

Is local journalism failing? – local voices in the aftermath of the Grenfell and Lakanal fire disasters

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Grenfell: A disaster foretold?

In the darkness of the early hours of June 14th 2017, shocking images of a tower block engulfed in flames flashed across our British television screens. Grenfell Tower, a 24-storey residential public housing block in the affluent London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, had caught fire after an electrical fault in a refrigerator in one of the flats. The speed with which the fire broke out of the initial flat and travelled up the outside of the building, overwhelmed the first responders from the London Fire Brigade (LFB) and bewildered bystanders. Whilst many residents survived by escaping the building, others became either trapped or followed longstanding advice issued by LFB and public to *'stay put'* in the event of a fire. Distressing footage later emerged of tenants making facetime calls before perishing in the inferno. By sunrise the flames and billowing smoke were still visible across the London skyline and the smouldering hulk had claimed 72 victims.

In the hours and days immediately following the fire, that corner of West London was inundated with national and international news organisations wanting to understand what, why, how, where and when this disaster had happened. Above all, who and what was to blame for an entire tower block going up in flames in one of the world's richest cities. The post-event became a textbook example of journalism trying to get to the very bottom of the story. Virtually no politician, local or national, no media commentator, no public official responsible for building regulations, no public bystander was immune from the outrage that such a blaze could happen causing such a catastrophic loss of life.

The exhaustive media coverage including local outlets explored every imaginable issue that could have caused the fire, probing official decisions, public warnings from local residents' associations, the regulatory framework and the minutiae of construction decisions taken during the refurbishment of the block in the two years before the blaze. It was unfortunately investigative journalism that came too late for the victims. Journalism it turns out, had seemingly failed to alert the residents, public and officials to the potential risks of a disaster in the making, when cladding, vulnerable to fire, was used to insulate the outside of the tower block.

On the 15th June, the day following the fire, British Prime Minister Theresa May quickly announced a public inquiry into the disaster, so blatant it seemed were the errors of the public authorities in preventing it from happening.¹ The disaster also raised very important questions for journalism and its practitioners. Why were these public safety failures not spotted beforehand?

¹ On June 14th the author was among the first commentators to call for a public inquiry on BBC Radio 5 Live, BBC R4's PM Programme, BBC Radio London and the BBC News Channel.

Was this due to the failure of grassroots journalism and a consequence of the economic failure of countless local newspapers? Was a deficit in local journalism putting the public at risk?

This chapter explores how local journalism failed to report on Grenfell before the blaze, ignoring the publicized concerns of the community, in particular those raised by the Grenfell resident's association about fire safety, that followed a similar fire at Lakanal House in Camberwell, South London, in 2009. In this sense it will argue that Grenfell was a disaster foretold.

What do we really expect from 'local journalism'?

The journalistic response to the 2009 Lakanal House Fire remains a cogent example of how local journalism can hold power to account. That disaster, where 6 people died, underlined the dangers of fire in tower blocks. It led to greater public awareness of the risks posed by fire to those living in high-rise residential buildings. This did not, however, stop the tragedy at Grenfell.

Holding power to account and keeping citizens informed about public affairs are integral to what is broadly characterized as the 'fourth estate' in power relations across liberal democracies. For more than a century an eco-system of local journalism evolved which also fed the national story-telling appetites of the biggest selling newspapers and broadcasters. It has been credited with binding local communities together, shaping distinctive identities and despite its imperfections, remained important and relevant to keeping readers and viewers alive to some interesting and important goings on in their communities (Mair 2013, Nielsen 2015, NAW 2018). Local power relationships evolved in a way that fostered what you might call a '*culture of exposure*'. It was the fear of exposure of misdemeanors that provided local editors with real leverage.

At their best, "local newsbrands are a unique and powerful campaigning force which can bring about real change for the communities they serve" (NMA, 2018). The News Media Association, the trade body for local and regional newspapers in the UK also claim that despite the public's growing scepticism about news providers more generally in the digital age, local papers remain the most trusted of all news sources, placed ahead of local commercial broadcasters, search engines, social media and other local websites (YouGov 2018). At the last 'census' there were still 1000 local newspapers in the UK (Local Media Works 2018) and 65% of people who read a newspaper everyday read one of them.

