

An investigation into hyperlocal journalism in the UK and how it creates value for citizens

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s, a largely Internet-based network of independent news operations has emerged focused on small geographic areas in the UK, often run by non-professional journalists. ‘Hyperlocal’ journalism seems to have captured the imagination of academics and policy-makers, with some arguing that it has the potential to fill the democratic deficit caused by the decline of mainstream local newspapers. Attention has largely focused on the journalistic values of these websites rather than their wider cultural value, with relatively little recourse to primary research in the UK context. This thesis addresses both of those aspects by drawing on a range of data: a large-scale overview of the sector, three case study accounts of hyperlocal news operations, and an analysis of interviews with practitioners.

The research finds that hyperlocal news operations are spread across the UK and collectively produce an impressive number of news stories. In that sense, they play a useful role in local news ecologies and their independence marks them out as an alternative to an increasingly consolidated mainstream local news sector. Hyperlocal news operations are gaining legitimacy through engagement with audiences on social media and through recognition by other news media. The thesis also finds that the hyperlocal journalist is often motivated by a desire to redress mainstream media’s representation of their locality or by a single campaign issue. Hyperlocal journalists traverse both the digital ‘beat’ and the real-world ‘beat’, using reciprocal journalism practices in order to build a community around their service. However, many services are precariously placed as the journalists exploit their own labour and avoid engaging fully with issues of economic sustainability.

Taking a case study approach, the thesis explores the working practices and environments of three hyperlocal news operations in detail, including looking at audience engagement. It finds further evidence of these issues of precarity, making the potential of sustaining hyperlocal operations difficult. However, the case study accounts also highlight the value of focusing on everyday aspects of community life and how that can help build audiences and enable citizens to become participants in content creation and distribution. Finally, the thesis argues that hyperlocal can play a more vital role in the UK’s local news landscape should the right conditions be created by policy-makers to create a more level regulatory playing-field.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

The heroes of ‘authentic’ citizen journalism are those who capture events on their cameras, break stories about events in their locales (‘hyperlocalists’), expose the failings of public and private institutions and their personnel, and sometimes become celebrated opinion-leaders, having circumvented the traditional journalistic career path. (Goode 2009: 1290)

Context

The role of the ordinary citizen in making journalism represents a significant challenge to those whose profession it is to produce the news for print, online or broadcast. The ‘citizen journalist’ has seemingly entered the profession without the need for formal training and has arrived as newsgatherer, publisher, curator and secondary gatekeeper (Singer 2014). Sometimes the citizen as newsgatherer is an altogether accidental affair as they bear witness to a breaking news event and instinctively reach for their smartphones to share images and words with whoever wants to see them. Examples of professional journalists then openly pleading with the citizen for rights to republish these images are easy to find. From a plane landing in the Hudson river (in 2009), to the Glasgow helicopter crash (in 2013) and a bus crash in Coventry (in 2015), the first-on-the-scene images we saw in newspapers and on television were taken by citizens and carefully negotiated from their grasp by canny news picture editors. These examples might feel like exceptions, given the events covered are hardly of the everyday. Yet the citizen – equipped with devices capable of taking images, shooting video, publishing to the Internet – makes contributions to news gathering at a more banal, everyday, ‘hyper-’ or ‘ultra-’ local level.

This near-ubiquitous capturing of the ordinary everyday comes at a time when traditional local media are in decline. The newspaper industry’s continued trend towards closure and retrenchment of their local and regional press titles (Oliver 2008) has resulted in concerns about the impact this may have on the public sphere (Siles and Boczkowski 2012). With fewer reporters on the ground and admittance that local newspapers can no longer be papers of record (Sharman 2015), what then might fill the resultant democratic deficit? Who is left to hold power to account? Inevitably, attention has partly turned to the citizen. Whilst most mainstream newsrooms would now recognise the value of the citizen as a newsgathering resource in capturing newsworthy moments as they happen, the decline of the local press has also created an opportunity for enterprising, civic-minded, digitally savvy individuals seeking to start news services for personal gain and/or for wider civic benefit. These services have come

to be labelled as 'hyperlocal' news services by practitioners themselves, by investors, by regulators, by lobbyists and by academics. It has been variously framed as a potential saviour of local journalism (Talk About Local 2011), an emergent area of the Internet economy (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013, Radcliffe 2012) and a mechanism to strengthen community cohesion (Carnegie UK Trust 2014). To some extent, therefore, hyperlocal has arrived as a fully-formed notion within the UK's media landscape, with the dominant view being that its contribution to ensuring a plurality of news sources in localities is of real value to citizens. Even local authorities have been encouraged to engage with hyperlocals, given their potential to offer the chance for more direct citizen engagement in the light of ailing local government communications strategies (SOCITM 2010: 163).

In attracting such attention in recent years, the hyperlocal journalist has become something of an idealised figure: civic-minded but tech- and business-savvy. The 'hyperlocalist', empowered by digital technology and social media, is required to hold a diverse skill set, well beyond that of the traditional local 'hack':

You also need to invest time in developing relationships, promoting your site, and in some cases working to turn your operation into a viable business. As the platforms become easier to use and more commonplace, human skills are becoming as important as technical ones. Community management, sales ability and other skills in communication and content promotion are all becoming increasingly important if you want your voice to be heard. (Radcliffe 2012: 16)

Embracing this diversity of skills, argues Radcliffe (writing on behalf of the UK innovation charity Nesta): "can be fundamental in making hyperlocal pay" (2012: 16). Indeed, making hyperlocal pay has become a key preoccupation of commentators, further positioning the hyperlocal publisher as a 'fictive' entrepreneurial figure. Sally Jones (2014) argues that there exists the idealised 'fictive' entrepreneur (drawing on Bourdieu and Passeron's 1996 discussion of the fictive student). Such a figure – gifted, responsive – is framed within policy discussion as a role model to whose level "only the handful of gifted, fictive students are able to achieve" (2014: 240). Jones finds that the "combative, status driven and all-conquering entrepreneur is still prevalent in contemporary business culture" (2014: 241) and one that is situated in "historically masculine-framed ideas of entrepreneurship" (2014: 241). This situating of such idealised 'fictive' figures is common in writings on citizen- or community-led journalism initiatives, argues Luke Goode (2009), noting how much work on citizen journalists frames

them as “fitting descendants of the radical pioneers of modern journalism prior to its corruption by commerce and vested interests” (Goode 2009: 1290).

Martin Moore (2014), writing for the Media Standards Trust, goes as far as to argue that securing the future of local journalism is at stake “the business model that supported news in the twentieth century no longer sustains it in the 21st. Hardest to fund has been local news reporting. This is not peculiar to the UK but symptomatic of many mature western democracies” (Moore 2014: 27). The UK communications regulator Ofcom claims that these sites have: “the potential to support and broaden the range of local media content available to citizens and consumers at a time when traditional local media providers continue to find themselves under financial pressure” (2012a: 103). The question of who will develop and run these sites is partly answered by the Carnegie Trust (2014). They have given financial support to a small number of hyperlocal publishers and argue that hyperlocal publishing offers an entrepreneurial exit strategy for journalists made redundant from mainstream journalism. It recommends that the National Union of Journalists “should consider how it can work with employers and the government to support its members who lose their jobs in a news institution to become entrepreneurs running hyperlocal media” (Carnegie UK Trust 2014: 16). Cook and Pekkala (2012) draw on a set of interviews with journalism entrepreneurs participating in a development programme to claim that: “Journalists are looking to reinvent their careers” (2012: 114). Further, the ‘reconfigured’ journalist entrepreneur has a real chance to act “as a connector: between audiences, services and revenue streams. This triangulation requires a new emphasis on business skills to complement those already honed through journalism” (2012: 114).

Much then rests on the shoulders of this fictive hyperlocalist although their precarity is recognised too: “Outside major UK cities local public interest news will rely on volunteers sporadically and inconsistently performing the functions of a Fourth Estate. As a consequence, while some areas may be well served, others will not be served at all”. (Moore 2015: 78). This debate about the value of alternative local journalism as fourth estate is not new. Whilst much of the policy discussion cites hyperlocal as if it were a new and novel form of doing journalism in defined, small geographic areas, there is in fact, as Tony Harcup describes (2006: 129-132), a recent precursor to this debate. The significant ‘wave’ of alternative local newspapers in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s also, like the current hyperlocal titles, garnered attention from regulators (The 1977 Royal Commission of the Press). As with hyperlocal, the alternative press that Harcup describes was extremely varied and largely distanced from the journalism

profession. Most such newspapers were: “produced by people with no formal journalistic training or background” (2006: 131). Although the current commentary on hyperlocal largely fails to connect with the significant body of academic work in relation to alternative and community media by Harcup and others, that is not to suggest it is ill-informed. Indeed, much commentary on hyperlocal is by practitioners themselves, many of whom are very well embedded in the practice (Talk About Local 2011). Harcup argues that the era he was examining was not a ‘golden age’ (2006: 137), for to see it that way would be to claim that current movements had less value. It is still the case that “dissatisfaction with the mainstream media persists” (2006: 138) and therefore new models of alternative media will persist in order to facilitate ‘active citizenship’.

Purpose of this research

It is the intention of this study to examine practices within this current phase of alternative local journalism and ask what forms of value are generated for citizens. The research presented here will inevitably ask questions about the value of hyperlocal publishing in the context of its potential ‘fourth estate’ role, yet to solely discuss this aspect would be to limit our gaze too narrowly. By focusing “on the social and cultural dimensions of hyperlocal news alongside its economic and political importance” (Hess and Waller 2016: 14) there is the opportunity to theorise the value of productive acts of media creation carried out by the full range of professional and non-professional social actors who produce and interact with hyperlocal information systems. Thus, this thesis seeks to address the question of the value for citizens of these operations as information nodes dealing the often banal nature of the everyday lived experience and asks how the everyday use of social networking and online publishing technologies might be used to support change at the local level. It also seeks to address the issue that so concerns commentators and policy-makers by examining the viability of the ‘fictive’ hyperlocal publisher as a figure on which to base our hopes that local democracies can once again be enriched by vibrant, pluralistic, local media ecologies. Yet as we will see in examples in this thesis, many of the topics covered by hyperlocal news go well beyond topics that which are usually considered as newsworthy by mainstream publications. Through extensive empirical research the thesis examines the reality of maintaining small-scale news publishing operations in the UK and offers an overview of the scale and scope of hyperlocal journalism. It engages with the practitioners themselves through interviews and three short thumbnail accounts.

Research questions and structure of the thesis

I have developed three research questions allow me to address my primary research question: What forms of value are generated for communities through the actions of hyperlocal news and information operations?:

- RQ1: What is the extent and variety of hyperlocal news and information operations in the UK and how do they contribute to local news ecologies?
- RQ2: What are the motivations and practices of hyperlocal information providers and how do these operations contribute to everyday and local information ecologies?
- RQ3: How do such hyperlocal information systems connect to citizens and what forms of value are created by the development of 'new networks of trust' (Couldry 2004)?

These questions are aimed partly at addressing the gap in literature of empirical research into current practices in UK community journalism but also to consider a wider set of information gathering and distribution practices within communities.

The thesis is split into eight chapters. Following this introductory chapter, there are two chapters that review relevant literature and outline my theoretical frameworks. In the first of these I give an overview of the scholarly literature on hyperlocal media that has emerged in recent years, whilst also expanding on how hyperlocal is situated in policy-related literature, as I have alluded to in this introduction. I then argue that scholarly work focused on the 'everyday' can allow us to see hyperlocal publishing as cultural practice and can allow us to investigate its counter-hegemonic potential through the foregrounding of the banal, everyday concerns of citizens. The following chapter begins by asking how we might frame the citizenship value of hyperlocal in terms of its potential to develop 'active' citizens. This chapter also makes the case that whilst the wider commentary regarding hyperlocal is ultimately based on the idea that it can make a valuable contribution to an enriched public sphere of communications, there is potential to draw on ideas of the alternative public sphere in order to make sense of hyperlocal's alternative means of production. Such means are usually based around Internet and social media technologies, and therefore I discuss how ideas of the networked public sphere can be drawn on for this study.

In outlining my methodology, discussed in chapter four, I detail how each of the key concerns developed from my literature review will be addressed. Firstly, the question of

hyperlocal's role in reinvigorating the public sphere is tackled through a systematic analysis of the scale and variety of hyperlocal publishing between 2012 and 2014. I use this data to reflect on whether hyperlocal can form a part of local news ecologies, drawing on a case study of Birmingham's media. Secondly, three short case studies, in the form of thumbnail accounts of hyperlocal publishers, allow us to consider both how citizen engagement forms a kind of 'everyday' activism, and how this allows the development of 'new networks of trust' (Couldry 2004). Thirdly, I use interviews to understand the range of hyperlocal's publishing practices and the motivations of its practitioners. I examine how key issues of representation and community are used by practitioners to rationalise the precariousness of their endeavours. Chapters five, six and seven present each of these sets of findings in turn. In chapter eight, I conclude by drawing together the key findings, arguing for new perspectives to be brought to the study of journalism enterprises at the local level and hypothesising on possible futures for the hyperlocal media sector in the UK.

Much of the data which informs this thesis formed part of a major UK Research Council-funded project on 'Creative Citizenship'.¹ That project had a research strand that focused on hyperlocal journalism (led by myself) and this thesis is in part a write-up of the project's findings. I outline in detail in chapter four my role in the project and the data I produced as part of it. Like the project, this thesis seeks to give an overview of an emergent activity in which citizens use their creativity to create wider societal benefits. However, the thesis offers deeper insights into the nature of these creative practices than were possible in the project. In particular, the framing here is only partially that of the public sphere lens we brought to our research in the project. Rather, I draw on ideas from a cultural studies perspective indicated above to examine the value of the more banal aspects of hyperlocal journalism and in doing so seek to frame it as an emergent cultural practice. Telling the story of hyperlocal journalism in the UK should of course involve drawing attention to the excellent work done to hold local power to account, to tackle local corruption and to give voice to those too often ignored by mainstream media. Yet the thesis challenges the view that hyperlocal journalism only matters when it is doing that kind of journalism. Rather, my aim here is to identify why the stuff in between – the banal and everyday – matters just as much in creating value for those communities which benefit from having a hyperlocal journalist on their patch.

¹ 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' - February 2012-15. Some research was conducted as part of a smaller research project funded by the Communities and Culture Network+. This is detailed in chapter four.

CHAPTER TWO – DEFINING HYPERLOCAL AS EVERYDAY COMMUNICATIONS

This chapter looks at how my object of study, hyperlocal journalism, has been defined by academics and others. The degree of debate about its definition has framed the emerging discourses around hyperlocal journalism; that is, the extent to which hyperlocal media might play a similar normative democratic role as that of existing mainstream media: playing a part in giving voice to those communities left without adequate local media outlets due to the market failure in the local commercial news sector. I then outline how we can understand this within the context of debates about digital media and the ‘everyday’ and how everyday participation by citizens on social networks and the subsequent foregrounding of their ‘banal’ concerns might be considered as part of a wider shift in community communications.

Defining hyperlocal

Clearly, settling on a definition for ‘hyperlocal’ is important for a study such as this. Yet doing so is not necessarily a straightforward process. Andy Price (2010) has noted that there is a lack of clarity over terms: “the description of non-professional news production is still in flux” (2010: 138). In their 2011 paper on ‘Defining Hyperlocal Media’, Metzgar et al. argue that the word hyperlocal “appears regularly in discussions about the future of the news media and potential alternative models, but there is no agreed-upon definition” (2011: 773). In general, the discussions they refer to describe Hyperlocal Media Operations (HMLOs, their term) as a kind of hybrid form of local newsmaking that has elements where “alternative newspaper movements combined the interactive and broadcast abilities accompanying Web 2.0” (2011: 774). For Metzgar et al., it is necessary to address the issue of definition so that they, and future researchers, can distinguish between “all websites with a local orientation from sites that may more genuinely deserve the moniker ‘hyperlocal’” (2011: 774). By those that ‘deserve’ this, they mean HMLOs that produce original content rather than aggregate the content of others and: “an expectation that the content be original and that engaging with the site results in increased connection to the community” (2011: 774). In essence, then, Metzgar et al. offer a kind of qualifying criteria for HMLOs and they set out some US-based examples that exemplify the criteria. This in turn shapes the definition they settle on:

Hyperlocal media operations are geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement. (Metzgar et al. 2011: 774).

Metzgar et al. make the claim that the potential of HLMOs is in reinvigorating the public sphere, seeing the Internet as a way to broaden access for all to news and information: “The interactive media these sites use have not created a perfect Habermasian environment, but they have moved conditions forward toward a more ideal setting than has been possible before” (2011: 783).

References to hyperlocal journalism in recent academic discussion in the UK broadly align with the Metzgar et al. definition. For Janet Jones and Lee Salter (2012), hyperlocal is an “emergent tier” offering “stories grounded in local, hermeneutic knowledge” (2012: 96), although they omit to tell us what the term specifically refers to in relation to geographic reach or organisational constitution. Stephen Cushion’s discussion of the value of public service broadcasting groups ‘citizen journalism’, ‘user-generated content’ and ‘hyperlocal’ together as being “bottom-up” (Cushion 2012: 86-87), but doesn’t offer a more precise definition. Charles Beckett (2010) describes hyperlocal journalism’s potential to address the issues of a declining local press scene in the UK, eulogising about a “blossoming of hyper-local online ventures” and claiming: “hyper-local journalism is not simply a hobby or a pleasant localist addition. It is a potential amelioration of the drastic problem of declining professional regional and local news media” (Beckett 2010: 11). Likewise, academics from Goldsmiths University argued that hyperlocal journalism could be part of a proposed new public service news consortium which could “develop and support hyperlocal media through the sharing of resources and on-line link up to encourage alternative voices” (Fenton et al. 2010: 2).

Given the lack of empirical research, there is little surprise that academics describe hyperlocal in fairly broad terms, in line with Metzgar et al.’s view that their contribution is in rejuvenating the public sphere. It is a similar case in UK policy documents, with the Labour Government, in its 2009 Digital Britain report, citing the “medium-term potential of online hyperlocal news” to contribute to a pending gap in the provision “between the old and new” (Department for Culture Media and Sport 2009: 150). In 2009, Ofcom, the UK communications regulator, in their review of ‘Local and Regional Media in the UK’, noted hyperlocal as being nascent in contrast to a developing US scene, with much of the UK material “hard to find, either because it does not attract a lot of traffic, or because it fails to deploy the strategies

required to get a high ranking in traditional search engines” (Ofcom 2009a: 45). By and large, they describe hyperlocal as an emergent element of an existing ‘ultra-’ (a prefix they say is interchangeable with ‘hyper-’) local media landscape that includes newspapers, radio, even television.

In their 2012 overview of the emerging network of hyperlocal websites Ofcom claims that these sites have “the potential to support and broaden the range of local media content available to citizens and consumers at a time when traditional local media providers continue to find themselves under financial pressure” (Ofcom 2012a: 103). Ofcom devoted a chapter (2012a: 103-111) of their annual Communications Market Report to hyperlocal, a recognition of substance that in this instance does draw on a definition published the same year by Nesta, a UK charity that invests in creative businesses and publishes research. In a report written by former Ofcom employee Damian Radcliffe, they say that hyperlocal can be defined as, “Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other, small geographically defined community” (Radcliffe 2012: 9).

This widely cited definition of hyperlocal encompasses services beyond news (though Radcliffe only gives examples of news services), yet narrows the field to online services and those operating within small geographic areas. However, in the same report (the same page even), Radcliffe recognises that “Hyperlocal can mean a whole town or city” (2012: 9). In Radcliffe’s later (2015) report (this time for Nesta and the Centre for Community Journalism), he makes the point that hyperlocal publishers “define their coverage locality in different ways” (2015: 17), qualifying his point by drawing on a 2014 survey of UK hyperlocal publishers (Williams et al. 2014: 13) which shows that 27 of 157 publishers ran services with a city-level reach, whilst most (n=92) described their intended coverage as “quite local” (2014: 13). In their survey of audiences’ consumption of hyperlocal media, Kantar Media and Nesta (2013) make a distinction between what they see as ‘traditional’ hyperlocal and ‘native’ hyperlocal. The former “includes online services provided by organisations with a background in local broadcasting, local newspapers and local authorities” whilst the latter are “independently-owned hyperlocal news sites and blogs” (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013: 3). Subsequently, “this makes the definition broader than some, but this categorisation was chosen in order to provide a comprehensive measure across all local media sources” (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013: 58).

Practitioners themselves are keen to draw attention to the participatory aspects of their offering, but also make the point that the extent of their geographic reach is a defining factor. A

group of hyperlocals came together in 2012 under the banner of the 'Hyperlocal Alliance'.² The group had 73 members as of April 2013 and a wiki space in which their definition was created:

A Hyperlocal is any web site which:

- provides news and information aimed at a well-defined and relatively small geographically (sic) area with a population of less than 150,000.
 - is created, owned and operated by individuals living and/or working in that geography.
 - encourages and facilitates debate within the community.
- (Hyperlocal Alliance 2013)

Unlike other definitions cited, this stresses the need for the hyperlocal site to be run by locally based individuals and rejects the inclusion of automated content generators that would be allowable under Nesta's criteria. A blog post by a hyperlocal publisher, Philip John (John 2011), expresses a degree of frustration with the term and some of the assumptions underlying it. He argues that hyperlocal websites "are just the *representation of communities via the internet*, not some sort of replacement" (2011, his italics). They are 'topic niche', that is, focused on a very narrow topic but in a specific geographic place: "Hyperlocal is a **topic niche** where the topic is a small geographic area" (2011, his emboldening). Finally, drawing on contemporary examples, he usefully recognises the diversity of hyperlocal practice:

Saddleworth News is obviously a news site. King's Cross Local Environment is more of an activism site. Harringay Online is a social network. North Sixteen is just a Twitter account. Fwix is an aggregator. Brownhills Bob's Brownhills Blog is a personal opinion blog. According to our topic niche way of describing it, all of these are hyperlocal. (John 2011)

Rather than settle on a single definition, Flouch and Harris recognise the variety of the form, setting out to identify a taxonomy of hyperlocal forms (2010a). They studied 160 of London's citizen-run online initiatives and identified eight distinctive types (discussed in more detail in chapters four and five). What it is important to note about the Flouch and Harris work is the attempt to measure the civic purpose of such websites using a scale that suggests listings-only sites have low civic purpose whilst discussion sites score more highly. Such weighting may be arbitrary, but the sites that are most successful can: "make a distinctive

² "An informal association where we can start to present ourselves as a coherent group, tackling issues like local accountability together"

contribution to local social capital, cohesion and civic involvement” (Flouch and Harris 2010c: 6).

In the UK, an attempt has been made to maintain a database of UK hyperlocal sites³ (analysed in chapter five). The services listed on this resource encompass many of the types identified by Flouch and Harris (2010a) and also include a high proportion of sites that are using platforms developed by mainstream media organisations. However, Chris Taggart, the developer behind the Openly Local resource, never sought to exclude those: “We allow non-commercial and commercial sites. The only sites we won’t allow are those behind a paywall or those that are pure listings sites (and don’t have a significant news or community aspect)” (Taggart 2010). In 2015, a new attempt was made to refresh the database of hyperlocal sites (by Talk About Local with financial support from the Carnegie Trust). In this iteration of the database the published inclusion criteria reject operations run by major news corporations: “If you are a big corporate trying to register dozens of new template sites then please contact us first as that isn’t quite in the spirit of things” (Localweblist.net 2015).

The failure of commercial hyperlocal media operations

It would be fair to say that corporate news organisations have not had a particularly successful track record in developing hyperlocal media operations. The Guardian’s city-based ‘Guardian Local’ experiment closed in 2011 after just over a year of running hyperlocal operations in three UK cities, claiming that it was “not sustainable in its present form” (Pickard 2011). Perhaps the largest experiment run in the UK was the Local People network operated by Northcliffe Media (now part of Local World Ltd) as a franchise operation. A network of paid community publishers curated content and wrote stories in small towns across the UK. However, it gradually removed financial support, with around 100 publisher roles reduced to 75 in a restructuring process in August 2012, and in turn the remaining posts being axed the following year (Lambourne 2013). Research by Thurman et al. (2011) examining this network found that although Local People did have paid journalists, it suffered in comparison to sites with a more civic-minded approach:

³ Originally at http://openlylocal.com/hyperlocal_sites but no longer online. Since superseded by the list kept at <http://localweblist.net/>

the reliance on community publishers from journalism backgrounds suggests that particular assumptions were made about the needs of such a community-driven project. In particular, the idea of community management as a skill distinct from traditional publishing roles appears to be, if not completely absent, then not a priority. (Thurman et al. 2011: 7)

This critique is similar to that made by St. John et al. (2013), whose analysis of Patch.com in the US argues that it lacked a “community sensibility” (2013: 208). David Baines (2012) offers a case study of a major UK regional (unnamed) news publisher setting up a hyperlocal project that ultimately foundered as a result of meeting the “Media Company’s corporate needs, not the community’s” (2012: 163). Glaser (2010) notes that mainstream commercial news outlets: “that have created hyper-local sites are trying to engage their readers, while also creating a place for smaller, niche advertisers who want to reach a highly geographically targeted audience” (Glaser 2010: 585). In contrast, Glaser points out, the “motivation for starting independent hyper-locals is often to tell the untold stories of communities” (Glaser 2010: 585). Jones and Salter’s overview of commercial hyperlocal services (2012: 103-107) is instructive, and identifies examples of initiatives focused on drawing in local advertising spend by monetising user-generated content. They note the tensions between the need for hyperlocal sites to have an emphasis on community engagement whilst ensuring they attract advertisers that may well compromise that position. The problem of the sustainability of emergent hyperlocal media organisations is the focus of research by Kurpius et al. (2010), who interviewed proprietors of a range of hyperlocals in the US. They note that whilst the form had a better chance for survival than previous experiments in civically orientated, participatory journalism, it found itself lacking a single recipe for financial success. They note that although a vibrant alternative media scene was needed now more than ever, they were unsure if hyperlocal media would survive to be part of it:

It is not enough to declare hyperlocal media operations the antidote to the decline of traditional media outlets in the United States. None of the evidence suggests that any of these projects has developed a working model that can be easily replicated in other communities and maintained for the long term. (Kurpius et al. 2010: 374).

Rather than develop a franchise platform, some mainstream media organisations have used the model to develop strategies to make better use of existing hyperlocal websites or to allow access to their own platform to facilitate networks of hyperlocal news bloggers. Andy

Price (2010) gives a detailed description of the development of a hyperlocal web strategy by the management of the Evening Gazette in Middlesbrough. This allowed a network of about 300 citizen bloggers to create content for the for the Trinity Mirror-owned newspaper. Price notes the venture's success for the newspaper, but argues that the exercise has been limited in realising its "full democratic potential" (Price 2010: 147). In detailing the editorial and technical process, he reveals that those blogging in the service of the newspaper ultimately conform to its practices and its news agenda: "there doesn't tend to be anything too contentious," claims the newspaper's assistant editor (in Price 2010: 147). In 2015, the BBC, in seeking to build better relationships with local news operators (BBC 2015), saw hyperlocal websites as part of the local media landscape and invited them to consult on how they might work together: "The aim of the proposals are to strengthen links between the BBC, hyperlocals and other established forms of local media, as well as directing BBC audiences to the best stories online and ensuring the right credit is given to external news sources" (BBC 2015).

Hyperlocal media and place

Whilst the viability of different hyperlocal business models may concern many commentators, the issue of the geographic reach of hyperlocal attracts relatively little explicit attention. Journalist Sarah Hartley argues "that it's no longer necessarily defined by a tight geographical area" (Hartley, S 2010), whilst US academics (Kurpius et al. 2010, Metzgar et al. 2011) often draw on examples that would go well beyond the 150,000 criteria mentioned by the Hyperlocal Alliance. Øie's (2012) work on locative journalism challenges us to think beyond "common meanings attached to the concept of hyperlocal news, which can be considered location-oriented" and to consider instead a definition that takes account of "location-aware or location-dependent" journalism (Øie 2012: 175). Perhaps more useful is Kristy Hess's work on rethinking local newspapers in terms of their 'geo-social' position in the digital landscape (Hess 2012). Whilst Sarah Hartley, in eschewing the geographic question, tends to emphasise aspects of the practice of doing hyperlocal (the status of the author, the use of different digital platforms, etc.), Hess sees the emergence of the term hyperlocal as being evidence of "a reinvigorated interest in geography as media industry and entrepreneurs experiment with new business models in the changing technological landscape" (Hess 2012: 53). Borrowing from the work of Manuel Castells, she argues that small local newspapers act as nodes, holding "a degree of symbolic power in constructing the idea of 'community' and the 'local'" (Hess 2012: 56). Bruns et al. (2008), in their examination of the emerging role of bloggers and citizen

journalists in the 2007 Australian federal elections, also note the intersection between local and the wider world in how hyperlocal journalism operates:

the choice for hyperlocally-based citizen journalism sites may be one between focussing on the establishment and sustainment of strong local clusters, informed by hyperlocal discussion, and between aiming for the infusion of hyperlocally sourced reports and commentary into wider national debates. (Bruns et al. 2008: 2)

Geography matters, then, but only in the sense that small media operations such as hyperlocals act as conduits to the wider digitally networked world and potentially help reinforce a sense of place. Hyperlocals are, in some sense, “local and global at the same time” (Castells 2012: 222). David Baines similarly emphasises the ‘glocalised’ nature of being on the internet, where one has the potential not just to reach make local connections but to draw on potentially any useful sources of information:

In a ‘glocalised’, networked society, even relatively isolated communities will have a large range of networks and sources of information, from direct social interaction, business, professional and civic contacts and customers; to regional, national and global networks occupying numerous channels of communication, some one way, most two way. (Baines 2010: 584)

Rethinking a definition of hyperlocal

In general, academics, commentators and even practitioners themselves have created a debate in which they seem to be having separate discussions with the hope of a similar outcome – that is, the potential of hyperlocal to be a new ‘grounded’ model for the provision of local news to the benefit of citizens and driven by civically minded entrepreneurs. Metzgar et al. (2011) note how: “grant-making organizations have hailed HLMOs as a potential saviour for the struggling news industry. Scholars have proclaimed HLMOs a 21st century breeding ground for civic engagement” (Metzgar et al. 2011: 773). In his analysis of a hyperlocal news blog in Leeds, Tony Harcup (2015a) argues that we need to resist simplistic categorisation of alternative forms of news production: “They do not form a uniform ‘sector’ any more than mainstream media are all the same, and it is only by exploring specific examples in depth that we can hope to dig beneath the labels to see what we can discover about the possibilities and potential of such journalisms” (Harcup 2015a: 16).

Yet for the most part, ‘hyperlocal’ is used as a collective term for the many different forms of operations that have appeared in this space, and those who seek to declare themselves, or declare others, as hyperlocal practitioners (for example, by submitting their details to the ‘Openly Local’ database), must consider themselves as part of a very specific movement. In this regard, the work presented here looks at those hyperlocal news operations who, to use Metzgar et al.’s (2011) term, see themselves as ‘deserving’ the hyperlocal moniker. The overlapping definitions that I have outlined above are symptomatic of the way the movement is being used to address the various interests of those discussing it. Each party wants to see hyperlocal journalism as delivering value in one or more ways in a number of areas; that is, addressing the decline of social capital within communities; developing new models of journalism enterprise; and addressing the ‘democratic deficit’ in the face of the decline of the local press. Maybe as a result of these diverse needs, as well as the diversity of practice by existing hyperlocals, we can see the difficulty of arriving at a singular, clear definition of hyperlocal. What there is consensus on is that there is a gap to be filled. Or, at least, a perceived gap: “HLMOs represent the latest attempt to fill the perceived gap in public affairs coverage and follow in a long history of media reform and citizen journalism efforts” (Metzgar et al. 2011: 782). In the UK, hyperlocal news publishing does seem to have a collective identity built around the perception that it is ‘filling the gap’ (as my findings reveal in later chapters). However, given that recent work by Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller (2016) has argued for a re-situating of the debate about hyperlocal news within a very different framework from that which has occupied journalism scholars to date, we must therefore consider the extent to which we might see the role of hyperlocal news operations as a set of practices that extend beyond ‘news’.

Hyperlocal news as cultural practice

Hess and Waller claim that we should see the production of “excessively local news” not simply as an attempt to replace non-viable forms of mainstream local journalism, but rather to examine it as a “marginalised practice” (2016: 206), in much the same way that one might study subcultures. Scholars need a “greater focus on the social and cultural dimensions of hyperlocal news alongside its economic and political importance” (2016: 206), they argue. Such a shift might allow for the ability to theorise the value of productive acts of media creation and better understand issues of sustainability. In this regard scholars should seek to understand hyperlocal news production as: “non-normative, [...], a resistance to massification;

generating an authentic – sometimes confronting – sense of style” (2016: 194). Hess and Waller use this approach to conjecture on the failures of networked or franchised hyperlocal operations set up by larger commercial media companies. It may be that these companies simply failed to understand the culture of hyperlocal: “Conceptualizing hyperlocal as ‘excessively local’ points to a celebration of the uniqueness of a given place and highlights the problem with trying to bottle hyperlocal culture and sell it as a template to distribute across mass audiences” (2016: 204). The subcultural lens allows them to see “the discomforting spectacle of outsiders trying too hard to fit in” (2016: 194). Ultimately, Hess and Waller argue that it is timely to “take a step back and view hyperlocal not as a product or object, but as a cultural phenomenon” (Hess and Waller 2016: 13). The focus of hyperlocal on the ‘excessively’ local means that the: “types of news featured in many hyperlocal publications provide a challenge to the very nature of news itself” (Hess and Waller 2016: 13).

Metzgar et al. (2011) also saw the need to look beyond the narrow confines of the discussion to date about the value of hyperlocal as journalism and see them as part of a broader set of changes to local communications systems: “HLMOs are about both stepping into the breach left by the retrenchment of local news operations and the exploitation of the tools available to the former audience” (Metzgar et al. 2011: 782). In general, Metzgar et al.’s upbeat assessment of the potential of the Internet is widely shared by other academics. The sense that digital technologies afford everyone the ability to participate and therefore have the potential to collaborate underpins the writings of authors such as Jenkins (2006), Shirky (2008, 2010) and Leadbeater (2010). Shirky (2010) argues that the ‘cognitive surplus’ we have as a result of less time spent engaging with mainstream media (specifically television) is now put to use in large collaborative projects (he cites Wikipedia) that would have been unimaginable in the pre-Internet age. John Hartley (2009) suggests similarly that the Internet has now made it possible for everyone to be a journalist: “journalism has transferred from modern expert system to contemporary innovation system – from ‘one to many’ to ‘many to many’ communication,” so that journalism research needs to take account of such practices and to take account of the ‘everyday’ (Hartley 2009: 152). Hartley points out the issues that come into play when ‘everyone’ is a journalist (issues of access, quality, truth, organisation of content, amongst others) but he stresses that the expansion of journalism beyond professional journalism is already happening, and is changing both form and practice: “user-led innovation will reinvent journalism, bringing it closer to the aspirational ideal of a right for everyone” (Hartley 2009: 162).

Hartley (2009) goes on to argue that it is these affordances offered by digital technologies that call for new perspectives to be brought to the study of journalism. In order to understand this impact he suggests we turn to cultural studies' interest in aspects of everyday cultural life, rather than journalism studies' interest in "producer and practice" (2009: 154). Bill Reader suggests that cultural studies offers a flexible approach to the study of journalism practices in communities due to its "open-ended, yet still empirical, approach to investigating the interactions between community culture and journalism" (Reader 2012: 109). Given the near-saturation of digital capture and publishing devices (which is to say, smart mobile phones) that we can carry with us nearly everywhere we go, the extent to which these devices become ways in which 'everyone' can capture and curate the 'everyday' needs some further thought. We now inhabit a digital world saturated with images and updates from ordinary citizens. As Ben Highmore argues: "'saturation' could be seen as a cognate term for the everyday: when something reaches saturation point it has bled into the everyday, set up home there, colonised the domestic realm" (Highmore 2010: 115). No topic seems too banal for us as we seemingly photograph and record everything around us. This abundance of 'everything' goes well beyond what Hartley imagines as the circulation of opinion on "blogs, websites, SMS and the like" (Hartley 2009) and extends to the whole realm of social networking sites as posts (often temporary on services such as Snapchat), comments, curated lists, hashtagged conversations. How this 'everything' reshapes journalism needs a framing beyond that of the public sphere; rather, "this is the terrain that a cultural theory of journalism needs to investigate" (Hartley 2009: 160). Similarly, Chris Atton argues that we must study "the banality of the internet and of the everyday practices that construct it and its relations to the wider world" (Atton 2004: 7). He makes the case that it is the 'significant everyday' that is of value to the cultural studies ethnographer interested in understanding how "the possibilities for meaning are organised" (Atton 2004: 8).

Revealing the everyday

Yet it is the 'ordinary' everyday rather than the 'significant' that emerged as a critical concern for 20th century thinkers looking for sites of resistance to the march of capitalism. Henri Lefebvre, in his key work, *The Critique of Everyday Life Volume 1* (1991, one of three volumes, the first of which was published in 1947) notes the ways in which the mass media seem to reflect the everyday. To an extent, his concerns are with its potential to pacify. Television gives the everyday a "world-wide dimension" (2002: 76 first published in 1961), yet

it does so on the basis of “non-participation and passivity” (2002: 76). Mass media, for Lefebvre, seems to consume the creative spirit and “shape taste and cloud judgement” (2002: 224). Michel de Certeau (1984) also has little patience for the way in which television represents the real: “they fabricate the terrain, simulate it, use it as a mask, accredit themselves by it, and thus create the scene of their law” (1984: 186). However, de Certeau does see potential in the ways in which audiences might put the outputs of mass media to use (he sees value in studying “contexts of use” 1984: 33). Similarly, Lefebvre is also keen to identify the ways in which some media reveal “the role of society and the roles society imposes” (2002: 63). He is much taken with the work of Charlie Chaplin, whose films seemed to offer a stinging critique to the modern world and its increasing mechanisation of the everyday. Chaplin battles against the most ordinary of objects (“an umbrella, a deckchair, a motorbike, a banana skin” 1991: 11), with the result that his films are able to “confront the established (bourgeois) world and its vain attempts to complete itself and close itself off” (1991: 11). For Lefebvre, the intention behind his ongoing critique of everyday life was that it would emancipate us, allow us to see for ourselves the constraints and rules under which we are instructed to organise our everyday lives. In doing so, we would reject the bourgeois notion of individualism and the value of ‘private’ life. The individual “will cease being ‘private’ by becoming at the same time more social, more human – and more individual” (1991: 248). The individual has to realise that they are a world “of social, material and human objects” and from there can develop a deeper consciousness: “reflecting on and conscious of power over all reality” (1991: 248).

Like Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin sees at least some role for the new mass media in achieving this state. He, too, argues that film in particular has the capacity to reveal and critique everyday life. In his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1968: 217-252, first published in 1936) he discusses the potential of film as a medium that reflects back the everyday and as a consequence makes us critical readers of our lives. Film “extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives” (1968: 236). He notes the way in which other mass media forms might create a more participatory relationship with culture: “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character” (1968: 233). In his later essay, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (Benjamin 1968: 155-200, first published in 1939), he draws out the distinction between the lived experience of life (*Erlebnis*) and the accumulation of experience that allows for reflection upon it (*Erfahrung*). He touches again on the function that film plays in modern life and allows for *Erfahrung* to provide a form

of 'shock' to counter the way that "technology has subjected the human sensorium" (Benjamin 1968: 217-252). For Benjamin, the startling nature of film's 'shocks' (through montage) is a form of training for modern living – a way to get us used to the chaos of modern life (the 'technology' that he refers to earlier being the technology of the urban realm: cars, traffic lights, etc.). As Ben Highmore makes clear, "such new forms of apperception allow us to experience our bewilderingly complex and violently sensationalist world in a state of absentmindedness" (Highmore 2010: 127). Benjamin, like Lefebvre to an extent, sees the revolutionary potential in film, as its focus on the everyday also offers the potential to reveal inequality and act as critique (Benjamin was a particular admirer of Soviet cinema).

In his 1934 essay, 'Author as Producer' (1978), Benjamin draws on the legacy of Dadaism to make clear his point that it is in the creation of radical works of art through the transfiguration of mass media that must concern the intellectual. For example, the 'new objectivity' of photography (its increasing tendency towards realist documentary style) will not be challenged until "we – writers – take up photography" (1978: 5). Only then, "the barriers which were erected to separate the skills of both productive forces must be simultaneously broken down" (1978: 5). Benjamin is not advocating that everyone is capable of becoming a producer; his argument is that these new 'specialists' will have the interests of the proletariat at heart and experience solidarity with them, and with other similarly minded producers. However, he does set out the framework by which the ideological functioning of mass media might be addressed – that is, through the participation of those not burdened with bourgeois privilege. The task involves not just sitting in opposition to the bourgeoisie but also in radicalising the accepted norms of media production, "adapting that apparatus to the aims of the proletarian revolution" (1978: 5). It is in Benjamin's description of the newspaper that he perhaps offers the clearest potential for wider, everyday participation in the creation of media: "the portrayal of the author as a producer must be derived from the press" (1978: 3). He notes how the content of newspapers thrives on user participation: readers are "raised to the level of co-workers" (1978: 3). Yet he notes that the potential for radical transformation was restricted in the West due to the dominance of capital, whereas in the Soviet Union, "the difference between author and public, maintained artificially by the bourgeois press, is beginning to disappear" (1978: 3). Joss Hands makes the case that Benjamin's contribution is central to allowing us to theorise ways in which digital media can offer routes into the means of production "beyond those of capital" (Hands 2011: 49):

The containment of a potentially liberating medium by the interests of capital is thus an ongoing regret, but even while there is constraint there is always also the underlying potential that must be continually explored and exploited.
(Hands 2011: 49)

Distraction, habit and everyday 'ordinary' activism

Ben Highmore (2002) reminds us that Benjamin's intention was for us to see the "revolutionary contingency" in everyday mass media consumption. (2002: 30). Whilst making the case that mass media were intended to be consumed in a distracted way, for the purposes of distraction from the relative drudgery of our everyday lives (Highmore 2010: 116), Benjamin likewise noted the "potential of distraction as a new collective and emancipatory form of perception that could offer a (potentially) critical purchase on the culture industry and on modern life" (Highmore 2010: 116). Highmore takes this as a cue to discuss the distracted way in which media is consumed and engaged with in the digital age. Like much else that happens in the home, media consumption is formed out of habit, which by its very nature, also leaves space for surprise: "Habit, it may seem obvious to say, is the essential ingredient of ordinary life: without it there would be no room for day-dreaming, no space for the new" (2010: 125). Habit – operating as it does in the realm of the almost unthinking – can free us up to better appreciate the points of 'rupture' (here Highmore draws on Rancière). We are primed, argues (Highmore 2010: 132), for such moments because so much of what we do is relegated to motor-based habit. Thus we are ready for the exceptional which may come in the form of memorable encounters with media texts that act disrupt our distracted state (Highmore gives examples from music listening and watching on television).

Other scholars have also focused on habit and the "grindingly ordinary" (Shove 2003: 1) and argued that it can offer insight into societal concerns about inequality or, in the case of work by Elizabeth Shove (2003, 2009, 2012) and Sarah Pink (2012), about the environment. Shove (2012) outlines an approach for the study of everyday activities, habits as such, that examines the ways in which they move from a pattern to a performance, and ultimately constitute a practice. Her essential contribution to theories of practice is to de-emphasise the role of individual taste or behaviour and instead see individuals as 'hosts' of habitual practices (2012: 7-8). Such practices are "provisional but recognizable entities composed of also recognizable conventions, images and meanings; materials and forms of competence" (Shove 2003: 18). Further, such practices are dynamic. Over time: "the meanings and purposes of the

practice and its characteristics [are] reconfigured” (Shove et al. 2012: 8). Shove is less concerned with activism than with how these practices constitute new patterns of consumption. By contrast, Sarah Pink’s work focuses on how a study of the everyday can reveal points of resistance, and discusses the extent to which new media can facilitate critique. Sarah Pink argues that the everyday: “is neither static nor necessarily mundane, and to understand activism we need to recognise that it not only involves dramatic public actions but is also embedded in ordinary ways of being” (2012: 14).

Pink’s approach to studying the digital is valuable. She asks that we rethink “digital media through a theory of place” (2012: 131). Pink draws on work by Ingold (2009) who describes the notion of a meshwork – how knowledge about place comes together through a process of wayfaring: “places, then, are like knots, and the threads from which they are tied are lines of wayfaring” (2009: 33). Places are not strictly geographic; rather, they are distinguished by movement (Ingold uses the term ‘inhabitants’ rather than ‘locals’). Pink uses Ingold’s concept – the idea of ‘interwovenness’ and ‘relatedness’ rather than ‘connectedness’ – to argue that we must approach place as an abstract concept: “Ingold’s work allows us to both appreciate the idea of place as unbounded and open [...] and to understand human perception and movement as central to the process of place” (2012: 26). In this sense, the digital plays a role in a ‘meshwork’, rather than a network. Pink wants us to explore the way the ‘meshwork’ is “lived, represented and experienced, through the multisensory, experiential, embodied and everyday practice” (2012: 129). As we use digital technology on an everyday basis, whether to record the extraordinary or the banal, what matters is its journey through the meshwork and the degree to which it contributes to a sense of place. Pink then is arguing that ‘placemaking’ happens as much through the ways in which people utilise online, social technologies as through embodied actions and experiences. People utilise these media in a multifaceted way on an everyday basis: switching between platforms, reading from a wide range of sources, making contributions (about ‘everything’) in social media updates or in posting photographs. Shaun Moores makes a similar case to Pink’s, arguing we should “understand everyday media uses by considering them alongside other social practices today, rather than as isolated activities” (Moores 2012: x). He calls for a renewed interest in seeing movement as part of a richer understanding of ways in which media technologies and texts are put to use. Such views prompt us to rethink our approach to a study of online activism, argues Pink: “Contemporary social media platforms and the technologies through which we access

them make digital activism interweave with our everyday media practices and the environment in which we participate” (Pink 2012: 131).

The banality of online activism

Whilst Pink and Moores seek to focus our attention on the activist value of everyday media use, John Postill (2011), through his examination of the use of the Internet in a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is concerned that researchers see value in how the Internet brings to the fore the everydayness of citizens’ concerns. His study of Subang Jaya in Kuala Lumpur notes a “vibrant Internet scene” (Postill 2008: 422) that contributes to an active culture of participation and debate amongst residents on matters that matter only to that specific locality. However, he notes how since the 1990s the Internet’s increasing ‘localness’ (that is, the huge increase in users inevitably means that over time there are more users at a local level) has created a problem for researchers:

the challenge is how to keep track of the fast pace of technological change while avoiding the default position whereby a seemingly stationary ‘local community’ is assumed to be impacted upon by ‘global’ technologies. (2011: 11)

He critiques the tendency for researchers to oversimplify the notions of ‘network’ and ‘community’ – “[it] is a vague notion favoured in public rhetoric, not a sharp analytical tool” (Postill 2008: 421). They have had “troubled careers as anthropological concepts” (2011: 12), saddled as they were with normative idealised notions of democracy and empowerment. He argues instead that we need to pay attention to the ways in which “people, technologies and other cultural artefacts are co-producing new forms of residential sociality in unpredictable ways” (Postill 2008: 426). Postill utilises Bourdieu’s notion of field theory, allowing for the examination of relations between social agents who might be competing for the same public rewards (2011: 16). What this allows is for Postill to study the detail of everyday engagement between citizens and those in positions of power. Ultimately, Postill, like Sarah Pink, Shaun Moores, and Chris Atton to a degree, is frustrated at the lack of attention to the ways in which everyday use of Internet technologies might be used to support change at the local level. There is much value, he claims, in studying: “emerging forms of residential sociality linked to ‘banal activism’ – the activism of seemingly mundane issues such as traffic congestion, waste disposal and petty crime” (2008: 419). He makes the case that, with very few exceptions: “banal activism has been neglected by internet scholars” (2008: 419). There is much value, he

claims, in studying: “emerging forms of residential sociality linked to ‘banal activism’ – the activism of seemingly mundane issues such as traffic congestion, waste disposal and petty crime” (2008: 419). He makes the case that, with very few exceptions: “banal activism has been neglected by internet scholars” (2008: 419).

The non-interventionist tradition in community media

In contrast to Postill’s anthropological approach and his study of how citizens are using digital technologies for themselves, the community media (photography, film, video) interventions gathered together by Nigg and Wade (1980) focus instead on the role of the community media worker and the degree to which they can facilitate access to enabling technologies. Such technologies (the still or film camera) allow communities to represent themselves in order to go beyond dominant representations of their everyday lives: “community workers try – although not always successfully – to develop their projects from within the community rather than by imposing channels of communication” (Nigg and Wade 1980: 264). Project workers need to build trust with participants and editorial control is always “for people” (Nigg and Wade 1980: 264) rather than for community media workers. Such careful consideration of the role of the worker is also referenced in an essay by Derek Bishton, who worked extensively in community media through the 1970s and 1980s in and around Birmingham. Bishton, writing in 1980 (essay reproduced in Bishton et al. 2012) about a photography project called ‘Handsworth Self Portrait’ describes the difficulties facing artists working in the community space. Their role is never neutral, yet they must seek to engage with issues of representation; to allow people to control their representation through media: “Documentary photography [...] tends to produce the stylised images and postures of aggression that have come to characterise young black men and women” (Bishton et al. 2012: 66). The media worker, or in this case the artist/photographer, must see themselves as “creating the situation [...] without totally determining the result” (Bishton et al. 2012: 67). Likewise, Daniel Meadows’ digital storytelling work in Wales in the early 2000s emphasises the need for citizens to have training to use new technologies in order to ensure that ultimately people make their own personal stories under their own editorial control. Only then, Meadows claims, will “light shine on an invisible nation” (Meadows 2003: 190). David Parker and Christian Karner (2011) argue that communities need to react against the dominant external myths about their localities. Forms of ‘spatial biographies’ that take account of “previously largely private, rarely heard memories of social struggle, exclusion and self-assertion” (2011: 308) can have an important counter-hegemonic

function: “young people are taking to new sites of self-representation such as street art and new media to challenge this invisibility and create potential archives of the present which may be less amenable to the analytical and curatorial practices of the past” (2011: 304).

