Precarious Labour: Digital Transformations of UK Newspaper Journalism

By

Salih Kinsun

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Department of Sociology and Criminology

University of Essex

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ABSTRACT

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Digitisation, the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working, and artificial intelligence (AI) have profoundly reshaped local journalism in the UK. These structural shifts have led to widespread newsroom closures, workforce reductions, and the decline of traditional newspapers, detaching journalists from the communities they serve. Institutional imperatives have redefined journalistic roles, exacerbated job insecurity, and intensified professional precarity. This study examines how local journalists navigate these transformations, their strategies, and their precarity experiences. In-depth interviews with 26 local journalists reveal that digitalisation and digital-first strategy have resulted in job losses, diminished community engagement, and an increased reliance on social media and digital platforms for news production. Speed and cost-effectiveness have overtaken traditional reporting values, fundamentally altering the profession.

The findings highlight that utilising digital technologies and AI-driven changes disproportionately disadvantages older journalists, contributing to ageism and the marginalisation of experienced professionals. Moreover, newsroom closures initiated during the pandemic have been permanent, forcing journalists to work remotely, often in inadequate home environments which can lack proper infrastructure. These conditions hinder journalists' ability to uphold journalistic standards. Financial instability is a pervasive issue. Due to persistently low wages, most interviewees, predominantly from working-class backgrounds, struggle to meet basic living costs. Many have been compelled to relocate from urban centres to more affordable but geographically distant areas, further disconnecting them from their reporting beats. Additionally, declining confidence in trade unions, driven by financial constraints, has left journalists with limited avenues for collective bargaining, deepening their vulnerability.

This study contributes to a critical understanding of UK local journalism's structural challenges. It offers insights into shifting professional identities, economic instability, and the broader implications of an industry in crisis, highlighting the urgent need for systemic interventions to safeguard the future of the profession.

Keywords: local journalism, digitalisation, remote work, de-unionisation, precarity

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DEDICATION

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INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

The local journalism profession has changed, raising essential questions about its evolving framework, professional practices, and identity in academia. As digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) become integrated into news production, traditional journalistic roles are redefined, often increasing job insecurity. Nielsen (2015) argues that the decline of traditional newspapers and the rise of digital media have compelled local journalists to adapt to new realities, reshaping their professional identities. Similarly, Diakopoulos (2019, 2024b, 2024a) and Carlson (2015) focus on the effects of AI and automation on journalism, pointing out that these technologies are altering labour dynamics and potentially worsening professional identity and job insecurity. Economic pressures, such as stagnant revenues and rising costs in remote work settings, complicate these challenges for journalists. Deuze and Witschge (2018) and Cohen (2015) contend that journalists are increasingly navigating precarious work environments. The shift to remote working, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has added another layer of complexity. Tobitt (2020a, 2021a) and Usher (2021) examine the implications of decentralised work for journalistic practices and professional identity and found that these forces—digitalisation, AI, economic instability, and remote work—fundamentally reshape local journalism, prompting critical enquiries about its future viability and the wellbeing of journalists.

Örnebring (2010a, 2018a) contends that journalists are experiencing a diminishing comprehension of their professional identity, a view corroborated by scholars such as Lloyd (2003, 2004), Lloyd and Seaton (2006), and Marr (2005). Örnebring emphasises the significance of addressing these concerns, asserting that journalists who perceive their profession as declining provide critical insights into how they conceptualise their roles and interpret their professional responsibilities. These reflections, he argues, are essential for understanding the evolving occupational identities of journalists in a rapidly changing media landscape.

Expanding on this body of research, my study reveals that local journalism in the UK has increasingly transitioned into a remote, multi-skilled profession, requiring practitioners to navigate a diverse and demanding array of tasks. This shift underscores the need for a critical re-evaluation of the defining characteristics of local journalism, as traditional notions of journalistic practice are disrupted by the dual forces of digitalisation and evolving labour

conditions. The profession is undergoing significant transformation, marked by the pressures of digitisation, the closure of newspapers and their offices, and widespread redundancies. The shift to remote work, compounded by prolonged hours in front of screens and the integration of artificial intelligence, has depersonalised journalistic practice, eroding critical skills and talent. Inadequate salaries have compelled many journalists to seek secondary employment outside the field, further diluting their professional focus. Whilst the role of trade unions in addressing these challenges is widely acknowledged, the cost of membership and the perception that unions neglect lower-tier journalists have limited their effectiveness. Collectively, these factors highlight that local journalism in the UK is facing profound structural and professional crises, signalling an industry on the brink of a pivotal and uncertain transformation. For a clearer understanding of these changing parameters and the data analyses, the following titles will define who the local journalist is within the traditional framework, how this role has evolved, what skills journalistic labour requires today, and what local journalism represents in the contemporary landscape.

1.1 Local Newspaper Journalism as a Media Occupation

The developments of local newspaper journalism in the UK commenced during the early modern era, adapting to social, political, and technological transformations. The first English-language newspapers emerged in the 17th century, with the Oxford Gazette (1665), later renamed the London Gazette, serving as a government-controlled bulletin rather than an independent news outlet (Raymond, 1996, 1999). During this period, local news often circulated through pamphlets, town newspapers, and handwritten newsletters, with formalised local newspapers yet to be established. The 18th century witnessed the gradual emergence of local newspapers as print technology advanced and literacy rates increased. The relaxation of printing restrictions allowed for the creation of provincial newspapers, with The Norwich Post (1701) and The Newcastle Courant (1711) among the earliest examples (Cranfield, 1962). These newspapers catered to growing urban populations, reporting on trade, politics, and community affairs whilst often maintaining strong editorial ties to local elites.

However, the actual expansion of local newspaper journalism occurred in the 19th century. The abolition of the newspaper stamp duty in 1855 significantly reduced production costs, leading to an explosion of local and regional newspapers across the UK (Lee, 1976). Titles such as The Manchester Guardian (1821), The Leeds Mercury (1718), The Sheffield Independent (1819), and The Scotsman (1817) played significant roles in shaping public discourse within their respective regions, offering extensive coverage of industrial, political,

and social developments (Conboy, 2004). These newspapers helped cultivate a sense of regional identity, mainly as urban centres grew during the Industrial Revolution. By the early 20th century, local journalism had become a professionalised industry. Newspapers were increasingly structured around commercial models, relying on advertising revenue and subscription sales to sustain their operations (Williams, 1998, 2009). The rise of media conglomerates, such as Northcliffe Newspapers and later Johnston Press, led to the consolidation of smaller independent titles, streamlining operations, and reducing editorial diversity (Franklin, 1998, 2006).

The second half of the 20th century heralded a further concentration of ownership, with regional newspapers increasingly controlled by large publishing groups such as Newsquest, Trinity Mirror (now Reach plc) and Archant - see Chapters 2 and 4 for a fuller discussion. These companies acquired numerous regional titles, reshaping the landscape of local journalism. The decline of print circulation in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, accelerated by digital disruption, forced many newspapers to transition to online platforms. Although digital technologies expanded audience reach, they also introduced financial challenges as advertising revenues shifted towards global technology companies rather than local publications (Jenkins and Kleis Nielsen, 2018). Despite these transformations, local newspapers continue to play a crucial role in democratic accountability, ensuring that local issues remain visible within public discourse. However, concerns regarding declining local news provision and 'news deserts'—areas with little to no dedicated local news coverage—have raised questions about the sustainability of regional journalism in the digital era (Franklin, 2012).

Defining who qualifies as a journalist in journalism research is a complex challenge due to the diverse perspectives available. However, in broad terms, local journalists are essential in providing information about public consequences, offering original reporting about their communities, and fostering social cohesion (Boyce, Curran and Wingate, 1978; Hagar *et al.*, 2019; Jenkins, 2024). A local journalist is a media professional who gathers, investigates, and reports news relevant to a specific geographic community, such as a town, city, or region. Unlike national or international journalists, local journalists focus on issues affecting residents' daily lives, including local politics, public services, community events, and regional economic developments (Kröll, 2015; Heiselberg and Hopmann, 2024). In this capacity, local journalists serve as watchdogs, holding local authorities accountable whilst acting as intermediaries between the public and decision-makers. Local journalists foster civic engagement, strengthen

community identity, and ensure that underreported local stories receive public attention (Hagar *et al.*, 2019; Heiselberg and Hopmann, 2024; Jenkins, 2024).

The definition of a local journalist has become increasingly ambiguous in modern journalism. Historically, local journalists were associated with newsrooms; however, the contemporary definition includes a broader range of people. Freelancers, independent contributors, videographers, and even late-night commentators who engage with current events are now considered part of the journalistic landscape (Subryan, 2020). Furthermore, the once-passive audience has become active in news production through social media, whilst influencers and online personalities increasingly fulfil journalistic roles (Kröll, 2015; Heiselberg and Hopmann, 2024). Artificial intelligence (AI) has also introduced new complexities to local news production. AI-driven systems aggregate and distribute content, often relying on national sources to generate local news narratives. This development raises concerns about authenticity, editorial judgement, and accountability (Thomas, 2025). The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has called for greater transparency from AI developers regarding the data sources used to train these technologies, emphasising the need to protect journalistic integrity (NUJ Editorial, 2025). AI-generated news content not only disrupts traditional journalistic labour but also weakens the diversity of local journalism, further blurring the boundaries between automated and human reporting.

The participants in this research project represent the local journalism sector across nine regions in the UK (see Table 5.2), drawn from five news organisations that publish regional newspapers and identify themselves as local journalism service providers (see Table 4.1). Accordingly, this study operates on specific assumptions regarding the definition of a local journalist. For this research, then, a 'local journalist' is defined as an individual employed to serve a particular community (Franklin, 1998; Jenkins, 2024), who socially constructs local events and information within a specific social framework (Heiselberg and Hopmann, 2024), and who is influenced—or compelled to be influenced—by the professional norms, practices, and ideologies of their organisation (Tobitt, 2021b).

Furthermore, the journalists who participated in this study exhibit several defining characteristics: local journalists must be adaptable to remote working; possess a diverse skill set—particularly as employers increasingly value multitasking abilities; and be proficient in evolving digital technologies. Social media has become an essential tool for news dissemination, requiring journalists to maintain an online presence whilst engaging with audiences in real-time. Although the participants in this study primarily identify as print journalists, the evolving nature of local journalism has positioned them as self-branding

specialists (Deuze, 2014), often operating beyond traditional professional frameworks. The pressures of the modern media industry require local journalists to constantly navigate changing digital landscapes whilst balancing their roles as information providers, content creators, and public communicators.

1.2 Defining Local Journalism in the Contemporary Landscape

In a common definition, local journalism has been serving as a vital component of democratic communities, providing citizens with local news pertinent to their immediate neighbourhood (Franklin, 1998; Jenkins, 2024). It has also fostered community engagement, ensured governmental accountability, and helped shape local and regional identities. However, the contemporary landscape presents numerous challenges and transformations for local journalism, including economic instability, digital disruption, AI, and evolving audience expectations. These parameters demonstrate how local journalism today has become a multifaceted mosaic of roles and civic functions, its contribution to community identity, its ineffectiveness and vulnerability to economic challenges and digital developments, and that it must adapt to ever-changing technology and practice.

Local journalism is crucial in supporting democracy by informing citizens about local affairs and facilitating participation in civic matters. It acts as a watchdog, holding local authorities accountable and ensuring transparency in governance. As Anderson (2020) indicates, local news connects people within shared spaces and engages them in civic matters, reinforcing the politics of place. Moreover, local media outlets inform members of a community about local government, elections, and other civic events, shape community views around shared values and beliefs, and create a sense of shared purpose (Husock, 2024; Ardia *et al.*, 2025).

However, in the UK in particular, the decline in the number of local newspapers (Tobitt, 2020c; Hunter, 2024), with the significant closure of local newsrooms, plus the forced remoteness of journalistic practice (Tobitt, 2021b) have reduced local news consumption and participation (Nelson and Lei, 2018; Heiselberg and Hopmann, 2024). There is criticism that the government does not allocate enough resources to small newspaper businesses (Ali and Radcliffe, 2017) and there is the belief that the heavy use of social media and the centrality of political polarisation (Chivers, 2023a) have led to polarisation among local audiences. Indeed, the indispensable role of local journalism in maintaining a healthy community and democracy has begun to erode. The desertification of local journalism emphasises the importance of the analyses.

Beyond its informational role, local journalism contributes significantly to constructing and reinforcing community identity. Covering local events, cultures, and issues fosters a sense of belonging and shared understanding among residents. A study by Heiselberg and Hopmann (2024) examining local journalism audiences, found that participants who pay for local news express strong desires for symbolic and emotional connections to their community through journalism, highlighting the role of the medium in community cohesion. Conversely, the emergence of news deserts – areas lacking adequate local news coverage – erodes this sense of identity and leaves communities disconnected (Ardia *et al.*, 2025). These news deserts, as the in-depth analyses in Chapter 7 attest, have worsened because local journalists are forced to work remotely, often involuntarily, due to rising living costs, increasing rents, and other financial pressures (Barclay *et al.*, 2022). The widespread belief that news primarily unfolds on digital platforms rather than in the physical world, coupled with the perception of journalism as a computer-based profession, has been exacerbated by inadequate internet infrastructure and poor-quality equipment. As a result, local journalism is increasingly diverging from its traditional framework.

The financial sustainability of local journalism is under significant threat due to declining advertising revenues and the collapse of traditional print media models. This economic precarity has led to newsroom closures and staff reductions, diminishing the capacity for comprehensive local reporting. In response, various initiatives have emerged to bolster local reporting, often resting on an unstated optimism about the future of local journalism (Neff and Pickard, 2023). Some communities around the world have turned to local philanthropy and non-profit models to support trustworthy coverage that is not driven by external political agendas (Husock, 2024). Despite these efforts, financial difficulties persist, necessitating creative solutions to ensure the sustainability of local journalism. Furthermore, generative AI is distancing news from local newspapers and journalists, transforming journalism into a practice which is handled without journalists, and preventing local news readers from consuming, subscribing to, and purchasing news, putting the future of local journalism in jeopardy.

Whilst the digital age and AI have transformed the local journalistic landscape and provided opportunities, they have also created a space of challenge and necessity, transforming journalism, news consumption, and journalists. Digital platforms have changed how local news is produced, distributed, and consumed, with social media and online news outlets serving as primary sources for many readers. A study of local news online by Joseph *et al.* (2021) found that local news organisations are increasingly covering national news, which is associated with

national news channels. Furthermore, the rise of citizen journalism and user-generated content has broadened local news sources, raising concerns about misinformation and credibility. Innovative platforms for collaborative storytelling have emerged, allowing communities to actively participate in local news production (Matias and Hernández, 2015). The digital transition poses challenges, including the necessity for effective monetisation strategies, the potential exacerbation of the information divides in digitally underserved communities, and the transformation of local journalism into clickbait, a material designed primarily to grab attention and motivate users to click on a link directing them to a specific webpage in today's journalism practices, practices (Cowley, 2022).

These ongoing changes and transformations have positioned local journalism and local journalists at the core of this study's research questions. This study seeks to assess the current state of UK local journalism by analysing its evolving nature through journalistic narratives. In alignment with this objective, the research has been structured and conducted according to the plan outlined below.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

In this section, I present an outline of the organisational framework and structural arrangement of my thesis.

Introduction: I establish the foundational context for the thesis by defining key concepts, including the nature of local journalism, the role and identity of a local journalist, and the concept of journalistic labour. I then outline the research aims and objectives, providing a clear direction for the study. Additionally, I articulate the significance of the research, highlighting its relevance and contribution to the broader field of journalism studies.

Chapter 2, Literature Review: This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the phenomena, contexts, and issues examined within the existing body of literature on local journalism, with particular focus on the UK, whilst incorporating some global perspectives. This chapter offers a concise historical account of UK local journalism, establishing a foundational body of knowledge that informs and contextualises the research. Additionally, the chapter critically evaluates the current state of scholarship, identifying key gaps and unresolved questions which this thesis seeks to address, thereby positioning the study within the broader academic discourse.

Chapter 3, Theoretical Framework: In this chapter, I outline the theoretical perspectives that have been revisited and refined through the analytical flexibility offered by grounded theory. It details how the iterative process of data analysis has shaped and influenced

these theories, allowing for their adaptation and development in response to empirical findings. The chapter also provides an overview of the ways in which the collected data has both informed and transformed theoretical understandings, highlighting the dynamic interplay between theory and data within the study.

Chapter 4, Methodology: In this chapter, I set out the methodological approach adopted for my research. It begins by detailing the formulation of research questions and the design of the research framework. Subsequently, it outlines the process of obtaining ethical clearance to ensure the study adheres to established ethical standards. The chapter also describes the development of the data collection tool, and the procedures followed for participant recruitment. Furthermore, the research methodology is presented, encompassing the analytical strategy, theoretical framework, and coding techniques employed during data analysis. Finally, the chapter reflects on the researcher's positionality, exploring how my background as a former journalist and my role as researcher influenced the approach to the study, interactions, and interpretations. This reflexive discussion underscores the intersection of personal experience and academic inquiry within the research process.

Chapter 5, The Effects of Digitalisation, Social Media, and Artificial Intelligence: This chapter begins with an introduction to the impact of digitalisation and the integration of artificial intelligence on journalistic labour, skills, and practices. It is organised into five key themes: (1) Anything and Everything: The Pressure of Multi-Tasking, which explores how journalists are increasingly required to manage diverse tasks, leading to cognitive strain and skill dilution; (2) Ageism: Adapt or Go, addressing the challenges faced by older journalists in adapting to rapidly evolving technologies; (3) The Burden of Digital Overload, highlighting the mental and professional toll of continuous digital engagement; (4) Digital Disruption: News From Everywhere, examining how technological advancements are reshaping the identity and sustainability of local journalism; and (5) Fact-Checking and Misinformation, focusing on the intensified demands for fact-checking in an era of pervasive misinformation. Each theme integrates excerpts from journalists' narratives, providing first-hand insights, and these analyses are contextualised through broader discussions before being appropriately concluded.

Chapter 6, Covid, The Cost of Living Crisis, and Remote Working: Following an introduction to the evolving dynamics of newsrooms, the shift to remote working, and the repositioning of journalists within this new work culture, this chapter examines five interconnected themes: (1) Journalists and The Distant Community, examining how remote working has redefined the relationship between journalists and their audiences; (2) Journalists And The Digital Divide, highlighting the technical challenges that hinder productivity and

professional output; (3) The Difficulties of Working From Home, addressing the difficulties in fostering teamwork and the pushback against remote working norms; (4) Maintaining A Work-Life Balance, exploring the complexities of maintaining boundaries between professional and personal life in a home-based setting; and (5) Health and Safety Implications, focusing on the physical and mental health consequences faced by local journalists. These themes are supported by in-depth analyses using data collected from local British journalists, providing insights into the deposition of journalists and the parameters influencing their work and wellbeing. The section examines these issues and offers a comprehensive discussion of their implications, concluding in alignment with the broader arguments presented in the other chapters of the thesis.

Chapter 7, The Journalist As Precariat: After introducing the precarious state of local journalism in the UK, which I described as a profession teetering on the edge of a cliff and characterised by profound professional insecurity, this section explores how precariatisation manifests in professional practice, labour conditions, and journalists' sense of self. It is structured around five key themes: (1) The Digital Squeeze examines how platform-driven pressures exacerbate instability in journalistic careers; (2) Remote Work and Increasing Precarity, highlighting how remote working has reshaped labour dynamics and heightened feelings of isolation and uncertainty; (3) The Habitus of Vulnerability addressing the pervasive economic fragility faced by journalists; (4) Journalism and Trade Unionism, exploring the role and significance of unionisation in mitigating insecurity; and (5) An Uncertain Future, reflecting on the broader implications of these challenges for the sustainability of local journalism as a profession. I conclude this chapter with an in-depth analysis of the data collected for this research, offering a comprehensive synthesis of the findings and their implications for understanding the precarious realities of local journalism in the UK.

Chapter 8, Discussion and Conclusion: In this chapter, I conclude the thesis by presenting the final discussions and key findings that encapsulate the core arguments of the study. I detail the implications of my research for both journalistic practice and theoretical advancements, highlighting its contribution to the broader literature on journalism and media studies. Additionally, I critically reflect on the limitations of this work, acknowledging the constraints that shaped its scope and methodology. Finally, I conclude the thesis by outlining potential future directions for further research in this area and offering pathways for building on the insights and themes explored throughout this study.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Overview

This chapter begins by outlining a brief history of journalism and its evolution. It then explores changes in local journalism and the ongoing transition shaped by digitalisation, which has permeated all aspects of news production. The chapter then examines key debates on local journalistic processes within the specific framework of the political economy of local newspaper journalism in the UK. The chapter synthesises prior research on traditional and digital-era local journalism, incorporating insights from a broader global literature. Further, it critically analyses local newspaper ownership and its implications for various factors, including job and income insecurity, life instability, and de-unionisation. Additionally, the chapter engages in ongoing discussions on the future of local journalism, particularly regarding shifts in its quantity and quality. Doing so establishes a strong foundation for subsequent chapters, particularly Chapters 5 and 6, where original data will be examined.

2.1 A Brief History of UK Newspaper Journalism

Journalism in the UK has undergone crucial transformations over the past four centuries, shaped by technological advancements, regulatory changes, and economic shifts. Understanding these historical developments is essential for contextualising the challenges and changes in contemporary journalism, particularly in the UK.

The origins of modern journalism can be traced to the inception of print technology, which enabled the dissemination of newspapers and laid the groundwork for the development of the press. Scholars such as Pavlik (2000) connect the roots of journalism to Johann Gutenberg's 15th-century printing innovations, which enabled the production of newspapers on a larger scale. This development took hold in the UK with the emergence of early newspapers in the late 17th century. The Nichols Newspapers Collection, dating to 1688–89, marked a turning point in newspaper history, followed by a new regulatory framework in the 1690s that encouraged the entrepreneurial expansion of the press. This period saw London becoming the dominant hub of UK journalism, with newspaper publishing growing rapidly in response to public demand (Briggs and Burke, 2009; Williams, 2009). By the late 18th century, more than one-hundred daily and weekly newspapers were printed in London alone (British Newspaper Archive, 2023).

Newspaper readership also expanded significantly in the early 18th century. The introduction of press taxation in 1712 provided an official record of readership growth

(Williams, 1998). Even before this, circulation numbers had been rising steadily. The government's official newspaper, the London Gazette, sold 15,000 copies annually by the late 17th century (Williams, 2009; Barker, 2011). Titles such as the Tri-weekly Post Boy and Post Man sold between 3,000 and 4,000 copies per edition in the early 18th century. By 1801, records showed a remarkable increase, with 16 million copies of daily and weekly newspapers distributed across the UK (Williams, 2009; Conboy, 2011). Technological innovations significantly contributed to this expansion. The advent of steam-powered printing presses and the expansion of the railway network in the 19th century profoundly increased both the production capacity and the geographical reach of newspapers. Daily newspapers, once limited to London and select regional areas, became more accessible on a national scale. By the late 19th century, national newspapers had become a dominant force in the UK journalism industry (Seymour-Ure, 1996).

The rise of Sunday newspapers exemplified this shift. Lloyd's Weekly News, one of the leading Sunday newspapers, sold 60,000–70,000 copies in 1852, surpassed 100,000 in 1854, and reached a circulation of over one million by 1896. This was part of a broader trend in which newspaper circulation dramatically increased. Between 1816 and 1836, circulation grew by 36%, followed by a 70% rise from 1836 to 1856. By 1881, circulation had surged by 600% (Williams, 2009). The expansion of the newspaper industry in the 19th century laid the groundwork for journalism as a fully commercialised and industrialised sector. By the late 1800s, newspaper publishing was no longer solely an information-sharing enterprise but had transformed into a highly profitable industry. Prominent newspapers such as The Manchester Guardian, Liverpool Daily Post, and Glasgow Herald generated annual profits exceeding £20,000–£40,000, whilst the Daily Telegraph earned £120,000 per year in the 1880s (Lee, 1978). Edward Lloyd, the owner of Lloyd's Weekly News and the proprietor of the Daily Telegraph, amassed fortunes worth over half a million pounds each. The emergence of media magnates and the pursuit of profit began to shape the nature of journalism, consolidating the industry into a more structured and commercialised model.

As a consequence of the period of rapid press expansion in the last 100 years, journalism extended and transformed into an industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s when *"the local daily papers were established in all the major urban centres of Britain and a new generation of predominantly right-wing national newspapers came into being."*[1] (Curran and

[1] According to Curran, these newspapers played an active role in UK journalism. The most known of these newspapers were People (1881), Daily Mail (1896), Daily Express (1900) and Daily Mirror (1903) (Boyce, Curran and Wingate, 1978; Curran and Seaton, 2018).

Seaton, 2018, p:32). By the early 20th century, circulation figures had reached new heights. Lloyd's Weekly News approached 900,000 copies in the early 1900s, whilst the Daily Mail surpassed one million. The Daily Mirror, launched by Lord Northcliffe in 1903, became the first daily newspaper to reach a circulation of 1.2 million by 1914 (Murdock and Golding, 1978). This period also saw significant consolidation and competition among newspapers, which continued into the interwar years. National newspaper circulation grew from 3.1 million copies in 1918 to 10.6 million by 1939 (Boyce, Curran and Wingate, 1978). After World War II, newspaper consumption rose, reaching 28.3 million in 1947, 35.4 million in 1961, and 40.1 million in 1975 (Murdock and Golding, 1978). However, this growth came with increased commercialisation and a shift towards media conglomeration. The pursuit of profitability reduced the diversity of newspaper ownership, with smaller publications struggling to compete against larger, well-funded enterprises.

The 1970s faced a significant transformation in the UK press sector with the rise of tabloid journalism. Many Fleet Street newspapers adopted tabloid formats, reflecting changes in readership preferences and media production methods. Scholars such as Golding and Murdock (1991) argue that *tabloidisation* reshaped the industry by introducing new ownership structures, altering news distribution methods, and leading to job losses. This period also marked the arrival of Rupert Murdoch, who acquired The Sun and turned it into the UKs best-selling newspaper by 1978, surpassing The Mirror in circulation (Boyce, Curran and Wingate, 1978; Seymour-Ure, 1996; Williams, 2009). Murdoch's aggressive business strategies intensified competition among tabloid newspapers, prompting The Daily Mail to adopt the tabloid format in 1971, followed by The Express in 1977. By the early 1980s, five significant tabloids dominated the British press, engaging in fierce circulation battles (Williams, 2009). However, whilst national tabloids flourished, regional newspapers faced a steady decline. Advertising revenue dropped sharply in the 1980s, and regional newspaper circulation fell by 1.67 million, exacerbating financial difficulties for local newspapers (Tunstall, 1983; Williams, 2009). The increasing commercial pressures on newspapers led to job cuts and strikes, with 400 jobs lost at the Daily Mail in 1980 and a £13 million loss at The Times and The Sunday Times (Williams, 2009). By the 1990s, competition from television and new digital technologies accelerated the decline of traditional newspapers. Television became the dominant medium for news consumption, with two-thirds of households owning multiple TV sets by 1995 (Seymour-Ure, 1996), whilst national newspapers consolidated into eight ownership groups controlled by figures such as Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black (Boyce, Curran and Wingate, 1978; Seymour-Ure, 1996).

The advent of the internet in the mid-1990s brought another paradigm shift. By 1995, The Daily Telegraph and Time Out had launched online editions, and by the early 2000s, digital news consumption was rising rapidly (Seymour-Ure, 1996). The percentage of UK households with internet access increased from 13% in 1999 to 42% in 2002, fuelling the expansion of online newspapers. By 2006, over 800 regional newspapers had online editions, and Guardian Unlimited became the largest and most widely read news website (Williams, 2009).

As evident in the historical snapshot, the technologies of each era brought about significant changes in journalism practices. These changes impacted newspapers, news agencies, and other news providers to adapt and shape the landscape of journalism throughout the centuries (Deuze, 2007; Franklin, 2014; Myllylahti, 2014; Picard, 2014). In addition to positive adaptation, there have been challenges. Faced with these challenges, local and national journalism evolved into a new phase of the news-making process after each technological innovation. News producers endeavoured to find new economically viable ways, ranging from small community media outlets to conglomerate media companies (Chyi, 2005). As observed, the advent of each technology was the primary driver behind innovation and profound transformations in every facet of journalism. This led to financial challenges for traditional news media outlets and spurred a frantic quest for alternative news-making models to ensure the long-term viability of journalism (Pavlik, 2000; Franklin, 2014).

In a broad sense, it appears to perceive technology and its development as inexorable, impersonal factors that significantly drive the transformations occurring in journalism (Örnebring, 2010b). From a historical perspective, technology-driven advancements have reshaped the organisational structure of both the newsroom and the news industry (Baines, 1999; Noam, 2016; Ramsay, 2019; Chivers, 2021; Majid, 2023; Duhe, Mortimer and Chow, 2004). Exploring these dynamics is essential in understanding how local journalists confront job and life security, precarity, and wellbeing challenges in their daily work in the 21st century.

In the following sections, with examples, I will explore when local journalism separated from the national press and how it evolved quantitatively and qualitatively post-separation.

2.2 From National Journalism to Local Journalism

The distinction between national and local journalism in the UK has evolved significantly. Whilst national journalism traditionally focuses on broad political, economic, and international issues, local journalism has been rooted in covering community affairs, governance, and events affecting specific geographic regions (Harcup, 2014). The expansion of the national press in the 18th and 19th centuries positioned London-based newspapers as dominant voices in the media landscape. However, as regional economies and urban centres grew, the demand for

locally relevant news increased, leading to the rise of provincial newspapers and, eventually, the development of modern local journalism (Williams, 2009; Curran and Seaton, 2018). Understanding the historical shifts from national to local journalism is essential in contextualising local newspapers' structural challenges, particularly considering digital disruption, ownership consolidation, and financial instability (Franklin, 2006; Chivers, 2023a, 2023b).

The rise of national journalism in the UK is often associated with the Industrial Revolution, when technological advancements, such as the steam press, made mass production of newspapers feasible. This period saw the emergence of major national newspapers such as The Times, The Guardian, and The Daily Telegraph, which catered to an expanding middleclass with an increasing appetite for news about politics, society, and international events. The 19th century is often regarded as the 'Golden Age' of national journalism, with prominent, London-based publications taking a leading role in setting the news agenda for the entire country (Harcup, 2014). On the other hand, local newspapers started playing a distinct but supplementary role in the news ecosystem. Provincial newspapers began to proliferate in the 18th century, primarily covering local events, civic affairs, and regional politics. By the mid-nineteenth century, these local papers were firmly established throughout the UK as vital links between citizens and their immediate communities. Local journalism provided a space for regional identity, addressing local issues whilst fostering a sense of connection among community members (Franklin, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2016).

The post-World War II era brought significant shifts in the media landscape. The emergence of television and radio, particularly the BBC, presented direct competition to the traditional print press, especially national newspapers which had once dominated public discourse. The expansion of broadcast media meant that national news could be disseminated to a far broader audience. This, in turn, diminished the prominence of print journalism, particularly for local newspapers, which had relied heavily on advertising revenue from small businesses (Curran and Seaton, 2018). The decline of the local press began in earnest in the 1960s, as advertising spend shifted towards television. As a result, local newspapers have been purchased by regional publishers, consolidating ownership and concentrating editorial power. Whilst this model attempted to ensure economic sustainability, it frequently resulted in a reduction in the distinctive local focus that had previously distinguished many publications (Noam, 2016; Freedman, 2021). By the 1980s and 1990s, the trend towards mergers and acquisitions intensified, and smaller independent papers were increasingly absorbed into larger media conglomerates. These changes resulted in the homogenisation of content and a loss of

the personal, community-centred approach that had defined local journalism for generations (Harcup, 2014).

The expansion of the internet and the growth of digital platforms have increased the challenges that local journalism faces. As national newspapers embraced digitalisation, many local outlets launched online editions to stay competitive. However, these efforts often failed to replicate the traditional financial model of print journalism, mainly as advertising revenue shifted towards digital platforms such as *Google* and *Facebook* (Reynolds, 2014). The challenge for local journalism lies in monetisation and competing with the vast array of free online content, including user-generated stories and social media feeds (Cohen, 2008; Cohen, Hunter and O'Donnell, 2019).

The economic challenges of local newspapers have immensely affected the quality and quantity of local reporting. As many regional newspapers have downsized or closed altogether, a significant gap in local news coverage has emerged. Once a staple of local newsrooms, investigative journalism has become increasingly rare as fewer reporters cover complex local issues such as government accountability, public services, and social justice (Cohen, Hunter and O'Donnell, 2019). This decline in investigative work has undermined the role of the local press as a key player in holding local institutions accountable. In response to these challenges, the BBC and other digital platforms, such as hyperlocal news websites and podcasts, have attempted to fill the void left by traditional local newspapers. Whilst these alternative news sources provide essential community coverage, they frequently lack the resources and reach those traditional newspapers once had, resulting in a fragmented and uneven local news ecosystem (Hendrickson, 2019).

As observed in the historical transition from national to local journalism in the UK, each technological advancement has profoundly impacted news production, distribution, audience interaction, the number of newspapers, and new job opportunities or job cuts. These technological shifts have also influenced journalism, leading to the disappearance of specific journalistic roles and genres whilst simultaneously opening doors to new career prospects. Today's local journalism landscape is intricately linked to the junction of traditional and digital journalism practices. Hence, the following titles explore these dynamics and reflect the developments of the last three decades.

2.2.1 New Technology: How Digitalisation is Transforming Journalism

The rise of digitalisation at the end of the 20th century brought about a convergence into a

culturally homogeneous entity. The growing availability of goods and services, the ongoing knowledge sharing, and their consequent influence on personal identities have driven this new technical revolution (Steger, 2003; Fenton, 2009). The advent of the internet, especially the development of the World Wide Web in 1994, has been key in facilitating the shifts in journalism and reinterpreting the notion of locality. As Deuze (1999) argues, digitalisation has fundamentally dislocated journalism, moving it from a local to a global stage and remapping the role of the journalist as a democratic intermediary. Moreover, the internet offers media practitioners many resources alongside an unparalleled array of technological alternatives. It has additionally engendered a unique variant of journalism in the digital sphere, commonly designated as digital or online journalism (Deuze, 1999).

For decades, newspapers relied on a well-established and profitable business model, which sustained the costly news production process. However, the rise of digitalisation has disrupted this traditional framework. In its early years, much online content was merely repurposed from print-newspapers without significant modifications. According to Meek (2006), The Electronic Telegraph became the UK's first newspaper website in 1994. BBC Online expanded into a full-fledged service in 1997, amassing over 140,000 pages of content and 61,000 news pages within a year. By 1999, The Guardian launched its unlimited network of websites, reaching 2.4 million unique users and becoming the UK's most popular newspaper site by 2001. In 2004, The Daily Mail followed suit, marking a turning point as both national and local news organisations gradually embraced digital journalism, transitioning from traditional news production and distribution methods. After the first decade, digital journalism evolved, and journalists began adapting news for the new medium, utilising its capabilities more effectively (Singer, 2009). They created hyper-stories, combining hyperlinks to additional digital resources, including source documentation or background information. This shift occurred simultaneously in the UK, the USA, and Europe (Fredin, 1997).

When digitalisation became indispensable for national, regional, and local newspapers, as well as major broadcasters and news agencies (Fenton, 2010), the UK press sector enthusiastically embraced digital interactive journalism, much like previous media innovations such as cable and local community TV. The excitement was short-lived, and, as with earlier transitions, the press struggled. However, the industry also witnessed that the internet brought crises with it, including industry decline, job losses, and financial insecurity for journalists (Curran, 2010a). And digital journalism has become a central part of news production and consumption, resulting in some audiences in the UK abandoning print-newspapers altogether and using digital platforms as their primary source of news (Newman *et al.*, 2020, 2021). Local

media organisations experienced this audience decline due to growing competition from new digital platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube*. Concurrently, as Freedman (2010) highlights, these organisations saw a substantial rise in online advertising, see more details in subsequent headings of this chapter.

However, this digital success was offset by the looming collapse of the existing news landscape, as explored in prior discussions on industry decline (Ramsay, 2019; Chivers, 2021, 2023b; Majid, 2023c). Advertisers, recognising this shift, have redirected their budgets to tech-giant social media companies, further eroding the financial viability of traditional local newspapers. The pace of this transformation accelerated between 2020 and 2022, with over 40 local newspapers closing across the UK (Newman *et al.*, 2020; Turner, 2022). Compounding these challenges, government regulators remained reluctant to intervene, adhering to a belief in the effectiveness of market forces despite the ongoing loss of readership and revenue (Freedman, 2010).

The transition from traditional to digital journalism has significantly redefined the relationship between journalism and democracy (Fenton, 2010, 2011; Fenton, Freedman and Birkbeck, 2010). Fenton (2010) also asserts that this shift has repositioned democracy within the intersecting domains of commercialisation, regulatory frameworks, and technological advancements. This transformation has also reshaped journalism at local level, affecting news production, distribution, and audience engagement (Barbey and Barbey, 2019; MediaNorth, 2022). A comparative study by Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014) examining Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands found that traditional local journalism is an increasingly endangered profession as a result of digitalisation advancements and local newspapers have merged with larger regional and national media groups, faced closures and budget cuts, and transitioned to sustainable hyperlocal business models (Radcliffe, 2012; Gulyas, 2019; Harte, Howells and Abingdon, 2019).

2.2.2 The Emergence of Grassroots, Hyperlocal Journalism

To define ‘hyperlocal media’ is not a simple task, primarily due to the significant variation in audience perceptions regarding what qualifies as local. But Damian Radcliffe, from the School of Journalism and Communication at Cardiff University, defines hyper-localisation as:

> *“Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode, or other small, geographically defined community. Hyperlocal journalism normally*

> *provides news and content at a more grassroots level than most traditional journalism can achieve. It can help to define local identity, fill gaps in existing content provision, hold authority to account and broaden the range of media available to audiences."*
>
> (Hall and Radcliffe, 2012, pp. 6-7).

According to this definition, hyper-localisation establishes a novel socio-economic setting and a framework for news dissemination. The way journalists craft news is inherently influenced by their working environment, which is moulded by economic, social, political, and technological factors in this new nature because these elements intricately intertwine, forming a dense interplay of commercial, ethical, regulatory, and cultural components (Fenton, 2011). In this new news environment, hyperlocal journalism integrates traditional news reporting with the evolving modes of participatory media facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies, including mobile phones, emails, websites, blogs, microblogging, and social networks. This form of journalism enables public involvement in all stages of news production through methods like crowdsourcing, interactivity, hyperlinking, user-generated content, and forums (Beckett, 2010). However, Williams (2009) asserts that the grassroots of hyperlocal journalism have an unreal ground situation and non-physical settlement conditions. According to Williams, the nature of newspaper journalism, with its reliance on advertising, high expectations of profits, and high turnovers, has been skewed.

Hyper-localisation is a model of how easy-to-access technology makes it possible for citizens to start their own media (van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014). In line with this, Radcliffe (2012) argues for technological potential, anticipated audience conduct, and potential commercial prospects. His assumption is that actively involved and dedicated citizens will employ technology to initiate blogging or contribute to digital platforms through various means. An empirical study by Chen *et al*. (2012) highlights that hyperlocal (a web-based local storytelling platform) shows promise as a mechanism to enhance engagement and interaction between different groups, addressing the gap in local news coverage. In line with the observations made by both Radcliffe and Chen, Beckett (2010) contends that independent hyperlocal journalism has the potential to alleviate the significant issue of declining professional regional and local news journalism. Corroborating the assertions of media scholars regarding independent hyperlocal journalism, at the close of the internet's inaugural decade, the House of Commons Media Select Committee stated that local newspapers could draw lessons from several of these innovative independent hyperlocal websites. They suggested in some quarters that local newspapers should collaborate with these platforms. And they stated

that local journalism, rather than local newspapers, requires preservation (House of Commons, 2010).

Relatively young adult news consumers have emigrated to the new media and deserted the community-based local newspapers. Moreover, as mentioned in the title above, frequent news consumers, this youngest generation, according to Hill (2016), have never been an audience for print-newspapers, nor had a strong community identity or much of an interest in local matters. They are typically drawn to the alluring adult world they have recently entered and the enticing possessions that might be theirs in the future. When compared, local matters appear considerably less significant for them.

The proportion of paying news consumers shows that the hyperlocal journalism project is not adopted among young news consumers. Given the strain on household budgets and a substantial portion of the public content with freely accessible news, only 9% of the total population in the UK pays to receive news (Newman *et al.*, 2023). The dominant character of algorithm-based tech companies has been another barrier of local news visibility (Newman *et al.*, 2020). Among the 70 prominent publishers monitored by Press Gazette – encompassing those listed in their monthly top 50 biggest local news brands ranking and other news sites tracked by Sistrix – half experienced a drop in their visibility score. Within this group, 24 news sites witnessed decline in the double digits (Majid, 2023a). The domination of social media companies increased uncertainty for both traditional local journalism practices and hyperlocal journalism websites. Recent reports show social media plays a pivotal role in this trend, as almost half (47%) of adults in the UK now utilise social media for news consumption. Whilst *Facebook* remains the leading social media platform, reaching 30% of UK adults, its usage shows signs of decline (was 35% in 2019). Conversely, *TikTok* has seen a surge in popularity as a news source and is now used by 10% of UK adults, a notable increase from 7% in 2022 and just 1% in 2020. Although there are variations in the types of news people access on different social media platforms, most platforms are utilised as a main news source in the UK (Ofcom, 2021a, 2022, 2023a; Majid, 2023b).

According to Hall and Radcliffe (2012) and Nesta and Kantar Media (2013), owners of hyperlocal news organisations have committed to outlining an innovative, bottom-up, technology-led alternative to the institutionalised model of news production. However, the active dominance of technology companies, attempts by major media organisations to enter the hyperlocal field, and the persistence of most of these attempts over time have resulted in the business models supporting these hyperlocal sites appearing unstable and fragile. Furthermore, these business models rely heavily on self-exploitation for sustainability. Accordingly, Harte,

Turner and Williams (2016), in their empirical study based on 35 interviews with hyperlocal news publishers across the UK, say that hyperlocal entrepreneur journalists are multi-skilled, have relatively autonomous working conditions, have a high degree of personal agency, and are taking risks. In this respect, hyper-localisation might limit the potential for achieving economic sustainability and risk isolating policymakers interested in collaborating with an idealised, fictitious hyperlocal entrepreneur. Observing the abovementioned aspects, local news fragmentation, monopolisation, and commercialisation necessitate a shift in the role of journalism. Local journalism now provides a distinct service to the public by thriving in such an environment; journalism has been forced to carve out a specific place in the media landscape, requiring a new positioning in the public sphere.

2.2.3 Local Journalism and the Public Sphere

The transition to digital media has significantly reshaped the landscape of local journalism, raising profound concerns about its capacity to sustain democracy. Scholars such as Lavender et al. (2020) argue that the concentration of digital newsgathering, production, and distribution in the hands of powerful corporations and technology giants has intensified structural inequalities within the news industry, thereby undermining the conditions for a pluralistic public sphere. This dynamic recalls Jürgen Habermas's (1989) account of the structural transformation of the public sphere, where he traced how the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie carved out spaces, through coffeehouses, salons, and particularly the press, where citizens could engage in rational-critical debate independent of state authority. Yet, while Habermas identified this as a formative moment for democratic deliberation, he also recognised its contradictions: the bourgeois public sphere was never universally inclusive, privileging male, propertied elites, and it was eventually eroded by processes of commodification and mass mediation that subordinated public debate to private and commercial interests (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1990). The current decline of independent local newspapers and the rise of conglomerate-controlled regional outlets and digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook echo this trajectory of "feudalisation". Just as aristocratic spectacle and patronage once curtailed the emancipatory potential of the early bourgeois sphere, today's commercial logics, driven by advertising markets, metrics, and corporate consolidation, have reasserted hierarchical control over public communication. In this sense, the contemporary local media landscape not only reproduces the exclusions Habermas identified in the bourgeois model, marginalising voices without economic or algorithmic capital, but also exemplifies how

market imperatives can hollow out journalism's role as a guarantor of deliberative democracy (Fenton, 2009, 2010). Thus, the precarious condition of local journalism illustrates not merely a technological disruption but a more profound structural shift consistent with Habermas's diagnosis of the public sphere's decline, where democratic participation is increasingly subordinated to commercial power.

Local journalism has historically played an essential role in informing citizens, scrutinising political power, and facilitating civic engagement. As Fenton (2009) argues, the news media must be studied as a reflection of liberal democracy, where access to reliable, independent journalism is a fundamental democratic right. Local newspapers traditionally fulfilled critical information needs, such as covering local elections and holding authorities accountable (Lavender *et al.*, 2020). However, the ongoing decline of the local press in the UK has resulted in widespread news deserts, where communities lack access to credible news sources (Toomer, 2023).

Media conglomerates have transformed local journalism into a profit-driven enterprise, often prioritising commercial imperatives over public interest reporting (Franklin, 2006). Consolidating local newspapers under corporate ownership has led to centralised editorial control, reducing the diversity of voices in local news (Gulyas, 2019; Barclay *et al.*, 2022; Mitchell, Roche and Milburn-Curtis, 2023). According to George Monbiot (2009) from The Guardian:

> *"Conglomerated local newspapers have been one of Britain's most potent threats to democracy, championing the overdog, misrepresenting democratic choices, defending business, the police, and local elites from those who seek to challenge them. Media commentators lament the death of what might have been."*

Monbiot further critiques conglomerate-controlled local newspapers as a threat to democracy, arguing that they protect elite interests whilst failing to represent local communities. This concentration of media ownership and an overreliance on advertising revenues have marginalised independent journalism and narrowed the scope of public discourse, see more details in substantial headings of this chapter.

The rise of digital platforms has further exacerbated the crisis in local journalism. Big technology corporations such as Meta (*Facebook*), Google, and X Corp. (*Twitter*) have reshaped news distribution through algorithmic curation, often favouring dominant publishers over smaller independent outlets (Elton, 2023). Mitchell, Roche, and Milburn-Curtis (2023)

report that these tech companies own 10 of the top 15 online platforms for news consumption in the UK. The resulting shift in news consumption patterns has reinforced existing power structures, privileging commercially driven narratives whilst diminishing opportunities for community-driven journalism (Fenton, Freedman and Birkbeck, 2010). Furthermore, corporate control of local journalism has decreased journalistic presence in many towns and cities. According to Mitchell, Roche, and Milburn-Curtis (2023), 38 local areas in the UK are not served by any local news outlet, leaving 4.1 million citizens without access to independent reporting. This democratic deficit is particularly pronounced in economically deprived areas where financial constraints make it difficult for independent news organisations to sustain operations (Bisiani, 2023; Bisiani and Mitchell, 2024). As a result, the structural transformation of the public sphere, as described by Habermas (1989), has accelerated, with market forces shaping media content at the expense of deliberative democracy, and even the understanding of democracy has been commercialised.

The integration of market-driven principles into local journalism has led to the commodification of democratic participation. Fenton (2009, 2011) argues that the commercial imperatives of news organisations have redefined democracy as a transactional process where media consumption replaces active civic engagement. This trend is evident in the declining participation in news consumption across various markets. Newman *et al*. (2023) report that only 22% of news consumers actively engage with news, whilst 47% abstain. The percentage of news consumers actively engaging with news has declined by over 10 points in the UK and the US since 2016, indicating a broader disengagement from public affairs. The demographic profile of active news consumers further reflects systemic inequalities, as they tend to be predominantly male, highly educated, and politically partisan (Newman *et al.*, 2023).

Digitalising news has altered audience engagement and transformed news production processes. The shift towards online news platforms has pressured journalists to update content rapidly, often at the expense of in-depth investigative reporting (Curran, Fenton and Freedman, 2016). Fenton (2010) highlights how corporate news expansion, characterised by 24-hour television, complimentary newspapers, and mobile platforms, has accelerated news cycles, prioritising quantity over quality. This emphasis on speed has contributed to the rise of ‘churnalism’, where journalists repurpose press releases and agency content rather than conducting original reporting (Davies, 2008; Lee-Wright, Phillips and Witschge, 2012; Fenton, 2014; Van Hout and Van Leuven, 2017).

Davies (2008; p.1.) describes this shift as *‘the business of reporting the truth had been slowly subverted by the mass production of ignorance.’* This critique underscores the extent to

which economic constraints have undermined journalistic integrity. Franklin (1998) found that 96% of local news stories were derived from press releases, a trend that has persisted despite the rise of digital news. More recent empirical research by Franklin (2006) and Fenton (2011) further confirms that these challenges continue to shape the contemporary local news landscape. Whilst digital platforms have created new spaces for community engagement, they remain insufficient substitutes for high-quality independent journalism.

Despite the ongoing crisis in local journalism, alternative models offer some hope for revitalising the public sphere. Publicly funded journalism, cooperative ownership structures, and hyperlocal news initiatives have emerged as potential solutions to counteract media monopolisation (Freedman, 2021). These alternative approaches seek to restore the role of journalism as a forum for rational-critical debate, aligning with Habermas's (1989) vision of the public sphere. However, structural challenges remain as dominant digital platforms exert disproportionate influence over news distribution and audience engagement. The concept of 'glocalisation'[2] —adapting global media strategies to local contexts— has also shaped contemporary news deserts (Fenton, 2014; Newman *et al.*, 2020, 2023). Whilst glocalised media models offer opportunities for localised content, they often operate within the framework of global corporate ownership, limiting their independence and democratic potential. Moreover, the concentration of media resources in wealthier areas further exacerbates regional disparities in news access (Mitchell, Roche and Milburn-Curtis, 2023).

