# Cover price rises of regional newspapers accentuated decline in sales as digital media grew between 2006-2016

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## Abstract

The decline in the regional press, traditional wisdom asserts, has been firmly placed on the rise in the number of people moving from newspapers and reading news online for free. While this is not disputed, this paper will show that cover price increases have in recent years been higher than in previous years and that a correlation exists between these larger than usual increases in cover price and the acceleration of decline in newspaper sales. The findings indicate that a vicious circle has been created in which budget shortfalls have prompted higher and faster price rises, which have driven down sales, leading to further shortfalls as falling circulation also leads to falling advertising revenue. Historically, newspapers put their cover price up by 1p to 3p a year or held the price in an attempt to keep sales high, an obsession of regional newspapers. For example, the Sheffield Star cost 32p in 2000 and did not increase in cost until 2005. In 2011, with the battle to keep readers a lost cause, regional newspapers decided to use cover price to help finance its business and the same newspaper which cost 47p rose in price to

60p by 2012, a percentage rise of 28.2 percent. The smaller increases often led to a sales decline, but the policy of bigger cover price increases had a far greater detrimental effect on sales, accentuating a larger decline in sales than previously experienced. Using data from the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), this paper maps the increasing price rises to the increase in declining sales.

**Keywords: newspapers, regional, decline, circulation, online, cover price, press, sales**

# Introduction

**Traditionally it is thought that blame for the demise in the sales of regional newspapers has been firmly based on the rise of online news, according to (Nielsen, 2015). He identifies that the transformation of the media environment is largely driven by the rise of digital media but adds that there are also other factors.**

Some of these factors included a change in the way people live, a redefining of boundaries over what is local and the centralisation of regional newspaper operations making the businesses less local (Ibid.). It is too easy to point the finger at online news as the sole reason for the dramatic fall in sales. Whilst digital is the root cause, the reaction of the industry to this technological development accentuated the decline. This study uses circulation data collated by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) to highlight a specific area, in this instance regional daily newspapers, to show that the number and scale of the increases in cover price have speeded up the decline in newspaper sales. It shows how newspaper groups decided to increase the price to make-up for a shortfall in revenues, but that this policy did not protect newspapers sale and hastened the decline. According to Wadbring and Bergström, (2015) with the increase in internet usage and transformation of the media eco-system, the problems for the newspaper industry have rapidly increased with circulation, readership and advertising declines. This is highlighted by the now defunct Northcliffe Media group, which comprised of around 80 regional newspapers, and reported in 2011 that the previous five months a six percent decline in advertising revenues to £59m, the loss of 317 jobs and circulation revenues down by 3 percent (Sweney, 2011).

According to Hill (2016), newspapers were obsessed with large sales so the price was kept low. Hill (Ibid.) added that 80 percent of income came from advertising and 20 percent from copy sales and it was the dependence on advertising that made the industry vulnerable. It is interesting to note that figures revealed in February 2020 show that print revenue for Reach PLC (formerly Trinity Mirror), from cover price made up for 61.2 percent of total revenue, highlighting the obvious decline in advertising income but also showing the importance of higher cover price to maximise income (Reach PLC, 2019). Going back to the original business model, based on 80 percent of revenue from advertising, this structure left the door open to new companies such as Facebook and Google to take advertising income and send regional daily newspapers into a decline. According to (Chamberlain, 2018) advertising income which had once kept newspapers in cities, suburbs and market towns going 'now bolsters the coffers of California's two tech titans which, between them, take over half of all UK advertising.' As sales and advertising income dipped, (ABC, Dec 2006-12; Mayhew, 2018a) it was clear that newspapers needed to make up for a shortfall in income and started to use cover price to fill the void, in other words shifting the funding for the regional daily newspaper business from advertisers to readers. However, with the decline in readers, this model looks fragile and this paper briefly looks at other models. This includes the *London Standard*, which went free in 2009, and was making a profit until recent investment saw a slump in profits (Sweney, 2018). The big difference between the *Standard* and other newspapers is the sheer volume of commuters providing a ready-made audience (Luft, 2009). Similarly, the free *Metro* has continued to make profits and is now the biggest circulation of any newspaper in the country (Business Matters, 2018). What this study has found is that the problem for the regional press was that by insisting cover prices should rise steeply, the decline accentuated, but whether a free/part-free newspaper model is the way forward is debateable.

# Methodology:

The research method used was stratified sampling because a controlled sample of newspapers was selected. According to Neuman (2007), this form of research guarantees representativeness or fixes the proportion of different strata within a sample. Stratified sampling produces samples that are more representative than simple random sampling if the stratum information is accurate. This study generated data from 10 regional newspapers from six different newspaper groups from different parts of England to reflect diversity across the sample. The places chosen vary in size from Blackpool, which is a seaside town and has a population of about 144,000 to a major cosmopolitan city such as Sheffield, with a population of around 542,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2018). There are two other towns in the group, Bournemouth (pop: 198,000) and Ipswich (pop: 149,000), one a seaside town and the other a rural town. The other cosmopolitan cities in the sample are Bristol (pop: 449,000) and Newcastle-upon-Tyne (pop: 280,000). The remaining places include former industrial cities such as Stoke-on-Trent (pop: 276,000), and Wolverhampton (pop: 244,000). That leaves two more rural cities, Norwich (pop: 196,000) and Carlisle (75,000).

The data concerned:

The average circulation of the 10 daily regional newspapers at the end of five, two-year periods from 2006-2016 Monday to Friday;

The increase/decrease in the number of newspapers sold;

The increase/decrease in the number of newspapers sold in percentage terms;

The cover price rises;

The cover price rises as a percentage.

