

SUPPORTING PUBLIC INTEREST NEWS

A BLUEPRINT

**INDEPENDENT
PUBLISHERS
TASKFORCE**

November 2019



Contents

1. Executive summary	4
2. The challenge	5
3. The opportunity	7
4. Options	9
5. The Public Interest News Foundation	11
6. Governance	14
7. Funding policy	15
8. Budget	16
9. Conclusion	16
Appendix I: About the Independent Publishers Taskforce	17
Appendix II: Defining Public Interest News	18
Contact	19

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The digital revolution has created huge challenges and exciting opportunities for public interest journalism in the UK. The business model for traditional newspapers has been damaged by the new media economy. At the same time, a new wave of high-quality journalism is emerging from the public interest news sector. Organisations in this sector include a mixture of start-ups and well-established newspapers, magazines and websites. They may be small businesses, but these publishers are making a big impact in their communities and around the world.
- 1.2. Public interest news publishers have a diverse range of legal structures, but they all aim to provide benefit to the public. Their journalism drives civic engagement and accountability. They are giving a voice to people who were previously voiceless, telling stories that once went unheard and providing information that the public would not otherwise receive. They are making the British media more diverse and more democratic. However, the benefits that independent publishers provide to the public outweigh the small revenues they generate, and they are fighting to survive in a turbulent digital economy.
- 1.3. The **Independent Publishers Taskforce** was established by IMPRESS in order to explore the challenges and opportunities that affect independent publishers in providing public interest news. (See Appendix I for more details about the Taskforce; and Appendix II for a definition of public interest news.)
- 1.4. IMPRESS has also engaged with the general public and with experts and organisations that represent the public interest.
- 1.5. Having considered a range of options to address the challenges facing independent publishers, and to maximise their potential to produce journalism that provides benefit to the public, IMPRESS recommends the creation of a new charity – the **Public Interest News Foundation**.
- 1.6. The Foundation would exist for the benefit of the public, not news publishers or journalists. It would work directly with the public and news publishers to promote citizenship, community development and high ethical standards of journalism. It would inform and educate the public and provide a blend of financial and non-financial support in order to strengthen the capacity of the public interest news sector to provide benefit to the public.
- 1.7. IMPRESS recommends that the Foundation should run three complementary programmes:
 - An **education programme**, to build knowledge and understanding of public interest news among the general public and people who work within the sector;
 - A **programme to build the capacity of public interest news organisations**; and
 - A **programme to build the capacity of organisations that provide infrastructure** for the public interest news sector.
- 1.8. In this Blueprint, we outline our vision for the Foundation, and invite support from all those who share our desire to see a new era of high-quality and accountable journalism that serves the public interest.

The vision outlined in this Blueprint belongs to the Independent Publishers Taskforce, convened by IMPRESS from April-September 2019. Future steps in response to this vision will be taken forward by the Public Interest News Foundation. More information will be made available on: www.publicinterestnews.org.uk.



2. The Challenge

- 2.1. The public suffer from an unreliable supply of the news they need in order to participate as well-informed members of local communities and as citizens. The public need a better understanding of the news they receive, and a better provision of news that is produced according to high ethical standards.
- 2.2. News publishers also need assistance. Whilst journalism was once largely funded through advertising, the lion's share of media advertising revenue now flows to search engines and social media platforms. These intermediaries do not produce journalism, but guide audiences to content from a vast array of sources, including not only journalists but also influencers, advertisers, public authorities, non-profit organisations and others. Some of these may have scant regard for the public interest or may seek to promote a narrow and distorted perspective.
- 2.3. The Cairncross Review of public interest journalism found that:
 - Print advertising revenues dropped by more than two-thirds in the ten years to 2017;
 - Print circulation of national papers fell from 11.5 million daily copies in 2008 to 5.8 million in 2018 and of local papers from 63.4 million weekly copies in 2007 to 31.4 million in 2017;
 - Sales of both national and local printed papers fell by roughly half between 2007 and 2017, and are still declining; and
 - The number of full-time frontline journalists in the UK has dropped from an estimated 23,000 in 2007 to 17,000 today, and the numbers are still falling.¹
- 2.4. This economic pressure has affected the capacity of traditional news publishers to provide:
 - the **information** on which the public base important decisions in their capacity as citizens, consumers, employees, parents, patients, carers, students and so on;
 - a forum for **civic engagement**, through which the public's views on shared concerns can be aired; and
 - a forum for **accountability**, through which the conduct of government, parliament, the courts, public agencies and local authorities can be scrutinised and improved.
- 2.5. In the late twentieth century, people relied on newspapers and broadcasters to provide them with information. Now, information is flying at audiences from countless directions. Some of this information is accurate but much of it is false. Sometimes, people share false information without meaning to cause harm (misinformation); but in other cases, false information is shared for malign purposes (disinformation).
- 2.6. Forced to compete with other sources of information, some publishers have entered a 'race to the bottom' which has led to a vicious spiral of declining journalism standards and trust in journalism. The victims of this spiral are members of the public, who are struggling to distinguish fact from fiction, and the publishers of public interest news, who are struggling to persuade audiences to trust them. As a result, audiences are prone to exploitation by the publishers of low-quality journalism and disinformation.
- 2.7. Civic engagement has suffered as newspaper operations have scaled back or collapsed across the developed world. In the words of Josh Stearns of the US-based Democracy Fund:
*'Numerous studies have explored the impact of local news coverage on core qualities of a healthy democracy such as people's political knowledge, voting rates and number of people running for office. While there are nuances between them, the studies are fairly unanimous in finding that erosions in local news are tied to drops in civic engagement.'*²
- 2.8. Community cohesion is also in jeopardy. Local newspapers once provided a shared space for debate, but now audiences exist in separate 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles'. As Josh Stearns puts it:
'Local news, done right, helps build community by reflecting the voices, concerns and stories of

