

Task and Finish Group on the future outlook for the media in Wales

Response from Port Talbot MagNet



Introduction

Port Talbot MagNet is a website run by Local News South Wales Ltd, a not-for-profit co-operative company which provides local news for the town of Port Talbot. It was established in 2009 by a group of professional journalists in response to the general downturn in South Welsh media as well as, more specifically, the October 2009 closure of the Port Talbot Guardian, a weekly newspaper owned by Trinity Mirror.

In this document, we aim to provide a case study of a new kind of business model for running news media, give an appraisal of the process of establishing the company, and provide suggestions for how the devolved government in Wales could better support social enterprises in the media industry.

History

In 2009, as the credit crunch hit businesses and public sector and wreaked havoc with jobs and profits on a global scale, two small towns in Wales were quietly suffering a drama of their own: the death of their local newspapers.

The Port Talbot Guardian (and its sister title the Neath Guardian) had been in business since the 1920s, but declining circulations had made them a target for cutbacks by owner Trinity Mirror. For the first time in more than 80 years, Neath and Port Talbot were without a dedicated newspaper. They may have been among the first to lose their local paper, but they may not be the last (*see Appendix A for statistics charting the long decline of Welsh newspaper circulations*).

It is worth noting here that the Northcliffe-owned South Wales Evening Post produces a Neath and Port Talbot edition every day, and that it publishes a weekly insert, the Neath Port Talbot Courier. There is therefore some print news coverage of the towns. However, penetration in the area is relatively low (17%, Source: Newspaper Society Database 2011), with a circulation in Port Talbot of 3,704 (Source: *ibid*) and Neath of 4,067 (Source: *ibid*). Though we can assume a slight rise in the Evening Post's figures since the closure of the Guardian, the circulation of the Guardian at its close was 4,402 (Source: Willing's Press Guide 2009) and just 12 years earlier was 19,853 (Source: Willing's

Press Guide 1997), and we must therefore acknowledge that overall local newspaper penetration in the town was likely to be about 30% for the last decade, and much higher before that. ***(See Appendix A for the figures of Neath and Port Talbot Guardian over the decades, which at its peak was over 30,000, and find details of the current media provision in Neath and Port Talbot at Appendix B).***

We must also credit the richness and diversity a larger number of journalists brought to the news media in Neath and Port Talbot. There were four journalists on the staff of the Guardian in its final year, along with one on the South Wales Evening Post. Now there is a single reporter for Neath Port Talbot at the Evening Post. That means an 80 per cent drop in the last three years alone in the number of professionals carrying out the watchdog and scrutiny functions of a local newspaper, attending courts and council meetings and calling politicians and big business to account.

After the closure of the Guardian, the news aggregator porttalbot.co.uk (which collects stories about Port Talbot from around the internet using RSS feeds, employing no journalists) was quick to move in, but two other professional-led projects also arrived after the closure of The Guardian. The first was Port Talbot News, run by a former Guardian photographer, Peter Knowles. Our project, Port Talbot Magnet, is the other.

Note: It is worth noting that since 2011, the diversity in the local news in Neath and Port Talbot has been further weakened. The council-produced newspaper Community Spirit stopped publication in March 2011 due to government cutbacks, and Port Talbot News ceased operations in August 2011 following the untimely death of its proprietor, Peter Knowles.

Starting a news service

We started our company, Local News South Wales Ltd, in the autumn of 2009, back when the Guardian was bidding farewell to its readers. Before the closure, a group of us, all journalists, had come together via our National Union of Journalists' branch to find a new way to make a living out of our profession. Most of us had suffered as a result of cutbacks, most had been made redundant, many from the Northcliffe-owned South Wales Evening Post; others were finding it difficult to sustain themselves as freelancers or struggling to get contract work as the industry tightened its belt. ***(See Appendix C for pen portraits of the directors).***

We decided we had to do something proactive about the decline in local news and local journalism jobs. Starting a co-operative seemed an obvious move, and the seven of us, with the excellent, and very practical help of the Wales Co-operative Centre, established a limited company. The company is also a co-operative and social enterprise. When the Guardian closed, filling the news gap in the towns seemed an obvious step for us to take, and so we began to work towards providing a news service for Neath and Port Talbot.

