

**Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies**

**Journey to the centre of a news black hole: examining  
the democratic deficit in a town with no newspaper**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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**DECLARATION**

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# ***Abstract***

Circulation and revenue declines affecting the newspaper industry are causing changes in the way local newspapers are run. Journalism has been withdrawing from communities and some local newspapers have closed. The resulting gap in local news and information has been called a news black hole.

This research takes one such news black hole – Port Talbot – and examines it longitudinally from the point of view of: 1) the quantity and quality of news in the 39 years before and the four years after the 2009 newspaper closure; 2) changes in newsgathering and journalism practices; 3) the community's ability to access the information, representation and scrutiny normally associated with fourth estate journalism; and 4) the community's civic and democratic behaviour before and after the closure. It builds on Habermas's theory of the public sphere, theorising the existence of local public geo-spheres, and that damage to these at the local level may entail damage to the whole public sphere.

This multi-method study finds that the quantity of local news halved after the closure of the newspaper, and that its quality declined from the 1990s onwards. Although the loss of the newspaper was important, so was the gradual withdrawal of journalism from the town, marked by steep declines in journalist numbers and the closure of district newspaper offices. It also finds newsgathering has become more distant from communities and is more likely to use press releases and high status or official sources, and less local and less likely to be witnessed by a journalist. It finds the community under-informed, under-represented, and unable to access timely local information or gain adequate access to scrutiny. The democratic measure of election turnout in particular declined from around the time the district offices closed. Together, these findings suggest damage to the local public sphere in the town.





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# *Chapter 1*

## *Introduction*

In 2008 Professor Stephen Hawking gave a lecture in Chile in which he spoke about the properties of black holes. He said that these “dark stars” could only be identified because of the way they changed the objects around them, saying: “Any light emitted from the surface of the star, would be dragged back by the star's gravitational attraction, before it could get very far [...] There might be a large number of stars like this. Although we would not be able to see them, because the light from them would not reach us, we would still feel their gravitational attraction” (Hawking, 2008). In other words, the only way to know a black hole is there is because of the way it affects the things around it.

Reading this, it seemed to me that, since the closure of its newspaper, the lack of dedicated news in the town of Port Talbot had formed a black hole – and the things around it, the community, the journalists, the public sphere and local democracy, were potentially being affected. Big things were happening in the town, like the plan to build Europe’s largest biomass-fuelled power plant, but they were not making it into the news (Moore, 2010). Newsworthy events had not stopped, but they were difficult to measure because they were hardly being reported – as Hawking said: “a black hole contains a lot of information that is hidden from the outside world”. Wondering about the effect of this lack of reporting of news, both on the people who lived in Port Talbot, and on the people who did not (but who might very well be affected by the things happening there), was the starting point for this study.

I also had a personal and professional interest in Port Talbot’s news black hole. I have worked as a journalist since 2000, and been an active member of the National Union of

Journalists (NUJ) for much of that time. In 2008, I was working as the Editor of the *Big Issue Cymru*, when company streamlining meant redundancy for my role. The following summer, a few of my colleagues at the Swansea Branch of the NUJ were also made redundant from their roles at the *South Wales Evening Post*. By then we had sat through many meetings discussing the loss of jobs in the area, and watching as talented colleagues retired or re-trained and left the industry altogether. In the autumn of 2009, Trinity Mirror announced the closure of the *Neath* and *Port Talbot Guardian* newspapers. It appeared at the time that the industry was spiralling downwards, and there seemed little hope of any improvement. We decided it was time to act. We set ourselves up as a workers co-operative, with the aim of supplying the newly opened news gap in Port Talbot. Five years on, the *Port Talbot Magnet* continues to run a website dedicated to Port Talbot, and helped by Carnegie UK's Neighbourhood News funding, launched a quarterly print newspaper in September 2013. As a founder director, and editor, of both website and newspaper, I have gained valuable direct experience of the problems faced by a community without regular, dedicated, pluralistic local news, and also witnessed first-hand the power of local news in providing a voice, and a community identity, to local people. Many of my experiences on the *Magnet* have informed this research.

However, exploring a black hole – even of the news-related variety – is no simple task. Most studies of the news examine content (Riffe & Freitag, 1997); they measure what can be seen. But when a newspaper closes the object of study becomes a lack of news, and this absence, by its nature, is very difficult to measure. We must therefore try to measure what we can see – the way the light from other stars bends around the black hole.

In this study, this has meant five different approaches and five different methods. The first approach set out to examine what was lost when the local newspaper closed by measuring news provision before the closure, looking back to 1970 and building a picture of change in the quantity and quality of local news provided for the town right through until 2013, five years after the newspaper closure. This entailed a large-scale content analysis of local newspapers.

The second approach set these data against a detailed history of change in the local news industry over the sample period, using two more methods, document analysis and interviews with journalists, to piece together a picture of how the practice of local journalism has altered over time. Third, it turned to the audience, using the fourth and fifth methods – surveys and focus groups – to explore how three of the main normative duties of journalism (informing, representing and scrutinising (Barnett & Townend, 2014; McNair, 2009a)) are accessed in the absence of dedicated journalism based in the town. Fourth, using document and secondary analysis, the study looked at existing data to see how trends in civic and democratic behaviour in Port Talbot compared with UK or Welsh trends. The final approach compared the findings with the theoretical frameworks of the public sphere and the two-step flow to find out how damage at the local level impacts the wider public sphere and, ultimately, democracy (Habermas, 1989; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948).

Three Research Questions were formulated as a basis for the research:

RQ1: How has local news changed in Port Talbot between 1970 and 2013?

RQ 1.1: How has the quantity of this news changed?

RQ 1.2: How has the quality of this news changed?

RQ 1.3: Can any changes in this local news be explained by changes in newsgathering practices over the sample period?

RQ2: How has the withdrawal of journalism from Port Talbot impacted on the community?

RQ2.1: What are people's current, and previous, news consumption habits?

RQ2.2: Are local people finding out essential information, and if so, how?

RQ2.3: How well-informed are local people about local public affairs?

RQ 3: Does the withdrawal of journalism from a town affect civic and democratic engagement, and if so in what ways?

RQ 3.1: Is there a measurable impact on civic and democratic indicators?

RQ 3.2: Do local people feel well-informed and able to participate in community, civic or democratic life?

RQ 3.3 How well represented do local people feel, and do they feel able to voice their concerns or be heard and/or answered by those in authority?

The study builds on large bodies of both theoretical and empirical research. Chapter 2 looks backwards to the roots of journalism, entwined as they are in the roots of democracy. The chapter tracks the way revenue from advertising underwrote the news industry at both the national and local level, allowing the development of styles of reporting that investigated and scrutinised the powerful, but also which espaliered journalism and news production, hot-housing styles of journalism that conformed to the demands of the market. The profits-first approach of the latest generation of corporate owners is also discussed. The chapter then examines the cyclical and structural decline of advertising revenue, and the way it both caused, and was caused by, circulation decline, in a so-called “suicide spiral” (Mantrala, Naik, Sridhar, & Thorson, 2007), before moving on to examine the decline of circulations and their causes. The sum of both these declines had consequences in the newsroom. Falling profits prompted many owners to cut costs and staff numbers to preserve the bottom line. The chapter notes how fewer journalists were expected to produce news to fill increasing numbers of pages, along with new websites that arrived with the advent of digital technologies. Journalists were encouraged into a new style of “sausage factory” journalism, desk-bound and heavily reliant on agency or wire copy, press releases and other free or cheap sources of news (Nick Davies, 2008). It also charts these declines “by numbers”, demonstrating falling circulations, falling staff numbers, and newspaper closures.



Chapter 3 puts these narratives into context, showing how and why these problems in the news industry matter for democracy. It describes theoretical work by Habermas to define the public sphere – a public arena for the exchange of information and opinion – in which the media are an essential component, providing information and alternative views, and then crystallising the consensus view and representing this view in order to influence the sphere of public authority (Habermas, 1989). It also describes McNair’s and Barnett’s formulations of journalism in democracy, and how they view the role of journalism in informing and representing citizens, and in providing a campaigning voice and an element of scrutiny of those in power (Barnett, 2009; McNair, 2009a). Finally it offers definitions of democracy and the democratic deficit to enable further discussions.

Chapter 4 outlines the five methods used in this research: content analysis, interviews, surveys, focus groups and document analysis. It reiterates the study’s three research questions and relates them and the methods to the overall aims of the study in illuminating the news black hole. It also outlines the case study in more depth, describing the demographics and population of Port Talbot, as well as describing its media landscape in more detail.

The results of the study are set out at Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Chapter 5 sets the scene, describing the contribution of the two main local newspapers serving Port Talbot, past and present, and combining original and existing data to set this within the wider context of circulation decline and job cuts that has been in evidence across the Welsh and UK newspaper industry. Chapter 6 builds on this assessment, providing a detailed historical analysis of the quantity and quality of local news provided for the town, and comparing these quantitative data with qualitative testimony from local journalists who worked the Port Talbot patch between the 1960s and the present. Chapter 7 ventures inside the news black hole to examine the audience’s view, using a survey to measure news consumption habits, news seeking behaviour, knowledge and perceptions of news coverage of Port Talbot. It compares the data with the evidence of focus group participants, using these to find out more about how well-informed local people are,

how well-represented they feel, how they engage with the local media that remain, and how easily they can access information from government and other official sources to ensure scrutiny of public bodies. It then turns to national data to compare civic and democratic behaviour in Port Talbot with that of UK and Welsh averages.

Chapter 8 concludes the discussion by reviewing all the findings in the light of the theoretical framework put forward in Chapter 3. It weighs each finding against the normative ideals of information, representation and scrutiny put forward by McNair and Barnett, and also examines the model of the two-step flow of communication inside a news black hole, where the mass media that were an essential component of the model as it was originally formulated may not be in evidence. Finally it looks to the public sphere, and to the way democracy may be impaired in the light of a weakened local public geo-sphere.

This study aims to further our knowledge of newspaper closures and job losses at the local level. It seems that many instinctive concerns we may have that something valuable is lost when a newspaper closes can be too easily dismissed by arguments that the digital revolution has made newspapers obsolete. Many are convinced that we will not miss the local paper when it has gone, that people will now get their news online. This misses the point that local news – representative, informative, scrutinising news – must come from somewhere, and that without paid and resourced local journalists it may not come from anywhere in sufficient or analogous ways. Others are convinced that the survival of local news publishers after the setbacks and challenges of the recent recession mean that we should now be less concerned about the future of the industry. Neither the platform we use to access local news, or the survival of (now further diminished) existing local news publishers as going concerns, is the problem I seek to address: I prefer to focus on the extent and consequences of the decline of local journalism for communities.

The concluding chapter also makes recommendations for further study or policy-making. One of these recommendations is that locally-owned and locally-embedded journalism

must be a part of the mix if we are to ensure local news continues to serve local communities into the future. As Hawkings says: “black holes ain't as black as they are painted. They are not the eternal prisons they were once thought. Things can get out of a black hole, both to the outside, and possibly, to another universe. So, if you feel you are in a black hole, don't give up. There's a way out.” I argue that investing in local journalism may be the only way out of the news black hole.

Further, I have been unable to find other studies that specifically take a single news black hole and research news content, audiences and/or the impact on the public sphere of lost news. This, too, could be said to be a gap in our knowledge – a black hole in the literature. This study aims to illuminate these black holes. I hope the findings I present and analyse here will help me in my future efforts on the *Port Talbot Magnet* to play a part in a regeneration of pluralistic and robust local news provision in Port Talbot.



# ***Chapter 2***

## ***The crisis in newspapers – the age of news black holes?***

This chapter takes as its starting point a brief history of British newspaper journalism and its roots within the development of democracy in the UK. It moves on to describe how advertising became the dominant method for underwriting the news industry, and links this with the way the press was shaped by its relationship with advertising. Finally, it discusses the decline of advertising revenue in the newspaper industry, and charts the fall in circulations and changes to news production practices, as well as other effects of falling revenues such as declining staffing levels and newspaper closures. Finally it discusses whether printed news is necessary for the future of journalism.

### ***2.1 Where news, journalism and democracy began***

Elements of the history of newspaper journalism in the UK are a useful starting point for this discussion. In particular, the dominant advertising financing model that developed in tandem with the practice of professional journalism offers a context for many of the relatively recent changes that fall under the remit of this research. The last few decades can be set against a turbulent history that is between 450 and 500 years long (Allan, 2004, p. 8; McNair, 2009a, p. 238; McQuail, 2005, pp. 27-28).

Half a millennium ago Britain was undergoing major social upheaval, both in the form of the Reformation of the early 1500s, as Protestantism emerged as a force to challenge the

authority and ideas of the Catholic Church, and also in the form of an upswell of support for democratic ideals that culminated in the Civil War of 1642-51, which saw the rejection of a feudal system of governance in favour of a more representative democratic government. As society re-made itself, journalism and news production evolved alongside it, rising from the public “greed” for news (Raymond, 1996, p. 2), the commercial and military necessity for regular and reliable information (K. Williams, 2010, pp. 29-30), the public’s “desire for news and information [...] political ideas and opinions” that would “make sense of events” that were rapidly changing society (ibid p. 44), and the burgeoning print industry, which was quick to capitalise upon the appetites of readers and the new opportunity to make money from printing technology (McQuail, 2005, p. 26).

From their geneses, British democracy, publishing technology, and journalism were closely intertwined, with the new political pamphlets and newsbooks enabling more and more people to access and debate political news and opinion. In turn newsbooks and journalists played an increasing role in shaping and influencing politics (McNair, 2009a, p. 238; Raymond, 1996, p. 13). More regular publications soon appeared and the first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant*, debuted in 1702 in London (Conboy, 2005, p. 6). It flourished because of a mix of political and entertaining editorial and an appealing cover price (Conboy, 2005, p. 7) – and this also encouraged other newspapers to begin trading. By the mid-18th century, there was a well-established regular press in the capital (K. Williams, 2010, p. 49).

The industrial revolution brought the news industry to a new level of influence and mass engagement. Mechanisation offered steam presses and railways to enable mass printing and distribution, but it also brought a mass readership (Conboy & Steel, 2008, p. 652) in the shape of the millions of industrial workers. A radical press developed, targeting this increasingly literate working class readership. It provided alternative ideas and ideologies that again challenged the status quo and brought about social and political upheaval, (Allan, 2004, p. 12; Conboy, 2005, p. 8). During its peak, the radical press played an important role in unifying the

working classes and offering a new way for them to view society, challenging authority in a way the ruling classes deemed a threat (Conboy, 2005, p. 8; Curran & Seaton, 1991, pp. 18-19; Herman & Chomsky, 1994, p. 3).

In response to its growing political influence among the working classes, the Government attempted to control the news industry through taxation and regulation (Conboy, 2005, pp. 8-9). Eventually it was the reduction of stamp duty, taxes on paper and advertising (the so-called “taxes on knowledge”) that intentionally weakened the radical press by allowing a rush of cheap, less radically politicised, newspapers aimed at the working classes to flourish, drowning out the radical papers by use of the market (Black, 2001, p. 182; Conboy, 2005, p. 8; Curran & Seaton, 1991; Herman & Chomsky, 1994, pp. 3, 14-15; K. Williams, 2010, pp. 18-19). However this also removed the financial obstacles that had made it impossible for smaller newspapers in Britain to go into business, and this seeded the provincial and regional newspaper industry (Black, 2001, pp. 178-179; Conboy, 2005, pp. 8-9; Curran & Seaton, 1991, p. 35).

Once the market became dominated by cheap advertising-funded publications, editorial began to be shaped by the newspapers’ paymasters – the commercial interests of their advertisers and owners (K. Williams, 2010, pp. 18-20) – and it is arguably this advertising revenue model that has shaped the news industry as we know it today.

It is worth noting at this point that cover price and advertising are just two of the possible sources of funding for journalism – in fact, many other possible sources of funding have been used by newspaper publishers, including: money from the state in the form of public subsidy or tax breaks (Barnett & Townend, 2014; House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2013; Kaye & Quinn, 2010, pp. 95-96; McChesney & Nichols, 2010; Nichols & McChesney, 2010, p. 6); investment (or tolerance of low profits) from owners (either as individuals or corporations) (Kaye & Quinn, 2010, pp. 89-95; Meyer, 2009, pp. 189-191); sponsorship or funding from foundations, philanthropists or individual donors (Kaye & Quinn,

2010, pp. 53-64); revenue from diversifying into other commercial activities such as running events or selling goods on behalf of other retailers; cross-subsidy from more profitable news holdings; and revenue from readers, normally through monetising online content with paywalls or micropayment systems or through a regular subscription fee or membership fee (Cole & Harcup, 2010; Kaye & Quinn, 2010, pp. 70-74, 35-41). However, none of these other methods have proved to be as resilient and robust as the revenue streams coming from advertising.

## ***2.2 The advertising revenue model***

The way news is funded is key to understanding the current crisis. The radical press had once been able to sell news at a cover price to sustain its operations, but once advertising began to emerge as a muscular revenue stream able to subsidise this cost, readers' expectations about cover price were lowered. Since that time, Picard argues, "news has never been a commercially viable product and has always been funded with revenue based on its value for other things" (2010, pp. 18-19) and describes how a "mass media financing model" became dominant in the late 19th and 20th century, with news provided for the masses for a small cover fee subsidised by advertising sales (2010, p. 18), and it is this model and its impact on today's newspaper crisis that I will now examine.

One of the key features of the model – also known as the advertising revenue model – is in the way its transactions differ from the standard economic model of a direct exchange of goods in return for money. Newspapers create news and editorial content, but they sell two commodities: they sell news to readers who buy the newspaper, and they also sell a by-product of this transaction – the attention of their readership – as a commodity to advertisers. This opens up a second, and very significant, income stream (Kaye & Quinn, 2010, p. 19). The size and significance of this second stream differs from market to market – a publication's cover price can bring in anything between 15-80 per cent of the total revenue of a newspaper, with most of the other 20-85 per cent brought in by advertising. Kaye and Quinn call this is an



“indirect” method of generating revenue, in which readers who receive the goods pay only a fraction of the revenue required to run the operation, with the majority coming from advertisers (2010, pp. 5-6). Conboy and Steel agree, that after the decline of the radical press: “Newspapers have always produced readers, not news, as their primary goal; creating a selection of news tailored for a particular readership to create profit and/or exert influence on that readership” (2008, p. 651). Therefore the main offering of newspapers was not just news to their readers: it was readers to their advertisers (Picard, 2004, p. 113; R. S. Thompson, 1989, p. 259).

It is not easy to corroborate this as figures on how much of the publishing industry’s income came from advertising in the past are hard to find. There are some clues in the literature, and I present three of them here as together they seem to demonstrate the same broad trend of reliance on advertising in the twentieth century. The first is from a 1991 history of journalism by Curran and Seaton, who note that in 1907, advertising brought in £20million to the British newspaper industry, enabling the expansion of newsrooms and newspapers (1991, p. 39). The second is from a 1913 description of the British press, which puts advertising spend in so-called “civilized countries” in the 1900s at £600million – this “colossal revenue” was at the time more than double the annual budget of the UK– and it was this that made “possible the costly task of collecting and transmitting the news of the world from all places to all other places at once” (Dibblee, 1913, p. 13). Third, a 1948 analysis gives a detailed insight into the different types of revenue streams in different strata of the industry (particularly the regional press, for which historical data are particularly rare) during the inter-war period, finding that 57 per cent of the British newspaper and periodical industry’s combined income in 1935 came from advertising alone, with the nationals relying on around 59 percent of their revenue from advertising and the “suburban and provincial weeklies” on 74.8 per cent (Kaldor & Silverman, 1948, p. 16). Figure 1 shows a more detailed breakdown of the split between revenues from cover sales and advertising at this point, illustrating the reliance of all types of newspaper on display advertising, and also the way cover sales in the 20th century were never more than half

of a newspaper type's income. Even as far back as the inter-war period, then, advertising carried newspapers, and this effect was most marked in the local weeklies.

	<b>National and London dailies (%)</b>	<b>Provincial dailies (%)</b>	<b>National and provincial Sundays (%)</b>	<b>Suburban and provincial weeklies (%)</b>	<b>All newspapers (%)</b>
<b>Sales</b>	<b>41.0</b>	<b>43.4</b>	<b>50.4</b>	<b>25.2</b>	<b>40.8</b>
Display Advertising	52.0	43.4	46.1	58.2	49.6
Classified Advertising	7.0	13.2	3.5	16.6	9.6
<b>Ad Total</b>	<b>59.0</b>	<b>56.6</b>	<b>49.6</b>	<b>74.8</b>	<b>59.2</b>
<b>Total revenue</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 02.1: Net revenue of newspapers, 1935. Source: Kaldor and Silverman (1948, p. 46).**

Sectors of the industry that relied most on advertising were most vulnerable to fluctuations in advertising spend. For example the quality national press were estimated to bring in 70 per cent of their income from advertising, and the regional press were also highly reliant on advertising, while the popular national press were less so, with around 35 to 40 per cent of their income earned in this way (K. Williams, 1998, p. 218). Equally, the American industry (at between 75 - 85 per cent advertising income (Nielsen & Levy, 2010, pp. 11-12; Picard, 2004, pp. 113-114; 2008, p. 704)) was generally more reliant on advertising than the UK.

What had begun in the mid-seventeenth century as a way for publishers “to use up empty space by placing announcements in their newsbooks for other publications of theirs” (Conboy, 2005, p. 4) had, over the course of three centuries, become increasingly entrenched until it was established as the main pillar supporting a voracious, burgeoning, mass news industry. The pillar, however, was perhaps not as structurally sound as might be hoped. Relying on advertising changed the nature of newspapers, and also put them at risk from advertising revenues reducing or disappearing, and at the close of the 20th century, cracks were beginning to show.

## ***2.2.1 The influence of advertising***

This section traces the interlinked relationship between advertising and editorial values that grew as advertising became more entrenched as a dominant revenue stream. This relationship has tended to manifest itself in three ways: first, in an increasing structural coherence and muscle within news organisations as a result of reliable revenues; second, in the way editorial has been influenced by advertising and its commercial focus; and third in the way ownership has become driven by the desire to make profits.

### ***2.2.1.1 Advertising and the structure of the press***

First, then, let us examine how the reliability of advertising revenue enabled newspapers to become stable and organised. As profits and revenue streams rose, newspapers – which previously had typically been run by a single individual – began to grow, employing more staff, organising their company structures and increasing their editorial range and sophistication (K. Williams, 2010, pp. 50-51). Editors celebrated their new financial independence, which they trumpeted as a sign of journalistic objectivity (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 63; Conboy, 2005; K. Williams, 2010, pp. 99-100) – though the reality of the press’s objectivity is widely disputed (for example Schudson & Anderson, 2009).

The large revenue streams that developed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries enabled the continuation and expansion of the British press (K. Williams, 1998, p. 217). With the notable exception of the Second World War, when a shortage of newsprint and the consequent restrictions on advertising imposed by the government caused many titles to go out of print (K. Williams, 2010, p. 177), the British newspapers that had managed to survive continued to enjoy high circulations and high profits throughout this time, and a thriving newspaper industry, characterised by competition and an emphasis on achieving profit through popularity, continued to serve millions of readers in Britain (K. Williams, 2010, pp. 153, 199-204).

It also enabled large newsrooms to become established, with investigative reporters, foreign correspondents, notable columnists and specialist reporters covering geographical or topical beats alongside a staff of regular reporters, subeditors and of course an editor to oversee production (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 63; K. Williams, 2010, pp. 82-83). A rich and diverse news media developed, that was useful and entertaining to readers, attracting readers to lifestyle supplements or niche interest features, but it also helped fund a desirable and important by-product: the fourth estate journalism for which newspapers are traditionally celebrated.

### **2.2.1.2 Advertising and editorial**

Advertising influenced the development of the press in a second way, by influencing the editorial values and ideology of the news, or by inhibiting or compromising the independence of news. There are several ways this can come about.

First is in the way the pursuit of advertising led to newspapers concentrating their editorial on appealing to certain audience demographics. Lord Northcliffe was first to publish audited circulation figures on the front of his newspapers in the 1920s, putting advertising overtly at centre stage of the newspaper business, and he began charging advertisers per thousand readers, not in column inches as had previously been the case (K. Williams, 1998, p. 59)<sup>1</sup>. It was not just high circulations that tempted advertisers however (Curran & Seaton, 1991, pp. 108-109); newspapers found that the type of reader they could access was just as important. The proportion of high-income earners within a readership had a profound effect on the appeal of a newspaper to an advertising buyer (R. S. Thompson, 1989, p. 260) and Williams notes an episode whereby *The Times* during the 1960s attempted to improve its fortunes by increasing its circulation with an aggressive marketing campaign. Its success (a 69-per-cent circulation increase) came at a cost, and a loss of profits, as the mainly lower-middle-class readers who had flocked to the newspaper as a result of the campaign simply “diluted the prestige quality” of the

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<sup>1</sup> This laid the ground for the establishment of the Audit Bureau of Circulation in the 1930s, which was formed in order to provide independently audited circulation figures for newspapers. By 1947 the Bureau had been accepted by most publishers and began issuing annual readership surveys (K. Williams, 1998, p. 59)

paper, and advertisers refused to pay *The Times'* high advertising rates for an audience they could secure more cheaply elsewhere, causing *The Times* to return to its previous editorial style (1998, p. 60). If nothing else, this is a vivid example of advertising's common influence over editorial at all levels.

The result of this trend towards appealing to certain types of readers was the development of tabloid and broadsheet newspaper styles. Newspapers directed their editorial towards keeping them attractive to advertising buyers: they consolidated their audiences, refined their modes of address to those audiences and claimed affiliation to these readerships, which they identified as having political, cultural or economic interests or backgrounds in common, and offering access to these readerships became the basis of their business (Conboy & Steel, 2008, pp. 652-653; Matheson, 2000, pp. 558-560). For example, the *Daily Mail* kept its lower middle class audience happy with editorial that chimed with their existing political and cultural views, but always with an astute eye on their commercial appetites (Conboy & Steel, 2008, p. 653). Equally, *The Times* catered to an elite bourgeoisie and the aspiring professional classes, while the popular press competed for the purchasing power of the lower-middle and working classes (Conboy & Steel, 2008, p. 652; K. Williams, 1998, p. 60).

The editorial choices of editors and publishers were shaped by the necessity to play to the gallery in order to maximise their audience and thereby maximise revenue, but advertisers also showed willingness to use their financial muscle to influence wider narratives in the media, and to protect their own interests by stifling unfriendly editorial, and encouraging positive editorial (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 2004, pp. 256-257).

This leads on to a second, more direct influence on editorial by advertising or advertisers. Advertising has arguably always posed a threat to the independence of journalism as it is so closely allied to financing its production (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 91; Herman & Chomsky, 1994, pp. 14-18; Meech, 2008, p. 238). William Cobbett, an early and radical newspaperman who founded the (advertising-free) *Weekly Political Register*, wrote in 1830:

Advertising is the great source of revenue with our journals, except in very few cases, such as mine, for instance, who have no advertisements. Hence, these journals are an affair of trade and not of literature; the proprietors think of the money that is to be got by them; they hire men to write in them; and these men are ordered to write in a way to please the classes who give the most advertisements. The Government itself pays large sums in advertisements, many hundreds a year to some journals. The aristocracy, the clergy, the magistrates (who are generally clergy too) in the several counties; the merchants, the manufacturers, the great shopkeepers: all these command the press, because without their advertisements it cannot be carried on with profit. (Quoted in K. Williams, 1998, p. 35)

Even though this notion is often denied by owners and editors (Curran, 1981, p. 43; 2005, p. 96; Franklin & Murphy, 1991, p. 59) Cobbett's claims have been borne out by several studies. One survey of American advertising sales directors, for example, found a significant proportion would be willing to allow an advertiser's demands to compromise editorial independence (An & Bergen, 2007, pp. 111-121), and the study claimed to "uncover frequent conflicts between the business side and the journalism side of newspaper operations" (ibid 2007, p. 118). The study did also note many examples of strict rules and processes that were enforced at the publications to keep advertising's influence separate from editorial processes, and found that though advertisers frequently *sought* to influence editorial, for example by asking a newspaper not to cover a potentially damaging story, the news editors and reporters insisted they denied such overtures. However there were differences between the extent of influence in independent newspapers, which were more easily influenced, compared with chain newspapers, which could perhaps more readily withstand the financial blow of losing a large advertiser.

Another study found that 90 per cent of newspaper editors reported instances of advertisers attempting to influence editorial, and 90 per cent reported advertisers had tried to use economic means to exert their influence on editorial (Soley & Craig, 1992). They also found

37 per cent had given in to this pressure; however 85 per cent said they had also run editorial that was seen as critical of, or harmful to, advertisers, suggesting a degree of balance – or at least give and take – in the power struggle between advertisers and editorial staff. There are many individual examples of advertisers seeking to influence editorial by withdrawing their advertising spend, or by threatening to do so, but the wider, aggregated consequence of this level of influence can mean structural or ideological bias happening across the media as a whole.

This leads us to a third influence of advertising on editorial – and this is an ideological influence. Bagdikian, in his examination of media ownership and economic bias, says that the media “adapted their content to the needs of advertising and of adopting its ideology as their own [...]. The media are no longer neutral agents of the merchant but essential gears in the machinery of corporate giantism” (1983, pp. 151-152). Furthermore, some commentators argue that the influence of advertising has fostered a kind of journalism that promotes and, “normalises”, capitalism (Conboy, 2005, p. 9) – with editorial that frequently enjoins the reader to buy goods, not just from its own advertisers, but in general. In the words of Lewis et al, the national news media tend to address audiences as passive “consumers” more than active and engaged “citizens” (2005, p. ix). Barnhurst and Nerone argue, too, that newspapers both “experienced” and “advanced the market revolution”, by communicating business news and information to a wide audience, by bringing the possibility of buying and selling goods directly into the hands of consumers through their advertisements, and also by marketing themselves as “branded commodities” (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p. 71).

In summary, the market-oriented structure inherent in the advertising model shapes the type of editorial that is presented in favour of appealing to mass audiences or particular demographics, and tends away from unprofitable or expensive journalism, such as alternative viewpoints or in-depth investigations.

### ***2.2.1.3 Advertising and ownership***

The third manifestation of the influence of advertising is in the ownership of newspapers, as its market-orientated nature attracted large corporations interested in benefiting from the 20-40 percent profit margins enjoyed by some newspaper publishers in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 55; McChesney & Nichols, 2010, p. 33; Meyer, 2009, p. 43; Soloski, 2005, p. 71). At the birth of newspapers in the 17th century, owners were typically individuals such as printers, booksellers or authors, but by the mid-1700s there emerged a new pattern of ownership in London, where booksellers began to band together as shareholders of the larger newspapers, attracted by the cash returns made possible by the profitable mix of sales and advertising, but also by the opportunity to advertise their own wares and even freeze out the advertisements of their rivals (Harris, 1978, pp. 92-93). It is apparent that commercial interest lay high above innovation in the priorities of these groups, and the power they wielded over distributors also stifled competitor newspapers from establishing themselves (Harris, 1978, pp. 94-95). The financing of these newspapers relied mainly on cover price and, to varying degrees, advertising revenues, but money also sometimes came from those seeking to directly set the editorial agenda. This was due in part to the growing political influence of the press in the 18th century, which encouraged those in power or in opposition to invest both in their own pamphlets and essay sheets, and also to pay the established news sheets to write copy favourable to their views. Even public funds were used in this way, with one government of the day documented as spending £50,000 on propaganda in a 10 year period, mostly by paying the London newspapers to write in its defence (Harris, 1978, p. 95). By the 18th century, more styles of ownership came to be seen, with individuals or partnerships proving to be innovative and often very successful, unencumbered by the slow or inefficient syndicate ownerships that had come before them. The syndicates that were successful were more usually those that were under the control of a single, powerful individual, mandated to make key decisions.



A few chains of newspapers were also established in the 19th century, though these were small scale and not typical of the industry as a whole. Many regional newspapers began to be owned by families, as newspapers changed hands by marriage or through inheritance (Asquith, 1978, pp. 103-105) – a pattern that grew through the 19th and 20th centuries (A. Lee, 1978, p. 124). However the mid-19th century saw the expense of reporting, writing, printing and distributing news rise, and this made it expensive to establish a newspaper, or even run an existing newspaper.

In 1844, the Companies Act came into force, making establishing and owning joint-stock companies a possibility, and in combination with the financial burdens and opportunities for profit offered by newspaper publishing, thousands of new companies entered the industry as a result (A. Lee, 1978, p. 125). This heralded a new age of companies, and it was these larger, and more structured organisations that dominated the ownership models of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Companies and corporations were better able to afford to spend capital in establishing a newspaper, absorb the ongoing financial risks and handle the increasing volume of work associated with filling, printing and distributing a regular newspaper. Corporations were also attracted by the profits offered by newspaper ownership, which had now begun to yield large returns from advertising sales (Asquith, 1978, p. 110; A. Lee, 1978). Arguably, the dominance of corporations in the industry led to an emphasis on profit as the primary motivation for newspaper production.

Acquisitions and mergers led to an increasing concentration of owners intent on “edging out” or taking over smaller, weaker titles or companies and closing or amalgamating them into other newspapers (Murdock & Golding, 1978, p. 134). As Murdock and Golding note: “By weeding out some of the smaller concerns, this thinning of the ranks reinforced market dominance of the leading five companies; and during this period [1921 to 1937] they increased their market share from 15 per cent to 43 per cent” (p. 135). This trend towards the concentration of ownership continued into the inter-war period, providing fertile ground for the

emergence of the first press barons. These moguls headed large media empires with multiple titles under their control. Lord Northcliffe and his brother Lord Rothermere (the Harmsworths), the Astor brothers, the Berry brothers and Lord Beaverbrook were among the first of these and newspaper titles were commonly bought and sold among them, with some titles changing hands several times during the inter-war period and the decades following the Second World War (ibid). The age of press barons faded into a new era of “entrepreneurial proprietors” in the mid-20th century. Though many of them were interested in the political clout afforded them by their newspapers, their primary focus was making a commercial success of their newspapers – again Murdock and Golding note the stance of Lord Thomson, who “repeatedly maintained he didn’t care what editorial position his papers took as long as they made money” (p. 142).

Today owners of local newspapers in the UK are more likely to be large multi-national corporations who are able to invest in newspaper businesses and are intent on making a profit, and do not typically prioritise editorial quality (Soloski, 2005, p. 66). There are many examples of this kind of owner, but News Corporation, which owns *The Times* and *Sunday Times*, is perhaps the best known. Run by notorious magnate Rupert Murdoch, the multi-national media conglomerate dominates print and television media in several countries and made around \$2.4 billion in one quarter of 2013. The company separated its newspaper and publishing divisions from its more profitable TV and media divisions in 2013 (Neate, 2013), though both divisions remained under the control of Rupert Murdoch. The separation of the company into the publishing company News Corp and the TV and media company 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox was welcomed by city analysts, one of whom anonymously wrote:

We believe that the publishing unit has outlived its usefulness as a cash cow [...] We are impressed with the fact that News Corp's publishing business is still more profitable than other similar firms. However, we can admit that print media is at best a cash cow and at worst, a declining business. Even if News Corp did not have the phone hacking scandal with *News of the World*, it would make sense to sell or spin off the publishing

division to allow shareholders direct exposure to News Corp's higher profit, higher growth entertainment properties. We believe that NWS will see its financial performance enjoy strong growth once the publishing spin-off is completed, and we believe that will bode well for the company's share price going forward. (Greenslade, 2013; Saibus-Research, 2013)

This kind of emphasis on the financial performance of a publishing company sees a publishing division “content to muddle along in the mediocre operating environment for publishing assets” but does not recognise the value of these newspapers to their readers, communities or society as a whole. As Meyer points out, only mediocre newspapers, ones whose quality is not excessive, and therefore not too expensive, are of value to shareholders and investors: where quality is too high, “the money spent on those projects should be left to fall to the bottom line” (2009, p. 11). This can be observed across the News Corp business. India has been a recent expansion for Murdoch, where his StarTV has been built from the ground up, establishing infrastructure and new channels. StarTV has also established and developed new markets for advertising and re-written the rule book on the production values and quality of television programming in order to maintain popularity with audiences and satisfy the requirements of advertisers (Thusu, 2007). Again, the profits-first approach of this corporate generation of owners has a direct influence on the type of content on offer, and this is at the heart of the way advertising revenue and the focus on profits it encourages has influenced the development and editorial content of news.

### ***2.2.2 The decline of the model***

I have so far discussed the importance of advertising revenue to the newspaper industry, but this important economic support is weakening, and I discuss its decline in this section.

Over the last two decades, advertising expenditure in newspapers has shown steepening decline. Before that, there had been a period of growth that had begun at the end of the Second

World War. In America, for example, it grew steadily from 1950 until the turn of the millennium, at which point it took just over a decade to decline to its pre-1950 levels, and the introduction of online products did not mitigate against the fall – only improving 2012 figures to around \$23 billion, as opposed to \$18 billion if print-only revenues are counted alone (Statista: The Statistics Portal, 2012). Meyer, too, notes: “In 1946, at the dawn of the age of television, newspapers had 34 per cent of the advertising market. In the second half of the 20th century newspaper share of the overall market fell from almost 30 per cent to close to 20 per cent” (2009, p. 42).

As in America, where the \$46.16 billion spent in 2000 on advertising in newspapers had dwindled to \$23.57 billion in 2013 (i.e. just over half what it had been), evidence presented to the Leveson Inquiry cited revenue losses between 2005 and 2010 at some of the major UK newspaper groups of between 2 per cent and 26 per cent for the nationals (with the exception of the *Telegraph*, which remained static and the *Financial Times*, which increased its income by 21 per cent). Meanwhile there were losses of between 23 and 53 per cent in four of the biggest regional groups, amounting to a total loss of around £150 million (Lord Justice Leveson, 2012, p. 97). Ofcom analysed the global expenditure on advertising in 2012, presenting the data by medium, and found that though there was an overall increase on advertising spending – up by 4.7 per cent to \$290 billion from 2008 figures of \$272 billion – there was a year-on-year average decline in newspaper advertising of around 5.7 per cent. Online advertising largely accounts for the overall increase, showing a 14.8 per cent rise between 2008 and 2012, with smaller increases in cinema and television advertising, and similarly small decreases in radio and magazine advertising. However, newspapers have not been successful at converting their print advertising revenues into comparable income from their online portals. They have also sustained losses from cover price as circulations have gone down and much of their audience migrated online where news is largely free, (but where advertising revenues are much lower). Though digital revenues have shown steep growth in the last decade, this has not replaced the scale of lost print revenues (D. Thompson, 2013).

Local newspapers bucked the trend for a time, and were notably “the only medium to increase advertising expenditure year on year for more than a decade: from £1,963 millions in 1995 to £2,762 millions in 2000 and more than £3 billions by 2004” (A. Williams & Franklin, 2007, p. 14). However by 2005 the decline began to be seen there too, and it has continued. Classified advertising expenditure – a staple of the regional newspaper sector – fell 63 per cent between 2007 and 2012. In the same time period, national display advertising in the local market fell by 17 per cent, and local display advertising fell by 40 per cent. Overall, £1,279 million was spent in 2012 in the local newspaper market, compared with £2,747 million in 2007 (Oliver and Ohlbaum Associates Ltd, 2013), constituting a 54 per cent drop in overall expenditure.

Local titles, of course, are exposed and vulnerable to the ups and downs of the advertising market, and are arguably more tied to its fortunes than national newspapers. Typically serving much smaller readerships, and therefore with smaller circulations, the paid-for dailies and weeklies bring in as little as 20 per cent of their revenue from the cover price and between 60 and 80 per cent from advertising (Franklin, 1997, p. 92; K. Williams, 2010, p. 240). The local free newspapers, which of course do not charge a cover price, are completely reliant on advertising (Franklin, 1997, p. 92) and are closely tied to its fortunes.

Equally, the regional press has not escaped the trend towards corporate ownership and the profits-first approach that has characterised the whole industry in the twentieth century. Regional newspapers in the 17th and 18th centuries were smaller and less financially secure businesses than their London or national counterparts, and as such were prone to be anxious of upsetting advertisers in a much smaller pool of potential clients, and therefore more cautious in their editorial (Harris, 1978, p. 96). However there was also a tradition of radicalism in the regional press which sought to challenge the status quo (Curran, 1978, p. 71; Franklin & Murphy, 1991, p. 55), but the increasing concentration of newspaper ownership already

discussed largely eroded this radicalism as owners sought to maximise their titles' appeal by catering to dominant views (Curran, 1978, p. 73; Murdock & Golding, 1978, p. 147).

Today many local newspapers have a monopoly in their local advertising market, and to some extent they have been able to withstand declining circulation because, as one senior journalist claimed, local businesses either “advertise in our paper or they don’t advertise at all” (A. Williams & Franklin, 2007). However, this monopoly power is being undermined by competition from the Internet, which has attracted readers and some of the most reliable advertisers away from newspapers. This is particularly true for classified advertising, traditionally a key segment of local newspapers’ income (property and recruitment for example), and this has migrated to sites such as eBay, RightMove or local job sites (2007, p. 14), making profits at many local newspapers precarious.

Across the industry, declining advertising revenues have meant declining profits, and the way newspaper publishers have (largely) responded to protect their threatened margins is by cutting back on their spending and making cuts to newsrooms, which in turn has weakened the content of newspapers and turned readers away, further depressing circulations and causing advertisers to be unwilling to spend what they once did on advertising. The story of declining advertising revenues is therefore closely interlinked with that of circulation decline – the two could be said to be locked in a potentially fatal embrace or “suicide spiral” (Mantrala et al., 2007). The discussion therefore turns now to the story of circulation decline.

### ***2.3 Circulation decline, newspaper closures and cutbacks***

Newspaper circulations in Europe and America are declining across all sectors of the industry. It is tempting to explain this decline with reference solely to the rise of digital technology, particularly the Internet and the ready availability of online news since the mid-1990s. However, circulation decline predates by many decades the structural changes triggered by new

digital technologies. This has been a long, slow fall that has its roots in the 1960s, and which, thanks to the continuation of high levels of profits due to buoyant advertising revenues (and, latterly, by the willingness of newspaper owners to reduce costs, usually by cutting their staff numbers and newsroom budgets (Phillips & Witschge, 2012, pp. 4,13)), has kept newspaper profits insulated from its effects. Until the 1990s the decline was largely ignored by newspaper owners and journalists (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 178; Picard, 2010, p. 17). When the Internet's emergence began to be felt by the print industry after 2000, alarm began to take hold (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 179). The downturn provided by the 2008 recession merely accelerated the effects (Cole & Harcup, 2010; Nielsen & Levy, 2010, pp. 4-12; Picard, 2010, pp. 19-20).

There's no doubt that the structural decline witnessed in recent decades has partly been caused by the advent of digital media platforms. New media have tempted both advertisers and audiences away from newsprint, as well as online offerings of traditional publishers (Nielsen & Levy, 2010, pp. 7-8; Phillips & Witschge, 2012; Picard, 2010, p. 21). But this is not a wholly new phenomenon – new and disruptive technologies have challenged existing news hierarchies before as other formats, cumulatively, took their toll on reader numbers, as Black notes: “each period of English newspaper history can be presented as one of transformation, shifts in content, production, distribution, the nature of competition, and the social context” (2001, p. 1). In particular television, and later the explosion in the number of available channels, took readers away from newspapers. Where TV penetration in UK homes in 1956 was 36.5 per cent, by 2013 it was 96.7 per cent (Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB), 2014) and the number of channels had risen from two in 1954 to 527 in 2013 (House of Lords Communications Committee, 2010; Ofcom, 2014a, p. 127). News is now available 24 hours a day on rolling news channels or the Internet and is more available, immediate and prevalent than it has ever been before (Phillips & Witschge, 2012, p. 8).

Alongside the Internet and other competing media, other, more urbane, reasons for the decline in newspaper circulations have been noted. These are largely symptomatic of cultural

and social shifts which exist outside the control of the newspaper industry. Commuting habits (P. J. Anderson, Weymouth, & Ward, 2007, p. 26), changing working hours, an increase in office workers and the move away from daily convenience shopping have all impacted on newspaper buying habits. Some of the “facts that drove purchase... [such as] late racing results or cricket scores”, are no longer published because late editions have been scrapped in favour of overnight printing in centralised printing hubs (Preston, 2009, p. 14). Picard (2010, p. 21) notes that the emergence of more choice for consumers, through emergent technologies, including radio, television and the Internet, has pulled audiences to a mix of other media for their news and entertainment. Meyer calls this a “media overload problem” (Meyer, 2009, p. 12), contending that the surplus of news and entertainment available on multiple channels and across multiple media consumes and therefore dilutes the attention of the audience and fragments it (see also P. J. Anderson et al., 2007; Phillips & Witschge, 2012).

These factors have thereby combined to pull readers away from the paid-for news in newspapers and divided the mass readership that existed during most of the 19th and 20th centuries into many small groups of audiences, a process of audience fragmentation. Through the Internet, anyone with a computer can access most newspapers, radio stations and television channels in the world, as well as the many millions of web sites that also offer news (raw or in aggregate), information, entertainment, opinion, marketing, advertising and retail, and this has produced an audience of browsers, who are adept at surfing the net, using multiple news sources across many different formats, and who are also able to consume information directly from sources such as government websites or eyewitnesses on social media.

This is seen by some scholars to offer a new dawn of civic and democratic participation as there is now a wealth of opportunities to receive, create and interact with information, as well as to link with vast networks of people (Gillmor, 2008; Shirky, 2008). However, many empirical studies cast doubt on this hypothesis. For example, though the Internet offers vast quantities of news, it is not mainly used for this purpose. Instead television is often cited as the



main source of news for most people around the world (Curran & Witschge, 2010), and a recent Ofcom study confirmed television is still the UK's biggest news source, though they reported a 3 per cent year-on-year decrease in television's prevalence, and a 9 per cent growth in the use of digital platforms in the same time (Ofcom, 2014b).

There are four factors that continue to limit take-up of digital news or access to news online. First, it remains the case that linguistic, literacy and cultural factors exclude many potential users of the Internet (Curran & Witschge, 2010; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010, p. 1088) – for example those that cannot read, or who do not speak the dominant language (English). Second, there are those that cannot access the Internet because they cannot afford to do so, or because, due to their socioeconomic status, they are not “equipped with additional tools to be more active citizens” (Papacharissi, 2002). Third, as discussed above, the limited time of many people restricts their ability to search out alternative points of view, cross-check what they read, or refer to raw data online: the Ofcom research shows rather that most people continue to gather at mainstream websites such as the BBC website or app (59 per cent) or other well-known news sources (Ofcom, 2014b, p. 6). Indeed, other studies of online traffic have similarly found a large audience concentration among a handful of established websites, with a smaller portion of the audience scattered among many much smaller news outlets (Hindman, 2009). Fourth, online news itself has been found to be narrow in scope and agenda (J. K. Lee, 2007; Phillips, 2012), with “content online [...] increasingly more homogenous” (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010), prompting some scholars to suggest that public messages are still reaching mass audiences because of the increasing tendency of the many news outlets to run similar content (Coleman & McCombs, 2007), or even “cannibalise” one another's content (Phillips, 2011). Though the public agenda may arguably be served under these conditions, with important messages possibly getting out to a large proportion of the audience, there are consequent problems with a lack of multiplicity and alternative viewpoints feeding into the narrative.

### **2.3.1 Circulation decline by numbers**

This section looks more closely at the decline of circulations across, first, the national press and, second, the Welsh newspaper industry. This latter approach offers insight into the wider decline that has occurred within the UK regional and local press, as well as contextualising the more local focus of my first findings chapter, below (see chapter 5).

#### **2.3.1.1 The Nationals**

An important starting point for any discussion of newspaper circulations is to note that the decline has been in place for many decades. Indeed, the data show the readership and circulation figures of most paid-for printed newspapers in Europe and America have been in decline since the 1950s. For example, the combined circulation figures for national daily newspapers in the UK were at their highest in 1957, with sales totalling 16.62 million (Freedman, 2010, p. 48; Seymour-Ure, 1992, p. 16). Since then, there has been a slow but steady loss of readers from daily national newspapers in the UK.

There have, of course, been some variations in this overall picture as the story of the *Daily Mail* demonstrates. The *Mail* showed a modest 3 per cent growth between 1950 and 2005. But while other newspapers were enjoying high circulations in the 1980s and 1990s, the *Daily Mail* conversely dropped down by almost a third in 1990, regaining its pre-1990s circulation by 2005, and could therefore be said to have simply recovered some of the earlier ground it had lost. However, in common with most other national dailies, the period from 2005-2010 has taken a heavy toll on the *Daily Mail's* circulation. In that time, it has suffered losses of around 250,000 copies, translating to a circulation drop of 25 per cent. In fact, the period 2005-2010 brought bad news to the managers of most national newspapers: the *Guardian's* dropped 48 per cent by 2010 – a loss of about 110,000 copies. The *Mirror* lost a million copies in the first decade of the new millennium; *The Times* dropped by just short of a third between 2005 and 2010. At the *Independent*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Star*, the *Express* – all (except the *Financial Times*,

which has weathered the decline better) suffered a seemingly inexorable decline. As Franklin summarises, “aggregate circulations of daily and Sunday titles across all sectors are in sharp decline from 38.4 million in 1965 to 32.6 million in 1985, plummeting to 22.7 million in 2007: 15.7 million copies lost in the paid newspaper market (41 per cent) with an accelerating rate of decline in reader numbers” (2009, p. 3). Meanwhile, there has been a growth in online readers, which in 2014 made up 41 per cent of UK adults (Ofcom, 2014b, p. 6). However, these readers attract less income than the readers of printed newspapers and have not made up the shortfall in lost profits (Blodget, 2011).

### ***2.3.1.2 Circulation in Wales***

In Wales, there is a similar picture of circulation decline. However, it’s worth pointing out that some elements of the Welsh media landscape are particular only to Wales, and mean the situation is particularly grave in this national context. I discuss five of these concerns in this section.

First, a poverty of media diversity both in terms of the number of titles and in newspaper ownership, has been noted (J. Thomas & Williams, 2008; K. Williams, 2010, p. 232). There is a predominance of news produced outside of Wales, or owned by those living outside Welsh borders, and Thomas and Williams highlight this paradox in the Welsh industry: “ownership [is] concentrated among large media corporations like Trinity Mirror ‘whose major commercial interests exist outside of Wales’” (2008, p. 17). Kevin Williams argues that the accountability of large corporate owners is “first and foremost to the profit-sheet and the shareholder, not the community and the public”, noting also that “there appears to have been little concern from owners about the relationship of their newspapers to Wales” (1997, p. 33). In fact, only a handful of newspaper groups own the majority of the newspapers in Wales: Trinity Mirror, Local World, Newsquest, NWN Media and Tindle News (*The Welsh Newspaper Industry*, 2009). This group may well shrink further, as Trinity Mirror is currently in talks to buy the holdings of Local News (Sweney, 2015). Only one of these, NWN Media, is “a Welsh

company, based in Wales, in family-ownership" (*The Welsh Newspaper Industry*, 2009). The group owns 12 titles, including a paid-for daily, four paid-for weeklies and a number of free newspapers, which reach up to 600,000 readers across the north Wales area according to their own website ("NWN Media: Our Portfolio," 2013). The others are large corporations with titles across the UK. Trinity Mirror owns influential daily newspapers such as the *Western Mail*, the *South Wales Echo* (which both cover south Wales), and the *Daily Post* (covering north Wales). Local World owns the *South Wales Evening Post* (previously owned by Northcliffe), which operates in south west Wales, and currently has the largest circulation in Wales ("Regional press sales round-up: Wales, Scotland and NI," 2012). Along with the *Wrexham Leader* (NWN Media) and the *South Wales Argus* (Newsquest), these six paid-for dailies had a combined average ABC circulation of 159,572 in the first half of 2012, many of them down between 3 and 9 per cent on the previous year's figures ("Regional press sales round-up: Wales, Scotland and NI," 2012).

Second, Thomas et al note the inability of newspapers to give adequate coverage to Welsh politics because of a "structural weakness" that is inherent in there being a "regionalised" rather than a national, Wales-wide, press, and this is also noted by others (Rosie, Petersoo, MacInnes, Condor, & Kennedy, 2006, p. 329; J. Thomas & Williams, 2008).

Third, Thomas et al note the limited financial resources of these newspapers and therefore their limited power to define debate and set agendas (2004, p. 282). Again, this has led to concerns of a lack of plurality in Welsh media (Barlow, O'Malley, & Mitchell, 2005, p. 46; J. Thomas & Williams, 2008, p. 16).

Fourth, there is a strong readership of UK national newspapers in Wales, with 85 per cent of the daily morning newspapers read in Wales originating outside Wales in 2002 (Barlow et al., 2005, p. 47; J. Thomas, 2006a, p. 49). While the two major Welsh newspapers, the *Western Mail* and *Daily Post*, together made up only 13 per cent of the Welsh sales of morning newspapers in 2002 (by contrast in Scotland, the penetration of Scottish newspapers was

almost 90 per cent in 1995 (K. Williams, 1997, p. 9)), the *Sun* was read in 19.6 per cent of Welsh homes, the *Mirror* in 16.8 per cent, the *Daily Mail* in 11.7 and on a Sunday the now-defunct *News of the World* reached 20 per cent (Barlow et al., 2005, p. 47; J. Thomas, Jewell, et al., 2004, p. 282). There is also a bias towards readership of the tabloids – tabloid readers outnumber those of the quality press 10 to one (K. Williams, 1997, p. 9). This might not be a problem were it not for the compounding issue of the weak presence (or virtual absence) of Wales in the national press. This is borne out by more recent data from Ofcom, which found 47 per cent of newspaper readers in Wales read a popular national newspaper, 30 per cent read a midmarket newspaper, and 18 per cent read a quality newspaper, but this is compared with only 5 per cent who read a Welsh newspaper (Ofcom, 2014c)<sup>2</sup>. There is concern among commentators that the lack of coverage of Wales and Welsh affairs in the national press, which is read by around 50 per cent of the population, is leading to a weakened public sphere in Wales (Rosie et al., 2006, pp. 332-334; J. Thomas, Cushion, & Jewell, 2004). The Welsh Assembly itself is concerned about the weakening Welsh press and the lack of robust reporting of its work in the national press, and the assembly’s presiding officer Rosemary Butler AM is concerned that Wales is “sleepwalking towards a situation where there will be little, or no, plurality in the coverage of the work of the assembly”, and that “a lack of comprehensive coverage of the assembly’s work could fundamentally damage devolution in Wales” (NUJ, 2014).

Last, and aside from these structural weaknesses, the Welsh press has also been subject to wider industry trends, and circulation declines have been in evidence in Wales as elsewhere. Daily newspapers have suffered the worst declines, with weekly paid-for newspapers showing collective, comparative, resilience, also in line with national trends (Cole & Harcup, 2010, pp. 53-54). However, the overall story remains one of decline, if of a slower kind (McNair, 2009b, p. 171).

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that the weighted base for these figures is small (N=52), and the data should therefore be treated with caution.

## ***2.3.2 The consequences***

The aggregated findings on advertising profits and on circulations decline addressed in this chapter matter so much, of course, because of the combined effects of the losses of advertising and circulation revenues on the ability of news companies to adequately resource their newsgathering and publishing activities. The drastic losses in revenues have been a major factor in cutbacks that have resulted in steep declines in the human resources devoted to producing news in the UK, especially at a local and regional level in newspapers, which have also affected their associated online publishing platforms (Phillips & Witschge, 2012, p. 13; A. Williams & Franklin, 2007, p. 2). This section examines the consequences of the declines, first by discussing these cutbacks and looking in depth at one newspaper to show how these cutbacks have had knock-on effects for news production, and second by examining newspaper closures.

### ***2.3.2.1 Cutbacks by numbers***

As suggested, cuts to journalists' jobs have weakened newsrooms and put profits higher up the agenda than the quality of editorial (Cole & Harcup, 2010, pp. 53-54; Franklin, 2006a, pp. 9-14; 2006b, p. xvii; G. Williams, 2006, pp. 90-91). This has resulted in lower numbers of staff and higher workloads, which has resulted in an over-reliance on PR, agency copy and other free or cheap sources of news.

There is no definitive tally of the job losses in the UK. However there are some estimates of the scale of the reduction in the journalistic workforce. Nel has used a combination of stories in the media press and publicly available data to "guestimate" a total workforce of around 40,000 journalists in 2010 – down by between a quarter and a third from 2001 (Nel, 2010). Furthermore, he says: "There is some evidence to suggest that the cuts in the regional press have been deeper than in the national press. At the Daily Mail and General Trust, for example, losses at their regional division, Northcliffe Media, over the past few years has typically been more than double those at the national division, Associated Newspapers, and are reflected in the

redundancy plans” (ibid). Other reports appear to agree with this interpretation. Johnson Press is reported to have lost 23 per cent of its workforce in 2012; Northcliffe Media to have lost half its editorial staff between 2008 and 2011 (Moore, 2014). Newspaper Society figures suggest there was a 13.75 per cent contraction in the number of local and regional press jobs between 2002 and 2007 (Nel, 2010) and Claire Enders estimated jobs in the regional press went down 40 per cent in five years (Moore, 2014).

Owners largely cited slumps in advertising spend, the rising cost of newsprint and the general economic downturn of 2008 as the cause of newsroom redundancies (Kiss, 2008; Luft, 2008), but some journalists have recorded their concern that this has resulted in the quality of their newsgathering becoming compromised: “They are tearing the heart out of this paper and each day that goes by they are doing it more and more,” said the *Daily Telegraph’s* National Union of Journalists (NUJ) Father of Chapel John Carey in an interview with the *Guardian* in 2006. He claimed that there was “no way to maintain the quality of the newspaper” with the cuts (Brook, 2006). Newspaper owners have argued that the cuts are necessary to maintain their businesses and point to substantial investments they have made in their digital publishing enterprises (FD (Fair Disclosure) Wire, 2008; Greenslade, 2010).

But there are those who disagree with their overall approach. Matthew Engel, a journalist and media commentator, says: “Britain’s local newspaper groups compounded their problems by their ill-judged expansion of the past few years and decades of editorial neglect before that” (Engel, 2009, p. 61). Others agree with the assessment that a lack of investment in staff and local editorial, and a lack of adequate planning to establish sustainable revenues when online publishing became the standard, were at the root of the declines of the last 15 years (Compton & Benedetti, 2010; McChesney & Nichols, 2010; A. Williams & Franklin, 2007). One study, which found a positive correlation between newsroom investment and circulation increase, also lends credence to this view (Chen, Thorson, & Lacy, 2005).

Alongside the cuts, workloads have increased sharply. The paginations of newspapers have increased, but this is not the only factor – the Internet has also added to the workload of journalists. According to Fenton, the “speed and space” (2010, p. 7) offered by the Internet has added to the pressure on journalists, making a hungry creature that must be fed often, quickly and plentifully, and this has affected quality, with many newsrooms now resembling a “sausage factory” (M. Martin, 2007, p. 151) or “news factory” (Nick Davies, 2008, p. 113), where “churning” out news stories as quickly and cheaply as possible is the main priority, prompting Davies to coin the term “churnalism” (ibid p. 59).

Of further concern is the growing muscle of public relations (PR). PR offers an easily accessible source of stories that is free to use, but by its definition it provides messages advantageous to the source – and the resulting copy often appears in newspapers unchecked or unchanged, or without a balancing view. It is nevertheless presented as traditional reporting, and it can mislead readers into thinking it is trustworthy news (Nick Davies, 2008). There are now more jobs in the PR industry than in journalism in both the UK and the US. In America, PRs outnumber journalists 4.6 to 1; in the UK there were reportedly 62,000 PR workers in a 2013 industry census and if, as Roy Greenslade suggests, this is compared with Nel’s figure of 40,000 journalists, the ratio is likely to be around 1.5 PR workers for every journalist (2014b).

PR is used increasingly prevalently in newspapers, and this has been fuelled by a desire to keep costs down. This has impacted on the quality of reporting as journalists look to maximise their “efficiency” (Gans, 1979) in carrying out their jobs with smaller editorial budgets, fewer staff, less time, and more pages to fill, which has, among other things, resulted in an over-reliance on the “information subsidy” (Gandy, 1982, p. 74) offered by PR sources. A 2008 study of UK national newspapers confirmed this suspicion and made the political economy-inflected argument that “this reliance on public relations and news agency copy has been prompted by the need for a relatively stable community of journalists to meet an



expansive requirement for news in order to maintain newspapers' profitability in the context of declining circulations and revenues" (Justin Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, p. 27).

The routine use of press releases on such a scale has been found to result in a limited diet of stories being reproduced across many outlets (Redden & Witschge, 2010, p. 175). Independent, quality, local and investigative journalism have been cut back to keep costs down, and this has impaired the fourth estate function of journalism. The multiplicity of voices that many commentators prize as a measure of the health and vitality of a democratic media system (Voakes, Kapfer, Kurpius, & Chern, 1996) is retreating, and increasing homogeneity compromises the audience's access to alternative views, making it difficult to challenge the status quo (Redden & Witschge, 2010). There has been a reduction in the resources available to scrutinise such information too – where journalists might once have used a press release as a single source and carried out cross-checking and additional interviews, this happens to a much lesser degree now, while the resources of press offices and their PR output have increased and become more professionalised (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014, pp. 600-601).

Together, these effects point to an increasing gap in the ability of newspapers to provide fourth estate journalism. These effects are exemplified in newspapers across the UK, but the next section explores one case study, the *Western Mail*, and how it has been affected by cutbacks and declines.

#### **2.3.2.1.1 Case study: the *Western Mail***

The story of one particular newspaper, the *Western Mail*, is typical of the experiences of many others and it has been the subject of a handful of academic studies and commentaries (Shipton, 2014; A. Williams & Franklin, 2007; K. Williams, 2003). Devolution was expected to herald a new era of "major political development for the UK[...] that would thrust new roles and responsibilities" onto regional and local media (McNair, 2009b, p. 164) and that the "distinctive public spheres" of the devolved nations would gain "greater definition and political relevance"

(ibid p. 178). While Scotland has a relatively strong national press, as I said above, the Welsh media are not in the same position (J. Thomas, 2006a). However, the *Western Mail* has called itself “the national newspaper of Wales” (Aldridge, 2007, p. 27), and it is for this reason I devote this section to a discussion of the newspaper’s ability to carry out its fourth estate obligations.

First, let us examine cutbacks at the title. An in-depth report of Trinity Mirror’s holdings in Wales found: a 31 per cent drop in staff numbers at the *Western Mail* and its sister title the *South Wales Echo* between 1999 and 2005; an increasing workload reported by staff; a rising reliance on PR sources and wire copy; and a corporate enthusiasm for embracing online publishing technologies without a coherent strategy for replacing revenues brought in by print products (A. Williams & Franklin, 2007), concluding that newspapers face a “stark choice”: to “continue to make cuts with an eye on maintaining short-term profit margins and watch the quality of their news decline over time, or they can invest in their businesses with the aim of producing quality print and digital news products with a view to creating sustainable long-term profits” (ibid p. 104). Trinity Mirror’s multimedia strategy has come alongside a steep downward trend in the circulation figures of the *Western Mail* and their other daily newspapers, and coupled with a continuing lack of investment in editorial facilities and cuts to the number of journalism jobs has compromised the newsroom’s ability to produce original, high-quality journalism (J. Thomas & Williams, 2008, pp. 17-18). Meanwhile, profits have remained high, an anomaly the NUJ’s Father of Chapel at Media Wales attributes to “a firm belief that the way to increase profits was not by increasing turnover, but by downsizing the workforce” (Shipton, 2014, p. 73). From 1999 to 2008, Media Wales posted annual profits of between 13 and 38 per cent, while circulation fell by about 40 per cent and editorial and production staff numbers went down by 41 per cent (A. Williams, 2010).

Trinity Mirror acknowledges the decline in print circulations but points to its success in gaining readers online – 1,354,964 monthly unique visitors in 2014 (Media Wales, 2014), a 153 per cent rise on the previous year’s figures (Linford, 2014b). The company has also disputed

many of the criticisms put forward in the literature. Media Wales's editor-in-chief, Alan Edmunds, rebutted the findings of the 2010 Williams study, and said Media Wales was carrying out "major innovation in tough economic times" (Greenslade, 2010).

This "rapid pace" of online growth has prompted the company to launch Newsroom 3.0, a new system for posting all its news and content on its WalesOnline website before the articles are distributed in its printed newspapers (Turvill, 2014). According to managers at the Wales division of Trinity Mirror, Media Wales Ltd, the new system is intended to grow their online audience: "The model sets us up brilliantly to deliver outstanding and engaging content for our readers and advertisers across all digital and print platforms" (ibid). Another manifestation of the effort to engage online readers is shareable content, often in the form of an article formatted into a list, sometimes called a listicle. Paul Rowland, head of web at Media Wales, presented his experience of creating shareable content at a journalism conference, saying: "Some people would say it's not journalism but who says we have to do journalism all the time anyway? What we have to do is fit what our audience wants" (McNally, 2014). This approach has caused concern among other journalists working at the *Western Mail*, who doubt the sustainability of the online model, and the perceived fall in editorial quality that accompanies it. Again, the *Western Mail's* Martin Shipton has been particularly critical of the online and convergence strategy:

Companies saw the Internet as a means to make advertising revenue without the expense of producing and distributing newspapers. When the revenues failed to materialise at anywhere near the hoped-for rate, they resorted to the only tactic they could think of: slashing labour costs and harming their papers in the process. Thus will the downward spiral continue until there is nothing left to cut. (Shipton, 2011)

He has likened the resulting working conditions to "the workhouse" (2014, p. 80). Shipton has also criticised Trinity Mirror's strategy of posting stories online before they appear in the newspaper, concluding that this has had a detrimental effect on newspaper readership, and also

accused the converged newsroom of destroying “the natural sense of loyalty a journalist feels towards a distinct title with its own style and character. Without a dedicated team working for it, a paper can easily become more bland” (ibid p. 76).

The disparity between the prominence given to the online news model in Trinity’s Mirror’s business strategy and the revenues that are being gathered from them in reality have prompted the NUJ in Wales to join the debate. They gave evidence to the Broadcasting Sub-Committee on the future of the media in Wales in 2011, in which they expressed these worries:

At a time when high levels of profit were being made, investments should have been made in journalism and jobs. Instead, damaging cuts were made so profits would rise even higher. Convergence has only worsened the situation as journalists attempt to produce material for more outlets and platforms with less and less resources. New media provision – digital and online – is too often being produced on a shoestring, and is in reality dependant on the core radio/television/print services consistently under attack. (National Assembly for Wales, 2011)

Studies of Trinity Mirror’s strategy in Wales have made unequivocal recommendations that the group should invest in journalism and newspapers in order to satisfy the basic demands of a healthy democracy. For example, Thomas’s study concluded: “Short-term profit maximisation at the expense of investment in journalism will only weaken the long-term future health of the Welsh press... The evidence clearly suggests that democracy in Wales will inevitably suffer with further cuts to the regional and local press” (J. Thomas, 2006a).

Ten years later, Thomas’s fears are closer to being realised. A recent memo sent by Trinity Mirror in relation to its titles in Birmingham and Coventry acknowledges the view that has been put forward by commentators for more than a decade. Managers responded to a question from staff about how they would manage to give adequate coverage to their patches in view of a recent announcement of 25 redundancies, saying: “The days are long gone when we

could afford to be a paper of record and dutifully report everything that happened on our patch” (Greenslade, 2015). Greenslade called this “one Trinity Mirror sentence that spells the death knell of journalism” (ibid.), concluding that the introduction of targets at the same newspapers is equivalent to a “time-and-motion-study approach” to journalism which encourages “safety-first story-getting, meaning PR pap”, and this undermines the “public benefit” provided by newspapers (ibid.).

As the case of this newspaper reveals, cutbacks have impaired the ability of many newsrooms to carry out good public service journalism. However, in some places the profits-first approach I have detailed so far has also had another side effect: the closure of unprofitable, or less profitable, titles.