The value of everyday digital participation

We might think of the conceptual framings of the everyday as a way to consider how citizens put the Internet and social networking technologies to use as tools for participation. Perhaps the banal way in which we record the everyday, almost on a kind of auto-pilot, might constitute a practice in and of itself. Such a practice would obviously be dynamic – the unwritten rules of participation are changing all the time and the line between habit and cultural practice is becoming increasingly fuzzy – but it could be argued that it has the potential to engender a form of ‘quiet’ or ‘slow’ activism through its politicisation of the banalities of everyday living in localities. This might allow us to think beyond producer/audience divides and the degree to which everyday use of technology allows for participation. Susan Forde points out that “the internet has provided this potential to empower audiences, and to reinforce the suspension of the audience-producer barrier” (2011: 46). Forde draws on significant primary research to make the point that simple audience/producer divides are increasingly difficult to make. In analysing community radio audiences in Australia she finds that: “it was in fact the simple, local, community-connectedness of an outlet that engaged its audiences and indeed, made its audiences members feel like they, too, could be part of the station’s programming” (2011: 91). However, she does make the distinction between these forms of participation and the traditional role of the alternative media as ‘watcher’ of mainstream media; that is, as a vehicle for addressing misrepresentation and revealing its ideologies, rather than explicitly facilitating “the extensive involvement of ‘ordinary’ people” (2011: 45).

By thinking about the ‘everyday’, we have the potential to consider new ways in which we might frame hyperlocal as a practice that emerges not simply from a set of societal ideals that then informs and shapes a set of professional norms (that is to say, the profession of journalism as underpinned by notions of democracy). Rather, hyperlocal might be thought of as a citizen-led practice that might be seen to disrupt the assumptions inherent in journalism’s norms. The theoretical framings of the everyday that we have focused on in this section have concerned themselves with the ways in which capitalist societies function to disguise our subjugation to the means of production, yet our developing ‘habit’ of using social media on an everyday basis has the potential to emerge as a practice that offers insight into life in localities

and works against this subjugation. Such insights are often beyond those moments of disruption, conflict or extraordinariness that would interest the established mainstream media. Rather, they act as glimpses into the banal and everyday ways in which people connect to spaces (from nostalgic discussions about the local park to word-of-mouth recommendations for restaurants) or to each other. We might conceive of this as a practice through which everyday activism takes place: a practice that has the potential to be a “methodical confrontation of so-called ‘modern’ life” (Lefebvre 1991: 251). In this study, this allows us to address the role of the citizen producing information about their localities through hyperlocal publishing in greater detail and allows us to pay attention to information creation practices that sit outside well-established, normative journalistic practices.

Summary

In this chapter I began by discussing the growing interest in hyperlocal media in the UK. We can see that the definition of ‘hyperlocal’ is contested, with practitioners seemingly keen to emphasise their community credentials (Hyperlocal Alliance 2013, Talk About Local 2011), whilst investors (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013) seek to broaden the pool of potential operations by including “organisations with a background in local broadcasting, local newspapers and local authorities” (2013: 3). Academic interest has tended to focus on the viability of hyperlocal in filling the ‘democratic deficit’ that results when local newspapers withdraw titles from localities and so reduce the plurality of news sources that citizens have access to. Some research suggests it may not be able to fulfil this role, with work by Kurpius (2010) and van Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014) casting doubt on hyperlocal’s ability to contribute to the democratic deficit over the long term because of its economic precariousness. Thurman et al. (2011) show how interest in hyperlocal from the mainstream fails to understand the dynamics of managing local communities online and the inevitability of one-size-fits-all approaches to hyperlocal leading to curtailment or closure and de-professionalisation. Yet the interest in ensuring community voices are heard in the public sphere persists, and hyperlocal media continues to present itself as a ready-made solution to policy-makers and other news media (BBC 2015).

I also argued that the development of social networking technologies, whose use is now widespread amongst a broad range of age and socio-economic groups, has prompted for some academics a renewed interest in the ‘everyday’. Sarah Pink (2012) and others (Postill

2011) are interested in how such technologies make us rethink our understanding of place and how the 'banal' is now foregrounded and put to use in holding local power to account. To an extent, this allows us to consider the role of this digital 'everyday' as a counter-hegemonic one, pushing back against dominant representations of place that come through mainstream media (Parker and Karner 2011). As we will see in later chapters, hyperlocal producers are confronted daily with the noisy banality of their local areas, almost struggling to keep it at bay in the social media spaces they manage. We might next ask what value is created for citizens by this greater participation in the production of information? In the next chapter I address the ways in which the citizen is framed in discussions about their role as participants in the production of journalism and the extent to which hyperlocal information systems might – as has been argued by others (Metzgar et al. 2011) – be seen as elements within a reinvigorated public sphere or as an alternative to it.

CHAPTER THREE – HYPERLOCAL AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

I begin this chapter by looking at how forms of citizenship with an “activist and communitarian ethic” (Hartley, J 2010: 240) might be engendered through the everyday technology use and communication practices outlined in the previous chapter. Given that hyperlocal journalism seems to be a form native to the Internet, and the ways in which digital technologies are now playing a key role in the production and distribution of news media, I then outline the various utopian and dystopian positions on the value of technology in journalism, suggesting that networked digital technologies can offer a route for greater participation of citizens in the production and distribution of news. Finally, I will draw on ideas of the public sphere, and alternative/counter-public spheres, in order to frame this discussion.

Journalism and citizenship

In his article entitled ‘Things I Wish I’d Known Before I Became a Citizen Journalist’, Barry Parr (2005), a journalist who set up a hyperlocal site for a coastal community in California, notes that the gatekeeping role in journalism had all but disappeared: “every citizen journalist is also a citizen publisher” (2005). Parr argues that his citizen journalism activity both ties him to the community and in turn, ties them to each other. Yet he has a discomfort with the way in which the concept is expressed in commentary: “It implies that the roles of citizen and journalist are separate, and I’m some weird sort of hybrid. All journalists are citizens, aren’t we?” (2005). Luke Goode (2009) outlines the various positions taken in academic literature towards the role citizens play in journalism. On the one hand, they are framed to represent a kind of ‘post-modern’ journalism where the process of crowdsourcing and collaboration produce fluid meanings and unfixed outcomes. In contrast, “there remains a tendency to invoke a modernist, heroic narrative” (Goode 2009: 1290). Goode argues that citizens now have the chance to involve themselves in many areas of the newsmaking process, not just in content creation but also “rating, commenting, tagging and reposting” news stories on mainstream news websites and dedicated social news services (2009: 1290). Jane Singer (2014) recognises these actions as ‘two-step gatekeeping’, whereby editors make initial editorial decisions but the user can then “upgrade or downgrade the visibility of that item for a secondary audience (2014: 67). Goode claims we can consider such actions to be a kind of ‘metajournalism’, thus allowing us

to situate our analysis of the citizen as journalist “within a framework of *mediation*” [his italics] (Goode 2009: 1291).

Yet a broader articulation of the citizen’s role in journalism inevitably meets resistance. Brian McNair focuses on how journalists and media organisations need to form a rearguard action in the face of a threat to their trusted position. Whilst acknowledging that institutions should embrace user-generated content, McNair argues that it should remain a news source and that the act of “critical, creative thinking” is very much one only trained journalists can carry out (McNair 2012: 87). Nothing less than the ‘survival’ of journalism is at stake, he claims. Gary Hudson and Mick Temple offer an equally acerbic critique in their essay ‘We Are Not All Journalists’ (2010), arguing that many academics are “stretching the concept of journalism to extremes” (2010: 66) by claiming that any ‘user’ who generates news content is therefore a journalist. Kevin Barnhurst (2013) has claimed that this ‘fear’ around the rise of the citizen journalist is built around the notion of active citizenship as a failed endeavour in the eyes of journalists and political scientists: “it imagined an unreachable ideal that ignored how people enact citizenship in daily life and devalued their political passions” (2013: 218). The lofty stance taken by journalists “guaranteed that citizens would fail” (2013: 218).

Encouraging ‘active’ citizenship

The sense that journalism is looking down its nose at citizens is endorsed by Justin Lewis, who argues that “citizenship is implicated in the discourse of news but in forms that are neither enticing nor engaging, and never centre stage” (2006: 312). The news industry is ‘top-down’, therefore the citizen is more likely than not positioned as recipient or consumer, allowed a voice only through the ‘vox-pop’. Lewis and Barnhurst (2013) share the concern that without a shift in journalism’s form, ‘active’ citizenship will fail to flourish. To a degree, Lewis argues for that shift to be towards the everyday: “the focus on the spectacular rather than the typical – endemic in news coverage of crime, for example – rarely implicates citizenship in useful or informative ways” (2006: 315). The ideal of the ‘active’ citizen is explored by Tony Harcup (2011), who argues that alternative media is awash with examples of this being fostered but that it remains “little discussed within mainstream literature about relationships between journalism and politics” (2011: 15). To be ‘active’ requires both agency and participation, according to Harcup. He draws on the work of feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who claims that: “a radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who acts as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking” (Mouffe in Harcup

2011). The possibility of active citizenship is that it opens up opportunities for alternative voices in the public sphere. Harcup makes it clear that alternative media has a central role to play:

It is by encouraging and reflecting a culture of participation that alternative media projects can be seen as supportive of active citizenship; and it is by being participatory forms of media that such projects themselves constitute a form of active citizenship. (2011: 27)

Harcup later goes on to ask the question: “To what extent can an engagement with alternative journalism foster active citizenship?” (2015b: 2). Drawing on his audience study of a hyperlocal website in Leeds, he notes the valuable role that this website plays in holding local power to account. However, although the audience self-identifies as active, he questions whether “some people choose to consume alternative journalism not as an integral part of their civic activism but as an alternative to engaging in civic activism at all” (Harcup 2015b: 2).

The citizen as participant and as consumer

Studies of citizen-led, participatory and user-generated content (UGC) initiatives or experiments (Bruns et al. 2008, Chen et al. 2012, Fröhlich et al. 2012) have tended to emphasise the effective role played by engaging citizens in media-making experiences and their subsequent positive impact on the public sphere. Wardle and Williams (2010), in research examining the use of UGC at the BBC in 2007 (see also Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2010, Wardle and Williams 2008), argue that their work has a lesson for journalism studies scholars. They note the positive impact of UGC initiatives but claim that a redefining of terms would help “to further understand the relationship which exists between audiences and media producers in terms of ‘Audience comment’, ‘Audience content’, ‘Collaborative content’ and ‘Networked journalism’” (Wardle and Williams 2010: 786). Alex Bruns (2008) emphasises the role that content production plays in enhanced citizenship. He describes the ability to create and share online content as ‘produsage’: “the capacity to be an active producer [...] equates increasingly with the capacity for active, participatory citizenship” (2008: 339). He cites citizen journalism as a key example of how produsage behaviour: “can be seen to help build the capacities for active forms of cultural and democratic citizenship” (2008: 398). In examining the culture of groups of ‘producers’, Bruns argues that social capital plays a key role: “sustained and constructive participation leads enables the accumulation of positive social capital” (2008:

341). José van Dijck's essay (2009) on new approaches to studying user-generated content sees a problem in current academic approaches to the practice: "conceptually and methodologically, media scholars will need to devise new ways to assess content trends across these new production platforms" (van Dijck 2009: 55). However, John Hartley (2009) sees the potential of participatory forms of journalism as examples of "user-led innovation" that will reshape and even undermine commercial models of public service journalism (Hartley 2009: 162).

Hartley has discussed notions of citizenship throughout much of his work on media audiences. In large part, he has focused on consumption practices and the ways in which citizenship is mediated (1987, 2002b). He notes the tensions inherent in the debate about the citizen's position between political sovereignty and consumerism sovereignty (2002a). The former is enacted through the choices we make in elections, whereas the latter "suggests that our choices as consumers are our primary means of exerting influence over the market" (2002a: 37). Hartley rejects the divide between the two and argues that 'consumption' is a vital concept in understanding how citizenship works: "our cultural consumption, and in particular our media consumption teach us about our society and to how to act in it" (2002a: 37). Nick Couldry makes a similar point in arguing that there is value in examining "the possibilities for more dispersed symbolic production (image-making, information distribution) embedded within new models of consumption" (2004: 24). Couldry argues that we might find what he describes as the 'dispersed citizen' by examining "websites or portals that collect information for consumption and civic activism on a relatively local scale" (2004: 25). Couldry makes an explicit call for researchers to recognise that there are "new contexts of public communication and trust" (2004: 26), contexts that may include consumption practices as well as explicit citizenship practices. He makes clear his object of study: "the productive and distributional potential of the internet is central" (2004: 26).

Towards creative – 'silly' – citizenship

Couldry's later research (2006) into the ways in which citizens connect through their media consumption is an attempt to look for 'cultures of citizenship'. He draws on an analytical model by Peter Dahlgren who argues that modern citizenship in democracies is "multi-dimensional and protean" (2003: 159). In suggesting an analytical framework to allow analysis of citizens' political involvement and use of media, Dahlgren wants us to consider how civic engagement happens in the everyday through cultural expression and engagement: "civic culture [...] is

anchored in the practices and symbolic milieu of everyday life” (2003: 153). Dahlgren argues that this ‘civic culture’ is important for democracy and comprises six interlocking processes (values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion). He is optimistic about the role the Internet might play in strengthening civic culture: “looked at from the standpoint of any and all of our six dimensions there are clear alternatives emerging on the Internet” (2003: 153). Couldry critiques aspects of Dahlgren’s model, but uses it in his (2006) qualitative exploration of how people engage through media with the world around them. To a degree, there seems to be a ‘culture’ of citizenship evidenced in the way people talk about aspects of their cultural consumption or even in the way they talk about their work. However, he does not find much evidence of connectedness happening through the media: “we did not find any case where this sense of collective connection through media – important pleasure though it may be, we make no judgement on that – connected with any discussion, action or thought about issues of public concern” (2006: 334).

In more recent work, John Hartley (2010) argues that rather than seeing citizenship through an individual’s media consumption, we need to focus on their capacity to create and distribute media using online platforms. This DIY/DIWO (Do It Yourself / Do It With Others) citizenship is “more individuated and privatised than previous types, because it is driven by voluntarist choices and affiliations, but at the same time it has an activist and communitarian ethic, where ‘knowledge shared is knowledge gained’” (2010: 240). To a degree, Hartley argues, we have arrived at a point where the importance of ‘Silly Citizenship’ should not be underestimated – ‘silly’ being a way to describe the often bizarre mix of cultural mash-ups and seemingly frivolous dance videos that have become extremely popular on YouTube. Around such creative content, communities (usually of interest rather than geographic) come together and “self-organise and self-represent, and act both culturally and politically, without bearing the weight of ‘standing for’ the whole society” (2010: 240). Such frivolity perhaps shows the limitations of understanding the public sphere in a narrow Habermasian sense: “While it may not look very much like the Habermasian public sphere, it is clearly attracting the attention of those who are notoriously hard to reach by traditional technologies of citizenship” (2010: 241).

Creating value for citizens

Whilst journalism has always sought input from citizens, there is recognition by both academics and the media themselves that the relationship is changing. The Internet-based resources available to the citizen with which they can be both producer and gatekeeper are

striking in their ease of use and their potential impact, which, as Goode (2009) points out, is impact in terms of reaching audience and also in exerting editorial control. Doubts may remain amongst professionals about how to best make use of citizen-created content, but it has become clear that managing and verifying such material is something mainstream media organisations now have to incorporate into their production processes. In some ways, the relationship between the citizen and the journalism industry has become increasingly complex and messy.

How citizenship is expressed online ranges from more direct expressions of political or advocacy blogging ('writer-gatherers', as Couldry 2010 calls them) to acts of consumership. Indeed, if we were to see such value in consumer choice as an important aspect of citizenship, then we might regard those more commercially-orientated local hyperlocal websites as serving a useful citizenship function; that is, the act of buying locally, prompted by geo-aware applications, as a form of enacting local civic duty (perhaps in turn being activist by resisting the lures of more corporate 'chain' offerings online or in shopping malls). Wider online participation has also led to greater cultural expression outside mainstream media channels and certainly outside what we might regard as the norms of journalistic practices. This leads John Hartley (2010) to argue that there is value in understanding the 'sillier' aspects of online expressions of citizenship, where seemingly individual acts can take on a life of their own, gathering pace and becoming memetic in nature, remixed and remediated along the way. Yet our concern here ultimately echoes that of Tony Harcup, who argues that "the production of alternative and participatory forms of media" (2011: 15) is one of the ways in which active citizenship is enacted. His view is that in turn this may well foster active citizenship in the wider population. Whilst his later case study (Harcup 2015b) has him doubting this view a little, it is clear he sees value in alternative local media publications as making an important contribution to the public sphere.

Hyperlocal's place in the Public Sphere

Chris Morley (2013), a senior officer in the National Union of Journalists and a former local journalist, argues that the 'havoc' wreaked by media owners wanting to extract as much economic value as possible from a declining local press means that the case should be made for local newspapers to be seen as community assets and therefore to allow them to be 'rescued' by citizens under the 2011 Localism Act. Without a robust local press, who will do the job of "holding the rich, powerful and those with vested interest to scrutiny and account in the

public good, while standing up for those that do not have a voice?” (Morley 2013).

Practitioners such as Morley are not alone in lamenting the “apparently remorseless advance of the market as the arbiter of the nature, the content, the form, the labour relations and mode of production and the ownership of the local press” (Franklin and Murphy 1998: 22). In their account of recent scholarship about the ‘crisis’ in the newspaper industry (a ‘crisis’ of declining audiences and income streams), Siles and Boczkowski (2012) note that the lack of empirical studies has not stopped academics stating “that the crisis has had negative implications for democracy because it undermines the watchdog role traditionally played by the press and its significance as a vehicle for free speech” (2012: 1380). Morley’s community-led vision of local journalism’s future reveals, as does much of the commentary around hyperlocal, attitudes to the role of local newsmaking in the public sphere.

For many, as I indicated in the previous section, hyperlocal journalism can potentially fulfil the role that Morley describes. In short, it may play a valuable role in rejuvenating a ‘denigrated’ public sphere whose journalism is “turning people off citizenship rather than equipping them to fulfil their democratic potential” (McNair 2002: 8). Moreover, as Luke Goode argues, there is an inevitability about citizen journalism initiatives feeding the democratic imagination, “because it fosters an unprecedented potential, at least, for news and journalism to become part of a conversation” (Goode 2009: 1294). For Chen et al., hyperlocals “serve not only as a traditional information source but also as a forum for ongoing discussion of local affairs and a mechanism for building and strengthening relationships among local residents” (2012: 932). James Curran notes that the “divergence of approach between liberal and radical perspectives [on the public sphere] also give rise to different normative judgements about the practice of journalism” (Curran 1991: 32). Liberal-plural judgements certainly seem to infuse the current discussion on hyperlocal, essentially seeing it as playing a useful role in the democratic functioning of society, where it can seemingly help citizens to engage with local democracy and understand the political alternatives facing them: “it is clear that the hyperlocal news sector has a considerable contribution to make to media provision, plurality of voice, democratic scrutiny, accountability and information provision at a local level” (Carnegie UK Trust 2014: 13). Hyperlocal journalism, therefore, has arrived just at the moment when the public sphere seems to be at its most degraded (certainly in a post-phone-hacking and post-Leveson era), and we should therefore consider whether its role is to support the rejuvenation of the public sphere, or to act as an alternative voice within it.

The Habermasian Public Sphere

Normative ideals about how citizens should be able to participate in decision-making in society are articulated in Jürgen Habermas' work on the public sphere. In his key work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989, originally published in 1962 in German), he details the development of a bourgeois public sphere: "the sphere of private people come together as a public" (1989: 27). Within this specific historical phase and place (the 16th to 18th centuries in Western Europe), it was possible for citizens to use the "coffee houses, the salons, and the *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies)" (1989: 30) and engage in wide-ranging discussions about art, literature and 'common concerns'. In essence, subjects that lay previously only within the domain of the church or state came within the domain of groups of private citizens who represented the 'public': "the issues discussed became 'general' not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to be able to participate" (1989: 37). This in turn prepared the way for "human self-determination and political emancipation" (Hohendahl and Silberman 1979: 90). Habermas spends some time discussing the role of the media in the public sphere. He charts the way in which the 18th century press shifted from being primarily carriers of information to being editorialising vehicles through which the public were able to make their contribution felt in the public sphere: "the editorializing press as the institution of a discussing public was primarily concerned with asserting the latter's critical function" (1989: 184). However, with the establishment of the 'state' and its increasing influence, the press was left to focus on profit-making, with the result that by the Victorian period, its editorial freedom had become an illusion and newspapers more readily reflected the commercial interests of their owners, whilst doing their best to shape 'public opinion'. This illusion is at its most rampant in the era of mass media, Habermas argues. State intervention in electronic media (that is, the development of state broadcasters for television and radio in many Western countries) combined with the development of public relations as a practice, results in a kind of 'dumbing-down' of the public sphere and a giving way to the logic of late capitalism: "because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to 'address' its citizens like consumers" (1989: 195). Ultimately, he argues, "the communicative network of a public made up of rationally debating private citizens has collapsed" (1989: 247). Indeed, the Habermasian view of the role of the media in advanced capitalist societies is ultimately a discussion of its responsibility for the "refeudalization of the public sphere" (1989: 195).

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2007: 13-15) outlines the many criticisms of Habermas' work, in particular noting that his idealised notion of the public sphere tends to exclude women and the poor, and their concerns. It also presumes that actors in the public sphere have a shared sense of the 'public good' rather than holding ferociously onto their own points of view. Essentially, it ignores the messiness of real debate, she argues. Nancy Fraser states that although Habermas' work "needs to undergo some critical interrogation and reconstruction" (1990: 57), it is an "indispensable resource" (1990: 56). She makes the case that the Habermasian view that a multiplicity of publics "is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy" is flawed (1990: 62). Rather, in both egalitarian, multicultural societies, and in more stratified societies, her reconceptualising of the public sphere as a space of multiplicity and with less divide between 'public' and 'private' can better show "how inequality affects relations among publics in late capitalist societies, how publics are differentially empowered or segmented, and how some are involuntarily enclaved and subordinated to others" (1990: 77).

From the private to the public sphere

For many scholars, the "problematically blurred" (Livingstone 2005: 164) line between the public and private spheres is a cause for concern. Habermas (1989) had himself lamented the way the media had become the conduit between the private and the public sphere: "The problems of private existence are to a certain degree absorbed by the public sphere; although they are not resolved under the supervision of the publicist agencies, they are certainly dragged into the open by them" (1989: 172). Livingstone argues that the debate around the impact of new technology tends to be polarised. On the one hand participation in the public sphere means being 'connected' and 'engaged', whereas the private sphere connotes "withdrawal or isolation" (Livingstone 2005: 169). As danah boyd (2014) also noted in her work with teenagers, it's in the private sphere where identity is constructed and social connections made, outside of the public gaze. There is value in online seclusion argues Livingstone: "Rather than stressing the problem of withdrawal or isolation from community and political participation, the activities these terms characterise can be re-described as independence or even resistance" (2005: 170). She draws on Habermas (1989) to conceptualise the space between the private and public spheres as a site of struggle (using children's' media as her example). That is, the struggle between resisting the individualising effects of the market on

the private sphere, and the desire for greater participation, through new media, in public debate.

However, Zizi Papacharissi (2010a) argues that the development of the internet as a public space doesn't necessarily mean that the concept of the Habermasian public sphere is the best way to understand and critique it. Such critiques tend to ignore what she calls the 'in-between' nature of online digital spaces. Instead she requires us to consider the ways in which the private sphere has become a vital site of study as it is here that the private connected citizen is most active: "Whereas in the truest iterations of democracy, the citizen was enabled through the public sphere, in contemporary democracy, the citizen acts politically from a private sphere of reflection, expression, and behaviour" (2010a: 244). Comments on blogs, YouTube videos, interactions on social networks, even 'lurking' online are all examples of a private sphere that is now networked and as a result is "empowering, liquid and reflexive" (Papacharissi 2010a: 244). Papacharissi (2010b) also articulates the value of personal blogging as an aspect of communications operating in the private sphere. It is the connectedness that bloggers have with others in the networked private sphere that makes them powerful, along with their use of personal narratives about public issues (a feature of the "new narcissism" as she calls personal blogging): "for citizens of developed and contemporary democracies, net-based technologies provide the tools with which to challenge what is defined as private and what is defined as public" (2010b: 152). The result she argues is: "broadening and overlapping private and public agendas" (2010b: 149).

Alternative public spheres

In later reviewing his key work, Habermas acknowledges many of his critics and concedes that understanding the complexity of the public sphere requires acknowledgement of 'alternative institutions', which would include not only 'independent media' but other forms of informal gatherings "outside of the state and the economy" (Habermas 1992: 453). He makes a contrast between the powerful role that 'citizen movements' played in the overthrow of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and the more complex picture in the West:

This is the question of whether, and to what extent, a public sphere dominated by mass media provides a realistic chance for the members of civil society, in their competition with the political and economic invaders' media power, to bring about changes in the spectrum of values, topics, and reasons channelled by external influences, to open it up in a critical way, and to screen it critically. (Habermas 1992: 455)

This reconfiguring by Habermas is critical. How can ideas counter to the mainstream in society be articulated when media systems are dominated by private interests in the West? John Downing (1988), in his forensic study of the anti-nuclear alternative press in West Germany, argues that scholars need only look at the way in which popular culture is developed and positioned in relation to 'mass' culture to see "the existence and productivity of an alternative public realm" (1988: 169). The anti-nuclear media represented an example of a particularly vigorous and flourishing alternative public realm, argues Downing. He is keen to ensure that the reader understands that the original German word for realm/sphere, *Öffentlichkeit*, suggests "movement, activity and exchange" (1988: 168) more than it does the boundary, which might be inferred from the English words. Thus, he articulates the alternative public sphere's relationship to and influence on the 'official' public sphere. Alternative public spheres offer opportunities for "experiences, critiques and alternatives" (1988: 168) to be developed.

How do these positions then create an impact in the mainstream? Natalie Fenton and John Downey (2003) pick up this concern, drawing on ideas of 'counter-public' spheres. Their claim is that the relationships between the 'common domain' and the 'advocacy domain' need to be better understood as the points of breakthrough (from the latter to the former). It is these moments that provide: "the opportunity for ideological claims to be displaced, ruptured or contested" (2003: 200). They propose that a study of the virtual counter-public sphere (which in 2003 would have been an emerging but vibrant space for alternative ideas) would allow us to see whether "the mass-media public sphere will become more open to radical opinion as a result of the coincidence of societal crises and the growth of virtual counter-public spheres" (2003: 199).

Importantly for this study, there is precedent in examining the value of alternative media scenes in the UK. Tony Harcup (2013) draws on Habermas to articulate the practices and histories that make up a 'plebeian public sphere' (2013: 31, drawing on Negt and Kluge 1983). In contrast to the notion of the increasingly homogenised public sphere that Habermas initially described, Harcup pinpoints moments where alternative media flourished in the UK. In particular, he covers similar ground to that discussed by the Comedia group (Comedia 1984, Landry et al. 1985), who examined the failure of a large number of 1970s and early 1980s alternative press titles. They noted the tendency for workers in small, radical organisations to "exploit their own labour to a high degree" (1985: 97). Further, in doing so, such organisations played an unintended role in shaping mainstream media output:

The 'alternatives' have produced something which has the chance of commercial viability, the 'majors' move in and 'sign up' the producers, who then leave the sector [...] the alternative sector continually functions as a kind of unpaid 'Research and Development' for the major commercial companies. (Landry et al. 1985: 97)

Ultimately, the potential for radical, marginal projects to develop a 'Gramscian' political strategy – that is, to develop a sufficient economic base in order to navigate their own way to sustainability – is undone: “marginality becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Landry et al. 1985: 98). However, Harcup explicitly critiques this view and sees this moment as evidence of alternative media's ability to create alternative public spheres to compete with “the dominant hegemonic public sphere” (2013: 78).

Throughout his work, Harcup draws heavily on the idea of alternative public spheres, arguing their importance despite the often small audiences for the media they produce. His empirical work draws on his own experience as an alternative media producer to claim that alternative media may offer the possibility of “subverting the dominant discourse by providing access to alternative voices, alternative arguments, alternative sets of 'facts', and alternative ways of seeing” (Harcup 2003: 371). In a series of interviews with journalists who had experience of working in both mainstream and alternative journalism, Harcup (2005) found that there was much “crossover of ideas, content, style, and, not least, people” (2005: 370). Further research in 2011, this time interviewing a group of 'alternative media practitioners', has led him to conclude that the value of this alternative public sphere lies in providing a benchmark against which citizens can measure mainstream output (Harcup 2011: 27) and, importantly, create spaces that are “less male, less bourgeois and less dominated by the market” (Harcup 2011: 17).

Chris Atton's work (specifically across three key books: 2002, 2004, 2008) is focused on articulating the value of the alternative public sphere as a model for understanding the alternative media practices of new social movements. Atton is concerned with proposing a new model for understanding alternative media that addresses two key questions: “What is radical about the ways in which the vehicle (the medium) is transformed? And: What is radical about the communication processes (as instances of social relations) employed by that media?” (Atton 2002: 24). The alternative media 'field' therefore is one of “process and relation” (Atton 2002: 30). As Christian Fuchs points out, “alternative media at the form level of the products have a radical potential if they transcend their societal context and have the

potential to subvert experience” (2010a: 188). However, at the level of content such media might have a more direct critical political engagement: “[it] shows suppressed possibilities of existence, describes antagonisms of reality and potentials for change, questions domination, expresses the standpoints of oppressed and dominated groups and individuals” (Fuchs 2010a: 189).

Atton presents a typology for understanding alternative media, split between products (content, form, reprographic innovations) and processes (distribution, social relations, communication processes). Atton makes the case that applying such a model to alternative media operations “avoids homogenizing alternative and radical media as the media of radical politics, of publications with minority audiences, of amateur writing and production” (2002: 29). Atton (2002: 30) notes how better understandings of active and ‘mobilised’ audiences means that simply seeing alternative media texts as vehicles for disseminating non-mainstream messages is insufficient. Instead, we need to consider how the media, in their organisation and in their textual norms, have the potential to be transformed through “wider social participation in their creation, participation and dissemination” (Atton 2002: 25). In turn, wider participation can not only transform the media themselves but can also lead to the transformations of social relations (2002: 25). In this sense, Atton offers a potential route to seeing value in hyperlocal as an alternative media movement. Whilst research to date has noted hyperlocal’s similarity to mainstream local media in terms of form (Williams et al. 2015), its production processes (which remain relatively under-researched) may well offer a challenge to those emerging in an increasingly conglomerated and streamlined local media industry. Whilst Christian Fuchs is concerned that “small-scale local alternative projects will develop into psychological self-help initiatives without political relevance” (Fuchs 2010a: 189), we should not dismiss the potential of hyperlocal’s alternativeness so easily. Instead, it can be seen to form part of a wider alternative media ‘field’ that, as Atton notes, consists of a range of cultural practices which are diverse but share in common “extremes of transformation in products, processes and relations” (Atton 2002: 30). The products, processes and relations inherent in hyperlocal journalism are discussed throughout this thesis, and in many instances they stand in stark contrast to those within mainstream media.

Between bourgeois and alternative

To some extent, ideas of the public sphere are useful in creating a space in which it is possible to study the value of an emerging practice such as hyperlocal in the context of the contribution

it makes to dealing with the 'crisis' in local journalism that so concerns Chris Morley (2013). Of course, for it to play any effective role, there needs to be sufficient evidence that hyperlocal media has impact; which is to say that it is actually used by citizens. But it is clear that current discussions about the decline of the press certainly have a distinctly Habermasian feel to them, and the appearance of hyperlocal media operations has some commentators idealising its role within a bourgeois public sphere: "I do think the growing belief in hyperlocal media needs much more thought, especially in Britain. We have fractured communities here and there is an urgent need to find some glue" (Greenslade 2007). Perhaps seeing past this hyperbole requires us to examine hyperlocal as a challenge from the private sphere to public agendas, and as a continuation of existing alternative media practices, maybe as part of the subaltern public sphere and a field of cultural production in and of itself. Negt and Kluge (1983) argue that assimilation into dominant practices is an inevitable process in the development of 'proletarian' public spheres, and that to be truly alternative is to resist the organisational norms of the bourgeois public sphere:

The proletarian public sphere which comes about through the use of its own forms of organisation not only binds together truly proletarian interest and experiences, but concentrates them as a specific stage in the proletarian public sphere which also differentiates itself externally from bourgeois forms of the public sphere. (1983: 93)

In this sense, to reject the norms associated with the organisation of journalism (if not always its form) might situate the practice of hyperlocal within the alternative public sphere. In taking this position, we can widen the scope of our study so that we might see the forms of value generated by hyperlocal as extending beyond merely what hyperlocal can do for journalism and journalism's 'mission'. Chris Atton's work, in arguing for an examination of process and product, and seeing the value in each (2002: 29), provides a route for us to consider hyperlocal outside this narrow framing and support this study's intention to look at the wider range of potential value generated. The opportunity here, then, is to situate this study of hyperlocal in the context of a post-industrialised era of journalism, where technology has given "everyone" (Hartley 2009: 154) the required agency to act as producers. In this sense, we should next consider the ways in which technology and the Internet have been framed in debates about journalism.

Technology and the networked public sphere

Whilst the debates about the public sphere referred to in the previous section often took place in the context of rapid social change, they perhaps could not have foreseen the extent to which computing technologies would allow for the development of what Yochai Benkler has called a 'networked public sphere' (2006). Joss Hands assesses Habermas' view on technology, noting how he considers it something that is "an always potential threat, something that needs to be bounded and contained" (Hands 2011: 100). Ultimately, Habermas "cannot perceive the role of technology playing a part in a politics that resists other technology" (Hands 2011: 101).

Benkler's work is focused on how large but dispersed groups of citizens, utilising networked Internet technologies, create significant impacts on the established order. He acknowledges from the outset the degraded nature of the public sphere: "the beginning of the twenty-first century is not typified by a robust public sphere populated by newspaper readers debating the news of the day and commentary in the idealized coffee houses of London" (Benkler 2003: 1264). He describes the reactive and generative capacities of the networked public sphere, 'reactive' being the ability of citizens to use technologies as a "mechanism to organize political action across many different locations and social contexts" (2006: 402). The 'generative capacity' represents "a model of peer production of investigation, reportage, analysis, and communication" (Benkler 2006: 408). In whichever capacity, for Benkler the networked public sphere is one where: "public inquiry, debate, and collective action [...] is [now] fundamentally different from the structure of public inquiry and debate in the mass-media-dominated public sphere of the twentieth century" (Benkler 2006: 414). Benkler notes that it is not just that the Internet gives space for alternative voices and action, but that the mass media themselves are using the Web to be an effective networked fourth estate (2011) within which citizens themselves can play a key participatory role: "there is the sheer presence of millions of individuals with the ability to witness and communicate what they witnessed over systems that are woven into the normal fabric of networked life" (Benkler 2011: 378).

Technological determinist positions

An overview of discussions related to journalism reveal that the potential transformative nature of the Internet and social media technologies is very much at the heart of a kind of scholarly technological determinism. Not only is "everyone a journalist," (Hartley 2009: 154) but they also have the potential to be proprietor, digital publisher and digitally networked newsgatherer as well. Zizi Papacharissi paints a picture of an idealised virtual counter-public sphere in which

'bourgeois' computer holders (making the comparison with Habermas' bourgeois property holders) represent the interest of counter-publics (2002: 21). Papacharissi is not blind to the widening gaps between politicians and their publics, but equally can see the value of the new democratic opportunities that technology brings:

The fact that people from different cultural backgrounds, states, or countries involve themselves in virtual political discussions in a matter of minutes, often expanding each other's horizons with culturally diverse viewpoints, captures the essence of this technology. (Papacharissi 2002: 23)

Dan Gillmor makes a direct connection between the technology-facilitated network bloggers and citizen journalists and the pamphleteers of the 18th century to laud the era of connected 'personal journalism' (2004: 1-22). Gillmor is enthusiastic about the potential of user-generated approaches to new forms of journalistic output and anticipates significant democratic benefits as a result of us all being: "active users of news, not mere consumers" (2004: 238). The outcome of this transformation, argues Leah Lievrouw (2011) in her examination of genres of alternative media production, situates alternative journalism practice as a critique of the industrialised and institutionalised processes of mainstream journalism, as well as a kind of personal political emancipation. Whilst Lievrouw's examples tend to focus on large-scale networked projects such as Indymedia, she makes the point that whatever the scale, the key characteristics of alternative journalism are "connectivity, interactivity and community" (Lievrouw 2011: 121). David Baines (2010) draws on Habermas for his study of a commercial hyperlocal initiative in the UK. The intention was to create a "putative public sphere" (2010: 584) to support the development of an 'informed' citizenry (drawing on Schudson 1999: 123). Yet when set against the Habermasian idealised public sphere, the commercial hyperlocal offering comes up short, failing to meeting the 'monitorial' needs of citizens and neglecting to engage with global perspectives. In some ways it was too hyperlocal, argues Baines (2010: 590).

The role of computing technologies in supporting or disrupting the public sphere has actually been much discussed since the 1980s. Philip Elliott (1986 originally published in 1982) sets out a critique of discussions about the 'information society' in the context of emerging interest in the role of personal computing technologies and video games. Despite some academics' optimism (he cites Daniel Bell in particular), the then-emerging digital communication technologies have the potential to simply continue the process of seeing

citizens as “consumption units in a corporate world” (1986: 106), resulting in a “continuation of the erosion of what Habermas called the public sphere” (1986: 106). Stephen Lax (2000) likewise details how early, optimistic positions on the democratising potential of the Internet gave way to a cynicism about the value of its contribution to the public sphere. There was a realisation that the existence of robust discussions on political issues on newsgroups and websites had little connection to the process of policy-making, and initiatives specifically designed to foster democratic participation tended to be short-lived: “the arguments that the Internet is an inherently democratic technology, or, more cautiously, that it can be used to in ways that enhance democracy, amount to little more than a technical fix to an old political problem” (Lax 2000: 168).

Peter Dahlgren makes the clearest of points that early positions on the Internet by academics were worryingly close to being little more than sales patter:

A new medium is introduced, swathed in utopian rhetoric about how it will benefit society and enhance democracy. This cheery notion comes not only from those engaged in marketing it, but also from some voices within academia and other intellectual corners. (Dahlgren 2001: 45)

Dahlgren does see the Internet’s potential in enhancing the public sphere, but notes how its use seemed limited to those already interested in political discussion. To enrich the public sphere, he argues, participation must be expressly political in practice (contributing to newsgroups, creating websites with political information from alternative viewpoints). He has reserved optimism for the Internet’s potential to allow “new communicative spaces to develop – alternative public spheres – even if the paths to the centers of political decision-making are far removed” (2001: 52). He later notes how early discussions about the role of the Internet were framed by the feeling that “democracy has hit upon hard times” (2005: 147) and laments that “its development is quickly veering toward the intensified commercialization that characterizes the traditional media model” (2005: 151).

Dahlgren’s position on the ways in which citizens contribute to the public sphere shifts a little in a later paper focused on public and private spheres. The blending of politics and entertainment in mass media results in an “empirical permeability between public and private” (Dahlgren 2006: 276). His desire to look at civic agency and address its decline means that the “at-times restrictive view of what ideally should take place in the public sphere, namely deliberative democracy, further narrows our field of vision in regard to civic agency and

interaction” (Dahlgren 2006: 282). Not only the Internet, but DIY media forms such as pamphlets and “neighbourhood bulletins” (2006: 275) now come under the analytical gaze. Indeed, the everyday activities of identity creation and engagement with culture are now something to be considered:

If this whole side [the private] is walled off analytically from our understanding of politics, then we will never be able to understand, for example, the motivations, identities and passions that can launch people into the public sphere. (Dahlgren 2006: 275)

However, Tanni Haas’s (2005) analysis of political weblogs finds little to suggest that ‘new’ media represents a challenge to the existing mainstream news agenda, and therefore the challenge for academics is to avoid,

uncritically assuming that so-called ‘new’ media of communication like weblogs represent a radical departure from and challenge to more established (or ‘old’) communication media [...] I would urge scholars to carefully attend to both continuity and change as a means of assessing the relationship between them. (Haas 2005: 394)

Manuel Castells (2012), in looking at the use of networked technologies by new social movements around the world, focuses on the ‘networked space’ that “enables the movement to relate to society at large beyond the control of the power holders over communication power” (Castells 2012: 11). Castells undertakes a detailed analysis of the role of social media and the Internet in the Egyptian revolution of 2011. He sees a link between the offline organisation of activists and how “networks formed in cyberspace extended their reach to urban space and the revolutionary community formed in public squares” (2012: 81). This notion of the offline mirroring the online is also present in descriptions of the ways in which the Mexican Zapatista movement in the 1990s used the Internet as part of their struggle:

The Zapatista structure is a non-hierarchical network, a horizontal organization with a hybrid identity, hidden behind masks. On the Internet, which is non-hierarchical and horizontal in structure, instead of masks we find usernames — pseudonyms that represent people, many of whom may be marginalized socially when off-line. (Martinez-Torres 2001: 352)

The idea that there is a link between the architecture of the Internet and the structure of relationships between revolutionary groups is also put forward by Garrido and Halavais:

“Hyperlinks provide a direct measure of relationships among documents on the World Wide Web, and possibly an analog for structural relationships among the core Zapatista movement and movements around the world” (2003: 169).

A much more detailed analysis of academic positions on the role of technology has been undertaken by Borger et al. (2012) in what they describe as a ‘Genealogical Discourse Analysis’ of scholarship on participatory journalism. They note the number of times the ‘founding fathers’ of ‘technological optimism’ (who include Dan Gillmor, Jay Rosen, Jeff Jarvis, Clay Shirky, Henry Jenkins) are cited in articles about participatory journalism. Scholars tend to display a “strong faith in the democratic potential of digital technologies” (Borger et al. 2012: 125), and such technological optimism “can be traced back to internet enthusiasts of the 1990s who voiced great expectations regarding the reinvigoration of the public sphere” (Borger et al. 2012: 125). A set of normative values about the role of journalism exists in such literature, they argue, and they identify four ‘dimensions’ within the discourse presented in the articles:

We labelled these dimensions “enthusiasm about new democratic opportunities”, “disappointment with professional journalism’s obduracy”, “disappointment with economic motives to facilitate participatory journalism”, and “disappointment with news users’ passivity”. (Borger et al. 2012: 129)

Within that first dimension, Borger et al. offer a critique of the normative values of journalism studies and in particular its positioning of ‘public journalism’ – now recognised as a short-lived phase of journalism practice in the mid-1990s (many examples in Rosen 1999) that saw a concerted attempt by some newspapers in the US to “actively nurture the conversation that healthy public life requires” (Merritt 2009: 21). Scholarly positions on public journalism played a key role in shaping the utopian technological discourse around participatory journalism, offering “a renewed chance to realize public journalism’s goals [...] In the theoretical ideal underlying participatory journalism, the audience is explicitly approached as citizenry” (Borger et al. 2012: 126).

James Curran has been critical of the liberal pluralist positions implicit within the kinds of writing that Borger et al. analyse. In his address to the 2009 Future of Journalism conference, he lists the kinds of buzzwords being used to describe utopian outcomes for journalism practice: “open-ended, reciprocal, horizontal, collaborative, self-generating, extensive, and inclusive” (Curran 2010a: 446). He critiques the ways in which liberal journalism educators

“mythologise the role of the Web in ‘mainstreaming’ minority journalism” (Curran 2010a: 470) and states that it is the failure of Web-based ventures to attract sufficient advertising that weakens the argument that the future of journalism is as participatory and networked as such academics suggest. As our earlier discussion shows, we can see how hyperlocal is in danger of being caught up in what Curran warns is a tendency for ‘millenarian’ prophecies to accompany developments in new media (Curran 2010b). Fenton (2010) asks a critical question about the role of technology in journalism: has it “revitalized the public sphere or become a tool of commerce for an increasingly un-public, undemocratic news media?” (Fenton et al. 2010). Christian Fuchs (2013) is concerned with the ways in which writings about the participatory nature of the Internet fail to take account of issues of “class, exploitation and surplus value” (2013: 215). His critical political economy approach reminds us that practices and institutions are created and recreated by the ‘proletariat’ as “spaces of common experience” (Fuchs 2010b: 194). In turn, such “spaces and experiences are appropriated and thereby expropriated and exploited by capital to accumulate capita” (Fuchs 2010b: 194).

The tensions in the debate around the role of technology ultimately hinge on the extent to which it allows participation in the process of doing journalism and whether such participation is to the benefit of journalism’s normative mission; that is, to enhance democracy. We can surmise that such participation, on whatever terms, may “not automatically result in, and should therefore not be confused with, increased political participation in the public sphere” (Paulussen and D’Heer 2013: 4). Yet Benkler (2003) makes the point that at the very least we are moving away from the model of a powerful media subjugating its readers “with the Baywatch effect, the depoliticization of public conversation” (Benkler 2003: 1265). The development of alternative media as facilitated by the Internet “offer[s] substantial outlets for more attractive democratic practices and information flows than we saw in the twentieth century” (Benkler 2003: 1265). Joss Hands puts forward a compelling case for a framework with which to view the role of technology. He describes a “digital networked technological hegemony, within a horizon of technocapitalism” (2011: 47), a framing that allows an opportunity for resistance. He contrasts Heidegger’s pessimistic view on technology (that it entraps us) with the realities of living in a world with near-ubiquitous take up of digital devices (in the developed world, at least). That is, by putting technology in the hands of the ‘multitude’, whose everyday use of it may be both ordinary and extraordinary by turns, capitalism is unwittingly opening itself up “to a new cycle of democratisation and social, economic and political flux” (2011: 47).

Summary

In this chapter I also outlined the ways in which the 'citizen' is situated in discussions about journalism. There is certainly a tension about how their technology-enabled role as newsgatherers places them in relation to the journalism profession. But the critical question is what value we might consider hyperlocal creates for the wider citizenship. Perhaps one desired outcome is that hyperlocal is seen to develop 'active citizenship', as Tony Harcup claims (2011). Harcup argues that this is an audience question (2015b), but we first need to better understand the practices within hyperlocal publishing and investigate the ways in which this form of journalism can offer more participatory contexts through which to stimulate active citizenship. Ultimately, I am seeking to examine the ways in which hyperlocal media is offering routes to civic participation for citizens. In tackling this through research focused on the producer rather than the audience, I am therefore asking if hyperlocal news publishing can create the conditions for a more active citizenship to be developed.

The question of what value is created by hyperlocal media is inevitably one of the contribution it makes to the public sphere. In my overview of debates about the public sphere I drew on work by Chris Atton (2002) to argue that hyperlocal might usefully be seen as an alternative media practice. Yet we must recognise that its form can feel closer to personal blogging and could be an effective example of the networked private sphere reshaping "what is defined as private and what is defined as public" (Papacharissi 2010b: 152). Hyperlocal media seems to be both stubbornly independent and stubbornly non-lucrative (Williams et al. 2015), despite the scale of investment to date (Geels 2013). These factors are valuable markers of its alternativeness and of activity in the private domain. In chapter five I give a detailed overview of hyperlocal media in the UK across a three-year period which will go some way to help us to understand its potential contribution to the public sphere. I will then draw on thumbnail accounts and interviews to the help identify the range of practices of hyperlocal journalism and understand the motivations of its practitioners as purveyors of everyday information sustaining alternative local information ecologies.

I further argued in this review that as hyperlocal publishing is largely native to the Internet, it inevitably gets caught up in the utopian discourses about technology that see it as a democratising tool that will give voice to the voiceless and turn us all into micro-level news publishers with, collectively, a macro-level impact. Whilst we need to avoid being too

technologically determined and note the scepticism from many academics, there is certainly the potential to see networked digital technologies as a useful tool for everyday voices to be heard in the mainstream and as a way for alternative media practices to be more participatory. The empirical evidence to be presented in this thesis will allow us to see past the polarisation in this debate as we witness the value created by hyperlocalists through both on- and offline newsgathering practices.

CHAPTER FOUR – METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research approach of this thesis. It is structured so that it identifies how each stage of the research design contributes to answering the research questions; drawing on the conceptual framings outlined in the literature discussed in chapters two and three. The research design is such that it begins by outlining in broad terms the nature of the field to give a sense of the extent of hyperlocal media in the UK. It then presents three short thumbnail accounts of hyperlocal publishing practices which help indicate key themes and issues which help frame the subsequent analysis of 40 interviews with hyperlocal journalists, some of which took place as part of the 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project.

The contention of the thesis is that a study of hyperlocal practices is necessary to understand “the ways in which the vehicle (the medium) is transformed” (Atton 2002: 24) and to ask “what is radical about the communication processes (as instances of social relations) employed by that media?” (Atton 2002: 24). These questions from Chris Atton are pertinent to this study, allowing us to assess the contribution that hyperlocal makes to the practice of journalism as well as its contribution to civic society as an aspect of alternative media practice emerging from the private sphere. The methods described here will offer insight into how practitioners place themselves in relation to mainstream journalism and to the communities they see themselves as serving. I begin discussing my status as a researcher and how it is informed by my previous experience with hyperlocal media. I also discuss my role in gathering research data as part of the collaborative research project that contributes to this thesis.

My position as hyperlocal media practitioner

In January 2010, I was handed the editorial reins of a hyperlocal website (<http://bournvillevillage.com>) for the Bournville area of Birmingham (population approximately 25,000). The then-editor, Bournville-born journalist Hannah Waldram, had started the site six months previously as a way to showcase her skills following her graduation from a postgraduate degree in journalism. I took on the role despite my own relative lack of journalism training – in my own mind, a “gifted amateur” perhaps (McNair 2010) – motivated by access to a ready-made publishing platform with which to develop further my range of writing and media production skills. I had little ambition to generate income from the endeavour and not much in the way of civic ambitions for it either. Rather than treat the site wholly as a space for the written word, I tended to use video, audio and interactive maps as ways in which to report on

activities relevant to Bournville. Further, I noticed the ways in which citizens were using social media to report on incidents around my locality. The ability to link to or embed their content meant I had acquired a network of local newsgatherers, whether they realised it or not.

