harrison (2010:199) suggests that this ideological background is used to “produce homogeneity” in news choice while the foreground is used to “provide informed opinion.”

Observation of news choice in the three newsrooms, in which the same clear news priorities could be discerned, operating on different levels, would seem to support Harrison’s argument. Research in the case study newsrooms support the claims of many academic commentators (see for example Cohen and Young (1973); Tuchman (1978); Golding and Elliot (1979); Schlesinger (1979) Gans (1979); Fishman (1980)) that the process of story selection is not the result of journalistic instinct but is manufactured to fit within the criteria and constraints of news organizations. Local journalists may claim quite sincerely that they instinctively know what a story is but this is because they have been socialized through the newsroom and before that, through the NCTJ, to recognize what makes an acceptable story.

The process of news selection, the angle chosen, the sources quoted and the way the story is written are all part of what Hall (1973:181) calls a “deep

structure” “whose function as a selective device is un-transparent even to those who professionally most know how to operate it.”

It was true at all three newsrooms that the choice of stories and their treatment ran within limited and predictable parameters within the categories outlined above. However, it was not true, as Hall argues, that news selection is un-transparent to reporters trying to get their stories published. The findings of this research also contradicted Rock’s claim (1981:65) that journalists’ decisions are governed by “an interpretive faculty called “news sense” which cannot be communicated or taught.” On the contrary, news sense in the three newsrooms was being communicated all the time more formally in settings such as conference and more informally through feedback and osmosis. It could, although the NCTJ’s website might like to imply otherwise, be taught, through NCTJ training and exams

Journalists’ story selections were pragmatic, not ideological. Getting stories in the paper or up on the website was core to what it meant to be a journalist. A journalist without stories had no journalistic identity, which was why shrinking editions and dwindling resources were a challenge in the newsrooms.

So in all three newsrooms that the reporters had absorbed the editor’s preferences and the publication’s priorities because they recognised that this was the only way they could achieve their core goal of getting their stories in the paper or on the website through the gatekeeping system operated by the editor and the news editor.

It is, however, possible to argue as others have done (Cox and Morgan 1973; Murphy 1976; O’Neill and O’Connor 2008) that local journalists do not question fundamental social structures and are too willing to accept the claims of those with economic or political power.



There was a process at work in newsrooms of what Sigelman (1973:138) describes as “anticipatory socialisation” and Harrison (2006:153) describes as a “process of training and socialisation”. Lule (2001:28) says: “Stories are shaped by many forces. The process begins early. Even as the story is assigned [...] editors and reporters make sure they have a mutual understanding of “the story”.

This was a process clearly visible through observation in which journalists learned from listening and watching their colleagues and from positive and negative feedback on story ideas. As Breed (1955:328) notes in his observation of newsrooms: “All but the newest staffers know what policy is. On being asked, they say they learn it “by osmosis”. Sociologically, this means they become socialised and learn the ropes like a neophyte in any sub-culture.”

Almost all the journalists also had the shared background of NCTJ training, which had already inculcated them into local newspapers’ approaches to news values and helped develop shared understandings of local news.

Reporters soon got to know what editors wanted. When a new editor or news editor took charge of the news desk, as happened shortly before the observation period at the Surrey Comet, reporters faced a steep learning curve to accommodate different priorities but adjusted quickly, because they had to, or face never being able to get their stories in the paper.

The new editor was from a daily paper and was keen to change the style and approach of writing: “My aim has always been to get everyone to think in terms of a daily news environment. Lots of things, even the language that’s used in locals – I don’t really like it. When they [reporters] are writing I’m trying to get them to think, Why is this a story?” (Interview ESC2012).

This was a clear rejection of the local newspaper tendency to run stories just because they happen to take place in the geographical area covered by the paper, and a challenge to existing news values.

There was an initial shock of working for an editor who would not hesitate to get them up for a story in the middle of the night (“if there’s a shooting at 2am I’ll phone one of the reporters or the photographers and expect them to get out of bed because you have to be there- it’s the media” (interview ESC2012). But this was soon replaced with respect because the new editor possessed the attributes of news sense and flair which were a core part of journalistic identity.

“She’s got great news sense. When I read her version of my copy, I have to say it’s much better. She’s got a hard news agenda” (interview RSC2012)

As Kaniss (1991:85) points out, journalists’ choice of stories and how they present them to editors in conference is heavily influenced by what journalists’ know from experience that editors will like. She also suggests that editors in turn are interested in stories which will attract an audience because editors are interested in sales and the business of the paper in a way that reporters are not. This argument was less clearly borne out in the case study newsrooms.

The editors observed were more interested in their readers from a journalistic point of view than a business point of view and there was little discussion of the impact of story choice on sales. However, there was an unspoken acknowledgement in all three newsrooms that the more local people could be mentioned and pictured in each edition the better, as this would persuade those people and their friends and family to buy the paper.

This was most visible in pieces such as the South London Press’s long-running Our Heroes campaign, which featured unsung heroes and pillars of the community, culminating in an annual presentation ceremony in November, accompanied by a double page picture spread.

### **8:5 The control of news: routines and beats**

Even a brief observation of any newsroom will reveal that journalists receive far more information than they can ever use. To separate the

exciting/interesting/important from the unusable/dull/insignificant, journalists at all levels perform a constant process of sifting to be able to bring order to chaos. Reporters are looking for stories which will fit the story selection criteria suggested above and editors are looking for the same and in addition looking for stories which will provide balance and fit into emerging themes so that they can group stories together on a page (Fishman 1980).

In the newsrooms observed during fieldwork, local journalists were divided into beats (referred to also as “patches”) but these were geographical rather than sectoral. In other words, a journalist was responsible for covering everything newsworthy in his or her allocated area (a London borough or part of a borough), rather than being responsible for, say, crime, or education, or planning, across all the areas covered by the paper. The point of a beat of whatever type is that journalists are expected to make and maintain contacts on their beat and come up with a flow of off-diary (non- press release) stories.

But in an illustration of the limitation of the use of structures to interpret activity, it also became obvious that the system of beats on the local papers observed was disintegrating in the face of staff cuts, redundancies and pagination cuts. There were not enough staff to allow staff to have specialist beats like crime and education and journalists felt they lacked the specialist knowledge to cover these complex beats. This suggests that structures can fail in the face of a shared understanding of adversity and a shared feeling of pointlessness and that a culture of despair can communicate itself quickly throughout a newsroom, despite structures set up to control and organise work.

It was possible to observe a similar pattern in the application of routines. Routine checking in with established sources to see what stories are developing is how many journalists start their day. Sociologists focusing on structures have identified routines as a core element of journalistic activity. Fishman noted the well-established routines developed by, for example, the city court house, in which the crime correspondent went daily to the court house for a briefing and even had his own office (Fishman 1980:38).

Journalists in the local newsrooms observed for this research were meant to follow the routines of calling the emergency services and the local council for stories. But, as with beats, some reporters had given up making calls because they were always directed to the press office.

Many of the routines identified by ethnographic studies were discernible in the case study newsrooms, partly because journalists had found them to be efficient in the past and were resistant to change. The structures of conference, identifying stories, drawing up news schedules, contacting sources, writing stories and meeting deadlines were all visible. Journalists were responsible for geographical patches (4:1) rather than occupational beats but like beat journalists, the aim of being on patch was to develop sources and contacts, to understand the issues of the area and to write stories which reflected the core news values of local news papers.

On large prescheduled stories, reporters and editors alike assumed allocated roles which as Tuchman (1978: 56) says, facilitated the control of work. For example, coverage of widespread public sector strikes over pension changes in the South London Press in November 2011 was routine in that it was anticipated and the newsroom could plan for it.

The day before the strike, the first routine was for the editor and production editor to have a quick conference to plan stories and pages. Reporters were already making calls to their contacts on their respective patches, trying to get quotes and case studies. They didn't need to be told which patch to work on or who to call, as this was a well-anticipated routine story. Their contact lists were predictable – local MPs, council press offices, local schools, colleges, trade union branch secretaries, local chambers of commerce.

These were the sources journalists were expected to use. Using these sources was part of the routine and because story selection and source routines were already in place and familiar, the story was not difficult to put together. The strikes were a national story but reporters were using their contacts and local knowledge to give it a local angle. The strike was due to take place the day after the Tuesday edition was published, which gave the SLP an advantage.

In observation, it was clear that reporters were animated by the challenge of working together to create a strong spread [pages 2 and 3] and a dramatic front page: “Grinding to a halt: Bins uncollected; schools to shut; streets unswept.” In an exception to Tindle’s rule that web should not scoop print, the stories were uploaded to the website the same day as the edition came out, on the ground that it was such an important story for their readers.

However, these routines had more significance for the journalists than the bureaucratic organisational role identified for routines by 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers. It could be argued that routines provided a framework for individual and collective journalistic identity, giving journalists a number of opportunities to demonstrate their standards of professionalism in their understanding of what made a story and how to get it. Working within routines of finding stories and getting them in the paper were a core part of journalistic identity. The ideal story was a non-routine scoop, achieved by the journalistic skills of nurturing sources and talking to people.

The routine of news conference gave journalists a chance to perform, and in the case of the Times and Independent, to consolidate working and social relationships with colleagues they had not seen for a week. Journalists also felt the need to establish new routines on their own terms rather than inheriting them or absorbing them from more well-established journalists. The weekly news meeting was a routine initiated by Times and Independent reporters and shaped by them to enable them to work collectively. One reporter said: “We never used to have news meetings when I started but it was one of things the reporters really wanted. And now it [the meeting] is in a coffee shop you feel more comfortable to chip in and come up with something. If you’ve got a story and you’re not too sure, you can say, what do you think about this? I feel like we’re a team and that everyone’s helping each other which is vital”(interview RTI2013).

This importance of routines for establishing and facilitating teamwork and individual journalistic identity was arguably underestimated by earlier ethnographers which tended to emphasize the bureaucratic organisation of newsrooms.

An interesting observation, however, was that because all three newsrooms were suffering from budget cuts, management decisions and lack of space, some routines had partly or wholly disintegrated. Far from freeing journalists up to display “flair” and use initiative, the loss of routine was disorienting, and serves to reinforce the argument of this research that routines are a vital framework for journalistic identity, although not sufficient in themselves to explain complex relationships between individuals, their colleagues and the work needing to be done.

At the South London Press, journalists on the Greenwich and Lewisham Mercury, which shared staff and offices with SLP no longer had a news conference. A reporter said: “I just send stuff over. I don’t know what’s going in. You write something you think is going to be a lead and it doesn’t go in. We used to have conference when we had more space.” (observation, South London Press November 2011). The main South London Press had dispensed with news conferences attended by all reporters on the ground of lack of time, which rankled with some of the reporters. The editor admitted this might have been a mistake: “I used to have a reporter’s meeting every week.. It was good because it put reporters under press to come up with a decent list and added an element of competition. It does get to me – I might reinstate it” (interview ESLP2011)

Journalists no longer made as much effort to make routine calls to the emergency services first thing to see what stories were emerging, partly because of the increasingly strong grip of press officers, which changes the source relationship (see detailed discussion below). “We don’t do fire brigade calls any more – we’re meant to twice a week but they always tell us to go to the press office. And we don’t call the police regularly. They’ve got some great stories but they don’t tell us” (observation November 2011).

Other key sources were also less inclined automatically to help journalists with official information, which made establishing routines frustrating. Far from providing journalists with their own desk in the court as enjoyed by court house reporters during Fishman's observation (Fishman 1980:38), court officials were sometimes obstructive. One reporter at the Surrey Comet needed to be very firm on the phone to a court clerk: "We cover all the courts and we need the information [Saturday's court list] to check facts. " Putting the phone down, he said to a colleague: "I don't know how often I've told them. We need every list – youth court, trial." (observation Surrey Comet 2012)

Routines which were once considered core for local newspapers, such as scanning council agendas, were now done by whichever individual reporters chose to undertake the task, with others choosing to ignore the routine. Those who still did read agendas said knowing how councils worked was a core part of their journalism training and part of having standards and doing the job local new reporters were meant to do. It is also a core part of the NCTJ syllabus and trainee journalists have to pass a Public Affairs exam to get the Diploma which is their passport to a local newsroom.

One reporter, describing how he got stories said: "People phone me or I go through the council agendas. The sad thing is that lots of reporters don't bother to read them any more. They don't find it interesting or to be blunt, they don't understand it so they avoid it and they stick to the fluffy stuff. But all those documents are there. The way I was taught you read them through from cover to cover and there's some great stories in there. And it's sadly neglected. It's something that all journalists should have. A prerequisite. And because it's been neglected on the news agenda, I can guarantee there'll only be a few people reading council agendas" (interview RSLP2011).

The operation of the system of "beats", noted by many researchers (Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980; Gans 1979; Golding and Elliott 1979; Kaniss 1991) was another part of the organisational structure which had partially collapsed. "Beat reporters" who cover a "specific and bounded turf" (Gans 1979:131) had been until recently a feature of several of the newsrooms, with

the South London Press having a crime reporter and an education reporter, and the Surrey Comet having four dedicated reporters for its sport and leisure section.

All these specialist posts had disappeared by the time the fieldwork for this research was carried out, with general reporters expected to pick up crime and education stories on their patches. This meant a loss of contacts in crucial areas and almost certainly a drop in sales, said one long-standing journalist on the South London Press. "The loss of the crime reporter was huge because you're basically relying on everyone in their own boroughs. With a crime reporter you have one port of call for police, for everything. People ring you up because they know you're the person who wants to know and you're the contact for press officers" (interview RSLP2011)

At the Times and Independent, beats, or patches, had been (and still were) geographical but each patch had had its own office and editor. By the time of fieldwork, a single group editor edited copy from all patches and put the papers together. "Years ago we had a Harrow editor, an Enfield editor, a Borehamwood editor and a Times editor. Now it's me. Borehamwood had a district office, Enfield had a district office, Harrow was based here [in Watford]. Through merging of different London offices and chief executives taking over different areas, people moving – it's just happened" (interview ETI2013). Again the shrinking of newsrooms and the merging of job roles had sliced into established routines which sustained not just organisational but social identity as part of a team. As Fyfe (2012:67) observes: "Historically, beats emerged to solve problems peculiar to news organisations. Over time, however, they also became central to the self-identity of daily journalists. Many criteria for what counts as a "good" reporter follow directly from the activities of beat reporting."