### **2.3.2.2 Closures by numbers**

Closures have not yet hit the national daily press (apart from the closure of the national Sunday newspaper the *News of the World* following the phone hacking scandal, later replaced by the *Sunday Sun*), but the local newspaper sector has suffered many title closures (Franklin, 2006a, p. 4; K. Williams, 2010, p. 221). Between 1985 and 2005, the number of paid-for daily newspapers showed a small increase (91 in 1985 and 94 in 2005), but the number of paid-for weeklies declined sharply, from 749 in 1985 to 526 in 2005. Overall, including local Sunday and free papers, the total of 1,687 local newspapers being published in 1985 had fallen to 1,286 by 2005 (Franklin, 2006a, p. 4). More recent figures produced by the *Press Gazette* suggest that a further 242 local titles have shut between 2005-2012 (Ponsford, 2012) and that a quarter of “Local Government Areas [...] have no daily local newspaper” (Moore, 2014, p. 7). Some titles have ceased publishing a printed version in favour of a web-only presence, for example Trinity Mirror shut seven titles in Reading and Surrey last year, making 50 journalists and production staff redundant. Trinity Mirror Southern’s Managing Editor Stephen Edgley celebrated the move

as a “bold digital-only publishing transformation” for a “digital-savvy audience”, though the NUJ wondered “where the quality journalism will come from when so many journalists are expected to sacrifice their jobs” (Johnston, 2014).

The number of local newspaper titles hasn’t fallen as precipitously as some analysts originally feared. Enders Analysis predicted in 2009 that by 2014 the number of UK local and regional newspaper titles would halve, meaning around 650 closures (Brook, 2009) – in fact the number of closures in this time was more like 100, many of them free weeklies (Linford, 2014a). However, as already discussed, reductions in staff numbers and editorial budgets imply that many more titles are being gutted behind the scenes and out of sight, maintaining little more than a “zombie newspaper”, unable to fulfil “local coverage and the local angle” (Climenhaga, 2012).

There are also fears that daily newspapers may begin to publish less frequently or become weekly (D. Davies, 2011) as has been the case in the US (“3 Alabama newspapers drop daily circulation,” 2012), but these have not been borne out in the UK to date.

## ***2.4 Stop press! Do we need printed news?***

The fact that readers are now turning away from newsprint in large numbers has prompted some to forecast newspapers will not survive beyond the middle of this century (Meyer, 2009). For other commentators, the ease and convenience of receiving up-to-the-minute news on electronic devices (and the speed of news audiences’ uptake of mobile devices) seems to be making newspapers obsolete (Langeveld, 2012).

Consequently, the need for printed news in today’s communities is still very much debated. Indeed, the 2008 recession prompted a period of gloomy predictions for the newspaper industry: of newspaper closures and the death of the newspaper as a means of transmitting and receiving news, for example Claire Enders’ prediction about half of regional UK

newspapers closing by 2014 (Brook, 2009), Robert Picard's prediction that falling advertising revenue would spell the end of newspapers (Picard, 2008) and Meyer's much-quoted 2043 end-date for newspapers (Meyer, 2009). Since then, though the cutbacks described above have stripped many newspapers of staff and resources, publishers' tactics appear to have staved off a more dramatic round of closures. These have not happened at the predicted rate, prompting Enders to issue a retraction of her earlier prediction (Ponsford, 2010). Though there are still many pessimists who view the end of newspapers as inevitable, the tide of general opinion among commentators has become more optimistic. There are those who have tempered the gloom with views that back the ability of newspapers and hybrid print and web "news organisations" to continue fulfilling a valuable role (Satchwell, 2012), or who see an exciting future for collaborative enterprises involving journalists and citizens, and in new types of digital journalism, data journalism and storytelling that push journalism into new frontiers (Franklin, 2014). Regardless of the continuing survival of local news publishers, however, deeper social problems endure because of the withdrawal and weakening of journalism already highlighted.

In conclusion, regardless of format – with or without physical ink-on-paper newspapers – there remains a need for news that keeps communities, towns, regions and nations informed about the events and issues that affect them, and there remains a need to pay for it. Key to the political economy-influenced narrative behind many of the studies to which I have already referred is the question of funding journalism to service democracy and the public sphere. Newspapers have been the source of much original news and scrutiny, and because of advertising revenues have historically been able to underwrite the costs of journalism as we currently know it. But if the mode of funding them is collapsing, then how can we ensure democracy continues to be serviced by public service, fourth estate local news? So far, the digital advertising model has not proved to be sufficiently profitable to adequately underwrite this kind of journalism, and it is still largely subsidised by print revenues, as I discussed above. Newspapers, too, in cutting back on resources, have shown that they are unable to deliver reliably the kind public service journalism we might expect.

Some predict a future in which news is provided by citizens themselves. Arguments have been made in favour of online citizen journalism's ability to provide a substitute for traditional newspapers, as "sources of public affairs news and information" (Fico et al., 2013, p. 152) – and there are those who claim a digital age of publishing freedom will allow many voices to join the public debate and open public bodies to scrutiny. One 2012 study in the US found that while websites run by citizen journalists increased the overall number of local government stories in the traditional print press, perhaps through a process of encouraging competition and rivalry for the best stories and scoops, they are not enough to provide a substitute for newspapers, concluding: "citizen journalism sites, particularly citizen blog sites, are more information complements than substitutes, and with respect to news and opinion about some communities they may have been neither complements nor substitutes" (Fico et al., 2013, p. 165). Similarly, a recent study of hyperlocal websites in the UK found that they were "economically precarious" and suffer from "a relative lack of visibility within their communities" (A. Williams & Harte, In press, expected 2016, np). Even though high levels of campaigning and investigative news were found, these sites typically have a low audience reach (A. Williams, Harte, & Turner, 2015b, p. 12). Financial stability, then, is the challenge for news organisations, large and small, if journalism is to survive and to serve the interests of the public and the public sphere.

The next chapter examines the importance of such public interest journalism to democracy, and analyses theories of media and journalism that might begin to explain why the weakening of the advertising revenue model has far reaching consequences for citizens living in local communities in the UK and for those in other similar economies.



# ***Chapter 3***

## ***Newspapers, democracy and the public sphere: why news is important, and why the newspaper crisis matters***

In this chapter I discuss three important theoretical frameworks, each of which informs this study. First, I discuss the public sphere and relate it to the local news environment. Second I examine theories of the normative roles of journalism within democracy, including a discussion of the two-step flow of communication. Third, I examine more closely how democracy is defined for the purposes of the research.

### ***3.1 The public sphere***

Put forward by the critical theorist Jurgen Habermas in 1962 and translated into English in 1989, the influential theory of the public sphere defined an arena for debate and information exchange that offers access to everyone and enables the people to take part actively in democracy. This arena enables the public to form a consensus view by discussing and debating their opinions and then influencing affairs of state to ensure the will of the people is carried out by those in power (Habermas, 1989). This is set against the private sphere, where domestic concerns or private commercial transactions are enacted, and the sphere of public authority, where the state and its agents, including the ruling class and the police, operate. The public sphere is in opposition to the state, but connects the sphere of public authority and the private sphere by mediating between them, and “comes into being in every conversation in which

private individuals assemble to form a public body” (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). There are several key characteristics of the public sphere, including equal access for everybody, “the freedom of assembly [...], the freedom to express and publish their opinions”, and the accessibility of information to the public (ibid, p.49). These conditions allow the public sphere to influence the state, but only when “a reasoning public is presupposed” (ibid. p. 50).

It is an important element of the Habermasian public sphere that people can learn about issues, debate them, form opinions about them, and use the weight of their opinion to influence the government and people in power, and this requires “specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it” (ibid, p. 49). The media are therefore an essential component of this in helping to inform citizens, provide alternative viewpoints, and communicate the consensus of opinion to the powerful.

This has its roots in the development of bourgeois society in the 18th Century, and in the “discursive arenas” offered by places such as coffee houses, where gatherings of people could access the news and discuss it. Indeed, the way the earliest newspapers were disseminated mirrors this model, where newspapers were read and debated in “barbers’ shops, taverns and especially coffee shops [which] all formed part of a spreading national network of outlets for newspapers and periodicals where people gathered informally to read, exchange opinion or catch up on the latest rumour or gossip.” (Conboy, 2005, p. 6).

Though the theory of the public sphere has underpinned much of modern-day research and theory in political communications studies, it has also been criticised by a number of commentators. Fraser calls Habermas’s theory “not wholly satisfactory” while also accepting “that the general idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical theory” (1990, p. 57). Susen also acknowledges that “Habermas’s theory of the public sphere may serve as an analytical basis for confronting the normative challenges arising from the material and symbolic complexities of advanced societies” (Susen, 2011, p. 59).

Criticisms of the theory can be grouped into two distinct themes. First, there is a series of inter-linked objections that find Habermas's formulation unrealistic or idealistic. These include an objection to the historical basis for the public sphere Habermas described, which some contend never existed in reality (Schudson, 1992; Susen, 2011). Related to this historical objection, some commentators criticise the idealistic nature of Habermas's formulation. Indeed, Habermas himself accepted that "it is tempting to idealize the bourgeois public sphere [...] going way beyond any methodologically legitimate manner" (Habermas, 1992, p. 442, quoted in Susen, 2011, p. 53).

There is a second set of objections relating to the way Habermas has used dominant discourses to explain the public sphere while ignoring other narratives or voices. For example some commentators contend the public sphere is "bourgeois-centric" and ignores the possibility of other, alternative publics (Susen, 2011), while others argue that the theory is "gender-blind", and has not taken into account how sexism has influenced the development of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Susen, 2011). Additionally, some object to Habermas's "overly rationalistic" approach, which they say does not take account of other forms of societal expression such as art or music, which are intentionally "non-rational" but retain their emancipatory power, or that the theory's "universalistic conception" ignores the complexity and multiplicity of modern society and other publics. Included within this is a further criticism that Habermas "fails to question" the binary relationship between the private and the public (Susen, 2011, pp. 54, 57-58). This second set of criticisms interrogates the idea of a dominant public sphere and has given rise to a branch of theoretical discussion that postulates the existence of alternative public spheres, and I examine these ideas in more depth in the following sections.

### ***3.1.1 Alternative spheres***

Habermas formulated the public sphere as a single sphere. However, this conception of the public sphere does not explicitly account for the possibility that different communities,

audiences, sections of society, or geographically delineated communities might operate within distinct, smaller, public spheres that could be different, or discrete, from the main public sphere. As Susen notes, Habermas “advocates a universalistic conception of public interests, thereby neglecting the fact that advanced societies are composed of a multiplicity of competing, and often counter-hegemonic, public spheres” (Susen, 2011, pp. 58-59). Indeed, there is a scholarly tradition that has discarded the single public sphere, and proposed alternatives. These include three similar conceptions: counterpublics and subaltern publics (Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2001); multiple publics (Hauser, 1999); and public sphericules (Gitlin, 1998). A fourth school of thought suggests geographical delineations within the public sphere. Before I go on to describe these theories, it is worth noting that Habermas himself later acknowledged the existence of counterpublics, but viewed them as being a part of the single public sphere he originally envisaged. For him, they exist within the public sphere and are part of “this open and rational discursive space, which can ‘absorb’ others without colonizing them” (Zhang, 2012, p. 147).

First, then, Fraser, acknowledges a dominant public sphere as Habermas has outlined it, but says a number of competing publics is better for “the ideal of participatory parity” than a single public. She notes that the public sphere functions to the benefit of dominant groups, and that subordinated groups have “no venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not... under the supervision of dominant groups”. They would therefore be less likely “to ‘find the right voice or words to express their thoughts’” and this would “render them less able than otherwise to articulate and defend their interests in the comprehensive public sphere” (Fraser, 1990, p. 66). Central to Fraser’s ideas is that counterpublics should, and do, operate alongside the public sphere, challenging established views and serving to offer a useful counterweight to what can be outmoded ideas in a progressive society. They also give access and representation to groups that might not be able to access the public sphere. For Fraser, alternative public spheres should be thought of as:

subaltern counterpublics, in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (1990, p. 67)

Fraser's critique comes from a feminist viewpoint, but similarly, Squires (2001), points to the countersphere constructed by the black community as an arena that has relied upon its own discrete rhetoric and debate to communicate with, and influence, the established opinion of the dominant public sphere. For Fraser and Squires, counterpublics exist alongside the public sphere, and offer new ideas to challenge pre-existing opinions. For Fraser, they operate outside the public sphere, are lesser to the public sphere, but information flows out of them and in to the public sphere, where it serves as a catalyst for change and growth, and promotes a healthy democracy.

Second, Hauser (1999) postulates the existence of a number of publics within a "reticulate public sphere" – he envisages a network of connected publics where opinion is formed in multiple arenas within the public sphere. He proposes "multiple, local, interactive webs of meaning and commitment that arise through discourse" where "vernacular rhetorics engage strangers in mutual talk to develop public opinion" (ibid, p. xi).

Underlying all of these finer grained views of the public sphere is the assumption that the 'main' public sphere exists and is functioning. But not all commentators agree. For Gitlin, the rise of alternative and segmented communities, that have become particularly apparent since the advent of computers and the Internet, challenges the integrity of the public sphere, leaving it damaged. He suggested, "Does it not look as though the public sphere, in falling, has shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury?" (Gitlin, 1998, p. 173). He called these scattered communities "public sphericules" – noting the fragmentation of the mass audience into many, smaller, niche communities. Unlike Fraser's theory that alternative voices can strengthen the public sphere, for Gitlin this fragmentation of society into small, special interest communities

does not add up to a Gestaltian ‘whole’ that has the same access to resources and influence as the intact public sphere. This multitude of voices might at first appear to form a rich, cohesive tapestry, but, he suggests, it is foolish to assume they have “a rough equivalence of resources for the purpose of assuring overall justice”, as well as to assume they are not “riven by deep-going fissures which are subject to being deepened and exacerbated in the absence of ongoing negotiation among members of different groups” (ibid, p. 173).

For Gitlin, the future of the public sphere seemed bleak because of fragmentation – and his fears appear to be have been borne out by a number of studies of the function of the Internet in the public sphere. As I have discussed, initially, commentators hoped the Internet’s opportunities and promise for offering a voice to millions of people, alongside access to an unprecedented level of data and information would signal a new more democratically open society (Shirky, 2008). However, the Internet does not appear to have strengthened the public sphere in this way (Fenton, 2009, p. 9) – instead, researchers have found large-scale homogeneity of news and sources online (Redden & Witschge, 2010, p. 177), a dominance of big players to the exclusion of minority or alternative voices (Fenton, Metykova, Schlosberg, & Freedman, 2010, p. 40), and in some cases a lower knowledge of news and politics and “democratic efficacy” among internet users (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002, pp. 69-70).

There is a fourth school of thought which examines the way communities who live within defined locations (such as towns or villages) might be served by smaller public spheres within the dominant sphere, and I discuss this below.

### ***3.1.2 Local public spheres and the local press***

My analysis of Port Talbot’s news black hole benefits from these theoretical frameworks on counter- or alternative public spheres, because they offer a basis for understanding how damage to the public sphere at a local level may damage the whole sphere.

Though alternative public spheres are most often spoken of as serving societal groups defined by class or identity (such as feminists or the black community), and which are in opposition to the prevailing “dominant” public sphere (Fraser, 1990, p. 67), there are hints in the literature that geographically-defined public spheres may also exist in some kind of inter-relational aspect to the national public sphere defined by Habermas.

For example some researchers have put forward the notion of geographical divisions of the public sphere, or geopolitical counter-spheres to the public sphere, which serve publics with certain geopolitical interests or commonalities (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Koopmans & Erbe, 2003, p. 8; Somers, 1993, pp. 588-589). For Koopmans et al, there is a case to be made for a European public sphere that exists in a layer outside the national public sphere and corresponds with the focus of different mass media. They envisage the public sphere in a series of concentric circles, like a cross-sectioned onion, with the national media at the centre and various rings they call international “intraspheres” outside it, such as the European Union, NATO, and even other nations, and they also incorporate “intersphere” communication occurring between the spheres.

For other commentators, the existence of local public spheres is clear. Conboy examines the history of local newspapers, and notes the interrelations between local news and local politics: “Local political factions throughout the country used the local press as a battleground for the hearts, minds, not to mention wallets of the local population so that the national public was increasingly complemented by a series of local publics.” (Conboy, 2005, p. 9)

However, there is no single theoretical framework that accounts for the way all levels of geographically-defined public spheres may relate to the national public sphere, and this study has provided an opportunity to theorise how damage to a local public sphere may harm the prevailing, national public sphere.

### ***3.1.3 The public sphere as a machine***

The onion-style model put forward by Koopmans et al (2003) puts the public sphere at the centre of a series of concentric circles, with each layer representing layers of influence or governance. The public sphere here is envisaged as a national sphere, served by mass media and positioned to influence national government. The model also allows for the possibility of interspheric flow of communication between the intraspheres, and this is a crucial element for understanding the way information flows within the democratic system. This model can be extended to take account of the interaction of geographical public spheres on a local and regional level.

If, as Koopmans et al describe, layers of the sphere exist outside the national sphere, I contend that it is useful to peel back more layers of the onion to find smaller intraspheres nested within the “national” (ibid, p. 8). They are in a hierarchical relationship relating with the different levels of governance (and consensus or common cause) at national, regional, local and hyperlocal levels. It is also possible there are further divisions based on neighbourhoods, parishes, communities, streets, apartment buildings and so on, and which are likely to overlap with each other.

For example, local communities, local democratic institutions and local media institutions engage in an active public sphere at the local level, which is not concerned with the interests or authority of a wider group of people and forms its own discrete local intrasphere. However, the concerns of this sphere may impact on wider geographical areas, and this is where intersphere communication would occur. So, for example, the people who live in Wales, while being interested in decisions taken by the Welsh Government (regional decisions) and government in Westminster which may affect them (national decisions), may not necessarily be interested in most of the decisions taken by the Scottish Parliament (regional decisions) which may not have much bearing on their day to day lives. Further down the hierarchy, at the local level, for example, the people of the town of Port Talbot may find that they are interested in



regional and national spheres, but are not particularly interested in or affected by the (local) decisions taken by, for example, Wrexham Council, 140 miles away – unless of course, those decisions have ramifications for their local policy or spending, set precedents or show good practice that could affect the wider public sphere, and in which case the information may flow up the hierarchy<sup>3</sup> into spheres where cross-communication of such information may occur. To aid our understanding of the news black hole in Port Talbot, we can therefore break the public sphere down into multiple publics, as Fraser, Hauser and others have done, but keep the primary focus of the divisions on geographical delineations to correspond with levels of state governance, i.e. local, regional and national, which also mirror the traditional boundaries of newsmaking.

As Table 3.1 sets out, these geo-spheres are each linked to a layer of society (equating to a collection of members of the private sphere), government (equating to the public authority sphere) and media. It may also be convenient to include a hyper-local layer to take emerging trends into account (Fenton, 2009; Fenton et al., 2010). Each of these geo-spheres is served by media at the appropriate level – local, such as local newspapers and radio stations; regional, such as the Welsh press and broadcast media; and national, such as the national press and broadcast media.

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<sup>3</sup> Habermas makes clear the private, public and public authority sphere are hierarchical, and I suggest that geographical spheres are similarly hierarchical within the public sphere

Public sphere	Private sphere	Public authority sphere	News media
Hyperlocal public sphere	Members of community such as neighbourhood, street, ward or self-identified group	Local government	Hyperlocal websites, community magazines
Local public sphere	Members of local society or community, eg suburb or town	Local government, (eg parish councils, councils and public bodies)	Local press (eg <i>Port Talbot Guardian</i> ), radio (eg Afan FM), websites (eg Inpt.org)
Regional public sphere	Members of regional society eg Wales, Scotland, North East	Regional state sphere (eg Welsh Assembly Government, Senedd)	Regional media (eg <i>Western Mail</i> , BBC Wales)
National public sphere	Members of national society (eg UK)	National state sphere (UK government)	National media

**Table 3.1: Geographical divisions of the public sphere**

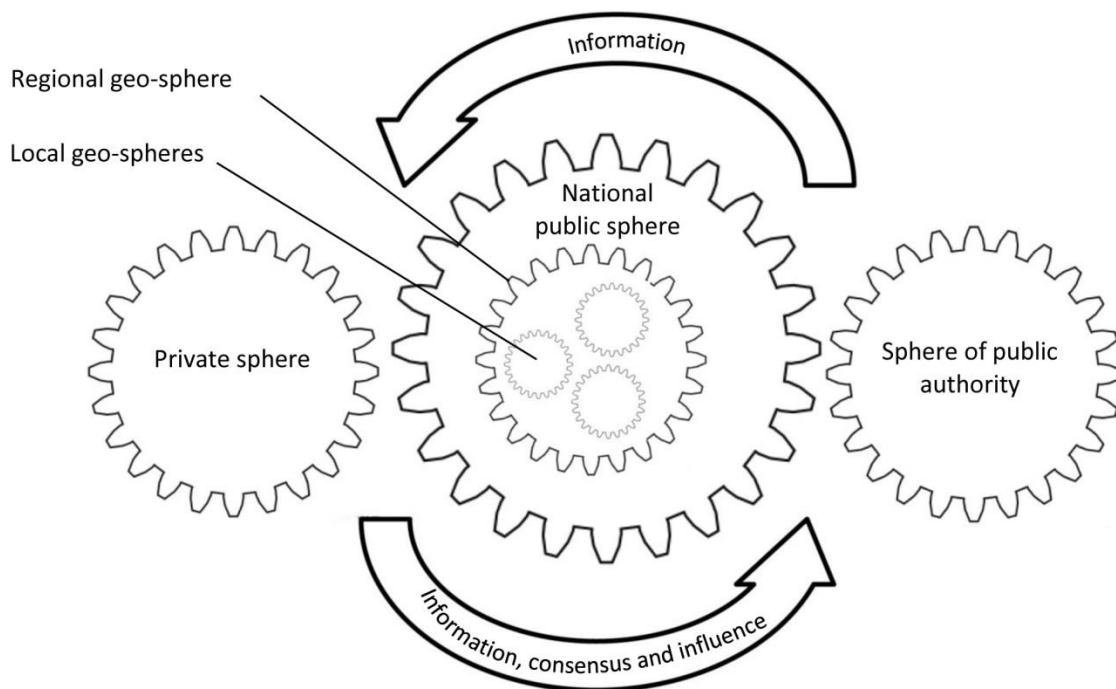
In this model there are overlapping geo-spheres that concern different publics. These function separately but are also part of a larger public sphere that mirrors the authority of democratic institutions that operate locally, regionally or nationally, and which are served by their own local, regional or national media. For example, there might be a sphere for Taibach, a ward of Port Talbot which identifies itself as a community or enclave of the town; this would exist alongside many other hyper-local or community geo-spheres inside the Port Talbot geo-sphere, which in turn would operate within the Wales geo-sphere, which would operate within the UK geo-sphere. Because of this inter-connectedness and the way information flows between the spheres in the manner of a network, these local spheres are perhaps most like Hauser's description of the "reticulated public sphere". There are likely to be many more nuanced and subtle divisions of geo-spheres than this suggests, but the model is useful for illustrative purposes.

An important point is that these small, geographically determined public spheres do not operate outside the main public sphere; they are part of it, and though each one can operate independently these geo-spheres are inherently inter-dependent. Each one is an essential element of a well-oiled democracy. They are the guts of the machine, each one helping with the

flow of information, opinion and influence. This brings us to a useful visualisation for geo-spheres in the public sphere as gears or cogs working within a larger machine.

In a machine, crucially, when one cog is missing or broken – when its organ of communication is shut down or the number of journalists cut back – the machine will falter. If we accept the public sphere as a kind of machine, in which each part must be working well in order for the whole sphere to remain healthy and effective, we arrive at a model that may account for the weakening of the public sphere in Port Talbot.

Figure 3.1 shows this model in more detail, with each sphere represented as a cog. The cogs turn, with the workings of the public sphere transmitting information, consensus and influence to the sphere of public authority, while information is transmitted back to the private sphere. Though the model shows just one regional geo-sphere, and three local geo-spheres, it is envisaged that thousands of these would co-exist within the public sphere, forming a complex machine. Just as in the intricate workings of a pocket watch, these cogs must be precisely calibrated and running smoothly to ensure the watch keeps time, and even the smallest fault can cause the clockwork to grind to a halt.



**Figure 3.1: Geo-spheres inside the machine model of the public sphere**

In this model it is possible for an individual to participate in more than one public sphere at the same time (as in Port Talbot) – both above and below the local layer – and if one sphere were weakened by the removal of an essential component (e.g. the newspaper), these individuals would simply rely more on the wider public spheres for discussion and debate. Furthermore, in this model each public sphere has direct and indirect influence on its other spheres. For example, if public opinion is formed at a local level, it directly affects the local political sphere, but it can also filter upwards into the national public sphere and then to the national state sphere. For example, a local protest campaign about a wind farm would form at a local level and be led by local people, but any outcomes of the protest (for example the blocking of a trunk road for a public demonstration) would make the protest of interest to the regional public sphere in Wales, while policing of such a demonstration would make it of interest to the national public sphere. The protest might also be of interest to campaigners in other locations, meaning the information could flow back down from regional or national spheres to local spheres in other

areas. This would make these spheres hierarchical, and also inter-related – information could flow both up and down the layers of publics, from local to national or vice versa. When one geo-sphere goes awry, therefore, as is possibly the case in Port Talbot, the inference is that there is a knock-on effect for the health of the entire public sphere – the machine breaks down, because information that might be of interest for debate in the wider public sphere does not reach it.

Perhaps what is most interesting in this model is that though it seems the larger public sphere can continue to work after one cog has been damaged (at least for a time), and people continue to get news from somewhere and form opinions about issues that affect them, the poorer quality of this news and information has implications for the quality of the product coming out of the machine. As a result of a weakening media, the information used by the machine is malformed, and equally, the information, consensus and influence coming out of the machine is misshapen, malformed, or of poor quality. This is where news gaps have wider ramifications for the public sphere, as news that is unreported in a local area also fails to flow up the hierarchy into regional and national media, and so issues that may affect the entire public sphere do not become part of the debate in wider geo-spheres.

This model underpins the design of this study, but as I set out at the beginning of this chapter, there are also other theoretical frameworks that have informed the research, and I now turn to the second of these.

### ***3.2 The role of journalism within democracy***

The role of the media within the public sphere is closely allied to the historical role assigned to journalism as a fourth estate of democracy, with the House of Commons, House of Lords and the Church comprising the traditional three Estates of the Realm. Journalism is said to be situated outside these institutions as an independent force calling them to account. Media that are capable of fulfilling this fourth estate role have several key elements. Similar in many ways to the ideals of the public sphere, they should provide a platform for public debate, communicate

any conclusions that arise, and ensure the government takes account of these conclusions (Curran & Seaton, 1991, p. 277; K. Williams, 1998, pp. 4-5). They should also provide information and educate citizens to enable them to make informed decisions at election time (Curran & Seaton, 1991, p. 278; Phillips & Witschge, 2012, p. 4), champion the individual in the face of the “misdeeds of the powerful” (Curran & Seaton, 1991, p. 278), provide an independent means by which different groups in society can communicate ideas and information to each other, and scrutinise those in power and call them to account (McChesney & Nichols, 2010, p. 2). More recently, and perhaps to a lesser extent, journalists have also been thought to be implicated in roles of “public engagement”, acting as a conduit between local democratic institutions and citizens by informing them about important issues or gauging and gathering opinion from the public (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014, pp. 596-597). For McChesney and Nichols, the press should:

regard the state secret as an assault to popular governance, watch the politically and economically powerful with a suspicious eye, [...] recognize as [its] duty the informing and enlightening of citizens so that they may govern themselves. (2010, p. 2)

But there are other elements of public interest, fourth estate journalism beyond just keeping people informed. McNair defines three other normative duties of journalism in relation to its democratic obligations: to scrutinise the powerful in the form of a watchdog; to represent the views of the public and mediate between them and politicians; and to be a “champion of the people”, engaging in campaigns or taking sides in public debates (2009a, pp. 238-240).

However, it’s important to note that these normative ideals do not necessarily naturally occur in any systematic way in practice. McQuail argues that news does not always set out to educate, but rather “offers a service in which diverse items of information are made available to members of an audience to select according to their interests” (2005, p. 504). Additionally, the attention of the audience, the motivations of news producers, the conditions under which journalists work, and the perishability of news do not necessarily offer the ideal environment

for learning. Equally, news is not always independent – it can be influenced at many levels, by owners, advertisers, the agendas of editors and individual journalists, by social and cultural norms and ideas, by PR operatives, lobbyists, politicians, and even by the State (Curran, 2005, pp. 95-97; Nick Davies, 2008, pp. 49-53; McQuail, 1977, p. 14; Tunstall, 1996, pp. 377-379; K. Williams, 1998, pp. 130-150). Its market-led business model, especially when profits are down, can put pressure on resources and this sometimes means that news does not always provide the balance, quality checks or scrutiny we might expect (Nick Davies, 2008, pp. 49-53). For-profit news often keeps its primary focus on retaining high audiences, which can mean salacious or celebrity content is given prominence and resources over public interest stories, investigations, or issue-based or political journalism.

### ***3.2.1 The role of local journalism, and what happens when it disappears***

Broadly speaking local and national newspapers both share similar modes of revenue gathering, styles of reporting and ethical codes, but there are also important differences. Local news, which is often made up of as many “good news” stories as negative ones, can reinforce pride in a local area and a sense of community that is largely absent from national news reporting, and it also has a firm focus on campaigns and scrutiny, enabling local people to take action: “local news has a more immediate impact on people’s lives than national news” (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 22).

Nielsen organises many of the strands that have emerged from the study of local journalism into three areas. These are: “accountability and information”, which include roles such as informing and educating citizens, scrutiny, coverage of public affairs and investigative reporting; “civic and political engagement”, including the role of local newspapers in influencing and fostering political and civic knowledge; and “community integration”, including the way local news defines and enables communities (Nielsen, 2015, pp. 13-17). These areas overlap with many of the normative principles of good journalism discussed above, and they are as true

at the local level as they are at the national level – that newspapers should educate, inform, enlighten, scrutinise local public affairs and offer an influential voice on behalf of local citizens, as Fenton et al note:

Reporting the local news means telling citizens a little of what they know and a lot of what they would not otherwise know about an area that they know very well.

Independent reporting should reveal not only what local government and private interests are doing but also the motivation behind their actions. It should dig deeper and provide people with insight that takes time and resources to reach. (2010, p. 25)

For the local press the institutions under their microscope are inevitably local and relevant to the newspaper's audience, including local councils, police forces, health boards, schools and commercial interests. Local newspapers traditionally report on council meetings, budgets, planning issues, businesses, crime and other issues which affect communities at a local level, and local citizens require the same quality of information, education, debate, balance, scrutiny and checking that we would expect from the national press at the national level. For McChesney and Nichols, a free press "must cover effectively" particular institutions in order for democracy to function, and lists among these, "legislative committees, courts, agencies, school boards, local commissions" (2010, p. X). For Fenton et al, it means:

...having a local presence, being seen to ferret out information, dig behind it, and make sense of it. [Readers] want analytic depth and scepticism regarding those in power, context and debate. They want stories that are compelling because they are relevant to them and they want to be part of the conversation (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 22).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, studies into local newspapers largely found they were fulfilling this role. Firstly, the influence of the local press was noted by Franklin and Murphy, who cited the large advertising revenues and circulations that gave financial muscle and influence to the sector (important if a citizenry is to impact on those in power), but importantly they also noted



its penetration into households (up to 80 per cent in some cases – with an inference that a large majority of people were getting hold of information to help them form opinions and make decisions), and a diversity and plurality of opinion and debate which showed local journalism to be more balanced than national journalism where newspapers’ political affiliations could bias reporting (Franklin & Murphy, 1991). These aspects – financial stability, penetration and balance – are important in maintaining a healthy public sphere which is well served by consistent, good-quality information and reporting from plural sources (underwritten by the support and resources of the institution), on behalf of a large number of well-informed citizens who are able to hold rational, well-informed debate. However, as Franklin’s more recent work suggests, much has changed in the industry since 1991, with documented declines nationally and locally in circulations and penetrations, changes in reading habits, a withdrawal of financial resources as a result of falling profits, and a consequent drop in the quality of the reporting at all levels of the industry: in short, as I discussed above, the local press has not been spared from the general decline in newspapers.

While its effectiveness may have declined, the importance of the local press to communities has not diminished. A more recent study by the Media Trust found “an explicit relationship between local and community news, local democracy, community cohesion and civic engagement” (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 7), and noted that local communities “want, and need, trained, conscientious, impartial journalists asking difficult questions, explaining and scrutinising those in authority”(Fenton et al., 2010, p. 3). But the localness of this local news is key. The study found that since the 1990s, mergers and takeovers have seen economies of scale for newspaper owners, but a reduction in the localness and relevance of their products, leaving instead a “remote localism that has its sights set on the bottom line rather than the news service people want” (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 16). This makes local news less relevant to readers, and according to some observers, has contributed to the decline in circulations (Engel, 2009).

Local ownership, or owners who prioritise and invest in localness, have been better able to withstand the declines in advertising and circulation. Fenton et al make this argument in their Media Trust report: “If local news is not local, it’s not news” (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 27) and their findings show that people miss the localness of news when it is withdrawn as a result of cuts or newspaper closures. For example, Cole and Harcup point to the relative success of the Tindle Group in the local newspaper sector, which owns just 27 local weekly newspapers but is tenth in on the Newspaper Society’s list of the UK’s biggest regional newspaper publishers. The group’s success, they say, is down to the simple formula: “keep it local, and then more local. [Tindle] caters for the traditional editorial imperatives: people like to see their name in the paper so fill it with local names from sport and a variety of local activities” (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 56). Similarly, the success of local newspapers in Norway, where circulations have increased in defiance of national trends towards decline, is attributed in one study to the localness of the journalism and of the journalists. Participants testified in interviews with the researchers that “we write with our hearts” – meaning they are invested in the communities in which they live, and of which they are members, as the authors noted: “the news values of local Norwegian journalists are constructed on a foundation of community membership that informs all aspects of their news routines” (Hatcher & Haavik, 2014, p. 160).

Equally, where UK newspapers have kept their editorial focus, and even their ownership, local and continued to invest in their product they have often bucked the wider trend of decline in the industry, and shown themselves to be more tolerant of lower profit margins and more resilient to market dips. The Camden New Journal is one: bought by workers in a 1980s buyout deal, the paper has established a strong presence in Camden, acknowledging: “today, we are managing, but it is because we can survive on a small net profit. A big company would not tolerate our performance” (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 28).

However, studies carried out by Franklin and many others have shown a trend towards a dilution of the localness of local news. Franklin et al looked in depth at the reporting of the

general election by the local press, finding an increase in stories with a national focus, a decrease in locally-focussed stories, and a tendency towards trivialisation and celebrity, which the journalists interviewed put down to a lack of reader interest, anxieties about losing circulation, and the absence of experienced political journalists in the newsroom (2006). Harrison described the rising power of public relations within local government – finding a growing army of civil servants providing a comprehensive and sophisticated flow of information to newspaper journalists to help fill their pages, a so-called “information subsidy” (Gandy, 1982, p. 74) paid for by local councils to advance their own agenda (Harrison, 2006). Coupled with the findings of a third study by O’Neill and O’Connor, which examined the use (and number) of sources in news articles in local newspapers in the north of England and found a large percentage of news stories came from a single source (76 per cent) – the concern is that there is a growing over-reliance in the local press on a narrow range of sources for stories, with an absence of “the sifting of conflicting information or contextualising that assists readers’ understanding and makes for good journalism” (O’Neill & O’Connor, 2008, p. 493), and this finding has also been supported in several other studies (Franklin, 2011; J. Thomas & Williams, 2008; A. Williams & Franklin, 2007). There is additional concern that fewer sources means the multiplicity of voices that is traditionally seen as a prerequisite of a healthy public sphere is compromised. Voakes et al found a prevalence of low-sourced stories, and though they did not present detailed findings on source status, they noted the presence of “high status” voices that suggested news was controlled to some extent by social and political elites, and that source diversity was not as widespread as hypothesised (Voakes et al., 1996, pp. 584, 590).

The deterioration of quality in local news is concerning, however the loss of what Fenton et al call “political knowledge” and “community understanding” when a local newspaper closes down altogether cannot be underestimated (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 29), as five studies of news absence in America suggest.

The first of these is a seminal study about the absence of a newspaper, which centred on the 1945 strike of delivery men in New York. This strike stopped the delivery of eight New York newspapers for 17 days and left the city without news (Berelson, 1948). Berelson attempted a new method of capturing attitudes and feelings about the loss of a newspaper that went beyond the “surface facts” captured by two other agency polls at the time, noting:

Both agencies attempted to get at the nature of the substitute for the newspaper, and in both cases respondents stressed that they listened to news broadcasts over the radio. Both attempted, in quite different ways, to discover what parts of the newspaper were particularly missed, and in both cases respondents stressed news (national, local, and war news) and advertising. Finally, both attempted to get at the degree to which the newspapers were actually missed, and in both cases respondents indicated that they missed the papers intensely. (1948, p. 112)

Berelson suspected that there might be more going on than the polls suggested, and coined a new research method – an in-depth interview-survey hybrid – which he used on a sample of 60 readers, capturing what he called “the more complex attitudinal matters operating in the situation” to answer the following questions: “What does ‘missing the newspaper’ mean? Why do people miss it? Do they really miss the parts they claim, to the extent they claim? Why do they miss one part as against another?” (Berelson, 1948, p. 112). Recognising that the sample was not large enough to be statistically robust, Berelson instead concentrated on using this intensive interviewing technique to provide qualitative data on why a newspaper “really mattered” to the people he interviewed. The researchers accordingly asked typical survey questions such as “Do you agree with the following statement: “it is very important that people read the newspapers”, and noted that most people answered with a strong yes, following up by saying newspapers were important for informational and educational purposes. However, further questions attempted to find specific examples of news that readers had missed being able to read about. The answers to these questions demonstrated that, in fact, though many

readers “paid tribute” to the newspaper’s informational role, very few of them actually used their newspaper for this purpose. He identified five uses for which people employed newspapers: information about and interpretation of public affairs; as a tool for daily living; for respite; for prestige; and for social contact. In identifying and separating out these different uses, Berelson uncovered a complex and dynamic relationship between readers and local newspapers and the way they were embedded in many aspects of personal, democratic, community and social life. Berelson’s methodological innovation in supplementing quantitative data with qualitative interviews to add further layers of nuance to his insights has partly informed the methodology of this study, and I describe this in more detail in Chapter 4.

A second study conducted much more recently by Scheufele et al researched the role of the Internet in the democratic engagement of citizens, and found that it was no substitute for traditional news consumption from newspapers, noting: “In particular, newspaper hard news use—at a local, national, and international level—is a crucial tool for disseminating information about political issues and processes among the public and, ultimately, one of the strongest predictors of participation in the political processes” (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002, p. 69). As well as finding a correlation between political engagement and the consumption of news from newspapers, the study found that those who said they used the Internet frequently for entertainment “were less likely to feel efficacious about their potential role in the democratic process and also knew less about facts relevant to current events” (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002, p. 63).

A third study has examined newspaper closure more deliberately. Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido’s 2009 study of Cincinnati analysed voter turnout, the rates of re-election for incumbents, the numbers of candidates standing for election and campaign spending in the years leading up to, and immediately following, the closure of Cincinnati’s second newspaper, the *Cincinnati Post*. They found that after the newspaper closed, the states that had been served by the *Cincinnati Post* showed lower election turnout rates, fewer candidates standing for office,

and that incumbents were more likely to be re-elected following the closure, concluding that “newspapers – even underdogs such as the *Post*, which had a circulation of just 27,000 when it closed – can have a substantial and measurable impact on public life” (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009).

Fourth, a relatively similar study in Denver and Seattle analysed newspaper closures from the point of view of civic engagement, using data from the Current Population Survey carried out by the United States Census (Shaker, 2014). To measure civic engagement, the study analysed responses to several questions about whether respondents had contacted a public official, bought or boycotted a product or service because of social or political values, whether they had attended particular groups including a PTA or neighbourhood watch or civic organisation such as a Lions group, or whether they had been an officer or served on a committee in any groups or organisations. The study found a decline in civic engagement measures after the closure of the two newspapers compared with civic engagement in other major American cities. Again, the focus was on cities that had formerly had *two* newspapers, and its findings were within the context of *one* of these newspapers closing while the other continued to publish. Even so, it found a measurable decline in civic engagement in the two cities following the newspaper closures.

Fifth, a large scale review of political data from 1869 to 2004 was correlated with statistics on newspaper “entries” and “exits” across America. It found that newspapers have a measurable impact on political engagement, with new newspapers or newspaper closures affecting voter turnout in presidential elections by 0.3 percentage points (Gentzkow, Shapiro, & Sinkinson, 2009). They found the effect was strong before the introduction of radio and television in 1928, showing the positive impact of newspapers in providing information on candidates and reporting the activities of incumbents before elections.

Added to these five studies of course is the research by Fenton et al. This study was particularly focused on newspaper closures in the UK. The research was conducted by Goldsmiths

Leverhulme Media Research Centre, funded by The Media Trust. The study used a variety of methods, including content analysis, interviews and focus groups to discover whether changes in journalism practices (for example the closure of a newspaper, an increase in hyperlocal activity, increased community engagement by a radio station, or the increased use of digital and social media platforms) had affected communities' relationships with the media (Fenton et al., 2010). Some of the conclusions have already been discussed above, but it is worth reiterating that, in interviews and focus groups, former readers of the newspaper that had closed said they felt under-informed, under-represented and vulnerable without their local newspaper. They also said they found it difficult to find relevant information to help them live their lives (Fenton et al., 2010).

### ***3.2.2 The informed citizen***

As I suggested above, according to theorists, a significant element of the role of news journalism in democracy should be in providing information to citizens. What this means in practice is generally agreed to include "contributing vital resources for processes of information gathering, deliberation and action" (Fenton, 2010, p. 3) and "to provide citizens with the information they need to understand and address problems" (McChesney & Nichols, 2010, p. xv). This provision is theorised to be essential: "information is to democracy what oxygen is to fire. Without one the other cannot survive" (Phillips & Witschge, 2012, p. 3).

But the media's provision of a flow of good quality information is thought to contribute to another normative ideal: the "informed citizenry" (Baresch, Knight, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011), which is, according to democratic theory, an essential component if democracy is to flourish and if citizens are to make informed judgements come election time. Anderson agrees: "high-quality, independent journalism which provides accurate and thoughtful information and analysis about current events is crucial to the creation of an enlightened citizenry that is able to participate meaningfully in society and politics" (2007, p. 65).

Until the 1940s, it was generally assumed that this information was gleaned by citizens directly from the mass media, a notion that visualised “the omnipotent media, on one hand, sending forth the message, and the atomized masses, on the other, waiting to receive it” (Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955, p. 20). But a study of the 1940 presidential election enabled researchers to deconstruct this framework. In their study, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and Gaudet discovered that a large group of voters who were undecided about which way to vote until late in the campaign, were eventually overwhelmingly swayed by the influence of a personal contact or friend (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, pp. 49-51). This led them to deeper analysis, and the eventual formulation of the “two-step flow model”, further developed by Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955), which theorises the existence of an “intervening variable” between the mass media and citizens in the shape of a layer of “opinion leaders”. These were people who paid more attention to the mass media, who came from “every stratum of a community” and played “relay roles in the mass communication of election information and influence” between the mass media and non-opinion leaders (ibid, pp. 21, 31). This “person-to-person influence” was said to “[serve] as a bridge over which formal media of communications extend their influence” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 152).

Some later theorists found the two-step flow problematic, and suggest it became outmoded when television appeared and challenged the flow of information and ideas in mass communication. For them, the two-step flow had been formulated “before more advanced political media systems (particularly television) became available and before a more educated and media-dependent public had emerged” (J. P. Robinson, 1976, p. 304). Audience studies in the 1960s and 1970s, found, for example, that few people credited “other people” as news sources (Roper, 1975), and, in almost complete contradiction of Lazarsfeld et al’s 1948 study, later findings showed “the ratio of media to interpersonal exposure was well over two to one” as television audiences increased (Hoffstetter (1972), cited in J. P. Robinson, 1976, pp. 304-305).



I would argue, however, that these studies themselves may now be outmoded in a landscape where mass audiences have fragmented, and the quality of the information provided by the mass media has been weakened. Particularly in Port Talbot, where there is only one newspaper providing regular local news, it is worth revisiting the possibility of a person-to-person, word-of-mouth based news network, reliant on opinion leaders, and operating where traditional media are no longer providing enough local and relevant news. If such a dominance of word-of-mouth does exist, however, we must also be mindful of its sources. For Lazarsfeld et al “ideas often flow *from* radio and print *to* the opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population” (1948, p. 151, italics in original). The two-step flow model therefore does not account for a weakened or absent flow of information from the mass media. This may mirror the kind of communication system that was in place before the advent of newspapers. This was a time of verbal information exchange, when the conversation often opened with the phrase ‘What news?’ and the answer came from a variety of sources, including gossip, first or second hand witness accounts, or the latest happenings from the nearest large town (Allan, 2004, p. 8; Raymond, 1996, pp. 1-2) and it took a long time to circulate, often taking weeks or even months to reach outlying or distant communities (K. Williams, 2010, pp. 39-40). Social media and the Internet may speed up this process today, but it may be the case that local information is now exchanged person-to-person rather than through mediated news outlets.

### ***3.2.3 Scrutiny***

According to McNair, good quality journalism should, among other qualities I have already discussed, scrutinise and challenge those in power (2009a, pp. 238-240). This idea of scrutiny is central to the way journalism keeps democracy in check – and it is often likened to a watchdog, for example: “[journalism is] the eyes and ears of the public, ever watchful, prepared to bark and bite when danger approaches” (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 168). In a detailed study of local newspapers in Sweden, Ekström et al were able to identify seven different forms of scrutiny, rejecting a definition that uses “scientific” norms, “that scrutiny journalism should be

characterised by independent investigation but also by giving an open account of their methods” on the basis this kind of approach is not in tune with common journalistic practices (Ekström, Johansson, & Larsson, 2006, p. 295). Instead they focus on forms of scrutiny that are more likely to appear in the local press, including uncovering quality issues or testing public services, digging or revealing elements of municipal life such as wrongdoing, reporting criticisms or the results of others’ investigations, or reporting positive results. Their longitudinal study found that, in fact, scrutiny was strengthened in local newspapers between 1961 (15.5 per cent) and 2001 (31.3 per cent), concluding that changes to journalism style over the period were responsible for the growth, but crucially they also found that digging and investigative scrutiny – the kind of journalism that is most resource-intensive – fell dramatically over the sample period and there was instead a tendency towards “the shorter, quicker and simpler stories (Ekström et al., 2006, p. 308). To what extent this is replicated in the local press in the UK is unclear, but the authors of the study do draw some parallels between the Swedish and British local press (ibid, p. 294).

If nothing else, these findings echo the concerns of British and American observers. Recent developments in the industry, particularly concerning cuts to human resources that I discussed above in Chapter 2 (pp. 34-36), have caused worry that if newspapers are not embedded enough in communities, nor well-resourced enough to send reporters to cover local institutions, this scrutiny element will be lost to the local public sphere (McChesney & Nichols, 2010; Moore, 2014, p. 6).

An extension of the scrutiny function has also been suggested by some. In addition to the notion of the press as a watchdog that guards the public and barks when it detects wrongdoing, some commentators have suggested the press acts as a kind of scarecrow, which, unlike a noisy dog that only barks when something is amiss, can prevent wrongdoing by its very presence. This so-called *scarecrow journalism* can be crucial to keeping public institutions in check:

The fact that only a watchdog actively barks and the scarecrow does not bark does not always matter. Though the scarecrow “does nothing,” its very existence, the very fact that the crows know it is out there, “watching,” is often enough to constrain bad crow-like behaviour. And the same goes for journalism. The watchdog press, it must be admitted, barks only rarely. But the continuity of that press, the fact that it is “out there,” is often enough to constrain bad behaviour on the part of powerful institutions. (C. Anderson, Bell, & Shirky, 2014)

There is currently little empirical evidence to support or deny the notion of the scarecrow journalist, and this is one avenue of research for this study.

### ***3.2.4 Representation, campaigning and community building***

Journalism’s role in representing local people, giving voice to their concerns and reporting or running campaigns on local issues must also be noted. For McNair, these roles are separate, with representation a natural result of the watchdog role, casting the journalist as a kind of “mediator” that represents citizens “to the political elite, and ensure the voice of the people can be heard in the democratic process”. This is largely ensured through the publication of readers’ letters, or the commenting function on news websites, as well as to a new and direct access through blogs and other digital communications. Campaigning is separate to this, with the journalist taking a “participant/ advocate” role, with an active voice in campaigning, or “seeking to persuade people of a particular view” (McNair, 2009a, pp. 239-240).

However, Barnett sees these roles as being intimately bound. He, too, characterises representation as “conveying the popular voice from citizens and voters to local and national elites and [...] facilitating the expression of popular opinion”, and lists public forums such as letters, discussion programmes or Facebook pages as the means to convey such representation. But campaigning is formulated as “a more pro-active version of representation”, where

journalists can identify “issues directly relevant to their readers” and use their reporting for “demanding political action” (Barnett & Townend, 2014, p. 335, see also Barnett, 2009).

Recent work on hyperlocal news websites has also illuminated the relationship between these representative and campaigning roles, and the ability of local news to build and foster community values. One such study sought to discover whether hyperlocal websites were able to fill local news gaps where coverage had ceased, weakened, or had never been present, and found that coverage of campaigns: “tapping in as it does, to existing networks of active citizens with an interest in local public life, and covering issues which are of common concern to many, can help hyperlocal producers gain wider audiences, generate social standing, trust and respect, and become more visible in their communities” (A. Williams et al., 2015b, p. 696). The study also noted a link between the remote reporting carried out by some legacy media and their inability to represent the community adequately, and the researchers noted participants in their survey and interviews were critical of “distant coverage which is not reflective enough of community life, is too reliant on press releases and is too deferential to authority” (ibid, p. 699). A second study of hyperlocal websites in the Netherlands found similar weakening of traditional local news media, but noted the inability of hyperlocals to plug this “news gap” adequately, concluding the sector showed “promise but vulnerability” (van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014, p. 307), and this is in line with other research, which shows the digital news sector is “characterised by very uneven quality, a high turnover (as many new ventures rarely last long) and genuine concerns over their editorial autonomy and independence” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 8; see also A. Williams, Harte, & Turner, 2015a, p. 219).

Historically, however, the local newspaper has had a unique relationship with its readers, and Franklin and Murphy argue that this is because of the way local news patches and territories are cultivated by newspapers to form distinct communities:

The market, in the form of the circulation area of the newspaper, is also identified with the community so that even if they are not definitionally identical the two are at least in a mutually supportive relationship. (1991, pp. 58-59)

This suggests that the community is partially constructed by the newspaper, and also maintained by it, as journalists “provide a record of the community; to make people publicly accountable who should be; to participate in the system of social control; and to do this in the context of a set of relationships, with ‘contacts’ chosen by their roles in the institutions which they themselves and the newspaper identify as the defining structure of the community” (1991, pp. 58-59). A local newspaper, therefore, defines for itself a local geographical area and (or) a community, which it then serves by providing truthful or accurate written accounts of the events that take place in that community. In fact the strong brands and the continuing local news provision of many local newspapers mean they are still strongly embedded in their local communities, even after cuts may have weakened their output.

How newspapers can foster or strengthen community identity has provided a fruitful area for research into the link between strong, integrated communities, local news consumption and local political participation. One American study looked for links between “the impact of communication and community integration” and found positive correlations between local newspaper readership and local political participation (Jack M. McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). The study noted that “Community integration can be understood as a necessary condition or at least an important prerequisite for local political participation. A lack of social networks and ties to the community makes participation undesirable and difficult” (ibid, p. 316), they note. They also state that:

[the] relationship between community integration and local political participation is, however, mediated by communication. Through communication, citizens acquire information about issues and problems in the community and learn of opportunities and ways to participate. Closely related to the first function of information dissemination,

media or interpersonal forms of communication may mobilize individuals to local political participation. While community integration provides the infrastructure for participating, media and interpersonal communication provide the knowledge or incentives to use the opportunities for participation that are provided. (ibid, pp. 316-317)

McLeod et al also noted that different levels of affiliation were influenced by readership of local newspapers, so where perhaps local people might have strong personal ties with neighbours or local social groups, facilitated by word of mouth interactions, membership of the wider community was facilitated by local newspapers (the study pre-dates the prevalence of the Internet, and so it is possible the effect could extend to any local news, regardless of platform). More recently, Robinson defined “community journalism” specifically in terms of “physical location (spatial nearness)”, which “continues to be an important anchoring of communal feeling” and which “should emphasise the ‘local’ in all of us” (S. Robinson, 2014, pp. 114-115). Another study examined the concept of “reciprocal journalism” within digital and community journalism, and argued that types of journalism which encourage an “exchange between two or more actors for mutual benefit” (in contrast to more top-down or gatekeeping styles of journalism) might “lead to what we describe as sustained reciprocity, or lasting forms of exchange that deepen collective trust, social capital, and overall connectedness—essential components for the vitality of communities of all kinds” (S. C. Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014, pp. 229, 230). In reality, however, they conclude this is largely an “unrealized potential” as opposed to a widespread phenomenon, both in new digital or community enterprises and within traditional media outlets (ibid. 2014, p. 236). Further, Nielsen notes that wider changes to society, the economy and politics have contributed to loosen the ties of traditional community identities, and that these may in turn have weakened local media by making them less relevant to local people: “we still live local lives but our lives are less locally bounded, as people move more often, as more and more people commute to work elsewhere, as more and more of the goods and services we consume are produced far away, and as some of the most

important decisions impacting our lives are taken elsewhere” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 5). There is a challenge for local newspapers, therefore, to maintain their relevance to audiences who may be “transient”, who may be less interested in what local businesses have to offer as they are accustomed to spending with businesses from across the globe, and whose interest in local politics may founder “if power is perceived to be elsewhere” (ibid, pp. 5-6).

Social Identity Theory posits that “however rich and complex may be the individual’s view of themselves in relation to the surrounding world, social and physical, some aspects of that view are contributed by the membership of certain social groups or categories” (Henri, 2010). In my study, membership of the group means identifying oneself as a Port Talbot local, and this is an important construct for maintaining social cohesion and a sense of community in the town. Localness, then, as Robinson also posits, would seem to be an obvious element of community-building news, and Williams et al also found that hyperlocals have “the ability to foster citizenship, democracy and local community cohesion” in the way that they emphasise local stories, local sources, positive news coverage and campaigning journalism (S. Robinson, 2014, p. 113; A. Williams et al., 2015b, p. 20). In her study of provincial English newspapers, Matthews, too, has made the case for the strong tie between newspapers and communities, noting the ability of the newspaper to define a community by the collective act of readership and exchange of common information, to reflect the community back to itself, and to exist “for the good of the community”, emphasising in particular the localness and local origins of newspaper staff as key to the newspaper’s ability to furnish “community good” (Matthews, 2014, p. 216).

However, for Robinson localness and communities are not limited to physical spaces such as towns or neighbourhoods thanks to developments in digital technologies which have broadened definitions of communities to include groups of citizens with shared interests, and may include, for example, former residents of a town who have moved elsewhere but continue to share community identity with current residents, i.e. “journalists of the locale should report

and write thinking about the citizens, as opposed to the place” (S. Robinson, 2014, p. 114). Similarly, essays by Hess, and also by Hess and Waller acknowledge the importance of newspapers in building community (Hess, 2013; Hess & Waller, 2012, 2014), but their 2014 essay theorizes that defining local or “community news” by the concept of community alone is problematic. They argue instead that it is more helpful to define digital local news in terms of “geo-social journalism”, which incorporates a more fine-grained approach:

the shifting constellations of global and national systems, issues and social relationships in the digital era and highlights the need for journalists to engage with and develop an understanding of the land (environment/agriculture/industry), populations, histories and cultures of the places they report news; secondly, as a methodology for researchers that eschews theoretical universalizing and instead demands fine-grained analyses of the specific dynamic of each “geo-social” publication, the particular setting and the practices that shape it and it in turn shapes. (Hess & Waller, 2014, p. 124)

Hess has continued her work in this area in a further empirical study which used focus groups and interviews to analyse the nature of the role of local or community newspapers in forming and strengthening communities. She identified three roles a newspaper might play in enhancing community:

“bonding”—the local newspaper’s ability to generate the idea of “community” and “close” ties among audiences based on its powerful role as a node in global information flows and spaces; “bridging”—the unique position of local newspapers to control the types of information shared between individuals in digital and physical spaces; and “linking”—the local newspaper’s role in linking ordinary people with those in positions of power. (2015, p. 492)

Importantly, she argues, such social connectedness can change the power balance between citizens and those in authority, and also that the ability to facilitate social capital and the flow of



social information “represents a significant resource of power” in the hands of local newspapers (ibid., p. 485).

Further empirical research in this field has sought to define causal relationships between local journalism and community. One such study hypothesised that “the greater the use of local news media the higher the level of community integration”, basing the research around “results from past research [that] indicate a fairly conclusive link between community integration and local media use” (Jack M McLeod et al., 1996, pp. 188-190). This evidence included a study that showed “psychological attachment” to a community or place was higher in people who read local weekly newspapers (Jeffres, Dobos, & Lee, 1988); another that showed higher “neighbourhood involvement” the more time people spent reading a weekly local newspaper (Finnegan & Viswanath, 1988); and two others which shed light on the link between activity and membership in organised community groups and subscriptions to local daily newspapers (Buddenbaum, 1994; Stamm & Weis, 1986). McLeod et al also drew on democratic political theory and concluded “it is reasonable to suppose that if strong community identification of citizens contributes to knowledgeable participation, then it will also lead to better decisions about community problems and issues and a better life for its citizens” (1996, p. 189). They found “strong support” for a link between local media use and an interest in local politics, and also for a link between those with “strong interpersonal networks” and an interest in local politics. Though these studies pre-date the Internet, and are centred on American communities, they nevertheless demonstrate the strong historical link between local media, which keep local citizens informed, and their local community, and also links strong community ties with political participation. Together, these interlinked features add up to a strong local public sphere, and a healthy local democracy.

## ***3.3 Democracy***

So far in this discussion, I have used the term democracy many times and it is a term with which most people are familiar. However, it is important in the context of this research to set out a clear definition of democracy in relation to journalism, and also of the democratic deficit.

### ***3.3.1 Definitions of democracy***

For Richard Katz, democracy is defined as “the installation of a government that has both the mandate and the determination to implement the popular will” (2001, p. 55), and these important tenets – the mandate of the people, and the people’s will, underlie many of the principles of the public sphere and fourth estate journalism I have already discussed. Both elements of democracy rely on a well-informed public. Indeed, the political scientist Larry Diamond has defined democracy as having four distinct features: a system of elections allowing citizens to determine government; “the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life”; human rights for all; and a system of law, “in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens” (Diamond, 2004). It is the second of these elements, the “active participation of the people in politics and civic life”, and how well it is furnished by the news media at a local level, which concerns us here. The reason for this is the importance of an informed citizenry, which, as I set out on p. 67 is a basic tenet of democratic theory (Baresch et al., 2011, p. 3). In their influential study of voting patterns in the 1948 presidential election, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee set out a definition of what they called a “democratic citizen”: “the democratic citizen is expected to be well-informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are” (1966, p. 308).

The importance of the informed citizen to a functioning democracy has also been borne out in empirical studies. As I mentioned above, Page and Shapiro found government policy to be more in tune with new directions of public opinion if information and knowledge levels in the

population were high (1983, pp. 181-182), concluding in a later work: “the level of information [...] may be an important determinant of how well the public can control government” (1992, p. 393).

Further, ensuring citizens are well-informed enough to make rational decisions, particularly when it comes to voting in elections, is often put forward as the main function, or duty, of the news media within a democracy (see for example Curran, 1991, p. 29; Sparks, 1991, p. 58). This is set against the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere. However, as I also set out earlier in this chapter (p. 52), much of the discussion about the democratic role of the news media and the public sphere refers to national media and the Westminster level of government (for example Sparks, 1991, pp. 62-63). It is important, therefore, to widen the debate and acknowledge the role of local and regional democracy (particularly since devolution) and its relationship to the local and regional news media, and the local and regional public geo-spheres that I introduce on pp. 52-57.

It is helpful, too, to widen the terms of reference when it comes to the participation of citizens within a democracy. Political scientists and media scholars often consider citizens’ knowledge in terms of elections alone. Opinion polls, votes and knowledge about the names of candidates, political parties or policies are often used to determine levels of knowledge and political engagement. But this approach has been criticised as “little more than trivia quizzes” that do not grapple with the fluidity of opinion and the decision making process that means voters are able to vote competently for a party or political figure when it comes to being confronted with the ballot paper (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. 12). What is not often discussed is the everyday running of local government – the part in between elections – where policies, changes or decisions can affect whole towns, cities or counties. Changes to roads, new amenities, property developments, school closures, inspection results or even potholes can affect communities and require interaction between citizens and the state. Local governance also exists across several unelected agencies, including local health boards, education

authorities, police authorities and, to some extent, in private commerce in the shape of major employers, transport or housing providers, utilities companies, retailers and many other interests (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 25). All of these bodies may make changes that affect communities, and the extent to which their activities and plans are monitored and communicated to the public, is crucial to understanding the effect of information flow on the public sphere.

Further, according to the two-step flow model, a flow of quality information reaching enough of Port Talbot's opinion leaders would enable a flow of information into pockets of the community that are less engaged. If information is neither of sufficiently good quality, nor plentiful enough, then one might expect the health of the democratic environment to be compromised and the knowledge of all citizens about key issues to be diminished. But does this make for a democratic deficit in Port Talbot?

### ***3.3.2 What is a democratic deficit?***

If democracy can be defined as the people giving mandate to elected officials to carry out their collective will – what Richard Katz calls the “popular sovereignty model” (Katz, 2001, p. 55) – then a democratic deficit must be defined as the inability of the people either to give their mandate, or to have their will carried out. Either the mechanism for enabling mandate – elections – or the mechanism for enabling the will of the people to be formed and implemented – the public sphere – may be compromised to cause this democratic deficit to occur. The public sphere is the people's method for debating and crystallising their collective will, and within this process robust media are crucial. It follows that the weakening of local news structures and systems will result in a weakening of the public sphere and we can see therefore how this might damage the ability of the people to debate issues of moment, and have their will represented by those in power. Additionally, for the people to give their mandate in elections, they must be

equipped to make well-informed choices about their preferences for candidates and political parties, and robust, balanced media are also important in enabling this.

### ***3.3.3 Defining and researching a news black hole***

This discussion on the importance of news to citizens, communities, and democracy as a whole might not have much relevance in today's world were it not for the threat that now faces the fourth estate. As I have discussed newspapers are under pressure from a squeeze in advertising revenues, and also from a dwindling readership as other media compete for the attention of their audiences. The economic threat, in particular, has seen drops in newsroom staff and the closure of many newspaper titles. Some commentators even predict newspapers will cease to be printed by the middle of the twenty-first century. News gaps, sometimes called “news black holes” or “news not-spots”, are opening up in areas where legacy media are withdrawing their services.

Barnett and Townend describe the reality of a “news gap” for the democratic process at a local level:

Populations were left with little information about their local communities. Whether towns with no journalistic presence or cities with an increasingly emasculated presence, the implications for local democracy are profound. Issues of enormous relevance to citizens in their everyday lives—about their local hospitals, local schools, local transport, police forces, businesses and courts—are simply not being addressed. Local elites and decision makers are not being questioned or held to account. (Barnett & Townend, 2014)

The context for these news gaps is commonly held to be newspaper closures (Ponsford, 2012), but this is too narrow a concern to explain the phenomenon. The broader withdrawal of local journalism and a decrease in local ownership (which as we have seen can lead to a less profit-

oriented approach than ownership by large conglomerates) are also concerns. Barnett et al and Fenton et al argue that “remote” ownership makes for news that is less local and therefore less relevant (Barnett & Townend, 2014; Fenton et al., 2010). As I discussed above, the result of less localness is “citizens starved of information and local institutions less accountable” (Barnett & Townend, 2014, p. 332).

The vacuum that opens up after a closure, or during the slow withdrawal of local journalism often preceding a closure, has encouraged a new generation of news provision at the hyperlocal level. It is worth noting that the capability of these news sites to fill the news gap has not yet proved universal nor reliable, and a lack of resources makes such organisations vulnerable and, sometimes, risk-averse, which can mean that many are less able or likely to take on the investigative or combative journalism styles most associated with the fourth estate (A. Williams et al., 2015b).

The market conditions that have prevailed in the Welsh media, and in Port Talbot in particular, led to the closure of its dedicated weekly newspaper, and the withdrawal of several other news sources from the town. In the last decade, Port Talbot has lost a dedicated weekly newspaper, its council-published monthly free-sheet, its community radio station and a hyperlocal website run by an experienced local news photographer. Before that, it lost other dedicated news outlets as well. It is still served by a regional newspaper and a hyperlocal website and, arguably, by media in higher public spheres such as the Welsh press, regional television and radio, and more widely still by the national media. However, the closure of the local weekly newspaper alongside the withdrawal of journalists who lived and worked embedded in the community have contributed to impoverish the local media scene, and have caused commentators to designate Port Talbot a news black hole (Moore, 2010). Examining this news black hole in depth is the purpose of this study.

# ***Chapter 4***

## ***Methodological Approaches***

### ***4.1 Statement of aims***

So far in this thesis I have discussed the current crisis in newspapers, and looked at the impact of this crisis on the public sphere. I have examined the question of whether journalism is able to serve democracy in a situation where journalists are under-resourced and unable to operate as effectively as when newspaper revenues were higher. In Chapter 2, I explored the history of the advertising revenue model in relation to news and newspapers, and showed how the current crisis in news journalism has been many decades in the making. I also discussed the evolution of newspaper funding, the dominance of the advertising revenue business model, and showed how both cyclical and structural changes in the media industry have come together at the turn of the millennium to damage newspaper revenues, limit publishers' resources and impair their ability to carry out fourth estate journalism. I went on to discuss the arguments that forecast a continuation of these diminishing revenues into the future. The chapter went on to explore how newspaper circulations have likewise diminished in tandem with falling advertising revenues, and how the mass audience that was once addressed by newspapers has in recent times fragmented into multiple, and much smaller, audiences that tend to be defined by the accessibility and convenience of news, as well as the geographical location or shared interests of the audience. I outlined, too, how these falling revenues have taken their toll in newsrooms across the UK (and much of Europe and America), by compelling newspaper managers (whose primary remit is to maintain profit margins) to shed staff, cut editorial budgets and increase

journalists' workloads to the point that the quality and quantity of editorial output is compromised, and prompting media owners to close some less profitable titles.

In Chapter 3 I turned to theories of democracy and the relationship between democracy and the media to help explain the impact of the current crisis. I discussed how the crisis outlined in Chapter 2 has implications for the production of the kind of journalism we might consider valuable for democracy. I described Habermas's theory of the public sphere and explained how it relates to democracy, but I also looked at ways the public sphere could be usefully seen as composed of smaller, more local, spheres, and theorised that different geographical communities, at the hyperlocal, local, regional and national level with their own public geospheres might be useful for explaining the damage wrought by local newspaper closures. This has given me a way into discussing the problem of so-called news black holes – geographical areas that are not served by newspapers (and other local media), or that at the very least are not as well-served by newspapers and other local media as they used to be due to reductions in staff and budgets and the resulting limitations placed upon the journalists that are working there.

Most of the available literature discusses the crisis and its implications for the public sphere at its broadest level, i.e. the level of the national media and the national public sphere, and therefore for democracy on a national scale, and so the literature mainly concerns national newspapers, national democracy and mass audiences – research into how local newspaper cutbacks have impacted on the public sphere is scarcer. Equally studies into the effects of newspaper closures are relatively few and, as I set out in Chapter 3 (pp. 63-66), with the exception of one (Fenton et al., 2010), focus on cases in the United States, and either discuss the loss of 'second' newspapers or temporary newspaper closures (Berelson, 1948; Gentzkow et al., 2009; Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009; Shaker, 2014). As I outlined in Chapter 3, the British study looked at four different communities that were affected by major changes in their local media landscape, one of which was the closure of the local newspaper, the *Long Eaton*



*Advertiser*. It used focus groups to research the link between local news and democracy, and sought to uncover the value of local news to people living in the affected communities, to ascertain what they expected from news and what their “news needs” were (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 7). My study aims to build on this work, but also makes strong reference to the research conducted in America following newspaper closures in Cincinnati (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009), and Denver and Seattle (Shaker, 2014), which looked at existing census data to gauge how democratic and civic behaviours changed following the closures.