1 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism>.

2 <https://medium.com/office-of-citizen/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy-9125e5c995fb>.

local people back to each other in ways that build connection and empathy. Traditionally, local news organizations have also served as a key part of the public square where communities debate the issues and ideas facing them.³

- 2.9.** Research in the *Journal of Communication* suggests that political polarisation increases when newspapers close. The authors claim that 'a relative reduction of local news in the media marketplace may result in less exposure to local news and more regular exposure to national media, with significant effects on engagement and partisan voting.'⁴
- 2.10.** The capacity for meaningful accountability has also declined with the decline of the newspaper industry. This affects both public and private institutions. In Port Talbot, for example, the decline of the local newspaper correlated closely with a decline in public accountability. When the Welsh Assembly decided to close a motorway junction that served the town, local people – lacking a dedicated newspaper – were unable to engage effectively with policymakers. One man told researchers that he only heard about the motorway closure by reading graffiti on a bridge.⁵
- 2.11.** A recent study found that local newspapers also help to hold companies accountable for their environmental impact. So much so that factories based near a newspaper office are less likely to cause pollution than factories that do not have a newspaper office in the neighbourhood.⁶
- 2.12.** In Australia, researchers have found a 'negative feedback loop' in communities with eroding local news capacity, where government has little incentive to consider or respond to civic input.⁷
- 2.13.** In these ways, the decline in the traditional newspaper industry is having a profound impact on the availability of trustworthy information, and of forums for civic engagement and accountability. Digital disruption is not just an economic phenomenon, but a fundamental challenge to citizenship and community cohesion.

Sarah Cheverton. Editor in Chief, Star & Crescent.

“Star & Crescent (S&C) aims to be part of the solution to the national crisis in local news. We prioritise voices and perspectives from the local political and social spectrum that are missing from the mainstream media, where the absence of those voices feeds social and political divisions that are becoming more familiar in our local communities and across the UK. Our continuing mission is for S&C to act as a platform for marginalised local voices and for stories and issues that are missing from the local media.”

Alex Feis-Bryce. CEO, RightsInfo.

“We tell human rights stories in a people-focused way – meaning you'll rarely see the words human rights in our headlines, because it's the people at the heart of the story that really matter. Our vision for the future of independent news rests on sustainability. We want to see publishers able to thrive, free from the threat of funding losses. We want to see a creative and innovative sector, which offers readers a choice, and also strives for social good.”

3 <https://medium.com/office-of-citizen/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy-9125e5c995fb>.

4 <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/politics/polarization/political-polarization-local-news-research/>.

5 See David Harte, Rachel Howells and Andy Williams, *Hyperlocal Journalism: The decline of local newspapers and the rise of online community news* (London: Routledge, 2018).

6 <https://psmag.com/environment/why-the-decline-of-newspapers-is-bad-for-the-environment>.

7 <http://dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30091529/freeman-digitalmedia-2016.pdf>.

