

This presentation is based on a chapter researched for an edited volume by Einar Thorsen and Jamie Matthews entitled "Media, Journalism & Disaster Communities." Forthcoming by Palgrave Macmillan.

Does the local press still exercise a watchdog function?

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A disaster foretold?

The disaster raised very important questions for journalism and its practitioners. How did these public safety failures not get spotted beforehand? Was this an example of the failure of grassroots journalism flowing from the economic failure of countless local newspapers?

Was a 'News deficit' putting the public at risk?

**Grenfell
Tower Fire**

**Real Lives
- Real
Debate**

Grenfell Tower Fire



Kurt Barling, 15th June 2017

Real Lives - Real Debate



Kurt Barling, 22nd June 2017

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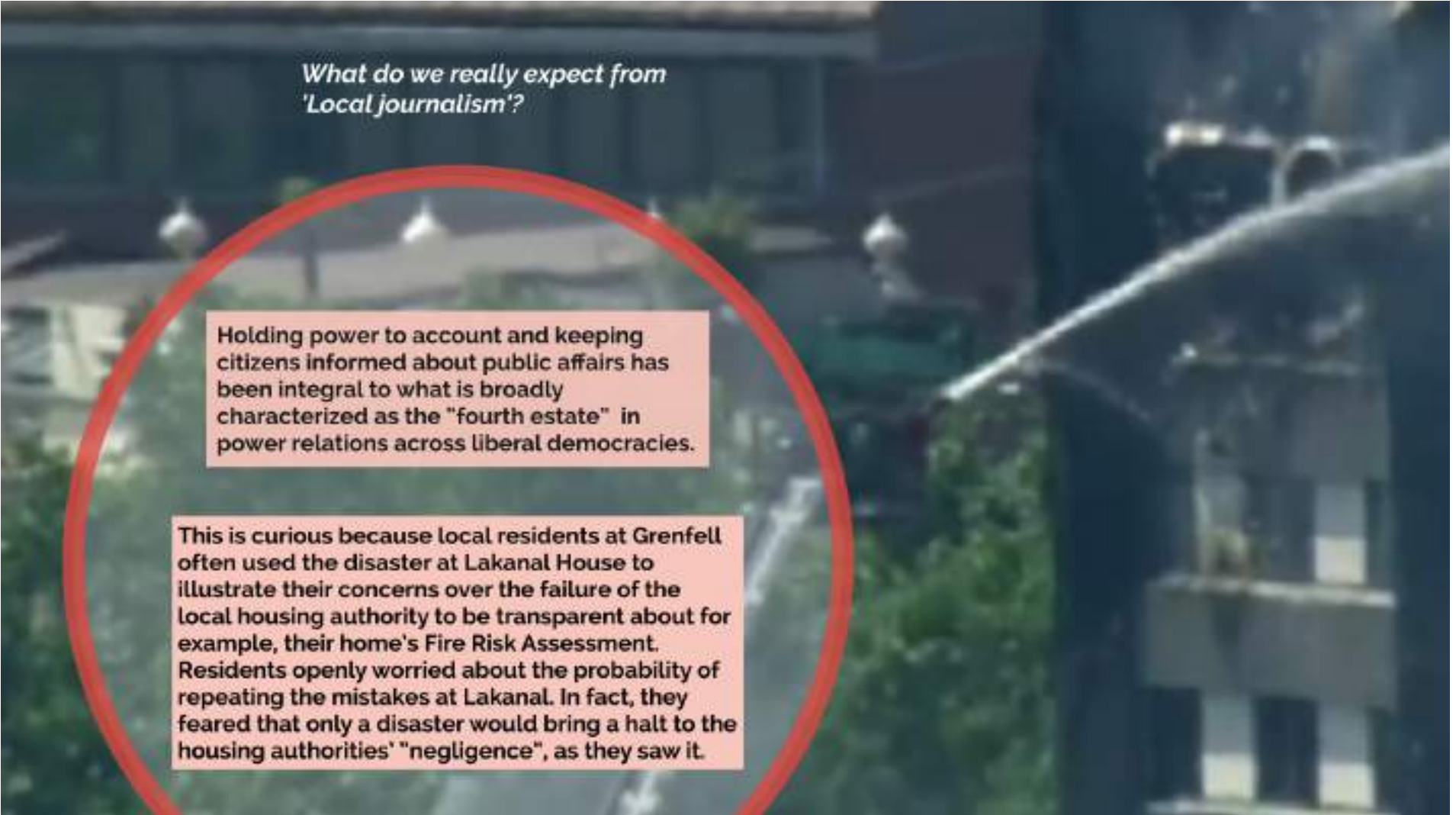
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*What do we really expect from
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Holding power to account and keeping citizens informed about public affairs has been integral to what is broadly characterized as the "fourth estate" in power relations across liberal democracies.

This is curious because local residents at Grenfell often used the disaster at Lakanal House to illustrate their concerns over the failure of the local housing authority to be transparent about for example, their home's Fire Risk Assessment. Residents openly worried about the probability of repeating the mistakes at Lakanal. In fact, they feared that only a disaster would bring a halt to the housing authorities' "negligence", as they saw it.