Some aspects of what I did, in particular where I had created stories from city council open data, attracted wider interest (SOCITM 2010: 163-164), and it was clear that 'hyperlocal' was beginning to be framed as a distinct practice whose activities were attracting the attention of media commentators (Greenslade 2007). My desire to study this area was based on what felt like a disconnect between the discussion amongst advocates of the practice who were seeking to influence policy discussions (as noted earlier: Nesta, Carnegie Trust and Talk About Local) and the lived experience of writing about my local area. Although such writing felt like 'news', it often came from the personal domain. One example would be a story about car accidents on a nearby road (<http://bournvillevillage.com/news/linden-road-accident-data/>) that was written largely as a result of this being the road my children crossed on the way to school. The manner mine and other hyperlocal sites had attracted such attention seemed to be by dint of their perseverance in the face of the ongoing decline on the mainstream local press. Whereas my own hyperlocal operation served up stories two or three times a week, hyperlocals such as Ventnor Blog (now called On The Wight) and The Lichfield Blog (now Lichfield Live) were posting as many as ten new stories per day. A database had been established in 2010 to list other active sites like them (originally at http://openlylocal.com/hyperlocal_sites, now at <http://localweblis.net/>) and to a degree, hyperlocal journalism sat refreshingly in contrast to the ongoing "narratives of decline" (McNair 2002: 9) around the local press whereby the critical perspective on the press is almost always pessimistic.

Undertaking collaborative research

The opportunity to research hyperlocal publishing arose in December 2010 when my participation in a research 'sandpit' event ('Connected Communities and The Creative Economy', AHRC, University of Birmingham) resulted in the securing of a research grant to examine 'creative citizenship' of which, hyperlocal news publishing was seen as a key example. The research for the thesis took place partially within that research project in collaboration with others; partially within another project on which I was sole investigator; and partially independently. A large part of the research (some interviews, one thumbnail account) took place within a strand of the 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project, for

which I led the research strand (one of three) in hyperlocal media. In addition, one of my thumbnail accounts was carried out for a project called ‘New Knowledge Networks in Communities: The Role of Hyperlocal Media Operations in Facilitating Everyday Digital Participation’ (Harte 2014), funded in 2014 by the Communities and Culture Network at the University of Leeds. In table 1, I indicate the range of research carried out in these projects and my role, and that of co-researchers, in producing the empirical data I draw upon for this thesis.

Project	Data gathered and drawn upon in thesis	Researcher(s)
‘Media, Community and the Creative Citizen’	Analysis of scope and scale of hyperlocal publishing 2012-2014	David Harte
	34 Interviews with hyperlocal practitioners	David Harte (7) Andy Williams (20) Jerome Turner (7)
	Tyburn Mail case study	David Harte (2 interviews) Jerome Turner (workshop support)
New Knowledge Networks	B31 Voices Case study	David Harte
Other research	Case study of Birmingham’s news ecology	David Harte
	On The Wight case study	David Harte
	Additional interviews with practitioners	David Harte (6)

Table 1: Breakdown of data gathered for this thesis.

As is evident in the table, some data for this thesis was gathered collaboratively. Questions for the semi-structured interviews were agreed between all researchers and then we all undertook the interviews. The interviews were conducted in late 2013 and early 2014 by the ‘Creative Citizen’ project research team (myself, Jerome Turner and Andy Williams) and then I undertook an additional six interviews in March 2017. Each of the interviewers worked from a set of questions (see appendix) agreed between myself, Andy Williams and Jerome Turner. Chapter seven draws on my own analysis of all 40 of the interview transcripts. See appendix 1 list of interviewees.

The Tyburn Mail case study consisted of two extended interviews with community media workers (both undertaken by me) and workshops with citizens. The workshops were co-designed and co-organised with the project's researcher, Jerome Turner. Chapter six draws on my analysis of the workshop data and the interviews as part of a thumbnail account. The B31 and On The Wight thumbnail accounts were solely undertaken by me, as was all data gathering and analysis in chapter five. Elements of chapter five were commissioned by Ofcom to support their understanding of hyperlocal publishing.

The 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project also undertook a wider range of research than I reference at points throughout the thesis but I do not draw on for fresh analysis in this thesis. After my initial scoping of the sector in 2012, a content analysis of hyperlocal websites and a practitioner survey (Williams et al. 2014) were also undertaken. Both are more fully described in Williams et al. (2015) and Barnett and Townend (2015). The findings of the survey and content analysis offer a degree of triangulation to my own analysis of the interviews and thumbnail accounts. That analysis has a slightly different gaze to that of the overarching project. Both Williams et al. (2015) and Barnett and Townend (2015) examine hyperlocal's role in filling the democratic deficit, whereas I draw on the qualitative data in order to examine the extent to which hyperlocal journalism could be a form of cultural practice. In that regard, the thumbnail accounts offer a more robust form of triangulation for this study, whilst the analysis of data about the scope and scale of hyperlocal publishing can address questions about the extent to which it forms part of the public sphere.

Autoethnography, 'Insider Accounts' and studying 'sideways'

My position as hyperlocal publisher has allowed me a significant degree of insight into the nature of this form and the issues inherent in practising it. The value or otherwise of a researcher researching from within a practice is widely discussed in the research methods literature (Bochner and Ellis 1992, Chang 2008, Ellis and Bochner 2000). Bochner and Ellis (1992) argue that the autoethnographer relies on 'epiphanies' (1992: 37) whereby moments of crises or realisation result in the writer reflecting insightfully on their experiences. The key aspect of using these insights, though, is the discipline required to move them beyond mere story and into valid research:

[Autoethnographers] must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. To accomplish this might require comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research, [...] interviewing cultural members [...] and/or examining relevant cultural artifacts. (Ellis et al. 2010: n.p.)

Rather than offer an autoethnographic account of my own time as editor of Bournville News, I used my experience to make sense of the 'epiphanies' of others that are heard in the accounts collected during the research process. To an extent my own 'insider account' therefore formed part of the research process: in particular it shaped my view on how others talk about hyperlocal and allowed me to hear the different discourses at play as participants took up their subject positions. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue, 'insider' accounts can be approached for their informational insights but also for "what they tell us about those who produced them" (1995: 125). In that way, insiders' knowledge becomes both "resource and topic" (1995: 126).

On a practical level, undertaking research into hyperlocal publishing as an 'insider' has advantages in terms of gaining access to participants and understanding the variety of professional/non-professional backgrounds that participants came from. I was able to draw up a list of likely research participants based on my analysis of the sector via the Openly Local database. I had attended conferences and 'un'-conferences since 2010 and built up a significant rapport with many in the sector. To some extent this meant that creating sufficient critical distance became problematic as I was presumed to be an advocate for the sector and to participate in policy-orientated discussions about the need for it to become more organised. However, as Ursula Plesner (2011) argues, researchers who share professional backgrounds with their subjects can overcome some of the methodological issues that arise from 'studying up' (where the interviewee may be in a more powerful position than the interviewer and able to manipulate the outcomes) or 'studying down' (where the interviewee may be marginalised and less able to understand fully the context or consequences of the research being carried out). Plesner claims that in more equitable situations: "negotiations often replace a researcher-imposed dialogue, and the circulation of shared or common vocabularies subverts an orderly division between researchers' vocabulary and interviewees' vocabularies" (2011: 471). Yet she also warns that when the researcher brings their own experience to the object of study, there is a danger of producing "overly smooth interactions" (2011: 480) that fail to tell us anything

interesting or new. Plesner's key concern, and one that this study shares, is that the researcher must allow their subject space to be reflexive, rather than spending too much time positioning themselves in the study and agonising over the terms of interaction. In short, we need to give reflexivity back: "focusing on interviewees' reflexivity [...] has the potential to get closer to the participants we study and to be more interesting than applying some introspection as a routine methodological duty" (2011: 479).

Research questions

The main research question of this thesis is: 'What forms of value are generated for communities through the actions of hyperlocal news and information operations?' I address this through three sub-questions that relate to the positions outlined in the literature review drawing on the data collected through the research methods outlined in this chapter. These sub-questions are:

- RQ1: What is the extent and variety of hyperlocal news and information operations in the UK and how do they contribute to local news ecologies?
- RQ2: What are the motivations and practices of hyperlocal information providers and how do these operations contribute to everyday and local information ecologies?
- RQ3: How do such hyperlocal information systems connect to citizens and what forms of value are created by the development of 'new networks of trust' (Couldry 2004)?

The questions are designed to help this thesis achieve its aim of exploring the phenomenon of hyperlocal practice through a study of the publishing practices of its exponents and an examination of the interactions between publishers and audience.

Connecting to the literature review

In chapter two I discussed the ways in which the definition of hyperlocal has been framed by academics and policy-makers according to their own interests. I argued that seeing hyperlocal as an aspect of cultural practice allows us to consider the value of such a practice as part of a wider transformation of local communication practices that takes place through everyday participation by citizens on social networks and the subsequent foregrounding of their everyday and 'banal' concerns. To a degree, this might form a kind of 'slow' activism. My review then asked whether forms of 'active' citizenship might be engendered by hyperlocal

media and framed this discussion in the context of debates about the public and private sphere. Hyperlocal journalism may indeed play a role in reinvigorating a ‘denigrated’ public sphere (McNair 2002: 8), but I argued that seeing it as an emerging alternative form of private sphere communications offers an opportunity to examine its potential beyond journalism’s normative, rather narrow framing of local concerns. The literature review also looked at ideas of the ‘networked public sphere’ and the role played by digital technologies. The potential of the Internet to transform the participation of citizens in the public sphere is seen in both utopian and dystopian terms by academics, but the ease of access to digital technologies and platforms has the potential to create the conditions necessary for alternative positions to be heard in the mainstream.

Table 2 sets out the sub-research questions and the methods used against key points from my literature review.

Literature review	Research question	Method	Findings
Hyperlocal’s role in reinvigorating the public sphere	1. What is the extent and variety of hyperlocal news and information operations in the UK and how do they contribute to local news ecologies?	Analysis of scale and variety of hyperlocal publishing	Identify the value of hyperlocals as an element of local news ecologies
Hyperlocal as a practice of ‘everyday’ communications of the private sphere	2. What are the motivations and practices of hyperlocal information providers and how do these operations contribute to everyday and local information ecologies?	Thumbnail accounts	Identify key themes and issues relating to motivations and practices of hyperlocal publishers situated in in specific ‘newsroom’ contexts
Hyperlocal as an aspect of active citizenship	3. How do such hyperlocal information systems connect to citizens and what forms of value are created by the development of ‘new networks of trust’ (Couldry 2004)?	Interviews	Examine practices and discourses of hyperlocal publishing

Table 2: Relationship between literature review, sub-research questions, methods and findings

Research approach

The research was structured into phases that led on from each other and had their own specific methods. This resulted in a degree of ‘between method’ triangulation (Denzin 1989: 244) enlisting contrasting methods using quantitative and qualitative methods to examine hyperlocal news practices. Whilst the data on the scale of hyperlocal news production may

well suggest the phenomenon is extensive and therefore in a fairly robust state of affairs, the case study ethnographies (thumbnail accounts), using a range of qualitative techniques (participant observation, visual and online ethnography, asset-mapping), identified the important themes and issues in hyperlocal publishing practices that are subject to further analysis through the interviews.

Collectively these methods may produce a holistic understanding of hyperlocal publishing in the UK but the point is not to produce ‘truth’ about the practice through triangulation. As Bloor (1997) argues, triangulation too often fails to produce validating evidence and instead needs to be approached as a reflective tool by the researcher, and one that merely begins a journey of research and discovery: “[triangulation] may yield new data that throw[s] new light on the investigation and provide[s] a spur for deeper and richer analyses” (1997: 49). Therefore the research here should be seen as such a ‘spur’, offering data and analysis upon which future scholars may undertake studies of hyperlocal media.

In the sections that follow I will draw attention to each of the sub-research questions cited earlier and describe the method used to address these questions.

RQ1: What is the extent and variety of hyperlocal news and information operations in the UK and how do they contribute to local news ecologies?

In this section I discuss my approach to mapping out the extent of hyperlocal publishing in the UK through an analysis of the news output of hyperlocals listed on an existing database. I describe the purpose of the analysis and outline the issues involved in relying on this particular resource. Despite these issues, I offer a rationale for its use and go on to describe my approach to the analysis.

Purpose

The purpose of this aspect of the research is to offer the reader insight into the number of hyperlocal operations active in this sector within the UK, their geographic spread and the volume and frequency of news stories published. The overview of hyperlocal established is intended to inform discussion on the role of hyperlocal in the ‘public sphere’ (see discussion in chapter two). I drew on the Openly Local database for this analysis, which took place in 2012, 2013 and 2014. A short analysis of hyperlocal media in Birmingham in 2016 is also included. To some degree, the work acts as a record of what were often short-lived but valuable journalistic endeavours and therefore is of use to future researchers. The rise and subsequent decline of the radical alternative press in the UK in the 1970s is well documented by

contemporary guides and bibliographies (Hoey 1973, Noyce 1979, Royal Commission on the Press 1977, Smith 1977, Spiers 1974) as well as later reflective accounts (Dickinson 1997, Franklin and Murphy 1991: 76-92, Harcup 2006, Nelson and Reed 1989). Overall, the alternative media researcher is able to gain a rich insight into the range of local publications that flourished at the edges of the mainstream press during this period and one would hope that the same is true as a result of the research presented here in relation to hyperlocal. In that sense, the work can contribute to a broader public understanding of the hyperlocal sector. A key aspect of the research is to understand the role that hyperlocal might play in local media ecologies. I drew on a range of publications by Ofcom that outline how local media is assessed in the context of media mergers. Hyperlocal plays a role in that assessment and my analysis is made in the context of the criteria for measuring media plurality that Ofcom applies.

This research took place in the context of the 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project and formed part of the findings of that project. Significantly, the analysis in 2012 helped to identify a set of 1,941 news stories that were the subject of a content analysis (see Williams et al. 2015). This analysis set out to examine hyperlocal against a similar set of criteria as had been applied to content analyses of the mainstream press; that is: "sources (who gets to define hyperlocal news?); topics (what news is covered?); the 'local-ness' of this news; and the civic value of the news" (Williams et al. 2015: 6). The findings have also been published in part by Ofcom (2012a, 2013a, 2014a).

The Openly Local Database

The Openly Local database was a regularly updated list of hyperlocal operations in the UK and Ireland. It was started in 2010 and existed until 2015 when it was superseded by another database (kept at <http://localweblis.net>). At face value, the resource seemed comprehensive and one might regard it as comparable to a degree with the series of bibliographic guides to the alternative and underground press covering 1972-1996 (of which Spiers 1974 is the first) published by Harvester Press (later Primary Source Media and Research Publications International). Such guides sought to capture the ephemeral nature of much of the alternative press and even one-off publications were included:

All across Britain in the past 10 years underground papers have been erupting, ending, and beginning [...] many papers have been short-lived, amorphous, fluid, constantly ebbing and flowing, individually impermanent, part of a new press deeply embroiled in a search for self-definition. (Spiers 1974: 19)

Spiers argued that the need to archive these publications was vital, as they captured the prevailing countercultural mood of Britain at the time, Although he recognised that such publications were “virtually uncollectable” in their totality (Spiers 1974: 19), the collection represented in the microfiche files was essential to “understanding the situation of the left today” (Spiers 1974: 20).

The Openly Local database made a less politically charged rationale for its existence, but did recognise that the precariousness of the local press makes an alternative listing of emerging non-mainstream media important. The database’s initiator, Chris Taggart, argues that hyperlocal publications form “a crucial part of the media future as the traditional local media dies or is cut back to a shadow of its former self” (2010). Taggart, a former journalist and web developer, initially developed the resource as a complement to his comprehensive Web listing of council services. He created the database to be compliant with Open Data standards, therefore its data could be reused freely “for mashups or anything else” (Taggart 2010).⁴ This results in the data being ‘Linked Data’⁵ and available in a variety of useful formats for analysis (for example: my analysis was based on an export of the Openly Local data in JSON format). Webster et al. (2015) argue that the use of Linked Data in community archives is necessary to ensure their sustainability. Use of proprietary software is ultimately limiting and results in the data being difficult to transfer to other systems. A Linked Data approach allows for “collaboration, mutual authoring, distributed responsibilities through community projects and the utilisation of other community or national resources” (2015: 647).

Although Taggart started the Openly Local resource, he argues that it was largely populated by others: “I actually started out with a very small number (probably a dozen or so, certainly less than 20), and then let the community do the rest” (personal communication with author). Presumably, ‘the community’ in this instance includes hyperlocal publishers themselves or others with an interest in the area. Taggart intended the database to be as inclusive as possible, but did indicate some loose criteria on the submissions page:

⁴ An example of the data being used can be found at <http://talkaboutlocal.org.uk/hyperlocal-heat-map-uk/>

⁵ That is, recording information in structured formats that allow the information to be interlinked with other data.

The directory is for both non-commercial and commercial hyperlocal news and community sites -- the news can be in the form of traditional news stories, blogs, or (if they're very good) forums with news content. Local shopping, housing or other pure listings sites won't be approved. (Taggart n.d.)

Community archivists

The emphasis on the community's role here is worth consideration. There is an emerging focus in archive studies on the role of activists and fans (indeed much work is focused on fan activity in archiving aspects of popular culture), which tends to emphasise the "failures of official archives" (De Kosnik 2012: 527) and the role of communities (be they of location or of interest) in adding value to official records. Andrew Flinn makes the case that "community-led archives may have significant roles to play in the production of these democratized and more inclusive histories" (2011: 5). Schwartz and Cook make a direct plea for a closer interrogation of archival practices in order to see beyond the myths of impartiality bound up in official records:

This lack of questioning is dangerous because it implicitly supports the archival myth of neutrality and objectivity, and thus sanctions the already strong predilection of archives and archivists to document primarily mainstream culture and powerful records creators. It further privileges the official narratives of the state over the private stories of individuals. (Schwartz and Cook 2002: 18)

However, despite the claim of community-involvement, it is difficult to evidence who submitted information to the Openly Local database, as the data revealed just the date of submission and not the name of the submitter. The situation from 2012-2015 was that the database was maintained and populated on an irregular basis by the civically focused consultancy Talk About Local (which is not to say others are not also populating it at the same time). Talk About Local are a business who work with organisations, usually in the public sector, who wish to give "people the simple skills and support to find a powerful online voice for their community" (Talk About Local 2011). They sit very firmly within the 'community' end of hyperlocal, and therefore their updating of the resource reflected their position. The research in this thesis therefore needs to be seen as a reflection of the UK hyperlocal scene as filtered through this database; that is, it draws on the contributions of the community of practice that helped to populate it, and one could argue that this community largely see hyperlocal as a civically

orientated practice: “We think that the best hyper-local platforms are those ‘owned’ by people in their communities. So Talk About Local is more about people and public service than technology platforms and advertising” (Talk About Local 2011).

Justifying use of the Openly Local database

Whilst Openly Local was not the only database that has been developed for hyperlocal media, it was the only one regularly cited by proponents of hyperlocal (it is linked from a series of blog posts by the BBC which start in October 2010) and within policy documents (its first citation coming in Ofcom’s Communications Market Report in 2010). In 2014, the Media Standards Trust published a report about the role of enterprise and innovation in local journalism and cited Openly Local as an authoritative source when discussing hyperlocal sites (Moore 2014: 11). Nesta have made several references to it in their work in this area (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013: 65, Radcliffe 2012: 9, 43). Yet despite this widespread citation, there had been, as my findings reveal, no systematic attempt to ‘clean’ the data it held. Many sites listed were no longer live or were duplicate entries, and some had not been updated for a long period of time,⁶ yet those with an interest in hyperlocal continued to make reference to it. On this basis, my interrogation of it was timely and of wider value to the community of practitioners (so that they have a more robust data resource) and to policy-makers and commentators (so that their commentary and decision-making was better informed).

Prior to 2010, there were other attempts to make sense of this emerging area of news⁷ in the UK and since 2013 the Centre for Community Journalism at Cardiff University has been populating its own map,⁸ with an initial focus on Wales but gradually extending out to the rest of the UK. This latter map also seems to be largely community-generated, with an open invitation⁹ for those running websites to register. However, the data is not accessible in Linked Data formats. When Chris Taggart decided to shut the Openly Local resource in 2015, a new attempt to produce an updated map was initiated by the Carnegie Trust with the help of Talk About Local and was published at <http://localweblist.net>. To be clear: it is data from the Openly Local database that is used in this study with the exception being the analysis of Birmingham’s hyperlocal media in 2016 which is based partly on my own and crowd-sourced knowledge.

⁶ By way of example: in May 2012 the database included 517 hyperlocal publishers but, after examination, only 432 were currently regarded as active.

⁷ See <https://web.archive.org/web/20100124213901/http://map.hyperlocal.co.uk/> and <https://web.archive.org/web/20110825045023/http://www.nutshell.org.uk/about/>

⁸ <http://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/find-a-hyperlocal/>

⁹ <http://www.communityjournalism.co.uk/register/>

A taxonomy of hyperlocal

By and large the hyperlocals listed on Openly Local fall into six of the eight types identified by Flouch and Harris (2010a) as part of their work on taxonomies of local websites. Their study of London 'citizen-run online neighbourhood networks' examines 160 local "citizen-led sites, typically set up with a civil purpose" (2010a: 1) and identifies eight distinctive types: Civil social networks, Local discussion sites, Placeblogs, Local blogazines, Local action groups online, Local digital news (Commercial). Those not included in Openly Local, on the basis of their exclusion by Chris Taggart, are Multiples and listings, "aimed primarily to generate revenue through listing local businesses, services and events" (Flouch and Harris 2010b: 9) and Public social spaces, which Flouch and Harris describe as: "Profiles set up on Facebook or Twitter for sharing information about areas and often light-hearted chit-chat about an area" (Flouch and Harris 2010b: 7). Flouch and Harris were writing at a time when locally orientated activity on social media networks was emerging but not widespread. Tracking the use of social media for hyperlocal news provision would be a useful but inevitably complex task and is not the primary focus of this thesis. Equally, to undertake a study of all UK 'pure listings' sites would entail including every automated content aggregation site in the UK, something that was outside of the scope for this research and would not have helped to address the research questions. Each site that was of interest to Flouch and Harris, and is listed in the Openly Local database, displays clear evidence of original content being produced exclusively for it by identifiable author(s) (although as the research will show, there is a tendency for some websites to 'drift' into disuse and start attracting spam postings). It is these sites that were the focus of this study. In my analysis of Birmingham's hyperlocal news websites in 2016, I map the active hyperlocal sites against the Flouch/Harris taxonomy.

Analyzing the Openly Local Database

The focus on the analysis of the Openly Local database was in two areas

1. Counting the number of active hyperlocal websites.
2. Counting the number of news stories produced during identifiable sample periods.

The analyses carried out in 2012 and 2013 looked at the above two areas, whilst the 2014 analysis just dealt with counting the number of active hyperlocals (in order to identify trends and assess the continuing impact of the failure of some commercial hyperlocal operations).

In each year, a sample date was identified (8 May 2012, 7 June 2013 and 25 October 2014) during which the data held in the database would be exported (in JSON format, then converted into a spreadsheet format) and a count would be made of the number of hyperlocals listed. After the data had been cleaned (as previously mentioned, for dead or duplicate sites) a second count was made on the basis of how active the sites were (to ascertain whether those that were still live were publishing anything). A decision was made to identify as 'active' those sites that had published at least once in the five months prior to the sample period. This was based partly on my own experience of running a site that may have fallow periods when other aspects of my life result in me being too busy to post. This lowered further the final number of sites that we might regard as active hyperlocal news publishers. This approach was a small shortcoming for the research, as it resulted in the omission of some sites that either rarely published or those that published a little more often but happened to miss the sample period. A longer sample period would benefit a future study and encompass more sites.

In 2012 and 2013, sample periods of eleven days were used to examine the active hyperlocals and count the total amount of news stories that were published by them. This period (including one weekend) was chosen as being a period of relatively 'normal' news activity; that is, there were no national-level events that might have impacted on the level of news produced. For example, in 2012 the period was from 8-18 May, which was after the local elections (which in any case did not take place in all areas of the UK) and before the beginning of the London Olympics torch relay. In 2013 the period was 18-28 June.

The method here was effectively to record a chronological sample in a sufficiently long period for variance in the volume of publication to be accounted for. Nathaniel Poor (2007) gives a good summary of media content analysis studies and their chronological sampling periods, pointing out the wide degree of variance but settling on a week for his own international comparative study of news websites (2007: 74). However, in his work and that of others, he explains the issue as being about identifying sufficient similarity (or indeed variance) in material for subsequent analysis. In my study, the sample was purely for counting, so what was needed was a 'typical' period of news production. My assumption was that in general, the level of output from hyperlocal sites would collectively have very little output variation (other than perhaps seasonal or when national news items, as noted, had impact at the local level). Using a sample in this way would provide a useful snapshot of hyperlocal news output, and the inevitable shortcomings of the approach would not create too much variation. However, such shortcomings are: there was only one sample period in each year; it did not take account

of local or regional issues that might cause one or a group of hyperlocals to have a spike in output; some hyperlocals that were 'active' might produce no stories during the sample period, or the number of stories published by individual hyperlocals might be well below or above average.

Identifying news items

It was important that criteria were applied to what qualified as news when counting news items. By and large, news on hyperlocal media looks and feels very much like news on mainstream media. Although the content analysis of hyperlocal undertaken by Williams et al. (2015) draws attention to some ways in which established practices (such as quoting multiple sources) are less likely to be followed in hyperlocal journalism, we can see a similar mix to that found in existing mainstream local media. Harcup and O'Neill (2001) argues for a rethinking of Galtung and Ruge's (1965) classic study of news values in their article questioning 'What is News?' In focusing their attention on the portrayal of international crises in Norwegian newspapers, Galton and Ruge, it is claimed, have failed to take account of "domestic and bread-and-butter news" (Harcup and O'Neill 2001: 276). Instead, Harcup and O'Neill propose (based on their contemporary research on the British press) an updated set of news values. In order for news stories to be selected for publication, they must satisfy one or more of the following criteria:

1. THE POWER ELITE [their caps throughout]. Stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations or institutions.
2. CELEBRITY. Stories concerning people who are already famous.
3. ENTERTAINMENT. Stories concerning sex, showbusiness, human interest, animals, an unfolding drama, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, entertaining photographs or witty headlines.
4. SURPRISE. Stories that have an element of surprise and/or contrast.
5. BAD NEWS. Stories with particularly negative overtones, such as conflict or tragedy.
6. GOOD NEWS. Stories with particularly positive overtones such as rescues and cures.
7. MAGNITUDE. Stories that are perceived as sufficiently significant either in the numbers of people involved or in potential impact.
8. RELEVANCE. Stories about issues, groups and nations perceived to be relevant to the audience.
9. FOLLOW-UP. Stories about subjects already in the news.

10. NEWSPAPER AGENDA. Stories that set or fit the news organisation's own agenda. (Harcup and O'Neill 2001: 279).

These criteria provide a useful guide to help identify items of news to be counted. However, the reality of the research process was that the broadness of the criteria only resulted in the exclusion of items that were clearly advertorial in nature (some sites seem to allow automated 'spam' content to mix with editorial). Ultimately, hyperlocal sites produce a mix of hard and soft news, event notices, reviews of local amenities or arts events, opinion pieces – much the same mix that can be found in existing mainstream local media.

It proved impossible to find a suitable way to apply this definition to those sites that are based on discussion forums. Such sites were outside the scope of this research unless they also had a section that produced separate news items. Some sites in the database were just aggregators of content from other news providers, therefore these were also excluded.

Counting news stories

In 2012, I used two methods to count the total number of news stories. The first was an automated digital system whereby active sites which produced content in the sample period through an RSS¹⁰ feed were recorded via a Twitter¹¹ account and then details pushed automatically to a spreadsheet. This form of recording allowed data to be produced on frequency of publication.

To identify the distribution of news items, a separate, manual, count was kept. This count had the benefit of including the small number of sites that did not use the RSS functionality but did produce news items (some were produced in hard-coded HTML pages). This study produced a slightly lower total of stories produced in the sample period, with a variation between the figures from the two methods of 5%. The lower figure from the manual count is explained by the realisation that a small number of RSS feeds in the automated method were linked to forum postings and that some feeds were publishing aggregated content.

However, the 5% difference was regarded as an acceptable tolerance, and the two sets of data were not being compared. One set allowed an understanding of the distribution of news stories and the other, in general terms, the frequency of publication. It was clear from

¹⁰ Usually referred to as 'Really Simple Syndication' – a function of most web publishing platforms that allows website content to be syndicated.

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/alllocalnews>

this exercise that the manual count could be regarded as the more accurate, and it was this approach (of using automatic and manual) that was used in the 2013 re-running of the analysis. The analysis in 2014 was purely to establish which hyperlocals were still active. In each year of analysis, I was able to identify the location of the hyperlocal and produce data on the number of hyperlocals in the UK nations, English regions and local council areas.

Ultimately, by gaining an understanding of the scale of hyperlocal publishing, we can consider whether the attention this sector receives from media policy-makers and commentators is justified and whether this means that hyperlocal plays a role in the public sphere in addressing the 'democratic deficit' that arises as a result of the decline in the volume of local news from mainstream media. In chapter five I discuss the results of this surveying of hyperlocal publishing in the context of measurements of plurality. Further, the analysis functions to show which hyperlocals are sustaining their enterprises over time and which, based on their longevity and the volume of work they produce, would be good candidates for interviews, the next stage of the research I outline.

RQ2: What are the motivations and practices of hyperlocal information providers and how do these operations contribute to everyday and local information ecologies?

The next stage of this research was to undertake a series of thumbnail accounts. In effect these are short case studies aimed at offering qualitative insight in to the practices and motivations of hyperlocal publishers. In the following section I outline the rationale behind this method, discuss the choice of thumbnail accounts and outline the range of research tools used.

The role of thumbnail accounts within this research

The intention in this research phase was to undertake short case studies that would act as 'snapshots' or 'thumbnails'; in effect, short ethnographic accounts from within hyperlocal newsrooms. Creswell makes the point that there is no single way to do an ethnography (2012: 94) but that its aims are to "describe how a cultural group works and to explore the beliefs, language, behaviours, and issues facing the group, such as power, resistance and dominance" (2012: 94). The three thumbnail accounts undertaken for this thesis and discussed here offer the chance to look in detail at a representative group of hyperlocals and understand the ways in which hyperlocal publishing is operationalised and how producers attempt to connect to their audiences.

In using a case study approach the researcher is able to offer rich detail, but often at the expense of being able to make generalisations. In making particular choices for hyperlocal case studies I aimed to allow for a degree of generalisation, as in each case the themes explored would inform the analysis undertaken of the interviews. Given that the 'actors' we see in hyperlocal (business entrepreneurs, grant-funded community media operations, active citizens) are limited, there is actually only a modest finite population that they represent. Hammersley (1992: 187) argues that it is wrong to assume that case studies cannot be generalised from, and that case studies that draw on wider research (as in this study) allow for informed generalisation to take place. By triangulating with responses from the interviews (and to an extent the wider pool of research data generated by the 'Creative Citizen' project) we can infer that the practices and issues we explore in the accounts are not uncommon. Some issues that arise out of each account were specific to a locality, but in general, the object of the thumbnails was to support earlier findings and therefore allow for a degree of generalisation.

In seeking to observe hyperlocal practice from within newsrooms, one comes up against the issue that there is rarely such a thing as a recognisable newsroom space. More likely, areas within the home, or a café, or public transport or indeed anywhere become the places from which news is updated. That journalism is increasingly not produced within institutionalised spaces is something journalism researchers have recognised in recent years. The affordances of digital technologies allow journalists to stay connected to each other and to the newsroom itself whilst working from other locations. Further, technology has allowed for the multiskilling of journalists, which has disrupted the 'routine' that Simon Cottle argues was the focus of too many earlier newsroom studies, whereby journalists were seen as subjects of ideologically driven decision-making rather than having personal agency of their own. The disruption caused by technology should allow the researcher to make "a conceptual shift from 'routine' to 'practice'" (Cottle 2007: 10), heralding a 'second wave' of newsroom studies (Cottle 2000).

For Wahl-Jorgenson (2009), the researcher is not able to gain insight into such practices through interviews alone, and multisite ethnographic observation is necessary. She recognises that the "days of the newsroom as a central ethnographic location may be numbered" (2009: 33) and the 'newsroom-centric' nature of journalism research studies has marginalised particular categories of workers, local journalists, freelancers and citizen journalists amongst them (2009: 29). We are now in a period where "news production is increasingly taking place in and through virtual spaces" (2009: 33) and workers are less likely to be tied to specific

locations (a virtue of the increasing casualisation of labour in news production as much as it is enabled by technology). That the interviews (discussed in the next section) with hyperlocal publishers took place remotely from their (usually) home-based newsrooms seems fitting, given the shift across the news industry to a desocialisation of the workplace. Yet failing to visit and understand the dynamics of these spaces would be missing the opportunity to make a valid contribution to this 'second wave' of newsroom studies. In hyperlocal we have a sector which has virtually dispensed with the newsroom completely. I used a range of ethnographic and participatory research tools in three thumbnail study sites to draw out important themes and issues to be raised in the thesis. Although interviews were also carried out during these studies, a much more flexible approach was taken. As Hammersley and Atkinson point out (1995), the nature of interviews carried out in the context of an ethnography can be very different, and although they may have some structure, it tends to be built around key issues and ultimately end up as "closer in character to conversations" (1995: 152).

Jane Singer (2008) makes the claim that the ethnographic case study is an ideal way to examine the shifting cultures of newsrooms as technology makes significant impacts on working practices:

Ethnography will continue to be an optimal method for exploring the nature and effects of this enormous cultural transition for journalists and journalism. It is ideally suited to understanding not just causes or effects, not just products or practices, but also the processes that underlie them, the perceptions that drive and are driven by them, and the people who have always been at the heart of the journalistic enterprise, whatever its iteration. (2008: 170)

The thumbnail accounts looked into the 'newsrooms' of hyperlocal media but also beyond them to offer an examination of the wider context in which hyperlocal takes place. By this I mean the wider physical context of the locality; the wider social, economic, political and cultural context; and the wider set of journalistic practices, particularly the impact of digital technologies, that shape hyperlocal working practices. Throughout this study we are attentive to the wider national sociopolitical context in which hyperlocal media can be seen to be flourishing, but we must also be attentive to such issues at a local level. To do this we must step outside of the research site of the newsroom and examine the wider physical context in which hyperlocal takes place: "a case may not be contained within the boundaries of a setting; it may be necessary to go outside of a setting to collect information on important aspects of it" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 41). In two of the three thumbnail accounts I did this and

explored the relationships that existed with local audiences and the role of local networks, both on- and offline.

Thumbnail case study selection

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 36-53) set out the rather pragmatic choices one has to make when considering what cases to include in ethnographic research. Often it is simply a matter of studying who one has access to, even if the research question has to be adapted as a result. However, it is usually the case that the research question can be addressed through the study of a range of cases that may well have differences, but at their core offer a similar set of circumstances or perhaps a degree of variability that can be tolerated (1995: 38).

In regard to hyperlocal, the variances are worth noting. Hyperlocal media can vary in the physical area it aims to cover (from small parts of cities to large semi-rural populations), and in the physical space it operates from (from rented offices to back bedrooms). One would of course expect the attitudes of its practitioners to vary (attitudes to other local media, to audiences, to ideas of citizenship), but there is also variance in relation to a normative set of journalistic practices. As discussed in the previous section, both amateurs and professionals inhabit this space. So in choosing a setting for ethnographic case studies, one has to take account of all these variances whilst also considering the practicalities of who will let the researcher study them: “the researcher is rarely in a position to specify the precise nature of the setting required” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 37). There was a degree of pragmatism to the choices made for the thumbnail accounts. I knew of the work of each of them and had built up relationships over time. Each knew of my own work as a hyperlocal publisher, which made negotiations simpler. With this in mind, I now outline the rationale behind the choices made for the case study sites looked at in this thesis: B31 Voices, On the Wight, Tyburn Mail.

B31 Voices

The study with the Birmingham-based hyperlocal, B31 Voices, took place in early 2014. B31 Voices covers events and news in a number of suburbs in South Birmingham. The editors are a couple, Sas and Marty Taylor, who have run the site since 2010. B31 Voices, typically of the hyperlocal sector, undertake their role voluntarily, have no journalistic training, and receive no income at all for their work. Yet their media operation attracts significant audiences, particularly through social media, and they are seen as a significant media node in their area of South Birmingham. The case study in this instance had the opportunity to examine the norms that

underpin their work and offer insight into the role that social media technologies play in connecting audiences to each other and to hyperlocal publishers.

The hyperlocal site has a regularly updated news blog and associated social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (it also has a Tumblr account which reposts material from all the other aforementioned sources). From the outset, B31 Voices have made clear that their inspiration to start the website came from others doing similar work. As the welcome page on their website says: “Inspired by other local bloggers and talkaboutlocal.org this is to be a hyperlocal blog” (<http://b31.org.uk/2010/07/welcome/>). Understanding this wider context, of what we might call the ‘civic web’ (Banaji 2013) dictated the research design for this case study. The research methods used were:

- Interview with B31 Voices, partly using photo-elicitation
- Participation observation at two ‘social media surgeries’
- Interview with social media surgery organiser
- Analysis of engagement with audience through social media

On the Wight

The second case study is On The Wight. Like B31 Voices, this operation is run by a husband and wife team, but in this instance it is undertaken as a business with a range of innovative approaches to income generation. The hyperlocal, operating since 2005, covers a semi-rural island area (the Isle of Wight) where there is only one remaining mainstream (weekly) press publication to cover an island of 140,000 people. An ethnographic examination of On The Wight can tell us much about the enterprise culture of hyperlocals, the networked role they play in rural communities, and the forms of value they create for citizens. The research methods used were:

- Interviews
- Participation observation

Tyburn Mail

Using case studies was part of the research design of the ‘Creative Citizen’ project, where each strand undertook ethnographic and co-creative research with communities or individual creatives. One of the case studies from the hyperlocal strand, with Tyburn Mail, forms part of

this thesis (the methods employed are detailed below)¹². Tyburn Mail is a monthly (published 11 times a year) printed newspaper accompanied by a regularly updated website and associated social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter). They represented an excellent opportunity to study a formally constituted organisation (a limited company) that was operating partly with grant support and partly through income generation. Rarely for the hyperlocal sector, they employ a professional journalist, but this exception meant there was a chance to examine the ways in which the professional norms of journalism come up against expectations of how community media can play a part in addressing “reputational geographies” (Parker and Karner 2011). The case study work with Tyburn Mail took place in 2012 and 2013. The research methods used were:

- Interviews with journalist
- Interviews with community media manager
- Workshops with residents
- Participatory co-creation exercise and news café
- Asset-mapping

For the thumbnail accounts the six interviewees agreed to be named. The residents of Castle Vale who participated in the workshops did so under the condition that they would remain anonymous. They were all over 18 and received a £20 shopping voucher each for their time. Contributions to the blank space published in the Tyburn Mail and at the news café were also anonymised. The analysis of contributions to B31 Voices’ Facebook page and interactions on Twitter was done without gaining consent of individuals. To do so would have been impractical given the volume of contributions. Also, the posting were in the public domain on Twitter and posts were made to a public page on Facebook. Other than those by B31 Voices, no individual posting is quoted from, thereby ensuring that the poster can not be identified through an online search. The analysis I undertake of the social media content is largely confined to identifying the volume of posts and, in broad terms, their subject matter.

¹² The other case study, with ‘Connect Cannock’, shed some light on the nature of hyperlocal publishing practices, but the data gathered during the research proved less insightful than the Tyburn case study and therefore is not included as part of this research.

Participatory research methods

The ethnographic thumbnail accounts drew on a wide range of methods, using a mix of participant observation and structured interventions. The intention was to be reactive to the circumstances of each site and choose methods accordingly rather than using the same ethnographic approach each time. Here I discuss some of the rationale behind the methods used.

Visual ethnography

The use of photo-elicitation in the B31 Voices case study draws in part on work by Pink (2012) and Gillárová et al. (2014). Sarah Pink has written extensively about visual ethnography, but it was recent work (Pink and Mackley 2012) about the home and the environment that has relevance here. In attempting to reveal how energy is used in the home, Pink shoots short videos of participants re-enacting their bedtime routines then uses the video as the basis of subsequent interviews. Gillárová et al. (2014) asked journalists to take photographs of the spaces in which they worked which then formed the basis of photo-elicited interviews. In both approaches, the images/videos worked to reveal the less visible dimensions of everyday life.

Asset-mapping

Asset-mapping was used in all strands of the 'Creative Citizen' project and made use of "visual tools to unearth assets such as people's relationships and skills, and the project's connections with spaces, organisations and infrastructure" (Greene et al. 2013: 456). The tool was used as an elicitation device during an unstructured interview with Tyburn Mail but also proved useful for the research participants to understand how their hyperlocal operation might better make use of people and physical spaces in the immediate locality.

Co-creation

A co-creation project was also used with Tyburn Mail to explore the value of participatory journalism approaches and offer insight into the relationship Tyburn Mail had with citizens. The co-creation project involved creating a blank space in the newspaper for citizens to write in their own news. Chris Atton describes a similar project in a New York underground paper of the 1960s: "Other Scenes once offered an entirely blank set of pages for readers as a do-it-yourself publishing project" (Atton 2002: 24). Readers were then asked to bring this to a news café event organised in a local supermarket. The café was intended to bring readers into

contact with the journalist and enable them to discuss and co-create stories based on the sheets they filled in. A discussion workshop with local citizens also took place.

Participant observation

As Bonnie Brennen makes clear, “participant observation is integral to ethnography” (2012). Although the time I spent with B31 Voices and Tyburn Mail included elements of observation, it was with On The Wight that I undertook a more rigorous participant observation (as well as semi-structured interviews). Berger (2010: 192-194) lists some of the considerations to take into account when undertaking participant observation, including making careful noting of the setting, the socio-economic background of those observed, and the behaviours (and the frequency of those behaviours) of the observed. Berger is also attentive to issues that arise from the researcher’s presence, such as maintaining objectivity and the need to avoid making assumptions about why people are acting in the way they are (2010: 196). Through close observation over one day with On The Wight, and through my participation in the news production process, I was able to understand the “practices, rituals and procedures” (Brennen 2012: 165) of the hyperlocal being studied and thereby gain insights into the practices that underpin the development of ‘new networks of trust’ (Couldry 2004: 26).

RQ3: How do such hyperlocal information systems connect to citizens and what forms of value are created by the development of ‘new networks of trust’ (Couldry 2004)?

The final stage of the research was the analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews with hyperlocal practitioners. As already described, these interviews were partially conducted as part of the wider research in the hyperlocal media strand of the ‘Media, Community and the Creative Citizen’ project. In this section I outline the rationale for the close analysis of these interviews and describe the method used for the analysis.

The role of semi-structured interviews in the research design

Interviews are a well-recognised tool in the research process in studies of journalism practice. Used in conjunction with participant observation or other ethnographic methods, they give a rounded view of how news is constructed and shaped by both individual attitudes and organisational constraints. Simon Cottle (2007) sees interviews as an important part of the process of triangulation: “claims and accounts produced from one source can be contrasted to those from another. Consistencies can thus be recognised and interpreted and discrepancies

or differences can be pursued further and all in pursuit of deeper, more valid, interpretations” (Cottle 2007: 6). Ida Schultz (2007) draws on a data set of 70 interviews with Danish journalists as well as participant observation in order to identify the unspoken assumptions underpinning the notion of newsworthiness. She finds that the “‘journalistic gut feeling’ entails both explicit news values – dominant (orthodox) and dominated (heterodox) – as well as silent, taken-for-granted (doxic) news values” (Schultz 2007: 204). David Domingo (2008) interviewed 20 journalists and editors involved in online journalism projects in order to understand “their definitions of online journalism” (2008: 690). Again, this was part of a wider ethnographic approach that involved a highly structured period of newsroom observation over time. Gillárová et al.’s (2014) study of Czech journalists began with a large-scale survey that was “interesting and informative, but we had a feeling there was more” (2014: 1). They followed this with a set of semi-structured interviews that drew on a series of photographs taken by the interviewees of their workplaces. The images worked as both ice-breaker for the interviews and as a way to shape the issues discussed, with the result that “Interviews took the form of conversations among equal partners rather than one-sided interrogations” (2014: 6). I drew on this photo-elicitation technique within one of my thumbnail accounts.

The interviews were designed to gain a producer perspective on the practices of hyperlocal news and the extent to which those involved were focused on civic and community goals. The interviews would also offer insights into entrepreneurship models, relations with existing media organisations, new media practices and an assessment of the everyday context in which hyperlocal news production took place. As we have seen in earlier discussions, much research and commentary makes assumptions about the intentions of producers (that by and large that their work is a result of their civic-mindedness) so it was important to reveal the detail of hyperlocal news production practices. Each of the interviewees was allowed to expand on points as appropriate, allowing a semi-structured approach to form.

Uses and limitation of interviews

As Jensen (2002) notes, interviews are limited by the limitation of language itself as the “medium of access to social and cultural phenomenon” (2002: 240). Our understanding of what is being spoken to us in research must come with an awareness, from the outset, that responses are filtered through the interviewees discourse. Language is both the tool for data collection and the object of analysis (Jensen 2002: 241). Berger sums up the issue more

plainly: “people want to put their best foot forward, want to appear nobler and better than they actually are, and so they often lie or distort things” (2014: 173). Further, they may tell you what they think you want to hear (Berger 2014: 174) in an effort to align themselves with the position they think you are advocating for. The interviewer themselves must also show an awareness of their own position, as Bertrand and Hughes (2005) point out, preparing for an interview “forces the interviewer to clarify their own goals” (2005: 79).

Hansen and Machin (2013) acknowledge the subjective nature of the interview but they argue that there are key advantages because they “provide greater detail of information and further explore any issues that arise” (2013: 46). In taking a semi-structured approach (all interviewers were allowed to veer away from the script if need be or to push for clarification and exemplification) the interviewer is in a better position to respond to issues of value that might have been raised and responses can often therefore be less formal and more revealing. The data such interviews produce however can tend to be more difficult to compare (Bertrand and Hughes 2005: 80). This is especially true in this case as interviews were undertaken by three different researchers. However, upon examination of the transcripts it is clear that each researcher asked questions broadly against the main themes of the pre-planned interview guide (see appendix 2).

Selection criteria for interviewees

To an extent, personal contacts were relied upon to draw up a list of interviewees, the research team from the ‘Creative Citizen’ project (myself, Jerome Turner, Andy Williams) having all built up relations with hyperlocals either through project dissemination initiatives or as part of our own ongoing interest (or in my case, practice) in the area. However, the list was further extended through consultation with Talk About Local and through my own analysis of the Openly Local database. This resulted in a longer list that was used both for the survey (Williams et al. 2014) within the Creative Citizens project and for the interviews. To a degree, the approach involved both purposive and snowball sampling. Motilola Akinfemisoye (2013) used this approach in identifying 125 journalists to interview for an examination of how alternative journalism in Nigeria is shaping the mainstream. A purposive sample is one chosen for a specific purpose (in Akinfemisoye’s case, journalists who were using digital technologies as part of their work). The purposeful nature of our sample was based on the regularity of their publishing. A snowball sample is one made up of suggestions from interviewees as one progresses through the research process (again, Akinfemisoye used this approach as she

undertook her research rather than relying on just her own contacts). I did this to an extent with the interviews I conducted, asking for further suggestions from interviewees, although I tended to find that I already knew many of those that were suggested. The final list comprised hyperlocals that fitted the following criteria:

- Based on my analysis of the Openly Local database, which took place in 2012, 2013 and 2014, the hyperlocal operations were active and publishing regularly.
- Their hyperlocal operation could be said to fit within definitions put forward by Radcliffe (2012) and Metzgar et al. (2011).

Overall there was a desire to choose as wide a range of organisational set-ups. That is to say, those who were operating not-for-profit, those who were developing a business, those were more in the guise of personal bloggers than journalists. However, at this stage we didn't know the details of each hyperlocal publisher beyond what could be surmised from their website (often this could be confusing as the website may appear professional and suggest that it represents an organisation, when quite often it was just an individual). All the hyperlocal publishers who participated in the interviews and thumbnail accounts were asked if they wished to remain anonymous. All agreed to be named but some asked for specific comments to be anonymised. In light of this I anonymised all the responses used in chapter seven (instead numbering the interviewees 1 to 40 (as Int-1, Int-2 etc.). Where specific places are mentioned these too are anonymised. As I suggested earlier, I did know a lot of the hyperlocals that were interviewed, having met many at events. The same is true of the other interviewees. However, none of us had a professional relationship with any of them and none would be regarded as 'friends'. Many participants may have presumed that myself or the other researchers were advocates for their practice but at no point did we suggest the research would be used for that end, making clear it was for use as part of the Creative Citizens research project or as part of my PhD research. Three of the additional six interviews that took place in 2017 had taken part in a Nesta-supported investment programme for hyperlocals on which I was a consultant (in 2015/16) with the others known to me from web searches or through attendance at events. All interviews were conducted via telephone or video conferencing software.

Overall, most interviewees operated alone from domestic premises, and interviews often took place in the evening when the interviewee had finished their main employment for the day. Of the 40 interviewees, 34 were with men and 7 were with women (total is 41 as one

interview was with a couple). England (n=24), Wales (n=7) and Scotland (n=3) were all represented in the sample. The Openly Local database listed five hyperlocal news sites in Northern Ireland but at the time of the study only one was active. All the interviewees operated websites, with nine also publishing a print publication of some form.

The degree of formal journalistic experience varied enormously amongst the interviewees and there were many gradations ranging from experienced, formally trained journalists (n=18), to those with no experience at all. There was no specific desire to target those with more or less training or indeed fill a quota that would comprise equal numbers of each, the gradations between trained/non-trained being too fine, with some having worked as journalists in the mainstream press yet having never received formal training. Others had a public relations background with first degrees that involved elements of journalism theory and practice. Clearly, some could be regarded as 'amateur' but Denis McQuail (2013) sums up the increasing problem of trying to label journalists as either 'professional' or 'amateur', especially in the Internet age, which is "encouraging new forms of journalism [...] rejecting formal organisation and with it any claim to professional status" (McQuail 2013: 92). It's evident, argues McQuail, that journalism in mainstream organisations has become increasingly professionalised, requiring higher-level qualifications, whilst in the alternative realm such requirements do not apply. Yet the "traditional norms and practices" (McQuail 2013: 94) might be as evident in the latter as in the former. Tony Harcup's (2005) research into the motivations of journalists working across both mainstream and alternative journalism found that most had started with no formal training but had worked on alternative publications through a desire to "change the world" (2005: 370). Formal training tended to come later or even, in some cases, not at all, the alternative 'journalist' being readily accepted into the mainstream through the richness of their experience.

Overall the sample can be said to be largely representative and is certainly generalisable to the whole population of hyperlocals; or at the very least, the rather modest number of hyperlocals that produce content consistently and over a long (for this sector at least) period of time.