The initial sample group is n=10. They are daily regional newspapers which focus on a particular town or city. To ensure there was a broad view of how different regional newspaper companies behaved with regards to price rises, the sample includes six different companies. Also, in an attempt to embrace regional variations, the newspapers are from across England, north, south, east and west.

| Newspaper name | Newspaper Group | Founded | Cover price (6/2017) | Sales figure (6/2017) | Sales figures (12/2018) | Reduction y-o-y |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bournemouth Echo | Newsquest | 1900 | 68p (M-F) | 12,795 | **12,289** | -10% |
| Bristol Post | Reach PLC | 1932 | 70p (M-F) | 17,148 | **15,271** | -12% |
| Carlisle News and Star | CN Group | 1967 | 80p (M-S) | 8,654 (combined editions) | **7,107** | -17% |
| Express and Star | Midland News Ass | 1880s | 65p (M-F) | 51,722 | **47,669** | -14% |
| The Gazette, Blackpool | JPI | 1873 | 75p (M-S) | 9537 *(Dec '16) | **8,187** | -14% |
| Ipswich Star | Archant | 1893 | 75p (M-F) | 9,513 | **8,620** | -15% |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newcastle Chronicle | Reach PLC | 1885 | 70p (M-S) | 25,056 | **22,401** | -16% |
| Norwich Evening News | Archant | 1882 | 75p (M-F) | 8,117 | **7,507** | -18% |
| Sheffield Star | JPI | 1887 | 70p (M-F) | 15,858 | **14,716** | -12% |
| The Sentinel, Stoke-on-Trent | Reach PLC | 1873 | 65p (M-F) | 25,181 | **23,249** | -13% |

***Note: Not all newspapers are declaring their sales figures every six months, some newspapers now declare their figures on an annual basis.***

**Table 1: Selected newspapers, n=10, figures are for June 2017 and sales figures for December 2018.**

The sample period looks across 10-years from 2006-2016. The reason for the start date of 2006 is that it is during this period that classified advertising disappeared from newspapers, which was a key factor in the loss of revenue for regional newspapers (Perch, 2016). However, it was only when the sales started to decline that the larger price increases came in to make up in the shortfall of cash, according to the author.

The research question asks whether larger than the normal rises in cover price correlate to larger sales decline. Of course, there were other factors, such as the audience moving to receive their news from online and often for free. As an example, in 2018, 74 percent of UK adults said they looked at news online each week, increasing to 91 percent of 16-24-year-olds, with only one in 10 people reading a regional newspaper each week, according to the Reuters Institute (cited in Cairncross, 2019). The data used for this research comes from the Audience Bureau of Circulation (ABC) which "sets industry-agreed standards for media brand measurement across print, digital and events. We also verify data, processes and good practice to industry-agreed standards" (ABC, 2017). The data put together by the ABC includes average sales during six-month periods. For consistency, this research is based on the average sales figure at the end of a two-year period and is taken from the sales reports compiled in December for the days Monday to Friday. The days have to be specific because a lot of newspapers charge a different price for their Saturday newspapers. However, there is a slight alteration in the six-monthly reporting which is highlighted in (Table 1), where the *Blackpool Gazette* does not have such up-to-date sales figures. This is because a number of regional titles have opted in recent months for annual reporting of their sales. This means the *Gazette* did not produce new figures for 2017 until December 2018 and this will be for the whole year. So in (Table 1) the figures are for December 2016. However, the change does not alter this work, which involved reporting of sales figures every two years until the end of 2016.

# Background

The rise of the internet led to the shift with classified advertising disappearing online creating a financial crisis within the business. However, as Hill (2016) states the industry had been in decline for 40 years. For 150 years newspapers were accepted as essential because they had no competition. However, first radio, then television and latterly the web provided competition and each accelerated the pace of decline in readership (Hill, 2016). Cover price revenue is a key income source for newspapers. As supported by (Hill, 2016) regional newspapers wanted to keep cover prices low to ensure large sales, but with sales and advertising in decline, companies have used cover prices to fill the vacuum in income. As an example, the *Wolverhampton Express & Star* did not increase its price from 2000-2004. In 2004 it eventually went up 2p to 32p, a 0.6 percent rise. However, more recently, the newspaper has increased more rapidly in an attempt to make up for shortfall in advertising revenues, with the cost in 2015 being 55p going up to 60p in 2016, a 33 percent rise; from 60p to 65p in 2017, a 39 percent rise and from 65p to 80p in 2018, a 52 percent rise (ABC, 2020). This study highlights the fact that the bigger the rise, the heavier the decrease in readership (Ponsford, 2013). Ponsford (2013) also noted that the worse newspaper performer in terms of sale was the paper with the biggest price increase, Newsquest's Brighton Argus, which increased from 45p to 65p in September

2012, a 44 percent rise in cover price.