In conclusion, the decline of local journalism and the rise of digital monopolies have significantly reshaped the public sphere, limiting opportunities for democratic engagement. Although digital platforms have broadened access to information, they have exacerbated existing inequalities by favouring commercially motivated content over independent journalism. As Habermas (2006, 2023) notes, the structural transformation of the public sphere necessitates a critical reassessment of media policies and economic structures to ensure journalism continues to serve democratic functions. Confronting these challenges necessitates a comprehensive strategy integrating regulatory measures, public funding programs, and grassroots media activism to preserve local journalism in the digital era.

[2] A phrase highlights that these two notions do not exist in direct opposition but instead function interdependently within a globalized context. Illustrated by the motto "Think globally, act locally," individuals grasp the importance of globalization when it influences their immediate surroundings. This results in the belief that global occurrences have local implications (such as portrayed in media depictions of distant locations) and that local occurrences possess global dimensions. (A Dictionary of Media and Communication in Oxford Reference, 2023).

2.3 The Contemporary Political Economy of Local Journalism

> *"The major modern communication systems are now evidently key institutions in advanced capitalist societies, and they require the same kind of attention, at least initially, that is given to the institutions of industrial production and distribution. Studies of the ownership and control of the capitalist press (...) interlock historically and theoretically with a wider analysis of capitalist society, the capitalist economy, and the neo-capitalist state."*
>
> (Williams, 1977: p.136)

Rethinking local journalism today extends beyond product innovation, to revisiting earlier communication frameworks mainly through the lens of the classical political economy of media (Golding and Murdock, 1991; Picard, 2011). This transformation has reshaped news creation methods, altered labour practices and audience engagements, redefined ownership structures at both local and national levels, and entrenched journalism within the industrial process (Hall and Jacques, 1989). The local press industry in the UK faces severe corporate concentration, cost-cutting measures, and weakened regulatory oversight. Its core public service mission has been undermined by funding freezes, political interference, and an uncertain digital strategy (Ramsay, 2019; Chivers, 2021, 2023b). The crisis has been exacerbated by the dominance of global tech giants that control vast portions of the digital infrastructure for financing, discovering, and accessing online media content (Noam, 2016; Majid, 2023c). Within this classical political economy context, local journalism is particularly vulnerable due to the decline of print advertising and the ongoing downsizing by significant publishing firms, leading to a diminished local press ecosystem (Chivers, 2021). Numerous local publications have either ceased operations or merged into generic 'hub' websites, often engineered by technology firms rather than journalists, resulting in minimal, if any, local news coverage. Whilst independent hyperlocal outlets have emerged, their lack of stable funding continues to tether local public-interest journalism to the profit-driven priorities of a few dominant publishing conglomerates (Chivers, 2023b; Mccabe et al., 2023).

By the late 20th century, journalism was already perceived as being in crisis as profit-driven media conglomerates expanded their control over the industry (Bromley, 2005). Golding and Murdock (1978, 1991) argue that the current media landscape continues a historical trend towards increased corporate concentration, were ownership structures shape financial dependencies and market strategies. Within local newspapers, this consolidation has led to what

Tunstall (1983) described as a 'meltdown', characterised by reduced editorial independence and a shift towards sensationalist content driven by corporate agendas (Franklin, 2006). The latest Reuters Institute report, which examines news industries across Brazil, India, the UK, and the US, highlights how the political economy of news organisations dictates editorial decisions, restricting the range of political perspectives represented (Banerjee *et al.*, 2023). The intensification of corporate ownership has fundamentally altered the relationship between newspapers and their communities. The rise of external investors has diminished the autonomy of family- and employee-owned newspapers, replacing local values with national and international market priorities (Bromley, 2005).

In the contemporary era, technological innovations—from mobile technologies and artificial intelligence to high-speed digital platforms—have transformed news production, distribution, and consumption (Hepp, Breiter and Hasebrink, 2018). The accelerating shift towards digital and platform-based news ecosystems has profoundly affected journalism's business models and content formats (Newman *et al.*, 2023). Whilst some scholars view this shift as an opportunity for innovation, others highlight its disruptive impact. Min and Fink (2021) argue that interactive video and podcast journalism have introduced new storytelling approaches, benefiting journalists trained in traditional print media. However, Singer (2009) critiques the concept of 'converged' newsrooms, contending that digital news production primarily serves advertising-driven revenue models. This commercialisation has turned journalism into a start-up-like industry, where online platforms commodify news and link social benefits to market transactions (Neff and Pickard, 2023). Pavlik (2000) asserts that journalism has always been shaped by technological advancements, from the Gutenberg press to the digital age, with function following form. Deuze (2007, 2014) reinforces this perspective, arguing that technology does not externally impose changes on journalism but rather interacts with and reshapes existing practices. Singer (2009), Watson (2017), and Mabrook and Singer (2019) observe that local newsrooms have been transformed by internet-driven innovations, affecting both the intake of information—through research, reporting, and user-generated content—and its delivery via multimedia formats (Quinn and Lamble, 2008).

Integrating digital tools has also blurred the traditional boundaries between journalists, newsmakers, and audiences, enabling widespread content reproduction and dissemination (Gillmor, 2004; Witschge and Nygren, 2009). This shift has intensified reliance on pre-packaged news sources, with studies showing that 60% of print articles and 34% of broadcast reports originate from such materials—figures three times higher than two decades ago (Davies, 2008; Lewis *et al.*, 2008; Witschge and Nygren, 2009; Van Hout and Van Leuven,

2017). The increasing replication of news content has reduced employment opportunities in journalism, accelerating the structural decline of local newspapers and weakening their connection with audiences (Fenton, 2010).

Traditional newspapers have seen declining engagement as contemporary audiences migrate from print to mobile devices and social media platforms (Marrouch, 2014; Seuri, Ikäheimo and Huhtamäki, 2022). Algorithm-driven content curation by search engines and social media platforms now determines much of the news people consume, with 27% of all news consumers relying on these automated selections (Nelson and Lei, 2018; Brlek and Kaluža, 2022). Platforms such as *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and *Snapchat* have not only altered consumption habits but have reshaped journalistic identity, compelling reporters to engage in self-branding to remain relevant (Brems *et al.*, 2017; Schwarzenegger, 2020; Smeenk, Harbers and Broersma, 2023) *TikTok*, in particular, has emerged as a significant disruptor in news consumption patterns. The platform reaches 44% of individuals aged 18 to 24 across multiple markets, with 20% explicitly engaging with news content. However, these audiences often prefer content produced by celebrities, influencers, and social media personalities over traditional journalism (Davies, 2008; Lee-Wright, Phillips and Witschge, 2012; Newman *et al.*, 2023). This trend has further eroded engagement with traditional news sources, reinforcing the dominance of social media-driven news consumption.

2.3.1 Who Owns The Local Newspapers in the UK

As a result of transformation and intensification, the production, supervision, and control of news in the media industry have gradually shifted from community journalists and into the hands of a relatively small number of media cartels (McChesney and Schiller, 2003). This process has occurred along three main axes encompassing horizontal and vertical concentration: diversification; cross-ownership structure; and internationalization. By incorporating local news networks, as exemplified by Rupert Murdoch's initiation of News Corporation's 'conquest' by acquiring local newspapers in small markets one by one, horizontally and vertically integrated media businesses gain control over distinct audiences within that segment (Herman and Chomsky, 2008). According to a study conducted in Europe and the United Kingdom, all stakeholders, including legacy firms and new entrants, have agreed on the rising fragility of their local newspaper sector in an internationalising and converging media landscape in the historical line (Donders *et al.*, 2018).

Most of the new local dailies were initiated or acquired by prominent local

industrialists' families throughout history. For instance, both the Northern Daily Express and the Northern Leader were purchased by colliery owners. The South Shields Gazette came under the ownership of Stevenson, a member of a local chemical manufacturing family. The Bolton Evening News was affiliated with the local industrialists, the Tillotsons. The principal shareholder of the Yorkshire Post was the Leeds banker, Beckett-Denison. The Ipswich Express was owned by the mustard manufacturer Colman, and so forth. These newspapers presented a distinctly different perspective on the world compared to the early radical press they replaced (Curran and Seaton, 2018). But the concentration in the ownership of local news outlets has disrupted this perspective and exacerbated the problem in terms of media plurality, impacting consumer opinions on journalism over three to four decades (Watson, 2021). Building on the perspectives of Curran and Seaton, and Watson too, a survey examining bias in UK news underscores the scepticism prevalent among nearly 70% of UK adults regarding the objectivity and non-partisanship of the media. This sentiment is echoed by over half of the population, who perceive conglomerated (group-owned) local newspapers as non-representative, less focused on informing the public, and primarily oriented towards supporting specific ideologies and political stances. The survey aligns with the concerns raised by Curran and Seaton, and Watson, emphasising widespread doubt about the objectivity of the media and the perceived influence of conglomerates on local news representation. (Edelman Team, 2021).

Traditionally, as Boyce, Curran and Wingate (1978), and Curran and Seaton (2018) noted, that local press ownership was local, often in the hands of family firms. However, by the last quarter of the 20th century, truly locally owned newspapers were becoming more of an exception than the norm in the UK. This ownership structure in the news industry in the UK has been emerging in three different types: consolidated, publicly traded publishers; privately owned publishers; and trust ownership (DCMS, 2021). The growing concentration of the ownership has resulted in mergers, closures, job cuts, precarity, the pursuit of economies of scale, and editorial content that is increasingly homogenised (House of Lords, 2008).

As evidenced by current data, there are 1,189 local newspapers in the UK, with 75% of these newspapers being owned by just five media conglomerates (see share percentages in Chapter 4). The three largest local publishers of these five companies – National World, Newsquest, and Reach (which include businesses outside these corporate entities but within their conglomerate umbrella) – announced a £40+ million profit (see footnote[3]), individually

[3]Newsquest Media Group Limited: https://find-and-update.company information.service.gov.uk/company/01676637/filing-history ;Reach Plc: https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/00082548/filing-history; National World Plc: https://find-and-

control a fifth of the local press market, surpassing the combined share of titles owned by the smallest 173 local publishers (Tobitt, 2022; Chivers, 2023b; Ponsford, 2023). In addition, Johnston Press (JP), which was defunded in 2018, was one of the largest local newspaper publishers in the UK, possessing 13 paid-for daily newspapers and 195 paid-for weekly newspapers, in addition to 40 free titles and 198 news websites (Ponsford, 2017).

The conglomerate of ownership is establishing an unparalleled position in setting the news agenda, as these media moguls, including DMG Media, News UK, and Reach, also control 90% of the national newspaper market in the UK. These news monopolies reach over 40% of the total audience and dominate the top 50 online news brands in the UK by providing the same news in local, regional, and national sequences (Ramsay, 2019; Chivers, 2023b; Majid, 2023c). Concerning local news, according to Freedman (2021), approximately 25% of local communities lack a daily local newspaper, and in 35% of communities a single title holds complete monopoly. It appears that the top two news magnates in the country collectively owned over half of all daily newspapers purchased in the UK. This is a concise example highlighting a significant issue of news diversity, where a small number of organisations overwhelmingly control the media landscape (Freedman, 2021).

Regarding local news ownership, tech giants have also been dominating the local news industry in the UK. According to the latest media coalition report, out of the top 15 online platforms utilised for accessing news in the UK, Meta (Google), and X Corp. in particular, control approximately 80% of total online advertising expenditure, providing these two tech giants with unmatched influence over the discovery and financing of online news (Chivers, 2023b). Journalism scholars, Chivers (2023a) and Freedman (2021), argue that a few numbers of billionaire media magnates and global 'big tech' "tycoons" already wield significant influence across various sectors of the UK press sector, spanning national and local newspapers, broadcasters, and emerging online platforms. They state, *"a billionaires' media is going to give us billionaire news, and politicians must break up Britain's media monopolies."* 2.5 million citizens reside in regions where there is no presence of a local newspaper in the UK. The closure or consolidation of regional titles into generic 'hub' websites is escalating in both print and online media, leading to reduced news coverage for specific areas (Mitchell, Roche and Milburn-Curtis, 2023). Whilst independent and hyperlocal outlets have emerged, the sector remains constrained by the lack of sustainable funding and support for local public-interest journalism, leaving it dependent on the commercial priorities of a small number of

update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/12021298/filing-history

disinterested publishing giants (Chivers, 2023b).

2.3.2 The Decline of Pluralism in Local Journalism

Over the course of more than four decades, local journalism has witnessed a decline, resulting in the closure of hundreds of local newspaper titles in the past two decades. The traditional print revenues of news publishers have crumbled as more people turn to online sources for news (Conboy, 2004). The challenge lies in the smaller audiences for local news, making the transition to digital business models reliant on online advertising or subscriptions especially challenging (House of Commons, 2023). Surviving this financially dependent news market has proven particularly challenging, as local news publishers struggle to generate revenue compared to other news outlets. They have faced competition from online giants such as Google, X Corp., *Facebook Marketplace*, and *TikTok*, which offer more targeted and search-based services (Dame Frances Cairncross, 2019). Furthermore, navigating and engaging with the online advertising market, establishing a subscription service, or devising other forms of business model innovation demand a level of technical and financial resources which smaller local news publishers often lack (House of Commons, 2023).

Local journalist Joshi Herrmann, from The Mill, argues that as revenues decline, local news publishers find themselves with diminished resources for conducting impactful journalism, leading to potential decreases in the quality and relevance of the stories they publish to local communities, and continues:

> *"The biggest barrier to creating a high-quality and financially independent local journalism outlet is that first year or two where you don't have enough paying subscribers or advertisers to break even. Once you hit that critical threshold, you can start to grow and create jobs."*
>
> (Herrmann, 2020)

In terms of Herrmann's arguments, Adam Cantwell-Corn, co-founder of The Bristol Cable, also contends that the economics of digital algorithms contribute to this trend and exacerbate the decline in local journalism outlets and warning policymakers as:

> *"There has been too heavy a focus on a series of short-term projects and limited subsidisation of business models (including initiatives by Facebook and Google) that are fundamentally flawed, in the absence of a rebalancing of power and profit away*

from the tech platforms. As such, more ambitious reform is needed."

(Cantwell-Corn, 2022)

In addition to the aforementioned arguments, independent small local news owners have been discussing media regulations, policymaking, and support actions (Freedman, 2021; Chivers, 2023a). The allocation of resources is a subject of considerable controversy, particularly concerning the concentration of publicly funded reporters within large private conglomerates. Instances have been observed where shareholder profits have continued to rise whilst newsroom resources are reduced. This allocation of public funds is deemed unacceptable, and there is a call for greater efforts to distribute resources to a broader array of diverse and independent publications (Herrmann, 2020; Cantwell-Corn, 2022). They also argue that there should be a more proactive approach that would empower the BBC to reach a broader and more diverse audience, simultaneously bolstering the resources and visibility of independent local publishers (Dame Frances Cairncross, 2019; Cantwell-Corn, 2022; House of Commons, 2023).

It is evident that the transformation of journalism, and consequently news, into a market commodity did not occur in an egalitarian environment. In the globalised and technology-dominated industry, escaping from the dominance of globalised capitalism that shapes free market conditions, fosters polarisation, and perpetuates dependency is impossible (Amin, 1997). In a globalised economy, concentration in the media industry reaches higher levels, and relatively small-scale media organisations cannot withstand intense competition. They are compelled to commercialise their products, alter the nature of news to align with advertisements, being a part of a monopolist company, or face closure (Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2016). In the broader context of local news, certain outlets have ceased operations by completely shutting, or merging. Local or regional media groups that have consolidated, hope that being part of a larger organisation will grant them improved access to pertinent expertise and essential digital tools crucial for bolstering their online presence (Picard, 2017). However, in this increasingly conglomerated media environment, the work of journalists is more unstable, and journalistic independence is changing due to industrial production conditions and bureaucratic structures inside the chain of command.

2.3.3 New Online News Sources and Advertising

The commercialisation of journalism is not a recent issue. In fact, journalism has always been a commodity bought and sold in the market, making commercialisation an integral aspect of

journalism production. However, in a contemporary context, the concern around commercialisation became prominent with the rise of the Penny Press in the United States and the elimination of the 'taxes on knowledge' in the United Kingdom (Kvalheim and Barland, 2019). Advancements like digitalisation and the rise and widespread use of the internet have changed the process of gathering, writing, editing, publishing, and processing; even receiving news has become highly commercialised. Local media groups have been exploring diverse revenue-generating strategies, including paywalls, subscriptions, events, members clubs, and e-commerce. One of the latest reports from Reuters Institute demonstrates local news outlets have been affected sharply by commercialisation and the migration of advertisements to tech-giant companies (Jenkins and Nielsen, 2018). Lauren Ballinger, executive editor of the Huddersfield Examiner, explains the situation of this local newspaper:

> "*We're a business. We're trying to keep The Examiner going for future generations, and the only way we can do that because people aren't buying as many papers anymore is by getting people on our website. However, these small local news outlets have to compete for advertising with major platform companies like Google and Facebook, and this is not an easy task."*
>
> (Jenkins and Nielsen, 2018)

New digital technologies create even more economic and journalistic challenges for the local press by increasing local communities' access to news via the internet and mobile telephony and enabling a significant and troubling migration of advertising to online websites (Franklin, 2012). Enders Analysis Report (Mccabe *et al.,* 2023b) (see Figure 2.1) indicates that these companies hold a substantial share and dominance in the entire advertising landscape, emphasising that local newspapers are far from being a safe zone (Maher, 2023a).

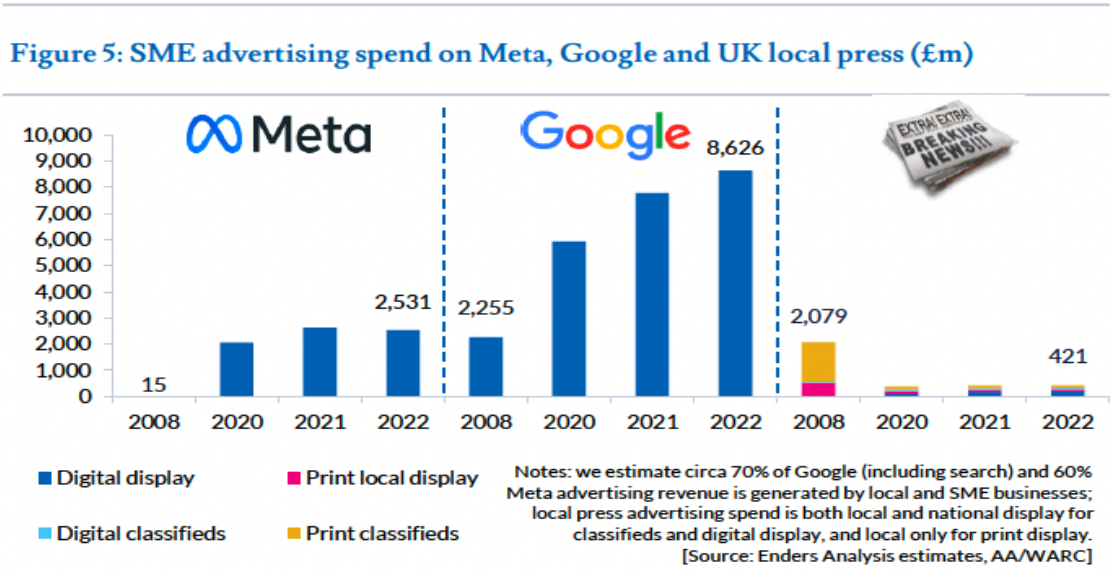


Figure 2.1: Advertising Spend On Meta, Google and UK Local Press (Mccabe *et al.,* 2023b).

The growth in sales competition was expanding the advertising market, and newspapers had consistently garnered 28% to 30% of the total advertising expenditure over the preceding two decades. However, according to Meyer (2004), the abovementioned technologies have been bypassing newspaper advertisements. Consequently, the more extensive city-based local newspapers have suffered disproportionate titles, circulation, and staff losses. The decline in local newspaper advertising revenue in the UK has played a pivotal role in this downturn. It was anticipated that by 2017, newspaper advertising in the United Kingdom had decreased to £1.9 billion, constituting 11.2% of the market share. Notably, digital advertising expenditure was expected to rise from £7.1 billion (47.5%) in 2014 to surpass all traditional media, reaching £9 billion (53.8%) in 2017 (Franklin, 2014). Thus, local newspapers were eclipsed by UK mobile ad spending, according to eMarketer, since 2014 (Reynolds, 2014). According to the DCMS report (2021), traditional global advertising, which emerged as worldwide advertising spending, faced an 8.1% decline in 2020 and experienced a downturn. However, digital advertising has remained robust. Social media, online video, and search advertising revenues continue to grow in the post-COVID-19 era. Notably, the latest Advertising Association/WARC Expenditure Report anticipated 15.2% growth in the UK's ad market in 2021. Regional/local news brands shifted their advertising spending by 15.4%, which was allocated to online platforms (Reynolds, 2014).

Newman *et al*. (2023) found that *Facebook* continues to be one of the most widely used social networks overall and dominating advertisement sector but its impact on journalism is

diminishing in the UK. Additionally, *TikTok* reaches 44% of individuals aged 18–24 across various ad markets, with a 20% reach specifically for news on *Snapchat* and the well-educated-people-oriented *X* (*Twitter*). Moreover, *Snapchat* reported that 70 million monthly viewers have been using it to access news content, consisting of a series of videos or images usually overlaid with text. These are uploaded over the course of a day, capturing most advertisements (Maher, 2023d). Traditional media sources, whether local, regional, or national, which previously held sway in disseminating news and information worldwide, are caught amidst this revolution, and they are struggling to adapt and seize opportunities and challenges within the evolving media environment (Meyer, 2004; Franklin, 2008; Hirst, 2011; Hess, 2013).

The annual Forbes report (Adgate, 2023) has also evidenced that the newspaper sector has experienced continuous decline, driven by reduction in readership and advertising revenue, which has shifted to alternative media, particularly digital platforms across the world. Although the industry has been declining for several years, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic slowdown have significantly affected key newspaper advertisers in areas such as retail, movies, and community event promotion. These sectors reduced their marketing budgets, hastening the decline in advertising revenue around the world. Commercialised news has sacrificed quality and community interests, triggering more ownership convergence. The migration of advertising has led to profit reductions, a reduction in the number of editions, closure of distribution arms, fewer and smaller pages, a lack of income, job insecurity, and an uncertain professional landscape. According to Keith Perch, the former editor of the Leicester Mercury and Derby Telegraph, online ads have contributed to a 70% reduction in journalist numbers at major UK regional dailies (Ponsford, 2017).

2.3.4 Local Journalism and Precarity

Local journalism, traditionally granted prominence through the 20th century, faces significant challenges in the 21st century. The traditional newspaper industry, which has generally been the primary source of local coverage, is in decline. It remains uncertain whether digital media will be able to support emerging models of local journalism (Nielsen, 2015; Newman *et al.*, 2023). The dominance of digital media companies impacts independent small local news outlets and the UK's largest regional and local media companies, as well. Regarding the closing of local websites, Reach has published a message telling their readers they will stop being updated: *"Changes in the media landscape and decisions made by large tech platforms have made life much harder for all media businesses."* (Linford, 2023a). As per Curran (2010b), during the

first decade of the internet, traditional local media companies have implemented measures to cut costs, such as layoffs, enhanced productivity, and merging online and offline newsrooms. A large proportion of local news organisations are abandoning traditional PR assistance and focusing instead on 'owned' media channels—specifically, their exclusive use of platforms like *Facebook* and *Twitter* (Sweney, 2023). However, according to reports from Ofcom (2021b, 2022, 2023), search engines, social media, and news aggregators, as online intermediaries, often play crucial roles in shaping a significant portion of the evolving landscape of news provision, influenced by the surge of online news and being the primary reasons for cut incomes, layoffs, and decreased productivity.

Regarding the challenges confronting regional media, the primary source of apprehension revolves around financial viability. Local and community media have been particularly susceptible to financial strain during economic downturns, like the 2008 financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic (Gulyas, 2023). Concerning this matter, a local journalist likened the environment for reporters to the '*Hunger Games*', capturing the growing uncertainty in the economically precarious regional/local newspaper industry. In the past two years, Reach, the largest owner of regional and local newspapers in the UK, including titles like the Birmingham Mail, Liverpool Echo, and Manchester Evening News, has initiated two rounds of cuts, putting around 620 jobs in jeopardy (Sweney, 2023). As a publicly traded entity, Reach's difficulties provide significant insight into the sector-wide endeavour to create a sustainable framework for local journalism in the digital era.

With respect to this, the authorities from DCMS and the House of Commons are addressing these challenges and working on robust financial protections. Their recommendations include the implementation of new codes of conduct overseen by a regulator to rebalance the relationship between online platforms and publishers; a market study of the online advertising market by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA); the introduction of the news quality obligation for online platforms through statutory measures; the development of a government media literacy strategy; a review by Ofcom of the BBC's market impact and role with an emphasis on supporting local publishers; the establishment of an innovation fund to enhance the supply of public interest news; the introduction of new forms of tax relief for news publishers; the expansion of the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS); and the creation of an Institute for Public Interest News (Dame Frances Cairncross, 2019; DCMS, 2021; House of Commons, 2023).

The government's acknowledgment of the Cairncross Review (2021) suggestion to establish these innovations for public interest news was seen as positive by news publishers.

However, the Future News Pilot Fund was deemed insufficient in scale and duration to bring about a substantial impact, and there has been no subsequent action (House of Commons, 2010, 2023). According to independent local news outlet owners, the BBC needs to expand the Local Democracy Reporters Service across different media platforms and give access to a broader range of independent news providers. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) asserts that conglomerate news companies have overlooked the Local Democracy Reporters Service, highlighting a £10,000 gap between what Newsquest receives and what it pays each LDR. The BBC pays Newsquest up to £38,782 per year for each LDR, but the company pays those reporters as little as £24,000 annually (Maher, 2023c). In addition, independent local news outlets are concerned that the most prominent publishers have taken a disproportionate share of the support available for local journalism, to the detriment of smaller publishers and those entering the market (Pennycook, 2014).

CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.0 Overview

This chapter explores the theoretical foundations concerning technological impacts on journalism. It examines key aspects of digitalisation, including labour transformation, flexibility, shifts in the employment landscape, the evolving role of workplaces, and the influence of digital platforms. The primary objective of this section is to develop a nuanced understanding of the digital transformation within the journalism industry. Furthermore, within the theoretical framework, the chapter explores the effects of digitisation on journalism, focusing on transformations related to location, time, and the skills required for the profession. This exploration provides a robust foundation to contextualise the findings in the literature review section with the original data utilised in Chapter 5 and subsequent chapters.

The following heading in this chapter introduces the work-life balance theory, which critically examines how remote-working UK local journalists perceived a practice that became normalised during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, as explored in Chapter 6. This chapter investigates how the shift in work culture influenced their ability to balance professional responsibilities with personal life. The discussion is grounded in the framework of work-life balance theory, serving as a lens to analyse the interplay between occupational demands and private life. At this stage, the chapter offers a detailed exploration of the theoretical foundations of work-life balance, addressing its core principles and broader implications for journalists navigating the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and daily life. Furthermore, the chapter critically evaluates how these theoretical constructs are applied throughout the analysis, providing insights into the nuanced challenges and opportunities that remote working has presented for those in local journalism.

Considering these debates, the following section will theorise the arguments, saying that the discussions explored in the preceding two sections and the following section are situated within a systemic context known as ‘habitus’ a concept developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1990), which refers to the deeply ingrained dispositions, practices, and perceptions shaped by structural forces that influence individuals’ actions and choices within specific fields. This systemic context has been conceptualised as a field of tendencies, subsequently framed and understood as a habitus. Drawing from the discussions in the analysis chapters, this section will explain the concept of habitus, elucidating its mechanisms and relevance to parameters such as family background, social class, individual decision-making, and the choice to pursue (or not pursue) a career in local journalism. By positioning habitus within this framework, the thesis will critically investigate the essence of local journalism: defining what it entails, identifying

who becomes a local journalist, and exploring how the labour dynamics within local journalism are shaped. Moreover, it will analyse the emergence of the organic journalist identity as an outcome of these shaping forces. Through this comprehensive approach, the thesis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how systemic structures and individual agencies intersect to influence the evolving identity and labour practices of local journalism.

The final section of the chapter is dedicated to constructing a robust theoretical framework to understand the core dynamics of *precarisation*. This encompasses critical issues such as bodily precarity, housing precarity, income precarity, occupational precarity, pervasive uncertainties, and de-unionisation processes. The objective is to establish a solid theoretical foundation to profoundly inform and enhance data analysis in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, the chapter examines the shift of journalism towards a model of precarious professionalism, highlighting how systemic changes have redefined the stability and structure of the profession. Together, these elements provide a comprehensive theoretical lens for critically analysing and interpreting the evolving local journalism industry in the UK. This groundwork ensures that the subsequent data analysis chapters are deeply rooted in a nuanced understanding of the precarious realities shaping the local journalism field.

3.1 Understanding the Core of Digitalisation Theories

Digitalisation has emerged as a transformative trend with far-reaching implications for society and business, driven by advancements in computer and online technologies (Parviainen *et al.*, 2017). Degryse (2016) from the European Trade Union Institute, likens the transformative potential of digitalisation to that of the Industrial Revolution, suggesting it could herald profound societal and economic shifts, including the decline of waged labour, the liberalisation of services, and the intensification of global competition. The concept of digitisation refers specifically to the action or process of digitising; the conversion of analogue data (especially in later use, images, video, and text) into digital form (Parviainen *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, digitalisation, or digital transformation, encompasses a broader spectrum, defined as the changes associated with the application of digital technology in all aspects of human society (Stolterman and Fors, 2004; Degryse, 2016; Parviainen *et al.*, 2017). Brennen and Kreiss (2014) further clarify that digitalisation involves organisations, industries, or nations adopting or increasing the integration of computer, online, and AI technologies.

In terms of the significant impact on the life of journalists, computers and online technologies have changed the work process and employment landscape, breaking the chain between newsrooms and journalists. Accordingly, digital technology has transformed media

workers' perceptions of accessibility in professional information-based occupations. Communication platforms and devices have enabled work to infiltrate moments and locations previously less influenced by their existence (Gregg, 2011). Digital transformation relates to the workplace, working hours, the hierarchical relationship between employer and employee, and work-life balance. As will be evident, this division does not necessarily equate solely to increased freedom for the employee. This influences management practices and the existing structures of salaried work in Europe, the USA, and the UK (Degryse, 2016). Within this environment, in her empirical study, Lareau (2010) claims that digital technologies have transformed the media industries for better and for worse, and journalists have been suffering in the battles against the change of flexibility (the new work nature), deskilling, and work intimacy (Gregg, 2011; Bélair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2023).

The impact of digitalisation on local journalism is profound, shaping news production, distribution, and audience engagement. As explored by Harte, Howells, Abingdon, and Williams (2016, 2019) the concept of hyperlocal journalism highlights how digital tools empower individuals to create news services that address local issues, fostering community engagement and filling voids left by traditional media. This shift has allowed the emergence of digital-first newsrooms, often run by citizen journalists or small teams. Yet, it has also contributed to increased fragmentation and financial insecurity in local journalism. As Hess and Waller (2016) argue, local journalists must now specialise in niche, local news, whilst adapting to a globalised context, requiring them to rethink their traditional journalistic roles. This challenge has led to the fragmentation of journalistic identity and increased confusion about what and whom the local journalist represents.

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, media companies frequently encounter shifting environments that introduce new institutional logic, often in conflict with those they previously adhered to, creating institutional complexity (Lischka, 2020). These socio-technological changes in the digital age have subjected news organisations and the field of journalism to unprecedented levels of institutional complexity, fostering conflicts and necessitating flexibility. As traditional office spaces have diminished and been replaced by remote working arrangements based on journalists' homes or random coffee shops, newsroom operations have become increasingly flexible (Majid, 2021). This significant transformation in workplace dynamics has driven the development of new communication strategies, resulting in a heightened reliance on resources and activities tailored to remote and more individualised communication methods (Berkowitz, 2019). This change has necessitated broader

organisational adjustments to evolving socio-technological environments, where decentralised digital workflows are increasingly replacing the physical centralisation of work.

News production and content creation processes are deeply embedded in the fabric of local communities, reflecting their unique concerns and priorities. Local news has historically been a vital source of information, fulfilling the public's informational needs and strengthening their role as active community members (Firmstone, 2016, 2024). Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou (2015) assert that audiences want to engage with local news and participate in a production ethos that emphasises critically consuming news and acquiring collective skills. However, as Steensen and Ahva (2016) find, digitalisation has blurred traditional boundaries in journalism, altering how news is produced and consumed. These changes raise many concerns regarding productivity, teamwork, the boundaries between personal and professional domains, and the relationship between local journalists and their representative communities (Mayhew and Tobitt, 2020; Tobitt, 2021b).

The digital transformation introduces an unending influx of new technologies, requiring journalists to continually develop new skills to stay relevant. This constant evolution creates a sharp divide within the profession, favouring those who adapt and marginalising those who cannot keep pace (Diakopoulos, 2024b, 2024a). Steensen and Ahva (2016) discuss how digitalisation requires journalists to rethink workflows, content strategies, and audience engagement. These challenges present significant obstacles to local journalism, hindering its ability to adapt to shifting demands of its audience and raising substantial concerns about the sustainability of local news and journalists in today's local news ecosystem (Rottwilm, 2014). Furthermore, digital media companies, such as Tortoise, now exacerbates this systemic crisis by acquiring major newspapers, and journalists unable to develop these new competencies often face the difficult choice of leaving the profession, either voluntarily or forcibly, further deepening the growing precarity of the field (Ponsford, 2024d, 2024b, 2024c).

The rapid pace of digitalisation has intensified career insecurity within journalism, fundamentally altering the profession and raising critical concerns about its sustainability and inclusivity. Phillips (2015) argues that the interplay between journalistic practices and the structural factors influencing them must be reconsidered in the digital age. Career uncertainties have long characterised journalism, but digital transformation has exacerbated these challenges, particularly within the daily newspaper sector, which has experienced widespread layoffs and diminishing job opportunities (Nel, 2010; Mayhew and Tobitt, 2020). From entry-level journalists struggling to secure their first positions, to mid-career professionals navigating office closures and shifting employment landscapes, the pervasive influence of digital

technologies and social media platforms has reshaped career experiences and expectations. Late-career journalists face significant dilemmas, often choosing between adapting to rapidly evolving technological demands through retraining or opting for early retirement; choices that may not always be feasible or accessible (Örnebring, 2010a, 2018a). The digitalisation of journalism presents both opportunities and challenges. As Steensen and Ahva (2016) suggest, digitalisation is not merely a technological shift but a fundamental transformation of journalistic practice, requiring new theoretical and practical approaches to sustain the profession. The evolving dynamics of local journalism, marked by digital workflows, remote reporting, and financial precarity, show the urgency of addressing these structural transformations to ensure journalism remains an inclusive and viable profession in the online-first future.

3.2 A Theoretical Understanding of Work-Life Balance

The concept of work-life balance has gained prominence in recent years, reflecting broader societal and economic changes. It has emerged alongside concerns over demographic changes, including transitions in workforce gender and age composition (Chaurasia, 2023; Morgan, 2023), as well as increasing awareness of the challenges posed by long working hours, particularly in the UK (Dean, 2002; Crosbie and Moore, 2004). At its core, work-life balance refers to an individual's ability to meet role obligations across professional and personal domains. It encompasses balancing work and family responsibilities and personal lifestyle considerations, such as wellbeing and leisure time. Voyandoff (2005) describes work-life balance as a global assessment of whether work and family resources sufficiently address demands, enabling effective participation in both areas. Technological advancements have further influenced work-life dynamics, enabling flexible working patterns that transcend traditional office environments. Whilst this flexibility offers reduced operational costs and potential convenience, it also obscures boundaries, normalising practices such as working unconventional hours during holidays or late at nights (Crosbie and Moore, 2004). Although flexibility is often marketed as a benefit for workers, it frequently serves employers' financial incentives, with the associated challenges to employees' wellbeing still needing to be explored.

Hyman et al. (2022) argue that it is essential to critique the notion that pursuing work-life balance inherently delivers positive outcomes, as the reality often includes significant trade-offs that complicate achieving equilibrium between professional and personal life. Friedman (2014, 2015) argues that remote work has fundamentally distorted professional and personal life boundaries. In the past, work was typically confined to designated hours and

specific locations outside the home, but this traditional structure has become increasingly obsolete. Today, the expectation that employees remain connected and responsive outside conventional working hours has become an unspoken norm in news organisations. For instance, checking and responding to work emails during holidays, such as Thanksgiving, illustrates the pervasive nature of this transition. This phenomenon demonstrates the erosion of clear distinctions between work and private time, creating new challenges for maintaining work-life balance in a digitally connected world. Vyas (2022) says the COVID-19 pandemic significantly worsened work-life balance by normalising flexible work arrangements causing an interwoven structure. Whilst offering benefits like reduced commuting and increased autonomy, these transformations have fuelled an unspoken expectation of constant availability, erasing traditional work hours and intensifying the pressure to remain perpetually connected. This 'new normal' has disrupted workers' ability to compartmentalise their lives and raised critical concerns about its long-term impact on wellbeing and organisational culture.

This transformation is further compounded by the structural challenges confronting the local journalism industry in the UK. The regional newspaper sector has been particularly affected, grappling with widespread significant layoffs, driven mainly by financial constraints from major publishers such as Reach plc. Linford (2023) reports that 22 print local newspapers have shut down in the UK over the past two years, whilst Press Gazette research reveals that at least 293 local newspapers have ceased publication since 2005. However, these closures tell only part of the story. Many titles continue to operate but with severely reduced staffing, forcing the remaining journalists to adapt to remote working conditions.

The shift to a remote-first culture has drastically reduced newsroom capacities. The UK's leading local newspaper publishers, Newsquest, Reach, and National World, employ approximately 3,000 journalists today, a stark decline from 9,000 in 2007 (Hunter, 2024). This contraction has intensified the precarity of work-life balance in journalism, as the disappearance of traditional office environments and the rise of remote working blur the boundaries between personal and professional spheres. The growing strain not only reflects the increasing demands placed on journalists but raises profound concerns about the long-term sustainability and viability of the profession amidst ongoing structural and technological upheavals. Furthermore, these evolving dynamics of work-life balance in journalism are inextricably linked to the broader digital transformation framework, which has significantly reshaped both professional responsibilities and personal wellbeing (Friedman, 2014). Journalists often contend with irregular hours, including late-night and early-morning shifts, which disrupt traditional routines and erode their capacity to delineate work from personal life.

The relentless pace of digital connectivity and demanding schedules further jeopardise these boundaries, intensifying professional pressures whilst reducing the time and energy journalists can devote to personal pursuits. Ultimately, this relentless blurring of spheres challenges the ability for journalists to achieve a sustainable balance, exacerbating the fragility of the profession (Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King, 2021).

Cherubini (2022) underscores the profound impact of the transition to hybrid workplace models, now prevalent in UK news organisations, on the life of journalists. This transition has transformed the home into a multifaceted space, serving as both a personal sanctuary and a professional hub. The situation is particularly demanding for journalist parents, as they must navigate the delicate balance of childcare, home-schooling, and professional responsibilities during overlapping hours (Tobitt, 2020b, 2020a). Those who live in shared accommodation face additional challenges, attempting to fulfil professional duties in spaces not designed for work. These foggy lines between personal and professional life have created a contentious arena where maintaining work-life balance has become increasingly difficult. The disappearance of distinct work and leisure spaces exacerbates this tension, compelling journalists to adapt to an environment that values constant availability over clear role boundaries.

The closure of physical offices has significantly exacerbated these challenges in the UK. As Tobitt (2021a, 2021b) and Hunter (2024) have observed, the widespread closure of offices has led to journalists collaborating with colleagues scattered across different locations, smudging the boundaries of the workday. The omnipresence of digital connectivity has normalised an ‘always-on’ culture, where journalists are expected to carry out tasks from any location with internet access, be it kitchens, bedrooms, or cars. This fluidity has rendered the traditional workday obsolete as professional and personal interactions merge into a single unbounded continuum (Kłopotek, 2017). These structural changes, combined with the closure of newsrooms and the rise of remote-first operations, have redefined the norms of journalistic practice. The constant connectivity and heightened expectations have placed unprecedented pressure on journalists, fundamentally reshaping the profession and raising urgent questions about its sustainability and the feasibility of work-life balance in an increasingly demanding digital-first environment (Friedman, 2014).

The work-life balance theory offered a critical framework for examining the profound challenges which are analysed in Chapter 6, which UK local journalists face when adapting to remote working. For these journalists, the pursuit of equilibrium between professional and personal life has been intricately shaped by skill disparities, income inequality, gender

dynamics, and parenting responsibilities. Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto's (2016) insights reveal how deeply ingrained the expectation to prioritise work is within the profession, with journalists often making significant personal sacrifices, whether abandoning family celebrations or responding to urgent assignments at a moment's notice, to fulfil professional demands. For local journalists in the UK, the transition to remote working exacerbates these pressures, dissolving the physical and temporal boundaries that once delineated work from home. Within this context, work-life balance theory becomes an essential tool for understanding the systemic and individual struggles of local journalists, offering a foundation to interrogate the far-reaching implications of digital transformation and remote work on professional practices and personal wellbeing.

These two sections can be situated within the systemic context of habitus. For local journalists, digitalisation and resetting journalists' skills, the pressures of remote work, the reconfiguration of personal and professional boundaries, and the 'always-on' expectations are not merely individual challenges but embedded in a broader structural framework. These pressures reflect the norms, values, and power dynamics in journalism. These conditions require journalists to prioritise professional commitments over physical and physiological wellbeing, adapt to evolving technologies, and navigate precarious working conditions.

The following discussion theorises how habitus operates within the context of UK local journalism, illuminating how these systemic forces shape the daily practices, struggles, and adaptability of journalists working from home in a rapidly transforming media landscape.

3.3 Habitus: A Structuring Force in Shaping Organic Journalism

The journalism industry is experiencing a vast evolution, driven by the rapid technological advancements of the digital age. The once-familiar rustle of newspapers has been replaced by the incessant clicks and notifications of digital devices, reflecting a seismic change in how news is produced, distributed, and consumed (Chew and Tandoc, 2024). This transformation has redefined the norms and practices of journalism, compelling professionals to navigate new tools, platforms, and expectations. For local journalists, in particular, these changes are not merely about adapting to technology but involve renegotiating their professional identities within a landscape increasingly shaped by economic pressures, diminishing resources, and the demands of constant connectivity from everywhere. These dynamics are best understood through the lens of habitus. This concept offers a framework for examining how broader structural forces and historical contexts shape individual practices, choices, and struggles in journalism. By applying this perspective, allows for exploration how UK local journalists are

reshaping their roles and routines whilst grappling with the enduring tension between tradition and innovation in their profession.

Habitus can be employed as a theoretical foundation to examine the differentiation within the journalistic field, its structural constraints, technologically induced changes, and the underlying social power relations. It also plays a vital role in providing comparative and historical contextualisation to the study of journalism (Maares and Hanusch, 2022). In Bourdieu's (1973) theoretical framework, habitus represents a 'structuring structure'; a system of enduring and transferable dispositions that guide how individuals perceive, interpret, and act within their social world (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p.72; Bourdieu, 1998). This concept reconciles the objectivist and subjectivist divide by demonstrating that human action is neither wholly dictated by external social structures nor entirely driven by free will. Instead, habitus reflects the internalisation of social structures, shaping the practices and behaviours of individuals (Chew and Tandoc, 2024).

Within the journalistic field, habitus allows agents (journalists) to develop a feeling to be ready for the game (Willig, 2013); a tacit understanding of the norms, rules, and strategies required to navigate and reproduce the professional culture. As Bourdieu (1998) conceptualises, the journalistic field is marked by competition for various forms of capital; symbolic, social, and economic, which influence how journalists perform their roles, adapt to change, and sustain their professional legitimacy. Wacquant (2011) extends this understanding by highlighting how habitus emerges as an embodiment of social position and lived experiences, enabling journalists to respond reflexively to shifting technological and structural demands. This approach strengthens the dynamic interplay between the broader systemic constraints and the individual agency of journalists as they grapple with transformations in their professional environment (Spyridou and Veglis, 2016).

According to Bourdieu (2005), the field of journalism extends beyond the mere actional dimension of news production. In this process, the journalist's consciousness, the environment they operate within, and the capital they possess play a significant role. These elements, which underline news production practices, reflect the position of journalists within the field, defined as habitus. Bourdieu (1984) theorises habitus as a state of consciousness that shapes and guides an individual's behaviour whilst simultaneously influencing and being influenced by the social field. Within this dynamic, individuals shape their habitus by navigating the rules and norms of the field, whilst their actions, in turn, produce patterns of behaviour reflective of the field itself. However, this habitus generates an isolated positionality for journalists who are increasingly detached from physical spaces such as streets and avenues and relegated to

working remotely with digital tools. This detachment significantly influences the decision-making processes of journalists, particularly their capacity to act or refrain from acting. Consequently, this habitus disrupts socialisation processes for remote-working journalists, exacerbating their disconnection from the social realities they aim to represent.

The structured habitus within the local journalism industry, such as economic precarity, housing inequalities and differences, and the rise of remote working, significantly hinder the development of journalists as intellectuals who must be deeply embedded within their communities to understand and authentically represent their struggles (Gramsci, 2011; Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971). Moreover, systemic issues such as de-skilling, ageism, low wages, and unaffordable housing often prevent journalists from living and working where needed most, creating a disconnect that undermines their ability to engage directly with local realities. Additionally, the increasing reliance on digital tools and remote working, whilst offering flexibility, often leads to impersonal and fragmented interactions with communities, reducing the depth and trust necessary for representative journalism.

These challenges are intensified by an industry prioritising speed and volume over depth, perpetuating a class divide where only the financially privileged can maintain proximity to resource-rich areas. In this systemic structure, organic journalists are emerging. When analysing the journalism industry or struggles, it is helpful to identify both organic intellectuals and traditional intellectuals. Organic intellectuals are leaders, organisers, or spokespeople who emerge from the working class or other oppressed groups, articulating shared experiences and grievances in ways rooted in lived reality. Their discourse reflects the group's material conditions and collective aspirations; for example, a factory worker who launches a blog and podcast to discuss labour rights and organise protests exemplifies this role (Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971; Gramsci, 2011; Deirdre and Wayne, 2017; Martin, 2023). Similarly, The organic journalist manages transitions between political economy, political culture, political theology, and psycho-politics, opening and expanding paths of connection between these spheres by creating canals, tunnels, roads, procedures, and networks of relation with the public. In practice, this is not an abstract exercise but one grounded in civic and political life. Such journalists often sustain close ties with labour movements and grassroots organisations, working alongside community members in collective struggles, while also maintaining a visible presence in public life by giving talks, chairing discussions, or contributing to local forums and events. The notion of intellectual journalism strengthens this embeddedness: it emerges not only in resistance to misguided reform or anti-intellectual populism but also in alliances with risk-tolerant scholars and activist communities, where journalists and organic academics jointly cultivate new forms

of public reasoning. (Noam, 2016; Friedman and Reeves, 2020; McDevitt, 2020; Mizon, 2022). In contrast, traditional intellectuals, while often appearing neutral or objective, function to reinforce the existing power structure. They might include mainstream news commentators/journalists who portray protests as disruptive and unpatriotic or academics who frame economic inequality as an inevitable market outcome without addressing the role of class power (Gramsci, 2011). Through these efforts, the organic journalist, in Gramsci's sense of optimism, moves local societies towards a progressive politics, whilst operating, sustaining, and ensuring the functionality of these connections (Mizon, 2022).

Examining how these two types of intellectuals interact reveals whether organic intellectuals challenge the narratives of traditional intellectuals and how they work to construct a new common sense within the industry. In this regard, although the majority of journalists in this study position themselves as class-conscious advocates for labour rights, their material circumstances, characterised by mortgage debt, rent obligations, utility bills, and other financial pressures, combined with the persistent threat of job loss under contemporary market conditions, constrain their capacity to champion a transformative vision for local journalism. Rather than mobilising towards an alternative framework that addresses structural deficiencies, these journalists, operating within the logic of neoliberal rationality and the accelerated tempos of digitalised news production, tend to reproduce the prevailing order. In doing so, their professional practices align more closely with the role of traditional intellectuals in the local sphere, legitimising and sustaining existing power relations, rather than functioning as organic intellectuals capable of cultivating a counter-hegemonic discourse.

This relatively new habitus, which creates a field of tendencies, is firmly established and becomes the only reality and hinders the role of responsible organic intellectuals. These intellectuals navigating within a specific habitus often share a mutual understanding that the ongoing struggle in this field is worthwhile. This shared understanding is referred to as 'doxa' by Bourdieu (2003, p. 44). Doxa embodies the 'worldview of the ruling class's and encompasses two key concepts: 'misrecognition' and 'alienation'. Bourdieu (2008) argues that those who are ruled tend to internalise the perspectives of the ruling class within their habitus, mistakenly believing that the dominant worldview aligns with a universal perspective representative of the ruling system. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 engage in a detailed analysis of the emergence of these tendencies and their subsequent establishment as a widely accepted worldview.

The habitus generates a specific spatial and social reality (Swartz, 1997), and for UK local journalists working remotely, this reality is primarily confined to the home; a space where

the boundaries between professional and private life collapse and become intertwined. Within this domestic environment, habitus imposes its own structural imperatives, shaping journalists' practices, behaviours, and struggles following their precarious position within the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 2005). The impact of digitalisation further intensifies these conditions as the adaptation to new technologies becomes essential, often exposing generational divides and exacerbating processes of deskilling and ageism within the profession.

