

PRESS RECOGNITION PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Panel with William Perrin of Talk About Local, held on 12 May 2015 at the Panel's offices at 88 Wood Street, London EC2V 7QR

Present: Dr David Wolfe QC (Chair of the Panel), William Perrin (WP), Susie Uppal (Executive Director of the Panel), Tim Suter (Panel Board Member), and Holly Perry (Head of Governance at the Panel) (taking notes)

Welcome and introductions

1. The Chair welcomed William Perrin of Talk About Local to the Panel's offices.
2. Following introductions, the Chair set out the planned format for the meeting, which was expected to last around an hour and a half. This was one of a series of meetings which the Board was holding in order to seek early input to how the Panel could give life to the Royal Charter recognition criteria. To date, there had been a wide range views on many of the key issues.
3. In terms of timescales, the Panel had now started preparing documentation setting out proposals for how it intended to go about the task of receiving and considering applications for recognition. The Panel then expected (between May and July 2015) to consult widely, including with hyper locals and civil society groups, on those proposals before publishing them in final form later in the summer of 2015.
4. In addition to the points set out in writing by the Panel in advance of the meeting¹, the Chair emphasised that the Panel would very much welcome comments – as part of the discussions, or in writing after the meeting – on the following points²:
 - the role of hyper locals and the specific issues arising from their perspective; and
 - thoughts about who the Panel should see, meet with and what else it should be doing.
5. The expectation was that the meeting would provide a forum for free and frank exchange of views. The meetings was being held in private, however a note of the key points discussed would be agreed with William Perrin for publication on the Panel's website.

¹ The Panel wrote to attendees setting out the areas for discussion ahead of the meeting; details of the points covered in discussions with all stakeholders are published on the Panel's website: <http://www.pressrecognitionpanel.org.uk/documents/Letter%20to%20attendees.pdf>

Discussions

Definition of relevant publisher and the role of a regulator for the sector

6. As part of its discussion with academics at Cardiff University held on 6 May 2015³, the Panel had had an opportunity to consider the definition of 'relevant publisher' and had concluded that a number were likely to be caught by the definition. The Royal Charter contemplated multiple regulators, and it the Panel was anticipating that at some point in the future, the sector would be interested in seeking cover in relation to exemplary damages and costs-shifting that arose by virtue of being a member of a recognised regulator. This might be through an existing regulator, or through the emergence of a new regulator specifically for the sector.
7. The Panel's emphasis, as part of the consultation, was to strike a balance between the needs of the large players (i.e. national press) and smaller groups (such as hyper locals) and to formulate a regime that would cater for everyone.
8. The benefits of small publishers keeping themselves out of court were significant, and could mean preventing someone losing their home if they found themselves subject to court proceedings. The effect would be to enable free speech, and support and sustain good journalism by keeping hyperlocals out of court.

Digital developments

9. WP explained that in relation to website publishing, Leveson had not anticipated the complexity of the digital issues on the horizon, or the challenges these would bring for the traditional press. Particularly at a local and regional level, there had been a trend of titles closing, and 'news harvesters' evolving following the hollowing out of press rooms. At the same time, populations were increasingly keen to hold local government to account, and to scrutinise at a local level. Talk About Local had been funded by Channel 4 initially to support the development of local press websites. It was now a consulting company, providing advice on cutting edge internet publishing matters.
10. In WP's view, there were two major challenges facing the sector:
 - a) new forms of news distribution (via the web) which might spell the end of traditional print media; and

³ Note available on the Panel's [website](#).

b) technical challenges arising around who was regarded as the publisher in these new forms of distribution.

11. WP advised that the Panel speak to Emily Bell⁴ to learn more about social media platforms. Another individual with whom the Panel should discuss the issues was Martin Moore (Media Standards Trust). The publication of stories straight onto Twitter and Facebook as a very recent development (rather than using a link to the newspaper's website). This development in particular raised issues about who the publisher was. Similarly, Google was producing digital output from newspapers and channelling this onto the web via an algorithm. Other issues to contend with arising from digital output were instant corrections, change control and 'block chain' technology (monitoring what happens to ownership via product design). The regulatory locus was difficult to pinpoint in these circumstances.
12. WP advised that there was a need for an individuals to advise and assist regulators (as well as the Panel) with significant strengths and core competence in digital platforms and related issues. There was also a need for such individuals at Board level, to hold the executive to account. DW acknowledged the position, though considered that some of the issues were likely to be at the outer limits of the Panel's jurisdiction and might be matters for the courts to determine.
13. There were also questions around what was ethically permissible, what was legal, and how such activity might be best governed. WP considered that the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Authority's (HEFA) model was interesting: HEFA's Board covered a very wide spectrum of individuals including scientists, journalists, a barrister, women who had undergone fertility treatment, and a bishop. Their regime was on the cutting edge of the legally and morally permissible, which had enabled the UK to be a global pioneer of ethically challenging embryology and fertilisation research. HEFA's work on public interest might inform the Panel's approach. Technology would allow journalists to do ever more ethically challenging work and there would be a need for the regulatory regime to keep up.

