



Independent Baseline Evaluation Report Summary



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

1 Introduction

The NCTJ and nine regional newspaper groups and independent newspapers are being supported by a charitable donation to the NCTJ from Facebook, to enable them to work together to address industry-wide solutions to the problems that newsrooms are facing to:

1. support local journalism by providing a service to under covered areas; and
2. improve the diversity of journalists in the UK.

It will do this by recruiting, training and qualifying a target of at least 80 community journalists in a Community News Project in a two-year pilot project.

The NCTJ has commissioned a comprehensive, independent monitoring and evaluation programme to ensure that ongoing progress can be measured and that the effectiveness of the project can be assessed both in a formative (*ie* developing our understanding of what activities and processes work in the desired way) and summative manner (*ie* that we are making a difference to the quality of local journalism and improving the diversity of newsrooms). The evaluation will provide accountability to Facebook for their investment in the Community News Project and, through the learning acquired, will increase understanding of the ways in which the desired impacts are generated.

This report summarises the findings from the first round of discussions with the publishers at the early stage of the programme. It is based on 21 qualitative interviews, organised around a semi-structured discussion guide (which had been previously agreed with the NCTJ). Following this there will be:

- a second round of discussions in June and July 2020, leading to the first year 'formative' evaluation report;
- a third round of employer interviews and data collection from individual community news reporters in 2021, leading to the final 'summative' evaluation report.

This baseline report is a summary of the 55-page report submitted to Facebook by the NCTJ.

2 Delivering journalism to underserved communities

All employers were comfortable with the concept of 'underserved' areas. Issues to note on this are that:

- underserved areas have been mostly defined by the publishers in a geographic sense, though some have defined theirs in socio-economic terms (age, ethnicity, *etc*) and at times these two factors overlap (*eg* lower socio-economic groups concentrated in geographic areas);
- many of the underserved areas are a re-establishing of services which the newspapers used to cover, but from which they have withdrawn. This is not the case for coverage of socio-economic initiatives, which reflect expansion into new areas for the newspapers. The shrinkage of coverage has been perceived to have had negative impacts, both on the credibility of the newspapers but also on those communities themselves

- there is no shortage of underserved areas – even if the project is successful in providing services to the areas defined for the current project, all could expand into further areas. Although the Community News Project is providing significant support it seems unlikely that this will provide coverage for all the underserved areas in the UK, as these are plentiful. Because of this, the proposal of moving the Community Journalists to develop new areas after six months is seen as being an attractive option as it adds flexibility.

The underserved areas were previously not completely uncovered, but the coverage tended to be limited, either ‘big stories’ often about negative issues (such as crime and drugs) or celebrity-based ‘gossip’. The Community News Project has allowed a change of news focus, and an increase in more positive news coverage. This should be considered as an unintended positive outcome: a shift away from negative news (which is easy to identify and collect) and a move to greater emphasis on positive news stories which is harder to do so, and requires connections at the local level.

3 Journalism recruitment and diversity

3.1 Recruitment process

All employers are supportive of the aim to increase diversity of their journalism workforce and, to that end, the majority were willing to amend their recruitment practices to attract new types of recruits.

All the publishers used a wide range of channels to advertise the community journalist positions. Collectively this has been to use (i) national advertisements (usually in *Hold the Front Page*), (ii) their own publications (both in print and online) and social media. This far, this is standard, and these activities reflect what would normally be done. But employers recognised that if they were to identify and recruit ‘different’ people they needed to use additional recruitment channels to advertise the community journalism positions. The employers had a strong desire to attract applications from individuals with a strong connection to the area which they will be covering.

Many of the employers (though by no means all) were willing to be open to consider different levels of applicant, moving away from only considering applicants with journalism qualifications and experience. The dropping of such requirements does not seem to have lessened the quality of applicants for some employers as training and support has been provided by the project.

Many employers who have used these approaches think they are better than their previous recruitment patterns. These perceived advantages have manifested themselves in:

- increased application numbers, with the community journalist positions attracting high numbers of applicants, which is an improvement over recent years where some employers reporting that they have had difficulties attracting sufficient numbers of applications;
- having a positive impact on building relationships with their communities.

The nature of the positions and the funding allows the publishers to take a bit of a risk and employ people with skills and from backgrounds that they would not normally accept. This in turn may have a positive consequence of allowing publishers to use the project to expand their skillsets and change their output styles, and consequently change the nature and style of their output.