Whilst digital tools promise flexibility, they reinforce isolation and fragmented community interactions, diminishing the depth of engagement required for meaningful journalism. As journalists are pushed into remote spaces, the pressure to adapt to technological demands collides with systemic inequalities, marginalising those unable to keep pace. This spatial and digital reconfiguration of habitus reflects the constraints of the contemporary media industry (Doudaki and Spyridou, 2015; Spyridou and Veglis, 2016). This reflects the growing disconnection between journalists and their communities, compelling them to function as organic intellectuals who support this transformation within a rapidly evolving field. Moreover, this shift often results in journalists needing help to critique the system they operate within. Simultaneously, it creates barriers that exclude those who challenge or resist the status quo from entering the profession. Consequently, the practice of journalism becomes increasingly dominated by individuals from elite backgrounds, reinforcing structural inequalities and perpetuating the continuity of the existing system (Gollmitzer, 2019; Mizon, 2022).

Bourdieu (1998, 2005) emphasises that journalists operating within the field must critically reflect on their actions and motivations. He underscores the importance of analysing the field's degree of autonomy to understand the journalist's capacity for independent action. Bourdieu identifies four key factors shaping journalistic autonomy: the concentration of ownership in the press; the positioning of the journalist's organisation between the 'commercial' and 'intellectual' poles; the journalist's status within the organisation, including salary determinants; and the level of freedom in the information production process. UK local journalists increasingly operate within remote and highly digitalised environments, reshaping traditional modes of news production by redefining what is covered and how it is reported. This shift, influenced by the structural habitus outlined by Bourdieu (1998, 2005), presents a direct challenge to conventional journalistic practices. Journalists must continuously adapt to evolving conditions in the presentation and delivery of news, navigating the complexities of digital platforms and remote engagement. This reconfiguration of the journalistic field transforms their professional practices. It also positions them in heightened financial and

wellbeing precarity, reflecting the broader vulnerabilities and systemic pressures in the industry.

3.4 Framing Precarity

The prevailing working culture and the mechanisms driving 'chronic socio-economic precarity' (Kınsün and Kınsün, 2022; Kinsun and Kınsün, 2023) have systematically dismantled the final bastions of social and institutional frameworks that once safeguarded workers' rights. This dismantling has precipitated a profound destabilisation of the labouring classes, engendering pervasive uncertainty about the future of work and collective agency. Within this context, journalism emerges as a profession acutely vulnerable to these destabilising forces, reflecting broader structural changes in the political economy of labour. The determinants of precarity in journalism, manifesting through eroding job security, stagnating wages, and the intensification of digitisation and remote work, expose the profession to heightened instability. These conditions diminish the capacity for autonomous practice and reconfigure the field itself, reinforcing hierarchies that privilege elite actors whilst marginalising those unable to withstand the pressures of commercialisation and technological adaptation. As journalism becomes increasingly tethered to the imperatives of speed, volume, and cost-efficiency, the foundations of professional integrity and critical engagement are placed at risk, situating journalists at the nexus of contemporary labour struggles and structural inequalities.

Precarity signifies a persistent state of insecurity and unpredictability that permeates diverse forms of employment, transcending contract types and professional statuses (Broughton, 2016). It extends beyond the absence of stable jobs to reflect a broader erosion of economic certainty, social protections, and career advancement opportunities (Standing, 2011). This instability manifests across various employment models, from full-time permanent contracts to part-time, temporary, and informal labour, each posing distinct yet interconnected risks (Walsh, 2019). Indicators such as low wages, fragile social security, weakened labour protections, and limited collective bargaining rights define the precarious experience, perpetuating cycles of in-work poverty and psychological distress. Bourdieu (1973) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) conceptualise precarity as pervasive instability that infiltrates all aspects of life, characterised by irregular schedules, the absence of fixed workplaces, and a relentless pursuit of employment driven by external contingencies. This provisionally aligns with broader structural shifts in deregulated labour markets, which foster insecure work arrangements, dismantle social safety nets, and obstruct long-term planning (Kalleberg, 2009, 2013; Standing, 2011)). The International Labour Organisation (2016, 2018, 2022), highlights

how precarity functions as a mechanism for employers to shift risks onto workers, resulting in job insecurity, ambiguous contractual relationships, inadequate pay, and formidable barriers to unionisation. Pembroke (2018) reinforces this view, asserting that precarious work translates into precarious lives, leaving individuals suspended in uncertainty with deferred personal ambitions and disrupted pathways to stability. Ultimately, precarity transcends economic domains, embedding itself into the social fabric and perpetuating systemic inequalities that entrench workers in ongoing vulnerability.

In the field of journalism, precarity materialises as the erosion of structural guarantees, encompassing labour market security, employment stability, job protection, and avenues for skill development and collective representation (Hof and Deuze, 2022). Neoliberal economic policies, coupled with the relentless pace of digitalisation, have reconfigured the press industry into a volatile and unpredictable sphere, fundamentally reshaping both the professional landscape and the lived realities of journalists (O'Donnell and Zion, 2019). This reconfiguration manifests through newsroom contractions, the proliferation of freelance and contract-based labour, and the prioritisation of commercial imperatives over editorial integrity. Journalists are increasingly subjected to shrinking wages, diminishing institutional safeguards, and the persistent spectre of redundancy whilst grappling with the pressures of technological adaptation and multi-platform content production (Rick and Hanitzsch, 2023).

The intersection of economic precarity and technological disruption not only constrains journalistic autonomy but imposes profound material and psychological burdens, exacerbating systemic inequalities and reinforcing hierarchical divides within the profession. Even those who secure full-time positions are compelled to shoulder intensified workloads, broaden their areas of coverage, and assume additional responsibilities, often without adequate preparation or institutional backing (Örnebring, 2018a; Chadha and Steiner, 2022). This condition shows the far-reaching implications of precarity, where instability, vulnerability, and depressed wages have become entrenched industry features, mirroring patterns observed across other labour sectors. The resulting landscape has perpetuated cycles of exploitation and marginalisation, ultimately constraining the journalistic field's capacity to fulfil its functions and further embedding precarity as a structural norm.

The destabilisation of newsrooms has fundamentally reconfigured both the structural dynamics of journalism and the professional identity of journalists, embedding precarity as a defining characteristic of the industry. As news organisations pursue aggressive cost-cutting measures and pivot to the demands of digital ecosystems, secure, full-time positions have steadily given way to freelance and short-term contracts, intensifying labour insecurity and

fragmenting professional trajectories (Chadha and Steiner, 2022). This erosion of stable employment dissolves the institutional buffers that historically insulated journalists from market volatility, limiting their capacity to engage in sustained investigative reporting and heightening susceptibility to external pressures from commercial or political actors. The resulting shift recalibrates journalistic priorities, privileging speed and content volume over analytical depth and accuracy, thereby compromising the epistemological integrity of news production. In this environment, precarity not only reshapes the working conditions of journalists but destabilises the public's relationship with news institutions, as diminished editorial resources and workforce reductions corrode the credibility and reliability that underpin trust (Keeble, 2005). The recursive nature of this process, in which economic imperatives dictate output, undermining quality and eroding audience confidence, reinforces the structural vulnerabilities of journalism, perpetuating a cycle that weakens its democratic function. Ultimately, precarity extends beyond the material constraints of the labour market, intersecting with broader cultural and technological shifts that redefine notions of value, labour, and expertise in the digital age, embedding instability at the heart of contemporary journalistic practice.

The intensification of precarity in UK local journalism is inextricably linked to the dual forces of digital transformation and financial instability, both of which have redefined the parameters of the profession. As local news organisations adapt to the demands of an increasingly digitalised landscape, journalists are required to engage with diverse multimedia platforms, often juggling content creation for social media, online news portals, and traditional print simultaneously (Newman *et al.*, 2022, 2023; Ofcom, 2023b). This expansion of responsibilities, without a proportional increase in compensation or institutional support, underscores the erosion of job security and exacerbates the workload pressures faced by local journalists. The expectation of cultivating digital competencies and maintaining a continuous online presence further blurs the lines between professional and personal life, fostering burnout and contributing to high attrition rates (Kersley, 2022a, 2022d). Moreover, the decline of physical newsrooms, accelerated by COVID-19 pandemic-induced closures, has intensified the isolation experienced by local journalists, dismantling collaborative networks that once provided both professional solidarity and editorial oversight (Tobitt, 2020a, 2021b). Whilst convenient for some, working from home amplifies financial strain through increased utility costs and the necessity for personal investment in digital tools and reliable internet infrastructure (Linford, 2023b). This economic burden compounds existing disparities in the sector, where underfunded local outlets are less able to provide technological resources or cover

expenses incurred through remote working (Mayhew, 2019; Mayhew and Tobitt, 2020). The cumulative impact of these factors perpetuates a precarious cycle in which UK local journalists are left vulnerable to market fluctuations, professional deskilling, and the diminishing public trust that results from understaffed and overburdened newsrooms.

The precarity facing local journalists in the UK is deeply intertwined with systemic and structural transformations driven by digitalisation, economic pressures, and shifting labour practices. Digitalisation has reshaped local journalism by intensifying competition for attention across online platforms. Social media giants and aggregators dictate the terms of visibility, compelling local news outlets to conform to algorithmic preferences that frequently prioritise virality over public-interest journalism. This platform-driven model forces local journalists to produce content continuously, obscuring the boundaries between professional reporting and click-driven editorial practices. As a result, job security is diminished, with employment contingent on audience metrics and advertising revenue, both inherently unstable and vulnerable to abrupt changes in platform policies. Simultaneously, remote working has expanded opportunities for local journalists to report stories without being tethered to physical newsrooms. However, this shift has also fragmented the profession. The dissolution of communal newsroom spaces undermines collective identity, weakening solidarity among journalists. This isolation exacerbates job insecurity as individual journalists become increasingly susceptible to layoffs and redundancies without the support networks traditionally found in newsroom environments. Remote working further accelerates the gig economy model, where freelancers and contract journalists bear the brunt of financial instability, lacking the benefits and protections typically afforded to salaried employees.

Amid these challenges, low wages have become a pervasive characteristic of local journalism, fostering a habitus of vulnerability that shapes career trajectories. Entry-level positions frequently offer insufficient salaries to meet the rising cost of living, forcing UK local journalists to juggle multiple jobs or leave the profession altogether. The underfunding of local media exacerbates this trend, as budget constraints hinder wage increases and restrict opportunities for career advancement. This systemic undervaluation of local journalism affects individual livelihoods and compromises the quality and breadth of reporting. In response, unions are crucial in mitigating precarity by advocating for fair wages, improved working conditions, and job security. However, membership fees and concerns that local journalists are inadequately represented undermine the effectiveness of unions. Barriers to unionisation, such as fears of retaliation and perceived ineffectiveness, divert attention from the union's role as a structural safeguard against the erosion of stable employment within the sector.

Collectively, these factors render the future of local journalism careers increasingly uncertain, necessitating innovative solutions to sustain the industry. Emerging business models, such as community-funded journalism and not-for-profit initiatives, provide glimpses of resilience yet they demand substantial public support to succeed. The precarious state of local journalism careers mirrors broader societal shifts, underscoring the need to reaffirm and redesign the value of public service journalism to secure its place in an evolving local journalism landscape.

The precarity experienced by local journalists in the UK is emblematic of a pervasive global trend, underscoring the profound structural transformations reshaping journalism as a profession (see also; Gollmitzer, 2014, 2021; Örnebring, 2018a; O'Donnell and Zion, 2019; Rick and Hanitzsch, 2023). Precarity is not incidental but rather intrinsic to the shifting dynamics of journalism as a form of cognitive and knowledge labour, where the interplay between passion and instability is mediated by market imperatives that redefine labour control, fostering new modalities of coercion and individual subjugation (Morini, Carls, and Armano, 2014). The proliferation of part-time, temporary, freelance, and casual employment arrangements serves as a salient indicator of the systemic instability permeating the industry, a condition that increasingly affects not only those engaged in contingent labour but journalists in ostensibly secure, full-time roles (Patrick and Elks, 2015; Rick and Hanitzsch, 2024). This convergence of precarity across employment categories reflects a broader dissolution of traditional labour protections, reinforcing the vulnerability of journalists to the fluctuating demands of an intensifying market logic. As Morini, Carls, and Armano (2014) contend, the structural tensions confronting salaried journalists epitomise the evolving nature of the labour process, wherein the cognitive dimensions of journalistic work expose practitioners to overt and covert mechanisms of labour control. These mechanisms, embedded within the daily rhythms of cognitive neoliberal work culture, not only shape the lived experiences of journalists but redefine professional autonomy parameters, underscoring the far-reaching implications of precarity as a constitutive feature of contemporary journalism.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

4.0 Chapter Introduction

Research projects in the social sciences are based on a methodological foundation to achieve scientific validity. The methodology provides an intersection between the method used to explain this foundation and the sociological phenomenon being researched. The path to determining the sociological phenomenon to be studied becomes apparent, giving the researcher a broad perspective (Creswell, 2013, 2014). Investigating social reality from a specific place and perspective opens a clear way for the researcher and the research. Accordingly, I underpinned my study with theoretical approaches that help to conceptualise the relationship between local journalists and the context of digitalisation, remote working, precarity, and job satisfaction in the local news journalism landscape of the UK. The framework of human participatory studies acquires significance and credibility through the selected methodology and analysis in this context (Neuman, 2014).

This study is founded on grounded theory-based methodological flexibilities incorporating related literature, parliamentary reports, newspaper articles, and field data and notes. The fieldwork study adhered to these conditions, aligning with grounded theory principles.

This methodology chapter is divided into two sections preceding the information. The first section outlines the research design and provides theoretical definitions for data collection methods, explaining the research problem and questions. The second section details the application of these methods and techniques, including sampling methods, data collection, transcription, coding, and data analysis.

4.1 Research Problem

Local journalism plays a vital role in shaping public discourse, fostering community engagement, and reinforcing democratic values across the UK. Beyond delivering local news, it promotes civic participation and accountability, anchoring communities to broader democratic ideals. Scholars such as Burns (1977), Born (2005), Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen (1998), and Tunstall (2000) have critically examined the structural, cultural, and economic forces shaping local news organisations. Through ethnographic studies, institutional analyses, and investigations of journalistic practices, these scholars provide valuable insights into how local journalism navigates financial pressures, technological advancements, and evolving audience demands. Burns' The BBC: Public Institution and Private World (1977) exemplifies

this by highlighting the tensions between public service imperatives and internal institutional constraints. His work, alongside contemporary reports like Ofcom (2023b) underscores the enduring significance of local journalism in fostering social cohesion and informed citizenship. Building on Burns' foundational contributions, Born (2005) explores the socio-political dimensions of media production, demonstrating how local outlets report on and actively shape regional identities. Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen (1998) extend this discourse by addressing the economic vulnerabilities that threaten the sustainability of local journalism, focusing on the impact of funding cuts and workforce precarity on community engagement. Tunstall's (2000) analyses of newsroom structures and media occupations further illuminate how local journalists adapt to digital transformation and resource constraints.

However, the role of local journalism has changed significantly since the millennium due to a combination of such factors, including neoliberal economic policies, technological innovation, newsroom restructuring, and precarious labour conditions. Shifting in news production, distribution, and consumption have further transformed the field. Additionally, the rise of social media and digital platforms has obscured the boundaries of professional journalism as ordinary citizens increasingly engage in news creation and dissemination (Deuze, Bruns, and Neuberger, 2007; DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun, 2012; Canter, 2013; Wall, 2015b, 2015a). These challenges manifest as job insecurity, devaluation of formal qualifications, precarious working conditions, and limited transfer of professional skills from journalism education to practice. The absence of social security, unequal income distribution, heavy workloads, and burnout further exacerbate the precariousness of local journalism. Wellbeing concerns linked to remote working, the role of institutional support, government aid, and the need for secure representation in local regions are also critical considerations.

Journalism practices have increasingly shifted towards a casual and precarious industry. Local news providers, facing paramount challenges, are compelled to adapt their offerings and business models. These developments necessitate a reassessment of local journalism practices and journalists' rights.

This study aims to assess the contemporary landscape of UK local journalism, focusing on the experiences of local journalists during ongoing transformations. It integrates reports, qualitative interviews, and institutional analyses to investigate the evolving dynamics and challenges within the local journalism industry in the UK.

4.2 Research Questions

Generally, technological advancements have dramatically impacted journalists, particularly those working in local, digitalised journalism environments. The flexibility of the digital labour market has contributed to the emergence of a precarious journalist profile. Local journalists are increasingly required to be multi-skilled, producing content across various genres, diverting them from their primary task of reporting. This transition has obscured the boundaries of journalistic roles, intensifying workload pressures and diminishing the focus on investigative and in-depth reporting. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated these transformations. Remote working and the downsizing and closure of newsroom offices have redefined professional norms and personal routines in journalism. As a result, local journalists have become increasingly detached from traditional forms of labour, distancing themselves from core journalistic practices and adopting the characteristics of precarious professionals. To maintain a career, journalists have been forced to invest more time and effort into marketing their work, often at the expense of their wellbeing and job security.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following four research questions:[4]

1. How does digitalisation impact professional identity and personal experiences of local journalism in the UK?

2. How does remote working impact the work-life balance, journalism practices, information dissemination, and landscape adaptation of local journalism?

3. What factors contribute to the precarious living conditions of local journalists, including permanent contracts, wage policies, and trade union rights?

4. How satisfied are local journalists with their jobs; what factors influence their decision to continue or leave their career?

This study is anchored in critical answers that reflect the ongoing transformations and challenges within local journalism in the digital age by tackling these questions.

4.3 Research Design

The renewed academic focus on local journalism has been driven by the intersecting pressures of digitalisation and the economic downturn facing local media outlets. Wall (2015b, 2015a) explores how local journalists navigate shrinking resources and increasing workloads, highlighting the precarity embedded in their day-to-day practices. Firmstone (2016) investigates editorial autonomy within local newsrooms, emphasising the tension between

[4] I will address the first question in Chapter 5, question 2 in Chapter 6, and questions 3 and 4 in Chapter 7.

commercial pressure and journalistic integrity. Ardia *et al.* (2020) examines legal and ethical challenges of local journalists, particularly defamation laws and public accountability. Tobitt (2020a, 2020c) provides a detailed account of the structural decline in local news ecosystems, tracing the closure of local outlets and the subsequent democratic deficit in underserved communities. Šimunjak (2022b, 2022a) expands this discourse by examining how digital transformation reshapes journalistic identities and redefines the relationship between local journalists and their audiences. Fenton, Freedman, and Birkbeck (2010) focus on investment-related challenges and the relationship between local media and democracy in the UK. These studies contribute to a growing body of literature that underscores the urgent need to reassess the economic, legal, and cultural frameworks underpinning local journalism.

Local journalism reflects a broader mirror to communities than mainstream media, and its development has been seen as vital for the future of news and journalism. As economic neoliberalism and globalisation became dominant in journalism studies at the turn of the millennium, the importance of local journalism has increasingly taken centre stage in academic discussions. These studies employ diverse theoretical and methodological frameworks, expanding theoretical ideas through case studies. Against this backdrop, this research is designed as a case study focusing on UK local journalists who have experienced deskilling due to computerisation, detachment from communities, insecure wellbeing resulting from hybrid work models, precarity stemming from economic and structural declines in the local news industry, and contemplation of leaving journalism due to job dissatisfaction.

The study is grounded in literature concerning the transformation of local journalism. It seeks to understand how journalism practices evolve and are influenced by various factors, particularly by evaluating the nature and social implications of the new work environment. This aligns with the broader scholarly focus on the challenges in local journalism and highlights the need for a nuanced analysis of the evolving local journalism landscape. The study draws on original data from 26 local journalists (10 women and 16 men) aged 22 to 54 working across various departments (see Table 4.3) to explore the complexities of their professional experiences. Integrating this empirical data with relevant scholarly literature provides insight into the precarity shaping journalists' routines, factors influencing career trajectories, and the role of unionisation in mediating workplace conditions. This multifaceted approach highlights the cohort's diversity and reveals broader systemic challenges of local journalists, contributing to ongoing academic discussions on precarity, professional identity, and resilience. It explores labour loss, insecurity in living standards, and alienation from work. This examination is

crucial for understanding the nuanced realities faced by local journalists, contributing to a deeper comprehension of the field.

Although no formal pilot study was conducted, the first three interviews were chosen for this evaluative phase because they provided an opportunity to test the entire interview process across diverse participants, ensuring a range of perspectives and experiences were captured early in the process. This selection identified any inconsistencies in question clarity, participant engagement, and data richness, reflecting potential challenges that could arise throughout the study. By incorporating a variety of voices at the outset, I could refine the interview approach to enhance reliability and ensure the method remained aligned with the research objectives (Barriball and While, 1994; Simkhada, Bhatta, and Van Teijlingen, 2006; Subryan, 2020). Following these, the study gathered data from interviews with 26 local journalists working for local print-newspapers owned by five major media companies: Reach, Newsquest, National World, DC Thomson, and Express Star, which collectively own almost 90% of regional newspaper titles in the UK, as reported by the Media Reform Coalition Report (Chivers, 2021) and the Press Gazette (Majid, 2023c), (see Table 4.1).

Company Name	Newspapers Number	Share in Total (%)
Reach	236	32 %
Newsquest	211	29 %
National World	183	15 %
DC Thomson	79	12 %
Express Star	72	6 %

Table 4. 1 Local Press Palette: Regional Publishers and Ownership Shares

This study employs qualitative research techniques to investigate and comprehend the meaning assigned by individuals or groups to social or human situations. Qualitative research involves inductively growing from specifics to broad themes, with data analysis, interpretation, and emergent questions forming integral parts of the process. Grounded theory, as articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967, 2006) seeks to develop a theory directly from data systematically

gathered through social research. This inductive approach is well-suited for exploring social relationships and group behaviours, especially in contexts with limited prior research (Crooks, 2001). Grounded theory enables researchers to uncover the social processes shaping the experiences of participants, empowering professionals to intervene effectively (Glaser, 1978). Charmaz (1990, 2006) refines this methodology, highlighting the simultaneous collection and analysis of data and the development of analytic codes grounded in empirical evidence. As Charmaz (2015) outlined, analytical codes, categories, and themes emerge from the data. Accordingly, the study involves long-term data collection and analysis, focusing on codes, categories, and themes extracted over time. By embedding grounded theory into the study, I adopt this flexible, emergent framework to explore the lived experiences of local journalists, capturing the complexities of their labour, career decisions, and responses to systemic inequities. This approach facilitates the discovery of patterns that reflect the realities of local journalism, constructing a theory that addresses the structural and cultural forces shaping the profession. Grounded theory emphasises uncovering ideas, concepts, and hypotheses within the data. This iterative process involves simultaneous data collection and analysis, allowing each to inform the other.

4.4 Justification for Employing Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling is a method of sampling without probability in which initial participants, known as ‘seeds’ (Neuman, 2014; Parker, Scott, and Geddes, 2019), recruit additional participants through their professional or social networks. Snowball sampling creates a chain referral process, allowing researchers to access hard-to-reach populations by leveraging trust and existing relationships (Neuman, 2014; Parker, Scott, and Geddes, 2019). The method is beneficial when the target population is closed or challenging to engage through conventional recruitment strategies, as it facilitates organic participant expansion whilst ensuring data collection remains contextually rich and relevant (Berg and Lune, 2017).

Snowball sampling was more than just a practical solution; it reflected the complex realities of working with journalists as research participants. The local journalism industry frequently operates within close-knit networks, with trust and reputation playing an important role in determining access. Direct approaches to journalists, mainly through formal institutional channels, are frequently met with limited responses, as media organisations may restrict external enquiries or view participation in research as non-essential. This guarded approach is exacerbated by the precarious state of the industry, in which job insecurity and organisational instability lead to heightened sensitivity around professional disclosure. Furthermore, the

competitive nature of journalism can discourage unsolicited participation, as journalists may perceive research involvement as potentially compromising their editorial independence or exposing internal vulnerabilities. Snowball sampling mitigates these barriers by fostering peer-led recruitment, accelerating access, and enhancing the quality of the data collected. Participants recommended by their colleagues are often more candid and willing to share nuanced insights, given the implicit endorsement of being referred. This method also helps researchers identify influential 'gatekeepers' within journalistic communities—individuals who, through their connections, can facilitate broader access to others who might otherwise remain inaccessible (Berg and Lune, 2017).

In addition, snowball sampling is particularly valuable in uncovering marginalised voices within journalism, such as community reporters, part-time contributors, and those working in smaller independent outlets. Despite playing critical roles in news ecosystems, these groups are often under-represented in formal studies. By starting with a diverse initial pool, snowball sampling allowed the research to surface a broader spectrum of experiences, capturing perspectives that reflect the full complexity of local journalism (Given, 2008; Creswell, 2014). This inclusiveness was vital in achieving the research objectives. It ensured that the resulting analysis towards this new, institutionally entrenched, and more invisible working culture covered the spectrum of precarious journalists who form the backbone of local news production.

4.5 Rationale for the use of Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

Whether in quantitative or qualitative research, a data-gathering instrument (method or tool) is always required. This research technique typically involves a device, such as a survey, an interview, or a focus group that a researcher utilises to explore an area of interest by acquiring information (data) and subsequent analysis. Employing one of these tools facilitates the direct involvement of individuals in the study. However, relying solely on attitude measures, only provides a superficial understanding of complex human sentiments and thoughts. In observational techniques, only observable behaviours may be understood and recognised, making it challenging to provide insight into the underlying causes and intentions behind these behaviours. To investigate more deeply and comprehensively the sensations and ideas that vary from person to person, a distinct research approach tailored to the social and contextual nuances of human beings is necessary (Patton, 2001).

Human beings, who are the subject of social reality, can only be included in a study with their information. According to many scholars who have worked on research methods,

one of the best methods to gather data has been the interview technique (Patton, 2001; Neuman, 2014; Bryman, 2016; Berg and Lune, 2017). Understanding the complexity of society, or how groups and individuals act and how institutions shape them, or how people shape institutions, requires using the appropriate study approach (Bryman, 2016). Gathering insights from those directly experiencing the transformation of journalistic practices is crucial for understanding how the new work culture, characterised by constant change, reshapes the profession. This approach allows a deeper exploration of journalists as social subjects within the evolving journalism landscape. This study employs the in-depth semi-structured interview technique to capture these nuanced perspectives, which Bryman (2016; p.469), identifies as 'probably the most widely used in qualitative research'. This method enables flexibility in questioning whilst ensuring that core themes related to the transformation and its impact on journalistic practices are thoroughly examined.

Interviewing as a research technique is a controlled and planned verbal contact between the researcher and the participants being studied (Cohen and Manion, 2018). I aimed to elicit the thoughts and feelings of the target participants by directing intentional enquiries under the supervision of questions. Furthermore, by asking the individual target questions on the study issue, I purposed to learn, analyse, and characterise the person's subjective thoughts and feelings (Kvale, 1996). With deep interview questions within the context of the results I wished to expose, I strive to bring disclose and discover the participants' ways of thinking, perceptions, ideas, feelings, and remarks throughout the interview (Bryman, 2016). I chose the semi-structured in-depth interview method based on open-ended interview questions in this framework because it would provide data of varying quality and depth about versatile participants. The interview method mostly suited the study of local journalism work under precarious transformation.

4.6 Justification for Employing Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis identifies patterns or themes within qualitative data, serving as a foundational method in qualitative research (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006, p.78) argue that thematic analysis should be the first qualitative method researchers learn, as it 'provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other types of analysis'. The decision to employ thematic analysis in this research represents a critical phase in aligning the theoretical framework with the empirical data, facilitating examining key issues derived from the framework. The distinct characteristics of thematic analysis, such as its capacity to organise data into primary themes, categories, subcategories, and codes, often supported by

direct quotations from interview transcripts, documents, and observational notes, were instrumental in selecting this method (Patton, 2001).

Thematic analysis is a robust qualitative method to identify patterns and recurring themes within textual data (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Unlike other qualitative approaches, it is not bound to a specific epistemological or theoretical orientation, making it highly adaptable to various research questions and contexts (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). This flexibility is particularly advantageous when analysing the diverse narratives of journalists, allowing for a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of their experiences. The method facilitates the categorisation and classification of data, enabling the development of coherent thematic frameworks that guide data interpretation and the drawing of meaningful conclusions.

Thematic analysis has been situated over the six main stages in the qualitative research literature (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2001; Neuman, 2014; Bryman, 2016; Berg and Lune, 2017; Baltacı, 2018):

- The researcher becomes acquainted with the data: the first step contributes to reading and rereading the data to comprehend it fully.
- Provides the correct method for generating initial codes, identifying relevant data features and assigning descriptive codes to them.
- Allows the researcher to search for themes in data repeatedly: this categorises codes into potential themes based on their relevance and relationship to one another.
- Gives a method for reviewing themes: this stage serves to review and refine the themes to ensure they accurately represent the data.
- Clarifies the process of defining and naming themes: this maintains explaining each theme and giving it a descriptive name that accurately represents its content.
- Finalises the findings to create the report: this facilitates writing-up the analysis results and presenting the themes and conclusions clearly and in an organised manner.

The primary objective of thematic analysis is to systematically organise and interpret data collected from field interviews by applying NVivo, a software program for qualitative and mixed-method research. It is specifically used to analyse unstructured text, audio, video, and image data, such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, social media posts, and journal articles (Wiltshier, 2011; Phillips and Lu, 2018). Through applying codes, subcategories, and

overarching themes, the analysis reveals more profound insights into the issues under investigation (Kvale, 1996; Creswell, 2014). Summaries of the categorised data are subsequently interpreted through the researcher's analytical lens, enhancing the richness of the findings (Baltacı, 2018). Moreover, thematic analysis allows for identifying cause-and-effect relationships within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It facilitates comparative analysis across different cases, further strengthening the validity and depth of the research.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

After updating and finalising all components of the research proposal and study design and determining the stages of fieldwork, the process of compiling reports for ethical approval began in March 2022. Following ongoing discussions with my research supervisor, the reports were completed and submitted to the ethics committee in May 2022. As a result of the committee's evaluations, ethical approval was granted, and the research received formal authorisation from the University of Essex Research Ethics Committee under reference number ETH2122-1019.

All interviewees were asked to sign a consent form in alignment with ethical guidelines.[5] Participants were informed about the research through an information sheet and consent form detailing how their data would be protected and used. Special precautions were taken to mitigate ethical risks associated with sensitive information concerning cities, specific workplace addresses, working conditions, union activities, and annual salaries. Before their involvement, participants were thoroughly briefed on the nature of the study, ensuring voluntary participation. Participants were reminded at the beginning of each interview of their right to pause, reschedule, or withdraw. The ethics committee also provided interviewees with information on relevant support services, as appropriate. Additionally, measures were taken to safeguard the wellbeing of the researcher. Training and regular supervision were implemented to manage potential emotional distress resulting from exposure to sensitive personal information shared during interviews.

4.8 Applied Methods

The following sections explain the implementation of the described methodological approaches, offering a detailed view of data collection, transcription, and analysis. They reflect

[5] I ensured that every participant endorsed the consent form prior to the interview, a procedure reiterated verbally and documented during the interviews. The initial correspondence includes an exhaustive information sheet outlining the research protocols. Further elaboration is available in the Appendices section.

on the researcher's role, biases, and the measures taken to ensure data quality. The subsequent data analysis is outlined, providing insights into the analytical framework and interpretation process.

4.8.1 The Sampling and Gaining Access

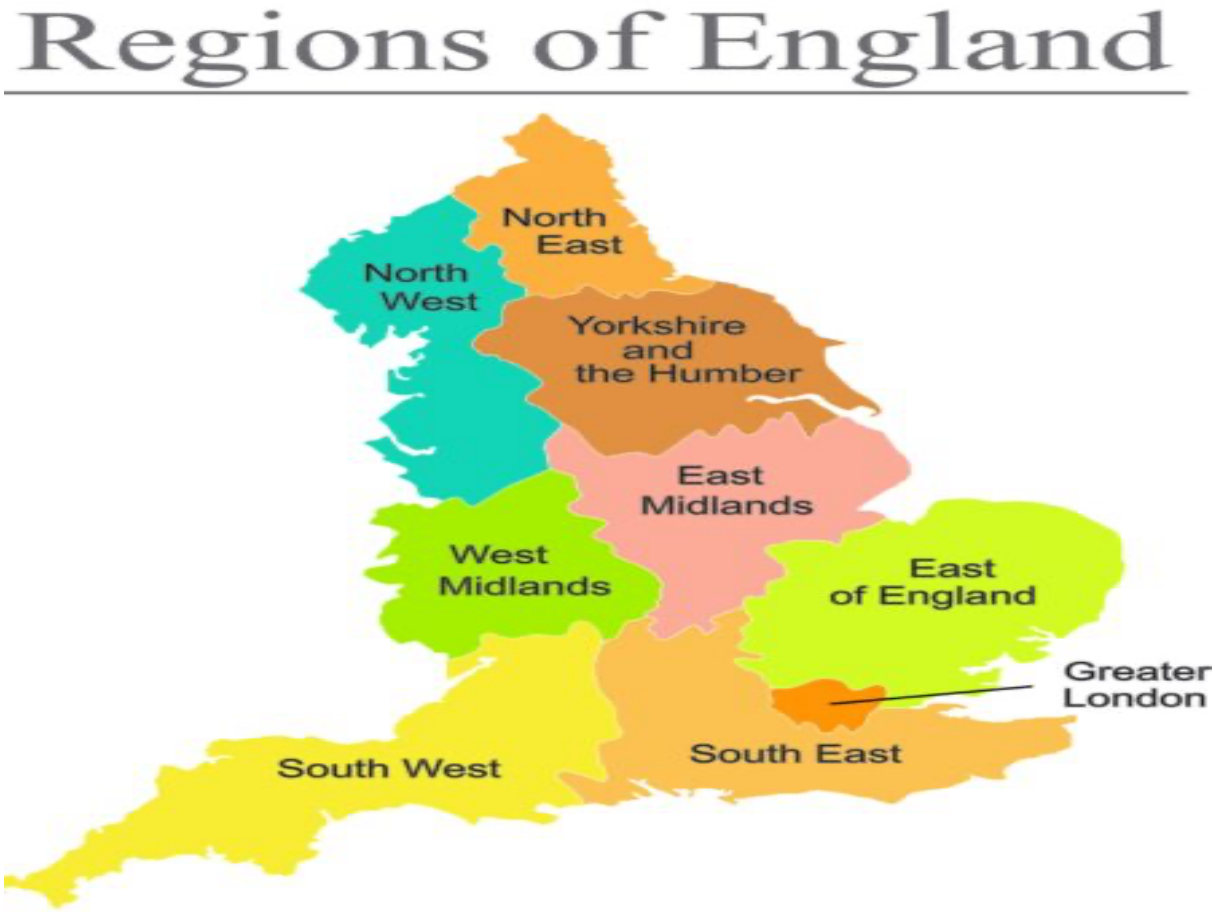
Despite differences in publishing philosophies, work distribution, news production processes, newsroom environments, staffing levels, and ownership structures among local newspapers in the UK, all participants in this study were deliberately and randomly selected from daily newspapers with a local focus. Table 4.2 below shows how field and participants' information were anonymised. Accordingly, the coding process was conducted after data collection was completed, with codes developed to represent regions, cities, newspapers, and journalists. Regions were assigned codes ranging from 1 to 9, with London designated as the centre. Cities were coded numerically from 1 to 3 with the 'CITY' prefix. Newspapers were coded using the prefix 'NP' (NewsPaper), followed by a region code (1 to 9) and a city code (1 to 3), resulting in identifiers such as 'NP101'. Journalists were coded based on their region and city, using the same format (e.g.: 101), with the addition of the prefix 'J' (Journalist) to distinguish them clearly. To adhere to research ethics, the names of these cities, newspapers, and journalists have been anonymised.

Regions	Cities	Newspapers	Journalists
1. London	CITY- 1- 2- 3	NP101-NP102-NP103	J101-J102- J103
2. The Northeast	CITY- 1- 2	NP201- NP202	J201- J202-J203
3. The Northwest	CITY- 1- 2- 3	NP301-NP302-NP303	J301-J302- J303
4. Yorkshire	CITY- 1- 2	NP401- NP402	J401- J402
5. East Midlands	CITY- 1- 2- 3	NP501-NP502-NP503	J501-J502- J503

6. West Midlands	CITY- 1- 2- 3	NP601-NP602-NP603	J601-J602- J603
7. Southeast	CITY- 1- 2- 3	NP701-NP702-NP703	J701-J702- J703
8. East of England	CITY- 1- 2- 3	NP801-NP802-NP803	J801-J802- J803
9. Southwest	CITY- 1- 2- 3	NP901-NP902-NP903	J901-J902- J903

Table 4.2 The Regions, Cities, Newspapers and Journalists' Divisions

The study's reliance on a participation-dependent sampling approach resulted in uneven representation across the nine regions surveyed, with some areas including as few as two journalists from two cities. However, the research encompasses these nine regions (see Map 4.1 below) to ensure broad geographical coverage across England. Whilst the qualitative nature of this study does not seek statistical representativeness, the sample closely mirrors the composition of the UK's local journalism workforce because all participants are employed by five major regional publishers (see Table 4.1 above), which collectively control over 90% of the country's local news market, and the sample captures a diversity of age groups, genders, and departmental roles, mitigating potential biases. Beyond its demographic and structural representativeness, the sample provides critical insights into the experiences of journalists across different newspapers and regional media organisations. By incorporating participants at various career stages and levels of industry experience, the study offers a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the local journalism landscape in the UK.



Map 4.1: The Regions of England [6]

I adopted a flexible approach during the recruitment period, combining random and snowball sampling to ensure a diverse range of participants. As Ellard-Grey *et al*. (2015) highlight, employing multiple sampling methods enhances the breadth of knowledge and experience necessary to address the research inquiry.

For the first month, I focused solely on gathering information without direct outreach, building a database of contact details, social media accounts, and regional affiliations. This initial data—such as newspaper names and headlines—was used to search for local journalists' personal accounts across platforms, including Google, *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*, *YouTube*, and *TikTok*. I conducted these searches using my personal accounts, clearly indicating my identity and the nature of the research. Contact information was also sourced from newspaper websites, newspaper articles, and journalist recommendations. Accordingly, I expanded my network by visiting local newspapers in the East of England, engaging with journalists in person, and using these interactions to facilitate further recruitment. Additionally,

[6] The Regions of England: https://www.mappr.co/counties/england-regions/ (Accessed: 14.04.2024).

I contacted the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), telephoned local newspapers, and continued to grow my contact pool through referrals and initial conversations. To ensure transparency, I provided both my personal and university-affiliated email addresses and phone numbers throughout the recruitment process. The personal information obtained from these methods was compiled into a separate, encrypted file. This file included journalists' names, affiliated newspapers, job titles, and the ownership details of their respective media organisations. By organising this information in advance, I avoided contacting journalists' multiple times, reducing the risk of overwhelming them with repeated emails, messages, or calls. To respect the time of journalists, I exclusively contacted participants on weekdays, recognising that they were more likely to respond during working hours.

I initiated outreach by contacting 15 journalists weekly, resulting in 75 per week. Communication methods included emails, private social media messages, and phone calls—timed to coincide with periods when journalists were most likely to be available. Initially, I prioritised social media messaging to establish contact, sending recruitment messages directly through private message boxes. To maintain confidentiality, I deactivated comments on my accounts and collected all responses through private channels. When contact numbers were available, I attempted to reach journalists by phone. However, after placing approximately 30 calls and receiving just one response, I discontinued phone communication and transitioned to email outreach.

Daily communication efforts continued throughout the week. Initially, I used my personal email but later shifted to my university email, facilitating better rapport with participants. I am a PhD researcher at the University of Essex, Department of Sociology. I explained the focus of my research—examining the challenges facing local journalism in the context of digitalisation, remote working, and precarity in the UK. I also provided details about the anticipated duration of interviews and reassured participants regarding confidentiality and data protection by sharing an information sheet through emails, messages, and phone calls.

In line with snowball sampling, I asked participating journalists to share information about the study with their colleagues and, where possible, encourage their involvement. In total, I contacted over 1,300 local journalists across the country. On average, I received one response for every 35 recruitment attempts. Many journalists who declined to participate provided explanations. Personal factors, such as illness or annual leave, were commonly cited alongside professional concerns, including fears of breaching company policies or compromising professional integrity. Others declined due to the sensitive nature of the study topic or a preference for maintaining confidentiality. Logistical barriers, including scheduling conflicts,

high workloads, and competing commitments, were also frequently mentioned. Despite these challenges, several journalists expressed interest in the research and were open to scheduling meetings or phone calls. However, due to the demands of their profession, weeks often passed between initial contact and the eventual interview. Throughout this process, I successfully arranged interviews representing various genders, ages, and roles. However, five participants later withdrew. Ultimately, I interviewed 26 local journalists between October 2022 and May 2023, as detailed in the following section.

4.8.2 Interviewing and Data Transcription

Twenty-six local journalists in England, selected through a random snowball sampling technique, have been interviewed. These participants were drawn from the expansive UK's local print-journalism landscape, chosen from a pool of over 1,300 local journalists. In alignment with ethical protocols (Braun and Clarke, 2013), all interviewees received an information sheet[7] detailing the nature of the study and provided informed consent[8] before participation. To ensure rich and nuanced data collection, interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via videocalls, fostering deeper engagement and enhancing the quality of the testimonies. This methodological approach aligns with the principles of qualitative enquiry, allowing for the extraction of insights into social phenomena and diverse perspectives (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Participants engaged in semi-structured, in-depth interviews to elicit detailed narratives about their experiences, criticisms, and perspectives concerning the focal themes of the study (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Out of 1,300 journalists contacted during the recruitment phase, those who agreed to participate voluntarily underwent interviews distributed across nine regions of England, conducted in-person or online.

The interviewees held permanent employment contracts within local journalism. They represented a range of professional roles, including court reporters, live reporters, sports reporters, senior journalists, content editors, search engine optimisation (SEO) journalists, and local democracy reporters. This professional diversity reflected varying educational backgrounds, career stages, and job functions, as detailed in Table 4.3 which provides further demographic data than Table 4.2, illustrating the participants' gender, age range department, and career length. These variables offer critical insights into how local journalists experience and navigate the pressures of digitalisation and precarious work conditions. All interviews were

[7] See Appendix 1.

[8] See Appendix 2.

conducted with explicit approval for recording. Five were conducted face-to-face with audio recording, whilst another five were conducted in-person without recording, during which comprehensive notes were taken. One interview took place via Google Meet, capturing both audio and video. The remaining 15 interviews were conducted using Zoom, with video and audio recorded. The interviews ranged from 50 to 70 minutes, consistently aligning within this timeframe.

No	Sex	Age Range	Position	Duration of Employment
J101	Female	22-30	Court Reporter	5 Years
J102	Female	22-30	Daily Life Reporter	6 Years
J103	Male	31-44	Senior Sports Reporter	21 Years
J201	Male	31-44	Senior Sports Reporter	18 Years
J202	Female	31-44	Editor	11 Years
J203	Female	22-30	SEO Journalist	6 Years
J301	Female	22-30	Daily Life Reporter	5 Years
J302	Male	45-54	Senior Journalist	30 Years
J303	Male	45-54	Court Reporter	17 Years
J401	Female	22-30	Editor	7 Years
J402	Male	45-54	Senior Sports Reporter	19 Years
J501	Male	45-54	Court Reporter	17 Years
J502	Female	22-30	Trainee Reporter	2 Years
J503	Male	31-44	Daily Life Reporter	10 Years
J601	Male	54-65	Editor	40 Years
J602	Male	54-65	Content Specialist	19 Years
J603	Female	22-30	Daily Life Reporter	7 Years
J701	Male	31-44	Senior Journalist	16 Years
J702	Female	22-30	Daily Life Reporter	3 Years
J703	Male	31-44	Senior Journalist	13 Years
J801	Female	22-30	Daily Life Reporter	2 Years
J802	Male	22-30	Daily Life Reporter	3 Years
J803	Female	22-30	Daily Life Reporter	3 Years
J901	Male	22-30	Daily Life Reporter	4 Years

J902	Female	22-30	Local Democracy Reporter	7 Years
J903	Male	31-44	Court Reporter	10 Years

Table 4.3. The Detailed List of Interviewees

At the outset of the interviews, I noticed that journalists often resisted sharing information, likely due to their unfamiliarity with academic research interview protocols. To address this and foster rapport, I initiated the interviews with straightforward and concise questions[9] regarding demographics, motivations for pursuing journalism, and prior training (Puwar, 1997; Garton and Copland, 2010; Braun and Clarke, 2013), this initial engagement aimed to cultivate trust and create a comfortable participant environment. Additionally, interviews explored the advocacy roles assumed by journalists within the local journalism landscape. The interview framework was guided by these foundational concepts, covering topics such as contract-based employment in evolving work environments, economic challenges, health impacts associated with digitalised workloads, shifts in news production venues (including remote working), work-life balance, and trends contributing to journalistic instability. Further, interviews explored the advocacy roles assumed by journalists within the local journalism landscape.

Following the principles of snowball sampling, the sample size was determined by reaching saturation rather than through pre-established quotas. Saturation was marked by recurring themes and diminishing novel insights in participants' narratives (Puwar, 1997; Given, 2008; Braun and Clarke, 2013). As a result, the data collection process concluded when journalists' testimonies began to echo one another, and subsequent interview recommendations led to individuals already included in the study.

The transcription phase utilised audio recordings captured through a digital voice recorder, laptop, and smartphone. I employed the Microsoft Word dictate function for the initial transcription and meticulously reviewed each audio recording to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed material. In assessing the interviews' content, I recognised that pauses, hesitations, and seemingly tangential remarks can carry analytical significance, often revealing affective dynamics, underlying tensions, or subtext relevant to interpretation. Consequently, decisions regarding the removal of material were made with careful consideration of its relevance to the research questions. Only sections deemed genuinely unrelated to the analytical aims were omitted, while all potentially meaningful verbal cues and digressions were retained. Editing

[9] Appendix 3 extensively details the interview questions.

was thus undertaken not merely for brevity or readability, but as a deliberate process to preserve the richness and interpretive potential of the data.

Confidential information was encrypted in a separate document to safeguard participant confidentiality, linking anonymised codes to real names and contact details. Other attributes, such as gender, class background, education, occupation, and employment status, remained uncoded, as they were essential for addressing the research questions. This approach ensured personal data protection whilst retaining key demographic insights critical to the study. Throughout the recruitment and interview phases, I maintained detailed notes capturing reflections on sample construction, follow-up actions, and observations made before, during, and after interviews. These fieldnotes supported a comprehensive, iterative analysis of the research problem, enhancing the depth and rigour of the final data interpretation.

4.8.3 Data Coding and Analysis

The initial data analysis phase involved generating a comprehensive list of preliminary codes derived from a thorough first reading of the interview transcripts. NVivo Pro V12 was employed to facilitate this process, enhancing the organisation and management of the data. The initial codes were iteratively refined through successive rounds of in-depth reading and re-coding, drawing on strategies advocated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), Fletcher (2017), and Gilgun (2019). NVivo Pro V12 supported open textual coding, enabling the systematic categorisation of responses along thematic lines to extract meaningful patterns and insights (Wiltshier, 2011; Phillips and Lu, 2018). Following the open coding phase, the dataset underwent a detailed review to consolidate and synthesise codes, culminating in identifying overarching themes grounded in the empirical data. Quotations were strategically integrated to substantiate each theme, ensuring a direct link between the findings and the core research questions. This iterative process required constant movement between the raw data and theoretical frameworks, allowing for the corroboration or reassessment of emerging interpretations in light of existing literature.

Braun and Clarke (2013) claim that thematic analysis enables in-depth qualitative data analysis to serve as the principal analytical method, offering a structured yet adaptable framework. Accordingly, the thematic analysis approach was used. This methodological approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the impacts of digitisation (see Table 5.1 for initial themes), remote and hybrid working practices (see Table 6.1 for initial themes), and precarisation within journalistic labour (see Table 7.1 for initial themes). The thematic analysis allowed for identifying novel patterns within journalistic practices whilst accommodating

emergent concepts that intersected with pre-existing themes. Consequently, the analysis operated in a dynamic, bidirectional fashion, enabling the development of new categories and conceptual frameworks.

To ensure the rigour and credibility of the analysis, interview transcripts were revisited throughout the writing process, reinforcing thematic consistency and identifying overlooked insights. In parallel, grounded theory, as articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967, 2006; Glaser, 1978) and Corbin and Strauss (1990), was employed to address emergent concepts arising from the narratives of local journalists. This complementary use of grounded theory facilitated the construction of novel theoretical insights derived directly from the data, enriching the overall analysis and addressing dimensions not initially anticipated by the research questions; combining thematic analysis and grounded theory allowed for the identification of complex patterns and relationships, strengthening the theoretical framework with empirically grounded insights.

4.8.4 The Researcher's Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher's role is participatory and subjective, yet a rationalist stance ensures that data collection and analysis remain systematic and critically reflective (Puwar, 1997; Patton, 2001; Garton and Copland, 2010; Tracy, 2010; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). I approach this study as a rationalist, engaging deeply with participants whilst striving to minimise personal bias. Social phenomena are examined within their natural contexts, allowing for a rich, context-driven understanding without manipulating environmental variables. Direct interaction with participants, including interviews and fieldwork, has positioned me as the primary instrument for data collection. This aligns with qualitative traditions that emphasise subjective engagement but balance it with methodological rigour (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Kvale, 1996). Whilst emotional investment in the experiences of participants may arise, I consciously maintain critical distance, reflecting on my role to prevent undue influence.

