ISPENT yesterday deep in conversation with a range of local media outlets here in Twente in the Netherlands. We were discussing problems they face that threaten the very existence of regional journalism.

The internet’s rise conditioned people to believe that news is freely available. Free news is driven by advertising sales, and that naturally means that good ‘free stories’ are those that attract readers’ attention for adverts.

Unlike in a printed paper, electronic news can reveal precisely which stories attract people’s attention. Pressure to maximise their stories’ appeal to advertisers hands editors the dilemma of sometimes having to choose between attractive or newsworthy stories.

The recent US election showed the risks of fake news sites pandering to voters’ base desires. Entrepreneurs in Montenegro created and promoted outlandish, widely-circulated stories about Trump and Clinton simply to attract American readers for whom advertisers pay a premium price.

And even honest journalism is shifting from a craft business to a production line. In this brave new age, there’s less scope for journalists in some places to stray beyond their regular news beats.

Journalists now have less time to shine the light of truth on murky goings on. Investigative journalism can only take place where there’s a steady flow of reader-friendly stories.

The biggest newspaper investigation in Twente in recent years revealed massive fraud at the local football club, FC Twente.

It was only because their sports reporter was writing match reports and daily transfer stories about the club that he stumbled on the financial skeletons skilfully hidden in the club’s balance sheet.

The resulting public scandal allowed new directors to quickly confess all to the authorities and escape with a small fine and a European football ban. It saved FC Twente: without those revelations and the subsequent breastbeating, the Dutch FA would have had no compunction in relegating and hence bankrupting them.
The local paper was 'the canary in the mine' that saved FC Twente: it shows in miniature the more general role journalists play in exposing all kinds of abuse before they damage our society too deeply.

And herein lies the risk for the North East. We face huge challenges in coming years, the more so with Brexit's inevitable destructive effects on our manufacturing fabric. Temptations will rise for public and private sectors to cut all kinds of corners whilst letting society pick up the tab.

The Tories want to unleash fracking, NHS privatisation, grammar schools workfare and unaffordable housing on the North East and are hoping we'll sullenly acquiesce. Our future welfare as a region will depend on finding ways to allow citizens to expose the malpractice this brings and demand improvement.

Without intense scrutiny, these abuses may go unchecked and bring the North East to the edge of disaster. And it's almost impossible for journalists nowadays to take the time to work undercover to reveal casual abuse in elderly care homes or companies evading paying minimum wage.

But for every abuse of power taking place, there are citizens with a story to tell and a claim to make that we should all take this seriously. And indeed, the idea of citizen journalism has emerged in recent years to help citizens expose wrongdoings and malpractice.

Bringing together citizens' casespecific knowledge together with those journalists with a nose for a story can give the time and space needed to develop the stories that can change the North East's trajectory.

And this has great potential for allowing our councillors and politicians to better hear citizens' own voices and to start resisting this Tory vision of impoverished, scared and isolated North Easteners.

| North East born Paul Benneworth is a senior researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands.

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