

MediaNorth

CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM (NORTH) • April 2020



As circulations stagger in the wake of COVID-19, newspapers offer free delivery – See Page 4.

COVID-19 creates havoc in print media

WITH race courses and betting shops shut the *Racing Post* was an early victim of COVID-19. It will not be published for the foreseeable future. But a grim picture is emerging, a perfect storm for local and regional newspapers already battered by a decade of falling advertising revenue and disappearing circulation.

These are the reasons why the future is grim:

Advertising revenues are taking a massive blow. Some local publishers say they are down by 50%, some national titles by 30%.

Reader revenues are also being hit. Supermarkets are increasingly reluctant to stock newspapers, so dramatically have sales fallen. Delivery boys and girls have been sent home, for fear that they might spread the virus. And, of course, people self-isolating are not going into

Newspapers take big hit as revenue is battered

newsagents to buy papers.

One prediction by the Reuters Institute is that the impact could mean a loss of something like ten percent of all front-line newspaper journalism jobs in the UK.

Then there is the wider economic context. The UK economy is already in recession, and the only question is how bad it will be and whether it will be a severe recession or turn into a full-scale depression with years of economic decline. The evidence shows that for every 1% decline in the economy advertis-

ing revenue drops by 5%, with a bigger impact on print rather than broadcast advertising.

The response of Newsquest, one of the regional press owners, has been to use the crisis to their financial advantage, using the government's job retention scheme to put a significant number of employees on furlough with 80% pay.

Newsquest has also announced a pay cut for all staff. From the start of April 2020 it intends to implement a 15 per cent cut on wages above £18,000 and pro-rata for those working part time.

JPI Media has suspended printing and delivery of most of its free newspapers amid a 'substantial reduction' in advertising and concerns over home deliveries and the spread of the coronavirus.

Grim times indeed.

Editorial

Vital role for robust media

THE coronavirus has put intense strains globally on health systems, media and broader economic and social structures. It has also, positively, spurred people to demonstrate social solidarity and revealed the vital importance of accurate, impartial information to guide people's behaviour.

Quality journalism is vital and our public service broadcasters and local press are playing a key role in providing information and working with volunteers to make sure the vulnerable receive help.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner, is famous for his assertion that famines do not occur in democracies. "No famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy," he wrote in *Democracy as Freedom*. And part of a functioning democracy is a robust, independent media free from censorship and political pressure at times of crisis.

We are now seeing globally how fractured and fragile sections of our media are when faced with political pressures over reporting the pandemic.

We welcome any feedback and comments on this special issue of *MediaNorth*.

Granville Williams,
Editor

BBC bashing: Will the Tories think twice?

BBC bashing by Boris Johnson's closest aides and supporters has already been knocked on the head by the deepening coronavirus crisis and the government's desperate need to maximise every possible means of communicating with the public.

Ministers are coming face to face with the stark reality that the nationwide network of television and radio coverage provided by the BBC is a unique resource that any responsible administration should be duty bound to preserve and maintain.

Well over half the 28 million television audience for the Prime Minister's Downing Street address announcing the lockdown was tuned to BBC 1, and the channel's Six o'clock News has been attracting as many as 9 million viewers, twice the average viewing figure.

Equally irreplaceable during the current lockdown is the reach and level of trust among viewers and listeners for the output of regional television newsrooms, and especially the BBC's 39 local radio stations.

I know from personal experience that even the most diehard anti-BBC Conservative politicians can be won over during a national crisis and will think twice before supporting any push to break up the corporation.

My hope and expectation is that one positive outcome from the current pandemic is that the forthcoming negotiations on charter renewal will deliver a more secure future for the BBC.

Nick Jones recalls the role of the BBC in the 1972 state of emergency

I joined BBC Radio Leicester as a news producer in January 1972 and within days I was contributing to what public service local radio stations do best during a state of emergency: supplying listeners with accurate up-to-date information tailored to their locality.

The start of my broadcasting career had coincided not only with a seven-week miners' strike and rota power cuts, but also the imminent launch of independent local radio, an initiative by the then Conservative government aimed at subjecting the BBC's local stations to the much-needed competitive force of commercial rivals.