By the end of 2009, we were incorporated, had a memorandum of articles and a mission statement. We had a Board of seven directors (now eight) and a further dozen or so members – all professional journalists. We had some early business meetings with the Swansea Business Centre, who advised us to split the very different towns of Neath and Port Talbot and concentrate on establishing the business successfully in one area first to avoid over-stretching ourselves.

We were incubated from an early stage by the Port Talbot charity NSA, who had given us some free office space, and so we decided to concentrate our efforts in Port Talbot as we already had a base and some contacts there. The next year was spent meeting AMs, councillors and local community leaders, and filling in funding application forms. Though we received much support from the local community, we did not receive any funding, and financed our operations with small donations from the directors, who had largely by now found employment in PR or policy roles.

Without any capital to fund news gathering, carry out market research or establish a print product, the first year was dispiriting. As journalists we perhaps lacked the necessary skills in business and marketing to achieve our goals. We manned the office and filled in application forms as volunteers with lots of encouragement from local people, but found no real way to make the business pay. By the end of 2010 we took the decision to stop applying for funding and to concentrate our efforts instead on doing something we knew we could do well: journalism.

Using the free content management system Wordpress, a site for bloggers, we launched the news website Local News Port Talbot (www.lnpt.org). This was an opportunity for us to learn multi-media journalism skills, technical skills and, more importantly, demonstrate what we wanted to provide. This proved to be the best decision we could have made.

Not long afterwards, we received a huge boost for our project, by being invited to become a community partner of the National Theatre Wales production, *The Passion*, starring Michael Sheen. We used *The Passion* to relaunch the website as Port Talbot Magnet (www.porttalbotmagnet.com), and pulled out all the stops to cover the event. We were given unbeatable access to the cast and crew before the production, as well as access to the performances during the production, and we were able to provide a unique multi-media record of the three-day event as it unfolded. This is now on our website.

Another important development for us has been to institute systems for running the website. We now operate a rota system which puts one of us in the editor's chair every week. This person checks and responds to emails, moderates comments, commissions articles and subeditors work. They also delegate as much as possible to the other members of the team. This keeps the level of work manageable for the volunteers, who all have other jobs and other commitments.

Cardiff University's relationship with Port Talbot MagNet has also been of enormous benefit. One of our directors, Rachel Howells, successfully applied for a funded PhD at the School of Journalism to study what happens to a town when they lose their local newspaper. She is one year in to the project, and Port Talbot is her case study.

The PhD is funded by KESS, a European fund distributed by the Welsh Assembly Government, as well as Cardiff University and the Media Standards Trust, and it fits into a wide jigsaw of other research that reflects deep concern with declines in newspaper circulations and the number of journalists employed by the local press, and what these declines might mean for the way news and democracy work together.

Rachel will attempt to discover the depth of the news decline in Wales and Port Talbot, and the ramifications for democracy in the face of encroaching news poverty. She will carry out five different pieces of research. The first is a look back at printed news provision in the town since the 1970s,

looking at how journalism has served the local community, and examining indicators of 'localness'. The second piece of research will apply the same measures to a modern day sample, which will include television, radio and internet news alongside the press. The third will be a large survey of local people, looking at their news consumption habits. Lastly she will carry out focus groups and interviews.

Rachel's PhD has been feeding into the Magnet project, and the research has been learning from Magnet's experiences in setting up a news service in Port Talbot. This has been a beneficial and collaborative working relationship that has supported the development of Port Talbot Magnet.

Six months on – where are we now?

