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# RECIPROCITY AND THE HYPERLOCAL JOURNALIST

Dave Harte , Andy Williams, and Jerome Turner

*Increased interest in hyperlocal news has led to growing evidence of its economic value, its ability to play traditional democratic roles associated with news, and its merits and deficiencies in comparison with the outputs of a declining established commercial news industry. Given many hyperlocal producers cite the desire to play a role in producing better communities, this paper breaks new ground in examining the social and cultural dimensions of hyperlocal journalism's news-making, community-building, and place-making roles. We examine this emergent cultural form's affinity with telling stories, and enabling conversations, about civic and political concerns, but also its affinity with, and celebration of, the banal everyday. Employing the novel theoretical concept of reciprocal journalism, we provide new evidence about the mutually reinforcing online, and offline, practices that underpin relationships between producers and the communities they inhabit and represent. Drawing on evidence from the most extensive multi-method study of UK hyperlocal news to date, it demonstrates the different kinds of direct and indirect reciprocal exchange practices common in community news, and shows how such work, often composed of journalistic and community-activist practices, can enable and foster relationships of sustained reciprocity which improve and strengthen both hyperlocal news and the communities it serves.*

**KEYWORDS** citizen journalism; community; hyperlocal news; journalism practice; local news; reciprocal journalism; reciprocity

## Introduction

While much research about hyperlocal news to date offers insights into its value, and limitations, set against journalism's commonly understood normative roles in society, little examines the more innovative, less traditional, roles that hyperlocal publishers play. Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014) offer an innovative theoretical lens that marks a move away from theoretical frames that primarily emphasise community news' contributions to democracy and the public sphere: the novel theoretical concept of "reciprocal journalism". They claim that this concept "could prove especially useful in studies of community journalism" (237). This paper draws on a large, multi-method, study of United Kingdom-based hyperlocal publishers to show how reciprocal practices between community journalists and community members can lead to "sustained reciprocity" over time based on "lasting forms of exchange that deepen collective trust, social capital, and overall connectedness—essential components for the vitality of communities of all kinds" (230). In our previous work we have sought to outline the value of UK hyperlocal news in relation to established traditional democratic roles for news (Williams, Harte, and Turner 2015). Here we seek to demonstrate newer forms of journalistic social value, mediated by internet and social media communication, but also by the real-world activities of hyperlocal publishers in their communities. More specifically, we will show how acts of reciprocal exchange

rooted in UK hyperlocal online participatory journalism, as well as in publishers' fostering of offline acts of community participation, can lead to "better [communities]" as well as "better journalism" (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 236).

## Literature Review

### *The Decline of Established Local News and the Emergence of Hyperlocal News*

In the United States (Downie and Schudson 2009; McChesney and Nichols 2011) and in the United Kingdom (Williams and Franklin 2007; Freedman 2010; Williams 2012), research has chronicled the decline in local and regional newspapers caused by falling advertising revenues, decreasing print circulations, and a lack of ability among news companies to raise equivalent profits from growing online and mobile audiences. The resultant closures of newspaper titles and heavy losses of paid professional journalists have been stark. Enders (2011) suggests that between 2005 and 2010, the revenues of the four leading local newspaper companies in the United Kingdom dropped by between 23 and 53 per cent (Enders 2011). While Ramsay and Moore (2016) calculate a 35 per cent decline in UK newspaper titles, falling from 1687 in 1986 to just over 1100 in 2015. Even where newspapers have remained, newsrooms have suffered continued cuts to their workforce, with many left working on severely diminished staffs (Phillips and Witschge 2012; Harding 2014). Enders (2011) estimates that 40 per cent of jobs in the UK local and regional press disappeared between 2006 and 2011, and this figure has been far exceeded in the worst-hit areas, in some approaching 85 per cent (Williams 2012; Howells 2015). The last decade has seen increasing agreement among scholars that local news has become: less plural; less local in its orientation; less embedded in, and reflective of, local communities; as well as less critical and independent from its (overwhelmingly elite) sources (Ramsay and Moore 2016). If, as has often been argued, the presence of news journalists in a community can foster a sense of collective identity and encourage greater connectedness between locals, these developments cannot be good for the cohesion of local community life.