3. The Opportunity

- 3.1. At the same time as disrupting the culture and economics of journalism, digital technology has also created exciting new opportunities for independent public interest journalism. (See Appendix II for a definition of public interest news.)
- 3.2. In the past, publishers needed access to a printing press, newsprint and a distribution network before they could even dream of launching a newspaper. Now, they simply need access to the internet. As a result, a new range of news publications has emerged in the UK. Older publications, too, have been transformed by the new opportunities that digital technologies provide for audience engagement.
- 3.3. The twentieth-century model of journalism tended to represent a narrow range of voices that spoke 'down' from the social elite rather than 'up' from the grassroots. The commercial and political interests of media owners were not always aligned with the interests of the public at large. And there was little guarantee that old-style newspaper journalism would be accurate; that it would respect people's privacy; or that it would avoid discrimination against vulnerable groups.
- 3.4. A new wave of independent news publishers is shaking off this legacy and developing new forms of public interest journalism. Publishers that have joined IMPRESS, the only independent news regulator in the UK, are setting out to provide trustworthy information and a forum for citizenship and accountability. As a result, they are enhancing civic engagement and community cohesion.
- 3.5. In place of the small number of large companies that control most traditional newspapers in the UK, the independent sector consists of a large number of small companies, all with turnover below £10.2m (and therefore defined as 'small to medium enterprises', or SMEs) and the vast majority with turnover below £2m (and therefore defined as 'microbusinesses'). Some of these organisations are charities; some are commercial businesses; and others are social enterprises, whose profits are ploughed back into their operations.
- 3.6. The independent sector produces all kinds of news, from local journalism to international investigative reporting, via political analysis and specialist journalism. This sector is not only filling the gaps that have been left by the decline of traditional newspapers; it is also developing new forms of journalism, including crowd-sourced reporting; and new business models, including micropayments, franchising, co-operative ownership and charitable models based on grants and donations. Some publishers are cross subsidising their journalism from other business activities, including events management and consultancy. Others are generating revenue from display and classified advertising.
- 3.7. Despite their dedication and determination, independent publishers are struggling to survive. The *Port Talbot Magnet* was established by professional journalists after the last newspaper in Port Talbot was closed by its corporate owners. Despite building up a loyal following, the *Magnet* was not able to cover the real cost of producing original public interest journalism and it, too, closed after five years.
- 3.8. Small, independent publishers do not have much in the way of legal, editorial or commercial support. Nor do they have the expertise to navigate the multiple social media platforms through which publishers now reach their audiences. Digital technology may have reduced the barriers to entry into the news publishing market; but it has also created new barriers to growth.
- 3.9. Organisations and initiatives such as the Centre for Community Journalism, the Bureau Local and IMPRESS are working to provide the infrastructure that small publishers need in order to maximise their positive impact. However, the sector is still highly vulnerable to outside forces.
- 3.10. In his book *Democracy's Detectives*, James Hamilton studied the benefit to society of public interest journalism. He found that the cost of such journalism was massively outweighed by the net gain to the public: 'each dollar spent on stories can generate hundreds of dollars in benefits to society.'⁸ He noted, however, that these 'gains are distributed in ways hard for news

8 https://www.cjr.org/q_and_a/investigative-reporting-value.php.

organisations to translate into additional reporting resources.’ In other words, public interest journalism provides a benefit to society that is not directly rewarded through a commercial business model.

- 3.11.** Clearly, it cannot be left to the market to sustain a sector which is setting out to reach audiences that are not necessarily affluent, and which is reporting stories that may not suit the interests of advertisers. We do not expect commercial businesses to provide everything that society needs in areas such as sport, community development and the arts. Public interest journalism is in a similar category.
- 3.12.** During the twentieth century, the commercial business model for newspapers aligned, to some extent, with the needs of society. That alignment has been fundamentally shaken by the digital revolution, and we urgently need to explore new ways of ensuring that the public are provided with a range of sources of high-quality public interest journalism that reflect the diversity of contemporary Britain.
- 3.13.** **The aim of the Public Interest News Foundation should be to serve the public by sustaining public interest journalism, not to protect a particular kind of publisher or newspaper. We do not want to turn back the clock to an imagined golden age of newspaper publishing. We want to move forward into a new era of diverse, high-quality journalism in the public interest.**
- 3.14.** **We believe that the public interest news sector is already providing a vital part of the social and democratic fabric of the UK. With additional support, this sector will be able to provide even greater benefit to the public.**



▲ *Members of the Taskforce at the June 2019 workshop. Pictured: Erica Roffe, Bedford Independent.*

