

Letter from the U.K.

# London Is a Local-News Desert. What Comes Next?

*After the Evening Standard, the city's last daily paper, went weekly, a hodgepodge of small news sources sprang up.*

**By Sam Knight**

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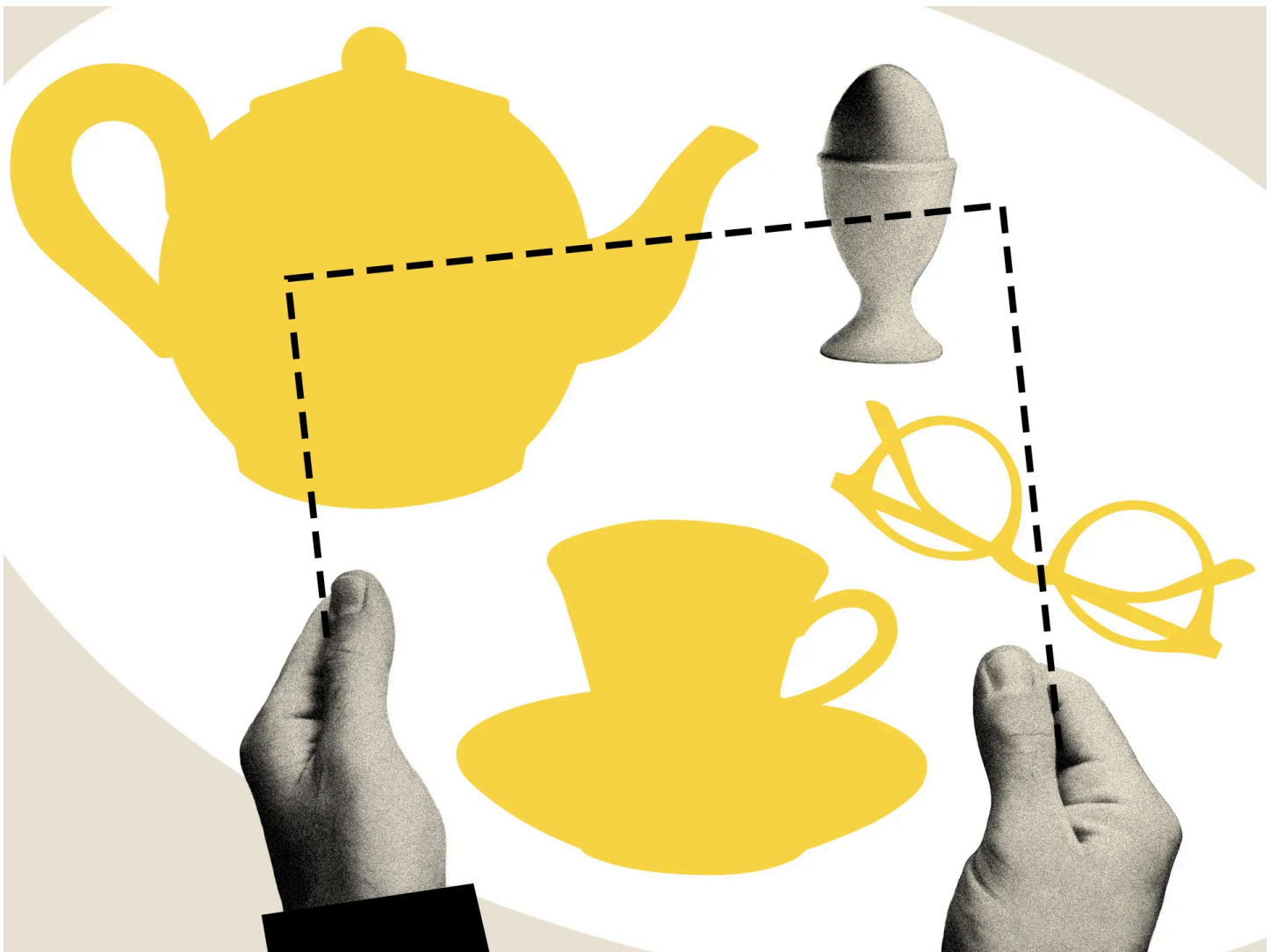