The role that small-scale, independent news operations might play in stemming such "narratives of decline" (McNair 2002, 9) has been increasingly examined. Our own work (Williams, Harte, and Turner 2015), as well as that of Barnett and Townend (2015), has recognised that much of the output of UK hyperlocal news: gives increased voice to local citizens and community groups; contributes to the plurality of local media; and covers cultural and civic life, local economies, as well as the business of local government. Both studies find evidence that hyperlocals often fulfil important social roles such as passing on accurate and reliable information to readers, holding elites to account, representing communities to themselves and the outside world, and advocating for locals in campaigning terms. There are important caveats to bear in mind, however, not least the widespread economic insecurity (and potential unsustainability) of hyperlocal news operations, coupled with the variable nature of the reach and scale of publishing within communities (Kurpius, Metzgar, and Rowley 2010; van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014; Williams and Harte 2016).

### *Audience Participation and Collaboration in Established Professional News*

In the pre-digital past, many journalists had "little or no interest in the audience" (Harrison 2000, 117). Members of the public who did use the limited means at their disposal to

express views about journalistic output were often dismissed as members of “the green ink brigade”, a shorthand for “obsessive” complainers (Lee-Wright 2009, 82). Audiences were routinely dismissed as unrepresentative of the wider citizenry (Gans 1979), and even as mentally unstable (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). More recently, as news organisations embraced the participatory and collaborative possibilities of the internet, journalistic practices shifted considerably (Deuze, Bruns, and Neuberger 2007; Deuze 2008; Hermida 2011). The use of audience material by professional journalists has often come to be seen as a democratising force (Bowman and Willis 2002; Gillmor 2004; Jarvis 2006), but this shift has often been driven by a need to cut costs and stem continuing declines in audiences and revenues by generating more highly engaged, and therefore profitable, audiences (Nicey 2016). Even in non-profit public service media, participatory journalistic practices have often been driven principally by pragmatic professional rather than idealistic goals (Williams, Wardle, and Wahl Jorgensen 2011), and “professional control” has tended to be prioritised over “open participation” (Lewis 2012).

Despite its claims to “horizontal communication”, user-generated content (UGC) has tended to be dominated by long-standing, hierarchical, “vertical logics” (Nicey 2016). Likewise, numerous studies point to widespread use of social media in routine news work (Broersma and Graham 2013; Gulyas 2013), but “much of the research suggests that journalists use the immediacy and reach of social media services ... to extend existing news-gathering, reporting, and broadcasting practices” (Hermida 2016, 87). In the crisis-hit UK regional and local press, UGC is sought by companies wishing to reduce costs at the same time as associating themselves with the “semiotic democracy” of audience content (Freedman 2012, 87). This approach to audience content is visible in the policies and practices of local news outlets. Howells (2015, 154) cites a 2010 email to staff at the company’s *South Wales Evening Post* outlining how 30 per cent of its editorial material would soon have to be sourced from “free-to-use sources including photographs, poetry, and articles generated by its readers”. Similarly, regional publisher Trinity Mirror’s editorial director Neil Benson sees the company’s readers in commercial terms as a “great untapped opportunity”, and re-deployed journalistic staff as “community content creators” responsible for “harvesting” people’s photos, video, and stories (Cookson 2013). In such commercially exploitative approaches there is scant evidence of participatory practices rooted in relationships of common purpose, equal mutual benefit, or reciprocal exchange.