4. Options

- 4.1. Emily Bell, Founding Director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, has recently called for a ‘transfer of wealth’ from digital platforms to public interest journalism.⁹ Several other groups have made similar proposals:
 - The LSE Truth, Trust and Technology Commission has proposed the creation of a ‘News Innovation Centre’, to be funded by platforms and philanthropists.
 - The Media Reform Coalition has proposed a levy on digital advertising to support a ‘local newswire service’.
 - The Labour Party has proposed a windfall tax on social media platforms to support public interest media.
 - The News Media Association (NMA) and Society of Editors have proposed a content licence fee, payable by digital intermediaries, to support journalism.
 - The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has proposed a levy on digital advertising to fund an ‘economic stimulus plan’ for the media.
 - Press Gazette has called on the major digital intermediaries to support high-quality local journalism, by compulsion if necessary.
- 4.2. These proposals all involve a transfer of funds from digital intermediaries to news publishers. Any transfer would create an opportunity to invest in public interest journalism but also poses the risk of interference. The challenge here is to build capacity for public interest journalism without compromising the editorial independence of news publishers.
- 4.3. The Cairncross Review recommended the establishment of an Institute for Public Interest News (IPIN), an arm’s-length public body that would be responsible for distributing funds from digital intermediaries and philanthropists.
- 4.4. The Taskforce welcomes this vision of a dedicated organisation to support public interest news. However, Taskforce members are concerned that a public body, established by and ultimately accountable to the government, could be subject to political pressure. A future government might choose to define ‘public interest’ journalism in a way that suited its own political agenda and did not necessarily provide benefit to the public. A future government would also have the power to close down IPIN, creating uncertainty and – at worst – self-censorship among publishers.
- 4.5. The Taskforce notes that existing initiatives in this area, such as the BBC’s Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) and the NCTJ’s Community News Project, have almost exclusively supported corporate newspaper groups rather than independent public interest news publishers.
- 4.6. Through the LDRS, the BBC has enabled a small number of mostly corporate newspaper companies to appoint ‘local democracy reporters’ to cover local government. These corporate groups have continued to cut journalists’ posts and close newspapers even as they receive this share of the BBC licence fee. The NCTJ scheme also enables companies to appoint junior reporters (in this case, known as ‘community reporters’) to engage with local communities.
- 4.7. In both cases, grants have been ‘one size fits all’. They have not been tailored to the needs of individual publishers and have not been designed to build those publishers’ capacity, or the capacity of the sector more broadly, to provide benefit to the public. They may have helped some reporters to gain employment, and they may have led to the publication of some useful journalism; but they have done very little to ensure that the public will benefit from high-quality public interest journalism in the long term.
- 4.8. In July 2019, the Government awarded £2m to Nesta (formerly known as the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) to launch a ‘Future News Pilot Fund’. Nesta proposes to invest in ‘a combination of technological solutions, new models for producing and disseminating public interest [news] and support for providers of local and regional news across the UK to build the capacities and space to experiment and work differently.’ This new fund promises to be more attuned to the needs of independent publishers than the BBC or

⁹ See https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-fix-journalism.php.

NCTJ schemes. However, it, too, is focused on individual projects rather than on the ecosystem for public interest journalism.

4.9. In the United States there is a more well-developed culture of non-commercial support for public interest journalism. There are multiple initiatives, including specialist foundations that focus exclusively on community news, non-profit news and/or investigative journalism. Similarly, in Europe, the European Journalism Centre works with and alongside a range of statutory agencies and private trusts and foundations to support public interest journalism. We believe that similar plurality is desirable in the UK, to avoid creating a culture of dependency where a sole funder becomes all-powerful.

4.10. Any attempt to support public interest journalism in the UK must recognise the diversity, the complexity and the fragility of the independent sector. The needs of this sector – and its many audiences – cannot be addressed through a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, or through discrete grants for individual reporting or innovation projects.

Mat Hope. Editor, *DeSmog*.

“We are dedicated to investigative journalism on the environment; two areas that are largely neglected by the mainstream press due to the risks and costs, and because the stories don't drive traffic or clicks despite their importance.”

John Baron. Editor, *West Leeds Dispatch*.

“West Leeds Dispatch is different because of our closeness to our communities. We're written, edited and run by local people and provide a level of community coverage, local knowledge and passion which simply can't be matched as mainstream media withdraws from our communities.”

Anna Merryfield. Community News Director, *Social Spider*.

“We believe that the decline of traditional local news outlets has had a significant effect on local democracy and civic pride. Our model utilises the skills, knowledge and passions of our communities to create papers which are reflective of and responsive to the people they serve...The UK is not facing a crisis of quality journalists who understand the importance of listening to and representing their communities, it is facing a crisis of how to pay them to do that work.”



5. The Public Interest News Foundation

- 5.1. The challenge is stark: the public is experiencing a crisis in journalism. Old models have collapsed and have not been replaced. Poor standards of journalism have corroded public trust, so that even high-quality journalism is scorned. Audiences are unwilling to pay for high-quality news when they can entertain themselves for free online – where they are also exposed to a flood of misinformation and disinformation.
- 5.2. Independent publishers are stepping up to address this crisis. Some independent publishers have been around for many years. Others are just emerging. Either way, they are determined to provide audiences with public interest journalism. Whether they operate in print or online, they are revitalising journalism for the digital age.
- 5.3. Independent publishers are bright but flickering beams of light in the darkness. They have the potential to provide even greater benefit to the public. But they – and the audiences they serve – are vulnerable to financial shocks and changes in the wider media economy.
- 5.4. In order to improve public understanding of public interest news, and enhance the capacity of the independent publishing sector to provide it, we propose the creation of a new charity: the **Public Interest News Foundation**. As a charity, the Foundation would exist to promote citizenship, community development and high ethical standards of journalism. It would pursue these purposes through three programmes:

Education

An education programme, to build knowledge and understanding of public interest news among the general public and people who work within the sector.