The regional newspaper industry has suffered massive upheaval. The key trend during the last 20 years has been a series of cost-cutting measures to maintain finances and alter the structure of the newsroom, to embrace a digital-first culture. According to the Cairncross Review (Cairncross, 2019) more than 300 local newspapers have closed and the number of frontline print journalists has dropped by 6,000 in the past decade from 23,000 to 17,000. The report also revealed print advertising revenues have dropped by more than half over the last 10 years, from nearly £7 billion to just over £3 billion. Job losses and restructuring have been major features of stories within the industry since around 2006-2007. Many of the closures of newspapers and job losses were highlighted in a report by the National Union of Journalists in a report (NUJ, 2015). Newspaper groups such as Reach PLC, formerly Trinity Mirror, have reported job cutbacks including the creation of centralised subbing hubs in 2017 with the loss of 78 jobs (Mayhew, 2017) and as far back as 2008 Midland News Association revealed it was cutting 120 editorial jobs ( The Guardian, 2008). Other areas of the business have also suffered cutbacks such as the closures of presses with a move to centralisation of printing including the press at Stoke-on-Trent being closed with the loss of 90 jobs (Press Gazette, 2012). Reductions in paginations has also created redundancies, this was highlighted by JPI Media, formerly Johnston Press, which shed jobs as fewer pages were to be produced (Walker, 2019). Another consequence of cost-cutting has been industrial unrest at a number of titles across England over pay and job losses. Concerns have been raised by NUJ members in Carlisle over the loss of jobs, increasing workloads and failure by Newsquest to offer pay rises (Sharman, 2018). Job cuts, understaffing and changing roles to newsrooms has also led to threats of action at the *Daily Post* in North Wales (Mayhew, 2018b). Some newspapers have tried to find a different business model to keep a large readership with sales in decline such as the *Manchester Evening News*. In 2006 the newspaper's average daily sale was 95,727 copies (ABC, 2016a) and it moved to giving away 50,000 copies a week free of charge (Campaign, 2006) to attract a new audience to the newspaper. This strategy changed in 2009 when the newspaper decided to be paid for Monday to Wednesday only, but give away 90,000 copies a week copies in the city centre (Guardian, 2009). According to (ABC, 2016), just 56 percent of the Manchester Evening News was actively purchase. However, this model is based on advertising revenues remaining steady or growing and the income being at a good level to maintain profitability. Referring back to (Hill, 2016) the regional newspaper model was based on 80 percent of its revenue coming from advertising and 20 percent from cover price. However, recent performance figures from Reach PLC indicate the decline in income from advertising and the importance of cover price which made up more than 61.2 percent of the income (Reach PLC, 2019). This shows the decline in advertising and brings into question the future prosperity of a free newspaper based on one sole provider of revenue, advertising.

The decline in print is not unique to the UK. In America, the industry was described as being in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression (Kirchhoff, 2009). Also, according to Lepore (2019) 500 dailies had closed in America between 1970-2016 and that between January 2017 and April, 2018, a third of the nation's largest newspapers, including the *Denver Post* and the *San Jose Mercury News*, reported layoffs. In Canada the government announced a package of funding for journalism to allow non-profit news organisations to receive charitable donations and introduce a new refundable tax credit to support original news content creation (Government of Canada, 2018). The Government has decided to fund aspects of journalism on the back of statistics which show that 250 community newspapers in the country have closed between 2008-2018 (Watson, 2018). Across Europe there has also been a decline in print. In Spain newspaper circulations has continued to decline almost 10% of the sale lost in 2017. Daily copies fell below two million – less than half the number sold just a decade ago (Reuters 2017). The report adds that leading titles, *El País* (-14%), *El Mundo* (-18.5%), and *ABC* (-14%), suffered the biggest year-on-year declines and for the first time in almost six decades, no single newspaper sold more than 200,000 daily copies overall.

# Circulation decline and digitalisation

Research has been undertaken concerning the rise of the internet and its effect on the regional press (Ramsay, G, Moore M, 2016; T*he Economist*, 2006), but little analysis have been conducted concerning cover price rises. According to (Snoddy, cited Mair et al., 2016) after serving local communities for 300 years, the life of local newspapers could be coming to an end with the loss of advertising revenue and sales decline. With readership and income falling, the industry set about on a series of cost-cutting exercises. In an effort to shore up and maintain income, regional newspapers also decided to increase the cost of their products.

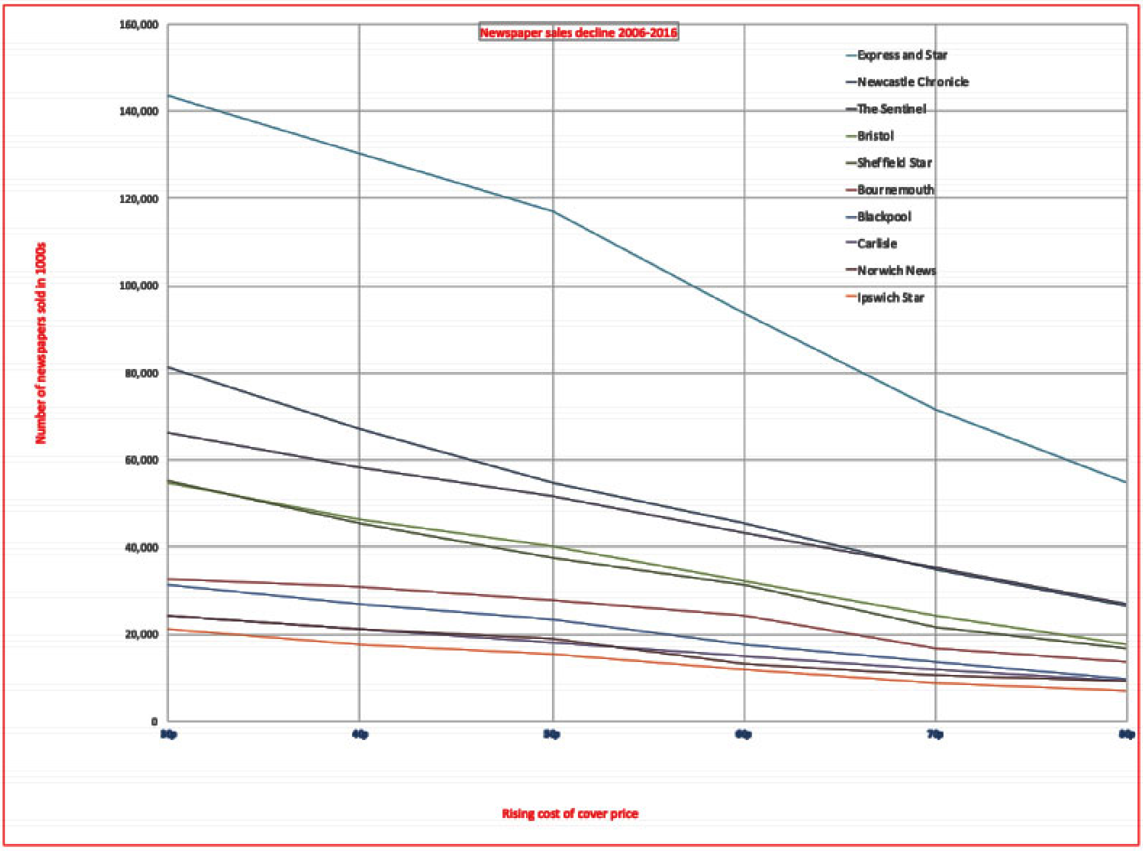


**Figure one: circulation decline as newspaper prices rise.**

Cost-cutting measures such as the move to single editions printed overnight and not live, a decline in paginations and stories have turned readers away (Oakley, 2012).