Interviews questions, coding and analysis

All the interviewees were asked questions intended to gain a holistic view of their practice. The focus areas of the interviews were: motivations, workload, collaboration (with audiences, with

other hyperlocal practitioners, with mainstream media), challenges faced, social media and technology, and the economics of running their hyperlocal operation. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using Nvivo textual analysis software. The starting point for coding was to simply code the interviews around the topics that structured the interview questions. However, a more open coding approach saw key values emerge across these themes.

The open coding process allows for a set of labels to be created based on the responses that arise from the interviews. These labels cut across topics so that, for example, issues of economics was discussed as part of the questions focused on motivations and challenges, as well as in direct questioning in the economics set of questions (which were related to income generation). The grounded approach of open coding (to be led by the data rather than by a desire to immediately apply an existing theoretical framework) allows the researcher to “break the data apart analytically, and leads directly to excitement and the inevitable payoff of grounded conceptualization” (Strauss 1987: 29). Jensen (2002) warns against the sometimes “epistemologically dubious” nature of a grounded approach, but in this instance, an open coding of the interviews allows for the categorisation of attitudes and underlying orthodoxies as much as specific practices. Further, it has the potential to avoid the assumptions underlying much of the literature in hyperlocal about the motives of practitioners and the conditions under which they produce their work.

When open coding I created descriptive wording for coding categories as I read through each transcript. As a new category emerged that was sufficiently different than one already used I created another. These categories are shown in appendix 3 and indicate amount of references in each category and the number of sources against each category (which would indicate whether the category is as a result of a small number of interviewees returning to the topic). Under some themes I explored whether those from different backgrounds (of trained/non-trained hyperlocalists) had different motivations (see appendix 4). Curtin and Maier (2001) use a similar coding process to divide their interviewees into Math-phobic and non-phobic groups (their research is a study of numeracy amongst journalists) and see which coding categories belong to which group, and therefore discuss the underlying attitudes that each group possess.

Axial coding has been referred to as the process of linking together the categories identified through open coding. In their analysis of interviews with citizen journalists, Sue

Robinson and Cathy DeShano (2011a) identify how axial coding “meta-analyzes the initial coding for patterns in specific phenomena and particular conditions and consequences of dominant categories and sub-categories” (2011a: 967). In other words, there is a narrowing from the initial coding as connections are made between categories. As Corbin and Strauss (2007) note, the two processes are inexorably linked and can take place simultaneously as the researcher looks through the data: “we break data apart, and identify concepts to stand for the data, we also have to put it back together again by relating those concepts” (Corbin and Strauss 2007: 198). Corbin and Strauss make little distinction between ‘open’ and ‘axial’ coding, but in this context it is worth making clear the process of connecting categories together and the value of examining themes from the different perspectives that the interviewees present.

Selective coding is a third-stage process of seeing larger themes in the data. For Robinson and Deshano, this “‘selective’ coding allowed us to see the ‘big picture’ from the data [...] illuminating a larger discourse” (2011b: 646). Selective coding represents a final phase of integration and synthesis of categories and sub-categories, and it is at this stage that the researcher can relate closely to the research question and therefore the theoretical framework. In his work on the use of Twitter in the newsroom, Stephen Barnard (2014) uses the process of open, axial and selective coding to allow a set of ‘frames’ to emerge that “revealed the accordant values and position-takings exhibited by actors’ practice in the field” (2014: 7). Barnard employs field theory to argue that just as the norms and practice of journalism are changing as a result of the integration of social media into the newsroom, so are the values of journalists themselves (2014: 14). Barnard is not alone (see also Benson 2006, Couldry 2003, Schultz 2007, Willig 2013) in drawing on Bourdieu’s field theory to examine the “invisible structures of power and recognition” (Willig 2013: 384) that shape the field of journalism. Couldry points out how Bourdieu was primarily interested “in the internal workings of the journalistic field or in the specific connections between those internal workings and the operations of other fields that come into contact with it” (Couldry 2003: 656).

Interpretative repertoires

A layer of textual analysis was also undertaken in order to reveal the ‘Interpretative repertoires’ that the interviewees draw upon in contextualising their practice. The method draws from work by Wetherell, & Potter (1988) who make the point that: “language is put together, constructed,

for purposes and to achieve particular consequences” (1988: 171). Because language use varies amongst those who may be talking about the same subject we need to look to the *repertoires* that are being drawn upon (1988: 172). The repertoires limit the possible ways that the speaker can talk about a subject but allow for variance: “repertoires can be seen as the building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena” (1988: 172). Particular tropes or figures of speech is what the researcher is looking for. Wetherell, & Potter point out that use of such tropes is not always intentional but the speaker assumes the words have a shared rather than a contested meaning. By way of example they discuss how ‘community’ is tied to positive evaluations even when describing contested policies such as ‘care in the community’ (1988: 170). Thus discourse analysis allows us to unpack the ideological function of *interpretative repertoires*.

Sally Reardon (2016) draws on Wetherell, & Potter’s work to analyse accreditation and training materials for journalists in order to reveal the “competing discursive constructions of what it takes to be a journalist” (2016: 942). Reardon finds that the materials construct a set of repertoires related to the notion of what it takes to be a journalist. Ultimately, these repertoires narrow the framing of the journalist: “either as a natural activity born of natural talent or learnt from those with experience and natural talent” (2016: 946). Deuze and Platon (2003) also draw on Potter & Wetherell’s work in order to examine how Indymedia activists “talk about, and give meaning to, their everyday experiences” (2003: 344). They find that workers legitimise their voluntary labour by drawing on a set of “consensual ideals” (2003: 345) that distinguish how Indymedia sites work from mainstream media sties. Yet Deuze and Platon found that when discussing journalistic practices, these same workers would draw on a normative journalistic discourse. Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti (2013) examine the attitudes of professional journalists, identifying the *interpretive repertoires* that their interviewees drew on when reflecting on the use of citizen-created photographs in mainstream media. They detect a shift in attitude towards the citizen journalist. The *repertoire* of ‘renewal’ signals, they argue, “a revising of the occupational ideology of journalism into one that embraces new values, such as open participation, transparency and ‘amateurism’ that are more compatible with today’s networked media culture” (2013: 974).

The intention in my analysis is to see what discourses are drawn upon by hyperlocal practitioners when discussing what they do. In my drawing together of coding categories at the selective level I examine the ways in which motivations, reciprocity and entrepreneurship are used as *interpretative repertoires*.

'New Networks of Trust'

The thumbnail accounts and interviews are intended to offer insight into how hyperlocals might operate as 'new networks of trust' (Couldry 2004: 26). Couldry argues that new communication technologies "challenge the long taken-for-granted hierarchy between a limited group of centrally-positioned cultural 'producers' and a dispersed mass of 'consumers'" (2004: 26). Whilst Couldry is in part calling for audience studies of interaction between citizens/consumers and the state through media use, he also makes the point that we need to examine emerging community media practices and "in what 'communicative ecology' [...] will such sites and networks be sustained, if they are sustained" (2004: 27). The thumbnail accounts aim to raise a set of issues in relation to this new 'communicative ecology' that are then further explored in the interviews. Hyperlocal publishing may well be one of the "settings where people are generating new contexts of public communication and trust" (2004: 26), making use of open source publishing platforms (and/or proprietary yet participatory social media platforms). The research outlined here, albeit from a producer perspective, can certainly address some of the issues that interest Couldry: "1) the actual social inclusiveness of those involved; 2) the dependence of such innovations on hidden subsidies (for example, a university base); and 3) the stability of the new forms of trust on which they rely" (2004: 27). Further, Couldry makes the case that we must study "the everyday space wherein people try to speak up for themselves or take action and their beliefs about what difference their actions will make (if any)" (2004: 23). The interviews take account of the role of both everyday physical and digital spaces.

Summary

In this chapter I outlined my research design and the methods used in order to address my research question. Inevitably the research will also be framed by my own ongoing experience as a hyperlocal publisher, which the research design capitalises on throughout. I began by describing my methods to map the field of hyperlocal in the UK and give a statistical overview of the extent of this sector and the level of news output. Secondly I undertook three short case study ethnographies (thumbnail accounts), employing a range of participatory research techniques in order to gain insight into the practices of hyperlocal and how they are put to use to create value for citizens. Finally, I undertake an analysis of 40 interviews with hyperlocal

publishers with a view to identifying the practices and discourses of hyperlocal publishing. In each of the next three chapters I outline my findings from each of these methods.

CHAPTER FIVE – THE ROLE OF HYPERLOCAL NEWS IN LOCAL MEDIA ECOLOGIES

In this chapter I present findings from my analysis of the UK hyperlocal publishing sector from 2012-2014. The chapter will address the research question: What is the extent and variety of hyperlocal news and information operations in the UK and how do they contribute to local news ecologies? This chapter is focused on giving statistical information on the number of hyperlocal operations active in this sector, their geographic spread and the volume and frequency of news stories published. It also presents a case study of a regional news ecology for Birmingham, examining the availability of independent hyperlocal media in 2016. These regional findings are then placed against a taxonomy first developed by Flouch and Harris (2010a) in order to consider their civic value. I begin by outlining the problem of the lack of robust data for the hyperlocal sector in comparison to the mainstream press, and also discuss Ofcom's interest in hyperlocal as an element of local news ecologies which formed the initial rationale for this research. I then give an overview of how media plurality has come to be measured and discuss the issues that arise when trying to consider hyperlocal media as part of a plural local media ecology. Looking at the data I have produced, I reflect on the value of hyperlocal sites as an aspect of local news ecologies in the UK and consider their contribution to local public spheres of information. This research informs the deeper analysis in subsequent chapters.

Data on hyperlocal production and consumption

As an emerging sector, hyperlocal media has no collective body that might help it to collate data about itself or its audiences. There are no audited readership figures available, although some data has emerged from individual hyperlocals and from recent research. For example, hyperlocals that publish as newspapers often list circulation figures, although they are not audited in the same way mainstream newspapers are. Brixton Bugle says it distributes 9,000 copies of its monthly free newspaper,¹³ Kentishtowner claims it has 20,000 monthly print edition readers,¹⁴ and South Leeds Life distributes 5,000 copies.¹⁵ In a similar vein, the

¹³ <http://www.brixtonblog.com/brixton-bugle-october-13-is-out-tomorrow-your-local-newspaper-for-brixton/16226>

¹⁴ <http://www.kentishtowner.co.uk/advertise/>

¹⁵ <http://www.southleedslife.com/newspaper/>

London SE1 website says that “7,300+ locals” read the weekly email newsletter it sends out.¹⁶ The 2014 hyperlocal survey (Williams et al. 2014) gave some indication of numbers of visitors to hyperlocal websites but the data was self-reported by hyperlocal publishers completing the survey rather than collated independently. The report found that: “the median number of monthly unique visitors is 5,039” (Williams et al. 2014: 4) and that “the great majority of sites have relatively small audiences” (2014: 20). Of further concern was the 31% of publishers “who do not know, who wish not to know, or don’t know how to find out, about the kind of website analytics that are necessary for generating income” (2014: 20). The same survey reported that social media was a particular growth area, and one interesting experiment conducted by Talk About Local¹⁷ highlights this. In 2015 Talk About Local listed the number of Facebook Page ‘likes’ and Twitter followers of 37 hyperlocals, set against population estimates. This seemed to show that some hyperlocals had significant reach locally, with the hyperlocal site for Stone in Staffordshire having a Facebook Page and Twitter account which each had likes/followers in the region of 50% of the local population figure. However, social media followers can come from outside a locality and may be interested more in the news project itself than in news and events in the area. Whilst the figures cited may provide a rough snapshot of hyperlocal audience reach, the problem remains that properly audited data for hyperlocals does not exist. By contrast, the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) gives rich data on the print and online readership of the mainstream press, whilst The Joint Industry Committee for Regional Media Research (JICREG) offers a detailed socio-economic breakdown of readerships to ensure advertisers can target their spend appropriately. As their website makes clear, “We Know Who Reads What” (<http://www.jicreg.co.uk/>).

Some data for the hyperlocal sector on ‘who reads what’ comes in the form of the 2013 Nesta and Kantar Media report (2013), based on a survey of 2,248 people to ascertain the degree to which they engaged with online hyperlocal information from a range of media sources. They found that 45% of adults had accessed hyperlocal media of some form, with two-thirds of those doing so at least weekly (2013: 6). The report also found that mainstream media was the key source that most people (65%) cited they turn to in order to find out what was happening in their local areas. Online ‘native’ hyperlocal media – “The website or app of volunteers or people with an interest in the local area / from the local area” (2013: 30) – was

¹⁶ <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/spreadtheword> - analytical data for email newsletters usually give insights into how many readers opened the mail, clicked on links, deleted it, etc. although they are not revealed in this instance.

¹⁷ See: <http://talkaboutlocal.org.uk/how-big-is-my-hyperlocal-twitter-audience/>

cited by 24%. The research notes the growing number of native hyperlocals entering the news and information space, yet their findings suggest “that audiences tend towards using traditional media brands for their hyperlocal consumption” (2013: 4). The authors recognise that their findings are limited by the potential confusion over which platforms ‘native’ hyperlocals use (newspapers, social media), with some possible miscategorisation as a result. However, the research did return some demographic data, noting: “it appears those who are more affluent and in the 35-54 age group are more likely to consume hyperlocal media” (2013: 8). Other data emerges from Ofcom, who in 2012 produced research that said 7% of people had looked at “local community websites, e.g. news website run by volunteers” at least once a week (Ofcom 2012a: 104). However, only 1% said that such websites were their most important local media source (2012a: 106). Ofcom’s ongoing research into news media use has been tracking, since 2013, whether people have “looked at websites/ apps for news about or events in the local area/ the local community” (Ofcom 2015a: 11). 69% said they did in 2015, up from 56% in 2013.

Whilst data on consumption of hyperlocal media is subject to wide margins of error – as a result of being pulled from different surveys, at different times, with differing use of terminology – the research to date does at least seem to suggest that hyperlocal’s share of audience is modest at best. However, there is at least a published and recognised record of hyperlocals and it is based on this, the ‘Openly Local’ database, that I present findings on in this chapter. In the previous chapter, I outlined how this database developed and how it came to be recognised as a ‘quasi-official’ record of the UK’s hyperlocal scene. It was certainly rich in data fields and allowed the researcher to access data via a range of non-proprietary formats. The Openly Local resource has now (since late 2015) closed, but localweblis.net, which has superseded it, largely replicates the data along with some recent additions. It is very much a work in progress (as of early 2016), and although there is much value in continuing to collect information on hyperlocal publishers in this way, the evidence to date suggests it requires a more systematic approach to maintaining and cleaning the data.

Hyperlocal’s place in UK local media ecologies

My initial interest in assessing the extent of hyperlocal publishing was to simply understand how much was being published by all sites collectively, irrespective of geographic spread. The work I undertook began as a commission by Ofcom, who were interested in writing an

overview of the sector for their 2012 Communications Market Report. Their 2009 review of local media (Ofcom 2009a) had noted the emergence of ‘ultra-’ local news websites but they had concerns about its sustainability, citing the need for more robust impact data as an issue affecting all aspects of community media: “it is difficult for community media to quantify their impact in order to make a case for funding” (Ofcom 2009a: 129). They draw on the thoughts of US media commentator Steven Johnson (2009), who has argued for an ecological model to understand the place of emergent news media forms:

Johnson sets out an eco-system. Local content would be delivered with far fewer fixed costs, relying on networks of volunteers and interested groups. But there would still be room for professional journalists, a smaller cadre of whom would be sustained by the reduced revenue streams available through this type of distribution model. (Ofcom 2009a: 129)

Johnson’s position veers towards the utopian in seeing an exponential growth in the number of local bloggers and commentators who will eventually ensure localities are awash with information on all aspects of everyday life, leaving nothing more than a curation problem for citizens as they pick their way through the dense ‘forest’ of information. The future of newspapers, he argues, may be as curators of the online, therefore freeing them up for original accountability reporting on more serious topics: “If they [newspapers] embrace this role as an authoritative guide to the entire ecosystem of news, if they stop paying for content that the web is already generating on its own, I suspect in the long run they will be as sustainable and as vital as they have ever been” (Johnson 2009). Also for the 2009 Local and Regional Media report, Ofcom commissioned Steven Barnett (2009) to offer an overview of the democratic role of local media. He made the case that although the emergence of “exciting, innovative, open and non-hierarchical” (2009: 12) hyperlocal news websites may play a useful bonding role within communities, their contribution to plugging the ‘democratic deficit’ was limited:

they are also precarious, shoestring operations, often sustained by a few dogged enthusiasts and unable to conduct investigative journalism, generate specialist knowledge across a range of local issues or have sufficient authority or determination to scrutinise the various conduits of local power. They cannot interrogate, they cannot report in any depth, nor can they properly represent given the generally small number of people participating in such sites. (2009: 12)

Yet Ofcom's interest in hyperlocal's role in local media ecologies persisted. As Ofcom make clear in the report (2009), they have a duty to examine the wider media landscape beyond their statutory remit: "we have to consider local and regional media in the context of a wider media ecology which touches upon areas that are outside Ofcom's remit, such as local journalism, local and regional newspapers, and the internet" (2009a: 139). This wider focus happens where a 'Public Interest Test' is required to take place in relation to the need to ensure plurality of media in localities. Ofcom will undertake a 'Local Media Assessment', which involves a content analysis of newspapers as part of their impact assessment: "Assessment of column inches dedicated to advertising, regional/local stories, sport, human interest stories, features, etc" (Ofcom n.d.). In 2010, Ofcom commissioned a consultancy to set out the framework by which they would assess whether consumers would benefit or otherwise from any merger: "These include the size of the paper, the frequency of delivery, the extent of distribution, the price of the title, the quality of the journalism, the extent of local presence, the variety of content, and the number of online services" (Ofcom 2011: 23). The framework developed by Dot Econ Ltd (2010) argues that labour input into the creation of journalism should be measured along with output (size and frequency of publication). It lists frequency of online news updates as one of the output measures, although it is dismissive of online offerings that are not part of newspaper groups: "Online offerings in a local or regional setting are in most cases provided by companion sites of traditional media outlets, and we have therefore dealt with online as an adjunct medium" (DotEcon Ltd 2010: 11). To date, Ofcom have only carried out two Local Media Assessments (2011, 2013b), with much of the data related to input/output measures heavily redacted. However, in their assessment (2013b) on whether to refer the joint venture Local World Limited to the Competition Commission, it does discuss online hyperlocal news publishers as part of the 'market context'. It cites the rise of independent hyperlocals, digital news sites, and "social networks" as part of the "key trends in local media" that have seen citizens turn away from traditional newspapers: "we note audience fragmentation due to the large number of new media services" (2013b: 5).

Media plurality

In 2013 the government, following a recommendation from the Leveson enquiry, undertook a consultation to collect views on the scope of a measurement framework for media plurality

(Department for Culture Media and Sport 2013). The consultation document was interested in views about the viability of a measurement tool for local media plurality and noted that whilst hyperlocal publishers were beginning to have impact “where there may be gaps in provision of news or information from other sources” (2013: 25), there was much variation: the “amount, quality and type of information that people are able to and actively do access in regions and local areas can differ enormously” (2013: 25). The government’s response to the consultation (published in combination with its response to the 2014 House of Lords Select Committee on Communications report and recommendations on media plurality) quotes a respondent who sees value in assessing the role of hyperlocal when considering plurality: “it seems obvious that in some cases the impact of hyperlocal web media and their audience size should feature in plurality considerations if the local paper, radio station, TV station are to be taken over or fall under same ownership” (in Department for Culture Media and Sport 2014: 16). The report concludes that a measurement framework for media plurality should consider local and regional markets, “but this need not include a forensic examination of every locality” (2014: 17). This conclusion is practical but works against the idea of taking account of hyperlocal media operations, given there is largely no consistency between localities: two cities of similar size may have completely different hyperlocal media ecologies. The report tasked Ofcom with developing indicators “that can show how far the UK has an ‘ideal’ market in terms of plurality” (2014: 18). After consultation, Ofcom (2015b) responded to the government by arguing that its previous 2012 advice was still relevant; that is, a focus “on three categories of quantitative metrics measuring the availability, consumption and impact of news content and a consideration of relevant qualitative contextual factors” (Ofcom 2015b: 11).

The 2012 report came as a consequence of Ofcom’s view that following the Public Interest Test undertaken on the proposed 2010 NewsCorp/BSkyB merger, existing media plurality rules may no longer be fit for purpose. The measurement framework is outlined below:

Availability metrics

“This category of metric captures the number of providers available at the point of consumption” (Ofcom 2012b: 18). However, Ofcom argue that a simple list of providers gives no insight as to the “diversity of viewpoints or whether they are consumed” (2012b: 18). Having lots of available news media does not necessarily mean that they are being read. Thus, the ‘Openly Local’ database may well show what feels like significant clusters of hyperlocal publishers in some local areas, but as Ofcom point out: “availability metrics are

relevant in any plurality assessment, but offer limited insight and on their own are not sufficient” (2012b: 18).

Consumption metrics

Consumption metrics capture both the number of people using news media and the amount of time spent consuming it. Here, online hyperlocal has the potential to be measured, as analytical packages will show the amount of time users spend on a site (a specific page/story). Ofcom use a measure called ‘share of references’ which measures the regularity with which an individual accesses news media (for example, they may only watch Sky News once a week) and then collates all the shares and apportions them to the news organisation. As Steven Barnett argues, the measurement tool tends to situate television as most powerful, which may mean “we may miss dangerous concentrations of power elsewhere” (Barnett 2013). ‘Share’, as above, and ‘reach’ (number of people exposed to a provider or platform) are the two measures that Ofcom argues should “form the foundation of a plurality assessment” (2012b: 21)

Impact metrics

Impact metrics are more complex to measure. Such metrics are intended to show the influence a particular piece of news consumption has had on opinion-forming. The importance of the news source, impartiality, reliability and quality are possible proxies for measuring impact. Ofcom relegate their importance in plurality measures, citing that they “can only measure people’s conscious articulation and not actual effects” (2012b: 22)

Contextual factors

Non-quantitative data can be drawn upon via an examination of contextual factors. These could be regulatory factors (such as the requirement for impartiality in broadcast news), governance models, editorial guidelines, and the degree to which an organisation would have ‘internal plurality’ – that is, how an organisation ensures a diverse range of views is presented across its news outputs. It was this issue that Ofcom had particular concern with when considering the proposed acquisition of British Sky Broadcasting Group plc by News Corporation in 2010.

These metrics and factors for measuring plurality raise issues for the hyperlocal sector and make its lack of drawing together of relevant data a significant issue in fulfilling its potential to

be seen as making a valuable, measurable contribution to the UK media ecology. In one example of a Public Interest Test, data about hyperlocal publishing was discussed more widely. I will briefly outline this case before drawing attention to my own findings.

Case study: The Public Interest Test on the acquisition of Guardian Media Group's radio stations (Real and Smooth) by Global Radio

In June 2012, Global Radio Ltd acquired the outstanding share capital in Guardian Media Group's radio stations. The then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport asked for a Public Interest Test to be undertaken by Ofcom in relation to the acquisition in order to assess the degree to which such a merger was a threat to media plurality. Ofcom looked at the consequences for specific geographies (since the licences for each group's radio stations crossed over in some areas) and across media: "We believe that in assessing the sufficiency of plurality of owners of media enterprises, we must take account of all platforms through which consumers source news content" (Ofcom 2012c: 6). Alongside other radio stations, television stations and local print media, "online sites providing local content" were considered as part of the 'availability metric' (Ofcom 2012c: 16). The report draws on the data outlined below to account for the number of active hyperlocal sites in 2012. It notes the issues with patchy geographic coverage and includes Ofcom's own statistic of such sites being regarded as an 'important' local news source to just 1% of people (Ofcom 2012c: 41-46).

Whilst hyperlocal publishing was part of the consideration of plurality in Ofcom's assessment, the area-by-area analysis in the annex of the report tells a different story about Ofcom's view of hyperlocal's importance. In assessing north Wales' media ecology, Ofcom declare that they "have seen no evidence to suggest that they [hyperlocal websites] have the capacity to influence the democratic debate in Wales" (2012d: 9). The same sentence is repeated in relation to Scotland (2012d: 27), the North-East (2012d: 46), Yorkshire (2012d: 52), the North-West (2012d: 59) and the Greater Manchester area (2012d: 65). So whilst Hyperlocal might have secured of a role as "one of the genres of interest in our Public Interest Test" (Ofcom 2012c: 41) as a result of its 'availability', its potential importance gets passed over in any analysis of plurality at national or regional level. In the consumption data available to Ofcom, hyperlocal publishing is seen to play an insubstantive role in local media landscapes.

The context set out above is intended to make clear that my own research into the availability of hyperlocal media in the UK had the opportunity to have a real world impact in judgements about ownership and control of major media organisations. Had a more forensic examination of the data been drawn upon, then perhaps there might have been potential for the assessors to see hyperlocal's potential to "influence the democratic debate" (2012c: 9). Indeed, a 2014 report on 'Internet Citizens' by Ofcom (2014a) drew on further research outputs from the 'Creative Citizen' and 'Media Plurality'¹⁸ projects to be able to note that:

not only are these sites providing their communities with information about local events, they are also playing an important role in upholding democratic accountability by initiating and conducting investigations into subjects as diverse as a waste incinerator breaching emissions guidelines, plans to develop land poisoned by previous industrial owners, and secret or illegal payments by local councils. (Ofcom 2014a: 52)

Furthermore, whilst noting that research to date suggests that hyperlocal websites currently have only small audiences, "most are seeing audience growth on both their sites and social media, and some are branching out into offline publishing as a way of increasing their reach into their local communities and generating more advertising revenue" (2014a: 53). As more research emerges about this sector, it should become more significant as an element of the 'availability' metric in plurality tests.

The 'availability' of hyperlocal media in the UK 2012-2014

My research into the hyperlocal sector took the form of an analysis of the 'Openly Local' database in 2012-2014. This presentation of data should be read within the context of the above discussion of how Ofcom undertakes Public Interest Tests and Local Media Assessments. Given that Local Media Assessments require some consideration of 'frequency', I took that as my cue to assess how often hyperlocal publishers produced news stories. I was aware that my own publication, 'Bournville News', might publish a story just once a week, but I suspected that the collective output of all hyperlocals would be significant.

As I indicated in the previous chapter, hyperlocal websites have been listed on the 'Openly Local' database whether or not they consider themselves to be 'hyperlocal'. Their inclusion might have come about through others adding them to the database (as was the case when Talk About Local took over maintenance of the database). It is clear that some

¹⁸ <http://www.mediaplurality.com/about-the-project/project-details/>

sites cover large geographic areas and perhaps might not be considered 'hyper'-local at all. However, for this analysis, their inclusion in the database was regarded as sufficient qualification for analysis. They can certainly all be regarded as 'topic niche' (John 2011).

Numbers of hyperlocal websites

The 'Openly Local' database listed 572 sites in May 2012, rising to 632 a year later. In 2014 the database had 702 sites listed. However, many hyperlocal sites publish highly infrequently or fall into periods of non-use between editorships, so a broad definition of what an 'active' hyperlocal site consists of needed to be applied. In 2012 and 2013 the database was examined over two 11-day periods (8-18 May 2012 and 18-28 June 2013). Any site publishing a story in the five-month period before these sample periods was considered 'active'. Therefore, in 2012 there were 432 active sites, rising to 496 in 2013. In October 2014, I undertook another count of active sites, which showed a drop to 408. The disparity between the numbers listed on the database and the number of sites that were 'active' marked a weakness in how the data was maintained (that is, it was being added to but not systematically 'cleaned').

Most of the sites, with the exception of a small number of forum-only sites, produced identifiable news stories of varying length. We can take a broad view of what a news item would be, but most sites produce a mix of hard and soft news, event notices, reviews of local amenities or arts events, opinion pieces: to a degree, a not dissimilar mix to that in existing mainstream local media. As outlined in the methodology section, I drew on Harcup and O'Neill's (2001) reworked definition of what constitutes news.

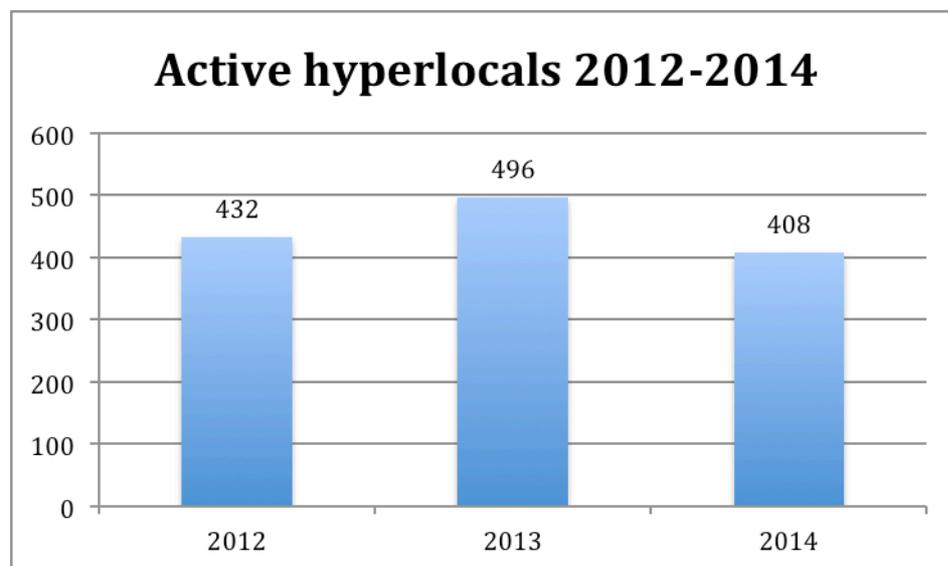


Figure 1: Active hyperlocal websites 2012-2014.

Number of stories produced by hyperlocal websites

A count of the total number of stories produced by all sites was carried out in 2012 and 2013. This research found that during the period of 8-18 May 2012 (11 days), hyperlocal websites produced 3,819 stories. Of the 432 sites that were identified as 'active', 313 produced at least one news story in the sample period. The average number of posts per site over the eleven days was 12.2 and the median number was seven. 39 sites produced just one story and 133 sites produced five stories or fewer. In 2013, between 18 and 28 June (also 11 days), there were 3,482 stories published but this time from just 224 sites, meaning only 46% of active sites produced a story, as opposed to 72% in 2012. The average number of posts per site was up, 15.5, but the median was down (6 rather than 7). This suggests that a small number of sites were producing lots of stories, even more so than in 2012. Figure 2 shows the distribution of stories in 2012 across the sites, showing a 'long tail' effect with 58% of stories being produced by 20% of the sites. It is clear that a small number of sites were very active, but by far the majority, 259 sites, produced fewer than 20 stories during the sample period. The result when looked at across the hyperlocal sector as a whole produces a kind of 'long tail' effect (figure 2).

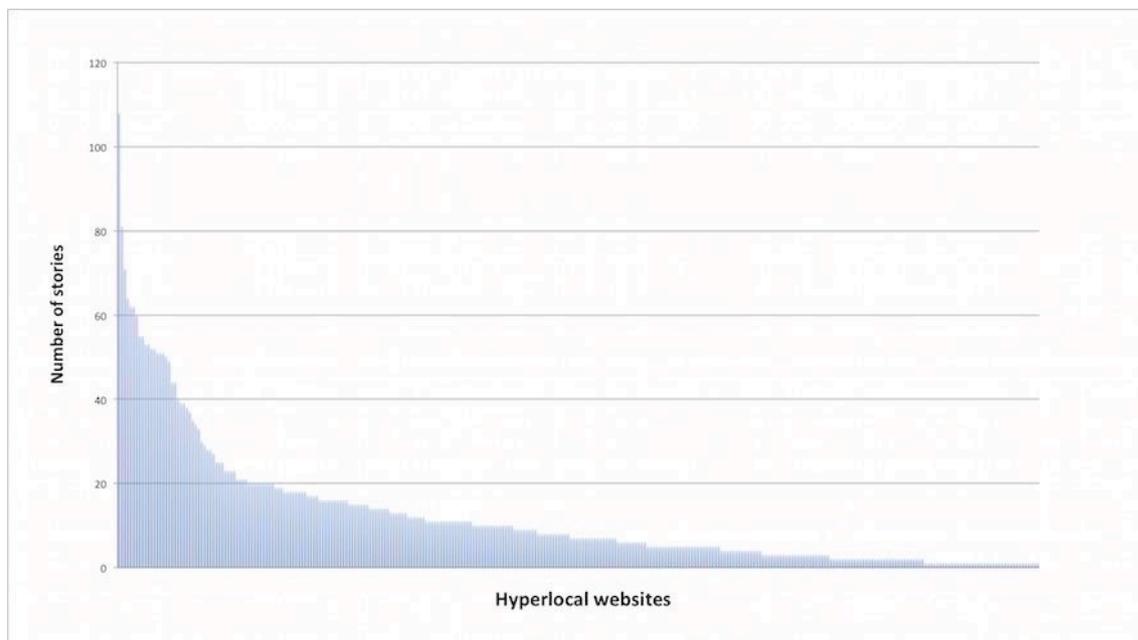


Figure 2: Hyperlocal's 'long tail' – distribution of stories across sites in 2012.

Frequency of stories

Overall, an average of 15 items per hour were produced by hyperlocal websites in 2012. This was calculated using the data gathered from RSS feeds as described in the previous chapter. The time-stamps of the stories indicate that hyperlocals were most active during the hours of 7am and 7pm. Indeed it was during this period, on the weekdays of the sample period, that the average number of stories published rose to 24 items per hour, close to one story every two minutes. The peak day for stories was 14 May 2012, with 483 stories published with a story every minute between 12pm and 2pm. The volume of stories published dropped by about a third at weekends. In 2013, an average of 13 items per hour were produced by hyperlocal websites and during the 7am to 7pm period on weekdays this average rose to 22 items per hour. A summary of the data for 2012 and 2013 can be seen in table 4.

	2012	2013	Difference
No. active sites	432	496	64
No. sites producing a story	313	224	-89
No. stories produced	3,819	3,482	-337
Avg stories per site	12.2	15.5	3.3
Median stories per site	7	6	-1
Sites with fewer than 5 stories	133	106	-27
Sites producing 1 story	39	38	-1
Active sites with no story	119	260	141
Avg stories per hour	15	13	-2
Avg stories per hour 7am-7pm	24	22	-2

Table 3: Summary of analysis of hyperlocal sites 2012 and 2013.

The differences between 2012 and 2013 are marked in some areas. Although more sites were 'active', over half didn't produce a story during my sample period. This is partly explained by the decline in activity from sites linked to the Local People network. That's to say, they had produced some content but it was sporadic and reflected the shift from these sites having paid-for editors to being run by volunteers or by no one at all in many cases. The data was beginning to show that those hyperlocal operations that were being sustained were run outside of this commercial network. The 2014 analysis further revealed the decline of the Local People network.

2014 analysis

The analysis of hyperlocal websites in 2014 did not track volume of stories published; rather, it was a simple interrogation of the 'Openly Local' database to identify currently active sites. Although the number of sites listed had gone up to 702, only 408 were 'active', indicating a significant fall from the 2013 figure of 496. 288 were recorded as no longer active, over twice the number in 2013. This figure is a mix of websites that had closed or had not published in the 5 months prior to the sample period. Many of these websites (n=86) were part of the Local People franchise. Although some (n=37) still showed evidence of activity from local residents (such as events being published or reviews of businesses), the vast majority comprised nothing but spam postings and although online were therefore declared inactive. At this point the Local People network was no longer receives financial support and had no paid editors in post (Lambourne 2013). The 2014 analysis was directly requested by Ofcom and the data included in their Internet Citizens report (2014a).

Geographic distribution of hyperlocals

Of the 432 sites that were designated as 'active' in 2012, 400 were located in England, 15 in Wales, 13 in Scotland and 3 in Northern Ireland (see table 5). Collectively, London Boroughs' 48 websites that produced a story during the sample period produced 483 news items. Birmingham's 15 sites that published during the sample period produced 92 news items. Overall Birmingham had 28 'active' sites (although this had dropped to 20 by 2014), the most for any local authority area, although the Greater London area had 77 in total (85 by 2014). Not all clustering of sites was around urban areas; rural south Gloucestershire had 11 sites in 2012, largely aimed at small towns and villages, and Wiltshire had ten (see figure 3).

	2012	2013	2014
England	400	445	359
NI	3	3	3
Scotland	13	20	19
Wales	15	26	25

Table 4: Geographic distribution of hyperlocals across nations.

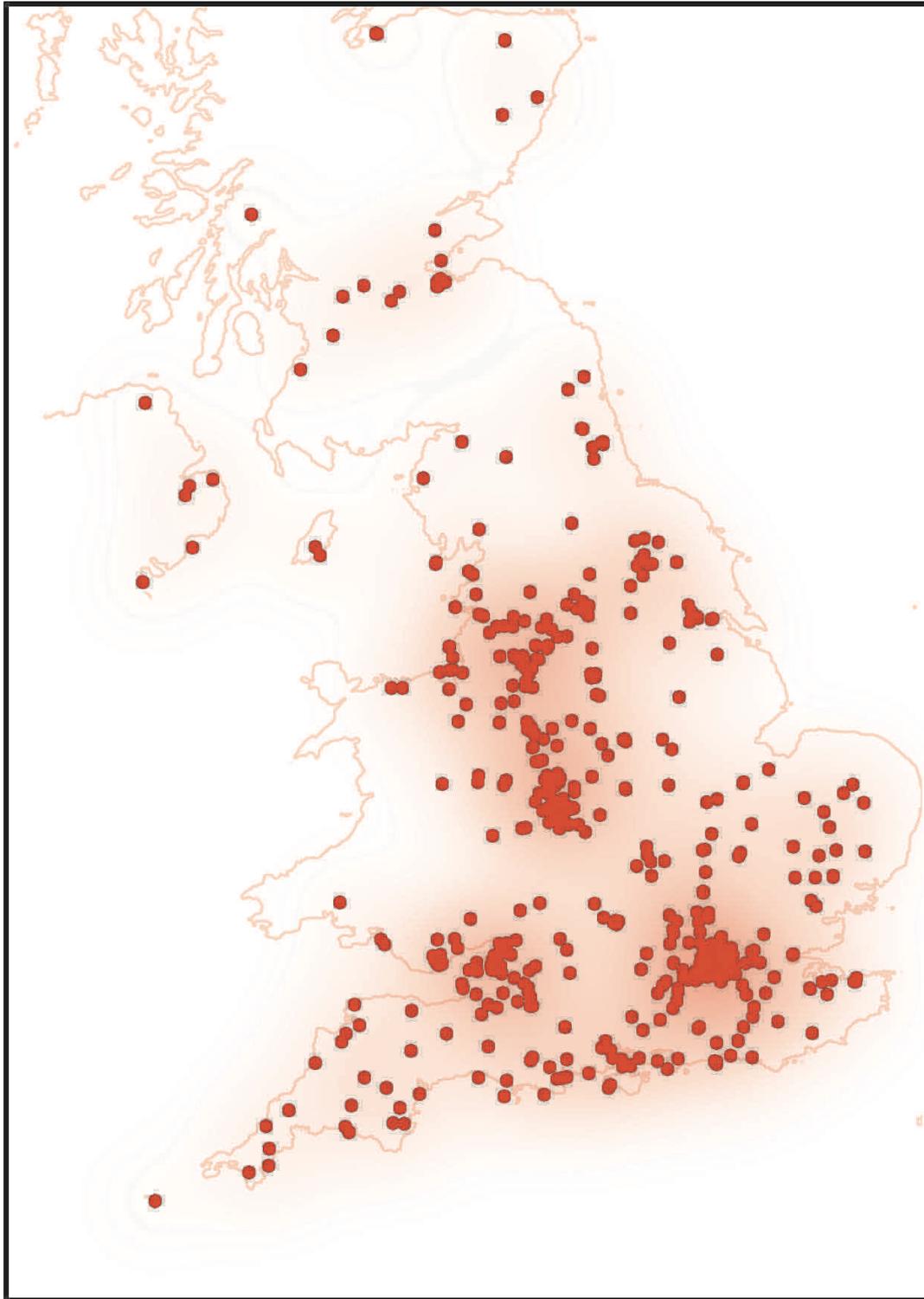


Figure 3: Geographic spread of UK hyperlocals in 2012.

Publishing platforms

The 'Openly Local' database records the sites' publishing platform. In general, the data for this was incomplete, as sites often change platform and the record is not changed. Despite this, it was observed that some sites make use of content management systems developed by

mainstream media outlets. The Local People platform was widely used (120 of all sites in 2012) with sites run through the About My Area platform comprising 19 of the total in 2012. Free blogging platforms such as WordPress and Google's Blogger were widely used.

Local news ecologies – A case study of Birmingham

Using the above data, I will now outline how it could be used in assessing the 'availability' of news media in a specific location. As I indicated above, Ofcom's conclusion in the Public Interest Test was that hyperlocal media drew audiences too local and too small to have the capacity to "influence the democratic debate" (2012c: 9). The primary issue is that the "share of references" measure that Ofcom applies requires recourse to existing survey data which is not reliable below regional level. But as they point out, time and resources are against them when it comes to carrying the work out in a more rigorous way:

this is very challenging to research. Our recommended method for attempting to deliver this aim would be bespoke telephone interview by postcode area to ensure the sample represents the geographical area of interest [...] the timeframe of 40 days is too short to allow for bespoke research. (Ofcom 2012d: 1)

In extrapolating from regional-level data, Ofcom may miss the contribution that hyperlocals make to the plurality of specific local media ecologies, particularly given that figure 4 shows us that the distribution of hyperlocal operations is very dispersed. In this case study, I give an overview of Birmingham's news media ecology at just the level of availability. The aim is to argue that localised gathering of consumption data should be considered, given area-by-area variability. I also place the study of the current picture of Birmingham's media scene into a historical context so that we might see the current development of hyperlocal as a revitalisation of the plurality of Birmingham's news ecology.

About Birmingham and its media

Birmingham is a diverse, youthful city of 1.1 million people (Birmingham City Council 2014). It has below the average number of pensioners for England as a whole and well above the average number of children. Almost a quarter of the population are children (22.8% according to the 2011 census). 21.8% of the population say they are Muslim (Birmingham City Council 2011), whilst some wards in the city have 40% of their residents stating their first language is not English. The city is served (in 2016) by a range of mainstream media across print,

television and radio. Since the buyout of Local World by Trinity Mirror in 2015, all the newspaper titles in the city are owned by Trinity Mirror (Birmingham Mail, Birmingham Post, Sunday Mercury, Sutton Observer and Great Barr Observer). BBC Local news serves the wider West Midlands area (from Stoke in the north to Hereford in the south) whilst Central News, the ITV news provider, runs a sub-regional news service for the west of its region, similar in coverage to the BBC's service. Since early 2015, Big Centre TV has operated a local television service whose twice daily news service covers its footprint of Birmingham and the Black Country. There are four Ofcom-licensed community radio stations. Two of these (Big City Radio and Switch Radio) were originally named after the areas they served (Aston FM and Vale FM respectively). The other two stations (Unity FM and New Style Radio) serve communities of interest (Muslim and Afro-Caribbean respectively). The BBC's local radio station, Radio WM (West Midlands) serves Birmingham, the West Midlands and South Staffordshire. Commercial radio stations Free Radio, Capital, and Radio XL all serve Birmingham, whilst Free Radio 80s, Heart, and Smooth Radio all have wider West Midlands licences.

Table 6 summarises the above media and also includes details on their provision of news. As Ofcom point out, "the value chain for the supply of news is complex" (2012b: 10). They make distinctions between news provision at retail level (the broadcaster) and wholesale level (the company supplying the news to the retailer). A single wholesaler might provide news to a range of retailers, which could limit the plurality of media provision despite the proliferation of individual retailers. In radio, Sky News Radio currently holds the contract for Independent Radio News (IRN), which supplies on a wholesale basis national news bulletins to more than 250 UK commercial radio stations, including many in Birmingham. Two of the local community radio stations (Switch Radio and Big City Radio) also take their news from Sky. In its report on its Public Interest Test of the Guardian Media Group / Global Radio merger, Ofcom (2012c) drew on commissioned research to show that the 'share of references' of news on commercial radio was low. By way of example, Heart FM had a 1.4% share, the highest of the commercial stations, compared to BBC One's 17.9% share (2012c: 53). At the wholesale level of news, Sky's share of references is 16% for the UK, recognition of its supply of news across a whole swathe of radio stations and on television (2012c: 53).

Media	Status	Name	Ownership	Wholesale level news provider	notes
Radio	Public	Radio WM	BBC	BBC	

Radio	Commercial	Free Radio	Orion Media	Free Radio	
Radio	Commercial	Capital	Global	Global / Sky News Radio*	
Radio	Commercial	Radio XL	XL	Radio XL	
Radio	Commercial	Free Radio 80s	Orion Media	Free Radio	
Radio	Commercial	Heart	Global	Global / Sky News Radio*	
Radio	Commercial	Smooth	Global	Global / Sky News Radio*	
Radio	Community	Switch Radio	Switch Radio	Sky News Radio	
Radio	Community	Unity FM	Unity FM	Unity FM	
Radio	Community	Big City Radio	Big City Radio	Sky News Radio	
Radio	Community	New Style Radio	New Style Radio	Sky News Radio	
Television	Public - PSB	BBC West Midlands	BBC	BBC	
Television	Commercial – PSB	Central TV	ITV	ITV Regional News	
Television	Commercial	Big Centre TV	Kaleidoscope TV Limited	Big Centre TV	
Newspaper	Commercial	Birmingham Mail	Trinity Mirror Midlands	Trinity Mirror Midlands	Part of Trinity Mirror
Newspaper	Commercial	Birmingham Post	Trinity Mirror Midlands	Trinity Mirror Midlands	Part of Trinity Mirror
Newspaper	Commercial	Sunday Mercury	Trinity Mirror Midlands	Trinity Mirror Midlands	Part of Trinity Mirror
Newspaper	Commercial	Sutton Observer	Central Independent Newspapers	Central Independent Newspapers	Until Nov 2015 part of Local World, now Trinity Mirror
Newspaper	Commercial	Great Barr Observer	Central Independent Newspapers	Central Independent Newspapers	Until Nov 2015 part of Local World, now Trinity Mirror

Table 5: Birmingham’s mainstream media in 2016.

**Global-owned stations take Sky News Radio feed from early evening until the following morning.*

The local, community and alternative press in Birmingham – some historical context

A small number of publications (Briggs 1949, McCulloch 2004, Whates 1957) have discussed Birmingham’s early press history. Briggs’ (1949) short history of public life and the press in early 19th century Birmingham offers a detailed list of newspaper and periodicals that existed between 1800 and 1835. The Birmingham Argus operated from 1818-19 and was a reformist paper whose publisher – like many others whose political periodicals suddenly became subject

to stamp duty in 1819 (Curran and Seaton 2003: 6) – was imprisoned following the government’s suppression of the radical press at that time (Briggs 1949: 25). Other titles with a reformist or radicalising agenda were just as short-lived: *The Selector or Political Bouquet* (1819), *The Birmingham and Coventry Free Press* (lasted for 6 weeks during 1830). Briggs makes the point that it was the arts, theatre specifically, that was in part responsible for the appearance in print of a more dissenting, politicised voice (Briggs 1949: 21-23). Publications such as *Birmingham Review*, *Theatrical John Bull*, *The Mouse Trap* (all 1824 according to Briggs) were strident in their condemnation of their rivals and used theatrical and literary criticism as vehicles for wider commentary on politics and society. Briggs notes, “the discussions about theatre were important, not only because they gave rise to a spate of new periodicals, but also because they launched many local writers into pamphleteering and newspaper work for the first time” (Briggs 1949: 23). Brake and Demoor’s guide to the 19th century press (2009) also lists some early radical titles operating out of the City after the period covered by Briggs. *The Birmingham Journal* (1825-69) had a reformist agenda until it was sold in 1844 and its new owner “moderated the paper’s politics” (Brake and Demoor 2009: 56). It subsequently in 1869 merged with the *Birmingham Daily Post* (still operating in 2016 as *The Birmingham Post*).

The growth of Birmingham’s suburbs in the late 19th century saw the emergence of newspaper titles focused on smaller localities (Harborne, Handsworth, Balsall Heath, Aston all had newspapers from the late 1870s and 1880s). This was no doubt helped by improved literacy rates, the growth of Birmingham’s middle classes and the repeal of the various duties on newspapers in the mid-19th century. The ‘Newsplan’ project, which in the 1980s sought to ‘save’ the UK’s newspaper heritage through a process of cataloguing and microfiching existing collections, offers rich insight into the number of publications operating at this ‘hyperlocal’ level. A UK-wide project initiated by the British Library, Newsplan’s aim to catalogue and preserve local newspaper collections was undertaken on a regional basis. Tracey Watkin’s report (1990) into the work undertaken in the West Midlands provides a comprehensive list of Birmingham papers operating at both the city and suburban level. The report is a record of newspaper holdings rather than a record of the publication dates of the newspapers, but one can infer from the holdings the longevity of the titles. It is largely a record of the commercial daily or weekly press, although the listings sometimes include titles that stray outside of the definition of a newspaper (such as the *Selly Oak Clarion*, “a monthly political magazine” from

1937, Watkins 1990: 202). It rejects including community newspapers for its listings (Watkins 1990: 14) but does usefully list such publications where there are British Library holdings for them. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to create a detailed timeline of the commercial, community and alternative press in Birmingham, it would be safe to say that much like elsewhere in the UK, there is a rich history of titles operating at ward or parish level during the late 19th century until the mid-20th century. After this point, for the most part, such titles either stopped publishing altogether or prolonged their existence for a short period by covering larger areas (for example, the Kings Heath Observer is recorded as having holdings from 1932-1964 before it became the Kings Heath and Kings Norton Observer until 1968, when one can infer from the lack of holdings that it closed, Watkins 1990: 148). Over the period of the late 20th century, as elsewhere in the UK, there was an inevitable shrinking in the number of Birmingham's newspaper titles. Only the Great Barr Observer and the Sutton Observer still exist as localised titles. That these titles are now owned by the same group that own the city-wide Birmingham Mail and Birmingham Post, is also part of a national trend. As Curran and Seaton note (2003: 75-80), the post-war period saw most small independent local titles, or small groupings of titles, becoming part of national groups: "the top five publishers increased their proportion of regional evening paper circulation by over half between 1947 and 2002" (Curran and Seaton 2003: 75).