Capacity Building – Publishers

A programme to build the capacity of public interest news organisations.

Capacity Building – Infrastructure

A programme to build the capacity of organisations that provide infrastructure for the public interest news sector.

- 5.5. In the following sections, we provide more detail about these three programmes.

Education

- 5.6. Members of the public are underinformed about the news they receive. They do not understand how news is produced and disseminated, and how this may affect the trustworthiness of news. On the whole, the public distrust journalists. However, they also rely upon journalists to provide them with important information. They struggle to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources of information.
- 5.7. In order to address this challenge, the Foundation intends to prepare and disseminate information about the nature of public interest news. This material will be designed to address the information needs of audiences with different capabilities, including members of the general public; and students on relevant courses at school, college and university.
- 5.8. In order to improve their knowledge and understanding of the principles of public interest news, the Foundation will also work directly with people employed (whether on a paid or voluntary basis) within the public interest news sector. This sector is led by a range of editors, publishers and chief executives with very different skills and experiences. These leaders carry a heavy responsibility for their organisations and the communities they serve. Many of them launched their organisations in the face of challenges. Like other social entrepreneurs, they are at risk of burning out under the stress and strain of their roles. At the same time, they have the potential to play an even greater leadership role across the sector, for the benefit of the public.
- 5.9. These leaders and their colleagues need greater capacity to serve the general public. We believe that the Foundation should therefore establish a professional development programme. This would be an educational programme with the fundamental purpose of improving the provision of public interest news to the general public. The public will be best served if this programme is initially aimed at the leaders of the public interest news sector,

to ensure that they have the skills and confidence to meet the needs of their colleagues and audiences. That is where the most urgent need is. However, in time the Foundation should expand this programme to others employed within the sector, including not only journalists but also engagement officers, social media officers and revenue officers; and to people who are interested in joining the sector. The programme should be open to all.

- 5.10.** The professional development programme should consist of the following elements:
- **Workshops**, where participants come together in small groups to discuss theoretical and practical challenges in relation to public interest news, learn new techniques and exchange best practice;
 - **Distance learning**, where participants access online modules; and
 - One-to-one **coaching**, where participants are supported by qualified coaches to find solutions to theoretical or practical challenges.
- 5.11.** The Foundation should appoint staff and consultants with a high level of experience and expertise to deliver this programme. This would enable the Foundation to provide a tailored programme of support for each participant.
- 5.12.** Publishing professionals would apply for places on the programme, which would be awarded in a fair and open manner by the board of the Foundation (see below for a proposed funding policy).
- 5.13.** Professional development courses would normally last for up to one year, although graduates of one course might subsequently go on to join another course. For example, a graduate of the engagement course might go on to join the leadership course.

Capacity-building for publishers

- 5.14.** Most independent publishers are operating at the limit of their capacity, with no time or energy to invest in developing their potential to provide public interest news.
- 5.15.** Around the world, media development funding tends to focus on specific projects, rather than core costs. This pattern has so far been repeated in the UK. The BBC Local Democracy Reporter scheme and the NCTJ Community Journalism Fund both enable grantees to employ junior reporters for specific activities, but do not enable them to invest in their long-term sustainability or resilience.
- 5.16.** In contrast, we believe that the Public Interest News Foundation should award capacity-building grants to public interest news organisations.
- 5.17.** Grants should cover a period of at least three years and should be renewable. They should be directed not towards specific projects but towards the core costs of running an independent news organisation. In this way, the Foundation would respect and protect publishers' editorial independence, whilst enabling them to focus on capacity-building initiatives.
- 5.18.** Publishing organisations would apply for capacity-building grants, which would be awarded in a fair and open manner by the board of the Foundation (see below for a proposed funding policy).

Capacity-building for infrastructure

- 5.19.** The independent news publishing sector consists of a large number of small organisations. They can best serve the public if they are able to be more than the sum of their parts. For this, they need shared infrastructure.
- 5.20.** The foundation should therefore support non-profit organisations that support the ecosystem for public interest news through services such as:
- Networking;
 - Training;
 - Complaints-handling;
 - Legal advice;
 - Ethical advice;
 - Technological advice;
 - Research; and
 - Advocacy.