### ***4.1.1 Research questions***

Traditionally, local newspapers have been seen as useful tools that help people live their lives more easily by giving people the power to understand (and act on) what’s happening in their area through balanced reporting on key issues, and an influential voice to have their own opinions heard on the issues they care about. This can inform primary audiences (i.e. those who read, watch or listen to news themselves) by giving them information and insight into events in the community, but also a secondary group of people: what the two-step flow theory of communication calls “influencees”, a kind of secondary audience, which, as a result of the “two-step flow of communication”, benefits from the same knowledge and insight through word-of-mouth (Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955, p. 309), as “ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders, and from them to the less active sections of the population” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). If the “influencee” can benefit from this flow of information and influence, it is also possible that a range of social actors benefit, to some degree, from the information, scrutiny and auditing roles fulfilled by journalists. The quality of the original information supplied by the mass media is assumed in this equation, but the impact of weakened or absent media at the local level has not so far been measured in the UK in depth.

Based on the theories of the public sphere and the two-step flow, however, we might imagine that a town without its own newspaper may run into difficulty. Without a newspaper,

there are questions about how local people become informed (how do they find out what is happening (and about to happen) in their town? How do they know about government or commercial decisions that may affect them?); how well they are represented (where do they go to air their concerns, call politicians to account, debate issues or discover opposing opinions? how are their views communicated to each other and to those in power?); how they build and strengthen their community (how do they find out about sport, culture, education, art, religion, social or civic events and other kinds of activities or events that help people engage with each other and their communities? How they record their own living history for future generations?); and how they secure scrutiny of public institutions (How do they secure trustworthy information from those in authority? How accessible is this information? Where do they go to get information that has been through the scrutiny, selection, editing and checking that make up good journalism, and which ensure the information is regular, timely, reliable, useful, unbiased and trustworthy? And is such information available at all?).

Arising from these questions, I have grouped the research questions of this thesis into three broad areas: first the research seeks to characterise the local news and to measure the output and quality of local news, both in the past and in the present, as I measure what is lost when a newspaper closes or journalism is withdrawn from the community by comparing it with what existed before; second the research seeks to discover how local people are accessing information since the closure of the newspaper, and examines the ability of this information to keep them informed and represented, to build communities, and ensure scrutiny of government and public institutions by examining how it is produced and comparing this with news production across the sample period; and finally it is concerned with the ability of local people to function in a democratic society, seeking associations between the quality and quantity of local news and information, and local civic and democratic behaviour. The research questions and their sub-questions are as follows:

RQ1: How has local news changed in Port Talbot between 1970 and 2013?

RQ 1.1: How has the quantity of this news changed?

RQ 1.2: How has the quality of this news changed?

RQ 1.3: Can any changes in this local news be explained by changes in newsgathering practices over the sample period?

RQ2: How has the withdrawal of journalism from Port Talbot impacted on the community?

RQ2.1: What are people's current, and previous, news consumption habits?

RQ2.2: Are local people finding out essential information, and if so, how?

RQ2.3: How well-informed are local people about local public affairs?

RQ 3: Does the withdrawal of journalism from a town affect civic and democratic engagement, and if so in what ways?

RQ 3.1: Is there a measurable impact on civic and democratic indicators?

RQ 3.2: Do local people feel well-informed and able to participate in community, civic or democratic life?

RQ 3.3 How well represented do local people feel, and do they feel able to voice their concerns or be heard and/or answered by those in authority?

Answering these questions necessitates a multi-method approach. RQ 1, for example, uses a quantitative longitudinal content analysis of local news output, which provides data about news quantity and how it has changed over time, but also codes for quality indicators, which I explain in more detail below. Answering this RQ also requires qualitative document

analysis, secondary analysis and interviews with journalists to provide a characterisation of newsroom changes over the sample period. For RQ2, a quantitative survey of local residents is combined with a qualitative method in the shape of three age-defined focus groups and one focus group composed of active citizens to provide richer, more nuanced, evidence about how local communities and news audiences keep themselves informed and represented, and fulfil the need for scrutiny of the powerful, in the absence of traditional media in the town. For RQ3, secondary analysis of UK studies, and primary document analysis of data from local authorities and the third sector is combined with analysis of original data about democratic and civic measures from my survey to add insights about the way local people are able to take part in the public sphere inside a news black hole. This multi-method approach allows for triangulation of data throughout and enables a full and detailed analysis to emerge. Each of the methods is therefore designed to add to the sum of knowledge about the local news black hole in Port Talbot, and to our understanding of the role of news in, and the withdrawal of journalism from, local communities more generally.

## ***4.2 Case study: Port Talbot – the news problem in microcosm***

I have chosen the South Wales coastal town of Port Talbot as a case study for the research. In 2009, Port Talbot lost its 85-year-old local weekly newspaper when it was closed by Trinity Mirror. According to the 2011 UK Census, the town of Port Talbot has a population of 37,276 and the slightly larger Aberavon Parliamentary constituency a population of 66,133. Due to a concentration of heavy industry and power stations, and a busy stretch of motorway running on a large overpass through it, Port Talbot has repeatedly been found to be the most polluted urban site in the UK outside of London (Friends of the Earth Cymru, 2000; Roberts, 2014). The closure of the newspaper means that the town offers an ideal opportunity to study the relationship, if any, between a relative lack of dedicated local news being produced in and about

a community and the democratic, community and civic opportunities and behaviour of the people who live there.

Port Talbot itself was established in the mid-19th century as industrialisation prompted the beginnings of copper and ironworking at a small settlement known as Aberavon. There were close links with the nearby Abbey at Margam, whose patrons were the wealthy Talbot family, and as the family began to invest in industry in the town, their name became synonymous with it. It is a relatively young town: it was officially designated as the borough of Port Talbot – and named Port Talbot for the first time – in 1925. Just a year before that, the *Port Talbot Guardian* was established as the local newspaper. The 16 wards that fall within the parliamentary constituency of Aberavon form the area that I have defined as Port Talbot for the purposes of this study. These are: Aberavon, Baglan, Briton Ferry East, Briton Ferry West, Bryn and Cwmavon, Coedffranc Central, Coedffranc North, Coedffranc West, Cymmer, Glyncorrwg, Gwynfi, Margam, Port Talbot, Sandfields East, Sandfields West and Taibach. The town is still known for its industry: Tata Steel operates a large steelworks, there are power stations, docks, and an industrial gas plant.

#### ***4.2.1 Media output – studying Port Talbot news***

Two newspapers are most closely identified with Port Talbot: the *Port Talbot Guardian* and the *South Wales Evening Post*. The *Guardian*, in particular, was thought of as the newspaper of Port Talbot, and in part this may be for historical reasons as its launch was so close to when the name of Port Talbot was officially designated for the town. This section examines both the history and current characteristics of local media provision for Port Talbot.

The *Port Talbot Guardian* was launched in 1925 alongside sister title the *Neath Guardian* by a group of Neath businessmen, to provide news coverage for the town of Port Talbot and the surrounding villages, including Margam, Cwmafan, and the Afan Valley, a patch it continued to serve until it closed in 2009. The *Guardian* remained in their hands until 1947, when the

Guardian Press was sold to brothers Norman and Glyn Walters, also from Neath. Over time, however, the two newspapers were bought by successively larger companies. Thomson Regional Newspapers acquired them in 1965 and added them to seven other weekly newspaper titles publishing in the South Wales Valleys, a small newspaper group they called Celtic Weekly Newspapers. In turn, Trinity acquired all Thomson's regional titles, including Celtic Weekly Newspapers, in 1995. Trinity merged with the Mirror Group in 1999, and the *Guardian* ended its days as a tabloid newspaper published by the Trinity Mirror-owned Media Wales company. The *Guardian* had returned relatively stable circulation figures and high profits until the mid-2000s. However, its circulation halved between 2000 and 2009, when Trinity Mirror shut it along with the paper's sister title, the *Neath Guardian*, citing tough economic conditions and the falling revenues of the two *Guardian* titles.

The other main newspaper circulating in Port Talbot is The *South Wales Evening Post*, which currently prints a local edition for the Neath and Port Talbot area six days a week and a weekly insert for Neath and Port Talbot called the *Neath Port Talbot Courier*. The *Post* was established in 1932 as the result of merging the *South Wales Daily Post* and the *Cambrian News*. It is now published by South West Wales Media Ltd, which has been owned by Local World since 2012, though the company was owned by Northcliffe for much of the sample period. Until the mid-2000s, the *Post* was an evening newspaper with a lunchtime edition and three evening district editions every day, but the daily tabloid is now printed overnight and distributed early the following morning in three district editions: Swansea (its main circulation area), Carmarthenshire and Neath Port Talbot.

Other, smaller, newspapers have also existed – and closed – in Port Talbot within the time span of this study, but have not been included in the sample due to the lack of accessible archive material. The first of these is the *Neath Port Talbot Courier*, which published separately as the *Port Talbot Courier* and the *Neath Courier* from 1999 to 2003 and then as a joint publication thereafter, with a short gap around 2007-8, and a re-launch in 2009 after the

*Guardian* closed. This is distributed as a weekly insert within the *South Wales Evening Post*. Also printed was the *Neath Port Talbot Tribune* (1989-2007), a free monthly newspaper, which was an independently-owned title that was printed on the *Evening Post's* press. The *Glamorgan Gazette* (established in 1937), primarily a Bridgend-focused newspaper, was also available in Port Talbot in very limited quantities and contained some news about the town. Other Welsh newspapers, such as the *Western Mail* and Cardiff's *South Wales Echo*, cover, or have covered, some Port Talbot news, but were not deemed to be specifically local enough to the town to be included in this study. Table 4.1 shows a timeline of these newspapers based on archive stocks or data from interviewees.

	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2013
<b>PTGuardian</b>				Green bar from 1920 to 2010									
<b>SWEP-NPT</b>									Red bar from 1980 to 2013				
<b>NPTCourier</b>										Green bar from 2000 to 2013			
<b>PT Tribune</b>									Green bar from 1990 to 2007				
<b>GGazette</b>				Red bar from 1937 to 2013									
<b>SWEP</b>				Red bar from 1930 to 2013									
<b>WMail</b>	Red bar from 1900 to 2013												

**Table 4.1: Timeline of newspapers in and for the Port Talbot area. [Note: green denotes newspapers specifically produced for Port Talbot, red is for newspapers that cover a larger geographical area but contain some Port Talbot news coverage. KEY: PTGuardian – *Port Talbot Guardian*; SWEP-NPT – *South Wales Evening Post*, Neath Port Talbot edition; NPT Courier – *Neath Port Talbot Courier*; PT Tribune – *Neath Port Talbot Tribune*, GGazette – *Glamorgan Gazette*; SWEP – *South Wales Evening Post*; WMail – the *Western Mail*.]**

Since the closure of the *Port Talbot Guardian*, some Internet-only news sites have been published: PortTalbotNews.com was published by a noted local press photographer and citizen journalist, Peter Knowles, but ceased publication on his death in 2011. The *Port Talbot Magnet* started in early 2010 and is run by a group of professional journalists seeking to establish a sustainable news service for the town – they expanded into print and published their first tabloid edition in September 2013, which has since been quarterly, alongside their website, www.porttalbotmagnet.com. There are also several smaller websites such as aggregators of existing local news, PortTalbot.com, and PortTalbotLife.co.uk, but these are not updated regularly with original content. Finally there are many active and relevant outlets on social

media that could be said to be covering some elements of traditional news territory, including several groups on Facebook. Examples include pages operated by news providers (*Port Talbot News* operated by *Port Talbot Magnet*), pages hosted by Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council or other official or commercial sources, nostalgia pages trading in local photographs, images and memories (such as *Port Talbot Old and New*), debate and information groups (such as *Port Talbot Debate and Argue*), and campaign groups dedicated to causes, fundraising or raising awareness of specific local issues. These websites and social media channels have not been included in an in-depth content analysis due to the difficulty in obtaining a stable, comparable, sample, but are referred to in the audience-based research, i.e. the survey and focus groups.

### ***4.2.3 Audience reaction – studying Port Talbot people***

In the context of the literature on the public sphere and democracy discussed in Chapter 3, this research seeks to examine news consumption in the light of declining mainstream traditional news media; the audience's view of current and previously extant news media and how well it serves them; and crucially, to analyse civic engagement and democratic behaviour in Port Talbot in the light of declining professional news production. This entails audience-based research with local people, and it is therefore important to understand more about the demographics and make-up of the town.

Port Talbot is currently within the boundaries of the Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council local authority (previously it fell within the West Glamorgan local authority), and statistics and population data from Welsh and UK government tend not to break down into smaller units of analysis than this (though there are some limited statistics available at the ward level). However, as the whole local authority (LA) area broadly overlapped with the former geographic “patch” of the now defunct newspapers (the *Port Talbot Guardian* and its sister title



the *Neath Guardian*, which covered the LA's other main town, Neath, both shut at the same time), statistics at this level are very relevant to this research.

At the time of the 2011 Census, there were 139,812 residents living in the Neath Port Talbot LA area (Office for National Statistics, 2011). According to analysis of digital inclusion levels in Wales:

Older people, those with lower socio-economic status, individuals with limiting disabilities and those with lower educational attainment are more likely to be digitally disengaged. (Welsh Government: Government Social Research, 2011, p. 6)

Statistics for the Neath Port Talbot area show it is the fourth most digitally-excluded LA in Wales, with 40.91 per cent of the population having never accessed the internet, compared with the area most digitally engaged, which showed a figure of 25.55 per cent (Welsh Government: Government Social Research, 2011, p. 48). The correlation noted in the 2011 report between digital exclusion, older age, socio-economic status, limiting disabilities and lower educational attainment is borne out in other measures. For example, the LA area scores high on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2005, as "19 per cent of Neath Port Talbot's areas fall in the 10 per cent most deprived areas in Wales, and the majority of its areas are more deprived than the Wales average" (National Assembly for Wales Members' Research Service, 2008, p. Summary). The unemployment rate in 2013 was 66.4 per cent (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 4), with gross disposal household income slightly lower than the Welsh average, though weekly full-time earnings are slightly above the Welsh average (Welsh Government, 2014, pp. 9-10). Both male and female life expectancy are far below the Welsh average: for women the average is 81, compared with 82.25 all-Wales; for men it is 76.5 compared with 78.25 all-Wales (Welsh Government, 2014, pp. 14-15). Obesity and smoking rates are both higher than the Welsh average (Welsh Government, 2014, pp. 16-17), and the mental well-being score is much lower than the Welsh average (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 19). The number of working age adults with no qualifications is higher than the Welsh average (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 25), and

the number of children attaining the “expected level” in core subjects including English and maths, is lower than the Welsh average (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 29).

However, the people of Neath Port Talbot are more likely to visit a library than the Welsh average, with a rate of almost 7,000 visits per 1,000 people, and they are also more likely to participate in sporting activity, with 51 per cent of the adult population participating in some physical activity – higher than the Welsh average (Welsh Government, 2014, pp. 42-43). Just over 60 per cent of the population in the LA is of working age, with 21.3 per cent at retirement age (slightly higher than the Welsh figure of 20.7 per cent), and an under 16 population of 18.6 per cent (slightly lower than the Welsh average of 18.9 per cent) (National Assembly for Wales Members' Research Service, 2008, p. 3). The local authority area has the highest levels of unpaid carers in England and Wales, and also the highest proportion of the most intensive (“activity limiting”) caring, who care for somebody for more than 50 hours per week (White, 2013). Limited data are available on literacy and numeracy at the LA level: the National Skills Survey for Wales was carried out in 2005 and showed Neath Port Talbot to have among the lowest literacy and numeracy levels in Wales; however the study acknowledged limitations in the amount of data it held at the LA level (Palmer, 2005). This survey was repeated more recently (Miller & Lewis, 2010) but did not provide data at the LA level, though it did show literacy levels across the whole of Wales had improved from 25 per cent of the population attaining only basic entry level literacy or below, to around 12 per cent (Miller & Lewis, 2010, p. 10). Welsh numeracy levels at the basic level or below were 53 per cent in 2004 and 51 per cent in 2010 (ibid.).

Taking all of this into account, sampling for my own audience research was done using quota sampling; i.e. “the size of each quota should be weighted to match with known distributions in the population” (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 2007, p. 52). Two of the major studies used in designing my research (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Shaker, 2014) found evidence that certain demographic traits such as age, gender or income, can influence news

consumption, absorption of information, willingness to go online and other factors. Research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project has also found a correlation between socio-economic factors and a citizen's likelihood to be politically active or engaged, and also their likelihood to be politically active online (A. W. Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). It is therefore important to obtain a sample that provides a balance for age, socio-economic background, gender, race and other measures which may otherwise bias the results.

### ***4.3 Methodology***

This study uses a combination of traditional methods, adapted to suit the purpose of this research. As is often noted in the literature, combining quantitative and qualitative methods can offer "a richer and more satisfactory account" (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 10), and "the resulting analysis is invariably stronger" (ibid, p. 140). Using two or more methods to triangulate evidence is also a way of strengthening research and increasing the validity of any claims: "if data from two or more methods seem to converge on a common explanation, the biases of the individual methods are thought to 'cancel out' and validation of the claim is enhanced" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 240). As such, two quantitative methods, two qualitative methods, and a fifth method which combines both approaches in the shape of document analysis, have been selected, meaning that both quantitative and qualitative approaches can be applied to the two areas of concern to this study: news output and the audience's response or relationship to it. Studying both these elements is crucial in answering the research questions, as the audience's interaction with the text, as well as the nature of the text itself, are closely interlinked, as Deacon et al note:

[Cultural] production in the media is in part informed by a conception of media texts, images and genres as variable units of consumption, among differentiated target audiences and readerships, and cultural consumption is likewise informed by the

resultant media products which, of necessity, provide the initiating points of use, reception and interpretation. (2007, p. 284)

Taking this as a starting point, Port Talbot's news output (the "media texts") will be studied using a quantitative method (content analysis), and the journalists involved in creating the news will be questioned in semi-structured interviews, providing a qualitative method to complement the content analysis. Equally, "audiences and readerships" (ibid. p284) will be subject to a quantitative analysis, namely a survey, while qualitative insights will be provided by a series of focus groups. All of these will be complemented by a further method, which can offer both quantitative and qualitative insights – namely document analysis. I will now describe the design of each of these five methods in greater detail.

### ***4.3.1 Content analysis***

Content analysis has long been employed as a methodological tool in communication studies to quantify and characterise the content of news stories, and is one of the field's most "fundamental", "widespread" and "widely used" methods (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, p. 243; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002, p. 587; Riffe & Freitag, 1997, p. 515). It was adopted within communication studies as a way of measuring "observable" (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 118) trends and patterns in texts, in particular to "measure the quantitative changes of newspaper contents during the last generation, especially in the advertising section, in the feuilleton [feature and short story sections], between feuilleton and editorial, between editorial and news, between what is generally carried as news and what is not presented. Because conditions have changed significantly" (Hardt, 1979, pp. 181-182). It is this feature of content analysis – that it provides strong data about change across time in news texts – that makes it a particularly suitable tool in this study, which seeks in part to identify trends in the quantity, quality and local orientation of news reports about Port Talbot and how these have changed over more than 40 years.

A common criticism of the method is its inability to capture nuanced variations within texts such as attitudes or bias (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 119), however the principal focus of this study is on broader trends in the development of local news, in particular as the financial crisis hit, and so finer-grained issues or attitudes within the text do not form a big part of the research. For example, the attitudes of journalists towards Port Talbot news are not a priority in this study, while the number of stories written, the localness of those stories, the length and topic of those stories, the origin of the stories, and the kinds of people used as sources in the stories, are critical in answering the research questions, and can all be more effectively captured using content analysis as opposed to a qualitative approach such as discourse analysis. It should be noted, however, that given my deep familiarity with sample after coding and reading all stories myself I am well placed to offer relevant supplementary qualitative observations where necessary. Additionally, the attitudes, experiences and reflections of journalists working the Port Talbot patch across the sample period will be gathered in semi-structured interviews – I will return to this in more detail in the next section.

#### **4.3.1.1 Sample**

As the archives of the *Port Talbot Guardian* and the *South Wales Evening Post* are relatively complete, well-kept and readily available at the library archives in Swansea and Port Talbot – and because these were the primary newspapers dedicated to news about Port Talbot – I concentrated on carrying out the analysis on a typical-case sample (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 55) from this large and extensive population. Additionally, where it was available, I also analysed the archive of the Neath Port Talbot edition of the *South Wales Evening Post*. I examined a selection of newspapers from different years and from every month of the year and determined that sampling for one complete month every five years from 1970 to 2010, plus coding additional years around the closure of the *Port Talbot Guardian* and the last available year of the *South Wales Evening Post* archive, would give an indication of the news being published across the sample period of 1970 to 2013, and I therefore sampled the years 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985,

1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2008 and 2013. I also determined that the month of October was least likely to be skewed or biased by topics of news such as election coverage, summer “silly season” news, large sporting events, seasonal news or other factors that could bias the results. I then carried out a series of pilot tests to ensure the sample was consistent with the qualities of a sound test-case, in that it “exemplifies the key features of a phenomenon being investigated” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 55) and that the coding frame was useful and comprehensive.

The archives of the *Port Talbot Guardian*, the *South Wales Evening Post* (Swansea Final edition) and – where the archive was available – the Neath Port Talbot edition of the *South Wales Evening Post*, were accessed on microfilm in Swansea Central Library and Port Talbot Central Library (with the *Port Talbot Guardian* for 2008 and the Neath Port Talbot edition of the *Post* in hard copy only), with limited access to the holdings in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. The holdings across all archives are not complete, particularly for the Neath Port Talbot edition of the *South Wales Evening Post*, which is why both editions of this newspaper have been included in the study<sup>4</sup>. As the sample included a weekly and a daily newspaper, the weekly *Guardian* was coded in its entirety, giving either four or five complete editions for the study year, while the daily *South Wales Evening Post* was coded for every other edition, giving an average of 15 newspapers per study year. The sample for the *Post* always began on October 1 (unless this fell on a Sunday, when the newspaper was not published – in which case the sample began on October 2), but this could have been any of the remaining days of the week. This gave a good representation of different days of the week across the selected years, and so the day of publication was not a skewing factor. Only articles which explicitly mentioned Port Talbot or an area within Port Talbot were coded in both newspapers; however any mention, no matter how trivial (for example within a list of fixtures at the bottom of an article about a sports match between teams not from Port Talbot), would be enough to ensure an article was coded.

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<sup>4</sup> Extensive enquiries were made to discover holdings of the different newspapers, including research at the National Library of Wales and the British Newspaper Library. Contact was also made with newspaper publishers, local libraries and commercial suppliers of historical newspapers.

It is worth noting that, to some extent, this is a partial sample as it focuses on three particular newspapers and does not include the weekly *Neath Port Talbot Courier* (for which, unfortunately, there is only a scant archive), the *Neath Port Talbot Tribune* (for which there is no archive), and the *Western Mail* (which covers a large geographical area, and which would therefore have been resource-heavy to code, while yielding a proportionally very small sample of locally-relevant stories) and that this is a potential weakness of the research, “because generalizability and use of some statistics can become questionable” when using purposive sampling techniques (Riffe & Freitag, 1997, p. 519). However I have selected the newspapers not only because of their availability, but because of their importance in being the primary providers of news for Port Talbot in the sample period, and which will be able to provide data to answer the first set of research questions about how Port Talbot news has changed over time.

#### ***4.3.1.2 Coding frame***

The coding frame I have designed allows a thorough investigation of the first set of research questions, which seek to analyse the *quantity* and *quality* of Port Talbot news. The quantity of news is relatively simple to categorise and code. The act of coding a story ensured it was counted, but in addition, each story coded was measured in cm, and the size and pagination of the newspaper were also recorded to allow the proportions of Port Talbot news within newspapers containing news about other regional towns to be calculated.

Assessing the quality of news is more difficult, and so several indicators were used in an attempt to operationalize and measure this feature in line with common practice in the field of journalism studies. I coded for: page number (as an indicator of prominence), photograph and who the story was written by (to indicate how resources were allocated and to uncover trends in human resources and the use of user-generated content), the topic (used to examine the proportion of news serving journalistic roles such as scrutiny, representation or community-building), the news trigger (an indicator of the way news is gathered, which illuminates changing practices in the newsroom), and the people directly quoted as sources (a measure of

whose voice is represented in the media, including the number of people quoted, the status of the sources and their location).

I also address the localness of stories by coding for their geographical focus. Localness is an important indicator of representation and community-building. Each story that appeared in the *South Wales Evening Post* or *Port Talbot Guardian* that mentioned Port Talbot or an area within Port Talbot was coded, and the localness of the story analysed. Within the selection criteria, of course, all stories could be said to be local, and so to capture the finer detail of the location, stories that gave equal balance to two locations, or when a significant portion of the story was about one location but with a lesser balance given over to Port Talbot, the concept of an 'angle' was introduced, with values including national (UK news), regional (Welsh news), South Wales (the region covered by the *South Wales Evening Post*, mainly Swansea), County Borough (the region covered by the Neath Port Talbot or West Glamorgan local authority area) had their own values. However stories that were mainly focussed on another location and only included a brief passing mention of a local area, such as a Welsh rugby story that only mentioned a local area in a score line or a fixture list, were coded separately under the 'mention' code.

An important measure of the quality of news is taken to be the amount of resources allocated to a story, and so the prominence of the story within the newspaper (what page it appeared on), whether it was accompanied by photographs, and whether the story was credited to a particular journalist, were all coded, as journalists with bylines are often "the better-paid, more experienced members of editorial teams" (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 45). The topic of the news was also coded, and some of these, such as council, health, political or education stories, link to the concerns of the fourth estate as I discussed in Chapter 3. Conversely, more salacious topics such as celebrities, and entertainment (an increasingly popular style of reporting which is known as tabloidisation (Gripsrud, 2000)), or some types of crime reporting might be said to be



an indicator of journalism that is not necessarily in the public interest (Bondebjerg, 1996, p. 27; Marshall, 2005, p. 28).

A new measure was also introduced for this analysis, which I call 'news trigger'. This acknowledges similar research into "news hooks" by Jenny Kitzinger and Jacquie Reilly (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997), which has also been used in further studies of how and why news is chosen by a journalist to become news, for example:

Each story in our sample was classified in terms of the main reason for its "newsworthiness" – a category that we call the story's "news hook", but which is also sometimes referred to as a news story's "trigger". (A. J. Williams, Gajevic, Lewis, & Kitzinger, 2009, p. 18)

However, in this study, the news trigger is not measuring the event or element of the story that made it "newsworthy" – instead it seeks to track the flow of information to journalists, and the way official channels, media management sources, readers, social media, well-publicised local events and other such (public and private) information reach a journalist. To explain this more fully, it is perhaps helpful to describe the nature of newsgathering at the local level.

As editor of the hyper-local *Port Talbot Magnet* website and newspaper, there are several different ways I am 'triggered' to write a story (or publish someone else's). We operate a central email address, and this receives more than 200 press releases every week, from the local council, the local health board, British Transport Police, the Church of Wales, the press officers of local politicians, entertainment public relations companies and similar organisations. We also receive emails from members of the public who would like us to cover their events or issues and from local sports clubs sending in their match reports. I am also signed up to several online discussion groups (mainly based on Facebook) that are relevant to Port Talbot, from general interest, photography or nostalgia groups, to those set up by specific campaigns, for example those opposing school closures or the campaign against the closure of Junction 41 of the M4

motorway. We also run our own Facebook page, Port Talbot MagNet News, and our own group, Port Talbot News, which entitles anyone to post their own news story, as well as promoting the news stories we ourselves write – a news exchange point for Port Talbot. I also get out and about, attending public meetings, council meetings, or just chatting to local people. All of these ‘channels’ provide me with opportunities to spot stories, and what I discover can trigger a story to be written – from a neatly packaged press release, to a Facebook thread about a protest meeting, to a chat where I hear complaints about dust from a local building site resulting in a neighbour being hospitalised – all can result in me writing a story.

This variable, then, codes the action or impetus that triggered the journalist to write the story, and seeks to discover whether journalists were overt about attending council meetings, courts and other events traditionally associated with fourth estate journalism (what Lewis et al call “meaningful independent journalistic activity” (2008a, p. 17)), or whether they were attending managed media events such as launches or press conferences, or indeed whether they were remaining in the office and relying on the “information subsidy” (Gandy, 1982, p. 74) of press releases or writing stories from meeting agendas, minutes or magistrate courts’ lists, which would be an indication of a less active, and potentially less critical or questioning style of journalism (O’Neill & O’Connor, 2008). As Marshall explains, for example, “the press release[...] has been instrumental in shifting the balance of editorial content of newspapers throughout the twentieth century” (Marshall, 2005, p. 24). Part of the aim of this variable is to examine whether journalists were better resourced in past years than they are now to leave their desks, cultivate contacts and actively search out news for their readers. Studies by Franklin et al, Harrison, Lewis et al and others have found that actively produced news is better for democracy than passively reproduced news that is spoon fed to newsdesks or ‘media managed’ by outside agencies and corporations (Franklin, Lewis, & Williams, 2010; Harrison, 2006; Justin Lewis, Williams, et al., 2008b). Studies into the way news is used by other news outlets once it is in the public domain, where journalists are used as “unwilling sources” and their original material is “cannibalised” are also relevant (Phillips, 2011, 2012), and this kind of news was also coded

where it was visible. Only where the trigger was explicitly mentioned or when it was obvious from the text was it coded as such, and data collected in this category, as well as any conclusions reached, are expected to be complemented by the data gathered in interviews with journalists.

Finally, the study also coded sources. This was an additional measure of localness, as the geographic location of sources was recorded, but it also captured the number of sources quoted, which gives some indication of the journalistic effort that has gone into the reporting, as well as the time and resources devoted to reporting the story. O'Neill and O'Connor, for example, examined newspapers in the north England to examine how news was shaped by the sources journalists used. They found that the range of sources being used regularly was "narrow", as that a "reliance on a single source means that alternative views and perspectives relevant to the readership are being overlooked", concluding: "Journalists are becoming more passive, mere processors of one-sided information or bland copy dictated by sources" (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008, p. 487). Another study coded sources for their status, affiliation and localness, contending that greater diversity of sources was favourable for a "multiplicity of voices [...] necessary for effective self-governance and cultural vitality" (Voakes et al., 1996, p. 582). Another study of the use of citizens as sources noted the lack of "bottom-up", community-originated stories within traditional local media in the Netherlands, and also that the lack of citizens used as sources in stories meant they did not live up to Fourth Estate ideals:

As for the use of citizens as sources, instead of using citizens in substantial roles as engaged actors who define the public's news agenda, this remains overwhelmingly restricted to the easy-to-use vox pop format used for illustration and pragmatic reasons. This falls short of meeting the principles of public journalism in which citizen sources are seen as crucial for the contribution they can make to public debate by sharing knowledge or presenting an alternative perspective. (Hermans, Schaap, & Bardoel, 2014)

Others have noted the inequality in the power balance between journalists and PR sources. Gans argues PR sources often set the agenda, and suggests, “it takes two to tango, but sources usually lead” (Gans, 1979). Others have noted this reliance on government (including local government) and PR sources (for example Harrison, 2006), but research has concluded the growth in the use of PR and agency copy is directly related to falling staff numbers (Davis, 2002, p. 17). Sources and the way they are used are therefore connected with several preoccupations of this research, including representation of local people, localness of news, changing working practices and the implication for scrutiny and fourth estate journalism.

Once the coding was complete, the results were entered into SPSS, apart from the physical measurements of each story, which were entered into an Excel spreadsheet, along with the pagination of each newspaper and the overall page dimensions of the newspapers, in order to calculate the proportion of Port Talbot news being produced within each edition of each newspaper. The coding sheet and coding manual are at Appendix A and Appendix B.

#### ***4.3.1.3 Reliability***

Once the data were collected, coder reliability was tested. There are many studies of intercoder reliability that recommend re-testing of elements of the coding to ensure coders are able to categorise data consistently between them: “intercoder reliability is near the heart of content analysis; if the coding is not reliable, the analysis cannot be trusted” (Singletary, 1993, p. 294). As there was only one coder involved in the study, intercoder reliability of multiple coders (i.e., the extent to which different individuals make the same coding decisions about the material) is less pertinent than measuring single coder reliability (the extent to which a single individual makes the same decisions across the sample). Testing for single coder reliability is equally important, as one study points out in its list of content analysis “sins”:

One researcher who did all the coding in one study observed that, as a result, no measure of reliability was necessary. Some content analyses may, of course, involve

measurement that requires little coder judgement (eg, the number of photos on a front page), but reporting of reliability seems essential. (Riffe & Freitag, 1997, p. 519)

That said, many of the same principles apply in designing a single coder reliability test as an intercoder test, or indeed any other kind of test to establish the reliability of a measure, as “the aim of techniques of this nature is to determine the reliability of measuring instruments, and specifically the extent to which the particular scale or test is likely to yield the same measurements upon repeated application” (Marais, 1988, p. 95).

The only way to test the reliability of a single coder is for multiple coders to code the same material, and to test for percentage agreements across the text sample: “Only a direct comparison of different coders on the same text... offers the possibility of a true test of coding reliability and the potential for systematic tendencies for misclassification” (Mikhaylov, Laver, & Benoit, 2012, p. 9). The study examines the coding of party political manifesto which used 39 coders to recode 179 “text units”, which had been coded using one variable with 20 possible values (Mikhaylov et al., 2012). In this instance, the re-testing sample was much larger than the original sample because it was re-coded by many more individuals. However, for my own study, which contained 10 variables and so gave a greater range of opportunities for comparison, a sample of 200 cases, randomly selected from a range of years and across the three newspapers, formed the basis of the test. The test sample constituted 3.8 per cent of the whole sample. A member of academic staff at Cardiff University was given the coding manual, coding frame, sample articles, and training in the use of the materials, and then re-coded the articles. Using the simple percentage agreement method, overall inter-coder reliability tests showed reliability rates were high. Most variables were over 90 per cent reliable, and all were more than 85 per cent reliable.

### ***4.3.2 Semi-structured interviews***

In order to supplement the data gathered in the content analysis, and provide additional insights into the working practices of journalists from 1970 to 2014, I designed a series of semi-structured interviews, either conducted face-to-face or over the telephone with 11 Port Talbot journalists. This qualitative method aimed to “promote an active, open-ended dialogue with interviewees” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 67), but also to uncover concrete examples of working practices that could be compared with findings from across the sample period, or indeed with the answers of contemporaries of the interviewee. As Lindlof and Taylor note, “interviews are particularly well suited to understand the social actor’s experience and perspective” through “stories, accounts and explanations”; they are also adept at “inquiring about occurrences in the past” and “verifying, validating or commenting on information obtained from other sources” (2002, p. 173). For the purposes of this research, therefore, interviewing as a methodology offers many strengths. Understanding more about working practices at different points in time will help in the analysis of data produced by, for example, the ‘news trigger’ category in the content analysis by offering insights into the way reporters gathered information for writing their stories.

However, informal interviewing has its drawbacks, and these must be addressed in the sampling technique, question design and interviewing style employed. The more unstructured the interview, for example, the more “human factors” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 65), such as researcher bias, might influence the responses of the interviewee. Equally the interview is at risk of being hijacked or unduly influenced by the concerns of the interviewee, as Lindlof and Taylor note:

They may decide to be more effusive in their replies to some questions rather than others. They may refuse to answer questions, feign memory lapses, or balk at being drawn into a position implied by a line of questioning. (2002, p. 171)

More structured questioning offers more control over elements such as the wording of questions or the order in which they are asked, and therefore gives a more “standardised” and “neutralised” mode of questioning than informal techniques, which can be biased (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 65). In this study, however, a more informal “semi-structured”(Wengraf, 2001) approach, offering the opportunity to “generate deeper insights into subtle and complex perceptions and beliefs” (Deacon et al, p.65) is more suited to answering the research questions concerned with the quality of news and how it has changed over time, as well as the third set of research questions which seek to discover more about how local news and democracy are inter-linked.

#### **4.3.2.1 Sample**

In carrying out pilot tests for the content analysis, it quickly became clear that behind the news stories of council business, crime and sport there were other stories to be uncovered about what was happening behind the headlines inside local newsrooms. For example, news styles changed dramatically between 1970 and 2013 (more on this in later chapters) for while today’s newspapers might be full of the bylines and even photo-bylines of local journalists, this feature was largely absent from the pages of the 1970s newspapers I piloted. This led to a set of related questions to do with the way news was produced – and who was producing it – and how that changed over time – because changes in newsrooms might be linked to the volume or quality of news being produced.

Only one group of people could answer these questions – those who worked for the *Neath* and *Port Talbot Guardian*, and the *South Wales Evening Post*, between 1970 and 2014. Lindlof and Taylor call these kinds of expert people “informants”, and they define them as people who “inform the researcher about key features and processes of the scene – what the significant customs and rituals are and how they are done” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 176).

A sample of 11 local journalists was recruited from a list of around 20 potential interviewees who had worked the Port Talbot patch over the years. These names came from a variety of sources, most notably from bylines in the relevant newspapers, and to supplement this I was able to utilise my links with the local branch of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) (of which I am an officer) as well as the Welsh Executive Council of the NUJ (of which I am an elected official) to ask union colleagues for suggestions and contact details. Having worked as a journalist for more than 15 years, I also spoke to contacts and colleagues for leads. I searched the business networking website LinkedIn for journalists who had worked at the *Neath or Port Talbot Guardian* newspapers, and contacted several journalists by LinkedIn message (however, though I had some replies, this method yielded no interviewees). Other approaches were made by email or Twitter in the first instance, and followed up by phone call. Some of those interviewed passed on the details of other colleagues who might be willing to take part, thus a snowball sampling method was in part employed (Rakow, 2011).

Of the 11 interviewees, seven were men and four were women. There was a mix of job levels, with four attaining higher levels of seniority in their roles, while the rest occupied reporter-level roles. Four of the interviewees had started their job during the 2000s, three during the 90s, one during the 80s, and three during the 1970s or earlier. Three of the interviewees had also had some experience of working with the town's new online news service the *Port Talbot Magnet*. About half were still working journalists. The identities and detailed descriptions of job titles or working periods of all interviewees have been anonymised to protect those who preferred not to be named.

Most of the interviewees were known to me personally in one or more capacity (e.g. colleague, friend, rival newspaper employee or, in one case, client) – and the fact I am currently a Director of *Port Talbot Magnet* is a potential weakness of the research as it may have biased the results. For example, there are two main problems with using contacts, acquaintances or even rivals for interview. As Wengraf points out, the “personal reality and social identity” (2001,



p. 106) of the researcher and interviewee can influence the questions asked, and the answers given, in two possible ways. The first is that the interviewee may be reluctant to give honest answers to questions in the belief they could be “dangerous-to-the-later-relationship” (ibid. p. 106) – in other words, the interviewee may be influenced by the role of the researcher, or give “answers they think the interrogator would like to hear, that they believe are socially acceptable or that they wish were the case” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 64). To this, I would also add that rival newspaper employees might be (understandably) more guarded in their comments in a bid to protect their own position or publication from competition. The second main problem is that the researcher may also be prone to being influenced by a close relationship with an interviewee, perhaps by failing to ask difficult or socially “impertinent” questions (Wengraf, 2001, p. 106); the power relationship between the researcher and a client, for example, is potentially affected by the researcher’s wish to keep a client’s business. Careful planning and preparation of questions is key to guarding against these kinds of issues (Wengraf, 2001, p. 5), but there must also be a great deal of attention given to the way the interview is explained and introduced to the interviewee, the ethical concerns of the research, the information given to interviewees, assurances regarding confidentiality of data and identifying information, and even acknowledgement of the roles and identity of both participants and an overt agreement to leave certain ‘hats’ at the door – in short, to what Benney and Hughes call “the understanding between two parties that, in return for allowing the interviewer to direct their communication, the informant is assured that he [or she] will not meet with denial, contradiction, competition, or other harassment” and that “as with all contractual relations, the fiction or convention of equality must govern the situation” (Benney & Hughes, 1970, pp. 194-195). It should also be noted that I had little choice in the matter. The group of potential relevant informants was very small, and as a participant in news production and public life in a small town like Port Talbot it is hard not to have met, and interacted with, many of my relevant research participants before.

#### **4.3.2.2 Method**

Each interview took place in a setting that was comfortable for the interviewee, “a private place in which the needs of comfort and confidentiality can both be met” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 185) – generally this was left up to the interviewee to decide, and most of the face-to-face interviews took place in the interviewee’s own home, though one took place in my home and another in a café. Two of the interviews took place over the phone. They were all recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

The interviews themselves began with an introductory statement about the research and its aims, a consent/anonymity form, and an explanation of the rights of interviewees. Participants were given the option of signing two different consent forms – one if they preferred to remain anonymous, the other if they were willing to be identified, but which guaranteed their data would be held confidentially and in accordance with data protection laws and the ethics policies of Cardiff University (Appendix D).

The questions were concerned with gathering concrete examples of working practices, and as such a detailed series of prompts and possible follow-up questions was designed to form an interview guide that was composed of “groupings of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195). This method gave enough flexibility to tailor the interview to the individual interviewee, without compromising the aims of the research, and ensuring all the topics were covered and all questions answered. The topics of the interview were as follows: a description of interviewees’ relevant roles and what they involved (to gather evidence about changing work practices); a typical day at the start of their relevant job (similarly, to gather evidence about changing work practices and also to make comparisons with other accounts or with reflections on how the job changed); how they interacted with sources and how this changed over time (to complement content analysis data on sources); what writing a typical story involved, and how this changed over time, how their work overall changed over time, how much, and why, they left the office to

work on stories during the working day and how this changed over time, how they covered council meetings and council business and how this changed over time (all of which added to the evidence on changing working practices); were there any office moves or closures and when and how staff numbers changed (to gather evidence on resourcing and localness of journalism); what they defined as the job of a local newspaper, and how well this was achieved over time; a description of the closure of the *Neath and Port Talbot Guardians* and how this affected their work; how much competition there was between different newspaper journalists (to gather evidence about how multiple voices in the media interacted); and their opinion of how well served the public are, and have been, and how this has changed over time (to understand how informing the public, representation and scrutiny roles are viewed by journalists). Prompts for concrete examples, such as “In what way?” “Can you provide me any examples?” “Exactly how much?” or “Can you explain a bit more about what you mean by that?” were designed to elicit detailed qualitative information and narratives without leading the participants unduly.

I recorded the interviews using two devices: a voice recording app on an iPhone, and a stand-alone digital voice recorder, both of which provided clear recordings. The length of interviews varied from 45 minutes to more than 2 hours. The recordings were transcribed, redacted for any identifying or confidential data, and then analysed into “thematic codes” (Jensen, 2002, p. 251) using NVivo. The interview scheme and confidentiality and anonymity agreements can be found at Appendix C and Appendix D.

### **4.3.3 Surveys**

As already discussed, more formal and structured interviewing techniques, such as surveys, provide an opportunity for greater control of the order and wording of questions and of participation levels, as well as offering reduced interviewer bias (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 73). Surveys, too, can be particularly appropriate where quantitative data and a large sample are the best way to answer the research questions. To answer the second and third sets of research

questions, it is necessary to establish the media consumption habits of a representative sample of local people since the closure of the *Guardian* (what news did they access and what do they now access? How do they find out about essential information? How much basic information do they know about the area?), and also to find out their levels of civic or democratic engagement, and compare these with existing data sets that pre-date the closure of the *Guardian*. A survey of a representative sample of local people was therefore determined to be the best method to answer these questions.

As the body funding the research (KESS) provided a budget for this element, a number of audience research companies were contacted to tender, and Future Focus Research Ltd was appointed. The company carried out Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing techniques in face-to-face interviews using tablet devices to interview respondents in Port Talbot's shopping centre at the beginning of September 2014.

#### **4.3.3.1 Sample**

A sample of 350 respondents was agreed recognising the margin of error of a sample of this size was within acceptable levels ( $\pm 5.21$  per cent with a confidence level of 95 per cent). Using data from the 2011 Census for gender and age, and Welsh Government statistics for Socio-economic Group (SEG) data, the quotas of participants identified are at Table 4.2.

	<b>% of sample</b>	<b>No of agreed interviews</b>	<b>No of actual interviews</b>
<b><u>Gender</u></b>			
Male	49%	172	174 (47.8%)
Female	51%	178	190 (52.2%)
Total	100%	350	
<b><u>SEG</u></b>			
AB	22%	77	52 (14.3%)

C1C2	49%	172	190 (52.2%)
DE	29%	101	122 (33.5%)
Total	100%	350	
<b><u>Age Groups</u></b>			
16 – 30	22%	77	82 (22.5%)
31 – 44	21%	74	73 (20.1%)
45 – 60	27%	94	100 (27.5%)
60+	30%	105	109 (29.9%)
Total	100%	350	

**Table 4.2: Survey sample weighting**

In the event, the sample consisted of 364 respondents, with an abandonment rate of 0. Some of the quotas were slightly under or over their estimates, most notably in the SEG category, where only 14.3 per cent were AB respondents, significantly below the 22 per cent aimed for in the quota. However, the lower-than-average earnings in the area and fact that Neath Port Talbot is high in the Welsh Index of Deprivation accounts for this departure from the Welsh figures.

#### ***4.3.3.2 Method***

The survey aims to understand how local people access information and news in a local news system which has recently lost its dedicated professional news outlet, how well they think the news they access serves their needs, “public knowledge” issues around how well informed they are about key issues affecting the community, and how they now engage with their communities and the democratic process.

As I have already discussed in Chapter 3, a handful of other studies have examined the civic and democratic repercussions of the closure of local newspapers. Mainly these centre on closures in American cities, but there is also one British study. These studies are Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido’s 2009 study of voter turnout, the re-election of incumbents, the numbers of

candidates standing for election and campaign spending in the years leading up to, and immediately following, the closure of Cincinnati's second newspaper, the *Cincinnati Post* (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009); Shaker's 2014 study of newspaper closures in Denver and Seattle, which used data from the United States Census to measure civic engagement in the two studies after newspaper closures, comparing these with US-wide data (Shaker, 2014); Gentzkow et al's 2009 review of political data and statistics of newspaper launches and closures from 1869 to 2004 (Gentzkow et al., 2009); Berelson's 1945 study, which centred on the 1945 strike of delivery men in New York, which stopped the delivery of eight New York newspapers for 17 days and left the city without news (Berelson, 1948); and the study of the effects of newspaper closures conducted by The Media Trust, which funded research by Natalie Fenton and others at Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre, in 2010, which used a variety of methods, including content analysis, interviews and focus groups, to discover whether changes in journalism practices (for example the closure of a newspaper, an increase in hyperlocal community news coverage, increased community engagement by a radio station, or the increased use of digital and social media platforms) had affected communities' relationships with news media (Fenton et al., 2010).

Of these, perhaps the one most relevant from a methodological point of view is Berelson's, as he set out to coin a new method of capturing attitudes and feelings about the loss of a newspaper that went beyond the "surface facts" captured by two other existing polls at the time:

Both [polling] agencies attempted to get at the nature of the substitute for the newspaper, and in both cases respondents stressed that they listened to news broadcasts over the radio. Both attempted, in quite different ways, to discover what parts of the newspaper were particularly missed, and in both cases respondents stressed news (national, local, and war news) and advertising. Finally, both attempted

to get at the degree to which the newspapers were actually missed, and in both cases respondents indicated that they missed the papers intensely. (Berelson, 1948, p. 112)

He used his new method – an in-depth interview-survey hybrid – on a sample of 60 readers, capturing what he called “the more complex attitudinal matters operating in the situation” to answer the following questions: “What does ‘missing the newspaper’ mean? Why do people miss it? Do they really miss the parts they claim, to the extent they claim? Why do they miss one part as against another?” Recognising that the sample was not large enough to be statistically robust, Berelson instead concentrated on using this “intensive interviewing” technique to provide qualitative data on why a newspaper “really mattered” to the people he interviewed. The researchers accordingly asked typical survey questions such as “Do you agree with the following statement: “it is very important that people read the newspapers”, and noted that most people answered with a strong yes, following up by saying newspapers were important for informational and educational purposes. However, further questions attempted to find specific examples of news that readers had missed being able to read about. The answers to these questions demonstrated that, in fact, though many readers “paid tribute” to the newspaper’s informational role, very few of them actually used their newspaper for this purpose.

For my own research, rather than attempting this hybrid method, I chose to pursue broadly similar questions about the loss of the newspaper but, acknowledging Berelson’s approach, using two methods: a survey with a relatively large sample, followed by focus groups, where the more in-depth issues and motivations of local people and their relationship with news and information could be probed. As such, the purpose of the survey was to establish the facts about current news consumption, to discover how local people are obtaining important information post-newspaper-closure, ascertain knowledge levels to test how well information and news are flowing to local people, and find out more about the civic and democratic behaviours that might indicate the effects of a newspaper closure. The aim of the survey, then,

was to discover local people's media consumption habits, their knowledge levels, and their civic and democratic engagement. The survey questionnaire can be found at Appendix E.

#### **4.3.3.2.1 Media consumption - habits and access**

The corrosive influence of Internet use on political knowledge was a key finding of the Scheufele study (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002), but other research has also found strong indications that reading printed newspapers is essential for promoting political knowledge and civic engagement (Gentzkow et al., 2009; Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009; Shaker, 2014). It is also key to this study to understand where local people might turn for information when a local newspaper shuts down, and so I needed to find out whether they were former readers of the *Guardian*, where they read news now, and (coming at the same question from a different angle) how they access information about particular topics. This strategy replicates the line of questioning used by Berelson, in asking "surface facts" questions as well as using specific examples of behaviour to discover whether respondents' answers match their behaviour.

I therefore used questions designed to: examine current media use (do they access news online, on TV, on the radio, in print?); examine access to media (smartphone, broadband, cable TV access etc); ask about previous habits (did they read the *Guardian* (or any other now-defunct newspapers) before it/they closed?); find out what they know about local events – to get an understanding of whether political knowledge may be lower than comparative data, and whether this reflects respondents' answers about current media use; discover which sources of essential information they access (do they go online, ask a friend, phone an organisation, check other news sources, turn to social media, etc?).

Berelson's study (1948) highlighted the importance of asking respondents about their preferences and habits, but also of following up with questions that reveal concrete examples that may belie, or at least shed further contextual light on, the answers given.



It was therefore important to ask a further set of knowledge-based questions. I also probed local people's knowledge of two major recent local news stories about Port Talbot, and how they first heard about the stories in question. The two stories I have selected have been covered in the press, on radio and television, and also on social media, and both have had a physical impact on the town. First, the trial closure of Junction 41 of the M4 has had an impact on travel in, around and out of Port Talbot, and has affected a large proportion of people. The survey gauges how many people know about the closure (as it is the main junction serving the town), and also to find out from where they get information about the issue. This is a town-wide decision affecting many people, which has a strong local campaign opposing the closure, but which has been decided by politicians in the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff. It therefore provided an ideal case study in that was a high-profile issue, on which active campaigns had received media attention, which affected a large proportion of those living in the town, and which offered an opportunity to learn more about how information and news flowed in the town. Second, I asked participants about their knowledge of a change to the wheelie bin service provided by the council. This is an essential service which has affected every household in the LA area, and again this offered an ideal opportunity to discover how well such a change was communicated to local people and how they first found out about it.

#### ***4.3.3.2 Civic, community and political engagement***

Though there are many measures of civic engagement employed in the literature, there is little point attempting to use them all in this survey of Port Talbot, as one of the study's main aims is to discover whether the closure of the *Port Talbot Guardian* is related to possible *changes* in civic behaviours. This necessitates a comparison between two points in time, before the closure and after it, and as such the most useful data to be gathered from the survey are from those measures which can be directly compared with existing data captured before the closure. First, then, I will outline the standard measures found in the literature, before giving an appraisal of the available data sets for Port Talbot. Secondary analysis of these data sets is necessary to draw

diachronous conclusions about changes in civic engagement in Port Talbot (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 17).

Shaker identified several measures of civic engagement in his 2013 study. They included: contacting an elected official; buying or boycotting products or services for political or ethical reasons; participating in local groups or organisations; serving on a committee of a local group or organisation. He was restricted by the available data, which came from a national census in which a series of questions on civic engagement had been included. However, other studies and research papers have included a variety of different measures when trying to assess civic and community engagement, for example volunteering, attending public meetings, contacting the media, using the internet to research community issues (National Conference on Citizenship, 2009), also signing petitions and taking part in protests (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003) and making freedom of information requests (C. Randall, 2014).

For Pattie et al (Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003), there is a 17-item list of possible measures to indicate civic engagement. The study warns that these measures are not enough in themselves to prove engagement: none can be taken in isolation, with many respondents saying they had done more than one in the 12 months prior to survey and 78 per cent of respondents reporting doing at least one of the following actions in that time. These measures are: donated money to an organisation; voted in local government election; signed a petition; boycotted a product; raised funds for an organisation; bought a product for ethical reasons; contacted a public official; wore a campaign badge/sticker; contacted a solicitor; contacted a politician; contacted an organisation; contacted the media; attended a political meeting; participated in a public demonstration; formed a group of like-minded people; participated in a strike; and participated in an illegal protest.

Pattie et al make the point that certain indicators are more significant than others, with some, such as signing a petition, being seen as low-cost and low-risk to the individual, quick to carry out, and perhaps showing a weaker level of engagement, while others, such as

participating in an illegal protest or strike, are more risky to the individual and demonstrate a high level of activity, and therefore high engagement. Schulhofer-Whol and Garrido's 2009 study looked at how the closure of a newspaper might impact on political indicators such as election turnout figures, the numbers of candidates standing in elections, the amount of money spent on campaigns and the number of incumbents re-elected. These are also useful, and comparable, measures of political activity. Scheufele's study looked at levels of political knowledge among users of different media, asking for the names of elected officials or the jobs or roles of well-known politicians, which he compared with measures of "participation in local political or community life", including attending a neighbourhood meeting, contacting a local journalist, circulating a petition, voting in local elections, working for a political campaign, contacting a local public official, fundraising for local organisations, or making donations to local organisations (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002, pp. 70-71).

There is overlap between the measures identified in these studies. Using the list from Pattie et al as a basis for identifying existing data sets, I have added two of the measures from Shaker's study which are not represented in the Pattie et al study (namely participating in a local group, serving on the committee of a local group), one from the National Conference on Citizenship list (namely volunteering), one from Randall's Office for National Statistics report (namely freedom of information requests), the traditional participation and political knowledge questions from Scheufele's study, as well as the election data listed by Schulhofer-Wohl and Garido, and found data available for comparison (Note: data are required at two geographical levels: Neath Port Talbot Local Authority or Parliamentary Constituency level, and all-Wales or National – this enables comparisons with overall trends to ensure significant results are not caused by a wider trend). The breakdown is at Table 4.3.

Measure	Data sets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participated in a local group</li> <li>- Served on the committee of a local group</li> </ul>	<p>The Living in Wales survey was carried out from 2004 to 2008 and contained questions on participating in local groups and serving in an official capacity in groups. After 2008 it became the National Survey for Wales, and these questions were dropped. Though it was hoped they would provide a useful baseline for before the closure of the <i>Guardian</i>, it appears sample sizes are too small. Additionally any answers gathered with my survey in 2014 cannot be compared more widely with the picture in Wales as there are no data available for Wales from the Living in Wales survey after 2008. I have also looked at the National Crime Survey, which asks about membership of Neighbourhood Watch schemes, but again the sample sizes are too small at Local Authority Level to be significant. There are also relevant questions on membership of organisations in the Understanding Society survey, but once again sample sizes are not viable.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Volunteering</li> </ul>	<p>The Welsh Government collates statistics from the 22 local CVS organisations around Wales. Volunteering rates for the Neath Port Talbot area can be compared with those for the whole of Wales or with other CVS areas (these correspond to Unitary Authority areas), and give a picture over time from 2005-2014</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Voted in local government election</li> <li>- Number of candidates in local election</li> </ul>	<p>Voter turnout figures are widely available for the UK Parliamentary Elections and the Welsh Assembly Elections. The British Local Election Database, 1889-2003 provides the data for the Local Council Elections. Candidate numbers are not consistently available for the sample period and this measure has been ruled out due to the difficult of collating the figures.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contacted a public official</li> <li>- Contacted a politician</li> <li>- Contacted an organisation</li> </ul>	<p>Unfortunately the local MP and AM do not keep records of contact from constituents. However, every few years, the British Social Attitudes Survey includes a set of political efficacy questions, and these include contacting politicians and public officials. Sample sizes at the constituency level are too small for analysis.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Signed a petition</li> <li>- Contacted the media</li> <li>- Participated in a public demonstration</li> <li>- Formed a group of like-minded people</li> <li>- Participated in a strike</li> <li>- Participated in an illegal protest</li> </ul>	<p>These issues are included in the political efficacy questions asked every few years by the British Social Attitudes Survey. Again, sample sizes are too small for a longitudinal analysis at the constituency level, but the national average from the most recent survey in 2011 forms a useful baseline for comparison with my own data.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Donated money to an organisation</li> <li>- Boycotted a product</li> <li>- Raised funds for an organisation</li> <li>- Bought a product for ethical reasons</li> <li>- Wore a campaign badge/sticker</li> <li>- Worked for a political campaign</li> <li>- Contacted a solicitor</li> <li>- Attended a political meeting</li> <li>- Attended a neighbourhood meeting</li> <li>- Circulated a petition</li> <li>- Political knowledge such as: The name of the mayor Name of a politician. The function of a named authority figure The job title of the person with legal or government level responsibilities for something important in the town</li> </ul>	<p>No data found</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Freedom of Information requests</li> </ul>	<p>There is no central collection of data from the Unitary Authorities in Wales of the number of FOIs they have received, and each authority has different methods of collecting this data themselves (and some did not keep records for the first few years after the legislation came into force). I therefore made my own Freedom of Information requests to the 22 Unitary Authorities in Wales, and have assembled data on the number of FOIs each authority has received since the legislation came into force in 2004/5 to make comparisons between the figures in NPT and the figures for the whole of Wales.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Importance of voting/ political intentions and morale</li> </ul>	<p>The national Understanding Society survey contains questions on the importance of voting, and how people feel about the political process, but again the sample sizes are too small to allow for a viable sample at the local authority level.</p>

**Table 4.3: Comparative data sets, by measure**

It is important to note that the acquisition of many of these existing studies and data sets has entailed document analysis, as well as some secondary analysis of the data. I describe my methodology in this regard later in this chapter.

#### ***4.3.3.2.3 Perceptions of Port Talbot in the news***

There is one final set of questions I think it is worth asking, to do with how local people feel they or the local area are portrayed and represented in existing media. Based on many informal conversations I have had with people in the area during my time as a community journalist on the *Port Talbot Magnet*, and my own-in-depth knowledge of media coverage of the town (both historic and current), I gathered informal data and impressions about how they feel about the town and the way it is represented in the media (for example a statement I hear frequently is that “there’s no news about Port Talbot in the *Evening Post*”). Similarly, existing research (identified in my literature review above) highlights how local and regional news has become increasingly less local in orientation in recent years. Pursuing this line of enquiry in focus groups enables me to gather data on this element, an indicator of how much of local news is trusted, how much local people agree with the portrayal of Port Talbot in the news, how well-informed they feel, how well-represented they feel, and other perceptions of local media coverage. These measures form a baseline that enables further discussion in the focus groups. These discussions are designed to illuminate areas difficult to capture in quantitative measures such as a survey – the qualitative data shed light on areas of the research to do with civic and community engagement, agency, trust, and other key indicators of how well journalism is serving local people.

#### ***4.3.4 Focus groups***

The Media Trust’s report used a series of focus groups to uncover how perceptions about the quality of news influence how easily people report being able to find essential information (Fenton et al., 2010), and as I have similar preoccupations I determined this method will be a

useful way to answer some of my own research questions. Focus groups can offer “a richer set of data than can sometimes result from a single interviewer’s interaction with a single respondent” (Hornig Priest, 1996, p. 109) as the dynamics of a group can put participants more at ease, change the power balance between respondent and researcher, and help participants to “pick up on” and “react” to each other (ibid. p. 109). Lindlof and Taylor call this a “chaining” or “cascading” effect, as “talk links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions preceding it” (2002, p. 182).

Indeed, one of the main benefits of using focus groups is the way they can “encourage participants to talk to one another, asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others’ experiences and points of view” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4), and it is this interplay between participants that offers the richness and detail of a broader “community view” that is useful in complementing other methods employed in this research, allowing the analysis to move beyond the quantitative data supplied by surveys and capture “how people experience, define, think, feel and represent” the topic of discussion (Waterton & Wynne, 1999, pp. 132-133). Equally, what is unsaid, or what is meant, is as important as what is said, and this layer of nuance can add “a wealth of information” to the data (ibid, p.133).

Though widely used as a stand-alone qualitative method in their own right, focus groups have also been commonly used to complement quantitative data, to “guide the interpretation of data” – for example in one study, participants were asked to press a button indicating their positive or negative responses to a radio programme; afterwards focus groups were used to gain further insight and detail about their reactions to the programme (Gunter, 2000, pp. 42-43). It is for an analogous purpose that I will employ the method in my own research, to supplement data gathered from the survey, and also to add qualitative depth, richness and the detailed experiences and observations of the participants to the story of Port Talbot’s news landscape.

#### 4.3.4.1 Sample

I recruited 43 participants for four focus groups, to be split by age for three of the groups, with the final group consisting of active or campaigning citizens. The age variable was selected due to the longitudinal nature of the study to correlate findings about changes over time with the content analysis, but also to account for the well-researched differences in media consumption habits between different age groups (Ofcom, 2014b). I was also keen to capture the different experiences of participants who had experienced different media landscapes: where the older age group might have been accustomed to large amounts of dedicated local news being produced by many different providers, and have responded differently to the closure of the *Guardian*; or, conversely, where younger participants might have been exposed to a media landscape dominated by digital platforms and the withdrawal of newsprint and who might never have experienced life in the town while a journalist was working there. In addition, a fourth group was added to provide an alternative viewpoint. These were politically active and campaigning citizens, known to the author through their campaigning work.

The intention, then, was to create “complementary interactions” between the different age groups to maximise the richness of the data – where “members broadly agree on an expressed view and add their own observations and subtle shades of interpretation to the view” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182). Each focus group had a minimum of 10 people signed up to it, but there were at least two no-shows for each group, and so they ran as Table 4.4 shows.

Focus Group 1	Age 60+	7 participants (3 F, 4 M)
Focus Group 2	Age 30-59	8 participants (7 F, 1 M)
Focus Group 3	Age 18-29	8 participants (4 F, 4 M)
Focus Group 4	Politically active and campaigning	8 participants (1 F, 7 M)

**Table 4.4: Focus group schedule**

Recruitment was done in four ways. First, those who were surveyed by Future Focus Research were asked whether they would be willing to take part in focus groups, and any that agreed



were added to a list. Those on the list were then phoned to ask if they were still willing and available for the group, and about 50 per cent of the age-based focus groups were recruited in this way. Second, an advert was placed in the *Port Talbot Magnet* newspaper, and two participants were recruited for the age-based focus groups in this way. Third, adverts and posts were placed on several local groups on Facebook, and the remaining participants for the age-based focus groups were sourced in this way. Finally, a pool of around 20 campaigners was identified from the researcher's knowledge of local news stories and campaigns. These contacts were approached with a short description of the research and an invitation to take part (mainly by using Facebook messages), and all the participants for FG4 were recruited in this way. Participants were given £25 to compensate them for any expenses incurred by their participation, and the groups lasted for 2 hours.

It is notoriously difficult to source participants for focus groups, even more so to create random or even representative samples, and even where money to cover expenses is offered, "those who accept will often be less busy, more co-operative, and perhaps poorer [...] than the population from which they are drawn" (Hornig Priest, 1996, p. 110), and this can, of course bias the results by attracting a certain type of participant and failing to attract others, risking sections of the community being unrepresented. As my study asked about essential information and how it was accessed, the gender, SEG and employment status of participants are likely to influence the results, for example a group of busy business people would be likely to give a different account of what information is important to them and what methods they use to access it – perhaps government policy or financial data accessed on a smart phone would be more likely to come up than, say, a group of residents from a care home, who might be more likely to stress their need to know about local health care provision and their preference to access it via a free newspaper or radio programme. For this study, where the participants were of mixed employment backgrounds, mixed gender, mixed age, and which attracted half its participants online and the other half in a shopping centre survey, one of its main strengths was that the participants included social actors not often heard from in media debates – in particular young

people, those who are socially excluded, digitally excluded, disengaged from the democratic process or unemployed (Cushman & Klecun, 2006; Cushman, McLean, & Klecun, 2008; MacPherson, 2008). I also sought to counterbalance any bias arising from the demographics of the participants by using multiple recruitment methods, and by holding one focus group for invited, pre-selected participants with histories of active political engagement to offer potential counter-views to the more random sample of FG1-3.

#### **4.3.4.2 Method**

The four focus groups were held in local venues chosen to be familiar and non-threatening to many (conference rooms at Blanco's Hotel and the Aberavon Beach Hotel in Port Talbot), at times of day that were intended to maximise participation by being most convenient for the attendees. For the over 60s group (FG1), this meant a central venue during the morning; while the other three groups were held at a central venue, but during the evening when younger or more socially active participants might be less constrained by commitments such as work, education or childcare.

Participants were given an information sheet upon arrival (see Appendix F for this and Appendix G for the focus group schedule), and invited to sit around a large table set out in meeting style. The researcher introduced herself, read through the information sheets, and obtained informed consent from the participants. Payments were handed out at the start of the session, and it was made clear that participants were free to leave the session at any time, as well as to ask questions, or decline to answer questions. Refreshments were provided, and a comfort break was offered to those who needed it. In the younger group, in fact, some participants became agitated after an hour of the session and this threatened to disrupt the discussion. Some requested to leave so they could smoke a cigarette, and this five-minute break where about half the participants left the room for this purpose served to restore a more productive atmosphere in the discussion afterwards. This is an important, and very practical,

experience which may be useful to other researchers contemplating running focus groups of this kind.

My use of this method aimed to obtain data on the experiences and opinions of participants about a number of key issues that were closely linked with the issues that formed the basis of the survey design. Once again, the method seeks to discover more about how well-informed and well-represented local people are, how well-served they are by the community-building and scrutiny function of the traditional media, or how they are able to access these elements for themselves in the absence of a strong, pluralistic media scene robustly fulfilling these duties.

To discover this, the survey examined news consumption habits of current and former local news outlets; it asked about news seeking behaviour in an attempt to understand whether and how people access information; it questioned their perceptions of how they were represented; it asked how well-informed they were, and it asked a series of questions relating to civic engagement. The design of the focus groups built on this structure, seeking depth and richness through the experiences of local people. However, though the focus of the research is on local media provision and how its absence may damage the public sphere, the research was mindful of skewing the results through social desirability response, either of giving an answer more socially desirable in the eyes of the group, or of the participants subconsciously attempting to supply the answers they perceived the research to require (D. M. Randall & Fernandes, 1991). As Priest notes, "it's natural for focus group participants to want to please the researcher, and they'll try hard to come up with the kinds of arguments they think are desired without even realising it" (1996, p. 112). In order to avoid this, open, non-subject specific, prompts were designed to elicit examples about information and knowledge and the way this reached the participants, and four of the five parts of the script deliberately avoided overt mention of the word *news*, instead asking about *important information*. As such this was a partially blind study, which avoided explicit use of the terms news, newspaper and media until

the fourth section out of five. This was particularly important considering the focus of the study is on a news black hole and an absence of local news in which there was a chance that news was not a significant factor in the flow of information – and it was therefore important not to seed any bias by overtly referring to news at the outset.

The five sections were carefully scripted, and concentrated on discovering how information flowed in the town. Broadly, the focus groups aimed to discover the following: how they felt about the town (was their experience or opinion positive or negative, or a mixture of both?); what information participants considered important or necessary to help them live their lives (for example what kind of information they needed in order to help them respond to decisions made by people in authority such as planning approval for a new development, or to behave as members of the community by attending groups or as citizens by putting out their rubbish on the right day); how they were able to get hold of this information (for example were they relying on traditional media or other channels of information such as word-of-mouth or official-to-public channels such as official websites – an indication of how information is flowing in the public sphere after the closure of the newspaper); how much they knew about important issues in the town – and how they were able to verify this information (an indication of how well-informed they are as citizens – an important marker of the health of the public sphere); how much they engaged with traditional news media about the town (again, adding to the picture about how information is accessed following a newspaper closure); how they used other media, e.g. social media; how they responded to and trusted all media (what was the value of the media to them, and what is their perception of the quality of the media); and what they would ideally like news media to be like if they were to serve their information needs.

