



## Independent Mid-term Evaluation Report Summary



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All views expressed are those of the author and are not necessarily shared by the NCTJ

# Community News Project: independent 'mid-term' report

## Introduction

The NCTJ and regional newspaper groups and independent newspapers are being supported by a charitable donation from Facebook which is enabling them to work together to address industry-wide solutions to the problems that newsrooms are facing by: (i) supporting local journalism by providing a service to under-covered areas and; (ii) improving the diversity of journalists in the UK. To this end, at least 80 community news journalists (CNJs) are being recruited and trained in a two-year pilot project.

The NCTJ has commissioned an independent monitoring and evaluation programme to ensure that ongoing progress can be measured and that the effectiveness of the project can be assessed. This report is a 'mid-term report' to assess progress in the scheme at roughly half way through the two years. It is, like the earlier 'baseline' report, mainly based on information gained from discussions with newspaper publishers, supplemented with information from the NCTJ's administrative database, information from the individual CNJs themselves and stakeholders.

This published report is a summary of a 68-page report submitted to Facebook by the NCTJ.

## Summary of findings

### 1. Remit

The baseline report had found that all employers had understood and accepted the concept of 'under-served' areas, and since there was no 'shortage' of such areas, the project opened up the possibility of reviewing them and moving the CNJs to develop new areas after six months. In practice, the majority have not been reviewed or moved, with there being a general level of content with the 'patches' as they are, because the areas originally selected are still capable of producing publishable content.

Where change had occurred, it has often been an evolutionary approach, keeping the original areas but expanding the remit, for instance to cover new types of community story. Where 'switching' had been done, publishers note that it needs to be done with some care, it particularly being important that there is not a perception that they have 'abandoned' the previous area.

### 2. Recruitment and churn

Because of the low level of turnover (discussed in more detail below) there have been relatively low levels of recruitment activity since the start the project. However, publishers note that the different recruitment processes used for the CNJs has had longer lasting impacts, in that it has made them reconsider: (i) the type of people they recruit and how they find them and; (ii) their recruitment processes.

A concern was expressed during the baseline interviews that recruiting a 'different', 'non-standard' type of journalist would bring inherent risks, including a greater degree of churn, either because the individuals did not like the actual role of being a journalist or because they are not able to satisfactorily meet the requirements of the job (or training). However, the evidence suggests that the degree of churn has been in line with 'normal' levels.

As the project works through and individual CNJs move closer to the end of their 24 months, it seems possible that individuals will be more likely to seek other employment, and in the event that it is offered and they leave, then the level of churn may increase. It therefore needs to be considered at what point should the CNJs be regarded as having completed a full term and to what extent moving into alternative roles prior to completing two years as a CNJ is a marker of success or failure. We can probably expect increasing numbers to move jobs internally and externally as and when opportunities arise. In itself, this is not a negative; it allows CNJs to move into the mainstream newsroom and so achieves one of the aims of the project, which is to increase the diversity of journalism as a whole.

Looking at the reasons for leaving so far, six of the CNJs were dismissed or resigned without (apparently) having another job to go to. Six moved into other jobs, (including three having taken other journalism jobs and one a job in PR and marketing). Three others left for personal reasons.

### **3 Training and skills**

The baseline report noted that there had been some disappointment with the timetabling of the training. Faced with a 'skills gap' compared to 'normal' recruits, many employers would have preferred the training to be 'front-end loaded', thereby taking pressure away from the newsrooms.

This interim research has confirmed that this delayed training did have an impact; partly because it 'delivered' to the newspapers individuals who were not able to contribute fully at the outset, partly because it led to extra management time for their line managers, and partly because it generated a negative impression. However, with the training coming on stream and the individuals growing into their roles, these early problems have been overcome.

The main 'additional' training element for the CNJs (over and above what a 'normal' entrant would receive) is the training being received at the Facebook bootcamps, which are viewed very positively. The NCTJ has also offered monthly skills-based webinars to all CNJs since the summer of 2019.

There are some reports of administration issues from a small number of employers, partly linked to the need to deliver training remotely as a result of the pandemic. However, these do not seem out of line with what might be expected with any programme spanning a number of training centres and trainees.

Given the different level of skills that the CNJs brought into the newsroom, even with the training that they have been receiving, they often need more support from their line managers and other staff in the newsroom than would be offered to a typical entrant. This need for support has also meant that others in the newsroom have had to make adjustments, with a need to manage

expectations so that the line managers and editors of the CNJs do not have unrealistic ideas how they are likely to perform at the beginning of their employment.

The full and continued development of the CNJs has been difficult to achieve at times, partly because of the nature of the 'community-based' job, and partly because of the impact on working practices as a result of the pandemic. This has led to a reduction in the number of people in newsrooms (and increasing pressures on those that remain) and has often changed the dynamic of the newsroom.