The six months since our launch have proved that we made the right decision when we launched the website. Traffic to our website has been encouraging, with sustained growth over the six months since we began monitoring. *(See Appendix D for a more detailed report.)*

Now that we have something tangible to show for our efforts, we have received renewed support from NSA in the form of a bigger office, we are gaining readers and advertising, and are hopeful of renewing our quest for funding. This is all positive.

But we should not forget that we exist because of the goodwill of committed volunteers. Without funding we have run the service so far with volunteers, partnerships with other organisations and cash donations, mainly from the directors.

We have sold a limited amount of advertising, and some of our video footage has been sold to outside organisations; these are heartening commercial steps forward for us. But this is not yet a working business model, not sustainable in its current form, and we know it will be difficult to fulfil our ambitions to provide dedicated, hard news for Port Talbot without a serious injection of cash or a decent, steady income stream, or even better, both.

We realise that, in common with many other social enterprises and charities, we will need to be flexible and innovative in bringing in revenue from many different sources.

We also have ambitions to ensure our coverage is the hard news readers expect from their local news provider. We want to cover courts, council meetings and call big business to account. We want to be a news service of record so that today's news is not lost to future generations. We would like to have an open, town-centre newsroom where members of the public can access IT and our editorial expertise (via training and mentoring) in bringing us their town's stories for publication, gaining skills and training along the way. We are also exploring new ways of printing and distributing hard-copy news to people who can't, or don't, use digital means of accessing news.

Achieving these ambitions will take resources, and we have been innovative in approaching the challenge.

In September, we launched an appeal for the site, called Pitch-in!. This uses a so-called 'crowdfunding' model *(see Appendix E, information about the similar US-based website Spot.Us)*. Our Pitch-in! appeal asks local people to pitch in to help the news service by offering cash donations, volunteering, or by telling us about what's going on in the local area. But it goes a step further than

this, by breaking down editorial objectives into micro-targets and offering people the chance to sponsor journalists or pitch in time or money towards a story they are interested in seeing a journalist write. You can therefore, for example, sponsor a court reporter for a day on our website, or help us set up a new sports results service for the local football league.

The appeal also asks freelance journalists and members of the co-operative to suggest stories that can be made into a target on the site, and which we can then help raise money for.

Crucially, this model puts payment for journalists at the heart of the enterprise. We provide a framework, a mechanism for professional news to be produced and supplied for the community. In theory, too, we will see what kind of editorial local people are willing to pay for – if any.

There are, of course, possible problems with this kind of model. Bias is one – where those with the deepest pockets can afford to push forward their own agendas. Rigorous, transparent processes about how stories are agreed and paid for and an adherence to the usual journalistic mantras of balance and independence will be essential, as well as the Board's willingness to divert advertising revenue into neglected areas where crowdfunding is not bringing investment. The cynics have also been quick to point out that readers are unlikely to pay for news in this way, now that they are accustomed to free, 'ambient' news on television and the internet. Only marketing and time will answer this question (but you should note that Spot.Us is thriving in the US), and our Board of Directors will need to rise to the challenges of the new model to ensure we adhere to rigorous standards and properly promote Pitch-in! to the local community.

The future

Is this the future of journalism? It would be nice to think so. To think that people will take up the challenge we have set, involving themselves actively in collaborating with the news – and thereby in the processes of democracy – surely fulfils journalism's prime, fourth estate, function.

It is early days to talk about how likely Pitch-in! is to make this a reality in Port Talbot, but simply by framing the question in this way, we have received donations and help that we would not otherwise have received. After a few weeks of posting Pitch-in! on our website, during which time we have not publicised it in Port Talbot, we have had £60 in donations from readers and we have sold four adverts. It's not much, but it's more than we had before, and it feels like a positive move forward. There is enormous potential for growth.

Two years on, then, in spite of the ups and downs and the slow rate of progress, we are still committed to bringing dedicated local news to Port Talbot, and we intend to keep working to bring the project to profitability.