Reflexivity is central to this process, as it transforms the challenge of subjectivity into an opportunity for more profound insight (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Finlay, 1998; O'Brien *et al.*, 2014). By critically analysing how my background, values, and positionality shape the research, I align with calls to place researcher subjectivity at the core of knowledge production (Braun and Clarke, 2013). My academic background, with both a Bachelor of Arts and a Master's degree in journalism, and prior research on Turkish local journalism, further strengthen this reflexive approach. This reflective stance fosters rapport and trust with participants, enriching the research whilst maintaining methodological clarity. Through

ongoing reflexivity, I ensure the data reflects the lived experiences of participants, grounded in the theoretical and empirical rigour that qualitative enquiry demands.

4.9 Conclusion

The connection between applied methods and the quality of work is vital, as Braun and Clarke (2013, 2021) noted. This connection is the meaning of how researchers perceive the problem, the research methods employed, and the findings obtained at the end of the research journey. The methodology serves as the roadmap for conducting a research project. It allows researchers to set aside preconceived notions about research and approach the field with an open mind. Like explorers immersing themselves in a new culture, researchers can only truly understand their subject matter if they refrain from viewing it through their perspectives and values (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The methodology used in this study has meticulously executed each step prescribed by the applied methods. These procedural steps have facilitated the establishment of a rapport between me and the participants, thereby assuming a crucial role not only in promoting the comprehensive collection of research data but in guaranteeing coherence between the findings of the study and the extant literature, as well as among the findings themselves. In this study, I maintained a steadfast position in line with the rigour required by qualitative research throughout collecting, organising, and analysing the research findings. I managed the entire process as needed.

CHAPTER 5 THE EFFECTS OF DIGITALISATION, SOCIAL MEDIA & ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

5.0 Chapter Introduction

The rapid digitalisation and the rise of online platform corporations, coupled with the continuous advancement of artificial intelligence technologies and generative AI, are fundamentally altering the landscape of journalism. The influential works of Cherubini (2022) and media and communication researchers such as Lloyd and Seaton (2006) have brought to light these significant transformations occurring in news production and consumption worldwide. The dominant platforms such as Google, *Facebook*, and emergent generative AI technologies like Bard (now known as Gemini), Grok, and ChatGPT wield remarkable influence, raising concerns about the sustainability of traditional journalism. The decline in newspaper subscriptions, the decline in print journalism, closures and layoffs, the migration of classified advertising to social media platforms, and the challenge of ad-skipping for free-to-air broadcasters have put the profession of journalism at the centre of new debates concerning the traditional journalism practices. This transition has seen newspapers adopt freemium models whilst free-to-air broadcasters have implemented a range of expanded payment structures (Bisiani and Mitchell, 2024; Newman *et al.*, 2024). Concurrently, the digital marketplace has grown increasingly saturated, with dominant platforms such as *Facebook* and Google monopolising a substantial share of revenues from online commercial communication (Donders *et al.*, 2018). The transformation reshaped the interaction and evaluation of viewpoints and information, as well as the formation of public opinion. Furthermore, the integration of digital technologies, the proliferation of social media platforms, and the necessity for remote or hybrid working models, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 6), have constricted the local news sector in the UK (Tobitt, 2021a; Newman *et al.*, 2022). This situation has been exacerbated by the leveraging of user data by major companies to establish imbalanced relationships with advertisers, users, and news outlets, impacting news market dynamics and the production and consumption of news (Ardia *et al.*, 2020; Ofcom, 2023c).

The multifaceted impacts of digitalisation, platforms, and AI on journalism practices, the quality of factual work in local journalism, and the skills of journalists warrant careful examination in understanding their adaptation to these technologies and the pressure of multi-tasking, as discussed in Zelizer (2004). These developments raise critical questions about the evolving nature of journalism, including the redefinition of journalistic competencies and the

changing scope of individuals recognised as journalists. As journalism continues to adapt to these technological advancements, comprehensive studies are crucial to fully comprehend and navigate the evolving landscape.

Accordingly, this chapter aims to examine the influence of digitalisation, platform corporations, and AI technologies on the work and skills of local journalists in the context of the UK. This exploration encompasses a thorough examination of the journalistic practices, information dissemination, and adaptation to the evolving local journalism. The intention is to provide nuanced insights into the complex interplay of benefits and challenges that accompany the digitalisation process in local journalism. Whilst digitalisation of work offers some tangible benefits, such as reduced commuting time and the ability to rapidly develop and disseminate stories, it also presents new and pressing challenges. These challenges include potential skill erosion, the need for rapid techno-adaptation, ageism, digital overload, erosion of reliance on traditional news making, as well as the crucial issues of fact-checking and misinformation. The primary goal of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of digitalisation on the skills and journalistic practices of local journalists in the UK. This analysis involves examining the experiences and narratives of 26 local journalists to gain insights into the potential drawbacks of digitalisation within the local journalism sector. Additionally, an essential aspect of this study is to identify the strategies that local journalists employ to adapt to these rapidly evolving technologies, to uphold the quality and integrity of their work.

5.1 Findings

As depicted in Table 4.3 in the Methodology chapter, the participants occupied various roles: Daily Life Reporter (n=9), Court Reporter (n=4), Senior Sports Reporter (n=3), Senior Journalist (n=3), Editor (n=3), Local Democracy Reporter (n=1), Content Specialist (n=1), SEO Journalist (n=1), and Trainee Reporter (n=1) within the local journalism landscape in the UK. The variation in the number of participants for each role has been determined by their willingness to participate. As a result, some roles have a more diverse number of participants, whilst others have fewer and more uniform participation. The unanimous consensus among all participants is that they encounter various challenges due to digitalisation, online platform pressures, and advancements in AI technologies whilst carrying out their professional duties. I have investigated the challenges faced in the digitally evolving journalism landscape, and the data collected serves as the basis for the five main inductive themes. These themes demonstrate the complex interplay between technology and practice changes in the British local journalism landscape, as outlined in Table 5.1 provided below.

Themes
Anything and Everything: The Pressure of Multitasking
Ageism: Adapt or Go
The Burden of Digital Overload
Digital Disruption: News From Everywhere
Fact-Checking and Misinformation

Table 5.1 Chapter 5 Main Themes

5.1.1 Anything and Everything: The Pressure of Multitasking

Throughout its history, the field of journalism has continuously evolved in response to advancements in technology. Whilst many of these changes have brought about positive outcomes, the emergence of the internet, widespread access to information via search engines and digital platforms, the adoption of digital business models, and the increasing use of artificial intelligence have all brought remaining transformations to the journalism practices.

According to the Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the day-to-day operations of journalists have been subject to dramatic change in the digitalised work culture (Newman *et al.*, 2023). Phillips *et al*. (2009) claim that the transition of news organisations to the internet has led to an expectation for journalists to produce content across multiple platforms, including print, radio, television, and online media. In specific contexts, particularly within the local and regional press, journalistic output has increasingly moved from original news reporting, relying instead on repurposing press releases and public relations materials. Furthermore, the predominant focus on factual reporting in the past has given way to an increasing emphasis on analysis and commentary, particularly in these local news publishers (see Table 4.1). These transformations arguably reflect a broader pattern of erosion within traditional newsrooms, characterised by the breakdown of departmentalised expertise and a move towards multiskilled journalism (Rottwilm, 2014). Accordingly, Singer (2004) notes that under-resourced local journalists are typically tasked with a wide range of media responsibilities, such as creating video, audio, and text content and editing and uploading it to websites. Her study on newsroom convergence indicates that these journalists face challenges, often needing more proper training and using unfamiliar technology. The production of cross-platform media content is more time-consuming and results in much more skill erosion than their editors may fully understand.

Beyond advancements in platform and equipment technologies, AI is increasingly reshaping contemporary journalism by transforming workflows, constraining certain aspects of practice, and necessitating the development of new skillsets. According to Diakopoulos (2024), AI has led to a noticeable decline in skillsets related to journalism, from 55.5% to 53.5%, and investigative news production, from 47.4% to 41%. These first AI's outcomes are particularly evident in the decline in specific skills such as punctuation and capitalisation (from 6.5% to 4.6%); information gathering (from 7.8% to 6.6%); content editing (from 4.7% to 3.7%); research (from 24.7% to 23.8%); memos (from 2% to 1.3%); grammar (from 14.8% to 14%); copywriting (from 4.8% to 4.2%); and image editing (from 1.2% to 0.9%). And he argues intervention is needed to address this issue through targeted initiatives such as specialised training programs, curriculum enhancement, mentorship, and peer review. Incorporating AI-integrated tools, establishing content quality standards, promoting collaborative projects, and expanding practical experience opportunities can help mitigate the decline in journalistic and media production skills (Royal, 2024; Wenger, Hossain, and Senseman, 2024). These circumstances stem from the necessity for journalists to possess the capability to engage across various media, including print, online, and diverse platforms, due to AI adaptation, as opposed to solely focusing on traditional newspaper reporting.

A recent investigation led by researchers Chew and Tandoc (2024) revealed that contemporary journalists perceive their role as one that necessitates agility and a willingness to embrace change. This outlook is driven by the need to ensure survival within a challenging environment with resource constraints. Journalists are compelled to adopt an iterative mindset and cultivate a diverse skillset to develop media products effectively (Schlichting, 2015). In their extended book, Friedman and Laurison (2019) expand upon this situation to reveal how journalism perpetuates class inequalities. They argue that individuals from privileged backgrounds possess cultural capital—such as accent, etiquette, and mannerisms—that aligns with the dominant norms of elite professions, including journalism. This alignment facilitates their entry and progression within these fields, whilst those from less privileged backgrounds may lack this embodied cultural capital, facing systemic barriers that hinder their advancement.

This situation is referring to habitus discussed in Chapter 2. Bourdieu (1973) argues that habitus reflects deep-rooted dispositions shaped by background and access, allowing privileged journalists to thrive whilst others encounter systemic obstacles. Habitus refers to a structured system that creates continuous and transferable tendencies, classifying individuals based on their social context (Bourdieu, 1971; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). It influences how we view and engage in practices, encompassing journalists' habits, abilities, and unique

inclinations in both work and life (Garton and Copland, 2010). As Deuze (1999, 2007) claims, that today's journalist, no matter they are local, regional, or national media workers, have to be adapted by deskill, reskill, and multi-skill to enhance their survivability and minimise redundancy in their work and job losses. Journalists working in a digitalised news setting have developed a journalistic mindset shaped by their existing ideas about their role and internalised guidelines and practices. Irrespective of their background, journalists require daily changed instruction and adaptation to embody this habitus (Garton and Copland, 2010).

The journalists interviewed for this study emphasised the need to acquire multiple skills and perform tasks that were once handled by separate individuals to succeed in the current newsroom culture and workplace environment. They explained that the extent to which a journalist adopts this 'disposition' towards technological transformation significantly impacts their position within the organisation and their career trajectory:

> "*There's an expectation to know how to do a lot more (…) It's not just about gathering stories and writing them anymore. You've also got to be able to edit videos, record audio, make packages like you would if you were working on TV, and have loads of tech developments such as AI, equipment and external devices. But you're also, at the same time, expected to write these really great stories for being a real journalist (…) So you're essentially a TV reporter, a radio reporter, and an online content producer, but then you've also got to work for a newspaper*" (J202).

J202, an editor with 11 years' experience in the local news environment, claims that there are evolving expectations placed on journalists, illustrating a significant shift from traditional reporting-focused roles to multiskilled positions. According to her, journalists are now required to master a diverse set of skills and handling extensive technological equipment including generative AI. This transformation reflects the increasing demand for multiplatform content creation, where a journalist's responsibilities span TV, radio, print, and online media. As a result, traditional distinctions between different types of reporters are blurring, with journalists expected to perform a wide array of tasks. Deuze (2014) argues this issue: media workers face a paradox in today's journalism atmosphere. Despite being constantly connected and immersed in their work, journalists struggle to develop effective survival strategies in an environment that demands instant and interconnected media content and experiences, upon which their professional identities and livelihoods depend.

"*(...) I guess today's journalist in local journalism is someone who is able to keep up with everything and have their sort-of finger on the pulse of everything that's happening, being able to use generative AI tools and social media in the right way to connect with the right audiences, and being able to produce the right content that is attractive to people to keep coming back to read what you've got to say, (...) journalism is not a job of a specific genre anymore*" (J402).

"*I'm a community reporter, but that's just a phrase (...) I'm responsible for everything (...) So, I do have to do a bit of everything to survive today's industry (...) I mean, writing headlines is not a skill anymore, this is definitely a job of multitasking*" (J803).

J402, a senior sports reporter, and J803, a reporter of daily life in the early stages of her career, highlight a paradox in which the acquisition of multiple skills, rather than enhancing proficiency, contributes to heightened stress and a dilution of expertise. This outcome stems from the lack of specialisation in a single journalistic genre, which, they argue, undermines depth and mastery in their respective fields. According to them, journalists today face the challenge of adapting to a rapidly evolving media landscape that requires a diverse skillset and significant adaptability. J402 asserts the need for journalists to stay informed about multiskilling, leveraging AI and social media effectively to engage audiences, and produce compelling content to retain reader interest. On the other hand, J803 claims that the struggles of community reporters, who must juggle multiple roles, leads to skill erosion and a dilution of expertise in specific areas. These insights collectively illustrate the complex balance which local journalists today must strike between versatility and maintaining depth in their specialised skills, all whilst navigating the demands of contemporary journalism. Court reporter J501 expresses concern in this parallel and points out the possible consequences of skill erosion:

"*(...) nowadays, there is a lot of pressure to constantly produce and publish content online, and this has a negative impact on the quality of journalism (...) When I started, I was covering a wide range of topics. This included reporting on council meetings, attending court sessions and inquests, and conducting interviews for both light-hearted features and serious reporting. All of this was just a typical day's work (...) Today thing's changed, I mean the tech change is compressing all these tasks into a computer and eroding those essential skills (...) I believe that today's journalists are pressured to*

produce more online content, leading to a decrease in the quality of reporting and fewer diverse assignments, resulting in a decline in journalism skills and diversity" (J501).

J501, who has worked in local journalism for 17 years, says the statement shows the profound effects of digitalisation on journalists' skills and journalism, particularly how the relentless demand for online content has eroded the quality and diversity of reporting. He reflects on a time when journalism encompassed a broad spectrum of activities, attending council meetings, court sessions, and conducting interviews, each contributing to a rich and varied skillset. However, he claims that the shift to a predominantly digital format has compressed these diverse tasks into a narrower, less nuanced workflow. He also says that this transition has led to a significant decline in the depth of journalistic practice, as the focus on high-volume content production undermines the ability to engage in comprehensive, high-quality reporting and results in a diminished capacity for journalists to develop a well-rounded skillset, with fewer opportunities for the nuanced and diverse assignments that once defined the profession. He underlines a critical concern that the digital age, whilst advancing efficiency, risks impoverishing the core elements of journalism that ensure its depth and integrity.

In parallel with what J501 said, early career reporter of daily life, J901, who has a journalism degree and experience as a news reporter, shows this significant erosion of specialised journalistic skills in the digital journalism landscape, where the demand for versatility increasingly overshadows traditional training:

"*I'm a daily life reporter; it's a very general role, dipping into absolutely everything (...) I dip into various topics (...) Whether covering daily life news, sports, politics, or health, journalism today demands versatility across multiple formats, print, online, and digital platforms, while navigating the complexities of reporting across geographically dispersed locations. Each of these story types requires a distinct skillset, further complicating the demands placed on journalists (...) You have to be very versatile for that sort of role (...) This is definitely beyond the journalism training you have received, and it disables most of the things you have learnt*" (J901).

Covering a vast array of topics ranging from daily life news, sports, and politics, to health, requires a high level of adaptability that often extends beyond the specialised training journalists receive. This breadth may undermine expertise, resulting in dependence on superficial reporting techniques instead of the thorough investigative methods characterising

quality journalism. As journalists are compelled to "*dip into everything*," the nuanced skills developed during their education become less relevant, resulting in more generalised and less insightful content.

The shift toward digitalisation in journalism presents a complex challenge to the foundational principles of the profession, risking the overall quality of reporting. The constant pressure to quickly adapt to a wide range of topics leaves journalists with little time to delve deeply into any specific area, ultimately compromising their ability to provide in-depth, investigative coverage.

Many participants in the study recognised several key advantages of digitalisation, such as broader reach and greater accessibility to diverse audiences. They noted that digital tools enable journalists to engage with communities in real-time, promoting more immediate and interactive reporting whilst allowing for cost-effective production and distribution. However, concerns were raised about the growing reliance on digital platforms, which can subject journalists to external pressures (Gopsill, 2025). For example, J901 observed that:

> "*People underestimate just how significant that influence is because we give all our products. Our products are the skills. If you work in a shop, your product is your stock, and we are currently losing our stock due to these developments"*.

In the context of digitalised newsrooms and the widespread adoption of remote work (see analyses in Chapter 6), the essential prerequisites for practicing authentic journalism are transforming, diminishing, and vanishing. According to participant J902, these alterations are so profound that they challenge the very essence of journalism itself:

> "*I do think technological change was the main thing that sort-of evolved everything, including our skills (...) Digitalisation is definitely more challenging and also is a reason for less in-depth journalism. I feel like it takes more time consuming to do nothing (...) Writing bulletins or surfing council's websites (...) Journalism is much more than that and needs real skills, which are not sought by employers nowadays*" (J902).

Her statement elucidates the significant influence of digitalisation on journalism, specifically emphasising its transformative effect on the requisite skills and the calibre of reporting. She expresses concern that digitalisation has introduced more challenges and has led to a decline

with in-depth journalism. According to her, the shift towards digital platforms has resulted in a more superficial approach to journalism, where tasks such as writing bulletins or browsing council websites take precedence over investigative reporting and in-depth analysis. The transition to new work paradigms in journalism has introduced several nuanced challenges. One prominent theme is the increasing time demands placed on journalists, driven by the expectation to adapt to digital tools and maintain a constant online presence. This has fragmented their focus, leaving less time for in-depth reporting and investigative work; hallmarks of quality journalism. Consequently, this shift risks diluting the depth and rigour of journalistic output, as the pressures of immediacy and multitasking often override the pursuit of thorough and skilful storytelling. Additionally, these changes exacerbate stress and job dissatisfaction, raising broader concerns about the sustainability of the profession and its ability to uphold high standards in an era of rapid technological and structural transformation. Furthermore, she indicates that employers increasingly value digital competencies over conventional journalistic skills, exacerbating the decline of fundamental reporting abilities. This change reflects a broader trend in the industry where the emphasis on digital content production undermines the fundamental principles of journalism, leading to a landscape where quick surface-level reporting is favoured over detailed investigative work. This evolution challenges journalists to maintain their professional standards and adapt their skills in an environment that increasingly values digital proficiency over journalistic depth.

Despite these mounting digital and online-first pressures on journalists and the profession, news publishers still struggle to compete with social media platforms and other digital giants such as Alphabet/Google, Meta, and Reddit regarding online consumption. Press Gazette's latest ranking of UK online publishers, which examines the broader internet landscape rather than just news, reveals that most major commercial news publishers, including industry leaders like News Corp. and the Daily Mail Group or regional/local news publishers National World and Newsquest, etc., fail to break into the top ten platforms where users spend their time online (Tobitt, 2024c). This decline is a means of pressure on journalists working for publishers. Contemporary journalists face challenges in acclimatising to the constantly evolving landscape of internet technologies and advancements in artificial intelligence. Individuals who have adhered to traditional journalistic practices during their career face significant challenges adapting to these changes, often leading to early retirement or career transitions. The narratives of industry professionals reveal that young journalists are grappling with a loss of skills amidst this shift, whilst their elder colleagues are facing job displacement and the prospect of compulsory retirement due to ageism.

5.1.2 Ageism: Adapt or Go

Ageism, often overshadowed by more recognised forms of disadvantage like those based on gender, race, or socioeconomic status, remains one of the most insidious and overlooked biases at the era of digitalisation (Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020). Ageism refers to a particular type of discrimination in which individuals are evaluated based on age-related stereotypes or beliefs about how individuals should behave, live, or feel and is embedded in social contexts and shaped by social factors (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2018). Ageism is widespread and commonly found in various aspects of life, such as the workplace and public areas. The challenges older individuals face in adapting to new technologies often exacerbate ageism within the workplace, particularly in the journalism sector where technological proficiency is paramount.

In the journalism profession, the impact of technology and its associated economic influences on journalism is fundamentally transforming the work of journalists, with those over fifty facing the most significant drops in income and increased redundancy. This transformation, influenced by factors such as convergence, the information economy, and knowledge of work, is reshaping the organisation, practices, and experiences of journalism professionals as they adapt to the evolving technological landscape (Zion *et al.*, 2016). Butler (1980) explains that ageism, often negative and harmful, can cause individuals to conform to ageist stereotypes, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Therefore, this circumstance illustrates why journalists aged over fifty, who struggle to adapt to the continuously advancing technology, experience drops in income and choose to pursue alternative career paths or retire from the profession.

Ageist stereotypes have deeply influenced the structures within the journalism profession, creating persistent and transferable biases that classify individuals based on their social context. These biases permeate educational institutions where journalism is taught, forcing older journalists to either endure unfavourable conditions or contemplate leaving the profession. In their investigative study which focuses on journalism in Brazil, Canada, and Europe, Pereira (2020) found that journalists have been compelled to adjust to the challenges and changes within the journalism community. This has led them to continuously re-evaluate their approach to career planning, adaptability, and the practice of journalism in the digital age. Josephi and Oller Alonso's study (2021) similarly reveals that with the advent of digitalisation, journalism is increasingly perceived as a profession suited for younger individuals, resulting in the gradual displacement of older journalists. He contends that contemporary newsrooms

prioritise dynamic professionals capable of staying abreast of technological advancements, effectively marginalising older journalists and diminishing their role within the industry. In alignment with these studies, O'Donnell, Zion, and Sherwood (2015) argue that the perceived terminal decline of the journalism industry has intensified feelings of anger and anxiety among older journalists, both concerning the future of the profession and the erosion of their professional identity. These heightened emotions have led many veteran journalists to voluntarily exit the field and pursue employment opportunities in other sectors. Parallel to these findings, a study by Nel (2010) on redundant UK local journalists estimates that the mainstream journalism workforce in the UK contracted by approximately 30-40% between 2001 and 2010. The study further suggests that a significant proportion of those affected by these redundancies were journalists aged fifty and above and had more than twenty years' career in the industry.

Reflecting similar patterns, a series of in-depth interviews which I conducted with 26 local UK journalists, shed light on the challenges faced by senior professionals in adapting to the dynamic technological landscape and the growing influence of artificial intelligence. These factors have significantly impacted the practice of contemporary journalism, posing difficulties for older journalists in retaining their roles within the industry.

This theme aims to clarify the persistence of ageism in UK local journalism, emphasising the impact of common digital tools and practices embedded in technological frameworks. Given that the study concentrates on journalists actively engaged in the practice of journalism, the analyses within this theme predominantly draw upon the observations of these journalists as recorded in the local newspapers where they have worked, particularly with regard to their senior colleagues:

> "*I know a colleague in her fifties who is not particularly tech-savvy and has faced significant challenges adapting to new technologies (...) She worked at the same newspaper as me and hoped her contract would be renewed. Unfortunately, her contract was not extended (...) One of the key factors contributing to this outcome was her difficulty in utilising modern technology and adapting to various equipment*" (J803).

The early career reporter, J803, exemplifies the theme of ageism within the workplace, particularly through the lens of technological adaptability. She states that her colleague, in her fifties, faced challenges in keeping-up with technological advancements, which has been identified as a key factor in the non-renewal of her contract. This situation confirms a common

ageist stereotype that older media workers are less adaptable to new technologies, which can lead to discriminatory practices. The 'adapt or go' narrative reflects a broader organisational expectation that older journalists, regardless of age, must continually evolve with technological advancements to remain employable. However, this expectation often disproportionately affects older journalists, who may not have the same familiarity with contemporary technology as their younger counterparts. The failure to extend the aged journalist's contract in this example, based upon her technological struggles, suggests an organisational prioritisation of technological proficiency over other valuable skills and experiences which older journalists might bring. This narrative highlights how ageism in the workplace can manifest through the undervaluing of older workers' contributions, reinforcing the need for more inclusive approaches that support lifelong learning and adaptability across all age groups.

> "*We have a colleague with excellent traditional qualifications in journalism (...) She might be in her late fifties or early sixties. She has accounts on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook and knows about AI, but she needs help using them effectively, particularly in browsing and finding stories (...) Additionally, she finds it challenging to use the software we use. As we work remotely, she has to contact me via phone, text, or email for assistance, which can be difficult for her. She has expressed frustration about not receiving story assignments and feels that the expectation for her to find stories herself is a hindrance, given her difficulty with these tasks (...) She also thinks leave [leaving the industry] has come for her from practice*" (J703).

As a common narrative, J703 explains technological adaptation or disengagement as follows: he highlights the stereotype of ageism in the workplace, particularly in relation to the evolving expectations for technological proficiency. His experiences are reflecting a wealth of experience and expertise. However, as J703 explains, despite his colleague's active presence on various digital platforms and her awareness of emerging technologies like AI, this senior journalist finds it challenging to use these tools effectively for essential tasks such as browsing for and discovering stories. In addition, as analysed in Chapter 6, which focuses on the changes brought about by remote working, this journalist has difficulty adapting to the software that made remote working possible, necessitating frequent assistance from younger colleagues. Her frustration with not receiving news stories and the expectation to independently find stories shows a broader issue of shifting industry standards that may inadvertently marginalise older journalists.

This situation reveals how technological advancements and the increasing reliance on digital tools can create barriers for older employees, even when they attempt to engage with these platforms. The aged journalist's feelings of inadequacy and her contemplation of leaving the industry suggest a pervasive sense of displacement, where her traditional skills are overshadowed by the demand for digital fluency. This situation exemplifies how ageism can manifest subtly in the form of unrealistic expectations placed on older journalists to quickly adapt to new technologies without adequate support or training, making them a more precarious age group. This journalist's experience reflects a broader trend in which older professionals may feel pushed out of the journalism industry, not due to a lack of capability, but rather due to the rapid pace of technological change that disproportionately affects them (Josephi and Oller Alonso, 2021).

> "*We have an older colleague in our team, and I would say that despite their extensive experience in newspapers, there are certain aspects, such as posting on social media, that he would approach differently compared to how I, as a younger person, would do it (…) one of them will soon be leaving our team, but that decision is unrelated to the aforementioned issue (…) I believe he's stepping down because of the fast-paced nature of our work environment. At his age, he wants to take a step back from that. This could result from the rapid digitisation of content and adaptation to new technologies and AI, which have made the pace of work challenging for someone from an older generation, and they might want to avoid continuing in such an environment*" (J801).

A young reporter of daily life, who is thoroughly adapted to new technologies, J801 provides more insight into ageism within a rapidly evolving workplace, particularly concerning integrating digital technologies and AI. According to her narratives, despite extensive experience in the newspaper industry, a team member approaches tasks such as social media posting differently from his younger colleagues. This difference in approach, emphasises generational divides in the adoption and use of digital tools, as older employees may use more traditional methods that differ from the expectations and practices of younger workers. Whilst the decision for this individual to leave the team is unrelated to these differences, the underlying reasons for his departure are intricately linked to the fast-paced and increasingly digitalised nature of the work environment.

This older journalist's desire to step back from a fast-paced workplace reflects a broader issue where the rapid digitalisation of content and the integration of AI have transformed the

demands placed on employees. For older journalists, who may have not grown up with these technologies, the accelerated pace and constant adaptation required can be overwhelming. This case also demonstrates how ageism may occur not only through explicit discrimination but also through structural changes that unintentionally push older employees out of the workforce. The technological shift creates an environment where older workers may feel outpaced or alienated, leading them to voluntarily step down or retire earlier than they might have otherwise.

Following these narratives, another journalist designed to foster local journalism, asserts that the inability to adapt to the rapidly evolving technological landscape renders being in contemporary journalism:

> "*It's definitely a case of age (…) If you are not adapted to how things are being done nowadays, then there is a sense that you cannot be a journalist there. Due to this, lots of really talented and experienced journalists have retired (…) They have been expected to be ready to work everywhere using every tool and digital platform (…) We have to have all the different skills for this casualised job. All my older colleagues have been stressed about feeling like they need to learn to manage all social media and use the technical system we are using and AI nowadays (…) They feel like they don't have the skills to do that, and I have heard rumours about all the colleagues who don't want to progress with their digital skills being more at risk of redundancy*" (J902).

Accordingly, she acknowledges that age has become a significant factor in determining whether one can continue to work as a journalist in the contemporary journalism landscape. The implication is that older journalists, despite their talent and experience, are increasingly retiring or being pushed out of the profession because they are unable or unwilling to keep-up with the rapidly evolving digital tools and platforms now essential to the job. This situation reflects a broader industry trend where the expectations placed on journalists have expanded to include a wide array of digital skills, from managing social media to using AI and other technical systems.

The casualisation of the job, where journalists are expected to be versatile and proficient across multiple platforms, places additional stress on older workers, who may not have had the same exposure or training in these areas as their younger counterparts. The result is a sense of inadequacy and heightened precarity among older colleagues, who feel that they must continually update their skills to avoid redundancy. According to her, the implicit message is

that digital proficiency is not just an asset but a requirement, and those who cannot meet this requirement, often older workers, are at risk of losing their jobs.

In addition to the testimonies and narratives, J402, a senior sports journalist with a twenty-year tenure in local journalism, clarifies this scenario through his personal experiences and apprehensions:

> "*The older journalists may not need to know where they're coming from because of our industry experience, but adjusting to all the changes can be challenging (...) As experienced professionals, we're still constantly trying to adapt to new ways of doing things, and sometimes, this situation only covers some (...) I know that some friends have retired because of this. I speak personally with one of my closest friends who was made redundant. He was furloughed initially and then was made redundant. And he was the only other person in my team on the sports desk at that point. And so, I went from the two-person team to be on my own. And so on, a 50% reduction. And it was quite stark, you know (...) So, really, from my own experience, it did have a big effect on our newsroom (...) Perhaps employers or potential employers may feel that I am too old to deal with some of the things they want me to do and want me to leave some day*" (J402).

He acknowledges that whilst their extensive industry experience provides a solid foundation, it does not entirely shield them from the challenges of adjusting to new technologies and practices. He highlights the constant need to adapt, coupled with the perception that these changes do not accommodate everyone equally, and the difficulties faced by older professionals in an industry increasingly driven by digital innovation. His statement of colleagues who have retired or been made redundant further illustrates the impact of these changes on older journalists. His personal account of a close friend who was first furloughed and then made redundant states the vulnerability of older employees in the face of organisational restructuring in terms of digitalisation. The significant reduction in team size from two, to one on the sports desk, starkly illustrates how redundancies can disproportionately affect elders, leading to increased workloads and stress for those who remain. He reflects on how potential employers may perceive them as "*too old*" to also handle certain tasks, which points to a broader issue of ageism, where older workers are often viewed as less capable of adapting to new demands.

The pressure to adapt, or face potential exclusion, creates precarity and apprehension about being marginalised in the workforce, regardless of a journalist's genuine competencies

or eagerness to learn. A reporter, in The Guardian, expressed the growing uncertainty of working in the economically and technologically unstable local/regional newspaper industry by likening it to "The Hunger Games for Journalists" (Sweney, 2023). The situation above shows how technology and digitalisation impact the local journalism industry in the UK. In addition to these concerns, the participants' narratives and the fear of becoming obsolete due to age and not adopting new technologies have led journalists to premature retirement or become redundant. Furthermore, despite the potential advantages of their age and education in digital adaptation, young journalists are also susceptible to digital overload, which can hinder their ability to engage in substantial journalistic efforts.

5.1.3 The Burden of Digital Overload

The digital era presents both opportunities and challenges for journalism. The rise of the internet, social media, and mobile technology has fundamentally reshaped news production, dissemination, and consumption (Rahman, 2023). The increasing integration of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, data journalism, and social media platforms, including *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *TikTok*, and *Instagram*, has heightened connectivity for journalists. Whilst essential for professional tasks, this persistent digital engagement has contributed to digital overload.

Journalists have relied on emerging technologies to enhance their work (Baines, 1999; Edstrom and Ladendorf, 2012), yet the demands of continuous connectivity, exacerbated by remote working, have intensified this phenomenon. Such disruptions typically stem from significant technological shifts, including digitalisation and artificial intelligence, or transformative events redefining established structures (García-Avilés, 2021). Mar Cabra, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, describes the cognitive impact of digital overload: "We haven't had a time like this in history where we have so much stimulus for so long and unprompted," further noting that the barrage of notifications is "changing the way our brains are operating because our brains are not designed for so much stimulus, so fast" (Cyprien, 2021).

The news media landscape is undergoing rapid and irreversible transformations, reflecting the industry's adaptability to evolving technologies and societal changes. However, the accelerated pace of this transition presents significant challenges. Renjith (2018) characterises this shift as a new era in journalism, where online and mobile platforms and the growing influence of social media shape content creation, news distribution, and audience engagement (Forbes, 2024). Whilst some senior journalists regard these developments as progressive, empirical evidence suggests a more complex and potentially detrimental impact.

These shifts hinder knowledge acquisition, constrain journalistic quality, and impose additional burdens, such as generating prompts and editing content (Diakopoulos, 2024b; Forbes, 2024).

The repercussions of digital overload extend beyond individual journalists, to media organisations. The overwhelming influx of information fosters disorganisation, diminishes productivity, and heightens stress. The narratives of the participants highlight how information clutter consumes time, weakens focus, and induces cognitive strain, leading to analysis paralysis and reduced decision-making confidence. These challenges impair journalistic performance and result in financial losses for media organisations as declining quality and increased errors erode credibility. The classification of journalism as a professional field is increasingly questioned in light of the growing immediacy of news in an age of digitalisation, round-the-clock live feeds, and the diminishing differentiation between professional and amateur reporting (Green, 2021).

Narratives of participants illustrate a conflict within journalism as it contends with the changing requirements of digital engagement, mainly via social media platforms:

> "*(...) I have to be on my phone; I have to be on Facebook; I have to be on Twitter. (...) Being like this is not journalism. Sharing here, following it, and reading the reader's comments, sometimes written answers to those comments, makes me an ordinary social media user, not a journalist—this is a thing causing me to end-up scrolling and being digitally fatigued*" (J803).

The perspective of J803, a reporter of daily life, that engagement in social media activities, such as content sharing, discussion participation, and responding to reader comments, fosters a sense of being more like an "*ordinary social media user*" than a journalist, highlights a more consequential identity crisis within the profession. The expectation of continuous digital engagement increasingly challenges the traditional role of journalists as gatekeepers and interpreters of information. This digital overload, marked by relentless scrolling and constant interaction, risks undermining the perceived professionalism of journalism and diminishing it to mere involvement in social media division. The reporter's frustration with the persistent need to maintain a presence on platforms like *Facebook* and *Twitter* underscores the eroding boundaries between professional journalism and casual social media usage. John Crowley, co-director of the Headlines Network, notes that journalists face overwhelming information throughout their workday, leading to professional identity confusion (Crowley, 2024). This blurring of roles contributes to feelings of undervaluation and inadequacy, particularly in an

era of instant news distribution, ubiquitous live broadcasts, and the diminishing distinction between professional and amateur journalism:

> "*We have to compete against user-generated content on platforms, which is strange (...) I feel like there's an expectation that we're supposed to be ahead of them. But in reality, we don't live on the platforms, and it's just me (...) I'm expected to be faster than every other user who posts from town. I'm the only reporter, so I can't possibly know and cover everything happening in the town (...) This makes me feel inadequate*" (J901).

Early career reporter J901, with a relatively short career in local journalism, grapples with the unrealistic expectations imposed by the digital era. He experiences pressure to compete with the vast and rapid influx of user-generated content, fostering a sense of inadequacy. Despite not "*living on the platforms*," he is expected to "*be ahead*" of this content, which exposes a disconnect between the demands of contemporary journalism and the realities of working as a lone reporter. Acknowledging the impossibility of covering every event in the town, he articulates the frustration of an unattainable standard, reinforcing the tension between traditional journalistic roles and modern news dissemination's decentralised, high-speed nature. This burden, demanding individual reporters to outpace an entire community of content creators, places an undue strain on professionals.

Court reporter J101 encapsulates this digital overload, likening himself to a machine that the company "*plugs in and always leaves on*", emphasising the relentless and dehumanising demands of the profession:

> "*We are like machines turned on by the company. (...) I have to gather stories to share. I am responsible for breaking the news first in the newsroom. Due to social media there is a sudden urgency for people to expect immediate news. (...) Unfortunately, failure to respond quickly is not an option in this job. I work around the clock, almost twenty-four-seven, and I even think about work before starting the day. I work before and after my official work hours, including weekends*" (J101).

> "*(...) Journalism has turned to mail-checks. Whether it is late or outside work hours, you must be awake or wake-up by notifications. You must be ready to go to virtual meetings, collect your stories online, and share your stories on social media (...) I mean, you need to have a digital personality*" (J203).

J101's account illustrates the intense pressures journalists face in a digitalised media landscape. She describes the expectation for immediate news delivery as having transformed journalism into a relentless, almost mechanical process. Comparing herself to a machine "*turned on*" by the company, she highlights the dehumanising effect of the constant demand for rapid news production. The urgency imposed by digitalisation leaves little room for delays or errors, compelling journalists to prioritise speed over depth and accuracy. The pressure to "*break the news first*" forces them to remain perpetually alert, extending their work beyond regular hours. She describes working "*around the clock*," with thoughts of work consuming her before the day begins. This erosion of work-life boundaries,[10] exacerbated by expectations to be available before and after official hours, including weekends, reflects the growing precarity of the profession.

J203 reinforces this narrative, linking the increasing demands of digital journalism to casualisation. She describes the expectation to remain constantly available, responding to emails and notifications outside traditional work hours. The shift to virtual meetings and online story collection emphasises the broader digital transformation. Additionally, the necessity of cultivating a "*digital personality*" highlights the rising importance of personal branding and social media presence in contemporary journalism, further contributing to digital overload.

In addition, as a senior sports reporter with more than twenty years' experience in the local journalism landscape, J402's personal journey and career trajectory vividly illustrate the profound transformation within the journalism industry. He particularly highlights the shift from a print-centric to a digitally driven environment. If he ever thinks there is a digital overload and has to throw it back, he emphasises that this will result in job loss:

> "*The job I have now vastly differs from the one I first took on in 2001 in so many ways. When I first started, I remember the emphasis was on print and how the newspaper looked. Only one computer in the corner was used specifically for the internet. If you wanted to use the internet, you had to book time on that computer. It seems ridiculous now that in this digital age, where we all have instant access to our phones, there used to be a rationing of internet time for each reporter. The digital side of it has had a massive impact and has changed how everyone thinks within a newspaper environment.*

[10] This primary issue also causes journalists to become isolated and struggle to cope with the challenges of remote working. Chapter 6 provides a detailed analysis of these difficulties through the first-hand accounts of journalists.

> *There's a real emphasis on how a journalist performs regarding digital content and its success with the audience the newspaper or outlet is trying to reach. I'm judged on how many page views I get every day, and if that number is down for any reason, it can be detrimental to my position*" (J402).

He reflected on the stark contrast between the industry when he entered in 2001, when print remained central, internet access was a luxury, and today's digital landscape, where connectivity is instantaneous and ubiquitous. Recalling the need to "*book time*" on a shared computer for internet access, he underscores the profound transformation in journalistic practice. The shift to digital has not only altered the tools and methods journalists employ but has redefined the metrics by which their success is measured. As he notes, the emphasis has moved from the quality and presentation of the print edition to the performance of digital content. His performance is now evaluated primarily through daily page views, a quantitative metric reflecting the prioritisation in the digital era on engagement and audience reach. This shift underscores the pressures associated with digital journalism, where success is increasingly determined by data-driven assessments rather than journalistic quality (Diakopoulos, 2024b).

The reliance on metrics such as page views signals a broader commercialisation of the profession, where journalists are judged on their ability to attract and retain audiences. When engagement figures decline, this raises concerns about job security.[11]

Most participants highlight the pervasive sense of digital overload and its accompanying emotional strain. Editor J202 describes the relentless nature of contemporary journalism, where the daily routine of journalists revolves around sourcing stories online, writing content, and scheduling posts on social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. This cycle reinforces the expectation for continuous digital presence, further intensifying the pressures of modern journalism:

> "*(...) Journalists spend their day writing stories I pick up online, and later, I schedule and post them on Facebook and Twitter (...) The ongoing nature of today's journalism causes them to feel overwhelmed and digitally overloaded (...) I wouldn't say I like using social media for my personal life, but it is necessary for my journalism work (...)*

[11] In Chapter 7, I explain how digitalisation is causing job losses through journalists' age, technological adaptation, skill and education updates, and unconditional compliance with remote working.

I must do extra work, changing all journalistic practices and moving news production away from traditional practices" (J202).

Unlike traditional journalism, which had more predictable rhythms and deadlines structured around print schedules, digital journalism demands constant vigilance and engagement, blurring the boundaries between work and personal life. The ongoing pressure to produce and manage content across multiple platforms exacerbates journalistic exhaustion. She describes a shift from traditional journalism to an unceasing cycle of digital content creation, reflecting the broader transformation of the industry. The immediacy and ubiquity of digital platforms dictate the pace and nature of journalistic work. The "*ongoing nature of today's journalism*" underscores the relentless, never-ending flow of tasks digital journalism requires, contributing to feelings of being "*overwhelmed and digitally overloaded*". This transition extends beyond adopting new tools and platforms; it signifies a fundamental reconfiguration of how news is produced and distributed, reinforcing the perpetual demands placed on contemporary journalists.

5.1.4 Digital Disruption: News From Everywhere

Contemporary journalism has become increasingly complex, requiring continuous adaptation, adopting new practices, and an intensified focus on immediacy. Over the past two decades, the internet and associated technologies have emerged as dominant platforms for global communication and information dissemination, fundamentally reshaping traditional journalism (Dimmick, Chen, and Li, 2004). The advent of web-based news services in the mid-1990s significantly expanded the role of digital journalism within the global news market. However, as O'Brien *et al*. (2020) observe, the low cost of digital content distribution has profoundly impacted news publishers and journalists, raising concerns about the sustainability of digital journalism as a viable business model. This shift from print to digital threatens the long-term viability of traditional print media and intensifies competition between conventional, higher-quality journalism and the proliferation of free, lower-cost digital content (Berger *et al.*, 2015). As a result, journalism faces a fundamental transformation, with digitisation setting a new agenda that challenges established practices and the profession (Duffy and Ang, 2019).

The digital work environment has reshaped the mindset of online journalists, fostering a media landscape defined by convergence across formats and publishing approaches. This transformation has led to a mode of journalism that extends beyond the traditional limitations of the internet (Deuze, 2009). Despite the growing engagement with digital media—

characterised by an immersive, always-on, and highly interconnected experience—the outlook for the industry remains pessimistic. This paradox highlights the persistent struggle of media professionals to develop sustainable survival strategies (Elefante and Deuze, 2012). Key challenges include devising viable business models, establishing effective regulatory frameworks, and, critically, structuring working conditions that support the creative processes necessary to meet the demands of a saturated global media market (Elefante and Deuze, 2012; Parviainen *et al.*, 2017; Donders *et al.*, 2018).

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has further intensified these challenges, prompting a departure from traditional models of news reporting (Ponsford, 2024a). Consequently, journalists are increasingly compelled to cultivate personal brands, dedicating substantial time to competing across digital platforms, often at the expense of more profound engagement with local communities:

> "(…) *Print media is declining. We've recently had a few meetings, and there have been some restructuring changes (…) A different team is now responsible for the print newspaper, so it's no longer our priority (…) We no longer have to write content specifically for the print edition; it's just pulled over and printed out*" (J203)

SEO journalist J203 highlights the profound transformation of local journalism, marked by the decline of print media and the industry shifting towards digital platforms. Traditional journalistic practices are being deprioritised, as evidenced by newsroom restructuring that diminishes the emphasis on print. Rather than producing content specifically for print, news organisations now repurpose material primarily for digital distribution. This shift reflects a broader industry trend away from local representation, contributing to the emergence of news deserts across the UK (Barclay *et al.*, 2022).

> "*(…) The company's focus has shifted towards generating web views, emphasising the importance of SEO [Search Engine Optimisation] and increasing visibility on platforms like Google and Facebook (…) Clearly, digital is the direction we're moving in. It could be better, especially for the company, as the primary goal now is to drive as much traffic to the website as possible to maximise advertising revenue. However, this means that instead of being a community journalist, we have to be self-branded, which is much needed and in direct competition with the platforms*" (J803).

The digital transformation of UK local journalism has replaced community-focused reporting with an emphasis on web traffic and platform visibility. A reporter of daily life, J803 observes that SEO strategies and social media engagement increasingly dictate newsroom priorities, compelling journalists to cultivate personal brands rather than serve their local communities. According to the Press Gazette (Majid, 2022), local newspapers frequently prioritise high-traffic, generic content at the expense of substantive local reporting. This shift highlights a widening disconnect between news outlets and the communities they were initially intended to serve, as journalists are pressured to produce viral content.

The urgency of this transformation is reflected in a 2024 UK Parliament report (House of Commons, 2023), which documents a 70% decline in local news advertising revenue between 2010 and 2020. This financial pressure has driven news organisations to adopt digital-first strategies. A review by Ofcom (2024) further highlights how the industry has sidelined print media, restructuring newsrooms to prioritise online content. ITV News exemplifies this shift by focusing on social media engagement alongside website traffic (Granger, 2024b, 2024a). Similarly, Reach plc has introduced traffic targets requiring journalists to generate between 80,000 and 850,000 monthly page views, detaching local journalists from their communities in pursuit of digital growth (Cowley, 2022).

Consequently, competition is no longer limited to other news organisations but extends to the platforms that distribute their content, fundamentally altering the nature of journalism. The transition from community journalism to self-branding poses a significant challenge to the profession. Journalists must now dedicate substantial time to cultivating their online presence, often at the expense of their relationships with local communities. The industry shift towards a commercially driven digital model has profoundly reshaped the role of journalists in contemporary news production. As J202 describes, this transformation reflects a broader erosion of professional journalistic practices under digitalisation:

> "*Journalism is not going to stay the same. It will be about something other than reporters going out, meeting people, and reporting on things that are really important to their local communities. It's becoming a convoluted form of advertising, doing things to appease PR companies. It's no longer about what matters, but what will make the most money. And that's going to change the way that journalism works completely. And it's also going to change the way that people think of journalists completely. It already does (...) Yeah, like journalism, as they call it, writing about things to earn money or*

> *writing about things because they know they will get social media clicks and write misleading headlines. And it's not fun, but that's how things are going*" (J202).

An editor with an 11-year career in local journalism, J202 captures the transformation of the profession from a community-focused practice to one increasingly driven by profit and digital metrics. Reflecting on the traditional role of journalists—engaging with local communities, meeting sources, and reporting on significant regional issues—she argues that these foundational practices are being overshadowed by pressures to produce content that appeals to PR companies and generates revenue. According to her narratives, journalism increasingly resembles a form of advertising, where content prioritises what will attract the most clicks and revenue rather than what serves the public interest (Cowley, 2022; Majid, 2022; Granger, 2024b). She asserts that this shift is already reshaping public perceptions of journalism as the profession becomes more centred on social media engagement and less on meaningful, in-depth reporting.

The discussion of misleading headlines—explored further in the next theme—illustrates how journalistic integrity is sacrificed in favour of digital visibility and commercial success. This digital-first approach represents a fundamental shift in the practice and perception of journalism, making it less about public service and more commercially driven. Consequently, journalists have increasingly relied on online sources for newsgathering rather than engaging directly with their communities, as illustrated by journalist J301; this transition has reduced journalism to a form of bulletin writing, limiting its investigative depth and making it more susceptible to misinformation and fake news:

> "*(...) Digitalisation just forced me to learn how to use Facebook, Twitter, or TikTok as a news source or create—you know, there were all my reports for the newspaper, and we just had to suck it up and learn how to do it and move with the times, which I think is just one of those things that changed in journalism*" (J301).

Her narrative illustrates how digitalisation has compelled journalists to adapt to new platforms, fundamentally altering their professional roles. She reflects on the experience of becoming a "*digitalised machine*" with a sense of inevitability, acknowledging that a profession once centred around newspaper reporting has now evolved to one that demands mastery of social media. This adaptation is not perceived as a choice but a necessity, reflecting the broader transformation in journalism, where immediacy, virality, and audience engagement

increasingly take precedence over traditional, in-depth reporting. Despite any reluctance, she shows journalists must "*suck it up*" and move with the times, underscoring a profound cultural and professional shift within the industry (Lareau, 2010).

> "*The local journalism job entails filing stories we collect from various platforms. So, in the era of digitalisation, you don't have to attend any daily meetings, story conferences, or anything like that. For instance, they introduced a video system so that if you're a journalist, you can log in to courtrooms online and cover court cases from anywhere (...) In this case, you need some tech knowledge and know how to cover that story by copying videos, photos, records, and so on*" (J602).

J602, a content specialist with two decades of experience in local journalism, underscores the growing expectation for journalists to be multiskilled in the digital age. He highlights how technologically-mediated forms of newsgathering have supplanted traditional reporting, once grounded in face-to-face interactions, attendance at public meetings, and on-the-ground investigative work. Journalists are now required to collect and submit stories through digital platforms, reflecting a profound shift towards remote and virtual work environments. This shift, whilst some participants say it is enhancing efficiency and accessibility, raises critical concerns about the nature of local journalism itself. J602 cites the example of journalists logging into courtrooms online to cover cases remotely, a practice that, whilst convenient, alters the journalist role in crucial ways. The loss of physical presence at such events may diminish the depth of reporting, as journalists can no longer observe nuances such as body language, informal discussions, or off-record exchanges that traditionally enrich reportage. Furthermore, reliance on digital feeds risks journalists becoming passive receivers of institutional narratives rather than active independent investigators.