In terms of the nature of skills being developed, there remains the need for all the traditional journalistic skills to be covered but, at the same time, there are different, wider skill-sets being developed amongst the CNJs. Sometimes, the focussed remit of the project has meant individual CNJs have not had access to the full range of experiences and opportunities a junior reporter might expect (e.g. court reporting). To an extent, some of these skills shortages are therefore caused by the entry route – although, after only a year in post, it is perhaps inevitable that some skills still need to be developed. There are some indications that the relative lack of experience of the CNJs has meant that they have been relatively slow to get started. The staggered recruitment process appears to have had an impact, since training could not proceed until sufficient cohorts were ready to start together at the selected training centres.

The CNJs on the diploma pathway have now started taking their NCTJ examinations (those studying for the NQJ will take exams in 2021). The pass rates of the CNJs are slightly higher than those for all students and trainees taking NCTJ examinations, being 98 per cent at grades A – E (compared to 96 per cent for all students and trainees) and 76 per cent for 'gold standard' (compared to 71 per cent for all students and trainees). The cohorts may not be directly comparable, but it is a good indicator that the CNJ group is managing to balance the requirements of work and study effectively.

#### **4 Working as a journalist**

##### ***General performance***

As with the feedback in the baseline report, general views of the project are positive, with the publishers generally happy about the quality and quantity of content that the CNJs are producing.

Coronavirus and the resulting lockdown have had an impact for many of the CNJs. The nature of the impact is multi-layered and varies across the publishers. For some it increases the importance of what they are trying to do; for some the changes in working patterns seems to have had little impact; and for others (perhaps counter-intuitively), the pandemic may even have led to positive changes in working practices.

The work of the CNJs has had wider effects within the news organisations involved in the project, leading to a consideration (or perhaps for some a re-consideration) both of the nature of journalism in their publications and the way that they manage other staff within their businesses.

## ***Substitution***

Concern had been expressed at the outset that the CNJs would be used to substitute for the work of other journalists who had been made redundant or furloughed. Data from the individual CNJs suggests that the extent of them directly substituting for other journalists is limited, with little such substitution of the CNJs into 'normal' journalism roles. However, some publishers are clear that there has been an expansion of job remit beyond the original specification.

There are a number of reasons as to why the remit of the CNJs may have begun to be stretched beyond their initial limits. These include:

- the growth of the individual as a journalist, with them developing their abilities to source and develop content for publication;
- the very nature of a developing news story, which may start 'within remit' but then grow into a wider story (trend accelerated by the coronavirus lockdown).

## ***Fitting in as part of the newsroom***

Previous concerns that the CNJs would not fit into the newsroom have been shown to be largely unfounded. Nearly all publishers and editors believed that the CNJs have fitted into the newsrooms quite easily and the journalists are generally regarded as being an integral part of the newsroom, with other journalists being welcoming. This is confirmed by the responses from the individual CNJs themselves, with more than 80 per cent saying they feel to be 'completely' part of the newsroom.

Despite this, it would be wrong to assume that there are not recognisable differences, in that CNJs work different patterns (no shifts, no courts, etc), sometimes in a different format (often with scope for long-form), sometimes in the nature of the stories they develop.

Another clear difference is the extent to which they are managed by the setting of targets. Most of those working in the mainstream newsroom are subject to target-driven management formats, with a range of different targets being utilised to manage journalists' performance. The CNJs are not subject to the *same* target regime and this adds to their perceived difference from the remainder of the newsroom.

However, some publishers feel that the targets are applicable to the CNJs and should be applied. These would argue that the application of targets to the CNJs is in the best interests of the development of the individual. Some of the CNJs themselves look to the target regime to allow them to understand how their stories are 'performing', with an inbuilt sense of competitiveness. As a result, most CNJs do have some targets (only a third of CNJs report that they do not have any targets), with the most common targets relating to the number of stories they write or to the development of new contacts or attending community events.

The CNJs had mixed views of these: some found the existence of targets challenging; others do not seem to find them problematic; and some think they have a positive impact. Although a qualitative

assessment, the majority of respondents either do not regard their target regime as problematic or regard them as positive.

Those who regarded them as negative mainly cite the quantity of stories required, either because of their relative inexperience or the nature of their patch. Those who regard them positively think that they help them develop their initiative and motivation.

## **5 Diversity**

The baseline report found that the publishers have embraced the opportunity to address diversity issues and amended their recruitment processes to do so. When compared to the overall journalism workforce, a higher proportion of CNJs are non-white, and a higher proportion come from lower social classes. Whilst the proportion of community journalists with a degree is much the same as the overall journalism workforce, the type of degree is different and there were fewer with pre-existing NCTJ qualifications.

Due to the low level of churn, the diversity of the CNJ workforce has remained essentially the same. Where there has been a need to hire replacements, employers were keen to maintain the diversity emphasis, trying to replace a 'diverse' CNJ with a similarly diverse one.

The differences that the CNJs bring to the newsroom are appreciated and acknowledged and the individual CNJs themselves also believe that they bring something new. The CNJs believe that their distinct contribution relates to them giving a voice to their under-covered areas (either geographic or socio-demographic), though they also relate to the nature of the stories they write, either the subject matter or the form of the stories. A minority note that they bring a greater range of social media and technical skills to the newsroom.