Nevertheless, while editorial aspirations typically strove to scrutinise local town hall decisions, cover crime and punishment in local magistrates and crown courts and expose local corruption, recent reality has fallen short of the democratic accountability of yesteryear. Despite aspirational values, journalism's declining potential has been widely critiqued by those observing the declining number of local news providers. Guardian commentator George Monbiot (2009) decried local journalism as one of the, "most potent threats to British democracy, championing the underdog, misrepresenting democratic choices, defending business, the police and local elites from those who seek to challenge them."

In Britain it is also increasingly the case that 80% of local media outlets are controlled by 6 large organisations including Newsquest and Trinity Mirror (Media Reform Coalition, 2017).

Therefore, since these organisations work on economies of scale and often provide news from locations remote from the locality it has become more difficult to represent the communities they serve.

The Press Gazette (2018), which has been charting local press decline over the past two decades has reported on the closure of several hundred titles. In the wake of the Grenfell disaster, the intensity of the scrutiny of ‘what went wrong’ also fell on a failing local media. Emily Bell (2017) described the disaster as an example of “an accountability vacuum left by (a) crumbling local press.” The assertion here is that greater scrutiny of the record of Kensington and Chelsea committee meetings and officials, in particular their response to active online groups, such as the Grenfell Action Group, a well-organised local community group that made representations to Kensington and Chelsea Council on behalf of local residents’ about their concerns over refurbishment work, would have potentially placed pressure on the local authority to listen more attentively to its critics during the refurbishment of the tower blocks throughout 2015-17. The warning signs, the argument runs, were missed by local news providers, specifically *Kensington and Chelsea News*.

It’s clear that in the lead up to the Grenfell Tower blaze the online presence of the local residents’ association and in particular the Grenfell Action Group blog were significant. However, a review undertaken by the author of local coverage shows the local paper did not champion their cause and as a result, other important outlets in the local news eco-system failed to pick up on the story. It shows that there was very little local coverage of the issues being raised by the Grenfell Action Group before the fire. This is curious because local residents at Grenfell often used the disaster at Lakanal House to illustrate their concerns over the failure of the local housing authority to be transparent about, for example, their home’s Fire Risk Assessment. Residents openly worried about the *probability* of repeating the mistakes at Lakanal and feared that only a disaster would bring a halt to the housing authorities’ “negligence”, as they saw it (Barling, 2017).

What this discussion does remind us is that readers have grown to expect that local journalism demonstrates greater care for the community, understands the values of that community and prioritises solutions to their problems as much as identifying structural social, economic or political harms that may impact on their communities. At Grenfell this may not have happened before the disaster. But, as I shall now argue, the reporting of the Lakanal House tragedy demonstrates that local journalism can provide strong public warnings about potential hazards and disaster risks even if they end up being ignored.

Reporting the Lakanal House fire: Lessons and a warning

Raphael Cervi was mid-way through his shift at the London Bridge restaurant on July 9th 2009 where he worked as a waiter, when he took the call from his wife Danielle. They were raising two young children in their home in one to the largest tower block estates in Camberwell. Their flat at the top of the block was well proportioned and spacious, with stunning views all the way to central London. Their neighbours were postmen, care workers and council officers and even fashion

designers. Little did they know they were living in a death trap. Not because the building was structurally unsound, but rather because the policies and procedures designed to keep people safe in tower blocks were being regularly flouted. It would take the fire disaster in 2009 to reveal how far the health and safety rot had penetrated.

Danielle was clearly in a panic. There was a fire in their block and she didn't know what to do. How could she get herself and the two children to safety? The local authority landlord had not made it clear to residents how they should behave in a fire. The basic guidance was to '*stay put*' and let firefighters get you out safely.

By the time Raphael arrived back at Lakanal House, the LFB were already tackling the blaze, immediately declared a major incident. A *bridgehead*² had been established on the 9th floor, but had had to be evacuated as the fire spread below the firefighters. That was unprecedented in tower block fires. Several flats on different floors had smoke billowing out of their windows (Barling, 2017). No firefighter could fathom why. Rafael rang his wife again, panic overwhelming him, for his own safety he was held back and was reassured that firefighters would be able to rescue them. They were wrong. He watched helplessly as his young family were consumed by the flames.