- 5.21. In addition to supporting organisations that already provide these services, the Foundation should also be open to opportunities to support the development of new infrastructure.
- 5.22. For example, a group of publishers might wish to build a new digital platform to share public interest journalism from different parts of the country, in order to provide greater benefit to the public. In this case, the Foundation would award the grant to an individual publisher, who would act as the lead grantee and would be responsible for managing the grant.
- 5.23. Organisations would apply for capacity-building grants, which would be awarded in a fair and open manner by the board of the Foundation (see below for a proposed funding policy).

Robbie Lockie. Creative & Operations Director, *Plant Based News*.

“We focus on credibility, transparency and telling stories the mainstream media won’t and see the future for independent news as constructive journalism that tells the truth, but also focuses on solutions.”

Michael Casey. Publisher, *YourHarlow* and *YourThurrock*.

“In the case of Harlow what makes our publication different is that we are the only publication producing news dedicated to a town of 80,000 that in the last decade has lost its three printed papers.”

Daniel Ionescu. Managing Director, *Stonebow Media*.

“My vision for the future of independent news is a network of independent local news providers working for the wider benefit.”

Paul Hutchinson. Managing Editor, *Bedford Independent*.

“We need independent news to have this recognition and support, because supporting the failing larger publishers is essentially throwing good money after bad. If this continues then the recommendations of the Cairncross Review will fail, independent news media will not survive, and we’ll be back at square one.”

Vanessa Baird. Co-editor, *New Internationalist*.

“I believe the future of independent news must be a rich and vibrant media ecology where there is support for media plurality and diversity, to improve standards, and tackle the current democratic deficit.”

Nancy Mendoza. Director of Communications and Membership, *The Canary*.

“The independent news sector in the UK has the potential to bring a plurality of voices to coverage of local, national and international issues.”



6. Governance

- 6.1. In England and Wales, charities are regulated by the Charity Commission to ensure that they exist to benefit the public. This protects charities against the risk of being captured by political or private interests, which, in turn, helps to build trust among the public.¹⁰
- 6.2. As a charity, the Public Interest News Foundation would be able to raise funds from a wide range of sources, including (in principle) government, tech companies, trusts, foundations, members of the public and high net worth individuals.
- 6.3. In return for the considerable financial and reputational benefits of charitable status, the Foundation would be subject to the requirements of charity law. It would be able to fund non-charities, so long as its decisions were guided by a commitment to the principles of public benefit. For this reason, our definition of public interest journalism (see Appendix II) is intended to align with the Charity Commission's understanding of public benefit.
- 6.4. The Public Interest News Foundation would be governed by a board of trustees with the right combination of skills and experience to ensure that the Foundation achieves its charitable purpose. These trustees would be selected to reflect the diversity of contemporary British society.
- 6.5. Public interest publishers and other stakeholders might be involved in the work of the Foundation through an advisory forum. However, the trustees would not represent the private interests of publishers or other stakeholders.
- 6.6. The Foundation would have the following objects:
 - *To promote public understanding and knowledge of the principles and practice of investigating, reporting and disseminating Public Interest News, including relevant law, ethics, codes of conduct and practical aspects of related activities;*
 - *to promote active citizenship and civic responsibility and encourage and facilitate informed participation and engagement by members of the public in their communities, including by supporting the provision of Public Interest News by exclusively charitable means; and*
 - *to promote high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism and the editing and publication of news in the print and other media for the benefit of the general public, having regard to the need to act within the law and to protect both the privacy of individuals and freedom of expression;*
- 6.7. We believe that these objects are charitable.



▲ Members of the Taskforce at the June 2019 workshop. Pictured left to right: David Floyd, Social Spider; John Baron, West Leeds Dispatch; Sarah Cheverton, Star and Crescent.

¹⁰ The Public Interest News Foundation would be registered by the Charity Commission for England and Wales but would work across the United Kingdom.

7. Funding policy

- 7.1.** The Foundation would achieve its purpose in part by awarding grants to independent news publishers. Any charitable foundation that awards grants is ultimately responsible for how those funds are spent. Charitable funds must be used to advance a charitable purpose for the benefit of the public and must not be used to advance private or political interests.
- 7.2.** In order to balance the need for accountability with the need for editorial independence, the Foundation should establish a clear funding policy which should be set out in writing by the Foundation board and periodically reviewed.
- 7.3.** The Public Interest News Foundation can learn here from the experience of journalism funders in Europe and North America. The Taskforce proposes that the Foundation should adopt the general principles for journalism funding published by the American Press Institute, which are as follows:
- *‘There should be no pre-publication review or attempts to influence coverage (either as a condition of the grant or in practice).*
 - *There should be zero to light-touch post-publication editorial feedback.*
 - *Funders should offer general operating support whenever possible, thereby providing grantees with maximum flexibility.*
 - *When supporting specific content areas or projects, the grant should be broad and general. Ideally any discussion should be no more specific than about beats or general areas of coverage.*
 - *When funding more specific topics or series, the funder and grantee should agree in advance on clear parameters of the grant and the work.*
 - *To avoid the appearance of undue influence or attempting to buy coverage, funders should try to avoid when possible being the sole underwriters of specific stories or series. They also should avoid conversations about specific expectations related to the conclusions, outcomes or opinions that will be derived from the reporting.’*
- 7.4.** In addition to these general principles, the Foundation should also set out criteria to confirm which organisations and individuals are eligible for support through its professional development and grantmaking programmes (eligibility criteria); and how applications will be judged (success criteria).