Development of hyper locals

14. WP explained that the development of hyper locals was analogous to the brewing industry, in that in response to changing tastes, people were increasingly turning to microbreweries and local producers. WP had set up his own community site for the King's Cross area in 2006/07 -

⁴ Emily Bell is Professor of Professional Practice at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the Director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, part of the CSJ, in New York City.

<http://kingscrossenvironment.com/> - costs were in the region of £90 annually. Publishing of articles was undertaken at a natural pace, rather than at a specific time and on a specific day. A team of three people contributed articles on a voluntary basis (with eight people having worked on the site since its inception). Visits to the site varied from 200 to 300 a day, to 2,000 to 3,000 a day, with the average daily figure being around 1,000. WP did not exercise editorial control over the site, but could remove an item if necessary. There was no advertising on the site. In WP's view, the site did not meet the definition of 'relevant publisher'.

15. Other sites, such as one which operated on the Isle of Wight - <http://onthewight.com/> - advertising generated sufficient resource to cover costs. In addition to the online site, OntheWight also published a printed copy, providing media plurality on the Isle of Wight where there previously wasn't any.

Representing hyper locals' interests

16. WP explained that a number of attempts had been made to form a representative group for hyper locals, including the Hyperlocal Alliance. Most of the hurdles were financial. Many hyper locals had adopted limited company status, to avoid and limit their liabilities, but this prevented them applying for lottery funding. Talk About Local was the nearest thing to a representative body as the hyper locals had. WP was currently in the process of reviewing the map of hyper local websites. There were around 750 on a database (a web list funded by the Carnegie Trust), but around 100 could be removed as they were now out of date.

Demonstration of a range of hyper local sites

17. WP showed the Panel a wide range of other hyper locals that were in existence, including the following:

<http://www.gurnnurn.com/>
<http://www.soglos.com/>
<http://www.london-se1.co.uk/>
<http://www.sheffieldforum.co.uk/>
<http://www.wv11.co.uk/>
<http://localweblist.net/>
<https://myturriff.co.uk/>
<http://w14london.ning.com/>
<http://b31.org.uk/>
<http://heeleyonline.org/>
<https://cricklade.wordpress.com/>
<https://twitter.com/formbyvillage>
<http://formbyfirst.typepad.com/>
<http://alittlebitofstone.com/>

<http://parwich.org/>

18. The Sheffield Forum was run by 25 volunteer moderators. This operated as a small business, and raised some money through advertising. Parwich.org was the community site for a rural village in the Peak District. It generated around five articles a day, and the editor exercised very close control of content. FormbyFirst had around 30,000 followers (as with many hyper locals, the number of followers far outweighed the size of the population being served) and had recently branched out to Twitter. Again, there was very close editorial control of content. It was likely that both the Parwich and Formby hyper locals might meet the 'relevant publisher' definition. The Brixton Blog also published a hard copy format (the Brixton Bugle) which generated income from advertising. A common feature of many hyper local sites was for original articles to be pasted into Facebook to generate interest. This blurring and spinning off into other formats was not anticipated or envisaged by Leveson and did throw up interesting regulatory issues.
19. DW explained that it would be possible for hyper locals to opt in and secure the protection that would be provided by a recognised regulator. There would be a number of questions to which the hyper locals would want responses, including what they would be opting into, who owned the process, as well as more detail about the benefit.
20. It was important that hyper locals did not wait to see what happened with IPSO and IMPRESS, but instead had early discussions with the Panel to ensure the guidance being formulated was informed by their views and requirements.
21. WP agreed to arrange for four or five hyper locals to attend an event at the margins of the Panel's consultation event in Birmingham planned for 8 July. Dave Harte at Birmingham City University was also likely to be able to assist with generating interest and facilitating an event. DW thanked WP for the offer and emphasised that it was vitally important for the Panel to accurately reflect the sectors needs in its developing approach to recognition.
22. DW added that it was likely that the Panel would do a webinar as part of the suite of consultation events, and this might pick up other hyper locals not able to attend in Birmingham.

Additional information

23. DW concluded the session by inviting WP to submit additional information as he wished. POST MEETING NOTE: WP corresponded with the Panel on 13

May 2015 to provide links to all the sites used in the demonstration (as referenced in paragraph 17) and provided the following additional comment:

Your panel should read the following two posts on algorithmic distribution of content - the relationships with Facebook and Google are fundamentally changing the nature of media distribution.

See also today's coverage of Facebook Instant Articles and Googles Digital News Initiative

<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/silicon-valley-and-journalism-make-or-break>

<http://talkaboutlocal.org.uk/public-service-distribution-in-the-age-of-the-algorithm/>

Closing comments

24. The Chair thanked WP for attending the meeting and for speaking so openly and frankly about issues.