Fostering co-operative and social enterprise newsgathering models

Innovation, goodwill and journalists committed to promoting local news for no pay are what got our project off the ground. We always hoped we could find a blueprint for local news production that would help fill news gaps in other areas as well, and bring services or plurality to a sector where the larger media corporations are withdrawing investment. In time, we would like to take a functioning Magnet model to other communities where there is no local newspaper. We also hope to keep

journalistic and editorial skills within the profession by paying journalists to write news, and stop the brain-drain from the journalism industry in Wales.

There are some things we believe government could do to make this easier for us.

- Provide a team of government-salaried mentors who could travel to different areas and help set up new media projects. The BBC already has a team of people who go to countries where new democracies are flowering and help establish independent news media. Now our own democracy is under threat as news gaps open up; why can't something similar happen in Wales or the UK?
- Establish a central fund rewarding media innovation. The current government in Westminster has proposed to spend £25m on LocalTV, a service that will not serve Wales. This money could have fostered hundreds of local media projects like ours to innovate and experiment in this sector.
- Find an effective way of putting philanthropists and partner organisations in touch with grass roots projects; this would be a welcome function of Welsh business centres.
- Provide affordable legal and financial advice and access to affordable insurance – perhaps using the benefit of the wisdom of procurement officers in government. Even a free or subsidised half hour each with a lawyer, an accountant and a procurement officer on a six-monthly basis would assist enormously.
- Establish a network of media hubs where journalists could collaborate with colleagues from across the industry to produce news for all outlets. This is a suggestion made by a team of academics at Goldsmiths University – and we would support this kind of solution. We do not want to compete with existing media, but we believe collaboration is key to fostering media and bringing plurality and diversity back to a weakening sector.
- Ensure politicians have an understanding of the wider benefits good journalism can bring to society, and promote them at all opportunities. A change in the way media is viewed would, we believe, improve our chances of gaining funding and working with communities, businesses and public bodies.
- Establish an accreditation system for quality local news websites. This would help new projects gain traction in a world where content written for the internet is, in our experience, viewed with suspicion by companies and public bodies.

If government is serious about addressing the problems facing the media industry the answer is simple. We need a national debate about why the media is important for democracy, and real, tangible support for the organisations at the coal face. Port Talbot is already offering lessons from which we can all learn.