More broadly, the fact that news is increasingly produced behind screens rather than in the streets underscores a more profound structural transformation in local journalism. The loss of locality is not just a spatial shift but a conceptual one: local news is no longer deeply embedded in the communities it serves. Still, it is filtered through digital infrastructures that may be geographically detached from the places they cover. This raises concerns about journalistic accountability, audience trust, and the erosion of the civic role local journalists traditionally played as mediators between institutions and the public. In essence, whilst digitalisation offers new possibilities, it also risks rendering local journalism more detached, homogenised, and susceptible to the constraints of platform-driven news production.

"*In terms of who is considered a local journalist today, I think there are a lot of foggy boundaries between who is a journalist and who is not and how digital platforms play an important role in that (...) I think, because social media is used so heavily now, it makes people think that they can report on things in the same way an actual journalist can, if that makes sense. I don't know if I'm a tech, myself. In terms of the use of social media, someone who reports something they've seen might be considered a journalist*" (J801).

"*The pressure is immense (...) It's challenging to compete as an individual when numerous people capture videos and photos of an event and post them online. You should look into a Facebook page called YAHA. We're struggling to keep up with an anonymous news company called BIANCA. They consistently get the first photos and videos, often ahead of the police statements. It seems like they have insiders or police intercepts in place. They have a large network that provides them with content, and being an anonymous news source, they don't have to adhere to the same standards as we do. Sharing a Facebook post is much easier for them than the legal protocols we must follow. Competing with them as a newspaper or news organisation is extremely challenging*" (J202).

The above narratives illustrate the evolving nature of local journalism in the digital age, where the boundaries between professional journalists and ordinary social media users are increasingly blurred (Canter, 2013; Harris, 2014). As Journalist J801 observes, digital platforms have expanded the scope of reporting to the extent that "*anybody*" with access to social media can share information and, in doing so, potentially can be perceived as a journalist. This shift challenges traditional conceptions of journalism, which has historically distinguished professional journalists through formal training and adherence to ethical and editorial standards. The widespread consumption of social media has fostered the belief that anyone can report the news, eroding the distinction between professional journalists and citizen reporters.

Journalist J202 further highlights the difficulties of traditional journalists in competing with these emerging reporting forms. The rise of anonymous news sources and social media platforms operating outside established legal and ethical frameworks presents significant challenges for professional journalists and news organisations. Anonymity-based reporting, exemplified by the news organisation BIANCA, demonstrates how quickly and efficiently

digital platforms can disseminate information—often outpacing traditional journalism by leveraging insider networks or bypassing the rigorous editorial standards that professional journalists are expected to uphold. This creates an uneven playing field where professional journalists struggle to match the speed and accessibility of unregulated digital content (Wall, 2015b, 2015a). As social media-based reporting continues to challenge traditional news organisations, the role of professional journalists remains in flux. The pressure to compete with fast-moving unverified content presents ethical and practical dilemmas. Journalists must navigate this landscape whilst maintaining professional standards, ensuring accuracy, and verifying the credibility of the news they report. This ongoing tension underscores the broader transformation of journalism in the digital era, where immediacy often takes precedence over journalistic integrity.

5.1.5 Fact-Checking and Misinformation

The digitalisation of media has profoundly transformed journalism, introducing significant challenges due to the proliferation of false and unsourced news. The decline of community-based journalism, coupled with the widespread dissemination of unverified information through social media platforms, has placed considerable strain on journalists, threatening the sustainability of their profession. Over the past decade, news consumption has shifted from traditional outlets to online platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* fostering an environment where misinformation thrives (Wu, 2023). This transition has not only increased the prevalence of fabricated news but has blurred the lines between credible journalism and user-generated content, with false information originating from both established news organisations and unvetted contributors (Curran, 2011).

Local journalists in the UK now face the growing challenge of distinguishing misinformation from legitimate reporting, a task made more difficult by eroding standard journalistic practices. In response to these concerns, Rebecca Whittington, the online safety editor at Reach, has launched a campaign to educate both journalists and readers on identifying and combating misinformation and fake news (Seal, 2024). The consequences of misinformation are particularly pronounced during election periods. A Press Gazette investigation revealed that, despite criticism from media organisations and journalists, both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties had continued to produce and distribute misleading digital and print-newspapers to promote their candidates in the 2024 general election (Maher, 2024). This case underscores the pervasive impact of misinformation on the journalistic process and its broader implications for public access to accurate and reliable information.

According to Zelizer (2019), digitalisation is not synonymous with journalism, and conflating the two risks, creates confusion whilst overlooking the incremental changes that technology introduces to journalistic practice. This perspective highlights how technological advancements can obscure the enduring principles of journalism, potentially neglecting foundational reporting values across different media platforms. Whilst technology is often expected to enhance the capacity to inform, it can also distort journalistic priorities by shifting focus from story integration and facilitating the spread of misinformation. Emily Bell of The Guardian underscores this dilemma, arguing that 'we can't fight fake news without saving local journalism' (Bell, 2019a). She notes that whilst local news tends to be more trusted than other sources, it remains particularly vulnerable to online disinformation. In this evolving media landscape, digitalisation requires journalists to act as fact-checkers, mediating between readers and the proliferation of fake news whilst simultaneously serving as instruments of public disclosure to uphold journalistic integrity.

James Mitchinson, editor of The Yorkshire Post, echoes these concerns, lamenting that 'whatever we do, people still believe a stranger on social media who disappears into the night, somehow' (Mitchinson, 2019). He argues that local journalists must develop verification strategies to maintain credibility, a responsibility that often detracts from traditional reporting and transforms journalism into an endless cycle of fact-checking. These concerns were widely shared among respondents (n=26), who expressed frustration over the demands of digitalisation and the challenges of navigating online information overload. Many acknowledged that the sheer volume of digital content sometimes made distinguishing factual reporting from misinformation difficult, reinforcing the need for robust verification mechanisms within contemporary journalism:

> "*(…) The truth is now a drop that looks like the colour of the ocean, and it sometimes takes us a day to distinguish it from the whole disinformation ocean*" (J301).

She emphasises the significant challenges of digitalisation and the incessant stream of online information for journalists. A reporter from the Northwest of England, J301 employs a striking metaphor, describing truth as "*a drop that looks like the colour of the ocean*," illustrating the difficulty of distinguishing fact from the vast expanse of disinformation. This imagery underscores how the overwhelming volume of online content, much of it misleading or false, complicates efforts to verify the truth. Her remark about taking "*a day to distinguish*" fact from falsehood underscores the painstaking and time-intensive nature of verification in the digital

era. The rapid spread of misinformation exacerbates this challenge, requiring journalists to balance speed with accuracy (Mitchinson, 2019). The phrase "*disinformation ocean*" reinforces the magnitude of the issue, portraying a media landscape saturated with misleading content. Reporter J901 articulates this complexity, as follows:

> "*(...) There is definitely fake news pressure, especially when I see something on Facebook related to politics (...) People, including some councillors and MPs, often get things wrong. When councillors make mistakes, their supporters tend to believe what they say. It then becomes my responsibility to correct the misinformation and present the facts quickly. It's essential to intervene promptly before the situation escalates, as it often does, but trying to fix it across so many platforms can sometimes be impossible*" (J901).

His account illustrates the immense pressure on journalists to counter the rapid spread of misinformation, particularly in the political sphere. He highlights the challenge of correcting falsehoods that proliferate on platforms such as *Facebook*, where political figures, including councillors and MPs, often disseminate disinformation (Maher, 2024; Seal, 2024). These inaccuracies quickly gain traction among their supporters, transforming journalism into a race against time to rectify narratives before they escalate. However, the vast reach and speed of social media make this task formidable, as misinformation can spread across multiple platforms simultaneously. Journalists must uphold accuracy, particularly when challenging deeply entrenched public beliefs. Ross *et al*. (2024) argue that a journalist's identity significantly influences the fact-checking process and how audiences perceive the credibility of news. When journalists fail to fulfil—or are obstructed from fulfilling—this responsibility, the consequences extend beyond individual stories. They threaten the integrity of fact-based reporting and contribute to audience disengagement from the news.

> "*(...) There are a lot of rumours going around, and people are quite easily manipulated to believe different things, which is a massive disadvantage (...) We see it in fake news. People adopt these made-up facts and then shout about them everywhere. This is a nightmare for journalists because, ultimately, audiences consume them whether these news articles give the facts or not. We should be news sources because we're not lying. Well, hopefully we're not; I'm not (...) Getting news from social media is dangerous and puts fake news pressure on us*" (J803).

Another reporter of daily life, J803 highlights the challenges journalists face in a social media-dominated landscape, where misinformation spreads rapidly and is often accepted as truth. She argues that the digital information environment, in which rumours and fake news easily manipulate public perception, presents significant obstacles for journalists striving for accuracy. Social media platforms exacerbate this issue by enabling misinformation to go viral, making it increasingly difficult for journalists to correct falsehoods and maintain their credibility. She underscores the ethical dilemma journalists confront; whilst they are committed to factual reporting, false narratives frequently overshadow their work. This complicates their ability to report the truth and erodes public trust in journalism, turning the fight against misinformation into what she describes as a "*nightmare*" for those dedicated to ethical reporting in the digital age.

Catherine McKinnell (2023), MP and Chair of the House of Commons Petitions Committee, observes that 'we are currently witnessing declining trust in the news, an increase in news avoidance, with four in ten people feeling 'worn out' by the news', alongside a marked decrease in the number of individuals closely following current events (Newman *et al.*, 2024; Tobitt, 2024a). This declining engagement creates an environment in which misinformation flourishes, diverting public attention from holding local authorities and public services accountable for decisions that affect daily life. Furthermore, as Barclay *et al*. (2022) and Kersley (2022) argue, digitalisation and social media platforms have become primary local information sources. Community members and organisations increasingly rely on these platforms for interaction and coordination, further distancing readers from local newspapers and news websites, which should serve as primary sources of reliable journalism. In doing so, they contribute to deepening local news deserts across the UK.

> "*I don't think of these bigger companies and companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Dailymotion, which are video websites we use to earn money (...) They manipulate and control the content we produce because newspapers aren't selling anymore, and readers no longer subscribe to our websites (...) They know this and will choose to publish certain topics that are often fake or misleading (...) So, we must change what we write about, based on what we think Facebook is like (...) I don't think they're supportive. I think they are using us to their advantage, and we are often entirely submissive to that*" (J202).

J202, an editor with over a decade of experience in local journalism, argues that whilst social media serves as an initial gateway to local news websites, it should not be regarded as a primary source for in-depth or substantive news content. She critically examines the power imbalance between journalists and major digital platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Dailymotion*. She notes that although these platforms have become essential for revenue generation to media outlets, they simultaneously manipulate and control journalistic content. This influence is driven by the economic pressures of declining newspaper sales and dwindling website subscriptions, which force journalists to prioritise content that performs well within these digital ecosystems. The reliance on platform-driven visibility, often shaped by algorithmic preferences, compels journalists to produce sensationalised content tailored to align with platform engagement metrics rather than public interest reporting.

Additionally, the increasing use of AI in content creation further exacerbates this shift. Beyond mere translation or content-sharing efforts, digital platforms have actively tested AI-generated articles on their leading news sites despite resistance from both editorial teams and readers. This development contributes to the widening of local news deserts across the UK by reducing the role of human editorial oversight in shaping news content. J202 underscores that this transformation significantly departed from traditional journalism values, where newsworthiness rather than commercial imperatives guided editorial judgement. She further critiques the exploitative relationship between news organisations and these platforms, emphasising that rather than serving as supportive partners, tech companies leverage media outlets for their advantage, deepening the financial and editorial vulnerabilities in journalism.

Most journalist participants are described as "*entirely submissive*" to the demands of digital platforms, reflecting a profound loss of professional autonomy. The intersection of journalistic integrity, platform-driven content strategies, and regulatory frameworks underscores the critical tension between commercial imperatives and the public's right to accurate information (Cowley, 2022). As social media companies increasingly dictate content distribution, concerns about the erosion of impartiality and the overall quality of public discourse have intensified.

In response to these challenges, the UK government has introduced a series of proposed reforms to address disinformation and harmful content. Initially relying on self-regulation, these efforts have evolved amid growing demands for stronger accountability mechanisms (Media-law Tutor, 2025). Key initiatives, including the Digital Charter, the Code of Practice, and the House of Commons DCMS Committee recommendations, advocate for enhanced transparency, establishing an independent regulatory body, and stricter controls over political

advertising (House of Lords, 2021). However, whilst these reforms seek to balance free speech with public safety, critics caution that they may also pose privacy and data security risks. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has reinforced the need for regulatory intervention by championing the principles of accuracy, fairness, and integrity—fundamental tenets in the fight against disinformation (NUJ, 2020, 2025). Through advocacy and adherence to longstanding ethical codes, the NUJ highlights the essential role of quality journalism in safeguarding public trust. Ultimately, combating disinformation requires a multifaceted approach that integrates education, technological innovation, robust regulatory frameworks, and sustained community engagement to preserve the integrity of the information ecosystem.

5.2 Discussion and Conclusion

Local journalists in the UK are undergoing profound transformations due to digitalisation, platform pressures, and advancements in artificial intelligence. These shifts affect journalists of all experience levels and are creating a rapidly evolving professional landscape. The increasing emphasis on digital content production and distribution is beginning to overshadow traditional journalistic skills and practices. One of the most significant developments is the shift in priorities from journalistic depth to digital proficiency, marking a fundamental paradigm shift within local journalism in the United Kingdom. A noticeable trend indicates that focusing on speed, digital interaction, and technological flexibility replaces traditional values of thorough reporting. This transition requires journalists to quickly adapt to new technological demands, often at the expense of investigative journalism, which has historically been a hallmark of quality reporting (Deuze, 2007, 2009). Furthermore, the industry's growing reliance on algorithms and social media performance metrics have reinforced a preference for rapid content dissemination, over traditional narrative techniques. This shift reshapes news production and significantly affects the public's access to nuanced, in-depth reporting. Ultimately, these developments present a formidable challenge to maintaining journalistic standards, contributing to the erosion of the fundamental principles that underpin quality journalism within the local journalism landscape in the UK (Chew and Tandoc, 2024).

The transformation of the local journalism landscape in the UK, driven by digitalisation, has introduced significant changes and challenges for journalists across all age groups. Older journalists, in particular, face ageism and are marginalised in a digital-first environment. As a result, they experience increased pressures, including early retirement, career changes, and redundancies. This demographic is disproportionately affected, as they are often perceived as ill-equipped to navigate the digital fast-paced, ever-evolving demands of

journalism, ultimately leading to premature exits from the industry (Josephi and Oller Alonso, 2021). In contrast, younger journalists, generally more adept at using digital tools, are grappling with 'digital overload', which hampers their ability to engage in substantial journalistic work (Pereira, 2020). The rise of social media platforms has further complicated the competitive landscape, blurring the lines between professional journalism and citizen reporting (Green, 2021). Rapid news dissemination on digital platforms, often without adherence to traditional editorial standards, places professional journalists in direct competition with citizen journalists and anonymous sources. This shift has resulted in ethical dilemmas, as local journalists in the UK feel pressured to match the speed of non-professional content creators whilst maintaining their commitment to accuracy and integrity.

AI technology has also dramatically reshaped journalism, offering opportunities for automating routine tasks but raising concerns regarding journalistic autonomy and content integrity. The use of AI to generate articles and content has shifted the editorial focus from public service journalism to platform-centric priorities, leading to a decline in editorial control. As the narratives from local editors reveal, journalists increasingly feel disempowered in an environment where commercial and algorithmic interests often dictate the stories that are told. The profound impact of digitalisation on local journalism practices in the UK, highlights the critical need for journalists to balance technological adaptation with ethical reporting standards. As they navigate a rapidly changing technological landscape, this shift towards digital-first journalism, coupled with the growing influence of AI and platform-driven content, poses a significant threat to the foundational values of the profession, as well as to local community engagement and democracy, creating a challenging environment for journalists to operate within.

In conclusion, the landscape of local journalism in the UK is undergoing a profound transformation driven by digitalisation, platform pressures, and the rise of AI. These forces have fundamentally redefined the nature of journalism, creating opportunities and challenges for journalists across different age groups and experience levels. Whilst digital tools offer new avenues for reaching broader audiences, they also shift journalistic priorities, often emphasising speed and engagement at the expense of depth and accuracy. This dynamic presents unique challenges for local journalists, who must navigate an evolving professional environment in which traditional roles are being reshaped, and the distinction between professional and citizen (user-generated) journalism is increasingly blurred.

Moreover, the rise of AI in content creation introduces a significant threat to the autonomy and credibility of journalism. The pressure to align with platform-driven strategies

jeopardises the core principles of the profession, shifting focus from editorial judgement based on public interest, to content designed to cater to commercial imperatives. The combined impact of digitalisation and AI has led to a marked decline in local news coverage in the UK, further eroding journalistic skills, weakening community bonds, and undermining regional democracy. This trend has been exacerbated by the widespread adoption of hybrid or fully remote work models, a subject that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 6. What has emerged is a new paradigm of journalism characterised by content that prioritises SEO optimisation, social media dissemination, and a growing disconnect from the public. This shift has significantly undermined the traditional role of journalism as a vital conduit for community engagement and democratic discourse.

CHAPTER 6 COVID, THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS, AND HYBRID WORKING

6.0 Chapter Introduction

The 20th century witnessed transformative advancements in household infrastructure (Hester and Srnicek, 2023). These developments facilitated the integration of new technologies that redefined the domestic sphere, enabling it to function as both a sanctuary and a workspace (Clark, 2000). This dual-purpose environment has been particularly influential in information-intensive professions, where the nature of work is inherently adaptable to remote settings. The proliferation of digital communication tools and the internet has further accelerated this transition, allowing professionals to perform tasks, which were traditionally confined to office spaces, from their homes or a random place. Consequently, there has been a notable increase in remote working, with a significant portion of the workforce transitioning between home/flexible place and office environments, tailoring their work practices to the distinct demands of each context (Hester and Srnicek, 2023). In the realm of local journalism, this shift has been particularly pronounced. It is believed that digital technologies have enabled journalists to gather information, conduct interviews, and produce content from virtually any location. However, this flexibility has introduced challenges unique to the field.

A study into local television journalists working from home found that whilst newscasts could be produced remotely, concerns arose regarding the quality of stories and the overall satisfaction of workers (Henderson, Raheja, and Crowston, 2022). The absence of a traditional newsroom environment has led to feelings of isolation among journalists, potentially impacting their wellbeing and the collaborative nature of news production. Moreover, the shift to remote working has necessitated significant changes in newsroom operations. Many news organisations have adopted hybrid models, where staff alternate between remote working and in-office presence.

The onset of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 resulted in the suspension of social interactions, forcing the majority of news organisations to transition their employees to remote working. Subsequently, in the ensuing two-to-three years, a combination of remote and office-based working gave rise to the concept of the ‘hybrid newsroom’, which became prevalent (Tobitt, 2020b). However, uncertainties have persisted regarding the precise implementation of this model and its potential impact on social and collaborative working dynamics, isolation and health, as well as on the sense of affiliation of journalists with their respective organisations (Newman *et al.*, 2020, 2021, 2022). As a result of the COVID-19 lockdown and afterwards, nearly two-thirds of newsrooms have adopted hybrid work models.

According to a survey conducted by the Reuters Institute (2023), 65% of newsroom leaders reported that their organisations have established flexible and hybrid work models along with new regulations for staff. Additionally, 16% indicated a return to predominantly pre-pandemic work models, with in-person office attendance being the norm; 30% of respondents stated that their staff were mandated to be in the office for a set number of days per week, and their company was actively enforcing this policy. In contrast, 22% stated that no measures were in place to verify compliance with the office attendance requirement. Furthermore, 38% of respondents cited that the adoption of hybrid and flexible work arrangements has led to a reduction in a sense of belonging among staff within their organisation. During the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, UK local journalists working remotely, experienced significant impacts from digital transformations, including remote newsrooms and digital newsgathering, on their wellbeing and job satisfaction. It was observed that remote working was often associated with negative emotions, such as anxiety and frustration, leading to increased stress and burnout among journalists in the UK (Tobitt, 2021a; Šimunjak, 2022a, 2022b).

The local news industry is constantly evolving, with innovations emerging daily in terms of education, location, production, and distribution (Wall, 2015a; Majid, 2021; Ofcom, 2023d). Whilst some of these developments may lead to positive changes in professional practices, they often result in a narrower framework for journalism, leaving journalists uncertain about their role. In recent years, the most significant change has been the shift in news production from traditional newsrooms to homes, which has created distance between journalists and their respective communities. The COVID-19 pandemic and the growing trend towards digitalisation have further accelerated the shift to remote working, making it the predominant work culture. This paradigm shift has significant implications for the future of journalism and the way in which news is produced and consumed. The trend of remote working has been noted in various industries, including journalism. In particular, this shift towards flexible engagements and remote working arrangements has become increasingly common in the local news industry.

However, this change involves more than just a shift in location. Remote working has significant implications across economic, structural, psychological, and creative dimensions. The remote work environment has not only transformed the job landscape for journalists but has impacted their lifestyle and health, as observed by Šimunjak (2022) and Tobitt (2020, 2021). Alongside this change, the rise of digitalisation has blurred traditional boundaries in journalism, requiring professionals with diverse expertise and skills to do more with less (Mukhina, 2022; Firmstone, 2024). As such, remote working has emerged as a fundamental

and transformative aspect of the journalism industry, impacting both the nature of work and the expectations placed on professionals in the field.

This chapter aims to explore the impact of remote working on the work-life balance of UK local journalists. By examining their journalistic practices, information dissemination, and adaptation to this new paradigm, I aim to shed light on the challenges with remote working. The findings of this chapter will not only contribute to the existing literature on remote work but will provide insights into the future of local journalism. Remote working has recently become increasingly popular and relevant, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. As many workers have transitioned to remote working, examining how this shift has impacted different industries and professions is essential. The field of UK local journalism has undergone significant changes due to remote working. Whilst remote working offers some benefits, such as reduced commuting time, it also presents new challenges, such as maintaining effective communication and collaboration with colleagues and the community, malfunctioning devices, work-life balance, and maintaining mental health. By examining the experiences and narratives of 26 local journalists, this study aims to gain insights into the potential drawbacks of remote working in the local journalism landscape, as detailed in the Methodology chapter. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the strategies local journalists use to adapt to remote working and maintain the quality of their work.

6.1 Findings

As depicted in Table 4.3 in the Methodology chapter, the participants occupied various roles within the local journalism landscape of the UK: Daily Life Reporter (n=9), Court Reporter (n=4), Senior Sports Reporter (n=3), Senior Journalist (n=3), Editor (n=3), Local Democracy Reporter (n=1), Content Specialist (n=1), SEO Journalist (n=1), and Trainee Reporter (n=1). The variation in the number of participants for each role has been determined by their willingness to participate. As a result, some roles have a more diverse number of participants, whilst others have fewer and more uniformed participation. All participants indicated that they were working remotely, either hybrid or full-time. The interviews took place between August 2022 and May 2023, representing the post-COVID-19 period. Accordingly, all participants noted that the shifts in work culture brought about by COVID-19 had become permanent in the first post-COVID-19 period. I have enquired about the challenges of the new work culture, and the collected data forms the basis for the five main inductive themes presented in Table 6.1.

Themes
Journalists and The Distant Community
Inter-Journalists and The Digital Divide
The Difficulties of Working from Home
Maintaining A Work-Life Balance
Health and Safety Implications

Table 6.1 Chapter Six Main Themes.

6.1.1 Journalists and the Distant Community

Alongside the impacts of remote work on news production and distribution, remote working is increasingly blurring the boundaries between newsgatherers (reporters) and news sources within the local community. Local news organisations are intrinsically linked to specific geographic communities, where their coverage, production, and audiences are geographically anchored. Sridharan and Bosse (2024) argue that local news outlets are deeply embedded in a sense of place, fostering unique connections between audiences and the people and locations these organisations serve. News production and content creation processes are fundamentally centred around these local communities, with local news consistently fulfilling a key role in meeting the informational needs of the public in their capacity as community members (Firmstone, 2024).

Individuals possess a strong desire to engage with local news, as Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou (2015) contend, and this engagement is shaped by a production ethos that prioritises critical consumption and collective skill-building processes. This reflects an ongoing demand for genuinely 'local' newspapers that deliver high-quality journalism. Such newspapers have the potential to effectively represent local concerns, reinforce accountability, and contribute to revitalising community bonds. However, the closure of many local newspapers and the shift in journalistic practices, compounded by the challenges posed by remote working, have hindered the ability for local journalism to meet this demand (Sridharan and Bosse, 2024).

The data I collected from 26 local journalists across the UK, reveals a significant gap in the connection between local news, newsgatherers, and the communities they serve. Most participants indicated that remote working was either mandated or voluntarily adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic and that its enduring effects have brought about substantial changes. Notably, the erosion of traditional distinctions between reporters and local communities has

emerged as a key consequence. The transition to remote working has led to a marked shift in journalistic practices, moving the focus from physical presence at events, to increased reliance on online interactions and crowdsourced information. This has limited access to community-generated content and further blurred the boundaries between journalists and community members. As a result, community members often assume quasi-journalistic roles, such as capturing footage, sharing updates, or contributing to news discussions online. Most participants (n = 23) reported that their work approach and the dynamics of their communities have undergone dramatic transformations, leading to practical challenges in maintaining the quality and integrity of local journalism:

> "*(...) I love working remotely, but I don't think that it should be a popular shift in journalism because it does make things particularly difficult, including pushing journalists to live out of cities for some reasons (...) I would say there are definitely problems with working from home (...) including vague boundaries*" (J901).

> "*(...) I think the new team was initially designed to be more flexible in the middle of the pandemic. We were driven out of newsrooms, and that's where the whole project came to a halt (...) I've been working in the evenings, and I find that very difficult because I cannot necessarily have the same kind of connection with newsrooms and local people from the community as I had when I was around the community*" (J401).

> "*(...) The community has also changed (...) It's definitely much more online. I would say it because I don't actually live on my patch. So, I do all my interviews on the phone, maybe through Facebook, nowadays. I pick up stories online, through emails, and on the phone. I don't actually have to walk around the streets where I don't think I would find anything to make news*" (J803).

Genuine local news holds significant value for community members, as it directly addresses issues impacting their lives, and documents individuals whom they are familiar with (Franklin, 1998; Jenkins and Kleis Nielsen, 2018; Fenton *et al.*, 2020). Local journalism, as widely shared by the participants in this study, is characterised by its focus on a tightly defined geographical area to which journalists strongly identify. News is considered local when it is peculiar to the community, with a greater degree of specificity seen as more valuable. Journalists are also expected to reside within the relevant region to provide authentic coverage. As Barclay *et al*. (

2022) assert, the collapse of local reporting represents a slow-burning crisis in the UK. Adequately resourced local journalism systematically offers real-time coverage of community and societal issues. For the first time in over two centuries, towns, villages, and communities across UK are experiencing a shortage of reliable and pertinent news. This can be attributed to the closure of local newsrooms, reduced investment in local reporting by publishers, and the deterioration of the traditional business model for print journalism, alongside shifts in work patterns.

The narratives provided by the participants further corroborate the ongoing crisis, highlighting the emerging local news deserts between journalism and the communities it serves. Whilst participants J901 and J401 indicated that working from home offers a suitable environment, they also expressed concerns that it creates a disconnect between journalists and the communities in which they live and report. Economic pressures often compel journalists to forego autonomy in living arrangements, leading them to reside in shared housing in more affordable areas. This economic compulsion contributes to a broader trend of blurred boundaries between journalists and the communities they cover. Due to low salaries and the flexibility of remote working, journalists are relocating from their previous proximity to newsrooms, often moving from expensive city centres to more affordable areas outside urban hubs. This shift has resulted in journalists distancing themselves from the local communities they are tasked with covering.

In parallel, participant J803 noted that journalists no longer live in their designated news patches and have fully adapted to remote working. She believes she can no longer find stories to report on the streets, underscoring the physical and professional disconnect between journalists and the communities they serve. Participants J902 and J503 also highlighted key challenges journalists face when engaging with local communities, exacerbating the divide between reporters and the people they cover:

> "*(...) Due to low wages, a problem, and high rents, I can't live in central London, where I need to communicate with the locals and where my workplace should be*" (J902).

> "*(...) I am allowed to go to the office, but I am flexible, and my home is so far away. (...) Still, I have email options with locals, WhatsApp groups, Twitter, Facebook pages, and local council websites that can be my news story sources. However, I doubt these ways are enough to engage with local communities*" (J503).

The structured work culture of the media industry, marked by economic precarity, housing inequalities, and the rise of remote working, presents significant barriers to developing journalists as intellectuals. In Gramsci's (Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971) sense, journalists must be deeply rooted within their communities to genuinely understand and represent their struggles. Systemic issues such as deskilling, ageism, low wages, and unaffordable housing often displace journalists from the communities where their work is most needed. This disconnect weakens their ability to engage directly with local realities. Additionally, the increasing reliance on digital tools and remote working, whilst offering flexibility, often leads to impersonal and fragmented interactions with the community, eroding the trust and depth necessary for trustful journalism.

These challenges are compounded by an industry prioritising speed and volume over depth, perpetuating a class divide where only those with financial privilege can maintain proximity to resource-rich areas. In line with Gramsci's (2011) definition of organic intellectuals, those who arise from specific social classes to articulate their productive activity as broader principles (Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971; Martin, 2023), the organic journalist navigates transitions across political economy, political culture, political theology, and psycho-politics. They create and expand pathways of connection, such as canals, tunnels, roads, procedures, and networks of relations with the public (Noam, 2016; Friedman and Reeves, 2020; Mizon, 2022). Through their work, the organic journalist directs society towards a particular form of politics whilst maintaining and ensuring the functionality of these connections (Mizon, 2022). However, these organic intellectuals express limited optimism regarding their capacity to advance a new and transformative worldview for local journalism. Instead, embedded within the discursive and material constraints of neoliberal rationality, they tend to reproduce and stabilise the existing system, even while recognising its structural deficiencies. Over time, this orientation solidifies into a relatively entrenched habitus, a field of dispositions and tendencies that shapes perception and practice, thereby naturalising the status quo (Bourdieu, 1998). In this configuration, the potential for organic intellectuals to enact a counter-hegemonic role is curtailed, as the prevailing field becomes the only conceivable reality within which their professional identities and actions can be meaningfully articulated.

Local democracy reporter J902, with a relatively long career, expresses dissatisfaction with low wages and high rents, which prevent them from living in central London, where they believe their proximity to the community is essential for effective communication and engagement. This suggests that financial constraints hinder their ability to stay close to the

community and workplace, potentially limiting their capacity to cover local news[12] effectively. Similarly, journalist J503, with over a decade of experience in local journalism, discusses the distance between their home and the office despite having the option to work from the office. J503 mentions relying on email, WhatsApp groups, Twitter (X platform), Facebook pages, and local council websites as news sources. However, they question whether these digital platforms are sufficient for fostering genuine engagement with local communities. They also highlight the complex interplay of financial constraints, geographical distance, and the use of digital platforms, which shape how journalists interact with local communities in their work. This suggests that whilst digital platforms offer alternative communication and information-gathering methods, concerns about their ability to facilitate meaningful engagement with local communities exists.

The emerging hybrid news production and consumption model is driven by significant shifts in the resources available for content creation and the associated entry barriers, as discussed by Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou (2015). The post-COVID-19 era has witnessed a substantial rise in digitalisation and the use of interactive news websites for content creation, resulting in reporters being physically distanced from the communities they cover. This transformation, characterised by blurring traditional boundaries in news production and content generation, further exacerbates the challenge for reporters struggling to engage with the unique dynamics and concerns within their communities:

> "*(...) I go to the office, which is located in London, once a month, and I am far away from the community's people's space regularly (...) I am working from home, and the remote work has changed my daily routine; the work environment (this is my home now) makes my communication very difficult and different from working in an office alongside other employees*" (J103).

> "*(...) I use digital communities like Facebook or TikTok rather than physical spaces and streets to gather news stories (...) However, this is a rapidly changing field; sometimes, I feel I am missing the story I need, or it can be difficult to sort out the right information from the wrong*" (J101).

[12] In the next chapter, I will examine the impact of low income and forcing local journalists to reside away from city centres. This circumstance often compels journalists to forego autonomy in selecting living accommodation, forcing them into shared housing arrangements in economically affordable areas, encapsulating the broader phenomenon of precarisation.

The shift to remote working has critically altered the routines and professional dynamics for local journalists, fostering a disconnection between reporters and the communities they cover. As highlighted by participant J103, a senior sports reporter, the infrequent visits to the central London office have led to a physical distance from the newsroom, thus diminishing the connection to the local community, a central pillar of compelling local journalism. This detachment from the community, a core component of quality reporting, further underscores the erosion of traditional journalistic practices where proximity to the community was essential for nuanced, in-depth reporting. Simultaneously, participant J101, a court reporter, reflects on the increasing reliance on digital platforms such as Facebook and TikTok[13] for newsgathering. Whilst these digital spaces offer new avenues for sourcing information, they introduce complexities that challenge journalistic integrity. J101 acknowledges the difficulties of navigating a fast-evolving digital landscape, suggesting that the shift to online sources compromises the depth and accuracy expected from professional journalism. This reliance on social media platforms signals a broader dilemma within the industry; journalists are forced to adapt to rapidly changing digital environments that prioritise speed and engagement over substance.

The transformation brought about by remote working and digitalisation raises significant concerns about the integrity of local news production, exacerbating the ongoing crisis of local journalism in the UK:

> "*(...) If any action is not launched, local news loses local communities and their people because these people define the locality as the news a few miles away (...) A local, for example, in Canary Wharf, wants to read news about their patch first*" (J103).

> "*(...) I doubt journalism stays the same whilst working remotely. It's not going to be about reporters going out, meeting people, and reporting on important things to their local communities anymore. Local journalism is almost becoming a convoluted form of advertising, doing things to appease PR companies (...) I think that's going to change the way that journalism works completely. And it's also going to completely change the way that people think of journalists*" (J202).

[13] I analysed the role of social media platforms in local newsgathering in the previous chapter. Here, however, the journalist's use of platforms instead of gathering news from the traditional community indicates the emergence of a new understanding of community, which requires further analysis.

Participant J103 underscores the crucial role of local journalism in fostering community identity, warning that without active local news coverage, communities' risk democratic disengagement and a weakening connection to their locality. This highlights the integral function of local journalism in sustaining civic engagement and social cohesion. Similarly, participant J202, a senior editor, critiques the impact of remote working on journalistic practice and expresses scepticism about its effects on traditional reporting. She argues that remote working risks shifting journalism from on-the-ground reporting and towards content shaped by PR agendas, potentially compromising editorial independence. This reflects broader concerns regarding the commercialisation of journalism and the erosion of its public service function.

The findings suggest that journalists perceive local news as vital to community cohesion whilst recognising the challenges remote working poses to journalistic integrity. The shift from physical newsrooms and direct community engagement raises critical questions about the evolving role of local journalism in democratic societies.

6.1.2 Journalists and the Digital Divide

In many aspects, journalism is in crisis, the profession and traditional role of journalism face erosion. A convergence of social and market forces, including organisational pressures for cost reduction and profit, a general scepticism towards elites, and a self-reliant culture that increasingly criticises the specialised education and bureaucratic obstacles associated with entering professions, has been triggering this crisis (Lewis, 2011). Alongside these, COVID-19 has reinforced and deepened the crisis of professional standards. Most participants indicate that the closure of offices forced by the COVID-19 pandemic and that local journalism companies have always been profit-centred have compelled journalists to practice their profession from their homes. However, the inadequate technological devices and internet infrastructures at home have not been sufficient for this purpose and are bringing many challenges to the profession (Trifonova Price and Antonova, 2022):

> "*(...) home has to be outside of any profession; there are numerous personal tasks and problems, and home hasn't been designed as a workplace (...) Because our offices shut down during COVID, we now have a small place which is not useful enough, and I have to work from home (...) Sometimes, I cannot get myself in a position where I have to do my daily tasks due to technical problems*" (J803).

> "*(...) I experienced various technical hurdles, including the requirement for high data speeds to facilitate the transfer of large files and the financial burden of acquiring essential technology such as a laptop, internet services, and a new phone*" (J603).

Participant J803, a female reporter of daily life, living in a shared house, emphasises the conflict between home environments and the demands of professional work. She notes that whilst homes are typically seen as retreats from work pressures, they often lack the necessary design features for effective productivity, such as adequate space and ergonomic setups. This disconnect can lead to challenges, like personal tasks intruding on work time and the absence of a dedicated workspace, which can hinder focus and efficiency. Similarly, reporter of daily life, J603, who resides in a family home, discusses the technological hurdles exacerbated by the shift to remote working. She points out that high-speed internet is crucial for smooth file transfers and communication; however, many participants struggle with inadequate bandwidth and unreliable connections. This situation is particularly relevant for home-based journalism, where such limitations can disrupt workflow and increase frustration, ultimately affecting the timely completion of tasks. Additionally, the financial burden of acquiring essential technology[14] further complicates these issues, highlighting the disparities in resources available to remote workers:

> "*(...) The internet is a problem. I was living in a shared house, and we were all five. Three of us worked from home, and the internet bandwidth wasn't enough. I can't remember how often I had to go out to find reliable internet for meetings and interviews (...) If I were going to live on my own, I'd leave my flat to my housemates and things like that; however, I cannot afford to live in the city centre by myself*" (J101).

In small neighbourhoods, the challenge of limited internet bandwidth often compels journalists to seek alternative workplaces nearby, such as cafes or local libraries. However, as participants in this study have articulated, these venues frequently fall short of providing an environment conducive to practical work. J101, a female court reporter, poignantly reflects on her struggles with inadequate internet connectivity whilst working from home. Residing with three other individuals, she faces many difficulties balancing remote work demands with constrained

[14] In the subsequent chapter, I examine the extent to which the financial challenges associated with obtaining essential technology jeopardise the livelihoods of journalists and contribute to precarity.

resources. The persistent need to find reliable internet access for critical meetings and interviews disrupts her workflow and complicates the story-gathering process essential for journalism. This situation shows a broader trend in which the physical and digital realms are increasingly intertwined. As the above heading highlights, stories are no longer confined to specific physical spaces but necessitate a constant online presence. Most interviewees concur that journalists are intricately linked to the internet and must remain connected regardless of location or circumstances. This reliance on technology raises pressing questions about equity and accessibility in journalism.

The disparities in internet access can exacerbate existing inequalities among journalists, particularly those operating from smaller towns or less affluent neighbourhoods. Moreover, the implications of these challenges extend beyond individual experiences; they reflect systemic issues within the journalism industry. Many respondents from various studies have indicated that remote working can negatively impact creativity and communication, with nearly half of participants in a Reuters survey expressing concerns about these aspects (Cherubini, 2022; Eidosmedia Editorial, 2022) This suggests that whilst remote working offers flexibility and opportunities for some, it simultaneously poses risks to the collaborative and creative processes vital to journalism:

> "*(...) I thought journalism would not stay the same after COVID-19, but I'm afraid time has proved me right (...) All our standards have changed, and we have become dependent on the internet (...) However, if you do not have useful internet bandwidth, there is no chance for a reporter to connect, meet people, and report on important things to their local communities*" (J202).

> "*(...) I was in the middle of a meeting with the editor, and the internet was gone; until I reconnected to the mobile internet, the editor had to wait (...) If you are in the middle of a meeting with a local councillor, and it's happening many times, people do not want to wait for you; it means you have to reschedule everything or lose the client for your news story*" (J601).

Almost all participants claim the critical role of the internet in the evolving landscape of journalism, particularly with the shift to remote working accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. They highlight the dependency of modern journalism on reliable internet connectivity and the potential consequences of inadequate bandwidth. With over ten years of

experience in local journalism, J202, a female editor, voices concern about the evolving nature of journalism in the wake of the pandemic and highlights the dependency on the internet for locating sources and covering news on the ground. She points out that reporters might be unable to carry out their responsibilities without eligible internet bandwidth, making it more challenging to interact with the public and cover significant events whilst working remotely.

Similarly, editor J601, who lives with his family in his own home and whose wife, and one child also work from home, describes an incident where internet connectivity issues disrupted a meeting with another editor, resulting in inconvenience and potential missed opportunities. This anecdote emphasises the practical implications of unreliable internet for journalists, such as the risk of losing valuable story sources and jeopardising the timeliness of news coverage, underscoring the vulnerability of journalists to internet problems whilst working from home, and emphasising the need for robust internet infrastructure and contingency plans to ensure uninterrupted workflow and effective reporting. In conjunction with issues related to internet bandwidth, journalists engaged in remote working encounter challenges arising from device malfunctions, thereby experiencing a heightened level of complexity compared to their professional environment in traditional office settings:

> "*(...) My company gave me both my phone and my laptop, although I'm not using them as much because those devices are not much better and are not much more efficient at work (...) There is a possibility caused by poorly designed devices that losing contact with directors will cause problems; they expect proper responses, so if they do not find someone else to talk to, I mean, now, if you don't answer within an hour, they think that you are ghosting them, and so do I, which is not valid*" (J101).

> "*(...) The phone and laptop I got from my company are quite slower; they sometimes crash (...) For example, I don't know how to use that phone because it is old, and I know it's so bad even to think about it, but I don't know how to use it. It's so inefficient for me to use it (...) These affect the quality of work I am supposed to do*" (J202).

> "*(...) Whilst working at home with inadequate devices, I am uncertain whether I am executing tasks correctly (...) My laptop is a bit slow, and I am unsure if it functions properly and I don't know if it's doing something weird*" (J803).

General statements from interviewees indicate the challenges journalists face whilst working from home due to device malfunctions and the digital divide, which can complicate the situation more than in traditional office settings. J101, a young female court reporter, expresses her frustration with poorly designed devices provided by her company. She highlights how such malfunctions can lead to communication breakdowns with directors. She also underlines the expectation of immediate responses from managers exacerbates the work pressure, creating a sense of urgency that may not align with the reality of technical issues. Participant J202 talks about how the productivity of employees is negatively impacted by slower and less dependable equipment that his company provides. He noted that journalists' tasks become even more complicated due to the frustration of using outdated technology, which eventually lowers the quality of their output. Echoing this sentiment, J803, a female reporter of daily life in her early career, who lives in a shared house, also doubts the reliability of her laptop and how it affects her ability to finish tasks.

Most participants highlighted how device malfunctions at home create added complexity for journalists, involving communication, efficiency, and confidence in task execution, and stressed the importance of technical assistance. Yet, many struggle to access it promptly in their remote setup. They also express a sense of isolation in problem-solving, often using personal devices to find solutions independently:

> "*(...) My company provides me with the devices, but they are not good enough. The laptops are okay, but like the phones, I never use them, as I use the phone for calling people, but I cannot use them for videos, photos, or anything like that (...) The laptop's quality is not balanced; I could not use it today for a Zoom call because its microphone isn't working. I reported this, but God knows when I will receive technical help (...) Due to such reasons, I always have to use my own devices*" (J902).

Whilst advancements in technology have reached a stage where reporters can feasibly cover stories entirely from remote locations, and news producers can create newscasts from home, the reality of remote working often exposes significant frustrations and practical challenges, mainly when journalists are provided with inadequate company devices (Henderson, Raheja, and Crowston, 2022; Crowston *et al.*, 2024). Local democracy reporter J902 articulates several practical issues she has encountered, including the limitations of company-issued phones, which serve primarily for making calls; inconsistent laptop quality characterised by problems such as broken microphones; and a lack of timely technical support to address these

shortcomings. Such deficiencies severely impede workflow and productivity, especially for tasks requiring multimedia content creation and videoconferencing. The ramifications of these challenges are significant, impacting individual journalists and highlighting systemic problems within the media sector.

Research indicates that inadequate technological support can lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased stress among journalists (Nielsen, Cornia, and Kalogeropoulos, 2016). The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has raised concerns about the exploitation of local democracy reporters under the BBC-funded Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), highlighting issues such as inconsistent pay rates and excessive story count expectations that contribute to burnout and mental health struggles among reporters (NUJ Editorial, 2024) This 'digital hamster wheel' effect, as described by participants in the NUJ summit (Radio Today Editorial, 2024), underscores the precarious nature of remote work in journalism, where technological inadequacies exacerbate existing pressures.

Moreover, relying on poor technology raises critical questions about equity in access to resources in journalism. Disparities in equipment quality can hinder the ability of journalists in less affluent areas to compete effectively with their urban counterparts, further entrenching inequalities within the field. As noted in a report by the Reuters Institute (Newman *et al.*, 2023), the challenges posed by an increasingly digital landscape necessitate re-evaluating how media organisations support their employees in adapting to remote work environments. In conclusion, whilst technology has enabled greater flexibility in journalism, it has also introduced significant barriers that must be addressed.

6.1.3 The Difficulties of Working From Home

Journalists grapple with many work-related crises, including challenging working conditions and limited reciprocity in their professional roles. The industry has experienced a significant increase in layoffs. According to Mayhew and Tobitt (2020) from Press Gazette, over 2,000 jobs at UK-based news organisations have been at risk during the COVID-19 crisis, with further anticipated losses. These reductions have had widespread effects on the news industry, attributable to the steep decline in print sales and the collapse of the advertising market under lockdown conditions, further compounded by COVID-19, resulting in the displacement of numerous editors and reporters. Journalists who stayed on or were newly recruited also had to adapt to working from home, which became relatively established with COVID-19 (Newman *et al.*, 2021). Young journalists contend with meagre salaries, extended work hours, and unfulfilling positions as they strive to secure stable employment (Bélair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2023).

Amidst these challenges, the transition to remote working has introduced additional hurdles for journalists, particularly in navigating subpar internet connectivity and inadequate technological resources. This shift has reshaped the professional landscape and is fostering feelings of isolation and hindering collaborative efforts (Newman *et al.*, 2023).

The impact of remote working varies based on age, job position, and adaptability to evolving work cultures. Nonetheless, a prevalent sentiment among participants is that remote working erodes resilience and disrupts the collaborative dynamics typically experienced in traditional office settings. The isolation from peers and perceived lack of support from departmental managers contribute to a disconnection from the workplace. In their study on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local journalism profession, Henderson, Raheja, and Crowston (2022) argue that the lack of personalised support imposes significant costs on employees, manifesting as cultural disconnection and missed opportunities for experiential learning and meaningful educational interactions. Whilst companies provide online training programs, these are insufficient substitutes for the tacit knowledge and experiential insights gained in a physical work environment. Furthermore, the reliance on online training exacerbates the digital overload crisis, as elaborated in Chapter 5, further highlighting the limitations of virtual learning in addressing the developmental needs of employees.

Whilst journalists transitioning from physical newsrooms to virtual newsrooms appreciated the increased freedom, independence, and creative possibilities afforded by the remote setting, they perceived drawbacks (Wall, 2015a). Specifically, early-career participants identified the absence of structure, resources, and consistent editorial feedback in home-based newsrooms as impediments to their capacity to generate high-quality work:

> "*(...) Working from home isn't always the best thing; it's hard for young journalists, as I do not have much industry experience (...) I benefited from senior journalists receiving more editorial feedback and more materials at the office*" (J802).

The statement from early career participant J802 emphasises the challenges faced by young journalists like him when working remotely, mainly due to their limited industry experience. He highlights the vital support received from senior journalists whilst working in the office, including editorial feedback and access to additional materials. He also underlines the importance of peer mentoring and learning opportunities provided through direct interaction with experienced colleagues in a traditional office environment for early-career local journalists. In their broad research, Rockmann and Pratt (2015) found that people aspire to

work in a physical office setting, seeing it as a chance for both social connections and collaborative work. Additionally, Stich (2020) and Bunce, Wright, and Scott (2018) evidenced that geographically distant journalists are less effective in fostering relationships among themselves compared to what might occur in a physical newsroom. According to similar statements by editors and senior journalists, young journalists like J802 who work from home, face challenges because they might not have the same mentorship and support to help them navigate their roles as they would in an office setting. According to most participants, a lack of in-person interactions with senior journalists can impede their professional development and advancement, affecting the calibre of their work and the capacity to advance in their career (Clio, 2021).

> "*(...) While you can perform your tasks remotely, engaging with others is integral to your role (...) It's also true that if you're working from home, you still need to consider asking for assistance, which cannot be easy*" (J701).

> "*(...) You've got to fire messages off or email off if you're looking for guidance while you are at home, whereas if you're in an office and face-to-face, it is easy to learn continuously from senior colleagues and editors*" (J901).

> "*(...) During and after COVID-19, I needed help while I was working from home. I thought I should not email or message my colleagues every time, and I considered taking the extra creative course (...) It was like unpaid part-time work around work, which I paid for*" (J401).

Parallel to the above quotation, interviewee J701, a senior journalist with more than fifteen years in local journalism, features the importance of engaging with others in one's role, suggesting that whilst tasks can be performed remotely, the need for assistance remains integral. He also sees that asking for help from a distance can be difficult, potentially complicating workflow and hindering productivity. By comparing the difficulties of remote communication and the convenience of learning from editors and senior colleagues in an office setting, J901, who is just at the beginning of her career and started her professional journalism career just before the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasises this point even more. She says the lack of face-to-face interaction makes it less straightforward to seek guidance and continuously learn from experienced peers, potentially limiting professional development opportunities for

remote workers. Additionally, journalist J401, who has been an editor for five years, states that he has to approach the problems caused by communication gaps differently than a reporter and reflects on the dilemma of seeking help whilst working from home during and post-COVID-19. She highlights the additional burden placed on remote workers who may hesitate to seek help, for fear of being perceived as burdensome or incompetent.