By now chaos reigned in the operation to extinguish the fire, which was behaving unpredictably. It was moving sideways and downwards through the building. It was not being contained to the original flat where an electrical appliance had started the blaze. '*Compartmentation*' was supposed to give firefighters 60 minutes to reach and contain a flat fire. Over many years of legitimate refurbishments this basic architectural fire-retarding feature had been compromised. Subsequently, this became a key feature of reporting in the local media for several years after the Lakanal fire. In fact, there is evidence that such local news coverage encouraged residents' associations across the UK, including the Grenfell Action Group, to ask more questions of their social landlords about fire safety in their own buildings. When in 2015 the major refurbishment project got underway at Grenfell, residents quoted Lakanal repeatedly. The Grenfell Action Group lobbied the local authority for access to information based on the recommendations of the 2013 Lakanal Inquest, which unlike a public inquiry, was not able allowed to look into all factors that led up to the fire.

At Lakanal firefighters got lost in the block in the tremendous heat and smoke of the blaze as it intensified. Worse still they had no known evacuation plans to hand. Each flat had been designed with a designated escape route along their external balcony to the main stairwell. Most residents had no idea it was for that purpose, firefighters had no idea, nor did council officials when asked. Escape routes were often blocked. This became a matter the Lakanal inquest dwelt

² This is how the forward firefighting station at a major incident is described. In a tower block this would usually be established within the building so that breathing apparatus and other essential firefighting equipment can be assembled close to the seat of the fire. At Lakanal this proved impossible to maintain as the fire spread along the panels outside the building and also through cavities within it. As a result of the Lakanal blaze, firefighters training was revised to recognise that fires could not necessarily always be contained within the '*compartment*' of the individual flat as originally envisaged, hence '*compartmentation*'.

on in detail. Although Grenfell Tower was a different design to Lakanal, the Grenfell Action Group remained concerned that there were also inadequate evacuation protocols in their block.

Local journalism revealed that Raphael's family perished needlessly in their flat because fire safety in tower blocks had been neglected, falling down the list of priorities for public and private landlords (BBC London News, South London Press, London Evening Standard, ITV London). It had been a disaster waiting to happen. Arguably it would have been impossible to have revealed all these dramatic oversights without the intensity of local newsgathering in the wake of the Lakanal disaster. These important insights were valuable to the residents' group at Grenfell but sadly were unable to prevent disaster.

At Lakanal House the LFB could not initially explain the spread of the fire. Two fire experts, Sam Webb, an architect, and Arnold Tarling, a surveyor, appeared regularly in the local media suggesting that the external cladding and UPVC windows, which melt in extreme heat, may have contributed to the spread of the fire. Both experts had extensive experience in investigating the fire safety of buildings, yet they were regularly undermined in public by those whose interests they challenged. These experts turned out to be right, but during the initial phase of reporting on the Lakanal fire there were robust denials from the local authority, the company that installed the improvements and anyone else who had an interest to defend in the refurbished block. The details emerging early on, prompted the local BBC newsgathering operation, to invest resources in searching for answers.³

BBC London was a very important part of the eco-system of local news gathering in the capital city and an important feeder of stories to their network news partners. Very quickly journalists identified the Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) document as an important source of safety information. Crucially, the FRA, as a legal requirement for landlords of multiple occupancy dwellings, should ensure fire safety by monitoring potentially risky structural changes to a building.

Newsgatherers at BBC London decided to issue a series of Freedom of Information requests, to identify when local authorities across London had carried out the last FRA in each of their Tower blocks. It soon became clear to journalists that the LFB, the key fire regulator, had neither the FRA information nor did they know how many tower blocks were covered by their fire service across the capital. They also had no idea how many authorities were complying with the law by gathering this legally required information. Local authorities stalled, some even refused to provide the information.

The BBC reported that the vast majority of local authorities had a very patchy idea of how compliant their tower blocks were with the Fire Regulatory Reform Order. This enabling legalisation, introduced in 2005, made all landlords (public and private) part of a self-regulatory regime for fire safety and removed the responsibility for inspecting premises from the LFB. According to a BBC investigation in 2009 it became clear the system was poorly policed and even

³ The author was the chief investigative journalist with BBC London at the time and ran a number of investigations into Lakanal over a period of 4 years. Longevity assists with credibility in getting sources to open up, but also brings with it a measure of hostility from those whom journalists investigate.

more poorly adhered to by public landlords (Barling, 2009). It also reported that it was inevitable that in such a lax regime people would eventually die again. The FRA issue flagged up at Lakanal became central to the Grenfell Action Group's search for answers from their local authority during the refurbishment of their block in the months leading up to their disastrous fire.