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On a recent foul, late-winter London morning—the sort when you can smell the river and almost taste the greasy sheen on the sidewalks—I had breakfast with Jim Waterson, the one-man operation behind *London Centric*, a six-month-old newsletter attempting to fill the void left by the collapse of local news in the city. It was a Friday, the day that Waterson chases down leads and finds stories. We met next to Paddington Station. Waterson, a thirty-five-year-old former reporter at *BuzzFeed* and the *Guardian*, had bicycled seven and a half miles from his home, in Peckham. He seemed full of adrenaline. *London Centric* has nineteen thousand people on its e-mail list, of whom around twenty-five hundred are paying subscribers, at £7.95 per month. Every story includes a WhatsApp link to text Waterson, and his phone buzzes through the night with neighborhood gossip and whatever else is on Londoners' minds. He tries to text right back. "People love that," he said. "It's, like, yeah, you've gone straight to the editor, the chief content officer, the customer-service rep, the whatever." Just before Christmas, Waterson had criss-crossed the city on his green electric cargo bike to deliver gift-card subscriptions door to door. "There is no job I am not doing at the moment," he said. "It's what happens if you shrank an entire newspaper operation down into a guy with a MacBook and a bicycle."

Waterson launched *London Centric* on September 18th last year, the day before the *Evening Standard* ceased daily publication, leaving London, one of the world's original wells of journalism—home of Grub Street, Fleet Street, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Orwell, and Dickens—without a functioning city-facing newspaper for the first time in almost two hundred years. At their zenith, in the nineteen-sixties, the great London newspapers—the *Standard* and its slightly down-market rival, the *Evening News*—sold a million and a half copies a day. They had correspondents in Paris and Washington.

But the closure of the *Standard* wasn't a huge loss, to be honest. In 2009, during London's peak Russian-money phase, Alexander Lebedev, a former spy for the K.G.B. who had been based in the city during the eighties, and his son Evgeny bought the paper for one pound. For a while, the newspaper prospered

under the Lebedevs. It became free, relying on advertising, and was read by a more or less captive audience of about eight hundred thousand commuters. The paper retained a certain glamour. (Its editor in the sixties had been Charles Wintour, the father of Anna.) This was amplified by the arriviste drive of Lebedev the younger, who set on London society like a latter-day Count of Monte Cristo. (I met him once, at a party, where he was handing out jewels to actresses; he was reported to keep a wolf named Boris.)

But local newspapers are dying everywhere, where they are not already dead. After the pandemic, the *Standard* thinned down to thirty pages. Its onetime readers were working from home or playing games on their phones, as the Wi-Fi on the Tube improved. The attention of Lebedev—now the Baron of Hampton, in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and of Siberia in the Russian Federation, thanks to a peerage bestowed by the other Boris—also drifted, to subjects such as extending human longevity. The *Standard*—rebranded as the London *Standard*—is now published once a week.

London is its own kind of news desert. For decades, the concentration of Britain's national newspapers in the capital, along with the BBC's headquarters, contributed to a distorting effect: people outside London complained that the media was too London-centric (hence the name of Waterson's newsletter), but the city was where stuff happened, rather than a subject in itself. London dominates almost every aspect of British life—economic, political, and cultural—and yet newspapers rarely cover it as a separate entity. “The national media stood in, in many ways, for what would have normally been a metropolitan-based media,” Roy Greenslade, a former journalism professor and a former media columnist at the *Guardian* and at the *Standard*, told me. “This didn't happen, by the way, in other cities. There was a Manchester media, a Birmingham media, and so on. It just didn't have the same coalescence in London.” The *Evening Standard* never filled that role, even at its best, and the paper's near-demise has led to a flowering of new projects that report on and imagine the city.

*London Centric* is one of perhaps a half-dozen Substacks—with names like *London Spy*, *The Londoner*, *Capital Letter*, *The London Minute*—that have sprung up, mostly in the past year or so.

Waterson covered the *Standard's* demise as a media reporter at the *Guardian*. Last June, he took a buyout. “I’d done a hundred pieces writing about how audience behavior was changing,” he said. “It felt like a time to put that theory into action.” Waterson has more than a quarter of a million followers on X. His partner, Jess Brammar, is an editorial executive at the BBC. Since the launch, he has published two reported stories a week, including pieces about London’s spotty cellphone reception, trouble at Britain’s largest night club, and how the city’s extremely popular Lime e-bikes have a habit of fracturing people’s legs. Last October, after Waterson published a post about the influence of Saudi investors at the *Standard*, Lord Lebedev called him a “prick” on X. “That sold about forty subscriptions,” Waterson joked. “It was the biggest investment in London journalism he’d made in a long time.”