The emphasis of the newsroom has also changed dramatically from newspaper first to digital first. Reach PLC, formerly Trinity Mirror, the biggest newspaper group in Britain with 240 regional titles, introduced the 3.1 newsroom in 2014. It was then described by Neil Benson, editorial director of Trinity Mirror Regionals, as 'crossing the Rubicon' (Reid, 2014) because it was not just a move to a multi-media newsroom, but to a digital first operation.

# Empirical investigation into regional newspapers

## Results/findings

This section looks in detail at the 10 newspapers used for this research. It looks briefly at the history of each newspaper and then charts the price rises and its effect on the sale of the newspapers, also describing any anomalies which may have affected individual titles.

### Newsquest publication: The *Bournemouth Daily Echo*

The *Bournemouth Daily Echo* was established in 1900, with its first issue published on August 20, 1900, (Bournemouth Daily Echo, 2017). Today it is part of the Newsquest Group, which describes itself as having more than 165 news brands and 40 magazines in print and digital. Its parent company is Gannett, which is the largest news publisher in the US (Newsquest, 2017). Between 2006 and 2016 the Echo lost 19,073 newspaper sales at an average of 1,907 copies per year. In 2016 it sold a daily average of 13,579, in December 2006 this figure was 32,652. The cost of the paper went from 35p to 68p, a 33p rise in 10 years or 21.76 percent increase (ABC, 2017). By way of comparison, the cost of milk from 2006-2016 rose by 35 percent, from 31p to 42p per pint, even though there is more fluctuation in this market (Statistic, 2003-2015). There are two large price rises. Between 2006-08 the price went up 5p to 40p, a 14 percent increase and the sales decreased at a modest 1,898, 5.8 percent. This was low compared with the previous year, which is not in this sample, but as a comparison was a loss of 4,126 in 2005. After 2006-2008, there is an increasing sales decline each year with 2008-2010 showing a loss of 2,890 copies, a 2p price rise to 42p, 5 percent increase and 2010-2012, a loss of 3,742, a 3p price rise to 45p, or 7 percent rise. The most dramatic fall is between 2012-2014 when the price went up 20p over the two years, from 45p to 65p or a 44.44 percent increase and the paper's decline is 7,204, effectively almost double the previous two-year figure. This is a sales decline of 29.86 percent on the back of a 44.44 percent price rise (ABC, 2017). The final period 2014-2016 shows a 3p price rise, 4.61 percent increase, a smaller decline, with the loss standing at 3,339, 19.7 percent sales decline.

Newsquest has had the same problems as other groups in the industry in the UK. In 2006 parent company Gannett blamed its decline in revenue firmly at the foot of the Newsquest arm (FT.com, 2006). It has also gone down the cost-cutting route of creating production hubs in Newport and Weymouth and getting rid of locally produced newspapers (BBC News, 2017). In 2018, the newspaper was selling on average of 11,521 and cost 70p (Mon-Fri), 2p higher than in 2016, or 2.8 percent price rise, having lost 2,058 copies, 15.1 percent down.

## CN Group publication: *Carlisle News and Star (now part of Newsquest)*

The *Carlisle News and Star* was part of the CN Group which has a history dating back to 1815 with the *News and Star* being opened in 1967 (Cumbria Newspapers Group, 2017). However, it was sold in 2018 to Newsquest (BBC News, 2018). The newspaper increased in price between 2006-2016 from 40p to 75p, a 35p rise or 87.5 percent. In the 10 years surveyed, the newspaper lost 14,688 copies, from 24,053 to 9,365. These figures were collated by joining together two separate editions of the newspaper, east and west (ABC, 2017). The difference with the decline with this newspaper and others in this sample is how evenly spread the decline is, there are no large decreases based on substantial price rises. The 10p price rise between 2012-2014 from 50p to 60p, a 20 percent rise in price, delivered a 22.26% decline in sales, 3.358 copies. However, if you look at the decline for all the years based on price rises of 2p in 2006-2008, from 40p-42p, a 5 percent price rise; 3p in 2008-2010, from 45p-48p, a 7.1 percent price rise; 5p in 2010-2012, from 45p-50p, a 11.11 per price rise; 10p in 2012-2014, from 50p-60p, a 20 percent price rise; and 15p in 2014-2016, from 50p to 75p, a 25 percent price rise, the loss of sales is reasonably even. So 2p equated to a sales loss of 2,877; 3p to 3,310, 5p to 2,783, 10p to 3,358 and 15p to 2,361. The newspaper also suffered job losses and industrial unrest during the last decade. In 2007 there was a threat of industrial action after CN scrapped the firm's final salary pension scheme (Press Gazette, 2007). A year later there were plans to lose around 30 jobs announced by the CN Group across its titles and a possible pay freeze (Ponsford, 2008). In 2014 it was announced that the paper would go to overnight printing. This transition period from a daily to a morning newspaper from 2014-2016 (Turvill, 2014) brought the second largest percentage sales decline, 20 percent, 2,361 copies, but this also included the biggest rise in the cost of the newspaper from 15p to 75p. In 2018, the newspaper was selling on average of 7,476 and cost 85p (Mon-Fri), 10p higher than in 2016 having lost- 1,889 copies, 20.1% down.