The majority intend to use these recruitment processes for general, 'non-community journalists' or at least will let these new processes inform their 'old' process.

3.2 Increasing the diversity of journalists

The diversity ambition

Increasing the diversity of journalists is one of the central aims of the Community News Project. The need for this is well accepted by the majority of employers, although there is, in some cases, a limited understanding of the full definition of 'diverse' with a focus on ethnicity, which may need addressing.

Monitoring diversity

The project didn't specify a strict definition of diversity. For the purposes of recording diversity, individuals would be considered diverse if they were either (i) transsexual or transgender, (ii) gay or bisexual, (iii) non-white, (iv) originates from lower social classes or (v) have a physical or mental disability.

Diversity issue:	Diverse if:
Transgender or transsexual	Individual identified as either
Sexual orientation	Individual identifies as gay or bisexual
Ethnic origin	Individual is non-white
Social class	Individual has a parental main wage earner at age 14 who is from SOC's 4 – 9 or unemployed ¹
Disability	Individual has a physical or mental disability

The diversity target was set as being that 50 per cent of places filled would be filled by an individual with at least one of the factors above. This target has been exceeded as, of the reporters recruited under the CNP banner, 51 of the 77 (66 per cent) individuals have fitted into one or more diversity criteria. The data for the individual factors are shown in the table below.

¹ We have used the occupation of the main parental income earner at the age of 14 as our determinant of social class. We know from previous research (Journalism at Work 2019) that the majority (72 per cent) of journalists come from a household in which the main earner comes from one of the top three occupational groups, which compares to 41 per cent of all those working. We have defined as 'diverse' therefore, someone whose main earner works in an occupational group other than these three.

Attainment of diversity targets

		N	%
Identifying as transgender			
	Yes	0	0
	No	78	100
Sexual orientation			
	Heterosexual/straight	63	88
	Gay	5	7
	Bisexual	3	4
	Other	1	1
Ethnicity			
	White	62	76
	Black	4	5
	Asian	11	13
	Chinese	1	1
	Other	4	5
Social class			
	SOC 1 - 3	41	55
	SOC 4 - 7	19	25
	SOC 8 & 9	15	20
Disability			
	Yes	5	6
	No	73	94

Base is individuals who gave a response to each question

It became clear during the discussions that employers were using the initiative to widen the pool away from applicants who had a (usually NCTJ) qualification in journalism. The data shows that 81 per cent of the community news journalists have a degree. This is slightly lower, but not markedly so, than we may expect to see in traditional journalists, where estimates of the proportion who have at least a degree vary between 82 and 87 per cent².

Where the variation occurs is on journalism-related qualifications and NCTJ-related qualifications. The Journalists at Work research suggests that 81 per cent of journalists had a journalism-related qualification and, amongst these, 81 per cent had an NCTJ qualification. This suggests that two thirds (66 per cent) of current journalists have NCTJ journalism qualifications. Compared to this, amongst those who had gained community journalist positions, 66 per cent held a journalism-related qualification and of whom 60 per cent had an NCTJ qualification. This suggests that 40 per cent of the community journalists had a NCTJ journalism qualification. Thus, we can conclude that the Community News Project has been successful in helping the participant employers look beyond their normal pools of recruits to new, non-journalistic applicants.

² *Journalists at Work: their views on training, recruitment and conditions*, Spilsbury M for the NCTJ, 2018

Qualification levels and journalism-related qualifications

	Community News Journalists	Journalists at Work, 2018
Proportion holding degree	81%	82% – 87%
Proportion holding journalism qualification	66%	81%
Proportion holding NCTJ journalism qualification	40%	66%

Source: (i) CNP monitoring data and (ii) Journalists at Work, 2018

Note: two % figures given for those holding a degree because the report quotes two sources, the ONS's Labour Force Survey and those responding to the journalists at work survey

Means of attaining greater diversity

It is the widening of the pool to which the job would appeal to, away from a qualified and experienced journalist to a more open specification, which is directly linked to the increase in diversity. It is this accessibility to diverse candidates, driven by the wider application methods and the wider pools this gives access to, that has made a difference to diversity rather than positive discrimination. When faced with candidates at interview, most simply went for the best candidate.

It is also important to note that not all approaches worked. We should consider whether it may be a useful exercise to gather together the experiences of the employers into a 'what worked and what didn't' guidance note so that lessons can be more effectively captured and disseminated to future participating employers.