Appendix A

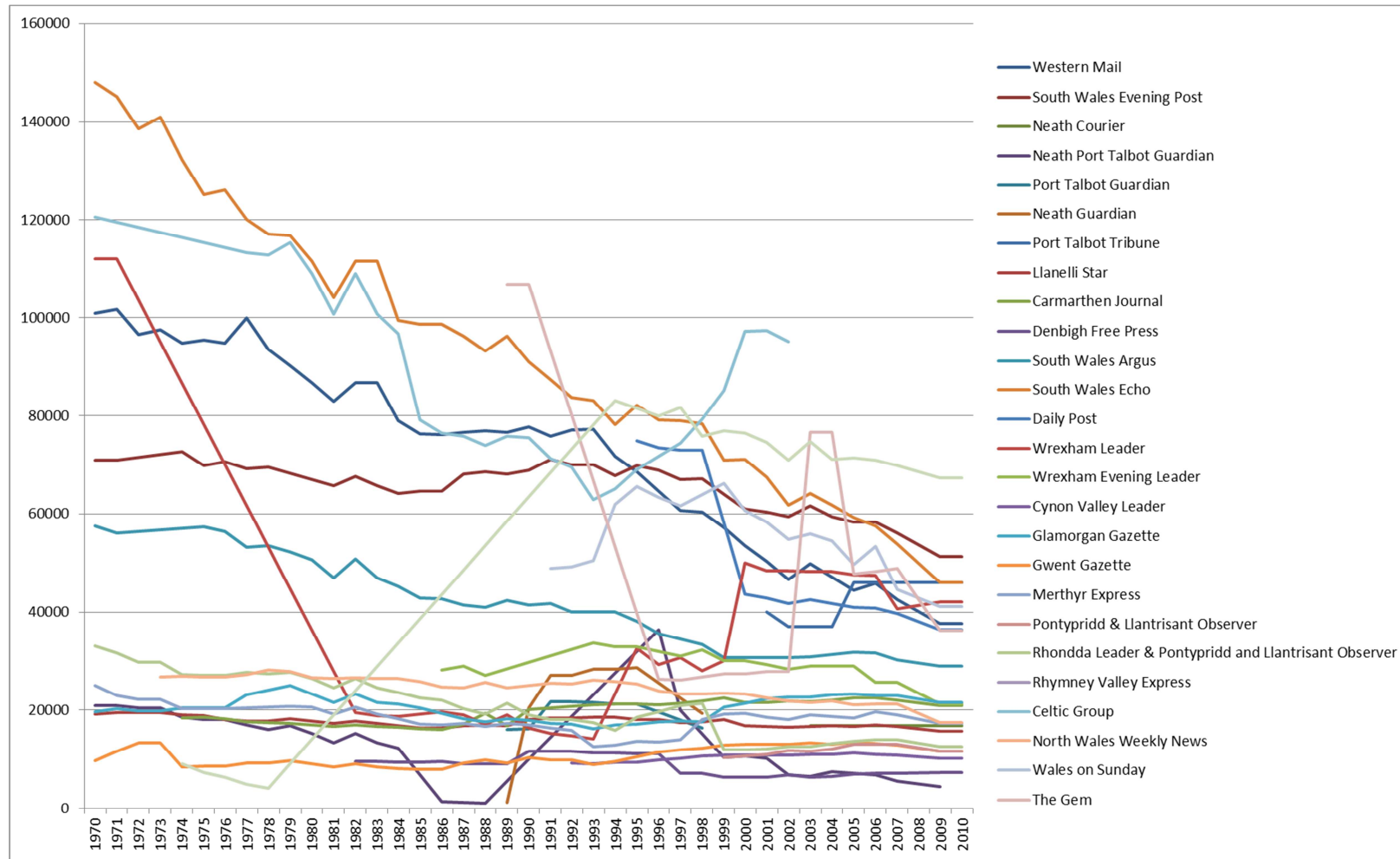
Circulations of Welsh local press since 1970 (Source ABC, Benn's Media Directory, Willing's Press Guide – courtesy of Rachel Howells)

