

Local News in Leicester and Leicestershire: A Civic Identity Balance Sheet to Guide Future Action

About the Project

Leicester and Leicestershire have a proud tradition of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, sustained in part by careful local journalism. Accurate, timely news helps connect communities and lets people understand and take part in local decision-making.

This PhD project will use participatory action research, an approach in which researchers and community members investigate a problem together, to build an evidence-based picture of how these challenges are affecting local news media's role in nurturing civic identity. Civic identity means people's sense of themselves as part of a community with a shared future. When it weakens, people can disengage from public life, co-operation across divisions becomes harder, and communities find it more difficult to solve social and political problems. The researcher will develop a new analytical framework to examine how local news shapes civic identity, and will explore whether new, community-based models of responsible news provision can help address the gap left as under-funded mainstream outlets withdraw from local news and technological shifts fragment audiences.

The project brings together academic expertise in misinformation, news and journalism with practitioner expertise from Leicester Gazette, a pioneering, member funded, community-owned news organisation. It is designed to benefit three Leicester and Leicestershire communities, which are defined inclusively: the local journalism community, local news audiences, and community practitioners in local authority and third-sector organisations. It responds to a clear local need for actions that help people live well together and increase feelings of belonging, and treats local news as a community institution whose trustworthiness and role in connecting people come from how it informs citizens about local affairs.

The project will produce a civic identity balance sheet, giving communities, news providers and local partners a practical way to understand and strengthen the role of local news in local life.

This project has been co-created with and is supported by researchers from Loughborough University and the University of Leicester, and partners at Leicester Gazette. The successful candidate for this project will be enrolled at Loughborough University.

Project Aims

The overall aims of this project are :

- Positively benefit three Leicester and Leicestershire communities: the local journalism community, local news audiences, and community practitioners in local authority and third-sector organisations.
- Explain how the hollowing-out of local news is enabling the unchecked spread of misinformation in ways that undermine local civic identity.
- Explore whether new, community-based models of good-quality news provision such as Leicester Gazette's can help fill the growing civic identity deficit.
- Produce a civic identity balance sheet detailing the acute local context of news under-provision and audience fragmentation. In keeping with our intuitive metaphor, the balance sheet will document local news media system "assets" and "liabilities" when it comes to civic identity. Who "owns" those "assets", by which we mean with whom or with what do they originate? What are the short-term and long-term factors that produce "surpluses" and "deficits"?

Supervisory Team

1. Lead Academic Supervisor: [Professor Andrew Chadwick \(Loughborough University\)](#)
2. Academic Co-Supervisor(s): [Dr Timothy Neff \(University of Leicester\)](#)
3. Community Supervisor(s): [Emma Guy \(Leicester Gazette\)](#)
4. [Community Supervisor\(s\): Rhys Everquill \(Leicester Gazette\)](#)

Key Details

Host University:	Loughborough University
School / department:	<u>Communication and Media</u>
Start date:	1st April 2027
Financial offer:	Tuition fees covered in full (worth approx. £15k-17k across full PhD programme). Monthly stipend based on £21,805 per annum, pro rata, tax free.
Working hours	Full-time (minimum 37.5 hrs per week)
Working Style:	Primarily in-person at host university. Flexible working supported. Working pattern to be agreed between successful candidate and lead supervisor.

Competencies

Collaboratory Core Competencies		
Category	Competency	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Comprehension and evaluation	Strong understanding of the project and its subject matter.	A / I
	Analytical, researcher mindset with keen attention to detail.	A / I
	Communicate complex concepts with clarity and precision.	A / I
	Able to identify connections, patterns, gaps, and irregularities in information/data.	I
	Able to interpret data/information confidently with logic and empathy to derive meaning.	I
Social and emotional	Demonstrable experience of responding effectively to changing contexts, information and demands.	A
	Ability to persevere in the face of challenges/failures and to remain constructive in developing solutions.	A
	Demonstrable passion for learning with clear drive and curiosity to undertake this specific research project.	A / I
	Willingness to immerse oneself in the research subject matter and make a contribution to new knowledge through a PhD.	A / I
	Strong desire to make a positive community impact through the research.	A / I
	Willingness to think deeply about complex concepts and engage with academic ideas and theory.	A / I
Preparedness and potential for success	Experience of working, collaborating and communicating effectively with different stakeholders.	A
	High level of self-motivation and ability to work with minimal guidance.	A / I
	Strong organisational and time-management skills with the ability to balance and prioritise multiple tasks.	A / I
	Ability to identify potential challenges and complexities and thoughtfully consider possible solutions.	A / I
	Able to identify the technical, personal, or professional skills required for a task and take action to develop these.	A / I

Competencies

Collaboratory Core Competencies			
Category		Competency	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Community Context		Genuine desire to undertake community-engaged research over more traditional approaches to research.	A
		Understand the impact of and need for the inclusion of diverse experiences and points of view in research.	A / I
		Appreciation/understanding of the importance of community insight and experience in the generation of new knowledge.	A / I
		Awareness/understanding of the broader societal context related to the subject matter of the project.	A / I

Project Specific Competencies			
Essential	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)	Desirable	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Ability and eagerness to work with people from diverse backgrounds as equal partners in the production of knowledge.	A / I	Prior experience of working with community groups.	A / I
Fluency with professional work cultures, including a capacity to respectfully work and communicate with professionals, and comfort and fluency in reaching out and talking to people.	A / I	Prior experience with research and information gathering, including familiarity with analysing evidence.	A / I
An appreciation of and dedication to high-quality, rigorous knowledge production and clear writing.	A / I	Familiarity with the practices of journalism and a curiosity about how news is reported.	A / I
A genuine curiosity about communities and their use of media in a complex and challenging context.	A/I	Familiarity with reading and analysing research publications.	A / I

References for Further Reading

- Barclay, S., Barnett, S., Moore, M., & Townend, J. (2022). Local news deserts in the UK: What effect is the decline in provision of local news and information having on communities? Charitable Journalism Project. <https://cjpproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/local-news-deserts-in-the-uk.pdf>
- BBC. (2026). BBC announces £160m in savings and 550 job closures. BBC Media Centre <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/2026/bbc-announces-savings-and-job-closures>
- Bhatt, C., Puri, V., Fahad Kamal, S., Patel, S., Sinha, S., Abraham-Gonsalves, S., Grover, S., Magarrell, L., Méndez, J. E., & Sultan, N. (2026). Better together: Understanding the 2022 violence in Leicester. A report by the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the 2022 Leicester violence. SOAS University of London <https://www.leicestereinquiry.org/report>
- Bisiani, S., Gulyas, A., Moore, M., & Heravi, B. (2026). The hollowing out of local newspapers: A longitudinal study of journalistic performance decline and content homogenisation at a major UK publisher. Journalism, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849261474910>
- Brooker, A. (2026, June 22). Biggest UK local newsbrands: Reach sites worst hit after Google algorithm changes. Press Gazette. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/media-metrics/biggest-uk-local-news-websites-2026/>
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- Russell, V. (2024). Reimagining democracy: Communication activism, social justice, and prefiguration in participatory budgeting. Lexington Books.
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