

## **SUBMISSION FROM ELIZABETH MCLAUGHLIN**

### *Background*

1. I have been a journalist for the past 25 years and have spent 10 years teaching at various FE and HE institutes in the west of Scotland, currently employed within the Journalism department at the University of the West of Scotland.
2. 15 years of my life in the newspaper industry has been spent as an editor responsible for the production of a number of local newspaper titles within the west of Scotland as well as training the editorial staff.

### *The story so far*

3. The Scottish newspaper industry is at a make-or-break moment in its long history. Staffing has been cut back to the marrow – the bone was passed almost 10 years ago – and the pressures on reporters and photographers have reached an all time high. The financial climate has seen seasoned reporters leave the industry (often for a life in PR) and what's left are young, inexperienced reporters who have little guidance from the (few) overworked senior staff. The days of trainee reporters being mentored by their chief reporter, shadowing older journalists to “learn the ropes” are but a distant memory. This lack of support and guidance has led to a proliferation of local newspapers peppered with poorly written material, “cut and paste jobs” from an endless flow of press releases and very little in-depth investigative stories. Real stories about real people have been replaced by cheaper and quicker methods of gathering news (this includes surfing the net for quotes, stats etc). The birth of citizen journalism has been embraced by management as a way of saving money: user-generated copy has been used to off-set smaller newsdesks, however citizen journalism can bring its own problems: questions over authenticity, accuracy and balance, the key principles of good journalism. Citizen journalists should be used to create greater interactivity with the newspaper and readers and not as an alternative to professional news reporting.
4. Reporters are desk-bound because of the amount of work which needs to be written both for the printed version and the website. A reporter out on a job for offices manned by one or two reporters can mean production of copy is immediately halved.
5. Local newspapers have a clearly delineated geography, and therefore the potential for readership impact is greater than at a national or international level of mass media communication. But this potential is being lost as reporters spend less time out of the office talking to their readership because of the staff constraints brought about by management cuts.

6. The reality is that with less staff and more work, the local newspaper reporter is losing (if they haven't already lost) their true identity: to be the people's voice and raise issues which impact on their community. The fourth estate is being lost at a local level and is in a cul-de-sac of mediocrity.
7. The introduction of new media has added to the local reporter's workload. Many reporters have had little or no training, and are expected to write for both mediums. There has been little real discussion at a local level on how the newspapers should use the internet and my research to date has revealed many local newspaper editors regard their websites as additional work with little reward.
8. A decision by several managements to centralise production and close town offices, has seen yet another attack on the local newspaper ethos of being within the community and for the community. Placing several titles under one roof may save on overheads but has led to the loss of community-connectiveness, breaking the ties of local involvement and social engagement.
9. For decades the local newspaper photographer has been the "front line" of titles but again cuts in staffing and pagination has seen fewer photographic events covered and the newspaper's visibility weakened. This has led to communities feeling disenfranchised from "their paper" and less phone calls made to news offices asking for the photographer to attend functions etc.
10. This lack of visibility and apparent lack of involvement with the community has added to apathy and created a gulf between the newspaper and its readership. Local newspapers should offer the public the opportunity to see democracy in action but cuts has led to democracy inaction.

*So what do we do?*

11. Newspaper owners are in the last chance saloon when it comes to the future of the local press as management is led more by profit than quality journalism. It appears that to survive local newspapers may have to be taken out of the hands of those who own them. Ironically the organisations which have created the local newspaper world have systematically eroded the local newspaper ethos - "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" - and the future of local news may need to be addressed by other organisations, unless management have a radical re-think and accept that community engagement i.e. the reader is as vital to profitability as the advertiser.

*Training*

12. The cuts in staffing levels has created smaller and less well-trained newsrooms throughout the country which has resulted in poorer quality newspapers who are failing to uphold the watchdog element which is core to the Scottish newspaper industry. Young reporters can quickly become

disillusioned with little support and the expectation of more work for less reward leads many to leave the industry as quickly as they enter it.

13. The need to invest in more reporters, who are better trained and supported, would in turn generate bigger and more dynamic newsrooms. This can only lead to better newspapers containing quality stories which need to be covered by talking to the local people whose stories really matter.
14. One way of addressing this would be to create a scheme similar to that adopted by education when offering new graduates a one year internship within Scottish schools. Support from government could allow newspaper organisations to employ more staff which would boost both newsroom morale as well as local story counts.
15. This scheme would have to be closely monitored as there is anecdotal evidence of trainees leaving FE and HE institutions and being left to find their way through an industry which, although rewarding, can be highly pressured and stressful. Monitoring could be done remotely through the use of Information and Communication Technology systems already in operation within FE and HE, as overworked editors and newsrooms could not be expected to administer progressions rates of interns alone. FE and HE could oversee training, progression and be involved in on-site visits to ensure both the trainee reporters and newsrooms receive the support required.

*An industry in need of Trust*

16. A more ambitious and radical approach would be to create local newspaper co-operatives which would give the newspapers back to the community they are expected to serve.
17. Using a template similar to the BBC Trust, these co-operatives would allow communities to have the voice they require in a democratic society without the constraints of commercial and market forces. This model would also need to stand outside the political arena, an independent body established to oversee the running of the newspapers, with all profits being ploughed back into the newspapers and websites.