### *Audience Participation and Collaboration in Hyperlocal News*

Kurpius, Metzgar, and Rowley, in their early analysis of the economic sustainability of US hyperlocals, define them as:

geographically-based news organizations that operate largely in big metropolitan areas and cover a narrow range of location-specific topics. Such sites allow input from citizens through content contribution, blogs, and other feedback loops. In the current media environment, hyperlocal media operate at the crossroads of highly focused, locally-oriented news with technology-enabled potential as tools for civic engagement. (Kurpius, Metzgar, and Rowley 2010, 360)

Key to this description is the co-existence of news provision and the use of online tools to encourage participation and civic engagement. Unlike with legacy media, online exchange relationships, rooted in the encouragement of collaboration and participation,

have been indigenous to this emergent cultural form from the start. Much of the literature suggests that many hyperlocal news providers have, to different degrees, an open and collaborative approach to working with members of the audience and co-producing news content (Baines 2010, 2012; Ryfe and Mensing 2010; Thurman, Pascal, and Bradshaw 2012; Zamenopoulos et al. 2016). However, it would be wrong to assume that hyperlocal journalism is a single coherent practice whose practitioners all share a clear sense of identity and are motivated by similar concerns. As Judith Townend (2015, 87) has noted: “there is a huge range and diversity of operations, from city-wide enterprises publishing dozens of items each week to single-person part-time projects publishing one or two items a week to the local parish”. As one might imagine, different approaches to online and real-world participation can be found across this range.

Echoing their largely unsuccessful approaches to harnessing UGC, large legacy local media organisations have been found wanting when entering the hyperlocal sector. Studies by Thurman, Pascal, and Bradshaw (2012) and Baines (2012) have both found commercial hyperlocal operations in the United Kingdom have largely failed to successfully engage communities in collaborative, grassroots news initiatives. Work on US, corporate-owned, franchise hyperlocal news sites has yielded analogous insights. In a study of the large chain of US local websites *Patch*, St. John, Johnson, and Nah (2014) note that: interactivity with readers was limited, with low proportions of posts containing comments; local community voices were rare in coverage; and editors did not encourage much participation or interaction. Barnett and Townend (2015) suggest that, in general, the more successful hyperlocals tend to be independent, and this seems to be the case when it comes to successfully engaging audiences, too. They cite Mathew Ingram, who believes hyperlocal journalism will be more successful if it is “artisanal” rather than “mass-produced”, if it is based on a close relationship with a local audience, and if it is driven by community members themselves, rather than by a “cookie-cutter version stamped out by an assembly line” (Ingram 2013).

Research from the United Kingdom confirms a general tendency among independent hyperlocal publishers towards encouraging the participation of community members. Kantar Media found that one-fifth of users of hyperlocal news have contributed by posting a comment or uploading content, and 10 per cent have created more substantive news content “about their local area from scratch” (Nesta & Kantar Media 2013, 9). Many UK sites have active networks of contributors among the communities they serve who: produce guest posts or regular columns on issues which interest them; write about things where they have special expertise; or are willing to participate in crowd-sourcing exercises submitting material around specific calls (Zamenopoulos et al. 2016). Dovey, Alevisou, and Williams (2016) point out that, as well as giving people information to help them navigate local life, many UK hyperlocals also often provide readers with tools such as My Society’s *FixMyStreet.com* which facilitate direct communication between citizens and local government.

Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley (2011) find numerous examples of US independent hyperlocals encouraging readers to interact with producers, comment on posts, and co-create content in different ways. Horning (2012), likewise, points out in his broad survey of US hyperlocals that most such sites include spaces for participation from audience members and include coverage of civic opportunities for readers and citizens. But he also notes the limits of opportunities for participation, stating: “it is not entirely true that hyperlocal sites are universally focussed on civic journalism” (153). Nor are the participatory

tools used to encourage interaction much different from those used by mainstream local journalists. As Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley (2011, 783) suggest, “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”. These notes of caution should be taken seriously, but also seen in the context of what we know about the heterogeneity of this cultural form. Part of our task in this paper involves identifying similarly broad trends in the UK hyperlocal sector, but also teasing out differences in approach taken by publishers who operate in a range of different ways, and identifying examples of interesting and innovative practice.