## **8:6 Local journalists and their sources**

One theme to which journalists returned repeatedly in interviews was that mainstream local news journalists, as opposed to amateur bloggers, could do a real job of telling people what was going on because they knew the right people to speak to and they had the access to the sources that mattered. This was part of what made them trustworthy to readers and “professional” in the sense of providing information that people could rely on and that was balanced. More than this though, it was part of a journalistic culture of flair and being able to dig up off-diary stories. This was an important part of journalists’ identity in all three newsrooms.

Being able to identify and have access to sources is key to journalistic activity (see for example Gans 1979; Sigal 1986; Manning 2001; Harcup 2004). As Harcup says (2004:44) “Sources are central to the practice of journalism. Sources are the people, places or organisations from who potential news stories originate and the people, places or organisations to whom journalists turn when checking potential stories.”

However, as Gans (1979:80) observes, the source-journalist relationship is more complicated than this. “Although the notion that journalist transmit information from sources to audiences suggests a linear process, in reality the process is circular, complicated further by a large number of feedback loops.”

In the case study newsrooms, it was certainly possible to observe feedback loops, created additionally by press officers, whose increasing power to drive news agendas and control access has been noted a number of researchers (see for example Davies 2008; Monck 2008; O’Neill and O’Connor 2008; Currah 2009; Williams et al 2010;). Currah (2009:59) comments: “The PR industry is assuming a “critical and contested role in the gathering and distribution of news.”

The reality in the local newsrooms was often that much of the time journalists did not have the exclusive access they longed for or the linear source-journalist relationship which would have made their job easier, but were funnelled through press officers at councils and emergency services. This “critical and contested role” which Currah identifies, in which PR people increasingly step in to do the job of agenda setting and newsgathering previously the role of journalists, has emerged partly because journalists are struggling with a shortage of resources and staff cuts which are particularly acute in local newsrooms. O’Neill and O’Connor (2008:489) suggest that in these circumstances “it is all too easy for journalists to become dependent on the pre-fabricated, pre-packaged “new” from resource-rich public relations organisations or the familiar and easily accessed routine source or re-writes of agency copy.” This was evident in all three newsrooms.

One reporter said: “We just don’t have enough reporters. Really we’re trying to operate on a bit of a shoe string. The Watford Observer, which is a really good paper, has 6-7 reporters across two newspapers whereas we’ve got 6-7 reporters across seven newspapers. As soon as someone’s ill or on holiday, there’s no slack. It’s a bit ridiculous.

“There’s masses to cover – courts, inquests, schools, road incidents. They’re just all things I don’t have time to do – there are council problems and people with quirky stories so you can’t cover it. You’re just massively picking and choosing” (interview RTI2013).

This was not because the journalists wanted it this way. On the contrary, they wanted to get their own stories and knew they needed to. As Phillips (2010) in Fenton (2010:90) suggests, there was a tension between the desire to preserve journalistic autonomy and the need to adjust to commercial realities. Phillips says journalists “may be pulled towards the commercial pole dominated by audience ratings, circulation wars and the increasing importance of advertising but within this field [of journalism] it is not commercial success but originality and proof of autonomy which are admired.”

This originality was prized by journalists as “flair”. It was much more difficult to show flair when rewriting a press release, which not only required little skill but also robbed journalists of their autonomy in going out and finding their own off-diary stories. Autonomy, as Bourdieu (1998:70 in Webb et al 2002:184) argues when outlining his concept of the “journalistic field” is core to the internal values of journalists and in tension with commercial priorities. “This field [journalism] is the site of opposition between two models, each with its own principles of legitimation, that of peer recognition, accorded individuals who internalize most completely the internal “values” or principles of the field or recognition by the public at large which is measured by numbers of readers listeners or viewers and therefore in the final analysis, by sales and profits.”

There was a reluctant recognition in newsrooms that in some cases, more sophisticated PR could be useful. “The hours in the day are less and less. Fortunately with PR being a bit more savvy, the LibDems, the Conservatives, the councils are ready to go with their stories, they know you’re going to be looking for a quote on this or that and in terms of their professionalism, they’re very good at PR and self-promotion, so it’s quicker” (interview ESC2012). But he added: “The most savvy PRs are well aware of the pressures on journalism and are using this to their advantage.”

This supports Aldridge (2007:59) who says: “Increased pressures on staffing mean that a reliable and plentiful flow of news from [sources] is vital, the more so given that there is little time to cultivate informants by informal face-to-face contact.”

The lack of effort required to rewrite a press release was the opposite of the amount of effort required to do an in-depth investigation and the excitement of chasing the story, which was what had attracted many into the industry in the first place. Journalists were in some cases so demoralised they’d stopped trying. One reporter said “Here you can just engage autopilot and just rewrite. You’ve seen the paper – it has the look of a paper where lots of it has been rewritten press releases” (interview RSLP2011). Another reporter on the same paper agreed: “We do more and more rewriting of press releases.

Even if you try and use your contacts to make a different story, it's still a press release" (interview RSLP2011).

This is not to say that journalists did not get original stories. The Times and Independent ran a series of critical stories about Barnet Council's mis-handling of an application for premier league football matches to be played at a local ground and their reporting enraged both Barnet Council and the football club owner. The South London Press uncovered a scam in which dodgy boilers were being installed in Lambeth council flats with big rake-offs for the installers. But such stories were becoming more difficult to do because of pressure of time and resources. The reporter who exposed Lambeth council said: "We can't run these contacts like we used to so I can't go out for an afternoon and perhaps sit in a pub with a councillor and come back with nothin." (interview RSLP2011)

Local newspaper journalists are particularly conscious of a need to nurture their sources (increasingly press officers rather than actual decision-makers within these organisations) as they have to return to them regularly (Cox and Morgan 1973; Murphy 1976; Franklin 2006; Aldridge 2007). Institutional sources such as local councillors, emergency services, local schools and businesses were core sources in all three newsrooms and editors were keen to maintain these relationships, sometimes, according to journalists, at the expense of trusting their own reporters. "They [the editors] couldn't do it [offend press officers] even if they wanted to because they'd ruin their relationships and everyone would be f\*\*\*\*d. They're unwilling to go into battle in any circumstances because if we fall out with these press teams, they're not going to give us anything. So you can't fight your corner – you don't have any support" (interview RSC2012).

This was a rare admission of the close symbiosis between journalists and sources (Gieber 1964) although it was observable in all three newsrooms in conferences and discussions, as well as interviews. Much more common was

for journalists to stress their independence and willingness to challenge their sources, revelling in the idea that sources saw them as trouble-makers.

One editor at the Times and Independent said: "We've had run-ins with Harrow Council and we wouldn't be their first port of call. They'd go to the Harrow Observer. The press officer used to be the Observer's news editor. I can imagine we're the black sheep but that's kind of what we want" (interview ETI2013). A reporter said: "If you go easy on your contacts, I think that in itself is unprofessional because your responsibility isn't to your contacts but to the public" (interview RTI2013).

Much of the research on journalists and their sources in general has focused on arguments that journalists tend to use a limited range of official sources (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979). In their analysis of the sources used by four local papers, O'Neill and O'Connor (2008) found that just 5 per cent of the news stories sampled had readers as the primary source. Police, courts, local government and "organisers of/participants in staged events" were the top four primary sources across the four papers. This in itself is not surprising, say the authors, as these are key sources.

However, the version of events provided by these sources is in a majority of cases left unchallenged as newspapers rely increasingly heavily on single sources. Of the sample examined by O'Neill and O'Connor (2008:493). 76 per cent of stories relied on just one source, and a further 24 per cent were "framed by a primary source with a brief alternative quote included at the end of the report". "What this means in practice is a formulaic style, superficially giving the appearance of "objective news" but which fails to get to the heart of the issue or misses the real story."

Some stories included an alternative quote, usually from a council spokesman or other official body putting the official line. As O'Neill and O'Connor note, this seemed to be more for appearance's sake than because the quote added anything to the story. Reporters in the case study newsrooms came under pressure from news desks to get a quote from official bodies like councils so that stories appeared balanced. Sometimes failure to get quotes from key sources prevented publication of a story

so that sources were able to exert pressure on the news agenda or even prevent publication altogether.

This did not always work, however, especially in the web-first news environment of the Times and Independent. “The way we work is that sometimes we go online before we’ve had a reply. We’ve asked for a reply. Say it’s anger at this but essentially it’s someone’s opinion. But if it’s a fact, like the council isn’t collecting all their rubbish, there’s a pile of waste, and I go down there and there’s a pile of waste, we put it online but we always give the council a chance to reply before it goes up” (interview RTI2013).

A simple content analysis of the primary sources of stories on the main news pages produced during the weeks of observation in the three case study newsrooms backed up the findings of O’Neill and O’Connor that journalists used a limited range of primary sources for stories.

As those authors note, it is relatively easy to determine the source of a story even if the journalist has tried to find a more interesting angle. In a number of cases, stories had more than one source, but these were used more to bolster the story provided by the initial source than to challenge it.

By far the largest number of stories across all three newsrooms came from what O’Neill and O’Connor (2008:491) defined as “staged events” or “charities” Because the newspapers I was examining were quite small (during my observation of the Times and Independent Series, it was the summer holidays, and when I was at the Surrey Comet, it was the New Year), I conflated “staged events” and “charities” into one category. “Staged events” included such happenings as school fairs and local festivals. It could be argued that almost all stories about charities and charitable activities are staged events, in that they are “pseudo-events” (Boorstin 1961) rather than actual news.

The dominance of staged events, mostly feel-good stories on the main news pages was striking. Of the 117 news stories carried by the South London Press and the Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury, 22 (18 per cent) came from charities or other feel good events such as the SLP’s annual Our

Heroes coverage featuring outstanding local people in a number of categories. Of the 68 stories in the Surrey Comet and Kingston Guardian, 19 (27 per cent) were from charities or other organisations with feel-good stories. Of the 118 stories in the print editions of the Times and Independent Series (across seven newspapers), 42 (35 per cent) had a charity or other organisation as the source of a story.

It must be stressed that this was not an in-depth content analysis and the figures need to be assessed with a number of caveats and explanations in mind. As with other local newsrooms, a number of the main news stories appeared in more than one newspaper. If a story recurred twice or three times, it was counted each time it appeared, on the ground that each newspaper had a different readership. This examination of content also covered only print editions. Web editions carried stories which did not always appear in print editions.

Newspapers are smaller in the summer months and over New Year, which potentially distorts news choices and foregrounds particular types of story. In the Surrey Comet and Kingston Guardian, New Year's Honours for local people figured prominently. In the Times and Independent Series in July, there were plentiful school summer fairs and local festivals which provided useful opportunities for pictures and name checks of local dignitaries.

However, this basic counting exercise shows the extent to which these local newspapers relied on information from charities and other organisations whose stories were uncontentious.

All other sources of stories were substantially less successful at getting their stories in the paper than charities and other organisations such as scouts, guides and youth groups. Traditional sources such as the police and the local council were well behind. Of the South London Press and Mercury stories, 5 per cent were police-sourced. In the Surrey Comet and Kingston Guardian, the figure was 14 per cent and in the Times and Independent Series 4 per cent. Local government-sourced stories accounted for 9 per cent, 4 per cent and 8 per cent respectively. As O'Neill and O'Connor also found (2008:491) stories emanating from sources such as readers were sparse. The figures

were very similar over all three newsrooms, with reader-sourced stories accounting for 6 per cent of the total on the SLP/Mercury and the Comet/Guardian, and 7 per cent across the Times and Independent Series.

Court reporting fared better, accounting for 14 per cent of stories in the SLP/Mercury and 16 per cent in the Comet/Guardian. However, there were a number of specific reasons for this. My observation weeks at the South London Press coincided with the high profile trial at the Old Bailey of two of the suspects in the Stephen Lawrence murder case. Stephen Lawrence's murder in 1993 took place in Eltham, part of the South London Press's patch. The papers in that newsroom therefore carried reports almost daily from the trial. But they used an agency rather than sending their own reporters. Reporters said they did not have time to spend the day in court.

However, it could be argued that this was a matter of personal choice rather than necessity, and that demoralised South London Press reporters were accepting too easily the decision of the news desk to use an agency. One reporter said: "We seem to have less and less time to cover courts. We get reports from Central [court agency] but they only cover the Old Bailey. But it's lack of staff, When we had two Greenwich reporters and there was a murder, one of us would have to go down to do all the door knocking. We don't do that any more. I think other people do and it's because of the editor we've got – before this year we've always done them" (interview RSLP2011).

It was noticeable at the Surrey Comet that a number of reporters, in particular the chief reporter, attended court almost daily and sourced a number of strong stories from there. Therefore it was not always impossible to attend court because of time constraints as journalists at the South London Press were suggesting. Court reporting is considered a core skill for local news reporters and those who did not practise were arguably rejecting (or at least not arguing with those who were rejecting on their behalf) opportunities to keep their skills up to date.



The aim of this chapter has been to explore the core operations of the case study newsrooms in terms of news agendas, organisational routines, and source choices. It has shown that sociological approaches to analysis of newsroom behaviour continue to be an important tool for interpreting what is going on in newsrooms. Earlier academic analyses of the question “What is news?” were also an important tool in examining news choices in the case study newsrooms and what lay behind these.