Local newspaper circulations 1970-2010	Benn's 1970	Benn's 1971	Benn's 1972	Benn's 1973	Benn's 1974	Benn's 1975	Benn's 1976	Benn's 1977	Benn's 1978	Benn's 1979	Benn's 1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	ABC Jan-1987	ABC Jul-88	ABC Dec-89	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011					
Western Mail	100605	101666	96583	97580	94840	95487	94840	99874	93646	90359	86795	83010	86795	86795	79088	76263	75196	76684	76981	76684	77830	75874	77083	77239	71198	68590	64602	60641	60306	57131	53474	50306	46732	49904	47138	44470	45857	42578		37576	37576	29567					
South Wales Evening Post	71000	71000		72724	69839	70643	69178	69474	68191	66971	66675	67621	65675	64090	64643	64649	68137	68563	68137	68907	71155	69954	69954	67723	69770	68935	67034	67067	63922	60946	60248	59446	61617	59340	58289	58289	56104		51329	51329							
Neath Courier																																															
Neath Port Talbot Guardian	20897	20904	20319	20319	18497	18067	18067	16955	15980	16802	15135	13217	15135	13217	12111		1344	1181	1004																												
Port Talbot Guardian																																															
Neath Guardian																																															
Port Talbot Tribune																																															
Llanelli Star	19108	19360	19360	19360	19026	18779	17960	17622	17735	18164	17878	17283	17610	17283	16737	16289	16218	16679	16966	16679	18004	18388	18279	18484	18525	17946	18033	17389	17464	17988	16671	16558	16439	16646	16713	16612	16813	16637		15699	15699						
Cardiff Journal																																															
Denbigh Free Press																																															
South Wales Argus	57399	56091				57286	56287	53138	53440	52207	50625	47072	50850	47072	45320	42920	42794	41429	41017	42467	41461	41794	40081	40110	40049	38143	35644	34459	33405	30670	30707	30741	30626	30804	31376	31803	31704	30382		28879	28879	28879					
South Wales Echo	148031	145111	138556	141040	132271	126134	126095	120015	117051	116713	111577	104045	111577	111577	99409	98736	98654	96328	93277	96328	91095	87478	83728	83101	78224	82117	79189	79002	78434	70973	71066	67904	61757	64185	61693	59200	57465	53780		46127	46127						
Daily Post																																															
Wrexham Leader	112003	112003																																													
Wrexham Evening Leader																																															
Cynon Valley Leader																																															
Glamorgan Gazette	19608	20157	19681	19681	20428	20342	20342	23037	24022	24934	23198	21455	23198	21455	21132	20364	19336	18214	17449	18214	17881	17203	16973	16111	16901	17019	17475	17739	17910	20590	21351	22316	22633	22949	23013	23228	22965	22870		21504	21504	17049					
Gwent Gazette	9561	11424	13291	13291	8363	8552	8552	9046	9164	9530	8945	8323	8945	8323	8086	7929	7799	9091	9738	9091	10199	9728	9630	8783	8645	10339	11378	11819	12191	12833	12857	12860	12999	13249	12939	13325	13025	12725		11495	11495	7119					
Merthyr Express	25007	22886	22664	22664	20171	20253	20253	20326	20589	20673	20459	19065	20459	19065	18120	17072	16820	17179	16582	17179	16920	16278	15854	13379	12822	13902	13377	13885	17969	19250	19236	18544	18624	18987	18560	18395	18653	18966		17138	17138	13402					
Pontypridd & Llantrisant Observer																																															
Rhondda Leader & Pontypridd	33118	31493	29750	29750	27202	27056	27056	27709	27283	27710	26320	24575	26320	24575	23610	22385	21898	20242	19120	21288	18975	18066	18066	17286	15837	18547	19538	20884	21332	11889	11869	11989	12507	12480													
Rhymney Valley Express																																															
Celtic Group	120521																																														
North Wales Weekly News																																															
Wales on Sunday																																															
The Gem																																															
Swansea Herald of Wales																																															

Key: Yellow = data not collected
 Grey = data not available

The data in this table is produced in graph form on the next page.

Circulations of Welsh local press since 1970 (Source ABC, Benn's Media Directory, Willing's Press Guide – courtesy of Rachel Howells)



Appendix B

Current news provision in Port Talbot

Port Talbot

[View JICREG data](#)

[Portfolio Database](#)

Demographic Profile of the area

Total Population aged 15+ : 37621				Total of households : 21429		
Total men	Total women	Total population aged 15-34	Total population aged 35-54	Total population aged 55+	Total population of social class ABC1	Total population of social class C2DE
18214	19407	10670	12396	14555	14023	23598

Newspapers in this area

Newspaper Name	Home Page	Type	Freq.	Circ.	Penetration	TOTAL Circ.	Tel	Audit Code	Audit Period
Cardigan & Tivy-Side Advertiser	www	P	W	1	.00	6724	01239 614343	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
South Wales Evening Post	www	P	E	3704	17.28	40149	01792 510000	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
South Wales Guardian	www	P	W	5	.02	6109	01269 592781	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
Wales - Western Mail	www	P	M	373	1.74	26931	029 20223333	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
Wales on Sunday		P	S	486	2.27	27227	029 20223333	A	Jan2011-Jun2011