### *Reciprocal Hyperlocal Journalism and Community Participation*

It is in this context that we turn to the notion of “reciprocal journalism” to theorise the participatory practices of hyperlocal community news publishers (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014; Holton et al. 2015; Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders 2016). Based on the work of Molm (2010), the concept approaches reciprocity as a social good underpinning strong communities, specifically in relation to the development of “trust, connectedness, and social capital”, what Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014, 229) call “the bundle of normative expectations and networked resources that are critical for the formation and maintenance of community ties”. Reciprocity has, they explain, been central to the functioning of both geographical communities and virtual online communities, but theirs is the first application of the concept in the sphere of journalism. Such an application is important because journalists can no longer be seen simply as content creators but increasingly must also be seen as community builders who can enable and “catalyse” reciprocal exchange in social media spaces in numerous ways: “directly” for their readers, “indirectly” among the broader community, and repeatedly over time in a “sustained” way (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014).

The communicative architecture of social media commonly invites direct reciprocal exchanges, e.g. in acts of liking, sharing, and commenting on the communications of others. We often give in ways that do not guarantee us immediately getting something back in return, in the expectation of being at the receiving end of equivalent acts of goodwill in the future. Indeed, as the authors point out, the success of most social media networks, and other Web 2.0 communications, rests on this kind of direct reciprocity (they cite the examples of bloggers hyperlinking to each others’ posts, Reddit users up-voting each others’ contributions, or journalists re-tweeting each others’ stories). *Direct reciprocity* takes place at the level of the individual, and helps cement relationships between individuals. But the internet has also enabled more diffuse forms of reciprocal exchange. *Indirect reciprocity* happens “when the beneficiary of an act returns the favour not to the giver, but to another member of the social network” (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 234). This kind of collective act of paying it forward is seen as more effective than direct reciprocity when “producing social solidarity, social unity, and trust, as participants begin to see themselves as more of a collective” (234). Local social cohesion is potentially well served by this kind of community-building activity. Examples given include: using a network to relay information quickly and accurately; connecting people with useful sources of information; and matching resources with those in need of them.

It is *sustained reciprocity*, though, that marks the apotheosis of reciprocal communicative exchange in communities. Direct and indirect reciprocal acts can often be immediate

and fleeting, but sustained reciprocity can only be achieved when relationships of exchange can be sustained over time, and in ways that ensure a steady stream of continued acts of mutual goodwill. This kind of reciprocity is desirable because it involves “lasting forms of exchange that deepen collective trust, social capital, and overall connectedness—essential components for the vitality of communities of all kinds” (230). This, it is suggested, will help with the development of normatively positive effects on communities, namely that they will become more trusting, more connected and engaged with each other, and more rich in social capital among their members.

The novelty of this theory in journalism studies means that it has not often been applied in discussions of news media of any kind, but some empirical studies have recently put the concept to use. Holton et al. (2015) aimed to analyse public perceptions of reciprocity and people’s reciprocal practices on social media as a way of understanding potential participation in acts of news production and co-production. They found key indicators of the relevance of reciprocity in theorising “the news interaction process” as well as social media and society more broadly (2526). Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders’s (2016) application of the reciprocal journalism framework focuses on a commercial hyperlocal news project in the Netherlands. They examine the specific mechanisms that allow for reciprocal exchange (such as those on a website) and find that achieving sustained reciprocity (of which social capital is a vital part) was not a given simply because the reciprocal mechanism existed. Rather, it had to be worked at, be committed to by the journalists, else failure was inevitable (Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders 2016, 722).

At its root, reciprocity, or “returning one favourable action for another” is seen as a social good which encourages participation, discourse, and dynamism among online and offline communities (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 230). Community journalism is seen as a sphere where this form of exchange might be explored because of the “distinct closeness” between producers and audiences at this level (230), by contrast with the more or less distant, exploitative, or dysfunctional exchange relations that seem common among established, legacy media participatory practices explored above. We are drawn to this theory to help understand the value of UK hyperlocal news, at least in part, because of its levelling approach to understanding the value of participatory reciprocal acts both on- and offline. The examples of Lewis, Holton, and Coddington relate overwhelmingly to the online journalistic social media practices of community news workers. We are acutely aware, however, that many in the UK hyperlocal sector encourage, foster, and enable participation in both journalistic and non-journalistic ways, both in virtual communities on the internet and in real-world community settings. These authors suggest that at its best reciprocal journalism can make the news, and the communities it serves, better. In this paper, we will demonstrate some of the ways in which online and offline reciprocal relationships can both inform hyperlocal news, and might be seen to improve connectedness between people in local areas to the advantage of community cohesion.