In this sense the scheme has had a really positive impact. It has put someone in the newsroom who otherwise would not be there, albeit with this sense of a wider impact being described as 'a feeling', rather than evidenced.

## **6 After the two years**

As the programme is half way through the two years, it is perhaps not surprising that thoughts are turning to what happens at the end of the two years.

Given the generally positive views of the CNJs' performance, it is not surprising that, if possible, publishers will want the CNJs to remain with the company. However, despite these positive intentions, the economic circumstances facing the publishers are challenging, and have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

There were a number of comments about the design of the scheme and how this would impact on the retention of the CNJs, specifically relating to the possibility (in the event of an extension of the programme) of having to hire a new cohort of journalists and not being able to keep the current CNJs in place.

But, in any event, the desire is for the scheme to continue.

At this stage of the programme there is mainly a need for clarity so that they can start to make suitable plans for the futures of their CNJs.

## **7 Working with the NCTJ**

The role of the NCTJ in the initiative is noted and appreciated, adding real value to the project over and above that which would have been produced if the organisation's role had been absent.

In the baseline report, some respondents had noted that they thought too much administration had been needed. These concerns appear to have been resolved, helped by the lack of churn leading to reduced recruitment administration, and by good communications, with the NCTJ's responsiveness and willingness to talk whenever issues do arise being widely recognised.

Minor issues with the administration related either to: (i) processes; (ii) the design; or (iii) with the funding regime (including salaries).

### **Discussion**

Overall, the views of the publishers and the CNJs themselves are positive. Whilst there are always minority, dissenting voices, for the majority:

- the CNJs are providing a service to a section of their communities that had not been receiving adequate coverage before, either because it had never been covered or because of a withdrawal of services. Even with the opportunity to move CNJs' coverage to other areas, most publishers have opted to stay with the initial areas identified by the project because of the positive returns being seen;
- contrary to early fears, there has not been an unusual level of turnover amongst the CNJs. Some have left for other jobs, because they have not performed to the publishers' satisfaction or for personal reasons, but the number leaving is not disproportionately large;
- the CNJs are providing good quality, publishable content. This is of a different nature to mainstream journalists, with different subject matter (being more community-based) and often of a different form (sometimes longform);
- the CNJs have fitted in well with the wider newsroom. Whilst it is recognised that there are differences between the CNJs and the mainstream staff, this does not seem to have prevented them developing good working relationships;

- the training is working effectively and the CNJs are acquiring the skills needed to progress. In terms of the examinations, they are achieving a slightly higher pass rate than average across all NCTJ-exam entrants; and
- the CNJs are people the publishers want to keep in the organisation, although whether this can be achieved or not depends on more than the performance of the individuals, particularly given the economic difficulties compounded by the pandemic.

Editors have had to make some adjustments in expectations and managerial approaches for some of the CNJs as many of them have come into the workplace with lower levels of developed skills and experiences than 'normal' journalists – for whom the NCTJ Diploma in Journalism would be an essential 'gateway' qualification.

Beyond the immediate performance of the individual CNJs, the project has stimulated some publishers (again, not all) to consider and (for some) to change, the way that the wider business operates. This includes:

- recruitment, with some publishers changing both (i) the recruitment process (in terms of advertising and selection methods) and (ii) the type of individuals that are looked for. Some are now willing to consider 'non-traditional' applicants ie those without degrees or NCTJ qualifications, being willing to forgo these in return for applicants who have closer connections to their local communities and a willingness to train while on the job;
- the nature of journalism, with more emphasis on 'traditional' journalism;
- a wider consideration of the diversity of the journalism workforce.

A concern at the outset of the project was that the publishers, in the face of challenging economic circumstances – all made worse by the coronavirus lockdown – would look to use the CNJs as replacements for their mainstream journalists who would have been made redundant or furloughed. There are two possible types of substitution:

- **direct substitution**, where the CNJs work outside their remit and directly work on producing content that would have been produced by other journalists; and
- **indirect substitution**, where the content that the CNJs produce compensates for reduced content from mainstream journalists who are no longer in the company.

There is little evidence of direct substitution taking place. Most publishers have kept the CNJs working within their remit and, even where it has changed, the change has been an evolution of (i) the individual as a journalist, with them wanting to undertake more challenging, 'hard news' stories and (ii) the nature of the stories themselves which may start by being 'within remit' but which grow beyond it.



The extent to which indirect substitution has taken place has not, at this stage, been assessed in depth. It is certainly the case that CNJs are producing different types of content (in terms of subject matter and form) that, in their absence, would not be produced. Whether this has replaced other content that would have been produced by other journalists is a moot point. There would be a natural limit to this – publishing only community-based journalism would unbalance the output of a publication which most editors and publishers could not accept. But this remains a topic to be explored in the final stage of the evaluation.