We should also note that this widening of the application pool and attracting new types of candidates is not universal – some employers recruited someone who they already knew from various sources, most often from a previous period of work experience relating to a journalism course. It seems unlikely that these employers were more widely considering reaching into new pools of talent, and more likely that they were giving jobs to people they would have liked to employ, but just don't have the posts.

A wider note of caution was raised, that this diversity activity only make a lasting impact if individuals go on to work in the industry after the scheme has finished. This is something which will need to be explored in later stages of the evaluation. But, at this early stage, the project has shown that it can change attitudes towards diversity.

4 Working as a community journalist

The discussions about working as a community journalist have been held at a relatively early stage in the process. Whilst some community journalists had been in posts for several months, some had been so for a matter of weeks. It is a little early, therefore, to be definitive about the nature of the work in all cases, and this information will need to be corroborated by information from the individual journalists themselves. But at this stage, we can comment on intentions and early experiences of the nature of the work.

4.1 Creating new roles and additional posts

An important emphasis of the project was that the community journalists should not replace journalists who have been laid off. As we have seen from the discussion above, the

community journalists have been aimed quite clearly at areas which are currently underserved. To counter arguments of 'deadweight' (ie that these journalists are replacing journalists that have been recently laid off) it is important that managers/editors understand this distinction: most seem to do so.

Given this distinction, it is useful to explore whether the nature of the jobs is similar to or different to that of other journalists. Whilst it is important that the coverage of content is different, if the individuals are to progress into the wider journalism profession, it is important that they develop the skills and experience which allow that progression. So it is important that the jobs are not so different that they are disadvantaged in their careers.

Views on this vary: for some publishers it is not the nature of the work do they do which is different from the work done by other journalists, but the areas in which they do it. In broad terms, the basics of the job are the same for the community journalists are the same as for the main newsroom, albeit with different working patterns (absence of rotas, weekend working, shifts etc). The differences lay in the focus of (in these early days) on establishing (or re-establishing) contacts within the under-served areas, with less content is being produced and published. Because of this, the community journalists are normally operating to different output targets to the rest of the newsroom.

This will need continuous monitoring and will be a subject for investigation later in the evaluation. A concern for some is that the community journalists may be asked to do tasks beyond their remit. Under the twin influences of time and distance from the centre, the 'good intention' element may weaken further into the project. However, there is potential conflict here: if the community journalists do become involved as part of the newsroom, if they become an integral part of it, then there may be 'job creep'. If asked, there will be (often subtle) pressure for the community journalist to expand their role because they will want to be seen as being a positive employee with a 'can-do' attitude. They may even decide to get involved themselves and if they see a colleague 'under the cosh' then it would be only natural for them to step in and help, which may take them beyond their job scope. The community journalists are aware that these jobs are time-limited and will be looking beyond this to the future.

4.2 Fitting in the newsroom

Nearly all publishers and editors believe that the community journalists have fitted into the newsrooms quite easily and the community journalists are, generally, regarded as being an integral part of the newsroom. Other journalists are welcoming – partly because they think it's a good thing and partly because they need an extra pair of hands. Staff see the differences between the jobs that they do and those that are being done by the community journalists.

There is also an increased risk that that the employment may not 'work out': the fact that they are reaching out to diverse people who do not have a journalism background is higher risk and may lead to greater turnover. This possibility of greater drop-out rates is a factor to be monitored. The publishers may also need to consider how they can better prepare people for the actual experience of working as a journalist, as people may not know the actual reality of working as a journalist. The question arises of how can the community journalists be prepared before they join and then supported whilst they are in post to prevent early departures. Again, this is an issue to be monitored in the on-going evaluation.

4.3 Existence of a skills gap

It is evident that there is a considerable 'skills gap' for some companies. Because the community journalists have been taken on at a lower level than would normally be the case, they are operating with lower skill levels. This is meaning that they are operating at a 'lower' performance level than would normally be expected. This puts extra pressure on the rest of the newsroom (particularly the editors) in terms of management, supervision and training, which some publishers have found difficult to provide.

This is not the case for all employers: those who have previously had experience of recruiting non-graduate journalists (eg via apprenticeships) were already aware of the extra development input that would be needed and were better prepared. These differences are worth exploring in later stages of the evaluation. At this stage, we highlight it as possibly being primarily an issue of internal publisher communications and where some are simply 'better' at these than others. The responses suggest that smaller companies or those that have a dedicated Community News Project manager appear to suffer less in this regard.

There was some disappointment expressed with the timetabling of the training. Faced with the '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.