## Methodology

This paper examines evidence of participatory and collaborative journalistic practices with reference to broad quantitative findings from a large snapshot content analysis of hyperlocal news sites in the United Kingdom and an online survey of practitioners, but leans to a greater degree on a series of qualitative interviews with, and case studies examining the practices of, UK hyperlocal news publishers. Our study was a very broad one,

designed to generate findings about a range of topics to allow us to map the field of UK hyperlocal news. It was not originally designed to draw on the specific notion of reciprocal journalism (indeed our fieldwork mainly pre-dates the introduction of the concept). Instead, we use the theory as a *post facto* “heuristic device” (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 237) to help us further understand the nature of hyperlocal news’ contribution to community life in relation to the broad range of participatory practices of UK community news organisations, and the broad range of data we have captured in relation to these.

### *Content Analysis*

Our sample consists of posts published on the sites of members of the UK’s Openly Local news network between 8 and 18 May 2012 (Openly Local 2014). During this period, 3819 posts were published on 313 active websites, and we coded every other story (odd numbers) on each site, a total of 1941 posts (for more detailed information about the generation of the sample, see Harte 2013a). Some entries in the network are blogs run by single individuals, some are collective enterprises; some are produced as a hobby and rely on volunteer labour; others have more commercial aspirations and are run by local media entrepreneurs. The overwhelming majority are websites that report on a wide range of news and events in small geographic areas (principally small towns, or city suburbs, but in a few instances larger conurbations such as counties, or smaller ones such as single postcode areas). Adding to our previous published findings in Williams, Harte, and Turner (2015), in this paper we focus on our evidence about opportunities to share website content and comment on posts, as well as examples of explicit encouragement in posts for readers to participate in online or offline community activities. The initial validity of our coding categories was tested using a pilot sample selected to represent the diversity of coverage. After further discussion, a finalised coding frame was formulated and a detailed 18-page coding manual was written to ensure the consistency of coders (both available on request). Overall inter-coder reliability tests showed our reliability rates were 90 per cent reliable for findings published in this paper.

### *Interviews and Case Studies*

In this paper, we draw much more extensively on semi-structured interviews with 35 hyperlocal publishers conducted in 2013 and 2014. The interviewees were drawn from the same network of hyperlocals cited above, and through contacts with the authors. We interviewed producers from a range of different hyperlocal outlets in terms of: the geographic areas served (urban, rural, wealthy, poor, etc.); the longevity of the site (some are new, some longer-established); the professional backgrounds of producers (19 of the 35 interviewees said they had received some formal of journalism training or had careers as journalists without the need for such training); and approaches to sustaining their operations (some who see their sites as hobbies, some as businesses). All the interviewees operated websites, with a small number also publishing a newspaper. Interview topics were wide-ranging, covering all aspects of production practices, motivations, site content, economics, sustainability, and relationships with audiences and the local community. We focus in this paper on social media practices, approaches to participation with community members, and evidence of relationships of offline and online reciprocal exchange with news audiences that cut across all of these topics. Interview responses have been anonymised for this

article. In addition to interviews, we also draw on a case study (of *B31 Voices* in Birmingham) where, as well as interviewing the publishers, we draw on a range of data from social media to examine the interactions between the hyperlocal publisher and its audience.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Direct Reciprocity On- and Offline*

Whilst direct reciprocity refers to a mutual exchange between individuals, Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (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 when there is a risk of not getting anything back, there is greater potential to “demonstrate and develop trust and social bonding” (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 233). We found extensive evidence of direct unilateral exchange in newsgathering practices of hyperlocals.