The focus group script was therefore divided into five parts, and these are broken down and described more fully at Table 4.5.

<b>Section</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Aim</b>
1) Introduction (20 minutes)	Explaining the research and purpose of the focus groups, including completing consent forms and time for questions from participants	Fulfilling the ethical requirements of the research, obtaining relevant information from participants and ensuring participants are fully informed and able and willing to consent
2) Information and how it flows (20 minutes)	Beginning with an icebreaker (which asked participants in turn to say their name, one thing they liked about Port Talbot, and one thing they didn't like), and followed with a brainstorming session on what information participants considered important to know about the local area, and then a question about how they find this information now	Discovering how people feel about living in the town; understanding what types of information are valued by participants; exploring how these information types are accessed, and how easy it is for participants to find out what they need to know
3) Issues and Campaigns	Asking participants to discuss their opinions of the closure of a major motorway junction into the town, and then probing how they found out about the closure, how they make their views heard to authority figures or in the public sphere, and how well their opinions are listened to and/or represented in the media	Using a case study to examine what kind of information flows in the town, how this information is accessed, and how the audience responds to the quality of this information
4) Civic Participation and Engagement	Asking for more detail about how their opinions on the closure are expressed, how represented they feel, and any practical ways in which they have tried to oppose the closure, broadening the discussion to wider concerns about the way they engage with issues or campaigns if the opportunity arises	Obtaining rich detail about civic and democratic engagement, the scrutiny of institutions, representation of their views and other essential features of the public sphere
5) Local News Media	A discussion on how they use local news media, what they think of them, and what kind of local news media they would like "in an ideal world"	An opportunity for participants to reflect on the local media currently available, and to discuss how they would ideally like these media to serve them through a discussion about possible formats for news that would be useful to them

**Table 4.5: Focus group design**

Each section was carefully timed, as the table shows, and a flipchart was used to aid the brainstorming style of sections two and three. The participants were seated around a large table in meeting style. The researcher sat around the table, or stood at the flipchart, which was set at the corner of the table where all participants could see it. All the focus groups were recorded on multiple devices (a smart phone and a digital voice recorder with multi-directional microphone) and then transcribed and anonymised. Finally they were thematically coded and analysed in NVivo.

### ***4.3.5 Document analysis***

In their chapter about the use of documentation in research, Deacon et al recommend that researchers “take full advantage of any available source that might supplement, back up or challenge the materials produced by your major methods of investigation” (2007, p. 16). Documents are used to “flesh-out, cross-check or question” other lines of inquiry or argument in a study (ibid, p.15). In historical research, the bulk of such analysis concentrates on personal accounts expressed in diaries, letters, taped conversations or other historical artefacts that are useful when participants cannot be studied at first hand, but document analysis can also be a valuable method for examining government documents, newspapers and other printed materials, recordings, digital media, and statistics (Deacon et al., 2007; Jane Lewis, 2004). It is primarily this latter type of documentation – official, commercial and academic statistics - that has been used in this study.

That is not to imply that in being limited to statistical analysis, the method has not added to the richness of detail in the discussions. Though the analysis has provided primarily quantitative data as opposed to qualitative data or context, it has provided a wealth of raw information that has contributed to illuminating discussions about newspaper circulation decline at national and local levels. It has also been an invaluable method for uncovering and analysing relevant studies and surveys to compare, for example, with my own data from

surveys. Much of the raw data has been subject to secondary analysis to provide new data about local election turnout figures in a news black hole, Wales-wide data about the rate of Freedom of Information requests, and also brought into the public domain longitudinal data concerning volunteering in Wales.

#### ***4.3.5.1 Sample***

Document analysis, by its nature, can entail examining a wide variety of documentation types, and the ways these can be studied is equally varied depending on the objectives of the research. As my own research has focused mainly on statistical records, I have not, for example, needed a coding frame or other thematic analysis tools. The bulk of the research involved identifying and obtaining access to relevant documents, and then analysing and collecting data from these in a methodical way. Though all the parts of the research which used document analysis used this overall approach, the sampling and method have differed slightly in each area of the analysis, and I have discussed each of these below.

##### ***4.3.5.1.1 Circulation data***

It is expensive to subscribe to the Audit Bureau of Circulation's (ABC) database, and as such most libraries do not offer access to historical newspaper circulation data in this way. The British Newspaper Library, however, keeps ABC data for national newspapers on microfilm for the period 1936-1998, and the ABC reports from 1998 onwards are kept on their open access shelves (though my own experience is that these records are incomplete). However, the British Newspaper Library also keeps copies of Benn's Media Press Directory and Willings Press Guide, dated from 1951 onwards. These publications often cite ABC circulation data. Accessing ABC circulation data, then, necessitated a trip to the British Newspaper Library, and I carried out the research in 2011, working first with the circulation figures on microfilm for national UK newspapers and a selection of Welsh daily and weekly newspapers, and then filling in any gaps using the later ABC reports, and then Benn's and Willing's guides. This resulted in a large

dataset that sampled the national newspapers between 1951 and 2010, and the Welsh newspapers from 1970 to 2010. For data about penetration, I accessed the JICREG database, where detailed information is available, divided by small geographical areas.

#### **4.3.5.1.2 Staff numbers**

Building on data from a study of the *Western Mail* (A. Williams & Franklin, 2007), I have used the Companies House website to access the Annual Report and Financial Statements of Media Wales Ltd, which published the *Guardian* and now publishes the *Western Mail* and Trinity Mirror's other Welsh titles, and South West Wales Media Ltd, which published the *South Wales Evening Post* and (as it was then) Northcliffe's other Welsh titles. These companies are two of the biggest publishers in Wales, and own most of the news titles that serve, or have served, Port Talbot. These reports contain a section that lists the number of employees (often categorised by type), and this information has contributed to me being able to update the figures produced by Williams et al, but also to add data for South West Wales Media for supplementary and comparative purposes.

#### **4.3.5.1.3 Democratic data – election turnouts**

General election and Welsh Assembly election turnouts are relatively easy to obtain online (most are on Wikipedia or other online reference sites), and these figures are usually available broken down to the constituency level, though some digging was required to find the Aberavon constituency turnout for the 1997 Welsh Assembly election (Kimber, ca 2015; Morgan, 1999). However, it is surprisingly difficult to obtain longitudinal data about local election turnouts, and only one study provide these data in one complete dataset: the British Local Election Database, 1889-2003 (Rallings, 2006). This vast study offers more than a century's worth of information (and over a million separate pieces of data) about candidates, votes, turnouts and many other aspects of local elections gleaned from a variety of documents and primary sources. Obtaining this dataset provided the basis for a secondary analysis that involved isolating parts of the data,



aggregating selected data to obtain constituency-wide or Wales-wide averages, and constructing my own data tables to enable the comparison between Aberavon’s turnout figures and the Welsh average.

**4.3.5.1.4 Civic data – political efficacy surveys**

It has not been possible to obtain the data on civic engagement that I had planned. While Lee Shaker (2014) was able to make use of the US National Census, which included questions on political engagement and offered a large sample size, the UK Census did not ask questions about political engagement or efficacy and so could not be used for this research. Four other national survey-based studies offered hope of large sample sizes and asked questions that included some markers of civic engagement. These are outlined at Table 4.6.

Name of study	Survey question themes/ relevant research areas
The Living in Wales survey, 2004, 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participated in a local group</li> <li>- Served on the committee of a local group</li> </ul>
The National Crime Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Membership of Neighbourhood Watch scheme</li> </ul>
Understanding Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contacted MP</li> <li>- Taken part in a protest</li> </ul>
British Social Attitude Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contacted MP or MSP</li> <li>- Spoken to an influential person</li> <li>- Contacted a government department</li> <li>- Contacted radio, TV or a newspaper</li> <li>- Signed a petition</li> <li>- Go on a protest or demonstration</li> <li>- Form a group of like-minded people</li> </ul>

**Table 4.6: UK-wide survey-based studies and their comparable data**

Though all of these studies might have offered longitudinal insights into civic engagement in Port Talbot, none had sample sizes larger than 50 for the Aberavon constituency area or the Neath Port Talbot Local Authority area, and so no conclusions have been drawn. A diachronous comparison of these civic markers is therefore not possible. However, the most recent British Social Attitudes Survey has provided a baseline for comparison with some of the civic markers used in the survey, and this is discussed in Chapter 7.

#### ***4.3.5.1.5 Civic data – Freedom of Information requests***

UK-wide data on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to local authorities is not held centrally. I therefore used FOI legislation to make 22 FOI requests of my own (an example letter is at Appendix H), one to each of the local authorities in Wales. All but one of these returned data that showed how many FOIs the authorities had received since the legislation came into force in 2005. I compiled this into a single data set, and generated a Welsh average figure for comparison with the figure for the Neath Port Talbot local authority area. The full data table is at Appendix I.

#### ***4.3.5.1.6 Civic data – Volunteering rates***

There are no longitudinal Wales-wide data at the local authority level available in the public domain about volunteering rates. As such I contacted Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), a body that oversees local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) offices located in the local authority area across Wales to request access to their data. They were able to compile statistics from the annual returns filed by each CVS from 2008-2014, which they supplied to me. I carried out secondary analysis on these data to obtain a Wales-wide average for volunteering rates, for comparison with the figures for Neath Port Talbot. The raw data are available at Appendix J.

# *Chapter 5*

## *The media in Wales*

### *5.1 Aims and theoretical context*

In 2005, Cardiff University's James Thomas was commissioned by the NUJ to write an independent report about the state of the Welsh media, and in particular its ability to serve Welsh democracy. He found that "the Welsh press is weak compared with the UK media in Wales", that the circulation of Welsh dailies was less than the weeklies, but that the revenue of the dailies was greater than that of the weeklies, and that "Welsh press ownership is concentrated among large media corporations whose major commercial interests are outside Wales" (J. Thomas, 2006a, p. 50). He continued:

Any further weakening of the regional and local press and Wales is likely to have a seriously negative impact on the health of the media 'debating chamber' that exists in Wales. It is crucial that Welsh regional and local papers are given the resources to effectively provide high quality journalism [...] They hold the main key to informing people about issues important to Wales [...]. The lack of coverage of Wales in the UK media makes a vibrant Welsh press all the more vital and the evidence clearly suggests that democracy in Wales will inevitably suffer with further cuts. (J. Thomas, 2006b, p. 4)

Though there have since been some studies into the Welsh newspaper industry, in particular of the "dominant" newspaper publisher in Wales, Trinity Mirror, the kind of overview of the Welsh media that was provided by Thomas has not been updated since his report .

Though this research cannot provide as comprehensive an undertaking as a full audit of the Welsh media in 2015, in this chapter I seek to update the parts of the analysis that are relevant to my own study. This entails: analysis of UK-wide trends to provide context for the Welsh picture; an examination of local and weekly newspapers in Wales including the wider trends in the market; a case study of Wales' largest newspaper (the *South Wales Evening Post* published by Northcliffe/ Local World); and an in-depth examination of the case study of news media in Port Talbot through a historical analysis of the two newspapers that have served Port Talbot over the sample period, namely the *South Wales Evening Post* (specifically its Port Talbot-related coverage) and the *Port Talbot Guardian* (the now-defunct weekly formerly published by Trinity Mirror).

This chapter uses original research to provide an overview of news trends in the UK, Wales and Port Talbot. The overview provided here offers a useful context for discussion in later chapters, but also begins to provide an answer to RQ 1.3: Can any changes in this local news be explained by changes in newsgathering practices over the sample period? Three methods are employed in this analysis: document analysis and secondary analysis of circulation data, annual reports, evidence to government committees and correspondence from journalists; interviews carried out with 11 journalists working in South Wales during the sample period; and content analysis of the *Post* and the *Guardian*.

## ***5.2 National trends***

As part of document analysis that was carried out for this study, I have gathered Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) circulation data in 5-year increments for a selection of tabloid, mid-market and quality national newspapers from 1950 to 2010, tracking the downward slide of circulations through the six decades, and this is at Table 5.1. Some, such as the *Mirror* and the *Express*, which peak in the 1960s, and the *Sun*, which peaks in the 1980s, take longer to show the decline.

	Jul-Dec						
	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980
<b>The Mirror</b>	4,618,923	4,694,042	4,648,768	5,019,314	4,443,584	3,918,916	3,598,676
<b>Daily Star</b>							1,061,565
<b>Sun</b>				1,273,751	1,721,533	3,457,455	3,741,373
<b>The Express</b>	4,220,952	4,075,889	4,269,704	3,987,439	3,518,664	2,750,614	2,194,174
<b>Daily Mail</b>	2,293,565	2,073,766	2,825,350	2,463,972	1,814,331	1,722,882	1,947,837
<b>Daily Telegraph</b>				1,336,775	1,415,656	1,308,804	1,433,077
<b>Financial Times</b>	57,319	81,767	122,505	146,183	165,047	175,340	196,495
<b>Guardian</b>	137,499	154,140	212,263	270,237	304,102	303,265	378,852
<b>Independent</b>							
<b>The Times</b>	240,085	217,903	259,961	254,337	375,055	310,548	279,059

	Jul-Dec					
	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
<b>The Mirror</b>	3,033,271	3,082,943	2,533,150	2,244,274	1,717,262	1,202,382
<b>Daily Star</b>	1,454,727	911,761	749,650	642,162	881,884	808,804
<b>Sun</b>	4,125,480	3,854,694	4,027,850	3,608,827	3,257,551	2,928,875
<b>The Express</b>	1,902,425	1,585,495	1,261,977	1,032,471	825,320	649,957
<b>Daily Mail</b>	1,815,056	1,708,280	1,876,911	2,382,369	2,363,724	2,117,030
<b>Daily Telegraph</b>	1,202,290	1,075,980	1,052,928	1,021,013	903,920	658,172
<b>Financial Times</b>	233,604	289,726	295,740	469,057	425,901	389,681
<b>Guardian</b>	487,080	424,124	395,135	394,913	382,291	273,384
<b>Independent</b>		411,378	292,827	229,544	259,178	180,812
<b>Times</b>	478,174	420,127	668,756	719,595	689,141	479,626

**Table 5.1: National daily newspaper circulations 1950-2010 (Source: ABC)**

There are notable declines across all types of newspapers, with an 84 per cent drop at the mid-market *Daily Express* from its 1950 heyday, and a 74 per cent drop at the tabloid *Daily Mirror*.

The quality titles have shown slightly smaller, though still substantial, losses, with circulation decline at the *Daily Telegraph* at 50 per cent decline between 1965 and 2010 (it launched in 1963), and 56 per cent at the *Independent* between 1990 and 2010 (it launched in 1987).

Many newspapers achieved their peak circulations in the 1980s and 1990s and the story since then has been one of loss and decline. The *Sun* reached its highest circulation in 1988, selling more than 4.2 million. Its decline in the 22 years to 2010, to a circulation of 2.9 million, was more than 30 per cent. The *Daily Star* peaked in 1984 with 1.6 million, but this had halved by 2010. The *Guardian* similarly peaked in the mid-1980s, returning audited figures of 524,264 in 1986, but dropping by 48 per cent in the following two decades. The *Daily Mirror* fell 87 per cent by 2010 from its 5.2 million peak in 1967.

Table 5.2 shows when newspapers' circulation peaked, and the percentage decline from that point to 2010. The most significant trend revealed by this analysis is that most newspapers peaked in the 1980s and 1990s; some peaked in the 1960s; and none have peaked since 2001. All have therefore been in decline for at least a decade.

	<b>Peak</b>	<b>Year of peak</b>	<b>% decline from peak to 2010</b>
The Mirror	5,282,137	1967	77.2
Daily Star	1,633,263	1984	50.5
Sun	4,219,052	1988	30.6
The Express	4,328,524	1961	85.0
Daily Mail	2,825,350	1960	25.1
Daily Telegraph	1,510,766	1979	56.4
Financial Times	487,263	2001	20.0
Guardian	524,264	1986	47.9
Independent	414,357	1990	56.4
Times	792,151	1997	39.5

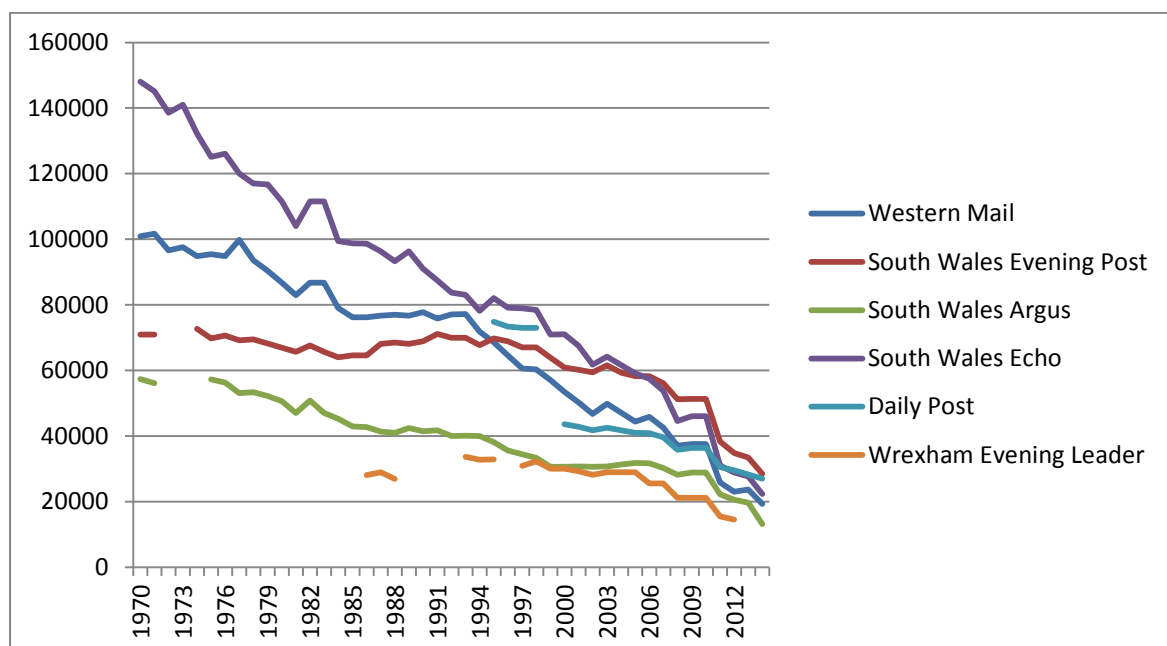
**Table 5.2: National newspaper peak circulations, with year of peak and percentage comparison with 2010 figures (Source: ABC)**

These trends towards circulation decline in the nationals, which I have already discussed at some length, underpin trends in the Welsh market as elsewhere.

## 5.3 The Welsh media landscape

### 5.3.1 The dailies

I have already discussed trends and patterns in the Welsh dailies, which show similar declines in circulations as national newspapers (pp. 30-33), but document analysis and secondary analysis have allowed me to supplement the evidence in this area. For example I am able to illustrate the fall in circulations at the Welsh dailies using ABC data, as Figure 5.1 shows.



**Figure 5.1: Daily newspaper circulation in Wales, 1970-2010 (Sources: ABC, Benn's Guide to Newspapers and Periodicals of the World; Newspaper Press Directory)**

In 1970, the combined circulation of daily newspapers in Wales was 377,322, but by 2010 it had dropped by 42 per cent to 221,523. The *Wrexham Evening Leader* has shown the most stability in its 25-year history. Owned by NWN Media, a family-owned company founded in the 1800s

which owns a portfolio of several paid-for weeklies and dailies<sup>5</sup>, the *Leader* has benefited from a company strategy that has included investment in technology and printing presses, and has continued to make acquisitions. According to its own website the company “is still investing in the future of print and online publishing, maintaining a staunch independence and determination to grow” (NWN Media, 2014).

As many commentators note, newspaper circulation decline preceded the arrival of the Internet by some decades, but the Internet’s effect on the decline cannot be ignored, as Roy Greenslade points out: “there is also no doubt, as the figures also show, that the rate of decline has accelerated since the rise of the net” (Greenslade, 2014a) – and this is illustrated here. The decline accelerates after 2000, becoming even more pronounced after 2010. Even for the *Leader*, where the track record for investment is high, the Internet-effect has been notable – a 54 per cent drop between 1997 and 2012. However in common with many other daily and weekly newspapers, the *Leader* has resigned from its membership of ABC and its circulations are no longer audited (Ponsford, 2014). It has also kept high the circulation of its “paid-for” weekly of the same name by a neat auditing practice. It continued to sell some copies (around 180) at the 60p cover price by subscription, but the rest of its 30,000 circulation was delivered free to homes (Audited Bureau of Circulations (ABC), 2013).

This raises an important issue for the future of newspaper research. Tracking the circulations and availability of local and regional titles in the UK will be much harder in the future, as more and more of their publishers resign from their membership of the Audited Bureau of Circulations, or combine their print circulations with digital audience numbers, masking the proportions of print or digital within the total. About 100 local newspaper titles

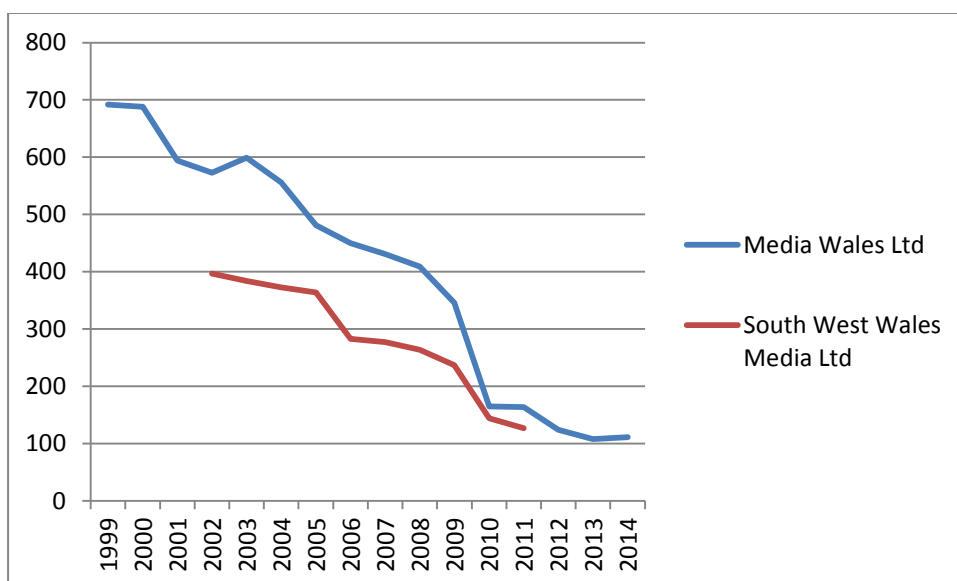
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<sup>5</sup> Despite its background as a family company, NWN Media is one of the largest regional publishers in the UK, placed at number 14 on the Top 20 Regional Publishers list (Newspaper Society, 2014), publishing 14 titles with a combined circulation of 398,187.



were missing from the 2013 audit (Ponsford, 2014), and though closures, amalgamations, and the expense of auditing circulations must be a factor in this, it also seems likely that newspaper owners do not see an imperative to publicise their weakened market position to advertisers. At the very least, future research will need to be alert to trends beyond audited circulations.

I have been able to supplement the evidence on the Welsh dailies in three other ways. The first is on job losses, which have been witnessed in the Welsh dailies as elsewhere. Figure 5.2 shows the results of a document analysis of annual returns of the two major newspaper publishers in Wales: Media Wales, the subsidiary of Trinity Mirror responsible for publishing the *Western Mail*, the *South Wales Echo* and the *Celtic Weeklies*; and South West Wales Media, which published the *South Wales Evening Post* and several weeklies across south and west Wales including the *Carmarthen Journal* and the *Llanelli Star*. The figures build on data supplied by Williams for research into Trinity Mirror staff numbers from 1999-2010, which formed part of a study with Bob Franklin (2007, p. 32). The document analysis has enabled me to update the figures as far as 2013, but also to add data from the annual returns of South West Wales Media Ltd, a subsidiary of Northcliffe, which published the *Post* until 2013, and together these figures reveal similar trends for job cuts across both companies.



**Figure 5.2: Editorial and production staff numbers at two major newspaper publishers in Wales. Source: Media Wales Ltd annual returns; South West Wales Media Ltd annual returns. Notes: 1. Data for SWWM are incomplete due to company restructuring which meant staff were moved to subsidiaries in 2011. 2. The figure for 2011 is described as “administration and support” staff, and the change is attributed to the company restructure.**

What these cuts means for newspapers has already been discussed in Chapter 2, and the case study of the *Western Mail* at 2.2.2.1 further illustrates the reality of circulation decline and job losses (pp. 37-40). However, I have been able to add to the picture already provided in the literature in two ways. Document analysis of penetration data provided by the newspaper industry’s JICREG database allows a more detailed comparison of the *Western Mail*’s claim that it is Wales’ national newspaper. Figure 5.1 has already shown that its circulation is by no means the biggest in Wales, but my analysis supports arguments that it is mainly a regional newspaper serving the interests of its south Wales readers. Data reveal that its penetration in north Wales, however, is limited by comparison. Percentage Average Issue Readership of the *Western Mail* in the south and west of Wales is higher: in Cardiff it is 3.07 per cent, in Swansea 5.4 per cent, in Carmarthen 12.31 per cent and in Cardigan 7.23 per cent, but in the north much lower: for example in Wrexham it is 0.19 per cent, in Rhyl 0.15 per cent, in Pwllheli 0.42 per cent, in Mold 0.21 per cent, in Llangollen 0.33 per cent, and in Llandudno 0.19 per cent (JICREG, 2014).

Equally, secondary analysis of another data set has revealed data about the shortfall between print and digital revenues at the *Western Mail*. While Trinity Mirror managers have emphasised the group’s success in increasing online audiences, evidence shows advertising revenue from Trinity Mirror’s digital products is not making up for the loss of print advertising. Building on previous work done by Williams on the annual reports of Trinity Mirror, which found that while the group’s print profits fell from £521.5 million in 2003 to 298.8 million in 2010 – a drop of £222.7 million – its local digital profits grew from £3.8 million in 2003 to £32.4 million in 2010 – a growth of £28.6 million (A. Williams, 2011b). Secondary analysis reveals that in this time, for every pound they gained online, they lost £7.78 from print, mirroring similar

patterns in the US, where some reports put the ratio at \$16 lost from print for every \$1 gained from digital across the industry in 2012 (D. Thompson, 2013).

### **5.3.2 *The weeklies***

Similar document analysis of ABC circulation figures reveals the fate of a dozen Welsh weekly titles from 1970 to 2013, as Figure 5.3 shows. Most of them track in almost horizontal lines until 2010, some two years after the global recession hit, when all but two titles show sudden and rapid decline. Those that have bucked the trend are the *Glamorgan Gem*, which has increased its circulation, and *North Wales Weekly News*, a series of eight titles along the north Wales coast owned by Trinity Mirror, which showed a brief jump in circulation before joining the general slump. The two lines in this graph that stop altogether in 2009 are the *Guardian* closures that have left the towns of Neath and Port Talbot without the newspapers that had served them for more than 80 years (Media Wales, 24 September 2009).

The *Glamorgan Gem* series is made up of several editions and is currently distributed free (with paid-for subscriptions) – and this is a likely reason for the increase in circulations. However, it is worth considering its circulation success may also be down to its editorial values. On its website it labels itself an “independent, family-owned business” (The Glamorgan Gem, 2014). In reality this family ethos refers to the company’s subsidiary position within the national Tindle Group chain, which is managed and owned by Sir Ray Tindle and his family. Still, in putting the group’s “ultra-local philosophy” at the centre of the company’s strategy, Tindle’s weekly newspapers have not seen the downward circulation trends witnessed in so many other companies (B. Thomas, 2011).

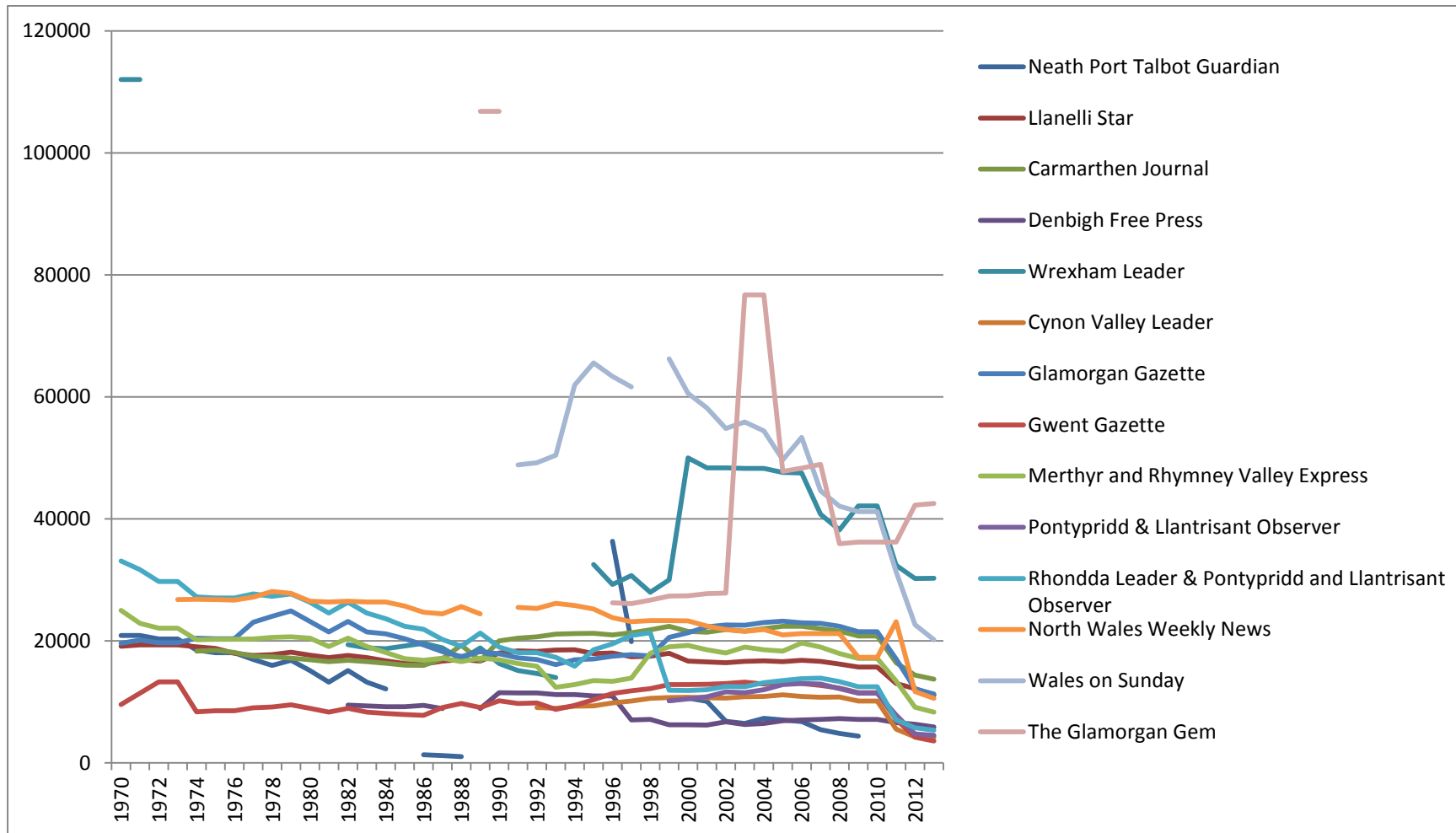
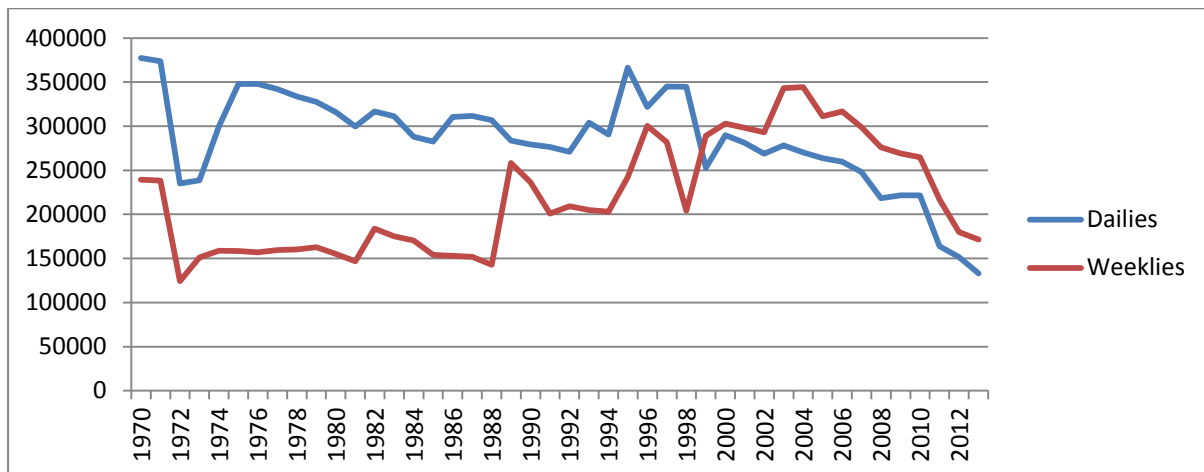


Figure 5.3: Paid-for Weekly newspapers in Wales, 1970-2013. Source: ABC, Benn's Directory, Willing's Guide to the Press

Further document analysis of ABC circulation figures showed the combined figures for daily Welsh newspapers dipped below those for weeklies for the first time in 1998, and they have stayed below them. Figure 5.4 demonstrates this, showing the aggregate circulation of the six main daily newspapers compared with the aggregate circulation figures of 13 major weeklies<sup>6</sup>.



**Figure 5.4: Aggregate circulations of daily and weekly newspapers in Wales, 1970-2012 (Sources: ABC, Benn's Guide to Newspapers and Periodicals of the World; Willing's Newspaper Directory, Newspaper Guide to the Press). Dailies: *Western Mail, Daily Post, South Wales Echo, South Wales Argus, South Wales Evening Post, Wrexham Leader*. Weeklies: *Neath Port Talbot Guardian, Llanelli Star, Carmarthen Journal, Denbigh Free Press, Wrexham Leader, Cynon Valley Leader, Glamorgan Gazette, Gwent Gazette, Merthyr and Rhymney Valley Express, Pontypridd & Llantrisant Observer, Rhondda Leader, North Wales Weekly News, Wales on Sunday, the Glamorgan Gem*.**

The figures of the paid-for weeklies between 1970 and the mid-1980s are much harder to obtain than those of the dailies, and so we must exercise caution in interpreting these figures, as weekly circulation figures may well be much higher. In addition, the weekly titles seem much more prepared to take comparatively quick decisions about changing format, frequency or

<sup>6</sup> The sample is not an exhaustive list of paid-for weeklies in Wales, but these titles were included by dint of their prominence, profile, established histories, and by the availability in the archives of circulation data for a significant part of the sample period.

pricing, and are not always transparent in auditing their circulations, and this can mask wider trends<sup>7</sup>.

That said, there is still something worth observing in this comparison. Weekly newspapers increased their overall circulation between 1998 and 2003, bucking the trend set by the dailies, which showed a marked decrease for much of the same period. The small increase seen in the dailies between 1992 and 1996 was short lived, and since 1996 daily newspaper circulations have been dropping. But both are now in decline – the weeklies may have shown more resilience, but since 2003/04 the drop in weekly circulation is as steep as it has been elsewhere in the industry.

The industry context for these declines is that locally-focused titles have shown more resilience than those that have tended towards convergence. Locally-owned titles, or those which have invested in local journalism, have fared better. For example, in her evidence to the Welsh Assembly's 2011 inquiry into the future of the Welsh Media, Beverley Thomas, the manager of Cambrian Newspapers Ltd, represented Tindle at the hearing and said that the newspaper group owed much to its policy of keeping “local community newspapers with plenty of local names, faces and places” in them. She went on to say:

The Tindle Group believes that truly local weekly newspapers are the key to a vibrant and successful future for the printed media in Wales. There is evidence to show that it is the truly local, community-orientated newspapers which are riding the current recession better than other categories of newspapers. Their market is local, loyalty amongst readers is strong, and they do not have such a heavy reliance on the national, recruitment and property advertising, the huge reduction in which is hitting larger and more national publications hard. Despite the recession, Tindle Newspapers has

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<sup>7</sup> For example the *Neath Port Talbot Guardian* was in fact two newspapers, the *Neath Guardian* and the *Port Talbot Guardian*, which were usually counted together in audited circulations, masking differences between them. There was a short time when circulation jumped by almost 150 per cent when they became free newspapers; for other periods they did not provide audited circulation figures at all.

continued acquiring publications, and has also launched new publications in core areas.

(B. Thomas, 2011)

Investment in key weekly titles, coupled with a focus on keeping newspapers local and relevant has also prompted the group to say they do not feel the Internet is a threat to their business, and that they have consciously decided to guard their content by ensuring their websites do not scoop their newspapers, by only putting headlines or teasers online, by ensuring e-editions are paid for (allowing them to access markets for their news around the world, but “not for free”), and by a commitment not to make redundancies in any department, including editorial (B. Thomas, 2011), and the group did make it to the end of the recession without having made compulsory redundancies (Greenslade, 2014c) – though there were staff losses due to “natural wastage” which caused Tindle’s Enfield newspaper group to strike in 2011. Ray Tindle has also gone on the record since the end of the recession to reaffirm his faith in UK weekly newspapers, and has also invested in Johnston Press (Greenslade, 2014c), which Roy Greenslade called “a sign of his continued confidence not just in his own business but in the overall newspaper industry” (2014c). Tindle publishes nine titles in Wales, serving around 216,000 readers (with a combined circulation of around 105,000).

Media Wales, however, which has cut and converged newsrooms, has seen steeper losses in its weeklies. Owners and managers have stressed that localness is at the heart of their operations, for example, in a statement presented in evidence to a Welsh Assembly committee in 2006 one manager set out the strategy of Trinity Mirror and its subsidiary Media Wales for satisfying the changing demands of readers, including maintaining its weekly news stable, the Celtic Weeklies:

Editorially, the approach of our weekly paid-for titles relies for its success on an intimate knowledge of grassroots issues and the mood and feelings of people towards these. The aim is not only to reflect these moods, but, where appropriate, to lead opinion through strong and effective campaigning. The papers are totally focused on a local,

community-based news diet, produced by reporters working from offices in the heart of those communities. Based across the South Wales Valleys, and stretching from the *Neath Guardian* in the west to the *Gwent Gazette* in the east, our nine titles have a readership of more than 250,000, which has grown consistently over a decade. (Media Wales, 2006)

The evidence also underlined the challenges the company faced in serving readers who had “greater demands on their time” but also “new demands and expectations” from news (Media Wales, 2006). By 2008, however, Media Wales had announced more job losses, mainly in its Celtic Weeklies, and in 2009 shut its offices in Aberdare, Ebbw Vale and Neath. It also closed two of its titles, the *Neath Guardian* and the *Port Talbot Guardian* (Shipton, 2010), leaving seven titles in the Celtic Weeklies portfolio, and no remaining weekly newspapers in the two communities it had withdrawn from. By 2011 Media Wales had carried out further restructuring at the Celtic Weeklies, merging editorship roles for the seven titles between four editors, making more journalists redundant, and “just six senior reporters and five trainees to cover the seven remaining local titles in communities like Pontypridd, Merthyr, Aberdare, Llantrisant, and the entire Rhondda Valleys” (A. Williams, 2011a).

## ***5.4 Local news in Port Talbot***

I have already described the various newspapers and broadcast media that have served the town over the sample period (pp. 87-90). This section examines in more depth the role of the two main newspapers providing news for Port Talbot between 1970 and 2013, namely the *Post* and the *Guardian*. Here I give an overview of the two titles in relation to the town and to each other, using data gathered from document analysis and content analysis before moving on to more detailed case studies based on document analysis and interviews with journalists.

The *Post* was a regional daily newspaper which dedicated a few pages of its coverage to the town every day. The weekly *Guardian* took on a slightly different role – to cover Port Talbot’s news and issues as comprehensively as possible. My content analysis revealed that, in a



typical month, just over half (53 per cent) of the local news produced about Port Talbot in the two newspapers between 1970 and 2013 appeared in *Guardian*, while 47 per cent appeared in the *Post*. This suggests relatively equal coverage of Port Talbot between the two titles. However the cost of acquiring this news was very different from the reader's point of view. The *Guardian* published either four or five editions in a typical calendar month, while the *Post* published an average of 26 editions a calendar month, which made it much more expensive to buy an equivalent amount of news from the *Post*. Further, in buying the *Post*, the reader was paying for a high proportion of news about other areas of South Wales other than Port Talbot. However, the proportion of an edition of the *Guardian* that was dedicated to Port Talbot was much higher. For example, an average edition of the *Post* would have carried 8.9 stories about Port Talbot, while one edition of the *Guardian* would have included an average of 63.3 Port Talbot stories. Table 5.3 shows how this is translated into the proportion of each newspaper devoted to Port Talbot, and how this changed over time. An average of 36.5 per cent of the *Guardian* was about Port Talbot, while an average of 3.6 per cent of the *Post* was about the town.

Year	South Wales Evening Post	Port Talbot Guardian
	Av. %	Av. %
1970	3.16	38.84
1975	2.51	39.25
1980	2.98	29.61
1985	3.45	57.36
1990	4.01	18.48
1995	6.39	11.23
2000	3.40	46.53
2005	3.27	41.05
2008	2.92	45.83
2013	4.37	--
Overall Average	3.6	36.5

**Table 5.3: Average proportion of Port Talbot news within the *South Wales Evening Post* and *Port Talbot Guardian***

As I suggested above, cost was therefore a significant factor of acquiring this news from the reader's point of view. To get hold of the same amount of news in a week meant buying one edition of the *Guardian*, but six editions of the *Post*, as one of the interviewees put it: "The problem with the *Post* is that you've got to buy it every day, so you've got make a big financial outlay to get quite a small amount of Port Talbot news, and I think what people want is to be able to spend a little bit of money or not have to pay any money and get a lot of Port Talbot news" (*Post* reporter 1990s).

This may account for the local perception of the *Guardian* as being *dedicated* to Port Talbot, while the *Post* simply *covered* the town's news alongside news from other South Wales towns. This was a point confirmed many times by the journalists I interviewed:

Whatever I could say good or bad about the *Guardian* or the *Evening Post* the one thing I've banged on about is the community side of things, and the *Port Talbot Guardian* was at the hub of the community, as was the *Neath Guardian*. The *Evening Post* is based in Swansea. (*Guardian* reporter 1960s and 1970s; *Post* subeditor 1970s-2010s)

What Table 5.3 also shows is that the proportion of Port Talbot news in the *Guardian* was at its lowest in the 1990s (and the *Post*'s at its highest), and again, the interviews shed light on why the *Guardian*'s coverage may have been lower at this time. One *Post* reporter told me that the owners at that time, Thomson Newspapers, had pared down the *Guardian*'s staff, and said the editorial had suffered, saying: "the *Guardian* went dormant for a long time, it was like a one man operation" (*Guardian* reporter 1980s, *Post* reporter 1980s-2010s), and this shows how staff numbers are associated with the quantity of news being produced.

Additionally, there is evidence that the *Post* followed a pattern of commercial competition with the *Guardian*, and the corresponding rise in the *Post*'s coverage at this time suggests they may have attempted to capitalise on the *Guardian*'s comparative editorial weakness in the 1990s.

However, it is important to say that the *Post* was not aloof from the local areas it served, in fact quite the opposite. In addition to its main edition, it published two dedicated local editions for West Wales (known as the West edition) and the Neath Port Talbot area (known as the East edition), and it also published a weekly insert called the *Neath Port Talbot Courier*, hyperlocal columns by lay reporters under various brands, including Grapevine and In View, as well as a relatively new attempt to cater to local communities through a section it calls the Community Pages (though one retired *Post* reporter dismissed this attempt as "a trick of the

light” in an interview, and was not convinced that a high level of local journalism was taking place to fill the Community Pages). The next sections are devoted to describing the *Post*’s Port Talbot coverage in its various editions and inserts, before moving on to give more information about the *Port Talbot Guardian*.

## **5.4.1 The South Wales Evening Post**

### **5.4.1.1 Editorial and managerial trends**

Acquired from Northcliffe in 2012 by Local World, the newspaper had a 20 per cent drop in circulation over the four years preceding its sale. Despite its losses, it remains the biggest-selling newspaper in Wales. As I discussed above, staff numbers have been cut here as elsewhere. In September 2005 it closed its in-house printing press, making 60 staff members redundant (P. Smith, 2009) and moving its print operation to a “centre of excellence” in Gloucester (“Northcliffe considers Swansea press closure,” 2007; “Northcliffe employees warned of more cuts,” 2009) and also for a time removing its in-house subediting team (Linford, 2009) in common with an industry trend towards centralising operations (Franklin, 2006a, pp. 10-11). Moving the press had the direct consequence of bringing forward editorial deadlines in order to meet longer lead-times for print. As Franklin notes, many journalists are now producing “yesterday’s news tomorrow” as the time to produce news is diminished and the ability of the publisher to deliver it quickly is compromised (Franklin, 2006a, pp. 10-11).

Against this backdrop, the *Post* has continued to shed journalists. According to the NUJ, journalist numbers in 2014 are half what they were in 2009 (discussion with the author, NUJ Swansea Branch meeting, 2014). Meanwhile it maintains its daily newspaper in several geographical editions and invested in its website (formerly [www.thisissouthwales.co.uk](http://www.thisissouthwales.co.uk), now [www.southwales-eveningpost.co.uk](http://www.southwales-eveningpost.co.uk)); it has also acquired a local lifestyle magazine, *Swansea Life* (Lambourne, 2012), and increased its online presence. This strategy is consistent with the findings of a study of national newspapers by a team at Cardiff University’s School of Journalism,

which researched employee numbers at the largest newspaper groups and found the workloads of journalists had as much as tripled in the same period (Justin Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas, & Mosdell, 2008, pp. 6-7, 10-12).

Pressure on the remaining staff to produce enough content to fill an increasing number of pages has changed working practices and put a question mark over quality. For example, one high profile case in 2011 saw the *Post* libelling a local man by using his photograph next to a story about a convicted paedophile (not him) of the same name ("Facebook group aims to highlight sex case mix-up," 2010), an error that some insiders said was caused in part by a lack of safeguards and a lack of adequate staffing levels (discussion with author at NUJ meeting, 2010) – confirming what many commentators have feared. The announcement of the loss of subediting jobs from Northcliffe to a hub they called a “centre of excellence” prompted commenters on the Hold the Front Page website to note:

It will be interesting to see how many mistakes start creeping in now – especially with all those tricky Welsh names. I’m sure local readers will appreciate it when their towns and streets are misspelled because the journalists are not from the area and there are no local subs. (Linford, 2009)

These concerns from journalists support points raised in the wider literature – of cuts damaging quality and diminishing the capacity of newspapers to carry out public service journalism (J. Thomas & Williams, 2008; A. Williams & Franklin, 2007). The NUJ, in particular, has pointed to the danger of removing journalists from communities: “Without a vigorous press, based in the communities they serve, fulfilling its essential role of holding the powerful to account, the functioning of that democracy will be seriously compromised” (National Assembly for Wales, 2011, p. 7). This is also in line with the findings of research on the notion of “serving the good of the community” in the local press, which warned “the notion functions best at those titles which enjoy direct investment in their ability to act in a way which serves the good the community;

conversely it is most under threat at those titles which are increasingly removed from their locale for reasons of profit” (Matthews, 2014, p. 5).

Aside from cutting staff and freelance budgets, the *Post* has made clear other ambitions to cut costs at the expense of quality journalism. In a leaked 2010 email written by a member of newsroom staff (see Figure 5.5), the newspaper’s management set out its intention to ensure that 30 per cent of its editorial would come from free-to-use sources, including photographs, poetry and articles generated by its readers (user generated content, or UGC) and a significant reliance on public relations and marketing material from local businesses and organisations.

**From:** [Redacted]

**Sent:** XX XXXX 2010 XX:XX

**To:** [Redacted]

**Subject:** Free Stuff

Hello all, there is a big drive to get more user generated (free) content in the paper. This will hopefully help to reduce the workload on the reps [reporters] and move us towards a target set of getting around 30 per cent of content as 'pro bono'. This will include:

- Insider columns – [Named journalist], guys from ILS will be doing regular columns that will appear in the paper.
- Patch News Features - patch reporters will be asked to do fortnightly news features on subject from their patch along the same lines that [named reporter] and [named reporter] have been doing. They will be responsible for coming up with the ideas and will need to feature around a dozen local people/businesses etc. This will be a good way to make sure that reps actually physically get out on their patch too.
- Obits page - When people phone up to book a death notice they will be asked if they would like to do anything editorially. This will be a two week trial to gauge opinion.
- More UGC - Spencer [Feeney, Editor] is keen to get more readers pics, art work, poems etc.
- Am Dram - we will be previewing as many productions as possible using a submitted pic and details and will also ask the theatre groups to supply reviews that we have not been able to attend.
- Church News - we will be speaking with local churches and giving them the opportunity to subject extracts/articles etc for the paper.
- Duty Calls - a wrap column of what our Lord Mayors are doing the next day, for example Friday's paper will carry details of what they are doing on Saturday. It will feature Swansea and NPT Lord Mayors and the Chairman from Carmarthenshire. All three councils have been asked to submit their weekly list to desk and let us know if there are any changes.

**Figure 5.5: Email from senior journalist at the *South Wales Evening Post***

The journalist who leaked this email remarked “Here it is: the official death knell of local journalism”, making reference to the lack of traditional reporting methods – checking, balance, independence and involvement of trained staff – predicated in the new strategy. If local newspapers: “should convey information about local government and local communities, and enable people to make informed choices on issues affecting their immediate environment” (G. Williams, 2006, pp. 83-84) then this kind of strategy, relying on readers, local businesses and council press officers to provide a target amount of free editorial without reference to its quality, undermines much of what local journalism is understood to stand for, and clearly makes uncomfortable the journalists involved in the gathering of this kind of material. The *South Wales Evening Post* is not alone: other newspaper groups have gone on the record to confirm they have set targets for UGC, including Johnston Press, which hopes to get 75 per cent of its editorial from its readers in Bourne, in what it calls the “Bourne Experiment” (Burrell, 2014).

The situation is exacerbated by job losses. Between 2009 and 2011, the *Post* had lost a further 20 journalists to redundancy, including a Crown Court reporter with decades of experience, and according to insiders, entirely cut its budget for paying freelance journalists (National Assembly for Wales, 2011). The *Post*’s parent company (Northcliffe at the time of this example) was by no means alone in its attempts to cut editorial spending to preserve profit margins. For example, Meyer (2009, p. 14) notes the practice across the industry: “A stagnant industry’s market position is harvested by raising prices and lowering quality, trusting customers will continue to be attracted by the brand name rather than the substance for which the brand once stood.” But, he warns, “if they continue to slash and burn their existing businesses, all they will end up with is slashed, burned, obsolete businesses.” (2009, p. 2).

#### **5.4.1.2 Covering Port Talbot: breaking news**

As a regional daily headquartered in Swansea, the *Post* was focused on breaking news across its whole South Wales patch. This stretched from Carmarthen in the west to Porthcawl and Pyle in the east. The *Post* was published every day of the week except Sunday. To enable this, the



newspaper operated a large network of local and district offices until the turn of the millennium (when most of them were closed and the work centralised to the Swansea offices in Adelaide Street). Before that, the *Post* had employed between two and seven reporters in a district office in the centre of Port Talbot. The reporters were often sent to cover unfolding news stories: as one local journalist who worked as a Port Talbot reporter for the *Post* during the 1980s said: “the *Post* did put a lot of effort in for a long time, it was covering the district office in Port Talbot. We had two or three reporters there – at one point we had four – and everybody worked really hard and the coverage was really, really good – very, very good” (interview with *Post* journalist).

From the 1960s until the advent of computer technology in its newsrooms in the mid-1990s, journalists were able to phone in reports to a bank of copy typists, or, in the earliest part of the sample, in the 1970s and 1980s, reports would be typed, copied using carbon paper, and copies put on the bus for collection by a runner. Public telephones were commonly used to phone in reports, and a good patch reporter would have knowledge of where other phones might be available: “There was a character who worked for the Press Association and he was known as ‘Cliff Ap Kiosk’ because he knew the location of every telephone kiosk in Wales, because you had to know [...] who [had a phone]... the local doctor, the local vicar; there weren’t that many people. [...] When there was a major incident... [...] it was very important because that was the only way they could get the story back out” (interview with *Post* reporter, 1970-2000s).

The *Post*’s reputation as a newspaper for breaking news lasted into the 2000s, as one *Guardian* journalist from that time said: “we had that massive competition of the *Post* being there six days a week and we were only there... well, not only there one day a week because we were on sale for the whole week but the breaking news wasn’t coming from us at that time” (interview with *Guardian* journalist). Breaking news was enabled by the *Post*’s in-house printing press, meaning the newspaper published four editions a day:

The first edition would be off the presses by about 10.30 I think it was. Then we would do the West [Wales] edition, then we would do the east [Neath Port Talbot] edition and then we would do any changes for the final edition in Swansea, which would be about 1.00 or 1.30. (Interview with *Post* subeditor from 1980s-2000s)

Printing editions was the standard practice of larger daily local newspapers in the late 20th century, and meant they were in a good position not only to cover and update readers on local news such as court cases or emergencies, but also to respond to breaking world news, as the following example illustrates: “When 9/11 happened, we still had the press. That happened at lunchtime [...]. We produced an extra edition that day and it sold 10,000 copies” (interview with *Post* subeditor).

The closure of the printing press in 2006 changed deadlines and stopped publication of the early edition. The *Post*'s local editions for Neath Port Talbot and West Wales continued to be published alongside its Swansea Final edition, but all three editions were sent off to the printer at tea time and delivered to newsagents the following morning and households later that day, relying on the website to break unfolding news, as this interviewee confirmed: “They call it the *Evening Post* but it's a morning paper. The only time we did an edition was the Swansea mining disaster when we put out an afternoon edition. You put it online but then it's the front page flash for the next day. So sometimes it is a bit old but that's newspapers I suppose. Everything is online and broken so quickly” (interview with *Post* reporter from 2000s).

But before the use of the Internet had become widespread by newspapers, the fact the *Post* could publish stories more quickly meant *Guardian* journalists, as several interviewees confirmed, were forced to find new or different angles, and guard their scoops jealously until print day. This spawned what a few interviewees spoke of as “friendly rivalry”, where the journalists would hide stories from rivals, chase one another to the scene of an unfolding story to get a better angle, or attempt to get an interview from another source to add a further dimension to their own story. This rivalry contributes to pluralistic and lively media better able

to scrutinise those in authority. This is a key component of my findings from the interviews, and requires an in-depth discussion, which I provide in Chapter 6 (pp. 175-177). While rivals from different newspapers might be competing, some reporters also found themselves keeping stories away from sister titles, or even away from their own newsdesks, so that they might be used to best advantage in a local edition. At the *Post*, this meant reserving stories, or a particular “line” on a story, for the Neath Port Talbot edition, or for the weekly insert that was introduced in the 1980s, the *Neath Port Talbot Courier* (the *Courier*).

### 5.4.1.3 *The Post’s locals: the Neath Port Talbot edition and the Neath Port Talbot Courier*

The *Post* published a Neath Port Talbot edition for the duration of the sampling period of this research. The archive of this edition, however, is not complete. Only the ‘change pages’ – the news pages that were changed from edition to edition and which contained local news relevant to the edition, typically including the front page and a selection of the first ten pages – were photographed onto microfilm, and even this was only done for a period of 20 years (1985-2005). I was able to purchase the edition for the final sample year as it was published, but it is not recorded in the archives.

	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2008	2013	Total
Post: Neath Port Talbot edition	0	0	0	70	314	306	318	126	0	240	687
South Wales Evening Post	196	182	222	250	254	238	252	220	274	232	2320

**Table 5.4: The number of stories coded in the Neath Port Talbot edition and the Swansea Final editions of the *Post***

As Table 5.4 shows, I coded the Neath Port Talbot edition where the archive was available, and it offers a tantalising glimpse into the amount of news being produced specifically for the town. However the picture is incomplete and so it is difficult to make generalisations about it. I have not used these data in any other discussions to avoid the possibility of any double-counting of

stories that might have appeared in both the Swansea Final and Neath Port Talbot editions from skewing the sample. What is apparent is that up until 2000, the amount of Port Talbot news in the Neath Port Talbot edition was substantially higher (almost treble the amount) than in the Swansea Final edition. In 2005 this ratio reduces dramatically. By 2013, when the figures are almost the same, the *Post* had changed ownership from Northcliffe to Local World Ltd, and new systems were brought in to keep the main body of the newspaper the same as its local editions, with changes only to the front page.

The final year of the sample, then, shows there were only eight stories in the Neath Port Talbot edition that were distinct from the Swansea Final edition, all of which appeared on the front page and trailed longer stories inside. This is a strong indication of the trend picked up in the literature review of this thesis – where newspapers have cut staff, closed offices, merged (or converged) backroom and editorial operations across titles and changed working practices behind the scenes in order to cut costs (Engel, 2009, pp. 58-59). The data suggest that though the Neath Port Talbot edition of the *Post* remains, it is not the local force it once was as it has been brought into close alignment with the main Swansea edition of the *Post*.

The *Courier*, meanwhile, was a weekly insert inside the Neath Port Talbot edition of the *Post*, specific to Neath Port Talbot. It is unfortunate that there is no substantial archive of the *Courier*. Some interviewees and focus group participants referenced this lack of available material in the archives, questioning what future generations might be able to find out about Port Talbot without an archive of the *Courier* and the incomplete archive of the Neath Port Talbot edition of the *Post*, which, as I've already mentioned, has not been captured since 2005. There are hints at there being a richer news landscape in and for Port Talbot during the sample period than the one I have been able to capture in my content analysis due to the lack of complete archives. In order to compensate for this I supplement the quantitative content analysis with qualitative data from interviews with journalists who know this context well, and the research I present here is based on those interviews.

The *Courier* was introduced in the mid-1980s, as one interviewee told me, as a “reaction” to a *Guardian* re-launch. It seems to have been used as a commercial foil to the *Guardian*, becoming more resourced and better quality when the *Guardian* was perceived to be more of a commercial threat, and becoming fallow in years when the *Guardian* was less threatening. It was suspended around 2000, but finally re-launched in 2009 following the closure of the *Guardian*, as: “they looked then and thought there was some potential, probably for advertising revenue more than anything because there was no weekly paper any more sucking up the available advertising cash. So the *Courier* re-launched on a lesser scale” (Interview with *Post* journalist).

The *Courier* added another dimension of localness to the *Post*’s provision. The different feel and audience of the weekly insert meant it was able to concentrate its resources on a more in-depth style of reporting, and also on more ultra-local stories than the *Post*, as one interviewee described: “I felt like I could put proper local stories in there and on the front of there. I felt like I could put real local issues on the front [and] actual things that matter to communities were better on the front of the *Courier*” (interview with *Post* reporter).

However, this was limited by newsroom constraints. For example, the *Courier* was not permitted to scoop the *Post*. Interviewees reported that there was a constant juggling act for the journalists that worked the Neath Port Talbot patch, who were also responsible for filling the pages of the *Courier*: “We weren’t allowed to scoop the *Post*. Obviously we didn’t want to damage the *Post* because the *Post* was the big breadwinner. The *Courier* was meant to be very much a grass roots newspaper so it didn’t have the big breaking news stories” (interview with *Post* reporter).

As Port Talbot’s only remaining weekly newspaper, albeit one that is shared with the neighbouring towns of Neath and Pontardawe, the *Courier* is a crucial element in the town’s local news mix, and it is with regret that I am unable to provide further data regarding the quantity and quality of Port Talbot news produced by the title.

## 5.4.2 *The weekly bible: the Port Talbot Guardian*

If the *Post* was busy creating a daily newspaper for a large area of South Wales and breaking news in its multiple editions, the *Guardian* concerned itself with being a different kind of creature. As a weekly, it had the status of a sort of weekly bible for the town: “the *Guardian* every week would be scanned from cover to cover. Yes, you had the main news at the front, the sport at the back and oddball features as you went through; there were pictures of people. It was a reflection of the daily life throughout that week, so that those people who couldn’t get to those events, whatever they were, would have some way of being kept up-to-date and kept informed of everything” (interview with *Guardian* journalist, 1960s and 1970s).

This was the handbook to life in Port Talbot: as another interviewee said: “If you wanted to know anything you’d look in the *Guardian*, and that’s not an exaggeration because if anything happened it was in the *Guardian*”. The minutiae of life were captured in its pages. News in brief columns listed court cases, planning applications and hospital admittances – *Guardian* reporters appeared to be attempting to report every court case, every council meeting, every wedding, funeral, accident, or, as one interviewee put it: “who stole the underwear off the clothes line of number 24 and who’s been in the garden shed of so and so. This is the minutiae that make weekly papers” (interview with *Guardian* reporter, 1970s). As another reporter from the 1960s and 70s said:

It was broadsheet then and absolutely crammed, there was no shortage of information.

It was like this huge vacuum cleaner sucking material in, stories about anything, little Johnnie winning an award for collecting £5 in his street for the Wings appeal or something. It could generate some interest even if it was people saying, ‘oh look at goodie two shoes, he’s never out playing,’ whatever, but it was there.

This was a newspaper of record, attempting to capture everything that went on in Port Talbot. It was common practice from the 1960s to the 1980s, for example, for the reporters to get out of

the office with no particular story in mind to report, as this reporter from the late 1960s said: “you had a situation where if you had nothing on, nothing to do, you’d literally go for a walk and just talk to people and [it was] amazing what you’d find out”. There was also a more formal system in place where reporters would go out for the day and speak to a series of contacts, many of them housewives or shopkeepers, to find out what was happening in the more remote communities such as the Afan Valley:

One of my first jobs was to take the bus up the Afan Valley because [I had] no car, so it was a case of a bus to Cymmer, call on certain people in Cymmer and then a bus to Glyncoed, call on people there and then back to Port Talbot and write up an Afan Valley notes column. (interview with *Guardian* journalist, 1960s)

The *Guardian* was also credited with representing local people or giving them a voice. One letter to the editor in 1975 thanked the *Guardian* for helping local people win a campaign: “But let us not forget that this battle could not have been won without the freedom of the press and the democratic rights in Port Talbot. The *Guardian*, as a good newspaper should, gave full coverage to the view of all parties concerned.” One of the interviewees, Kay Byrne, had worked at the *Post* from the 1980s to the end of the 1990s, and in her later freelance capacity made a documentary about the closure of the *Port Talbot Guardian* for ITV’s *Wales This Week* series. In the documentary she interviewed local campaigners, and her experience led her to believe the *Guardian*’s campaigning voice had been crucial to the democratic health of the town:

Maybe not at the very end but certainly back in the 70s and 80s, everybody was saying when the paper came out, there was practically a stampede to get it and they campaigned on a lot of big issues and, of course, there have been a lot of big issues in Port Talbot. It’s probably got one of the most fertile news patches in the country. When I made that documentary, I looked into quite a lot of the background about what effect it had had on the town and I think it’s very sad because I think the biggest impact is the lack of information to help people vote in a democracy. (interview with the author)

It may be this ability of local journalists to scrutinise those in authority and represent the views of local people that led one *Guardian* reporter from the late 1960s and early 1970s to tell me:

The paper was called the *Guardian* and many years later this phrase, ‘the guardians of democracy’, came to my mind, and I think that’s what they were. Anything the council started to do, hinted at doing, or anyone hinted at doing, that didn’t meet favour with the community would get a massive airing. If there was a major news story, then it would be given full vent in the paper and people would have the opportunity to write letters that would be amply displayed. The story would be covered from all angles, so it would be given a good shakedown.

Before the *Port Talbot Guardian* closed, it had constantly employed between two and seven reporters to cover the patch, and from 1925 when it was launched until the late 1990s, it had also maintained an office in the centre of Port Talbot.

According to interviewees this enabled the *Guardian* to be extremely local and comprehensive – there is further discussion of the role of district offices in this regard in later chapters. Readers appeared to value the depth and localness of this coverage:

With a local paper like the *Neath* and *Port Talbot Guardian*, particularly when you get towards the back of the paper, you’ll take most things, whereas a normal evening daily paper probably wouldn’t take a lot of it. I think some people like that, the readers like that because it was virtually as ultra-local as you could get at that time. If you were replacing a park bench in some community, a few people cared about that but try and find that in an evening paper would be scarce. (mid-2000s *Guardian* reporter)

However, this changed over time. Where *Guardian* reporters said that in the 1960s, 70s and 80s they had been able to work on virtually any story that came their way (knowing that there was no guarantee it would make it into the newspaper), or spend time out of the office with no



guarantee of finding a story, by the turn of the millennium, staffing levels in the newsroom began to be cut, and those who remained found it an increasingly pressurised environment.

Another point that came out of the interviews very strongly was the question of how embedded reporters were in the community. Ownership played a part in this, as, for example, by the end of the 1990s the *Guardian's* Port Talbot office was closed, and the staff moved to the company's Neath office to work across both the *Port Talbot Guardian* and its sister title the *Neath Guardian* (having previously maintained a well-staffed office in Port Talbot). This was part of a behind-the-scenes trend towards cutting staff, and closing offices, that seems to have started in the early 1970s, as the ownership of the *Guardian* began to be increasingly remote from the community the newspaper served. As I outlined above, the *Guardian's* owners became increasingly corporate and remote. In 1965, the newspaper, which had previously been independently owned by the Neath-based Walters family, was bought by the Canadian-owned Thomson Group, and then in turn, bought from Thomson Newspapers as part of a £280m sale of Thomson Regional Newspapers by Trinity Holdings in 1995 ("£280m swoop on newspapers," 1995, p. 84; Murphy, 2005), and Trinity Plc later merged with the Mirror Group, forming Trinity Mirror in 1999, the UK's largest newspaper group ("Trinity-Mirror merger sealed with (GBP) 2bn deal," 1999). By 2008, Trinity Mirror was heralding a new style of "integrated" newsroom, as Group Finance Director Vijay Vaghela outlined in a 2008 presentation to investors and shareholders:

Over the past year, we've invested in a new, highly sophisticated ad production system, which has been implemented across our nationals and is now being rolled out across our regionals. Now this has significantly improved efficiencies through the automation of what were once specialist job roles, slashing the time it takes to create advertising for our clients from a number of weeks down to just a few hours, and reducing headcount.  
(FD (Fair Disclosure) Wire, 2008)

As I suggested in Chapter 2, advertisers and cost efficiencies are given precedence over editorial concerns, or the needs of readers or communities, which are not mentioned here. The “reduced headcount” at Trinity Mirror’s Cardiff-based Media Wales operation has been noted by academics (A. Williams, 2010). In my own interviews, reporters and subeditors told me that this kind of streamlining – or convergence – had resulted in job losses, district office closures and a problem with larger titles scooping their smaller weekly sisters as all editors were required to report their stories at a daily news conference, where the best were picked off by the daily titles. What speeches like this mean on the ground and in the newsroom is evidenced by the reporters. Just before this speech was made, the *Guardian’s* Neath office was closed, and staff moved to Bridgend. The then-editor of the *Guardian*, Rachel Mistear, was re-deployed, and from then, the *Guardian* titles were edited by Deborah Rees, who also edited the *Glamorgan Gazette*, another Celtic Weekly title, and the remaining reporters then worked across all three titles – the *Port Talbot Guardian*, the *Neath Guardian* and the *Glamorgan Gazette*. Then, just over a year after Vijay Vaghela’s made this speech, the company closed the *Port Talbot Guardian*.

This overview of newsroom practices and industry trends, both in the case study area and more widely in Wales and the UK, suggests that local journalism has been subject to wide-ranging and rapid change since 1970. As I argued in early chapters of this thesis, the decline of advertising revenue, and the inability of digital revenues to make up for the shortfall, has caused newspaper publishers to respond by cutting staff in their newsrooms, closing district offices and limiting more expensive kinds of newsgathering. This goes some way towards answering the research question RQ 1.3 (Can any changes in local news be explained by changes in newsgathering practices over the sample period?) in that it establishes how newsrooms changed over the sample period. The next chapter looks in more detail at how the output of local newsrooms changed over this time, and, using interviews with journalists and focus groups with local people, begins to analyse how these changes inter-relate.