Eligibility criteria

- 7.5.** The Taskforce recommends that organisations should be eligible to apply to the grantmaking programmes if they are:
- An incorporated organisation registered in the United Kingdom (not an individual or an unincorporated association); that is
 - Either a charity, social enterprise or another form of non-profit organisation¹¹;
 - Primarily concerned with the publication of public interest journalism, or with the provision of support for public interest journalism; and
 - Demonstrably committed to high ethical standards of journalism for the benefit of the public.
- 7.6.** The Taskforce recommends that individuals should be eligible to apply to the professional development programme if they are employed or aspire to be employed (whether on a paid or voluntary basis, and whether on a permanent, fixed-term or consultancy contract) by an organisation that meets the above criteria.

Success criteria

- 7.7.** The Taskforce recommends that applicants should be selected for support on the basis of criteria such as the following:
- Demonstrable commitment to provide benefit to the public by publishing or supporting the publication of original, ethical and high-quality public interest journalism;

¹¹ See <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/What-is-it-all-about/> for a definition of social enterprise.

- Demonstrable capacity to use the Foundation’s support to provide benefit to the public; and
 - Demonstrable commitment to working collaboratively to provide benefit to the public.
- 7.8.** The Foundation would expect to see quantitative or qualitative evidence that publishers meet these criteria. In particular, the Foundation should look for evidence that a successful applicant would use the Foundation’s support to increase their long-term sustainability.
- 7.9.** If the Foundation’s programmes are oversubscribed, it should (a) award grants to applicants who best meet the selection criteria, whilst (b) striving to ensure an overall diversity of grantees.

8. Budget

- 8.1.** In order to calculate an appropriate budget for the Foundation, we have looked to comparable organisations in the UK and US. We want to know how big the Foundation should be; and what proportions of its budget should be allocated to its operating costs and to grantmaking.
- 8.2.** The BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service operates on a budget of £8m per year, of which less than 5% is allocated to operating costs. The NCTJ Community News Project has a budget of £4.5m per year. The Nesta Future News Fund is running a one-year pilot on a budget of £2m. It is not known what proportion of these funds are allocated to the organisations’ operating costs. By contrast, the American Journalism Project (AJP) expects to spend a \$50m fund over a five-year period. Approximately one third of this fund is allocated to the AJP’s operating costs.
- 8.3.** The Taskforce believes that the American Journalism Project provides the most relevant model for the Public Interest News Foundation. Each programme officer at the AJP is responsible for a small portfolio of grantees. This allows the Programme Officers to remain closely involved with their grantees, and to provide a ‘funding plus’ model of support.
- 8.4.** A 33% operating budget is above average in the philanthropic sector, but it is appropriate in this context. It would enable the Foundation to ensure due diligence, provide effective support to grantees, share lessons learned, and in these ways to achieve its charitable purpose.
- 8.5.** If, for example, the Foundation had an annual budget of £3m, it could make grants of up to £2m, whilst spending £1m on its operating costs, including the cost of running the education programme and providing non-financial support to grantees.
- 8.6.** The Foundation would be able to generate an annual budget of £3m in perpetuity from an endowment of £100m. An endowment would give the Foundation and its beneficiaries the greatest security, stability and independence. Failing this, the Foundation should seek to raise enough funds to cover at least a five-year period (i.e., £15m). It should strike funding agreements to confirm that donors’ support is not conditional on editorial decisions made by grantee publishers.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1.** There is an unprecedented opportunity to support public interest journalism in the UK by creating a dedicated charitable foundation with the expertise and capacity to support publishers and their audiences through a blend of capacity-building grants, professional development and support for the independent publishing ecosystem.
- 9.2.** The Taskforce has developed a clear vision of the scale of the challenge and the outlines of the solution. We now welcome contributions from experts and stakeholders who can help us bring this vision to life.
- 9.3.** IMPRESS is currently hosting the Taskforce and incubating the Foundation. However, the Foundation will ultimately become a wholly independent organisation, and IMPRESS will become one partner among others.