## Reach PLC, *The Bristol Post, Newcastle Chronicle, Stoke Sentinel*

The *Bristol Post* and *The Sentinel* were part of the Northcliffe Newspaper group which was sold to a new company, Local World, in 2012 (BBC News, 2012). Three years later, in 2015, Local World was sold in a £220m deal to Trinity Mirror, now Reach PLC, to make TM the biggest newspaper group in the country (Sweney, 2015). The *Newcastle Chronicle* was already part of the Mirror group. All three newspapers are now part of the newly-named TM Group, Reach PLC (Tobitt, 2018).

The *Post* is a daily newspaper and **website covering Bristol, South Gloucestershire, and parts of Somerset** (Bristol Post, 2017)**. It was founded in 1932. In 2009, like many regional newspapers, it became a daily newspaper with a single edition** (Dearlove, 2012)**. This article also reveals that in April 2012 the newspaper stopped producing a Saturday edition with the loss of 20 jobs. Between 2006 and 2016 the** *Post* **lost 37,288 newspaper sales, or an average of 3,728 copies a year** (ABC, 2006; 2016)**.** In 2006 the paper cost 35p, by 2008 this was 37p, a 5.1 percent price rise and the sales fell by 14.9 percent, 8,147 copies, across the two years or on average 7.7 percent or 4,073 copies a year (ABC, 2006; 2016)**.**

Between 2008 and 2010 there was a 1p rise in cost, 0.5p per year, 2.7 percent price rise, but the decline was 14.1 percent, less than the 14.9 percent from the previous two years, perhaps reflecting the effect of a smaller price increase. The figures show that between 2008 and 2010 the paper lost 6,578 copies, an average of 3,289 per year, close to the 10-year average. Between 2010-2016, the Post went from 39,944 copies a day to 17,381, a loss on average of 3,760 per year, with price increases of 7p, 15p and 10p across three two-year periods. In 2012, the newspaper cost 45p, a 7p increase from 2010, a 18.42% cost rise. The paper lost 19.35% of its sale or 7,730 copies. In 2014 the paper cost 60p, an increase of 15p from 2012, a 33.33% cost rise. Sales declined by 25.1% or 8,087 copies. Finally, in 2016 the paper cost 70p, a 10p rise on 2014, a 16.66% rise. The decline in sale was 27.96% or 6,746 copies.

It is clear from this that the two-year period with the biggest percentage sales decline was between 2012-2014 and this matches the biggest rise in cost, 15p. There were bigger sales losses for the newspaper, between 2008 and 2010 when 8,147 copies disappeared, but this could have been partly to do with the move to printing one edition overnight, a decision taken in 2009. In June 2012, the newspaper took the step of going to five days a week and getting rid of its Saturday edition. It was claimed that the move saw an 8,000 rise in Friday's sales (Lambourne, 2012). However, the figures compiled for this report look at Monday to Friday editions only and the rise for Fridays is not noticeable with a decline between 2012 and 2014 of 25.1 percent or just over 12.5 percent per year. In 2018, the newspaper was selling on average of 13,102 and cost 85p (Mon-Fri), 15p higher than in 2016 having lost 4,279 copies, 24.6% down.

The first edition of the *Evening Chronicle* newspaper was in November 1885. In 10 years, the *Chronicle* increased its price by 23p, from 42p to 65p and the circulation fell from 81,139 to 26,578, a loss of 54,561 sales, a 67 percent drop over 10 years (ABC, 2017). In percentage terms, the biggest decline happened when the newspaper went up 7p to 55p, a 14.5 percent cover price rise, in 2012-2014, when the decline in sales was 22.7 percent, from 45,225 a day average sale to 34,954, a 10,271 sales decline and between 2014-2016 when the price went up 10p to 65p and the decline was 23.9 percent from 34,954 to 26,578 copies per day, a loss of 8,376. However, the biggest loss of physical sales happened between 2006-2008 when 14,036 sales disappeared, 17.29 percent decline, when the price rose just 2p to 44p. Outside influences during this period include a number of restructuring plans for the newsroom, job losses and the closure of district offices. Also, in the north-east the building society Northern Rock collapsed in 2007 sending shock waves through the area (O'Connell, 2017) and this was followed by the world financial collapse in 2008 which caused economic problems across the world (Mathiason, 2008). Perhaps, this was a factor in 23 journalists losing their jobs at the *Chronicle* in 2008 (Ponsford, 2008). These changes happened during the period highlighted in this research when there was the biggest physical drop in sales. In 2011 the newspaper started printing overnight (Press Gazette, 2011) and the press was closed in Newcastle (Linford, 2015). Finally, in 2014, it was revealed that the *Chronicle* newsroom would become a digitally-led news operation (Reid, 2014b). In 2018, the newspaper was selling on average of 19,259 and cost 75p (Mon-Fri), 10p higher than in 2016, 7,319 copies down on 2016, or 27.5% down.

*The Sentinel*, Stoke-on-Trent became an evening newspaper covering the Potteries and south Cheshire in April, 1873. Its circulation grew rapidly and went from 1,800 a day to 125,000 in 1973. *The Sentinel*, like other newspapers, showed a large decline between 2006-2008, a period of austerity, which saw a 1p price rise, a 3.1 percent increase, bring about a 7,972 decline, an average of 3,986 per year, from 66,021 to 58,049, a 12 percent decline in sale. The larger price rises between 2012-2016 did bring bigger decreases in sale and there is a consistency in an average of more than 4,000 sales decline per year. From 2010-2012 the paper rose in price by 5p to 40p, a rise of 14.3 percent, with a sales fall of 8,546, from 51,730 average daily sale to 43,184; 2012-2014, a 10p rise to 50p, a 25 percent price rise, brought a sales decline of 8,072, from 43,184 to 35,112 average copy sale a day; in 2014-2016, *The Sentinel* increased again by 10p to 60p, a 20 percent price rise, the sales decline was 8,455, from 35,112 average copy sale per day to 26,657. The largest percentage sales decrease was between 2014-2016, 24 percent, from 35,112 to 26,657 (ABC, 2017). It is worth noting that *The Sentinel* was the cheapest newspaper in the group at the start of the period studied in 2006 at 32p and the cheapest in 2016 with the *Wolverhampton Express and Star* at 60p. Despite this, like other newspapers, there has been a consistency in decline. Like the *Bristol Post*, *The Sentinel* was affected by Northcliffe's cost-cutting Aim Higher initiative which looked to make £45m savings by September 2007 (holdthefrontpagestaff, 2007). This led to job reductions, reduction in newspaper paginations and the move towards large subbing hubs. In 2012, the central subbing hub was dismantled but this led to further job cuts (Pugh, 2012). In 2009 *The Sentinel* also moved to printing overnight and its editions disappeared in 2014 (*The Sentinel*, 2014). In 2018, the newspaper was selling on average of 20,682 and cost 70p (Mon-Fri), 10p higher than in 2016, 7,319 copies down on 2016, or 27.5% down.