However, this chapter also suggested that for a full understanding of how journalists develop and maintain both a shared identity and an individual identity in the newsroom, it is necessary to go beyond sociological interpretations which emphasise routine and control and consider how routines, news and source choices are shaped by the culture of the newsroom.

Within the definition of culture as shared meaning making, it was possible to recognise the conservative print-oriented news choices especially of the South London Press. Journalists in this newsroom had a print culture and this was their mindset, their shared understanding of how news was produced. It was possible to use theories of newsroom work as performance and communicative exchange as part of an analysis of shared meaning-making, with news conferences providing an arena in which journalists could display their understanding of what stories were important to their specific readership but, just as importantly, to their editors. When routines such as calls to key sources or designated beats started to disintegrate when journalists became demoralised, this was also part of a process of shared meaning-making in which journalists absorbed the unspoken attitudes of their colleagues.

## **Chapter 9 Research findings: local newspapers and community**

This chapter continues the exploration of the nature of newsroom work and how this shapes journalistic identity, but it moves outside the newsroom to examine how identity is also shaped by journalists' concept of the role of the local newspaper as a "silent watchdog", and the importance of journalists' relationships with the communities they serve. The chapter explores what "community" means in the context of London and the challenges London local news journalists face when attempting to cover large geographical areas with constantly shifting populations.

### **9:1 The role of the local newspaper: the "silent watchdog"?**

In democratic societies such as the UK, in which members of the public enjoy the right to vote, newspapers generally are seen by both journalists and academic commentators to have a watchdog role in holding the powerful to account (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007; Anderson and Ward 2007; McNair 2009; McChesney and Nicholls 2010; Kleis Nielsen 2015). In the context of the local press, the powerful are perceived to be those who have control over the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of members of the public living in a particular geographic area; the local council or councils; emergency services, developers, businesses, landlords, utilities providers. The ideal is that the activities of all these sources of potential power and control should be regularly scrutinised and their activities questioned and highlighted.

In the case of councils, who are democratically elected, persistent scrutiny of their activities is vital to allow the public to make an informed decision at the ballot box. Council scrutiny should be at the core of local newspapers' newsgathering and news writing operations (Morrison 2011 in Charles and

Stuart 2011).

Local councils now have much less power than they used to, as they have been stripped of their rights to provide services and raise money by successive central governments. But it can be argued that London boroughs play an important role in the way residents perceive their community and relate to each other within it. In local news narratives, residents often relate to each other by grouping together to protest a council's actions but equally residents intersect and interact with each other positively through council services to celebrate school success, enjoy council-provided sport and leisure facilities and develop local businesses. Local councils, however emasculated, still have a core role in civic culture, as do local newspapers, which are for readers an important source of information about the council. This is not just information about services and activities but also about creating a feeling of what Alexander (2010:278) calls "social solidarity, the we-ness of a community, whether regional, national or international, which defines feelings of connectedness". Local newspapers have become willing partners with councils in promoting the positive aspects of their areas with plenty of feel-good and business-boost stories.

However, previous research (Cox and Morgan 1973; Murphy 1976; Kaniss 1991; Franklin 1998; Franklin 2006; Aldridge 2006; Franklin 2014) argues that the so-called "watchdogs" have been muzzled by a combination of local papers' reliance on big advertisers and unwillingness to be critical; over-reliance on official sources which peddled an official line; reductions in resources; which prevented them from attending meetings and digging below the surface of stories.

Franklin (2014:469) identifies the lack of resources as a key reason for the muzzling of the watchdog: "Starved of economic and editorial resources, these local newspaper watchdogs are constrained on a tight financial leash, no longer able to hold local politicians and governments to account".

For their part, local authorities have acted to strengthen their ability to put a positive spin on their activities and bypass possible criticism and scrutiny. In a move highlighted by Morrison (2011:194), local councils have moved onto local newspapers' own patch and launched their own magazines and glossy newspapers.

"Staffed by professionally-trained, well-paid journalists whose salaries the private sector cannot hope to match, this new breed of title reaches far more households than the conventional press and is increasingly out-competing it in the pursuit of a dwindling pool of paid advertising."

Morrison argues that this is part of a wider trend in which councils use media-management techniques to pre-empt and control comment on their activities. Recent changes to legislation governing the structures and operation of local government have also enabled councils to hold more meetings behind closed doors away from press scrutiny, says Morrison.

All these factors combined to undermine coverage of council activities in the case study newsrooms. To varying extents, journalists in all three newsroom were aware that the reality of their working days fell far short of the ideal of the local newspaper as a community watchdog, which was a core meaning of their occupational existence and identity.

Journalists at the South London Press in particular admitted that they no longer regularly attended council meetings, citing time and resource pressures. But they expressed concern that councils could be allowed to get away with at best poor decision-making and at worst, dishonesty and corruption.

"If you don't have the level of staff to cover the borough, the traditional role of the reporter, going to council meetings courts, all those things which are the requisites to cover, if we can't do that and we're office bound, then we can't do our jobs as well" (interview RSLP2011).

Another journalist agreed: "Councils have got away with a lot more and

people aren't as well informed. You exist as a local newspaper to champion your community on good things as well as uncovering the bad stuff. Who else is there to investigate them but us?" (interview RSLP2011).

An editor said: "I worry now because we see local newspapers closing and town councils are being left without these checks. When I was a reporter I used to go to all these parish meetings, I used to drive for miles in the middle of nowhere to sit in a cold church hall writing about the lampposts or the gravel and everyone was name- checked. And here decisions are being made on a grand scale, multi-million pound decisions are being made about housing estates and parts, and if we can't cover them no-one else will, because the nationals are certainly not going to" (interview ESLP2011).

What was significant about these quotes for the purposes of this research was that all these interviewees saw coverage of local councils as being exclusively the province of traditional local newspapers. There was a reluctance to acknowledge the possibility of collaboration with other non-traditional media outlets such as hyperlocal websites or bloggers, who attended council meetings and reported on them. This was further evidence of journalists protecting their own patch by citing their own professionalism and reporting skills. They saw council reporting as part of their role and protected their boundaries against amateurs.

A conservative culture in newsrooms prevented journalists from making an imaginative leap into networking with other media sources which could have provided much-needed extra reporting capacity at council meetings. The same shared understanding of the importance of the "watchdog" role of the local press prevented a loosening of the newsrooms' self- imposed unspoken boundaries for the benefit of both journalists and readers.

Anderson (2012) found similar attitudes in newsrooms in Philadelphia, where he carried out observation. Expressing surprise that networking opportunities did not only not happen but were "actively thwarted" (2012:7), he concluded that "the difficulties in networking the news stem as much from journalistic culture – journalism's vision of "its" public and the importance of the act of

reporting in the journalistic imaginary – as they do from logistic or transaction cost difficulties.”

Part of this act of protection was because journalists in all three newsrooms saw their role as a “fourth estate” in a democratic society as a core part of journalistic identity. The ideal of local journalism was still very much alive, even in newsrooms in London where the idea of “local” is problematic (Aldridge 2007:71).

Almost all interviewees admitted that they had not initially considered issues like the journalist’s role in a democratic society or the concept of journalists as a “fourth estate” when they first started in journalism. However, as they grew more experienced and started making contact with a range of readers and sources, this became a more significant part of their motivation and also an important part of what it meant to be a local, as opposed to national, journalist. Many interviewees mentioned the important role of the local paper in supporting individual readers in fights against public bodies such as councils, and the personal satisfaction of achieving a positive result. More than one journalist used the word “privilege” to describe being a local journalist. Local journalists still had a strong sense that theirs was a worthwhile and important job, representing their readers and scrutinising decision-makers (Firmstone and Coleman 2014). One editor said: “We’re always watching, and people who are making decisions need to be questioned” (interview ESLP2011).

Because journalists saw themselves as representing their readers, a key claim throughout all three newsroom was that their coverage was “neutral” rather than “political”. Neutrality was considered a strength, a local journalistic norm, and journalists contrasted their own “neutral” coverage unfavourably with the obvious “political agendas” of the nationals and also with local opinion blogs. “We’re doing this purely neutrally. It’s not the case in every paper but in ours it is. We don’t have any groups that we favour whereas a lot of bloggers round here have a political agenda” (interview RTI2013). An editor agreed: “I don’t think local newspapers should be

political. It's about scrutinising, giving people a voice and actually making change" (interview ESLP2011).

There was also a more prosaic reason, suggest Cole and Harcup (2010): "...with proprietorial or baronial ownership replaced by corporate control and local competition replaced by local monopoly and thus the need to "include" all the target audience rather than divide them on political lines, the political allegiance of most regional and local papers has been replaced with a weak and ill-defined "community interest". Aldridge (1998:119) also argues that commercial constraints restrict overt politicking: "Relying as they do on maximum readership in their sales area, local newspapers cannot afford systematically to alienate whole swathes of readers by political partisanship."

Journalists did not appear to see any contradiction between an ideal of "neutrality" and the ability to play an active role in effecting change in the community. In fact, local newspapers were defiantly partisan in the sense that they saw their role as siding with the reader and "the community" often against those operating in local political or economic spheres (councils, landlords and businesses for example). If not "political" in terms of supporting one political party on the council rather than another or individual councillors because of their party leanings, local papers are by their very nature political in that they are trying to influence decision-making processes and outcomes by their actions.

Local newspapers have historically been an important part of the civic sphere partly because they are not neutral and this involvement on behalf of what they perceive as their readers' interests was seen by journalists as a key part of their role.

Newspaper campaigns were one of the most overt ways in which publications took sides on an issue and tried to change decisions. The South London Press, for example, campaigned against the closure of Battersea Children's

Zoo and the closure of the 24-hour mental health facility at the Maudsley Hospital. Campaigns fulfilled a number of functions, including raising the profile of the paper with MPs, charities and government departments as well as helping people in the community who would suffer if cuts and closures went ahead. On an ideological level, campaigns were key to the projection of a local newspaper as a vital player on the local democratic stage. As Aldridge (2003: 500) suggests, newspapers also used campaigns “as a key strategy in sustaining the papers’ self-definition as important movers and shakers with whom a loyal readership will identify.”

## **9:2 The meaning of “community” for London local news journalists**

The choice of campaigns, as well as the choice of news stories and news agendas, was governed by what Aldridge (2003: 498) describes as a “deeply held but rarely articulated theory of identification”. The aim, continues Aldridge, was to “create a “community of readers” who relate to each other and to the newspaper”. Kleis Nielsen (2015:1) argues that there is a specific role for local newspapers in creating a community of interest which is more than geographical:

“For more than a century...local media have represented their area and helped people imagine themselves as part of a community, connected in part through their shared local news medium, bound together by more than geographic proximity or politically defined administrative boundaries.”

This section will argue that the concept of the shared, imagined community identified by Aldridge and Kleis Nielsen, and earlier by Anderson (1991) is important to understanding journalists’ relationships with their readers but that geography is still key to understanding not only how journalists negotiate reader and source relationships but also how readers and potential readers interact with and relate to each other. Hess’s proposal of a “geo-social” framework (2012:53) provides a useful focus, as she suggests that this concept provides “scope to acknowledge the connection a small newspaper



has to a geographic territory whilst considering the degree of openness and boundlessness of the social space in which such newspapers operate.”

Scholars have suggested that the geographical ties linking local newspapers and their readers are loosening as print gives way to digital. Franklin (2006:xxi) argues: “While local residents used to wait patiently and eagerly for newspaper boys and girls to deliver their copy of the Birmingham Post, a “Brummie” diaspora community can read their favourite columnist from an internet café in Bangkok, Burma or Belgium as easily as their used to in Birmingham.”

As journalists are increasingly moved into centralised hubs away from the geographical areas to which their titles link them (Machin and Niblock 2005; Franklin 2006; Guylas in Mair et al 2012), it might appear as if geography is irrelevant. The South London Press at one stage produced all its features from a centralised hub in Uxbridge on the other side of London (before realising this did not work and bringing features production back in-house). The Surrey Comet covered Kingston but operated from Twickenham, a frustrating three quarters of an hour bus ride away, and its pages were subbed 10 miles away in Sutton. Times and Independent reporters covered north London but print editions were put together 20 miles away in Watford.

The answer, from journalists’ point of view, was that geography was still of supreme importance for local newspaper journalists and a core part of what it meant for them to be local, rather than national, journalists. Cutting or distorting geographical links between papers and readers was damaging because it affected their ability to get stories but even more importantly, to be physically represented in a building in the heart of the communities they were writing about. Centralisation meant that journalists were less likely to get readers dropping into the office to offer stories or to think of calling their local paper (interview ESC2012). It meant that journalists were less likely to pick up information as they walked around, which in turn, they believed, made them less credible to their readers, challenging a core part of their identity.

As one reporter commented: “It’s just tiny granular bits of information, that because we don’t live on patch, because we don’t go every day, we might not know a pub closed two weeks ago. They’re small details but for local people it shows that the paper perhaps isn’t as rooted in the local community as it could be” (interview RSC2012). Journalists based far off patch said they were less inclined to go out and cover stories because they would miss the key events which would make the journey worthwhile. As a result, they became more desk based – which in turn made it more difficult for them to understand the nature of the community, or more accurately, as this chapter suggests, communities, about which they are writing

“If a murder happened or something there was no point in going out there because we might hear about it while it was happening but by the time you get out there it almost wasn’t worth it, the scene would have been secured, you’d just be standing at a police cordon being told nothing. I mean you’d get more out of the press office than from the scene.” (interview RSLP2011).

Conversely at the Times and Independent, where journalists were out on patch rather than in a newsroom, reporters recognised the value of being on the spot, however much they regretted not having a newsroom base.

“Being out on patch is a real benefit because you see people you know. I would say that I’ve been to lots of meetings, lots of community events and because we’re on patch, it’s so much easier to do that ...I’ve popped into lots of shops in Golders Green which is part of my patch... People say, oh, we invited the other newspaper but they haven’t turned up and I do think it’s because we’re on patch. If there’s a fire down the road it’s easy for me to just get there straight away” (interview RTI2013).