The morning we met, Waterson was following up on a tip that a pub renovation next door to the Chiltern Firehouse, a celebrity hangout in Marylebone that is owned by André Balazs, might have resulted in a restaurant feud. I followed Waterson on a Lime bike (after he carefully checked the brakes and tires). When we reached the building site, he scoured the exterior for permits and took a few photographs. “It’s quite fun and silly, if you’ve got two big property-owning people in a preposterous part of London at each other’s throats,” Waterson said. He was going to write a couple of hundred words and see if the *MailOnline* followed it up. (Two days later, a fire at the Chiltern Firehouse nixed the story.) Next, he wanted to stop by a Harry Potter merchandise store, not far from Piccadilly. In December, he had published an investigation into a string of similar stores, which appeared to be changing their corporate ownership every few months, possibly, he theorized, to avoid paying taxes. (The owner admitted to the unpaid taxes but denied any impropriety.) We parked our bikes. The store, which before Christmas had been called Wizards

and Witches, had been rebranded and was now called Relentless London. “This is fantastic! I love it,” Waterson said, before going in to nose around.

Relentless London occupied a ground-floor space in the London Trocadero, a kind of seedy but nonetheless valuable complex of buildings in the heart of the West End. The Trocadero is run by Asif Aziz, a Malawi-born property developer who is one of London’s most infamous landlords. Around the corner, off Leicester Square, another property company controlled by Aziz was in a dispute with a tenant, the Prince Charles Cinema—a cultish place, beloved for its cheap tickets, sing-along musical screenings, and original programming. According to the owners of the Prince Charles, Aziz’s company wanted to modify its lease, to make the cinema easier to evict. The P.C.C. had launched an online petition and a campaign to fight back. “This is mine and many others favourite cinema in London,” Paul Mescal, the Irish actor, wrote on Instagram. (In response, Aziz’s company has issued a statement saying that it has acted “legally, and in good faith.”) When Waterson and I passed by, the marquee above the doors read “DAMN THE MAN. SAVE THE PCC.” It was an obvious London news item, and Waterson and his main Substack rivals had all published stories. “If a national pitched it, it would be, ‘Oooh . . . that’s too London,’ ” Waterson said. “And yet there’s millions of people who want to know. The reason that Leicester Square is like it is, and is developed in the way that it is, is that there is one guy who controls it.”

**T**he *Londoner*, which started charging for subscriptions on January 15th, covered the cinema dispute with an atmospheric post, describing the whirring in the theatre’s projection booth, coming from its Cinemacanca Victoria 8 dual-gauge projector. “Distracted, I watch a trail of celluloid on its journey from material to immaterial,” Miles Ellingham, who has contributed to the *Financial Times* and the *Economist*’s *1843* magazine, wrote. Ellingham is one of three staff members at *The Londoner*, which is part of a stable of new local-reporting ventures in six British cities, started by Joshi Herrmann, a former features writer at the *Evening Standard*. Herrmann started the

experiment in Manchester, during Britain's first COVID lockdown, in the spring of 2020.

At the time, Herrmann was coming down after three years in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he was the editor-in-chief of Tab Media, a network of student-run news sites which raised ten million dollars from investors, including Rupert Murdoch. The company was founded in the U.K. before it entered the U.S., soared briefly, then flamed out. Tab Media relied mostly on unpaid student freelancers. It mixed fresh, occasionally powerful reporting with a whole section called "Trash." It also published the site Babe.net, for "girls who don't give a fuck." "The workplace operated like a frat house, where interns and supervisors, underage and of-age, partied together and gossiped about who had hooked up and who slept with whom," *The Cut* reported, after Tab Media withdrew from the U.S., in 2019. (In response, Herrmann apologized for having consensual sexual relationships with members of staff. "I regret doing it and I learned from it," he said.) "At the time, it was, like, really fun to be trying to get millions of people to read your thing," he told me. "Clearly, it was reckless and in some senses kind of meaningless. But it was also of its moment."

Back in England, Herrmann set up the *Mill* to challenge the Manchester *Evening News*, a once great city newspaper that has been hollowed out by clickbait and staff cuts. Herrmann noticed that a single writer had filed twenty-nine stories in two days for the paper's website. "That's a story every half an hour," he wrote, in the summer of 2020. "This isn't the fault of the writer—at all. It's the result of media companies trying to make a living from the meagre earnings of online ads." Herrmann sought a small but paying audience for carefully reported local stories that he wrote himself. "Numbers that would have been pitiful," he said, compared to his Tab Media days. "I just want to get two hundred people paying, and then four hundred people paying," he said. "You're trying to create, like, an actual relationship with people."