So, long before Grenfell the Lakanal Inquest established that building regulations were ambivalent enough to allow for flammable materials to be used inappropriately. By devoting resources to the story, BBC London was able to shine a bright light on fire safety, producing in excess of 200 reports across all outlets on the Lakanal Fire between 2009-2013. Its lead was followed by the South London Press, The Evening Standard, and on occasions BBC National News. It was the classic public interest story kept alive by a news provider that had the resources to devote time and energy to keep the story and the debate about fire safety on the public agenda.

It's worth recalling what the coroner, Justice Frances Kirkham, recommended to then local government minister, Eric Pickles, in her Rule 43 letter. A ruling that gave Rafael Cervi hope that the deaths of his wife and children might prevent future tragedy.

“It is recommended that your department review Approved Document B ... to ensure that it provides clear guidance in relation to Regulation B4 of the Building Regulations, with particular regard to the spread of fire over the external envelope of the building and the circumstances in which attention should be paid to whether proposed work might reduce existing fire protection” (Kirkham, 2013).

The disruption of the journalism eco-system

The Lakanal House fire came at the very start of the disruptive era provoked by social media. Journalists were increasingly able to connect quickly with local contacts on the ground and feed this information into their newsgathering workflow. The anger in local meetings on the disaster could be fed to journalists quickly. Residents with access to their local representatives could garner information 'the press' found difficult to extract from the press office, and local residents positively encouraged filming in their premises when the local authority banned filming onsite.

The poor quality of FRAs, the questionable '*stay put*' policy, the cladding, the fire service equipment shortages and shortcomings, had all been exposed. It could be reasonably argued that if public interest journalism raised all the obvious safety issues that contributed to the Lakanal fire in 2009 and reported extensively on the findings of the 2013 inquest this should have identified the need for thorough shifts in public policy. And yet despite all these investigations and the leverage it offered to the Grenfell Action Group to raise important questions, Grenfell Tower still succumbed to disaster in 2017.

In the context of the impact of local journalism on the processes of governance and public responses to disasters it could be argued local journalism made serious headway in the aftermath of the Lakanal event. Investigative reporting helped open up the public discourse so the public and public authorities could discuss the plausible remedies to a lax fire safety regime. Reporting made many public officials deeply uncomfortable and demonstrated that local journalism can, to a point, give voice to a disaster-affected community. Nevertheless, no individual has to date been held to

account, no one went to jail, although in early 2018 the local authority, the London Borough of Southwark, was heavily fined for breaches of its duty of care as a landlord. The bereaved families also received compensation.

What journalism can do, and did in this case, is ask how and why. What it can't do is force politicians to put things right. The danger is, once the story or spotlight moves on, it becomes difficult to keep using a '*culture of exposure*' to effect change. All this investigative work was of course done with hindsight at Lakanal, alerted to the dangers of tower block fires post-event. This clearly did offer foresight to the residents involved in the Grenfell Action Group, but it failed to deliver changes at the policy level which could have prevented another disaster. In this sense even where journalism does work, there are significant limitations to the power of the media to sway the debate onto an arc of justice.

At the local level many newspapers and their owners are looking back up at the cliff face as one by one they have fallen over the edge. The digital revolution promised renewed possibilities for local activism. Hyperlocal journalism, citizen journalists and bloggers would fill cyberspace with informed discussion and liberating voices. There is some evidence around the Lakanal and Grenfell disasters that this was starting to happen in a rather disjointed way.

In the days and weeks following the Grenfell Tower Fire social media platforms buzzed with comment, questions and demands for direct and meaningful intervention. But how much did all this internet chatter really matter? How did it impact on public discourse? What evidence that a 'Fifth Estate' as Dutton (2009) has called it, was gaining traction to add something new and 'networked' to the public discourse, so often dominated by political elites and the mainstream press? Could social media be an effective replacement for a vigilant local media reporting on such a disaster?

One recent study analysed the type of news discourse that emerged on Twitter in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell disaster. It argued that despite the vast number of tweets on the subject in the weeks following the disaster, the type of words, topics and subjects, raised and those who raised them suggests that the social media outputs often reflect an inclination to support existing institutional views of the subject matter (Barling and Rathnayake, 2018). The most retweeted participant in this research study was Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the UK Labour party. In other words, not yet a replacement, more of a complementary source.