In the three newsrooms, journalists at all levels mentioned the word “community” frequently when talking about the nature of their job and how they related to their readers. The relationship to community was a source of pride and came from working on titles which journalists perceived to have a solid and long-standing reputation in the community. The value of this long-standing reputation was frequently highlighted as part of a wider idea of the trustworthiness of mainstream local papers as opposed to the unreliability of

material on blogs and social media and was a core part of journalistic identity. Understanding the nature of the community was seen as a key part of being “professional” and of sustaining an identity as a local journalist. This understanding was seen as part of what set them apart from journalists on national newspapers. For journalists, community was primarily a matter of geographical proximity, of having a continuing relationship with people they physically met or saw in the street.

“I think we’re much closer to our readers so if we get something wrong, it impacts on us immediately because we’ll be seeing the same people the next week and the week after. Whereas when we see nationals writing about our patch and they get things wrong, and they do, they can shrug their shoulders and they’ll be in the Isle of Wight next week or Scotland or wherever” (interview RSC2012).

But the meaning of “community” in London, as commentators have pointed out (Aldridge 2007; Johnson in Mair et al 2012) is nebulous or as Kaniss (1991:9) describes it, the “more intangible moulding of regional character and local identity” Although many Londoners have lived in the same house for a long time (Aldridge 2007), figures from the 2011 census showed a much more fluctuating pattern. Overall London’s population grew by 12 per cent but at the same time the ethnic composition of this population changed, with 623,000 white Britons leaving London (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2011). The capital’s population is transient and people move frequently. The social and economic make-up of different areas of London is in a constant state of flux (ONS 2011).

London is distinguished from other UK cities by its extremes of wealth and poverty and its status as a safe haven for overseas wealth. It is the richest part of the country, but also it is the most unequal, with the highest levels of poverty. It is home to some of the world’s most expensive real estate, but has the highest proportion of renters of any area of the country, many of whom are locked out of home ownership. It has some of the world’s best teaching hospitals, but suffers from profound health inequalities.

London households in the ten per cent of the population with the lowest incomes have £94 per week or less using the after housing costs measure, whereas Londoners in the ten per cent of the population with the highest income have over £1,000 per week (Greater London Authority 2013).

Working-class parts of south and east London are becoming gentrified, both through central government investment in transport infrastructure such as the London Overground, and through more subtle ripple effects as middle class couples start families and move further out of the centre in search of green space and better schools. The desirability of particular schools has a distorting effect on “communities”, as middle-class parents move to be close to these schools. Poorer people are becoming priced out of the centre as rents rise and government policies restricting housing and other benefits start to take effect.

This meant that what was “local” in the three newsrooms was not easily defined. “The idea of local doesn’t really apply in London. Communities are so overlapping, their interests... population movements are huge and it’s not surprising that some neighbours don’t know each other” (interview RSC2012). But this very fluidity was seen as an advantage by journalists in the three newsrooms, particularly those who had worked on newspapers in more homogenous and close-knit areas. Reporting on a changing environment was a challenge which satisfied the desire for excitement so many journalists were looking for when they came into the industry. One editor said: “You get the feeling that OK we’re in Kingston and while we champion our area we also take into the mix that we’ve got this fantastic metropolis. I like that - the comparison. More of a strategic and geographic context. I enjoy it. It’s interesting to see how Kingston’s affected by things in London and how we buffet what’s going on in the rest of London” (interview ESC2012). However the constant flux of London’s population and its changing social and ethnic make-up made it potentially very difficult to identify “the community”. Journalists attempted to resolve this by prioritising the importance of geographic proximity in their working practices but this was not always easy as managements continued to centralise newsroom operations.

### **9:3 News and geography**

The synergy between news and geography is core to local newspapers (Hess 2012:52). However, this section suggests that geography is both part of what defines local newspapers and shapes their news agendas and part of what traps them within limited conceptions of what constitutes communities and readers, which in turn limits their potential and relevance to wider audiences.

Case study newsrooms were structured geographically in “patches”, which roughly corresponded to London boroughs, or in larger boroughs, geographical patches within boroughs. So on the South London Press, reporters were individually assigned to the boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth and Lewisham, with the Lewisham reporter also filing stories for the Lewisham Mercury. Another Mercury reporter covered the borough of Greenwich, which included Woolwich. On the Surrey Comet, reporters were individually assigned patches within the borough of Kingston, which covers a large area. On the Times and Independent Series, reporters were each allocated a borough covering a large stretch of outer North London – one each for Harrow, Enfield and Haringey and two for Barnet.

Every one of these patches had, to a greater or lesser extent, a range of richer and poorer communities, areas of gentrification, mixed ethnicities and religious affiliations. There was an element of territoriality based on borough boundaries which made for some bizarre discussions in conference. At the Times and Independent, a story about the closure of a Tai Kwon Do club was claimed by the Harrow reporter and the Barnet reporter. Happily for the editor who needed the story, the club was just within the borough of Barnet on the Harrow/Barnet border so could be put in the Barnet Times.

But the patches made sense, as their organisation meant there was in theory at least one reporter to cover each borough council (although coverage of council meetings was patchy). In addition, many other services such

as the police and fire services, local hospitals and local schools were organised on a borough basis. Another layer of potential contacts such as local cubs, scouts and brownies and volunteer services were also borough-based. Geography gave reporters a vital framework for understanding their area and developing contacts within it. Geography allowed routines to function and the localness of the papers and their reporters to be asserted. It allowed news editors to assert their authority and assign stories without argument, as in the example in the previous paragraph.

Borough boundaries in London are mainly for administrative convenience but they provide a context in which residents can identify with a smaller area within a borough or a particular set of streets. It was in this context that residents developed a shared community of interest and a number of council conflict and David v Goliath stories took shape, with neighbours bonding over council decisions. The protest by residents of Ladywell's Church Walk (a small cul de sac) over Lewisham council's plans to put a travellers' site at the top of the road, was an example of this.

Local residents also identify with micro communities of interlocking interests which have a claim to be a claim to be part of "a community"., for example, residents' associations, campaigners for various causes, schools, park-users, local shop owners, local sports fans, tenants or homeowners. Sometimes they band together, for example in opposition to a planning application, and sometimes they are in opposition to each other when their interests conflict. Lee and Newby (1985:57 in Hess 2012:50) say: "There may be little interaction between neighbours. Rather it is the nature of the relationships between people and the social networks of which they are a part that is often seen as one of the more significant aspects of "community". These interlocking communities can be social, political, cultural or a mixture of some or all of these but there is also a geographic bond, because their interests coalesce round their neighbourhoods and their amenities. It is this geographic bond which makes the story interesting to the local paper. It is in this context that social groups become interesting to journalists and start to constitute part of what journalists see as one community among many in their geographical area.

Some groups combined more effectively than others to capture the attention of reporters in a way already noted by commentators (Gans 1979: 117). The reality in newsrooms was that a lack of time and resources often reduced the “community” to small, self-selecting sections of the public who were prepared to contact local newspapers, to air a grievance or to get help with disputes with official bodies. Vocal groups in affluent areas like Surbiton were able to capture the attention of reporters by sheer persistence.

A reporter said: “The story that I dread here is the Surbiton filter beds. There are plans to build and they go crazy about it. They ring me up every week and go nuts over it – it’s going to ruin our view, our sailing club won’t be able to sail...and before this [on a different London paper] I was doing stories about people being scared to come out of their flats at night because gangs are roaming the streets” (interview RSC2012).

Journalists recognised that they were one element in a wider local news ecology and that in London, other factors such as ethnic and religious affiliations created additional loyalties. “Communities are interested in their own communities. When I worked in Haringey, there’s a large Afro-Caribbean population and I did very few stories about that community because they all went to the Voice [the newspaper for the Afro-Caribbean community] because they cared about news from their home countries” (interview RTI2013).

But, recognition of this variety of communities and news sources did not continue to the extent that there was much practical collaboration or networking with other elements operating in the media ecology. Local newspapers remained tethered within their geographical boundaries and within journalists’ conception of what constituted their communities.

However, as Anderson (2012) suggests, the model of a single “community” or readership is no longer adequate, not only in a complex digital age, but also in a complex and changing metropolis like London. The model of the “imagined community” as depicted by Benedict Anderson (1991) has changed. Anderson’s depiction (1991:35) of how people consume

newspapers “as an extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost simultaneous consumption of the “newspaper as fiction” now looks old-fashioned.

In a news ecology in which actual and potential readers can access a huge range of news sources 24 hours a day, journalists can no longer assume that everyone is exhibiting the ritual behaviour of reading the same news at the same time. It can no longer be claimed, as Anderson does (1991:35), in almost religious terms, that “each communicant is well aware that the ceremony [i.e reading newspapers] is being replicated simultaneously by thousands or millions of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion”.

Local newspapers’ concept of how their readers read is, however, closer to Anderson’s idea of simultaneous ritual consumption than to the complex interlocking networks of the digital age. As suggested earlier in this section, the very idea of a local newspaper is geographical, attached to a locality which the newspaper can represent to the world. The existing model of local newspapers, still predominantly print based not only in fact but also in the imagination and conception of the journalists who create them, assumes readers across their geographical patch will buy a paper or pick up a free paper from the supermarket or their own doormat. This is not necessarily a foregone conclusion in an age of 24 hour news and a choice of news sources from hyperlocal to global. A further irony is that local newspapers are at the same time too local and tethered by geography, and not local enough to drill down into London’s micro-communities, which is where hyperlocal websites have had success.

#### **9:4 London: where local and national intersect**

A peculiarity of working on a London local newspaper was that the journalists were working in the most news-saturated part of the country, a short bus or



tube ride away from the offices of all the national newspapers and national broadcasters. All these outlets were interested in London stories because not only was London the capital but almost all journalists on national media live in London and see the news through London-centric eyes. As one editor on the Times and Independent, who had previously worked in the provinces, put it: “They [the nationals] are closer neighbours in London” (interview ETI2013).

They also had to contend with the Evening Standard, the only London-wide paper, distributed free across the capital every afternoon, and the Metro, distributed free in the morning. This meant that many readers saw no need to get a local paper. “The issue here [in Kingston] is that they get the Standard for free, the Metro for free and that satisfies their need for local news” (interview RSC2012).

With national and regional papers, national and local broadcast channels and a range of hyperlocal websites and council freesheets and magazines, as well as their local competitors, the London local papers were operating in a very complex news ecology. They had to work hard to carve out a niche for themselves to show local readers they were still relevant and different from the Evening Standard, a newspaper primarily aimed at commuters and younger readers (Aldridge 2006:69). This research argues that the case study newsrooms were not always succeeding in this aim, held back partly by their own cultural conservatism.

Efforts by local papers to carve out a distinctive niche were regularly made more difficult by other news outlets’ habit of lifting stories wholesale from local newspaper websites and carrying them on its own pages with no by-line or acknowledgement. A typical example was a story lifted from the South London Press about the remains of an RAF bomber from Honor Oak whose plane had crashed in Italy in 1945, which the Standard ran in full. The editor was very annoyed. “When I see Geordie Greig [Evening Standard editor] ... we had an agreement. They [the Standard newsdesk] were quite good but now they’re getting worse again.. I’m keeping a file.” (observation December 2011).

Other editors accepted that they had a role as a feeder to the Evening Standard and the nationals, as long as their stories were not just lifted. “I think we’re very good. We’re up on the game. The Madingley fire [a dramatic fire in a Kingston tower block] was a case in point where we had ITN phoning us and saying we’re watching your coverage. Rather than competing with them, we accept we’re a feeder for them” (interview ESC2012)

There was also reluctant acknowledgement that the superior reach of the nationals meant that interesting London stories would be covered by the nationals and that people would be more likely to notice the story on a national outlet.

When a Banksy mural was stolen from a wall in Haringey, the Haringey Independent did everything it could to get the story out, updating its website and tweeting the updates. But, said the editor on duty: “Whatever I did, even if we got it before everyone else, people would be going, wow, have you see this on the BBC, ITV, Twitter, and I’d be thinking, hello? It was the fact that however heard we worked here as a local paper we wouldn’t get any credit for it” (interview ETI2013).

Local news journalists responded to this by positioning themselves to their readers as journalists who understood the communities they were writing about and supported their readers long after the nationals had left the scene. This was at the centre of being a local newspaper journalist, absorbed by every journalist in the newsroom and reinforced. One senior editor said: “It’s one of those things – I can’t tell you where I learnt it, I probably absorbed it. You understand you have to have relationship with schools, councils, even if you’re damning them to hell one week.... It’s one of the things I need to work on with some of the younger reporters. You might be knackered and not want to write anything but you can always give your contacts a ring, have a chat, see what’s going on” (interview ETI2013).

Journalists had an ambivalent attitude to the national press as a potential

workplace. On one hand, the nationals carried higher status among journalists generally and were an obvious next step up on the career ladder for local journalists. Moving to a national was seen to be a part of professional development - a daily paper, a larger newsroom (Franklin and Murphy 1991:8). It was common for local journalists to do shifts on the nationals. This was a remnant of the time before Rupert Murdoch broke the unions at Wapping, when journalists had to do three years in the provinces before working on a national, as part of their union membership. Journalists were allowed by their contracts to offer stories to the Standard and the nationals (although they could no longer negotiate individual fees, instead having to pass details to syndication departments).

On the other hand, many were keen to assert their identity as local news journalists, protecting their local identity by claiming frequently in interviews that they would not necessarily want to work for the national press. Some expressed scorn for their news values and the way they worked.

One reporter said: "Having seen how the nationals work, I actually have less respect than I did for the BBC, the Telegraph, the Mail, seeing them lifting my stories, rejigging the intro and bunging it onto a page without checking the stories for themselves" (interview RSC2012).