Current news provision in Neath

Neath

[View JICREG data](#)

[Portfolio Database](#)

Demographic Profile of the area

Total Population aged 15+ : 39843				Total of households : 21584		
Total men	Total women	Total population aged 15-34	Total population aged 35-54	Total population aged 55+	Total population of social class ABC1	Total population of social class C2DE
19177	20666	11225	13038	15580	19213	20630

Newspapers in this area

Newspaper Name	Home Page	Type	Freq.	Circ.	Penetration	TOTAL Circ.	Tel	Audit Code	Audit Period
Cardigan & Tivy-Side Advertiser	www	P	W	2	.01	6724	01239 614343	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
South Wales Evening Post	www	P	E	4067	18.84	40149	01792 510000	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
South Wales Guardian	www	P	W	8	.04	6109	01269 592781	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
Wales - Western Mail	www	P	M	459	2.13	26931	029 20223333	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
Wales on Sunday		P	S	643	2.98	27227	029 20223333	A	Jan2011-Jun2011
Western Telegraph	www	P	W	2	.01	20629	01437 763133	A	Jan2011-Jun2011

Appendix C

Pen portraits of the Directors of LNSW Ltd

Mike Burrows is a freelance sports reporter who has worked in the south Wales area for most of his career. He has written for the South Wales Evening Post and edited the rugby magazine Scrumbag.

Photojournalist **Ingrid Bousquet** is widely published in local newspapers and magazines including The Waterfront, Homefront, the CND newsletter and The South Wales Evening Post, as well as in the book The Vetch: the final season. A seasoned documentary-maker, she is a member of the Swansea Film Makers' Collective and One People Productions. Her footage of a Michael Sheen interview was broadcast by Sky News earlier this year.

Swansea-born and raised, **Simon Davies** has worked as a writer and production journalist for various newspapers (including the South Wales Evening Post), magazines and websites, and was assistant editor of Swansea youth paper HadOne. He has a degree in English and History and an MA in English from Swansea University, and a postgraduate diploma in magazine journalism from Cardiff University. He currently works as a fundraising and press officer for a national youth charity.

Welsh-speaker **Rachel Howells** has worked as a journalist since 2000, primarily in magazines. She was editor of The Big Issue Cymru, and has also written and edited numerous staff magazines, books, websites and a university newspaper. She has won awards for her feature writing, and was part of a team that gained the Crystal Mark for the Transport for London website. She is researching a funded PhD in journalism studies at Cardiff University, looking at what happens to democracy in a town that loses its local newspaper; Port Talbot is her case study. Rachel was born in Neath and lives in Swansea.

Brecon-born **Andy Pearson** spent 20 years in newspapers, his positions including Llanelli Star editor, South Wales Evening Post features editor and Western Mail reporter. He won national industry awards. Andy works as an account manager for PR company Effective Communications, and has authored two books and edited others. Andy has family across Port Talbot.