Whilst the 'Newsplan' project was dismissive of the value to archivists of community-level publications, it is possible to gain a good understanding of the flourishing of community and alternative publications that emerged in the late 1960s. Like elsewhere in the UK, there is a good record of the alternative press (see Royal Commission on the Press 1977), and Birmingham was well-served by alternative news publications in the late 1960s and 1970s. John Noyce's Directory of Alternative Periodicals (1979) lists 34 separate alternative and community publications as coming out of Birmingham during 1965-1974. Although only a modest number (5) cover suburban areas, it is likely there were more that Noyce's desk research simply failed to bring to light. One such publication is discussed in David Parker and Christian Karner's article (2011) on the Saltley area of Birmingham. They highlight the impact of the community newspaper Saltley Gas¹⁹ (1972-79) in the context of wider civic activism at this time:

¹⁹ An interview with one of the founders of Saltley Gas is available at: <http://www.saltleystories.org.uk/local-history/saltley-gas>

The practical impact of the information in *Saltley Gas* about housing rights, and the work of the CDP [Community Development Programme] researchers and local activists, helped save many of the properties in the side roads of Alum Rock from demolition as the end of their ninety-nine-year leases approached. The site of the informal summer adventure playground, Norton Hall, was brought back from disuse, and today is a busy family and children's centre which owes its existence to the local residents who were energised by *Saltley Gas* and related civic activism in the 1970s. (2011: 302)

Another Saltley newspaper was the bilingual (Urdu/English) *Saltley News* (1974-76). The record on its archive suggests that other local publications existed in the same period:

Before it appeared there were already a number of community newspapers in Birmingham such as Sparkbrook's 'Spark' and Lozells' Trapeze which reflected the activities and concerns of people in their respective parts of the city. *Saltley News* was different in that it was to become the city's and Britain's first local community newspaper in Urdu. (Dar n.d.)

We should not be surprised at such a flourishing of local titles at this point: as Tony Harcup makes clear in his book *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices* (2013), Britain was in the midst of something of a boom in the late 1960s and early 1970s with regard to community newspapers: "an alternative local press was springing up in towns and cities across Britain, challenging the social, political and journalistic conservatism of mainstream media" (2013: 33). Writing in the midst of this 'springing up' in his 1974 bibliographic guide, John Spiers (1974) is equally effusive in his praise of the alternative local press, regarding them as: "the genuine, unbought voices of their communities" (1974: 21). Spiers' guide gives a precis of the Birmingham-wide publication *Street Press* (1971-73) and quotes from its 'autobiographical note', a polemic clearly intended to differentiate the publication from the mainstream:

If you believe implicitly in the politics of the established press, you won't like what you see in the pages that follow. We have produced a critic's paradise – a jungle of thoughts and feeling which don't pretend to be objective. There is no fat wad of hypnotic advertising and we're not geared to offer the kind of services that the national and local dailies bring to your home. (in Spiers 1974: 21)

The report into the alternative press by the 1977 Royal Commission for the Press (1977) also sees value in Britain having a vibrant alternative local press, stating that, "the community press performs an important function" (1977: 49). However, it notes the difficulty in accurately

gauging the size of the sector. Instead it makes the decision to focus on one area, Leicestershire, where it finds 22 newspapers operating in rural areas (1977: 50). The Commission observes that county council officials: “often appeared to ignore the community newspapers or regard[ed] them as a nuisance” (1977: 51). The newspapers were a mix of paid-for and free publications, with the latter often delivered door-to-door. Whilst the Royal Commission did not produce any data on the specific localities covered by the newspapers (or indeed their names), taking a localised approach to understanding the role of alternative and community publications in media ecologies remains the most sensible approach.

Hyperlocal media in Birmingham 2012-2016

One of the findings of the data exercise I undertook in 2012 was that Birmingham had more active hyperlocal websites than any other local authority area in the UK (28). Although this in itself attracted interest (BBC 2013a), it is worth noting that the city is the largest (by population) local authority area in Europe, so it may be no surprise that it tops the league table for hyperlocals. During the 2012 research period, I found that 15 of the sites produced 92 stories collectively. Figure 4 shows the distribution of those stories, with just 5 sites responsible for 69 (75%) of the stories. Whilst the contribution that these sites made is valuable, they amount to just over 8 stories per day. Subsequent years found the active number of hyperlocals had dropped to 26 in 2013 and 20 in 2014. This drop was the combined result of some of the 2012 sites no longer publishing and very few new sites for the area being added to the ‘Openly Local’ database.

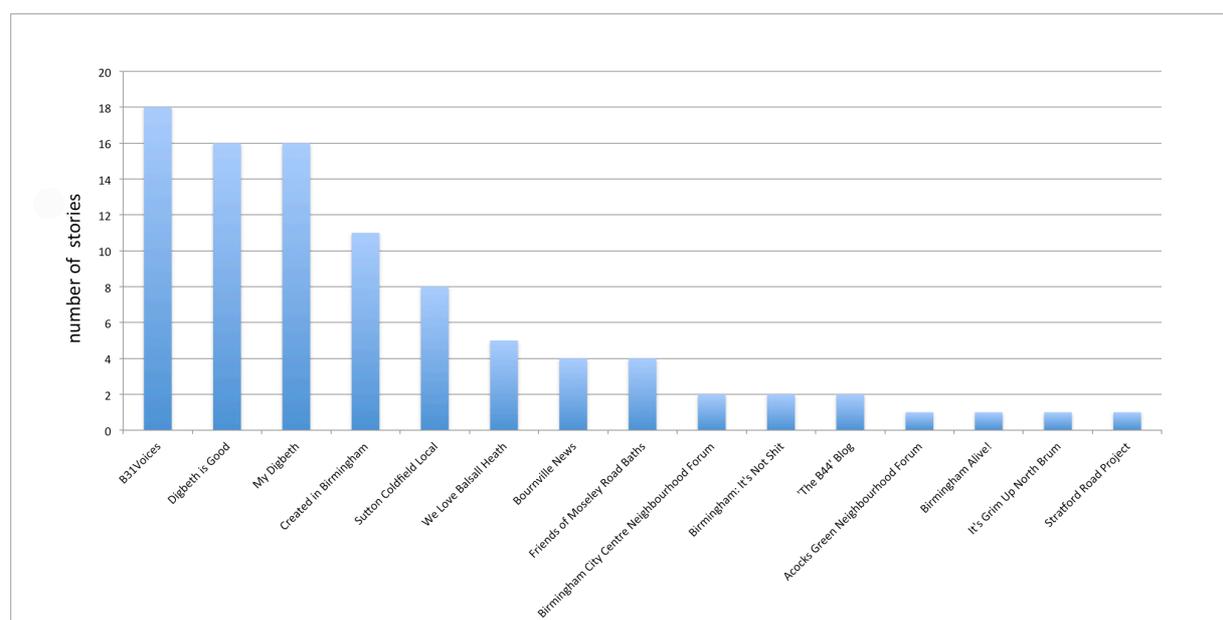


Figure 4: Distribution of stories by Birmingham hyperlocals in 2012 (8-18 May).

Although the 'Openly Local' database was still being updated throughout the period of research I suspected that it did not reveal the full picture of hyperlocal publishing; that is, some websites were not added to the database at all. In February 2016 I drew on my own and other local expertise (via requests on social media) to compile a more accurate list of hyperlocal websites. At this point in time, the 'Openly Local' database had stopped being updated, and the replacement resource, localweblist.net, had not yet been officially launched (although it was being populated by data by the organisation Talk About Local). My own list revealed 30 active sites in February 2016 ('active' based on the same criteria used previously). Using the same length of sample period of 11 days as I had in 2012-2013, I found that 20 sites had produced a story in the sample period and a total of 213 stories had been produced, an average of 19 per day (see figure 5 for distribution of stories). Obviously this data cannot be compared to my earlier 2014 snapshot of Birmingham given that it is based on a different method of identifying hyperlocals, but it does at least give a sense of the continued vibrancy of hyperlocal publishing in Birmingham. Of course, in some ways it also shows the issues the sector faces in trying to maintain a resource that can keep up with the pace of change in the sector.

It is worth noting some of the new ventures operating in Birmingham's hyperlocal media scene in 2016. Whilst many hyperlocals originally listed in 2012 are still going, there are some new ventures that are publishing often and contributing both in specific locales, and across the city. A hyperlocal for the Sheldon area,²⁰ run by a single individual, covers the eastern suburbs of Birmingham and produced 23 news items in the 2016 sample period, largely comprising updates from the local council and other public services. 'Birmingham Updates'²¹ covers the whole of the city and has amassed a very large audience in the three years since it began. Again run by one person, it operates largely through a Facebook Page and a Twitter account where it offers updates on travel, crime, weather, local politics. The website published 46 stories in the sample period but relies heavily on press releases from public sector sources. What is particularly impressive is the amount of followers its social media operations have. On Twitter it has in the region of 82,000 followers; on Facebook it has over 196,000 'likes' on its page (both figures as of February 2016). The number of Facebook likes is just 4,000 short of that of the mainstream newspaper, the Birmingham Mail. I discuss Tyburn Mail (in the north-

²⁰ Started in May 2013: <http://b26community.wordpress.com/>

²¹ Started in March 2013: <http://birminghamupdates.com>

east of the city) as one of my thumbnail accounts in chapter six, but it is worth noting its prolific output (46 stories in the sample period) from just one full-time journalist. Tyburn Mail also produces a free monthly newspaper (delivered door-to-door and claiming a reach of 24,000 readers). Three other new publishers are worth noting. ‘Birmingham Eastside’ is run by students at Birmingham City University and covers stories from across the city (had my snapshot taken place outside term-time, the story count may have been less). ‘Chamberlain Files’ covers political issues and is run by a private ‘public affairs’ company, whilst ‘Slaney Street’ (‘active’, but did not publish a story within the sample period) is a newspaper and website for alternative politics, produced intermittently since January 2013. There are also two publishers of community magazines in Birmingham, both of which rely heavily on adverts from small businesses: Swan Publishing (two magazines for different suburbs, monthly) and Pages Magazines (two suburbs, monthly).

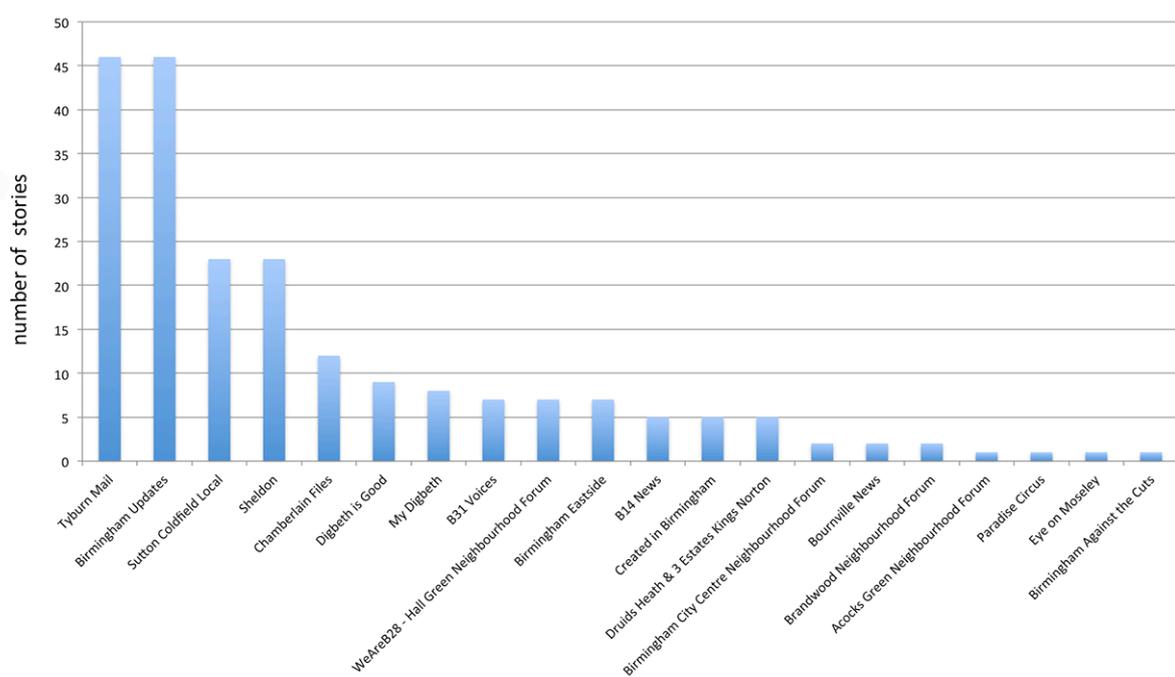


Figure 5: Distribution of stories by Birmingham hyperlocals in 2016 research period (1-11 February).

Birmingham’s hyperlocal media as an element of a local news ecology

In understanding the value of the Birmingham hyperlocal media sector we can draw on two useful models. The first, by Hugh Flouch and Kevin Harris examines the civic value generated by citizen-run websites and forums whereby the “civil society purpose” (2010a: 2) of Web-based activity is set against the number of contributors and level of user interaction (see figure

6). They argue that, “The citizen-led local online ecosystem is becoming richer and more varied. Understanding the impacts and implications of the sites within this ecosystem requires some framework against which each one can be calibrated and understood” (2010a: 1). In analysing 160 London-based websites, they place sites with a clear activist or news purpose as having high civil society purpose but low user interaction and contributors, whilst discussion and network-orientated sites have both multiple contributors and high civil society purpose. Commercial sites that offer listings score low on both axes.

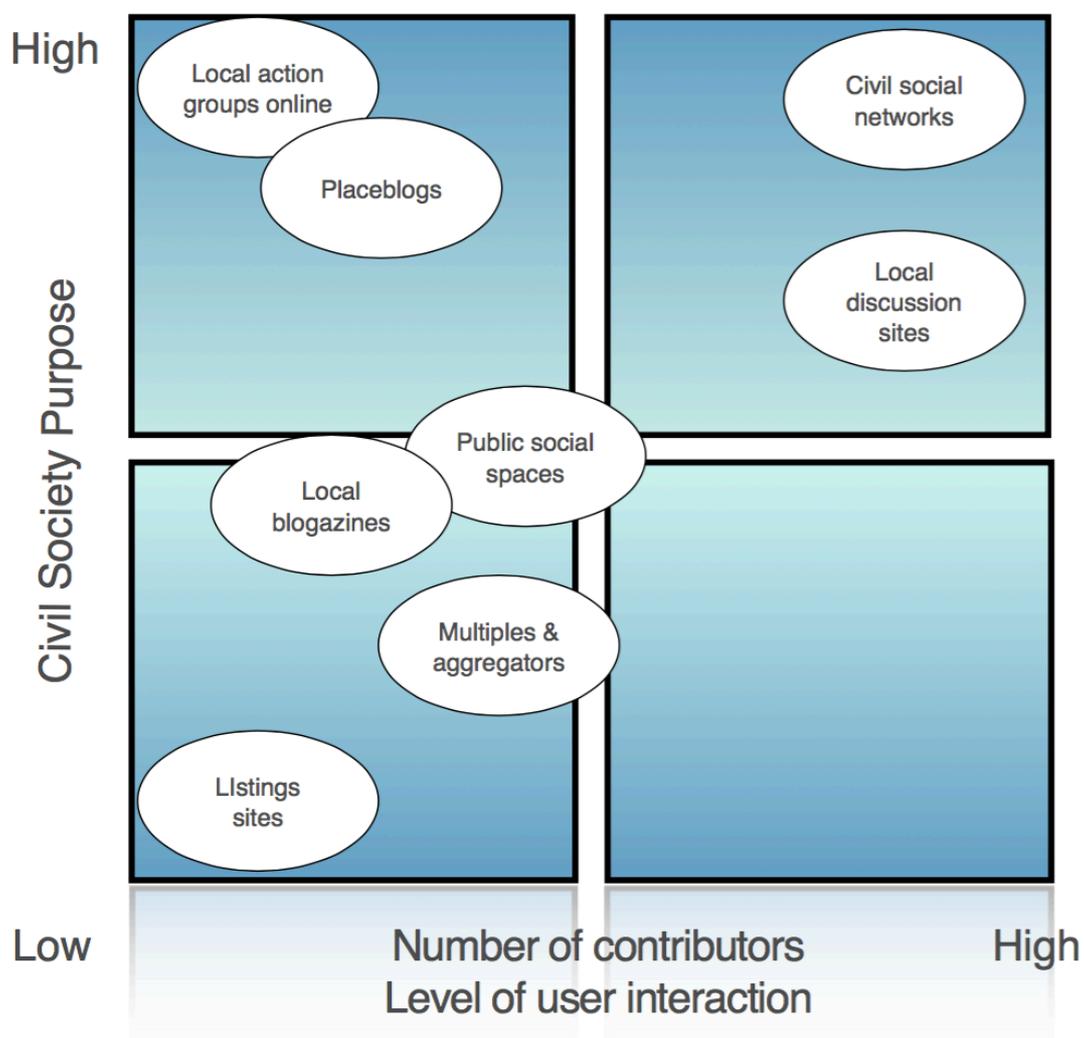


Figure 6: High-Level Model (reproduced from Flouch and Harris 2010a: 2).

The civil society purpose of Birmingham's hyperlocal news ecology

In attempting to apply the Flouch and Harris model to a locality such as Birmingham, one immediately comes up against several issues. Firstly, Flouch and Harris see Web-based operations as distinct from those that are social media platform-based. In fact, in almost all examples in Birmingham the websites also have Facebook pages or groups and Twitter accounts. There may well be social media-only 'Public social spaces' (to use the Flouch and Harris terminology) but they have not been listed by the 'Openly Local' database, and nor were any suggested in my later request for sites, although it could be argued that some sites' work has a greater focus on utilising their social media operations than others and so might warrant categorisation as Public social spaces. Also, the demise of the Local World and About My Area franchised sites results in none of the Birmingham sites being categorised as 'Local digital news (Commercial sites)'. This grouping was not intended to include the mainstream press but rather those "established with a civic purpose, these sites are distinguished from citizen journalist sites by their commercial nature" (Flouch and Harris 2010a: 9). In Birmingham, it may well be that some sites are maturing to a level where they are commercialising, but outwardly at least, signs of this are not evident. Finally, although Birmingham has one example of a community-focused, hyperlocal newspaper (Tyburn Mail), Flouch and Harris's study only focuses on Web-based operations, so these are not categorised at all.

Given these caveats, Table 7 apportioned Birmingham's active hyperlocal sites (in 2016) against the Flouch and Harris typology. It is clear that Placeblogs form the highest number of sites and, in turn, produce the largest amount of content (over the 11-day 2016 analysis period). All the Placeblogs share the criteria that Flouch and Harris require of them: "There is often a strong purpose of driving local change through shining the light on issues of local concern" (Flouch and Harris 2010a: 5). At least, it could be argued that this is a concern of theirs at particular moments. They all have low numbers of contributors, but we could regard them as having high civil society purpose. In chapter six, I examine two of these Birmingham Placeblogs in further detail (B31 Voices and Tyburn Mail) and in one case, look in detail at how they utilise social media networks to also enable much wider citizen contribution. The lines between Placeblogs, Public social spaces and Civil social networks are much more blurred in 2016 than in 2010 (the time of the Flouch and Harris work), given the ubiquity of social media as a mechanism to engage with civil society discussions in the everyday.

Flouch / Harris typology	no. of sites	no. of stories
Placeblogs	12	189
Local action groups online	9	9
Local blogazines	7	15
Civil social networks	1	0
Local discussion sites	1	0

Table 6: Birmingham hyperlocal websites typology.

Flouch and Harris’s typology is useful in sketching out the potential value of the “citizen-led local online ecosystem” (Flouch and Harris 2010a: 1). In that sense, it goes beyond a simple measure of ‘availability’ (as Ofcom would describe it), and instead sees particular kinds of activities as being more important than others. So an area with a large number of Placeblogs, publishing frequently, might indicate that such operations have a key role to play in a plural local media ecosystem.

Visibility, legitimacy and revenue in Birmingham’s hyperlocal media sector

Matt Carlson (2013) argues that news ecologies are in a state of rapid change due to shifts in technologies, economics and public attitudes to journalism’s credibility. In seeking a way to “unravel increasingly complex heterogeneous journalistic environments” (2013: 1), he proposes an analytical framing that allows us to consider “visibility, legitimacy and revenue as distinct, semi-independent characteristics of journalism as a public activity” (2013: 1). In doing this, we are able to stand back and better conceptualise the changing news landscape. This ‘characteristical model’ can be drawn upon to help understand the value of Birmingham’s hyperlocal sector as part of a changing local news ecology. It moves beyond seeing particular activities (such as placeblogging) as having inherent value in themselves, and asks that we examine hyperlocal operations within the broader social and economic context within which they operate.

Carlson first considers the visibility of news media, and does so in three senses (2013: 2): via its distribution mechanism; via the strategy it takes to reach audiences (pricing, choice of medium, focus); and through measures of engagement (copies sold, viewing figures, website visits). Outside of Tyburn Mail’s monthly newspaper, most hyperlocals in Birmingham use a combination of a website and social media for distribution. As we have noted, audited data on audiences for hyperlocal media is not available at a local level but we can infer from the number of likes on Facebook pages and followers on Twitter accounts that this is a media form that is very much visible. However, as Carlson points out, legitimacy cannot be inferred

from visibility. That is, to have a large audience does not legitimise your news operation. Rather, “legitimacy must be recognized as an independent characteristic linking journalistic institutions and news forms with public approval and recognition” (2013: 6). Carlson makes the case that in the US and the UK, the press is in a crisis of credibility, with public opinion taking the view that journalists are too easily influenced by ‘big business’ and are, post-phone-hacking crisis, somewhat morally bankrupt (2013: 7). However, whilst news and political bloggers may not have gone through the same credibility crisis, there are concerns over their objectivity, something which affects their legitimacy. Among Birmingham’s hyperlocal websites, nine were identified as belonging to local action groups campaigning on specific issues, and so might be regarded as lacking objectivity. The 12 Placeblogs tend to take an impartial position, with little evidence of political partisanship.

Finally, Carlson sees a focus on revenue as essential. He breaks this down into three aspects: “the ability of a news entity to extract revenue, its strategies for doing so, and its quantitatively measurable success in these efforts” (2013: 2). As we will see in chapter seven, the discussion of revenue creates tensions for hyperlocal journalists as much as it does for mainstream journalists (often a taboo subject, argues Carlson 2013: 8). As others have noted (Siles and Boczkowski 2012), the digital age has resulted in a significant revenue crisis for news organisations, and whilst the proliferation of online platforms may have increased visibility, this has not necessarily resulted in increased revenue. Carlson notes the various strategies being tested by news organisations, such as subscription models and even volunteerism (2013: 10). As we have seen locally in Birmingham (Ponsford 2015), and as Carlson predicts, journalists are now increasingly attentive to online metrics: “journalists are unable to escape the relationship between their own work and the overall revenue of their employer” (2013: 10).

Carlson’s framework is well-suited to understand the dynamic nature of local news ecologies. Much has changed in Birmingham’s hyperlocal media sector between 2012 and 2016. There continue to be new publishers emerging in this space. Although my 2016 data was not gathered under the same circumstances as that of 2012-2014, it is clear that there continues to be a good volume of stories produced, and certainly there is significant visibility through social media. While the increasing legitimacy of this sector might be evidenced through the volume of ‘likes’ and ‘followers’ on social media, it also comes through the recognition it receives from mainstream media. The Birmingham Mail links to many hyperlocal sites through its website’s local pages, directly taking headlines from the hyperlocals via an

RSS feed. This linking was established in 2010 via a partnership agreement (Trinity Mirror 2010). More recently, in 2015, the BBC started linking to hyperlocal websites via its Local Live feed, part of an initiative by the public service broadcaster to create stronger links with a range of local news organisations (Holdsworth 2015). But revenue issues seem to remain unchanged. The degree to which Birmingham's hyperlocal sector is any better situated in 2016 than it was in 2012 at generating revenues is hard to identify. In 2015, B31 Voices (operating in South Birmingham and discussed in chapter six) undertook a crowd-funding campaign which raised £3,249. Tyburn Mail operates on a mix of grant funding and newspaper advertising revenue (see chapter six), whilst others display banner adverts on their websites which may only generate small amounts of income (based on my own experience with advertising on bournvillevillage.com). Beyond those examples, Birmingham's hyperlocals no doubt operate, like many others, on a degree of self-exploitation of the editor's labour and on the volunteerism of others. I will discuss the implications of this more fully in chapter seven.

Towards a new plurality test for hyperlocal media

In this case study of Birmingham I have attempted to show that a closer examination of specific local media ecologies is needed in order to understand the contribution that hyperlocal news operations can make to media plurality. My focus has been on demonstrating that the availability of hyperlocal news is substantive. Hyperlocals in this area collectively produce a significant number of stories across a range of forms. Research by Flouch and Harris (2010a) has argued that Placeblogging, the majority form used in Birmingham, has high civil society purpose. Drawing on Matt Carlson's framework, we can see that there is a strong case to argue that the sector has both visibility and legitimacy, although questions remain over its sustainability due to lack of revenue.

The vibrancy of Birmingham's hyperlocal news sector may not be replicated in every area of the UK, and so the question is, how does one measure whether hyperlocal media has reached a level where it might be making a valuable contribution to local media plurality? Based on the data made available through this research, one could make an initial assessment based on three criteria:

- How many hyperlocal websites are operating within the area of focus?
- To what extent is the form they take serving a civic society purpose?
- How often do they publish?

The lack of consumption data means that any further assessment is difficult to make.

Surveying at the local level would help get a clearer picture of the 'share of references' that hyperlocal commands in localities. But even without such data, the analytics from social media platforms and websites could possibly be collated and comparisons made. I would argue that the 'share of references' may change from locality to locality, as the legitimacy of some hyperlocals in particular areas means they are regarded as more trustworthy and might then have greater reach. Ofcom's 'share of references' measure is annually updated via its News Consumption report. The 2014 report noted that "Social media (Facebook and Twitter) are used by 20% of online news users" (Ofcom 2014b: 6). By the time of the 2015 report, that figure had risen to 31% (Ofcom 2015c: 43). Unfortunately, whilst Ofcom recognise that social media platforms are aggregators for news from other sources, it is beyond the scope of their survey method to find out what those sources are. In Birmingham, for local news, that source (on Facebook in particular judged by the number of page 'likes') is as likely to be Birmingham Updates as it is the Birmingham Mail. The 'share of reference' attributed to Facebook alone is 7% for 2015, up from 3% in 2014. In 2015 it is third, to the BBC and ITV, in platform share of references (2015c). Consumption practices are changing rapidly and, to an extent, are creating the conditions by which hyperlocal can extend its reach and be recognised as more significant an element of local media ecologies.

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented findings on the scale and scope of the hyperlocal news sector in the UK. From my analysis in 2012 and 2013 I found that the volume of stories collectively produced by these websites is impressive, with a high volume of stories being produced per day. The decline in the number of active sites by 2014 is largely attributable to the failure of a commercial network of hyperlocal websites and some localities are either not served at all or very poorly served by hyperlocal news. The degree to which a hyperlocal website that publishes only one or two stories a week is making an effective contribution to the public sphere is debatable. However, in my case study I argued that a closer examination of specific areas can reveal buoyant and dynamic local media ecologies. Measuring the vitality of a hyperlocal 'scene' is difficult. Whilst such operations are visible, it is more complex to

understand the extent to which their 'share of references' makes their contribution worthy of consideration by Ofcom when key decisions about media mergers are made. But as Barnett and Townend (2015) argue, hyperlocal could play "a potentially major role in compensating for the decline of traditional local media and making a genuine contribution to local plurality" (2015: 344). Irrespective of their organisational setup or the degree of professionalism of their journalists, Barnett and Townend argue that hyperlocals generally fulfil journalistic norms: "[they] contribute to local knowledge, to the accountability of local elites and to the ability of local people to lobby for change" (2015: 344). My findings in this chapter would suggest that whilst this might be the case, it is only in those locations where sufficient numbers of hyperlocals are publishing regularly that their impact will be felt.

This discussion has not taken into consideration other ways in which media ecologies have shifted and the role of the media has changed. It is by and large a record of the shifting producer landscape rather than one in which the wider digitally enabled citizenship is taken into account. However, research by Firmstone and Coleman (2015) suggests that the legitimacy of the role of the citizen journalist is questionable. They examine Leeds' media ecology to map out the relationships between mainstream media, communications officers in the local council, and citizen journalists (they propose a typology that distinguishes between levels of citizen involvement but does include those who run hyperlocal-type sites). They find that whilst there is now a greater breadth to the local communications ecology, there are limits to the legitimacy of citizen journalism in the eyes of local communications stakeholders:

a combination of a lack of understanding of new forms of media, limited resources to implement a digital strategy, and conservative perceptions of the media preferences and skills of the public serve to maintain the value of mainstream news media above that of digital media. (Firmstone and Coleman 2015: 134)

In Leeds, at least, as enriched as the local public sphere may be by the presence of hyperlocal news publishers, there is little sense that they are taken seriously by either mainstream media or those in public office.

To some extent, this research can be seen as an attempt to set a benchmark against which the future growth or otherwise of the hyperlocal sector can be mapped. In future iterations of this work, clearer criteria might be established around what is defined as 'active' and a longer sample period identified to help make the findings more robust. What is clear is

that this area of news publishing is highly dynamic, with many sites having relatively short but active lives and others changing Web addresses or content management systems and so exposing the fragility of 'Openly Local' as a data source. The role of Talk About Local as custodians of the current iteration (localweblis.net) of the database provides some consistency and at least allows researchers to understand the kinds of websites that will be added to the site. As noted in the previous chapter, this narrows the database to those closer to the Metzgar et al. definition of hyperlocal: "community-oriented", "promot[ing] civic engagement" (2011: 774).

The findings outlined here should be viewed against a backdrop in which regional newspapers have suffered from declining advertising revenues and circulations. 242 newspapers closed between 2005 and 2011 (Graham-Dixon 2012) leaving a total of 1,083 regional daily or weekly newspapers in the UK in 2012 (Newspaper Society 2012). But the picture is complex, with more recent data suggesting that 46 newspapers closed between 2012 and 2015 but 37 new titles launched (Kirk and Chang 2015). This is further complicated by the ongoing conglomeration in newspaper ownership, which has the potential to limit the range of news sources in localities. But even when newspaper groups are bought out, it may not mean changes at the wholesale level of news, with newsrooms within the same group still operating independently despite geographic proximity. The buyout of Local World by Trinity Mirror has not seen (yet) a coming together of newsrooms of titles close to each other in the West Midlands. Ofcom's distinctions between the wholesale and retail level of news are useful guides to assessing whether there is diversity in local news ecologies, whilst Carlson's framework (2013) is a useful aid to testing the ways in which news media can become more 'legitimised' through a process that is more than just about its degree of popularity. As Carlson notes, "understanding the changing nature of journalistic legitimacy in the emerging new media environment begins with an acknowledgement of different strategies toward legitimacy pursued by different entities" (2013: 7). Carlson warns scholars not to simply pitch the old (mainstream media) against the new (bloggers, online activists), but to instead be attentive to the norms and practices in these forms and how they give rise to new, accepted legitimising practices (2013: 7). It is to a discussion of these practices through a series of thumbnail accounts that this thesis turns next.

CHAPTER SIX – THUMBNAIL ACCOUNTS OF HYPERLOCAL PRACTICE

In the last chapter I discussed the extent to which hyperlocal news operations make an effective contribution to local news ecologies. The lack of data on the consumption of hyperlocal news holds it back from being considered as a news provider of significance – its ‘share of references’ is negligible – but it has at least surfaced in judgements made about plurality and assessments of media mergers. Further, in a landscape increasingly dominated by fewer providers at the wholesale level, hyperlocal news publishers do at least offer a refreshingly independent voice. This chapter leads on from the previous one by taking its cue from Matt Carlson (2013) and asking whether there are new norms and practices emerging in hyperlocal news which could be seen as legitimising (2013: 7). For Carlson, issues of visibility, legitimacy and revenue are vital when assessing the heterogeneous nature of local news ecologies. Carlson argues that “journalists do not wholly control their visibility, legitimacy, or revenue but adopt structures, practices, and norms with the aim of bolstering these three areas” (2013: 1). It is the structure, practices and norms of hyperlocal news that are the focus of this chapter and the next.

In this chapter I present findings from three short thumbnail accounts of hyperlocal publishing. Through these thumbnail accounts studies I examine how hyperlocal publishing is operationalised, what distinct practices emerge, and how producers attempt to connect to their audiences. The issues that emerge here – issues of professionalism, sustainability, community – are then further explored in the next chapter via an analysis of interviews with 40 hyperlocal practitioners. In these thumbnail accounts we can also see at first hand the nature of hyperlocal publishing’s working practices and the way relationships with citizens are managed. The voice of the citizen is present in two of these thumbnail accounts, as well as the voice of the practitioner.

The case study hyperlocals have similar characteristics: they are news-focused operations, they are run from within the communities they serve, and they are operated by very small numbers of people. Yet their operational characteristics are different, with differing approaches and attitudes to technology, sustainability, and levels of citizen participation, in particular. The first case study, of B31 Voices in Birmingham, involves in part an analysis of audience engagement online. This operation is run from their family home by a husband and wife team who utilise social media to allow for high levels of citizen participation. Here we draw

attention to the process by which citizens are facilitated to “become producers themselves” (Couldry 2004: 27) through their engagement with B31 Voices via social media.

The next case study also involves a husband and wife team, also based in their own home. Yet unlike B31 Voices, On The Wight are focused on building a financially sustainable enterprise built on a more open approach to newsgathering and dissemination with innovation at the core of their offer. Whilst they began their operation in order to celebrate the cultural life of a very local community where they live, they inevitably expanded to the area already covered by mainstream media and they see themselves very much in competition with them. Here the value created by their operation can be seen in the context of discussions about media plurality. Their practices situate them very much in the guise of the ‘fictive’ hyperlocal entrepreneur discussed in the policy literature.

Finally, the case study on Castle Vale in Birmingham examines the challenges faced by a community news operation that has variously been run as a business, a charity, and a non-profit element of a local housing trust. It offers a critical case study of how citizens can become sensitive to externally imposed “negative reputational geographies” (Parker and Karner 2011: 309). In Castle Vale we look at how assumptions about the ‘voice of the people’ role of community media belies the reality of how the norms of journalism practice come up against the expectations of audiences.

B31 Voices – towards sustained reciprocity

B31 Voices (<http://b31.org.uk>) is a hyperlocal news operation covering a series of suburbs well beyond the B31 postcode from which it takes its name in south-west Birmingham. The areas covered have a population in the region of 100,000 and have a higher than average (for Birmingham) White British population (it varies from just above the 59% Birmingham figure in Weoley ward to 90% in Longbridge ward, according to 2011 Census data). In general, the areas covered would be considered working class. This case study contributes to answering the research question by examining how the working practices and motivations of the publishers of B31 Voices shape the creation of a local networked public sphere of information and debate.

Context

Sas and Marty Taylor are the husband and wife team that runs B31 Voices. Their ‘patch’ is dominated by the former Longbridge motor works, a vast former factory space once employing

22,000 workers in its heyday and, since its closure in 2005, the subject of extensive regeneration. The Taylors moved to Longbridge in 2003 and started blogging in 2010 out of concerns about the representation of their estate's reputation. This desire to redress negative press coverage emerged as a common trait amongst hyperlocal publishers, as we will see in the next chapter six. However, it was not long before their blog became a service of value to the wider public:

The area has got quite a bad reputation and we wanted to learn more about it really. So we just started with a little blog that covered the estate that we live on and it just snowballed from there really. I think as it grew and people started interacting with it more, peoples' expectations of it then changed so we started to deliver more to them. (Sas Taylor)

In this case study I discuss the online and offline production cultures and networks of B31 Voices. Because Sas and Marty operate from home, this case study offers the opportunity to examine the role played by the everyday spaces used in the production of content.

This case study had two research elements: an interview that partly drew upon visual ethnography techniques (Gillárová et al. 2014, Pink 2012) and an analysis of the social media networks of B31 Voices. I draw on each in turn, as the former offers insights into the practices of B31 Voices and the motivations behind those practices, whilst the latter reveals the nature of the wider community network underpinning the B31 operation.

The domesticated newsroom and the civic web

The interview undertaken with Sas and Marty Taylor took place inside the 'newsroom' of B31 Voices (that is, the Taylors' home), and in order to understand the role of this domestic space in the news production process, a form of photo-elicitation was used. This took its cue from work by Gillárová et al. (2014), whose use of photo-elicitation in their interviews with professional journalists allowed participants to reveal 'feelings' about work and working conditions and in particular the role played by technology. Similarly, I found the use of images invaluable in opening up discussion about working practices.

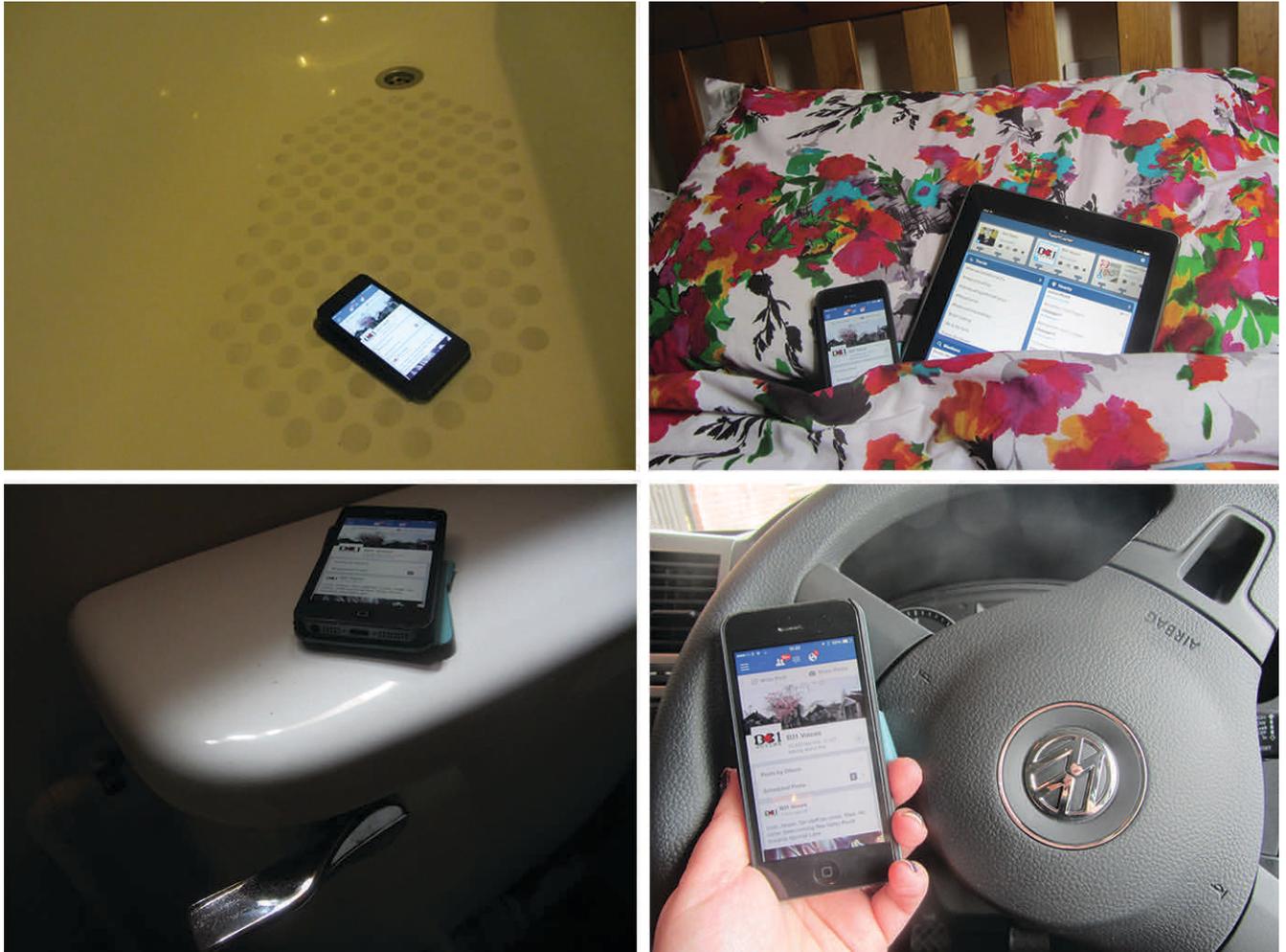


Figure 7: Compilation of photographs taken by Sas Taylor to represent where she worked on B31 Voices.

Asked to photograph the areas in the house where they undertook B31 Voices work, Sas Taylor produced a set of images (see figure 7) that revealed both the places of work within the home (which turned out to be just about everywhere) and the role of technology in the domestic setting, as she chose to take her mobile devices on a tour of the places in which they are put to use in the course of updating B31 Voices' various online outputs. The results were images of her smartphone and tablet computer in the bedroom, the bathroom, the car and the living room. These, and other, domestic spaces become places to carry out their operations:

When I'm out and about taking my kids to school or shopping, or whatever else I'm doing. Whenever I park up or get back into the car, I'll sit and just check all the social media sites and see if anything's happening. (Sas Taylor)

Keeping up with the social media output takes up most of the time. The photographs taken in the bedroom represented the tendency they had to check social media at any time: “we might have a missing person or a missing pet that’s touched everyone, and I will check in the middle of the night to see if there’s any news,” said Sas. Marty Taylor added, “So when we’re talking about a dog, it can be about 4 o’clock in the morning, we might wake up, has that dog been found? Yes, it’s ridiculous, it really is, it’s wrong”.

Although in many ways, the work of B31 Voices is informed by the textual norms of journalism (seen in the standard journalistic construction of stories on its website), the production culture is certainly very different. It is difficult to describe the Taylors’ working processes in traditional newsroom terms, as there is no evidence that editorial decisions are made prior to publication, and there is little consultation between them about what does or does not get covered. The vast majority of the material published on their website is their own, and keeping this operation afloat invades every aspect of their daily lives, as evidenced in the photographs which elicited Marty to admit: “it’s constant, we talk about B31, it’s like 24/7 pretty much”. Hyperlocal newsmaking practices for B31 Voices are bound up in the domestic lives of the publishers rather than the professional norms of mainstream journalism, and the photo-elicitation process revealed how the ‘habitus’ of hyperlocal, whilst free from the hierarchies of traditional newsrooms and their working practices, might instead be subject to other, domestic rules and social structures (“I won’t tweet at the dinner table unless there’s an emergency” - Sas Taylor).

The relatively unstructured nature of B31 Voices’ domesticated newsgathering arrangements perhaps reflect Sas and Marty’s lack of professional journalism experience. As we have noted, many other hyperlocal publishers from a similar background tend to draw heavily on a civic value discourse in order to frame their practice. The same is true here and like others, Sas and Marty situate what they do as being more authentically community-orientated than the local journalism produced by the mainstream press: “it’s about bringing a community together and being a community. If you’ve got newspapers, they’re just about money, that’s all they’re there for” (Marty Taylor). Instead of seeing their role as contributing to a mainstream local news culture, Sas and Marty instead cite Birmingham’s thriving culture of place-based blogging as a key influence in getting them started. Other suburbs in the city have similar news blogs (see chapter five) and there are city-wide blogs covering politics, arts, environment and sport – indeed any topic you might expect the local press to cover. This network has veered in and out of formal organisation, with occasional ‘Birmingham blogger’

meetings and with many, including Sas and Marty, participating in regular 'Social Media Surgeries' to support charities and community groups wishing to increase their media impact. Such surgeries and the wider city blogging culture feel distinctly part of a more civic-orientated Internet culture than a news one.

Social media and networked publics

But just as with the modern professional newsroom, social media plays a key role in the process of finding news and engaging with audiences for B31 Voices and other hyperlocals. The potential, as Spyridou et al. (2013) note, is for new, audience-orientated, participatory approaches to journalism to emerge. However, the established routines within the professionalised newsroom can also act as a barrier to innovation and a devaluing of the audience contribution: "the practice of considering the audience's opinion on the content produced is not widely incorporated into the journalists' working routine, connoting authoritative rituals based on one-to-many communication models" (Spyridou et al. 2013: 88). The domesticated B31 Voices newsroom is not burdened by these professional norms and the approach to social media utilised by Sas and Marty is very different.

Although they have concerns about the degree to which running their operation has become a burden, Sas and Marty have developed a more networked approach than other hyperlocals examined as part of this research. This sees citizens as active contributors, which in some way has eased the pressure of having to be constantly finding new material. Indeed, the particular domestic circumstances of Sas and Marty (as well as the routine of the school run, shopping etc., Sas is a full-time carer for Marty who is disabled with limited mobility) mean that some conventional newsgathering strategies are next to impossible to carry out.

An examination of the Facebook and Twitter feeds for Sas and Marty's hyperlocal news operation revealed that whilst the news blog they run might only post two or three stories daily, their Twitter and Facebook networks play host to a continuous, noisy conversation about everyday living, a flourishing of assets "designed to be networked" (Dovey et al. 2016: 98). Everything from the trivial to the more serious concerns of local governance and crime gets covered, acting to bring people together online through shared, everyday concerns. Reports of car accidents and traffic delays often result in near-live updates from the scene as witnesses and participants come together to offer up their version of events. This makes Sas and Marty's role as administrators difficult as "the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen 1999)

take control of the online space and offer every possible angle to a story, contributing more than just opinions but vivid detail and eyewitness accounts.

Facebook Page analysis

In March 2014, an analysis of the Web-based and social media activity of B31 Voices showed that their Facebook Page was particularly active, with 2,399 comments on 233 posts (table 8).

Website	Facebook	Twitter
20 posts 20 comments 34,101 unique visitors	223 posts 2,399 comments 5,567 likes 3,174 shares 13,707 page likes	684 tweets by @B31Voices (of which, 318 were retweets) 1,160 mentions, replies or retweets of @B31Voices 5,619 followers

Table 7: Engagement across platforms during March 2014.

Whilst there is plenty of evidence on B31's Facebook Page of citizen engagement with issues such as politics and crime; any mention of pets – lost or found – received the bulk of likes, shares and comments (see table 9).

Subject	Stories	Comments	Likes	Shares	Total Engagements	No. Engagements per story
pets	50	788	1,296	2,429	4,513	90
celebration	18	116	1,194		1,310	73
other	13	94	814	23	931	72
jobs	3	66	48	94	208	69
education	2	45	65		110	55
crime	31	408	489	281	1,178	38
community update	23	282	276	87	645	28
traffic	12	195	80	32	307	26
events	47	142	812	128	1,082	23
arts	19	80	296	43	419	22
call for support	15	96	175	57	328	22
crowd sourcing	6	76	8		84	14
sport	2	4	3		7	4
local government	7	7	11		18	3

Table 8: Facebook engagement according to subject matter, March 2014.

In this analysis, each post by the administrators of the B31 Voices page (which is to say, Sas and Marty Taylor) was categorised according to its subject matter. An engagement with the

story was counted whenever a story was liked, commented upon or shared. These may require the user to do no more than simply click or press an icon onscreen, but they do at least suggest the content has been read. Facebook's own insights also give data on 'reach', an indication of how many user timelines the story made an impression on (although the content may not have been read). 'Reach' data was not available to the researcher. The majority of stories are links to material on the B31 Voices website, links to stories on other news websites, or announcements without links.

Information about local events (47) and lost or found pets (50) were the two largest categories. Pet stories were the most likely to receive some form of engagement. The number of engagements per story was 90, with the next highest engaged category being 'celebrations'. In this category were acknowledgements of birthdays, special occasions or achievements (for example: "10 year old ballroom dancer [name] from Northfield has been selected to represent Great Britain! Well done! :) #Positiveb31"). These updates were not shared at all, but users often tagged other Facebook users via the comments box to alert them to the content. This could be seen as a form of targeted sharing rather than the networked sharing that happened with pet stories, which was intended to bring the content to new audiences by ensuring it appeared in the user's news feed.

Overall, stories about pets received 76% of the total shares for March 2014, with one lost dog story receiving 132 comments on its own. In contrast to this rather everyday, 'banal' content with its high engagement rates, stories concerning local government, albeit only 7 in number, were never shared (see Turner 2015 for a detailed discussion of the value to local online networks of "banal pet stories"). The networked effect of platforms such as Facebook result in a form of 'secondary gatekeeping' (Singer 2014). Jane Singer's research notes the impact of social media and social bookmarking platforms on the gatekeeping process. What was once within the control of the news-producing organisation had become something "that is both more complex and more collaborative" (2014: 66). Indeed, the complexity of what happens to B31 Voices' material that is liked, commented upon or shared is bound up in the decision Facebook makes about how its algorithm works, and also dependent on the security settings of the B31 Voices' Facebook Page users. Precise engagement statistics are only available to the administrators of Pages (data not made available to this researcher). But what is clear is that pet-related stories receive an average of 50 shares per story (all other genres of stories were below 5 shares per story), thereby creating significant visibility for this kind of content. In some sense, the banal is a place where indirect reciprocity practices are most in

evidence and perhaps works to build community more effectively than other story genres. Sas and Marty seem very aware of the value of this banal content: “It’s just these silly little things but it you will get hundreds of likes on a post like that. People want to hear good stuff, don’t they?” (Sas Taylor).

Twitter as a tool for direct reciprocation

On Twitter there are over three times as many posts than Facebook by B31 Voices. Sas and Marty are the sole administrators of the account and tweeted 684 times in March 2014, compared to 223 posts on Facebook. There is much evidence on Twitter of direct reciprocation with 46% (n=318) of tweets by B31 Voices for March 2014 being retweets of other users’ content. It is worth looking at who gets retweeted (and therefore directly reciprocated) to see whether it is individuals who get their content recognised (table 10). Of the retweets, the majority were for accounts run on an organisational basis or individuals tweeting only in an organisational capacity (for example, a journalist, police officer or politician whose account was only work-related). 28% (n=90) of tweets were from individual citizens not affiliated to any organisation, whereas the remainder of retweets were from 77 different accounts affiliated to organisations. A fifth of retweets (n=64) were of police accounts (individual officers and corporate accounts) with various other council and public services accounting for 10% of retweets (n=31). The vast majority of the individual citizen accounts were retweeted once or twice (57 out of 62 accounts). This reciprocity appeared to arise from the fact that a total of 416 different accounts either mentioned or retweeted B31 Voices at least once in this month.

Subject	No. tweets	%
arts	7	2%
business	13	4%
charity	15	5%
community	27	9%
education	11	3%
housing	6	2%
individual	90	28%
media	27	9%
police	64	20%
politicians	7	2%
public services	31	10%
sports	10	3%

transport	5	2%
religion	4	1%

Table 9: B31 Voices – Retweets by user type.