## Midland News Association: *The Wolverhampton Express & Star*

The paper was founded in the city in the 1880s by the Scottish-American millionaire Andrew Carnegie and a group of radical Liberal Party members, including Thomas Graham. The *Express & Star* has steadily overtaken its rivals to become the biggest-selling regional evening newspaper in Britain outside London (Express & Star, 2017). MNA owns more than 20 newspapers and a handful of radio stations. During the last decade it has been involved in major restructuring such as the loss of 120 jobs in 2008 (The Guardian, 2008). It has also, like many other titles moved to overnight printing (Linford, 2014). In 2006, the Express and Star was the biggest selling regional newspaper outside of London, selling 146,000 papers a night. From 2006 to 2016 the newspaper increased in price by 25p from 35p to 60p, while sales dropped from 143,571 to 54,890, a loss of 88,681, or on average 8,868 copies a year, a 61.7 percent decline (ABC, 2017). The biggest decline in sales came out of the blue between 2010-2012 when the newspaper lost 23,193 copies on the back of a 2p, from 40p-42p, or a 5 per rise over two years, a decline of 19.82 or 9.9 percent a year (ABC, 2017). There is no direct reason for this sudden decline, but with the announcement the closure of the newspaper's sports edition and some of its Saturday editions, this may have provided a backdrop to accentuate the fall with the price rise (Birmingham Post, 2009). The following four years, with a price increase of 8p, from 42p-50p, a 19 percent rise, between 2012-2014 and 10p, from 50p-60p, a 20 percent rise, between 2014-2016 this also heralded big sales losses and larger percentage sales decline. Between 2012-2014 the newspaper lost 22,214 copies, 23.68 percent, from 93,799 to 71,585 average daily sale; between 2014-2016 it lost 16,695 copies, 23.32 percent of its sale from 71,585 to 54,890, once again showing that the cost of the paper going up from 42p to 50p, a 19 percent rise, 50p to 60p, a 20 percent rise, may have been a reason for sales being hit hard. In 2018, the newspaper was selling on average of 38,690 and cost 70p (Mon-Fri), 16,200 copies down on 2016, or 29.5% down.

## JPIMedia, *The Gazette, Blackpool, Sheffield Star*

Both newspapers are now owned by the newly created JPIMedia, which bought the newspapers from Johnston Press after agreeing to wipe out £135m of the company's debts in return for control of the business (Linford, 2018). *The Gazette* first started publishing on April 3, 1873 (Rhodes, 2013). It was sold to Johnston Press (holdthefrontpage, 2007) in a £560m deal from Regional Independent Media (RIM) before being sold on again, like the Star in 2017. In 2006, *The Gazette* sold 31,509 daily, but this dropped to 9,537 in the 10-year period, a loss of 21,972. What is striking about the *Blackpool Gazette* is the consistency of sales loss, from 2008 to 2016, but this could reflect similar price rises; the number of copies lost in every two-year period is close, 4,541, 3,683, 5,607, 4,111, 4,030. The largest slump in sales was between 2010-2012 when the paper lost 5,607 on the back of its first 10p rise, which took the paper's price to 60p, a 20 percent rise, one of three 10p rises (2008-2010; 2010-2012; 2012-2014) which saw the newspaper also lose 4,111 and 4,030 copies.

This paper is another example of one which lost sales heavily between 2006-2008, the start of a period of austerity, sales dropped 4,541 on the back of a 3p rise, from 37p-40p, a 8.1 percent increase. After the three 10p rises on the bounce, the newspaper increased in price by 5p between 2014-2016, but even this failed to halt the slide with a decrease in sale of 4,030. By 2016, the newspaper cost 75p and was selling 9,537 a day (ABC, 2017). Both the *Gazette* and *Star* have a similar history in terms of cost-cutting and staff reductions. As far back as 2004 there were industrial problems with strike action in a dispute over pay (Press Gazette, 2004). The theme of industrial unrest continued with a petition set-up in 2008 over staff cuts (Press Gazette, 2008). There were also been a number of job losses at the *Gazette* with the loss of production jobs (Ponsford, 2010) and a work to rule over the introduction of a new production system, Atex. In 2018, the *Gazette* was selling on average of 7,010 and cost 85p (Mon-Fri), 2,527 copies down on 2016, or 26.5% down.