### **9:5 Sources and readers: a blurred dividing line**

On local newspapers which defines themselves primarily in relation to geography, as this research argues they do, the dividing line between sources and readers is more blurred than on national newspapers. On a national newspaper, an official source such as a government minister or a chief executive might talk to a reporter in their official role but they may well not be a reader. On local papers, sources are likely also to be readers, who are both local consumers of news and producers of stories when they need

publicity, or help against a council, developer, landlord or business.

This means that perceptions among journalists of who constitutes part of the “community” are closely bound up with those who constitute their contacts. This tended to skew the case study newsrooms’ perception of “community” depending on who their contacts were.

Management reluctance to spend money on readership research meant that journalists’ understanding of their readers and the wider community was very much based on the experiences and narratives of their contacts, to the exclusion of other parts of the community which did not write in or email or communicate.

Although community relationships constituted a key part of local journalistic identity, in practice, “community” was often understood as a business decision, in a narrow instrumentalist way in which editors targeted stories and campaigns towards those “communities” they believed were most likely to read the paper and raise sales. Editors continued to make news choices based on a limited view of their readers which did not take into account social changes in gentrifying areas but which played to anecdotal impressions of who their readers were.

“There are a number of us who are quite experienced so we have a history of this area and we know the kinds of issues which people tap into” (interview ESLP2011). However, there was also significant input and feedback from the sales department.

In interview, editors at the South London Press were quite open about the way the paper shaped its news agenda into their idea of what constituted their community. “We’re not going to do too much about [expensive public school ] Dulwich College and their waterlogged playing fields because we cover some of the biggest [council] estates and everything needs refurbishing and the big issue is that schools don’t have playing fields so how do they get to the local parks? We sell most of our papers in traditional areas, Rotherhithe, Bermondsey, Brixton, Vauxhall, Catford, Lewisham” (interview ESLP2011).

Traditional in this context means “poor”. All these areas are working class with substantial tracts of social housing. But all these areas have also seen substantial regeneration redevelopment and an influx of what estate agents call “young professionals”. Little of this social change was however reflected in the South London Press’s coverage of these areas, which continued to focus on issues of primary interest to poorer people such as the failure of a council to respond to requests for repairs.

As one South London Press journalist commented, this ignored large parts of the newspaper’s potential readership. “I think we do a good job of representing the best and the worst aspects of south London... [but]. there’s a large area we don’t tap into, like the green movement. There are a lot of Guardian readers in south London. But they [the news desk] have the idea that our readership is this...” (interview RSLP2011).

Newspapers are owned by one of a handful of large national and multi-national companies which have effectively carved up the capital between them, with each company owning a number of titles covering parts of a wider geographical area. Their interest in the communities their newspapers cover is economic and the managers of these companies have little interest in developing relationships with local communities in the areas they cover despite the best efforts of journalists to develop such relationships.

This lack of interest results in some juxtapositions which appear to some critics to be bizarre. Aldridge (2007:72) points out that the South London Press covers three football teams which are bitter rivals: Millwall, Crystal Palace and Charlton Athletic. “It would be hard to imagine a more powerful indicator that these newspapers are not a distinctive presence in the communities they claim to serve, nor to have the capacity to be a recognised and effective player in local affairs.”

However, as Cox and Morgan (1976:27) argue, newspaper publishers are well aware of the need to strike a balance between ruthless profit-seeking and the need to maintain credibility for their titles. It could be argued against Aldridge that supporters of the three rival teams just extract the stories which interest them and ignore the rest, just as others readers do with other

sections of this and any newspaper. From the South London Press's point of view, to be seen to ignore one local team at the expense of another would itself be more harmful to the title's credibility.

Newspaper publishers stick with what makes money, which is both a strength and a weakness: a strength because newspapers need to make money to continue to exist, and a weakness because they are not responding rapidly enough to change to keep themselves relevant.

The aim of this chapter was to move beyond questions of newsroom routines, organisation and internal newsroom culture to questions of how journalists perceive their role in the community, what "community" means in the context of London local newspapers and how London local journalists relate to the national newspapers on their doorstep. The chapter explored the role of local newspapers as a "watchdog", and questioned how well they were achieving their goal of holding local councils to account. Journalists blamed cuts in resources for their diminished attendance at council meetings but a culture of boundary creation which also meant that journalists were reluctant to consider innovations such as informal or formal partnerships with those who did attend such meetings.

The chapter also suggested that local newspapers were by definition tethered by geography, and this was a strength, in that they needed to be seen by readers to be there on the ground representing them. But being rooted in geography was a limitation as well as a strength in the internet era in which geographical boundaries in an internet era in which geographical boundaries are becoming less relevant.

## Chapter 10 Discussion

An important question for this research was what it felt like to be working in a sector apparently written off by many commentators, how journalists preserved a sense of pride in their work, and the extent to which there existed an individual and collective culture in local newsrooms which supported and even rescued journalists from succumbing to pessimism.

What emerged from observation and interviews was that there was a distinctive “local” newsroom culture, shaped by industry training and exams followed by years of newsroom socialization in which the idea of the importance of local journalism to the community and the role of journalists in defending and representing readers was inculcated in a predominantly young and ambitious workforce.

This culture was both a strength, insofar as it allowed journalists to create a positive individual identity for themselves as skilled workers with professional standards, but also a weakness because the culture of the newsroom was predominantly a closed one, reluctant to open up to fundamental changes in outlook and working practices or to reach out to collaborate with others operating in the same geographical area. This tension limited the potential of the local papers in their areas to carve out a new niche for themselves in a changing environment and was part of the reason why the circulation of paid-for papers in particular continued to fall. To put it bluntly, the newspapers produced by the case study newsrooms were not reaching out to substantial numbers of new readers or making an impact beyond their core readerships of a few thousand people.

This is not to disregard the impact of relentless cost-cutting and redundancies on journalists’ ability to do a good job. But, following Ryfe (2012), the essential conservatism of journalists and the deeply embedded processes which framed journalists’ conscious and unconscious actions meant that adapting to change was a slow and painful process.

The findings also support the conclusions of Anderson (2013:3) who argues

that the local journalism's cultural certainties are a stumbling block to progress. "Local journalism's occupational self-image, its vision of itself as an autonomous workforce conducting autonomous research on behalf of a unitary public, blocked the kind of cross-collaborative communication that might have helped journalism thrive in an era of fractured communication."

The three year period in which fieldwork took place showed journalists in each of the three newsrooms attempting to develop new working practices in response to changes such as online news, competition from social media and other non-mainstream commentators, without dislodging their core beliefs in the role and value of the work of themselves and their colleagues. It is possible to identify over the three years an increasingly sophisticated use of websites, an increased emphasis on web-first journalism and the use of processes such as live blogging, which were to do with wider changes in reader expectations and changes in technology. But at the same time, between observing the first newsroom in 2011 and the last in 2013, the similarities between the first and last were substantially more marked than the differences.

The initial focus for the research in this thesis was on the question of the extent to which journalists in local newsrooms saw themselves as "professionals" and the extent to which this perception influenced and shaped an internal newsroom culture, relationships with colleagues and ability to change and adapt in a digital age, as well as externally driven relationships with sources and the wider community and the role of local news as challenger and critic of the main holders of the levers of power within the community. This focus is encapsulated in the first of the five research questions framing the research: "What do local journalists understand by "professionalism" and to what extent does it shape their journalistic identity?"



This exploration tapped into a large pool of sociological research into the nature and power of the professions in industrial societies, and the question of the extent to which occupations such as journalism can be described as professional.

This yielded revealing insights into how journalists saw themselves and how they operated in the newsroom environment. However, it became clear that many journalists did not readily identify with the label of “professional” as a core marker of journalistic identity which supports the findings of previous research in this area (for example Soloski 1989; Aldridge and Evetts 2003; Singer 2003; Deuze 2005; Evetts 2006). A number of journalists argued that journalism was not a profession but a craft, as many journalists have done (Cameron 1967 in Bromley 1999; Marr 2004). Others suggested that “professional” was too narrow a definition, which did not account for skills highly valued by the newsroom of talking to people and getting stories out of them. There was support for what Aldridge and Evetts (2003:547) call “the discourse of professionalism, [my italics] as a set of values and identities” and a form of self-discipline, and what Deuze (2005:445) calls an “occupational ideology”, a “collection of values, strategies and formal codes characterising professional journalism and shared most widely by its members.”

Added to this was an appreciation among journalists of the importance of what Schudson (1989 in Berkowitz 1997:17) calls “the cultural givens of journalism”. This emphasis on the existence of a journalistic culture which was made up of a number of elements as well as professionalism was expressed in research question 2: “What do local journalists understand by “journalistic culture” and how does this manifest itself in the case study newsrooms? To what extent is “professionalism” part of a wider local newsroom culture?”

All the journalists interviewed equated professionalism with core journalism standards such as accuracy, balance and truth-seeking (Singer 2007) rather than professionalism as a marker of class, privilege, codification of

knowledge and restricted entry (Larson 1977). There was little evidence that journalists in the case study newsrooms had as some commentators suggest, a “weakening commitment” (Örnebring 2009:2) to journalistic professionalism as interpreted in the above two paragraphs. There was, however, a recognition of the challenges to their professionalism arising from budget cuts, 24 hour rolling deadlines and pressure to produce copy.

The importance of these journalistic norms to individual journalists and collectively in the newsroom, in conference and in conversation was clear in observation and frequently emphasised in action. There was pride in achieving the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) qualification, although this was not universal, and many stressed that having an NCTJ qualification was not the marker of a good journalist. However, concepts of professionalism tend to stress structures and emphasize the idea of control, both individually and collectively within the newsroom and within wider corporate settings (Dickinson 2007). Scholars like Tuchman (1978:5) link professionalism to organisations: “News professionalism has developed in conjunction with modern news organisations and professional practices serve organisational needs.”

As a prism through which to understand how journalists see themselves and create an identity, concepts of professionalism, understood in the sense of collections of values and strategies as suggested by Deuze (2005) and Aldridge and Evetts (2003) are useful and important, especially when analysing how journalists in newsrooms respond to change.

But these concepts of professionalism do not adequately capture the multiple and changing attitudes of journalists, the different personalities and allegiances in the newsroom, and how these impact on journalists’ work in a changing environment. It does not capture the gap between what journalists say they do and what they actually do in practice. It does not capture the continuing desire of many of the journalists interviewed to be seen as maverick, non-conformist and investigative – “tentative hell-raisers” in the words of Aldridge (1998) – rather than part of a profession, which they equate with being part of an “establishment”.

The research therefore also drew on analysis of what creates a specifically journalistic culture, through which journalists shape an identity for themselves, and how this culture influences journalists' actions.

Professionalism (in the sense of adhering to high standards of accuracy and balance and maintaining autonomy) is a part of this culture but it is not the only part.

In this study of journalistic identity, journalists absorbed the attitudes and priorities prevalent in the newsroom, both positive and negative, and developed a set of shared understandings about the nature and value of their role as local journalists. Among the positive attitudes was an enthusiasm for the ideals of journalism as a form of public service, the value of competition and the enduring importance of local journalism and relationships with "the community". This finding helped answer research question 3: "What significance does the idea of a local (as opposed to a national) newspaper have for the journalists who work there and how does this shape their idea of the role of a local journalist?" It also helped answer research question 4: "How do local journalists conceive of the idea of "community" in London and what is the importance of "community" to local journalists?"

The idea of "community" had a continuing positive resonance for London local news journalists, despite difficulties in identifying what "community" actually meant in London.

Among the negative attitudes was suspicion of change and justification of this suspicion through reference to external factors such as management decisions and budget cuts. Ryfe (2012:11) characterises the culture of journalism as "a kind of gravitational force for journalists, pulling them together so that they are more similar to each other than to members of any other kind of occupation." As Ryfe points out, this gravitational force can have the negative effect of closing newsrooms in on themselves. This is part of what this research has identified as a closed culture, in which journalists engage in constant debate and discussion among themselves about what constitutes a good story, which sources are important and how to serve their readers, but group together against criticism to justify their actions. This was

observed in all three case study newsrooms, particularly when journalists were justifying reasons why they no longer covered courts or councils, a mainstay of local news reporting, or why they ended up rewriting press releases. The justification in these cases was lack of resources and budget cuts. Ryfe (2012:16) says: “..the cultural elements that define journalism serve as a reservoir of meaning to which journalists appeal to render their actions sensible.”

Many scholars (Breed 1955; Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980; Schudson 2005 in Curran and Gurevitch 2005; Zelizer (2004); Ryfe 2012) have focused on the way the socialization of journalists in the newsroom creates a “collective mindset”, which shapes unspoken shared understandings of what makes journalists “just know” a story when they see it.

Newsroom socialisation is a powerful tool in shaping a collective culture although, as this research shows, not so powerful that reporters were afraid to criticise story choices or the actions of the news desk as part of asserting their own autonomy over their stories.

Swidler’s (1986:273) concept of culture as a “toolkit” of “symbols, stories, rituals and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” is a useful one in the context of this research and useful within the wider definition of culture as shared meaning-making. In observation, it became clear that journalists adjusted to circumstances and changing surroundings by applying different understandings of what it meant to be a journalist both individually and collectively. The “toolkit” could include behaviour at news conference, performance as a journalist as part of shaping identity, the mix of co-operation and collaboration in the newsroom to achieve the collective end of producing newspapers and websites and the individual end of getting the story first and with flair, the initiation of trainees into a specifically local brand of journalism through the National Council for the Training of Journalists, the emergence of new methods of working together in the absence of a physical newsroom, assertions about the importance of local journalism, the difference between “professionals” and amateurs and the inferior journalistic

methods of national newspapers. The toolkit could also include journalists' need to perform to each other and establish their individual identity in relation to others, as Goffman (1990) has described.