B31 Voices’ use of their Twitter account is largely there to tweet useful short updates from others. Links to their own website made up just a small number (n=17) of tweets, whereas 308 tweets contained links to content on other websites (either via a tweet or retweet). Twitter seems to be utilised in a way that is aimed at nurturing relationships with organisations and individuals, rather than at driving traffic to their website. They focus on organisations that can give them information and who might in turn retweet B31 Voices content. When their content is retweeted or information is offered they make sure they acknowledge it, and there are a good number of tweets in the data (n=29) saying ‘thanks’ or ‘thank you’ to users.

Sas and Marty use third party management platforms to surface local content on Twitter: “we’ve got saved searches on the area name and all the keywords and key people. [...] we use TweetDeck on the computer and TweetCaster on the iPad” (Sas Taylor). They expressed wariness when it came to using updates from citizens:

If it was a significant accident, if someone was saying a road was closed, we would tell people straight away but clarify that it had come from a reader(s), and then once we can get official information, we would add that as official information then. (Sas Taylor)

Although they did not talk specifically about formal verification processes, they did mention one example where once a Twitter user had taken photographs of an accident, they were more comfortable in publishing the information (in this case, ahead of official confirmation). The prominence given to official sources and organisations on Twitter is partly a consequence of the differences between the nature of users on Facebook compared to Twitter:

If people are telling us things on Facebook, the first thing I’ll tend to do is turn to Twitter through the contacts we have, the official contacts we have who use Twitter, because they’re more reachable and they use it more in that way. For example, they wouldn’t comment on our Facebook Page, councillors or police officers wouldn’t. (Sas Taylor)

Hashtags as a mechanism for indirect reciprocation

Although the management of social media is a time-consuming and somewhat complex job for Sas and Marty Taylor, the use of hashtags has allowed some degree of structure to emerge around user engagement. Inserting hashtags into social media updates (on Facebook or Twitter) acts as a way to simplify gathering and collating news, as well as allowing for a degree of participation by users in newsmaking. By way of example: during snowfall they use a single hashtag across all platforms to both tag their own content and to bring together the content of citizen contributors (#B31Snowwatch). Such content is then accessible to all by clicking the hashtag on the various platforms, but is also curated by B31 Voices using social media aggregation platforms (such as Storify) to create a clearer narrative from the material. Such hashtag use becomes a form of storytelling. For Sas Taylor, #B31Snowwatch was also evidence of the value of their service:

The B31 snowwatch as well, I think was a big thing that sort of proved how much people relied on it and were interacting with it as well. So then you think, if B31 Voices hadn't done that, what would have happened. [...] they really got a lot of benefit from it and so then you feel that you've got to keep that up, you've got to keep giving them that. (Sas Taylor)

Outside newsgathering, hashtags are used in a way that attempts to highlight positive news stories (#B31positivenews) and also to encourage citizens to support each other (#B31supportinglocal and #B31crowdsource). Even irreverent use of hashtags produces effective networked results. In one case this involved an oft-seen but seemingly uncapturable stray dog. The extent to which the hashtag (#runningcollie) went viral was a point of realisation for Sas and Marty of the real-world impact they were having:

So everybody knew this hashtag and I was like, wow, people really do read it and people do actually pay attention [...] That was a bit of a realisation because you know that you've got x amount of followers and they're talking to you and that's fine, but to know that actually out there in the community when something was happening, people were more aware because, yes, it's a silly example but people are more aware about what's going on so it might be affecting them. (Marty Taylor)

These are useful examples of indirect reciprocity (Lewis et al. 2014), as their use is amplified by the network, not just B31 Voices. The hashtag allows for Person A's social media update to be shared by Person B, which then results in Person C also sharing it. Person C may not be a

member of Person A's network, which means that the reach of the original message is extended beyond B31 Voices' audience. Such use of social media has the potential to achieve "sustained reciprocity" (Lewis et al. 2014), and in contrast to what most other hyperlocals told us about their social media use, B31 Voices appear to retweet and share just about any content requested of it, whether it be banal or extraordinary.

In looking at the participants in the social media networks of B31 Voices, one can see local politicians, public sector workers, police and other official bodies. B31 Voices therefore offers a useful direct networked connection through to those in local power, even if the residents of the area are more immediately interested in the banal rather than the political. So in the suburbs of B31 in Birmingham, people are happy to come together around everyday personal crises (such as a lost pet) and in so doing to show their networked potential. Such a focus on issues of seemingly little importance seems to be a rejection of journalism's traditional goal of holding local power to account, yet as Marty Taylor makes clear in his description, the intention is for B31 Voices to serve a more benign civic purpose:

I don't think it [the community] necessarily needs us. It needs something like B31, every area I think needs something like that to bring communities together, to bring people together, to share so you know what's about because otherwise you don't know what's actually going on in your area. So I think being able to do that is... well, it's all about being a community, isn't it, I guess. (Marty Taylor)

Summary

This case study revealed the everyday nature of undertaking hyperlocal journalism and the everyday nature of engaging with hyperlocal news content. The particular circumstances of B31 Voices means that their newsgathering is centred around a highly developed use of social media, with reciprocation at its heart. This allows the public to act as both newsgatherers, effectively chronicling the everyday, and also secondary gatekeepers, shaping B31 Voices' news agenda through sharing, commenting, and 'liking' specific kinds of content. The publishers of B31 Voices operate more in the civic domain than a journalistic one, and the editors draw on a community discourse to contextualise their work. Newsgathering is carried out as they traverse the domestic realm, using mobile technology in the bedroom, in the bath, in the car, and at any time of day. It might be a stretch to infer from this that their content is partly shaped by this setting, but on Facebook at least there is certainly an emphasis on the

everyday concerns of ordinary people. Sas and Marty's own perception of how they use social media is that they tend to firefight rather than plan, and social media becomes something of a flow that they react to whatever the time of the day. For this reason they cannot quite imagine anyone taking over from them: "It's quite a hard thing to hand over I think what we do on social media; we'd have to find the right person to trust to do it to the same level as we're doing it now" (Sas Taylor).

Yet their management of social media could be seen as a mirror of how their audience use it; that is, using it to keep up to date with what is happening within their community, always glancing at it no matter what else they are doing. But their sometimes casual attitude to social media masks a well-developed strategic use, with clear distinctions made between platforms. On Facebook, the individual citizens whose successes and losses (of pets) produce high levels of engagement, are a resource who turn to B31 Voices to tell them of breaking news, be it snowfall or car crashes. On Twitter, official sources are given prominence, but there is constant direct reciprocation in order to sustain their network. Reciprocation is at the heart of their social media practices across both Facebook and Twitter, with the use of hashtags enabling their network to participate in newsgathering or in promoting civic values. Such digital practices are aimed at "suggesting future interactions and benefits" (Lewis 2015: 2) and are necessary for the success of a news operation that prides itself on the participation of ordinary citizens. Research by Borger et al. (2016) into the (lack of) participatory practices within a commercial hyperlocal operation found that audiences assumed that they would be addressed as newsgatherers as much as audience: "[they] considered it the journalists' task to create the preconditions for a participatory environment and to encourage participants to become active in it and make the actual news" (Borger et al. 2016: 716). It is this culture that B31 Voices encourages, but it is a time-consuming process that, at the time of the research, had no clear model for sustainability. However, the issue was beginning to loom large as server costs rose due to increased traffic: "What I'm working on at the moment is funding, is how we can get funding, grants and just generate more money... well, money. Not more money, just any money" (Sas Taylor). There is recognition that routes to income generation beyond advertising are needed, with grant funding and crowdsourcing considered as options: "looking at things like the server [costs] we were talking about crowdsourcing some funding for that. There's a lot of people who rely on us. Even our Facebook followers, if we got a pound or a small percentage of each, could cover that" (Sas Taylor).

B31 Voices represents a well-developed example of a hyperlocal that successfully operates within a civic discourse and one that has nurtured reciprocal relationships with the people and organisations of South Birmingham. Yet, in failing to address its precarious economic situation, it falls short of fulfilling the ‘fictive’ role set out in much of the policy-focused literature about the UK hyperlocal sector. In the next section we look at a hyperlocal publisher that has matured into an operation which, outwardly at least, is achieving a high degree of success.

On The Wight – a hyperlocal ‘start up’

In this case study I draw on an interview with Simon and Sally Perry from On The Wight (<http://onthewight.com>) and a day spent as participant observer while they worked on producing stories for their hyperlocal news operation. This case study offers insight into how a news operation seeks to gain legitimacy and sustainability within an existing local news ecology. It begins by setting out that wider media ecology before looking at the motivations of the publishers and examining their newsroom practices. It argues that whilst On The Wight represents, to an extent, the ‘fictive’ hyperlocal entrepreneur as discussed widely in policy-focused literature, the publishers draw on a much broader discourse to situate their practice, rather than simply an entrepreneurial one.

Context

The Isle of Wight sits on the south coast of England in the county of Hampshire. It has a population of 139,105 (mid-2014 estimate) and 94.8% of residents are of ‘White British’ origin (2011 census). Over a quarter of residents are over 65.²² The island is a destination for retirees and is largely rural, with several small to medium-sized towns. Five of its wards are in the 20% most deprived in the UK and it has half the rate of managerial occupations than the south-east as a whole,²³ indicative of its economy having a high level of service sector jobs to meet the needs of the large number of summer visitors who visit its seaside towns. It also hosts two large music festivals and other cultural and sports (largely sailing) festivals that attract visitors.

²² <https://www.iwight.com/azservices/documents/2552-Isle-of-Wight-Demographic-and-Population-2014-15-Final.pdf>

²³ <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=7&b=6275138&c=P030+1UD&d=13&e=10&g=6402196&i=1x1003x1004&m=0&r=0&s=1464871658625&enc=1&dsFamilyId=185>

The island has only a small range of media outlets dedicated to it, one of which is a weekly newspaper, The County Press (circulation 26,817 in May 2016 according to JICREG data). The County Press is the only surviving newspaper title on the Island which, like many other areas in the UK, has had a rich history of local newspaper publication. Like Birmingham's press history (see chapter five), there was much amalgamation of smaller titles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The British Library lists 64 newspaper titles for the island (the earliest in 1845) with some beginning their life covering small towns (for example, The Shanklin Gazette, 1899-1937). The County Press, like other local newspapers, has seen a decline in income from advertising. In its 2015 financial report (Isle of Wight County Press Limited 2015), it admits that the climate has become tougher due to "structural changes" (2015: 1) which has seen its traditional advertisers switch away from classified to online. But online advertising is also a competitive space: "the market for online display advertising is very competitive with many choices available to potential local and national advertisers" (2015: 1). The County Press saw its income drop by 4% in 2015 from £4.025m in 2014, to £3.872m.

Isle of Wight Radio is an independent commercial station that has changed ownership many times since it began in 1990. It was briefly owned by Global Radio but is now part of a small media group (Media Sound Holdings) who also publish a glossy magazine (Beacon Magazine) which has four editions for different areas of the island. The magazine includes advertising for local businesses along with some feature-style editorial. The island saw some experimentation with local TV in the late 1990s, with 'TV 12' becoming one of only a handful of local TV stations in the UK to operate on an analogue Restricted Service Licence. It was followed by Solent TV, which had less locally focused content and relied on imported international programming to fill its schedule. This closed in 2007 (BBC 2013b). The island has coverage from the BBC's local 'South Today' programme but does not have a dedicated journalist on the island, relying partly on On The Wight as a feeder for stories: "the relationship with the BBC is very good, they will come to us for stories or come to us for photos and credit and they'll link back" (Simon Perry).

The nearest rival to On the Wight in online terms is Island Echo, which describes itself as "the Isle of Wight's only true 24hr news source" (www.islandecho.co.uk/contact-us/island-echo). Begun in 2012, it has an emphasis on breaking news. The Isle of Wight News (<http://isleofwightnewsdaily.com/>) is an aggregation service that draws together content based on hashtags related to the Isle of Wight. Typically, its content comes from On The Wight, Island Echo and the The County Press, as well as official sources such as the local council.

On the Wight

On The Wight was originally called Ventnor Blog (Ventnor – population circa 10,500 – being a small town at the southern end of the Isle of Wight) and was set up by Simon and Sally Perry in 2005, not long after they moved to the island from London. They publish “a minimum of ten” (Sally Perry) news stories a day, although that number is sometime higher: “it can be between ten and fifteen sometimes” (Sally Perry). As well as the website, they also run a Twitter account (approx 11,400 followers, June 2006), a Facebook Page (16,656 likes, June 2016) and also a WhatsApp group (which sends news updates with links to stories on the website). The Facebook Page is used to link back to news stories on the website but also sometimes shares readers’ photographs, tagging the reader in question as part of a direct reciprocal exchange. The Twitter account uses this kind of content much more rarely, largely acting to direct people back to the website. The different uses of the platforms is deliberate: “what’s popular on Facebook is different to what’s popular on site. Twitter is always quite hard to get a handle on really. It’s not very well used on the island” (Sally Perry). The Perrys admit that neither platform is still used to directly engage with readers: “It’s something we’ve lost. We have lost [...] the social part of our social media” (Simon Perry).

The Perrys’ main motivation for starting Ventnor Blog was not dissimilar to that expressed by B31 Voices, in that they were attempting to redress negative perceptions about the area. However, in their case they were motivated less by countering stories about crime or deprivation, and more by letting their friends know that the Isle of Wight was not a cultural backwater. Its initial focus was therefore intended to be a cultural one:

We started the site to talk about the local art scene when we moved to Ventnor [...] We were just amazed by how active a scene there is [...] so we were writing about gigs that were coming up or exhibitions that we’d been to [...]. It was sort of almost to show our friends in London that actually there’s a really vibrant art scene out here. (Sally Perry)

Like the Taylors in the previous section, the Perrys situated their origins within the blogging community. Simon Perry had run an online technology publication (with a global audience) in London. It was during this time he received training as a journalist on a course at the London College of Printing, but he describes himself as having come from the “world of blogging”. For Simon, this comes with a particular sensibility:

In the blogging world, transparency, openness and dependability were, you know, the absolute core. So when we were starting this, we thought well look there's no other way to do it because you've got to be open and transparent because why would it be anything else? (Simon Perry)

However, this intention to retain a focus solely on the cultural was never carried through, and Ventnor Blog started from the outset, almost unintentionally, to include news:

The very first post was actually about a bomb being detonated in the harbour in Ventnor, it was an old World War two bomb that had washed up and I guess we just thought [...] we just decided if we're going to start it we may as well start it today because this is you know, great content and so I stood down there for about eight hours with a camcorder. (Sally Perry)

Again, much like with B31 Voices, there was a sense that the operation grew at a rate that surprised them. Ventnor Blog's forum is an example of this which saw thousands of individual contributions: "it became a thing on the island where people, not just Ventnor people, people from all over would contribute" (Simon Perry). Its success helped the Perrys realise that they were providing a platform that was useful to citizens, and although the forum eventually stopped being used, the Perrys believe it situated their operation as being one where the citizen's voice can be heard, anonymously if need be:

It was anonymous on the forum, it was anonymous on the site, we've had tremendous pressure to the people who control the Island; have exerted various forms of pressure to try to get us to make people use their own names. (Simon Perry)

The desire to offer a platform for debate is partly linked to the Perrys' status as 'incomers'. They are certainly sensitive to how their audience perceive them: "we would never be accepted in the same way as someone who has grown up here" (Sally Perry). Their tactic has been to "stick their neck out" (Simon Perry), but building trust has taken time and has involved getting past what they argue is quite a "closed mentality" (Sally Perry) on the island.

Managing Ventnor Blog and forums was soon becoming time-consuming ("Sally had the nightmare of adminning the forums" - Simon Perry) and it was clear that the operation as a whole would need to move from a hobby to a business: "We were putting too much time into it and not getting an income from anywhere else so it had to become commercial" (Sally Perry). The operation now relies on a mix of income sources. Some of these relate directly to the

website (display advertising, sponsored features), whereas others are separate activities such as creating websites for local businesses (“few and far between really” - Sally Perry) or offering consultancy. They have tried running events on the back of the On The Wight brand but the time and organisation needed is not matched by the income generated. There are clear signs of the enterprise maturing and stabilising after ten years in operation (by 2016), but Sally Perry pointed out, “It’s been a real struggle really.” Attempts to use third parties to sell advertising for them were not successful and they remained frustrated at their own failure to make more significant inroads into the near-monopoly enjoyed by The County Press: “what people commonly say to me is that ‘we advertise in the paper, but we don’t know why’ and it doesn’t stop them doing it” (Simon Perry).

One other source of income for On The Wight has come from their participation in a funded programme aimed at developing the hyperlocal sector. In 2015 they bid successfully to be able to participate in a programme from Nesta (Geels 2015) aimed at developing expertise in audience analytics. As well as advice on social media and search engine optimisation, the programme paid a fee (£6,500) in exchange for participants taking actions to adapt their content to attract more visitors to their websites.²⁴

The ‘fictive’ hyperlocal publisher

On The Wight’s participation in the Nesta programme comes as little surprise given they have long been cited by Nesta and others as fulfilling an ideal about what hyperlocal publishing can achieve. Damian Radcliffe’s 2012 report for Nesta, *Here and Now*, lists Ventnor Blog as one of a number of hyperlocals that are “excellent at identifying and meeting the requirements of a local community” (Radcliffe 2012: 16). Earlier still, in 2009, they were cited in a BBC report as being “in the vanguard of the UK’s hyperlocal news movement” (BBC 2009). Ofcom mention Ventnor Blog in their 2009 report on local and regional media as an example of “ultra-local” community media that has “raised their profiles and generate tens of thousands of unique visitors a month” (Ofcom 2009a: 45). The journalism industry website, journalism.co.uk, wrote favourably about On The Wight’s coverage of a local trade dispute (Townend 2009) that attracted national coverage in 2009, contrasting its detailed reporting and live blogging with that from The County Press and The Guardian: “the Ventnor Blog has done an excellent job of providing the islanders (and outsiders) with raw and useful material, showing us how high-quality hyperlocal reporting is done” (Townend 2009). Talk About Local acknowledged this

²⁴ Disclosure: I was a consultant for Nesta on this programme.

work with two awards in 2010,²⁵ for best overall site and best hyperlocal story. The Society of Information Technology Management described the site as “prolific”, citing its coverage of severe weather in January 2010 as an example of how hyperlocal sites can keep local communities informed (SOCITM 2010: 163).

In 2015, On The Wight was featured as a case study in a publication by the Carnegie Trust (Pennycook 2015: 15-16). Praise for the operation continues but its work is set in the context of its struggles to sustain itself. The case study pitches On the Wight as an innovator that is able to fulfil a fourth estate function despite only being able to pay “a modest salary” to Simon and Sally Perry who work “over 10 hours a day” (Pennycook 2015: 16). It argues that they have repurposed content around “audience demand for more civic news” (2015: 15) and it is an online operation that enlivens the local news media ecology, forcing incumbents to follow its innovations:

[With the introduction of On The Wight], the Isle of Wight was forced to shift to a culture of more immediate and comprehensive local news provision, with outlets publishing more content online, at a faster rate; highlighting exclusive content; and using social media to cover council meetings in real time. (Pennycook 2015: 15)

In all of the five case studies detailed by Carnegie Trust there is a sense of precarity about their sustainability. On The Wight and the others have a role in “help[ing] inspire those who are considering starting a hyperlocal news group” (2015: 7) and the case studies make clear that relying on the market alone will not allow them to succeed: “for the sector to reach its full potential and meet this demand, further support for hyperlocals must be forthcoming” (2015: 3). The Carnegie Trust therefore emphasise the public service role played by On The Wight and the others rather than their role as journalism entrepreneurs. In a sense, the case studies are shaped to fit the Carnegie Trust’s agenda that hyperlocal publishing should receive state subsidy.

The home office as hyperlocal newsroom

While the ‘newsroom’ for B31 Voices was similar to On The Wight in that it was a domesticated space, there was a sharp contrast, in that the Perrys used a home office space and largely confined their hyperlocal operation within it. Their hyperlocal newsroom was a relatively formal one. It had two desks, with Sally and Simon sitting diagonally from each other

²⁵ <http://onthewight.com/2010/04/25/ventnorblog-wins-best-uk-hyperlocal-site/>

(see figure 8). The walls had a couple of posters on them related to running the business. One says: "We get paid to connect businesses with Islanders through our News and other information services," and the other: "Quality first, last and forever". In the corner of the room is another desk which gives live updates on a computer screen of the number of visitors coming to the website (see figure 9). Although during my observation Simon expressed a lot of pride in having set up this system (it shows the Google Analytics platform and is run from a micro-computer called an Arduino), in the interview he argued that knowing which story resonated more with the readers was shaped by instinct rather than statistics: "Well we've got the live stats in the corner which gives us a pointer, but you know when you've found a story, you know, you just know, don't you?" (Simon Perry)

Although the Perrys can sometimes work long hours, it is not quite to the extent that they spend late nights waiting for updates on lost pets, as B31 Voices acknowledged doing. The Perrys' day is partly built around family time but they do admit to spending evenings working on stories: "We used to stop but now it's bled back into evenings again" (Sally Perry). Maintaining a separation between home and family can be difficult:

Because we are married and we live together and we work together the conversations about work will continue elsewhere and pretty much all of the time. You know it is one of my bugbears actually. (Sally Perry)

The presence of the newsroom in the family home meant that the temptation to carry on working was always there: "because the office is in the home, yeah, if something happens then we will just come down and start working" (Sally Perry).



Figure 8: Newsroom of On The Wight.

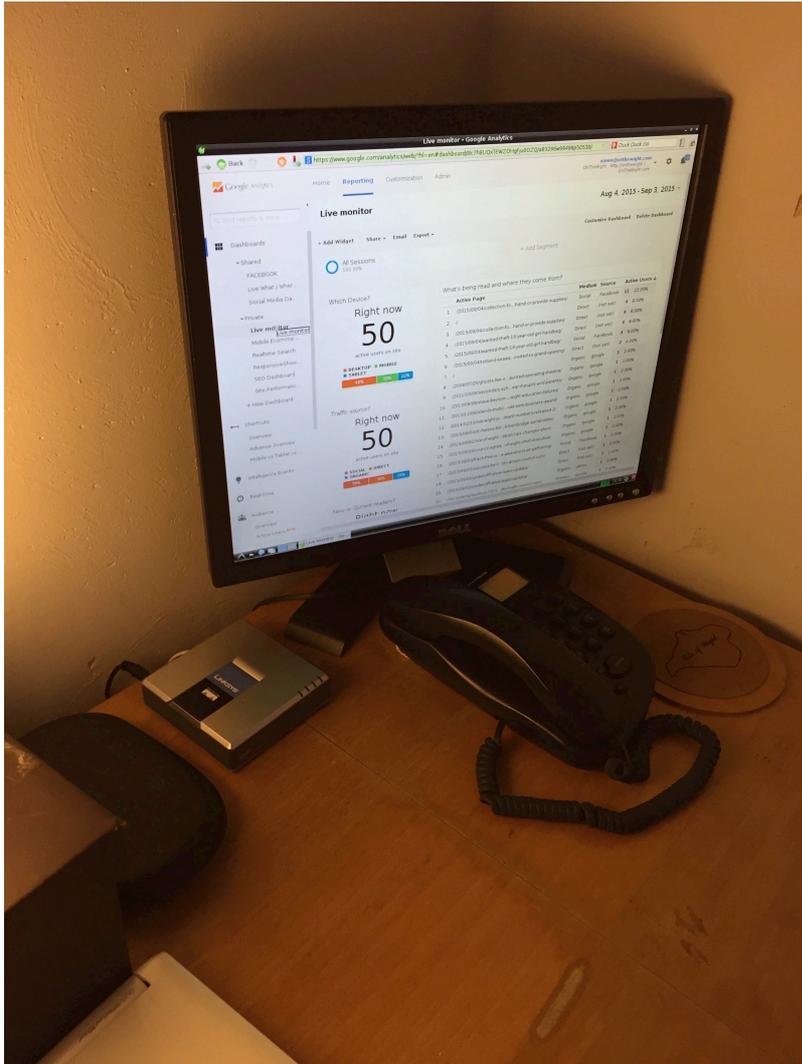


Figure 9: Computer showing live data of visitor numbers to On The Wight.

I spent a day with On The Wight (4 September 2015) which involved a period of participant observation (I was asked at a couple of points for ideas for headlines and for story angles) as well as an interview. Seemingly, there is very little communication between them in the newsroom, with short utterances (“yeah, that’s fine”) made seemingly in relation to nothing at all. However, they utilise instant messaging in place of a lot of direct verbal communication. This has a number of advantages:

We just find it easier using instant messaging for passing over links, that sort of thing, but as we showed you with ‘Slack’, being able to categorise everything and go back and search you know it might be you’ve forgotten and I’ve sent something and forgotten the details, you go back and find it easily. (Sally Perry)

The mix of online messaging and non-verbal communication is part of a news production system that has a clear separation of roles in the newsroom:

Yeah we have a sort of system, we know how we work. We've worked so closely for so long that it's almost telepathic. If Simon is publishing the article, I generally just look at them all. I'm the last person normally to do the publishing because I'd have to read over; he's [Simon] dyslexic. So I will do the final read over and then I'll publish and then I rejig the front page and I do Twitter and I do Facebook and Simon will do WhatsApp and so there's a sort of routine of how we do stuff".(Sally Perry)

As well as keeping a close eye on website visitors, the Perrys are also attentive to the output of other media on the island. There is a copy of the County Press newspaper with stories highlighted throughout. This is to identify stories that appear in the newspaper but that On The Wight may not have covered. Sometimes they follow up these stories and write their own versions of them. Discussion about this practice revealed that they have a tense relationship with the County Press:

We have this thing where we, as you saw when you looked through the paper, we looked up highlighted stories which we might then follow up on. But we will always source them, and we always credit them as a source and they take lots of stories from us and they never do. Back and forth with them about it. The editor says it's not their policy, their policy is to not credit any sources. (Sally Perry)

This policy of crediting others is core to the practice of On The Wight. Indeed, Simon reacted to Sally's statement above by saying: "...which coming from the blogging world is, is absolutely revolting". When press releases are used on the site, the practice is to give the author of the press release a named account in order to make it clear to readers that it has not been written by On The Wight.²⁶ Simon described this as an "open and honest way" to deal with press releases rather than the more common method in journalism of lightly adapting them and giving them a byline from the journalist.

²⁶ For example: all stories by 'Claire Robertson' on the website are press releases from Island Roads who manage the highways on behalf of the local council. See: <http://onthewight.com/author/clairerobertsoncontributes/>

The gendered hyperlocal newsroom

On 3 September 2015 (the day before my visit), 12 stories were published to the site, which was within the number Sally had suggested was average for On The Wight. Of those, six were written by Sally and the rest were either press releases, treated as suggested above, or from guest contributors: “that’ll be people who might send a weekly piece or might send a monthly piece or a one-off piece” (Sally Perry). Press releases might be from public sector sources (there was a police one on 3 September) or from activist groups (an anti-fracking group in this instance). A regular contributor on sailing also had an article published, as well as a representative of a local theatre group who reviewed performances.

Simon did not have any bylines on that day, and during my observation his contribution to the writing on the site was, as Sally had indicated, to write headlines for the WhatsApp service and field phone calls related to the commercial side of things (“I can’t close a sale, Simon can” - Sally Perry). From the interview and observation, it became clear that Sally wrote much of the copy for the site and managed much of the day-to-day operations.

She is the engine of the site [...] output is amazing. Absolutely amazing and without her the site would be nothing, we would be delivering hardly any content at all. She doesn’t like hearing this because she is over-modest but that’s the reality and by her saying about doing the admin, what she means is that she is the organised one and she’s the one who stays on top of everything. (Simon Perry)

Sally had a system for “staying on top of everything”. She used a diary to list what needed to be done on each day and crossed it off when complete (see figure 10). The list included family commitments as well as On The Wight business. Where a story was listed it also included the time it went live:

The day starts for me writing a list of the stories that I’m going to do that day and that generally gets doubled as the day goes on, and then things will move over to the next day, and then there’s always stuff coming in and it can be, you know, really juicy stories or it can just be really quite simple things. (Sally Perry)

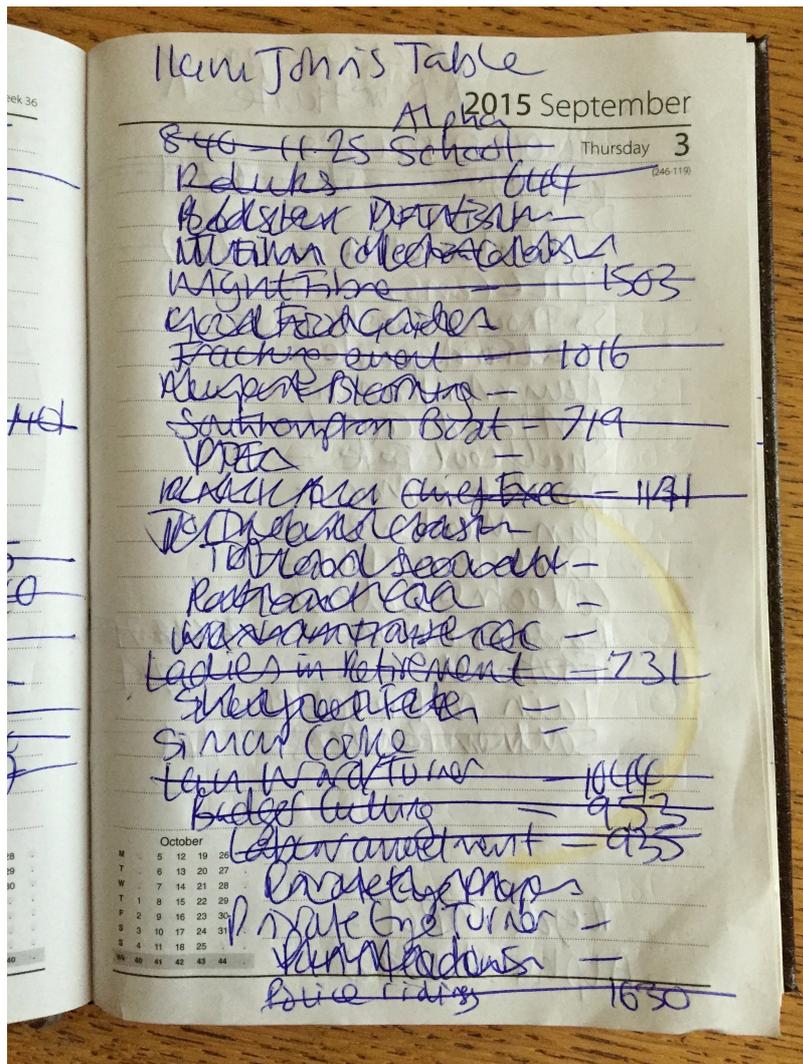


Figure 10: Sally Perry's diary for 3 September 2015.

Yet despite the amount of stories she writes, Sally resists being labelled a journalist:

I would never call myself a journalist, I refer to myself as a reporter, I think there is a distinction between the two. When people call us journalists and I say 'I'm not a journalist, I'm a reporter, I report what goes on'. (Sally Perry)

She made a careful separation between the kinds of stories she wrote and those that Simon took a lead on: "Simon is more interested in investigative stuff because that is what he is better at" (Sally Perry). She argued that she is underconfident and unlike Simon, has not had any training:

Things to do with the MP perhaps and Council stuff where; or things where's there a lot of research and knowing who's the right, knowing the right route to find that information I think Simon is a lot better at that. (Sally Perry)

Yet despite this view, Sally cited an example where she took on an investigation into the closure of a local road after a landslide. The story is a long-running one (from 2007-2016) and 55 of the 89 stories written on the subject are by her.²⁷ Yet she argued that she felt “less confident” doing such work:

So I will do investigative stuff and I have done in the past but I feel less confident doing it. I mean I guess there's things like Undercliff drive as an example which was done probably in the last year and a half, I don't know if there's been a landslide in those landlocked properties and the council handled it really badly and I've kind of taken that as my thing [...] That's been one thing that has been, it's holding people to account, and it's along those lines. (Sally Perry)

The distinction she made between her own investigative work and Simon's was that the latter's might require a challenge to authority over the phone or face-to-face: “in terms of social skills and in terms of some sort of social engineering of being able to phone someone up and get the answer, I don't feel confident doing that” (Sally Perry).

Recent research (North 2016) has examined the extent to which female journalists in mainstream news organisations are allocated ‘soft’ news topics because of their gender: “women remain steadfastly pigeon-holed in soft news areas that are deemed less prestigious than hard news genres” (North 2016: 369). Whilst the analysis here has not looked in detail about whether the allocation of story topics is gendered, there is a degree to which the On The Wight newsroom is “hegemonically masculine” (North 2016: 369). Sally situated her own role as ‘admin’ despite the work she does on investigations and in live reporting local council meetings (a regular and distinctive feature of On The Wight's work). In contrast, Simon's role was described (by Sally) as more reflexive; focused on research. Her response to questions about the use of technology in the newsroom was telling: “Simon's thing is that he will look at stuff, where I would continue working in the same way in which I work, because Simon's background is in technology, and he's always looking to innovate” (Sally Perry). To an extent, the gendered newsroom of On The Wight is inevitably an extension of the gendered domestic space within which it is physically situated.

²⁷ The actual figures are: Sally, 55; Simon, 11; joint, 2; official (press releases), 17; other, 4.

Summary

This case study looked at the practices and discourses that operate within what we might describe as a semi-professional hyperlocal newsroom. On The Wight seem to be at a critical point in their development whereby they recognise the civic value they have as an independent news operation and the role they play in enlivening the Isle of Wight news ecology, yet they have not quite developed the business model that will enable them to sustain their operation at a level that provides a living for them. Much like the Taylors at B31 Voices, they situate themselves partly within a discourse of openness that comes from the “the blogging world” (Simon Perry). They give space to other voices on their platforms but rarely in the developed reciprocal way through social media that B31 Voices do. Their main concern is to retain their authenticity, which they operationalise through choosing to publish press releases or statements from third parties in full with a byline attributed to the organisation, and allowing anonymised comments and articles from citizens.

On The Wight presents an attractive case study for policy-lobbyists in that it is well organised, civically-orientated, and with a successful shared editorship in place. Yet it is clear that Sally has the responsibility for carrying out the day-to-day practices that sustain the operation and ensure enough content of any kind is published onto the site. All stories end up being checked by her before publication and although Sally and Simon seem to work relatively autonomously (Sally’s notebook is evidence of this), they consult constantly via instant messaging or the occasional verbal exchange. Karen Ross and Cynthia Carter (2011) make the point that professional newsrooms have taken-for-granted conventions and routines “which make them difficult to identify as gendered” (2011: 1149). The On The Wight newsroom is certainly highly routinised and its tasks are, to a degree, divided on gendered lines (Simon can “close a sale”, takes on technology projects, and is seen as sufficiently “confident” to undertake investigative work; in contrast, Sally sees her work as ‘admin’). The implications of this divide may not, as other studies have focused on (North 2016), be seen in the output of On The Wight. Rather, the perceived success of the operation, that is, its partial fulfilment of the ‘fictive’ promise of hyperlocal as envisaged by policy-makers and lobbyists, is built upon Sally soaking up the burden of its precarity.

Case Study 3 – Tyburn Mail (Castle Vale, Birmingham)

Having looked at a case study where the newsroom is largely informal (B31 Voices) and another where the operation is semi-formalised (On The Wight), this final case study focuses

on a hyperlocal news operation that although equally small in size (like the others, having just two people at its heart), is more formally situated as a professional news operation. But rather than focus solely on the news production process in this case study I instead examine the ways in which assumptions about the democratising, empowering function of community media comes up against the tensions over representation that exist between readers and producers. The focus therefore is on both the hyperlocal media operation and its audience on the Castle Vale estate in north-east Birmingham. A range of primary research was undertaken for this case study: workshops with residents, interviews with the estate's community media organisation, and reflections from the undertaking of a participatory journalism project. The case study offers a critical account of the 'banality' of everyday activism by citizens sensitive to what David Parker and Christian Karner have described as externally imposed "negative reputational geographies" (2011: 309).

Context

Tyburn Mail is a monthly newspaper and regularly updated news blog (with associated social media accounts) that covers the largely working-class Tyburn council ward in north-east Birmingham. The area includes the large Castle Vale housing estate, originally one of the largest such estates in Europe. Known locally as 'The Vale', the area is home to 25,297 people (2011 Census) and is in the top 10% of the most deprived wards in the UK.²⁸ It has a higher than average white population in proportion to the rest of Birmingham (76% compared to 59%).²⁹

Adam Mornement's (2005) account of Castle Vale's post-1990s transformation – from troubled high-rise housing estate to a less imposing mix of suburban houses and low-rise flats – is entitled 'No Longer Notorious', reflecting the widely held belief among citizens of Birmingham that for much of the estate's history it was considered something of a no-go area: "the media didn't help. Castle Vale was constantly portrayed as a den of iniquity by local papers" (Mornement 2005: 84). Ali Madanipour's (2005) description of Castle Vale shows how much it had in common with many other 1960s failed estates that were already looking tired within 20 years of being built: "the neighbourhood suffered from poor quality infrastructure and buildings, lack of services, fear of crime and vandalism, poor health, unemployment, low educational standards, and a poor image" (2005: 51). The building of the largely council-run

²⁸ via <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>

²⁹ via Birmingham City Council.

estate was begun in the early 1960s following extensive slum clearances of inner-city properties in Birmingham. By the time it was completed in the late 1960s, it included 34 high-rise blocks. Mornement highlights how the estate's social issues were exacerbated by the poor condition of the housing stock. It was clear something had to be done.

For years Birmingham City Council had been aware of the gravity of Castle Vale's problems. Final confirmation came in 1991 when a chunk of concrete fell from one of the tower blocks. There was nobody underneath, but Castle Vale was falling apart. (Mornement 2005: 9)

Veronica Coatham and Lisa Martinali outline how by the early 1990s there was: "an identified need to develop a long-term strategy for Castle Vale encompassing the key priorities of a regeneration initiative" (Coatham and Martinali 2010: 91). The solution was the development of a Housing Action Trust (HAT), of which there were only six in the UK (see Evans and Long 2000 for an overview of the HATs). These trusts were a policy of the 1980s Conservative government, designed to deal with problematic estates by providing investment but taking them out of local government control into the hands of a Non-Departmental Public Body. Tenants in estates where a HAT was proposed were given a vote on whether to leave the control of the council. As well as new funds, the HAT promised a more holistic approach that saw social problems as related and encouraged partnership working with police, education and other parties (Mornement 2005: 15). In 1993, Castle Vale residents voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining the HAT: "the residents of a 1960s experiment in social housing had voted to be part of a social engineering experiment in the 1990s. It was a leap of faith" (Mornement 2005: 14).

The Castle Vale Housing Action Trust saw its role, as did the other HATs, as being the "redevelopment of the social infrastructure and combating social exclusion from the outset" (Evans and Long 2000: 309). The importance of emphasising citizen participation was central to how the HAT went about its subsequent regeneration of the area. The 1995 masterplan for the area makes clear that the future for the estate would mark a move away from central control and towards a more significant role for citizens:

A revitalised Castle Vale [...] must engender a greater pride of place and community spirit than at present. In turn this may lead to the residents assuming greater responsibility for setting standards and taking wider responsibility and authority for the future management and maintenance of the new Castle Vale. (Castle Vale Housing Action Trust 1995: 2)

The development of community media in Castle Vale

Whilst improving local social capital was seen as a central part of the regeneration process, it was also clear that the external perception of the area needed addressing. Adam Mornement (2005: 82-93) describes the role that public relations and art played in helping shift the story of The Vale to something other than crime and deprivation from the mid-1990s onwards. However, the area also developed community media outlets, tasked partly with playing a similar role.

In the first instance, a community radio station, Vale FM, was set up in 1995. Its manager at the time, Neil Hollins (interviewed in 2013), describes its early development: “Vale FM was born out of an idea by local residents who were maybe involved in pirate radio or who were maybe mobile DJs and believed that a community radio station would be good for Castle Vale”. Hollins became the station’s first employee in 1996 and was employed directly by the HAT. The station broadcast on the basis of applying for ‘restricted service’ licences which confined its output to a 28-day period at any one time (this was the most common way for community radio stations to legally operate at this time). ‘Castle Vale Community Radio Limited’ had been set up in 1999 as the vehicle through which grant funding that was not directly from the HAT could be bid for. Hollins became adept at securing external funding (“a mix of funds, which would be regional and European, and then some which were more local”) and at expressing the value of Castle Vale as a place where funders could see the potential for interventions to transform lives: “this is about putting out an image of Castle Vale as a vibrant creative place, where things are happening. It might not be the best place in the world but things are happening” (Hollins). Different funders might require different articulations of place, but the desired outcomes were always the same: “the primary benefits were very much about the personal outcomes for beneficiaries. The secondary ones [...] were about reputational aspects and challenging negative stigmas” (Hollins).

Whilst the radio station might have initially been developed out of concerns to address wider public perceptions of the area and to give voice to residents, it also provided training and development for individuals who might then go on to fulfil educational or creative ambitions:

[From 1998] we began running training courses under franchise contract radio courses for unemployed people to use it as a way of developing skills, confidence, employability. (Hollins)

By the time it was applying for one of the new community radio licences in 2004, its role in supporting Castle Vale's transformation was recognised by a local councillor in the licence application: "CVCR has been an important player in the regeneration of Castle Vale since the mid 1990s" (Castle Vale Community Radio 2004: 24).

In 2001 a community newspaper was developed (with just four pages at that stage and called Vale Mail) which, like the radio station, was directly linked to the HAT. Hollins argues that there was initial distrust of the impartiality of the newspaper: "it was still under the control of the HAT, so wasn't particularly trusted, it was seen a bit of a propaganda sheet, and it was rather disorganised and didn't look very nice really" (Hollins). There was little citizen participation in the newspaper, which in 2004 took on a trained journalist, Clive Edwards, as editor. The newspaper under Edwards expanded in size (to 24 pages eventually), in area (to cover nearby council wards outside Castle Vale in order to increase revenue from advertising), and in editorial confidence in subsequent years. Edwards describes the role of the newspaper before he arrived:

[It was] closely edited and controlled by the Housing Action Trust entirely as promotional material. No indication of any bad news or anything. Its function was to improve its reputation [...] All the work that the Housing Action Trust did to regenerate Castle Vale in terms of its buildings and its organisations, they thought would be well served by a monthly newspaper. (Edwards).

The HAT was designed to have a limited life span, with residents allowed to choose to go back to local council control or to a housing association at the end of the HAT period. On the winding up of the Castle Vale HAT in 2005, almost all residents agreed for their properties to be managed by Castle Vale Community Housing Association. This also resulted in change for the community media operation. It was expected that the HAT's closure would result in the likely withdrawal of funding for community media in Castle Vale. However, the HAT had surplus funds to dispose of from the sale of its stock to the housing association, and these funds were to be distributed via a charity called the Castle Vale Endowment Trust Fund. Some funds from this have gone towards maintaining the radio and newspaper in each year since 2005. A change to charity status (and a renaming to Headline Media) in 2008 was part of a

strategy to target lottery funds but two bids were unsuccessful. In 2010, with a crisis in funding looming, the charity came under the sole control of Castle Vale Community Housing Association: “We were subsumed into this large organisation. Huge change, for all sorts of reasons [...] that was a massively difficult period for the organisation but we survived, we came out the other end” (Hollins). Yet during this time, which saw problems with trying to get the radio station permanently on air, the newspaper went “from strength to strength,” argues Hollins. It became “the predominant form of communication in Castle Vale at the time” (Hollins). In doing so, it reached a level of securing advertising income in the region of £33,000 in the financial year up to March 2012 (this is similar to the amount of grant received, according to its published accounts), compared to only £3,000 generated by the radio station. In 2013 another change would happen, this time separating out the radio and newspaper operations and severing the formal link with the housing association (although it remains one of its biggest advertisers). Headline Media was wound up as a charity and Topcliffe Media was established (named after the tower block that houses its offices on the estate) to run just the news operation.

Tyburn Mail as normative local media node

In 2016, Tyburn Mail had just two employees: one journalist (Clive Edwards), and a manager (Frank Kennedy) who sold advertising space and ran the operation on a day-to-day basis. Edwards is a trained journalist who also does sports reporting for a national radio station. He argued that the newspaper’s current role is to provide critical commentary on the ongoing regeneration of the estate: “Our independence is crucial to providing a sensible and level-headed critique of the progress that is or isn’t being made” (Edwards). The newspaper acts very much in the mode of traditional, local journalism:

We follow rather than innovate. Everything that we do mirrors the bigger players within our society. We just operate on a smaller level. The way that we report, we report in the same genre than they do. (Edwards)

As if to reinforce the point, at one point Edwards articulated his pride about one of his stories having “a real Sunday Mercury³⁰ stance.” However, the shift to a more formalised journalistic tone was not a comfortable change to make by any means:

³⁰ The Sunday Mercury is a tabloid-format regional Sunday newspaper for the West Midlands published by Trinity Mirror Newspapers.

[We] took the view that we would include bad news as well as good news. We still hold true to that for all of the downside that that creates. It creates an uncomfortable relationship sometimes within what is a fairly small community. We can, and we have, alienated some organisations and some individuals as a result. (Edwards)

Coverage of crime was considered an essential element of Tyburn Mail's remit by Edwards. He had pride in how it was covered and argued it offered values to citizens as a route to better understanding how society works:

We tackle crime stories very well when we go to Court. When I say, 'we', I mean I. So the reporting of a case that happens either at Magistrates Court, or more particularly at Crown Court, a more serious case, has some kind of prurient or titillating interest for members of the public. It's also there as a narrative which offers some insight into human behaviour. Also the way that society works or doesn't work, in the way that it deals with deviant behaviour, or disruptive behaviour. (Edwards)

Edwards saw the Tyburn Mail as playing a monitorial role alongside other media. He lamented that the size of his organisation limited this role:

All of these journalistic jobs, their *raison d'être* is to make organisations and individuals accountable to each other and to the community or society in which they live. Our minuscule size means that we can do a job for Tyburn, but there are huge swathes of geographic areas and institutional areas that we just touch on the surface. (Edwards)

Whilst there is a reliance on local residents as paid door-to-door distributors of the monthly newspaper, it has only occasional written contributions from citizens, who sometimes write column pieces on fashion, music, history and suchlike. Although Tyburn Mail's digital outlets (website, Facebook Page, Twitter account) prove useful both for newsgathering and for gaining a sense of which content its audience is most interested in, it is the newspaper that remains the focus of its operation: "there are some stories that we leave out of the web, because we want the print version to have impact when it comes out [...] I think the newspaper has got more status than the web output" (Edwards). Mechanisms for engagement with the audience in any form are limited. Indeed, this is recognised by Edwards:

We don't communicate with the average person who's happy to keep their head down and stay anonymous, except for within their own group of friends that they socialise with or live nearby. I don't think we have a mechanism for getting feedback from the silent majority. (Edwards)

Edwards pointed out that his local contacts were largely formal in nature (school, police, council, local politicians) although he recognised that digital has a role to play in allowing citizens to express civic pride: "if you look at social media sites, such as people's Facebook pages, they are always referencing the community ethos around Castle Vale". Although there are ample opportunities for feedback on matters of content, Edwards claimed that was not what concerned most people:

The most frequent feedback we get is about delivery of the newspaper. In terms of either it hasn't been delivered to them, or they've had three delivered. The newspaper deliverer has left the flap open, so the draft is coming in. Things like that. (Edwards)

Edwards' view on the value of participation via the Web seems fairly entrenched. Although Tyburn Mail makes use of social media platforms, Edwards never engaged in comment threads, shared user-contributed content, or undertook any action that might be regarded as reciprocal. In our wider research, we found this approach to be the exception, but some hyperlocals that were developing a more business-orientated approach similarly failed to make use of the reciprocal functionality of social media, arguing that it was distracting and wasted time. At Tyburn Mail, Edwards saw potential in Facebook only as a route to reach an elusive younger audience: "When I've written an article and I want to reach the younger generation, I put a link to it on our Facebook Page and we then see, about half an hour later, a spike in our figures". But beyond such observations, there was little sense that reciprocal engagement via social media was a useful way to build relationships with this or any other group of readers.

Research with residents

The research focus in this case study was on the role that the Tyburn Mail news operation (across newspaper and digital outputs) played in creating a sense of place for residents on the Castle Vale estate. There were a number of research interventions: firstly, two exploratory workshops with citizens during 2013 in order to help understand how Tyburn Mail was perceived. This involved two groups (five in each group) who were asked to map out how they

engaged with a wide range of news media throughout the day and how Tyburn Mail fitted into that. Further, they were asked to imagine what kinds of stories they might write for Tyburn Mail, prompting them to mock up a newspaper front cover. Secondly, a 'news café' was organised. Here the journalist from Tyburn Mail (Edwards) would meet local residents and see what stories emerged from conversations with them. To further facilitate these interactions, a series of blank spaces were created on a page in the monthly newspaper into which citizens could write their own news stories. In consultation with Edwards, some direction was given to topics, but there was also an 'anything else' space. Readers were then asked to bring their completed pages (see figure 11 for an example of a completed page) to the news café event organised in a local supermarket. These interventions were designed to allow Edwards to see where in the cycle of story development the citizen can play a role; to see, as Luke Goode notes, "possibilities for citizen participation at various points along those chains of sense-making that shape news – not only new possibilities for citizens to 'break' news" (Goode 2009). The intention was also to see what potential there might be in Castle Vale citizens playing more of a 'producer' (Bruns 2008) role in their local media.

<p>Bedroom tax What are your thoughts on 'taxing' the space in your home? Will your benefits be affected? Is it fair?</p>	
<p>Is the Queen taxed on all her spare bedrooms? I doubt it. Fairness? What a joke.</p>	
<p>Crime Do we talk too much about crime in the area, or is it right to tell the story of what's happening?</p>	
<p>Tell it like it is. Castle Vale has always been, just like the Bromford, an open prison. Never flinch from reporting truths about the area. We may have had a superficial makeover but a person's character does not change.</p>	
<p>HS2 With the high speed rail link coming close to Castle Vale, what does it mean for the community? Do you welcome it?</p>	
<p>HS2 will affect me directly as I live within yards of the track. I expect to have a compulsory purchase order slapped on my Blenheim Way property. The scheme itself is a hideously expensive white elephant designed to profit only southern carpetbagger fatcats. If they choose to throw some compensation my way then I shall take their filthy lucre, buy a pair of Nike trainers and run. Far from Birmingham. Kerching!</p>	
<p>Speeding Is speeding / street racing being dealt with in the area? Is a 20mph restriction too heavy-handed?</p>	
<p>Bring on the 20 mph limit. One in the eye for fans of Jeremy Clarkson. The only other things that concern B35 petrolheads are, in no particular order, beer, skunk and football. On a related topic I find it distasteful having to walk past the makeshift memorial to a dead child on Farnborough Road. Even the bench outside the swimming pool has lately been festooned with helium balloons. This type of vulgarly speaks volumes about the values prevalent on Castle Vale - tacky, shallow and cheap.</p>	
<p>Anything You'll probably have your own concerns too. Let us know them here.</p>	<p>Leave contact details to be entered in the random prize draw (phone or email)</p>
<p>The title 'Tyburn Mail' should be changed to 'Parochial Pictorial' owing to its emphasis on trivia. I sometimes wonder if our local rag is aimed solely at kids. Disproportionate coverage is given to the chav factory and other failing schools. A news(?) paper should accurately reflect the demography of an area inasmuch as we have an 'aging population' (Cliche City, groan). Who wants to read the vacuous opinions of a bimbo fashionista? It panders too much to the future stars of stage, screen and date queue.</p>	<p>e-mail com Full coverage Skeletal in Cliche City Kerching!</p>

Figure 11: Completed page of Tyburn Mail.