Before the *Sheffield Star* became *The Star*, it was originally the *Sheffield Evening Telegraph* which was first published on June 7, 1887, by W. C. Leng and Company (British Newspaper Archive, 2017). *The Star* has increased its price by 32p in 10 years, from 38p to 70p. In 2006 the paper sold 55,285 copies, but by 2016 this had fallen to 16,708, a loss of 38,577. The newspaper's sale was hardest hit between 2010-2012 on the back of a 15p, a 33.33 percent price rise, from 45p in 2010 to 60p in 2012 as the sale dropped from 37,354 to 31,304 average sale per day, 16 percent decrease in sale. The average daily sale dropped in 2012 from 31,303 to 21,437 in 2014, a loss of 9,867 (ABC, 2015) or a 31.5 percent decline. One of the cost-cutting measures of Johnston Press was to close publications and this included in 2013 the shutting down of the newspaper's sports paper, the *Green 'Un* after 106 years (Hollander, 2013). The research highlighted that the sales of the *Green 'Un* were wrapped into the sale of the main newspaper, prior to closure. The additional sales from the *Green 'Un* were removed from the figures for this research. In the final sales figures for the *Sheffield Star* 2008-2010, 1,609 *Green 'Un* sales were taken out, 2010-2012, 1,426 and 2012-2014, 688 copies. In 2018 *The Star* average daily sale was 12,609, 4,099 copies a day on 2016, or a decline of 24 percent. It costs 78p, an 8p rise since 2018, or a 11 percent increase in cover price.

## Archant, the *Ipswich Star, Norwich News*

Both newspapers are part of the group Archant Group. They were in the Eastern Counties Newspapers Group but the group changed its name to Archant to have broader appeal around the country in 2002 (Archant, 2017). *The Star* started publishing between 1885-93 (British Newspaper Archive, 2017). The newspaper has gone up 31p in 10 years, from 44p to 75p, an 83 percent rise, and its circulation has declined from 21,115 to 6,884, a loss of 14,231 copies during the decade (ABC, 2017). What is interesting about *The Star* is that there were several strategies to halt the decline of the newspaper, which included reducing the cost of the newspaper between 2010-2012 and then adding free delivery copies to its sales figure. Due to this, it would have been difficult to calculate the impact of the price on the number of copies sold. A decision was taken to remove the free copies from the figure to give a more accurate picture of what was going on with the newspaper with regards to being actively purchased. The newspaper went up 1p, from 44p to 45p, or a rise of 2.7 percent, between 2006-2008 and lost 3,567 in copies or 16.89 percent of the sale. Between 2008-2010 it reduced its price by 5p, from 45p to 40p, or 11%, the only newspaper in this sample to do this, and the sales fell by 2,140 or 12.19%, so this strategy did stem the tide of decline to an extent and points the finger at cover price as being a cause for accentuated or decelerated decline. In the next two years, 2010-2012, the newspaper then increased its cover price by 20p from 40p to 60p, a 50 percent rise, and the sale went down by 3,395 or 22.03%. Also between 2010-2012, the newspaper started delivering free copies through letterboxes, a total of 4,770 (ABC, 2017; ABC 2006-2012; 2006; Pugh, 2012b).

During the following four-year period the newspaper continued to distribute free copies, 3,773 during 2012-2014 and 3,254 copies during 2014-2016. Intriguingly, after the 20p price rise in 2010-2012, the newspaper then had a price freeze between 2012-2014, but this saw a decline of 3,352 or 27.9%, its biggest percentage decline during the whole period, but not the largest loss of copy sale. Effectively, the idea to freeze the price, possibly in an attempt to stop the decline, failed as sales went down heavily. There are two possible reasons for this, it was the previous 20p price rise ripple effect with more readers deciding to turn their back on the newspaper in terms of actively purchasing it, or the free distribution having an effect, the figures for the decline and the free delivery are similar with 3,254 fewer distributed free compared with a decline of 3,352, people stopped buying the paper because they were getting it for free. The price freeze policy changed between 2014-2016 with a large 15p increase, from 60p to 75p, a 25 percent increase, which saw sales losses of 1,777 or 20.51%. The sale of *The Star* in 2016 was 6,884 with the free deliveries taken off. In 2018, the Star was selling on average of 5,423 and cost 80p (Mon-Fri), a 6.6 percent rise, 1,461 copies down on 2016, or 21.2% down.

The price of the *Norwich News* between 2006-2016 rose by 37p, from 38p to 75p, a 102 percent increase, and the sale fell from 24,322 to 9,172 in 2016, 15,150 copies, a 62 percent decline. The newspaper price rises during that period are consistently higher than the average, going up 4p, 6p, 7p, 5p and 15p, compared with smaller rises of others in the sample group. The 7p rise between 2010-2012, from 48p to 55p, a 14 percent rise in cover price, saw the biggest decline in sales, 5,601 or 29.59 percent, from 18,923 to 13,322 average daily sale. The 5p rise between 2012-2014, from 55p to 60p, an increase of 9 percent, also hit sale, with a reduction of 2,719 or 20.4 percent. The biggest sales loss outside these dates is when 4p was put on the price between 2006-2008, from 38p to 42p, an increase of 10.5 percent, and the paper lost 3,292 copies or 13.57 percent of the sale. The 15p price rise between 2014-2016, from 60p to 75p, a 25 percent increase, saw a slowing up of the decline with 1,431 copies lost, 13.49 of the sale. Looking across the other newspapers, there is an argument to say that decline starts to plateau in the last period with a number of newspapers showing a drop in the percentage of decline such as a the *Ipswich Star, Norwich Evening News, Bournemouth Echo, Carlisle News and Star and Sheffield Star*, but it is not consistent across the whole group of newspapers (ABC, 2017).

Similar to other newspapers in this sample, both papers had a lot of upheaval during the period of this research. In 2006 Archant Norfolk had 197 editorial staff across its newsrooms (Lagan, 2006). After that there were a number of job cuts including a planned 54 in 2009 (McNally, 2009) which was later reduced to 34. Further job losses included 20 in 2011 (Pugh, 2011) and 24 in 2013 (Pugh, 2013). The Norwich paper moved to print overnight in February 2011 (Norwich News, 2017). Interestingly, Archant admitted in 2015 that it had off-set revenue decline by raising the price of the newspaper (Sharman, 2015), but as pointed out by (Ponsford, 2013) the worse performing newspapers in 2013 were those with the biggest price increases. In 2018, *The News* was selling on average of 6,351 and cost 80p (Mon-Fri), 2,821 copies down on 2016, or 30.7% down.