The use of this toolkit at varying times served to boost journalists' individual and collective confidence and allows them to relate to each other, to editors, to readers to sources. The research findings suggest that rituals such as news conference and reporters' meetings became more, not less relevant, in times of change and that superficial changes in the way journalists worked masked a deliberate attempt to preserve core rituals and structures which are part of journalists' collective identity.

Looking at elements of journalistic culture more widely rather than just through a prism of professionalism opens up the way to examine core journalistic norms mentioned frequently by journalists in interview as important to them, such as "neutrality", "objectivity" and acting as the "eyes and ears of the community", as well as being independent from official sources and PR people and getting exclusive stories. This is how local journalists like to see themselves but the ideal does not necessarily match the reality. This gap between ideal and reality was widely recognised by journalists in interviews and informal conversations as a challenge to their journalistic identity but it was also clear from observation that journalists had a more complex relationship with official sources than they sometimes liked to admit, and that their output frequently stopped short of critical probing of bodies such as local councils and the police. This supports previous research into the workings of local papers (Cox and Morgan 1973; Murphy 1976; Franklin 2006).

Detailed observation provided clear evidence of the continuing existence of long-standing routines and rituals, supporting recent findings by Ryfe (2012) and Anderson (2013) in their ethnographies of US newsrooms that the culture of journalism is essentially conservative. Anderson (2013:7) notes: "Reporters and editors still worked to build stories in an assembly line- like fashion and news organisations struggled to collaborate with people and groups outside their formal institutional walls."

Weekly (or in the case of the South London Press, twice weekly) deadlines were still in place, alongside rolling deadlines for web copy. News conferences took place. Hierarchies of editors, news editors and reporters were clearly visible although shifting. Reporters rang round their contacts to get stories and had conversations familiar to any journalist who has ever worked in a newsroom: (Reporter to contact: “Hi, I’m trying to find some stories – I’m scratching about a bit this week.” (Observation November 2011); Editor to reporter: “Where’s the WI (Women’s Institute) story?” Reporter: “It all depends on speaking to people. I could make up quotes but you don’t want that.” Editor: “No, so what story can I have first?” Reporter: “I’ll call the WI woman now” (observation 2012)

Indeed, one of the most noticeable aspect of the newsrooms observed for this research was how recognisable many of the routines and processes were from the author’s own time in the industry 10 years previously. However, what was also noticeable was the gradual disintegration of some of these routines and structures in the face of management action, budget cuts, time constraints and low morale.

This is, of course, not to say there have been no changes. In particular, observation in three newsrooms over three years showed journalists in the process of grappling with ways of incorporating print and web operations and choosing different ways of doing this. This was the focus of research question 5: “What is the new nature of newsroom work, what impact does this have on daily work organisation and newsgathering processes and how does this impact on journalistic identity?”

In answer to research question 5, during the observation periods, it became clear that the relationship between print and web was still contested, by journalists concerned with the erosion of their reputations and less frequent print by- lines, and by management, concerned about print sales being hit by web publication. Allocation of responsibilities for editing and uploading was ad-hoc and news desks oscillated uneasily between giving reporters almost complete responsibility for web pages in one newsroom and almost none in

another. But the underlying processes of news gathering and news production were still there. As Singer in Allan (2010:277) says: "Multimedia content draws on complex and perhaps unfamiliar formats but it still consists of stories produced and controlled by journalists."

Journalists preserved their essential processes because they constituted a vital framework for their cultural identity. "As being a journalist is closely connected to doing journalism, a change in habit can trigger an identity crisis. Asked to do journalism in a different way, a reporter can come to feel less and less like a journalist." (Ryfe 2012:20). This finding supports the findings of earlier ethnographic studies (for example Boczkowski 2005; Robinson 2010) that existing newsroom cultures have more influence on the way journalists work than do developments in technology.

The shared culture which largely preserved newsroom routines also allowed journalists to minimise the significance and activities of "amateur" bloggers and users of social media, and to seek to continue to control reader participation by operating traditional gatekeeping techniques. This suggests that the culture of journalism operates partly to create boundaries, which prevent the kind of collaborative network journalism outlined by commentators like Gillmor (2004) and Beckett (2008). Noting a similar finding in his research in Philadelphia newsrooms, Anderson (2012:7) described it as "a "non-diffusion" of collaboration, the opposite of the diffusion of innovation theory set out by Rogers (1995).

This non-diffusion is the opposite of Zelizer's (2005:200) suggestion that looking at journalism as culture "opens journalism's definition to activities that go under the radar of professionalism", such as political satire and blogs. In the newsrooms studied for this research, journalism culture served more to close off alternatives to mainstream journalism.

The apparently radical change at the Times and Independent to get reporters out on patch were really an evolution, a pragmatic response to financial pressures which tempted Newsquest to sell off its Hendon office. The importance of patch reporting for journalists is not new (see Tuchman 1978;

Schlesinger 1978; Machin and Niblock 2005). The move was seen as harking back to the days of the district office, which existed in the collective memory of many of the older journalists interviewed and remembered in the slightly deprecating way of much journalistic memory, self-consciously handing on experiences to the next generation. The group editor of the Times and Independent said: "I was a patch reporter and I was very much working in pubs, working Monday to Thursday in the field, find a phone box, ring the office, can I come in tomorrow. And then going in and typing it up, no emails, no faxes. I always say to them [the reporters] I used to work like this but without the technology. I think they get bored of me saying that. But I know how hard it is" (interview ETI2013).

As Machin and Niblock (2005:68) suggest, the idea of going out on patch has long been part of journalistic culture and the journalist's self-image. "The beat reporter, also known as a district reporter, epitomises for many the classic idea of the roving journalist, often depicted romantically in the movies, who restlessly roams around their locality on the hunt for stories"

Other changes such as downturns in staffing levels and the subsequent impact of these on remaining staff working practices, can also be seen as evolutions, similar to those which have occurred at regular intervals reflecting the booms and busts of the wider economy and technological development (Cox and Morgan 1973). Remaining staff were under more pressure and had less time to produce copy, correlating with previous research done on local newsrooms (Machin and Niblock 2006; Franklin 2006; Williams and Franklin 2007; Aldridge 2007) that journalists are having to "churn" more. Falling advertising revenues meant fewer pages which meant stories ending up on the spike or being cut from leads to nibs. However, it is clear from earlier studies (Cox and Morgan 1973) that staffing shortages are not a new phenomenon. In their study of local journalism on Merseyside, after commenting on the youthfulness and high turnover of staff, the authors (1973:117) say: "None of the weeklies could afford the luxury of a designated specialist municipal correspondent. With journalistic staff of only five to 10, little specialisation was possible."



The extent to which journalists reflected the “last man on the deck of the Titanic” gloom of some commentators appeared to depend mainly on factors such as age, length of time in the industry, newsroom relationships, newsroom location in relation to patch, the nature of the patch itself, opportunities for up-skilling and career progression, and the impact of editorial choices and management strategies on news agendas and working practices, than on a universally accepted narrative of gloom. In short, local news journalists were affected by the same range of issues which have always preoccupied journalists, through boom and bust alike.

The process of maintaining an individual and collective journalistic identity resulted in a number of tensions in journalists’ perception of their role in the newsroom, their relationships with readers and sources and their understanding of the wider role of local newspapers in the civic sphere and in the community. Tensions on a number of levels emerged as a key theme of these research findings.

A core tension was that between the commercial imperatives of the newspapers as a business and journalists as autonomous professionals. It was this tension that Bourdieu (1995) explores in his theory of the journalistic field. Bourdieu identifies two forms of capital or power: economic and cultural, which operate at opposing poles of a field, or sphere, of activity. In terms of journalism, economic capital is represented by advertising, circulation and audience ratings, while cultural capital is represented by the content of the newspaper, website or broadcast and its ability to influence public life. This capital’s value is reputational, unique and autonomous (Benson and Neveu 2005). These two forms of capital are always in tension. Within the field, however, there are differences between highly intellectual publications which do not make money but generate maximum cultural capital, and mass market publications which are chiefly designed to make money. UK local newspapers increasingly fall into the latter category.

As Franklin (2006: xxii) notes: “Undoubtedly, the most substantive change [in the local newspaper sector] has been the shift away from the perception of local newspapers as central to the local political life of communities and a vital ingredient in local democracy, to an understanding of local newspapers as businesses in which the achievement of profit and a preoccupation with the bottom line too readily trumps a journalistic ambition.”

In the case study newsrooms, many of the tensions identified in this research stemmed from this core tension between the reality of economic constraints which had seen cuts in resources and increasing centralisation, and the ideal of doing a proper professional job of going out on stories, covering courts and councils and producing newspapers which had a public service role (research question 3). From this core tension between the economic reality and the journalistic ideal, other tensions arose, such as the growing concern among some journalists that hard news was giving way to softer, easier news which was less labour-intensive to gather. The concern among journalists at the South London Press in particular that they were not attending council meetings in the evenings was blamed on management refusals to allow them to take a morning or afternoon off in lieu, an economic decision which had an effect on journalists’ perception of their ability to do their jobs.

Other tensions emerged from uncertainties about how to manage work processes in an environment which was changing, albeit slowly. There was a tension between the relative priorities of print and web in the newsroom and a developing external network of commentators on social media and competing hyperlocal websites, against which journalists saw the need to position themselves as “professionals” and “real journalists”. This in turn created a tension between needing to relate to the outside world for the benefit of their readers and their own benefit, and preserving journalistic boundaries. More long-standing tensions not peculiar to these newsrooms but shared by journalists in them included definitional tensions between journalism as a profession and journalism as a trade. The desire to appear politically neutral was in tension with a need to be seen to be politically active in a wider sense,

through such devices as campaigns in which newspapers inevitably took sides.

This discussion chapter explored the key themes emerging from the findings of this research and suggested that a complex set of processes were at work in newsrooms, which together played a key role in shaping journalistic identity. Journalists were torn between a recognition that they were operating in a changing news environment and their desire to preserve their journalistic role and their familiar newsroom practices. They were held back from innovation and collaboration partly because their traditional roles and activities as print journalists, and their relationship to each other as journalists, constituted a core part of their identity.

## **Conclusion “This place...” Challenge and change to journalistic identity**

This thesis aimed to answer five related research questions about the nature and definition of journalistic identity in three London newsrooms. The research has shown that local newspapers do possess a distinctive local news culture, in spite of obvious differences in individual working practices, internal and external pressures.

Newsrooms valued a spirit of competition with rival newspapers but were collaborative and collegiate with each other, with an expectation that senior staff would help junior staff with training and feedback. When this did not happen, journalists expressed frustration. Because all but two of the journalists in the case study newsrooms from the most senior editor to the most junior reporter had been through the same process of obtaining an NCTJ Diploma and going through NCTJ training, there was a strong shared understanding of how to write a strong local news story and how to recognise a good story in the first place. There was a strong “public service” ethos in all three newsrooms, with journalists proud of being able to help readers, whether or not it made a story. There was a conscious recognition of local journalism’s important role in representing readers and challenging those in positions of local power and the recognition of the importance of this role grew stronger the longer journalists worked in local news rooms and absorbed this understanding from their colleagues.

This shared culture played a vital role in shaping a local journalistic identity. This identity was also shaped by journalists’ understandings of themselves as professional in the sense of aspiring to high standards, writing accurately and with balance, representing their readers against the powerful and

guarding their independence from advertisers and managers. However, journalists across all three newsrooms rejected the label of professionalism. Many were more comfortable with the idea of journalism as a craft or a trade in line with the craft-oriented training provided by the NCTJ. They were proud to possess the skills and training which they considered differentiated them from amateur bloggers and writers on hyperlocal websites.

However, pride in their own skills and abilities as journalists led to a process of creating and maintaining boundaries between themselves and others active in an increasingly complex media ecology, with journalists laying claim to themselves as “professionals” who were the real journalists and who were the only people who could be trusted to report. This manifested itself particularly in reluctance to acknowledge fully the potential usefulness of collaborating with others outside the mainstream covering news in the same area, even when journalists in the case study newsrooms admitted that some writers on hyperlocal websites were doing a better job of covering important meetings and writing about issues that local people minded about.

A key finding of this research was that the process of boundary creation was part of a predominantly conservative culture in all three newsrooms in which journalists maintained editorial hierarchies, continued to work within an established rhythm of print deadlines, and continued to work within established beats and with familiar sources.

They also to varying extents prioritised print over web. This was particularly obvious in the South London Press newsroom, in which the website was an afterthought and never mentioned in conference. In all three newsrooms, even at the web-first Times and Independent, there was no significant discussion of how to present stories in a non-textual way. It was true that a budget cuts, a shortage of resources and no training worked against the use of video, for example, but a conservative mind set in which journalists still thought textually was just as much of a contributing factor in the generally unimaginative presentation of stories.

During the period of fieldwork, changes were occurring in the three newsrooms but the implementation of changes such as running websites alongside print editions, incorporating social media such as Twitter into news gathering and using techniques such as live-blogging for reporting stories was happening at an uncertain pace. Innovations were often down to individual reporters rather than being a matter of editorial policy, although editorial policies played an important role in some areas.

The web-first policy at the Times and Independent and the print-first policy at the South London Press were editorial policies which fundamentally shaped not only newsroom work processes but the wider culture of the newsroom. It could be argued that new ways of working had a limited impact (research question 5) because the newsrooms were slow to embrace change and ways of working remained substantially the same. Journalists created boundaries around themselves to preserve their position, despite widespread individual enthusiasm for learning new skills and embracing new technologies such as video. The act of boundary creation, as argued previously, has a negative impact in that it had the effect of shutting local newsrooms out of the wider news ecologies operating in their areas and stifling potential innovation and collaboration.