4.4 Output management

Journalists today are very 'output-managed' with targets relating to number of stories, number of clicks, number of pages, etc. The question is therefore whether the community journalists are subject to the same regime of targets or whether these would be considered beyond their job role?

The Key Performance Indicators developed for the Community News Reporters show where the activities are intended to be targeted. The **key indicators** are for the reporters to:

1. reach an audience within a community that was previously under-served;
2. grow a loyal audience that regularly connects with the news brand;
3. publish wide-ranging, high-quality content relevant to that audience;
4. use varied digital tools to reach audience in myriad ways;
5. share knowledge about digital tools with colleagues and across newsrooms; and
6. ensure coverage of diverse groups within designated communities/specialisms.

The responsibility for gathering the supporting data for these indicators lies with the individual reporters, though it will be agreed by their line manager or editor. Information from the reporters/publishers will be provided quarterly, although monthly figures will/can be provided when requested. The deadlines for the production of this data have yet to be confirmed. Information should be provided in bullet points, not lengthy prose. As a general point of principle, community journalists and reporters will not be compared against one another.

In general, the community journalists are not on the same targets as other reporters. It's very early days for most of them and the focus is on developing contacts in their under covered

areas. However, they are already producing good material at this early stage. It seems likely that the pattern of output from community journalists will be different: there will be a slow build up, accelerated later with some gaps and spikes as they engage with their communities and have the skills to produce more content.

However, some query whether this 'different' treatment is what the community journalists will want, as they will want to demonstrate that they can fit in and achieve targets similar to reporters.

If the stories being developed are different, a question also arises about whether the output produced by the community journalists is judged by the same quality criteria. Publishers note that all stories, whether from a community journalist or not, have to meet basic quality standards (accuracy, truthfulness, fact-checking, etc). Also, the quality of writing has to be of a good standard (spelling punctuation, etc). Quality is quality and sub-standard material is unacceptable regardless of who produces the work. But there is an acceptance that if the community journalists were not focussing on these areas, some of these stories would not get published – possibly not 'newsworthy' enough, and not of interest to enough people to merit the coverage.

5. Skills and training

5.1 Training

The interviews for this baseline evaluation report took place at a very early stage of the project and, as such, it was too early in the process for many employers to have undertaken many, if any, training activities. That being said, all community journalists have a training plan in line with NCTJ requirements and feedback on this is positive.

The training is progressing. Some employers report that this is sometimes more formal than that for 'normal' journalists. For others, it seems to be a standard process, with an emphasis on on-the-job training. It is clear that the community journalists have different training elements to that followed by typical recruits, much of which relates to the Facebook boot camps. There is a desire for this Facebook training to be passed on more widely in the newsroom.

5.2 Skills development

Anticipating the development of skills over the two-year project, the views vary. Some believe that the community journalists will develop higher levels of skills than 'normal' journalists, due to the enhanced emphasis on social media skills. Others believe that the skillset will be essentially the same, albeit targeted in different areas. Some believe that the community journalists will have skills gaps which will need addressing if they are to progress into jobs in the general newsroom.

5.3 Development of skills over the two-year project

As we have seen, the extent to which the community journalists are perceived to have different skill sets to the rest of the journalism team varies. But, the extent to which the community journalists can and will progress into a wider journalism career at the end of the two-year project will depend on the extent to which they have developed all round skills. Opinions on this vary:

- some are of the view that the community journalists will have higher skill sets due to the social media skills they will develop as a result of the link to Facebook;
- others think that the skills they will develop will be different because of the nature of their experiences. As the nature of stories they develop vary, so will their skills. For some, this difference may be useful as a new career path may be emerging;
- some believe that they will have the same skills and just use them in different areas (the underserved communities) and in different ways; and
- others that there will need to be a skills top up as the community journalists will not be able to develop the full range of necessary skills.

6 Administration and communication issues

There were a number of comments made regarding the programme's administration and communication.

There are some concerns about general communication. In particular, some respondents expressed an issue that they had not been sufficiently involved in the development of the programme and expectations were not fully explained. It is unclear whether this is due to communications between the NCTJ and the employers, or whether communications from the NCTJ have not been passed on adequately between the publishers and individual editors.

Some respondents noted that they thought that too much administration has been required. This suggests that there is a need to review and consider what information is collected, whether this information is used, and how it is used.

As the discussions developed, other comments were made which fell outside the structures of the interviews. In particular, the development and implementation of the programme has positively impacted on the image and reputation of the NCTJ and the project has encouraged more co-operative working within the industry.