

News journalism in Wales: print decline and digital growth

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Print circulations of Welsh newspapers have dropped sharply over the last decade – as they have the world over – leading to job-losses, mergers and newspaper closures. Online traffic to news sites has vastly increased over the same period – though online revenues are far from compensating news organisations for the loss of revenue from newspaper sales. This is an international phenomenon, but given the comparatively weak indigenous Welsh media, the effects could be expected to be felt more sharply in Wales.

Print decline; digital growth

Welsh newspapers have seen continued decline in their print circulations. Since 2008 the Western Mail's circulation has more than halved – from 37,576 in 2008 to 15,259 in



2016. Over the same period, the Daily Post's circulation has fallen by over a third – from 36,432 in 2008 to 22,251 in 2016. This is not out of sync with what has happened in UK dailies, with the Mirror and the Express both more than halving in their circulation over the same period. In 2016 regional dailies' print circulation [reduced on average by 12.5%](#).

Whilst print circulation has dwindled, online traffic has soared. WalesOnline's use has risen by almost 1000% since 2008, up to almost 6.5 million unique browsers a month. Many regional news websites have [recorded](#) double-digit year-on-year growth in unique daily visitors in the latter half of 2016, with WalesOnline seeing year-on-year growth of 13.1% .



Analogue pounds turn to digital pennies

However, the difficulties of monetising online traffic have led to challenging economic circumstances for news organisations. It has been estimated that print products of newspaper groups still tend to generate up to 90% of their advertising revenues, and that for each £1 that is gained in digital revenue in national newspapers, £31 in print revenue is lost. Although news sites score highly in terms of visits, these visits tend to be for relatively short amounts of time. It has [been estimated](#) that by 2020 Google and Facebook will take 70% of all money spent on display advertising online in the UK.

Since 2005 there has been a [net loss of about 200 newspapers across the UK](#). In addition to the overall reduction in the number of titles, Press Gazette estimates that the total number of journalists working on local newspapers has at least halved since 2005, as has the industry's revenue. Dr Andy Williams of Cardiff University thinks that the impact on a community of losing a newspaper are serious: "When the Port Talbot Guardian closed down in 2009", he says, "citizens lost their primary source of day-to-day information about how to navigate civic and community life".

Although the problems caused by declining news revenues are not specific to Wales, arguably Wales had less media than other areas of the UK to lose in the first place. In 2015, communications regulator [Ofcom noted that](#) "the absence of a strong indigenous print media" in Wales "is in stark contrast to Scotland and Northern Ireland". Consequently, "Most readers of daily newspapers in Wales read UK newspapers which include very little content that relates specifically to Wales and its devolved elected institution, the National Assembly for Wales".

The rise of the hyperlocals

Whilst the advent of digital news consumption has created a challenging economic environment for news companies, it has also provided a platform for new, volunteer-driven "hyperlocal" news providers. Rooted in communities, although these news providers are often run by people with some previous journalistic experience or training, they are primarily run for love rather than money. There are around 400 active hyperlocal publishers in the UK, 46 of which are in Wales, more than double what one might expect given Wales's population share.

These hyperlocals are a tough prospect to make economically self-sustaining. Although often born from the opportunities provided by online publishing, they are



subject to the same revenue-generating difficulties posed by this new environment as the traditional newspapers they are in some places replacing. Just over 10% of hyperlocals generate more than £500 per month in revenues.

These new hyperlocal sites are in addition to the more than 50 Papurau Bro – Welsh-language newspapers – that have provided local news to Welsh-speaking communities for over 40 years. The Papurau Bro receive funding from the Welsh Government from its Welsh Language budget, whilst the Welsh language news website Golwg 360 receives Welsh Government funding via the Welsh Books Council.

Future support

With the principle of public-intervention in news provision accepted at least in part by the Welsh Government through its support of the Papurau Bro and Golwg 360, perhaps a similar funding model could be explored for the nascent hyperlocal news sector?

Emma Meese, from Cardiff University's [Centre for Community Journalism](#) has called for public funding of hyperlocal publishers to help “revive journalism at the local level”. Dr Williams suggests “smart, independently-administered, contestable funding” to help drive innovation and make the hyperlocal sector more sustainable.

Emma Meese and Dr Williams recently discussed what could be done to support news journalism in Wales with the Assembly's Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee, which is conducting an [inquiry into news journalism](#). Dr Williams outlined the various forms of state subsidy he felt supported traditional newspapers – such as advertising revenue from statutory notices and tax-breaks for newspaper publication – and called for these to be reassessed for the digital era. Emma Meese felt that it would be “huge” if hyperlocals could publish statutory notices, which Dr Williams estimated were worth £40–50 million a year across the UK. There are several statutes covering different areas of law that require public authorities to place notices in local newspapers: these laws would need amending if publications that don't fit within a traditional definition of “newspaper” were to be included.

Emma Meese pointed out that there is profit to be made from local journalism still, just not enough to satisfy the large companies that increasingly dominate the Welsh news landscape. As such, she felt that start-up funding targeted at hyperlocal journalism could have a large catalytic effect for the sector.



What would the established media in Wales make of these proposals? Would further public funding of hyperlocals crowd out private investment in the sector and provide unfair competition to the remaining local newspapers? Or would a vibrant and sustainable hyperlocal network – training journalists and generating stories – benefit the whole sector? The Committee will be exploring issues such as these as it takes evidence from news providers in Wales – such as ITV, BBC and Trinity Mirror – in the coming weeks.

Article by [Robin Wilkinson](#), National Assembly for Wales Research Service.

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