# ***Chapter 6***

## ***Was there a “golden age” for local journalism?***

### ***6.1 Aims and theoretical context***

As I outlined in Chapter 4, a primary objective of my research is to characterise Port Talbot’s local news in an attempt to measure what is lost when a newspaper closes. In order to answer my research questions, it is not enough to simply measure current news output, or survey local people about their news consumption habits post-newspaper-closure. To form a clear understanding of the impact of the *Port Talbot Guardian’s* closure, it is also important to measure and describe the news output that was available in Port Talbot decades into the past, and to ensure that the study reaches far back enough in time to uncover the detail of the history of news production in the town, which may offer evidence of the presence of features long before the newspaper finally closed. This will show empirically how news has changed and lend much-needed evidence in the ongoing debates about whether and in what ways the quality of local news has declined.

This historical element of the research is also a conscious attempt to head off criticisms of what we might call ‘golden-ageism’. One of the main pitfalls of researching the newspaper industry’s decline is relying on the assumption that journalism was better for democracy in the past and has now declined or degenerated in some way. Even by labelling the industry’s recent

history a decline, we presume that things must have been better in the past: in other words, we run the risk of inferring that higher revenues somehow automatically enabled an almost mythical level of fourth estate journalism to take place. This risks presumptions that journalism was more thorough, more investigative, more objective, more balanced, more plentiful and therefore more able to fulfil its role in supporting democracy and the public sphere than it is now. As I discussed in Chapter 2, there is good evidence that journalism is not always able to fulfil this fourth estate function now, for example in the way newsgathering is now so reliant on PR and wire copy – but what of the past? Making assumptions about what journalism was like 30, 40 or 50 years ago weakens the arguments surrounding the decline of quality in the industry, because we cannot say for certain that there is a decline in standards, only note the well-documented declines in circulations and revenues and attempt to draw a correlation between these and the evidence of current standards. John Tulloch encapsulates this objection well:

Each generation stages a version of the new journalism debate and projects into the past a tale of a more rational public sphere [...] Once upon a time, the public meeting, the serious newspaper, the radio discussion, the television documentary – take your pick – was a model for public discourse. But each has been destroyed or subverted by unthinking change. The golden age beckons tantalizingly, a generation ago, endowed with the roseate glow of our own youth. (2000, pp. 133-134)

Other commentators agree with this concern about aggrandising the past (for example Preston, 2009, p. 642), contending that either this “golden age” never existed, or that the true picture of the journalism practices of the past is being coloured by nostalgia, or both. If nostalgia is colouring the discourse it means we are unable to make rational conclusions about the state of today’s journalism because it is being unfairly compared with a distorted view of the journalism of the past.

My research seeks to correct for this possible weakness by putting forward an accurate description, based on measurements of news output from 1970 to 2013 (by means of a content analysis) and triangulating this with the evidence of the journalists producing the news during the same period (by means of interviews). As I have already set out, the content analysis consisted of a typical-case sample of the two main local newspapers (the *Port Talbot Guardian* and the *South Wales Evening Post's* Neath Port Talbot edition), stretching from 1970 to 2013. This yielded 4,883 cases. The 11 semi-structured interviews yielded 13 hours and 54 minutes of evidence from journalists working the Port Talbot patch in the same time period.

Let us briefly return to my first set of research questions:

RQ1: How has local news changed in Port Talbot between 1970 and 2013?

RQ 1.1: How has the quantity of this news changed?

RQ 1.2: How has the quality of this news changed?

RQ 1.3: Can any changes in this local news be explained by changes in newsgathering practices over the sample period?

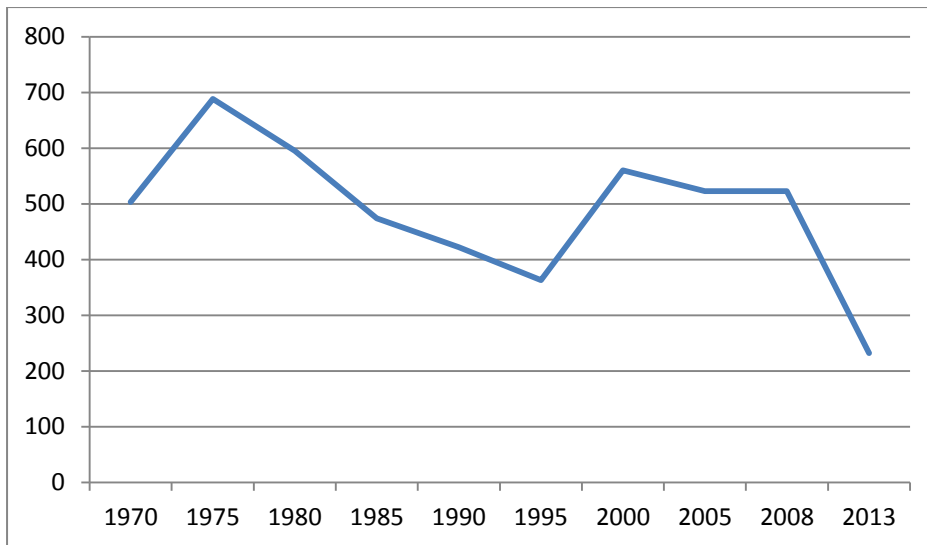
RQ1 seeks to discover the broad, overall picture of how news has changed over the sample period, and in order to answer it I must first set out my findings in response to the sub-questions RQ1.1 and RQ1.2. There are several indicators of the quality of news, and these largely reflect the normative roles of journalism I set out in Chapter 3: informing, representing (which includes elements such as campaigning, localness and community building), and scrutiny. Underpinning these journalistic duties is a series of measures that reflects whether, and how well, they are being carried out. Scrutiny is measured in the news topics that are covered, the reason or method by which news is triggered to appear (such as attendance at public meetings or official statements), and a balance of sources. Campaigning journalism is reflected in news topics, sourcing, triggers and the localness of the news. Localness is reflected

in the geographical origin of the news and the sources it quotes. Community strengthening is part of this localness, but is also reflected in news topics such as the coverage of sport, and also in sourcing. Representation is reflected in the number, status and localness of sources, and also in certain types of coverage that give readers an opportunity to speak.

Accordingly, I will address these sub-questions thematically, relating them to these measures, before returning to address the larger issues raised by RQ1 in the final section of this chapter.

## ***6.2 How the quantity of news changed in Port Talbot, 1970 - 2013***

There were 4,883 stories about Port Talbot published in the *South Wales Evening Post* (the *Post*) and the *Port Talbot Guardian* (the *Guardian*) in the month of October between 1970 and 2013. Figure 6.1 shows how this is spread across the sample period, and therefore how it changed over time. The greatest number of stories was produced in 1975, while the smallest number of stories was produced in 2013 (unsurprisingly – as this is the only sample year to capture news output after the *Guardian* had closed).



**Figure 6.1: How many news stories were there about Port Talbot?**

The overall decline in the number of news stories about Port Talbot between 1975 and 2008 is clear and constitutes a drop of 23.9 per cent. The closure of the *Guardian* provoked a further steep drop in the number of news stories. In 2008, a total of 523 stories was produced about Port Talbot, 52 per cent of which appeared in the *Post* and 48 per cent in the *Guardian*. In 2013, the total number of stories produced had dropped to 232, a fall of 55.6 per cent. The closure of the *Guardian* therefore meant that Port Talbot lost approximately half its total dedicated news coverage.

Table 6.1 sets out this picture in more detail, showing the quantity of news produced by the two newspapers and revealing how the proportions of their coverage changed over time. In the period before the closure, slightly more of the sample was produced by the *Guardian* (55.1 per cent of the stories between 1970 and 2008), while the *Post* produced 44.9 per cent.

	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2008	2013	Total
South Wales Evening Post	196 (39%)	182 (26%)	222 (37%)	250 (53%)	254 (60%)	238 (66%)	252 (45%)	220 (42%)	274 (52%)	232 (100%)	2320 (47%)
Port Talbot Guardian	307 (61%)	506 (74%)	373 (63%)	224 (47%)	168 (40%)	127 (34%)	308 (55%)	303 (58%)	249 (48%)		2565 (53%)
TOTAL	503	688	595	474	422	363	560	523	523	232	4883

**Table 6.1: Number of stories for the month of October, by year (NB data for the *Post* have been adjusted to account for the sampling method)**

But there is a story behind these headline figures that shows more accurately how well the two newspapers were serving Port Talbot across the sample period, and also how well-resourced and staffed their newsrooms were – and this is told in the next section, which looks at how the quality of news changed.

## ***6.3 How has the quality of this news changed?***

### ***6.3.1 Resources and journalism practice***

As I have argued throughout this thesis, newsroom resources underpin many aspects of journalism, and staff numbers, in particular, are crucial if news organisations are to be able to provide good quality, public interest news. I therefore begin this section with a discussion of resources as this will inform later discussions.

The 11 interviewees were able to give me an idea of staff numbers across the sample period, and Table 6.2 reflects their evidence. We can only take this as an indication, reliant as we are on the memories of the interviewees, but they do agree with each other on a several key figures, and this is an encouraging sign that their estimates are accurate.

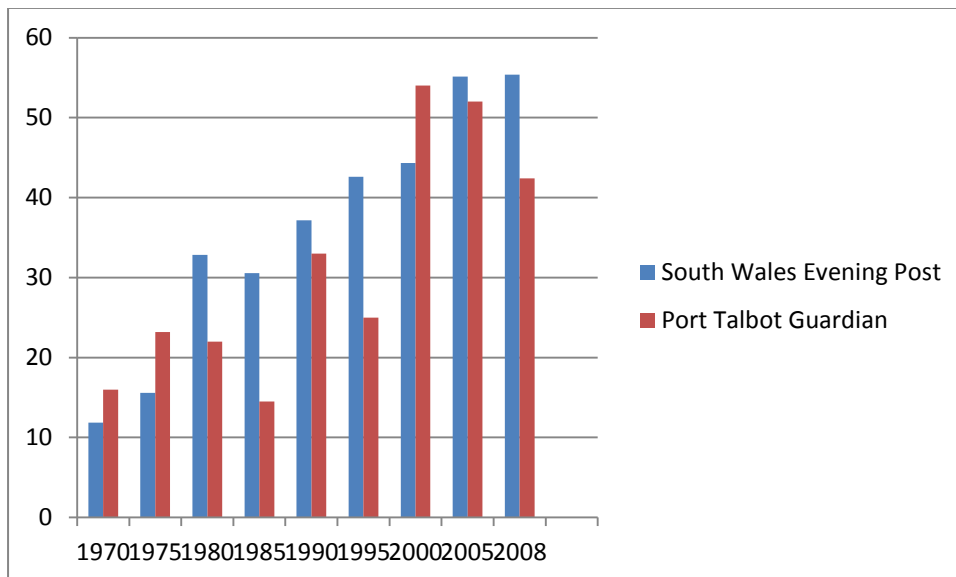


	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
South Wales Evening Post	4 (1)	Main office 50-60 (1) PT District office 4-2 (1)	Main office 40 (1) PT District office 2 (3)	Main office 24 (2) Neath and PT patch 3-4 (1)	Main office 40 (1) Neath and PT patch 4 (2)	Main office 9 (1) Neath and PT patch 4 (2), dropping to 2 (2)
Port Talbot Guardian	3 (2)	4 (1)	4 (2)	1 (2) -> 5 (1)	5 (1) 5-6 (2) down to 1-2 by 2009 (2)	
South Wales Echo	1 (1)	1 (1)	2 (1)			
Western Mail	1-2 (1)	1 (1)	2 (1)			
Glamorgan Gazette	1 (1)					
TOTAL working Port Talbot patch	10-11	8-10	10	1-9	9-10 -> 3-4	4 -> 2
TOTAL based in Port Talbot	10-11	8-10	10	4-9 -> 0	0	0

**Table 6.2: Reporting/ editorial staff estimated to have worked the Port Talbot patch 1960-2013 (figures in brackets denote the number of interviewees who reported the figure; “->” symbol denotes the change between the start and end of the decade)**

The headline from this table is obvious: in the 1960s, up to 11 reporters worked across five newspapers, all of whom had offices in the town; by the 2010s, two reporters worked the Neath and Port Talbot patch in combination, based in an office in Swansea 10 miles away. As noted above, this does not mean these two reporters were working exclusively on Port Talbot stories; as one of the interviewees told me: “they’re also doing a lot of Swansea stuff as well” (1980s-2000s *Post* reporter). He went on to say: “So if you think you go from those numbers down to two reporters who are not based in the area and producing copy for other areas, you just can see why the local coverage is just a shadow of what it was” (1980s *Guardian* reporter and 1980s-2000s *Post* reporter).

Coupled with this drop in staff numbers, paginations at the newspapers rose steadily over the sample period, as Figure 6.2 clearly shows. Taken together, this figure and Table 6.2 show falling staff numbers set against rising paginations, and this trend towards falling human resources and increasing workloads has been noted in several studies (for example A. Williams & Franklin, 2007).



**Figure 6.2: Average pagination of the *South Wales Evening Post* and *Port Talbot Guardian***

The increase in workloads also affected reporters whose job it was to cover certain geographical areas, known as patch reporters. Interviewees who worked in the 2000s confirmed that the reporters covering geographical patches began to be required to cover other patches as well as their own, as this reporter explained:

Sometimes they got [one of the Neath and Port Talbot patch reporters], to do west [Wales] stuff and I felt like I had a half a reporter [with me], because we didn't just have the *Post* stuff to do, we had the *Courier* stuff to do as well (*Post* reporter, 2000s).

New technology also added to the workload, and reporters described “juggling” their shorthand notebooks with their smart phones as they also tweeted from events, took photographs,

recorded interviews and filmed video footage. This was something reporters had come to accept was part of the modern job of journalism: “it is the way it’s going. It’s just what we’ve got to do” (*Post* reporter, 2000s).

Equally the number of stories a journalist was expected to do increased. At the *Post*, journalists no longer spoke of how they “worked on stories” as they had before the mid 2000s. Instead, as two *Post* journalists from the 2000s told me, they “filled shapes” (templated boxes reporters were required to fill with the right number of words), “wrote down-page” (smaller, less significant stories), or “wrote leads” (bigger, more significant stories). As one said: “Weekends were particularly tough because there were only two of you on all the down-page. The leads people wrote on a Friday night but some weeks there might not be a lot on the list on a Friday night for the Monday and you had to fill all that down-page. Once there were two people [working] and they had 70 shapes to fill the whole weekend, all down-pages” (interview with *Post* journalist 2000s). There is a shift in the discourse away from an emphasis on the often intensely interactive craft of making news, and towards a mechanistic process of news production as meeting targets, and, essentially, filling the gaps between the advertisements under intense time pressure, echoing Nick Davies’s assessment of the newsroom as a “news factory”, which I noted in Chapter 2 (p. 35) (Nick Davies, 2008, p. 113) .

### **6.3.1.1 Plurality of news**

This decline in the number of reporters, but also in the number of titles based in or publishing about Port Talbot is concerning when set against another strong theme of the interviews: the power of rivalry. As one interviewee told me, “there was a little bit of rivalry, it wasn’t competition, a bit of rivalry between mates” between journalists and newspapers. This was mentioned by all 11 interviewees, a total of 32 times. Journalists called it “healthy” and described it as motivating them to improve their work, to get the story that nobody else had got. One senior subeditor who worked at the Celtic Weeklies between 1995 and 2008 echoed the previously noted discourse of seeing journalism as a mechanised industry when they told me:

“journalists try to get the lead. If there’s no competition and there’s no hunger for the story, you don’t get the same feel for it. Every job you’ve got to have dedication and motivation and be focused and try to outdo everybody else, otherwise there’s no point; you might just as well be making washers in a factory” (Trinity Mirror senior subeditor 1990s-2000s).

In the 1970s and 80s this rivalry, although real, was also marked by a certain amount of camaraderie, given the different roles played by the different titles (as discussed, the *Post* was a daily publication, which covered a wide geographical area and emphasised breaking news, and the *Guardian* a weekly which focussed on detail, depth and completeness (see pp. 155-165 above) – and other newspapers such as the *South Wales Echo* or the *Western Mail* were concerned with different audiences and were deemed rivals but not competitors by the interviewees). But by the 2000s, only the *Guardian* and the *Post* still operated on the patch with any regularity or focus, and the competition between them had intensified as both began to chase the same stories. One *Guardian* journalist from that period said: “All good patches need that level of competition I think, and it was a genuine rivalry I considered it to be. If we beat the *Post* to something, we’d be absolutely chuffed and also each week, the front page of the Port Talbot *Guardian* had to be an exclusive” (2000s *Guardian* reporter). She continued, “The *Post* came out every day, so yes, [our] splash on a Thursday would have to be an exclusive. That just drives you to get things which looking at the areas which other reporters on the *Post* hadn’t been doing.” And this was echoed from a counterpart at the *Post*: “You do kind of listen a bit more carefully, because [...] if someone else is there, you’re always thinking about what line they’re going to take, you want to get the best quotes and stuff like that. So, no, it’s good when someone else is there in a way because then you do think about things, you concentrate a lot more.” Even in this reduced state, in the eyes of reporters on the ground, journalism about Port Talbot was improved and helped by this competition and plurality.

As well as offering multiple voices, then, the number of newspapers publishing in Port Talbot meant the journalists were working hard to find different angles from their rivals.

Numerous versions of the same story covered from multiple perspectives, and often in different ways, made for a richer public sphere. It also meant that news sources in the town were able to bargain for representation in the news. As one of the interviewees from the 1960s said: “Some of the people, if you were busy that day, you could say ‘I’m busy, come back and see me tomorrow and yes I’ll look at it’. Now what they used to do when there were lots of newspapers they’d say, ‘if you don’t do something on it, I’m going to the *Guardian* or the *Post*’ – and don’t forget the *Echo* and the *Western Mail* had offices in Port Talbot”. This plurality-induced rivalry was present not just between journalists working from different publishers, but also between those working for different titles owned by the same groups. One interviewee who worked at the Celtic Weeklies, for example, told me that he kept his bill posters (which heralded the week’s big headline on newsstands) secret from editorial staff on the *Western Mail* and *Echo* to avoid being scooped by the daily titles that were owned by the same publisher.

Rivalry of all kinds was therefore seen as a healthy and essential ingredient of local news, where journalists spurred each other on to better stories, more in-depth angles, and which made newspapers more interesting and entertaining to readers, which in turn boosted circulations and profits. But an essential ingredient of rivalry was a pool of journalists employed by more than one outlet, and in Port Talbot this pool of journalists had largely been drained by the end of 2010, with just two reporters remaining on the Neath and Port Talbot patch, and working on covering the town part-time from a base in Swansea. In Cardiff, convergence meant the same journalists working across weekly and daily titles and the website, and this, according to the NUJ’s Father of Chapel at the *Western Mail*:

kills some of the reporter’s creativity and turns them into a process worker. Working for a group of newspapers rather than just one also destroys the natural sense of loyalty a journalist feels towards a distinct title with its own style and character. (Shipton, 2014, p. 76)

### **6.3.1.2 The decline of the “snappers”**

Alongside reporters and other editorial staff, photographers, referred to colloquially in the trade as “snappers”, were an essential component of the newsroom. They too had strong links with the community, went on a regular beat, and had large contact books and knowledge of the area and its history. One such was Peter Knowles, a Port Talbot photographer who took over a family photography business from his father, and who worked as a news photographer across South Wales throughout his working life. Sadly Peter Knowles died in 2012 and was not interviewed as part of this research, but his obituary describes him as a “community stalwart” who was “linked with all sections of the town through his photography. From business to weddings, work to play he touched them all” – and also someone who “would stay in contact with any community news. Even after the closure of the *Guardian*, I would have regular updates of Port Talbot news” (Howells, 2011a). Photographers, then, were valued in the newsroom and the community, but my interviews revealed further decline. For example, I asked one reporter whether there was a dedicated photographer on the *Guardian*’s staff:

When I started, yes, but as time went on and changes went on within the group, it started to change a bit and [...] I think our photographer went down to a couple of days a week with us and then the other days we’d have someone else or we’d have to go out and take pictures ourselves. (Mid-2000s *Guardian* reporter)

The decline of staff photographers, and later near-eradication even of freelance “snappers” from the workforce, is an important part of the emerging narrative of the withdrawal of journalism from this area, and many others like it. Not only did the town lose further valuable editorial staff, rooted in the communities they served, and who, by the very nature of their work, were getting out of the office and meeting contacts face-to-face, but the loss of photographers also added to the workload of reporters who were left. Interviews revealed that as time went on (often ill-trained or untrained) reporters were asked to multi-task and take photos themselves.

### **6.3.1.3 *The decline of the specialists***

Another effect of cutbacks was the removal of specialist reporters. This meant the loss of detailed knowledge and contacts, and affected roles that had traditionally been associated with fourth estate journalism in the shape of scrutiny of public institutions, such as health reporters, council reporters and court reporters. One journalist who had experienced the better-resourced days of the 1980s as well as the lean years of the 2000s told me:

Bit by bit, specialist reporters, either their brief widened or they'd simply ceased to be specialists in the same way. We used to have a dedicated council reporter. I think that just went by the board and by the end of it, there were health reporters and people but they couldn't give it the full-time attention that they could 20 years earlier. They were very dedicated to their particular [role], so they would do general stuff as well but they were spread thinner by the end, there's no question. (*Post subeditor 1980s-2000s*)

Again, this affected the health of the public sphere in limiting the ability of general reporters to scrutinise institutions without the specialist knowledge and contacts that had made this task both more efficient and more effective for specialists.

### **6.3.1.4 *Patch reporters and district offices***

The qualitative data reveal an erosion of resources behind the scenes which made the job of gathering local news increasingly difficult. For patch reporters, whose job it was to cover a particular geographical area, this erosion was two-fold: a reduction in staff or human resources dedicated to the patch, and the closure of offices situated inside their patch, which distanced them from the community. I have already described above how patch reporters in Port Talbot decreased from around 10 or 11 in the 1960s to one or two in the 2010s, and shown how the number working within the town had fallen to 0 by the 2000s (p. 173).

District offices were significant resources for both reporters and local people. Reporters from the 1960s to the 1980s describe district offices operated by both the *Guardian* and the *Post* which were open to the public and in which three or four members of staff were the norm. From this base, reporters would regularly leave to cover nearby stories.

However, the importance of district offices was in the way they linked journalists with the local community. They were credited with being a source of news stories, but also a way to filter out those with “a bee in their bonnet” (1990s-2000s *Post* reporter), and also an important and regular point of contact between the journalists and the communities they served. News publishers were pro-active in encouraging local figures (often seen as reliable sources of news) into the offices on a regular basis. According to one interviewee, free newspapers were given out to the local police and traffic wardens, which gave them an incentive to call in to the office and formed a regular and informal point of contact between them and the reporters, encouraging the flow of information between them; another interviewee said members of the public would pop in to pick up a free bus timetable. One 2000s *Guardian* reporter who worked firstly out of the Neath office, and later from the Bridgend office, said:

You’d be surprised the number of stories that actually came in. Even if you’d have like crazy stories coming in from people which were nonsense, you did actually have some fairly decent stories coming in from people just walking in. There’s something about having that link which was big.

If district offices were convenient for local people, there were useful reasons for maintaining them for reporters, too. First, district offices meant reporters were more likely to cover routine stories that were happening out of hours, and it became less practical when district offices closed. One *Guardian* reporter whose job moved to Bridgend in 2008 when the paper’s Neath office closed, explains:



I'm pretty sure [reporters] stopped going to those PACT<sup>8</sup> meetings as frequently as they did when we were based in the town, just because by the time you're done after a day in Bridgend, you've got to drive back to Neath and then you've got to drive up into the valleys, like into the Swansea Valley and [closing the Neath office] definitely would have had an effect, just on a really practical level. (2000s *Guardian* reporter)

One of the interviewees was in a senior position at the Celtic Weekly titles at this time, and likened the positioning of district offices to the Romans' fort system, where forts were only ever a day's march away from each other meaning reinforcements could be called in quickly:

We had a really good chain of command going through every area. [...] So if there was trouble you could send someone over very quickly, someone would say, 'I haven't got a photographer' and I'd ring someone else, 'get so-and-so over there.' [...] Of course when they shut that office and shut that office and I had people working in Ebbw Vale in the morning who had to be taking photos in Neath by 1 o'clock, that was the start of the rot. (senior subeditor 1990s-2000s, Celtic Weeklies)

This "chain of command" meant that, even when staff numbers began to drop, the co-ordination of staff meant local areas could still receive coverage from their local newspapers.

District offices also meant reporters could respond more quickly to stories, ask face-to-face questions, and get a more detailed understanding of an event. One *Post* reporter who worked there from the 1980s to the 2000s told me about an incident that happened in the mid 1990s:

There was one example where I'd heard that somebody had been knocked down by a bus in the bus station. So I walked out of the office, round the corner and had a look, yes

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<sup>8</sup> Police and Communities Together, or sometimes Partnerships and Communities Together, an open meeting between local police and the public

you could see something was going on and you'd warn the news desk that there'd been an incident over the bus station, I'll find out more.

This was contrasted with his later experience:

Now you've got to hope you can get hold of the police if they are there when you ring.

You can't just walk out of the office and look any more because you're based in Swansea and you've got to drive into Neath and back.

The possibility of such stories going unreported, or reported with only single or official sources, is higher if journalists cannot make it to the scene of an event, and makes the scrutiny of the official version of events much more difficult. But other newsgathering practices were also affected. Routine journalism, or the kind of 'on-spec' newsgathering that happened when journalists went out of the office and spoke to local people to "find out what was going on" (*Guardian* reporter 1970s) was also more limited by the closure of district offices. Journalists of the 1960s-1990s were just a short distance from the action – able to "just take a walk into town – go to the libraries and community centres, you'd look at posters, you'd find out little bits and pieces" (*Post* reporter 1980s), and covering news at a distance became an increasing problem for reporters as "the staff you have got aren't based in the communities they cover so it's really tough" (*Post* reporter 1980s).

Once the district offices closed, news was often covered using the quickest or most convenient means possible, and journalists working in the late 2000s and early 2010s spoke about telephones and social media as their main points of access to members of the public. A *Post* journalist who had worked there since the early 1980s said that by the 2000s: "they didn't like people going out of the office unless they were going on a defined page lead story. There became more of a dependence on rewriting hand-outs of all kinds"; another *Post* journalist of the late 2000s, who had never experienced district offices in operation at the newspaper, said "news surgeries" had been tried in the districts, but quickly dropped because they weren't used:

We did try... They had an idea that we'd do little surgeries and I think one reporter did the [Port Talbot] Civic Centre and I did Neath Civic Centre, but the footfall wasn't good enough. Because we didn't have laptops or phones, I couldn't do any work, so you'd just be sitting there waiting for stories. It didn't work, it was a waste of time, but they did try. It is a shame because the office and sometimes the *Post* is seen as a Swansea paper; people forget that you were based in Swansea as well, so the best way [to cover local stories] used to be going to evening meetings, PACT meetings and community stuff.

The distance of newspapers from their local patch did not go unnoticed by the community. The *Guardian* had once been based in Port Talbot, but this office was closed in the late 1990s, and staff moved to Neath. But in 2008, the *Guardian's* Neath office closed, some staff were made redundant, and the remaining reporters moved to share the *Glamorgan Gazette's* Bridgend office. A *Guardian* reporter from this time remembers community contact dropping:

You're not there and they just think you don't care about the community if you're not there. I think we probably were [missing stories]. I think people just didn't know where to go. If they see a number with 01656 instead of 01639 on it, they're not going to phone. They're going to think that's not the number I want. I think people were losing touch with the paper because we weren't there to keep touch.

The role of journalists in their communities was raised many times by the reporters I interviewed and district offices were described as important hubs where local people could meet journalists. The relationship of journalists to the communities they served was a recurring theme of the interviews – it was mentioned by 10 of the 11 interviewees, an average of four times apiece (41 mentions in total), while the role of district offices was mentioned by eight of the interviewees, an average of three times apiece (22 mentions). One reporter said the job of a local newspaper is: “to be the voice of the area. They're the ones who really should come up with the goods. If you are in that town or whatever, you're the ones who should be coming out with the stories. You're the ones who the readers should be turning to” (2000s *Guardian*

reporter). When district offices had operated, journalists felt embedded in the town, and local people also felt this connection.

From the audience's perspective, the relationship of local people to local reporters was also raised in the focus groups. Those in the over-60 focus group (FG1), spoke about trusting journalists when they were based in the town because you could see them face-to-face and know who they were:

You could speak to [journalists], you could go along and inevitably, [they would say] do you mind if I quote you and an article would be written, and you go ahead, knowing that, because I'm big enough and ugly enough, do it, but don't misquote.

As this quote suggests, journalists who were known to the community in this way were also picked up and corrected by the local community if they got details wrong. The stakes were much higher for journalists to represent their communities accurately because they themselves were part of the community. Those in FG4, which was made up of activists and campaigners and designated as "opinion leaders" for the purposes of this study, also spoke of the importance of a continuing relationship with a known journalist, and linked this to accuracy in reporting:

With the *Guardian* I felt particularly with this one reporter we dealt with, that you build-up a relationship with and always speak to [them], it works well, but when there were two or three other reporters who came in who didn't know the background it was a total mess. I found [some reporters] used to misquote me terribly, [...] someone else would come in who didn't know the previous history and so on [...] so in the end I said, I'm not going to have an interview on the telephone, tell me what you want and then I would write them an email. I'd say, you can use anything you like from the email, and I found that worked a lot better. [...]

Some journalists put this down to the newspapers' focus on the bottom line, acknowledging: "newspapers aren't supposed to be social in that sense. They've got to make money", but they also lamented this, and were critical of the position cuts had left them in: "I think that the balance has to be right between making money and also representing an area, representing the people of an area, giving the people a voice. I think the balance went the other way" (1980s-2000s *Post* reporter). Changes to work practices followed the cuts and the increasing focus on profit, and I would now like to examine these changes in more detail.

### **6.3.1.5 Working practices and how they changed**

The experiences of the journalists I interviewed have enabled me to analyse how working practices in local newsrooms changed over the sample period. Four distinct categories emerged from this analysis, and help us trace the change from a 1960s-1980s reporting style that was often face-to-face, on-spec or time-consuming, to a 1990s-2010s style that was increasingly led by new technologies and became more remote from communities.

I identified four main areas of activity which made up a reporter's job from the 1960s to the 1980s:

- covering regular *diary* events such as the courts, sports matches, council meetings and theatre productions;
- *beat* activities, where reporters would go on rounds to find out stories from well-known sources;
- *response* activities such as chasing up accidents, emergencies or leads from members of the public;
- *investigative* activities such as going through council meeting minutes or official documents or chasing up stories on corporations.

However, from the 1990s onwards, working practices began to change radically. As I have discussed, interviewees testified that owners began to streamline operations behind the scenes by merging roles, cutting staff, closing local offices, removing overtime pay or stopping extra payments for additional work. Employing specialist reporters became more unusual and the patch reporters (those allocated to write stories about a specific local area) reduced in number. Stories began to be shared across titles and scoops given to the bigger daily titles, while weekly newspapers either lost the story or had to find a new angle to ensure their title remained fresh. Each of the four main activity areas saw change or reduction as a result.

Diary events were increasingly dropped and budgets to pay freelancers to cover these items were also eroded. Dedicated court or council reporters became less common. Where meetings were attended, they were a struggle to resource and journalists reported “Sometimes it feels like the job is taking over my life because I’m at so many meetings” (*Post* reporter late 2000s) – meanwhile many meetings went unreported or were not attended.

Beat activities were not done in person, but on the phone or later by email, and also by the 2000s, response activities were being done by using phones, social media and press officers, and face-to-face newsgathering was the exception rather than the rule. Tellingly, none of the interviewees from the 2000s mentioned investigative activities when asked to describe their newsgathering practices, though these were mentioned by all the journalists working in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. (Though the interviewees were not asked specifically about investigative practices, they were probed for details about the way they scrutinised local public institutions, and this analysis is a result of these responses). What the interviewees say echoes much of what has been found in the literature regarding falling staff numbers and a decline in newspapers’ ability to cover public interest news, investigative news, remote or less populated areas (or less profitable areas) of the readership or patch (Davis, 2002; A. Williams & Franklin, 2007). These findings underpin many of the other findings in this research.

### ***6.3.2 News topics: what gets covered and why?***

The nature of the news itself also supports many of the findings about working practices, and this section examines news topics and news triggers in more detail.

Over the course of the sample a fifth of Port Talbot's news was about sport (20.7 per cent), just over a tenth was about crime (11.6 per cent), and almost a quarter (22.4 per cent) covered local government or public institutions. Table 6.3 shows the breakdown. The first two of these, sport and crime, are unsurprising statistics to anyone who has ever picked up a local newspaper, and other studies of local news confirm the dominance of these two topics. In one study of local television news, for example, crime was found to be the most common topic of news output (26 per cent), while disaster/ accident (9 per cent), business and economy stories (8 per cent), environment (8 per cent), education (6 per cent), and government or politics (6 per cent) were "popular secondary topics" (Gant & Dimmick, 2000) – sport was not included in their analysis. This topic list is very similar to that identified in a study of sources in local newspapers in the north of England, and which lists similar trends in the proportions of news topics – for example news that used sources from court cases, equitable with my crime value, was similar to my own finding at 12 per cent – again sport stories were not coded (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008, p. 492). Another study of internet news use, found that sport stories were the most read of all news stories, at 26 per cent (crime was not a stand-alone topic in their study) (Tewksbury, 2003, p. 704).

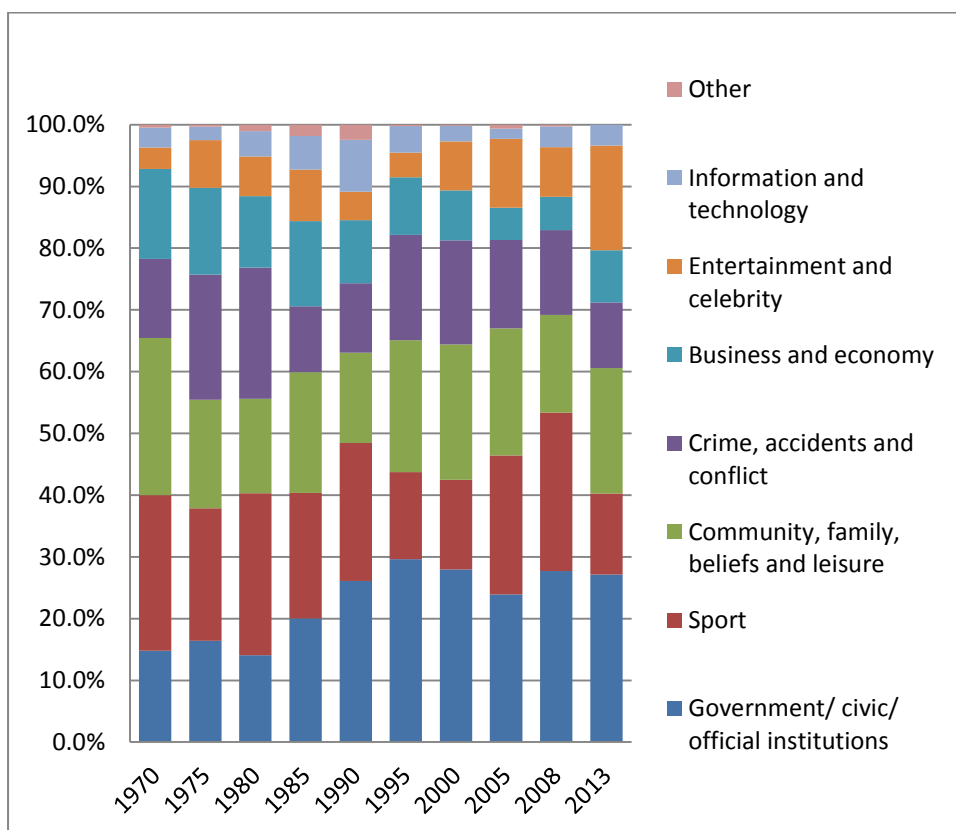
Table 6.3 lists all the news topics coded in the content analysis, and shows how I have grouped the topics into broader areas that reflect the themes discussed in this thesis. With more than 30 separate topics coded, it is necessary to group these into wider topic areas and Table 6.3 also lays out the proportions of news topics across the sample, organising them into broader groupings. The spread and range of these news topics show that a diverse mix of news was maintained from 1970 to 2013.

Broad topics	Per cent	Topic	Per cent
Civic/ government/ official institutions	22.4	Council	6.2
		Health	4.2
		Education	3.4
		Planning	2.7
		Public transport	2.3
		Political	2.1
		Emergency Services	.9
		Government	.6
		Utilities	.1
Sport	20.7	Sport	20.7
Community, family, charity, beliefs and leisure	19.2	Community	6.3
		Family	4.1
		Charity	5.0
		History/ nostalgia	1.3
		Religion	1.3
		Hobbies/ personal	1.0
		Activism	.1
Crime, accidents and conflict	15.5	Courts/ crime	11.6
		Accident/ injury	2.7
		Disasters	.8
		War/ conflict	.3
		Terrorism	.0
Business and economy	10.2	Business	4.0
		Industry	2.8
		Property	1.0
		Consumer	.9
		Employment	.6
		Economy	.5
Entertainment and celebrity	7.5	Entertainment/ arts	7.0
		Celebrity	.5
Information and technology	3.8	Local directory	2.4
		Environment	1.1
		Technology	.2
		Weather/ conditions	.1
Other	.7	Media	.7
		Animals	.0
		Immigration	.0

**Table 6.3: Topics and groupings of Port Talbot news**



The spread of news topics reflects a similar picture to that found in other studies of local news topics, as discussed above. However, patterns of how these news topics were used changed over time. Figure 6.3 shows the proportion of each news topic grouping in each sample year, and reveals trends across several of the broad groupings. For example, there is a large increase in entertainment and celebrity news (from 3.5 per cent in 1970 to 16.9 per cent in 2013), supporting research on the increasing tabloidization of the local press (Marshall, 2005). Other trends in news topics are discussed below.



**Figure 6.3: News topics from 1970-2013**

### 6.3.2.1 Crime in the news

There is a drop in crime stories (from 12.8 per cent in 1970, or its 1980 peak of 21.3 per cent to 10.6 per cent in 2013). As I said above, studies have traditionally found crime coverage comprises a large and prominent section of newspaper content, and newspaper owners often

say are among the most popular news stories, which sell newspapers and underwrite the cost of reporting public interest and political news (Picard, 2010, p. 21).

The decline in crime coverage seems perplexing, but I think it can be explained. The withdrawal of specialist journalists from the courts must be significant to the decline, but it must also be noted that this has happened in tandem with the closure of local magistrates' courts, which were once located with the towns (in Port Talbot and Neath), but which are now centred further away (in Swansea) – a practice that has been repeated across the UK with closure of “under-utilised” courts (Casciani, 2010)<sup>9</sup>. Of course, Swansea is not a long way from Port Talbot (just 10 miles) and the journalists of the *Post* are based there, so this should not on the face of it be seen as a reason why coverage should reduce in this way. But seen alongside changes to the working practices of journalists, and the increasingly desk-bound nature of the job as the sample period progressed, it is likely that this could have played a role in the decline. The reporters of the 1960s through to the mid-2000s told me they had regular stints at the local magistrates' courts, often resulting in several separate news stories. This practice had stopped by the late 2000s and the early 2010s as the newspapers focused their attentions on higher profile crown court cases, or on other, easier-to-obtain news stories, such as the celebrity and entertainment news readily available on the newswires, in press releases and on social media. Dedicated court reporters became increasingly scarce. One interviewee told me: “they don't have a court reporter now, a dedicated one, which is a shame because they miss so much, and that's what we used to struggle [with] as well, going to court, because we rarely got the chance to go” (2000s *Post* reporter). Furthermore, a day spent sitting at Swansea Magistrates' Court now might only yield one or two stories of relevance to a Port Talbot patch reporter, and so this also makes it an inefficient use of a their time.

This is a national trend with a 30-year history, according to Davies (1998). He points to the decline in court reporters at the nationals, at news agencies, and in the local press, quoting

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<sup>9</sup> These changes are, further, related to changes in the way low-level crime is now handled by the police, with many more crimes dealt with at the scene with on-the-spot fines and fixed penalty notices

one court reporter, who said “we are a dying species” (ibid.). Davies found the Press Association had haemorrhaged reporters at the national level (from twenty reporters in 1970 covering the Royal Courts of Justice alone, to 5 reporters covering all London’s crown courts, magistrates’ courts and county courts in 1998). He also pointed to the same trend in the local press, where:

Most local newspapers have abandoned their traditional role of recording all the proceedings of their local magistrates, coroners and judges regardless of whether or not the stories made great headlines. Most now tend to run court stories only if they have some particularly eye-catching angle. (ibid)

This has opened the door to influence from increasingly powerful and well-resourced police PR officers. One former crime reporter at a local newspaper compared crime figures with the press releases issued by the police in Newcastle, finding: “in June 2009, they released information about 76 crimes – less than 1 per cent of the total of 7,951 cases [...]. Taking sex attacks as one example, while 62 were reported to Northumbria police, the media were only told about three. There were six stabbings, but none were publicised” (Green, 2009). He also found information about crime was released late to make it less newsworthy, or downplayed in press statements. Heather Brooke is likewise concerned about the inherently labyrinthine and closed nature of the courts system, coupled with the lack of resources for court reporting and the increasing restrictions on the press. These developments mean the process of justice, which the public “pays a lot of money for” is happening behind closed doors. She notes, “if the public can’t see justice being done then the entire system is little more than a cloistered club solely for the benefit of judges, lawyers and their lackeys”, which means the courts are “becoming an elitist enclave entirely separate and out of touch with modern society” (Brooke, 2012, pp. 59-69).

Informal discussions with those working in the local courts also raise another issue: that court procedures and rules might not be followed to the letter in the absence of court reporters, and that “things are happening now that would never have happened with a reporter there”

(discussion with the author). This highlights the role of “scarecrow journalism” that was discussed in Chapter 3 – that journalists’ presence has the effect of keeping the behaviour of public officials in check (C. Anderson et al., 2014). The impact of the decline in crime coverage and the withdrawal of journalists from the day-to-day routine of the courtroom may have wide-reaching consequences for the scrutiny of the local justice system and the way justice serves, or is seen to serve, the victims and communities impacted by the crime, and the reporting of local courts is worthy of further study.

One other aspect of the decline of crime reporting must also be noted. One participant in Focus Group 4 (made up of activists and campaigners) told me that the lack of crime reporting was having an impact on knowledge of crime in the town, which also seemed to be heightening locals’ fears unnecessarily. He spoke about several rumours that had been circulating on social media about dog thefts:

The accurate reporting of crime is really important for us because there can be a sort of folklore side of crime. Think recently of the rumours about dog thefts, quite a big thing about people stealing dogs for fighting and so on. These rumours were going round and round, you’d hear a lot of people just talking about it, not being reported [in the news] just being talked about, and then it got into the *Evening Post* and then the police are issuing denials that this is happening, and I was thinking that that was a strange way of news about crime filtering through, word-of-mouth.

This illustrates a case in which rumour circulated for several weeks before official channels – in this case a police inspector – intervened by releasing a statement, at which point the story was reported in the *Post* (“No-one is marking up houses, then stealing and killing dogs on Sandfields housing estate - say police,” 2014). As this participant pointed out the “folklore element” of these repeated inaccurate reports on social media elevated the story from a rumour to a received truth. This shows how the information flow can easily be guided by word of mouth without an authoritative editorial source to counter rumour. However there is a second concern

here that suggests a trend in the reporting of such stories as a result of official sources. Local people discussed the issue among themselves for many weeks without journalists picking up the story, and because of this the story was not subjected to the editorial checking that might traditionally have happened. In fact, the story was only reported when an official source stepped in to correct the rumours and allay public fears. Other data in the study have also revealed this trend towards an increasing use of high status sources and official channels for triggering news, and there is further discussion of these findings below (p. 215-217).

### **6.3.2.2 *Business in the news***

Business stories decreased from 14.6 per cent in 1970 to 8.5 per cent in 2013. Where the decline in crime stories may be attributed to the decline in cases seen by the courts, so too the decline in business stories may be partly attributed to the fall in Port Talbot's economic fortunes. This once thriving industrial town was known as:

‘Treasure Island’ because of the wealth brought into the town by the huge new works of the Steel Company of Wales (SCOW). At that time thousands of men and women worked for SCOW, earning very high wages, so that the weekly payroll ran into many thousands of pounds. (Parsons, 2000)

Today, the steel is produced by multi-national corporation Tata Steel, and the company employs around a quarter of the 1950s steelmaking workforce, which now stands at around 3,500 in its Port Talbot works ("400 jobs to go at Tata steelworks in Port Talbot," 2014) – and as I've already noted, Neath Port Talbot is now high on the Welsh Index of Deprivation (National Assembly for Wales Members' Research Service, 2008). It may also be that local businesses have not been as effective at operating the machinery of PR that their counterparts in wealthier places have adopted (or that they have been less able to afford it). Again, this may merit further study, as the impact of the relationship between local business and local media and the ability of

local small or medium business to access media is likely to have implications for the local and wider economy, as well as information in the public sphere.

### **6.3.2.3 Sport as community-building news**

Another striking finding of the content analysis is the drop in sports coverage from 25.2 per cent in 1970 to 13.1 per cent in 2013. This kind of sports reportage is resource intensive, and often requires a publisher to send journalists to witness sports events. I know from my own knowledge of cuts and redundancies, gathered from NUJ branch meetings, that many sports clubs are now expected to provide their own match reports as staff journalists are no longer numerous enough to cover all matches, particularly of the smaller teams or lower leagues. For instance, the *South Wales Evening Post* cut its budget to pay freelance sports journalists sometime around 2010-12, and this may well account for some of the decline.

The community-building power of sport is well-documented (see for example Frisby & Millar, 2002; Jarvie, 2003; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008), but the evidence for the impact of sports news on communities is thinner. One book on minor league baseball in America attributes the power of the sport in fostering community to the “shared emotional connection” it creates: “a review of articles and stories about Minor League Baseball in the press indicates a strong connection between the team and its community” – and it is the local media’s power to mediate between the community and the sport which appears to be most potent in building and fostering this sense of community (Hoffmann, Kraus, & Manning, 2012, p. 84).

Equally the lack of representation of certain groups in sports coverage has also been documented, though not from the angle of a local community. Studies have instead concentrated on the lack of representation of women or ethnic minorities in sports news, finding, for example, “with sports sections giving such little space to female athletes, readers can get the impression that women’s sports are trivial” (Wanta, 2009, p. 113) and that this amounts to “symbolic annihilation” of women, as if their activities and achievements are not worthy of note

(Tuchman, 1981) – and in this instance it seems the lack of representation of Port Talbot could be a similar “symbolic annihilation” of the town’s sporting achievements and the resulting sense of community that is achieved through coverage of local sport.

Furthermore, one of the reporters I interviewed linked the decline in the quality of sports coverage to the overall decline in circulations and the loss of appeal to younger audiences:

A big thing was it was an ageing readership and we hadn’t really done much to reconnect with that younger audience [...]. That’s a problem for all newspapers but there wasn’t a huge connection to younger readers coming through, and the quality of the sports reporting went down and that was a big, big part of it as well. (2000s *Guardian* reporter)

He also said he thought too much of the newspaper had been devoted to council news and crime reporting, and worried that this had also blunted the appeal of the newspaper to younger audiences, contributing to its eventual downfall.

#### **6.3.2.4 Reporting local government and local public bodies**

But what of public interest news? Many commentators equate the public interest with robust, critical coverage of government institutions. For example, O’Neill and O’Connor point to reporting of local government as having: “a profound impact on the public interest and the fourth estate role of the regional press” and were concerned to find only 9 per cent of the stories they coded in local newspapers in the north of England were from local government sources (O’Neill & O’Connor, 2008, p. 494). While my own study finds only 6.2 per cent of stories were about the local council, I would also add that public institutions such as health boards, hospitals, schools, the emergency services, public transport and utilities require scrutiny from local journalists and that such reporting constitutes public interest news. Once all public institutions are accounted for, the overall proportion is 22.4 per cent, a substantial proportion of the news,

which suggests the public interest duty is taken seriously by local newspapers. In fact, there is a rise in news about local government, civic and official institutions (from 14.8 per cent in 1970 to 27.1 per cent in 2013).

Why coverage of these stories increased is not clear, but the increase may echo findings from another longitudinal study which uncovered a trend towards increasing levels of scrutiny in the news between 1961 and 2001 in the Swedish local press (Ekström et al., 2006). This study attributed the rise to a change in the culture of journalism which increasingly favoured scrutiny and stories that were critical of local government over human-interest styles of reporting. The qualitative interviews, along with other data from the content analysis (for instance in my discussion of news triggers, below), however, point to less favourable interpretations of this figure. It seems likely that as reporters became more desk bound they became steadily more reliant on information subsidies such as press releases sent to them by institutions (such as the local council) with well-resourced PR teams and a vested interest in securing positive news coverage.

What is also clear from the qualitative data is the importance of this kind of coverage to newspapers and local journalists, evidenced by many of the interviewees, who said they think local newspapers should and do play this public interest role in scrutinising those in authority. One *Guardian* reporter from the 2000s “found [the job] really interesting, kind of holding power to account – and especially the fact that some of those councils have been Labour-held for decades and decades. I was suspicious of all kinds of dark dealings going on in that council which you couldn’t really get close to”. But this journalist noted with alarm that the loss of the *Guardian*, and therefore a reduction in the journalists covering local politics, meant that local officials were now under less scrutiny than previously: “the fact now that they’re probably just acting with impunity, it just does concern me, because it wasn’t the most efficient of the councils. It’s just slightly concerning the thought that now, knowing some of the councillors who



are there and some of the council officers, that they've not probably got people keeping a close eye on them like I think they once did" (2000s *Guardian* reporter).

Many others framed their work in this way, too, saying they thought journalists were "doing an important job" and "holding power to account and kind of being the eyes and ears of the public" (2000s *Guardian* reporter). However, many of them go further, outlining the role of the local journalist in informing local people, representing their views, building community cohesion and campaigning – in short, echoing the elements identified by McNair (2009a) and Barnett (2009):

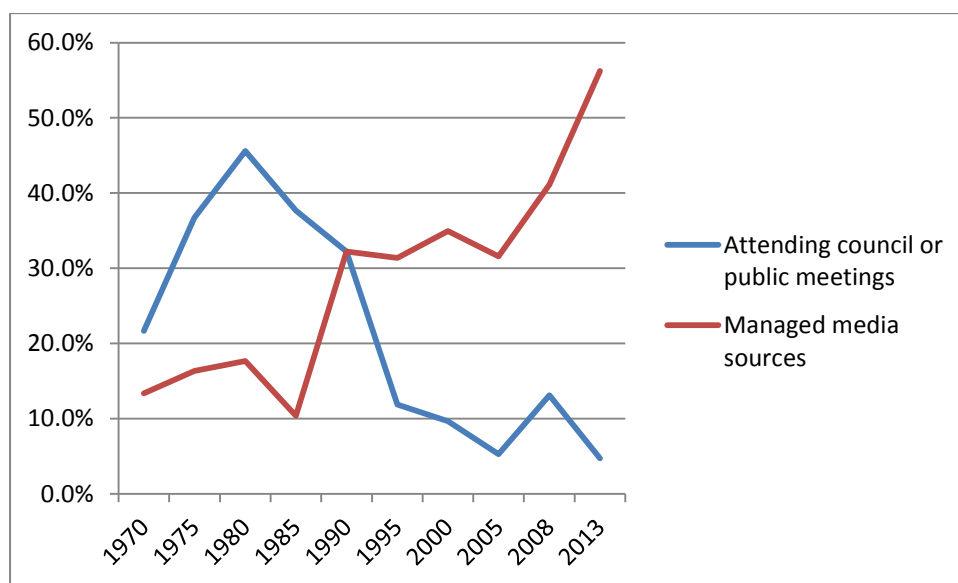
Personally what I want my job to be is to be able to give a voice to the people of the town. Let them raise their issues, inform them about what's going on in their town or what people in charge of their town are doing, either to help or hinder them, and to champion good causes in the town (2000s *Post* reporter).

Journalists are conscious of the way local journalism can "help bind communities – [and] help strengthen local democracy" (2000s *Guardian* reporter), and are serious about their "responsibility for reporting what's happening in the community and being there for a community". As previous studies have shown, local journalism is associated with community cohesion, and the fact journalists are conscious of this role, and therefore more likely to select news items that correspond with supplying readers with this kind of public interest news bodes well for the health of the local public sphere (Jack M McLeod et al., 1996).

Journalists may see the role of the newspaper in this way, but as another reporter points out, newspapers have "got to make money", and it's this financial imperative that endangers time-consuming journalistic practices. When staff are cut, time for more resource-intensive journalism decreases. Interview data suggest that investigative news, the kinds of speculative news gathering techniques that made up many beat activities, and face-to-face newsgathering practices have all been hit. This is also reflected in the data on news triggers, which captures the

reason or event behind why a journalist has been prompted to cover a news story, for example a scheduled event such as a sports match, the release of an official report, a press release, a tip-off from a reader, an investigation, a council meeting, and so on.

In fact, data about the way journalists are accessing information channels to write public interest news are revealing. These analyse news triggers for the government/ civic and official institutions category I outlined above. As Figure 6.4 shows, journalists' attendance at local council meetings, public meetings or political party meetings dropped from 45.6 per cent in 1980 to 4.7 per cent in 2013. Meanwhile the use of announcements and statements, press events and successes – all of which were most likely to be provided by PR sources, rose from 17.6 per cent in 1980 to 56.3 per cent in 2013.



**Figure 6.4: How public interest news is covered**

Again, the growth of the use of managed media sources is steeper after the turn of the millennium. This growing reliance on official information sources and PR is a consequence of the resource limitations and cutbacks that have been described in interviews. The next section looks in more detail at the way news triggers are used in the local news.

### **6.3.2.5 Choosing the news: how and why journalists are prompted to cover news stories**

It is not always easy to discover the trigger for a news story, as journalists do not always make overt reference to how or where they discovered the story, and it is highly unusual for them to credit press releases as being the basis of their article (Justin Lewis, Williams, et al., 2008a). However they often include cues that reveal there is a managed element to the story. For example they mention an official statement, a launch, a gala opening, or a press conference. Conversely, they may indicate active news gathering when they write that they attended a PACT meeting, a local council event or a public meeting. Only where the trigger is apparent in the text have the stories been coded into a value – otherwise they were assigned the ‘unclear’ value (only 3.6 per cent of the sample was coded ‘unclear’).

Once again I have grouped the 36 values in this category into themes. These reflect the four activities I identified above (p. 185), i.e. diary, beat, response and investigative news gathering practices. I have further refined the diary trigger category into those which are active, such as court cases and council meetings that were actively pursued by journalists, and those which came from managed media methods such as press conferences or photo calls. There are also other themes that reflect areas of discussion from the thesis, and findings that I will discuss later in this chapter. These are *cannibalisations*, which are stories taken from other news sources; *community*, which is made up of feature content such as local history, comment or community reports written by lay-reporters; *media*, which form content about the newspaper itself including appeals for stories, competition results or staff changes; and *reader*, which include, for example, readers’ letters, poems or photographs and can be equated with the recent term User Generated Content (UGC). These groupings are set out at Table 6.4.

<b>Coding values</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Government body meeting Public or political party meeting Crime/ courts Scheduled event, eg sports match, play Pre-meeting (information such as agendas, reports or applications sent out ahead of meetings) Academic/ trade conference	Diary – active
Press conference/ media event/ opening/ photo opp Announcement/ statement/ decision Interview <sup>10</sup> Appeal Closure Speech Donation Report/ official figures/ inspection	Diary – passive (managed)
Human interest Nostalgia/ history Opinion of member of public/ comment Community report	Beat – including community, human interest, features
Accident/ incident/ emergency Trade Union action Whistleblower/ leak/ tip-off Law change Protest	Response

<sup>10</sup> Though interviews can sometimes be used in an active way to scrutinise politicians or public officials and put their actions under the spotlight, no such examples appear in this local news sample. Here interviews are usually with celebrities and form the basis for profile pieces or features that precede an event such as an album launch, and as such are categorised as passive.

Success (eg comp winner) Complaint Social Media Fundraising event <sup>11</sup> Celebration/ tribute/ ceremony Campaign	
Investigative journalism	Investigative
Apology/ retraction/ clarification Meta (stories where the newspaper refers to itself, for example launching a competition or profiling reporters)	Media
Letter/ reader content	Reader
News already broken	Cannibalization

**Table 6.4: Groupings for the coding values of the News Trigger category**

We must be cautious in approaching these data, as there is some overlap between the groupings. Beat activities are difficult to identify because, by their nature, they use speculative news gathering methods which could turn up any kind of news story. Community reports are in this group because, particularly in the early part of the sample, the interviewees told me they were often in charge of writing these kinds of community columns, and though responsibility for them later transferred to community reporters, they were still very much entrenched in the regular routine of the newsdesk. Equally features and other human interest stories can be triggered by beat activities, but might also be from a managed media source (for example a profile of a celebrity set up by a PR), or an encounter with a member of the public. Fundraising events, too, are in the response theme here, but could equally be active or managed diary events. I have used my knowledge of the sample to make informed judgements about where the

<sup>11</sup> Again, fundraising events could have been categorised as diary stories, but as they were largely composed of one-off activities being carried out by individuals or small groups, they were deemed to be the result of contact from readers, rather than orchestrated PR or marketing from larger organisations.

balance of these news stories would best fit. With this caveat in mind, then, the groupings do reveal trends in the newsgathering practices of the two local papers.

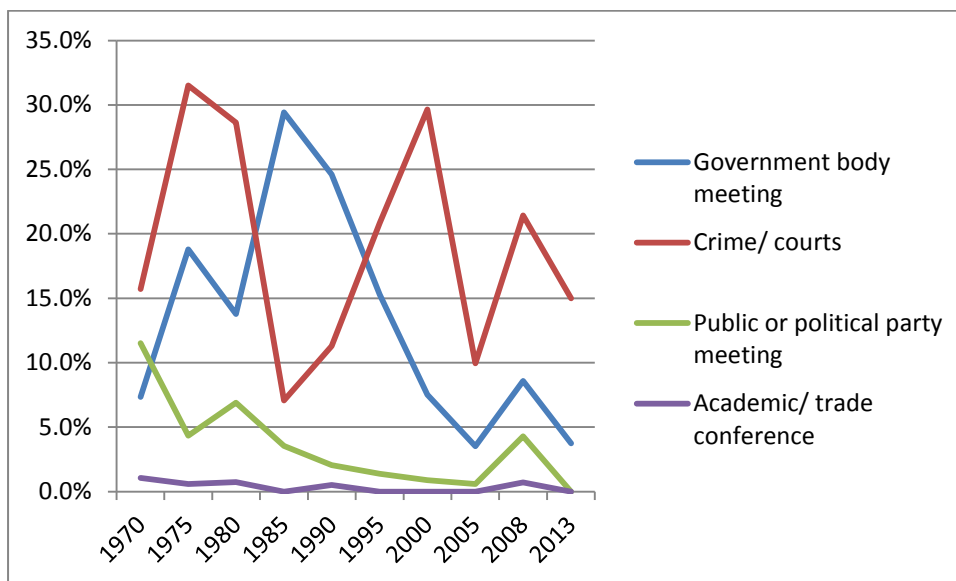
First, let us examine the overall picture. Table 6.5 shows the proportions of each group of news triggers in the sample. Active diary triggers formed the largest percentage, though passive diary triggers are within 1 per cent of them. Readers accounted for a similar amount of triggering as community or beat triggers, while news that openly stated its investigative credentials was extremely rare – only 0.2 per cent of the sample was triggered in this way.

	<b>Per cent</b>
Diary – active	25.5
Diary - passive (managed)	24.6
Reader	16.7
Community – beat	16.4
Response	11.8
Unclear	3.6
Cannibalization	1.2
Investigative journalism	0.2
Total	100.0

**Table 6.5: Triggers for newsgathering, in the order of the most- to the least-used groups**

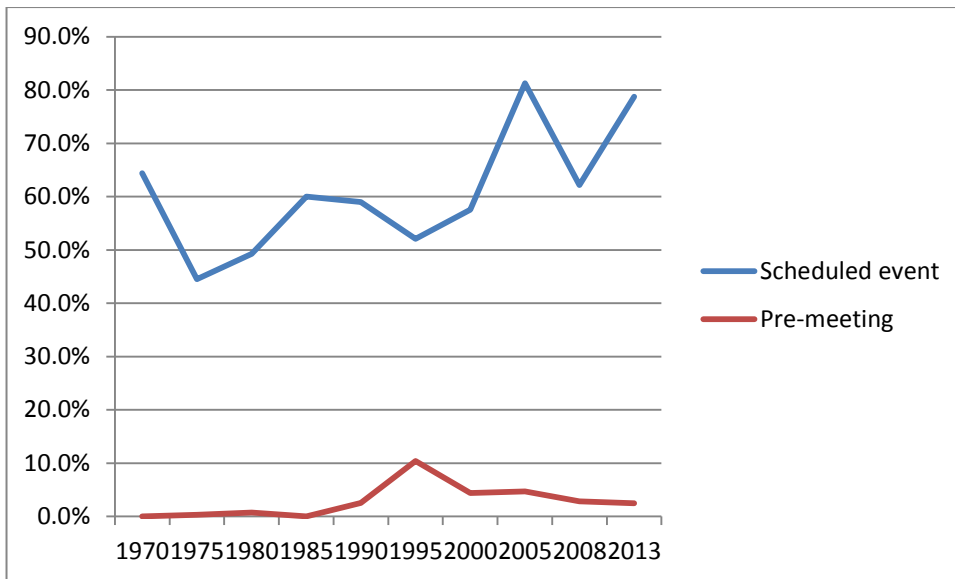
This suggests a relatively healthy local news scene, with just under a quarter of stories triggered by obviously managed media activities such as PR, and the rest triggered by journalists actively pursuing the kinds of activities that are often associated with an “effective”, “free press”, such as scrutinising local politics or holding our “governing systems” to account (McChesney & Nichols, 2010) – i.e. attending council and other public body meetings, courts, and public and political meetings – and also responding to leads from the public, publishing the letters and opinions of the public or reporting the local concerns of communities.

But there is a more nuanced tale to be told here when one considers longitudinal changes. Within the two ‘diary’ categories, for example, there were many changes over time. Four of the values within the ‘diary – active’ category showed a marked decrease over time, as Figure 6.5 shows. These are all reporting types that would necessitate the physical presence of a reporter: coverage of government meetings, courts (though these showed a large spike in the middle decades), trade conferences (though these were never a large proportion of the sample) and public and political meetings.



**Figure 6.5: How ‘physical presence’ news triggers in the ‘diary - active’ category fell over time**

Meanwhile, the use of other types of news trigger increased. Scheduled events such as sports matches or theatre productions became more prevalent, and in the 1990s a new kind of trigger appeared – what I’ve called ‘pre-meeting’. This was composed of reports previewing what would be discussed at the next council or government body meetings. In the overwhelming majority of these cases, this was as a result of reporters being sent press releases about, or the agendas of, the meetings ahead of time. This practice began to take hold from 1990 and was used in between 5 and 10 per cent of the ‘diary – active’ stories between 1990 and 2005, thereafter falling to about 2.5 per cent – Figure 6.6 shows the increase in these news triggers.



**Figure 6.6: How news triggers in the 'diary - active' category rose over time**

The arrival of 'pre-meeting' triggers, and the fall in the actual attendance of government and public meetings, points to a gap in the level of scrutiny. It suggests, in ways which are backed up by interview data, that as time went on journalists were no longer going in person to report on most meetings. As one interviewee described current news coverage of the area:

Now, it's very difficult to actually find out what's going on because the paper doesn't have the number of staff to go out and cover those meetings, and if they try and find out from the council, or whoever else, they're fobbed off quite often by press officers, whose job is to act as a barrier between the press and the people in charge. (*Post* reporter, 1980s-1990s, now freelance)

Many academic accounts worry that reporters are losing their ability to scrutinise the governance systems of our democracy if they are not able to attend council (or similar) meetings in person, for example:

The state and its associated bureaucratic institutions (police, courts, councils, regulatory agencies and crown corporations) still exist and require constant scrutiny. The scale of newsroom layoffs and the concurrent expansion of a reserve army of freelance



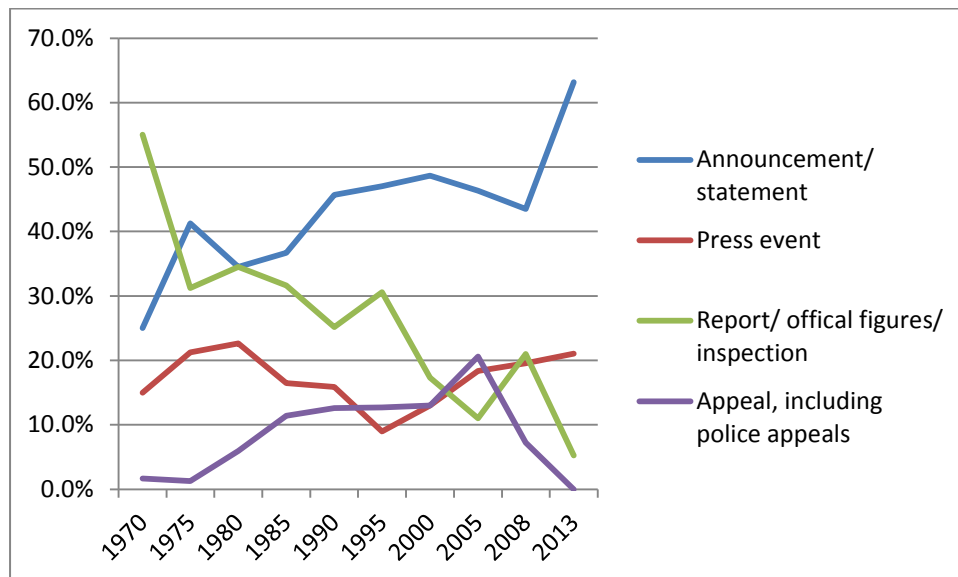
reporters or amateur bloggers have fundamentally altered the institutional context.

(Compton & Benedetti, 2010, p. 492)

We know there has been such a drop in staff numbers, but in fact, in Port Talbot, freelancers have not replaced staff journalists either. With the exception of the hyperlocal news service the *Port Talbot Magnet*, which pays a small number of freelancers to write for the quarterly newspaper, there is now no substantial freelance workforce in Port Talbot, nor indeed in South Wales. The local NUJ branch reports they had 30.1 per cent of freelancers in the total membership in 2009, and the latest NUJ Wales statistics from 2015 show that the proportion of freelance members in Wales was 21.8 per cent, and though the samples are different, this is at least suggestive that the freelance workforce is also in decline (anonymised data provided by NUJ Swansea branch and NUJ Wales). Coupled with the drop in the staff workforce, this suggests the machinery of governance is not subject to adequate scrutiny in Port Talbot, and the quantitative data, which show a drop of 61.5 per cent in the number of stories about government and public institutions between 2000 and 2013, supports this view.

The 'diary – managed' category offers an even clearer view of journalists limited by a lack of resources and demonstrates the encroachment of PR into the local news, as Figure 6.7 shows. In this grouping, the biggest growth, from 25 per cent in 1970 to 63 per cent in 2013, was in the use of statements or announcements – an indication of the flow from high status sources to journalists through official channels. This appears to support an example I discussed above, where a participant from Focus Group 4 told me about a case in 2014 in which several weeks of rumours on social media that dogs were being stolen and killed was only reported by the *Post* when an official source – a police inspector – intervened to correct public fears (see pp. 192-193 above). Secondly, the use of managed media events rose from 9 per cent in 1995 to 21 per cent in 2013. Meanwhile the use of reports and official figures declined sharply from 55 per cent in 1970 to 5.3 per cent in 2013 – a 90 per cent drop – and another clear indication of the decline in the scrutiny of such documents in favour of running the 'official line'. The use of

appeals rose until 2005, and then fell sharply, suggesting a change, perhaps, in the relations between the police and journalists and, especially, in the media relations practices of the police (Green, 2009).