It is important to note that experiences of change in the three newsrooms differed. Journalists in the most traditional newsroom at the South London Press were demoralised because they saw little evidence of change and innovation as editorial policy and recognised that they were losing out, so in that sense change had an impact. Journalists at the Surrey Comet and the Times and Independent, where online journalism was more central to operations and reporters used social media and liveblogging regularly, were positive about changes which gave them a professional edge on their more print-oriented rivals. The difference between them was the extent to which

they individually and collectively exploited this enthusiasm in their working practices and the extent to which this enthusiasm was tempered by conservative attitudes absorbed in the newsrooms.

As argued above, an important element of the culture of local journalism is the importance they attached to being close to their readership and serving their community. The idea of community was a strong one in all three newsrooms but at the same time, there was acknowledgement that in London, issues of “community” were particularly contentious because the communities in the geographical areas they covered were diffuse and fragmented, with many overlapping interests. The reality was that all the newspapers produced in the three newsrooms predominantly served those that they perceived as their core readership, and those who shouted loudest and spent longest on the phone pushing their causes to reporters.

Local newspapers are defined by geography. The research findings suggest that this is both a blessing and a curse. Geographical presence and the promotion of the local newspaper’s central role in the community are vital for papers’ self-identity and their ideology of going into battle on behalf of readers. But geography is also a limitation in an internet age where physically being based somewhere is less and less relevant, and the idea that people will buy a print paper or pick one up because it is local less likely.

In summary, the research suggests that there was a strong shared local news culture in all three newsrooms, of which the idea of being professional, or striving for high standards, played a part but was definitely not the only marker of journalistic identity. This was a complex combination of individual ambition, shared rivalry, shared experiences such as taking NCTJ exams or fighting press officers for a quote, collaboration, teamwork and performing the role of the dynamic and determined journalist in conference in front of other people. Standards, expectations and attitudes were absorbed by a process of osmosis and unspoken understandings more than by formal instruction.

But journalistic identity was partly being maintained in the newsrooms by creating and maintaining boundaries against people who could challenge their newspapers' position as representative and reflector of the communities they covered. Within their newsrooms, journalists worked much in the way they had always done and change was slow and haphazard. They held strongly to the idea that they were the only people who could and should be covering local news.

A conservative culture encompassing the attitudes set out in the paragraph above underpinned attitudes at all three newsrooms, however radical it might appear to dispense with a newsroom altogether and file stories from patch by laptop as at the Times and Independent. This conservative culture is part of what is preventing local newspapers from developing new partnerships and new ways of working. It potentially condemns them to irrelevance.

If this is not to happen, and the newspapers produced by the case study newsrooms are to survive, journalists need to liberate themselves from their self-imposed boundaries in which they present themselves as the only people capable of producing local news, and make use of outside resources, in particular reporters on hyperlocal websites who have been covering important council meetings and local issues well and have acquired a following. Much of the concern expressed by journalists centred on a lack of resources and investment, which meant they were less able to do the job they were trained to do. Journalists unfortunately need to accept that this is not going to change and that their publishers are going to continue to cut jobs and slash budgets as this is the only way they are going to make a profit.

Since fieldwork finished in 2013, Newsquest has cut 29 staff across its south London titles to 12, leaving the Surrey Comet with just two reporters (NUJ 2016). In north London, Newsquest combined four news desks into one, with the loss of the Times and Independent Group Editor, and cut nine editing and reporting jobs, replacing these with just three new jobs (Press Gazette 2015). At the South London Press, redundancies and non-replacement of staff mean that there are now just three reporters to cover all the patches of the South



London Press and the Lewisham and Greenwich Mercury (London News Online 2016).

The remaining journalists in the case study newsrooms need to focus on tapping into resources available to allow them to cover stories important to their local communities. The simplest and cheapest way to do this would be to develop closer relationships with other websites and blogs covering different parts of local newspapers' patches, starting with those sites run by ex-journalists and others whose work is reliable, and linking to these on the newspapers' websites. As Radcliffe (2015) comments: "At a time when original local reporting is being cannibalized, the efforts of grass-roots journalists should be welcomed with open arms by other publishers with column inches to fill."

This would have a number of advantages. Firstly, it would allow mainstream reporters to plug gaps in their coverage of important issues, such as council meetings and planning meetings. Secondly, once readers realized that there were relevant links on local newspapers' web pages, this should help drive traffic to the sites. Mainstream local news websites need to reposition themselves as a local news resource by aggregating links to local websites worth reading. There would clearly be a gatekeeping function here for local journalists to ensure that the links are of sufficient quality and accuracy. Thirdly, it would allow local newspapers to drill down into more hyperlocal coverage than they are able to achieve covering large patches with a handful of reporters. One of the ironies of mainstream local newspapers is that, although they are historically bound by geography, they have also gradually moved away physically from their communities and are no longer in a position to target readers directly. It is clear from the large numbers of comments and the reader interaction on respected hyperlocal sites like SE1 and Brockley Central that these sites are tapping into subjects readers are interested in at a much more local level than local newspapers covering their patch achieve.

A clear commitment to bringing readers reliable information from a number of sources, not just from the news desk's own reporters, would be an important move towards repositioning traditional local newspapers within the local media ecology. It would also be better, and more honest to readers, to make it explicit that reporters are getting news from a number of sources, rather than seeing reporters resort desperately to lifting stories almost wholesale from hyperlocal blogs, as happened recently when the SE1 hyperlocal site noticed that its story about a celebration mass to mark the canonization of Mother Teresa's had appeared almost unchanged in the South London Press (853 blog 2016).

A number of newspapers, including the Surrey Comet, have experimented with asking readers to file their own stories directly onto pages, giving them access to the paper's content management system (Surrey Comet 2011). However, this foundered because most of the stories were poorly written and lacked news interest, and the Comet's reporters and editors did not have time to sub-edit them. Some element of quality control is needed and a good way to achieve this is by collaborating with respected outside resources who already know how to gather news and report it. Collaborating with mainstream local media would also help hyperlocal websites improve their visibility to readers and improve their own traffic, which in turn would drive advertising revenue to these sites.

Collaborations could also enable newsrooms to widen and deepen their news agendas and reach out beyond a narrow range of sources to find new, richer, seams of news. Currently, local papers mine the same seam of sources again and again, as this research has shown.

As this thesis has also shown, there is growing concern at all levels of the industry and at government level about the continuing viability of the local newspaper model and the need to support an independent local press. In moves announced in December 2016, the government offered local newspapers a discount on their business rates and forced local councils to stop competing with independent newspapers by publishing their own glossy

magazines and newspapers. But these measures do not tackle the fundamental problem, which is that staff numbers are shrinking but reporters are locked into their own perceptions of what their role should be as journalists and appear to be unable to imagine how to use new resources to change and improve their offering to their readers. Collaboration with others in the local media ecology as outlined above would be a start.

## **Appendix 1 Themes for interview**

I carried out 25 semi-structured interviews for this research across the three newsrooms. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour (although in a number of cases, interviews were longer as interviewees wanted to go off the record).

Before the first interview, I planned a list of themes which I wanted to cover in each interview. These themes were driven by my five research questions (3:1). I subsequently covered the same themes in each of the 25 interviews, although not necessarily in the same order, as the shape of the interview depended on the interviewer's response to my questions. The reason for the choice of semi-structured interviews as a research method was to encourage interviewees to speak freely and at some length.

Before starting to discuss the themes, I spent some time obtaining biographical information so that I could provide context for my findings. Questions asked included job title; age; educational background and qualifications. I also asked where journalists lived and whether they lived on the patch they covered for the paper.

This was important information when answering RQs4 and 5 about the meaning of local to journalists working on local papers.

The interviews then covered the following themes:

1. The meaning and acceptability to individual journalists of the term “professional” in the case of journalism. Is journalism a profession or a trade?
2. The importance of journalism training and in particular NCTJ training, and whether having a qualification makes someone more “professional”.
3. The impact of budget cuts and staffing reductions on journalistic professionalism (in journalists’ terms doing their job to a high standard).
4. The “culture” of the newsroom, relationships between reporters and editors; and reporters and the news desk; newsroom organisation and hierarchies and how well these worked.
5. The impact of the changing news environment in a digital age; the way that newsrooms managed print and web.
6. The use of social media by journalists; attitudes to non journalists (bloggers; hyperlocal websites; users of social media) and willingness to collaborate or use expertise outside the newsroom.
7. News agendas and news choices; how reporters viewed news desk choices and the extent to which they attempted to shape news agendas.
8. Interaction with sources and the problem of press officers blocking access to sources.
9. The meaning of “community” for London local news journalists; how journalists interact with, and relate to, readers, with examples.
10. The role of the local press; the importance or otherwise of journalists’ watchdog role.

## **Appendix 2 Sample interview transcript**

Interview, journalist, Surrey Comet

Interviewer: Sara McConnell (SM)

Interviewee: Reporter on the Surrey Comet (RSC)

SM How long have you been at the SC?

RSC I've been here since October 2009.

SM So would you consider yourself a "professional"?

RSC I think so. I think I'd like to think of myself as a professional journalist. It just sounds a bit strange to me still. I still feel I'm new – if I think of journalists on national newspapers or the BBC, you think, well does what I do, is it the same, or am I not quite good enough or experienced enough.

SM But you're trained.

RSC I'm trained.

SM And you've passed the serious barriers...

RSC I think of myself as a professional journalist but the confidence, the experience perhaps aren't there.

SM You've mentioned the nationals and the BBC – what makes them in your view professional?

RSC It might just be a question of how they're perceived by other people. So people think – local journalists, it's just a local rag, not much kudos...not like the BBC for example or the Daily Mail.

SM So it's a reputation thing.

RSC Yes, I think it probably is.

M What generates respect?

RSC The BBC's a global brand and it's respected for impartiality, accuracy and so on. But having been in journalism now, and seen how the nationals work, I actually have less respect than I did for the BBC, Telegraph, Mail, seeing them lifting my stories, rejigging the intro and bunging it on a page without checking the stories for themselves and so you wonder, is it because they don't have time or do they trust us to be accurate, good journalists.. perhaps they have a better expectation of us than we do of ourselves..

SM I think a lot of the time local newspaper journalists have less of a good opinion of themselves than they should do. Because when you're listening, you think, that's picky, people obviously mind. For example yesterday, the discussion about law, Dave's obviously a law obsessive but people mind about whether people have said the right thing because it's important for their professional integrity.

RSC And I think it's because we're very much closer to our readers, so if we get something wrong, it impacts on us immediately because we'll be seeing the same people the next week and the week after. Whereas when we see nationals writing about our patch and they get things wrong, and they do, they can shrug their shoulders and they'll be in the Isle of Wight next week or Scotland or wherever. So I think there's a trust with the readers in the community.

SM And how do you perceive community? How do you relate to the community?

RSC It's to do with the people who read the paper or read the website – without them we don't exist. It's contacts, who are people like chairs of residents' groups, councillors, police officers, just local residents who get in contact with us. It's just also, I've been in situations where I've heard people talking about the Surrey Comet or the Guardian or whatever and saying you won't believe what they've done and they've never actually read the paper, they've just heard from a neighbour, oh there's a mistake here or they thought this happened here.. I went to a stabbing at this block of flats, I

knocked at every door and I could hear people when the door closed phoning their neighbours and they said there's a journalist coming and I could hear their private conversations. They'd seen the web story which went up an hour earlier and they'd seen we'd made a mistake in the pub's name and then laughing about it...it was obvious to them that Crown House was a block of flats not the pub next door which we wrote.. and that showed a lack of local knowledge perhaps and that showed we weren't actually such a local newspaper and that we didn't have the right feel for the local community.

SM Did that matter to you?

RSC Very much so. But only after I thought about it . At the time I was just trying to get the details of the story. But it was just interesting because...

SM Because it shows an expectation on the part of your readers, obviously that you'll get it right but also that you'll know.

RSC It's just tiny granular pieces of information, that because we don't live on patch, because we don't go every day, we might not know a pub closed two weeks ago. They're small details by for local people it shows that the paper perhaps isn't as rooted in the local community as it could be.

SM Because one of the interesting questions is what you see as the journalist's role and this is very closely linked to what you've just said.. when you first became a journalist, what did you see the local journalist's role as being?

RSC Finding out news and telling people about it – an information role. And trying to find things that wouldn't be in the public domain otherwise but which belong in the public domain, such as increasingly crime rates or councils spending money on something people don't agree with – things of public interest which wouldn't be known by the public. A watchdog role. But the primary role is to reflect what is going on in the community and to let people know. A lot of that involves stuff that as a professional journalist you don't take a particular pride in. You're having to write about the school fair... they're not what you're dying to do. But actually they're the things which often



matter more to local readers than the brilliant investigative thing which you've just found out.

SM You're very local [has lives in Kingston, New Malden and Whitton, grew up in Essex but Kingston connections since 1999, worked for Kingston council for four years]. Do people in the street recognise you as being from the Comet? Has that happened?

RSC It has but in Kingston. Yes, at the Madingley fire, I got to know people quite well and they say how are you doing?

SM Since you've been at the Surrey Comet [three years] what has changed in the way that you work? Different routines? Choices of sources, Twitter/Facebook?

RSC Twitter and Facebook were there from the start and Twitter's become more important. I thought I'd use it to find news stories – I'd look on Twitter every day but that's actually the least important thing. There's so much information and to keep on top of everything – I can't cope with that. It's much more useful once you've heard something is happening to then find out more information so there are police at Norbiton Station. Someone phoned in and then we checked if someone had tweeted and someone had, 15 minutes before the phone call, someone who we didn't follow. The news was already out there but once we knew that it had happened we could pinpoint it [the tweet]. A reader called – a local guy in his twenties who's plugged into a local political party, a local church, very much a community person. He lives nearby and he spotted this helicopter and saw the vans outside the station. I also asked the other guy to tweet back which he did but didn't know anything else.

SM How else do you use Twitter?

RSC To get more information for the story – I can put out a tweet under the Surrey Comet. A couple of people retweeted [the Norbiton story] but we

SM Because previously the people who would have had access to you would have been more official sources, even the residents' associations – so you've been able to extend your sources.

