TEXT 1

The town without news

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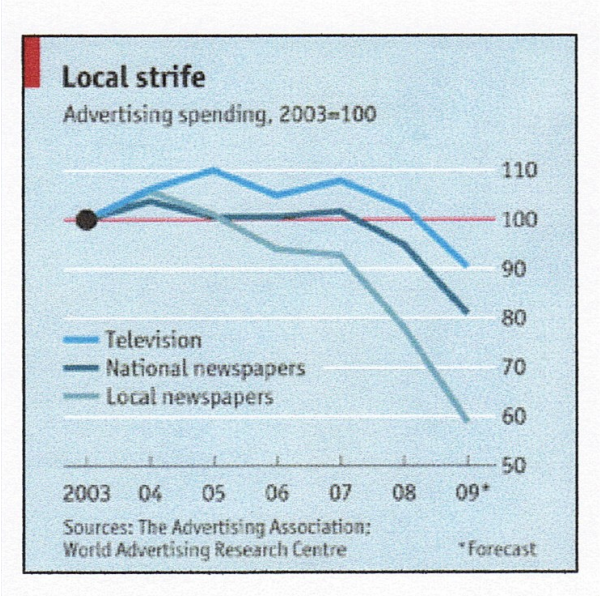

As local newspapers collapse, information is finding new ways to reach people. Not all are hi-tech

WHAT happens when a place loses its newspaper? Most of the 80 or so local papers that have closed in Britain since the beginning of last year were the second- or third-strongest publications in their markets. But the weekly *Bedworth Echo,* which published its last issue on July 10th, was the only paper dedicated to the town's news. A small former mining settlement in the Midlands, Bedworth also lacks a radio station. Although it will still be covered by newspapers focused on its bigger neighbours, it is now a town without news.

It will not be the last. With a few exceptions local newspapers are declining quickly. Trinity Mirror, which owned the *Echo,* shut 27 local newspapers last year and has already closed 22 this year. The main reason more local papers have not collapsed, says Paul Zwillenberg of OC&C, a consultancy, is that they were cushioned by large operating margins. Many have gone from annual profits of up to 30% to negligible earnings. As they tip into loss, the trickle of closures is likely to become a torrent. Enders Analysis, a media consultancy, reckons a third to a half may go in the next five years.

An advertising slump has hit local newspapers much harder than national papers or other media. The growing reach of national brands like Rightmove and Auto Trader means that local papers have lost their grip on property and car advertising. Most painful has been the disappearance of job ads. Public-sector recruitment has shifted mostly to official websites in the past few years, and recession has eroded the rest. In July 1999 an edition of the *Echo* carried 17 pages of job advertisements. The final issue had one-fifth of one page.

As it declined, the *Echo* withdrew from its office in the middle of town and trimmed its coverage of local affairs. By the end it was hardly an effective watchdog. "We used to nearly

write the stories for the journalists," says Richard Chattaway, a county councillor. Not surprisingly, the newspaper's circulation more than halved between 2001 and 2008.

Something is nonetheless being lost with its departure. The *Echo* carried reports of school plays, notices of future meetings of the Korean war veterans' association, local sports results and other humble fare. It also reinforced a sense of community. Borough politics has generally revolved around assertions that Bedworth is receiving more, or less, public money than neighbouring Nuneaton, according to Bill Hancox, a councillor. It is not clear where the debate will carry on. The internet is undermining local newspapers much more effectively than it is supporting alternatives.

"This is a poor town, and not computer literate," says Anne Tippett of the Civic Hall, an arts centre. Bedworth has no prominent blog. Indeed, local politicians appear to be just coming around to e-mail as a means of mass communication. Even if online sources of local news existed, they would not reach many of those who relied on the local paper. The *Echo* was disproportionately read by skilled manual workers and by the middle-aged and old. In its final throes it reached just 15% of the town's 15- to 24-year-olds but 31% of people aged 45-54, reckons JICREG, a local-newspaper research group. Not, in short, the sort of people with Twitter accounts.

Claire Enders of Enders Analysis notes that the people who most need information about local goings-on are the immobile old and the poor, for whom the news that a local clinic is about to close can be vital. They are the people least likely to have access to broadband. As newspapers close, people will seek local news on television and radio, much of it supplied by the BBC. It will not be nearly as detailed.

Yet alternatives are emerging. As its newspaper declined, Bedworth's politicians worked to set up local residents' groups as a conduit for views and information. Their meetings are advertised by means of leaflets posted through people's doors. The Civic Hall too sends leaflets to 12,500 households, and hands out more at the annual carnival and on Bonfire Night. Now that the local paper is no more, Ms Tippett plans to do more of that. The local borough council delivers an increasingly professional-looking newsletter. So do local churches. Oddly, a problem that is high-tech in origin has strengthened a low-tech form of communication.

One person who hands out a lot of leaflets these days is Lynne Price, a local activist known affectionately as "Gobby Lynne". Yet she gets much of her information about planning proposals, crime and so on from the internet. This illustrates one effect of the digitisation of information. As newspapers weaken and die, most people probably become less informed about local affairs, but a few motivated folk grow extremely knowledgeable. Ms Price will miss the *Bedworth Echo,* but not as a source of news. It was, she says, a useful way of getting the word out.

To an extent, the problem of local news is generational—a result of the difficulty of adapting to new technology. As more newspapers fail, and the broadband generation ages and settles down, it is likely that online local-news outfits will strengthen. Intriguing experiments are already under way. In northeast England, Trinity Mirror has "Gazette Live", a mix of professional news and user-generated content, sorted by postcode. Associated Northcliffe Digital, an arm of the media group that runs the *Daily Mail* newspaper, is rolling out a string of town-oriented websites. Associated cleverly located the local gadflies and community chatterboxes—the "gobby" folk—and got them to contribute.

At the moment hyper-local sites tend to be filled with discussions of town fetes and the next

music night at the village pub. It may be, says Roland Bryan of Associated, that this is the equivalent of small talk at a cocktail party, and that people will eventually get down to local politics. Or they may not. As local newspapers fail, we may learn that their real value was less as a check on politicians than simply as a forum for casual conversation—a place where a town can talk to itself.