Our objective at Radio Leicester, as the very first of the BBC's local stations, was to fulfil the undertakings given at our launch in 1967.

Our broadcasts had to be informative, fast, reliable and truly local, not forgetting that as a city rather than a county station our transmission area was restricted to the city itself and the towns and villages in the immediate vicinity.

Once the miners' strike had reduced output at the electricity generating stations and the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath had been forced to introduce a state of emergency, we did all we could to tailor our news output to help listeners come to terms with the enforced rota of nine-hour power cuts.

Early each morning I read out the name of every single school that would have to close that day due to the restrictions, an invaluable service to families already struggling with the loss of power, and the kind of detail that we knew would be so valued by our listeners.

At a pep talk some weeks later I remember being impressed by the stance of the then director-general Charles Curran when he congratulated the local stations for having served licence payers so well when there was so much disruption to daily life.

I was struck by the way Curran had defended the principle of the BBC being funded by a fee that had to be paid by every household with a radio receiver or television set; he seemed not only aware but proud of his responsibility to the licence payer.

The strength of Curran's commitment to public service broadcasting had made a lasting impression and soon after becoming a political correspondent I was regularly remind-

Looking into the future

COVID-19 isn't distracting the Tory hardline MP Julian Knight from launching his inquiry into public service broadcasting. Knight took over as chair of the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee with a clear political agenda which fitted closely into the government's plans to 'whack' the BBC.

He wrote his application for the DCMS post in an article published on *Conservative Home* in January. 'I want the DCMS Select Committee to serve as a MP-led "royal

commission" on the future of the BBC,' he wrote. In the piece he compared the licence fee to both a 'poll tax,' and 'a modern version of Charles I's Ship Money'.

The inquiry follows other attacks on the BBC: the government's consultation on decriminalising licence fee evasion and the cost of funding free TV licences for those aged over 75. There is an absurd deadline for submissions of Thursday 30 April 2020. In the present crisis this inquiry should surely be put on hold



HARD-LINE: Tory MP Julian Knight





BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg invariably gets called first at live televised news conferences from Downing Street. Boris Johnson's BBC-bashing communications chief Dominic Cummings is having to face reality. In a national emergency any responsible government has to communicate with the public and that means acknowledging the extent of the BBC's audience reach.

(Image: Daily Telegraph 25.3.2020)

ed of his clarity about the BBC's contribution whenever I interviewed Conservative MPs.

Never once did I hear criticism from the Tory benches about the role or value of the BBC local radio stations that were broadcasting in their constituencies.

Even those MPs who never missed a chance to harry the BBC realised that their local station was a platform that had an appeal across the age ranges and was a trusted friend especially among hard-to-reach groups such as the elderly, disabled, least well off and vulnerable sections of the community.

In the first two weeks of the coronavirus lockdown and the start of the BBC local radio's *Make A Difference* campaign – aimed at maintaining contact with listeners during the pandemic – the 39 stations received more than 100,000 calls.

Such has been the response that with the help of radios donated by Argos, Currys PC World, John Lewis & Partners, Pure and Roberts Radio, the BBC is offering free DAB radios to the most at-risk elderly who are self-isolating and would like access to news

and entertainment.

Let's hope history repeats itself in the months to come and that Tony Hall's successor as BBC director-general speaks with the same conviction in defending the licence fee as Charles Curran did in the 1970s.

Nicholas Jones was a BBC Industrial and Political Correspondent for 30 years and edited The Lost Tribe: Whatever Happened to Fleet Street's Industrial Correspondents?

Journalists' warning

THE International Federation of Journalists joined eight press freedom and journalists' groups to warn EU governments against the use of the COVID-19 pandemic to punish independent and critical media and to introduce restrictions on media access to government decision making and action.

The joint letter points out, 'While we appreciate that certain emergency measures are needed to combat the pandemic... numerous governments around the world are already using the pandemic to claim excessive powers that can undermine democratic

institutions, including the free press.'