In contrast to the Lakanal fire where voices from the disaster-affected community were amplified by the local media creating a running story and investigating the causes and consequences of the fire, at Grenfell the most powerful impact of the "Fifth Estate" seems to have been the immediate calls for a public inquiry and placing pressure on Prime Minister Theresa May, who made an exceptionally swift decision to announce an inquiry into the fire at Grenfell. A public inquiry, chaired by Sir Martin Moore-Blick a former Lord Justice of Appeal, is now fully underway and at the time of writing is into its second year.

But there is little systematic evidence that local voices were heard any more clearly following the Grenfell tragedy. This form of platform journalism still lends itself to powerful existing institutional actors. It may be as more sophisticated approaches evolve to exploit these

platforms this will change but what was clear was that the local reporting lessons of Lakanal had not been learned.

A recent parliamentary inquiry into the Welsh local media landscape confirmed widespread fears about the decline of local journalism, but it also bemoaned the lack of empirical research on the impact of social media on the policy making process (National Assembly for Wales, 2018). It identified some dysfunction in our understanding of local media and its relationship to democracy during this period of digital transition. A lot of what we are doing is guessing and there is currently no effective means of judging whether new digital sources of information are closing has been characterised as the ‘News deficit.’ In other words, as local papers fail, there is as yet inadequate evidence to show that social media information flows into this gap. Like all revolutions we are still in the midst of a process of intense disruption. If it remains difficult to comprehensively establish what the sources of digital information are on the ground, it is even more difficult to speculate on how the public discourse might be impacted by these new sources and what this means for decision-makers.

It is nevertheless now possible to see beyond the hyperbole of the falsely declared dawn of social media as an essential tool of accountability in democracy.

This group of disparate participants, a fifth estate, in an evolving eco-system *could* be a new vehicle for democratic renewal. Networked individuals *can* take advantage of the new methods of distribution to channel robust and critical thinking, even make the voices of ordinary people count. But what matters, is what happens in practice.

Conclusions: Quality, accountability, public policy and the continuing role of journalism?

The digital revolution has been very painful. With the loss of so many newspaper titles and paid jobs it has been hard to see anything but a very bleak future for an alignment of quality and local journalism. It is easy to see how the loss of the local journalists, their newspapers and coverage in the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea *might* have had an impact on coverage of the concerns so widely circulated by the Grenfell Action Group before the fire that killed 72 people. It often takes a disaster for journalists to recognise there is actually an important story to be told. It is equally possible that the risks and vulnerabilities that contributed to the disaster at Grenfell may have been missed when there were newspaper titles aplenty. It is easy to be wise after the event.

What on the other hand *is* perhaps unusual about the Grenfell disaster for our understanding of the impact of reporting on public discourse, is its proximity in time to another tower block fire disaster, whose causes and consequences *were* covered extensively by the local press. Almost all the issues that contributed to the disaster at Grenfell were well ventilated in 2009 *after* the Lakanal House fire and during the public inquest in 2013 into the deaths at Larkanal House.

The recommendations of that inquest were well reported and indeed dispatched to the Secretary of State responsible for the oversight of public housing. The problem is, nothing happened. This suggests that it wasn't so much a deficit in journalism, nor the impact of this

journalism on public discourse and the extent to which the voices of the adversely affected were put in the public domain, but the quality of policy-making and the decisions taken by government after the facts about what caused the Lakanal fire were well-known.

Recent research shows that local voices can provide alternative perspectives in the immediate aftermath of a disaster (Barling & Rathnayake). These voices are no doubt amplified in the digital eco-system and across social media. Although it's clear we do need more research to determine how, and even if, this social media discourse feeds into the policy-making process.

It remains extremely difficult to track the newcomers to the news eco-system and assess the value that they add (Ponsford, 2018). It is even more difficult to assess if they are reducing what we have called here a '*News deficit*'. More research is clearly needed to map this emerging eco-system and to properly understand what service it is actually fulfilling in a democratic system which relies on a plurality of views to sustain it and an eclectic mix of outlets to challenge and disseminate those views.

If there are established local media players, there is little doubt that communities at risk from or affected by disaster can have much clearer communication pathways to power. But it is important to recognize that to address hazards and vulnerabilities that cause disaster and support communities in their recovery needs action by public authorities. The Public Inquiry into Grenfell is yet to report, one of the issues it may well tackle is why matters plainly placed on the public record by journalism were ignored by successive governments. Only this, in truth, can prevent disaster, not journalism alone. This does not mean that local journalism doesn't matter, it does mean, however, in the emerging digital eco-system we should be careful what we wish for.

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