The *Mill* now has three staff writers, an editor, and more than three thousand paying subscribers, from an e-mail list around twenty times that size. In 2023, Herrmann raised some half a million dollars from investors, who included Mark Thompson, the chief executive of CNN, and Nicholas Johnston, the publisher of Axios. Herrmann has expanded the model to Glasgow, Liverpool, Sheffield, and Birmingham. He grew up in Sussex, in London's commuter belt, and the capital was the logical, but somewhat overwhelming, next target. "I suppose it was sort of nagging at me," he said. Then the *Evening Standard* stopped its daily edition. "So then it was kind of, like, 'Well, actually, wouldn't it be great?'"

I met Herrmann and Hannah Williams, the editor of *The Londoner*, at a pub not far from the BBC's offices. When *The Londoner* advertised for two writers last summer, Herrmann received two hundred and seventy applications. Williams gave up an editing job at the *Financial Times*. Like Mill Media's other outposts, *The Londoner* leans toward the evocative, alongside more conventional investigations and local news. "I'm not saying that the city just needs endless romanticizing," Williams said. "But I think it's just such a deeply interesting, varied, really fucking strange city." In December, she wrote a story about London's last street-lamp lighters and the changing quality of its nighttime glow. In February, Ellingham wrote about the nuns of Tyburn Convent, who live in near-silence a few minutes from Selfridges, the department store, and the permanent bustle of Oxford Street.

Williams grew up in the Ribble Valley, in Lancashire. Like Waterson, she moved to the capital in her twenties. "I feel like there's a certain kind of—it sounds so corny—but this kind of kinesia about it," Williams said. "I just love London . . . I think there's a tendency to kind of downplay it as well. I think everybody has a slight, in a good way . . . ironic humor about it." I got the impression from her and from Herrmann that *The Londoner* was as interested in creating a sense of belonging—of fellow-feeling, or a shared experience of the city—as it was in covering breaking news or in challenging those in power. Herrmann has a theory that London's original journalism culture evolved from a combination of seventeenth-century court gossip and actionable financial

news. “Essentially the kind of trade information of an empire: boats coming and going and cargo and whatever, the prices of commodities,” he said. “I think you can still see that reflected in the tenor of U.K. national journalism. It is very much about daily scoops, about information, and it’s very, very structured around tribal sort of opinion.” *The Londoner*, which currently has a few hundred paying subscribers, wants to be both less and more than that. “I think a lot of what people feel like they’re missing in modern media is a sense of connection,” Herrmann said. “You don’t really want to feel like you’re a consumer of information. I think a lot of people like to feel like they’re part of something.”

People have tried before to find a new model for local news in London. They have typically failed. The reason is at least partly psychological. The city is both geographically and spiritually amorphous. (Around forty per cent of London’s population was born overseas, a slightly higher proportion than in New York.) It resists coherence. I wonder, on some level, how much it wants to know about itself. “London is a disparate capital,” Greenslade, the former journalism professor, said. “People in East Ham are not interested in what happens to the people in Southall, and the people in St. John’s Wood really couldn’t give a toss about what happens south of the river. So it is very difficult.” When we spoke, Greenslade reminisced about Channel One, a London cable-news channel, inspired by NY1, that launched with some excitement in 1994 and shut down four years later.

“It lasted ten minutes. It collapsed. Why?” Greenslade said. “Because you didn’t identify with your city the way that people in New York do.” I recently watched Channel One’s final hour of content, on YouTube. It is a touching highlight reel of London in the nineties: East End markets, the death of Princess Diana, a drum-and-bass soundtrack, interspersed every now and again with self-deprecating footage of the channel’s newsroom and its eager, young reporters. I forwarded it to Waterson. “It’s incredible,” he replied. “Nothing as thrilling as a time capsule from the past that presents an entirely wrong vision of the future.” When I spoke to Nick Pollard, who was in charge of Channel



One's programming for the first couple of years, he couldn't quite put his finger on what went wrong: whether it was the state of Britain's cable industry at the time, the tough logistics of reporting on breaking news, or some innate aspect of the city's personality. But he wanted to read whatever was coming next. "I take my hat off to people who can make a project like that work for London or part of London," Pollard said. He asked me to send him some links. ♦

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