Participants grapple with whether to contact colleagues for assistance or pursue alternative creative solutions independently. In addition, the sudden surge in remote working represents a monumental transformation in the professional landscape, marking one of the most significant generational changes (Rockmann and Pratt, 2015). Young journalists emphasise the loss of connection to the experience and expertise of their elder colleagues. In contrast, senior journalists also express that they need to take advantage of the opportunity to benefit from the experience of their younger colleagues in adapting to ever-changing technology but working from home challenges this.

> "*(...) I've not spoken to someone in ages; (...) Sometimes, I need to ask questions about these new technologies, but it's impossible at home. I realise I'm on my own, taking time away from work to learn, and I think distractions are creeping in. I'd say the longer I work from home, the more I get distracted and the less productive I get*" (J703).

> "*(...) I also think that if you're working from home, you still need to consider the possibility that, you know, asking for help cannot be really easy. And you know you've got to fire messages off an email if you're looking for guidance. In contrast, if you're in an office and face-to-face, it is straightforward to learn continuously about new technologies from relatively young colleagues*" (J602).

Relatively older participant J703, who claims to find it hard to adjust to new technologies every afternoon, expresses frustration with the lack of opportunities for spontaneous interaction and learning that are readily available in an office environment. He feels isolated and unsupported when navigating unfamiliar technologies from home, leading to distractions and decreased productivity over time. This situation reflects the difficulty remote local news workers face in staying focused and up to date with technological advancements without the immediate support of colleagues.

Similarly, J602, a content specialist with almost twenty years in the local journalism sector, states the contrast between seeking help for new technologies in an office versus a

remote setting. He acknowledges that whilst it is possible to ask for guidance via email or messages whilst working from home, it is not as straightforward or immediate as face-to-face interaction in an office. He also argues the limitations of remote communication in facilitating continuous learning and adaptation to new technologies, especially when compared to the collaborative environment of an office where colleagues can easily share knowledge and expertise.

In media labour studies, social networks encapsulate the critical role of relationships and informal interactions in shaping professional trajectories, particularly in precarious industries. Friedman (2014) and O'Brien and Friedman (2017) highlight how these social dynamics are deeply entwined with class inequalities, as privileged individuals often have better access to networks that provide informal mentorship and opportunities. Their work underscores the cultural and social capital that enables individuals to access elite sectors within creative fields. Lee (2011) further builds on this idea by exploring how social networks within the UK independent television industry play a pivotal role in career progression, especially for workers navigating precarious labour conditions. Lee (2013) also discusses the ethics of insecurity in creative labour, arguing that reliance on personal networks exacerbates the challenges faced by workers in unstable environments.

The shift to remote working has disrupted these networks, curtailing opportunities for spontaneous collaboration and informal exchanges that foster creativity and resilience. Rockmann (2015; p.152) cautioned that the erosion of social ties poses significant risks: '... the danger of a diminished social network is that when you run into trouble, you're not going to have strong relationships to fall back on'. This diminished capacity for social support is particularly troubling in media labour, where systemic precarity exacerbates the need for robust social networks. Thus, whilst remote working offers flexibility, it often weakens the relational structures underpinning resilience, thereby perpetuating inequalities for those who have had the chance, however limited, in a newsroom.

> "*(...) You are working far away from written job rules while working from home, so the real problems cannot be visible (...) Connecting with colleagues is part of your job; only this is a clue to understanding this mysterious resistance because we lost it*" (J203).

> "*(...) I believe resistance depends on how much you adapt to this new work culture. Those who do not adapt will either remain outside this circle voluntarily or be forced to do so*" (J901).

"*(...) Deciding between going and staying is difficult because you have been trained for this job. What else can I do? (...) I also spend time at home looking for answers to these questions*" (J603).

Participant J203, a female SEO journalist in the local news landscape, states the difficulty in identifying and addressing problems whilst working remotely, as the absence of written job rules can obscure issues. She raised the importance of connecting with colleagues as part of the job, suggesting that losing this connection contributes to poor resistance to remote working. As many participants' statements also shed light, this resistance may stem from the lack of clear communication channels and the isolation experienced when working remotely, making it challenging to navigate work-related challenges effectively.

Equivalently, interviewee J901 suggests that the lack of resistance to remote working depends on one's ability to adapt to the new work culture. He states that those who struggle to adapt may find themselves feeling excluded from the remote work circle, either by choice or necessity, and may be fuelled by feelings of disconnection and a lack of belonging in the remote work environment, highlighting the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive remote work culture. Similarly, J603, a female reporter of daily life, reflects on the difficulty of deciding whether to embrace remote working or seek alternative employment opportunities. Her statement sheds light on the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding this decision and the time spent searching for answers and solutions whilst working from home.[15] Most early-career interviewees suggest that lack of resistance stems from concerns about job security, career advancement, and personal fulfilment. This demonstrates the complex interplay between individual motivations and external factors in shaping attitudes towards remote working.

6.1.4 Maintaining the Work-Life Balance

Journalism has experienced structural transformations in recent years, mainly due to digitisation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the widespread transition to remote working (Clio, 2021). These changes have reshaped journalistic practices and newsroom structures, yet their full implications remain an evolving working area, especially for local journalists in the UK (Cherubini, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many of these trends, forcing news

[15] Additionally, this situation clarifies the extent of precariatisation and the precarious nature of the local journalism profession. More in-depth analysis of this scenario is provided in Chapter 7.

organisations to close physical offices and adopt remote or hybrid work models. Whilst remote working has provided flexibility, it has also introduced challenges for local journalists, who now manage extended working hours, diminished access to sources, and reduced networking opportunities (Westlund *et al.*, 2023). The home has become both a refuge and a workplace, complicating the balance between professional responsibilities and personal wellbeing. As UK local journalists navigate this evolving work environment, concerns about information quality, autonomy, and journalistic objectivity persist. Additionally, issues such as mental health strain, media freedom restrictions, and the financial sustainability of local journalism add to the challenges of maintaining a stable work-life balance at home (Stich, 2020a; The House of Lords, 2020). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for evaluating the long-term impact of remote working on journalism and identifying strategies that uphold journalistic integrity and personal wellbeing. The participants' perspectives have provided valuable insight into how these changes affect work-life balance, offering a deeper understanding of the challenges and adaptations experienced by local journalists:

> "*(...) Where is my workplace? Is it my kitchen, living room, or my bedroom, where none has been designed as a workplace but as a family zone? Home should be redesigned if this new culture is going to be the future of us*" (J101).

A young female court reporter, J101, who lives in a house shared with professionals, raises significant concerns about the difficulties of defining a suitable workspace within the home environment, particularly in areas traditionally reserved for family and leisure activities. She questions whether the kitchen, living room, or bedroom should be used as a workspace, emphasising the lack of designated work areas.

Achieving success in implementing hybrid and flexible working is not solely dependent on having well-defined rules; it requires additional focus and deliberate planning from regulators and policymakers to encourage people to work from home effectively (Cherubini, 2022). However, participants indicate that homes in the UK are mostly considered unsuitable and not designed as workplaces. Most interviewees expressed concern about the impact of remote working on home design and the need to redesign residential spaces to accommodate this new work culture effectively. According to them, remote working is becoming more common, and there is a growing need to reconsider traditional notions of home design to accommodate the blurred lines between work and personal life:

"*(...) I had a decent table and a good work environment in the office, but my kitchen table is now a work desk at home, and my bedroom is also my office*" (J102).

"*(...) I clean up my desk daily, so it looks different. It doesn't look like a tiny home desk anymore. It looks like it's cleared up. It's visual stuff; I try to ensure I am there for the job (...) I work by putting all my lights and stuff out in the living environment. Because I think it's too easy to see it as a workspace, not a living space*" (J902).

"*I prefer working at home because the office is empty; no one goes into the office very often. However, the problem is, when I work from my kitchen table, I find it quite hard to log off at the right time while also managing daily tasks such as cooking and cleaning (...) Men are not involved in this; my boyfriend also works remotely, but I do most of this work. It does leak into your daily life quite a lot, especially because of one of the requirements of being a journalist*" (J202).

Interviewee J102, a female early-career journalist, reflects on the stark contrast between the structured work environment of the office and the makeshift setup at home. She describes turning her kitchen table and bedroom into workspaces, emphasising the blurred line between work and personal life. She emphasises the importance of flexibility and adaptability when transitioning from traditional office spaces to remote work environments at home. Participant J902 states she now accepts that the house is a new workspace and has learnt new practices to live in this space healthily. Her approach demonstrates a deliberate effort to separate work and living spaces within the home. She aims to visually differentiate her workspace from the rest of the living space by clearing her desk daily and rearranging her surroundings. She also seeks to maintain a sense of balance and boundaries, preventing the workspace from gradually advancing on the home's relaxation and leisure areas. Another female journalist, J202, highlights the challenges of working from home, emphasising the difficulty of separating professional and personal life due to the foggy boundaries of a home workspace. She struggles to log off at appropriate times and is continuously pulled back into working due to the constant journalism engagement required by her profession.

This issue is compounded by the unequal division of domestic responsibilities, with J202 bearing most of the household chores despite having a partner who also works remotely. This persistent overlap of work and home duties leads to significant stress and a lack of proper downtime, illustrating the complexities of remote working and traditional gender roles. In their

study, Bunce, Wright, and Scott (2018) similarly found that journalists have conveyed challenges in 'switching off' and managing the equilibrium between personal and professional life when assigned to work remotely. Journalists generally view their home as a place to relax and socialise with their family members and housemates. However, they argue that their employer's work demands violate this ideal, leaving them with few options for when to stop working or disconnect from work at home.

> "*(...) All the things I dreamed about, such as having a job in journalism, have fundamentally changed. Aside from millions of home things, I am just trying to adapt as a story generator observed by the company computers at home*" (J501).

> "*(...) My workspace is the same as my relaxation space (...) I find that quite tricky because I am always within it (...) As daft as it sounds, going into an office to work, leaving it, and relaxing in a different room is healthy. I believe working from home is a condensed combination of life and work*" (J903).

Although home standards typically tend to become indicators of increased capacities for expanding leisure time, as enforced by state representatives, advertising, and societal expectations, the norms, life standards, and expectations surrounding working from home have evolved in a manner that minimises these advancements (Hester and Srnicek, 2023). Journalist J501, with over 15 years in local journalism, has witnessed the changing dynamics of newsrooms and the considerable shift in how journalists perceive their jobs, primarily due to remote working. This highlights the challenge of adapting to a new reality where work intertwines with household responsibilities.

Correspondingly, journalist J903, who resides with his wife and two children, expresses the challenge of maintaining boundaries between work and relaxation spaces whilst working from home. He acknowledges the significance of physical separation between work and leisure environments, noting that the absence of such distinction in a home workspace can result in a blurred fusion of work and personal life. He emphasises the importance of establishing clear boundaries and routines to uphold mental wellbeing and achieve work-life balance in remote work.

In support of these views, according to several interviewees, the employer ceases to recognise the house as a home during the daily work shift. Additionally, the uncertain flexibility provided by working from home leads to the persistence of active work throughout the day,

challenging the availability of free time and relaxation space. The interviewees also emphasised the possibility that this home transformation could strain family life or, for those living in shared houses, their relations with their housemates:

> "*(...) I am living in a shared house; we are four in total at home, which means, you know, you have a mess around you every time (...) I have only one place, my bedroom, most of the time (...) Once, while I was in a virtual meeting or interview, my housemate had a relationship issue at the same time, and she was crying and doing similar stuff (...), so how could I focus on the work at that moment?*" (J401).

Whilst some interviewees, particularly those who live alone in their own homes, express that the flexible layout of their residence offers new opportunities for journalism and enhances productivity, this sentiment is not general. The distinctions among household members, various areas and objects within the home, different times of the day and weekly routines, and the separation between private and work life have become indistinct and blurred (Watson, Lupton, and Michael, 2021). According to Tobitt (2020), for many journalist parents, remote working poses an extra challenge in managing the equilibrium between home and work life, given the responsibilities of childcare and home-schooling during working hours. For instance, the remarks by J401 highlight the difficulties of working from a shared living space, where household dynamics can disrupt focus and productivity. She describes the constant presence of others in the shared house, leading to a cluttered environment that may impede concentration. A designated workspace is necessary to address this issue, as individuals are primarily confined to their bedrooms for work. Her anecdotes prove the opposite of the above belief and underline the inherent difficulties of maintaining professional boundaries and concentration in a shared living environment where interruptions and distractions are unavoidable.

In most participants' statements, the presence of a partner, flatmate, or child further compounds the challenges associated with adapting to a remote workspace. With these conditions, participants such as J401 state that working from home is significantly more intricate, and at times it is nearly impossible for them to redirect their focus towards work. The families of employees faced challenges, as the flexibility of the workplace and schedule blurred the lines between work and family life (Hill *et al.*, 1998; Harpaz, 2002).

> "*(...) Having a work-life balance is hard; it started during COVID and still runs hard after COVID. The thing that I find trickiest is working when your family members are*

around (…) Work life at home is like living with all my contacts across all virtual public because they will contact me on the weekends or outside of my shift, or something like that (…) It isn't easy to switch between sides, as well" (J902).

"*(...) While working from home, my kids perceive the day as my day off and desire to spend all their time with me. However, my screen-focused work demands more attention than my children (...) Managing everything together can be challenging, leading to a sense of intrusion into my personal space*" (J201).

"*(...) I have a colleague who is a single mother, and her son was recently hospitalised (...) She had that crisis, and meanwhile, she needed to do a virtual meeting with the local councillor simultaneously (...) She asked me to conduct the interview or take her son to the hospital. I took the boy to the hospital, but both situations were chaotic, and this level of work intrusion into our private lives made me wonder whether or not to have children*" (J202).

Work and family situations make balance challenging; the alteration of the home environment impacts individuals across diverse dimensions, encompassing factors like age, family status (whether married or single and the number and age of dependents), work status (including home office arrangements, work demands, and flexibility), ethnicity, gender, and income. Achieving balance between professional and personal life has a nuance for journalists engaged in remote working. There is variability among these journalists, concerning skills, income, parenting responsibilities, and gender. In their study, Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto (2016) found that journalists often compromised their personal life for work during their professional journey. This could involve sudden departures from the country and leaving colleagues, home, and family, even during celebratory occasions such as Christmas and birthdays, to cover an event. This condition shows the complexities and challenges of handling a work-life balance whilst working from home, particularly in the context of family responsibilities and interruptions.

The participants' general sentiments congruent with these findings were obtained in this study. Local democracy reporter J902 discusses the relentless challenge of establishing boundaries between work and personal life. Family members and work contacts often blur the line between professional and personal time. The constant availability and virtual nature of work make switching roles and maintaining a healthy balance an uphill battle. Equivalently,

participant J201 reflects on the struggle to manage the demands of screen-focused work whilst attending to the needs of children who perceive their parent's presence at home as leisure time. He says this imbalance can lead to feelings of imposition into personal space and difficulty prioritising work tasks over family responsibilities. The real-life scenario shared by J202, a female editor, vividly illustrates the impact of work imposition on personal life, especially for individuals with caregiving responsibilities. The colleague's struggle to balance a work meeting and the care of her son, who needed to be taken to hospital, highlights the challenges working parents face in managing their professional and personal obligations.

6.1.5 Health and Safety Implications

The surge in home-based working has brought many challenges and health considerations. With the transition to remote working during and post-COVID-19, journalists face new circumstances that impact their physical and mental wellbeing (see also Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto, 2016; Tobitt, 2020b; Šimunjak, 2022b; Trifonova Price and Antonova, 2022; Hester and Srnicek, 2023; Granger, 2024a).

Central to these concerns are the reported feelings of anxiety, worry, and loneliness, which have demonstrated significant negative repercussions on the mental health and overall wellbeing of the participants. Particularly noteworthy is the observation that early-career journalists exhibit a notably higher prevalence of these issues than their more seasoned counterparts.

This section of the chapter examines the health implications of the transition to remote working, aiming to shed light on the multifaceted effects on the health and wellbeing of local journalists in the UK. Some participants, especially those with sole homeownership or residing independently in family-assigned residences, have articulated favourable aspects of remote working; the evolving state of the household in this context is perceived diversely among participants. Similarly, journalists conveyed a heightened sense of comfort, flexibility, freedom, and diminished fatigue stemming from their working-from-home arrangements, as evidenced by surveys conducted by Press Gazette (Majid, 2021; Tobitt, 2021b).

However, this sentiment was not universally echoed, as a more significant number of interviewees attested that working from home engendered a convergence of domestic and professional spheres. In this study, most participants living in shared houses or living in a house with family members and experiencing the restrictions on workspace, mentioned under the above heading, were more likely to say the transition to remote working caused health problems. This amalgamation resulted in heightened fatigue and challenges in disengaging

from work-related matters and general news consumption, as found by Šimunjak (2022) and Tobitt (2020). During the interviews, some editors expressed anxiety and concern for their staff, whilst some senior journalists were also worried about the wellbeing of their young and early-career colleagues. These problems include stress due to a loss of motivation, feelings of loneliness related to isolation, digital overload, burnout and exhaustion due to unclear work hours, and the need to adapt to updated technologies almost daily. Additionally, anxiety linked to regular screen observation and physical health problems related to ergonomic issues with home furnishings were indicated.

> "*There is no longer a newsroom for any newspapers I work for. I know these closures started with COVID-19, and then they removed all newsrooms (...) I have a long career of almost twenty years and have seen many more difficulties than this, but working from home is mentally and physically challenging for younger journalists, particularly those without much experience*" (J402).

> "*(...) Journalists are expected to work all the time and everywhere. You always have to be on [call], even if the place is a house and was not designed as a workplace*" (J502).

> "*Unplugging from work, coping with loneliness, addressing the lack of collaboration and poor communication in home workplaces, maintaining motivation, taking vacation time, and ensuring a reliable internet connection are all genuine daily struggles. It's difficult to stop working at 5:00. I don't often speak to anybody face-to-face, potentially for days (...) As I heard from my peers, I don't communicate very much with my team, which is a new normality*" (J803).

With a career spanning almost twenty years and first-hand experience of newsroom changes since the millennium, content specialist J602 claims to live alone and feel more comfortable at home. Still, there is evidence to support the general narrative. His statement highlights the absence of traditional newsrooms due to closures accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasises the significant shift to home-based working. Additionally, he underscores the potential mental and physical challenges younger journalists face, corroborating that the transition to remote working may disproportionately affect early-career journalists.

In her early career as a trainee reporter, J502 highlights the significant work pressure and stress induced by work relocation to the home environment, which may not be conducive

to productivity. She underscores the pervasive expectation within journalism for professionals to remain constantly accessible and "*on call*", irrespective of their physical location, attributing it as a catalyst for mental health challenges. She raises that this perpetuation of work demands beyond conventional office hours is posited to exacerbate feelings of stress, as evidenced by the recounted experiences of anxiety and apprehension among participants.

Another early-career journalist, J803 discusses the adverse effects of flexibility, and highlights the challenges arising from the dependency of their work on computers. They articulate various struggles in remote work settings, including disengaging from work, managing loneliness, and navigating communication hurdles in home-based workplaces. She particularly emphasised the feelings of anxiety, worry, and isolation experienced in such environments.

Over the years, new media technology has been promoted to grant the freedom to work in flexible arrangements, providing the convenience of choosing when and where to work. Today, as the participants demonstrated, this trend extended beyond the traditional office space to locations such as cafes, streets, and trains, and eventually to the domestic settings of living rooms, dining rooms, and bedrooms (Gregg, 2011). This shift in work dynamics reveals that the concept of work-life balance may work against the employee, impacting the professional lives of today's salaried individuals. These impacts encompass the personal, familial, and broader social challenges workers face within the evolving employment landscape (Hill *et al.*, 1998; Gregg, 2011). As a trainee reporter, J502 emphasised:

> "*(...) Home hasn't been designed as a workplace. When I say everywhere, I mean my bedroom; when I mention every time, I also refer to my eating or sleeping time (...) I just realised that if I have my computer and a reliable internet connection, every phase of my life can be stolen by work (...) Working in the bedroom and spending all day in there, it's a form of imprisonment (...) These are strong enough reasons for being mentally or physically ill*" (J502).

The advancement of device technology and the widespread integration of robotics have intensified corporate control over labour, continuing historical trends of technological intervention in the workforce. In pursuit of greater productivity, companies restructure labour practices and redefine roles to align with evolving economic demands, often at the expense of the personal spaces of employees. This intrusion extends beyond traditional production sectors, as digitalisation reshapes perceptions of accessibility to professional roles and reconfigures

spatial and temporal boundaries of work (Mosco, 1983; Gregg, 2011). Communication technologies enable work to permeate spaces and moments previously reserved for personal life, subtly orchestrating a shift in work patterns under the guise of flexibility. These transformations have profound implications for worker wellbeing, particularly among journalists, where the erosion of clear work-life boundaries affects mental health and professional commitment, ultimately influencing the quality of journalism itself (Šimunjak, 2022b).

The lived experiences of local journalists further illustrate the wellbeing challenges associated with remote working. The transformation of the home, particularly the bedroom, into an inescapable workspace highlights the psychological toll of constant professional demands. The perception of "*imprisonment*" reflects the struggle to separate work from rest, exacerbating stress, isolation, and the risk of burnout. Many accounts of the participants underscore the broader concern of occupational overreach, where digital connectivity fosters excessive labour expectations and diminishes personal autonomy. These results coincide with more general debates on the adverse effects of remote working and underline the need for policies protecting mental and physical health by enforcing more apparent differences between professional obligations and personal space.

> "*(...) I am always working overtime, and it is getting quite stressful just to be active (...) When I am at the office, I log off and I'd go, but while I am working from home, I'm still in my workspace; I'm still in the room and doing work and can't leave, so I think it is affecting my motivation to be ready for tomorrow and make qualified news, raising expectation-induced stress and burnout*" (J901).

An early-career male reporter of daily life, J901 expresses the stress of constantly being active and working beyond regular hours, which can harm their mental wellbeing and overall work-life balance. He compares working at the office to working from home, underscoring the difference in the ability to disconnect from work; he notes that he would log off and leave the workspace whilst at the office. In contrast, at home, he remains within the same environment.

Some similar participants' narratives note that this lack of separation between work and personal space can contribute to decreased motivation, not being ready for the next day, and exacerbate feelings of stress and burnout. J901 also mentions the "*expectation-induced stress and burnout*", suggesting that the pressure to meet professional expectations and deliver high-quality work in a remote setting adds a layer of stress to the situation. As creative labour

workers, journalists have expressed frustration with the perceived increase in emotional labour, dissatisfaction with adaptation to these new rules, and heightened anxiety about the potential effects of digitalisation on their professional image and personal wellbeing (Lee, 2015, 2018; Bossio and Holton, 2021).

Burnout, defined by the mental health charity, Mind, as a consequence of prolonged and unmanageable workplace stress, gained recognition as a 'workplace phenomenon' by the World Health Organisation (2019). Most journalists and editors, accustomed to demanding schedules and numerous responsibilities, are no strangers to the challenges contributing to burnout. However, burnout extends beyond a heavy workload, becoming prominent when the boundaries between work and home life blur, a phenomenon exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and afterwards (Granger, 2024a). The manifestations of burnout vary, but participants commonly emphasise that burnout includes feelings of exhaustion, being overwhelmed, or lacking motivation:

> "*(...) I would say working from home itself is one of the major causes of stress, burnout, or anxiety (...) Being away from work is impossible because you're constantly thinking about it, and your home is your workplace (...) So, your mind is constantly on that, and that can be quite anxiety-inducing (...) Due to flexible work hours, I need to be aware that, using various media applications, I have to work at any time, whether on weekdays or weekends, and the concept of traditional working hours may not truly apply to me (...) It can be quite stressful even if I have a chance to get one-on-ones with my manager or editor to sort out problems*" (J401).

> "*(...) It's mentally disadvantageous when you are working from home. I live at work just as much as I do [at home]. I question what the house represents too much, especially if family members are around me; this can be much more confusing and stressful than seeking sick leave consistently*" (J402).

The general statement underscores the significant impact of working from home on stress, burnout, and anxiety levels. Equivalently, female editor J401 expresses the challenge of separating work from personal life when one's house serves as the workplace, leading to constant thoughts about work even during non-working hours. She says flexible work hours further complicate the situation, as she feels compelled to be available at any time, including weekends. She thinks the lack of clear boundaries between work and personal time contributes

to heightened stress levels, even during interactions with managers, editors, and reporters aimed at problem-solving. Sports reporter J402 discusses the mental cost of working from home in a shared household versus participants living alone in their own home and the perceived disadvantage of the arrangement. He feels they "*live at work*", implying a blurred line between their professional and personal lives. The lack of separation between the work and home environments causes confusion and increased stress, especially when family members are present. The comparison to seeking sick leave implies that the mental strain of achieving work-life balance in a remote setting may outweigh the difficulties associated with taking time off due to illness.

In line with the general narrative, participants J403 and J902, who do not live in a home of their own or provided by their families where they can live alone, emphasise that switching to remote working in a shared house has pushed them into mental burnout:

> "*Shared accommodation is the main problem for journalists; it's like living in bomb cells. I wasn't sure before the experience, but afterwards, I saw that, due to their shared accommodation status, many journalists at the same level share their houses, lives, privacy, and even themselves emotionally, causing anxiety, stress, and burnout*" (J403).

> "*(...) I enjoyed working at home except for being stuck in a necessary room (...) We had a reality in the newsrooms, such as having people constantly come up and start these stories (...) Some appear to pile up quite often when I am at home and doing things over the screen (...) I found that I was burning out quite a lot doing that*" (J902).

A young male reporter of daily life, J403 highlights the difficulties faced by journalists living in shared accommodation, comparing it to living in "*bomb cells*" due to the significant stress and anxiety it causes. According to him, shared living arrangements reduce privacy and emotional boundaries, exacerbate feelings of anxiety, stress, and burnout, and harm the mental wellbeing of journalists. He emphasises the need for interventions to address these challenges, such as providing alternative housing options or supporting journalists in shared living situations. Similarly, J902, a local democracy reporter, reflects on her experience working from home, noting the benefits of the flexibility it provides whilst highlighting the drawbacks, such as feeling stuck in a specific room and missing the dynamic environment of the newsroom. She claims that the constant interruptions and interactions inherent in a traditional newsroom setting, which are absent when working remotely, and the transition to remote working, result

in an accumulation of tasks and interactions across digital platforms, contributing to feelings of burnout. Additionally, interviews revealed that reporting sensitive stories and sourcing news remotely can cause trauma due to the isolation caused by remote working:

> "*As part of my job, I attended an interview about a sensitive topic, such as murder. The details were intense, and they had a profound impact on my mental health. I came back home, bypassing the office, to write the story. With no one around to talk to, I didn't have a chance to share those details with anyone, which left me feeling traumatised. I felt like I was suffering in silence, experiencing isolation, anxiety, guilt, exhaustion, and brokenness due to the news we were supposed to report*" (J502).

An early-career reporter, J502 vividly recounts the profound emotional toll experienced after covering a sensitive topic, specifically a murder. The impact on her mental health was immediate and intense, leading to trauma by having to bypass the office, which was the company's decision, and write the story alone at home. This isolation, compounded by the absence of a support system, intensified feelings of anxiety, guilt, exhaustion, and a pervasive sense of brokenness (Crowley, 2021). This account underscores the significant psychological strain that reporting on traumatic events can have on journalists, mainly when there is a lack of support mechanisms to help process the emotional burden. Deuze's (2025) most recent study on the mental health and wellbeing of media professionals indicates that they tend to score high on depression, stress, burnout, and suicidality. The absence of an environment where journalists can share their distress exacerbates the situation, leaving them to cope in silence. Consequently, the mental wellbeing of reporters becomes vulnerable, and their ability to sustainably produce quality work is jeopardised.

This situation highlights the critical need for institutional frameworks that provide psychological support and resources for journalists. Research into how the emotional toll of covering such sensitive topics can be mitigated is essential, alongside the ethical responsibility of journalism to safeguard the mental health of reporters. Given the intensity of the psychological impact, further research is necessary to develop effective support systems, prevent long-term mental health issues, and address the ethical considerations related to the wellbeing of journalists in high-stress environments.

6.2 Discussion and Conclusion

Generally, local reporters are often constrained by factors such as the high cost of living, steep rents, low wages, COVID-19 restrictions, and the resulting shift in workplace culture. As a result, they frequently reside outside the communities they cover. Local journalists participating in this study have emphasised the noteworthy outcomes of adjusting to a new work culture. First, the borders between reporters and their local communities are becoming hazier. In addition, the dependence on devices and internet bandwidth has created technological difficulties, with malfunctions interfering with communication and workflow. According to them, there are also challenges for collaborative efforts, including opposition and practical problems. Furthermore, the shift to remote working has made it more difficult to distinguish between work and personal obligations, affecting work-life balance, especially for those who work from home. Finally, there are health ramifications to consider since the transition to remote working disrupts routines and might worsen screen-time problems and sedentary behaviour.

Forcing journalists to work from home firstly results in an erosion of public trust and leads to the disengagement of journalists from the community, severing ties with potential local sources, and erosion of local news coverage. This situation leads to losing their physical connection with local people, resulting in decreased audience engagement and a departure from community-centred news making. The interviewees believe staying and working outside the local patch alters the traditional boundaries between newsgatherers and local communities. If local news is the essential foundation of local democracy and accountability (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou, 2015), the significance of the local news element should not be overlooked, even in the broader context of news production. The loss of direct and consistent access to local communities and/or news sources could have detrimental implications for democratic backsliding. The closure of local newspapers, coupled with the prevalence of the BBC as the sole surviving local newsroom in a particular part of the UK, as found by Kersley (2022), exacerbates the absence of representation for over 4 million UK citizens lacking access to local news sources (Barclay *et al.*, 2022).

Beyond undermining democratic norms, this scenario is compounded by local journalists being compelled to reside outside their respective communities, leading to detachment from local affairs. Consequently, residents remain uninformed about developments within their neighbourhoods. Such circumstances may precipitate a lack of media scrutiny and accountability measures for the local private or state entities of these regions. According to research conducted by Barclay *et al*. (2022), local newspapers, whether independent, relatively

small, or large monopolies, are no longer effective in building or maintaining a sense of identity for a community.

Additionally, such newspapers are not equipped to assist communities in dealing with shared traumatic experiences or crises. This study's findings support the existing literature and find that journalists' ties to local communities weaken after office closures or adaptation to working from home. This distancing can lead to a tendency for local news sites to prioritise clickbait content that aims to get instant reactions from viewers rather than nuanced or positive news. Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) shows the recurring complaints, legal warnings, and enforcement of page view targets at regional publishers such as Reach, exemplify how financial pressures incentivise local news sites to prioritise sensationalist, misleading, and engagement-driven content over substantive journalism (Private Eye Editorial, 2025). This shift not only erodes public trust, but reinforces the systemic precarity of local journalism, where commercial survival increasingly takes precedence over accurate and community-focused reporting. As a result, journalists may write press bulletins, which are relatively easy news, rather than community-engaged news.

Bringing work home is not merely about having a laptop and an internet connection; it is about having the appropriate infrastructure, overcoming technical hurdles, and alleviating financial burdens that intersect to form substantial barriers. All respondents, especially those living with family members or in shared households, emphasise these problems and state that reliable internet connectivity, access to appropriate devices, and secure digital platforms are indispensable pillars for remote work-engaged journalism success. Even highly motivated and senior local journalists who live in their own home or family-provided accommodation, face technological limitations whilst working remotely. According to a study by Cherubini (2022), industry representatives are aware of the situation and have invested in upgrading some technologies, such as audio-visual technology, to counterbalance presenteeism and aim to ensure that journalists who join meetings and work remotely are not at a disadvantage.

However, adopting innovations such as high-quality tools, virtually enhanced newsrooms, and enhanced cybersecurity measures has yet to significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of remote working arrangements. Journalists have expressed dissatisfaction with the technological devices provided for working from home. They stated that they often had to use personal equipment, such as phones and computers, to perform their duties effectively. However, they have raised concerns about information security, overuse of individual equipment, and other related issues. The timely production and delivery of news to readers relies highly on the technology and internet infrastructure utilised in remote work

settings. The devices employed for news production and the quality of internet access play crucial roles in ensuring that news is delivered to audiences at the right time. The study indicates that remote working requires more than individual adaptability and necessitates system restructuring to enable and empower workers in remote work environments. It emphasises the need for collective efforts to address infrastructure gaps and technological limitations, particularly in journalism, to establish a more just and sustainable remote work ecosystem.

As per findings by Cherubini (2022), newsroom leaders are expressing concerns about the growing sense of detachment among UK local journalists due to remote work culture. Similarly, most of the participants in this study have expressed that hybrid and flexible work arrangements have undermined their sense of connection with the organisation. The home environment, which is now doubling as a working office, has not only resulted in the breakdown of community ties and malfunctioned devices, but has deprived young and early career journalists of the opportunity to be in the same environment as senior journalists, which disrupts the continuity of learning, as participants indicated.

The lack of collaboration resulting from remote working, the absence of professional knowledge, and the inability to receive prompt editorial feedback, impact journalistic practices and diminish output quality. Šimunjak (2022) and Tobitt (2021) found that some UK journalists perceived themselves as more productive when working remotely but reported feeling less satisfied and creative. They also found that the quality of journalists' works dipped. In this study, participants state that they work longer hours and missed having colleagues to speak with and build relationships with new co-workers. They attribute these challenges to the absence of a physical newsroom environment. In addition, most participants criticised the rules for having a job or education attributed for this profession; they said the regulations and training written for the office environment are inadequate at home. According to them, the house is not intended as an office. Embracing the home as a workplace requires new training and skills, many of which, they say, are made more difficult by losing ties with co-workers.

The challenges associated with balancing work and personal life are a phenomenon that have been around for every journalist. Global studies have shown that journalists face these challenges from blurred work and personal life boundaries. Marques Pinto and Roberto (2016), Crowley (2020), and Šimunjak (2022), for example, indicate the complexities and challenges inherent in achieving work-life balance in the journalism profession. Remote working, which has become more prevalent during and after COVID-19, has further complicated the interplay between work and family dynamics, particularly in shared households or when living with

family members. The study conducted by Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto (2016), among others, has unearthed significant insights into the factors contributing to work-life balance challenges for journalists. Participants in this study state that these factors, including age, family status, gender, home status, and work demands, have been found to play a crucial role in shaping the work-life balance of journalists. For instance, the study by Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto (2016) revealed that journalists often prioritise work over personal life, even at the expense of essential family moments. This sacrifice is further amplified in remote working scenarios, where the boundaries between professional and personal life can become blurred, as observed in the experiences shared by participants. Some participants vividly portrayed the struggles of working parents, particularly female journalists with caregiving responsibilities, to balance work obligations with family duties. The constant accessibility and virtual nature of work can make it difficult to establish clear boundaries, leading to feelings of intrusion into personal space and difficulty prioritising tasks for local journalists. These real-life situations underscore the challenges for journalists in maintaining work-life balance in remote working scenarios.

The blurring of boundaries between work and personal life, particularly exacerbated by the shift to remote work, presents a multifaceted challenge that disrupts the delicate balance between professional responsibilities and individual wellbeing. This challenge is particularly pronounced among local journalists, who not only contend with the demands of their professional roles but face a surge in unpaid household work in the UK. Living in shared houses with limited private space outside the bedroom, coupled with responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, compounds the stress and strain experienced by these journalists. As one participant aptly notes, the repercussions of burnout extend beyond the individual, permeating through organisational ranks and adversely affecting overall productivity and morale. Furthermore, the remote work setting imposes limitations on traditional emotion management strategies, such as informal discussions and verbal processing with peers in physical newsrooms, exacerbating journalist frustration and anxiety, similarly found by Šimunjak (2022). This situation underscores the profound impact on their wellbeing and mental health, necessitating a re-evaluation of support structures and coping mechanisms to address these challenges effectively. Therefore, it is imperative to establish an efficient and holistic support system that recognises and addresses the unique challenges of remote journalists whilst safeguarding their wellbeing and mental health.

The comprehensive analyses presented in this chapter sheds light on the multifaceted challenges local journalists face working remotely, emphasising the importance of effectively

managing these challenges to cultivate a supportive and productive work environment. These analyses underscore the vital role of efficient communication, support structures, and mentorship opportunities in alleviating the difficulties associated with remote working, particularly for early-career local journalists and senior professionals adapting to technological changes. Furthermore, these findings highlight the significance of local news publishers prioritising the establishing of robust communication channels and support systems to ensure local journalists can access timely assistance and guidance, ultimately enhancing job satisfaction and professional growth. By recognising and addressing these challenges, local news organisations can set the groundwork for a more inclusive and resilient remote work ecosystem, enabling local journalists to thrive and contribute substantially to their respective fields. If remote working becomes the standard model for the future of local journalism, employers must ensure that journalists receive adequate compensation to secure alternative living arrangements or are supported in shared living environments. This necessitates providing essential work tools, ergonomic furniture such as chairs and desks, and access to mental health support in the regions where journalists reside. The journalists' union should actively monitor the implementation of these provisions and strive to ensure that all local journalists in the UK, regardless of union membership, are afforded these conditions.

CHAPTER 7 THE JOURNALIST AS PRECARIAT

7.0 Introduction

The future of local journalism is increasingly defined by precarity, a condition broadly characterised by employment uncertainty, unpredictability, and risk from the worker's perspective (Kalleberg, 2009). Expanding on this concept, Kalleberg (2009, 2013) explains that employment insecurity arises when individuals either lose their jobs or face the constant threat of job loss, have limited access to alternative employment opportunities in the labour market, or encounter reduced prospects for acquiring and retaining essential skills necessary for career advancement. In local journalism, this precarity is driven by a convergence of economic, technological, and social factors that have fundamentally reshaped the work industry (Kınsün and Kınsün, 2022; Kinsun and Kınsün, 2023).

One of the most significant transformations in local journalism is the rapid digitisation of the media industry. Whilst digital platforms have expanded the reach of local journalism, they have also introduced challenges such as job instability and the continuous need for journalists to adapt to emerging technologies (Deuze, 1999, 2007; Zelizer, 2019). The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation has transformed conventional journalistic practices, supplanting tasks previously integral to the profession. Simultaneously, office closures (Tobitt, 2020a, 2020c), job cuts (Mayhew and Tobitt, 2020), and the transition to remote working (Newman *et al.*, 2020, 2021, 2022) have further exacerbated precarity, with many journalists now working from home in makeshift office spaces. The digital transition has transformed news production and consumption and placed additional pressure on journalists, who are now expected to multitask across digital, social, and print platforms, making career security increasingly tenuous (Ardia *et al.*, 2020; Ofcom, 2023c).

Financial instability is another critical issue confronting local journalists in the UK. Many in the sector struggle with low wages that do not adequately reflect the long hours and significant emotional demands of the profession (Elefante and Deuze, 2012; Kahn, 2024). Kersley (2022a, 2022b) asserts that financial precarity impacts the daily lives of journalists and contributes to high turnover rates, as many leave the industry to pursue higher-paying opportunities or engage in secondary employment unrelated to journalism (Linford, 2024b). The financial strain is further compounded by the rising costs associated with remote working, including expenses incurred from using personal spaces as offices, further exacerbating the economic instability faced by local journalists.

Beyond financial struggles, job insecurity remains a pressing concern (Kınsün and Kınsün, 2022; Kinsun and Kınsün, 2023). As publishers downsize, many local newsrooms operate with a skeleton staff, struggling to meet the demands of comprehensive news coverage with limited resources (Tobitt, 2020a, 2020c; Hunter, 2024). Whilst remote working was initially viewed as a solution, it has sometimes deepened job insecurity, as reduced in-person collaboration erodes professional networks and a sense of job stability. Additionally, the decline in union representation has left journalists more vulnerable to these industry shifts. Mortimer (2013) highlights the multifaceted challenges of local journalists due to the weakening of union advocacy for improved wages, job security, and working conditions. Historically instrumental in safeguarding the rights of journalists, unions have lost influence, exacerbating financial uncertainties within the industry. The broader decline in union membership across the UK has further discouraged young journalists from joining, despite efforts by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) to support new entrants. Concerns over student debt, low wages, and unpaid work have made emerging journalists hesitate to invest in union membership.

Despite these challenges, many local journalists in the UK remain committed to their profession, driven by a sense of public service and accountability to their communities. However, persistent job insecurity and financial instability often undermine this dedication, leading to professional dissatisfaction. The emotional toll of navigating this precarious landscape has resulted in fluctuating levels of job satisfaction, with many journalists taking second jobs or leaving the industry. Reports from the National Council for the Training of Journalists (Spilsbury, 2018; Butcher, 2022) reveal a decline in job enjoyment since 2012, with the mean score for job satisfaction returning to 2002 levels. Whilst just over half (51%) of new entrants believe journalism aligns with their professional aspirations, nearly half of early-career journalists express dissatisfaction, with at least 8% planning to exit the industry.

Technological intensification and rapid workplace transformation have led to the rise of ‘flexicurity’, allowing for ‘flexitime’ outside standard working hours (Deuze, 2007). This chapter examines these complex and interconnected factors to comprehensively analyse the current state of local journalism in the UK and the broader implications of precarity for the sector. It explores key challenges facing local journalists, including career insecurity, financial instability, and declining unionisation, whilst considering their perspectives on the future and their decisions to remain or leave the industry. Comprehending these dynamics is crucial for assessing the future trajectory of local journalism.

7.1 Findings

As depicted in Table 4.3 in the Methodology chapter, the participants occupied various roles: Daily Life Reporter (n=9), Court Reporter (n=4), Senior Sports Reporter (n=3), Senior Journalist (n=3), Editor (n=3), Local Democracy Reporter (n=1), Content Specialist (n=1), SEO Journalist (n=1), and Trainee Reporter (n=1) within the local journalism landscape of the UK. Local journalists in the UK face increasing aspects of precarity due to economic and structural challenges. Digitalisation has narrowed job opportunities and intensified career insecurity, forcing journalists to adapt to evolving technologies or face redundancy. Under-capacity offices, remote working, low wages, and financial instability have left journalists overworked and struggling to achieve financial sustainability. The weakening of unionisation has made it harder for journalists to secure fair wages and improved working conditions. As a result, job satisfaction has become a challenge, and local journalists face a precarious environment that threatens their professional stability. Accordingly, the study has inquired about the challenges of the precarious nature of local journalism, and the collected data forms the basis for the five main inductive themes presented in Table 7.1.

Themes
The Digital Squeeze
Remote Working and Increasing Precarity
The Habitus of Vulnerability
Journalism and Trade Unionism
An Uncertain Future

Table 7.1 Chapter Seven Main Themes.

7.1.1 The Digital Squeeze

The modern journalism industry is experiencing deep precarity, exacerbated by the rapid digitisation of news production and distribution. Whilst the past saw an oversupply of aspiring journalists, recent years have been marked by widespread layoffs, particularly in the daily newspaper sector (Tobitt, 2020a, 2020c). This has made securing stable employment in journalism increasingly difficult in the UK (Nel, 2010; Mayhew and Tobitt, 2020) and globally (Cohen, Hunter, and O'Donnell, 2019). Digital platforms exert considerable power over the industry by controlling algorithms that dictate content visibility. When these platforms deprioritise news, publishers struggle to generate revenue, leaving journalists more vulnerable

to financial instability and job insecurity (NUJ, 2024). The precarity created by digital technologies and social media platforms impacts journalists at every career stage. Recent graduates face difficulties securing their first job, mid-career professionals contend with newsroom closures, and late-career reporters often find themselves forced to retrain or take early retirement due to techno domination, if those options are even available (Örnebring, 2018b). Maintaining employment in 21st century journalism depends on adopting digital tools, which have fundamentally reshaped the profession (Marjoribanks *et al.*, 2022). Whilst digital technologies offer journalists an array of resources and new storytelling possibilities (Deuze, 1999), they have also undermined the economic foundation of traditional journalism by diverting advertising revenue that once sustained newspapers, thereby intensifying job precarity (Deuze, 2009).

The rise of misinformation, deepfakes, and AI-generated content further complicates the landscape. Concerns that artificial intelligence may significantly alter or even replace journalistic roles continue to grow as AI-generated news content expands across media platforms (Brennen, 2024). According to a study by Chew and Tandoc (2024), journalists today recognise that adaptability is crucial, and those unwilling or unable to embrace constant change may be forced out of the profession. This underscores how technological advancements have made journalism an increasingly unstable career. AI's integration into news production is automating core journalistic tasks. Diakopoulos (2024) predicts that within the next fifteen years, AI will generate approximately 50% of news content; a projection believed by 25% of participants in this study. Such developments have profound implications for the careers of journalists, potentially displacing human reporters whilst simultaneously reshaping the profession. Additionally, algorithmic control over news distribution alters journalistic practices whilst contributing to eroding journalistic skills (Rick and Hanitzsch, 2024; Gollmitzer, 2021, 2022).

Local newspapers face particular challenges due to the rise of digital platforms. The increasing accessibility of news through the internet and mobile devices, coupled with the migration of advertising revenue to online platforms, has significantly weakened the financial viability of local journalism (Franklin, 2012). According to the Enders Analysis Report (Mccabe *et al*., 2023b), digital companies now dominate the advertising sector, exacerbating the financial instability of local newspapers (Maher, 2023a). The UK's local journalists participating in this research expressed concerns that digitisation, alongside AI-driven transformations, will lead to job losses and a decline in journalistic expertise. The increasing dependence on digital technologies and their economic implications exemplifies the 'digital

squeeze' on journalists. It forces them to adapt to an ever-evolving landscape in which precarity is not only an economic condition but also a structural feature of contemporary journalism.

> "*(...) Platforms are the biggest triggers of career precarity. It's linked to what we've been having in the industry (...) Facebook and Google have reaped a lot of money that would have previously gone to newspapers (...) This has significantly changed the way things work and potential redundancies (...) These companies maybe just sped up and made a more extreme version of what journalism was always likely to become in the contemporary era*" (J703).

> "*(...) My job security now depends on how much my stories meet digital requirements. I have to put them on social media, which, when I started, wasn't my job. The other thing is, there's been a massive push for video because video makes a lot of advertising money. So, they asked us to make many videos (...) But they are okay with what the video is of (...) Do any video because it's going to bring in more advertising money. But then you have to spend a lot of time on stuff that used to be someone else's job, and they used to be good at it, and you're not necessarily trained in it, but you have to do it because it makes the company's money. So yeah, it's very frustrating, and if I don't do it, I will be replaced*" (J902).

A senior journalist, J703, with over fifteen years in UK local journalism, states the profound impact of digital platforms on the precarious nature of the profession. He argues that tech giants such as *Facebook* and Google have monopolised advertising revenue, destabilising the financial foundation of local newspapers and exacerbating job insecurity. This claim aligns with the latest Advertising Association/WARC Expenditure Report (Reynolds, 2014), which forecasted a 15.2% growth in the UK's advertising market for 2021, with a 15.4% shift in regional and local news brands' ad spending towards online platforms. These financial shifts underscore the increasing dependence of journalism on digital revenue streams controlled by external platforms, further undermining employment stability. The growing dominance of digital platforms has placed journalists in an increasingly precarious position. In an interview with the editor of the Press Gazette, Reach CEO Jim Mullen confirmed that the sustainability of local journalism, and the ability to employ more reporters, is contingent on sufficient advertising revenue, which he argues requires government subsidies (Tobitt , 2024). According to a report by the News Media Association (2023), in 2022 the UK government designated less

than 3% of its advertising budget to local news media, whereas 17% was allocated to Google and *Facebook*. By diverting substantial advertising revenue from local journalism, these platforms have fundamentally restructured the economic foundations of the industry, leading to newsroom downsizing and increased job instability.

J703 links this transformation to a broader pattern of labour precarity within journalism, where digital platforms have disrupted traditional funding models and reshaped employment conditions. The testimonies of multiple participants underscore how platform dominance has intensified job losses and forced structural changes within newsrooms (Newman *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, J902, a local democracy reporter funded by the BBC but employed by a regional news organisation (BBC, 2023), argues that the increasing prioritisation of digital content to generate advertising revenue has fundamentally altered journalistic roles. She expresses frustration over the shift in expectations, as journalists are now required to produce social media content and videos-tasks that were previously beyond the scope of traditional reporting. The change shows a wider trend in which financial survival depends on advertising revenue (Jenkins and Nielsen, 2018), often at the expense of public-interest journalism. As a result, commercial pressures have led to the prioritisation of more financially lucrative content rather than editorially significant, further entrenching precarity within the profession.

Additionally, J501 contends that digital platforms fundamentally alter journalism by democratising content creation, effectively allowing anyone to act as a journalist. Whilst this expanded access to media production has increased content diversity, it has eroded professional boundaries and devalued journalistic labour. The rise of user-generated content and algorithm-driven news distribution has created further instability, as professional journalists must compete with non-traditional sources whilst contending with declining job security:

> "*Nowadays, thanks to social media companies, everyone is a journalist; everyone with a smartphone in the street is a journalist. When it's wild because nowadays, you can pay an investigative journalist by going on the internet for half an hour and uncovering some of the stories of our air account here, which is patently ludicrous, and it's led to all sorts of quite mad situations where people believe any old nonsense (...) So traditional news outlets have been discredited as a result of this. The authority that might once have had, has been undermined, forcing the profession to be more precarious, and that's a real shame*" (J501).