The hyperlocal producers we interviewed are (with just a single exception) resident in their neighbourhoods. Most of the operations we examined were web-based, usually using free blogging platforms like Wordpress or Blogger that have functions for reciprocity built in (that is, comment functions or share/like buttons that connect to social media services). Ninety per cent of posts in our content analysis had comments enabled, 89 per cent allowed sharing via Facebook, and 64 per cent using Twitter ( $N = 1941$ ). Comment functions were actually used by readers in 19 per cent of all posts: in 9 per cent readers commented about the content, but did not engage in conversations with anyone; in 4 per cent readers conversed with each other; and in 6 per cent of posts hyperlocal publishers also participated in comment thread conversations ( $N = 1941$ ). In addition to this, many hyperlocals make direct calls for audience participation in their website posts. Overall, 28 per cent of all posts in our content analysis contained a direct invocation to readers to participate in some form of community endeavour ( $N = 1941$ ), 8 per cent involved some form of action online, and 20 per cent some form of real-world activity. Of these, the highest proportion involved invocations to join in with (non-political) community events or meetings of community groups (11 per cent of all posts), followed by encouragement to: report things to local authorities like the local council or the police (6 per cent); commit acts of citizen journalism such as sending in content or views (5 per cent); take part in formal political processes (3 per cent) or informal political protest (1 per cent); and to participate in acts of charity or take part in local creative cultural life, for example by attending a local art class or photography club (both 1 per cent) ( $N = 1941$ ).

It is clear from our interviews, however, that the majority of exchanges with readers occur away from the sites themselves, on social media. The online survey of UK hyperlocal publishers of Williams et al. (2014, 21) shows that 91 per cent use Twitter and 79 per cent use Facebook for their hyperlocal activity. This research also finds, in a sign of the importance attributed to participatory practices, that 28 per cent of hyperlocals would like to “improve” their sites by carrying out more “community engagement” work, and 27 per cent by encouraging audiences to participate more by submitting greater volumes of UGC ( $N = 123$ ) (37). We did come across some producers who do not use social media very extensively in their hyperlocal work. For instance, one interviewee told us “Twitter

for me unfortunately tends to be a one-way street. Facebook's a little bit different, but mostly I'm on Facebook for family and close friends" (Int-31). Almost all of our interviewees use these platforms to promote and distribute their posts, and a large majority for a range of other reasons such as publishing breaking news, gathering news, and generally interacting with audience members, sources, and the wider community to maintain good relations. It was common to hear of audience information, tips, and content such as photographs and video being used in hyperlocal news.

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: "Depending on what it is, we'd re-tweet it. Quite often if it is a tweet ... it'll be a retweet and then we'll say, 'a reader has given us ...'" (Int-2). When gathering news on social media, hyperlocal publishers rely on audiences trusting their content will be considered for use. Using the direct reciprocal functions of social media was also 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 ... 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. (Int-7)

The ability to embed content from Twitter results in a simple way to co-create content on the hyperlocal site and offers the reader a clear indication that they have been part of a reciprocal exchange process: "So just embed that straight in—that's your story, that's the picture" (Int-15). If a citizen tweets about something in their locality, there is a chance that this will be used by the hyperlocal, especially in breaking news (Int-8). In this sense, social media content provides a set of "assets" that hyperlocal producers can create value from. Despite these open approaches, it is worth noting that most hyperlocal producers still discussed a gate-keeping or gate-watching (Bruns 2003) process, which results in news values being applied 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)

Hyperlocal publishers also offer up many examples of off-line engagement with news sources in which direct, unilateral exchange takes place. Some producers have a very deliberate real-world newsgathering routine which involves walking a self-described unofficial "beat" taking in local high streets, making themselves visible within communities. For instance, one told us, "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" (Int-16). Often, the gathering of stories happens not in a deliberate way but from accidental everyday reciprocal exchanges as hyperlocal publishers go about their everyday activities. Face-to-face encounters with local citizens were fruitful sources of news, 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).