This research shows that there is a direct correlation between price increases and newspaper sales decline. Whenever the price of a newspaper rose substantially in price, the sales of newspapers generally declined in greater numbers. Traditional wisdom asserts that the decline of print has always been blamed on the rise of the web. However, this research shows it was the reaction of regional daily newspapers to the web, in attempting to maintain income by increasing the cover price, which helped speed up declining sales. As far as can be ascertained, no-one else has done this kind of research, drilling down into the cost of the newspaper as being a cause for sales decline. This research is limited, it only looks at 10 regional newspapers in England. This research could be expanded with a bigger sample group and compare it with more detailed experiences across the world. The implications for this research are that regional daily newspapers need to look at their pricing strategies in a bid to slow the decline down. In 10 years these newspapers lost an average around two thirds of their sale (average 64.5 percent).

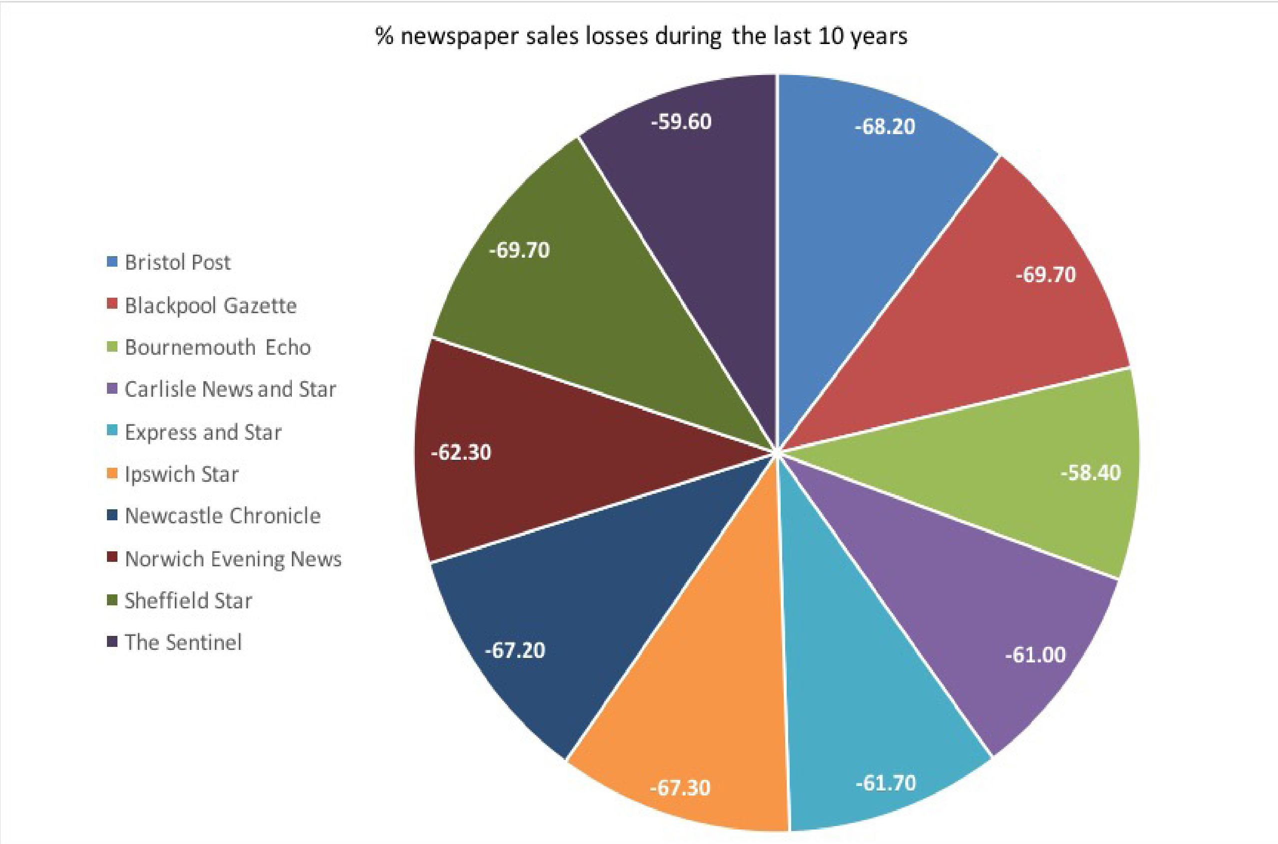


**Figure 2: The overall percentage loss of sales for all newspapers in this study during a 10-year period 2006-2016.**

# Conclusion

At this rate of decline, the future of paid-for regional newspapers is bleak.

This paper has looked at a possible solution in terms of newspapers becoming different models similar to the *London Standard*, the *Metro* and the part-paid for and part-free model of the *Manchester Evening News*. As discussed, the *Standard* was making money until recently when profits slumped (Sweney, 2018). The concern is that these formats are based on advertising income being maintained and in the regional newspaper industry this has seen a dramatic decline with a 69 percent drop in advertising revenue in a decade (Cairncross, 2019). Little has been written about the decline of regional newspapers in terms of discussing whether cover price has had an impact on sales decline. An article in the *UK Press Gazette* (Turvill, 2014) did look at the decline of national newspapers in relation to cover price, but nothing that focuses on the regional daily press. The idea of this research was to show that while the web 'stole' readers from the regional daily newspapers, it was the reaction of these newspapers which added to the decline. There are a lot of external factors which affected the decline in sales and sometimes skew the figures such as the economy, printing overnight, loss of editions and loss of staff. However, it was desperation which led to steep cover price rises and the fall in sales. Newspapers simply did not know how to deal with the situation as they leaked money both from advertising and loss of newspaper sales. Traditionally, cover price was kept low to ensure high readership. However, this paper shows that with readership and advertising income in terminal decline, cover price has been used to provide vital income for daily regional newspapers and there is a correlation between increasing cost of regional daily newspapers and the accentuation of the decline in those reading the publications.

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