THE annual Paul Foot awards were presented a fortnight ago in honour of a great investigative journalist. His legacy continues to this day, carried by nominees from local and national media. Their stories were powerful, leading to the government’s new Student Office advisor depart in disgrace after two weeks, the resignation of senior Oxfam managers, and a charity collapse after organising seamy hostess fundraising evenings.

This year’s winner was Carole Cadwalladr who has done great work cataloguing corrupt Russian influence on the Brexit referendum. She spent over a year following the lead, with a slow trickle of articles in late 2016 recently becoming a torrent of revelations laying bare the extent of dodgy foreign cash stealing the referendum result.

Journalism is sometimes called the fourth Estate, vital to the functioning of a healthy democracy. Powerful people find it easy to cover up mistakes and misdeeds. It’s only through journalists dogged efforts that our betters and masters feel a healthy fear of what will happen if they step out of line.

American scientists in Chicago recently proved the economic value of a local newspaper for taxpayers. Pengjie Gao’s team looked at borrowing costs for local authorities, and found that municipalities lacking a local newspaper were saying a substantial interest rate premium on their borrowings.

Gao explained this through the vital monitoring function that local newspapers provide. Local journalists continual nosing round gives them a sense when something stinks and a platform to speak truth to power. They call out councils when they make mistakes and prevent coverups. They criticise waste, vanity projects and misbehaviour, ultimately adding value to taxpayers by driving efficiency.

With austerity, we should all be grateful for anything that is making local authorities more efficient. So it’s ironic that the lost austerity decade has seen pressure on regional newspapers rise to almost intolerable levels. Hit by a triple whammy of falling corporate and small ad revenues along with lower sales figures, they’ve been forced to cut journalists. They no longer have the feet on the ground to follow their nose, painstakingly track down scandals and expose wrongdoing.

For every Brighton Argus spending six months forcing an NHS to apologise for unnecessary care home deaths, there’s a South Yorkshire Times that bows to the inevitable and shuts up shop forever. And when fewer of us buy local newspapers, we all suffer with local scandals going unreported.

This issue is a classic example of the ‘free rider’ problem in economics. Why would anyone in their right mind pay individually for a newspaper when everyone, including nonpayers, benefits from a strong local press watchdog?

Local newspapers are in that sense ‘club goods’; many people paying together create benefits for us all.

And modern society suffers from people’s increasing unwillingness to pay a premium for club goods even where it benefits us all. Local shops illustrate this point: one project asked everyone in a country village to spend £2 per week to keep their local store open – literally a pack of coffee per week. All the villagers were initially enthusiastic, but by the end of the first year, the store was forced to close, undermining all residents’ quality of life.

So how can we arrest this decline before it’s too late? Club goods rely on members recruiting new members by word-of-mouth. If you value something, then persuade others to do the same, and get them into the club.

If you value local newspapers, help others pick up the ‘habit’ of paying for quality journalism by talking about the stories and passing the paper around friends and family. Otherwise we are leaving our democracy open for take-over by foreign powers who definitely don’t have our welfare at heart.