Findings

Across the workshops and the news café there was a tension between the ways in which Tyburn Mail represented Castle Vale through the prism of normative news values, and the expectations of citizens that it should play a more effective role in redressing the historic misrepresentation of Castle Vale as a 'no-go' area. Whilst one resident (in their written response on the newspaper blank page) argued that the Tyburn Mail should "tell it like it is" and worried about problems being "swept under the carpet", this largely proved an exception. Most citizens

were concerned that there was “too much focus on individual crime” (newspaper blank page response). The issue of crime and how much of it was covered was a recurring theme. One resident argued that the coverage of crime on the estate was disproportionate: “the problem is it’s no worse than others, but it gets reported more, so it makes it look worse [...] It’s reporting more giving it a worse opinion of Castle Vale” (workshop respondent). During the workshops, residents were asked to react to example stories from the Tyburn Mail news blog as points for discussion; the first story was about local crime: “It gives a bad name to Castle Vale [...]. Someone from Castle Vale is always getting arrested for doing something, always”. As with Irene Costera’s Meijer’s (2012) research in Utrecht, we found that the people of Castle Vale were acutely aware of the mediatisation of their locality. Limited as it was by its one-off experimental nature, the blank space in the Tyburn Mail did at least offer readers a modest role in countering the “problem neighbourhood frame” (Costera Meijer 2012: 18).

There was also a degree of suspicion and confusion about how Tyburn Mail was organised and who it represented. Some thought it was still linked to Castle Vale Community Housing Association: “lots of peoples’ negative articles or opinions are being filtered out, especially if it’s against the housing and social” said one resident in the workshop. Likewise there were concerns that coverage of the City council tended to shy away from controversy: “there’s always something about what the Council are doing. They print all the good things, of course. It’s very, very rare you get failings, unless it comes from the locals”.

Overall, the workshops concurred with the journalist’s view that the majority of his audience was disengaged. But when asked about the use of social media by Tyburn Mail, residents by and large saw it being used in a way that was no different to the newspaper. Just as they tended to read the newspaper quickly and then discard it, there was a similar *laissez-faire* attitude to its presence on Facebook: “I think I’ve got better things to look at when I’m on the Internet” (resident). However, a workshop exercise to create a citizens’ version of the newspaper revealed examples of citizens as both active community members (one person talked about their attempt to tackle local traffic speeding) and potential chroniclers of the everyday (another talked about wanting to write about a local homeless person who had not been seen for a while), often mixing fact and fiction to create alternative narratives about life on the estate. One resident, in filling in the blank space we created, came up with a whole list of story and content ideas, some participatory in nature, that could be taken up:

Maybe have a panel of moms review baby groups [...]. The Children's centre is going through major cuts and changes and this needs covering [...]. More coverage on what's on for under fives [...], Advice on how to pick nurseries and schools.

The research interventions (workshops, news café) were an attempt to intervene in the well-established, professionally prescribed routine of making news at Tyburn Mail. To a degree, the news café helped to place the organisation more centrally in people's gaze and Edwards continued to run it on a monthly basis for a short period after this intervention (a column called 'News from the Café' was created). At least one news story from the completed blank pages was followed up, and in the subsequent interview with Edwards he was clear that he understood that not only can citizens play a role in newsgathering, but that the initiative had changed perceptions of the Tyburn Mail:

Clearly the news café is a good idea. We feel that it has worked for us in terms of opening us out and saying we are after domestic stories [...] It may well be that we are now being perceived as a voice of the people, as opposed to a voice of the council, or a voice of the councillor. (Edwards)

Yet the nature of the journalism at Tyburn Mail remained largely the same. As Michael Schudson's critique of the US public journalism movement pointed out, despite the strong desire and concrete initiatives to engage the 'public' in the co-production of news, "authority about what to write and whether to print stays with the professionals" (Schudson 1999: 123).

Summary

As with my other examples, this case study drew attention to the working practices of a hyperlocal media operation. Although initially set up in part to play a role in addressing the negative reputation of a specific locality, the Tyburn Mail now prides itself on being an independent voice that plays a monitorial role and has the potential to hold local power to account. It is an operation that has shifted from a not-for-profit arm of a non-departmental government body (the HAT), to a limited company scouring for grant funding, to a charity, and back to being a limited company. Its existence throughout has been precarious, and it is now reaching a point where its only consistent source of funds (the endowment trust fund) may be

coming to an end. Yet unlike similar operations, it has not quite built up the level of trust where funding through citizen patronage or crowd-funding are likely options.³¹

Whilst Tyburn Mail does an excellent job of fulfilling a 'fourth estate' role for its citizens, it comes up against the tensions in the area's troubled history. As Adam Mornement points out, "the tangled knot of notoriety cannot be quickly be undone" (2005: 82). Residents are clearly conflicted about the extent to which 'bad' news should be talked about, and many of the research participants want to see their local media cast Castle Vale in a more positive light. Whilst there is a shared desire to 'tell it like it is', the residents of Castle Vale seem to contest the idea of what 'it' is and, in that sense, engage in a hegemonic struggle with Tyburn Mail to claim what they feel is a more authentic representation of 'The Vale'. As much as anything, the lack of reciprocal exchange in Tyburn Mail's newsmaking practices has resulted in residents themselves taking an oppositional stance to their community news provider; it is Tyburn Mail that is seen as the incumbent mainstream news operation whose utilisation of normative news practices closes down the opportunities for a more participatory journalism to emerge. This is ironic, given the history of citizen participation in local decision-making that has been a feature of Castle Vale's regeneration process to date.

Ultimately, Tyburn Mail still has a vital role to play in charting the effects of austerity on what remains of local public services. To do so it must engage with, and perhaps confront, the notion of what it means to be from the 'The Vale', and what it means to practice a normative model of journalism. Perhaps by refocusing on the banal, hyperlocal media operations such as Tyburn Mail have a chance to articulate a citizen-led vision of what life in areas such as The Vale are really like.

Conclusion

In this chapter I drew together three examples of how hyperlocal news operations work. Whilst Tyburn Mail may seem the most successful financially in terms of achieving a mix of advertising and grant funds that have been sustained for a number of years, that success is not necessarily to do with its mode of journalism. Rather, its mode of distribution (a copy is posted through every letter box in the Tyburn council ward) means its circulation in the local area is to 100% of the potential audience, a figure that no doubt keeps advertisers returning to it. Its more formal constitution has come about as a result of the need to attract grant funding

³¹ Brixton blog, A Little Bit of Stone and B31 Voices are all examples of hyperlocal media operations that have run crowdfunding campaigns with some success.

and sometimes deliver outputs in return for funding. Its shifting status as a non-profit entity has often been in response to funding requirements. B31 Voices and On The Wight, on the other hand, might be seen as examples of what Charles Eisendrath (1979) calls the 'mom-and-pop' press. Eisendrath's portrait of small town USA community newspapers has many parallels with the operations of the Taylors and the Perrys. Eisendrath makes the point that these tiny operations work in ignorance of the travails of the market and with no desire to push alternative political agendas: "they avoid rigid politics, support the idea of small, workable communities, and pour everything they have into intensely local, rather than personal coverage" (1979). In doing this, they filled a gap that the mainstream press had let slip from its grasp. The same is true in our examples. The minutiae of lost pets and keys in South Birmingham certainly does not seem to interest the city-wide Birmingham Mail, while On The Wight work hard to distinguish themselves from what they feel is The County Press's over-commercialised offer. The 'gap' that On The Wight saw was the lack of authenticity in incumbent media which they promptly filled in order to go from outsiders to insiders: "we've stuck our necks out where other news, other media, didn't" (Simon Perry). In both thumbnail accounts, women are at the centres of their operations, but while Sas Taylor has developed reciprocal strategies that take the pressure off her and instead allow the audience to generate and sustain content, at On The Wight we can see how routines become divided along gender lines as the process of generating news content becomes framed as 'admin'.

Whilst both B31 Voices and On The Wight displayed the potential to become "trusted agents" (Couldry 2004: 24) in their communities, our case study of Tyburn Mail showed how the "network of trust" (Couldry 2004: 26) proves a more problematic concept. Citizens in this instance are not invited to participate in co-producing journalism as a matter of course and are instead suspicious about the value of the output of the hyperlocal news operation. In their examination of a suburb of East Birmingham, David Parker and Christian Karner (2011) reflect on the notion that "localities contain multiple 'subjugated knowledges' [to use Foucault's phrase] and previously largely private, rarely heard memories of social struggle, exclusion and self-assertion. Such subjugated knowledges need to be excavated, captured and articulated" (2011: 308). They claim that such an excavation needs to take place online via the social Web as much as offline through located local cultural expressions such as graffiti. The point is to counter the partial accounts of communities that come through mainstream media and position places such as Castle Vale within a very narrow representational frame in the public gaze.

Instead, richer 'spatial biographies' might have a counter-hegemonic role in working against dominant external myths and instead "recognise the intertwined histories of places and people, roads and their residents" (Parker and Karner 2011: 309). Peter Matthews' (2014) account of research interventions in Wester Hailes in Edinburgh notes how working-class residents "resist the discourses of policy-makers that seek to denigrate their neighbourhood to justify intervention" (Matthews 2014: 25). In Castle Vale, we witnessed similar resistance from residents to the ways that journalism tells stories that denigrate rather than celebrate.

What each of these thumbnail accounts offer is insight into the stability of "the new forms of trust on which they [community media] rely" (Couldry 2004: 27). Couldry was interested on the one hand in the extent to which such forms were participatory – and in B31 Voices we see a well-developed example of participation – but he was also interested in how such forms might rely on "hidden subsidies" (Couldry 2004: 27). Our thumbnail accounts relied on hidden subsidies in various ways. As sophisticated as it has been over the years in securing grant funds to make up the shortfall from advertising, Tyburn Mail now finds itself in the precarious position of relying on grant funding from a source which is declining. Without the grant, it is doubtful whether it can increase its revenue from advertising sufficiently to provide enough income for it to continue with its full-time journalist still in place. Unlike B31 Voices, it lacks the recourse to wider community to fill what might be an impending content gap. It is the wider community that provides B31 Voices with its hidden subsidy. In tandem with the exploitation of their own labour, their use of indirect reciprocation enables them to exploit the text and images of the audience as they turn to social media to share their everyday experiences; an example perhaps of finding value in the collective 'cognitive surplus' (Shirky 2010) of South Birmingham. The hidden subsidy within the 'fictive' newsroom of On The Wight is again the self-exploitation of labour, in particular, Sally's labour. On The Wight attracts interest from policy-lobbyists because they manage to situate themselves as disruptive innovators in the local news ecology. They embrace new platforms (such as WhatsApp) and experiment with new journalistic forms (they have undertaken trials with data-generated news stories in partnership with an Open University academic), yet their operation remains precarious and exploitative.

In the next chapter we look in more detail at the issues that have been raised by these thumbnail accounts. That is, issues of representation, the role of audiences, the use of social media to support reciprocity journalism, and the precarity of managing small-scale news enterprises.

CHAPTER SEVEN – PRACTICES: COMMUNITY, RECIPROCITY AND PRECARIETY

This chapter draws on semi-structured interviews with hyperlocal publishers and directly addresses the motivations and practices of hyperlocal information providers and how their operations contribute to everyday and local information ecologies. This chapter looks at how hyperlocal publishers draw heavily on a civic values discourse in order to contextualise their practice, and how that in turn motivates them to be an authentic voice for citizens. This discourse can be seen as part of a legitimising strategy by hyperlocal publishers, and I set my findings against three *interpretative repertoires* that emerged in my analysis of the interviews: (i) authenticity as a motivating factor; (ii) reciprocity in newsgathering practices, and (iii) rejecting entrepreneurship. The chapter is structured around these themes.

Nick Couldry's work provides a useful framing for these interviews. He argues that there has been a collapse in the trust of citizens towards the 'large actors' of politics and economics in society. Trust is vital for successful democracies (and for that matter for successful economies) so where do we look to find trust being rebuilt? To citizens themselves: "the production practices of consumers aimed at generating or sustaining, through participation, new spaces of public connection, new spaces of mutuality" (2004: 24). Couldry cites some specific examples of community media sites using open publishing platforms (such as Indymedia) that seem able to make highly effective contributions to the public sphere (2004: 26). Such examples are, claims Mark Deuze (2006: 267), part of a move towards participatory media that began in the latter half of the 20th century as an inevitable reflection of the shift towards monitorial citizenships in Western democracies. Deuze even makes the claim that the default mode for media-making is local and participatory rather than commercial and closed:

it becomes possible to argue that people using and making their own individual, local and communal media is the structural condition of media, culture and society relationships, whereas the notion of national mass media telling an invisible audience what they 'need to know' is an anomalous trend particular to the forming of modern nation-states. (Deuze 2006: 267)

But such claims require empirical research, Couldry argues. Central to a questioning of media operations at the heart of this participatory shift is a need to examine "the stability of the new forms of trust on which they rely" (2004: 27). For hyperlocal publishing, this requires a focus on the relationship between editors and citizens as much as it does an examination of the sustainability of these operations. Thus, in these interviews we will again look at reciprocity

practices as mechanisms for building trust. Are hyperlocal publishers “trusted agents” (Couldry 2004: 24) that can rebuild social capital in communities and thereby “refashion belief in larger forms of connection” (Couldry 2004: 23)?

Authenticity as a motivating factor

In this section I discuss what motivates hyperlocal publishers. The interviewees were asked directly about why they started their publications or, where they had taken over another hyperlocal (which was only the case for three of them), why they had decided to become involved. Initial coding of the interviews suggested that those without any prior journalism experience had slightly different motivations than those who did. For this group, there were two key origin stories cited that were different to the group that had some form of journalism experience: firstly, the desire to redress existing media coverage of their localities, and secondly, the development of a single-issue campaign into a full-blown hyperlocal news blog. In both cases, issues of authenticity were to the fore.

Redressing reputational geography

Those without a formal journalistic background were more likely to outline origin stories that had a more reputational/civic emphasis. It was often cited that starting a hyperlocal media operation was a way to redress how mainstream media covered (or did not cover) their area:

Another motivation was that the local newspaper, which [...] has a very kind of negative slant on life as we see it and we felt there were a lot of positive things going on that basically didn't even get on the radar of the local paper, because either they were very small local things which perhaps a citywide newspaper wasn't really interested in or, as we felt, they just didn't bother covering a lot of the good stuff that went on. So those were two of our motivations. (Int-34)

The feeling that newspapers veered towards negative coverage was a repeated concern: “they were cherry picking the news and they were verging towards more negative news [...] It was more 80% negative with the rest of it being a mixture of mediocre beige and positive news, and I didn't like that. I didn't like that at all” (Int-19). Expressing a strong local identity was something that a hyperlocal might do where the mainstream press, covering a larger area, would not have the chance to:

I'm very passionate about what's happening in [name of place] and how unique it is in terms of an area within a city. We have no chain outlets, all our shops are independently owned, all our restaurants and pubs are all independently owned, which makes for a really vibrant area. (Int-12)

The interviewees (with a single exception) lived in the places they operated from, so exploring the role of media in placemaking was an oft-cited motivating aspect: "something like that could bring people together to some degree and it could create some sort of sense of place I suppose" (Int-6). Righting a perceived wrong in terms of reputational geography was a gap that could be filled: "if the newspapers are not going to print what we know is right about the town, then why don't we start our own newspaper? And so we thought, yes, that's a good idea" (Int-31). This particular interviewee felt they were representing a wider community view about the way in which the press handles bad news:

If there's a bad news story in [name of place] it goes on the front page, if there's a good news story, it doesn't go in, and that is the perception. And people don't like that, certainly here people do still feel a connection with their community and when people attack their community, there's a kind of collective backlash to that. (Int-31)

One interviewee with a professional background in PR saw the chance to bring their expertise in using media in a persuasive way to redress negative media representations:

My background's in PR and I spent many years telling people that they needed stuff that they couldn't afford and they wanted stuff that they couldn't afford and they didn't need. So I know how you can shape people's feelings about things and I find that the local press, if you tell someone something's shit long enough, they'll start believing it and that's how the local press is about the town. My motivation was to reverse that trend and get people feeling positive about the place. (Int-4)

The presentation of 'good news' about their localities was seen as a way to give a more authentic impression of place. But there was also recognition that this brought its own issues:

I think if we do get criticised, it's for being a bit too rose tinted. I have heard us described as 'an organ of puffery', which actually I took as a huge insult and sulked for quite a while and then decided it was probably fair actually. We're here to promote the town. We do acknowledge that there's the bad side of stuff, but I think we tend to let the mainstream press deal with that. (Int-28)

This tendency to let other news outlets deal with ‘bad news’ was widely cited. It was often a case of the hyperlocal feeling they were too personally tied into an area to be able to report on such issues: “I’m sometimes reluctant to cover crime because I know so many people in the community, or a sudden death in the community because it’s kind of a bit in your face if you see it on a local site” (Int-15). The proximity to audience can result in uncomfortable encounters for those who do cover crime: “there’s a couple of crime stories we’ve published where we’ve had people in the street shout at us and call us grasses” (Int-34). Yet it is clear that crime stories generate traffic to their website (“we clocked onto the fact that crime was quite a popular thing” – Int-3) but this creates a tension for many hyperlocal publishers. They want the traffic to their websites, but feel that reporting too much crime results in an inauthentic impression of their area. One hyperlocal discussed this issue at length, at first realising that coverage of these stories was popular but then receiving backlash from locals directly named in the story. Their solution to deal with this was to stop doing their own coverage and instead simply point to mainstream local press coverage, creating a critical distance for themselves:

So what we try and do is, if there is a proper source [...] and they’re covering some incident, we might make a reference to it and the article. So we still get all the traffic but we don’t name names. We let the other side do that and we don’t show pictures of the people either. So we like doing crime but we have to have a distance with crime because of the local issue of you’ve got to walk down the same street as some of these people. Int-3

The use of “proper source” in this response might suggest that the hyperlocal publisher has doubts about their own legitimacy. Yet in shifting responsibility to the newspaper, they potentially retain legitimacy locally by remaining on the community’s ‘side’ and purporting to be an advocate for the ‘authentic’ image of the area.

Other interviewees also revealed how they tailor their news coverage to manage their area’s reputation: “I do have concerns about reporting on crime and my concerns are creating the impression that the area is... well, [...] it could easily give the impression that it’s a crime riddled area” (Int-6). Justin Lewis (2006: 315) argues that coverage of crime can be problematic in creating an informed citizenship. The decision by a hyperlocal publisher to cover or not cover crime stories can be seen as part of a wider placemaking strategy that many of these publishers consciously enact in order to construct what they imagine to be a more authentic sense of place.

Other origin stories that were connected to a placemaking theme tended to be based around a personal desire to discover what was happening locally:

After being made redundant, it was about setting up something for my home town so I could literally, after living away for a number of years, rediscover my own town. (Int-16)

I'd moved up [...] from the south and I thought it was a good idea to join in, make friends and get involved, so that's how it started. Then I realised it might be exactly the sort of thing that I wanted to do, it was brilliant. (Int-28)

Whatever the initial motivation, the desire to write against the grain of the approach taken by mainstream media and gain legitimacy in the eyes of their audience was most often enacted by telling 'everyday' stories. This approach acted to resist the dominant narratives of the mainstream press and also provided no end of content, even when the areas covered were very small.

The amount of material a community the size of [name of place] is infinite because everybody has a story and everybody has a point of view and if they're willing to talk to you, you can have this information. (Int-15)

We also at the beginning, as probably most hyperlocal publishers do, thought we might actually run out of ideas when we're just dealing with a small geographic area, but that's been anything but the case. In fact there's a massive backlog of things we want to cover and simply haven't got round to doing. (Int-18)

Starting with a campaign

Another theme to emerge in origin stories from non-journalists, but rarely from journalists, was the way in which single-issue campaigns had snowballed into broader-based operations:

I was never interested in anything to do with community, it just didn't interest me and then I think moving into an area and becoming settled, I got interested in how fast cars were going in front of our house. I got sick of it and I started, in the most minor way possible, a campaign to try and get traffic calming outside our house [...] It was just one of those things that took over. It wasn't planned in any way, but then people in the local area started campaigns about things they did and didn't want to happen. (Int-27)

Another one came about due to our son's school being closed and at the time, this was 2007, there wasn't really much in the way of online activism or anywhere online people could get behind a cause and ask questions. So we felt we'd kind of been victims of the school closing and how that was done by the local council. We felt that we'd like to provide somewhere should issues as this occur again and if it did occur again, people had somewhere they could voice their concerns and talk with other people online. (Int-34)

One interviewee told a long story about the ways in which he was "messed around with the council" when dealing with a local road issue. He took to the Internet as a space in which to put his side of the argument: "I thought this was a big enough fib to put on the website so I put up the documents with comments, and that's what gradually snowballed from other people with similar experiences" (Int-5). Direct involvement in politics was rarely cited as a reason for starting a hyperlocal operation but in one case a desire to become a local 'whistleblower' after being involved in a local party politics has resulted in an operation solely focused on holding the local council to account (Int-37). For another, it was the inability of the local newspaper to adequately deal with a campaign issue that was a catalyst for the beginnings of their own enterprise: "Personally speaking, it's come from the experience of local media covering an important issue to me personally, which was the plight of the local football club" (Int-33).

Where those with some journalistic experience discussed campaigns that helped them begin their hyperlocal experience, they tended to be expressed in terms of the campaign's usefulness in helping them set out the terms under which they would operate, or as a useful boost to visitor numbers: "So that [the campaign issue] came to the fore and there was a little bit of community activity around opposing that and I thought that this was a way that the site could be used to put an alternative view really" (Int-6). In another case, concerns over a local regeneration scheme enabled the hyperlocal to situate itself as the voice of the community:

The stories come from that community itself and then what we do is we try and give them a voice as much as possible, backed up by investigative research which is where I come in because obviously I've got the background to do that. You can't expect community people to go and research 100-page reports from the council or wherever. (Int-26).

Filling the gap and learning new skills

Those with a professional journalism background had, broadly, two reasons for starting a hyperlocal news operation. One set of responses was around skills and the desire to learn new digital skills or different aspects of journalism:

The motivation, really to train me up more as a journalist and get a feel for what it's like reporting more local news as opposed to the national things I was used to doing. (Int-24)

I kind of wanted to keep a hand in doing journalism-related stuff and my job now isn't as directly related as it might be, so there's a personal motivation to actually keep my skills up in that area. (Int-9)

But like the group of non-journalists, this group also saw opportunities in addressing what mainstream journalism was failing to cover. In their view, the gap was not so much in terms of creating positive stories to address perceived misrepresentation; rather it was a concern about what was being lost, given the decline of the local press. "Local news is dying on its feet" (Int-31), as one interview put it. Another noted: "you've got issues with crime and it's almost a shame because none of the traditional newspapers distribute to that area by large, so there's a big gap" (Int-39). Other articulations of the problem offered a more detailed analysis:

I always felt that, as regional papers lost more and more staff [...] they simply weren't able to get out into the communities as much as they used to, and I always felt that one of the USPs of a regional or local paper was that you felt it represented the communities. What I've noticed with the newspapers is they're having to kind of fall back on more centralised type news, councils, courts and things like that, and they simply don't get out into the communities any more, and it seemed to me like there was a gap in the market. (Int-13)

I was aware at the time that the [local mainstream newspaper] had limited coverage of council business, and what business it was running was largely based on press releases and contacts within the council. There wasn't very much that was there that was actually questioning how decisions were made, so I sort of rolled into it I mean mostly because I enjoy it, I'm interested in finding stories. (Int-20)

In contrast to the non-journalists, this group were more likely to talk about the detail of how they could create stories for their area:

I would see lots of things that weren't being covered. I don't mean big crime, just lots of things. There are characters from the area, there are people that have done unusual stuff, and it's almost the sort of thing you would make a 350-word page lead with a picture. It was just different, it was either really small or it just wouldn't fit in with what a newspaper would normally do. (Int-10)

This particular interviewee was one of very few who expressed that you might be able to do something a little different with the form of journalism produced, in contrast to the expectations of local newspapers: “Yes, the hyperlocal, the blogging side, allows you to do stuff that doesn’t fit into that classic newspaper style” (Int-10).

On the whole, amongst either group of hyperlocalists, ‘filling the gap’ was a common theme. Sometimes the motivation came about as a result of a seeming lack of innovation in the local press: “it was the fact that no one was doing it. The local paper were way behind on technology, I mean way behind” (Int-19). In another case the interviewee had worked on a commercial hyperlocal operation that had ceased and wasn’t keen to return to mainstream media: “I kind of got a taste for it” (Int-40). But the overriding rationale was articulated as a civic duty, rather than a gap in the market from which a clear, scalable entrepreneurial opportunity existed.

Shifting motivations

Some interviewees still felt a ‘buzz’ from their work when asked if their motivations had changed over time. In only one case was this pleasure expressed in the context of the professional norms of journalism: “In a way, and I think most journalists will understand this, it’s just the curiosity of wanting to know more” (Int-17). The more frequent response was more emotive: “I still love doing it, I’ve no intentions of stopping it. But my motivation? The reasons why? Exactly the same” (Int-10). “I still get pretty much the same buzz” (Int-20). In one case, the hyperlocal practice had gone from a rather secretive affair (due to concerns about being unemployed and publishing at the same time) to a proudly public-facing one where being seen as the local ‘blogger’ was a point of personal pride:

Something that gives me a real buzz is when I hear people say, or I’ll see on Facebook, if you like, people are saying, ‘oh we’re going to get covered by the [name of site] blog’, ‘they’re coming down to take photos’ and stuff like that. I get a real buzz out of that because it’s like people get excited now by being on the blog, so that’s good, so I get quite chuffed about that. (Int-16)

Some felt that, over time, they had become more aware of the impact they were having in the community:

Working in that community made me realise that actually this was something really important that they were missing from their daily lives, from their community, and this was an opportunity to build an asset for that community. (Int-22)

As the site has gone on, 3 and a half years later, it's suddenly become a lot bigger for a start than I thought it ever would. So I feel that an audience has been built and now the site is trying to do something positive for the town with that audience in a way. (Int-2)

Most felt sure their endeavours were impactful and purposeful: "I really want to make a difference to the community, always wanted to make a difference to the community. That, I think at the moment, is what keeps me going" (Int-31). For one trained journalist, the setting up and running of his hyperlocal site had deepened his commitment to the local area: "I love where I live, I love this town, and doing this site has actually increased and cemented that even more" (Int-2).

The journey for many has been one of discovery, both of themselves, and of their community. Another interviewee came to realise that their personal blogging might have a wider benefit:

I think I discovered a local community in my town which I was quite surprised existed, that actually there was lots going on. I started not just recording our own experiences of doing things but it was very much about what I'd found out and what else was going on. So it started plugging notices about events and activities that were going on, and lo and behold, people actually started to read it [...] So the whole focus of it changed from being one of something personal to one of actually this is providing something useful as well. (Int-16)

In this case, the interviewee described how his operation went from being 'useful', by listing events and publishing notices, to being campaigning. Similar to those who described how they started doing hyperlocal through a single-issue campaign, it was a campaign that proved transformative here:

Since then, the audience for the blog has just kind of grown and grown. We've become not just something that comments on but also something that potentially people know that we – I always use this word 'we', I think of us as we – but the blog has actually got some influence and it's got potentially something. So people now in authority I think are not wary but respectful. (Int-16)

It is clear that many working in this space have a real sense of pride in their work. When prompted about what stories they had published that they were most proud of, almost all the examples were of single-issue campaigns that they had ownership of from the outset and played a key role in holding power to account and creating impact. These moments emerged as a key motivating factor for many to continue:

What I'm most proud of is developing the campaigns element, which wasn't there at the beginning [...]. The more you got to know, the more you realised what they were passionate about, and the issues that were really driving that community to kind of make change for themselves. (Int-22)

Authenticity as an interpretative repertoire

In this section I outlined the range of motivations that hyperlocal practitioners had in starting, and continuing, their operations. Central to all was a desire to be authentic. This was expressed by some as dissatisfaction with existing media representations of their locality. Their frustration was most often with the lack of coverage or the wrong kind of coverage. A lack of coverage resulted in a 'gap' that could be filled and thus the authenticity repertoire becomes about being authentic to the perceived role of journalism. Indeed, those from a professional journalism background noticed that the thinning out of editorial staff in the mainstream press meant that the opportunity for them to carry out investigative, accountability or campaigning journalism presented itself. Likewise, the wrong kind of coverage also created a gap of sorts; that is, a gap in positive news to counter the bad news. This issue was also framed around issues of authenticity in terms of how mainstream local press failed to reflect the authentic experience of living in their areas; what was at stake was the reputation of the area and the hyperlocalists was there to 'save' it. In this way they are active placemakers and perhaps more than a little conflicted by the position of power they hold. Hyperlocal publishers are very conscious that what they choose to talk about can affect their area's reputational geography. Those without journalism training felt most strongly that they wanted to say something positive and thought that existing press coverage simply was not giving the whole picture. For them, being positive was about being authentic.

As they continued their operations, hyperlocal publishers from both backgrounds were often motivated by a feeling that their role as the authentic voice of community was legitimised, and overall we can see that the "civil society purpose" (Flouch and Harris 2010a: 2) of doing hyperlocal is a dominant motivating factor. Indeed, as we will observe in the sections that

follow, this civic discourse looms large. Hyperlocal publishers, frame much of what they do within a discourse where giving something back becomes the be all and end all. They seek to strengthen their personal connection to their community by creating a resource that they consider useful: “A chance for me living in the actual community myself to give something back” (Int-9). In almost all cases, they began without a plan of any sort, but often with a sense of a ‘wrong’ that needed to be righted. They then began a journey in which they drew on journalistic practices that they considered to offer an authentic voice for the communities they represented. The reciprocal nature of these practices is discussed in the next section.

Reciprocity in newsgathering practices

In this section I discuss the range of practices that hyperlocals utilise in order to generate content for their services and sustain them. Here too we see how the emphasis is on developing authentic relationships with citizens. My intention is to not see journalistic practices in isolation but to also address the practices that contribute to sustaining and legitimising their operations. The journalistic practices outlined here of gathering and publishing news both draw on, and sometimes reject, existing professional norms and values. I draw on the notion of ‘reciprocity journalism’ in order to frame my discussion (Borger et al. 2016, Holton et al. 2015, Lewis 2015, Lewis et al. 2014).

Reciprocal practices on- and offline.

Hyperlocal producers are very much embedded in their neighbourhoods. The same might have once been true of the local press, and one of the interviewees noted rather nostalgically the way in which the local press used to pride itself on working ‘the beat’:

I remember speaking to a former journalist [...] who said, ‘back in the day, in the seventies [...] I’d go in the morning say to everybody “bye I’m off now, I’ll see you later”.’ She’d be out all day talking to the vicar, she’d just go on a circuit of contacts she had and just get chatting and she’d pick up half a dozen or a dozen stories that way, just by going and speaking to people. (PORT Int-22)

Hyperlocal publishers offered up many examples of working both the digital ‘beat’ and the real-world ‘beat’. Both are key elements of how they gather news, and in discussing these practices interviewees further revealed their strategies to legitimise their operations in the eyes of their audience. In order to make sense of these practices, Seth Lewis et al. (2014) offer an

alternative theoretical lens that marks a move away from public-sphere dominated positions within studies of journalism: that of “reciprocal journalism” (Lewis et al. 2014). Lewis et al. claim, “this approach could prove especially useful in studies of community journalism, as scholars seek to untangle the complex set of relationships and interactions that embody each particular community” (Lewis et al. 2014: 237). Such a lens can help to examine the social relations developed as a result of the specific practices of hyperlocal publishers. They go on to identify how “reciprocity” is one of the ways in which “social capital” is accrued, something they see as crucial “for the vitality of communities of all kinds” (2014: 230). Reciprocity operates at two levels: direct and indirect. I examine the ways in which hyperlocals employ or reject these reciprocal strategies and conjecture on the extent to which sustained reciprocity is an achievable goal (Lewis et al. 2014: 235-236).

Reciprocity practices through social media

Direct reciprocity refers to a mutual exchange between individuals. Lewis et al. (2014: 233) make the distinction between unilateral, informal reciprocal exchange (where nothing is expected in return but something is often given) and bilateral, negotiated exchange (where there is an agreement or contract in place, or perhaps just a clearer sense that information gathered would be used). The benefit of the unilateral exchange is that whilst there is a risk of not getting anything back, there is greater potential to “demonstrate and develop trust and social bonding” (Lewis et al. 2014: 233). We can see evidence of unilateral exchange in newsgathering practices of hyperlocals.

Social media (particularly Twitter and Facebook; other platforms were very rarely mentioned) is at the heart of newsgathering practices for hyperlocals. Facebook in particular is clearly becoming a key tool for newsgathering. Many hyperlocals talked about getting ‘tip-offs’ through this platform and it was repeatedly cited as a key resource for interaction with citizens:

You’ll get individuals as well who send you titbits, people who know about us will say, ‘my choir is doing this...’ or ‘have you guys heard about x, y, z?’ That happens less through email now. It happened a lot like that at the beginning through email but it tends to be more through Facebook now. (Int-22)

In fact it was often the case that Facebook Pages for hyperlocals developed a life of their own with relatively little intervention from the publisher: “we’re not pushing it at all. We hardly post on it at the moment because we’re not doing much, but people want to be a part of it and

they're having discussions on there" (Int-22). As well as a place to enact the everyday digital 'beat', Facebook was also utilised to gather eyewitness accounts of breaking news incidents: "the first question would be to put something out on the Facebook group and ask anybody if anyone's seen what's going on in this particular area?" (Int-25). Twitter was also cited as a place to gather news: "I might do a word search or a place name search on Twitter and see if there's anything going on there" (Int-29). There was certainly a tendency to manage Twitter more carefully (usually by not following too many people) and to use it largely to seek out stories rather than as a distribution platform: "I use Twitter as a means of gathering information really, the people I follow are people who I think will provide me with leads for stories, just keep me informed" (Int-7). However, in one case the interview felt the reputation of the mainstream press had resulted in some cynicism about the media in general and resulting in a lack of willingness of citizens to participate: "I think some of that residual distrust sort of bleeds through a bit" (Int-39).

Beyond newsgathering and managing, the ability to like, share or retweet content on social media platforms is cited frequently as a way for hyperlocals to reciprocate the contributions from their audience. Using the direct reciprocal functions of social media was seen as a way to play a community role such as promoting local interests:

I've got a list of local businesses who are on Twitter and I go through that list of local businesses and see what they're tweeting about on a Saturday morning and I retweet as many of them as I can if they are of any interest, just so local businesses get a little bit of a boost on a weekend morning. (Int-7)

The other way I use social media [...] if someone says we could do with a tweet about this, that and the other, I thought well, I know that they won't be able to write the article. I certainly haven't got time to structure anything. There's no photograph with it, so what I will do is I will retweet something or tweet it or even copy it in on Facebook if I can to help someone get some exposure. (Int-19)

Social media makes reciprocation simple and swift. Likewise, the ability to easily embed content from Twitter results in a simple way to create content on the hyperlocal site and offers the reader a clear indication that their content may be used: "So just embed that straight in – that's your story, that's the picture" (Int-15). This is a direct reciprocal exchange process; which is to say, if a citizen tweets about something in their locality, there is a chance that this will be utilised by the hyperlocal. Many hyperlocals also make direct calls for participation from their audience through their website or via social media:

Every article online has a begging letter attached to it saying, what do you think about this, send us your views, and we'll give people a range of ways they can do it with links to our email, to our Twitter feed, to Facebook, whatever they're more comfortable with. (Int-7)

In gathering news via this method and asking for contributions, the hyperlocal publisher relies on a degree of trust built up between themselves and the audience. That is, the audience trust that their content will be considered for use.

There is no doubt that social media content provides a set of 'assets' that hyperlocal producers can create value from. It is increasingly central to hyperlocal practice as much as it is mainstream practice. One publisher saw it as a valid emergent form of journalism: "I came across someone who was doing something local-ish, just retweeting stuff, and I thought, I wonder if we can do more with that. So that was one angle, was Twitter a way of doing local news?" (Int-32). For time-poor hyperlocal publishers, this practice of 'gatewatching' (Bruns 2003) was very common, with publishers acting as "internet 'librarians'" (2003: 34) very much in the mode that Bruns articulated for the role: "personally involved, 'of the people' and partisan" (2003: 34).

The use of networked strategies such as hashtags on social media platforms could be seen as a more developed example of *indirect* reciprocity (Lewis et al. 2014: 235). Hashtags allow anyone to contribute to conversations or information-gathering and are not reliant on a direct exchange with the hyperlocal publisher. Borger et al. (2016), applying the reciprocal journalism framework to a commercial hyperlocal news project in the Netherlands, argue that they did not find examples of indirect reciprocity in either of the two projects they examined. There was plenty of direct exchange between individual reporter and reader, but concerns about quality prevented a more developed, networked participation (2016: 721). In my research, practitioners rarely outlined strategies that were focused on developed inter-citizen, and therefore *indirect*, information exchange.

But some publishers did see value in the more ordinary, everyday use of social media: "[it's] just banal chat half the time, but that's a big community-building aspect" (Int-32). Others were beginning to recognise the value of the network that extended out from their own: "[I] send that out [via Facebook] and you know straight away that's gone out to 5,000 people and then they'll share that to other people" (Int-24). This showed the possibility of a more indirect approach, recognising the value in the more generalised connections that are created by a

kind of 'pay it forward' approach: "Person A gives to Person B, who gives to Person C, and so on. Such gestures benefit members of the network and indicate to other potential members the bond shared within that group" (Lewis et al. 2014: 234). Lewis's suggestion is that the route to sustained reciprocity is through a recognition of the potential in this kind of network, therefore the development of a community-building strategy is vital: "community-builders [...] catalyze reciprocal exchange – directly with audiences/users, indirectly among community members, and repeatedly over time, altogether encouraging the kind of social norms associated with reciprocity writ large" (Lewis 2015: 2).

For many hyperlocal producers, the key barrier to more sophisticated use of social media was time. In their eyes, it was too much of a distraction. Better to avoid reciprocation than to have too much information to deal with:

We don't retweet anybody because again if you retweet one lost cat story or charitable jumble sale story, then why not do them all? So we've had to have a policy of not retweeting anybody and we don't interact. (Int-18)

Others discussed their management of social media as part of a gatekeeping process in order to apply traditional news values to the information received from readers:

It's just someone extending their garage and the neighbour has a problem with it, it's not the sort of story we would be looking at. We try to look at the stories which have impact on a larger amount of people. (Int-30)

It was recognised that the discourse on Facebook can also be problematic ("you know the way, how things in small communities can kick off on Facebook and they can become quite ugly and sometimes vile" – Int-15) yet more than any other social media network, it was seen as a platform that people were willing to contribute to: "I suppose Facebook really is great because people are comfortable on Facebook, they're comfortable with responding" (Int-28). However, in one case it was clear that they saw the potential of Facebook as a place to generate stories from contentious commenting and they were not afraid to manipulate debate in order to generate lively interactions: "it's really quite easy and interesting to tweak that group and have a little firestorm of opinion and just watch it unfold" (Int-7).

Reciprocation on the real-world 'beat'

Overall, social media was very much a space about which hyperlocal publishers spoke with a degree of tension, even when practitioners highly valued its reciprocal nature. In contrast, offline engagement was discussed in wholly positive terms. The interviewees offered up many examples of offline engagement with news sources in which direct reciprocated unilateral exchange takes place. Some producers had a very deliberate real-world news gathering routine which involved walking a self-described 'beat', taking in local High Streets, making themselves visible within communities:

I do the blog beat, I always try and do it at least once a day if I can [...] I know loads of people now as well, people are always coming up to me with snippets of stuff and all the rest of it, so just being out and about I think is great. (Int-16)

Sometimes, the encountering of stories happened not in a deliberate way but from the hyperlocal producer going about their everyday activities:

I could be walking along a street and just see somebody's put up a sign for an event and I could literally just take an iPhone photo of it and then write about it and that's it. I mean that's hardly a big deal. (Int-21)

So just on a normal day walking to work, I would see a few things. I might see a new business park up or a sign or a group of people gathering somewhere and that would help me create content in terms of just what I was seeing and things that were happening. (Int-12)

Face-to-face encounters with local citizens were fruitful sources of news, with such encounters often taking place in shops or pubs ("I go to pubs, that's my kind of thing" Int-10). It was discussed as something closer to gossiping, a more everyday, accidental form of newsgathering: "Once you sensitise yourself to picking up news, [...] You go and you just talk to people on street corners, you go into shops, you keep your eyes open, you see things" (Int-7). In one case a volunteer on the hyperlocal site was identified as having a particular expertise in this area:

He's tottering off to the local shops every day and chatting to the shopkeepers. I work full-time so he does a lot of the finding out about stuff, so he's a good source and he's drinking in the local pub every night as well, which is a good place to find out stuff. (Int-9).

Others had stories thrust their way as they became better known in their local area: “literally it’s as I’m wandering around and someone says ‘oh, have you heard that such and such is happening?’” (Int-21). Local shops and pubs are both places where producers can demonstrate their social embeddedness in communities, as well being places instrumental to newsgathering:

It’s not a question of the ‘beat’, it’s a question of going down to the local shops and saying hello to the traders really. There’s a sort of fascination with the local string of shops which is one of the things that people seem to be quite interested in locally [...] People like to read about what shops are coming and going and who’s doing well and there’s issues about local traders versus supermarkets and things. (Int-6)

Melissa Wall argues that scholars should note the importance of the “contingent places” (2015: 807) in which citizen journalism takes place. The pubs and shops that seem to be a site of reciprocal exchange for the hyperlocal journalist are such places. Indeed, they are seen as an important symbol of independence, something to be protected against more corporate encroachment: “We’re about the community, we’re about supporting the small businesses” (Int-31); “yes, that’s exactly what we’re about, buy local” (Int-31).

Reciprocity as an interpretative repertoire

The engagement that hyperlocal publishers have with their audience is a reciprocal one. The language use to describe their encounters is always positive. Unlike the relationship discussed in my account of Tyburn Mail (where there was a distrust between journalist and audience), here the emphasis is on exchange and participation. Reciprocity is both sought out and casually happened upon as a result of the everyday movements of hyperlocalists. The language of journalism practice is repurposed within a broader technology-enhanced civic discourse (“I do the blog beat” – Int-16). This practice of walking the ‘beat’, literally or digitally, is discussed by practitioners as key to developing relationships with audiences. Murray Dick (2012) charts the history of analysis of the ‘beat’ journalist. Although it has been attacked as inefficient by managers and overly cosy by academics, Murray comes to the view that emerging digital practices in journalism have a chance to reinvigorate the ‘beat’ journalist. Whilst the economics of modern journalism might leave journalists tied to their desks, social networking tools have the potential for them to replicate the way local networks were once nurtured on a face-to face basis:

The rise of the network, evidenced in everything from user-engagement via Twitter, to the processing of user-generated content, offers a means of [...] re-invigorating the 'beat'. It permits the re-constitution of journalism's traditional power-base, re-connecting journalists with their audience online within a wider social network. (Dick 2012: 757)

It comes as no surprise then that for hyperlocal publishers the 'beat' is a space in which they seek to make visible an authentic connection to community. In directly reciprocating tweets or in receiving word-of-mouth updates in the pub, the process of newsgathering also becomes one of legitimisation. Making themselves visible in the real world demonstrates their embeddedness, whilst selectively sharing or retweeting updates from locals is a form of 'gatewatching' (Bruns 2003) that makes clear they share the same values as their audience. This is not unproblematic, and one can be too embedded: "I am so deeply embedded in the community, that actually is a problem to me and I don't know how to deal with that" (Int-31). Here too the language of professional journalistic practice is brought to bear with the hyperlocal publisher in this instance feeling that they were simply too close to the community to write from an impartial perspective. This surfaces a key tension that many hyperlocal publishers feel: how to write *for* the community but still write within the conventional journalistic mode of objectivity.

Borger et al.'s research into the extent of use of reciprocal practices amongst commercial hyperlocals found that "participatory journalism as a functioning social system, based on stable and reciprocal expectations of what all actors involved would deliver and receive, did not materialize" (Borger et al. 2016: 722). In this research there were certainly practices that might involve direct reciprocal exchange, but the findings concur with Borger's in that there was relatively little in the way of developed participatory journalism on display to quite the extent that was exemplified in the B31 Voices case study where we saw that "sustained reciprocity" (Lewis et al. 2014: 235-236) is potentially achievable. What's more interesting perhaps is the way that hyperlocal publishers take every chance to articulate their practice through the interpretative repertoire of reciprocal exchange. Within this discourse they can imagine themselves not simply serving content to audiences, but rather, collaborating with communities.

Rejecting entrepreneurship

In this final section, I outline the various ways in which issues of sustainability are addressed by hyperlocal publishers. For the one- or two-person operations that are largely the focus of this research, sustainability practices are as important as journalistic practices, occupying just as much time and carried out by the same person. In this sense, we need to think of hyperlocal publishers as entrepreneurial subjects as much as journalists. For Matt Carlson, the legitimacy of a news operation in an ecology is its ability to generate revenue in order to sustain itself: “To become and remain a public activity, journalism requires continuing funding” (Carlson 2013: 2). However, amongst our interviewees, relatively few generated revenue and many rejected the notion that they had to make money to continue. The ways in which hyperlocal publishers discuss economic issues can tell us much about how they attempt to legitimise their practice. Some interviewees were keen to describe the ways in which they hoped to make their hyperlocals economically sustainable, but most tended to reject sustainability under those terms, instead drawing on a civic discourse that allowed them to place the exploitation of their own labour, and that of others, within the context of volunteerism and working for a ‘greater good’.

The hyperlocal entrepreneur

In order to frame this discussion I draw on research into entrepreneurship and precarious labour in the creative industries. There is a growing literature about the experiences of workers in the creative industries which has focused on the issue of precariousness (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008, 2011, Ross 2008). Gill and Pratt (2008) describe the two ways in which we can understand the term. Firstly: “precariousness (in relation to work) refers to all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work – from illegalized, casualized and temporary employment, to homeworking, piecework and freelancing” (Gill and Pratt 2008: 3). However, they also note how the term “embodies a critique of contemporary capitalism in tandem with an optimistic sense of the potential for change” (Gill and Pratt 2008: 10). Those working in a ‘precarious’ way have the potential to see “new subjectivities, new socialities and new kinds of politics” (Gill and Pratt 2008: 10). Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s (2008) workplace ethnography of the television industry attempts to show “the specific ways in which precariousness is registered and negotiated in the lives of young workers in one media industry” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008: 104). Their findings identify the vulnerability of working in the creative sector, yet they also draw attention to the “symbolic nature of cultural products” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker

2008: 114) produced by workers. Like the television programmes they discuss, local journalism also has a “symbolic power” that comes with pressures and bears a certain weight of responsibility in terms of enacting the normative values that are inherent within it.

Mirjam Gollmitzer’s (2014) study of the working lives of German freelance journalists found stress and satisfaction in equal measure within the independent context in which they carried out their profession (2014: 8). There was a strong desire to do justice to the normative values of journalism, even if it required a degree of self-exploitation: “the complex narratives of freedom, independence, and public service ethos illustrate the will to journalistic professionalism, even as the acute awareness of economic insecurity and high stress levels relativizes those claims” (2014: 12). By contrast, in looking across research into the motivations of journalism students, Baines and Kennedy (2010) note that students are less motivated by the normative, public service ideals of journalism than they are by the promise of a career that shares the attractive features perceived to be common to other jobs in the creative and cultural sector: “independence; risk-taking; non-routine; autonomy; creativity; control (and in some cases the prospects of high earnings)” (2010: 105). These features, they argue, are also ones that are dominant in discourses of entrepreneurship. They specifically cite the opportunity that running hyperlocal media operations offers for the enterprising journalism student: “the establishment of such an enterprise can offer the autonomy, independence and routine-free career sought by many would-be journalists and which is often no longer found in traditional hierarchical corporate media organisations” (2010: 98).

The conflicted hyperlocal journalist

The contrary findings of the research cited above are echoed in the findings here. Hyperlocal publishers fell into two distinct camps. Like the subjects in Gollmitzer’s (2014) research, the majority of those interviewed self-exploit whilst drawing on a discourse that emphasises the civic value of their work. The sacrifices they make were explained away in that context. A smaller group of interviewees are situated within a “historically masculine-framed ideas of entrepreneurship” (Jones 2014: 241) whereby they discuss their work within “a relatively coherent discourse which emphasises risk-taking, calculation and economising, and represents these points in unflinching positive ways” (Jones and Spicer 2009: 15). As one interviewee made clear: “I’ve always been very sure about the fact that there’s no point in setting up something that doesn’t have a commercial footing, because to me that’s just a hobby” (Int-13).

The schism between the two groups is often made evident when they come together at networking events where there seemed to be a clash of discourses: “we’ve been to this conference [...] a couple of years ago, we were commercial and we kind of felt we had a bit of a devil’s eye there, how dare you be commercial” (Int-30). This is not a sector that one could call internally cohesive, and another interviewee also talked about feeling ill-at-ease in the company of others doing the same thing: “I went [to an event on hyperlocal] and I was the only person it seemed, it may not be true, who wasn’t either a hard right-on campaigning activist or an absolute über geek. I seemed like the only journalist there” (Int-32).

