I've been shocked by the recent Panama [...]  

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I've been shocked by the recent Panama Papers revelations. We all knew that the rich stashed their wealth overseas away from the taxman, but the way it reaches to the top of British government is mind-boggling.

The Panama Papers point up the media’s importance as the Fourth Estate - a watchdog against the rich and powerful. The old saying goes, news is anything that someone does not want you to read - the rest is just public relations.

It's stunning what the elite get up to when they think we can't see them. They salt their cash away in unsavoury tax havens, while building unlimited snooping powers just to check that we're paying they taxes they happily avoid.

We're ever-more dependent on journalists taking time and effort to sift through the clues to the elite's dirty games. Without the great work of the New York Times or the Guardian we’d still be in the dark, just the way the super-powerful like it.

But traditional journalism is dying out. It’s being replaced by the so-called "new media", such as the Huffington Post, that cover their costs selling online advertising. They're breaking interesting stories for sure, but the important stuff's confined to their fringes.

When their business model is based on maximising numbers of page views, then all they care about is the widest mass audience. But the public don't generally follow scandals until they're too big to ignore: big readership demands celebrity gossip, jokey lists and eye-catching photos.

We face an uncertain future and some tricky choices in the North East. We need to be well-informed about the consequences, and can't leave it to these new media entrants to tell us what we need to know.

We need to hear what Brexit means for Boldon and Benwell, not for Boris and the bankers. Whether the Metro will be extended to Blyth and Washington, not if HS2 will shorten stockbrokers' commuting trips.

The government slashed our public sector employment and now seem to be setting up the NHS for a gutting.

We know that they won't bat an eyelid if a large employer closes down, just wring their hands and spin the lies "that you can't buck the market".

We need a media watchdog to challenge government misinformation. Whether it's regional steel closures, devolution, transport or NHS "reforms", it's the media that stands between us and a neglectful, abusive government. So how can we reinvent our North Eastern media in this brave new media world? It's much easier to care about the peculiar cruelty of Tory austerity when its crushing the lives of people close to us. If we're going to make a stand, then it'll be spurred by our friends being treated unfairly, not abstract tales of injustice elsewhere.

When we're bothered by something, we need to kick up a fuss locally to make sure councillors and MPs
nationally can't ignore our collective voices.

Existing hyper-local campaigning media from local community activists, newsletters and flyers needs linking to established regional platforms, such as the Journal and Chronical.

Most importantly, a good story we can all support needs welltrained journalists to sniff out the smell where something's rotten. In today's market, they need a nose close to the ground, attuned to what's bothering their local readers.

And we're going to have to pay for them, because Fleet Street oligarchs are happy keeping us dumb. We've got to co-operatively fund clever, passionate people to shine a light into the shadowy recesses our masters want kept dark.

In the industrial days we came together to collectively make our lives better, building co-operative sports clubs, swimming pools, and social clubs.

We must remodelise that social pioneering spirit to make media work for us in the North East and let our voices be heard in this busy digital age.

So how can we reinvent our North Eastern media in this brave new media world?