**Figure 6.7: How the use of 'diary - managed' news triggers changed over time**

The other groupings in this category paint a similar picture. The response grouping, for example, started high, at 26.4 per cent in 1970, dipped to 13.5 per cent in 1990, but formed 21.6 per cent of coverage in 2013. This grouping is made up of news stories that are generally one-off, and which a journalist responds to as he or she is informed about it. It is difficult to know why this type of journalism dipped overall in the 1990s, but perhaps this reflects the beginning of falling staff numbers who were less able to respond to ad hoc news stories – the advent of technology, and in particular the introduction of social media, may have made responding to such stories more easy as time went on. Certainly interviewees from the 2000s and later said they were used to sourcing information from emails and social media in this way, and by 2013 social media emerged as a new trigger in its own right. It made up 3.6 per cent of the response activities in that year, suggesting new ways of searching for local stories which do not involve active participation in real-world events, or active scrutiny of official sources.

It also seems certain types of these news stories were given more resources than others. The staples of response news reporting – accidents and emergencies, law changes and protests – stayed stable over the period, but the personal and community elements represented by the coverage of family celebrations such as weddings, exam success or anniversaries, and also tributes and obituaries, showed a steep fall, from 61.7 per cent in 1970 to 13.7 per cent in 2013; also there was a fall in the coverage of trade union activities. Successes (good news stories about awards or plaudits won by local groups or individuals) and fundraising events (usually run by small groups or individuals) grew – successes from 11.2 per cent in 1970 to 42.9 per cent in 2008; fundraising from 3.7 per cent in 1970 to 31.4 per cent in 2013 – both of which perhaps show that small groups and local charities were becoming more aware of the processes of PR that could get their story printed in the local newspaper. It may also reflect a trend in newspapers towards publishing feel-good stories that often came with a colourful photograph and required less work in terms of background checks, balance and scrutiny to get them on the page. Journalists also spoke of their pride in helping local campaigns and fundraising efforts to succeed, and so it may also reflect a community-building effort from within newspapers. Evidence from interviews suggests a mix of all three is likely to be the case here.

For beat activities, which included community reports written by lay-reporters (more on this below), the story was relatively stable – these remained at between 5 and 8 per cent of coverage until 2013 when they dropped to 2.5 per cent. For most of the sample, this seems to run against the thesis of journalists becomingly decreasingly embedded in communities. However, beat activities are particularly difficult to measure using the news trigger variable, because they are not credited as such in news articles, and, by the very nature of beat activities, where journalists go out of the office and check-in with regular contacts to find out if anything is happening, any kind of news story can turn up. For example, while working for the Port Talbot Magnet, I speak to a regular contact, and in a single conversation in November 2014, I discovered stories about: new courses starting for adults, a community garden, a local video documentary maker, a Christmas open day, a fundraising campaign for the Christmas lights, and

a problem with dust from a nearby building site which had caused a neighbour to be hospitalised with breathing problems. Tracing these stories back to beat activities would have been impossible for a researcher carrying out content analysis of the Port Talbot Magnet. Interviews shed some light on this type of activity, and journalists from the 2000s and 2010s confirmed much of their reporting was done from the office and was sourced from readers contacting the news desk, from social media, or from phoning contacts – and these are more likely to be coded response stories than beat stories.

The reader grouping, a measure of representation of the local community, showed a modest rise from 2.2 per cent to 5.1 per cent between 1970 and 2013, though it has never been high. The increase may link to the rise in user generated content (UGC), and the newspaper publishers' enthusiasm for generating free or cheap content from readers, as I noted above (pp. 154-155).

Cannibalisation of other news sources rose, but again, was not a large proportion of the sample in any year. This may be good news for the public sphere in that it indicates higher plurality in the media. However, on the other side of the debate, openly investigative reporting, which is one of the main tenets of fourth estate journalism, was low or non-existent – only two instances were recorded across the whole sample. The full breakdown of these figures is at Table 6.6.

	%										
	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2008	2013	Total
Diary – active	47.2	58.0	57.0	44.3	43.1	36.2	38.1	35.9	36.3	33.9	44.0
Diary - passive (managed)	14.8	13.4	17.4	20.6	33.4	33.7	31.2	28.6	35.8	32.2	25.5
Response	26.4	13.2	15.5	15.1	13.5	18.3	15.5	17.9	12.7	21.6	16.5
Cannibalization	0.0	0.0	0.0	.3	0.0	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.8	2.1	0.5
Investigative journalism	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
Community – beat	6.4	6.4	2.9	8.1	4.4	5.5	5.9	8.6	6.5	2.5	5.8
Media - meta	0.7	0.8	0.2	0.3	2.9	0.0	1.3	0.4	0.5	0.0	0.8
Reader	2.2	4.0	4.3	7.0	0.4	1.3	5.1	6.5	6.5	5.1	4.2

**Table 6.6: How the use of news triggers changed over time**

Changes in news triggers reveal an encouraging amount of active news gathering is still under way. There are signs that resources are limiting certain types of newsgathering, particularly in face-to-face journalism styles, and increasing use of other triggers which may signal new, and less active styles of journalism, such as a reliance on official announcements or social media, and the effects of these styles of journalism on the audience are examined in the next chapter.

### **6.3.2.6 How local was the news?**

Localness is an additional measure of the quality and relevance of news that serves the local public sphere. The detailed variable design allows me to say with reasonable certainty how much of the sample had Port Talbot at the heart of the story, and how much of it simply paid lip service to the town, and this gives us a detailed measure of the localness of the sample.

Most of the news was very local: about two thirds (65.2 per cent) of the sample placed Port Talbot at the heart of the story. Though there is a distribution of stories across the 24 values in the geographical focus variable, with 22 of them featuring at least one case, the top 10 categories make up 94.3 per cent of the sample, as Table 6.7 shows.

Rank	Geographical focus	Percent
1	Port Talbot	65.2
2	Neath Port Talbot	11.0
3	Swansea + mention	5.5
4	Swansea	2.9
5	Wales	1.8
6	South Wales + mention	1.8
7	Not specified	1.7
8	UK	1.5
9	Uk with PT angle	1.3
10	Wales + mention	1.3
10+	All other geographical values	5.7
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 6.7: The top ten coded values for Geographical Focus**

What the table also shows is that while the majority of news stories put Port Talbot firmly at the centre of focus, the attention given to the town in the rest of the news was very mixed: three of the top 10 involved Port Talbot in no more than a mention in a list, together amounting to 8.6 per cent. Across the whole sample, 11.2 per cent of the stories were only passing mentions of Port Talbot. Meanwhile Port Talbot played a slightly stronger role in some of the stories about other places, gaining an equal focus with Neath, Neath Port Talbot County Borough, Swansea or Wales in 19 per cent of the stories. Stories with a geographical focus that was centred on places other than Port Talbot, but which were nosed with a Port Talbot angle, formed 3 per cent of the sample.

What is surprising to me, having read many thousands of news stories and spoken to numerous journalists, is that these figures remain relatively stable over time. I expected to find a decline in the quality of Port Talbot's 'staging' or focus in the news because of the reductions in staff numbers, the closing of district offices, the changes in work practices and the rise of PR that many of the journalists mentioned during interviews. However this must be set against the overall drop in the quantity of stories about Port Talbot discussed above. Equally interviews with *Post* journalists from the 2000s suggested that news about Port Talbot was not necessarily high up in the pecking order of the newsroom. This is reflected in the lack of resources devoted to covering the patch at the *Post*, and also the lack of resources available to reporters responsible for the weekly *Courier* insert. One interviewee explained how resources were limited for producing the *Courier*:

When it was a big *Courier*, sometimes we'd have, like, 12 pages to fill or something silly and we'd end up just... you'd have to adapt one of the [*Post*] stories or do something. We never wanted to duplicate but I think we might have reused something in a slightly different way because we had to.

But also how the *Courier* newspaper was not a priority of the newsroom:

Then the *Courier* got really small [...] we were burying away stories through the week. So you'd have, like, eight stories ready and then you'd only have four pages to fill, so that was sometimes disheartening [...] They kind of didn't really care about it [...] We wanted to make it really good. We had no time to do it, they just assumed we'd do it and because we'd always do it each week. They were just quite happy the way we were doing it, but no-one really... they used to forget that it does take up time.

While the quantitative data point to the continuing prominence of Port Talbot in the local news and the proportion of geographical focus at the centre of stories remaining constant over the sample period, the qualitative data again reveal an erosion of resources behind the scenes

which made the job increasingly difficult. If stories about Port Talbot were less of a priority in the newsroom, this appears to be reflected in the data on the prominence of the town as it appeared in the two newspapers.

An analysis of the page number of the stories in the sample revealed that 8.9 per cent appeared on the front page, 23.4 per cent appeared between pages 2 and 5, and 67.7 per cent appeared on later pages. Broken down by year, Port Talbot news was more likely to feature on the front page than the sample average between 1970 and 1995, more likely than average to feature on pages 2-5 between 1985 and 2000, and more likely than average to feature on page 5 or later between 2000 and 2013. Table 6.8 gives the breakdown.

	%										
	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2008	2013	Av.
Front page	15.1	11.4	12.2	19.3	9.7	9.8	3.2	3.2	2.1	3.0	8.9
pp2-5	23.0	17.8	20.2	30.5	29.4	26.4	28.2	17.2	25.6	13.6	23.4
pp5+	62.0	70.9	67.6	50.3	60.8	63.8	68.6	79.6	72.3	83.5	67.7

**Table 6.8: How likely was Port Talbot news to feature on the front page?**

There were also differences in the prominence of Port Talbot news between the two newspapers. The *Guardian* carried an average of 5.3 stories about Port Talbot on its front page, while the *South Wales Evening Post* featured 0.3 Port Talbot stories on its cover (or one front page story every third edition). Port Talbot news stories were less likely to be given prominence on the front page, and more likely to appear on page 5 or above, from the year 2000.

Once again, the turn of the millennium appears to be a turning point for coverage of Port Talbot in the local news. Interviews have shed light on the context for these effects, and the closure of the Port Talbot district offices of both the *Guardian* and the *Post* is a key event that precedes these effects by a matter of a year or two, and there seems to be a link between their closure and several of the trends in the content analysis data.



### ***6.3.3 Who gets to speak?***

This final section takes as its framework the literature on diversity and multiple voices in the media. A wide and diverse range of sources from the perspectives of their status, affiliation to different organisations and their proximity to the news story or community being featured have typically been seen as a measure of healthy, vibrant democracy, where a “multiplicity of voices is necessary for effective self-governance and cultural vitality” (Voakes et al., 1996, p. 582). Equality is also emphasised in the literature, where an equal distribution of sources among these perspectives is the most desirable position for healthy, diverse, media (ibid, p. 584).

Overall, the proportion of quoted sources in the news rose significantly between 1970 and 2013, and at first this may seem counter to the evidence presented so far, as fewer resources behind the scenes might suggest the time journalists had in the working day to interview sources would fall, and therefore cause this figure to drop. The general increase is attributable to stark changes in journalistic sourcing practices over the sample period. Early on in the sample stories were written in a style and form that differs quite substantially from news stories as we know them today. News articles were far less likely to directly quote sources in the early part of the sample, instead indirectly quoting by paraphrasing and attributing general statements to sources. Directly quoting sources became a more common practice after the 1980s. Notably, the proportion of articles with at least one quoted source is 41 per cent – but over time we see a rise from 24.7 per cent in 1970, to 38.5 in 1990 to 61.9 per cent in 2013. Such trends can be seen as more evidence of a decreasing plurality in the voices and perspectives to which news audiences are exposed at a local level.

There were many different types of source (200 different values in all, categorised by affiliation and also by geographical origin), but for the purposes of this discussion I have grouped these together into categories that reflect the status and affiliation of the person being quoted. Organising sources into groupings according to their status or affiliation to a particular group or organisation is an established method in the literature (Sigal, 1974; Voakes et al., 1996,

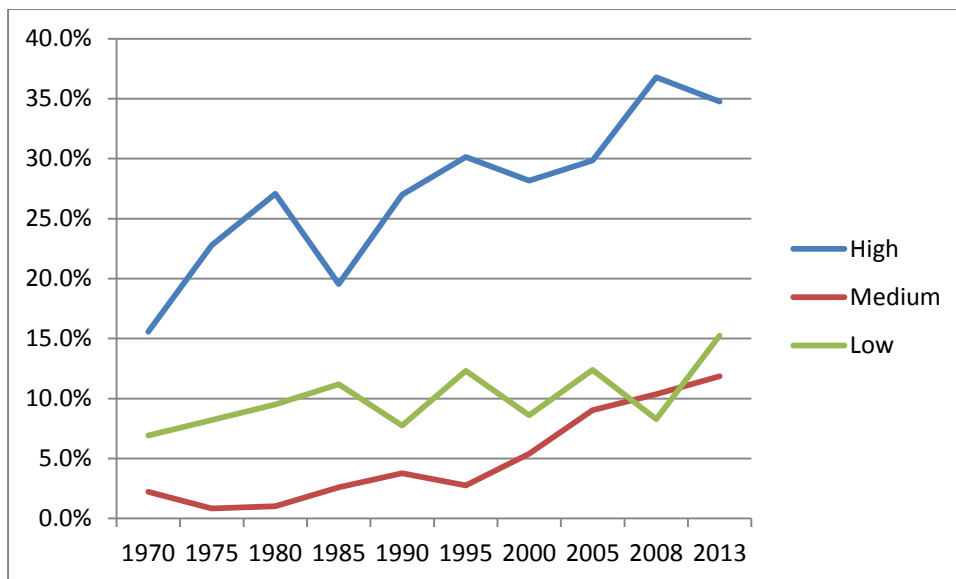
pp. 583-584). There is also a study that relates the number of sources used in a news story to the geographical proximity of the news event to the newsroom of the journalist working on the story, where closer news events were found to correlate to a higher number of sources quoted by local television news programmes (S. E. Martin, 1988), and also that “when a media organisation is further away from an event, more official or high-level sources will be quoted” (Voakes et al., 1996, p. 584). I have also coded sources according to their geographical location in line with the geographical focus categories I outlined in the previous section and so it is possible for me to measure this indicator of source “localness” in this study too. Table 6.9 shows the different categories that were used during coding, and the way these have been grouped together for the purposes of discussion.

Original name of coding value	Groupings		Status
None	None		None
Member of the public Action group Activist Community group Witness/ victim/ protagonist Trade Union	Member of the public		Low
Government Public body Emergency services	Establishment authority figures	Authority figures	High
Politician	Political authority figures		
Expert Religious figure Legal practitioner	Intellectual/ moral authority figures		
Business Professional Association Charity	Business and charity		High
Celebrity Artist	Arts and entertainment	Other	Medium
Sport	Sport		
Not specified	Not specified		

**Table 6.9: Source categories by their status groups**

Here, varying degrees of status are equated with the reported affiliations of the sources. I have also made some innovations in the way I have categorised source status. Here, low status sources are considered to have no influence and no authority. Members of the public, those involved in court cases as victims, witnesses or defendants, the action groups and campaigns set up by citizens and trade unions representing the interests of ordinary workers are defined low status (trade union voices were typically quoted as grassroots campaigners in the setting of industrial action, rather than as press officers or other managed media channels). Medium status sources are considered to have influence but no authority, and include sports people, artists and celebrities. Those who have either authority, or both influence and authority, are designated high status, and are affiliated to an organisation including a business, charity or professional association such as a chamber of trade, politician, legal representative, civil servant (or government or establishment employee), employees of the emergency services, experts and religious figures. This extends and builds on the methodologies of Sigal, Voakes et al, and Ross, who notes: “citizens are simply not as equal as government spokespeople” (Ross, 2007, p. 454, see also Sigal, 1973; Voakes et al 1996, p. 584).

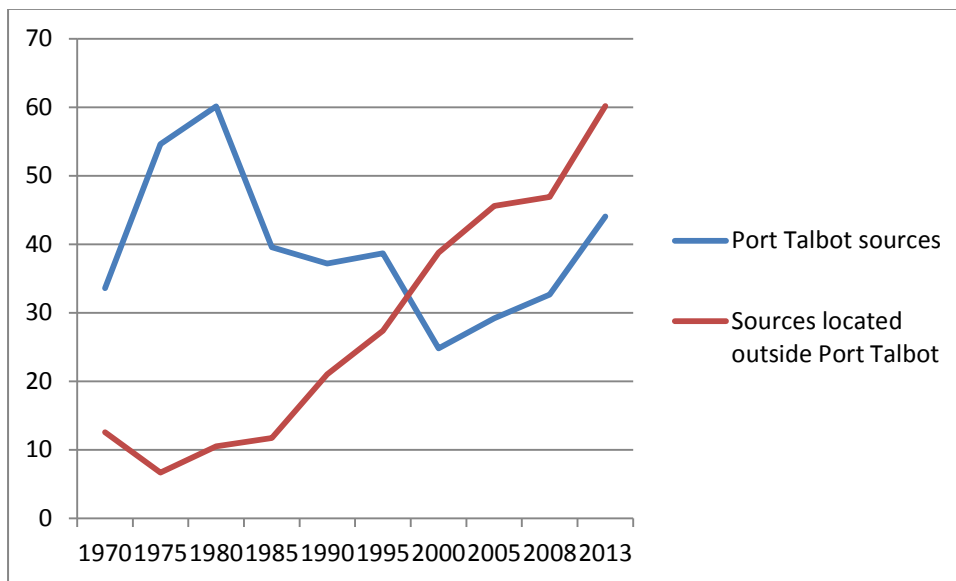
In Port Talbot, as in other studies (see for example Brown, Bybee, Wearden, & Straughan, 1987; Soloski, 1989, both of which found high status sources made up more than half of quoted sources in the news), those with high status are most often quoted in news articles. I have also found that the proportion of high status sources rose more steeply over time than medium and low status sources, as Figure 6.8 shows. Equally citizens and low status sources were less likely to be given the opportunity, and this is also consistent with research (Hermans et al., 2014).



**Figure 6.8: The status of sources in Port Talbot news stories**

This is concerning because it shows the local news media were increasingly dominated by government or political sources, while those with medium status also showed strong growth. Meanwhile citizens, those for whom the media are considered to be a representative voice, show much slower growth. If the news media favour high status sources over the voices of citizens, then commentators fear this source choice “influences both [the news story’s] shape and its orientation, casually but irrevocably promoting a particular perspective which often goes unchallenged if the balance which allegedly underpins the journalistic code of conduct is absent” (Ross, 2007, p. 454). She continues, “Who is invited to speak as commentators on and in the news says crucially important things about who ‘counts’ in society, whose voices have legitimacy and status” (ibid, p. 454). In view of this, I also coded individual sources for their geographical origin. This allowed me to make an additional measurement of the localness of the stories by discovering whether the people of Port Talbot had the chance to speak for themselves in the news. Figure 6.9 shows the proportion of Port Talbot sources compared with sources located outside Port Talbot across the sample period. It clearly shows a diminishing local voice in the news – where local sources accounted for 60 per cent of the sample in 1980, this went down as low as 24.8 per cent in 2000, finishing at 44 per cent in 2013. Meanwhile sources

located outside Port Talbot began as a minority – in 1975 as few as 6.7 per cent of stories carried quotes from people outside the town – but this grew exponentially across the sample, and non-local voices made up 60 per cent of the quotes in news stories in 2013. Again, the effect appears to accelerate around the year 2000, after the closure of the district offices, suggesting the proximity of reporters to news events has impacted on the localness of the news, as other studies have found (S. E. Martin, 1988).



**Figure 6.9: Who speaks? Comparing the local and non-local geographical locations of sources**

What this evidence suggests is a clear decline in the localness and diversity of sources, and an increase in the use of high status sources. Local people’s voice and representation in the local news diminished over time, and this is a key finding of this research as it has such a strong bearing on the local public sphere and the ability of the news media to represent the views of the public to those in authority.

Their voices may be growing fainter as sources in the news, but local people have increasingly been invited to contribute to the local news media by supplying news content. User Generated Content (UGC) is a growing phenomenon according to the literature. However, another finding of this research is that local people have been playing this role for many decades

as community reporters. These lay-reporters were an important part of the local news mix in Port Talbot, producing ultra-local columns from about the early 1980s until 2005 in the *Post* under the brands Grapevine and later In View, and in the *Guardian* as Look Around. The community reporters were members of the public who were paid a small fee, what one interviewee called “expenses”, and who would write a column each week mainly listing community events such as fetes or jumble sales, noting the landmark birthdays and anniversaries being celebrated and other titbits of information relevant to that particular community. These were densely written columns, usually comprising not much more than a list of events and celebrations. Interviewees told me they used the Grapevine community column to spot stories which could be worked up into more substantial news pieces. But those who had to deal with the community reporters and the copy they submitted also described it as, resource-intensive, “dangerous” and “a nightmare” – with many issues having to be dealt with to ensure newspapers avoided libel, that community reporters got the copy in on time, that names were spelled correctly, that the community reporters didn’t divert the flow of “better quality” news stories away from the newsdesk, that their reports were accurate, and that they weren’t biased or pushing any kind of agenda.

These concerns echo the findings of quite recent studies that researched the attitudes of mainstream journalists to citizen journalists, which found: “their content was dismissed or roundly criticized, viewed as unethical, untrustworthy, too subjective and emotional, said to be of poor technical quality or simply of no real news value” (Wall, 2015, p. 3) – see also (Niekamp, 2011; Pantti & Bakker, 2009), and also the tendency of mainstream journalists to “reshape” content so that it conforms to existing professional standards and norms (Wall, 2015, p. 5). Citizen journalism is often framed as a new challenge journalism must tackle in the age of digital technology, but this is far from true at the local level; local journalists have elicited and published citizen content since at least the 1960s, and probably earlier. What has changed most is the power of journalists as gate keepers – where once journalists held the reigns of access and

authority, now it is much easier for those with internet access to comment, publish a blog or share a piece of information, a viewpoint or a photograph.

Another commonality between the citizen journalists of today and the community reporters of yesterday is that both are blamed for endangering, or even taking away, journalists' jobs. Some journalists are pragmatic about this: "I think they're going to try and get lots of content from the community, but relying on that isn't... I don't know, it is hard isn't it? But when there are fewer bodies in the room they need to get the content from somewhere don't they?" said one *Post* reporter from the 2000s. Another, who worked at the *Guardian* in the 1960s and 1970s before moving to the *Post* and staying there until the late 2000s, is less equivocal:

Grapevine writers, their hearts are in the right place but their heads are in the clouds.

Many of them, to be fair to them, didn't realise that they were doing a job of a reporter and doing someone out of a job, which is what's happened. Many of them had no reason for understanding the legalities of libel or anything like that.

There is, it should be added, no evidence that this common perception among journalists (that community reporters replaced their roles) is true. Journalists lost their jobs because of a complex range of political economic factors. News publishers clearly hoped that the growing ability of the public to more easily publish themselves online would help them cut costs, but there is little evidence to suggest it was a primary causal factor in the withdrawal of journalism from UK towns and cities. My interviews, however, suggest that this aspiration that community reports would provide such cheap content was misguided. The idea that these reports made it easier for journalists to fill newspapers was not true. Interviewees told me there was a huge onus on subeditors to quality-check and re-write these columns, and in many cases this added a large amount to workloads. This is probably why Grapevine, and its successor In View, were abolished by the *Post* in the mid-2000s, in spite of their evident popularity with readers.

The late 1990s and early 2000s seem to have been a turning point in the available resources at newsrooms, and, as I have already discussed, after this time journalists were discouraged from leaving the newsroom or carrying out the staple activities of diary, response, beat and investigative journalism in the same way. Furthermore, if UGC really were a cost-saving measure one would have expected its use to have increased with time – the fact that it did not suggests other cost-saving measures, such as the use of pre-packaged “information subsidies”, were more effective in this regard (Gandy, 1982, p. 74).

To sum up, if this thesis were a news story my front page splash would be ‘Port Talbot loses half its news in paper closure’. But the fuller, more detailed investigative news piece would reveal a richer story of local news production in Port Talbot. This lies not just in the bare figures around how much of the news was printed by the *Post* or by the *Guardian* – though these give a useful baseline for discussion – but in the subtleties and complexities in the way the quality of news changed over time, and of how financial decisions and restructuring by owners impacted on the staffing levels and the ability of those journalists who remained to serve the public sphere. This was a long and slow process. In Port Talbot, and very likely elsewhere too, cuts to staff and the closure of district offices meant the quality of the news was eroded in several key areas.

The quantity of news halved when the *Guardian* shut, but it had already fallen by 23.9 per cent before that – an aggregate loss of 66.3 per cent. In terms of quality, the ability of the local media to scrutinise news was impacted as journalists had less time to investigate stories, were discouraged from leaving the office and began to rely more on “hand-outs” such as PR, or the easy flow of information traded on social media, with less time to check these stories for accuracy, or balance their stories by sourcing additional quotes. The localness of stories diminished, in particular in the number of Port Talbot sources that were used, but also in the coverage of certain topics of news that are linked to community cohesion or democracy. Local sports coverage, in particular, fell dramatically. And though the proportion of local government



stories rose, these tended to be based on PR or press releases rather than attendance at meetings or interviews, while representation of local people fell – sources were less local, but also more likely to be high-status, and community reporters were abolished. This suggests the process of news reporting changed dramatically over the sample period, and this is linked with the falling quantity of news stories, but also a fall in the quality of news because of a sustained and worsening withdrawal of journalism from the town. It became less representative, less based on scrutiny and less local, and this suggests it was less able to fulfil the fourth estate function of news.



# ***Chapter 7***

## ***Port Talbot: inside a news black hole***

### ***7.1 Aims and theoretical context***

Chapters 5 and 6 set out how the local news landscape changed in Port Talbot over the last four decades, and quantified and explored the number of journalists, and the quantity of news output, that has been lost to the town as traditional media have gradually withdrawn resources and journalism. With detailed reference to my quantitative (content-related) and qualitative (production-related) findings I also track the weakening of journalism, with reference to numerous commonly-applied indicators of news quality. This is particularly associated with district office closures in the late 1990s at both the *Guardian* and the *Post*, and following cuts to the number of journalists working the patch.

The news black hole was not created immediately when the *Guardian* closed. It had already been forming at pace for more than a decade before this. Its more incrementally advancing origins go back much further, to the mid-20th century, when circulation declines first began and the advertising revenue model began to falter. It was created not by the closure of the *Guardian* newspaper, but by the slow and pre-existing gradual withdrawal of journalism from the local public sphere. Building on these findings, Chapter 7 examines some of the effects of this withdrawal upon the community.

In section 7.2, audience-based research – a survey and focus groups – are used to capture a portrait of local people’s current news consumption habits, their knowledge of key issues and facts with a widespread relation to local life in the town, and the complex relationship people now have both with the news (online and offline), and with other methods of obtaining essential information to help them live their lives (such as non-news social media, word of mouth and official sources). It also compares survey and focus group data with other relevant research to gain new insights into the impact of news consumption on civic and democratic behaviour and engagement.

Two sets of research questions form the basis of this element of the research and they are closely interlinked. RQ2 and its sub-questions concern the way local people are now getting hold of essential information; and RQ3 and its sub-questions seek to interrogate the civic and democratic implications of the findings from RQ2:

RQ2: How has the withdrawal of journalism from Port Talbot impacted on the community?

RQ2.1: What are people’s current, and previous, news consumption habits?

RQ2.2: Are local people finding out essential information, and if so, how?

RQ2.3: How well-informed are local people about local public affairs?

RQ 3: Does the withdrawal of journalism from a town affect civic and democratic engagement, and if so in what ways?

RQ 3.1: Is there a measurable impact on civic and democratic indicators?

RQ 3.2: Do local people feel well-informed and able to participate in community, civic or democratic life?

RQ 3.3 How well represented do local people feel, and do they feel able to voice their concerns or be heard and/or answered by those in authority?

## ***7.2 Inside the black hole – what is the impact on the community?***

My hypothesis, based on the studies by Shaker (2014), Schulhofer and Wohl (2009) and Scheufele and Nisbet (2002), is that the closure of the *Guardian* newspaper and the more widespread withdrawal of journalism from the town, preceded a decline in the democratic and civic measures I outlined in Chapter 4 (as happened in Cincinnati, Denver and Seattle), and also on political knowledge and participation. I have found that, although the consumption of (and appetite for) news is high, the flow of essential information in Port Talbot has been weakened and has resulted in several measurable effects on local people, which together coincide with damage to the public sphere. I have also found such an association in other data sets that measure democratic and civic engagement, most strikingly in voter turnout figures.

### ***7.2.1 Current consumption habits***

This first section seeks to answer RQ2.1 in establishing current news consumption habits. The findings from the survey of 364 local people suggest news consumption in general was widespread in Port Talbot at the end of 2014, as Table 7.1 shows.

<b>Media activity carried out at least once a week</b>	<b>%</b>
Read a local newspaper	17.8
Read a UK national newspaper	14.9
Read local news online	5.6
Read UK national news online	4.8
Watch Welsh news on TV	20.2
Watch UK national news on TV	19.3
Listen to local news on the radio	8.0
Listen to UK national news on the radio	3.4
None of the above	6.0
	100.0

**Table 7.1: News consumption in Port Talbot (Question: At least once a week, do you...)**

As the table highlights, only 6 per cent of people indicated they did not read, listen to or watch any news at all, while the use of television news came out most strongly, with 20.2 per cent watching Welsh regional TV news at least once a week and 19.3 per cent watching national news. This echoes findings in previous studies, which show television is the primary news source for most people (J. Thomas, 2006b, p. 7), however this figure is much lower than the 75 per cent who reported using television for accessing their news in Ofcom’s 2014 report (2014b, p. 2). The difference may be accounted for by the different phrasing of the two questions – where my survey asked whether each news format was accessed “at least once a week”, Ofcom requested respondents to consider all the times of day and different ways they might come into contact with news, and then asked, “Which of the following do you use for news nowadays?”. Ofcom’s approach may be more likely to encourage even occasional users of a format to indicate that they use it as a source of news. Ofcom also asked respondents to consider a wide definition of news, which their survey defined as “news and current affairs in Wales [or appropriate regions], across the UK and from around the world” (Ofcom, 2014d). This definition was

geographically wider than my own which specified local and national news only, and also to include current affairs in the definition, which my survey did not specify.

That said, the proportion of television news users is still comparatively low in Port Talbot, and this may signal a wider problem with news consumption in the local public sphere, which seems to be consistently lower than UK averages and suggests local people may be switching off from consuming news. For example, though most people in Port Talbot are not reliant on a single news format for their news – this was a multiple response question, and respondents ticked an average of 2.16 boxes – the use of multiple sources in Port Talbot is lower than the average found in Ofcom’s survey, which found that UK adults use an average of 3.8 news sources (Ofcom, 2014b, p. 2). The lower figure found in my survey may be related to the fall in the number of available news sources in Port Talbot since the closure of news outlets I described in Chapter 5, or to the poverty of stories about Port Talbot or directly relevant to the interests of the Port Talbot community.

There is a similarly low result when the survey data on local newspapers are analysed. Only 17.8 per cent of respondents said they read a local newspaper at least once a week, which is perhaps unsurprising as there is only one local newspaper now publishing local news for the town. Indeed this is echoed by the focus groups, where there were many discussions about why the majority had stopped reading, or didn’t bother with, newspapers. Their reasons were varied, including convenience, cost, reporting styles, and the lack of relevance or localness to their area. This extract from Focus Group 4, which comprised local activists and campaigners, was typical:

MS1: I’ve stopped reading newspapers.

MS2: Me too.

MS3: Yes.

MS1: I mean sometimes I’ll go on the [This Is] South Wales site [the *Evening Post* online] and just look at a few stories, but newspapers, I haven’t bought a newspaper in

years.

MS4: It's mainly because of the sensationalised reporting methods now.

MS5: Its rubbish now.

MS2: That's right. What I have found, especially people of 40-plus, they love the old *Guardians*, they absolutely love them. Now if I delivered weekly to you an edition of the 1960s *Guardian*, I know that you'd read it from front to back.

MS4: Yes.

However, the readership of national newspapers, at 14.9 per cent of the Port Talbot survey respondents, at first appears discordant with findings from other studies. Some of these have suggested readership of national daily newspapers is more widespread in Wales than local daily newspaper readership (J. Thomas, 2006a, p. 49), though a survey by Thomas found that national newspapers were only cited as a main news source by 4 per cent of respondents (no national newspapers were cited as a main news source in my study). Ofcom, however, finds national newspapers are used as a news source by 39 per cent of Welsh adults. Again, this anomaly is likely to be accounted for by differences in the definitions of news outlined above, as well as the different emphasis in the questions, with Thomas asking for a narrowly defined "main news source", Ofcom asking for a much more broadly defined "news and current affairs" accessed beneath the more general timeframe "nowadays", and this survey asking for news read "at least once a week" (Ofcom, 2014b, 2014d; J. Thomas, 2006b).

Local radio news and local online news came next at 8 per cent and 5.6 per cent respectively, while national radio news (3.4 per cent) and national online news (4.8 per cent) were least likely to be accessed in an average week.

Further, in the so-called "digital age"<sup>12</sup>, many commentators are pinning their hopes on the news black hole being filled by the use of online news providers, but with only 10.4 per cent

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<sup>12</sup> The phrase "digital age" is increasingly commonplace in the literature, and is most often used to refer to the time after which digital technology use was introduced and became widespread: "With the advent of the



of local people saying they access local and national news in this way, this is not currently the most dominant element of Port Talbot's news mix.

When probed further about which news sources they access in a typical week, only 4.4 per cent of respondents selected 'None'. A more detailed picture emerges when we examine which news providers people use. The most accessed was the *South Wales Evening Post*. Table 7.2 gives the breakdown.

<b>News provider</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Television</b>	<b>44.6</b>
BBC TV	23.0
ITV TV	20.5
Other TV	1.2
<b>Print</b>	<b>22.9</b>
The Post	19.3
The Western Mail	0.9
Tata Steel newsletter	0.9
The Courier	0.5
The Guardian	0.2
Port Talbot Magnet	0.2
Glamorgan Gazette	0.2
Other print news	0.2
Swansea Life/ The Bay magazine	0.1
Council newspaper	0.1
Metro	0.1
<b>Radio</b>	<b>14.6</b>
The Wave/ Swansea Sound	7.2
Radio – other	3.7
Radio BBC Wales	1.3
Radio BBC national	1.0
Regional commercial radio	0.7
National commercial radio	0.7
<b>Online</b>	<b>13.5</b>
Council website	1.6
Facebook or other social media	9.2

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computer, the Internet and other information technologies, we have apparently been entering into a digital age" (Chu, 2003, p. 14).

BBC online	0.8
A news app	0.7
Local news on the web	0.6
A blog	0.2
Google	0.2
Police website	0.1
<b>None</b>	<b>4.4</b>

**Table 7.2: Which local news and information providers are being regularly accessed?**

Local people are mainly reliant on the *Post* for written news, and the 19.3 per cent figure from the survey is slightly higher than the *Post*'s own circulation data, which put penetration in Port Talbot at 16.6 per cent (JICREG, 2015). This finding may, then, have been influenced by social desirability bias (with some claiming to read news more often than they do because they feel this is the "right" thing to say (Prior, 2009, pp. 134-135)). Only 0.5 per cent make reference to the *Post*'s dedicated weekly insert, the *Courier* (although it is possible that *Post* readers do consume news from this outlet and simply do not know this is what the insert is called). Knowledge of the *Courier* was high in focus groups, but participants were not complimentary about its contents and were particularly scathing about the lack of Port Talbot news contained inside it. A participant from Focus Group 2, which comprised people aged 30-59, described her impression of the *Courier* was that "the front page is news, the back page is news, and the middle is [adverted of] houses" (FG2).

Moving on to broadcast and online media, almost half of people surveyed watch regional television news, and most were split fairly evenly between the BBC and ITV, (Sky News was the most commonly mentioned in the 'other' category). Online news from dedicated news websites represents the smallest proportion of online information sourcing, and social media – specifically Facebook – is most widely credited as fulfilling the function of local news provision. This is a concern in light of studies on the use of social media as a gateway to news, and which

cast doubt on the ability of any “Daily Me”<sup>13</sup> (Baresch et al., 2011, p. 4) model of accessing news to fulfil democratic duties such as keeping the citizenry well-informed (ibid, p. 3). They found that Facebook links to traditional news websites (i.e. those that are more likely to have used journalism techniques such as fact checking, balance and multiple sourcing) make up less than half of all links, and of those, general interest and news made up 42 per cent. However the majority of these links were to art and entertainment news (40 per cent) and current events (15 per cent), while politics (9 per cent) and health/ technology (10 per cent) – topics I have put into the ‘public interest’ category in this study – made up a much smaller share. This suggests access to reliable, good quality, local and public interest news online is relatively low.

Providers	%
The Post	24.2
TV – BBC	22.7
Social media	17.8
TV – ITV	17.5
The Wave/ Swansea Sound	6.4
Other websites	4.0
Other Radio	2.1
Council website	1.8
Other TV	1.2
Western Mail	.9
Other written news	.6
Tata Steel newsletter	.3
Blog	.3

**Table 7.3: What is your main provider of local news?**

This survey also asked people to name their main source of news. Again, the *Post* was most likely to be named a main source of news, and the BBC and ITV also scored highly in this question, as Table 7.3 shows. There is a prevalence of social media once again, which comes third on the list, between the BBC and ITV television news. Though studies have looked at

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<sup>13</sup> The “Daily Me” is a by-word for personalised news or news recommended by friends, which has been the subject of concern from commentators, for example: “The decline of traditional news media will accelerate the rise of The Daily Me, and we’ll be irritated less by what we read and find our wisdom confirmed more often. The danger is that this self-selected “news” acts as a narcotic, lulling us into a self-confident stupor through which we will perceive in blacks and whites a world that typically unfolds in grays.” (Kristof, 2009)

national news linking on social media, further research may be required to measure the quality, range and localness of local news accessed in this way to assess the impact of this growing phenomenon on the local public sphere. Also, we must not ignore that in spite of the diminished news and journalism service provided by the *Post* (which I discussed in Chapter 5), and the paper's diminishing circulations, the remaining local newspaper is the most dominant source in the minds of local people, and is seen as providing the lion's share of local news. Along with the *Post*, only the *Port Talbot Magnet*, the *Wave* and Swansea Sound radio, the Tata Steel newsletter and the Council website provide a significant and regular portion of news and local information coverage directly related to Port Talbot. Whether this level of directly relevant local news consumption (i.e. the 19.3 per cent of people who read the *Post*, the minority who read the *Magnet* and access direct sources of news and information such as the Council website) is enough to sustain Lazarsfeld and Bernstein's two-step flow, is an interesting question (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), (for discussion see below).

Meanwhile, there is one further point to examine – readership of the closed newspapers. As I described in Chapter 4, there have been several newspapers dedicated to Port Talbot, or with local correspondents based in the town, over the sample period. These include the *Port Talbot Guardian*, the *Neath Guardian*, the *Neath Port Talbot Tribune*, and the *Herald of Wales*, all of which ceased publication in the 2000s. Only 13.5 per cent said they were former readers of a closed newspaper. Of these 58.5 per cent said they used to read the *Port Talbot Guardian*; a further 16.9 per cent read its sister title the *Neath Guardian*, and the monthly newspaper the *Tribune* was read by 15.4 per cent (N=49). These titles were not largely missed by survey respondents: by far the majority of those who chose to answer these questions (51.8 per cent) said they did not miss these newspapers at all, while 23.7 per cent missed them “a little”, 15.1 per cent “not much” and only 8.6 per cent missed them “a lot” (N=139). These results are surprising when set against findings from the focus groups. In all four focus groups there were frequent suggestions that local newspapers were missed, but that the community's relationship with and attitude towards local newspapers, past and present, was complex. Focus Group 4

(FG4), for example, which comprised local activists and campaigners, credited the *Guardian* for its in-depth coverage, accuracy and balance, and the consensus was that the newspaper was missed, by them, and the wider community:

I used to love the *Guardian* to be honest, I loved the 'what's on' section and local news and I feel out of touch by not having it. I definitely want something more frequent. I know the *Magnet* is only every quarter right now, hopefully that will improve in the future. I think the town is missing it and people are missing what's happening, there's no community spirit anymore.

There was also evidence that some community members felt new media "replacements" for the information previously provided by local journalists were not satisfactory (in this case either because they were not "local" enough, or because it is not trustworthy enough):

I don't think Facebook can really replace anything on a local level, because Facebook isn't just local, you've got people all over the world commenting on what you say and do, so it's not even a bigger picture it's just gossip. I think we need something like the *Guardian* back, I think it would really benefit the town. People don't know what's happening in the town.

But it was not only these "active citizens" who felt the loss of professional news provision. Focus Group 1 (FG1), which was composed of people aged 60 and over, also suggested they missed the regular and reliable information provided by the *Guardian* and the now-defunct monthly, the *Tribune*. When given the chance to discuss this issue as a group, where complex and overlapping reasons can be teased out collectively, rather than asked simply to answer a question in the abstract as in the survey, they complained it was difficult to get local newspapers delivered to them now, and also that they felt quality had declined at the *Post*. Focus Group 2 (FG2), made up of people aged 30-59, also suggested they missed the *Guardian*, and complained the *Courier* and *Post* were not local enough, and that there were things

happening that they were not getting to hear about which impacted on their ability to live as a community, as one participant in Focus Group 2 said:

Port Talbot is really down on itself and there isn't this sense of community that there should be, part of that is because people don't know what's going on across the road, or down the rugby club, or in the theatre group. (FG2)

The idea of having their own local newspaper, in fact, was a recurring theme across all the focus groups, and I will return to this point in later sections. Even the younger group of 18-29 year olds, Focus Group 3 (FG3), who predominantly testified to not reading newspapers and not being engaged with news generally, said they would like a free dedicated local newspaper. This feeling stemmed from (often intense) frustration that they did not know what was going on locally (though they also advocated other formats of dedicated local news provision, including a television programme or channel, or an information source in a public space). I will also discuss this in more depth below.

However, before moving on, it is important to reflect on why survey respondents did not appear to miss Port Talbot's lost newspapers. As I have already discussed, the quantity and quality of the local news produced by both the *Guardian* and the *Post* had declined and become less local over the sample period, particularly after the turn of the millennium. District offices had closed and journalists become more difficult to access. Circulations at the *Guardian* had declined from 10,607 in 2000 to 4,402 in 2009, a fall of 58.5 per cent (Source: ABC), and this suggests that many readers had already begun to turn away from the *Guardian* as its localness and usefulness diminished. Equally, survey respondents are most likely to recall these newspapers as they were at the point they shut, and in terms of quantity and measures of quality such as using local sources or attending council meetings, they were at their weakest during these last years. This is borne out by the fact that only 13.5 per cent of the respondents said they had once read a closed newspaper, a figure which seems low when we consider the penetration of the *Guardian*, in common with many other weekly newspapers, may once have

been as high as 70 or 80 per cent (Franklin & Murphy, 1991, p. 6). This low figure, coupled with the decline in news quantity and quality makes it possible that those who did choose to answer the question were likely to be negative about the *Guardian*. Indeed, as I discussed above, many focus group respondents said they missed elements of the *Guardian's* coverage that included the comprehensive information it contained, its strong campaigning voice, its localness, its community focus, and its accuracy. Furthermore, even where the *Guardian* itself was not missed, many focus group participants felt they missed elements of news coverage that were once provided by the *Guardian*. For example, several focus group participants expressed a wish that any future media service would include a weekly printed newspaper provided by a professional journalist, scrutiny of government institutions, and which would be comprehensive enough to provide information about everything they needed to know – echoing the “weekly bible” style of reporting that was once provided by the *Guardian* and which I identified in Chapter 5. The following extract is from FG2 (age 30-59):

Although I'm pro-social media I would love to have a free newspaper through my door, weekly. I think it's the excitement of having it and going, I don't have to search for information it's coming to me. [Inside would be] everything I wanted to know [...] Events going on; local news; if things are changing in the town; if things are changing to people who work in the town; if roads are changing; closing times, opening times. Everything, anything to do with education, meals-on-wheels, anything that would affect the people in Port Talbot.

This suggests that even if local people do not miss the *Guardian* they remember from the 2000s, they may well miss the functions a local newspaper would have provided in its heyday.

## ***7.2.2 The flow of essential information***

Further analysis is required to understand how people find out essential local information (which is RQ2.2), how well-informed they feel, and how able they feel to participate in local civic and democratic life (which is RQ 3.2).

The first point we must make here is that the mixed diet revealed by the survey relies on media that are not necessarily very informative for the local public sphere. The major local news provider, the *Post*, is, according to the analysis I carried out in the previous chapter, showing weakening quality and localness in the face of 20 years of newsroom cuts. Some of the other dominant news providers I identified – for example social media, radio news, and the regional television channels that cover the whole of Wales – contain very little news that is directly relevant to helping the people of Port Talbot make informed decisions about local issues in the town<sup>14</sup>. This is something that some focus group participants felt, too. They were contemptuous of the amount of Port Talbot coverage in the news in general, naming BBC regional TV news and the *Western Mail* as outlets that only rarely cover Port Talbot, bemoaning the fact that the *Post* is “a Swansea paper” and saying radio stations Swansea Sound and the Wave only sometimes covered Port Talbot news (FG2).

There is also strong evidence to suggest news stories are going unreported. This has already been noted by Moore, who discovered Europe’s largest biomass energy plant had been given planning permission in Port Talbot, but also that it had received:

almost no coverage [...] in the news. Search for ‘Biomass Plant Port Talbot’ on Google and you find fewer than 10 stories since the plant was given the go ahead in 2007 – including just two on BBC news online and three short pieces on Reuters, This is South

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<sup>14</sup> It was not possible to make a comparative study of broadcast media past and present for this study as accessible television and radio archives for Welsh news programmes do not exist. Equally there are difficulties in capturing comparative historical data from social media.



Wales [the *Post's* website], and Wales Online [the *Western Mail's* website]. (Moore, 2010)

He sets this against findings from the Institute of Welsh Affairs, which found that more than 90 per cent of the Welsh population read national newspapers, and that these have “virtually no Welsh content” (G. T. Davies & Morris, 2008) – also noting that no national newspapers have a correspondent based in Wales (Moore, 2010). Unreported news gives the researcher a particularly difficult challenge: it is difficult to measure something that is not happening, and to measure the scale of the problem (if there is one). However, I used two ways of finding out whether news (or essential information) is going unreported – first by obtaining evidence from those who are struggling to engage the media in the stories they are supplying, and second by measuring how well-informed or knowledgeable people are, or feel they are, about established events.

Focus group participants told me that they found it difficult to get their news and campaigns in the press and broadcast media, and one campaigner from focus group 4, who had been a participant in public debate and community action against the new power plant as part of Port Talbot Residents Against Power Stations (PT-RAPS), said:

A lot was going on but the national newspapers just weren't interested. We tried really hard and they just weren't interested at all, even the *Western Mail* was a real struggle. We got two articles in the *Western Mail* but they just weren't interested; I think Port Talbot isn't on their radar, that's what I concluded. (FG4)

This frustration about the remote-ness of regional and national news outlets, and their unwillingness to cover town residents' concerns, was coupled with annoyance at the *Post* reporters' lack of attendance at grassroots events outside of more habitual working hours. This found expression in an attack on journalists' reluctance to attend events “out of hours” (FG4), and five activists from two separate campaigns mentioned specific incidents where a reluctance

on the part of journalists to work out of hours had affected news coverage, in one case resulting in publication of a photograph so out-of-date, “there were a couple of people [in the photo] who were dead by then”. The participant added, “that wasn’t good, it reflects badly on the press” (FG4). These campaigns were Save Morfa Beach (which campaigned against Council and Tata Steel plans to close a public footpath that led to a local beauty spot) and Port Talbot RAPS (which campaigned against proposals to build a new power station). One active member of Port Talbot RAPS said: “we found the *Post* journalists wouldn’t work on a Saturday” (FG4), and this is a problem because many of the campaigners were volunteering around their day jobs, and so could only hold meetings or events out of normal working hours. Participants in the other focus groups complained events weren’t being covered or that they didn’t know what was going on (FG2), or that “they [reporters] missed a lot of articles” (FG4).

One member of FG2 spoke about the difficulties of running a youth organisation which specialises in sporting activities for young people because they found it difficult to get their message out to families and relevant publics. Others in the group agreed that finding out about such information was difficult:

FS1: I’m on the Board of the YMCA and they’re always trying to set up stuff for kids, but it’s getting the information out there.

FS2: You never see that advertised anywhere.

MS: No.

FS2: That’s the thing, it’s seeing things advertised.

FS1: Yes. I know people whose kids are with the football club and they’re telling me there’s loads that goes on at the rugby club or the football club and I’m like, nobody from outside the rugby club knows about it. (FG2)

This suggests that local people are having difficulty engaging increasingly remote traditional commercial media in telling their stories. It also shows that from an audience’s perspective the

same local citizens also have trouble finding out what is going on in their local area. But is the information they're missing essential to help them live as democratically- and civically-engaged citizens in the town? In other words, are local people finding out enough essential information to help them live in the Port Talbot, and if so, how are they getting it?

The survey asked people whether they had sought local information related to a list of key topics: air quality (an ongoing and long-standing topic of concern in the town (Turner, 2013)), sport, travel updates, politics, council services, live theatre or music events and crime. The majority of people in the town, a total of 64.3 per cent, said they had not looked for any information or news about key topics in the previous six months (N=364). Of those that had, sport (32.6 per cent) and live events (24.7 per cent) were most often selected as the main topics of local interest. The full breakdown is in Table 7.4.

Topic	Per cent (N=130)
Air quality	2.8
Sport	32.6
Traffic and travel updates	13.5
Local politics	2.8
Council services	10.1
Live events eg theatre/ music	24.7
Crime	13.5

**Table 7.4: Most sought-after topics of local information**

This shows us that, in the absence of a dedicated news service for the town, far more people most actively look for news about local cultural events rather than civic and political life. Local newspapers dedicated to a small geographic community often take a holistic approach to covering community life (see, for example, my discussion of the *Guardian* as a local news “bible” above). In the past if these citizens had taken a dedicated local newspaper, or visited a local news website, to find out about sport or live music there would have been a far higher likelihood of them also encountering news about local civic life, essential services, or the environment. This kind of chance encounter with professionally-produced news about Port Talbot is now much diminished.

Where information was sought, people used a variety of news and information providers, and though this variety is in keeping with the reported mixed news diet I discussed above, in fact people are not turning to professional news and media outlets alone. Table 7.5 gives a full breakdown of news and information seeking trends in Port Talbot, and shows that though newsprint, broadcast and online media were all in use as part of the information supply chain, informal information sources such as friends and family were a significant ingredient. There is also a strong trend towards the use of non-news websites (like social media platforms, where professional news links may be shared, but where they vie for attention with direct comments friends, family, and others). They also use direct contact with agencies such as the local council to get local information (using leaflets, phone-lines or face to face contact). This suggests local people are navigating the news black hole by becoming more adept at accessing information direct from the source, but also that information from key sources is not always (or even very often) filtered by a professional news producer whose job it has traditionally been (among other things) to verify information for accuracy, and to be an independent mediator between officials and citizens.

			News providers											
			<u>Print</u>		<u>Online</u>			<u>Broadcast</u>		<u>Other sources</u>				
Topics	N	Percent of whole sample	Local newspaper	National newspaper	News websites	Non-news websites	Social media	TV	Radio	Friends and family	Contact campaign group	Info from company / provider	Don't know	Other
Air quality	5	1.4%				50.0%		16.7%				16.7%		16.7%
Sport	56	15.4%	10.8%	3.2%	8.6%	18.3%	12.9%	10.8%	3.2%	22.6%		9.7%	1.1%	
Traffic updates	24	6.6%			17.8%	24.4%	15.6%	8.9%	17.8%	6.7%	2.2%	6.7%		
Politics	5	1.4%			16.7%							83.3%		
Council services	18	4.9%	8.0%	4.0%	4.0%	24.0%	4.0%	4.0%		20.0%		32.0%		
Live events	44	12.1%	9.0%	2.6%	12.8%	28.2%	14.1%	3.8%	2.6%	17.9%		9.0%		
Crime and incidents	24	6.6%	14.0%		16%	16.3%	20.9%	14.0%	7.0%	9.3%			2.3%	
<b>Average</b>			<b>10.5%</b>	<b>3.3%</b>	<b>12.7%</b>	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>13.5%</b>	<b>9.7%</b>	<b>7.7%</b>	<b>15.3%</b>	<b>2.2%</b>	<b>26.2%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>16.7%</b>
<b>Category average</b>			<b>7.4%</b>		<b>17.9%</b>			<b>8.9%</b>						

Table 7.5: News providers used when searching for news and information on local news topics

Though 22.9 per cent of people surveyed said they read a newspaper at least once a week, and 44.6 per cent said they watched television news, when it comes to seeking specific information they do not often turn to these media for answers. For example, as the table shows, their most local newspaper (the Swansea-based *Post*) is only used for finding out about sport, council services, and crime, and the average proportion of people who used a local newspaper for information seeking, at 10.5 per cent, is therefore lower than we might have expected. Similarly, television was only used for information seeking by an average of 9.7 per cent of people. However news websites, other websites and social media are more commonly used for this purpose, by an average of 17.9 per cent of those looking for information.

Another of the significant trends – getting information by word of mouth (used by an average of 15.3 per cent of people seeking information) – is borne out by evidence gathered in focus groups. In particular, the two younger focus groups (FG2 and FG3) testified repeatedly to the importance of word of mouth. Here, answers to questions about news sources on a multitude of issues (where participants put forward an issue or supposed fact and were asked “how do you know that?”) repeatedly came back to friends and family, a contact in an organisation or, “your neighbour, just go and knock on the door of your neighbour and ask, quickest and easiest way” (female speaker, FG2). Across the focus groups, word of mouth was credited as a news source 10 times in FG1, 23 times in FG2, 15 times in FG3 and 4 times in FG4. FG4, the group of campaigners and activists I designated as “opinion leaders” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 50), showed evidence of either being more adept at navigating information channels, or feeling more in control of their ability to navigate these channels – although in the absence of the detailed and rich coverage they wanted, they also stated a heavy reliance on getting information by asking friends and contacts. There was very little reference in the focus group discourse to questioning the reliability or trustworthiness of such sources of news or local information.

In the absence of a dedicated news outlet for the town there was significant evidence to support the idea that information is being discovered by chance as people stumble upon changes, closures or events as they physically move around the town. This is true even when media coverage preceding the event is relatively high. For example, one participant in FG2 said he had discovered the closure of Junction 41 of the M4 only when he tried to access the motorway one morning on his way to work and found it was closed (this significant controversial local event is discussed more fully on pp. 250-258). Another, a young person in in FG3, said he had found out about the closure from graffiti sprayed around the town. Others had only heard about a major open-air theatrical event, *The Passion*<sup>15</sup>, when they went into town to shop and found their way barred.

Indeed, the role of informal public spaces in conveying news and information was an unanticipated finding from the focus groups. Participants in all the focus groups had discovered essential information such as plans for new developments, times for public meetings, the existence of protest groups, charitable services or live theatre or music events by stumbling upon signs on lampposts, tables manned by campaigners in public spaces, petitions in shops or banners across roads. Some of them, particularly the younger participants, advocated formalising this phenomenon, and were keen to see the introduction of a big screen television in the centre of town, broadcasting essential local headlines, or even “someone with a megaphone saying what the headlines are” or “a projector or a moving screen where they could come up and ask somebody what’s happened there and they could go into depth about that thing” (FG3). It is indicative of the paucity of independent, reliable and locally-specific information that such social actors (perhaps unwittingly) advocate for a return to an (admittedly digitally-mediated) version of the medieval town crier.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Passion* was a National Theatre Wales production (directed by Hollywood actor and former Port Talbot resident Michael Sheen) that took place over the three-day Easter bank holiday weekend in 2011, and which saw large areas of the town given over to the production, both over the weekend and during the weeks of rehearsals preceding it. Roads were closed and access to parts of the town was restricted during this time.

Social media was also a dominant player in the news mix according to focus group participants, and many of them credit Facebook for alerting them to possible problems through digital contact with campaign groups or well-informed contacts. Even so, there was a high level of suspicion of the veracity of the information many were getting. Some participants were very clear about what they saw as the need for independent corroboration of such information that separates fact from hearsay. One commented:

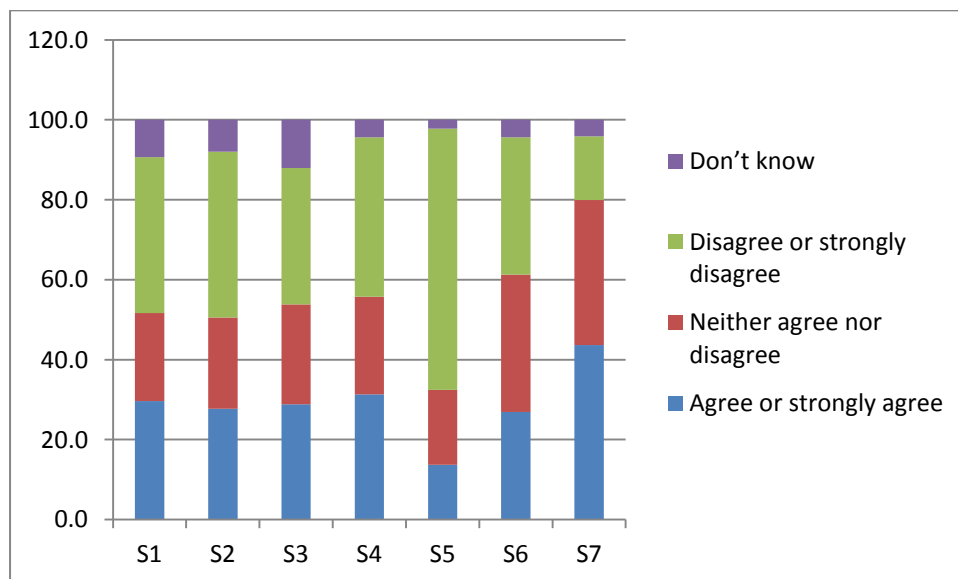
All I read on Facebook is people's opinions on what's happening or a rumour they've heard in the shops, which isn't actually the truth of the situation. So you need something external. (FG3)

A benefit of this trend, however, is the suggestion of a certain level of new media literacy, and this was also noted among all the age groups – all four groups seemed used to questioning all types of information and comparing different sources of information. They did not apply a simple binary in which information from journalists is trustworthy and that from a (potentially) self-interested institution or a friend or relative is not. Indeed, there were high levels of mistrust of mainstream news media, with allegations of bias levelled at journalists. For example: "It's like TV, you either believe what they say or you don't believe what they say, you've got to use your brain" (FG1). This suspicion extended to all traditional media as well as some non-news sources such as the Council website. All of this adds up to a widespread lack of trust in local information encountered online, and an awareness of the need to verify sources and read widely from plural information sources. As one participant told me:

I look at Facebook – and I'm in a number of groups in Facebook. But those groups that interest me. If I want news about Port Talbot specific to things like bin collections and that sort of thing, I would go to the council website, which you would hope would be up-to-date; nine times out of ten it's not. I watch the BBC news, I don't trust it, but to agree with everyone else, I think you've got to look across the board and use your own judgement as to what you think is right. (FG1)



Survey results, too, support this lack of trust of the media. As Figure 7.1 shows, respondents were asked to rate statements about local news on a Likert scale, and 34.3 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement: “I trust news about Port Talbot” (S6), while only 26.9 per cent said they agreed or strongly agreed. The survey also suggests that people do not think there is enough news about Port Talbot (S1 and S7), that they do not feel they are getting the full story (S2), that local people’s views were not well-represented (S3), and that they did not have enough information (S4). The statement with which people most vehemently disagreed was that Port Talbot was portrayed positively in the media, and this is an important part of building community identity, which many felt was lacking.



**Figure 7.1: Perceptions of Port Talbot news coverage. Statements:**  
**S1: There is enough news coverage about Port Talbot**  
**S2: In news stories about Port Talbot, I feel like I am getting the full story**  
**S3: The views of local people are represented in news stories about Port Talbot**  
**S4: There is plenty of information in news stories about Port Talbot**  
**S5: Port Talbot is portrayed in a positive light in most news stories**  
**S6: I trust news stories about Port Talbot**  
**S7: Port Talbot is not in the news enough**

Figure 1, then, suggests a local population that is not impressed by the quality of local news they receive in relation to quantity, depth, representation and trust. This begins to provide an answer to RQs 3.2 (Do local people feel well-informed and able to participate in community,

civic or democratic life?) and 3.3 (How well represented do local people feel, and do they feel able to voice their concerns or be heard and/or answered by those in authority?). The response to these statements suggests people do not feel particularly well-informed, and this may in part be because they do not trust the veracity or quality of news stories about their town. The response to S3, “the views of local people are represented in news stories”, where 34.1 per cent of people disagreed, and also to S5, “Port Talbot is portrayed in a positive light”, where 65.4 per cent of people disagreed, also begins to answer the question of how well-represented local people feel. It is clear that many do not feel particularly well-represented by the media, and that (when seen in the light of focus group comments about overly-negative portrayals of the town in news) many do not like the way their town is represented either. Taken together, the lack of trust in news and information, the unreliable nature of local information’s availability and veracity, and perceptions of inadequate and negative representation in the news, translated into several key concerns among focus group participants. I found evidence for (often extreme) confusion and/or lack of knowledge about developments, proposals and issues in the town. This confusion was sometimes founded on rumour and hearsay (indeed, the transcriptions to the focus groups yield much evidence of the rumour mill in action, as participants discussed important news and events in a somewhat circular manner, more often than not without the empirical anchor of verified facts). I also found signs of a lack of agency among many of the people interviewed in the focus groups, particularly the youngest group, in which I witnessed several outward displays of anger, as well as statements of hopelessness, for example “what’s the point? Nobody listens to us anyway” (FG3). There was frustration and despondency about people’s inability to affect their futures and, in some cases, protest against unwelcome developments or cuts. The next section examines these issues in depth.

### ***7.2.3 Knowledge is power***

If, as the evidence presented so far indicates, people lack enough credible, good-quality local news to enable them to be well-informed citizens, are they instead able to inform themselves by

other means to ensure they can participate in civic and democratic life? In other words, can they circumnavigate the news black hole? The answer appears to be that, by and large, they cannot. I have found evidence of problems with the flow of information to citizens both through traditional news outlets and other channels such as those established by organisations for direct-to-public communication. I also found that, even where the quality or quantity of news might be relatively high, this is not always enough to enable people to participate in local democracy. Information must be *useful* and *timely* in order to enable citizens to react. Additionally I found that the effectiveness of “opinion leaders” is being compromised by their experience of the opacity of institutions (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948).

Let us take RQs 2.3 (how well-informed are people about local public affairs?) and 3.2 and 3.3 again (can local people participate in community, civic or democratic life based on the information they receive, and are they able to voice their concerns or be heard or answered by those in authority). These questions can in part be approached by examining evidence from focus groups.

Having information to enable forward planning was a key concern of focus group participants. Many of the participants felt their ability to plan ahead or make their voices heard was impaired by the fact they did not know what was being mooted or planned by the council or other agencies. During the discussions, focus group participants themselves, unprompted, introduced 31 separate issues of ongoing concern in the town. These issues were varied, but can usefully be categorised, as Table 7.6 shows.

Planning and developments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Morfa Beach campaign (a campaign to retain access to a local beauty spot, which was under threat due to the proposed closure of a public footpath)</li> <li>- Glan Afan development (plans to redevelop the site of a school set for relocation, into residential and retail units)</li> <li>- Customs House development (the redevelopment of one of Port Talbot’s oldest buildings, which was demolished to make way</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>for a block of flats and was opposed by local campaigners)</li> <li>- Plaza Cinema proposals (the proposed redevelopment of a listed former cinema into a public arts facility)</li> <li>- The proposed tidal lagoon in Swansea Bay (a scheme to construct a large enclosure in Swansea Bay in order to harness tidal energy)</li> <li>- The demolition of a running track to make way for development</li> <li>- Development along the seafront</li> <li>- The development of land behind the train station</li> <li>- Possible plans to re-site the Tesco supermarket</li> <li>- Plans for a new power station</li> <li>- The new road, Harbour Way (a Welsh-Government-funded bypass road, also known as the Peripheral Distributor Road (PDR))</li> <li>- Speed bumps and traffic calming measures</li> </ul>
Local amenities and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Port Talbot Parkway train station redevelopment</li> <li>- Afan Lido redevelopment (a controversial scheme to replace a much-loved local leisure centre which was demolished after a fire in 2009)</li> <li>- School closures and the new superschool</li> <li>- Library closures</li> <li>- The food bank (a new food bank service, which focus group participants said they had only discovered by chance)</li> </ul>
Culture and events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Passion (A National Theatre Wales open-air live theatre event that took place in 2011)</li> <li>- A local theatrical production</li> <li>- The sale of artworks owned by the Council</li> <li>- The Christmas lights campaign (a campaign to fund Christmas lights for the town after the Council withdrew its funding)</li> <li>- A fete at Sandfields School</li> </ul>
Changes around the town	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New businesses and restaurants opening along the seafront</li> <li>- A windfarm in the Afan Valley</li> </ul>
Crime and policing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The closure of magistrates' courts</li> <li>- The closure of police stations</li> <li>- Drug paraphernalia not being dealt with</li> <li>- Rumours of dog thefts</li> </ul>
Complaints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rubbish on the old Bay View Club site (the site of a former social club)</li> <li>- Pollution</li> </ul>
Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The appointment of the new MP</li> </ul>

**Table 7.6: Local issues raised during focus groups, categorised into broad themes**

Surrounding all these issues, I found evidence for confusion, lack of fore-knowledge of the issues before official decisions about them were final, frustration, powerlessness, speculation, rumour, and numerous experiences of opaque public institutions that are perceived not to give adequate access to information. The following exchange is typical, and I have marked up the text where I see such issues as prescient:

FS1: I feel that there's going to be a big development down in between, behind the railway station all the way round to behind McDonalds [rumour]. I think I heard something like £10 million has been put to one side to regenerate that area [rumour], but you hear these things at meetings off somebody that's on a committee somewhere and then that's it, you don't hear anything [rumour; powerlessness; opacity]. Probably in ten years' time now it will be like, grand opening [speculation].

FS2: But the bus station is supposed to be going behind there, it's moving and the bus station is going behind the train station. [confusion; rumour]

FS3: Did you hear about the new supermarket in town, that was a couple of months ago, wasn't it [confusion, rumour]?

FS1: No [confusion; lack of fore-knowledge].

FS3: News about, I can't remember they're moving Tesco somewhere [confusion; rumour].

FS4: Yes, that was supposed to be going down by the train station [confusion; rumour].

FS5: The train station yes.

FS3: That's right, but you sort of get these bits of information and then it goes quiet [opacity]. (FG2)

In addition to the 31 issues raised by participants, I also used two recent news stories as examples for survey questions and talking points in the focus groups. The first was the closure of a major access road into Port Talbot from the M4 motorway in the summer of 2014, a Welsh

Government decision aimed at reducing journey times (principally for non-Port Talbot residents) driving by on the M4 motorway, which bisects the town. This closure was associated with a complicated set of related road closures and traffic calming measures around the town, and resulted in a strong oppositional local campaign spearheaded by the Port Talbot Chamber of Trade, and which produced a petition containing more than 22,000 signatures (Howells, 2014). There were also information boards and a campaign table in the town centre, as well as news coverage of the issue in the press (the *Post* and *Western Mail*) and broadcast media (BBC and ITV both ran packages on Welsh regional news programmes), and on Facebook, blogs, Twitter and the *Port Talbot Magnet* hyperlocal website and newspaper. The second issue was a change to the recycling and waste collection arrangements for the whole local authority area, which had included a press release regarding a new recycling mascot being launched by the Council and which received a small amount of media coverage ("Green Bob's school visit," 2014; "New mascot has important recycling message," 2014), as well as a direct mailing campaign to inform residents of the change to their bins, and then the delivery of these new bins to some trial households ("Small bins proving wheelie successful in recycling drive," 2013). Both examples were chosen because of their widespread relevance for many residents.

### ***7.2.3.1 Public knowledge of the M4 junction closure***

The survey found that knowledge levels about the M4 junction closure were high. The junction had already been closed for a month of the six-month trial period by the time this survey was carried out in September 2014, and unsurprisingly, 91 per cent said they were aware of the closure. Further probing revealed that more detailed knowledge of the closure was also relatively high: 67.9 per cent were able to name the junction by its number, and a further 6.9 per cent at least knew it was "the main junction into Port Talbot"; also 73.4 per cent knew when the closure had started and 41.5 per cent knew how long the trial closure would last – a relatively high degree of knowledge across the questions.