They cite 'an extreme and opportunistic power grab' by the Hungarian government which is demanding an indefinite extension of the state of emergency and the power to impose prison sentences of up to five years on journalists.

The few remaining independent media outlets in the country are regularly attacked and accused of spreading 'fake news' for raising simple questions about the government's preparedness and strategy for tackling the pandemic.

BBC jobs cuts now on hold

THE BBC News plan to cut 450 jobs is now on hold as the corporation faces up to the challenge of reporting the coronavirus crisis.

The major restructure of the newsroom has been suspended. Outgoing BBC director-general Tony Hall said, "We haven't got the resource to plough ahead with those plans at the moment, so we'll come back to that at some point."

Free delivery lifeline for national newspapers?

By Nicholas Jones

NATIONAL newspapers have put commercial rivalries aside in launching an unprecedented free delivery scheme aimed at shoring up circulations during the coronavirus crisis. Well before the government issued advice on the shielding regime for the most vulnerable – and then the nationwide lockdown – full page advertisements were urging readers to sign up for free delivery for a minimum of six weeks and a maximum of 12 weeks.

Newsagents are among the essential retail outlets that are being allowed to continue trading and readers can obtain vouchers for free delivery online from www.delivermynewspaper.co.uk (or directly via freephone



Full page ads giving the latest NHS advice about the coronavirus pandemic provide income for national newspapers.

numbers). All told, 20 daily and Sunday titles have signed up to the scheme and readers can opt for free delivery every day of the week or weekends only.

Publishers were desperate

to take steps to shore up circulations fearing that sales would haemorrhage once those aged 70 and over were told to self-isolate and would no longer wish to visit newsagents, convenience stores and supermarkets.

Casual sales on the High Street, at newsstands and station kiosks have already plummeted. Regular newspaper orders have also been cancelled by a wide variety of commercial outlets such as hairdressers, dentists and betting shops.

Although publishers have collaborated in organising and promoting free delivery, some titles – such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* – are offering only six weeks while this has been upped to 12 weeks for the *Sun*, *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *The Guardian* and *Observer*.

In the two weeks since BBC local radio launched its *Make A Difference* campaign – aimed at helping listeners with problems during the crisis and putting them in touch with those who can assist – the 39 stations received more than 100,000 calls.

Print advertising has held up initially as supermarkets, banks and other concerns have been taking full page advertisements to give advice and explain changes to sales policies.

NHS information campaigns about coronavirus will provide the national press with a valuable source of income but there are already far fewer consumer promotions and the *Daily Mail* and General Trust has warned that print advertising will be hard hit as the crisis continues.

Assange denied bail by London court

By Barry White

Wikileaks founder Julian Assange had his application for bail denied on 25 March and has been sent back to HMP Belmarsh in London. His lawyers argued that the application for bail was to avoid contracting coronavirus, which is beginning to sweep through prisons. The high security prison is no longer accepting visitors and more than 100 of its staff are self-isolating.

The decision not to release Assange was strongly condemned

by Doctors4Assange, a group of more than 100 doctors, who released the following statement: 'Doctors4Assange strongly condemns Wednesday's decision by UK District Judge Vanessa Baraitser to deny bail to Julian Assange. Despite our prior unequivocal statement that Mr Assange is at increased risk of serious illness and death were he to contract coronavirus, and the evidence of medical experts, Baraitser dismissed the risk citing UK guidelines for prisons in responding to the global epidemic.

Don't forget to buy It's the Media, Stupid!

WE still plan to publish our book *It's the Media, Stupid! The Media, the 2019 Election and the Aftermath* later in April. Sincere thanks to Steve Bell, *The Guardian* cartoonist, for the pungent cover cartoon.

Obviously plans for book launches are now on hold. So we will be relying on people buying the book directly from CPBF(North). Here's how you can do it:



- Send a cheque for £11.50 inc P&P, with your name and address, to CPBF(North) 24 Tower Avenue, Upton near Pontefract West Yorkshire WF9 1EE

- Or you can use BACS to transfer £11.50 to CPBF

(North) Sort code 08-92-99 a/c No 65796090.

Please remember to email cpbfnorth@outlook.com with your name and address.

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