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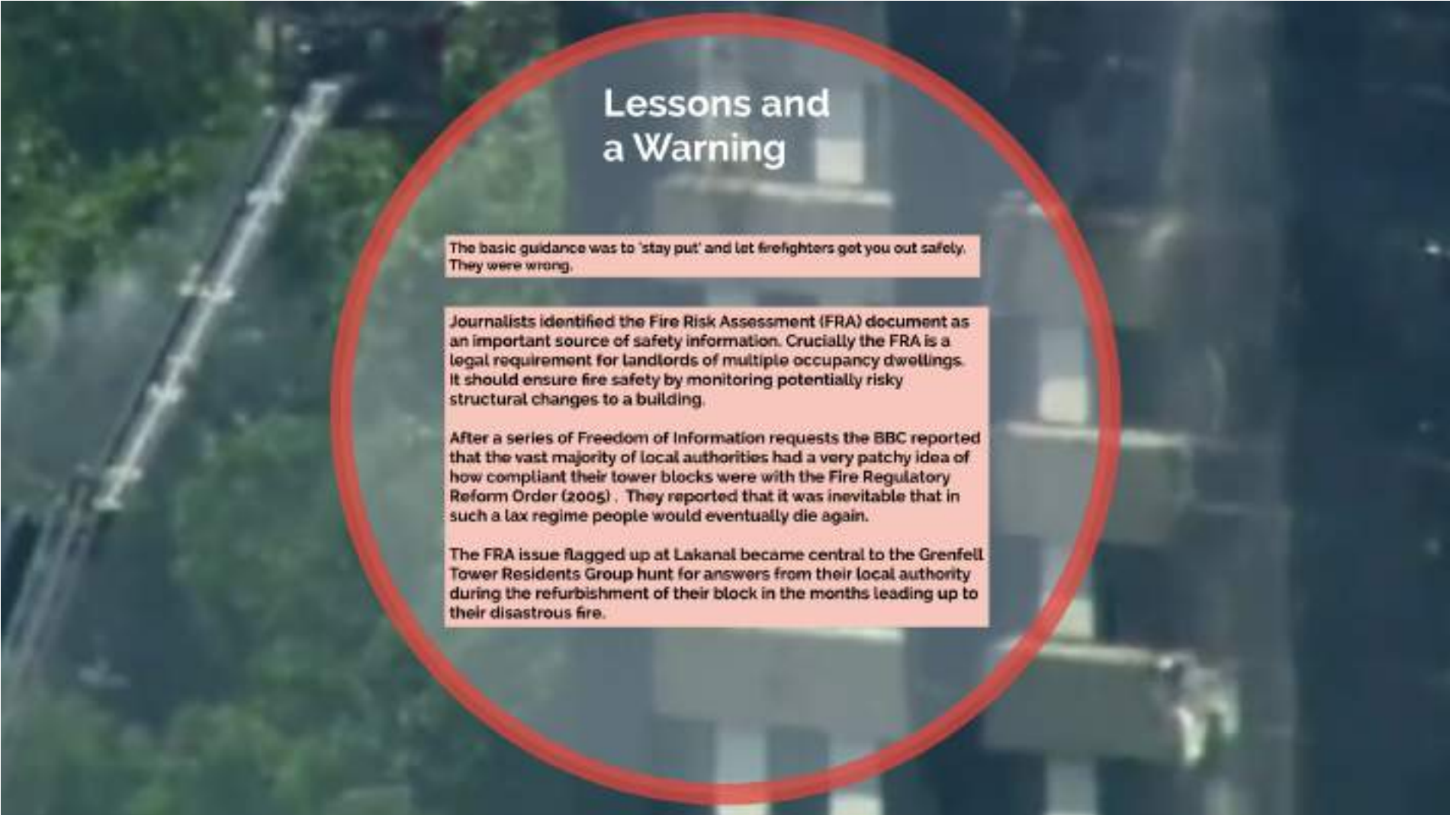
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Lessons and a Warning

The basic guidance was to 'stay put' and let firefighters get you out safely. They were wrong.

Journalists identified the Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) document as an important source of safety information. Crucially the FRA is a legal requirement for landlords of multiple occupancy dwellings. It should ensure fire safety by monitoring potentially risky structural changes to a building.

After a series of Freedom of Information requests the BBC reported that the vast majority of local authorities had a very patchy idea of how compliant their tower blocks were with the Fire Regulatory Reform Order (2005). They reported that it was inevitable that in such a lax regime people would eventually die again.

The FRA issue flagged up at Lakanal became central to the Grenfell Tower Residents Group hunt for answers from their local authority during the refurbishment of their block in the months leading up to their disastrous fire.

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The disruption of the journalism
eco-system: Can Social Media
plug the gap?

Is there credible evidence that a "Fifth Estate" as Dutton has called it (2009) is gaining traction to add something new and "networked" to the public discourse?

Can social media be an effective replacement for a vigilant local media reporting on such a disaster?

There is little systematic evidence that local voices were heard any more clearly to find remedies to the Grenfell tragedy. This form of platform journalism still lends itself to powerful existing institutional actors.

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If there are established local media players, there is little doubt that disaster affected communities can have much clearer communication pathways to power.

But it is important to recognize that risk reduction and recovery need action by public authorities.

The Public Inquiry into Grenfell is yet to report, one of the issues it may well tackle is why matters plainly placed on the public record by journalism were so ignored by successive governments.

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As the power to deliver rebuke wanes, so the fear too of retribution diminishes.

Making decision-makers fear the truth will prevent disaster - not journalism alone.

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