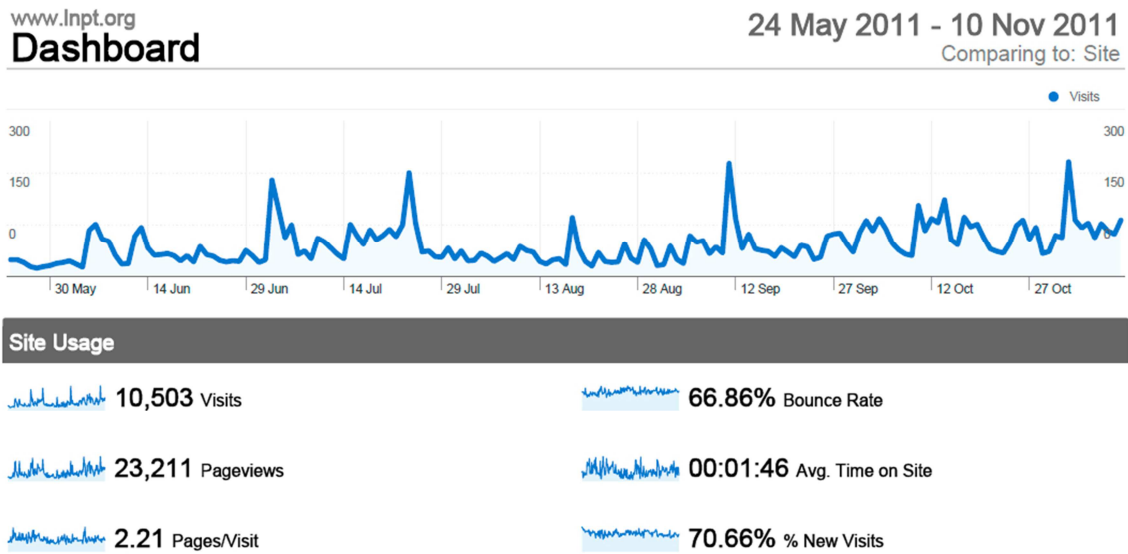
Claire Pearson works as a senior broadcast journalist at Swansea Sound and The Wave, two of South Wales' largest commercial broadcasters. She has previously worked at the South Wales Evening Post, and has been a journalist for more than 20 years.

Born in Scotland and brought up in Wales, **Ken Smith** has 25 years' journalistic, freelance, social media and PR experience in London and Wales under his belt. He is currently a communications consultant for the National Trust in Wales. He has worked as an editor of a weekly newspaper, a PR for Derek Hatton, and as a senior production journalist at the South Wales Evening Post. He was a director of the company which produced the feature film Business as Usual in 1987. Ken has authored two books and edited three others. Ken has family and business links with Port Talbot and

lived in the town in the 1980s. Ken is currently chairman of the NUJ in Wales and Secretary of the Swansea and District branch.

Mike Witchell was born in London in 1950 but has spent most of his time in Swansea since the age of 19 when he joined the university as an undergraduate. After learning his trade in London he returned to the city to spend almost 20 years with the Evening Post as sub-editor and weekly columnist. Now working freelance, he writes and performs humorous sketches for his own and others' amusement.

Appendix D



Website Traffic Report for Port Talbot Magnet (www.inpt.org) from 24 May – 10 Nov 2011

The usage figures show that more than 10,000 visitors have come to the site, spending almost two minutes each and looking at more than two pages when they come. Other data suggests the lion's share of users are based in Port Talbot, with others in Swansea, Cardiff and London, and a lesser share in Neath, suggesting that there is not much cross-over of interest between the two towns of Neath and Port Talbot.

Appendix E

The American website Spot.U.S

Spot.us
Community-funded reporting

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Healthy San Francisco
09/29/11 by SF Public Press
[Fund This Story](#)
\$2,277.16 raised and \$222.84 to go

Tax Dodging in Florida
09/23/11 by Public News Service
[Fund This Story](#)
\$500.50 raised and \$299.50 to go

Viticulture in NoCal the Truth
09/13/11 by ruth bird
[Fund This Story](#)
\$1,127.00 raised and \$2,473.00 to go

What they say:

“Spot.us is a nonprofit project to pioneer “community powered reporting.”

Through Spot.us the public can commission journalists to do reporting on important and perhaps overlooked topics. Contributions are tax deductible and we partner with news organizations to distribute content under appropriate licenses.

Community members can also take a survey from our sponsors, when available, to support the story of their choice at no cost. Such a deal!

We practice the "TAO of Journalism" (Transparency, Accountability, and Openness). To our knowledge Spot.us is the only open source fundraising platform.”

Port Talbot Magnet’s Pitch-in! model hopes to learn from Spot.us and develop a model that is appropriate the needs of media in Wales.