However, members of both groups talked about the many roles they had to take within their operations in a positive and unproblematic light. It is clear that upon starting a hyperlocal there was a need to then develop a wider spectrum of skills that was not always anticipated:

I do everything really. So there’s selling and then making up adverts because I tend to do artwork for most of the people who advertise and then invoicing and chasing money for that, so that’s another side of it. Writing and editing, doing techy work really. (Int-6)

The approach to picking up the required skills and knowledge was often a matter of just learning on the job: “I’m completely self-taught [...] I practised writing through blogging and basically picked up everything else on the way. I taught myself to video edit and shoot video” (Int-25). Sometimes practices were gleaned from observing other hyperlocals:

We’ve picked stuff up. I think some stuff we’ve learned from other hyperlocal sites. We always keep an eye on other sites across the country to see what people are doing, the ideas they have, the stuff they’re covering, how they’re covering it. (Int-34)

Learning new skills was part of the pleasure of having to (usually) manage every aspect of the operation themselves:

I do quite enjoy laying out adverts. It’s another skill I’m developing, it’s another string to my bow that I’ve learnt. I’ve always been a firm believer in that the more skills you have, the more adaptable you become. (Int-8)

The gap between the discourses in the two groups was most evident when interviewees were asked directly about how they sustained their operations. The majority articulated a clear rejection of their hyperlocal operation needing to sustain itself on an economic basis: “I’m

really wary of the linkage of community stuff and money [...] I just think when money gets involved, it can be really tricky. I don't care if there's money involved, it's more about what people feel they want to do" (Int-27). The resistance to generating income was a fear of losing independence and tainting the authentic relationship they felt they had with their community; a fear of no longer being their 'voice': "It's always been seen as the independent and uncensored voice of [name of area] and I think that's how I want it to continue" (Int-12). There may have been an element of bravado in some responses, with a sense that making money was entirely possible, just not desirable: "If I was interested in becoming a small business, I could do that, but it doesn't interest me in the slightest" (Int-32). One described the potential of their site making "£50,000-£100,000 a year," but they would rather operate it as a community venture: "I feel it's more of a community service than anything else [...]. I sometimes feel I'm just doing it for a labour of love. It's for the readers. So that's the part I like about it" (Int-24).

(S)hyperlocals

But confidence was also a problem. Indeed, some of the same people taking ideological positions against making money also cited confidence issues. Some publishers recognised that they needed funding, usually very modest amounts, to avoid the situation of having to pay for running costs themselves, yet they simply did not feel able to approach businesses or indeed anyone for funds: "I'm terrible about going and asking people for money, just really don't enjoy it at all" (Int-29). Some waited until businesses approached them rather than seek it out: "if somebody wants to advertise and there's a couple of quid in it, then it happens" (Int-15). Those happy to accept advertising, and able to ask for it, did so within a discourse of community enterprise whereby it is fine to help local traders but less so large corporate organisations: "[we were asked] what would you do if Tesco came along and said they wanted to advertise in your paper and we said, we wouldn't do it. And actually I hold the same view. We're about the community, we're about supporting the small businesses" (Int-31).

But many reported that they found the balance between doing journalism and reaching out to the local business community was too time-consuming and often a distraction from what they felt was their core work (keeping their hyperlocal updated with content). In fact, for some it was any sense of operating in a commercial space that would be the distraction, by making the endeavour much less pleasurable: "the thought of having the economic pressure of actually having to make a living through it, I think it would just totally take away the enjoyment actually and it becomes a chore" (Int-9). Occasionally the interviewees wanted to discuss what

was meant by the term 'hyperlocal', but only one found it a barrier to income generation: "we found that it just took a lot of time to explain what it was we were doing, why we were doing it, how it could benefit the business and why they should do it. So it just wasn't really feasible" (Int-34).

Precurity and self-exploitation

Another common thread in the findings was that hyperlocal producers spent more time than perhaps they wanted to on producing content and running their sites. Even where the hours were modest, the position taken was that it was too much in the light of either slim or no pay: "at least between 14 and 20 hours. It really is an unpaid job" (Int-7). "It's very rare that I'm not doing something to the paper or the site, finding articles, interacting, or whatever" (Int-28). The process of doing hyperlocal often feels like it completely takes over the lives of its producers. Although there was a recognition of the extent to which they were exploiting themselves, issues of exploitation extended beyond the individual hyperlocal producer and out to their network of contributors. Many described how their operations relied on sometimes quite large networks of volunteers who gave small amounts of time: "I love that we are able to work with so many community writers and brings a real diversity of content to the site" (Int-38). The value that these volunteers gained was usually expressed in two ways: they were either seen as benefitting by gaining new skills or they were assumed to be benefitting emotionally from the act of contributing: "I think the other volunteers also feel that they're working for the good of the community" (Int-28).

Clearly, without volunteers many of the hyperlocals interviewed would not be operating in anywhere near the capacity they are but even amongst those who talked up the value of the volunteerism, there were some concerns about the degree to which volunteers were being exploited. There was much angst about the amount paid or not paid to contributors to hyperlocals and some expressed a limit to volunteerism: "the number of people who want to blog about the neighbourhood for free, which is basically what I've been doing for quite some time, in a sustained long-term way is very, very small, but what I've found is that crowdsourcing bits of content and stitching it together is a way that can bring people in" (Int-14). Many interviewees had trouble articulating what rewards they felt should be due to others: "I know time is money, whatever the words are. I've made a tiny bit of money out of the site [...] it might mean that if someone was doing some of the techie stuff, I could give them a few quid, because I'm a believer you work, you should get paid for it" (Int-10).

One hyperlocal seemed to realise that embracing a more enterprise-focused approach would solve their worries about exploiting others:

What I'd like is I'd like to make more money, I'd like everybody who works on it to make more money. I want it to go further afield. I'd love to be able to franchise it out around the country. That would be great. I've no idea how to do that. (Int-4)

This tendency to fantasise about possible outcomes where the money issue is solved was a recurring theme. For most, the prospect of being able to pay people on a regular basis felt like a distant prospect and one in which the rewards might take various forms:

I'd like to maybe be able to pay a retainer to some of the people who are regular contributors, on the basis that it might not be much, it might not even be NUJ rates, but it might be if you could post a story a week, you could have £40 a week or something, just a gesture. I'd like that. It wouldn't even have to be cash, it could be an Amazon voucher [...]. I'd just like to somehow have something to say thanks to people, that would be nice. (Int-1)

Cross-subsidy, grants and alternative economies

The tendency towards self-exploitation resulted in an informal degree of cross-subsidy whereby time was taken out of personal life to be spent on producing the hyperlocal ("I've got an understanding wife" – Int-20). But there was more formal cross-subsidising happening as well. Some hyperlocals described doing paid journalism-related freelance work as a form of cross-subsidy, but others discussed how connected business ventures provided the financial underpinning for their hyperlocal. One hyperlocal cross-subsidised through producing magazines for a trade union, whilst another produced a trade journal. Another ran a business 'expo' that they claimed provided all the resources to employ two people to work on their hyperlocal site (Int-25).

Despite the lack of desire or confidence to generate income, as detailed above, there was evidence of hyperlocals generating funds in innovative ways that demonstrate an entrepreneurial attitude. In one instance, a hyperlocal site that outwardly seemed to be very successful in drawing in advertising was in fact using a bartering system:

The adverts on there, most of those adverts you see have all been swapped. I wanted some tyres for my car so a guy from [tyre company] swapped me some tyres. I wanted my lawn doing, I've put one on for a lawncare company who's done my lawn for me. So there's no money there, I've just swapped them all for things. (Int-24)

In one instance bartering was a way to get content onto the site and advertising was only used when cash was needed:

If I give you more content, more space with a bit of free advertising, will you write me two or three articles on financial advice and that kind of thing. So there'd be barter, I'd be bartering in – there'd be no cash transaction, it'd be bartering in and only if I needed to pay for the server that month, I'd go and sell some advertising. (Int-19)

Another hyperlocal asked for donations rather than accept advertising and used an electronic payment system to allow readers to donate directly. However, he had instances where the donations came in a more direct form:

A guy came up to me – this is amazing – a guy wanted to meet me, this is a few months ago, and he wanted to meet me in the community centre and he gave me £300 in cash, £150 of which were pound coins. I didn't ask where it came from. (Int-26)

But again, there was tension about how to deal with money. Some hyperlocals had not even the most basic knowledge of what might happen should they attract income: “being paranoid I rang up the Tax Office to find out what the code was for some unique tax” (Int-10), whilst others were keen to dispose of any excess income through philanthropic means: “any profit we make, we put into local good causes [...] it keeps the money circulating locally, but we don't want to bang the drum too much about it because we don't want to be too sanctimonious, be smug about it” (Int-7).

It was no surprise to see take-up of grant initiatives, given the attention this sector has from public funders. For some, it was a key part of their work, although securing funding was not easy: “that's another part of my job to try and find grants, and obviously they're harder and harder to come by” (Int-28). In this particular instance, the grant income was not directly for doing hyperlocal work but instead was for a related activity that would cross-subsidise the hyperlocal: “I do other work with community groups doing digital media projects” (Int-28). In a similar example, the hyperlocal was happy that the funding was for other related activities

rather than hyperlocal, making clear that where cross-subsidy happened it did not go towards paying individuals: “I just think when money gets involved, it can be really tricky [...] it’s more about what people feel they want to do rather than have any money involved” (Int-27). But undoubtedly the income flowing into the sector is seeing an entrepreneurial response, with those securing success noting its competitive nature: “we were one of ten projects out of 165 to be awarded that funding, and that allowed us to set up the business as a limited company and really it went from being a side project to being our main project” (Int-18).

Social entrepreneurship as an interpretative repertoire

There is a clear tension in the ways in which finances are discussed by hyperlocals. The language used often draws on an enterprise discourse and the exploitation of their own labour is certainly explained away within language that talks up the benefits of having a diverse skill set, taking risks and being outcome-focused. Yet there is also a clear rejection of financial motives, with the majority of our interviewees tended to draw on a civic discourse whereby they saw their work creating other forms of value for the community they write about and engage with. They found aspects of their work pleasurable and burdensome in turns, but they had a clear sense of the “symbolic nature” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008: 114) of their journalistic outputs. They continued to self-exploit based on their belief in the civic value of what they were doing, and in turn they had a tendency to exploit others. But even within this dominant civic discourse, there is certainly evidence of a wide range of entrepreneurial attitudes. As tense as they were when it came to talking about money, hyperlocal producers will try just about anything to draw in micro amounts of funding and in many cases they seem to be more than content with these small amounts. In that broad sense of how we have come to understand entrepreneurship (whereby it might be socially as well as economically focused, as discussed in Jones and Spicer 2009: 10), this is a group who fit the template: being self-starters, having a diverse skill set, taking risks and being outcome-focused. They use the interpretative repertoire of enterprise but make it socially focused, always foregrounding the wider community benefit. However, there’s a tension in the way they also seek to draw on a repertoire of authenticity with the result that for many, the notion of making money was something of an anathema and potentially limited any prospect of further development of their projects. The repeated references to the motivating factor of what we might regard as hyperlocal’s ‘warm glow’ (“the big thing I get out of this is the creative aspect of it and the community aspect of it” – Int-29) is to a degree a discursive practice that prevents discussion

about the complexity of the challenges facing the sustainability of hyperlocal. In some ways, the hyperlocal producer as a conflicted, self-exploited figure drawing on an interpretative repertoire that they don't quite believe in.

Conclusion

In this chapter I examined how hyperlocal publishers talk about their news operations. I found that publishers utilise a range of interpretative repertoires in order to to frame their practice. They utilise narrow interpretations of 'authenticity' in order to situate themselves as playing a pivotal role in either 'saving' journalism (by returning it to its 'authentic' origins) or 'saving' communities (by offering alternative representations of what they perceive to be the 'real' experience of living in their communities). Of course it could be argued that local mainstream journalism also draws on a repertoire of authenticity as it seeks to position itself as the 'voice' of local people. Yet here the difference is the attention to issues of representation and the resistance to wanting to cover issues that might sully the reputation of the local area. The professional journalist, whether or not they personally want to avoid covering tricky subjects on their 'patch' (those that might still have 'patches', that is), has editorial requirements to fulfil, and good and bad news alike must be covered.

One of the ways in which authenticity is expressed for hyperlocals is through newsgathering practices that rely on reciprocal exchanges with audiences. This reciprocation directly acknowledges contributions and, to a modest extent, was seen to have potential as a way to develop more participatory approaches to their journalism. This desire for a deeper participation, through reciprocity, acts as a interpretive repertoire whereby such exchanges are unproblematic and equal in terms of power relationship. There is certainly no desire amongst the interviewees to unpick this exchange value in monetary terms.

The need to be seen as acting on behalf of the community is most strongly articulated when the issue of sustainability is discussed. Whilst some have clear financial motives from the outset, for most, undertaking hyperlocal publishing is seen as very much a personal sacrifice, one done for love rather than money in most cases and articulated through a social enterprise repertoire. But as Carlson points out, we should not be surprised that this view is articulated: "journalists have long based arguments for their legitimacy on independence from their revenue- generating sides" (2013: 8). In this sense, the desire amongst hyperlocal journalists to sidestep the subject of finances is likely also to be the case when asking mainstream journalists. What is different here of course is that those being questioned are not

just in a journalistic role: they are also proprietors (of sorts) and the continuation of their operation clearly plays on their minds.

Overall we can see that these hyperlocal publishers seek to situate themselves in a civic value discourse, drawing on these three interpretative repertoires. Hyperlocal publishing seems to be happily resisting marketisation, and in that sense it does sit in contrast to how much of local news media operates. In giving an overview of definitions of alternative media, Chris Atton (2002: 15-19) makes the point that for many scholars, the involvement of citizens is key. Atton's view is that we must see beyond the textual characteristics and look at cultures of production. He draws on Raymond Williams to make the distinction between 'oppositional' media (which one might consider counter-hegemonic, with the intent of replacing dominant ideas in society with new ones), and 'alternative' media (which seeks to co-exist within the existing hegemony). Hyperlocal publishing may have a modest claim to being counter-hegemonic in the way its practitioners champion local businesses over the blandness of national or global brands. But it has a greater claim to alternativeness, representing a break, in its means of production and organisation, and in ethos and ideology, from how local journalism has historically been produced; going against the flow of conglomeration and consolidation so prevalent in mainstream media.

In the next chapter I draw together the key points in this thesis but I also address the issues that concern the policy-lobbyists and policy-makers who are keen to see the local media operations we have examined here continue to flourish and ensure we continue to have vibrant, plural local media ecologies.

CHAPTER EIGHT – CONCLUSION

My research intended to find out ‘What forms of value are generated for communities through the actions of hyperlocal news and information operations?’ In addressing this I have argued that hyperlocal publishers act both as contributors to the public sphere, fulfilling to some extent a normative journalistic role; and also as chroniclers of the everyday. I have set out research that has offered an overview of the scale of this form of journalism in the UK and offered insights into the actions and motivations of its producers. This thesis is intended to contribute to the ongoing debate about the value of such services to local news ecologies in the UK since, as I outlined in the introduction, the narrative around the decline of the local press has resulted in much attention being paid to hyperlocal journalism, with such services pitched as filling the ‘democratic deficit’ left when local newspapers close. There is, then, a weight of expectation on hyperlocal news services, with those who operate them framed in a ‘fictive’ way that situates them as heroic figures (Goode 2009: 1290), able to manage both the business and journalistic side of their endeavours whilst remaining authentic to the communities they serve. As someone who runs a hyperlocal news site, fulfilling this role feels like a rather tall order. The research I have set out here has therefore gone about unpicking this idealised image of the ‘hyperlocalist’ and instead offers a more nuanced sense of the issues they face. My intention in the thesis was to raise questions about the value of hyperlocal journalism but to avoid framing those questions wholly around normative assumptions about the role of journalism in a democracy.

In this chapter I will summarise the main arguments and observations of this research before setting out a series of key findings, and the implications they have for scholars of community journalism, policy-lobbyists and policy-makers, and practitioners themselves.

Framing hyperlocal publishing: cultural practice, the public/private sphere and technology

I began in chapter two by highlighting how hyperlocal news was being discussed – by commentators and by some academics – as potentially playing a role in reinvigorating both communities and the local media sector. The emphasis in definitions has been on the civic value of hyperlocal and the expectation that “the content be original and that engaging with the site results in increased connection to the community” (Metzgar et al. 2011: 774). In the UK much discussion has focused on the value of these enterprises sustaining themselves through new business models. Only tentatively has discussion turned to the potential of public subsidy

(Holdsworth 2015). While much commentary concerns itself with the hope that hyperlocal publishing can hold fill the gap left by a ever-declining local press and hold power to account, I argued that looking at hyperlocal from a cultural practice perspective might be a better way of understanding a broader role they might play. Firstly, drawing on recent work by Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller (2016), this allows us to look beyond the narrow debate about the sustainability and newsworthiness and see value in doing hyperlocal as a celebration of place and of the everyday. I pointed out the numerous failures of commercial hyperlocal operations which Hess & Waller argue may down to the impossibility of trying to 'bottle' what is a cultural information-sharing practice rooted in everyday lives, rather than a news gathering and distribution practice. Highmore (2010), Pink (2012) and Postill (2011) all see value in the conceptual framings of the everyday. Whilst Highmore attempts to account for the habitual the ease with which we incorporate media technologies into our everyday lives, he recognises the potential for disruption. Likewise Pink sees value in the ubiquity of use of social media and digital technologies and therefore the potential for a kind of 'slow' activism. Postill sees such activism taking place as a result of citizens' interest in the 'banal' matters of everyday living.

In chapter three I began by asking if such activism is less direct than the 'active citizenship' that Harcup discusses (2015b), and we could consider how Nick Couldry's idea of 'cultures of citizenship' (2006) offers a more useful framework for considering the value of what we might call everyday active citizenship. We could argue that the networked search for lost pets is as good an example as any of DIY citizenship with "an activist and communitarian ethic" (Hartley, J 2010: 240). I then drew on ideas of the public sphere, the private sphere, alternative public spheres and the networked public sphere. Whilst the debate about hyperlocal may well feel like a discussion about the degraded nature of the public sphere, it might be more valuable to consider hyperlocal not simply as another mechanism through which the public can contribute to civic debate. Much of hyperlocal news doesn't feel particularly newsworthy (the B31 Voices case study shows many examples of 'banal' news) and Hess & Waller point out that "types of news featured in many hyperlocal publications provide a challenge to the very nature of news itself" (2016: 13). But as Zizi Papacharissi's argues (2010a, 2010b) we might consider hyperlocal publishing as a space of: "broadening and overlapping private and public agendas" (2010b: 149). What might concern the individual (such as the single issues that concerned many of the interviewees) in the private sphere does not mean it is not of wider concern. As Sonia Livingstone points out, what is needed here is a reframing of the debate about the value of the private sphere "the activities these terms

characterise can be re-described as independence or even resistance” (2005: 170). It is more difficult to frame hyperlocal publishing as alternative but as Chris Atton (2002) argues we should be as attentive to process as well as product in looking at alternative media operations, and in its practices and means of production, perhaps there is evidence of alternativeness in hyperlocal’s ability to foster: “wider social participation in their creation, participation and dissemination” (Atton 2002: 25). Finally in chapter three I gave an overview of academic critiques of technology’s value in creating a networked public sphere. Certainly, the use of open source blogging platforms and social networking services situates hyperlocalists as being part of the vanguard of the inevitable transformation of journalism from analogue to digital. The rather utopian rhetoric surrounding hyperlocal journalism regards digital technologies as a critical enabling factor, aligning it with those commentators who see the Internet as key in allowing greater participation in gathering and disseminating news by a wide range of citizens not formally trained in journalism. In attempting to find out the role that hyperlocal may play in creating value for citizens, we can see that, in part, its ‘fictive’ role as a solution to the decline of the local press rests on assumptions about the participatory nature of digital technologies. Indeed, a similar technological advance in the 1960s – in low-cost litho printing – bolstered the alternative local press of that era in the same way digital developments have aided the current wave of community journalists.

The limits of hyperlocal publishing as components of local news ecologies

In the first of my findings chapters (five) I analysed the scale and scope of hyperlocal news in order to assess its potential role in local news and information ecologies. I noted that the scale of such services has resulted in them being identified by Ofcom as potentially playing a useful role in ensuring vibrant local news ecologies. Here is an emerging sector, publishing (in 2012 at least) as many as 15 news stories an hour, with some operations seeming to garner large audiences and filling specific geographic news gaps. Drawing on my own research, Ofcom have argued that hyperlocal media has “the potential to support and broaden the range of local media content available to citizens and consumers at a time when traditional local media providers continue to find themselves under financial pressure” (2012a: 103). In order to play its public sphere role, hyperlocal publishing needs not just to be visible and to be publishing, but also needs to be consumed. As I showed, data on consumption is scarce, with even Ofcom observing that their own research shows that “only 1% [of people] said that such websites were their most important local media source” (2012a: 106). Ofcom’s focus on

hyperlocal news may appear contradictory, in that it recognises value in a practice that evidence suggests is not paid much attention by audiences. However, we should be attentive to the regulatory and wider economic context of the time as a way of understanding Ofcom's interest.

In the late 2000s, ITV were keen to pare down their licence obligation to provide local news, potentially leaving the regional BBC offering as the only broadcast news provider. Further, as the economy slowed, Ofcom were worried about how the newspaper industry would emerge on the other side of the recession:

Some property and display advertising may return, and newspaper owners may be able to make further savings; however operating margins are likely to be much reduced, and some currently unprofitable titles could continue to lose money for some time. (Ofcom 2009a: 5)

This 'perfect storm' was further exacerbated when the plan to license a series of regional Independently Funded News Consortia (IFNC) (Ofcom 2009b) as a way to fill the local news gap was scrapped early in the life of the 2010 coalition government. Ofcom's interest in 2012 in hyperlocal media lay, therefore, in its potential to provide public service news content online in a cost-effective way. After all, it was the 2009 Public Service Broadcasting review that had made it clear that the Internet was now a space that was as legitimate a distributor of news as broadcast platforms:

We introduced the concept of public service content as a broader category that included public service broadcasting, but also captured the contribution made to public purposes by content distributed over other platforms, principally the internet. (Ofcom 2009b: 16)

Ofcom's remit to take account of the "wider media ecology [...] such as local journalism, local and regional newspapers, and the internet" (2009a: 139) resulted in it welcoming the hyperlocal news sector as a kind of ground-up version of the IFNC, albeit embryonic in nature and with little in the way of evidencable audience. This lack of evidence resulted in Ofcom being unable to judge whether this form of news should be considered as playing a role in ensuring media plurality. As I pointed out in chapter five, Ofcom have noted, in a Public Interest Test for a media takeover, that there is "no evidence to suggest that they [hyperlocals] have the capacity to influence the democratic debate" (2012d: 9).

But that is not to say that in some areas (I gave Birmingham as an example), the range of hyperlocal news media does not act to successfully complement existing local media. Cities inevitably have quite rich media ecologies, although Birmingham, like other regional cities, has a less rich offer in print media than it had during the heyday of the press in the early 20th century. Also, radio news is an area where the wholesale offer is dominated by very few news organisations. Birmingham's hyperlocal news offer is evidence of a flourishing alternative news ecology, one that can be argued to have high 'civic value' if we situate it against the framework that Flouch and Harris propose (2010a). Using Carlson's characteristical model (2013), we can see that hyperlocal media in Birmingham has some claims to legitimacy. Firstly, it has not gone through the credibility crisis prompted by the phone-hacking crisis that the press has, and so has a relatively untarnished reputation. Secondly, it has built up significant followings outside of traditional distribution channels, using social media to accrue large networked followings on very little funds. Thirdly, the mainstream local press and the BBC have both reached out to hyperlocal publishers in Birmingham (in the BBC's case, also across the UK as a whole) and therefore increased both the visibility of hyperlocals and their legitimacy. This move by incumbent news producers is perhaps inevitable, given the stretched resources of the press (hyperlocals can be useful in feeding stories through) and the troubled politics of a public service broadcaster going through charter renewal (and therefore having to be seen to give recognition to other local news sources). Hyperlocals may welcome the attention, but it might serve to merely situate them as a relatively minor node in a still hierarchical local news ecology.

Overall, the evidence presented in chapter five suggests that hyperlocals provide useful spaces for citizens to participate in the public sphere. They shift the nature of the local news ecology from being one dominated by large media corporations to one that has a wide variety of independent operators, although the sustainability of these operations is questionable, relying as they do on volunteerism, shoestring funding or hidden and cross-subsidies. Collectively, they do represent an alternative to the mainstream, but perhaps not one that is alternative in politics. In that regard, one could not say that they are immediately counter-hegemonic in nature, although of course the celebration of the local, the rejection of the corporate ("if Tesco came along and said they wanted to advertise in your paper, we wouldn't do it" - Int-31) is itself a form of counterhegemony. Rather, they seek to work alongside the mainstream, which in turn plays a role in legitimising them. Of course, as Negt and Kluge

(1983) argue, assimilation into dominant practices is an inevitable process in the development of 'proletarian' public spheres, which is what we may be seeing in this instance.

Creating authentic reciprocal relationships with audiences

Across my three thumbnail accounts (in chapter six) a set of key issues emerged, some specific to the cases being presented, and some pertinent to the wider hyperlocal practice community. B31 Voices' motivations were similar to other practitioners in wanting to change wider perceptions about their locality. They want to bring back some civic pride to an area that has suffered widespread unemployment as a result of the decline of manufacturing and has been at the forefront of austerity cuts to public services. Whilst they report on these issues in the same way that mainstream media do, they also utilise reciprocal practices via social media to the point where their audience enthusiastically works together to gather and share positive content. The use of hashtags to highlight stories of good deeds (#B31Positive, #B31SupportingLocal) draws citizens into the newsmaking domain not as witnesses to breaking news, but as observers of the everyday. My analysis of the social media engagement of B31 Voices certainly suggests that there is an appetite to engage with the more banal aspects of life in South Birmingham. As I argued in chapter three, this is not to be dismissed, and can be seen as a way in which citizens seek to gently push against the dominant myths about the places that they live with stories of their own. The Facebook Page of B31 Voices is a place where 'producers' (Bruns 2008) get a chance to participate in the public sphere through what are now everyday media technologies. Further, citizens' networked actions of sharing, commenting and liking counteract any gatekeeping practices that Sas and Marty Taylor might enact. Reciprocation was key to citizen engagement, a practice I also found amongst the wider group of hyperlocal publishers.

Authenticity was another shared concern for hyperlocal publishers. My research shows that in general, hyperlocal journalists are at pains to situate themselves as 'authentic'. One of the interviewees described the need to be authentic to both audiences but also to local public bodies from which stories are procured: "[initially] they [the council] didn't really understand who we were, what we were and why we were doing it, and I think they were quite cautious at getting too involved with us" (Int-34). Whilst the relationship with audience hinged on foregrounding the not-for-profit nature of their operation and the informality of their exchanges on social media, they had to present a more professional face to the council and others in order to convince them "that we are genuine, and in it for the right reasons and worth dealing

with". As Damian Radcliffe notes in his report for Nesta in 2012, for many hyperlocalists, 'keeping it real' is more important than attracting an audience: "success does not always equate to page views. Engagement, civic impact and plurality of voice can be as important as reach, if not more so" (Radcliffe 2012: 11). Yet such a focus on these ideals can unfortunately come at the cost of sustainability (after all, page views can equal income).

How maintaining authenticity is operationalised was shown by On The Wight who understood that they need to show their audience that they can be the authentic voice for their concerns. Whilst their strategies to do this (for example, through their method of creating author accounts for re-publishing press releases) are different from those of other hyperlocalists, the intended result is the same. However, in the case of Tyburn Mail, however, we saw how a more professional approach to hyperlocal journalism which seemed to create a disconnect between the hyperlocal operation and its audience. Here, the time-poor journalist operates wholly within a professional journalism discourse and rejects the potential to develop a network of citizen 'producers' through a more reciprocal use of social media. In turn, there is suspicion among residents about the motives of the community newspaper and the ways in which it seeks to represent its community. This hyperlocal does not seem to provide the opportunity to challenge the residual, stigmatised view of the locality, and by failing to create space for discussion and debate on its social media channels, little will is created amongst residents to offer up content in the hope of a reciprocal response that is not forthcoming. It may be, in this case, that the focus on that traditional stalwart of news, crime (the coverage of which the journalist takes particular pride in), at the expense of the banal, is a factor in failing to build sufficient social capital among residents. The research process offered interventions that challenged Tyburn Mail's professionalism through trialling more participatory methods of newsgathering. Taking up such practices might help break down the consumer/producer barriers and help to create more authentic relationships.

Translating personal motivations into civic value

In my analysis of interviews (chapter seven) with hyperlocal practitioners, I addressed in detail how emerging practices within hyperlocal journalism act to legitimise it in the eyes of its audience. What norms were developing and how were such norms shaped by the motivations of hyperlocal publishers? A clear motivating factor was a desire to redress reputational issues about the localities they lived in, offering up alternative representations of place to the one

created by mainstream media. It would be simplistic to write this motive off as one that is selfish in nature; that is, the act of someone arriving in a new place (as many hyperlocalists have), realising it is not quite what they expected, and then seeking to resist negative attacks in order to protect their personal financial investment in property or to save face with friends and family (as we saw in the case study of On The Wight). Rather, there seems to be a genuine desire to resist dominant myths about localities and to reshape reputational geographies. This shapes the kind of news that is covered, with the emphasis being on 'good' news and the everyday, rather than what might be seen as bad news.

What is clear is that many hyperlocal publishers are situating themselves as distinct from mainstream media by choosing not to cover a contentious news genre such as crime. Instead, the focus on the everyday was a characteristic practice of many hyperlocalists. The activities of local shops, clubs and organisations, the 'banal chat' of local citizens, were all material from which content could be created. That is not to say that all news covered was 'soft', with issues of local governance also covered and campaigns carried out around issues of local concern. Indeed, in this respect many hyperlocals play a really valuable role in enriching the public sphere and filling the 'democratic deficit'. However, there was a tendency for interviewees to feel more comfortable in discussing their role in producing 'soft' news.

The notion of 'reciprocal journalism' (Lewis et al. 2014) is helpful in understanding the hyperlocal journalist as a social actor. Content of all kinds is often found or solicited via social media, with updates used as 'assets' in reciprocal exchanges. They employ reciprocal strategies – both online and offline, on the 'beat' – in order to build relationships with the community they are so determined to appear authentic to. This building of social capital is more important than gaining financial capital, it would seem. Indeed, there seems to be a clear rejection of an entrepreneurial discourse for most of the hyperlocal journalists we spoke to. Putting effort into making money might spoil the 'fun' of doing hyperlocal, but more importantly, there was a feeling that it would taint the relationship they had built up with the community, because what seems to matter most to the hyperlocal journalist is being seen to be on the community's side.

However, it would be wrong to characterise all hyperlocal journalists in this way. Those with a more focused business sense identified how the news 'gap' in their neighbourhoods created an opportunity to both address the democratic deficit and make some money. It was also true that for many, it was less about wanting to be the authentic voice of a community and

more about dealing with personal concerns. Feeling angry about a single issue and wishing to campaign on it was a motivating factor for many, but largely one that came from untrained hyperlocal journalists. This campaigning, personally situated as it was, resulted in the setting up of a blog that changed into something covering wider local topics once the campaign had run its course. Whatever the initial motivation, many described how their operations had spiralled out of control and, to an extent, were becoming a burden. Yet they continued to run operate them, often with the consequence that their own labour was subject to exploitation. Although this was expressed with a degree of grumpiness, it was clear that for many, the 'buzz' of doing journalism was a clear continuing motivating force.

In asking researchers to examine the new "communicative ecology," Nick Couldry (2004: 27) requires us to look closely at the "particular settings where people are generating new contexts of public communication and trust" (2004: 26). Hyperlocal journalists have created such a public setting, built on a very different relationship from that of the local press but one that is precarious, built as it is on the contradictions at the heart of the 'fictive' hyperlocalism that Radcliffe (2012) and others have argued for. Set against Couldry's three questions for emerging models of community media (2004: 27), we can see that hyperlocal journalism faces issues despite its practitioners attempts to be authentic brokers of "new networks of trust". Whilst I have not examined the extent of hyperlocal journalism's social inclusiveness, I have argued that "hidden subsidies" come in the form of the free labour provided by the practitioners themselves. Couldry's third question focuses on "the stability of the new forms of trust on which they rely" (2004: 27). Couldry imagines this as relating to the degree to which editors make transparent the rules of engagement. It is here perhaps that the authenticity that hyperlocal journalists rely on so much is of most significance, potentially becoming a resource that might suggest a sustainable future for hyperlocal journalism. As my study of Birmingham's hyperlocal news ecology showed, many of the operations that I surveyed in 2012 are no longer operating, but others have come in their place. It is interesting to note that many new entrants are reliant wholly on social media. Alum Rock Updates is a Facebook Page with almost 14,000 'likes' (as of June 2016) covering a largely Muslim area of the city. Such operations may be short-lived, or, like B31 Voices, find a way to deal with the relentlessness of engaging with citizens across social media platforms by developing reciprocal strategies that effectively hand over editorial and newsmaking control to citizens themselves.

The value of hyperlocal journalism

The development of a network of hyperlocal news operations in the UK has created value for citizens in a number of ways. I set out here my key findings:

1. *Hyperlocal publishing is a route to participation in the public sphere, supporting everyday active citizenship.*

The various hyperlocal publishing outlets, although geographically patchy, provide an alternative route to participation in the public sphere at a time when newspaper readership is declining (by an average of 10% year-on-year according to Turvill 2015). Such participation is often focused on the more banal aspects of living in communities, but can help foster everyday active citizenship (Postill 2008: 419). Further, hyperlocals invariably celebrate the endeavours of local independent shops, charities and community groups, which can help grow local social capital and enhance community cohesion. In short, it offers a route to civic participation.

2. *The embedded hyperlocal practitioner's lack of objectivity can result in greater civic value.*

The focus on these everyday concerns should come as no surprise when we are dealing with people who are embedded in their neighbourhoods and whose journey into hyperlocalism started in the private sphere. To a degree, even the professional journalist feels the weight of the civic discourse and can end up in a less critical space than one would expect from local news organisations. Pfau et al. (2004) note that journalists embedded within US military units during the Iraq invasion of 2003 lose perspective and inevitably end up displaying bias towards the troops they are embedded with. What is lost is “the idealized standard of reporter objectivity” (Pfau et al. 2004: 84). In hyperlocal publishing, similar issues inevitably arise. From a citizen perspective it may well come as something of a relief to find that a news outlet wants to be on your side from the outset, working to counter the media framings that often blight local areas.

3. *Hyperlocal publishers are part of a wider information ecology in localities.*

There is no doubt that in some localities (I gave the example of Birmingham), hyperlocals can contribute to a more plural media ecology. However, their emphasis on good news, the tendency to operate in a civic discourse, means they are just as likely to be an aspect of local tourist information, or an extension of local council information, as they are a news source. Paulussen and D'Heer's (2013) study of a Belgian newspaper's experiment with hyperlocal news found that citizen journalists were more likely to report on 'soft' news: "coverage about daily community life has become the domain of the citizen reporters" (2013: 599). The practitioners in this research talked at length of the value of 'good' news. One might take this as a reason to dismiss the value of hyperlocal but it does provide a vehicle through which citizens can feel some civic pride in place. In that there is much value.

4. *Reciprocation is a practice through which civic engagement is nurtured*

Another form of value comes about as a result of the practices of reciprocation that seem to lie at the heart of many hyperlocal news operations. Through social media there is a constant invitation to participate. This brings citizens' knowledge and opinions into the public domain (as their comments are shared or retweeted) and situates them as co-creators of news content rather than mere observers whose 'assets' are there to be picked off only at the point where their observation is of the extraordinary rather than the ordinary.

Future research directions

This research has taken a perspective that shifts the analytical lens from the public to the private sphere. It argues, as Hess & Waller (2016) also do, that undertaking hyperlocal publishing is more akin to a personally-motivated cultural endeavour. Practitioners are caught between a civic and a journalistic discourse but the reality is that much of their motivation is rooted in the personal and therefore scholars should take a research approach with that in mind. Jerome Turner (2015) likewise calls for a recasting of the study of hyperlocal news away from that of the public sphere. He argues that this is not news as we have come to understand it: "editors often need do little more than offer the conduit and curatorial channel by which narratives of everyday, local life are sourced, assessed, and then re-broadcast to the

audience” (Turner 2015: 48). His study of hyperlocal audiences shows that hyperlocal media is valuable to residents because it is “key to an everyday understanding of their neighbourhood [and] can encourage unexpected forms of civic engagement” (Turner 2015: 48). Further research with audiences for hyperlocal news is needed (see also Harcup, 2015a, 2015b) and Turner’s anthropological approach (he observes interactions on social media platforms over an extended period of time) is likely to offer richer qualitative detail about the value of producer-audience interactions than a more quantitative approach. Given the role played by social media as platforms for reciprocation then this surely it is there that future fieldwork should be located.

Implications for hyperlocal publishing and its practitioners

It could be argued that the majority of hyperlocal news has a tendency to be rather po-faced and celebratory, and from a policy-maker’s point of view, a conclusion that argues for a celebration of the banality of hyperlocal news is surely not quite what was hoped for. Clearly there are some examples show the effectiveness of having a harder investigative edge as their central offer (Bristol Cable, Love Wapping) or the value of employing satire to poke fun at the absurdities of local politics (Paradise Circus and Fuck Yeah Stirchley in Birmingham; Broughton Spurtle in Edinburgh). The ‘fictive’ hyperlocalist may well be allowed to celebrate the everyday, but they must also play their public service role in ensuring that local power is held to account. It is for this activity that policy-lobbyists want to help secure funding from a range of parties (Carnegie UK Trust 2014). At first glance, my evidence suggests that this call for funding might be at odds with what many hyperlocalists want, given that many expressed a kind of revulsion at the idea of having to deal with money. Money would “spoil the fun” they argued, and be to the detriment of the authentic relationship they have developed with their audiences. However, although many of my interviewees expressed this view, it remains the fact that Nesta received 165 applications for a £500,000 pot of seed funding in 2012. They may not necessarily want to talk about money, but they are not shy about applying for funding. Just ten of these applications received funding, suggesting that further competitive funding alone may not be a solution that will help the proliferation of the sector.

The Carnegie Trust have made useful suggestions for ways in which the market conditions could favour the further development of hyperlocal news operations. They note how

local councils are still required to place statutory notices in local newspapers, thus providing a form of hidden subsidy:

The Department for Communities and Local Government could also intervene to start levelling the playing field on financial support, for instance to permit local authorities to spend some (e.g. 10%) of their statutory advertising budgets through hyperlocal news providers. (Carnegie UK Trust 2014: 14)

Newspapers also feel the benefit of zero-rated VAT, said to be worth £600m a year (Carnegie UK Trust 2014: 5), whereas the largely online publications run by hyperlocal operators receive no such benefit. The number operating at the VAT threshold level may be very small, but the issue at stake here is about creating the conditions by which it becomes an option for hyperlocal publishers to attempt to grow if they can or wish to. Market conditions are tricky enough in dealing with a competitive online advertising market and grappling with the algorithmic nature of social media platforms (that often seem to work to keep readers away from income-generating websites), without also having to take on commercial competitors who have an advantage through hidden subsidies.

Should hyperlocal news get the level playing-field it deserves, it has a greater chance of forming a more robust part of local media ecologies, becoming part of the news mix as business models settle enough to produce stable income streams. This need not come at the expense of a complete shift to the mainstream in terms of either practice or product. Relatively lightweight organisations such as those in my thumbnail accounts can survive if they have access to even a small slice of the subsidies of the mainstream press (Tyburn Mail, although a print newspaper, has no statutory notices placed in it by the City Council). Despite often rejecting a genre of news that many recognise catches the attention of readers – that is, crime – the focus on the everyday also seems to bring the multiple shares, likes and comments that hyperlocals can then capitalise on. In fact, it is this genre of content that gives hyperlocal the authentic, warm feel that attracted academics, policy-makers, lobbyists to the practice in the first place.

Something will have been lost if hyperlocal news matures into a sector that simply replicates mainstream news media and its practices. We might see a form that once had the potential to form an alternative public sphere, “silently reproduce” (Couldry 2004: 27) the hierarchies it had the potential to replace. Given the shift in the UK towards regional devolution and either the running down of public services, or the reliance on the private or third sector to

sustain them, it is vital we have more local scrutiny rather than less. The 'more' that hyperlocal offers is independent, participatory and networked. Further, it brings its audience into the domain of journalism to talk about 'everything', in the 'everyday'. It traverses its digital and real-world 'beats' in a way that the commercial press no longer has the resource to do, and whilst my thesis makes clear that the 'fictive' hyperlocalist remains tantalisingly out of reach, we should look to champion a form that offers a fresh chance for journalism to have a more authentic relationship with its audience and allows us a glimpse of what happens if "everyone is a journalist" (Hartley 2009: 154).

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APPENDIX 1: Interviewees

Hyperlocal organisation	Name	Project interviewer
Abergele Post, North Wales	Gareth Morlais	Andy Williams
B26 Community*	Lol Thurstan	Dave Harte
BalsallCom.Com	Neil Cooke	Dave Harte
Bedford Clanger	Erica Roffe	Jerome Turner
Bexley is Bonkers	Malcolm Knight	Jerome Turner
Bitterne Park	Guy Phillips	Andy Williams
Broughton Spurtle	Alan McIntosh	Dave Harte
Caerphilly Observer	Richard Gurner	Andy Williams
Crosspool News	Robin Byles	Dave Harte
Cwmbran Life	Ben Black	Andy Williams
Deeside.com	Jonathan Sheppard	Andy Williams
Digbeth is Good	Pamela Pinski	Jerome Turner
Filton Voice	Richard Coulter	Andy Williams
Greener Leith	Ally Tibbit	Dave Harte
Gurnnurn	Des Scholes	Jerome Turner
HU12/Hedon Blog	Ray Duffill	Andy Williams
Inside Croydon	Steven Downes	Andy Williams
Knutsford Times	Jonathan Farber	Andy Williams
Leeds Citizen	Quentin Kean	Andy Williams
Little Bit Of Stone	Jamie Summerfield	Jerome Turner
Love Wapping	Mark Baynes	Andy Williams
Other side of Solihull *	Dave Irwin	Dave Harte
Port Talbot Magnet	Rachel Howells	Andy Williams
Roath Cardiff	Geraldine Nichols	Andy Williams
Saddleworth News	Stuart Littleford	Dave Harte
Salford Online	Tom Rodgers	Dave Harte
Salford Star	Stephen Kingston	Andy Williams
Southwark Living Streets	Jeremy Leach	Jerome Turner
Star and Crescent*	Tom Sykes and Sarah Cheverton	Dave Harte
Telford Live*	Andy Smith	Dave Harte
The Ambler, Amble, Northumberland	Anna Williams	Andy Williams
The Kentishtowner	Tom Kihl	Dave Harte
The Kirkby Moorside Town Blog	Jean Richards and Gareth Jenkins	Andy Williams
The Lincolnite	Daniel Ionescu	Andy Williams
Wayland News/Breckland View	Julian Horne	Andy Williams
West Hampstead Life	Jonathan Turton	Andy Williams
West Leeds Dispatch*	John Baron	Dave Harte
Wirral Council blog*	John Brace	Dave Harte
Wrexham.com	Rob Taylor	Andy Williams
WV-11	James Clarke	Jerome Turner

*Interviews conducted in March 2017

APPENDIX 2: Questions used as guide for interviews with hyperlocal journalists.

[Turn on recorder, and go through the following important information:]

OK, so this interview is designed to help us understand what you do, how you do it, and why... really. It's part of a big research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and part of it is aimed at understanding community news, or hyperlocal news, better than we currently do.

I'm going to need to record your consent for the interview, rather than sending you a form to sign, because we're going to do this over the phone.

The main thing you're going to need to know before you decide that is where your words might end up. There are three possible places:

- Academic journal article or books;
- Final reports to funders; and/or
- Interim blog posts and articles about hyperlocal in the UK, and the progress of our research

Your participation is voluntary, you can stop at any time, and it can be anonymous if you wish. That's the main thing we need to decide before we start. Would you like the interview to be:

- completely anonymous;
- completely named; or
- named in principal, but with the option of anonymity for parts of the interview you think may be sensitive?

[repeat anonymity code for tape]

Setting the scene/breaking the ice:

Can you tell me your name, where you're based, and a little bit about how you describe your site?

Motivations for producing hyperlocal news:

People do this kind of thing for all sorts of reasons... what motivated you to start producing news/doing what you do?

(prompts: why did you set up your site? What were the reasons?)

Once you've done this for a while I can imagine motivations change over time? Have your motivations developed?

Day-to-day practice:

Can you tell me about one of the posts, stories or issues you're most proud of working on, and why?

(prompts: what topics do you enjoy covering the most? Which kinds of issues are most important for you to cover?)

How much of this kind of work do you do in relation to the rest of the stuff you produce on the site?

[Let's get a bit more general now. Can you take me through the process of finding, researching, and writing posts:]

Where do you tend to get your starting ideas for posts from?

(prompts: From institutions or authorities in your community like councils, or the police? Politicians? Your audience/readers? Community groups? Other local media (mainstream or alternative)? What places? Social media? Institutional websites?)

What kinds of research and checking do you do when you prepare your posts?

(prompts: Do you use content available online? Where do you check the raw materials of your posts from? Organisations? Do you do any other research when you are preparing stories?)

What kinds of people get most of a voice in your posts, in aggregate?

(prompts: Why do you choose those people? If you didn't do interviews where did you get the quotes from? It's pretty common for mainstream media to interview and quote people, but not all hyperlocals do it... do you make much use of it? How many different people are usually quoted in your stories? If you do/don't quote a number of different sources, why do you/don't you do that?)

Workload, resources, and the volume of hyperlocal news:

How many people work on the site, and what are the different roles people play?

How many stories/pieces did you publish on the site last week/last month? *[ask last month if no work done in last week]*

How typical is this kind of workload for your site?

(prompts: does the volume of stuff you produce for the site fluctuate at different times? In what ways? Why?)

How many hours did you work on the site last week?

(prompts: or the last full week you worked on the site (e.g. without holidays, etc)?)

How many hours a week do you work on the site, on average, and how does that break down into different tasks?

Collaborating with audiences:

Do any community members work with you to produce stuff for the site?

(prompts: do you have any regular contributors? Any guest columnists or anything like that? Do you ever put out calls to action, asking readers to contribute or send your content? If so, what kinds?

Are some calls more successful than others? Why?)

Audiences:

What type of stories do you think most resonate with your audience?

How do you know what your audience thinks about what you produce?

(prompt: first of all, what kinds of feedback do you get? From whom? Do you check your web stats/metrics? What kinds of audience figures did you get last month/in an average month? Is that typical?)

In what ways do you respond to the feedback you get from audiences/readers? What do you do about it?

(e.g. Have you ever changed what you do after feedback? How?)

Challenges faced by hyperlocal news producers:

I'm trying to get an idea of the main challenges you face... If you could have three wishes granted that would make your main problems go away, what would they be, and why?

(prompts: can you give me specific examples to illustrate these problems? How do they effect what you do?)

Are there any areas of community life you avoid writing about/covering? If so, why?

(prompts: I'm trying to understand if there's anything you shy away from covering for any reason... with the aim of understanding what could be done to help overcome any problems you face)

Do you ever come up against problems dealing with official sources like the council?

(prompts: some people say it's difficult to be accepted as a legitimate news outlet... have you ever experienced that? How about with other organisations? ... like the police, for example?)

How do you think the work you do fits into the wider picture of local news in your area?

(prompts: Any other hyperlocals? What's your relationship with them? Do you have a MSM local paper on your patch? do you interact with the mainstream local press? Do you have good/co-operative relations? Antagonistic relations? Both? In what way(s)? Can you give examples?)

Can you give me a picture of how you've developed the knowledge and skills you need to do what you do?

(prompts: have you had any formal training? What kinds? From whom/where? How about informal support? What kinds? From whom/where?)

How sustainable is your site? For example, if you were to stop, could the site keep going?

Social media and mobile technology:

Does your site have a presence on social media?

Can you take me through the ways you use social media in relation to your site?

(Prompts: to interact with audiences? Example? To research stories you write? To

interact with sources of information? Example? To publish/publicise/distribute your work? Example?

If social media has been covered a lot already, ask: is there anything you use social media for that we haven't covered already?

Do you use mobile technologies to support your work? How?
(prompts: when producing stuff for the site? For readers to access the site?)

The economic value of hyperlocal:

Some people see their sites as businesses... do you aim to make money from the site?
(prompts: not everybody wants to, of course, some are activists, some do it as a hobby and don't want to make money)

[If you do aim to make money:]

What is your business model?
(prompts: Do you have advertising on the site? If so, who advertises – local ads, national ads? how do you find them? Do you sell your own ad space? Does someone do it for you? How does that work?)

Is there any way you could give us an indication of how much you make from your site?
[prompts: does the site generate wages for anyone? Full wages? Part time?]

Do you support the work you do on the site with other income? If so how?
(e.g. Day job – what kind? Freelance work? Consultancy? Training? Etc)

APPENDIX 3: Open coding categories

Coding category	Sources	References
Experience		
Evidence of experience	1	2
No formal training	2	2
Economics		
Advertising - in newspaper	3	6
Advertising - on site	6	11
Enterprise misc	5	8
Exit strategy	2	2
Expanding	1	1
Feeling a warm glow...	2	4
Getting paid	5	12
Grant Funding	3	4
In it for the money from the outset	1	1
Innovative ideas or experiments	1	1
Legal worries	1	1
Mainstream media links - economics	2	2
Money - voluntary tensions	2	3
Not feeling a warm glow	1	2
Not wanting to do it for money	4	6
Thoughts on sustainability	2	2
methods to make money	1	1
multi-skilled	1	1
other motivations than money	1	1
self-exploitation	0	0
Motivations	13	14
'fill the gap'	12	13
Poor quality of existing press	3	3
Motivations over time	5	5
Origins	1	1
Family-life	2	3
Improve my skills	1	1
Needed a job	1	1
because of a single cause	1	1
giving something back	1	1
moving back home	2	2

APPENDIX 4: Coding matrix for 'motivations'

	Person:Experience = Experienced Journalist	Person:Experience = No Journalism experience
1 : Origins	1	0
2 : 'fill the gap'	6	7
3 : because of a single cause	1	4
4 : desire to connect people	1	1
5 : Family-life	2	0
6 : giving something back	2	0
7 : improve area reputation	1	5
8 : Improve my skills	1	1
9 : incomer - get to know people	1	1
10 : inspired by others	0	0
11 : moving back home	1	1
12 : Needed a job	1	1
13 : Poor quality of existing press	1	1
14 : skills or keeping hand in	0	1
15 : Taking over from someone else	1	0
16 : Challenge Journalism norms	2	0