



By: *Harvey Morris*

Democracy at threat in expanding news desert, UK panel warns



The continuing decline of traditional media is creating 'news deserts' across Britain and ultimately threatens the future of its democracy, according to the latest warning from parliament about the sector's fate.

In a finding that echoed fears expressed in other democratic societies, a House of Lords' committee **declared**: "There is a realistic possibility of the UK's news environment fracturing irreparably along social, regional and economic lines within the next 5-10 years. The implications for our society and democracy would be grim."

In a 100-page report published in late November, the upper house's Communications and Digital Committee recommended measures that included increased support for local journalism and more efforts to make society resilient to disinformation and fake news.

The committee nevertheless showed itself aware that anything that smacked of government meddling in the sector would undermine the very concept of a free press. It stressed that the role of government was to enable the sector to stand on its own feet and survive a protracted period of technological turbulence.

Titled 'The Future of News', the report covers the entire media sector from national broadcasters, newspapers and online providers to small regional outlets and is based on evidence from journalists, academics, government officials and the global tech industry.

It came out just after data for October showed a further decline in the printed newspaper circulation of all but one of 16 national titles, and after an almost 20 per cent fall in regional newspaper circulation in 2023.

News deserts

A few of the larger regional titles have benefitted from a migration of readers to online versions. But outside of the major cities,

some areas have become so-called news deserts, defined as regions and towns that have no dedicated local news outlet, whether print, broadcast or online.

Historically, all major technological advances, from the spinning jenny to the internal combustion engine, have had the power to disrupt. Ditto the internet and the smartphone, which have altered many aspects of modern life but have arguably made their greatest impact on the media landscape.

What was once considered news is no longer even covered

In an online world, it is not just the medium but also the message that has changed, to the extent that aspects of what was once considered news is no longer even covered.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in local coverage of public interest events such as local government meetings and magistrate court sessions. These now routinely take place without what was once the guaranteed presence of the local press.

The Lords' report notes that the role of the media includes holding power to account and that extends to monitoring the functioning of local institutions as part of a news reporting structure that supports democracy.

Pre-internet journalism

In pre-internet days, widely read local newspapers were a one-stop shop for all the information anyone needed about a city borough or rural neighbourhood, from politics to crime to the progress of the local football team. Events of wider interest fed into the coverage of the national press.

In an era when journalism was still considered to be a skilled trade rather than a would-be profession, editors would hire 16 or 18-year-old school leavers, often locals themselves, on binding three-year apprenticeships in exchange for training and eventually

qualifications from the National Council for the Training of Journalists.

Armed with skills that included shorthand, concise English, doorstep reporting and a knowledge of the workings of municipalities and the law courts, many would go on to provide the backbone of the national Fleet Street press or rise to senior roles on regional titles.

Reporting has switched from the street to the screen

Even the most ardent media Luddite would not imagine or propose reviving such a regime in an era when the decline of the printed press in particular may prove to be terminal. But it is still worth considering what has been lost in the past three decades of the information revolution.

Today's newsrooms have been stripped to the bone as large conglomerates have bought up and consolidated surviving titles, often centralising production of news output from a variety of locations. In the process, reporting has switched from the street to the screen.

The revenue stream from small classified advertising long since dried up, diverted to fill the coffers of online companies.

Substantial measures

What can be done then to irrigate a news desert spreading across much of the democratic world? In Australia, for example, the Public Interest Journalism Initiative **identified** 31 local government areas without a local publisher.

Some measures can have mixed results, at least in the short term. In Canada, a 2023 Online News Act **required** online giants Meta and Google to share their profits with Canadian news providers whose material they linked to on their sites.



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Meta responded by banning all news posts to its Facebook, Instagram and Threads sites for Canadian users. Google opted to pay up to the tune of \$100 million annually to continue to host Canadian journalism on its search engine.

The overall outcome was that social media engagement with local Canadian news fell by almost 60 per cent in the first year of the Act.

In the UK, the Lords' committee's recommendations are relatively modest. It proposed tax breaks for hiring and training local reporters and legislation to help news providers strike copyright deals with tech firms and AI developers. Regulators should also investigate alleged anti-competitive practices by big tech firms.

Given the government's current agenda, it would be wise not to expect substantial measures anytime soon. Not much has changed since a similar review in 2019 when its chair, Frances Cairncross, also pointed to the importance of reporting the activities of public institutions such as councils and courts.

The same year saw the **creation** of a Future News Pilot Fund to examine ways of boosting local news coverage. The government of the day put in £2 million pounds, barely a drip in an expanding news desert.