

Full speech by Liverpool Echo editor Maria Breslin at the Journalism Matters Parliamentary Reception on 31 October 2022

The Echo has been championing the Liverpool city region and telling the stories of its remarkable people for more than 140 years. Editing a publication with such a long and proud history is a real privilege - but it's also a huge responsibility. And it is a responsibility both I and the editorial team take extremely seriously.

Quite simply we are a trusted news source. We saw that during covid. The internet is a noisy place and social media even noisier. And in troubled times our audience wanted trusted news from reputable sources fact-checked by qualified journalists. And local news brands are perfectly placed to deliver that trusted news because we enjoy a unique relationship with our readers and our online audience, and it is a relationship that we cherish and respect and never take for granted.

We understand our readers because they are just like us. We understand what keeps them up at night, what makes them laugh, what gets them talking - and this is why our purpose cuts through. Our children go to the same schools, we catch the same buses and trains to work and we socialise in the same pubs, bars and restaurants. Before I was an Echo editor, I was an Echo reader.

During my time at the Liverpool Echo, we have spearheaded a number of high-impact campaigns which, I believe, have made a real difference to the lives of our readers and to the environment of Merseyside.

Our support for the Hillsborough families is undoubtedly the most significant and remains my proudest moment in journalism despite me being only a bit-part player. Stop the Rot was launched in October 2000 in a bid to safeguard and preserve the rich architectural heritage of the city and the wider Merseyside region and prevent beautiful but crumbling buildings from being bulldozed.

Wearing new pyjamas on Christmas Eve is a real Liverpool tradition so we joined forces with a local mum and daughter to support the Pyjama Party - a community-led campaign to collect pyjamas for children who were homeless or in need.

And following the death of Rhys Jones, an innocent schoolboy shot dead as he walked home from football practice, we launched Liverpool Unites raising money to establish a community centre in memory of the football-mad 11-year-old caught up in senseless gang violence.

Some campaigns are meticulously planned, and others are spontaneous. Whose Side Are You On? was our response to the fatal shooting in August this year of nine-year-old Olivia Pratt-Korbel - a little girl fatally wounded in her own home - the very place where she should be safe.

It came exactly 15 years after the murder of young Rhys and meant Liverpool was once again in the national spotlight for all the wrong reasons. And, while we were determined not to let it define our city, we needed to acknowledge we had a problem. We knew instinctively that reporting on the tragedy and the ongoing police investigation was not enough and we appreciated early on we had to reflect the emotions of our readers, to empower them and give them a voice. Because the despair, disbelief and anguish felt by the people of Liverpool when they woke up to news of Olivia's death was quickly replaced by anger and a determination to do the right thing.

At times like this it feels regional media faces more scrutiny because, when the national media go home, we are still accountable to our audience. And our content creation decisions are made accordingly. Will this help the police investigation and will it cause unnecessary suffering to Olivia's family were always questions at the forefront of our mind before publishing.

I'm under no illusion that our future lies in digital publishing, but newspapers are far from niche products and the impact of a powerful front page is undeniable. Whose Side Are You On put the Liverpool Echo at the heart of the call for people to do the right thing and share any information they had with Merseyside Police. It was a very public condemnation of the so-called 'no-grass' culture and the wall of silence which only prolonged the agony before Rhys Jones' family finally found justice.

The front page was bold and unrepentant and attracted much national and international media attention allowing us to amplify our message. There was praise from our peers and gratitude from Merseyside Police's Chief Constable and local politicians. But the real vindication came from our readers who thanked us for articulating their voice.

In covering this most tragic of events we sought to give our audience the trusted news it deserves and expects. There's no speculation, no hearsay, just facts. Just as when a bomb exploded outside Liverpool Women's Hospital on Remembrance Day last year killing suspect Emad Al Swealmeen and seriously injuring the taxi driver. It's easy to have your head turned when the national press descend but we remained true to our core values.

Not everything we do, of course, is so high-profile. But we genuinely believe we have a responsibility to exploit our access to those in power and ask questions on our readers' behalf.

When Liverpool FC played Atletico Madrid in March 2020 and more than 3,000 fans from the Spanish capital, then at the centre of Europe's coronavirus first wave, were allowed to travel to our city despite them playing their home game behind closed doors we asked questions. We were the first to raise the alarm over public health risks and to ask who gave this the go-ahead.

And when Liverpool FC fans were falsely blamed for chaos outside the Stade de France ahead of the 2022 Champions League Final we had a reporter on the ground reporting live and putting us at the heart of the action and the truth. Our readers trust us because we are there and our reporting is live and authentic.

I truly believe Liverpool and the city region is a richer place thanks to the Echo. And, while exposing wrongdoing and holding authorities to account is as central to our ethic as it has ever been, so is celebrating all that is great in our city and helping it to achieve its potential.

After such a torrid year, Liverpool needed Eurovision - not words I must admit I thought I would ever say. We were proud supporters of the Liverpool bid in the same way we supported our Capital of Culture entry back in 2008. And our content, both in print and online, and our very real enthusiasm to host the competition was a key part of the city's bid.

The way we tell stories has changed beyond recognition since I started my journalism career more than 25 years ago. There was no easy access to the internet when I started as a reporter with the Press Association and we relied on a cuttings' library. While mobile phones were very much in their infancy and the size of bricks.

But what hasn't changed for the Liverpool Echo, and for most other regional news brands, is our commitment to public service journalism, to answering questions on behalf of our audience and making others answer questions on their behalf. Educating and informing is, of course, only part of the story. We want to entertain and inspire. Fashion, shopping, television, showbiz and, of course, football have long been part of our content mix. We are a populist publication and unashamedly so.

And our print product remains a trusted friend for so many of our readers. The puzzles, crosswords, the BMDs are part of the fabric of their lives and we worked hard during lockdown to ensure this lifeline for so many people was still delivered through their front doors. We really are a trusted friend.

We have a business model that I believe works but we do need a helping hand. It's wrong that a Facebook audience will never see some of our most important content because of an algorithm I cannot begin to understand or that the BBC will always rank higher in search engines when we have the boots on the ground.

Our commercial ad-revenue-based model has its challenges, but these challenges are not insurmountable and the reward is high - free and trusted news for all - not a nice-to-have based on the ability to pay. And that is important in cities such as Liverpool where financial challenges and deprivation are widespread.

What I care about is the long-term sustainability of local news. Making it a profitable business is a key part to ensuring it remains powerful and relevant. That's why it's so critically important for the legislation giving the new digital regulator, the Digital Markets Unit, to be brought to Parliament without any further delay.

One of my predecessors said editors of the Echo must always remember that our privileged position is temporary. The Echo belongs to Merseyside and we are merely holding the title in trust for future generations of the communities we are proud to serve. It is a role that does bring influence, but of far more importance, it also brings enormous responsibility.

Whatever technological changes lie ahead as the way news is delivered and consumed continues to evolve, I am confident that the editors who come after me will always carry out that responsibility on behalf of the people of Merseyside just as they have since the paper first hit the streets in 1879.

That is why we have a distinguished past - and that is why, with a little support from the government, we have an equally bright future.