The rise of platform companies has blurred the boundaries between professional journalism and amateur reporting, eroding the credibility and authority of traditional news outlets. As J501 highlights, the accessibility of digital platforms allows anyone with a smartphone to share content, undermining investigative journalism and intensifying job insecurity. This shift has contributed to a loss of trust in traditional media, making journalism more precarious as public confidence wanes and job stability declines. The digitalisation of newsrooms, often framed as 'convergence' between print and online operations, has introduced new pressures, with journalists fearing layoffs whilst being expected to continuously adapt to evolving technologies (Min and Fink, 2021). Research by García Avilés *et al*. (2004) on digital newsrooms in Spain and the UK, found that journalists faced growing uncertainty as continued employment increasingly depended on acquiring new skills. Similarly, as detailed in Chapter 5, journalists interviewed in this study confirm that their career sustainability relies on constant adaptation, further entrenching the precarity of the profession.

> "*There's also a sense now in journalism where you have to obey or be wary of the algorithms of how to work. You almost have to follow the rules being changed by these new bodies and their systems and the way they force new skillsets and adaptation agendas to ensure that you don't fall behind; otherwise, voluntarily or not, you will find another way*" (J703).

> "*This needs to be done by securing titles precisely, like photographers, video editors, and subeditors. I know some friends have been redundant and have yet to be replaced. Because I haven't been redundant, their job is waiting for me; I am still there and have to do that work (…) So now it would have to be me having to go outside of town to get photos, which puts a lot of pressure on the time I'm trying to spend doing other stuff, like just the quality of things like photography (…) I haven't done photography modules at Uni stuff. I am not a professionally trained photographer (…) My job now also involves more admin than at the start*" (J902).

These narratives highlight the deepening precarity within journalism due to the evolving demands of digital platforms and technological shifts. The reflections of J703 underscore how algorithm-driven content distribution have redefined journalistic labour, making adaptability a prerequisite for career survival rather than journalistic merit or expertise. The necessity for journalists to constantly adjust to fluctuating digital trends intensifies job insecurity, reinforcing

a precarious environment where the boundaries of professional journalism are dictated by external technological forces rather than editorial integrity or public interest (Deuze, 2007; Elefante and Deuze, 2012).

The observations of J902 expose how newsroom restructuring exacerbates this precarity. Cost-cutting measures eliminate specialised roles and consolidate responsibilities to fewer individuals. This transformation forces journalists to stretch beyond their traditional roles, navigating an expanding skillset that includes videography, social media management, and administrative work. Such expectations lead to excessive workloads and burnout and heighten employment instability, as those who fail to meet these evolving demands risk redundancy. These testimonies reflect broader industry concerns, demonstrating that digital restructuring alters journalistic practices and destabilises employment conditions. The shifting demands of the profession, marked by a push towards multiskilled 'generalist' roles, erode the stability of journalism as a career, making job security increasingly contingent on cost-saving measures rather than professional expertise. Ultimately, this digital squeeze reconfigures journalism into a space of persistent precarity, where uncertainty, insecurity, and vulnerability become defining features of the profession.

> *"My company has recently experienced substantial redundancies and cutbacks, which is very worrying. And yeah, for instance (...) we do not have photographers and video editors because we have already covered them. And so, it's just one reporter per site on a regional basis. So, we have various regional thoughts on the only reporter my company (...) Some jobs, such as lifestyle writers, are more at risk than others. So, we'll do reviews and the kind of news in journalism, for example, in my rule of thumb, all of the in-between from reviews, news stories, longer-form pieces, and actual extended interviews. I'm trying to keep expanding because one of the companies' processes is to get journalists to have an extensive skillset to perform while reducing the wage bill as much as possible"* (J702).

A reporter of daily life, J702 articulates a deepening sense of precarity within journalism, exacerbated by cost-cutting measures and widespread redundancies (Linford, 2023a, 2024b). The publisher's decision to eliminate photographers in favour of a single reporter per region exemplifies how media companies prioritise efficiency over job security, forcing journalists to take increasingly demanding workloads. The expectation for reporters to cover multiple beats, from hard news to lifestyle features, creates immense pressure and reinforces the instability of

their employment. J702 highlights how the erosion of specialised roles has led to a work culture where survival depends on constant skill expansion, a hallmark of precarious labour. Underscoring the precarity, the regional press giant regional publishers have intensified content production demands, requiring journalists to produce eight stories per shift (Linford, 2024a). As journalists struggle to meet these quotas, many turn to AI-generated content to sustain online traffic, raising concerns that those who are unable to keep up will face job losses. The increasing reliance on AI for news production, driven by economic imperatives rather than journalistic principles, heightens fears that editorial quality is being sacrificed for efficiency, further marginalising journalists in their profession. Beyond job insecurity, precarity manifests in deteriorating working conditions. Office closures and the shift to remote working, often imposed rather than voluntary, have intensified work-life imbalances and wellbeing challenges for local journalists. Many faces financial strain due to the cost of living whilst working from home, with little-to-no institutional support (Hoak, 2021). The compounded effects of these pressures, excessive workloads, unstable employment, and inadequate support, underscore the deep structural precariatisation of journalism, particularly in the local news industry. As digital transformations continue to reshape the industry, journalists remain caught in an increasingly precarious cycle of labour insecurity, professional devaluation, and relentless demands for adaptation.

7.1.2 Remote Work and Increasing Precarity

Remote working has reshaped the modern labour landscape, offering flexibility whilst deepening structural precarity. Although it mitigates some health risks associated with traditional workplaces, it has exacerbated job insecurity, particularly for workers in unstable employment arrangements (Mai, Song, and Donnelly, 2023; Schulz *et al.*, 2024). Precarity, characterised by insecure contracts, low wages, and limited protections, has long been defined in the media industry. The rise of remote working has intensified these vulnerabilities, fostering competition, eroding job security, and blurring the boundaries between professional and personal life (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion). Furthermore, it has widened disparities, disproportionately impacting low-income and informal media workers who lack access to such arrangements and essential labour protections (Abey, 2020). As Posetti, Bell, and Brown (2020) and Radcliffe (2020) noted, journalists have historically faced employment instability, but financial pressures in recent years have amplified this precarity.

Many newsrooms have shut offices and reduced staff to cut costs. The shift to digital-first operations, alongside algorithm-driven news production, has accelerated remote-only

work cultures, raising concerns about job security and working conditions (Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2023). Perri *et al*. (2024) highlight how remote work has increased risks of unemployment, underemployment, income loss, and additional daily expenses. Media companies' remote-work policies have forced most journalists into home/remote-based offices, often without sufficient institutional support (Hoak, 2021), further embedding precarious work/life conditions.

The return to in-person working has been uneven, reflecting the industry's instability. Whilst a minority of journalists have re-entered understaffed newsrooms (Radcliffe, 2020), many have found their offices downsized or permanently closed. The Reuters Institute (2023) reports that only 16% of UK publishers have reinstated pre-pandemic work models, with the majority adopting remote or hybrid structures. Hof and Deuze (2022) argue that this new work culture has contributed to the -omnipresence of precariousness- in journalism. Most participants working remotely illustrate the multiple dimensions of this precarity, ranging from financial instability to mental and physical health challenges.

> "*(...) I think it definitely cannot be easy (...), I've been working at home for ten months (...) However, it is a struggle to adjust to (...) This environment makes communication, for example, very difficult and different as opposed to working alongside other employees in an office (...) You have to be a specific type of individual to want to work in that environment long-term, either physically or mentally*" (J502).

An early-career journalist, J502 argues how remote working deepens professional precarity in journalism-related industries. After ten months working from home, she describes the challenges of isolation and the weakening of professional networks, contrasting this with the ease of collaboration in an office setting. Many narratives in Chapter 6 express similar concerns, noting that reduced real-time communication hinders feedback, guidance, and professional development. J502 echoes these sentiments, stressing that remote working exacerbates uncertainty and instability, reinforcing precarity in the profession. She also notes that remote working does not suit everyone, further amplifying job insecurity. Those who are struggling with the mental or physical demands of home-based working, often face reduced productivity or burnout, putting their employment at risk.

Whilst remote working offers flexibility, it intensifies isolation and erodes job security, making local journalism increasingly unstable. Beyond professional concerns, home-based working has introduced significant health risks for journalists, contributing to bodily precarity

(Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto, 2016; Tobitt, 2020b; Šimunjak, 2022; Trifonova Price and Antonova, 2022; Granger, 2024). The shift to remote working has led to increased physical strain, anxiety, and loneliness; factors which have profoundly affected the mental wellbeing of journalists (Light, 2023). The following quotations illustrate how these challenges manifest, highlighting the physical and psychological toll of working remotely:

> "*(...) If I have my computer and a reliable internet connection, every phase of my life can be stolen by work (...) This is a strong enough reason for being mentally or physically ill (...) Home isn't designed as a workplace (...). it is ergonomically death zone*" (J502).

> "*(...) Working remotely would be mentally and physically challenging for younger and aged journalists (...) particularly those without much experience and seeking help for problem-solving, causing home problems*" (J402).

> "*(...) While you can perform your tasks remotely, engaging with others is integral to your role and security zone (...) It's also true that if you're working from home, you still need to consider asking for assistance, which cannot be easy and makes you mentally burnt out*" (J701).

The narrative of J502 shows how remote working obscures the boundaries between personal life and work, leading to an overwhelming intrusion of professional responsibilities into every aspect of daily life. Constant accessibility through computers and the internet fosters mental and physical exhaustion, particularly as home spaces are rarely designed for long-term work. Her description of remote setups as an "*ergonomically death zone*" underscores the dangers of inadequate workspaces: poorly designed desks and chairs contribute to physical ailments such as backpain and repetitive strain injuries. Prolonged exposure to these conditions heightens bodily precarity of journalists, increasing their vulnerability to illness and injury, a concern echoed by many participants (Boateng and Kodwo, 2020).

J402 and J701 further emphasise the mental strain of remote working, particularly for early-career journalists. Without immediate access to colleagues or employers for support and feedback, the isolation of home-based working intensifies stress and mental fatigue. The lack of in-person guidance makes professional challenges harder to navigate, increasing uncertainty and burnout and rendering journalists mentally precarious.

Whilst some participants have adapted to remote working and find it beneficial, the overall sentiment reflects concerns about isolation eroding both mental wellbeing and long-term professional sustainability. Moreover, working from home forces journalists to sacrifice personal time and private spaces, integrating their domestic life into work. As Lukan and Čehovin Zajc (2023; p 411) observe, 'If you're not willing to be available 24/7 and being everywhere, then journalism may not be the right fit for you'. This sentiment captures how the erosion of work-life boundaries exacerbates precarity, demanding constant availability and deepening a sense of instability for journalists.

> "*Journalists struggle to have a work-life balance because looking the other way is challenging (...) The problem is, when I work from my kitchen table or am in my bedroom for the whole day, I find it difficult to log off at the right time, or it's not very easy to realise I forgot to do something and then, you know, quickly log back on and check. It does leak into your daily life quite a lot*" (J202).

J202, an editor whose experiences align with most participants, raise their concerns of how remote work disrupts the work-life balance of a journalist, reinforcing their professional precarity. She describes the difficulty of "*logging off*" when personal and professional boundaries blur. Working from spaces like kitchen tables, unsuited for professional tasks, complicates establishing clear time limits. The ease of "*quickly logging back on*" to check emails or finish tasks results in work spilling into personal time, fostering an environment where journalists feel perpetually on call. This constant accessibility leads to exhaustion, burnout, and a heightened sense of instability as the distinction between work and personal life erodes (Bunce, Wright, and Scott, 2018). Tobitt (2020a) notes that remote working has intensified challenges for journalist-parents who struggle to balance professional duties with childcare and home-schooling responsibilities.

Whilst journalists acknowledge that long, unpredictable hours pre-date remote working, the shift to digital-first production has exacerbated these pressures. The expectation of constant availability forces journalists to remain responsive beyond regular hours, heightening stress and limiting recovery time. The inability to disconnect makes them more vulnerable to mental and physical fatigue, deepening both professional and personal precarity. As work invades their private life, their sense of control diminishes, further undermining job security and work-life balance. Additionally, the focus of journalism on societal issues and personal tragedies exposes reporters and editors to secondary trauma, a burden intensified by

remote working. The absence of a newsroom and in-person colleagues for support exacerbates the emotional toll of covering distressing news, leaving journalists more mentally and physically precarious (Bélair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2023).

As discussed in Chapter 6, this isolation compounds the challenges of an already precarious profession, further destabilising those working under these conditions, which was already mentioned from J502:

> *"As part of my job, I attended an interview about a sensitive topic, such as murder. The details were intense, and they had a profound impact on my mental health. I came back home, bypassing the office, to write the story. With no one around to talk to, I didn't have a chance to share those details with anyone, which left me feeling traumatised. I felt like I was suffering in silence, experiencing anxiety, guilt, exhaustion, and brokenness due to the news we were supposed to report"* (J502).

J502 shows the imbalance between work-intensive family life and remote journalism, as well as the persistent trauma she encounters in her profession. She describes covering distressing events, such as a murder, and then returning home to write the story in isolation, without the support of colleagues or a newsroom environment. The intense subject matter and solitary working conditions leave her without an outlet to process her emotional response. Without access to debriefing or peer support, she experiences heightened trauma, anxiety, and isolation, carrying the psychological burden alone. In this context, home transforms from a space of comfort and recovery into one of mental precariousness.

The absence of social interaction and immediate peer support deprives journalists of essential coping mechanisms, exacerbating feelings of guilt and exhaustion. The inability to separate work-related trauma from personal life reinforces the precarity of their mental wellbeing, making them more vulnerable to long-term emotional strain. Blurring emotional boundaries between home and work heightens these challenges, deepening the instability faced by journalists.

Research suggests that financial stability and union protections are critical in sustaining a journalism career. Key factors such as dispositional affectivity, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and work mood significantly influence professional continuity (Fisher, 2010). These elements are vital for local journalists navigating increasingly precarious conditions (Chadha and Steiner, 2022).

The following sections examine the remaining debates: the impact of low wages and financial instability; and the decline of unionisation concerning precarity.

7.1.3 The Habitus of Vulnerability

Precarious employment, as outlined in Chapter 3, is characterised by unpredictable work schedules, uncertain job continuity (Kalleberg, 2009; ILO, 2016), and unlimited work hours (ILO, 2016). This form of employment is frequently unprotected by legal frameworks or collective agreements, offering little-to-no social benefits or statutory entitlements (Standing, 2011; Kalleberg, 2013). Whilst precarity is often associated with atypical employment, it also permeates standard work arrangements (ILO, 2016, 2018, 2022). However, as the previous chapters demonstrate, precariatisation extends beyond contractual conditions. It is embedded within the structural and habitus rhythms of work itself, what Bourdieu (1990) terms 'habitus',[16] an ingrained system of dispositions that shapes and normalises precarious working conditions (see Chapter 3 for a deeper exploration of this concept). In local journalism in the UK, precarity is not simply a consequence of external economic pressures but a deeply rooted, internalised reality that has intensified with digitalisation, low wages, extra expenses, and remote working. These factors not only exacerbate economic instability but threaten the watchdog role of the news media by undermining journalistic independence and sustainability (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Lukan and Čehovin Zajc, 2023).

Within this research, the local journalism sector in the UK emerges as a paradigmatic illustration of what can be conceptualised as a habitus of vulnerability, in which precarity, low pay, and financial insecurity are structurally normalised rather than incidental. Among the 26 journalists interviewed, most of whom originate from working-class backgrounds, the habitus of vulnerabilities is inscribed through lived experiences of economic constraint, classed dispossession, and professional instability. Their class position not only intensifies their exposure to precarious working conditions but also circumscribes the resources available to resist or transcend them, thereby embedding vulnerability into the very fabric of their professional trajectories. Concentrated ownership structures and market logics actively reproduce this condition, benefiting from the insecurity of labour while exploiting an oversupply of media graduates, dwindling employment opportunities, and the continual closure

[16] In Bourdieu's work, *Outline Of A Theory Of Practice*, "Habitus refers to 'a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class'. These 'internalised structures' and 'schemes of perception' structure the subject's (shared) worldview and their 'apperception' of the world in which they suppose they exist." (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 86).

of newsrooms. Technological change, far from offering emancipatory potential, is experienced as a destabilising force that displaces journalists, renders existing skills obsolete, and erodes established genres of reporting. For these journalists, the consequence is a cycle of constant adaptation, unstable careers, and deepening precarity: a structural condition in which the habitus of vulnerability becomes both a mode of survival and a mechanism of compliance, evident in the image of reporters working from cluttered kitchen tables, disconnected from their communities, overworked, underpaid, and perpetually conscious of their disposability.

According to Journo Resources (2024), the average annual salary for a local news reporter in London is £25,827, whilst journalists outside the capital earn significantly less, averaging £21,215, with wages as low as £18,000 in many regions (Mizon, 2022). These findings align with this study, where the average salary for 26 local journalists across different career stages and reporting genres was approximately £23,000 per year. Beyond low wages, instability manifests in unpaid leave, job losses, and financial precarity. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) survey of over 1,200 members (April–May 2024) found that 45% reported editorial staff furloughs, 52% received no pay supplementation, 42% faced pay cuts, and 84% feared redundancies at their workplace. These figures underscore the deepening financial crisis in local journalism, where salaries fail to keep pace with rising living costs, particularly in urban areas (NUJ, 2024).

> "*My salary increased after passing the NCTJ qualification, which is now £20,000 per year. But I would expect to get just a bit higher than this (...) I know some people, for example, one of my friends, told me, we've recently talked about this, and he's earning only £17,000 a year, which is so ridiculous; I think that there is so much money to spend on rent, food, and electricity bills. If I did not live in my parents' house, coping with these expenses would not be easy (...) My company does not pay me separately for new courses. So, I invest my time and money (...) If I do not do this, there will be a specific job for me that seniors only do at specific points in their lives, such as public affairs*" (J101).

A young female court reporter, J101 underscores the financial precarity experienced by all journalists in this research, illustrating how low wages and the lack of institutional support for professional development shape their professional trajectories. Although she received a salary increase upon passing the NCTJ qualification, bringing her annual income to £20,000, she still finds this amount insufficient given the high cost of living. Many young participants echoed

this concern, including one of J101's peers, who earns only £17,000 per year and struggles to cover essential expenses such as rent, food, and utility bills.

As detailed in Chapter 6, financial constraints often prevent journalists from living in city centres or securing independent accommodation, forcing them to share housing or sacrifice privacy. In the case of J101, she continues to live with her parents to mitigate financial pressures. This dependence on familial support reveals a systemic issue within local journalism: entry-level wages are too low to enable financial independence. The persistence of such conditions disproportionately favours individuals from an affluent background, limiting socioeconomic diversity in the profession. As Kersley (2022d) argues, economic instability in local journalism discourages individuals with a working-class and disadvantaged background from pursuing a career. The latest NCTJ report (2021) reinforces this pattern, showing that 80% of UK journalists come from a professional and upper-class background, whilst 92% are from a white and advantaged ethnic group (Spilsbury, 2021). These statistics highlight journalism's deep-rooted class and racial disparities, illustrating how financial precarity perpetuates exclusion and underrepresentation.

Despite these barriers, working-class journalists who remain in the profession seek alternative ways to navigate financial insecurity. As explored in Chapter 6, many participants describe repurposing their home and private life for work, making themselves perpetually available to sustain their career. J101's account, and other participants, suggest that journalists must invest significant personal resources, both time and money, into additional training and qualifications to advance in their field. However, this expectation to self-fund professional development exacerbates their financial insecurity, forcing them to choose between economic stability and career progression. The implication is clear: without the financial means to afford continuous training, many career paths in journalism remain inaccessible, reinforcing structural inequalities and limiting opportunities for those from a disadvantaged background.

> "*(...) As an early-career journalist, I'm at that stage where I need more money to be ready to rent a flat on my own, but I can't, mainly due to the wage itself. But yes, I am trying to train up and become a qualified journalist; I'll probably be at some point in my next step. But now I do not have any chance like that, really (...) because, at this wage stage, it's impossible*" (J301).

Early-career journalist J301, who comes from a working-class background, argues the financial precarity that constrains professional and personal aspirations. J301's narrative shows the

struggle to achieve economic independence, as their current salary does not allow them to afford essential milestones, such as renting a flat independently. This experience reflects a systemic issue within local journalism, where low entry-level wages disproportionately affect those from a lower-income background, reinforcing socioeconomic disparities in the profession. As an investigation in The Guardian revealed, many journalists at local/regional publishers report severe financial struggles, yet management remains mainly unresponsive to these concerns (Waterson, 2022).

The ambition of J301 to progress within journalism is evident in their strong desire to "*train up and become a qualified journalist*", as explored in the final finding of this chapter (7.1.5). However, this aspiration remains unattainable due to financial constraints, illustrating how low wages impact immediate living conditions and hinder long-term career development. The statement, "*At this wage stage, it's impossible*" encapsulates the structural barriers that early-career journalists from a working-class background face. Without sufficient income to invest in additional training or professional qualifications, they find themselves unable to access opportunities for career advancement. Unlike their more financially secure peers, who may receive familial or external financial support, journalists from a disadvantaged background lack a safety net to navigate these early-career hardships. These dynamics compound financial precarity, restricting upward mobility and forcing these individuals to choose between meeting their basic needs and investing in their professional future.

The experiences described by J301 exemplify the broader class-based inequalities embedded within the profession. Low wages exclude those from a disadvantaged background and contribute to the shrinking diversity of perspectives in local journalism. Studies confirm financial instability exacerbates class inequality, limiting the representation of working-class voices within the industry (Kersley, 2022c, 2022e). This exclusion has tangible consequences beyond individual journalists; according to the Local News Desert report (2022), approximately four million people in the UK now lack local news coverage, a trend linked to declining newsroom resources and journalist attrition. Ultimately, the financial precarity drives many journalists, particularly those from an underprivileged background, to avoid or exit the profession.

The following accounts further illustrate how these structural vulnerabilities affect early-career and senior journalists, shaping their financial stability, professional development, and overall wellbeing:

"*This year is the 40th year of my career in local journalism, and I earn £30,000 per year. I know the wage for early careers is around twenty thousand quid or below, and if you are 19-20 years old and do not have your parents around, it would be strict to continue as a journalist in the profession (...) Pound for pound, journalists these days should get more*" (J601).

"*Without taxes, my annual salary is £21,484. It cannot be enough (...) it's not a high salary, and I know that, certainly amid a cost-of-living crisis and with how expensive everything is. It's not and doesn't give you a fantastic quality of life (...) I come from the working-class, live in a house and share my accommodation. So, my rent isn't costly, but I can't afford to get by with journalism. It's a little bit of it. People don't go into journalism if they're not passionate about it because that passion makes so much for the salary (...) We've hit this many views we've done this minute, and they'll talk about all these achievements, but sometimes it does not feel as if well. Where is the reward for the journalists who produce from this? Because at the end of the day, those achievements are getting achieved by your everyday reporters. So, the success portrayed to the public isn't reflected in how staff are rewarded*" (J901).

"*I rely solely on my salary, which is £19,000 a year. I need to be mindful of my spending and avoid excessive expenses, and I have not had much fun. When you say you have a contract, the managers think I am not precarious, but £19,000 is the low wage in the UK, and this wage makes many things precarious*" (J803).

Journalist J601, with 40 years of experience, earns £30,000 per year, a modest income considering his tenure. He empathises with early-career journalists earning £20,000 or less, acknowledging that many struggle without parental support. His remark, "*pound for pound, journalists these days should get more*", reflects a broader sentiment that the profession is undervalued despite its critical public role. J901, earning £21,484 annually, describes the ongoing challenge of maintaining a decent quality of life whilst sharing housing to cut costs. The financial strain is particularly severe during the cost-of-living crisis, forcing journalists to make sacrifices that limit their personal and professional aspirations. Many participants express frustration that their dedication to journalism is not met with fair financial compensation. Whilst passion sustains their work, wages remain insufficient for stability. J803, earning £19,000, shows that even a formal contract does not ensure security, stating: "*This wage makes*

many things precarious". Their experience challenges the assumption that contractual employment provides financial stability, as low pay still forces difficult trade-offs in daily life. These accounts underscore a systemic issue: journalists remain financially precarious regardless of contract status, particularly in local news.

In contrast, some participants from a more affluent background view financial hardship as secondary. J801, who benefits from economic security, argues that journalism is not the right profession for those seeking stability. Unlike working-class journalists who struggle to remain in the field, wealthier counterparts can rely on privilege to navigate challenges or leave for better opportunities. This disparity reinforces the socioeconomic divide in journalism, limiting access for those without financial support. Ultimately, these narratives highlight the financial instability embedded in local journalism. Low wages affect the ability of journalists to sustain themselves, hinder career progression, restrict diversity, and contribute to the growing precarity of the profession.

> "*My annual salary is £19,300 currently (...) The essential thing in this role, and I recognise I'm in a very privileged position, is to see it this way: as I said, I have my own house, and if I need extra money, my family always supports me. Once I get my senior qualifications, my family support will open up many better-paying jobs for me (...) As I said, I love to do this job, but if you are supposed to get money to be here, this is not an industry to be in*" (J801).

Some acceptance by participants, of financial precarity in local journalism, can be attributed to their upper-class background, which provide a financial cushion that shields them from the industry's low wages. For example, J801, earning £19,300 annually, acknowledges that their access to family support and homeownership allows them to view journalism as a passion-driven career rather than a financial necessity. This security enables them to remain in the industry despite its financial challenges, reflecting a disconnect between the financial realities of journalism and the choices made by those with an affluent background. Their perspective is encapsulated in the belief that "*if you're supposed to get money to be here, this is not an industry to be in*". For these individuals, journalism is more a calling than a livelihood, and they can endure its financial shortcomings because they do not rely on it as their primary source of income. However, this situation reveals a significant issue regarding diversity and inclusivity in the field.

Journalists with a lower-income background who cannot afford to work without adequate wages may struggle to remain in the profession. Most participants in this study, especially in regions with fewer opportunities, noted that many local journalists come from a low-income background and depend on their salaries as their sole source of income. As one participant explained, during the early stages of her career, she had to live with her family for eighteen months to avoid rent and utility costs, relying on familial support for financial sustainability. This reliance on family shows the financial struggles many journalists face when starting in the industry.

> "*(...) Until recently, I had to live at a family home, which took about 18 months. It was like extra income, not paying taxes and rent, and saving (...) You know, there is a rise in the cost of living, and I know that is the case for many reporters (...) I wouldn't have been able to move out, especially in the middle of a cost crisis like, you know, a kind of cost-of-living crisis, and I know that that is the case for many reporters*" (J401).

This last narrative reflects the financial precarity many local journalists face, particularly regarding income instability amid rising living costs. Participants, like J401, highlight the necessity of relying on family support for financial sustainability, as low wages in local journalism fail to cover the high cost of living. For some, living with family, functions as a vital financial cushion, enabling them to save and avoid living expenses like rent and utilities; a privilege not available to everyone. This reliance on familial support is framed as a critical necessity rather than a choice, reinforcing the extent of financial vulnerability within the profession (Deuze, 2007; Elefante and Deuze, 2012; Mizon, 2022; Bélair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, the economic strain is exacerbated by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Journalists face heightened difficulty achieving financial independence as wages remain stagnant whilst essential living-costs continue to rise. This reflects a broader systemic issue in the industry, where wages fail to align with workers' needs, forcing many into a cycle of dependence and financial insecurity. As many participants noted, financial precarity is not unique, but widespread, impacting a significant proportion of the industry.

The financial challenges experienced by journalists in this research, point to the unsustainability of the profession, when salaries fail to provide sufficient income. The inability to achieve economic independence or stability, coupled with the need to seek supplementary income, contributes to a disconnect between the vocation of journalism and its role as a public service. Moreover, financial precarity contributes to barriers to entry for people from a low-

income or working-class background, potentially limiting the diversity of voices within the industry. As many journalists are forced to rely on family support or pursue other income sources, this underscores the need for collective action and union advocacy to address the systemic financial issues in local journalism.

The next section of this chapter will explore the significance of trade union membership and the potential for collective efforts to address these economic challenges and improve working conditions within the profession.

7.1.4 Journalism and Trade Unionism

Unions have historically played an important role in promoting workers' rights through collective bargaining and political lobbying. These mechanisms have contributed to higher wages, better working conditions, and necessary employee benefits (Harcourt, Gall, and Wilson, 2024). Beyond direct negotiations with employers, unions influence government policies and labour laws, achieving systemic improvements in job security, workplace protections, and pay equity (Visser, 2024). These points indicate that unions also monitor employer compliance with labour regulations, ensuring adherence to minimum wage laws, health and safety standards, and antidiscrimination protections (Morantz, 2017). Journalists frequently turn to unions in the media industry in response to precarious economic conditions, low pay, job cuts, and eroding employment security (Assmann, 2024). However, since the mid-1980s, union membership and coverage have steadily declined, reducing their ability to protect workers and exacerbating income disparities (Premack and Hunter, 1988; Harcourt, Gall, and Wilson, 2024).

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has represented journalists across the UK and Ireland for over a century. However, in recent years, it has faced increasing criticism. Many members argue that the union is disconnected from industry realities, provides insufficient support for early-career journalists, and imposes membership fees that are difficult to afford (Pugh, 2012; Mortimer, 2013). The NUJ has experienced a 21% decline in membership over the past decade, with paying members decreasing from 25,897 in 2012 to 20,722 in 2022, despite union membership across the UK falling by less than 4% during the same period (Clark, 2022). The only year that did not record a decline was 2020, likely due to the pandemic-driven economic instability. In response to financial difficulties, the NUJ raised membership fees by 5% in 2023 and again in July 2024. Yet, membership figures remain 32% lower than in 2004, underscoring the union's struggles to retain members amid ongoing industry shifts (Maher, 2023b, 2023c).

The decline of the NUJ is linked to broader structural changes in journalism, including digitalisation practices (see Chapter 5), the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shift to remote working (see Chapter 6), all of which have exacerbated precarity within the profession by forcing many journalists out of the industry. At the same time, mass redundancies at companies like Reach and National World continue to shrink membership numbers (Clark, 2022). Economic hardship has traditionally reinforced the necessity of union membership, yet rising subscription fees deter struggling journalists, further weakening collective bargaining power. Among the 26 local journalists interviewed for this study, there was widespread agreement that the NUJ should play a more decisive role in advocating for local journalists. However, participants expressed frustration over the perceived lack of support by the union for early-career journalists, high fees, and slow response to the increasing precarity caused by industry changes. Some participants also noted that the union prioritises elite journalists whilst failing to represent a broader spectrum of political and economic concerns. These perceptions, alongside a wider cultural shift from union participation, have deepened professional insecurity in local journalism:

> "*I've been a union member, actually, just because of all the redundancy (...) The membership fee is costly, and it's made me consider leaving the Union a few times (...) It's been a lot to pay, significantly when the union is not solving your problems, like I do not feel I have enough income, all the stuff you're doing, and then having to pay, like, £20 a month or more to be part of the union (...) It's sometimes been a bit of a dilemma whether I should stay. They try their best, but I don't think they seem to get the results we want that often*" (J902).

> "*As a careerist journalist, I can deal with membership fees, but younger journalists are avoiding NUJ because of this (...) I expect that's one of the issues as well: they don't want to pay the subscriptions, and I can't blame them because they're on such low wages*" (J501).

> "*Unions are fantastic in every industry. It's too easy for workers to be at the mercy of their employers, which creates situations where they can be exploited and manipulated, and the union keeps tabs on that (...) It's sometimes difficult to address because people don't want to upset their employers (...) It's nerve-wracking and daunting for someone to go to that boss and say 'you're not treating me well', which is why unions are*

> *important (...) But, I understand that people avoid being members due to the membership fee. I would love the membership fees to be cheaper for me and early career journalists*" (J901).

The narratives of the 26 participants highlight how financial strain, compounded by union membership fees, intensifies the sense of precarity among journalists. Membership costs can significantly deter early-career and lower-paid journalists, particularly when they feel the union fails to address their concerns in an industry marked by redundancies and stagnant wages. Local democracy reporter, J902, has a dilemma over remaining in the union, illustrating this difficult balance. Whilst most participants recognise the union's potential benefits, they struggle to justify membership when monthly fees exceed £20 amid persistent financial insecurity and limited tangible outcomes from union efforts. Their ambivalence underscores how economic instability weakens collective action.

Despite acknowledging the union as a safeguard against employer exploitation, particularly in precarious fields like journalism, many find membership financially unfeasible. This paradox reflects a broader challenge: low wages make even modest financial commitments burdensome, discouraging union participation at a time when collective advocacy is most needed. The cost barrier disproportionately affects entry-level journalists, further weakening union influence and reinforcing the structural precarity that defines local journalism. Ultimately, these financial constraints undermine solidarity and exacerbate the vulnerability of the profession, limiting efforts to secure better conditions for journalists across all career stages.

For experienced journalists, union fees are less burdensome yet still a concern, mainly as they observe younger colleagues eschewing membership due to expenses. This generational divide exacerbates precarity, as experienced journalists who support union efforts see dwindling participation, weakening the union's influence and sustainability. Many participants express frustration that unions "*try their best*" but "*don't often get results*", leading to eroded trust and a growing sense of professional isolation.

The discussion around union fees reflects more profound financial barriers within local journalism. Low wages make essential protections, such as union representation, inaccessible to many professionals. For those struggling to cover basic expenses, the added cost of membership intensifies their financial insecurity, limiting their ability to secure collective support for better conditions. Some journalists explicitly reject union membership, arguing that it is ineffective in defending their rights. One journalist told the Press Gazette they chose not

to join because there were cheaper ways to obtain a press card (Maher, 2023b). Under these conditions, journalists operate within what Deuze and Witschge (2018) describe as precariat habitus. This mutual informality, where journalists navigate instability without structured protections, ironically deepens the precarity they seek to escape (Čehovin Zajc and Lukan, 2023). Ultimately, the high cost of union membership and persistently low wages are both symptoms and drivers of the worsening precarity in journalism, restricting access to the protections that could mitigate industry-wide vulnerabilities.

> "*(...) To be honest, I am not a member of the union; I do not want to pay my money to be a member. Instead of this, I will spend my money on paying my bills (...) There are certain rights in the contract offered to me, and I only accepted them. The union doesn't effectively determine these rights*" (J101).

The decision by J101 to forego union membership instead of allocating limited financial resources to essential expenses, illustrates how financial insecurity fosters a 'precariat habitus', a shared orientation towards economic survival in precarious work conditions. This mindset shapes the collective choices of journalists, leading many to disengage from formal labour structures such as unions. By prioritising immediate financial stability over long-term protections, journalists such as J101 contribute to a broader culture of disengagement that inadvertently reinforces industry-wide precarity. Rather than viewing unions as a safeguard against exploitation, J101 relies on the minimum rights outlined in their contract, reflecting a diminished belief in the union's ability to secure meaningful improvements.

This shift from collective action to individual survival strategies highlights how financial necessity undermines solidarity, weakening the bargaining power of journalists. The preference for contractual rights over union representation signals a passive acceptance of precarious employment conditions, creating a cycle in which low wages and unstable work deter engagement with structures designed to improve labour protections. Participants widely share this scepticism. One journalist described the union as a "*tiger without teeth*", arguing that membership holds little value. This widespread disillusionment normalises a culture of mutual informality, where journalists navigate precarity independently rather than collectively. However, this fragmented approach weakens the ability of the profession to resist exploitative practices, deepening the very vulnerabilities it seeks to mitigate (Čehovin Zajc and Lukan, 2023). As union disengagement becomes the norm, the structural precarity of journalism is reinforced, making securing better conditions for journalists increasingly difficult:

"*Well, I'm strongly in favour of unions (...) But the problem was that the unions were powerful in the eighties, and now it's gone the other way. And now the unions don't really have a say (...) It's just like the companies have long since ceased to take any notice of what the union says. There's just no point in paying the union. The issue is the fact that the union is a toothless tiger. It's not worth paying a single pound in a month because the danger could not be more serious (...) There's no point in being in it, if it doesn't do anything (...) We need to have a good and powerful union*" (J601).

J601, a senior journalist with over 40 years in local journalism, expresses deep disillusionment with union power in today's journalism landscape, describing unions as "*toothless*". Whilst supportive of their principles, he perceives a stark decline in their influence since the 1980s, attributing this shift to companies' increasing disregard for union demands. For J601, this loss of leverage renders membership economically unjustifiable, mainly when financial precarity necessitates careful spending. His characterisation of the union as a "*toothless tiger*" encapsulates a critical barrier to engagement: as unions struggle to counter rising precarity, journalists disengage, weakening collective bargaining power. This cycle of withdrawal exacerbates systemic vulnerabilities. Declining union membership diminishes protections against exploitation, reinforcing financial instability across the profession. Without strong collective representation, journalists become increasingly dependent on the goodwill of employers, leaving them with little bargaining power to demand better wages and conditions. The erosion of union influence not only intensifies individual job insecurity but also makes long-term career sustainability in journalism increasingly unattainable:

"*We are losing the culture of unionisation daily; in my experience, most journalists think they don't need unions. It's only because of weak wage negotiations and the apathy and weakness of the NUJ. Arguably, it doesn't influence wage negotiations because we generally accept what we're offered; the argument to be part of a union has been steamed. I mean, I can't remember the last time there was industrial action in Doncaster; there was a walkout for a few weeks, which would have been more than ten years ago, maybe 15 years ago*" (J602).

"*Unionisation is a cultural thing, as well. The idea of wanting to belong to a union is less intense now than it used to be. Still, I also suspect we might see the time turn slightly*

as time passes. The cost-of-living crisis, etc., increases (...) We need more union activity rather than less (...) Well, that's quite a lot, as in any job, they require a lot of keen people in journalism (...) Quite honestly, journalism has very naive people who think they're exceptional, but they are not; that is why the unionisation culture has gone" (J501).

The perspectives of both J602 and J501 highlight a perceived erosion of union culture in UK journalism, particularly the diminishing influence of the NUJ in wage negotiations. Many journalists now question the union's relevance, viewing its advocacy as increasingly ineffective or apathetic. Participants describe a growing tendency to accept employer-proposed wages without resistance, reinforcing a culture of individual bargaining over collective action. J602 notes the rarity of industrial actions, citing a walkout over a decade ago, underscoring the weakening of the role of organised labour in securing financial stability for journalists. This decline in union influence exacerbates precarity by leaving journalists more vulnerable to low wages and poor working conditions. Without a strong collective force to negotiate better terms, journalists lack the bargaining power to challenge exploitative practices.

Additionally, some participants express confusion about the fundamental role of trade unions, with certain journalists perceiving the NUJ as more of a political entity than an advocate for workers. Those with differing political views feel alienated, discouraging membership and weakening the union's ability to organise effectively. Given the NUJs over-100-year history, this disconnect poses a serious risk. If misconceptions about its role persist, membership will likely continue to decline, further eroding its ability to protect the rights of journalists and worsening industry-wide precarity.

"*There is a huge misunderstanding about what union means (...) I was in a meeting when some journalists said they don't really like unions. They are more of an antisocialist than a socialist by a long stretch. They have never really been fans of them and have never taken part in any strike action (...) They don't really get on with them all because they're all just socialists*" (J903).

This quotation from J903 suggests that some journalists lack a fundamental understanding of the primary function of trade unions, viewing them through a political rather than a labour-focused lens. J903 recalls colleagues who believe unions are aligned with socialist ideals, creating a perceived ideological barrier for those who identify as antisocialist. This viewpoint

portrays unions as politically motivated entities rather than advocates for the rights of journalists, which may alienate individuals who would otherwise benefit from union membership. These perspectives indicate a gap in understanding that unions aim to secure fair wages, improve working conditions, and offer protections irrespective of the political beliefs of its members. By conflating union activities with partisan politics, some journalists might miss the practical support and protections that unions can provide, thereby limiting collective bargaining power and entrenching a sense of precarity within the industry. The narrative suggests that this ideological misinterpretation could undermine solidarity, weakening the potential for the union to negotiate effectively on behalf of its members and leaving journalists more exposed to precarious conditions.

From a broader perspective, local journalists in the UK have been compelled to adapt to a precarious work environment due to evolving skill demands, digitalisation pressures, downsizing, office closures, and the shift to remote working. This adjustment stems from these structural changes and persistently low wages, which have exacerbated financial instability and driven many journalists to seek supplemental income, detracting from their professional focus. Additionally, journalists report that the union has been ineffective in adapting to contemporary needs, both in securing livelihood protections and exploring new opportunities, leaving many to feel that membership fees are not justified by the union's current level of support. Consequently, journalists often avoid joining the union or continuing their memberships, weakening the collective power needed to challenge precarious conditions.

Ultimately, the financial, ideological, and structural barriers to union engagement contribute to a fragmented workforce in which journalists navigate precarity in isolation rather than through collective action. The erosion of union influence coupled with widespread financial insecurity has led to journalists increasingly relying on individual strategies to secure their livelihood. This reality reinforces a cycle in which the lack of collective resistance enables continued wage suppression and job instability, further exacerbating the conditions that necessitate union support in the first place. Under these circumstances, UK local journalists adopt a different perspective on job satisfaction, which will be explored in the following section. Young journalists, particularly, express that the profession holds little appeal for them, viewing local journalism as merely a steppingstone. This widespread perception raises concerns about democratic participation, regional representation, and increased susceptibility to misinformation, highlighting the societal implications of precarity within the industry.

7.1.5 An Uncertain Future

The increasing prevalence of atypical and casual employment across various industries, combined with declining profits in media organisations, has significantly altered the working conditions of journalists, often for the worse. Since the late 20th century, the number of employed journalists has dropped considerably, whilst the wages of those who remain in the profession have stagnated or declined (Gollmitzer, 2019). Deuze (2007) argues that this transition to a market-driven model has exacerbated job insecurity, increased workplace stress, and eroded professional autonomy. These conditions contribute to what Bourdieu (1971, 1998) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) describe as a structured habitus, an ingrained system of social conditioning that shapes how individuals perceive and navigate their environment. Within journalism, this habitus manifests in how journalists internalise precarious work conditions, adapting to uncertainty as a defining feature of their professional lives (Garton and Copland, 2010).

Journalists often cannot voice concerns about deteriorating conditions due to the financial risks. As Ponsford (2024c) notes, fears of losing financial stability, whether through mortgage payments, rent, or daily expenses, deter journalists from speaking out against exploitative practices. Deuze and Elefante (2007, 2014; 2012) further argue that contemporary journalists must constantly reskill and multi-skill to maintain employability regardless of whether they work in local, regional, or national media. This imperative to adapt reinforces a culture of silence, where job security hinges on compliance rather than advocacy for better conditions. Furthermore, the rapid technological and economic transformations within the media industry have reshaped the professional identities and practices of journalists, diminishing their autonomy (Witschge and Nygren, 2009). Gollmitzer (2014) attributes this to shrinking financial resources, an intensified demand for speed over depth, and the increasing commercialisation of news. Many journalists describe their economic circumstances as ‘not great’ or ‘worsening,’ leading them to spend more time at their desk than in the field, ultimately questioning their long-term future in the industry (Deuze, 2017). This growing uncertainty and precarious working conditions reinforce a professional landscape where insecurity is an occasional risk and a defining characteristic of journalistic work.

The increasing invasion of work into home life, coupled with the transformation of journalists into 24/7 active workers, has intensified exhaustion and overwork in the profession (Wu, 2024). As detailed in the following section, the pressures of digitalisation, platform dependency, and artificial intelligence (AI) have exacerbated this strain, pushing many reporters to leave the profession or reconsider the viability of a long-term career in local

journalism. According to Gretel Kahn from the Reuters Institute (2024), these challenges reflect a broader trend among UK local and regional journalists, who frequently endure low salaries, excessive workloads, and uninspiring roles, holding onto the hope of eventually securing a stable, full-time position; an aspiration that, for many, remains unattainable. This struggle is further compounded by continuous industry disruptions, with each year presenting new obstacles to job security. Recent years have been particularly difficult, marked by record-high layoffs (Fischer, 2023) and the increasing encroachment of AI into traditional journalistic roles (Cooban, 2023). Against this backdrop of declining job stability and diminishing resources, journalists are increasingly aware of the precarious state of the profession and the uncertainty of their future.

For many local journalists, financial insecurity, alongside platform and AI pressures, job cuts, and the burdens of overwork and burnout, has become an inherent aspect of their careers. As a result, many must take supplementary employment for financial sustainability. Whilst their primary income may cover essential expenses such as rent, food, and bills, additional work is often necessary for savings or other expenditures. Participants describe balancing their journalism career with secondary jobs such as fact-checking, editing, tutoring, retail work, Uber driving, pub DJing, or customer service. The necessity of these secondary roles further discourages existing journalists from envisioning a long-term future in the field, whilst deterring new entrants from pursuing a career in local journalism – a career that has historically played a crucial role in holding power to account and representing the diverse voices of their communities. The persistent challenges in achieving financial and professional stability relegate local journalism to a profession with an increasingly uncertain future.

> "*I have a second job; I also do freelance work to get extra money (...) You know, the £17,000 alone per year is probably not enough (...) It can be enough for some because they might still live at home, for example, or they, you know, have a partner, a wife or husband or girlfriend or boyfriend who also works. So, they've got two forms of income. But, you know, for me, £17,000 a year leaves very little to save. You can get by each month, but you can't look much further ahead than each month, and that's why I have a second job*" (J201).

> "*I fear the future of my journalism career and often wonder how long it will last. That's why I have a side gig. As a young man, I work in retail due to the daily expenses, cultural consumption, and saving for a better future (...) And that is quite good*" (J802).

> "*Suppose it's coming from a purely financial source, and you necessarily want to. In that case, I need to find out where I can save money for retirement and what economic opportunities there are. Because they don't exist, there are no incentives to stay in the local media industry (...) I have a second job: DJing in the pub*" (J401).

The precarious state of local journalism is starkly reflected in testimonies from journalists, highlighting inadequate pay, financial instability, and a lack of long-term security. J201, for instance, notes that the widely reported £17,000 annual salary in local journalism is insufficient for financial stability, forcing many to rely on freelance work or second jobs. This economic fragility compels journalists to live paycheck to paycheck, unable to plan beyond immediate needs. Similarly, J401 describes working as a pub DJ to compensate for the industry's lack of retirement savings and economic incentives. These experiences point to a systemic issue: local journalism no longer offers a sustainable career, and low wages and minimal financial support create a climate of uncertainty. Whilst participants recognise journalism as a valuable profession, many see job security as a luxury rather than a guarantee. To survive, journalists must diversify income streams, turning what should be a fulfilling vocation into a precarious balancing act. J802 articulates concerns about career longevity, explaining the need to work in retail to cover daily expenses whilst trying to save for the future. This dual burden, pursuing journalistic passion whilst securing financial stability, reveals the unsustainability of the profession, particularly for early-career journalists.

The absence of economic incentives and career progression opportunities weakens young journalists' commitment to the field, diminishing motivation and long-term investment in their craft. These accounts illustrate a pervasive crisis: chronic underfunding and inadequate wages hinder the attraction and retention of talent, perpetuating financial instability and jeopardising the future of local journalism.

> "*I am overworking by covering five newspapers in the North, which occupy a distinct geographical zone (...) Local journalists are uncertain and nervous more than any industry they're seeing almost crumble around them, so they're feeling hopeless that things aren't going to settle (...) I am a unit title optimist and hope that these industries have many different industries to do that they adapt and find a way to survive, and we have yet to see much of that*" (J501).

"*(...) The money is in PR, and you wonder how many people would have been good journalists twenty years ago, now working in public relations because there's more money there (...) So that's also another thing that's worth looking at (...) If half our workforce lost jobs, how many will try to move to that industry? I'd imagine a good percentage of them. So, by not having the best conditions, you find that many talented people who could be journalists end up using their talents elsewhere, which is a bit of a shame*" (J703).

"*It's precarious for everyone (...) It isn't good. We're all struggling. All of us (...) It is challenging, and things become old quickly due to digitalisation, which puts more pressure on everyone. And it feels like we have to work around the clock for no money (...) You must love your job to do this, but not many of us, today*" (J803).

These narratives expose the immense pressures facing those still committed to local journalism in the UK. J501's experience covering five newspapers across the North illustrates the overwhelming workloads imposed as newsrooms shrink and geographical coverage expands. This burden fuels professional uncertainty, with journalists expressing despair as they witness the industry "*almost crumble around them*." Despite this, J501 clings to a flicker of optimism, hoping for the adaptation and survival of the industry. However, this hope is tempered by the stark reality that structural reform and resilience remain elusive.

The demand for journalists to stretch across multiple roles dilutes their ability to produce quality work, leaving them overworked, underpaid, and deeply insecure about their future. The broader financial challenge exacerbates precarity. As J703 observes, many who once aspired to journalism are now turning to public relations, where economic stability is more attainable. The reality that "*money is in PR*" shows the inability of journalism to provide adequate pay or career advancement, resulting in a loss of talent to better-compensated industries. Similarly, J803 highlights the personal cost of working in an increasingly digitalised journalism environment, where constant adaptability and work-life sacrifices are expected in exchange for "*no money*". Whilst passion for the profession sustains some, J803 notes that fewer individuals today are willing to endure these sacrifices, further threatening the future of the profession.

"*I think newspapers will eventually die out; as we've seen, their jobs are precarious. For the newspaper I work at, they used to have a lot of a bigger team than we do now.*

So many more reporters have gone (...) And years ago, when we used to be based in a massive office in the town centre, they used to have not only the editorial in the news desk, but they also had a photography desk that no longer exists. The future is uncertain for many of us" (J201).