RSC We have but it doesn't work as much as I'd like it to. We don't get as many people coming to us or responding to tweets. It could be because it's coming from a professional journalist and it's a bit scary or they don't want their name in the paper. Rather than just from someone in the pub. Twitter is levelling things out but I think the fact that we're journalists is intimidating for people still.

SM Because they see you as a gate guarder?

RSC I'm not sure about that. Perhaps they see Twitter as a very informal thing, then it becomes the official media and that's different – it's something they can be held to account for, it's on the record.

SM And this brings us to the question, people can tweet and blog, with no journalistic training, how does that make you perceive your role and position as a journalist?

RSC Partly it's that you can trust us. You know that we're the Surrey Comet, we're professional journalists so that if you come to us it's much more likely to be true and accurate than if it's someone who saw something in the street or heard a rumour in the pub. The key example for us was the riots. In Kingston there were lots of tweets going around about Nando's being on fire, the Bentall Centre being on fire and someone put out a message saying, let's meet at the station and cause trouble. And [we] were walking the streets for 12 hours on Tuesday when Kingston was meant to be a target. Obviously to find a riot if there was one but also to tell the truth so that when a tweet came up saying Nandos was on fire, we could say no it's not, here's a picture of Nando's now. And our Twitter followers doubled from 1000 to 2000 in that two day period. We were just trying to keep moving around the town, seeing where people were, where the police were. It was a very strange night, it was almost empty, there were police everywhere. It was good for people to know what was actually happening.

SM So the idea that professional journalists have something to offer which isn't able to be replicated on Twitter or a blog. What about hyperlocal websites?

RSC Again, Surbiton People does break stories and keeps things going but

when we look at them, they're not accurate. They're things the website has heard or he [the man who runs the website] misinterprets something or he's misheard something. And it's frustrating for us because he's putting something up there that looks exciting and sexy and new and it looks like we're lagging behind, but we've got to find out whether it's true or not, we've got to get sources, get quotes and back these things up but these constraints aren't there for social media.

SM That again is a professional constraint.

RSC It is but local people want to get the news so they'll be going to Surbiton People because it's seen as faster. It gets comments.

SM So do you see this as a challenge to your professionalism or do you rise above it?

RSC It's hard to know. I don't think we can rise above it or ignore it because people who are reading that are potentially our readers and we're suffering by comparison if people think we're slow or don't know our patch. We have to be careful in understanding the scale of a story and this is an issue with Twitter. The danger is in blowing things out of proportion and not knowing how important these local blogs are, whether we're going to be over-reacting or under-reacting. Another thing about Twitter, you get blow-back, people accuse you of being biased and things and you do question your professionalism, have I got that wrong and it can be quite intimidating, the immediate challenge.

SM Because you're closer to members of the public than you used to be. But you have the security that you'll know that people will trust you. How much value is there in encouraging readers to collaborate with you?

RSC Now that I have found a challenge to my professionalism. I guess as a professional journalist in an ideal world I'd find all my stories myself, source my own quotes and put all my work up there. It's all my work. And it's this idea of collaborative newswriting through citizen journalists or hyperlocal sites – it's breaking that down. We've always got to accept that it would be more unusual to be the sole author of all the facts in a news story. And that's a challenge because you think, what's my role here, if you've got people with

blogs. Why should other people bother to read my work? And also because it's more transparent now, people can see you've used Twitter to source things or Facebook or they can see they've had a part in your story. So the mystique is no longer there. They're looking at the sausage machine and it doesn't look attractive.

SM It's particularly acute in local papers but ... in your case there aren't any other competitors? The Kingston Informer?

RSC That closed last October but knowing there was a competitor kept us on our toes. It has a website and sometimes it would break stories faster than us. But Twitter and social media are providing the challenge now – anyone can break a news story.

SM So how does the web work in this office? What's the balance between not scooping yourself excessively, making sure the paper doesn't suffer?

RSC In terms of what goes up on the web, it's very ad-hoc. The aim is to have four news stories a day going up on the web. Anything to meet that quota to make sure people keep looking at the web. [...] we upload our own stories but we email them over to [news editor] first then we get an email back saying upload this. If it's a breaking story, it's a quick email.

The strategy is often to upload the previous evening ready to go at 7 or 8am the following day so that when people log on at breakfast or at work, there'll be four new news stories there. If it's a breaking story, it'll go up anyway and we'll keep it updated. Things marked breaking news or updates get the most hits and I think our stats last week showed that the most read was the woman jumping off the Bentalls centre. It was interesting because people were tweeting, although someone phoned us. There were all these rumours, it was a boy, it was a 14 year old girl and those were being retweeted, but they were all false. It was a middle aged woman with a family who was depressed from Teddington. You feel if people are consuming all these rumours and not knowing whether they were false or not, we couldn't saying they're false, trust us, or they're true, trust us. But we didn't want to be out there saying we don't know anything.

SM Obviously since you've been here you've acquired more multi-media skills. Do you see that as a positive thing or just as something you do, or do you think it's important to have something to put on a CV to show you can cover all the bases?

RSC Definitely important for the CV. I'm looking for other jobs at the moment and I'm not applying for any jobs where the website doesn't impress me. Or Twitter. Because I think in two years' time, in 1- years' time- if you don't have those skills you'd be so much less employable. Looking ahead...there were some chief reporter jobs, quite well paid but I didn't apply for them because the website was crap.

[..]I'd look at websites and Twitter feed. And in my covering letters I need to show how I've used Twitter [in the riots and the Madingly fire]

SM Turning to the issue of shrinking papers and shrinking staff, how does that represent a challenge in how you're able to perform your job? How has it been possible to continue with six fewer people and far less features and leisure?

RSC I'd love to know what readers think. I don't know whether they've noticed the difference or not. I think we've still got the same number of leisure pages as before but to fill them we're having to use work experience people a lot, people from News Associates, they need to have by-lines and we're having to use them. And I feel guilty about that for them because they need hard news stories for their portfolios. And without having this free labour of people who can do this stuff, I'm not sure how we'd cope. And the quality is less good. Even when I have to write leisure leads or down pages, I mean my view is that I'm a professional trained news journalist, so I don't devote the time I should give to the leisure leads. When we had professional leisure journalists they had the context, the background, which would make more of a textured piece. But for me, it's just churn it out, get it out of the way and I don't like having my by-line on work which I think is sub-standard.

SM Does this mean your workload has increased?

RSC Yes, where it impacts are that we try to do the leisure stuff on

Thursdays and Fridays which are the down days. But those are the days when we're freer to go out onto patch or to read through lengthy council documents. It [leisure] is soaking up all the time we have to get off our own backs and find news stories, make contacts. The quality of the news is suffering. We're not able to find those things which would never have come to light if we hadn't had a coffee with someone.

SM Does that mean you don't go to council meetings?

RSC We still go to council meetings because they're evening meetings so we're lucky in that they're not affected. We get lieu time.

SM Have you seen that change since you've been here?

RSC Yes.

SM So you spend less time out of the office because of leisure and less time checking out what councillors are doing, the dodgy stuff... And in terms of fewer staff?

RSC Morale certainly suffered. We saw friends, people we respected, losing their jobs. And the feeling that we were being very badly treated by management. There's a lot less goodwill towards Newsquest as a company. What keeps me being a good journalist is that I love the SC and I love Kingston and that's why we put in the extra time. If it wasn't for that I think people would literally just be working to the minute they're paid for. They wouldn't make much effort for stories.

SM That's changed since you've been here?

RSC Since the dispute.

SM What's Newsquest's attitude to new media?

RSC They'd say they're keen on it and they want us to do things on it but not if they have to spend a penny on it. I've paid to have my own iPhone so I can upload photos onto the web in 10 minutes and take down quotes on the way back from court. And I can take video on it. And I can edit it. I find that really rewarding, to splice together five or six shots, and add something to the website. It's very much self taught and no training from the company. And they didn't pay for the phone. And I've made videos which have just been lost

in the ether because of the inertia of the company, because our web manager's been doing other things and it's not a priority. Because videos should go through him. If I do a weekend shift I put up my own. It's like Twitter - it's all off our own backs. There's been no encouragement from management.

SM Is there an attitude from management that you've got to be careful about what you put up on the web in case you scoop yourself?

RSC I think that's an editorial thing. I'm not aware of management saying anything. I think it's stupid that our paper comes out on Friday morning and we put the whole of the front page lead on the web for free. Why not put in on Monday or the first three paras. It must be because we're a weekly newspaper. The Colchester Evening Gazette puts three pars up and says read the rest tomorrow. Because you can do that on a daily. [Discussion of the danger of when the Kingston Informer existed – if there was a good court case for example, should the SC put up a story immediately and risk tipping off the Informer]

SM Do you still get to go to court?

RSC Yes, not as much as I'd like to. [Another journalist] is good like that – he's flexible about letting us go to court to a case that looks interesting and if it isn't a lead then you take the risk. Now with [news editor], because she's a lot more demanding and getting a lot more out of us...

SM How is she more demanding?

RSC When [another journalist] was news editor, he'd accept what we wrote and rarely push us for more whereas [current news editor] is much more...she's making us better journalists but it's putting a lot more pressure on us and we're a lot more stressed. But she'll push for clarification or she'll ask for it to be rewritten or she'll ask for a breakout box or a factbox...

SM The result is better.....that must make you feel professional.

RSC It does – look at the paper now and look how it is visually. It's much more sharp, a better quality product [discussion of difference between 2005 and 2011].

What you might find is that there are a lot of stories which matter to the community but not such hard news. But hard news takes us away from the community. [News editor] would like a story which has big amounts of money involved for example like fraud...when [news editor] first saw the story about the Asian businessman being convicted, the connection was that he lived in Chessington – there was no other connection. There was a press release. But then we found he'd done lots of other stuff, so it made it a local story and on the front page. But this is one person who no-one's heard of, one court case five years ago. It's because they live in Kingston that it's on the front page. And I think, why would I buy a newspaper with nothing.. it's a quirk of residence, not a community story and I dislike the way we're going towards this hard news but if it means that things which might not have controversy – I'd rather have stories which make people talk in the pub or give them information that they want to know or need to know. Julia came from a paper up north and she comes from a hard news background. I'm not sure that suits a slightly more genteel area.

SM Has that made you feel more alienated from the news agenda?

RSC Yes it distorts what we do. We try to deliver the story [news editor] wants because it'll get in the paper. And if there's not an angle about a crime or a council cock-up we know it's going to be really hard to sell that to her. So there's no point putting the effort into it. For example, the Charter Quay development had this big leasehold dispute and there was an LVT decision which tied it to this multimillionaire Iranian businessman and I thought this makes the story sexy. It was Peverell, and I thought it was a splash, quite posh people, big sums of money...but it was second lead on page 7. It made page lead on page 5 of the Telegraph. They took that story.

[discussion about Newsquest's syndication on behalf of its journalists – Newsquest gets 40%, the syndication agency another 40% and the journalists share the rest]

SM Tell me more about the strike.

RSC I wasn't there for the first one because I was training for the NCE [which Newsquest pays for] the strike was sheer frustration which management and



how the company's being badly led and we're being run into the ground. It seems to be a strategy of managed decline. They seem to have a pessimistic view that newspapers are dying so let's extract as much as we can from them during this time, giving dividends to the American shareholders. The multimedia side was driven by us.

SM so this boiled over because they wanted to sack 6 people from sport and leisure and make [sports editor] do everything?

RSC Yes. We weren't members of the NUJ but we became members.

SM Were you optimistic, worried?

RSC I was pretty bloody minded about everything. It was a sense of sending a really clear message to the company that we value the newspaper and we want to work for a newspaper that we think is professional and we're able to write original copy and feel good about ourselves as professionals. I hated the idea of having to write sports reports when I don't know anything about sport and I wouldn't be able to do a good job and I think the changes would force us to do a much worse job, sitting in the office. Because we're committed journalists, we smooth over a lot of the cracks and somehow manage to wing it. We want it to be a good product... we had a 2 day strike – the newspaper still came out because they could hold us to our contracts so we banked enough copy for two days.. But as a former Father of Chapel [union branch leader] it was very difficult [for the editor] We had placards, a petition, people supported us, but mainly RTT because it's their patch.

SM Does it make it harder that you're not on patch and have been centralised in Twickenham?

RSC I think so. It makes it much harder to go out on spec. The RTT can go out in five minutes but for us you'd have to have a higher threshold to get in the car and drive through the traffic.

SM How does Sutton [where the subs are] work in comparison with North Cheam? Does it make it more difficult?

RSC It does. It's more inconvenient. It's more communication. Now you're playing telephone tag and we waste a lot more time. And there's a branding

issue for us that we're called the Surrey Comet but Kingston isn't in Surrey, it's in London. And that probably loses us some readers. Kingston and Surbiton, there's a big churn of population going on, people coming from London for the schools and if they walk into a news agent and see the Surrey Comet, they'll say that's the country, that's not me. It's more difficult to establish community. The community isn't there as much as in Richmond or Kew because of immigration, transience and who commute. There are some long-standing people but I'm not sure how much they reach into their communities and how much they're a core elite.

SM All the nationals and broadcasters are in London – does the local press have to struggle for impact?

RSC It's probably worse closer to London. The issue here is that they get the Standard for free, metro for free, that satisfies their need for local news. I don't feel we're competing with the nationals. The one example was the Madingly fire. We held our own pretty well and followed up. I went to the Christmas party on the estate. That's the story I've been most proud of. I got a much more comprehensive picture of what happened in that tower block, the human stories, than anyone else did and we were following it through on the web every 15 minutes. We got massive hits.

The nationals were using that as their coverage and getting people to talk to us..the woman who started the fire had mental health problems. It was very satisfying. I'm still trying to get the fire brigade reports and there's no-one else doing this.

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