However, the focus groups, which took place in December 2014, give us further, more complex, insights than the bare quantitative indicators afforded by the survey. Despite large numbers of people knowing what had happened after the event, I found evidence for high levels of confusion around the issues, lack of fore knowledge, frustration that the “decision had already been made” (FG3) before the plan to close the junction was brought to their attention, high levels of rumour and speculation around the issue, and a lack of voice or power in changing the decision. This was also coupled with accusations of a lack of accountability on the part of those making the decisions, and the opacity of institutions such as the Council and the Welsh Government which prevented them identifying authority figures to complain or protest to. These effects were found across all four focus groups. Table 7.7 shows a selection of extracts from the focus groups, and categorises them by these effects.

Effect	Example	Focus Group
Confusion	<p>INT: Do you know who's made the decision?</p> <p>MS: The council obviously isn't it?</p> <p>FS1: Isn't it being trialled by the Welsh Government for a certain period of time I think.</p> <p>MS: Yes, but that trial has already taken place.</p> <p>FS1: I think it's for six months or something like that.</p> <p>FS2: Yes, they're never going to reopen it.</p> <p>FS1: I don't think they will.</p>	FG3
	<p>MS1: But our road planning decisions are not planned by our council, it's Swansea in control of that aren't they?</p>	FG4
Lack of fore-knowledge	<p>INT: Do you feel like you've got the facts of which roads were going to close?</p> <p>FS1: No.</p> <p>MS1: No.</p> <p>MS2: You didn't find out anything unless you went and looked for it.</p> <p>MS1: That was willy-nilly.</p> <p>FS2: Nothing in Port Talbot is public here.</p> <p>MS3: There's been media coverage and again it's been reactive media coverage only because it was newsworthy. It was newsworthy that the traders were up in arms, that the centre said you're killing us, other traders, you're killing us, the people who lived on these diverted roads, you're killing us.</p>	FG1
	<p>MS: I heard it in my area because there's loads of graffiti all over the walls on the M4, saying J41 and all that.</p>	FG3
	<p>INT: How did you find out that the M4 was going to close?</p> <p>FS: I heard on Facebook.</p> <p>MS: I was in the car going up and you had the thing, a big barrier and that was closed, and most people didn't know about it.</p> <p>FS: Oh yes, people were reversing back down weren't they, that's right. I forgot about that.</p>	FG2
Rumour and speculation	<p>MS1: Well, it has been said lately that it was the Port Talbot Council that suggested it in the first place, so I don't know if that is gossip.</p> <p>MS2: Yes, is that just rumour?</p> <p>MS1: If that is true, why weren't we told about it then in the very beginning?</p>	FG4



	<p>MS2: That's one of those things, it depends how it's spun as to how that comes out. The council proposed the PDR [Peripheral Distributor Road], it was in the document. One of the suggestions they put, because they had to compulsory purchase a lot of land to build it, so they had to justify doing that. So there was a big public inquiry and the officers put forward saying, if we build this new road we can shut some junctions as a justification, and it got completely thrown out, it was just the council officers trying to get the road through and that sort of stuck in that document and it's haunted them ever since, but that's not really been... it never comes across in that way.</p> <p>MS3: They've never admitted it.</p> <p>MS2: Well, it doesn't come across in that way when it's been reported.</p>	
Frustration and anger	<p>INT: Were they from the local council?</p> <p>GW: Yes, because he was on the Board of this new school. He sat there, had a face like a slapped arse, never said a word, and then turned round and said I can't comment because I'm on the Board of the new school. What was he there for then? [also opacity]</p>	FG1
	<p>MS1: I'd be very tempted to go up there with a disc cutter and just open it [the barrier] up myself and then drive on it.</p> <p>MS2: Need a revolution really but it's going to take violence for people to listen to it.</p> <p>FS1: It doesn't always take violence.</p> <p>MS2: A bit of a riot.</p> <p>MS1: Yes, but in London there was all this big hoo-ha, they caused riots but they got what they wanted. They won't let that happen again.</p> <p>INT: What did they want, what do you mean they got what they wanted?</p> <p>MS2: The government listened, and they got a free telly [laughter]</p> <p>MS1: The Government... about funding, about stopping everything in the local area, about changing Government... with the job centres and everything and trying to make it unpopulated and they caused riots and now things have not changed. Things are the same as they was before because of what they done.</p> <p>MS2: The town's upset, they're just going to riot one day everyone's just going to blow. I think everyone's going to get so angry they're just going to go...</p> <p>FS: It is going to get to that stage.</p> <p>FS: I can see it getting to that stage very soon.</p> <p>MS1: I'm going on Facebook after. I don't use Facebook but I'm going to have a go after, I'm going to start a riot.</p>	FG3

Powerlessness (decision already made) and lack of agency	<p>MS1: I feel as they've been chucked in the bin. Who signed a petition in this room? All of us. Nobody's heard anything about the petition, no one's heard what the outcome of the scores were, no one's heard anything, it's been shut [the road] and that's that.</p> <p>INT: Has anyone been to a public meeting; has anyone been up to the protests in the Assembly?</p> <p>MS1: No, because there isn't enough information around about it of how to go and what to do.</p>	FG3
	<p>INT: Has anyone been to one of those meetings?</p> <p>MS2: I've never been to any meeting apart from this one.</p> <p>MS1: They don't do nothing.</p> <p>INT: Are the politicians listening to you?</p> <p>MS1: No.</p> <p>INT: So it's pointless going to a meeting then, is that how you feel?</p> <p>MS1: It's all about money. It just seems as if everyone's all about money and until something happens in Port Talbot that you see with your own eyes, actually there in front of you, then you don't believe that it's happening.</p>	FG3
Opaque institutions – how to protest?	<p>MS1: That was the council, a council decision that was.</p> <p>MS2: The council haven't got anything to do with that, it's all to do with the...</p> <p>MS3: When we were at one of the meetings we were talking about it. When I asked her she said speak to them in Cardiff.</p> <p>MS1: No, that's the council that.</p>	FG1
	<p>MS: I don't know, there's been an interesting mix of information, because there's the blame game between our council and the Welsh Government, it's quite petty actually, because technically the council aren't responsible so they're not taking any rap for it at all but the Welsh Government are trying to pin it on the council as well. There's a really terrible piece from the Trunk Road Agency where they're trying to say the council instigated the closure, which they have no power to do. So that's complete misinformation being put out by an official source and then reported on by the newspapers. It's a mess but I think that's because the sources of information are completely messed up as well.</p>	FG4

**Table 7.7: Effects of impoverished information about the M4 closure on local people - categories of focus group responses**

Why are (often seemingly well-informed) citizens expressing feelings of powerlessness, frustration and anger over an issue about which they are, according to the survey results, fairly knowledgeable? The data reveal that this can be at least partly explained by this complex mix of weak, partial or untimely information, official opacity and rumour.

For example, one clue is in the testimony of a number of the participants, who claimed to have first discovered the closure by literally stumbling upon the road blocks after the junction had closed, as I discussed above. This meant that by the time many people had found out about the closure, they felt it was too late to change it. For them, the information was not timely, and was not useful in enabling them to respond in a meaningful or powerful way. For others, who were accessing news stories about the issue and knew about the closure before it happened, this was still perceived as too late to change the decision. Most of the media coverage came as a result of the local campaign, and this began after the decision to close the junction had already been announced on 18 March 2014 (Byrne, 2014; "M4 Port Talbot junction to close in traffic congestion trial," 2014).

Confusing messages also fogged the public perception of the protest campaign; a partial turnaround by the Welsh Government did not help the clarity of the information in the public domain. Originally the trial closure was to have been full time, and would have affected both the on- and off-slip roads of the junction, but the strong local campaign and the petition appear to have stayed the hand of the Welsh Government, who in May 2014 announced a smaller scale closure of one side of the M4 instead of both, and only at peak times ("Port Talbot M4 junction closure plan change after complaints," 2014), but this resulted in confusion about whether the campaign would continue – some focus group participants said they had not attended a protest at the Welsh Assembly because they had heard the campaign had been called off (though the protest did go ahead (Howells, 2014)). Consultation on the closure was ongoing for the six months of the trial and open for anyone to make clear any concerns, but even the modified plan was controversial, and, for the focus group participants, the overall decision to close the

junction was perceived as having been made already, and engaging with the consultation perceived as pointless. Those who did write in expressed dissatisfaction with the “anodyne” written response from Edwina Hart, the Welsh Government’s Minister for Economy Science and Transport, who was seen as having made the decision already: “The woman, she’s so full of her own sense of power – this is Edwina Hart, don’t argue with me, you can see it in her face – I’ve made this decision, *my* people will go out and *my* people will decide that you have to go over the bridge and go down, and you’re not going to be able to get into Baglan Energy Park that way because it interferes with the flow of traffic coming off Harbour Way, so *I’m* going to make you go all the way down to the other roundabout, but that’s now going to have an impact on the school, but that won’t matter because *I’ve* said so and *I* don’t live there. That is the attitude” (FG1). Additionally, the Government turnaround was not generally perceived as a victory for the campaign, who wanted to stop the closure altogether (ibid), and this seems to have added to feelings of powerlessness, and the perception of a lack of accountability of the Welsh Government and Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council.

The opacity of institutions was also an explicitly explored factor in confounding the public’s ability to respond, and the focus group participants said they did not feel those in authority were responsive to them. Decisions about the trunk road network are made by Welsh Government, but the local road network is the responsibility of the local council. Because both kinds of road were affected by the trial, responsibility for handling complaints (and even where responsibility for the decision lay) was not clear. Several focus group participants made the point that they had tried to complain or protest but had been pointed to another body, and this is also a common complaint on the campaign’s Facebook group (“NO to closure of junction 41,” ca. 2014). One focus group participant summed up frustration at people’s inability to access clear and useful local information:

That’s what I’m saying about the council. It’s our fault because we have lack of knowledge and sometimes it’s a little too complicated to find that knowledge. If it was

just a simple case of [going to the website for] Port Talbot Council and you've got crime, what's building, old buildings, and you can select what you want, but if you go on the Port Talbot Council website, I mean for me I just get lost and I think, 'Oh God'. (FG4)

Traditionally, journalists would have been better placed than individual citizens to navigate confusing or opaque institutions. Journalists have historically been allowed privileged access to official institutions, and are permitted to ask questions, and receive answers, that individuals find more difficult to access. This power balance is highlighted in research by Williams, Harte and Turner, who noted citizen journalists and bloggers were taken more seriously by those in power only once they became more critical of the institution and gained influence as a result of the "audience gr[owing], and bec[oming] more engaged" (A. Williams et al., 2015b, p. 16).

Professional journalists, also, by their training, experience and knowledge are at an advantage in scrutinising the complexities of government or government information. Additionally, through their access to a large audience, the information they transmit ensures clear messages are able to reach a large number of people, which is not the case for individuals or even opinion leaders in possession of the same knowledge. This lack of power in gaining information from institutions has been witnessed first-hand at the *Port Talbot Magnet*. Institutions such as the Council and South Wales Police were initially unwilling to engage with us or respond to our questions, but later, once we had become established, the same institutions more willingly answered questions of ours for which campaigners had struggled to get responses.

Compounding this lack of power in accessing information from official sources, the prevalence of word of mouth as a major information source has potentially troubling effects. Knowledge of key facts may be high, but if the original source of the information is unverified – and this is also true of much information circulated on and accessed through social media – it can leave citizens in doubt about the veracity of the information. One participant suggested it would be helpful if news stories could include references so readers could check their sources

(FG3); such source transparency may need to be a consideration for the media and other information providers in a new era of more digitally aware citizens.

Particularly striking is the evidence from FG3 – the 18- to 30-year-old group – in which I witnessed high levels of negativity, anger, resentment, powerlessness and cynicism. This group said they were not accessing much (if any) local news, and that most of the news they did access they did not trust. Of all the groups, this was the only one which had nothing good to say about the town. They felt there was nothing happening, in terms of services and events for their children or opportunities for employment for themselves, and some of them expressed the desire to leave the town. Though the other groups also expressed negative comments about Port Talbot, they were able to balance them by listing positive things about the town or community as well. But in FG3, frustration often simmered over into outright anger, which was at one point directed at myself as the researcher. Later in the session, the group also discussed sabotage, and taking direct action, against the closure of the M4, and as Table 7.6: Local issues raised during focus groups, categorised into broad themes shows, some of them went as far as to suggest rioting. There was also a further discussion of the merits of graffiti as a means of receiving news, as many of them had encountered local information this way, with one participant saying: “When it’s actually tasteful and it’s done correctly, graffiti can be a really good work and way of spreading news” (FG3). This offers a troubling insight into the way younger people relate to news and information in the town. They are not accessing (the already weakened and diminished) traditional local news to the extent of older groups (for example 17.1 per cent of 18-30 year olds, 39.1 per cent of 31-59 year olds, and 53.2 per cent of over 60s read a local newspaper at least once a week), and are more likely to use a more varied range of news and information sources – particularly online news and social media – than older groups. This group advocated more use of public spaces to communicate essential information, and also wished the media would be more transparent when referencing their sources.

### **7.2.3.2 Public knowledge of changes to bin collections**

The second news story I used in the surveys and focus groups was the launch of a new council scheme to encourage recycling. The changes to the council's rubbish collections, which affected all households in the county borough area, were communicated through direct mailings to households. Only 16.5 per cent of people were aware of the Council's media campaign to publicise the scheme and to launch their mascot, GreenBob SquareBox. Of these respondents, just over a third (or 6 per cent of the whole sample) knew how the mascot for the launch had been named. However, 58.5 per cent of the whole sample knew their wheelie bins would change as a result of the new scheme, and this is possibly because the new bins had already been supplied in many areas and the change had been communicated by direct methods including leaflets. Of these respondents, 91.5 per cent knew their new bins would be smaller (this was 53.5 per cent of the total sample). This suggests that people were more likely to be aware of the new bins, than they were of the Council's managed media messages about the scheme, which further suggests they are not being exposed to such messages in the media or from official Council channels. Even so, considering all households in the County Borough area were affected by the bin change, the number of people who were aware of the change was comparatively low.

This is supported by focus group findings. Only one person mentioned the issue of bin changes (though all groups were probed in general about bin collections) and this was through the lens of the M4 decision, where both issues were used as examples of the community being insufficiently consulted over controversial council decisions:

I think it's a case of Port Talbot Council, or the authority, once they built the PDR [Peripheral Distributor Road] road it's forcing us to use it, that's what they're doing essentially. By closing one or two junctions you will force the people to use it. It's like giving us smaller wheelie bins so they're forcing us to recycle. That's their mind set, once they've done something. Like I said about the planning, once it's got to go there, it's

got to go there and everybody is going to be forced to get used to the idea. That's what I think it's about. (FG4)

Again, on bins, confusion and lack of fore-knowledge is evident in the survey results, and frustration and opacity are both in evidence in this extract. While this issue did not produce the volume of comment in focus groups, nor were other effects such as anger and rumour visible, the presence of confusion and lack of fore-knowledge remain suggestive of a problem with information flows in the town.

Whether there has been a change in the amount of timely or useful information that is available in the town since the 1970s, and in particular being produced by news media, is debatable. The Internet has arguably opened a gateway to more information and inter-connectivity (Shirky, 2008), but there are many debates in the literature concerning the digital literacy (or inclination) of the majority of people to spend time scrutinising this “abundance of the digital marketplace” (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012, p. 41). In my own content analysis I was able to track changes in information provision available to local citizens seeking to make decisions about how best to live their daily lives in the community by tracking topics, news sources, and news triggers. Firstly, and most obviously, since the closure of the newspaper there has been quantitatively far less news about local politics, council services, and planning issues. The nature of this news has also changed in important ways. News topics, for example, have become increasingly tabloidised and there has been an increase in celebrity and entertainment news, while coverage of sport, crime and business has fallen and the coverage of local government is increasingly reliant on office-based newsgathering, high status sources and official information channels. Behind the scenes, I found a weakening of systems of newsgathering that favour official information channels and sources over the voices of local people.

In the focus groups, planning and building developments are one of the main issues about which participants say they are under-informed and would like more, and better, information. This is a common finding across all four focus groups and they rated it as one of the



types of information they valued (or would value) most. The following exchange is from FG1, but similar exchanges occurred in all four focus groups:

MS1: A newspaper is effectively yesterday's news and we all know that. To get up-to-date news you need a radio or TV or computers.

FS1: We also need to know future plans don't we?

MS2: Oh yes.

FS1: Which Port Talbot is very cagey about that, future plans for the town.

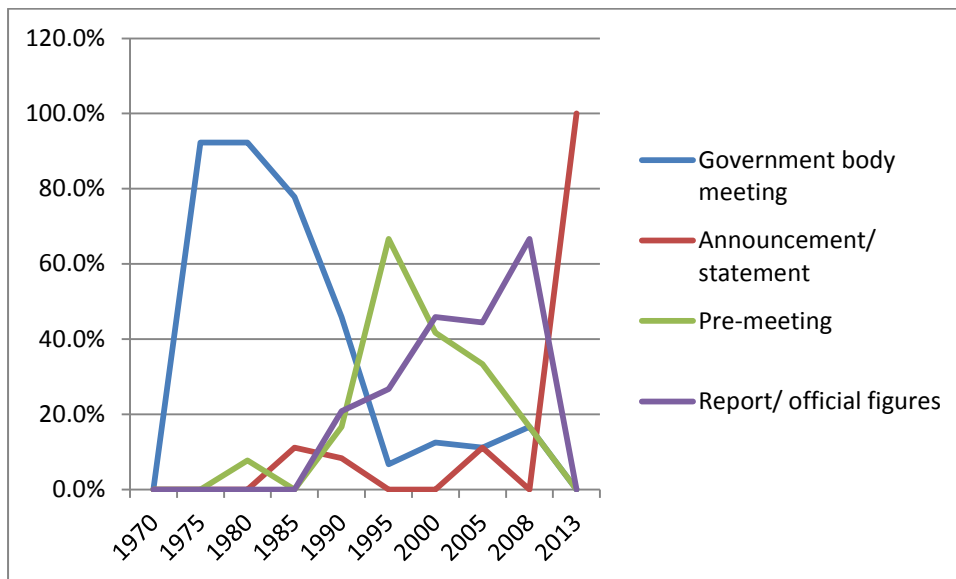
FS1: Like buildings, roads, everything really.

MS1: Yes you're absolutely right.

MS3: I think you need clarity on that stuff.

Turning to my content analysis findings, I specifically analysed the planning news topic, and examined which news triggers were most often associated with it. Figure 7.2 shows how the four main news triggers associated with planning news changed over time. Planning stories that came from journalists attending government body meetings such as council meetings peaked in the 1970s, while planning stories that were triggered by pre-meeting agendas released to the media before the meeting took place peaked in the 1980s, and the use of reports and official information peaked in the 1990s, to be replaced by the predominance of official announcements and statements – usually sent out through managed media sources – which peaked until it was the trigger for 100 per cent of stories in 2013. This suggests that professional reporting retreated from an eyewitness style in 1970s, and increasingly became reliant on official sources shaping their own news coverage. The data show a clear weakening of the quality and independence of public local information about planning proposals. If journalists were less likely to attend planning committee meetings, plans were less likely to be reported at an early stage of discussion, and my interview data results suggest that plans were potentially under less scrutiny than if a journalist had been present at the planning meeting. A growing

reliance on official announcements suggests a reliance on the official line, which implies less and less scrutiny of important decisions and the processes that lead to them being made.



**Figure 7.2: How the main news triggers for planning stories changed over time**

This suggests a weakened flow of information on issues that allow citizens to plan for the future. This has worrying implications for the local public sphere, meaning citizens are less likely to be able to hold rational well-informed debate, but also that they may lack the information to enable them to have any debate at all on issues they have not heard about, or where they have heard too late to make the debate relevant or to be able to influence official decisions. Further, in the two-step flow model, which is one way information can penetrate the public sphere, opinion leaders find out information, add their own layer of opinion to the information and then disseminate it to their networks (Laughey, 2007, p. 24). For this process to work, the quality of the original information is very important. If institutions are not free with useful and timely information, and if the news media are not fulfilling their role in informing citizens and scrutinizing institutions, then the quality of the information received by opinion leaders is threatened.

Furthermore, if the information does not reach enough opinion leaders the result may be a public sphere that more closely resembles an echo chamber of false information and rumour. For this research, the members of Focus Group 4 were considered to be opinion leaders, in that, as campaigners and trusted figures, they are in a position to spread the information they access to a network of other less-informed or less-engaged citizens. I found that the members of this group did not feel they were well-informed, as they found it difficult to access information from institutions they regarded as opaque. Many of them spent a proportion of their spare time attempting to scrutinise local government on behalf of the town, but even from their vantage point as active and monitorial citizens, they find this increasingly difficult to do. For example, one expressed frustration in this regard with reference to an anecdote about the proposed sale of Council-owned artworks kept at Margam Park, (once information about the proposed sale became public, members of the local history society stepped in to question the terms under which the artworks had been given to the local authority, which resulted in an investigation and the sale being put on hold):

MS: It depends what it is, like certainly with the council you don't get a lot of information out of them. I attend lots of meetings with them, [MS2] does as well. We hear things in the meetings, and there are things that I'll tell people that I think should be said that perhaps haven't been published and that will filter its way out. But it tends to be a lot of the important things, like the Margam Park paintings, somebody just happens to say something. Whether it's because there aren't enough journalists investigating things, so it's not just news is happening but it's actually [that you need to be] looking for something that people aren't seeing. I don't think enough people, whether it's journalists or residents, are actually scrutinising what's going on enough. When you say 'scrutiny,' it's never going to be easy but I think there are a lot of barriers there when you try and question a lot of things as well. (FG4)

This again suggests that information is difficult to find, that it is not readily available to opinion leaders, and that the withdrawal of journalists from local public life is keenly felt by those who are left to play the role of providing local accountability and scrutiny without the benefits of professional training or the means and resources to as effectively gather and disseminate such local information. They also lack the public forum and mass audience to publicise issues and campaigns such as these – the arena of debate put forward by Habermas. This arena for airing issues and concerns was once provided by the local newspaper, and the ability of the public to influence the sphere of public authority is weakened without it.

There are numerous indicators in my data that people feel abundant and independent information helps people to take part in community activities. There were several parents represented in the focus groups, and many of them gave examples of being frustrated at the lack of information about opportunities for their children, or of having stumbled upon useful information by accident, either through word of mouth or on social media. We should also remember here the difficulties professed by local groups in getting journalists to report on their news, which I discussed above (pp. 237-238). But there is an issue even more crucial to the health of local democracy at stake here - scrutiny. Scrutiny of democratic institutions is a fundamental tenet of fourth estate, public interest journalism (McNair, 2009a, pp. 238-240). If journalists, as independent auditors or scrutinisers, are not attending council meetings, meetings of other public institutions such as health boards or parish council meetings, corporate interests such as shareholder meetings, or the public proceedings of the justice system - magistrates' courts, crown courts, family courts – then how can the public be sure these institutions are being run as they should be, that they are making proper decisions or decisions that are in the interests of the people, and that their plans or decisions do not affect their lives deleteriously? As Martin Moore puts it: "With no-one attending and recording what happens in local government there is a real danger that we will lose the accountability function that most agree is integral to a functioning and healthy democracy" (2014, p. 8). At its worst, news may not just go unscrutinised or unchallenged – it may go unreported altogether.

As a local reporter myself I have witnessed these effects first hand. For example, I attended a council meeting in the capacity of a *Port Talbot Magnet* reporter in December 2011, at which a *Post* reporter was also present. At the end of the meeting, just before the agenda item entitled 'any other business', the *Post* reporter left. Under this agenda item, the council confirmed a £93 million super-school would be built in the town, which would mean the closure or merger of seven existing schools. My own report for the *Magnet* appeared as a result of the meeting and contained quotes I noted from the meeting (Howells, 2011b); the *Post's* report ("'Enormous' £93m Neath Port Talbot schools boost," 2011) appeared after a Welsh Government and Neath Port Talbot Council press release ("NPT schools funding boost," 2011), and all its quotes are those from the press releases. None of the outlets covering this story, however, questioned the official line, and this suggests none of the media currently serving Port Talbot are able to carry out this scrutiny function as effectively as a public sphere model demands. Both the *Post* and the volunteer-run *Magnet* are constrained by low staff numbers and resources and are reliant on news subsidies such as official PR to help them cover this kind of story. The *Magnet* also lacks the "institutional muscle" required to sustain regular scrutiny of institutions, and also to take on their might in contentious situations where legal backing might be required. This can lead to a risk aversion not conducive to scrutinising and challenging the decisions of those in power. This example, of course, is only one story, but evidence from the content analysis, interviews and the focus groups suggest this scrutiny function is less and less a part of a journalist's job. To an extent the worries of local people uncovered in the survey about the nature and trustworthiness of news about Port Talbot also indicate a problem with this scrutiny function in that the majority do not trust the local news, and also that they do not feel local people are well-represented in the news, and it may be that readers are aware of the damage being wrought by an over-use of official channels. Indeed, focus group participants demonstrated an awareness of the use of PR, and noted the muscle of institutions was high in comparison to the ability of citizens:

The BBC would be reporting only because they've been given a series of facts by the AM's press officer, or the council's press officer, whose job that is to shed a positive light on what the council are doing. Now if there are then voices in the dark that say, whoa, hold the bus, this isn't going to happen; the people don't have that machine, that continuity, that sense of power. People power, god rest it, is a myth. (FG1)

Indeed, the content analysis showed how news is now more likely to be triggered by an official channel, sources likely to be fewer, and of higher status, as the sample period progresses. Journalists themselves say they are less likely to leave the office to play an active news gathering role than previously, and that they passively get most of their news leads from sources contacting them, social media, or press releases. The evidence of focus group participants about the perceived opacity of institutions means local people are finding it difficult to scrutinise institutions themselves, and this raises an equally salient point about the need for regular, well-resourced journalists who can fulfil the scrutinising role. McChesney and Nichols (2010) provide good insights into the special contributions made by professionals working for stable and supportive local news institutions. For new systems of providing local news to work, they argue:

There needs to be a significant body of full-time paid journalists, covering communities [...]. There need to be independent newsrooms where journalists who are secure enough in their livelihoods to focus on their work can collaborate, and receive professional editing, fact-checking and assistance. (p. 81)

Part of this assistance, they argue, must take the form of institutional and legal support designed to back up, make less precarious and risky, the job of holding those in power to account in public debate. The independence and institutional muscle of scrutinisers is crucial for a number of reasons, and often journalists working for institutions where there is "a series of social rules that create stable patterns of behaviour" (C. Anderson et al., 2014) are best able to offer this.

As well as the act of carrying out watchdog journalism, and exposing local elite malpractice on behalf of local citizens, there is a case to be made that the regular presence of journalists in local political institutions might have a prophylactic effect on curbing potential abuses of power. Some of my data, as well as my own experiences covering the town, suggest that journalists' presence can have a preventative effect on possible bad behaviour or corner cutting in public institutions – what some academics have called “scarecrow” journalism:

Both a watchdog and a scarecrow stand guard. But the fact that only a watchdog actively barks and the scarecrow does not bark does not always matter. Though the scarecrow “does nothing,” its very existence, the very fact that the crows know it is out there, “watching,” is often enough to constrain bad crow-like behaviour. And the same goes for journalism. The watchdog press, it must be admitted, barks only rarely. But the continuity of that press, the fact that it is “out there,” is often enough to constrain bad behaviour on the part of powerful institutions. (C. Anderson et al., 2014, np.)

The journalists I interviewed were aware of this, worrying that the absence of journalists from meetings meant planning decisions being made behind closed doors by officers, rather in the public forum of a meeting, or about big business pushing through an agenda without journalists questioning the official line being given out in press releases and challenging the official narrative. One interviewee noticed that her presence at council meetings meant: “they all speak up, which is good, and you don't get the same old people speaking up all the time, which can be the case sometimes”.

So, in answer to the research questions, many still rely on traditional media, particularly television news (which has very limited local content), but the remaining local newspaper (based in the neighbouring large town of Swansea, seen by many as distanced from local life in Port Talbot) remains a part of this mix. News and information published online is also important, but it does not seem to be filling the gap left by the retreating professional journalism to the extent some might have hoped. The use of Facebook, in particular, is

widespread, and this compounds the dominance of word of mouth as a news source. That is not to suggest that no local news is shared on Facebook, or that official and grassroots sources do not seek to disseminate information and engage people on this channel too. But word of mouth (information passed on from friends and family on social networks, or face to face) is one of the most trusted news sources according to focus group participants. They also suggest they have to work hard to verify what they have heard from all sources. There is significant evidence to suggest they do not feel well-informed, and do not feel well-equipped by the information they can access to participate in the democratic process and civic life more generally. I have discussed some of the effects that were evident in focus groups – confusion, rumour, speculation, frustration, anger and evidence for institutional opacity, which are troubling for the health of the local public sphere. This last effect has implications for the ability of local people and journalists to scrutinise those in power, and also to keep them in check by observing their processes and decisions. As I have already set out, other studies of civic and democratic engagement and media use have found links between newspaper closures and democratic and civic data such as election turnouts and national surveys that have included political participation questions (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009; Shaker, 2014). In the next section I examine three data sets that are relevant to Port Talbot to determine whether similar effects can be observed in democratic and civic behaviour in the town around two key points in the history of Port Talbot’s media: the closure of the *Guardian* in 2009; and the closure of district newspaper offices around 2000.

### ***7.2.4 Civic and democratic behaviour***

Let us turn now to RQ3.1, to examine whether there has been a measurable impact on civic and democratic indicators in Port Talbot.

As I set out in Chapter 4, a handful of studies into newspaper closures have found effects on democratic and civic markers. Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido’s 2009 study of Cincinnati

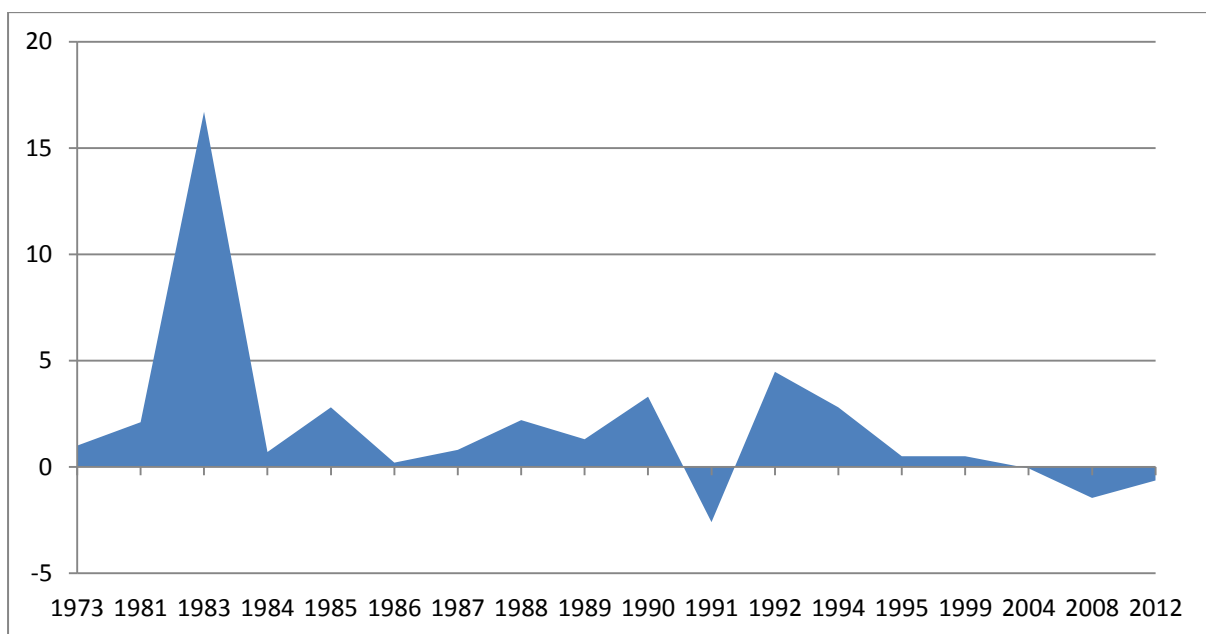


examined voter turnout, the rates of re-election for incumbents, the numbers of candidates standing for election and campaign spending in the years leading up to, and immediately following, the closure of Cincinnati's second newspaper, the *Cincinnati Post*. They found that the states that were served by the *Cincinnati Post* showed lower election turnout rates, fewer candidates standing for office, and that incumbents were more likely to be re-elected following the closure, concluding that "newspapers – even underdogs such as the *Post*, which had a circulation of just 27,000 when it closed – can have a substantial and measurable impact on public life" (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009, from abstract). Second, Gentzkow, Shapiro and Sinkinson also found election turnouts in Presidential elections were affected by the presence, or lack, of newspapers (2009).

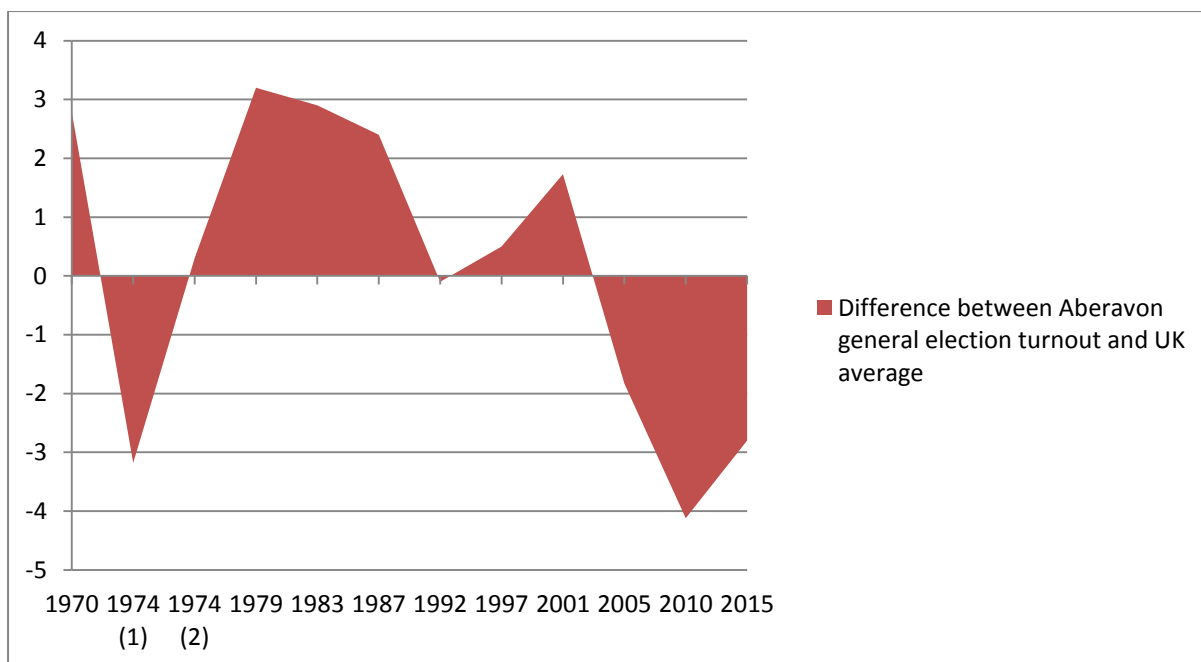
A third study analysed civic newspaper closures in Denver and Seattle looked at data from the 2008 and 2009 Current Population Survey carried out by the United States Census (Shaker, 2014). The study found a decline in civic engagement after the closure of two newspapers in Denver and Seattle compared with civic engagement in other major American cities. Again, the focus was on cities that had formerly had two newspapers, and its findings were within the context of one of these newspapers closing while the other continued to publish. Still, it found a measurable decline in civic engagement in the two cities following the newspaper closures compared with similar cities which had not lost newspapers. To measure civic engagement, the study analysed responses to questions about whether respondents had contacted a public official or bought/ boycotted a product or service because of social or political values in the previous 12 months, asked whether they had attended particular groups including a PTA or neighbourhood watch or civic organisation such as a Lions group, or whether they had been an officer or served on a committee in any groups or organisations.

To measure democratic engagement in Port Talbot, I analysed election turnout results, as these are the most widely available and replicable measure from the Schulhofer-Wohl et al (2009) and Gentzkow et al (2009) studies . I found a similar decline in voter turnouts in all three

election types – general, local and Welsh Assembly elections – when measured against UK or Wales turnout averages. However this analysis reveals the declines did not happen after the closure of the *Guardian*. Instead, in keeping with the longitudinal nature of this study I looked further back, analysing all turnouts from 1970-2015 to reveal long-term trends. The analysis reveals a drop in election turnout figures after 2000. I have already identified this as a significant turning point in several key areas of news production, quantity and quality, and concluded these declines were associated with the closure of district newspaper offices and the withdrawal of journalists from the community. It may be that the same effect is in evidence here with turnout figures. Figure 7.3 and Figure 7.4 show the percentage point difference between the Aberavon constituency turnout and the UK average for local and general elections.



**Figure 7.3: Percentage point difference in turnout average for local council elections compared with Wales average. Source: Rallings (2006).**



**Figure 7.4: Percentage point difference in turnout average for general elections compared with UK average. Source: Kimber (ca 2015).**

Between the 1970 and 1999 local elections, turnout for the seats within the Aberavon constituency was an average of 2.45 percentage points above the UK average, but dropped from the 2004 elections onwards to 0.72 percentage points below the UK average. For general elections, the turnout for Aberavon was an average of 1.17 percentage points above the UK average until the 2001 election: for the 2005-2015 elections this dropped to an average of 2.91 percentage points below the UK average. Similarly, Aberavon's turnout figures were 0.5 per cent above the Welsh average in the first Welsh Assembly election in 1999 (Morgan, 1999), but since then have dropped below the Welsh average by 0.35 per cent in 2003; 3.66 per cent in 2007 and 4.66 per cent in 2011.

These data suggest a correlation between the withdrawal of journalists from Port Talbot, and the consequent drop in quality local news that I have identified, and democratic engagement in the town. How this has affected local people by 2014 is also noteworthy.

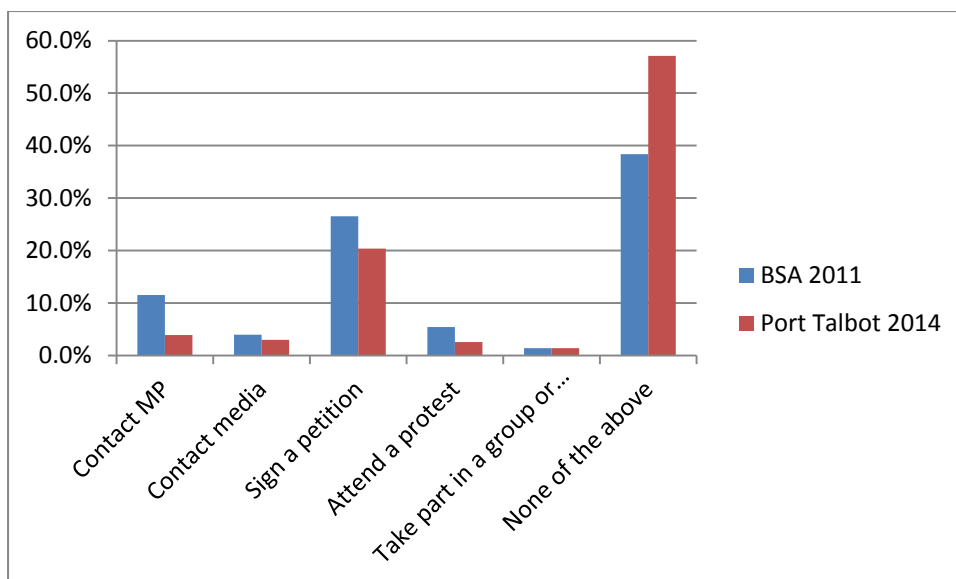
In my survey I tested survey respondents on their political knowledge. Knowledge of the political landscape, particularly in naming candidates or policies is a common method for

measuring whether local people are well-informed enough to be able to vote, and although such measures can be problematic when used in isolation, can help add to an overall examination of how well-informed the public is if we also examine the “broader discursive” evidence as I have done (Justin Lewis, 2001, pp. 103-108). My findings suggest that even basic knowledge, such as the political persuasion of the constituency’s MP, was relatively low: only 56.6 per cent of people were able to answer correctly by naming Labour – the party has held the Aberavon constituency since 1922, and Labour also controls the local council. More detailed political knowledge was even less abundant: at the regional political level (i.e. the Welsh Assembly), only 14.7 per cent of people were able to name a local or regional AM, while 11 per cent named someone incorrectly, and 74 per cent said they did not know. Meanwhile, at the local political level (i.e. the local council), 27.5 per cent were able to name council leader Ali Thomas’s job, while 0.5 per cent got it wrong and 72 per cent did not know. However, in similar studies in the past, political knowledge of this kind has often been found to be low (Justin Lewis, 2001, p. 108). It is also difficult to know whether this knowledge is lower now than it would have been in previous years, as data have not been collected at this local geographical level with any consistency<sup>16</sup>. What is noteworthy irrespective of longitudinal comparisons, however, is the high proportion of ‘don’t know’ responses, which, as Page and Shapiro (1983) found, has been shown to correlate with low government responsiveness to public opinion: or put another way, “policy moves in harmony with opinion changes more often when ‘don’t know’ survey responses are few” (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. 393).

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<sup>16</sup> For example, The British Social Attitudes Survey which has been carried out every year since 1983, contains some questions that relate to political efficacy (not knowledge), but these were not asked in every year of the survey and when they were asked, the sample sizes for the Aberavon parliamentary constituency were too small to be statistically valid.

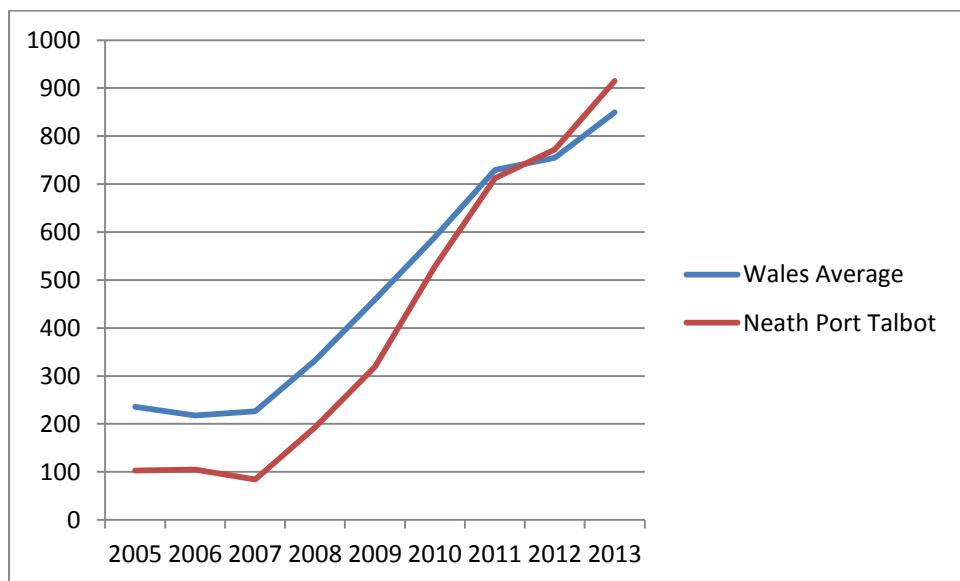
Obtaining comparative data on civic markers has been challenging due to the small sample sizes at constituency or local authority level, as I discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 131). I have, however, been able to make one useful comparison with data from national studies. The most recent available relevant data are from the British Social Attitudes survey that took place in 2011 (NatCen Social Research, 2011). Using five markers of civic engagement from the BSA, I compared them with five comparable measures in my own survey (these are: contacting an MP; contacting the media; signing a petition; attending a protest or demonstration; and joining a group or campaign). As Figure 7.5 reveals, civic engagement was much lower in Port Talbot than the UK as a whole in four of the five civic engagement measures used (the fifth, membership of groups, was the same in both data sets at 1.4 per cent). A sixth variable, repeated in both studies, was the 'none of the above' question, which allows for further comparison, and reveals local people were much more likely (at 57.1 per cent) than the national sample (38.4 per cent) to have taken part in no civic engagement activities. It is frustrating that no longitudinal analysis could be carried out as it may be that civic engagement in Port Talbot has always been lower than the national average, and the lack of a diachronous comparison means it is not possible to determine whether these data are related to the weakening of local news provision.



**Figure 7.5: Comparing civic engagement in Port Talbot with national findings**

However, there are two other measures of civic engagement used in studies. These are not survey studies, and as they don't rely on sample sizes, offer longitudinal data at the local authority level. These are Freedom of Information (FOI) requests (C. Randall, 2014) and volunteering (National Conference on Citizenship, 2009). I asked survey respondents about these measures. None had made an FOI in the preceding two years, and 4.2 per cent said they had volunteered in some capacity. Again, a longitudinal comparison for local people's habits in Port Talbot has not been possible because of the lack of national survey data with valid sample sizes on these subjects, but there are some clues to the trends within national data sets on these two measurements. For example, I carried out 22 FOI requests of my own to discover how many FOIs had been received by each of the 22 local authorities in Wales since they began taking records. The raw data for all the local authorities are at Appendix I, but Figure 7.6 shows how the figures for Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council compare with the average for Wales. The rise after 2011 is suggestive when examined in tandem with other findings from this study – it may be that the perceived opacity of the Council (a common gripe of the focus groups), coupled with the drop in reliable or trustworthy information and news that is shown both in the content analysis and the focus groups, has prompted citizens to take steps to access essential

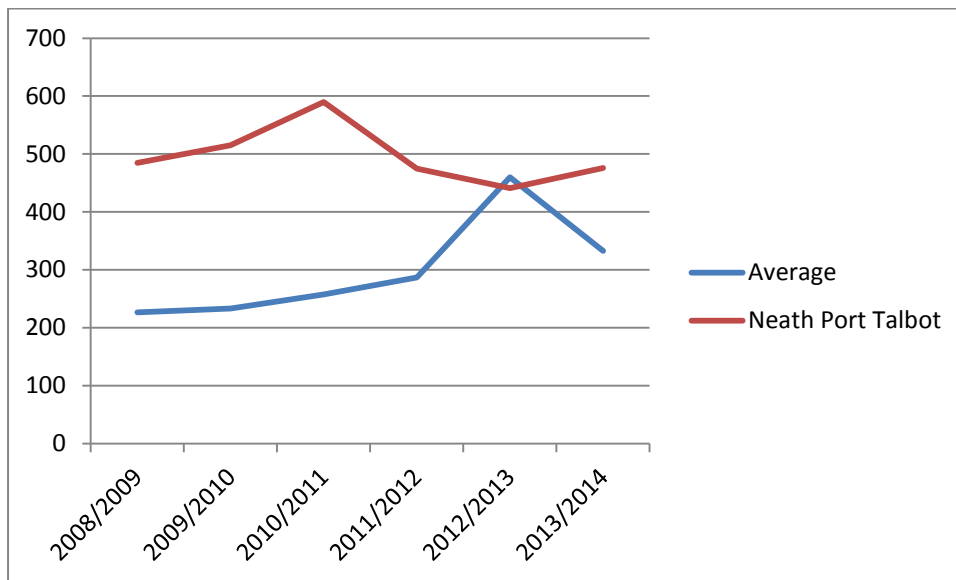
information for themselves. This growth in active information gathering may be a heartening sign, showing that digital and information literacy is increasing in the county borough area and that citizens are becoming more adept at navigating the information flows associated with government and democracy. But it may also be a sign of something else, of how bad things have become – in other words, this may be evidence that citizens are having to take matters into their own hands in an impoverished public sphere where transparency and easy access to information are low (a point that was made by many of the focus group participants, as I discussed above (pp. 256-258)). It is also worth noting that even as someone with a very high degree of engagement in public debate in the town, I have not noticed the results of such FOI requests circulating in local news or on the numerous less formal digital media spaces that have emerged in the wake of the withdrawal of journalism I chart in this thesis. Anecdotally, at least, it seems that even though these requests have been made their fruits are not well publicised in the way they would routinely be by a local news publisher.



**Figure 7.6: The number of Freedom of Information requests received by Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, compared with the Wales average. Source: figures supplied to the author by the 22 unitary authorities in Wales**

The statistics for volunteering show that volunteering rates in Neath and Port Talbot were more than double (214 per cent) the Welsh average in 2008/09, the earliest year for which figures are

available. Though the rate remained significantly above the average, over the next five years, it came closer and closer to the Welsh average, and by 2013/14 was just less than one-and-a-half times the Welsh average (142 per cent), as Figure 7.7 shows.



**Figure 7.7: Number of volunteers supported by Neath Port Talbot County Voluntary Council, compared with the Wales average. Source: Wales Council for Voluntary Action**

Though this decline in the figures for Neath Port Talbot may indicate erosion of community spirit, or even simply a lack of effective communication of volunteering opportunities, it is difficult to make pronouncements based on these data alone. But it is one more measure showing a decline in community and citizenship activity in recent years, and it cannot be dismissed out of hand either. The trend away from civic and community participation in Port Talbot, whatever its root cause, must be a concern for policy makers and advocates of local democracy and local media.

In this chapter I have sought to show how news and information flows inside a news black hole. There is no less appetite for news, as the data on news consumption suggest, but the localness and timeliness of information in the news does not seem to be furnishing local people with the tools to influence those in power to the extent they would like. I found evidence that word of mouth, stumbling upon information, and social media were dominant news sources,



that official channels were opaque, and that the information flow is not keeping local people well-informed about key issues. This has resulted in frustration, anger and powerlessness: the perceived opacity of institutions and the diminished resources of the local media have threatened the ability of the public to keep the powerful under scrutiny. I also found a decline in measures of democratic and civic engagement, which happened not when the newspaper closed but when journalists ceased to be based in the town and cover it in the depth they once had. This shows that it is difficult to live effectively as a citizen inside a news black hole, which is impaired by the lack of reliable, quality local news and information.



# ***Chapter 8***

## ***Conclusion: Is there a democratic deficit inside the news black hole?***

I began this research with the intention of exploring a news black hole from the point of view of both the audience and the news, to try to deepen our understanding of the nature of a news gap. This included examining how the community accesses information, representation (including community-building, localness and campaigning) and scrutiny inside a news black hole, and also to measure news output over the sample period to discover what has changed, and what, if anything, has been lost. As the title of the work suggests, I also wanted to know whether a news black hole entailed a democratic deficit. To this end, the study set three research questions:

RQ1: How has local news changed in Port Talbot between 1970 and 2013?

RQ2: How has the withdrawal of journalism from Port Talbot impacted on the audience?

RQ 3: Does the withdrawal of journalism from a town effect civic and democratic engagement, and if so in what way?

This concluding chapter reviews my findings, and attempts to pull the answers to these research questions together with the theoretical framework I set out in Chapter 3, and also with the overarching question of whether there is a democratic deficit in Port Talbot.

### ***8.1 Local news in decline***

The first research question asked, how has local news changed in Port Talbot between 1970 and 2013? I examined this question from three perspectives – the quantity of news, the quality of news, and differences in news practice which might account for any changes. I found declines in

the quantity and quality of news, and linked these to cuts to resources. The quantity of news dropped sharply. The *Guardian* and the *Post* produced between them in a single month in 1975 (the peak year of the sample) a total of 688 news articles about, or directly relevant to, Port Talbot. By 2013 the number of stories being produced in a month had fallen to 232, constituting a fall of 66.3 per cent.

Behind the scenes, staff numbers were also falling and a slow, and ongoing, withdrawal of journalism from the local area is clear in my findings. In the 1970s, there were five newspapers with offices in Port Talbot, employing 10 or 11 journalists between them. By 2013 only the *Post* was regularly providing coverage of Port Talbot's news, for which it employed two reporters to cover Neath and Port Talbot from its Swansea headquarters. These reporters were, according to interviewees, often called upon to write for other sections of the paper, so they only cover Port Talbot for part of their time. Rough calculations point to there being the equivalent of one Swansea-based reporter covering Port Talbot, or perhaps three-quarters of a reporter on a busy week. That means that the number of journalists reporting the patch had fallen by around 90 per cent between 1970 and 2013. Leaving aside issues about the quality of the news for the moment, the first answer to RQ1, is that Port Talbot's local news showed sharp decline between 1970 and 2013.

Resources were a fundamental issue underlying this decline. Across media companies in south Wales, I found evidence for cuts to editorial and production staff. There was an 83.9 per cent drop in editorial staff at Media Wales between 1999 and 2014, and a 68 per cent drop at South West Wales Media between 2003 and 2011. This cutting process saw the loss of well-connected and skilled photographers along with many specialist reporters, whose experience, knowledge and contacts were lost with them. Council and court reporters, once a staple of the newsroom, were culled, and the practice of attending local government meetings and law courts fell away in favour of a more generalised approach more reliant on press releases and other official information channels.

A side-effect of this decline was a reduction in plurality around news outlets and news sources cited. Reporters working in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s spoke of competing against each other to get the scoop, the angle or the line that nobody else had. They not only competed with rival newspapers owned by other companies, but with rival titles inside the same company. Journalists told me that this had ensured lively, healthy local newspapers which were good for “keeping a close eye on [local government]”. However the focus changed sometime in the 2000s. Where interviewees from earlier in the sample spoke of “get[ting] the lead” or “beating the *Post* to a story”, or “making the front page an exclusive”, those from the latter part of the sample spoke of “filling shapes”, or meeting high targets for the smaller stories known as “down-page” (*Post* and *Guardian* journalist interviews). At some point, the prime focus of local news reporting had stopped being about beating the competition (e.g. by finding a better story, getting an extra source, attaining an original angle, or researching a topic deeply), and become instead about a much-diminished number of over-worked journalists dispatching quick, hastily-researched copy, often accepting the frames and news angles inherent in pre-prepared information subsidies. This affects the quality of the news in that it is less likely to be independent, critical, and based on the plural (and sometimes competing) accounts of a range of local news sources.

### ***8.1.2 Out of office: the turning point of district office closures***

Part of answering RQ1 was looking at the way diminishing resources are linked with weakening news quantity and quality. I found a strong association between declines in the localness and depth of news output and the closure of district offices.

The cutbacks at newspaper groups resulted in more than job losses and budget cuts, they also meant district office closures, and, according to interviewees, these happened at around the turn of the millennium at both the *Guardian* and the *Post*. In the earlier part of the sample, offices like these had operated as a base for journalists working for Media Wales and

South West Wales Media across south Wales, and when they were closed, reporters were moved to centralised offices often many miles distant, while editorial processes behind the scenes were streamlined and converged. We should remember here the NUJ assessment, that: “Without a vigorous press, based in the communities they serve, fulfilling its essential role of holding the powerful to account, the functioning of that democracy will be seriously compromised” (National Assembly for Wales, 2011, p. 7). According to the journalists I spoke to, the offices had been a practical and useful base for reporters, enabling them to engage and link with the community very closely. Popping out to get the latest information from local shopkeepers or police officers was, according to the interviewees, an integral part of the working week. As one told me, “you’d be surprised the number of stories that actually came in” on the desk. The process was focused around this access point between journalists and local people, and local journalism was founded on the community knowing journalists well enough to trust them and call them to account if they got the facts wrong. As a *Guardian* journalist told me: “there’s something about having that link which was big”. District offices meant journalists were accessible, were well-known locally, were embedded in the community, and were able to respond to incidents by arriving quickly on the scene as an eyewitness, rather than “hop[ing] you can get hold of the police if they are there when you ring,” as is more likely to happen now (*Post* reporter 1980s-2000s).

The loss of these district offices was lamented by interviewees, and while this could have been just another cut among many other cuts, my data suggest the closures were in fact a pivotal turning point in the way local news was produced, and in the way communities interacted with local news. It is not that all of the other cuts, to jobs, budgets and more expensive newsgathering styles, did not matter – they did take a toll as declines in measures of news quality are certainly in evidence before the district offices closed. However, several trends show an amplified effect from the late 1990s or early 2000s which seem to suggest the absence of journalists from a base in the community was a key stage in the withdrawal of local journalism.

One of these trends is in the way events were triggered to become news stories. The use of managed media channels as news triggers for reporting government stories, for example, increased much more steeply from the year 2000 – in other words, PR was much more likely to trigger a news story about local government than more active triggers, such as attending a council meeting, which likewise decreased at about this time. I found, for example, that the proportion of stories triggered by a journalist attending a local council meeting, public meeting or political party meeting fell from 45.6 per cent in 1980 to 4.7 per cent in 2013, and in the same period the use of more managed information sources such as announcements, statements or press events rose from 17.6 per cent in 1980 to 56.3 per cent in 2013 (see pp. 195-198 for the full discussion). Scrutiny is under threat where this is the case. O’Neill and O’Connor have said local government reporting has “a profound impact on the public interest and the fourth estate role of the regional press” – but this is only true if the institutions involved are being reported on independently, and if the statements they make are being checked and scrutinised to ensure they are in the public interest (2008, p. 494). Reporting which uncritically relies on official statements for its news is not what O’Neill and O’Connor had in mind. I similarly found that stories about planning and proposed developments, identified as important by local people in helping them to understand what was being proposed for the town, were more likely to be triggered by more scrutinising journalism styles in the 1970s and 1980s, but by 2013 were exclusively triggered by announcements and statements coming from official channels. In 1975, for example, 92.3 per cent of planning stories were triggered by attendance at a local government meeting; by 1995, 66.7 per cent were triggered by pre-meeting information such as agendas or planning lists being sent to journalists; by 2005, reports and official figures were the main trigger at 44.4 per cent; but by 2013, 100 per cent of the planning stories were triggered by announcements and statements – a sign of the use of PR or official sources. This means that after the mid-1990s, journalists were much less likely to have attended the planning meeting where any contentious proposals were discussed, and less likely to have carried out any scrutiny of the proposals or discussions. Equally, they were less likely to attend other council

committee meetings (such as finance or the main public Council meetings) in which large developments would be proposed and discussed at an early stage. As a result, the story is less likely to be reported at this early stage, and so local people are less likely to find out about it at a point where they might still have an opportunity to influence any decisions. I will come back to this point in the next section.

Port Talbot's prominence in the *Evening Post* also decreased at around the turn of the millennium, and this lack of visibility in the news, which has been likened to the "symbolic annihilation" of minority groups in sporting coverage, can also here be extended to include the symbolic annihilation in the news of a whole town's concerns and interests (Tuchman, 1981). If news has the power to build community through "shared emotional connection" (Hoffmann et al., 2012), then it may also have the power to neglect community to the point it shows signs of crumbling. There is evidence from journalists, too, that Port Talbot was not high in the priorities of the *Post's* newsroom – understandably, being only one among several communities served by the newspaper – but as Port Talbot's only local news outlet, this must also have served to fuel the often-expressed complaint by local people that "the *Post* is all Swansea and nothing about Port Talbot" (FG2).

Indeed, as this observation suggests, the localness of the news also decreased over the sample period. The use of local sources, for example, fell from 60 per cent in 1980 to 44 per cent in 2013, while sources located outside Port Talbot rose from 6.7 per cent in 1975 to 60 per cent in 2013. News and articles about sport were particularly affected, falling from 25.2 per cent in 1970 to 13.1 per cent in 2013. Sport is a news topic with well-established ties to community-building and community identity (see for example Frisby & Millar, 2002; Jarvie, 2003; Skinner et al., 2008). This suggests a decrease in the ability of local news to furnish the community with the right kind of news to foster and encourage a strong sense of community. In fact, focus group participants showed evidence of a lack of pride in the town and negativity about the town and the lack of opportunities they perceived for themselves and their children. This was particularly



evident in the 18-30 age focus group (FG3), which were the least engaged with traditional news and had not been exposed during their adulthood to a local news service that provided them with regular fourth estate journalism embedded and based within the community. They were predominantly negative about the town, and had no praise for any of its features or services, with some of them expressing a desire to move elsewhere.

Another effect that was amplified at around the year 2000 was the use of high-status sources in news articles, which rose from 15.6 per cent in 1970 to 34.8 per cent in 2013 – a 19 per cent rise across 43 years, 8 per cent of which happened in the last 13 years. This, again, suggests a rise in the use of official and media-managed information sources as a result of resources being cut and journalists being distanced from the community and less able to get out of the office to speak to local residents and other low status sources.

Some of these effects can also be seen in audience data. Election turnouts, for example, all show a decline at around the year 2000. Between 1970 and 2001, Aberavon constituency turnouts were between 1.17 and 2.45 percentage points higher than the UK or Welsh average, but these dropped to between 0.72 and 2.91 percentage points below the Welsh or UK average after the 2001 election. This suggests something significant happened to change turnout patterns at around this time, and the theorised importance of media to this democratic process, coupled with the changes in work practices, the withdrawal of embedded journalists, and the lowering quantity and quality of news, seem to point to an association between the decline in turnouts and the decline in local news. Further research may be warranted to enable conclusions about the direct effect of a newspaper closing or journalism being withdrawn. This would need to compare such democratic indicators with those of towns of a similar economic and demographic make-up, but which have not lost their local news or journalism coverage, in order to provide a comparison similar to research by Lee Shaker (2014). Shaker compared data of civic measures from Denver and Seattle, where newspapers had closed, with control data from “eight comparison cities [...] chosen with both a purposive and practical reason [...] in

terms of culture and demographics". A comparison with demographically comparative Welsh towns that had lost embedded journalists or experienced newspaper closures, or demographically comparative towns where journalism had continued, would enable more definite correlations to be tested between a lack of local news and a fall in democratic and/or civic measures. This has not been possible in this study as the design of the research concentrated on a typical case rather than comparing the data from one town with the data from a control sample, but this would be a fruitful area for future research.

## ***8.2 I predict a riot: the uninformed and angry citizen***

My second and third research questions focused on the community, asking: How has the withdrawal of journalism from Port Talbot impacted on the audience? And, does the withdrawal of journalism from a town effect civic and democratic engagement, and if so in what way? I was able to approach audience-based research from two perspectives – first, a longitudinal comparison of existing studies and data sets, and second, surveys and focus groups that captured behaviour and attitudes in 2014. I found under-informed citizens, many of whom said they were finding out information by stumbling across it in public places or reading it on graffiti. Some of those from the younger focus group were angry enough about the lack of information and influence to suggest rioting. I also found evidence for declining civic and democratic engagement.

Let us examine the background to these findings more closely. It suggests something has occurred in Port Talbot at around the year 2000 to cause a decline in voting patterns, and therefore in democratic engagement. I asserted that there may be some kind of link between the decline, and the measurable changes in local news output and resourcing I have found, in particular the closure of district offices. In the quantitative data, there are two other indicators of decline, and these are in the two measures of civic engagement for which I was able to find limited longitudinal data. The first is freedom of information requests, which increased above

the Welsh average after 2009 (when the *Guardian* closed), suggesting local citizens are having to do for themselves more of the scrutiny work that traditionally would have been done by journalists. From 2005, for example, the Welsh average for FOIs rose 72.2 per cent, while the growth for Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council was greater, and their figures rose 88.7 per cent. In numbers this means Neath Port Talbot council received 65 more FOI requests than the Welsh average in 2013, but had been receiving 139 fewer FOI requests than the Welsh average in 2008 when the *Guardian* was still in business. The second measure is volunteering rates, which were more than double (214 per cent) the Welsh average in 2008/09, but which have bucked the Welsh trend for growth, declining to just under one-and-a-half times the Welsh average (142 per cent) by 2013/14.

These results are suggestive of a democratic and civic deficit, answering RQ 3 by showing an association, although not a causal link, between the withdrawal of journalism and declines in at least some measures of civic and democratic behaviour that are greater than in other parts of Wales. The surveys also contributed important findings, demonstrating low levels of active information-seeking behaviour, and suggesting local people did not feel well-served by local media, and showing word of mouth is a dominant news and information source. This raises questions about the ability of the two-step flow of communication to work in a place where there is a weakening of the mass media that is essential to keep opinion leaders – and thereby the rest of the community – informed. Even the participants of focus group 4, designated opinion leaders, were less informed than they wanted to be, and found scrutinising institutions difficult, suggesting the two-step flow model of diffusing information into the community at large is likely to be impaired.

In fact, it was the data from focus groups that really allowed close study of what it is like to live inside a news black hole. A key finding from this part of the research was that, as I discussed above (pp. 261-262), local people said information about planning permissions and proposed developments was important to helping them live in the town, but that they were not

able to access reliable and regular information of this kind. Apart from the two issues I used as discussion points (the closure of Junction 41 and the change to new-sized bins) 31 other issues were raised by participants as examples of controversial or badly communicated issues. Of these, more than a third were concerned with planning or developments. Where such knowledge or information was lacking, I found evidence for the effects listed above – feelings of powerlessness, frustration at decisions being made or the inability of local people to influence those decisions, high levels of rumour and speculation, and a perception that institutions such as the Council and Welsh Assembly were opaque, and that it was difficult to find out what was going on in the town, to know where to complain, and also to get answers to questions.

As I set out in Chapter 3, journalism must fulfil three important functions if it is to serve the public good in relation to key democratic and social roles. It must inform and represent local people, and scrutinise those in power (Barnett, 2009; McNair, 2009a). If it is not doing so, then it follows that journalism is not acting in the public interest, and not servicing a healthy public sphere. Analysis of the focus groups revealed, strongly, that local people are not getting hold of enough timely and useful information, that they do not feel represented, and that scrutiny is not routinely provided and is difficult for them to do for themselves. Focus Group 4, the opinion leaders group, spoke very strongly on this subject and seemed particularly affected by it, for example one participant said:

With the council you don't get a lot of information out of them. I attend lots of meetings [...], hear things in the meetings, and there are things that I'll tell people that I think should be said, that perhaps haven't been published, and [in that way, information] will filter its way out. Whether it's because there aren't enough journalists investigating things [...]. It's not just news [that] is happening but it's actually looking for something that people aren't already seeing.

Participants access important information from multiple and complex channels. This includes traditional news outlets, but word-of-mouth sources are dominant and also among their most

trusted news sources. They felt local news was not fulfilling their information needs, and they gave evidence of both being suspicious of some of the information provided by official channels, and of not being able to access the information they wanted, as this extract from FG4 demonstrates:

There's a really terrible [press release] from the Trunk Road Agency where they're trying to say the council instigated the [M4] closure, which they have no power to do. So that's complete misinformation being put out by an official source and then reported on by the newspapers. It's a mess but I think that's because the sources of information are completely messed up as well.

But, in important ways, digital media are not necessarily filling this information gap. In the absence of a local newspaper, the older group (FG1, aged 60 and above) had turned to traditional regional media, and stayed largely loyal to the *Post*, though not many of them were regular readers and they were critical of it and the coverage provided by the Welsh media in general, which they did not think served their needs. The opinion leaders (FG4) had become more adept at finding out information themselves, particularly in scouring Council documents, and also transmitting this information to others using meetings and other networks, as well as social media. The two younger groups (FG2, 30-59 and FG3 18-30) were frequent users of social media, in particular Facebook, though they also complained that much of what they read there was based on rumour or from untrusted sources. They also gave many examples of word of mouth interactions.

Information flow was evidently erratic and from a mixture of sources with equally mixed provenances. All four groups gave examples of finding things out by physically stumbling across them while out in the town, and the importance of public spaces to local people is an important finding of this study. One of the participants in the 18-30 age focus group told me he'd found out about the closure of Junction 41 of the M4 from protest graffiti. Opening up public spaces to transmit key information and headlines to local people may be one way to

ensure a more adequate flow of information, at least to alert local people to the existence of proposals, which they could then use other networks, such as official websites or news sites, to investigate.

But the damage to the information flow in Port Talbot has serious consequences for local people. Participants' discourse evidenced: a lack of fore-knowledge of events; much engagement in speculation; the strong influence of rumours and untrustworthy information; feelings of powerlessness to respond to decisions that, often, people had heard about too late to act upon; and the fact that information from institutions and government is difficult to access. Participants told me that they frequently found public bodies to be opaque, information difficult to find, and, in the case of the Junction 41 closure, that they found it difficult to find which body was responsible for decisions. This made it difficult to know who to contact to make complaints or protests. This makes for an under-informed, under-represented citizenry, unable to access adequate scrutiny.