"*To pass the other, like the prominent journals, newspapers, or BBC, journalism will always be like this (...) It will remain a professional job option or a career option. However, local journalism did not return to a good level; it was days when everyone bought newspapers. I think you ever get back to that, but there is a human desire for information (...) Even though the industry is not in the most fantastic place, I don't think it'll die completely, but it will be insecure and not be preferred too much*" (J901).

"*This needs to be done by securing titles precisely, like photographers, video editors, and subeditors. I know some friends have been redundant and have yet to be replaced. I like only some of the decisions being made. So, it makes me question how much longer I want to stay in the industry, and it makes you question, as so many of my colleagues have ended up just going into other jobs because it's better*" (J902).

As these reflections illustrate, the precarious conditions of local journalism are inextricably tied to systemic downsizing and industry-wide uncertainty. J201 depicts the visible erosion of newsroom resources over time, showing how once-robust editorial teams and specialised roles, such as photography desks, have been eliminated. This reduction increases workloads and signals the declining stability of journalism as a profession. The closure of physical offices, which once served as hubs for collaboration and community presence, underscores the decline of the industry. For journalists, like J201, these structural changes cultivate a sense of vulnerability as the future of the profession appears increasingly fragile and insecure. The disappearance of once-secure roles raises significant concerns about career longevity, exacerbating the uncertainty inherent in the current state of local journalism.

In contrast, J901 offers a broader perspective, examining the ongoing relevance of journalism despite its precarious trajectory. Whilst acknowledging the decline of traditional forms, such as print-newspapers, and their failure to regain former prominence, J901 emphasises the enduring human need for information, implying that journalism will continue in some form. However, this survival is marked by instability, as the appeal of the profession as a viable career path diminishes. Similarly, J902 highlights how the redundancy of critical

roles, such as photographers and subeditors, has weakened the industry's infrastructure, leading to gaps in journalistic quality and increased precarity for those who remain. The lack of investment in these positions has prompted many journalists to leave the profession for better opportunities elsewhere. This talent exodus reflects a broader issue: precarious working conditions jeopardise the long-term viability of journalism, forcing individuals to prioritise financial stability over their passion for the field.

The current state of local journalism is characterised by profound economic and professional precarity, which has significantly reshaped the industry's demands and its workforce. Journalists contend with low wages, uncertain job prospects, and ever-increasing workloads as newsrooms shrink and resources dwindle. Many are forced to take on second jobs or rely on family support for financial sustainability, making the profession increasingly inaccessible to those without external financial stability. This economic strain erodes the quality of life for journalists. It weakens the industry, as talented individuals either leave journalism or transition to other fields, such as public relations, which offer more stable financial rewards.

Once a cornerstone of democratic engagement and community building, local journalism now struggles to attract and retain skilled professionals, who can no longer afford to prioritise passion over financial necessity. Beyond economic insecurity, local journalism faces additional structural challenges that intensify its precarious state. Newsrooms are shrinking, with essential roles, photographers, video editors, and subeditors, disappearing, diminishing the depth and quality of reporting. The rise of digitalisation has only compounded this pressure, as journalists are increasingly expected to produce content continuously whilst navigating changing formats and platforms. Meanwhile, the decline of institutional support, including reduced union influence, leaves journalists feeling isolated and powerless, unable to challenge the problematic conditions they face.

7.2 Discussion and Conclusion

Local journalism continues to exist in various forms, much as it has in the past, but contemporary conditions and technological advancements are profoundly reshaping the field. The landscape of local journalism in the UK has become increasingly constrained, demanding considerable effort and adaptation to navigate its diverse genres. This evolving environment places local journalism at the centre of a broad spectrum of precarity. On one end of this spectrum are digitisation, platformisation, and the pressures brought on by artificial intelligence, job cuts, and declining advertising revenues from traditional media (Reynolds,

2014; Bell, 2019b; Gollmitzer, 2019; Subryan, 2020; Cooban, 2023). On the other hand, there is growing disillusionment among journalists, who no longer perceive local journalism as a profession that offers sufficient fulfilment or security (Lee, 2018; O'Donnell and Zion, 2019; Chadha and Steiner, 2022; Gollmitzer, 2022; Hof and Deuze, 2022). This disillusionment is compounded by the transformation of the home into a workplace, erasing boundaries between personal and professional life (Tobitt, 2021b). As private living spaces shrink, the notion emerges that personal life holds value only insofar as it serves work-related purposes. For many local journalists, work now dominates their existence, blurring the line between the professional and the personal life. This dynamic not only adds financial burdens and expenses to already constrained incomes, but deepens psychological precarity, isolating journalists and undermining their wellbeing.

Local journalists in the UK face significant financial and economic disadvantages, even when employed under permanent contracts (Deuze, 2007; Elefante and Deuze, 2012; Mizon, 2022; Bélair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2023). Their average annual wage is reported to be below £25,000, further exacerbating their economic vulnerability. Adding to this precarious situation is the perceived ineffectiveness of journalists' unions. Despite recognising the necessity of union representation, many journalists express frustration with the union's inability to defend their rights effectively. They view membership fees as unjustified and feel that the union fails to adequately support those who lack elite status or hold differing views (Clark, 2022; Maher, 2023b; Assmann, 2024; Brennen, 2024; NUJ, 2024). This failure of collective representation has amplified the precarity experienced by local journalists.

Digitalisation has undeniably reshaped the journalistic landscape, but its effects have deepened the sense of precarity among UK local journalists. This study reveals that the introduction of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, not only reshapes traditional journalistic roles but threatens the long-term viability of the profession. The looming threat of redundancy, particularly for those struggling to adapt to rapid technological changes, has led many to retire early or lose confidence in their professional future. This climate of uncertainty forces journalists to continuously justify their roles whilst navigating an industry that increasingly prioritises cost-efficiency over journalistic quality. As a result, the value of the profession is often reduced to metrics such as digital engagement rather than the richness of content, further entrenching the precariousness of those within the field.

Moreover, newsroom downsizing or closure, exacerbates these challenges by forcing journalists into isolated working conditions, often from home, with minimal institutional support. This cultural shift intensifies feelings of alienation whilst introducing new stressors,

including the blurring of professional and personal boundaries, financial strain from remote working expenses, and health issues arising from the 'new normal'. Hoak (2021) identified that the absence of employer-provided resources or emotional support exacerbates these issues, leaving many local journalists feeling abandoned in the face of a rapidly changing and unforgiving industry. This environment represents a profound shift in journalism and emphasises a systemic failure to protect the mental, physical, and financial wellbeing of employees.

The combination of emotional precarity, economic insecurity, and workplace isolation has culminated in a compounded crisis for local journalists, particularly as the boundaries between professional and personal life become increasingly blurred. The shift to remote working, necessitated by newsroom downsizing and closures, transforms the home from a haven of solace into a site of professional strain and mental instability. The absence of immediate peer support, once crucial for debriefing and emotional release, forces journalists to process traumatic subject matter in solitude, thereby intensifying the affective burden of the work. This isolation, coupled with the inability to share experiences or receive validation, amplifies feelings of trauma, guilt, and anxiety, resulting in exhaustion and a profoundly precarious emotional state. For the 26 journalists interviewed, these emotional difficulties cannot be separated from material conditions: low wages, mounting financial obligations, and limited institutional protections situate their insecurity within a broader habitus of vulnerability. Their class position not only heightens their susceptibility to such compounded forms of insecurity but also restricts their capacity to mobilise resources or resilience strategies, leaving them both emotionally and materially constrained. Thus, the habitus of vulnerability manifests not merely as an external occupational hazard but as an embodied, class-inflected disposition that structures how these journalists experience, interpret, and endure precarity in their daily lives. According to Fisher (2010) and Chadha and Steiner (2022), job satisfaction, affective commitment, and financial stability are crucial for ensuring professional continuity and emotional wellbeing. However, the erosion of union protections and the systemic underfunding of local journalism have further strained these parameters, creating an environment where wellbeing becomes an increasingly elusive goal.

Participant's narratives of reliance on familial support or alternative income sources underscore a systemic flaw in the local journalism sector, which jeopardises its inclusion and sustainability (Deuze, 2007; Elefante and Deuze, 2012; Mizon, 2022; Bélair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2023). The inability of low incomes to keep pace with escalating living costs, compounded by the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, has forced many journalists into positions

where financial independence is unattainable. For some, living at home with family provides a much-needed respite from expenses such as rent and taxes. However, this option is available only to a select few, particularly those who are not from a working-class or marginalised background, further limiting diversity within the sector. Cushion (2007) and Wahl-Jorgensen *et al*. (2016) contend that financial insecurity not only jeopardises the individual life of journalists but undermines the broader representation of marginalised groups in journalism. Individuals who lack external support are often excluded from entering or remaining in the industry, reinforcing inequality and making journalism increasingly exclusive to those with pre-existing financial security. This dynamic undermines the public service role of journalism and its potential for democratic inclusivity.

Participants in this study stress the need for a comprehensive union that can effectively protect journalists and support them in negotiations within the system. However, their narratives reveal a weakening of the NUJ's inclusivity, with union avoidance becoming increasingly common among journalists (Clark, 2022; Maher, 2023b). The decline in NUJ membership reflects deeper systemic issues in the industry, exacerbated by economic and cultural shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted job losses and redundancies at major outlets such as Reach Media and National World, underscoring the uncertain financial viability of the field (Clark, 2022). Whilst economic challenges often highlight the importance of union solidarity, high membership fees have alienated many journalists, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, exacerbating feelings of disenfranchisement. According to several participants, the failure of the union to adapt to challenges such as remote working and post-pandemic norms, has heightened perceptions of its inability to address the growing precarity within the profession.

Furthermore, complaints about the union's prioritisation of elite journalists and insufficient advocacy for diverse political perspectives point to a disconnect between the union and the realities local journalists face. This disconnection, alongside a broader cultural shift from union affiliation, has perpetuated professional insecurity, revealing a vicious cycle in which structural issues within journalism and the union's limitations mutually reinforce one another. Whilst the NUJ retains symbolic importance, its operational and cultural challenges hinder its ability to effectively support journalists in an increasingly fragmented and economically unstable industry. This limitation influences the decisions by journalists about whether to pursue a career in local journalism and contributes to the growing sense that the future of the profession is in jeopardy.

The talent migration from local journalism reflects the convergence of economic, structural, and cultural difficulties that threaten the long-term viability of the profession. Precarious working conditions, including low wages, inconsistent job security, widespread remote working, and limited newsroom resources, have fostered an environment where financial necessity precedes the core democratic value of journalism. The exodus of competent journalists represents more than a professional shift; it signifies a systemic failure to sustain journalism as a viable career option, particularly for those without external financial support. As talented journalists move to fields with higher compensation and more stability, such as public relations, local media loses expertise and the capacity to uphold journalistic integrity. This attrition exacerbates structural challenges, such as the erosion of specialised roles and the rise of 'churnalism', which prioritises speed and quantity over depth and quality.

Additionally, digitalisation further demands journalists to adapt to multiplatform work whilst receiving minimal institutional or union support. As collective bargaining tools weaken, individual journalists cannot avoid exploitative conditions, perpetuating a cycle of disempowerment and disengagement. The intertwined financial, emotional, and institutional instability of local journalists underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to safeguard their mental health and career sustainability. The persistent cycle of financial precarity diminishes the appeal of journalism as a viable long-term career, compelling many to seek supplementary income or transition to more stable industries. This exodus threatens the integrity of the profession, weakening its commitment to the public good and undermining its role as a cornerstone of democratic society. The systemic undervaluation of local media impairs its ability to serve as a foundation for community participation and democratic accountability, rendering it susceptible to further destabilisation and diminishing its societal influence.

CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

8.0 Overview

The transformation of local journalism in the digital era has been shaped by rapid technological advancements, with digital platforms, remote working, and precarious labour conditions presenting opportunities and challenges. The dominance of platforms such as Google and *Facebook* have fundamentally altered news production, distribution, and consumption, which has reshaped journalistic roles and work environments whilst placing additional strain on the quality and integrity of reporting (McChesney and Pickard, 2010). Journalists are now expected to navigate multiple responsibilities, including content creation, social media management, audience engagement, and digital optimisation (Deuze, 1999; Zion *et al.*, 2016; Marjoribanks *et al.*, 2022). Whilst multiskilling has become essential in the evolving media landscape, it risks diluting the depth of reporting and compromising journalistic standards (Harcup, 2014; Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto, 2016; Boateng and Kodwo, 2020). A recent study by Chew and Tandoc (2024) highlights that contemporary journalists perceive adaptability as a necessity, with the expectation that they either embrace constant change or exit the profession. The pressure to produce content that aligns with platform-driven metrics has led to 'digital overload', where the pursuit of online visibility undermines journalistic values, contributing to burnout, fatigue, and ethical compromises.

The shift towards virtual/remote newsrooms, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has introduced flexibility and new challenges. Whilst remote working mitigates geographical constraints, it exacerbates digital exclusion, particularly for journalists in rural areas who face inadequate internet infrastructure and outdated technology (Hendrickson, 2019). The decline of physical newsrooms and increasing reliance on freelancers and short-term contracts has intensified the precariousness of journalism (Marjoribanks *et al.*, 2022). The prioritisation of online engagement metrics has eroded job security and financial stability, leaving journalists more vulnerable to exploitative conditions. Moreover, the concentration of media power in a few dominant digital platforms has threatened the viability of independent local journalism (McChesney and Pickard, 2010). As Google and *Facebook* increasingly control news distribution, the homogenisation of journalism raises concerns about declining media plurality and the erosion of democratic discourse (Fenton, 2010; Coddington, 2015).

Addressing these challenges requires recalibrating digital strategies to balance technological innovation with journalistic integrity. Structural protections must be reinforced to mitigate cognitive overload and sustain ethical journalism, and sustainable working

conditions must be established. Equitable access to technology should be prioritised to ensure that journalists, regardless of location, have the resources to maintain high reporting standards. Additionally, unions must be more active in advocating fair wages, job security, and professional autonomy, safeguarding journalists from the pressures of an increasingly unstable industry. Ultimately, fostering a sustainable future for local journalism necessitates collaborative efforts to navigate technological, economic, and social challenges whilst upholding the core ethical principles of the profession.

8.1 Digital Transformation

Once a cornerstone of civic engagement and democratic participation, local journalism is undergoing a profound structural transformation shaped by technological acceleration, ownership concentration, economic instability, and evolving audience behaviours. The ascendancy of social media platforms (Nelson and Lei, 2018; Seuri, Ikäheimo, and Huhtamäki, 2022), the rapid integration of artificial intelligence (Thomas, 2025), and the expansion of national broadcaster websites have collectively destabilised the operational foundations of local newsrooms. This transformation has redefined professional norms, disrupted traditional business models, and created a climate of precarity that disproportionately affects local journalists (Tobitt, 2025). As newsroom structures fragment and digital imperatives dictate production cycles, the pressures of cognitive offloading, ageism, adaptability, and 'digital overload' (Pereira, 2020) have intensified. This change raises fundamental concerns regarding the ability for journalism to fulfil its democratic function whilst preserving professional autonomy in an era dominated by platform-driven priorities.

The findings presented in Chapter 5 demonstrate that the local journalism industry in the UK is experiencing an epochal shift, where digitalisation and platform monopolisation have radically altered the economic and ethical landscape of the profession. The emergence of AI-powered content generation, audience analytics, and algorithmic curation has not only restructured workflows but redefined the epistemological foundations of journalism itself. This transformation has disproportionately affected different generations of journalists. Whilst older journalists face marginalisation, job displacement, and premature retirement due to difficulties adapting to emerging technologies (Josephi and Oller Alonso, 2021), early career journalists, despite their digital fluency, experience a relentless demand for online engagement that undermines their capacity for in-depth, investigative reporting. The precarious conditions foster a 'Hunger Games dynamic' for journalists (Sweney, 2023; Weaver, Sweney and Topping,

2023), in which survival in the profession is contingent on relentless adaptability rather than journalistic merit.

One of the most striking developments revealed in the study is the erosion of structured newsroom routines in favour of a continuous content production cycle. Unlike the regimented deadlines of the print era, the digital-first mandate enforces an 'always-on' culture where immediacy supersedes accuracy. Furthermore, it addresses the disruptive influence of digital technologies on the evolution of local journalism and the critical role of fact-checking in combating misinformation (Zelizer, 2004b) with increasing imposition of journalistic practices. This perpetual news cycle, driven by algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics, erodes journalistic autonomy, reinforcing a climate in which reporters are pressured to produce content at a pace that is neither sustainable nor conducive to quality journalism (Deuze, 2007, 2017). The study further demonstrates how this transformation has blurred the distinction between professional journalism and unregulated citizen content, as social media facilitates the proliferation of amateur news sources that often bypass traditional editorial standards (Wall, 2015b, 2015a). The implications are far-reaching: journalists are forced into a reactive mode, engaging with misinformation rather than proactively shaping public discourse, further compromising the epistemic authority of journalism.

A recurring theme in the data is the intensification of platform dependency, which constrains journalistic agency by subordinating editorial priorities to algorithmic imperatives. Participants describe an increasing loss of control over their work as the commercial logic of digital platforms increasingly dictates editorial decisions. The dominance of social media algorithms and engagement-driven revenue models fosters a content economy prioritising virality over journalistic substance, exacerbating the devaluation of in-depth local reporting (Cowley, 2022). The rise of AI-driven journalism, whilst promising efficiency, raises ethical concerns as algorithmic decision-making processes shift editorial autonomy from human journalists and towards opaque technological infrastructures (Tobitt, 2025). The consequences of this shift are significant: as AI encroaches on traditional reporting roles, concerns over bias, misinformation, and the deskilling of journalists become increasingly urgent.

The findings ultimately present a stark reality: local journalism stands at an inflexion point where unchecked technological encroachment, commercial imperatives, and newsroom precarity threaten its democratic function. Without systemic reforms that reinforce professional protections, invest in sustainable business models, and restore editorial independence, the profession risks deterioration. The study highlights the urgent need for structural interventions, including regulatory oversight of platform influence, collective bargaining mechanisms to

counteract precarity, and the development of sustainable revenue models that prioritise public interest journalism over algorithmic profitability. As journalism grapples with this volatile transformation, the challenge lies not only in technological adaptation but in safeguarding the ethical and democratic principles that underpin its legitimacy.

8.2 Resilience in Remote Newsrooms

The analysis presented in Chapter 6 reveals that remote working has become deeply embedded in local journalism in the UK. Whilst some journalists benefit from this shift, particularly those with conducive home environments, strong community ties, and reliable access to news, the prevailing consensus suggests that remote working exacerbates pre-existing structural challenges within the industry. This shift, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent adaptations (Tobitt, 2021b), has reconfigured the relationship between journalists, their communities, and the organisations they serve. Traditionally, local journalists thrived on direct physical engagement with their communities (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou, 2015), but remote working has eroded this essential connection. The findings indicate that this physical and emotional detachment undermines the fundamental principles of local journalism, which rely on sustained community interactions to ensure accurate, representative, and impactful news coverage.

Remote working has also disrupted traditional newsroom culture, diminishing opportunities for mentorship, knowledge transfer, and professional development, particularly for early-career journalists. The absence of shared physical spaces has hindered collaborative learning, reducing the informal but crucial exchange of expertise that strengthens journalistic practice. Senior journalists find it increasingly challenging to provide meaningful guidance in a fragmented work environment, weakening professional cohesion (Tobitt, 2021b; Šimunjak, 2022b, 2022a). Furthermore, whilst necessary, the reliance on digital communication tools has proven inadequate in replicating the depth of interpersonal interactions found in physical newsrooms. This transition has compounded existing structural deficiencies, particularly those related to resource constraints, making high-quality journalism more challenging to sustain.

Technological inadequacies exacerbated the challenges of remote work practices in the local journalism profession. Unreliable internet access, outdated software, and inadequate digital infrastructure frequently disrupt news production, delaying content dissemination and limiting capacity for journalists to meet the fast-paced demands of digital reporting. These technological shortcomings are compounded by economic pressures, including persistently low wages, rising living costs, and inadequate employer support. As a result, many journalists face

precarious working conditions that contribute to burnout, diminished productivity, and declining journalistic quality. Participants in the study stressed the urgent need for systemic interventions, such as more significant investment in technology, comprehensive training programs, and robust digital infrastructure. Without these measures, remote work practices risk becoming an unsustainable model that undermines journalistic integrity and efficiency (Cherubini, 2022).

The erosion of work-life balance represents another critical consequence of remote working, particularly for working-class journalists who lack private workspaces and financial stability. Many are forced to work from bedrooms or communal living areas, intensifying stress and reducing overall wellbeing. Those living in shared accommodation or fulfilling caregiving responsibilities, experience heightened difficulties in maintaining clear boundaries between professional and personal life. This lack of separation exacerbates burnout and creates further disparities within the profession, as journalists with limited financial resources struggle disproportionately (Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto, 2016; Šimunjak, 2022b). These findings show the intersection of socioeconomic inequality and journalistic practice, revealing how structural disadvantages are magnified in remote work settings.

The findings in Chapter 6 underscore the significant ramifications of these changes for local journalism as a democratic entity. The weakening of engagement by journalists with their communities threatens the role of local news as a pillar of public accountability and civic participation. When journalists lose direct contact with the people and issues they report, the depth and contextual richness that define impactful local journalism are compromised. This detachment risks reducing journalists to mere content producers, prioritising output volume over substantive community engagement. Additionally, the increasing dominance of click-driven content further degrades journalistic quality, as audience metrics dictate editorial priorities at the expense of investigative and community-focused reporting. This transformation marginalises in-depth journalism and weakens public trust, positioning journalism as a commercial enterprise rather than a public good. Participants in the study consistently voiced concerns that these trends undermine the capacity for local journalism to fulfil its democratic function, reinforcing the urgent need for structural reforms that prioritise journalistic integrity over short-term profitability (Barclay *et al.*, 2022).

8.3 The Future of Local Journalism

Chapter 7 explicitly details the systemic challenges confronting local journalism. These challenges highlight a precarious landscape in which both the survival of the field and the

careers of those working within it are increasingly at risk. Local journalism, once seen as an integral pillar of community life and a cornerstone of democratic accountability, is now under siege. This precariousness results from a confluence of financial, technological, and cultural pressures that have transformed the profession, often to its detriment. The findings illustrate a dynamic wherein the historical resilience of local journalism faces the relentless demands of modern realities, revealing a sector struggling to adapt whilst maintaining its essential public service function.

Whilst digitalisation and platformisation have introduced new tools and distribution channels, they have eroded the economic foundations of local journalism. Declining advertising revenues, alongside the rise of artificial intelligence in content production, have led to prioritising efficiency over journalistic depth. As a result, many journalists report feeling undervalued and vulnerable, caught in a system where the pressure to cut costs undermines quality journalism (Reynolds, 2014; Gollmitzer, 2019; Subryan, 2020; Tobitt, 2024b). The increasing prevalence of 'churnalism', a term used to describe the regurgitation of press releases and sensationalist content, and the growing focus on audience metrics over editorial substance exacerbate these challenges. In such an environment, journalistic integrity often takes a backseat to financial survival, reshaping the very nature of journalistic work. These transformations have necessitated a redefinition of journalistic roles. Reporters are now expected to perform across multiple platforms, juggling tasks that range from writing, to social media engagement and video production. This expansion of responsibilities often comes without sufficient institutional support or compensation, leaving many journalists vulnerable (Bell, 2019b; Tobitt, 2021b).

Equally concerning are the structural and cultural issues contributing to the precarious state of local journalism. The shift to remote working has blurred the lines between personal and professional life. This boundary dissolution has placed significant strain on the mental health and physical wellbeing of journalists, intensifying feelings of isolation and disconnection from both colleagues and the communities they serve. Coupled with the financial strain of remote working, many journalists find themselves grappling with wages below £25,000 annually, exacerbating their vulnerability, particularly among early-career and working-class reporters (Bélair-Gagnon *et al*., 2023; Deuze, 2025). The absence of adequate institutional protections, compounded by the perceived ineffectiveness of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), amplifies these pressures. The dissatisfaction of journalists with the union's failure to adapt to the evolving demands of the profession reflects a broader decline in collective bargaining power. The prioritisation of elite journalists and the exclusion of diverse

political perspectives have alienated many, widening the disconnect between union leadership and the lived experiences of its members (Clark, 2022; Maher, 2023b).

This disconnect exacerbates systemic vulnerabilities, leaving journalists without the advocacy to challenge exploitative working conditions or push for reforms that might stabilise the profession. These challenges are symptomatic of a broader systemic failure to invest in local journalism as a public good. The chronic undervaluation of local media and an increasing reliance on external financial support or alternative income streams have made the profession less accessible to individuals from a marginalised or working-class background. Research by Cushion (2007) and Wahl-Jorgensen *et al*. (2016) underscore how such financial precarity limits diversity within the sector, ultimately undermining its democratic mission. The exclusion of those without an economic or familial safety net perpetuates inequality in journalism, reducing its representational scope and diminishing its societal relevance.

The migration of talent from local journalism to more lucrative and stable fields such as public relations further underscore a systemic issue. This talent drain erodes the profession's institutional knowledge, compromising its ability to maintain journalistic integrity. As newsrooms contract or close, the remaining journalists face mounting pressures, increased workloads, reduced resources, and a relentless focus on speed over substance. The loss of specialised expertise diminishes the quality of reporting, weakening the capacity of the sector to fulfil its democratic role. The narratives of journalists in this study reveal a profession caught in a vicious cycle of disempowerment and disengagement, where the interplay of financial, emotional, and institutional precarity threatens its survival (Hoak, 2021; Chadha and Steiner, 2022).

8.4 The Research Implications

This research has two primary implications: practical, addressing real-world challenges within local journalism; and theoretical, contributing to academic discourse on the evolving nature of the profession.

8.4.1 Implications for Practice

The study examined the shifting landscape of UK local journalism, exploring how journalists perceive and respond to ongoing transformations. The findings reveal three critical insights:

- Journalists face an existential crisis, particularly older professionals struggling to adapt to technological changes that have rendered specific skills obsolete.

- Remote working has intensified feelings of isolation and alienation, further destabilising professional cohesion.
- Whilst early-career journalists and those from a privileged background may romanticise the profession, the majority experience increasing precarity across multiple dimensions.

The impact of digitalisation on local journalism has fundamentally redefined professional practices, accelerating both opportunities and challenges. The shift from traditional print cycles to an 'always-on' digital model has eroded structured deadlines, replacing them with relentless content production driven by engagement metrics. This transformation has blurred the boundary between work and personal life, exacerbating exhaustion and professional instability. Moreover, the rise of social media and citizen journalism has heightened competition, forcing local journalists to contend with unregulated digital actors whose influence challenges established journalistic norms. This dynamic undermines professional credibility and creates ethical dilemmas as reporters struggle to balance speed and accuracy whilst maintaining public trust.

In practice, these structural changes have deepened precarity by diminishing journalistic autonomy and reinforcing algorithmic control over content. Journalists are increasingly subject to commercial imperatives, restricting their ability to prioritise public service journalism. The integration of artificial intelligence has further accelerated this shift, as algorithmic decision-making replaces editorial judgment, prioritising profitability over integrity. Whilst these technological advancements offer efficiencies, they threaten editorial independence and the democratic function of journalism. Systemic challenges such as ageism, digital overload, and job insecurity continue destabilising the profession. Older journalists face an existential crisis as they struggle to adapt to AI-driven workflows and evolving technological expectations. Concurrently, emerging journalists face unstable employment circumstances, exacerbating financial and professional uncertainty in the absence of structural measures that reconcile technological advancement with the maintenance of fundamental journalistic principles; consequently, local journalism jeopardises its function as an essential instrument of democratic accountability and community involvement.

Participants in this study also underscored the resilience of journalism in times of crisis, highlighting systemic underinvestment in digital infrastructure, on-the-job training, and professional development. Whilst younger journalists saw potential in online training, many warned of the risks associated with digital overload, which exacerbates stress and burnout.

Employers, however, have largely failed to address these challenges, particularly regarding the impact of remote working and downsized newsrooms. A lack of investment in digital tools, training, and mental health support has created unequal work conditions, disproportionately affecting journalists from a working-class background. Whilst participants expressed optimism about evolving journalistic practices, they remained sceptical about the willingness of policymakers and industry leaders to implement reforms for safeguarding journalistic accountability, representation, and public service amid technological and social upheaval.

A recurring theme in the testimonies of participants is the pressing need for a structural reconfiguration of local journalism in the UK. They stressed the urgency of addressing systemic barriers and establishing a sustainable funding model that safeguards the core public service function of journalism. The precarious state of local journalism is not merely an occupational issue but a structural crisis requiring coordinated action from policymakers, media organisations, and trade unions. Low wages and limited union protections exacerbate precarity, compelling journalists to seek secondary employment to financially sustain themselves. This study highlights the necessity of structural reforms to ensure fair compensation, stronger protections, and a more inclusive industry framework. Participants strongly advocate for reimagining the role of trade unions, emphasising their potential to enhance professional security, build solidarity, and reinforce the viability of journalism as a career.

Ultimately, this research underscores that the survival of local journalism hinges on its capacity to navigate contemporary challenges whilst upholding its democratic mandate. The systemic undervaluation of local media and the precarious conditions imposed on journalists pose a significant threat to the sustainability of the profession. Reversing this trend requires a commitment to structural change that acknowledges local journalism as a public good and prioritises its long-term viability as both a profession and a cornerstone of democratic society.

8.4.2 Implications for Theories

Chapter 3 outlined three key theoretical perspectives that underpin this research: habitus, work-life balance theory, and the theory of precarity. This study's findings provide empirical substantiation for these frameworks, demonstrating their relevance to understanding the evolving conditions of UK local journalism. First, the concept of habitus offers valuable insights into the transformation of journalistic practice amid digitalisation and systemic change. As technological advancements and shifting industry structures reshape traditional norms, the boundaries of habitus extend, challenging entrenched professional routines. This adaptation

reveals the dynamic nature of journalistic identity as practitioners navigate new modes of storytelling, audience engagement, and workplace structures. The findings suggest that whilst some journalists successfully internalise these shifts, others, particularly those with a long-established career, struggle to reconcile emerging digital demands with their professional dispositions.

Second, work-life balance theory has gained renewed significance as remote working increasingly disrupts established boundaries between personal and professional life. The study highlights the extent to which journalists experience boundary dissolution, with the pressures of 24/7 connectivity intensifying burnout and emotional strain. The findings indicate that journalists working from home face heightened work encroachment, leading to difficulties maintaining professional detachment. This supports existing literature on occupational stress but extends its application to local journalism, illustrating the unique vulnerabilities of the profession in an era of digital acceleration.

Finally, the theory of precarity provides a critical lens through which to examine the systemic instability shaping journalistic labour. This study reveals that precarity manifests in multiple interrelated dimensions: financial insecurity; deteriorating mental and physical wellbeing; the erosion of occupational identity; and the increasing difficulty of sustaining secondary employment. Additionally, cognitive offload, where technological reliance diminishes specific professional skills, contributes to long-term career viability anxieties. These findings align with broader discussions on precarious work but offer insights into the evolving conditions of journalism, reinforcing concerns about its sustainability as a profession. This research applies these theoretical perspectives to uncover the structural, cultural, and economic forces shaping contemporary journalistic labour. The findings illustrate the complex interplay between systemic transformations and individual agency, offering a critical understanding of how journalists negotiate professional survival amid industry upheaval. These frameworks contextualise the challenges facing UK local journalists and contribute to broader debates on labour precarity, digital adaptation, and occupational identity in journalism.

8.5 Contribution to Knowledge

This research has contributed to understanding the increasing precarity in UK local journalism, highlighting the structural and economic factors that have rendered the profession unstable. By examining the experiences of journalists, this study has identified the impact of shifting work models, technological adaptation, low wages, and the necessity of secondary employment on the sustainability of the profession. Crucially, the findings demonstrate that these challenges

permeate all levels of journalism, although their effects vary based on career stage and socioeconomic background. Older journalists face heightened vulnerability due to the pressures of digitalisation and generative AI, leading many to exit the industry (Pereira, 2020; Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020; Josephi and Oller Alonso, 2021). Additionally, some participants viewed local journalism as a transitional phase, with aspirations to move into other industries, such as human resources (Elefante and Deuze, 2012; Čehovin Zajc and Lukan, 2023). These findings provide new insights into the evolving career trajectories within journalism and reinforce concerns about the ability of the profession to retain talent.

The study also illuminates the shifting ethical and professional concerns of local journalists. Whilst participants consistently reaffirmed the importance of journalistic ethics, their critiques of social media platforms, AI-based tools, and digital innovations reveal shared anxieties about declining moral and professional standards. Their reflections indicate a tension between journalistic ideals and the structural transformations reshaping the industry, exposing concerns about eroding public trust and credibility in the digital age. Furthermore, analysing journalists' perceptions of audience criticism underscores a fundamental shift in journalistic engagement with the public. The transition to remote working has deepened the disconnection between journalists and their communities. Some participants asserted that platforms allow reporting, thus rendering traditional street-level journalism as obsolete. Rather than addressing this widening gap, many journalists positioned themselves as skilled storytellers whose primary focus remains producing high-quality content (Nelson and Lei, 2018; Seuri, Ikäheimo, and Huhtamäki, 2022; Wu, 2023). This perspective reflects an ongoing struggle within the profession as digitalisation redefines the practice and perception of journalism.

A further key contribution of this study is its identification of class-based disparities in remote working experience. Journalists from a working-class background, often living in shared housing with inadequate technological infrastructure, found themselves forced to work from their bedrooms; an arrangement that underscores the unintended consequences of remote working flexibility (Sandberg and Norman, 2008; Chung and van der Lippe, 2020; Rofcanin and Anand, 2020). Upper-middle-class journalists with family support and homeownership were more likely to romanticise the profession (Friedman and Reeves, 2020; Mizon, 2022). However, across all socioeconomic groups, those who viewed journalism as a long-term career described the work as stressful, exhausting, and, at times, psychologically distressing. These findings expose the intersection of economic precarity and professional wellbeing, revealing how financial instability exacerbates the already demanding nature of journalistic work (Elefante and Deuze, 2012; Deuze, 2014, 2025b; Bélair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, this research offers critical insights into the financial instability of UK local journalists. The study finds that local journalists earn an average annual salary of approximately £25,000, a figure that significantly contributes to their precarious working conditions (Gollmitzer, 2014; Lee, 2018; O'Donnell and Zion, 2019; Chadha and Steiner, 2022; Rick, 2023). Low wages and the decline of union membership and protections have forced many to take on secondary jobs outside journalism (Maher, 2023b; National Union of Journalists, 2023; NUJ, 2024). This economic reality is not only fostering individual insecurity but undermining the professional integrity of journalism. The precarisation of local journalists accelerates the deterioration of the industry, contributing to the expansion of local news deserts and threatening the role of journalism in democratic accountability (Barclay *et al.*, 2022; Kersley, 2022c). Thus, this study highlights the urgent need for structural reforms, including fairer wages, stronger union protections, and a reassessment of the funding models of local journalism to ensure its long-term viability as both a profession and a public good.

8.6 Limitations

Whilst the datasets generated through the interviews in this study provide a robust foundation for analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the study was geographically restricted to the UK due to financial constraints and a high refusal rate for online or recorded interviews. Although the initial aim was to include journalists from England, practical challenges led to excluding participants from Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Many journalists from these regions declined to participate in recorded online interviews, and financial limitations prevented in-person data collection. Additionally, the shift to remote working meant that several journalists were not physically present in their assigned regions during the study period, further complicating geographic representation.

Second, the concentration of media ownership in UK local journalism influenced the study's sample. As documented by the Media Reform Coalition (Chivers, 2021) and the Press Gazette (Majid, 2023) approximately 90% of UK local journalism is controlled by five large regional publishers, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4. Consequently, these organisations had employed the most in the research sample; 1,374 journalists. This ownership structure led to the exclusion of journalists working for smaller independent media outlets and local broadcasters, limiting the scope of perspectives represented in the study.

Third, the sample composition presented another limitation. Despite efforts to engage a diverse range of participants, all 26 interviewed journalists were white and British. Previous

reports (Martinson, 2018; Spilsbury, 2018) highlight the lack of racial diversity in UK journalism, which this study inadvertently reflects. Whilst outreach efforts included journalists from various racial and national backgrounds, none opted to participate, restricting the ability of the study to examine the role of race and ethnicity in shaping precarious journalistic experiences.

Additionally, the study focused exclusively on local newspaper journalists with permanent contracts, excluding those working in television, radio, or podcast journalism. Whilst local journalism extends beyond print-based practices, including digital-first and broadcast models, incorporating these varied formats within a single study would have introduced significant complexity, potentially diluting the depth of analysis. Moreover, the precarious nature of freelance and self-employed journalists, particularly in digital media, was not explored in this research, representing another limitation.

Finally, the study was conducted following the COVID-19 pandemic, which was marked by significant disruptions to journalistic work. Many journalists were still adjusting to new work conditions, including remote working and shifting newsroom dynamics, which may have influenced their perceptions and willingness to participate in the study. The sensitivity of the research topics, covering workplace conditions, salaries, and union affiliations, further constrained participation, as some journalists expressed reluctance to discuss these issues openly.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study offer critical insights into the evolving realities of local journalism in the UK. However, future research should address these constraints by incorporating a more diverse sample, including freelance journalists and non-print media journalists, and adopting alternative methodological approaches to enhance participation from underrepresented groups.

8.7 Future Directions

Throughout this research journey, I have identified several topics that could inspire future studies. These include areas that could not be fully explored due to data limitations, issues that emerged during the research process, and concepts developed through my reflections as a researcher. This study has examined how working from home, requiring a reconfiguration of work topologies, shapes journalistic behaviour as reflected in journalists' narratives. The findings indicate that this shift has redefined the role of journalists, traditionally seen as elite representatives, opinion leaders, and organic intellectuals, rendering them increasingly inert and potentially anachronistic. Moreover, these behavioural changes appear to disengage local

news audiences and further destabilise fragile local news ecosystems. To address these challenges, future research could explore the practice of journalism from the perspectives of news consumers. Using focus groups with selected community members in specific regions, these studies could investigate how this practice influences news consumption and the evolving role of journalists within this context. It would be valuable to explore public perceptions of journalists and their practice by examining the opinions of focus groups in a coordinated manner.

During the fieldwork phase of this research, generative AI was just beginning to emerge in journalistic practices. Therefore, the data obtained did not provide enough insight for problematisation, which could form the basis for a new study idea. However, recent developments highlight the increasing influence of artificial intelligence in shaping journalism practices and journalist's labour. This includes the proliferation of advanced infrastructures capable of scanning vast internet databases and aggregating news within single platforms, such as Apple News. These advancements underscore the urgent need to address emerging ethical questions surrounding the use of AI in journalism. Furthermore, the necessity for large-scale research focused on the implications of AI in journalism, particularly its ethical dimensions and regulatory frameworks, has become increasingly apparent. Investigating these issues is critical, as they can reshape the practice of journalism, public trust, and the broader dynamics of news consumption.

Another promising area for future research involves examining how journalism education in the UK universities, specifically technology-focused universities in the Global North, has adapted to rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and related technologies. This research could investigate whether and how these institutions have integrated AI into their curricula and educational practices and the depth and breadth of this integration. Furthermore, assessing how such programs equip today's journalism students and future journalists with the skills and critical understanding needed to navigate the opportunities and challenges posed by an AI-driven career landscape would be essential. Such an inquiry is vital not only for evaluating the preparedness of future journalists, but for understanding the broader implications of AI in redefining journalistic practices, ethics, and the professional roles these graduates will assume.

Another critical area for future research could focus on the impact of ethnic and cultural diversity on the professional identity of local journalists. Studies by Spilsbury (2018, 2021) highlight that most journalists in the UK are white, pointing to a lack of ethnic diversity within the profession. Although efforts were made during this study to engage journalists from diverse

ethnic backgrounds, no participants outside the majority white demographic were successfully included. This raises critical questions about the extent to which different ethnic groups are represented within local journalism and the implications of this under-representation for the profession. Investigating this topic is essential, as a lack of diversity among journalists may influence news coverage, perspectives, and the ability of local journalism to represent authentically the communities it serves. Understanding how ethnic and cultural diversity shapes journalistic practices and professional identities could contribute to developing more inclusive policies and practices within the industry.

Finally, there is limited data on how exposure to traumatic events, such as witnessing death, murder, and crime scenes – often inherent in journalism – affects journalists, particularly within the context of the new work culture. As Bélair-Gagnon (2023) and Deuze, (2025) found, this work culture, characterised by remote working and the absence of collaborative office environments and supportive colleagues, may exacerbate the psychological toll on journalists. Future research could address critical questions regarding how these factors contribute to disengagement by journalists from their profession and how they are coping with the increasing prevalence of burnout. Research focusing on the psychological and emotional challenges faced by journalists in conjunction with exploring how the evolving nature of work impacts their wellbeing could yield valuable insights. Understanding the intersection of trauma, isolation, and professional identity is crucial for informing strategies to better support journalists and mitigate the negative effects on mental health because of their work.

Ultimately, the identified areas for future research provide critical opportunities to improve the understanding of the changing dynamics within journalism. Examining the influence of artificial intelligence on journalistic practices, the impact of ethnic and cultural diversity on professional identity, and the psychological effects of trauma, particularly in remote working, is critical for understanding the future trajectory of the profession. Addressing these research gaps will provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for journalists, ultimately informing educational frameworks and industry practices. Such research is critical for improving the wellbeing of journalists and ensuring the long-term viability of local journalism in an increasingly complex local journalism landscape.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Informed Consent

Title of Project: Exploring the precarious labour and digital inequalities which local journalists encountered in relation to their experiences in journalistic practices.
Research Team: Salih Kinsun (Principal Researcher), Michael Bailey (Supervisor), Stevphen Shukaitis (Supervisor).

Taking Part in the Study

Please read each statement and initial that you have read it on the line provided. I have read and understood the study information provided and have been given a chance to ask questions.

_____
I confirm that I am voluntarily participating in this study. _____
I understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason. If I do withdraw, I understand that my data will be destroyed and not used as part of the research project. _____
I understand that this conversation will be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher, with any information that may identify me removed from the transcript. _____
I also understand that the audio recording will be stored in a password protected file on the University Box system until the researcher has completed the transcription. _____

Use of the Information in the Study

I understand that information I provide will be used for writing up my final year project in the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex. Any information used will have anything that could identify me removed. _____
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared with anyone. _____
I agree for my direct quotes to be used and understand that identifying information will be changed. _____

Signatures

Name of participant (PRINT); Participant signature; Date

_____ _____ _____
Name of researcher (PRINT); Participant signature; Date

_____ _____ _____

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: Exploring the precarious labour and digital inequalities which local journalists encountered in relation to their experiences in journalistic practices.

You have been invited to participate in this research because you are an over 18-year-old local journalist who encounters with potential precarious work conditions and digital inequalities. Please read the following information carefully, which will tell you what your contribution will involve and how your data will be processed. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the precarious work conditions and digital inequalities which local journalists encounter within the digital, capitalist platform era based on neoliberal economic transformation. In order to survive in journalism, which has evolved into a profession that every citizen has begun to do in some way as a result of the rise of social media and existing digital developments and opportunities, journalism practices have transformed into casual and precarious work industry. Due to this transformation, journalistic practices and journalists' rights should be discussed from a new perspective. In this direction, the specific goal of this research is to determine what journalists must do, how their labour has evolved into precarious labour, and what journalists are thinking about their future.
To determine into what professional practices of journalism have become in the digitalised working conditions and media professions.
To offer a critical solution for the future of journalism as a profession and the wage systems of journalists' efforts in this field.
To detect and separate the limits of journalism as a profession from citizen-oriented journalism, which is described as a "gatekeeper", and which is somehow done by everyone in the digitalised new media atmosphere.
To seek for an answer for the question of "what journalists do within the more interwoven processes of journalism because of the use of artificial intelligence in the professional practices of journalism.
You have been selected because you are a journalist working for local media for over 18-year-old. We plan to interview at least 20 journalists. If you choose to participate, I will arrange an in-depth interview with you at a time convenient to you. Before the in-depth interview commences, you will be asked to sign the attached consent form and will be given the opportunity to clarify anything that is still unclear. The in-depth interview will last for approximately one hour. With your permission, the in-depth interview will be digitally recorded (audio). If there are any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, you do not have to. Please remember that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to change your mind about participating at any time. You can withdraw at any time, and you do not have to give a reason.
Should you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign an informed consent form before the in-depth interview begins.

You are free to change your mind about participating in this study at any time. Please remember that you can decide to withdraw at any time before, or during the study. After the study, can request that your data not be used. You do not have to have a reason to withdraw. If you chose to withdraw, any data associated with you will be destroyed and not included in the research.

There are no know risks or benefits to this research.

The interview will be transcribed (a copy of your transcript can be made available on request) and analysed. The findings will then be written up in an academic final year sociology project. Sometimes quotes from the interview will be used in the research but every effort will be made to ensure your anonymity and you and your workplace will not be named in the reports. All the data you provide will be kept securely on a password protected personal computer which will only be accessible by the researcher and his project supervisor.

Following GDPR guidelines, the legal basis for processing your data will be your consent. The Data Controller will be the University of Essex. The contact person in relation to this is Sara Stock, University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

I may need to break this confidentiality if you disclose illegal or criminal activity to me or I become aware of an issue that puts you or another person at risk. In this instance, I will aim to first discuss the issue with you, but I may be legally obliged to share this information with the appropriate authorities.

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the undergraduate student who is the principal investigator of the project, Salih Kinsun and their supervisor Dr Michael Bailey using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research, Neli Demireva, Department of Sociology. If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press. All contact information is in the contact details section below. Please include the ERAMS reference number which can be found at the foot of this page.

Thank you again for agreeing to take part in this research. Please retain this Information Sheet for future reference. If you have any questions about any aspect of the research, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Primary Researcher: Salih Kinsun Student Researcher, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, CO4 3SQ, Colchester. Telephone:07518421483, Email: sk21450@essex.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Michael Bailey, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, CO4 3SQ, Colchester. Telephone: +44 (0) 1206873867 Email: mbailey@essex.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Stevphen Shukaitis, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, CO4 3SQ, Colchester. Telephone: +44 (0) 1206 874283. Email: s.shukaitis@essex.ac.uk

Sociology Research Director: Neli Demireva, Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, CO4 3SQ, Colchester. Telephone: 01206-872640. Email: nvdem@essex.ac.uk

University of Essex Research Governance and Planning Manager: Sarah Manning-Press, Research & Enterprise Office, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, CO4 3SQ, Colchester. Email: sarahm@essex.ac.uk. Phone: 01206-873561

Appendix 3: Interview Schedule

Demographic Insights

Can you tell me your age or age range?

How would you describe your gender identity?

What is your current job title or role in local journalism?

How long have you been working in local journalism?

What type of genre did you work for (e.g., reporter, editor, etc.)?

1. Decent Work and Permanent Contracts:

Can you describe your current employment status (e.g., permanent, freelance, contract-based)?

Which company do you work for?

How is digitalisation shaping developments within your company?

How has digitalisation impacted your ability to secure stable, long-term contracts in local journalism?

In your experience, what are the biggest obstacles to achieving decent working conditions in the local media industry?

2. Socio-Economic Struggles:

Can you share a bit about your family background and how it may have influenced your career in journalism?

How has your work in local journalism affected your financial stability and quality of life?

Can you share any specific challenges you have faced balancing your professional responsibilities with personal or family life?

How do fluctuations in local media revenue streams influence your day-to-day financial security?

3. Age, gender, and the pressure of digital transformation:

From your perspective, which age groups or genders face the most significant challenges adapting to digitalised journalism practices?

How has digital transformation impacted career progression differently for younger versus older journalists?

Do you think gender plays a role in how journalists experience the transition to digital platforms? If so, how?

4. Digitalised Journalism and Industry Change:

How have digital tools, AI and platforms transformed the production and distribution of local news?

In what ways has audience engagement and news consumption changed with digitalisation?

What strategies have you or your organisation adopted to remain relevant in a digital landscape?

5. Work-Life Balance and Precarity:

Have you experienced remote work in your role as a journalist? If so, how has it impacted your work processes, productivity, and overall experience in the industry?

How would you describe your work-life balance as a local journalist in the remote newsrooms?

What aspects of your work environment contribute to or hinder this balance?

Have you noticed a shift towards more precarious working conditions? If so, what factors are driving this change?

6. Advocacy, Unionisation, and Rights:

Are you currently a member of a journalist's union or professional organisation? Why or why not?

What role do unions or advocacy groups play in addressing the challenges local journalists face?

What are the key benefits and limitations of union membership in this evolving media environment?

How do you and your colleagues advocate for better rights or working conditions in your profession?

7. The Future of Local Journalism: Perspectives, Challenges, and Proposals for Change

Given the industry's increasing casualties and precarious nature, how do you perceive the future of your career in local journalism?

What changes or innovations do you believe are necessary to secure the future of local journalism and improve working conditions for journalists?

What role should local journalists, media organisations, and policymakers play in shaping a more sustainable and secure future for the local media landscape?

Appendix 4: Ethical Approval

University of Essex

24/05/2022

Mr Salih Kinsun

Sociology

University of Essex

Dear Salih,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2122-1019

I am pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "Exploring the precarious labour and digital inequalities which local journalists encountered in relation to their experiences in journalistic practices." has been reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 1, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following **conditions**:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the ethics application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,

Sandya Hewamanne

Colchester Campus
Wivenhoe Park
Colchester CO4 3SQ
United Kingdom

T 01206 873333

www.essex.ac.uk
@Uni_of_Essex /uniofessex /uniofessex