Appendix I: About the Independent Publishers Taskforce

The Independent Publishers Taskforce was launched in April 2019 to develop concrete proposals to support the future of public interest journalism.

The Taskforce included independent news publishers from across the United Kingdom. These publishers are responsible for many forms of journalism, including local and regional news, investigative reporting and political analysis. All members of the Taskforce were also members of IMPRESS, which provided meeting space, facilitation and logistical support to the Taskforce.

The Taskforce met for the first time on 21 May 2019, when Taskforce members considered the challenges and opportunities facing their sector. Following this meeting, IMPRESS prepared the first draft of a Blueprint for a new organisation that would support public interest journalism. This Blueprint was informed by the Cairncross Review's proposal for an 'Institute for Public Interest News' (IPIN).

At the second meeting of the Taskforce, on 25 June, members were joined by a range of experts and interested parties who brought a range of perspectives to bear. This larger group discussed the draft Blueprint and made a number of important contributions, ensuring that the Blueprint is anchored in the needs of the public.

In light of those contributions, IMPRESS prepared a second draft of the Blueprint. This draft was discussed at the third meeting of the Taskforce, on 30 July. Following that meeting, the Blueprint was revised again. It was finalised following the fourth meeting of the Taskforce, on 18 September.

Members of the Independent Publishers Taskforce included the following publishers:

- Bedford Independent
- Cornish Stuff
- DeSmogUK
- New Internationalist
- On The Wight
- Plant Based News
- Rights Info
- Social Spider
- Star & Crescent
- The Canary
- The Conversation
- The Guildford Dragon
- The Irish World
- The Lincolnite
- Unity News Network
- VIEWdigital
- West Leeds Dispatch
- Your Thurrock

The Taskforce also benefited from the advice of representatives of other organisations including:

- Bristol Cable
- Bureau Local
- Community Media Association
- Ethical Journalism Network
- European Journalism Centre
- Facebook
- Google
- ICNN
- Luminate
- MeCCSA Local and Community Media Network
- Media Reform Coalition
- NewsGuard
- NUJ
- openDemocracy
- The Bureau of Investigative Journalism

The Taskforce was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT), an independent foundation that promotes democracy, transparency and accountability.

Appendix II: Defining Public Interest News

By 'public interest news', we mean information that is produced and disseminated to the public according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism and which provides one or more of the following benefits to the public:

- *informs members of the public about matters of relevance to their role and responsibilities as citizens; or*
- *enables members of local communities to become aware of and understand matters of common concern to them as members of their community and which promotes their involvement and cooperation in such matters and community cohesion accordingly; or*
- *enables members of the public to participate in an informed manner in relevant democratic processes and, as a result, supports the legitimacy of the democratic process as a whole; or*
- *benefits the public by promoting charitable educational outcomes, such as improving public understanding of health and medical matters or the conservation of the environment.*

In other words, public interest news is a potentially wide range of material, which must have at least one of the four categories of charitable public benefit set out above.

For example, the definition would encompass local news, produced and published according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism, which informs local citizens about matters which are relevant to the exercise of their civil rights and duties. Providing members of the public with reliable information about matters which affect them and other members of their communities leads to associated beneficial outcomes, including informed participation in local elections and local voluntary work, for example.

The definition would also encompass investigative journalism which is produced according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice and which provides the public with fact-checked, politically neutral information, for example about the conduct of public bodies like the NHS or of people in public office, which has a bearing upon the lives of ordinary members of the public. Information of this sort enables the public to better understand matters of public importance and make more informed choices. It is commonly accepted that, without investigative journalism, these varieties of public interest news may not come to light at all.

The definition would not encompass journalistic material which is simply entertaining in nature, because that would not generate any of the four benefits identified. Nor would it include journalism which is politically motivated, biased, inaccurate or which fails to observe a person's right to privacy, because these are not forms of journalism which are carried out 'according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism', as the definition requires.

The definition it is clearly not an exhaustive list of the beneficial effects of public interest news. Its purpose is to specify, in the Foundation's constitution, the necessary qualities of public interest news, in order to ensure that the Foundation advances exclusively charitable purposes.

Contact

The vision outlined in this Blueprint belongs to the Independent Publishers Taskforce, convened by IMPRESS from April-September 2019. Future steps in response to this vision will be taken forward by the Public Interest News Foundation.

More information will be made available on www.publicinterestnews.org.uk.

 [@PINewsF](https://twitter.com/PINewsF)

Alternatively, if you would like to contact IMPRESS, please write to info@impressreg.org.uk or visit www.impress.press

 [@impressreg](https://twitter.com/impressreg)