The most concerning aspect of this damage to the information flow was its effect upon citizens. All the age groups showed signs of frustration, some even outright anger. The participants of the 18-30 focus group appeared to be least engaged with traditional media, most negative about the town as a place to live, and were the most volatile and outwardly angry of all the groups. They spoke at some length about taking potentially illegal, impulsive, direct action against the closure of Junction 41 (but not of organising collectively to oppose the development). They were angry, and they felt nobody was listening to them. They keenly experienced a lack of influence over the Junction 41 issue, and this made them think their most effective course of action would be to start a riot in the town. As one of the participants said of the 2010 summer UK riots, "in London there was all this big hoo-ha, they caused riots but they got what they wanted". The perception that direct, possibly violent, action is a viable option in a public sphere not served by healthy information flow, representation and scrutiny – together with the incorrect assumption of its effectiveness in other cases (e.g. implying that the London

rioters “got what they wanted”) - is worrying. One consequence of an ill-informed public could be an unstable public, which feels it has no power in influencing decisions and therefore only one option – aggression – if it wants to be heard. Research and analysis to explore the links between good public service news and young or disenfranchised groups should be a priority of future research. Ensuring the whole community continues to benefit from the fundamental features of fourth estate journalism – information, representation and scrutiny – must be a concern of researchers and policy-makers alike.

We can therefore say that there is an impact on the audience, and on all three of the duties of journalism traditionally associated with the fourth estate – the information flow has been weakened, the representation of the community impaired, and the scrutiny function traditionally supplied by mainstream local media is less in evidence in the remaining news outlets, and also difficult for local people to carry out themselves. Furthermore, though the measures of civic engagement showed less clear results as the longitudinal data did not go back very far, the data from election turnouts in three different kinds of election showed similar results, and this appears to be indicative of a problem with democratic engagement in Port Talbot.

### ***8.3 Is there a democratic deficit in Port Talbot?***

The previous sections have shown that the weakened local news media in Port Talbot have contributed to create a news black hole that has serious democratic consequences for the community. But can we go as far as to say this constitutes a democratic deficit? If democracy is defined as “the installation of a government that has both the mandate and the determination to implement the popular will” (Katz, 2001, p. 55), then the democratic deficit might be said to be made up of two separate elements. The first of these is concerned with citizens giving their mandate. This mandate is generally agreed to be expressed through suffrage in elections, for which citizens need to be adequately informed so that they can make a rational choice between

candidates, parties or policies. The second part concerns the implementation of the people's will, an ongoing duty that continues between elections and entails a continual dialogue between citizens and those in power. This requires an informed citizenry, but it also rests on there being adequate scrutiny of authoritative institutions to feed into the flow of information, and also representation of the views of local people so that politicians are informed of their will. A democratic deficit therefore is the inability of citizens either to give their mandate, or to have their will carried out by government, and the quality of the information flowing between the people and the representative bodies is crucial in determining this.

In fact, as the information flow to local people is crucial, it is also important to understand whether the two-step flow model is able to operate inside the news black hole. As I hypothesised in my discussion of the two-step flow in Chapter 3, the lack of mass media in the local public sphere in Port Talbot does indeed seem to have resulted in an information flow dominated by word of mouth. The effects of this are in fostering rumour, speculation, confusion and lack of fore-knowledge, which seem to be linked to other effects such as powerlessness and frustration, all of which I found in evidence during the focus groups. This also seems to confirm my argument that the two-step flow model is an essential tool for analysing the news black hole. My findings about the prevalence of word of mouth as a news source, for example, contradict the findings of audience studies that were carried out in the 1960s and 1970s which found few people credited "other people" as news sources (Roper, 1975) and a high "ratio of media to interpersonal exposure" which they attributed to the increase in television audiences (Hoffstetter (1972), cited in J. P. Robinson, 1976, pp. 304-305). I hypothesised that in the news black hole, word-of-mouth would be a strong information source, and I found that the use of a person-to-person network is prevalent in Port Talbot. Some local people even seem aware of the importance of the two-step flow. In FG4 (activists and campaigners), many of the participants gave examples of scrutinising official documents such the Local Development Plan, attending meetings and consciously spreading the information they discover to others. This partially echoes the findings of Lazarsfeld et al, though it does so not from the point of view of



“influencees” but from the perspective of opinion leaders themselves – a perspective Lazarsfeld et al said they regretted not being able to include in their own study (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Influencees also seem aware of the information flow, however. In FG3 (18-30 year-olds), for example, one of the participants credited one of the opinion leaders that (unbeknownst to him) participated in FG4, saying “[name of FG4 participant], I trust him. He’s a good boy. He says what’s on his mind and he does try and make a difference. If he put something in the paper about [a meeting], I would go to it.” This appears to show that the two-step flow is in evidence in Port Talbot, but as I said in my discussion, it is important to be mindful of the source of the information – in other words, the news and information received by opinion leaders in the news black hole. I found much evidence to suggest this flow is impaired.

Is there, then, a democratic deficit in Port Talbot? The quality, quantity and consumption of information are the crucial measures in determining a deficit, and so here I review the evidence I have found and relate it to this question.

First, I have found the local media have been weakened and this has affected the flow of information. The quantity of news about Port Talbot halved when the *Guardian* closed, and is down more than 60 per cent since 1975. The quality of news, too, had begun to be compromised from the 1980s, with falls in active newsgathering practices and increases in passive ones, and local news began to make use of fewer local sources and became less prominent in the newspaper. Newsroom cutbacks have prompted a growing reliance on official sources and managed news triggers in order to produce the news, and this affected the quality, timeliness and usefulness of news, which seems to have caused audiences to turn away from the local paper. As a result, audiences fragmented towards many different information and news sources. Because of this, representation has been affected. The impact and influence of the news was weakened, as it reached fewer people and was less able to inform debate, but also less able to help crystallise and report on the consensus because fewer people were using it as a debating arena. Other elements crucial to healthy debate – particularly multiple voices and alternative

viewpoints – have been impaired by the lack of rivalry that was a product of competing newspapers and journalists. The closure of district offices and declines in journalism numbers meant journalists were not as embedded or invested in their communities, and also that they were less approachable by local people, and less likely to report meetings and other democratic interface points in person, weakening the information flow and representation of local people.

This has also affected the scrutiny function of journalism. The traditional ability of the local newspaper to act as a watchdog or scarecrow was weakened at the local level as journalists pulled away from attending council meetings, court proceedings and other public institutions. Many stories, too, have gone unreported, meaning they are not being spotted by media higher up the food chain, as traditionally happened, and weakening their impact on regional and national media, as well as, potentially, on higher levels of democracy.

This is the news black hole in action in Port Talbot. Crucially, the local news black hole has not been filled by other means. Online news, heralded as the new hope of the digital generation, does not form a significant part of news consumption habits in Port Talbot, and the black hole has instead been filled by word of mouth, social media, and a reluctant relationship with institutions, who are perceived to be opaque and inaccessible. The audience, then, is not able to access the information it needs to sustain itself as a well-informed citizenry.

When people did know about local issues – notably the M4 closure – only the most basic knowledge was prevalent, with rumour and speculation about important details being common in focus group discussions. Much of the information that had reached people had come through friends and family, social media, stumbling upon the information in public spaces, or graffiti, and the quality of this information was uncertain, and had led to misunderstandings. One person, for example, had wrongly heard a local campaign's protest event – a march at the Welsh Assembly to hand in a 20,000 signature petition – had been called off, and as a result missed the protest (it did in fact go ahead). After she told this story, several others revealed they had been under the same impression and also missed the protest; others said they wished they had heard about the

protest as they would have attended it. This was typical of several exchanges, revealing an under-informed local citizenry with no definitive news source to turn to if information is in doubt, and no regular stream of information to give them incidental, serendipitous, access to news they might find interesting or useful. Here, the lack of information can be seen to directly influence citizens' ability to make their voices heard, and their numbers felt, at the national Government level. Indeed, the smaller than anticipated numbers at the march meant that the regional media stationed in mobile units at the Senedd building decided not to film it, and it was not covered on the Welsh evening news, potentially compromising the influence of the people and exemplifying the democratic deficit in clear terms.

I conclude, therefore, that there is a democratic deficit in Port Talbot, and that it is associated with the decline in local news, and with the withdrawal of journalism that created a news black hole that began to make its presence felt at the end of the 1990s. The public sphere in the town is now showing signs of damage by not having access to these fundamental tenets of fourth estate journalism, and on the basis of the theoretical framework I set out in Chapter 3, this may well be damaging to the larger public sphere. Citizens who are not equipped to make, or act upon, rational decisions locally, may also be unable to access adequate information to respond to issue of national democratic importance. Equally, there may be news or events going unreported or uncontested in Port Talbot that have wider implications for the region or country, but which are not gaining exposure or influence in the wider public sphere. The case of the Junction 41 closure and the plans for Europe's largest biomass plant are just two issues of wider import that have affected Port Talbot in the last five years, but which have been under reported in the regional and national press.

## ***8.4 Conclusion and recommendations***

I originally wanted to investigate these issues because of numerous conversations I'd had with Port Talbot residents, many of whom told me they missed their local newspaper, didn't find that

the *South Wales Evening Post*, as a regional newspaper, filled the gap, and that they would like to have a dedicated weekly newspaper back again. What I expected to find was that the closure of the *Guardian* was the main event – that it would be the factor that would be most important in explaining any other findings of low knowledge, or powerlessness, or frustration, or that election turnouts or civic engagement would fall after the closure.

What I found instead was much more concerning for the health of local democracy. As I have discussed, newspaper closures have not happened at the expected rate – and on the face of it, this seems like good news for the communities who still have a local newspaper. However, the cuts to staff and resources that *have* happened almost ubiquitously across newspapers large and small, corporately- and family-owned alike, have meant that many of these newspapers have been hollowed out to the extent they resemble “zombie newspapers” (Climenhaga, 2012). What I found is that the turning point – the deepest falls in the quality of the news and the fall in election turnouts – came when journalists were removed from the community, something that happened almost ten years before the newspaper closed. The findings suggest that it is not just that newspapers are important to communities, it is the specific style and content of the journalism they (may or may not) bring with them.

Habermas said, “newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere”; and Anderson that, “high-quality, independent news journalism [...] is crucial to the creation of an enlightened citizenry that is able to participate meaningfully in society and politics” (P. J. Anderson, 2007, p. 65; Habermas, 1974, p. 49). These positions presuppose not only the ability of media to facilitate the process of democracy, but that the media (and journalism) exist in the first place. Inherent in these theories is the idea that good quality news is necessary for the public sphere, and democracy, to work properly. Though it is not said explicitly, there is an inference here that a news black hole would not be good for the public sphere. How, then, should the future look for the local public sphere? Is there a way out of a news black hole?

There are many arguments in the literature in favour of supporting and funding local journalism as a public good. McChesney and Nicholls, for example, argue “It’s time to recognize that all the evidence available to us at this point leads inexorably to one conclusion: having anything remotely close to a satisfactory level of journalism will require a large public subsidy” (McChesney & Nichols, 2010, p. 159). They argue that journalism able to hold those in power to account will need the financial support of government, but should also to be kept separate from “the heavy hand of government” to “prevent any direct control by politicians over editorial content” (p. 159, p. 161). Fenton et al recommended the creation of “local news hubs” that would benefit from mixed-funding streams sourced from “local government advertising” and “a diversity of funding” that would safeguard editorial and uncomfortable scrutiny from being influenced by any one funder (Fenton et al., 2010, p. 48). Moore argues for the creation of a fund for news innovation, comprising “small amounts of money, made available on a competitive basis, [which] could have a huge impact on UK local news and information” (Moore, 2014, p. 34). Barnett argues the case for increasing already existing public subsidies for news provision such as community radio (through an existing OFCOM-distributed fund) and local newspapers (through VAT exemptions and the statutory notices of local authorities) to other local news providers and initiatives (Barnett, 2014). Townend also advocates “legal and social policy measures that allow more creative and collaborative models for quality journalism in the public interest”, arguing that relaxations in charity law would make it easier for independent news organisations to access the benefits of charitable status, including becoming eligible for certain types of funding and gift aid payments (Townend, 2015). Barnett and Greenslade looked in more depth at the possibility of local news organisations applying for charitable status in this way, but observed first that “a charity must have a public purpose and be run for the public benefit,” and second that:

This raises the slightly uncomfortable spectre of finding measurable evidence that, for example, residents are better informed about local issues or more likely to participate in local elections after the launch of a local newspaper or news website than before. While

those of us in journalism – and particularly in journalism education – might be convinced of the public interest nature of local journalism, to demonstrate such impact empirically is a problem. (Greenslade & Barnett, 2014, p. 66)

This thesis perhaps goes some way towards solving this empirical problem, in providing evidence less for the “public good” of local news, but for the “public bad” of not having local news, and it is hoped this evidence may assist in future policy-making. Certainly the need to indemnify local communities against becoming news black holes is apparent from the evidence, and methods for safeguarding embedded local journalism should be a focus for continuing research. This, alongside other findings from this research, leads me to make six recommendations for future research or policy:

- More evidence about the correlation between local newspaper closures, the withdrawal of journalism, and democratic or civic engagement is needed. I recommend comparative studies between news black holes and towns that are considered well-served by local journalism to establish this correlation;
- Existing research and national surveys should be mindful of the gap in existing longitudinal data about civic engagement, democratic engagement and political efficacy at the local level, and seek to include more of these questions in large-scale surveys to enable future diachronous comparisons;
- Existing media should be mindful of the importance of embedded local journalists and seek to safeguard their roles in the future. They should also heed requests from participants in this research to make their news more transparent to enable readers to evaluate its sources for themselves;
- Official institutions should ensure the information they make available is clear and accessible to citizens, and that they increase their efforts to engage local people in important issues, and ensure widespread access to the kinds of information that will

allow local people to plan ahead and respond to civic plans. They should also explore the possibility of opening up public spaces for the exchange of information;

- Archivists should be mindful of an increasing gap in knowledge, both about historic media (for example the Neath Port Talbot edition of the *South Wales Evening Post*), but also in the news and information that is being gathered about towns that are not represented by local newspapers to ensure the “record” that was once kept by local newspapers is not lost to future researchers;
- Funding should be made available to ensure continuing experimentation in ways of filling the news black hole.

As well as these recommendations, it is also hoped the evidence of this thesis can provide hope for local journalists and hyperlocal news providers, by demonstrating that their work is essential to communities, civic engagement and democracy, and that its absence is measurable, and missed by those communities. I, for one, look forward to returning to the *Port Talbot Magnet* project with the knowledge that what it aims to provide as a dedicated local news service is needed and will be valued by the community of Port Talbot. Also, that the plurality it provides in tandem with the *South Wales Evening Post* is equally valuable to the future of the local public sphere. I hope the *Port Talbot Magnet* project will allow for continuing experimentation in sustainability, and in the opportunity this allows for contributing our experiences to the wider debate about the future of sustainable local journalism.

Stephen Hawking tells us that black holes are “not the eternal prisons they were once thought. Things can get out of a black hole, both to the outside, and possibly, to another universe. So, if you feel you are in a black hole, don't give up. There's a way out” (Hawking, 2008). The findings from this thesis point to the importance of local, embedded journalists in keeping the public sphere well served. I argue that the best way out of the news black hole for

Port Talbot, is through dedicated, embedded, sustainable and well-resourced local journalism, and I hope this thesis offers a basis for further discussion and research in the field.



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## Appendix A Content analysis coding sheet

Newspaper info

Pagination: \_\_\_\_\_

Width (cm): \_\_\_\_\_

Height (cm): \_\_\_\_\_

Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Story headline \_\_\_\_\_

3. Paper: \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Date \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Page number: \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Size: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Written by:

1. Unnamed	2. Named journalist	3. Named journalist with specialism	4. Community reporter
5. Expert	6. Community group representative	7. Company representative	8. Reader
9. Sports person	10. Celebrity	11. Unnamed with specialism	12. Pen name

7. Photograph

1. No photograph	2. Photographer credit	3. Photograph supplied by story stakeholder	4. Photograph supplied by reader
5. Photo credited to agency/ news wire	6. Photo credited to newspaper	7. Uncredited photo	8.

8. Format

1. News article	2. Feature	3. Letter to editor	4. Editorial/ opinion
5. Photo story	6. Reader contribution	7. Listings	8. Public notice
9. Other:	10. Information list	11. Meta coverage	12.

9. Geographical focus

0. Not specified	1. Port Talbot	2. Neath Port Talbot	2.5 Neath Port Talbot + mention	3. Swansea
3.5 Swansea + Mention	4. Wales	4.5 Wales + Mention	5. UK	5.5 UK + Mention
6. International	6.5 International + Mention	7. Wales with local angle	7.5 Wales with local angle + Mention	8. UK with local angle
8.5 UK with local angle + Mention	9. International with local angle	9.5 International with local angle + Mention	10. South Wales	10.5 South Wales + Mention
11. West Glamorgan County Council	11.5 West Glamorgan + Mention	12. Neath	12. Neath + Mention	

10. Type of content

1. Accident/ injury/ accidental death/ suicide	2. Activism	3. Business	4. Celebrity
5. Charity	6. Community	7. Consumer news	8. Council/ civic
9. Courts/ crime	10. Disasters	11. Economy	12. Education
13. Entertainment/ arts	14. Environment	15. Family	16. Government
17. Health	18. History/ nostalgia	19. Immigration	20. Industrial relations
21. Industry	22. Political	23. Property	24. Public transport
25. Religion	26. Sport	27. Technology	28. Terrorism
29. War/ conflict	30. Weather/ conditions (eg tides)	31. Planning	32. Local directory
33. Hobbies/ personal	34. Media	35. Emergency Services	36. Employment
37. Animals	38. Utilities		

11. News Trigger

0. Unclear	1. Government body meeting	2. Press conference/ media event/ etc	3. Scheduled event, eg sports match, play	4. Human interest
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5. Announcement/ statement/ decision	6. Accident/ incident/ emergency	7. Crime/ courts	8. Public or political party meeting	9. Nostalgia/ history
10. Trade Union action	11. Law change	12. Exclusive interview	13. Investigative journalism	14. Whistleblower/ leak/ tip-off
15. Apology/ retraction/ clarif.	16. News already broken	17. Appeal	18. Opinion / comment	19. Community report
20. Letter/ reader content	21. Protest	22. Interview	23. Success (eg comp winner)	24. Closure
25. Complaint	26. Fundraising event	27. Celebration/ tribute/ ceremony	28. Report/ official figures/ inspection	29. Speech
30. Other	31. Academic/ trade conference	32. Donation	33. Meta	34. Campaign
35. Pre-meeting				

12. Sources (multicode possible) NONE

	Port Talbot	Neath Port Talbot	Swanse a	WG CC	SWW	Wales	UK	Inter- national	Not clear	Neath
Member of the public	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	181
Emergency services	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	182
Politician	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	183
Government	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	184
Public body	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	185
Business/ company	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	186
Action group	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	187
Activist	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	188
Community group	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	190
Expert	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	191
Celebrity	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	192
Witness/ protagonist/ victim	100	101	102	103	104	105	106	107	108	193
Professional association	109	110	111	112	113	114	115	116	117	194
Legal practitioner	118	119	120	121	122	123	124	125	126	195
Charity	127	128	129	130	131	132	133	134	135	196
Religious figure	136	137	138	139	140	141	142	143	144	197
Union	145	146	147	148	149	150	151	152	153	198
Sport	154	155	156	157	158	159	160	161	162	199
Artist	163	164	165	166	167	168	169	170	171	200



Other	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180	201
Not specified/ identifiable										



### Coding manual

# Historical Content Analysis of Port Talbot newspapers from 1970 to 2013

*This research aims to establish how press coverage of the town of Port Talbot has changed over the last four decades. Since 2009 there has been no dedicated local newspaper in the town, and so by looking back over the history of reporting we aim to discover a detailed picture of what exactly has been lost with the demise of the local newspaper. We also want to discover whether democratic participation was facilitated more effectively in times gone by.*

We will be coding the following features:

- Format of editorial: with the aim of establishing whether certain types of editorial were given more precedence, for example, were letters to the editor more commonplace in 1970 than in 2005, or was there a higher ratio of news to features?
- Geographical location: with the aim of establishing whether the local newspaper covered a higher proportion of local news in times gone by.
- Type of content: with the aim of discovering whether the balance of coverage has been about local government or politics or issues that affect local communities, as opposed to 'softer' stories that rely on celebrity or lifestyle issues.
- News trigger: with the aim of examining whether styles of reporting may have changed over the decades, by attempting to capture the events that may have triggered a story appearing in the newspaper, for example, is the story being written as a result of a press conference, or a formal statement, or a court appearance. Has there been some management of the press by PRs? Or are journalists going out into the field to find their own stories?
- Written by: with the aim of establishing whether paid journalists are writing the copy, or whether community or 'citizen' journalists are writing for newspapers.
- Sources: with the aim of discovering how many sources are quoted in articles, and how local they are – this will contribute more evidence to our aim to discover how local these local newspapers are, as well as our aim of discovering whether journalism practices have changed over time.

### **Unit of analysis**

This coding exercise will take a selection of local newspapers from Port Talbot and examine every piece of editorial within those newspapers. We are researching the last 40 years of local news

provision in the area, and so the sample will consist of one month's worth of newspapers every five years across the historical sample. In this case we have selected the month of October, in order to minimise the effects of anomalous events such as elections, or the summer 'silly season'. We will sample every five years, beginning in 1970, and including the last full month of October available for the *Guardian* (which shut down in October 2009 – as such we will use October 2008) and finishing with the available sample for 2013. For the weekly *Guardian*, every newspaper with an October date will be included in the sample; this may mean that sometimes there are four editions in a year's sample, and sometimes there are five. For the daily *South Wales Evening Post*, every-other edition will be coded, always starting with October 1, which will ensure an even spread of editions on different days of the week (unless October 1 falls on a Sunday when there was no edition, in which case begin on October 2 and continue to code every-other edition as described).

For coding purposes, all relevant editorial should be sampled. This will not include banner advertising, classified advertising (including paid-for obituaries or wedding notices) or advertorial.

Editorial will include:

- News
- Features
- Letters
- Comment/ opinion
- Photographs/ illustrations
- Reader contributions
- Fiction/ poetry
- Community reporting
- Listings

Sometimes several items of community news will appear under the banner of a community report, eg 'Cwmavon notes' – these should be coded together as a single unit of analysis.

### **Headline**

Write out the headline in full. If there is no headline, write the first three words of the editorial or sample and enclose them in [square brackets]. Only include the main headline; do not include subheadings.

### **Number**

Number each sheet in sequence, to denote the coding sheet number. This will be linked to a corresponding number in SPSS.

### **Paper**

Three newspapers will be sampled: the *Port Talbot Guardian*, the main Swansea edition of the *South Wales Evening Post* and the *Neath Port Talbot* edition of the *South Wales Evening Post*. Write PTG for the *Port Talbot Guardian*, SWEP for the *South Wales Evening Post* and SWEP NPT for the *Neath Port Talbot* edition of the *Post*.

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### Date, page number

Make a note of the newspaper publication date in DD/MM/YYYY format, and record the page number on which the story appears. If it goes across two pages, write, for example 3-4 or 1&6 if it is continued on a non-consecutive page.

### Size

Measure the story in cm, doing so in blocks where the story is not a rectangle, to give a width and height. When measuring, include headlines, photographs, captions and related box-outs. If the story is split over two pages, measure all the elements, wherever they appear. However, if there is a separate but related article, for example an editorial piece written by a different journalist commenting on the same story, code and measure this separately. Separately, for each new edition of the newspaper, measure the full front page size and the number of pages in the edition. This will enable us to calculate how much printable space was available in each edition, and also what the proportion of Port Talbot editorial this was given over to. If measuring from micro-film, ensure the machine is always set to the lowest magnification to ensure consistency of measurements.

### Written by

This category aims to discover who supplies editorial for publication in a newspaper. Although it is easy to assume named journalists write the largest proportion of copy, we also want to discover how community reporters were used in the past compared with now, and how other interests (such as businesses) may have supplied copy for publication.

These are the values used for coding in this category:

- **Unnamed:** Pilot tests have already shown that giving journalists a byline was not standard practice in the 1970's and 1980's, and so it will be necessary to code many articles as 'unnamed'
- **Named journalist:** for articles with an explicit byline
- **Named journalist with specialism:** for articles with a byline and job title, or just a job title (eg 'our current affairs reporter')
- **Community reporter:** for community reports, but only if an individual is named
- **Expert:** only if an individual is explicitly named and referred to as an authority in the field about which they're writing, eg an academic, but not someone publicising a commercial interest – eg do not use this value for a hairdresser writing hair styling tips to publicise their business.
- **Community group representative:** for articles explicitly written by representatives of community groups, eg a religious figure, a protester, a review written by a member of a theatre group or a match report written by a local footballer.
- **Company representative:** for articles explicitly written by people publicising a commercial interest
- **Reader:** for articles, photographs or any other content provided by readers or members of the public

- **Sportsperson/ Celebrity:** editorial written by well-known personalities or celebrities. Do not use this code for reviews written by members of a theatre group or match reports written by members of a local football team – use ‘Community group representative’ for this.
- **Unnamed with specialism:** for stories where a particular type of reporter is credited but no individual is identified (eg By Staff Reporter)
- **Other:** Be as consistent as possible with these values to enable them to be formalised into codes at a later date. Be sparing with this code, and always see if your example can fit into a pre-existing code before using it.

### Photograph

In this category we are keen to capture data about the use of photographs and how they are credited. Code for the following:

- **No photograph:** for stories with no accompanying photograph
- **Photographer credit:** use only where the photographer is explicitly named. Photographs by amateurs should be coded under ‘Reader’
- **Photograph supplied by story stakeholder:** where the subject of the story is credited, for example a story about a company where it is clear the photograph was supplied by that company
- **Supplied by reader:** where the photograph is clearly credited as being supplied by a reader, for example a ‘photo of the week’ slot
- **Credited to news agency/ wire:** Where this is clearly marked
- **Credited to newspaper:** Where it says ‘Staff Photographer’, or includes a code which allows readers to order the photograph from the newspaper
- **Uncredited photo:** Where there is no credit given

### Format

Each article will need to be allocated a format from the following list:

- **News:** this will include all news, news in brief and sport articles – essentially time-sensitive editorial that is generally written in response to a particular event or incident. Include any content that is directly related to the article, for example vox pops, box-outs of facts or interviews, and photographs.
- **Feature:** this will include all features, reviews, interviews, profiles, Q&A style pieces. Again, include directly related content such as box-outs.
- **Letter to editor:** code each letter separately. Only include letters; do not include poetry or other contributions here, because they have their own category, ‘Reader contribution’ (see below).
- **Editorial/ opinion:** include anything that is clearly labelled as comment or opinion except letters to the editor and vox pops that are related to particular articles. Also include regular columns here.
- **Photo story:** only include stories here that consist of a photograph or series of photographs with captions, and have no or very little (fewer than 150 words) accompanying editorial. This

## Appendix B

category is for stories that are only included in the newspaper because of what the photograph depicts. News or features that happen to be accompanied by photographs should be coded as news or features.

- **Reader contribution:** this is for editorial that has been supplied by readers, including photographs, poetry and fiction. Any 'reader comment' facilities, such as 'have your say' or 'from our website' features can be included here.
- **Listings:** this is listings of public events or performances such as TV and radio, cinema, community events, sports, arts or entertainment.
- **Public notice:** An official public notice from an official source.
- **Information list:** a list or table of information, for example a tide table
- **Meta coverage:** For when a newspaper is referencing itself, by writing about its own successes, appealing for news, introducing its journalists, running competitions and so on
- **Other:** If you find other kinds of format that you cannot fit into the other categories, please note here what they are. Remember that advertorial, banner advertising, obituaries and wedding announcements, advertorial and classified adverts will not form part of this study.

### Geographical focus

We are coding for the 'localness' of the editorial items in these newspapers, and so it is important to gauge what the geographical focus of the story is. This will usually mean looking to see where the incident or event took place, or sometimes where the sources are from. Always use the geographical location of the event or incident as your first priority for coding, and turn to the origin or location of sources as a secondary pointer. Local will always trump County Borough if both are mentioned. If more than one location is mentioned, treat the categories as a hierarchy, with Local always trumping other categories, and so on down the list.

However, use common sense – we are looking for the geographical *focus* of the story, so if some firefighters from Port Talbot have travelled to Turkey to help earthquake survivors but the story is mainly about the firefighters and their decision to help, code it as Port Talbot, but if the story is about the earthquake and the firefighters are only mentioned in passing, code it as International with a Port Talbot angle.

The variables are as follows:

- **Port Talbot:** Strictly Port Talbot only – the area is more correctly known by the name of the Electoral ward, Aberavon, and includes the following wards: Aberavon, Baglan, Bryn, Cwmavon, Coedffranc Central, Coedffranc North, Coedffranc West, Cymmer, Glyncoed, Gwynfi, Margam, Port Talbot, Sandfields East, Sandfields West, Tai-Bach. Any mentions of the Afan Valley should also be coded Port Talbot.
- **Neath Port Talbot:** this will include stories about the County Borough area of Neath Port Talbot as a whole, or stories that are about the other Electoral Ward area within the County, which is the Neath Electoral Ward, including the following wards: Aberdulais, Allt-Wen, Blaengwrach, Briton Ferry, Bryncoch North, Bryncoch South, Cadoxton, Cimla, Crynant, Cwmllynfell, Dyffryn, Glynneath, Godre'r Graig, Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen, Lower Brynamman,

Neath East, Neath North, Neath South, Onllwyn, Pelenna, Pontardawe, Resolven, Rhos, Seven Sisters, Tonna, Trebanos, Ystalyfera.

- **Swansea:** this will include stories about neighbouring counties, towns and cities, including Swansea, Gower (including the Swansea Bay area – note, for explicit mentions of Aberavon Beach, use the Local category), the Lower Swansea Valley and Ystradgynlais.
- **West Glamorgan:** for stories that focus on the County Council area of West Glamorgan, which existed until the late 1980s and included the town of Port Talbot.
- **South Wales:** this is mainly for stories that focus on the geographic area covered by the South Wales Evening Post, but can also include other areas of South Wales such as Cardiff and Newport. If in doubt, code for Wales.
- **Wales:** Wales-wide stories or stories that are about other places in Wales outside the Local, County Borough and Local Plus 10m categories.
- **UK:** UK-wide stories, or stories that are about other places in the UK that are outside the Regional, Local Plus 10m, County Borough and Local areas.
- **International:** Stories that cover areas outside the UK.
- **AREA with local angle:** This is for stories that are essentially broader in focus, but have been given a Port Talbot OR Neath Port Talbot County Borough angle, for example by taking a story about a change in Welsh Assembly policy but interviewing local people about their views or looking specifically at what this will mean for the local area.
- **AREA + Mention:** when Port Talbot is not the main geographical focus of the article but is mentioned in a minor way, perhaps with a single source being quoted in a series of vox pops, or as part of a list of fixtures, or in a political story where several towns are listed, code for the main geographical area + mention to give an indication of the quality of the localness.

### Type of content

This is where you record the main focus of the content of the story. Again, use common sense – identifying the focus of a story will generally mean that the type of content appears or is clear in the headline AND/OR the first three paragraphs, AND/OR more than half the story is devoted to a particular type of content.

Code stories into the following values:

- **Council:** where the local council is the **focus** of the story, not merely mentioned or quoted (this will be captured in the Sources category). Include parish councils and other local or hyper local levels of government here as well.
- **Courts/ crime**
- **Health/ education**
- **Public transport**
- **Sport**
- **Business/ commerce/ industry/ technology**
- **3<sup>rd</sup> sector, including charity, community, religion**
- **Entertainment/ arts**
- **Accident/ injury**
- **Political**



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- **Celebrity**
- **Family**
- **History/ nostalgia**
- **Government** (other levels of government, except local council)
- **Hobbies/ personal/ leisure:** include stories about personal interests and leisure pursuits, including content that refers to enjoyment or appreciation of the landscape
- **Media**
- **Emergency Services** – for stories about the emergency services such as staffing issues, rather than for the incidents they deal with which should be coded under a different variable
- Employment
- Animals
- Utilities

### News trigger

This category is an attempt to get at the process of news production, and we are particularly interested in whether journalists rely on the machinery of Public Relations, or whether they source stories themselves. We also want to capture whether journalists attend council and committee meetings for their reports. The news trigger, therefore, is the event or reason for the story coming to the notice of the journalist.

The trigger may not always be obvious or easy to find. Do not rely on guesswork or inference in this category – only code if the trigger is obvious and explicit; otherwise code as ‘Unclear’. For example, a report that quotes or paraphrases a speech given in a meeting or press conference can be coded as such, but if the trigger or origin of a story is not mentioned, do not make assumptions about it.

Keep asking yourself, **WHY** has this story been written?

The news triggers are:

- **Unclear:** if in any doubt about what has triggered the appearance of a story, use this code
- **Government body meeting:** include committees as well as well as meetings of officials
- **Press conference/ media event/ launch/ photo opp:** include anything here that might be viewed as an orchestrated event put on for the benefit of the media, including shop openings and product launches
- **Scheduled event, eg sports match, play:** include events that would happen with or without a media presence, such as art exhibitions, performances or sports matches
- **Human interest:** include stories that are written because they offer a human angle to a news story, such as a profile of a business leader or the true story of a crime victim
- **Announcement/ statement:** include ‘official’ statements, announcements or statements by politicians or governments, but remember that this must be the TRIGGER for the story appearing, not just a part of a wider story. There’s a good chance that stories influenced by PR will end up being coded in this category.
- **Accident/ incident:** include stories that are reported as a result of an incident, accident or injury taking place
- **Crime/ courts:** include stories that are reported as a result of a crime taking place, or a court appearance happening, including civil actions.

- **Public meeting:** include meetings by action groups, community groups and any meeting that was open to the general public, that was ALSO outside the structure of government
- **Nostalgia/ history:** include only pieces that are written for the purpose of nostalgia, for example the reminiscences of a war veteran included in a nostalgia supplement. However, if those reminiscences are included because of a book launch, for example, code for 'Launch'
- **Trade Union action:** only include direct TU action here, for example ballots, meetings or strikes – again, remember this must be the TRIGGER. WHY has the story been included?
- **Law change:** include changes in the UK or Regional law
- **Exclusive interview:** include only stories that are clearly labelled as being exclusive
- **Investigative journalism:** include only stories that are clearly labelled or explicitly mention that they are as a result of investigate journalism
- **Whistleblower/ leak:** Include only stories that explicitly mention they are a result of a leak, whistle-blower or anonymous tip-off, but also include any stories that are obviously resulting from direct contact from a member of the public
- **Apology/ retraction/ clarification:** include only stories that are explicitly labelled as such
- **News already broken:** include stories that bring a local angle to a regional, national or international story that has already broken – this should be considered a last-resort category if other triggers are more relevant
- **Appeal:** include only stories that specifically mention the word 'appeal' including Police appeals
- **Opinion of member of public/ comment:** include only stories that appear because they offer an opinion, for example a column or a 'have your say' feature.
- **Community report:** include only stories that are explicitly labelled as community reports.
- **Letter/ reader content:** include only editorial that is explicitly labelled as a letter or reader content
- **Protest:** include only stories that appear as a direct result of a protest taking place (it may be that a comment or announcement has been made, and that would trump this value)
- **Interview:** include only stories that are written because an interview has been carried out. The interview may be linked to a launch, however, and this would trump this value
- **Success (eg comp winner):** include only stories that are written as a direct result of someone winning something, or a business achieving success – however bear in mind that the latter category is likely to have been announced by a press officer.
- **Closure:** include only stories that are a direct result of the closure of a service, facility or business – remember that an announcement or protest may have triggered the coverage
- **Complaint:** include only stories that are explicitly labelled as complaints
- **Fundraising event:** include only stories that explicitly mention a fundraising event
- **Celebration/ tribute:** include only stories that appear as a direct result of a celebration such as an anniversary or birthday, or a tribute, for example a death or lifelong achievement award
- **Report:** include only stories that appear as a direct result of the publication of a report or the release of official figures
- **Speech:** include only stories that appear as a direct result of a speech being made
- **Academic/ trade conference:** for any conferences
- **Donation:** where money has been donated, although check that 'fundraising event' would not be a more appropriate variable first

## Appendix B

- **Meta:** for the newspaper's coverage of itself
- **Campaign:** for a clearly marked campaign such as a health campaign by a local health board
- **Pre-meeting:** for stories which foreshadow the agenda or meeting items at a forthcoming political or government body meeting
- **Other (please specify):** Be as consistent as possible with 'other' values so they can be formalised into codes with the minimum of effort if needed. Be sparing with this code, and always see if your example can fit into another code before using it.

### Sources

This category is designed to capture the 'localness' of news by finding out who is being quoted in stories, what prominence they are given, and where geographically they come from. Pilot tests have shown that styles of journalism were dramatically different in the earlier years of our sample, and to take this into account we will include both directly quoted sources (speech in quotation marks) AND sources whose speech is reported or paraphrased.

That said, do not include people who are simply mentioned by name, or people who performed functions at an event but whose speech is not recorded. For example, a meeting can be 'opened' or 'chaired' by a named individual, but this would not constitute a source. However, a speaker at a meeting may have 'given a rousing speech in support of the motion' – and this would be recorded as a source. For example in the following story, 'Mrs D welcomed the speaker, Mrs W, who gave a thoroughly informative lecture' – Mrs D would not be coded as a source, but Mrs W would be coded.

If there are no sources in the article, tick the 'None' box at the top.

If a statement is attributed to a group, for example 'the transport committee thanked the media for their support with the campaign', code this as if it is reported speech by an individual from that group – in this instance, code it as 'government'.

Code each source according to who was quoted in the order they appear, by writing 1, 2, 3 etc in the relevant box.

Sources who are labelled as being 'former' job holders under the relevant category, for example 'Former Mayor of Port Talbot' would be coded as if they still hold that position, in this case as 'Politician (Port Talbot)'.

ENDS



## Appendix C

### Interview Schedule

#### Questions for journalists

1. Can you tell me a bit about your career first of all – which newspapers have you worked at, and when did you work there?
2. Which of your roles specifically covered reporting on Port Talbot?

**If more than one role mentioned, go through the roles separately, and ask Q3 to Q11 for each of the roles**

3. Concentrating on this role/ your role at the Post/ your role at the Guardian/ your role at another newspaper, what were your main duties?

#### TYPICAL DAY

4. Can you describe a typical day you might have had when you first worked at the newspaper? (*Prompt: just take me through the main jobs you'd have on a typical day... what did you do when you got in in the morning?*)
5. How many hours would you have worked in a typical day/ week? Did this change over time? How? Can you give me any examples?

#### SOURCES

6. How did you interact with your sources most? (face to face? On the phone? etc) Did this change over time? How? Can you give me any examples?

#### TYPICAL STORY – TIME, HOW MANY IN A DAY?

7. How much time would you have to produce a typical story (say, a page lead)? Did this change over time? Can you give me any examples to illustrate this?
8. How many stories would you have written in a typical day? How did this change over time? Can you give me examples to illustrate this change?
9. How many of the stories you wrote in a typical day would be about Port Talbot? Did this change over time? Can you give me any examples to illustrate this?
10. What did writing a story involve (did you have to write headlines, take photos etc)? Can you take me through an example, perhaps? (*Prompt: Research? Checking? Interviewing? etc*)
11. Did this change over time? Can you give me an example?

#### HOW DID THE WORK CHANGE OVER TIME?

12. Overall, including all your jobs, how did your duties/ the nature of your work change over time? In what ways did you think they changed?
13. If things did change while you worked there, what's your assessment of why?
14. Can you tell me a bit about how you got to know about the stories you wrote about?  
*(Prompts: emails, press releases, phone calls, chatting, working contacts, being there on the scene?)*
15. What would you say is the main one out of those, and has this balance changed over time?

#### LEAVING THE OFFICE?

16. Did you leave the office much during your working day, and if so, where did you go, and why?

#### COUNCIL MEETINGS

17. Did you cover council meetings? Has the way you cover council news changed over time? If so, how?
18. How did broader changes in the industry affect how you did your job over the time you worked there?  
*(Prompts: cuts to staff or budgets? Additional work? Changes in your role or shifts? Extra duties?)*

#### OFFICE MOVES?

19. Did the newspaper move offices while you worked there? How did this affect your job? Can you think of any examples to illustrate this?

#### STAFF NUMBERS

20. Were there any big changes to the number of editorial staff employed by the newspaper while you worked there? How did this affect your job? How did this affect the content of the newspaper? Can you think of any examples to illustrate this?

#### WHAT IS THE JOB OF A LOCAL PAPER?

21. What do you think is the job of a local newspaper (use prompts)? Can you give me any examples?  
*(Prompts: informing local people? Scrutinise those in power? Provide entertainment? Strengthen community? Advertise local businesses? Improve local economy? Strengthen democracy? Provide a voice for local people? A forum for debate? To campaign on issues? Champion the underdog? Investigate and expose corruption? Reflect society? Provide a record for future generations?).*

#### DID THE GUARDIAN/ POST ACHIEVE THIS?

22. In what way(s) do you think the Post/ Guardian manages to fulfil this role/ these roles? Can you give me any examples?  
*(Take note of answers from previous question and prompt individually for examples, eg, if 'scrutinising those in power', then ask for an example of this).*

#### CLOSURE

23. I want to talk a little bit now about the closure of the Neath Port Talbot Guardian. I wondered how you first found out that it would be closing?

24. How did the closure affect you and your job?

#### DID THE CLOSURE CHANGE OTHER MEDIA?

25. Do you think the closure affected the way the Evening Post reported the news about Neath and Port Talbot? Can you think of any examples to illustrate this?

26. In the run up to the closure, was there any hint that the newspaper would close? Can you give me any examples?

27. Do you think the Guardian's editorial policy was different in the year or so before the closure? In what way? Can you think of any examples?

#### COMPETITION

28. When there were two newspapers operating and competing in Neath and Port Talbot, did that make the journalists work harder to cover the patch? In what way? Can you give me any examples?

#### ARE THEY WELL SERVED NOW?

29. Do you think readers in Neath and Port Talbot are well served by the media that exist there now? In what way? Can you give me any examples?

*ENDS*





## **Appendix D**

### **Interview consent forms**

#### Consent Form - Anonymous data

I understand that my participation in this project will involve a recorded interview which will take about 30 minutes of my time.

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time.

I understand that the information I provide will be shared with the research team or research supervisor and may be used in subsequent publications.

I understand that the information provided by me will be held totally anonymously, so that it is impossible to trace this information back to me individually.

I understand that, in accordance with the Data Protection Act, this information may be retained indefinitely.

I, \_\_\_\_\_(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Rachel Howells, School of Journalism, Media & Cultural Studies, Cardiff University with the supervision of Dr Andrew Williams.

Signed (researcher/student):

Signed (Participant):

Date:

## Consent Form - Confidential data

I understand that my participation in this project will involve a recorded interview which will take about 30 minutes of my time.

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I am free to withdraw or discuss my concerns with Rachel Howells, researcher, or Dr Andrew Williams, research supervisor. I understand that I can ask at any time for part or all of my interview to be designated as anonymous.

I understand that the information I provide will be shared with the research team or research supervisor and may be used in subsequent publications.

I understand that the information provided by me will be held confidentially, such that only the Experimenter can trace this information back to me individually. The information will be retained for up to 2 years, when it will be deleted/destroyed. I understand that I can ask for the information I provide to be deleted/destroyed at any time and, in accordance with the Data Protection Act, I can have access to the information at any time.

I also understand that at the end of the study I will be provided with additional information and feedback about the purpose of the study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Rachel Howells, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University with the supervision of Dr Andrew Williams.

Signed (researcher/student):

Signed (Participant):

Date:

## Appendix E

### Survey questionnaire

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## Cardiff University Port Talbot Press Survey

Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ from Future Focus Research. We have been commissioned by Cardiff University. The study is looking at how people get hold of news when their local newspaper closes down, for example the Port Talbot Guardian, which closed a few years ago. The study wants to know more about how people in Port Talbot get hold of news stories now, for example how you find out what's going on in the town and the local area, so I was wondering if you might have some time to spare to tell me how you get your news? It will take about 10 minutes. All the answers you give will be kept completely confidential.

S1. First of all, can you tell me which age group you fall into? RECORD AND CHECK QUOTAS

- 18 - 30
- 31 - 44
- 45 - 60
- 60+

S2. Record respondent gender

- Female - check quota
- Male - check quota

S3. Could you tell me the occupation of the main wage earner in your household? (write in & code and CHECK QUOTAS

Write in here

Code here  AB

C1

C2

D

E

1. So firstly we'd like to get an idea of how you get hold of your regular news – by regularly we mean at least once a week. So at least once a week do you...?

Select all that apply

- Read a local newspaper?
- Read a UK national newspaper?
- Read local news online?
- Read national UK news online?
- Watch Welsh news on the television?
- Watch national UK news on the television?
- Listen to local news on the radio?
- Listen to national UK news on the radio?
- None of the above

2a. Thinking about sources of news about Port Talbot, which of the following do you watch, listen to and read, in a typical week

SELECT ALL THE APPLYSHOWCARD Q2

- Written news - South Wales Evening Post/ "The Post" [thisissouthwales.co.uk](http://thisissouthwales.co.uk)
- Written news - The Neath Port Talbot Courier "The Courier"
- Written news - The Neath Port Talbot Guardian "The Guardian"
- Written news - The Western Mail/ Wales Online
- Written news - The Port Talbot Magnet/ [Inpt.org](http://Inpt.org) "The Magnet"
- Written news - Tata Steel newsletter
- Written news - Swansea Life/ The Bay
- Written news - Council newspaper/ Community Spirit
- Written news - Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Web - Council website
- Web - Facebook/ social media
- Web – Blog
- Web - Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- TV – BBC
- TV – ITV
- TV - Other TV (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Radio -The Wave/ Swansea Sound
- Radio - Other radio (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

None

2. Of the news sources that you just mentioned, which one would you say is your main source of news about Port Talbot?

Select ONE only SHOWCARD Q2

- Written news - South Wales Evening Post/ "The Post" [thisissouthwales.co.uk](http://thisissouthwales.co.uk)
- Written news - The Neath Port Talbot Courier "The Courier"
- Written news - The Neath Port Talbot Guardian "The Guardian"
- Written news - The Western Mail/ Wales Online
- Written news - The Port Talbot Magnet/ [Inpt.org](http://Inpt.org) "The Magnet"
- Written news - Tata Steel newsletter
- Written news - Swansea Life/ The Bay
- Written news - Council newspaper/ Community Spirit
- Written news - Other (specify)
- Web - Council website
- Web - Facebook/ social media
- Web – Blog
- Web - Other (specify)
- TV – BBC
- TV – ITV
- TV - Other TV (specify)
- Radio -The Wave/ Swansea Sound
- Radio - Other radio (specify)

None

3. How often do you read, watch or listen to this main source of news?

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

Don't know

4a. I am going to read out a list of local newspapers that used to be published in Port Talbot, but which have now stopped publishing. I'd like you to tell me which of these newspapers you used to read when they were still being published, and how often you used to read them, so for each one could you say Often, Sometimes, Rarely or Never?

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know
Port Talbot Guardian	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Neath Guardian	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Glamorgan Gazette	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Neath Port Talbot Tribune	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Herald of Wales	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4b. Are there any other local newspapers that you used to read?

Yes (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

No

ASK IF YES TO Q4b

4c. How often did you read them?

Often



- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Don't know

ASK IF YES TO Q4b

5. How much would you say you miss any of these newspapers?

- A lot
- A little
- Not much
- Not at all
- Don't know

6. Have you looked for information on any of the following topics in the last six months?

Select all that apply

- Local Air Quality
- Local Sport
- Local travel updates or information
- Local politics
- Council services, for example, road maintenance, rubbish collections or benefits
- Live local events such as theatre or music
- Local crime or policing
- None of the above

7. Of the ones you have mentioned which TWO are you most interested in

CODE UP TO TWO ANSWERS

- Local Air Quality
- Local Sport
- Local travel updates or information
- Local politics
- Council services, for example, road maintenance, rubbish collections or benefits
- Live local events such as theatre or music
- Local crime or policing
- None of the above

Now, looking at the topics you have said you are interested in, I'm going to give you some examples of common situations you might find yourself in, and I'd like you to tell me where you go to find out the information you need to know. Places you might go for information could include a company website, a friend, a social media site or a news channel – you can name any that you think you might visit based on the example.

Air Quality

ASK IF AIR QUALITY SELECTED AT Q7

8. So, if you hear the air quality limits have been exceeded in Port Talbot and you want to check whether the story is true, where do you go to find out?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY PROMPT IF NECESSARY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper

- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Ask friends and family
- Contact a campaign group
- Politician
- Leaflets through the door
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

Sport

ASK IF SPORT SELECTED AT Q7

9. So, if you want to check the time of the next Aberavon rugby game or Port Talbot town football match? (or any local team), where do you go to find out?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY PROMPT IF NECESSARY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Ask friends and family
- Leaflets through the door
- Noticeboard
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

Travel

ASK IF TRAVEL SELECTED AT Q7

10. If you hear there has been something like a bad accident on the M4 and want to avoid the traffic, where do you go to find out more?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY PROMPT IF NECESSARY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Ask friends and family
- Contact a campaign group
- Politician
- A motorway sign/ noticeboard
- Helpline
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

Politics

ASK IF POLITICS SELECTED AT Q7

11. If a local election, such as a council election, is coming up, how do you find out more about the different people standing for election?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY PROMPT IF NECESSARY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Ask friends and family
- Contact a campaign group
- Politician
- Noticeboard
- Polling card
- Ask them in person
- Leaflets through the door
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know



Council Services

ASK IF COUNCIL SERVICES SELECTED AT Q7

12. If you hear there have been changes to the regular refuse collections, how do you find out about the details of what is planned?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY PROMPT IF NECESSARY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Ask friends and family
- Contact a campaign group
- Politician
- Phone council/ helpline
- Noticeboard
- Leaflets through the door
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know



Live Performance

ASK IF LIVE PERFORMANCE SELECTED AT Q7

13. If you want to find out when a particular live event is happening, for example a gig in a local pub or a performance at the theatre, where do you go?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY PROMPT IF NECESSARY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Ask friends and family
- Phone venue/ helpline
- Noticeboard
- Leaflets through the door
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

Crime

ASK IF CRIME SELECTED AT Q7

14. If you hear an incident or crime has taken place locally and you want to know more details, where do you go?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY PROMPT IF NECESSARY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Ask friends and family
- Contact a campaign group
- Politician
- Phone police/ helpline
- Noticeboard
- Leaflets through the door
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

So we're going to move on now and briefly consider how you think Port Talbot appears in media stories.

15. Thinking about how Port Talbot currently appears in news stories you might have come across in any newspapers, on the internet, on radio and on television, how strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements?

SHOWCARD Q15/Q16

	Strongly agree	Slightly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
There is enough news coverage about Port Talbot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In news stories about Port Talbot, I feel like I'm getting the full story	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The views of local people are represented in news stories about Port Talbot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There is plenty of information in news stories about Port Talbot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Port Talbot is portrayed in a positive light in most news stories	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I trust news stories about Port Talbot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Port Talbot is not in the news enough	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



16. Thinking about how the news you get helps you to live your life and participate in the community and politics in Port Talbot, how strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements?

SHOWCARD Q15/Q16

	Strongly agree	Slightly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
I can get hold of enough information about Port Talbot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can get hold of enough information about the candidates to enable me to vote in a council election	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can get hold of enough information about the candidates to enable me to vote in a Welsh Assembly election	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can get hold of enough information about the candidates to enable me to vote in a General election	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know where to go to complain if I'm not happy about something that's happening in Port Talbot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can easily find out what my local politicians are doing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am confident my voice will be	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

heard if I have an opinion on  
issues in the town

I find it difficult to find out      ○      ○      ○      ○      ○      ○  
what's going on in Port Talbot

17. Now, I would just like to ask you some quick questions about your participation in local political or  
community life. Would you please tell me if, in the past two years, you have:

SHOWCARD Q17SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Attended any local groups, organisations or associations?
- Served as an officer or on the committee of any local groups, organisations or associations?
- Contacted an elected official such as an MP, AM or local councillor?
- Volunteered for a local group or charity
- Made a freedom of information request
- Signed a petition on a local issue
- Taken part in a local or political campaign
- Contacted the media
- Participated in a public demonstration
- None of the above

PLEASE ENSURE THAT THE RESPONDENT DOES NOT SEE THE SCREEN FOR THE NEXT FEW QUESTIONS AS WE ARE TESTING THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND DON'T WANT THEM TO SEE THE ANSWERS

18. Next, I would like to ask you a few questions about local politicians and political events. Of course, there are so many issues and events taking place these days that it is impossible to keep track of all of them. But can you perhaps tell me:

a) The political party of the MP for Aberavon?

- Labour
- Don't know
- Incorrect answer given (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

b) The name of one of any of the local or regional Assembly Members representing Port Talbot?

If they named more than one please record each one

- David Rees
- Peter Black
- Bethan Jenkins
- Byron Davies
- Suzy Davies
- Don't know
- Named someone else (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

c) Can you tell me who Ali Thomas is or what he does?

- Leader of the local Council
- Don't know
- Incorrect answer given (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE ENSURE THAT THE RESPONDENT DOES NOT SEE THE SCREEN FOR THE NEXT FEW QUESTIONS AS WE ARE TESTING THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND DON'T WANT THEM TO SEE THE ANSWERS

19. Earlier this year the Welsh Assembly Government decided to close one of the slip roads of a junction of the M4 for a trial period. Are you aware of this?

- Yes
- No

ASK IF YES AT Q19

20a. Can you tell me which junction of the M4 is affected?

- Junction 41
- Junction 40
- The main one into Port Talbot
- Don't know
- Other answer given (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

ASK IF YES AT Q19

20b. Can you tell me how long the trial closure is supposed to last?

- Six months
- Don't know
- Other answer given (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

ASK IF YES AT Q19

20c. Can you tell me when the trial closure started?

- August/ Summer
- Don't know



Other answer given (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

21a. Have you seen or heard any news coverage of this story in the last month?

- Yes
- No

ASK IF YES AT Q21a

21b. Where have you seen it?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Friends and family
- A campaign group
- Politician
- Leaflets through the door
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

PLEASE ENSURE THAT THE RESPONDENT DOES NOT SEE THE SCREEN FOR THE NEXT FEW QUESTIONS AS WE ARE TESTING THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND DON'T WANT THEM TO SEE THE ANSWERS

22a. Neath Port Talbot Council has recently announced a few different schemes to help increase recycling rates. It has a new mascot called Greenbob Squarebox to encourage people to recycle their rubbish. Are you aware of this?

- Yes
- No

ASK IF YES AT Q22a

22b. Can you tell me how was the new GreenBob Squarebox mascot named?

- In a school competition
- By a child
- Don't know
- Other answer given (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

23a. It will also be changing all the wheelie bins in Neath and Port Talbot in a scheme called the Big Bin Swap. Are you aware of this?

- Yes
- No

ASK IF YES AT Q23a

23b. Will the new bins be bigger or smaller than the old wheelie bins?

- Smaller (correct answer)
- Bigger
- Don't know
- Other answer given (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

ASK IF YES AT Q23a

23c. How have residents been told about the scheme?

- A leaflet through the door
- Don't know
- Other answer given (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

24a. Have you seen or heard any news coverage of either of these recycling stories in the last month?

- Yes
- No

ASK IF YES AT Q24a

24b. Where have you seen it?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Online news
- Other websites
- Social media
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Radio
- TV
- Friends and family
- A campaign group
- Politician
- Leaflets through the door
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know

Respondent details

READ OUT: "The following information is only collected for quality assurance purposes so that backchecking can be undertaken to ensure this interview was conducted appropriately. These details do not form part of the survey and will not be included along with your responses to the survey." IF

'REFUSE', please just enter 'REF' in the relevant box.

Name

Postcode

Telephone

In the next few months we will be conducting some focus group in the area to explore this topic in more detail. Would you like to come along to one our of groups? We will pay you £25 on the night for your time.

Yes

No

IF Yes READ OUT: We will contact you when we have a date and time for the group to invite you along.

PLEASE MAKE SURE THAT YOU HAVE A VALID TELEPHONE NUMBER

READ OUT: This interview has been conducted within the Code of Conduct of the Market Research Society. INTERVIEWER INSTRUCTION: Click on the 'Submit' button to ensure the survey is saved.

## Appendix F Focus group information sheet and consent form



**Title of Project:** Communities, local information and news in Port Talbot

**Main researcher:** Rachel Howells – raehowells@gmail.com

**Research supervisors:** Justin Lewis – [LewisJ@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:LewisJ@cardiff.ac.uk)  
Andrew Williams – [WilliamsA28@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:WilliamsA28@cardiff.ac.uk)  
02920 870088

- 1. Purpose of the Study:** This project is part-funded by the Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarship (KESS) and the Media Standards Trust. The main purpose of this group discussion is to ask residents of Port Talbot to talk about: whether they are well informed about things going on in the place where live; where they get information about life in their local areas; how this has changed over time; and how things could be improved in the future.
- 2. Publication details:** The results of the study will be published in a PhD thesis at Cardiff University. Results may also be published in academic journals or monographs, and communicated to the public through the medium of the project's blog and academic conference papers.
- 3. Your participation:** You will participate in a small group discussion to allow the researchers to gain a fuller understanding of how people in Port Talbot find out information about their town.
- 4. Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in your everyday working life.

5. **Benefits:** The results of the study will provide a greater understanding of communities and how they interact with information and the media in the digital age.
  
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured at Cardiff University. In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research your name will be changed and you will remain anonymous. Just to re-iterate, you will not be named in any publications resulting from this research. Once the group discussion is over the session will be transcribed and all participants will be given fake names.
  
7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Rachel Howells or Andrew Williams at the above address with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you.
  
8. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.



Consent form:

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research. If you agree to take part in this study and understand the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

---

Participant Name and Signature

---

Date

---

Person Obtaining Consent

---

Date



## Appendix G

### Focus Group Schedule: Port Talbot and Local News

#### **Part 1: Introduction**

(20 mins)

- Introductions (name stickers)
- Explain the project and how data will be used
- Explain anonymity and ask them all to sign consent forms
- Give out money and receipts and collect signatures

#### **Part 2:**

(30 mins)

ICEBREAKER (and CONSUMPTION HABITS)

**I'd like us all to introduce ourselves a little bit, first. So can we go around the table and state our names, something we like about living in Port Talbot, and something we maybe we don't like so much about living here.**

Brainstorming exercise with flipchart/whiteboard:

**I want you to try to come up with things that are important to know about when you live in a local area... you all live in Port Talbot, what kinds of information about Port Talbot life is important for you to have. I'll start the ball rolling... I don't live in Port Talbot but I come here a lot in my car so I find local traffic news pretty important... what about you? First thing that comes into your head... no such thing as a wrong answer....**

(Write down whatever they say and make sure to prompt on the following if they or similar don't come up, and include them on the list if they agree... may want to prompt on them to get responses to the next question/table)

What the council's up to	Live music/arts	Local clubs/societies	Local sports	Crime
Local transport or travel news	Campaigns (give an eg)			

**I want us to do a different kind of brainstorming exercise now: I'd like you to come up with as many ways you can think of for people in Port Talbot to get information about their local areas... the kinds of thing we were just writing down on that other bit of paper.**

*(PROMPT specifically on the following topics of news, making sure to mention a good few, prioritising the most important to you first: so where do you get information about: local clubs and societies; the environment/air quality; what the council is up to; live music/arts; local sports; crime; local people who are involved in campaigns, travel updates)*

<b>TV</b>	<b>Print</b>	<b>Internet</b>	<b>Radio</b>	<b>Public places</b>	<b>People</b>
TV news	Newspaper (ask which ones)	Websites (ask which ones)	Radio news (which stations)	Noticeboards (where)	Friends
	Community	Facebook		Signs	Family

	magazine (ditto)	(from who on Facebook)			
	Council paper	Twitter (who?)		Posters (where? What kind?)	Groups
	Leaflets (what kinds?)	Blog (which ones?)			Businesses (which ones?)
	Receipts/ tickets	Council/ official website			

Once there as many examples as possible up, then focus down and ask a follow up question:

**What are the most important ones for you?.... why?**

*[Prompts: which ones do you use most often? Which ones couldn't you do without? Why's that? ]*

**Which ones do you trust most?..... Why?**

*(prompt on news media, social media, and council sources if nobody mentions them)*

### **Part 3:**

(30 mins)

ISSUES and CAMPAIGNS

In this section we will try to:

- Find out how people are interacting with issues of concern to them
- Understand how people are finding out essential information
- Understand attitudes towards the news and its role in informing and representing local people, and scrutinising those in authority (are they getting a voice, can current sources of information be trusted, are they aware of issues, willing to campaign, and do they feel their interests are being looked out for)
- Find out whether this has changed over time
- Find out ways they would like the media to perform in the future, and why

**Something I've noticed people talking about in the town lately is the closure of the M4. I want us to focus on that for a little while, now.**

**Has the closure affected you at all?**

*[Prompts: Are there any road closures near you? Have you been stuck in traffic? Have you changed your routes home to go around it, or changed the time of your journey?]*

**How did you first find out about it?**

*(ADD TO FLIPCHART BRAINSTORM AS NEW ONES COME UP... Prompts: noticeboards in the shopping centre? When I was stuck in traffic? Did the Council send anything out? Did you see it on TV, online, or in the newspaper?)*

**Are you satisfied with the information you've had? Why/why not?**

## Appendix G

### **Part 3:**

(20 mins)

CIVIC PARTICIPATION/ENGAGEMENT:

**Let's say you really felt strongly about this and you really wanted to DO something about it – make your voice heard in some way – how would you do that?**

*[Prompt sparingly: write to your MP? Stage a protest? Write to the papers? Phone a radio show? Phone the council? Go online and comment? Write a blog? What would have the most impact?]*

**Have you seen there's a campaign to stop it happening? where?**

**Have you supported them in any way?**

*[Prompt – have you signed the petition? Have you been on the Facebook group? Have you done anything else to have your say?]*

**Can you think of any other controversial issues like this that have affected people in Port Talbot in the same way now or in the past? What ones?**

*[Prompt: what about power stations, air quality, Afan Lido, Morfa beach, the M4 motorway when it was first built?]*

**Where did you get information about them?**

*(Prompts: Where did you first find out about them? Did you see stuff in the papers? Which ones?)*

**Was it easier or harder to find out information or make your voice heard about stuff like this in the past?**

### **Part 5:**

(15 mins)

LOCAL NEWS MEDIA

**What's local news like in Port Talbot?**

*[Prompts: anyone read a local newspaper? Which ones? What local newspapers are there? What are they like? What do read in them? What about on the internet? Do you get any local news online? Where? What's it like?]*

**Is it better these days, or worse, than it used to be? In what ways? Why?**

**If you could have the absolute best local news service you can imagine, what would it look like?**

*[Prompts: what kind of things would it cover? Why? How would you like to access it? Newspaper? Online? TV? Radio? Why?]*

(5 minutes available at the end to answer questions from participants)

ENDS



## **Appendix H**

### **Freedom of Information request sample letter**

This letter was sent to the 22 Local authorities in Wales using the FOI website [whatdotheyknow.com](http://whatdotheyknow.com). The correspondence sent and received is publicly listed on the website, and can be viewed here: [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/rachel\\_howells/wall](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/rachel_howells/wall)

Dear XXXXXX Council,

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, I would be grateful if you could provide me with the annual total figures of all the Freedom of Information requests received by your Authority between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2013.

Yours faithfully,

Rachel Howells





## Appendix I

### Number of FOI requests received by local authorities in Wales

	2005-06		2006-07		2007-08		2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12		2012-13		
	2005	2006	%inc	2007	%inc	2008	%inc	2009	%inc	2010	%inc	2011	%inc	2012	%inc	2013	%inc
Blaenau Gwent	150	100	-33.33	100	0.00	100	0.00	248	148.00	301	21.37	320	6.31	325	1.56	325	0.00
Bridgend	151	173	14.56	169	-2.31	269	59.17	380	41.26	507	33.42	775	52.86	849	9.55	964	13.55
Caerphilly	394	486	23.35	500	2.88	634	26.80	715	12.78	864	20.84	1084	25.46	858	-20.85	1057	23.19
Cardiff	-	-		-	0.00	-		691		1215	75.83	1448	19.18	1481	2.28	1495	0.95
Carmarthenshire	449	372	-17.14	314	-15.59	473	50.64	658	39.11	782	18.84	942	20.46	887	-5.84	1028	15.90
Ceredigion	-	-		-	0.00	-		-		-		-		527		860	63.19
Conwy	217	277	27.64	284	2.53	342	20.42	350	2.34	595	70.00	611	2.69	736	20.46	-	
Denbighshire	221	250	12.12	272	8.80	363	33.46	462	27.27	521	12.77	659	26.49	644	-2.28	794	23.29
Flintshire	311	197	-36.65	194	-1.52	330	70.10	509	54.24	616	21.02	748	21.43	778	4.01	804	3.34
Gwynedd	174	203	16.67	237	16.75	380	60.34	464	22.11	573	23.49	683	19.20	651	-4.69	890	36.71
Isle of Anglesey	-	-		-	0.00	-		-		515		629	22.14	711	13.04	705	-0.84
Merthyr Tydfil	-	100		134	34.00	256	91.04	356	39.06	412	15.73	547	32.77	587	7.31	617	5.11
Monmouthshire	108	138	27.77	156	13.04	258	65.38	405	56.98	515	27.16	688	33.59	736	6.98	858	16.58
Neath Port Talbot	103	105	1.94	84	-20.00	193	129.76	319	65.28	528	65.52	712	34.85	772	8.43	915	18.52
Newport	-	-		-	0.00	-		-		-		545		661	21.28	817	23.60
Pembrokeshire	275	215	-21.81	203	-5.58	285	40.39	440	54.39	512	16.36	724	41.41	744	2.76	808	8.60
Powys	259	187	-27.79	198	5.88	328	65.66	394	20.12	460	16.75	604	31.30	690	14.24	655	-5.07
Rhondda Cynon Taff																	
Swansea	339	324	-4.42	320	-1.23	492	53.75	582	18.29	701	20.45	814	16.12	907	11.43	-	
The Vale of Glamorgan	-	-		-		-		-		-		-		762		859	12.73
Torfaen	-	-		-	0.00	-		-		477		678	42.14	783	15.49	814	3.96
Wrexham	149	143	-4.02	226	58.04	281	24.34	376	33.81	514	36.70	644	25.29	755	17.24	873	15.63

**Table 1: All FOI requests received by Local Authorities in Wales, 2005-2013**



## Appendix J

### Volunteering statistics

	Referrals that lead to a placement	Volunteers placed with organisations	Number of volunteers placed (all ages)			
	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014
Blaenau Gwent	159	112	303	198	309	331
Bridgend	109	119	154	165	187	273
Caerphilly	133	150	168	206	268	280
Cardiff	1,012	989	796	759	954	1,184
Carmarthenshire	142	208	132	176	131	154
Ceredigion	150	113	92	76	72	95
Conwy	225	245	135	300	338	259
Denbighshire	359	353	337	793	302	284
Flintshire	222	160	257	447	3,675	716
Gwynedd	141	124	156	149	170	163
Isle of Anglesey	29	46	42	55	74	56
Merthyr Tydfil	110	180	220	178	189	199
Monmouthshire	118	145	125	132	125	159
Neath Port Talbot	485	515	590	475	441	476
Newport	115	142	174	135	211	179
Pembrokeshire	71	96	82	190	197	204
Powys	342	421	707	889	905	750
Rhondda Cynon Taff	74	210	225	238	256	283
Swansea	390	12	63	0	289	349
Torfaen	66	65	158	108	193	287
Vale of Glamorgan	204	245	391	388	455	264
Wrexham	326	478	362	255	380	379
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,982</b>	<b>5,128</b>	<b>5,669</b>	<b>6,312</b>	<b>10,121</b>	<b>7,324</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>226.4545</b>	<b>233.0909</b>	<b>257.6818</b>	<b>286.9091</b>	<b>460.0455</b>	<b>332.9091</b>
<i>Neath Port Talbot</i>	<i>485</i>	<i>515</i>	<i>590</i>	<i>475</i>	<i>441</i>	<i>476</i>
<b>Diff</b>	<b>258.5</b>	<b>281.9</b>	<b>332.2</b>	<b>188.1</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>143.1</b>

Table 1: Volunteer placement figures in Wales. Source Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)