Sometimes volunteers on hyperlocal sites are 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 once well 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)

Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014, 236) state that reciprocal journalism does not necessarily "describe some wholly new kind of journalism". Such tip-offs, rooted in real-world, face-to-face exchange, were once a staple of local newspaper beat reporting, but have become more rare since the above-referenced large-scale withdrawal of professional journalism from so many UK communities.

Another example of direct reciprocal exchange comes in the form of the labour that is given by volunteers. Many described how their operations relied on (sometimes quite large) networks of volunteers who gave small amounts of time, often with some reciprocal benefit. The value that these volunteers gained in return was usually expressed in two ways: they were either seen as benefiting by gaining new, or honing existing, skills; or, they were assumed to be benefiting emotionally, or in terms of enhanced social capital, from the act of contributing: "I think the other volunteers also feel that they're working for the good of the community" (Int-28). In this example, the role of hyperlocal was as much about offering opportunities to contributors as it was about the value of the journalism produced:

that's one of our, kind of, reasons for being. Not only to get news out to people but also to help people with skills, to get volunteering experience, to learn new skills, to get better at things. (Int-28)

Another hyperlocal publisher likewise felt that the way to directly reciprocate the contributions he got from volunteers was by giving away some of his own knowledge about how to do community journalism: "let's have people who have the opportunity—because they enjoy it and they want to promote the area—to get training if they want to about how we can do that kind of community journalism better" (Int-16).

### *Indirect Reciprocity Through Social Media*

If direct reciprocity is about exchange between individuals then indirect reciprocity is about the value that arises from networked connections. In our research we found hyperlocal publishers utilised indirect reciprocity both in the service of communicating the banal everyday, and of more serious issues facing communities. *B31 Voices* is run by a married

couple (Sas and Marty Taylor) and covers a set of largely working-class suburbs in Birmingham, UK. They came to the area and started blogging in order to address what they perceived as a misrepresentation of the area's reputation, and to grow their own social network:

The area has got quite a bad reputation as being a kind of a chav area 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. (Sas Taylor)

In the intervening years (they started blogging in 2010), the website they created has developed to become a significant news node in that area of the city. It has circa 25,000 likes on its Facebook page and circa 8300 followers on Twitter (as of mid-2016). It also runs a Tumblr blog and a Flickr photography group that pools images from photographers in their area. The degree to which their operation has become popular with the public has taken them by surprise:

We're always interested in what people want to know about, but I think now it's got to a point where it has snowballed out of control in a way and people actually rely on it now. So the motivation was a little hobby about the small area we live in, and it's kind of developed into a feeling that you have to deliver a service to people now. (Sas Taylor)

Whilst other hyperlocals also reported that their operations have grown in scale to a point where it can be a burden ("people want a story every day. It's like a monkey on your back in a sense", Int-26), Sas and Marty had developed a more networked approach, with active citizen contributors, which has eased the pressure of having constantly to find and publish new material themselves.

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" and creating a new local commons (Dovey, Alevizou, and Williams 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. In March 2014, an analysis of the Facebook group showed that there were 2399 comments on 233 posts. Other hyperlocals reported similarly high levels of community activity on dedicated hyperlocal Facebook pages, even when they did not actively nurture a community on there: "we're not pushing it [Facebook] 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). The volume of material contributed by citizens on social media has resulted in *B31 Voices'* increasing use of hashtags across its platforms in order to help organise elements of the conversation, and create greater value from them.

Hashtags act as a way to gather and collate news, and to generate and maintain mutually supportive networks within their area, and to facilitate storytelling. By way of example: during snowfall they use a single hashtag across all platforms to tag their own content and to bring together that of citizen contributors (#B31Snowwatch). Such material 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. For Sas Taylor #B31Snowwatch was evidence of the value of their service,

The B31 Snowwatch ... 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?

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 #B31crowdsourcing). In one case even a lost dog had its own hashtag (#runningcollie). These are examples of indirect reciprocity as their use is amplified by the network, not just the producers of *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, and so on, which means that the reach of the original message extends beyond the habitual hyperlocal audience.

In contrast to what most other hyperlocals told us about their social media use, *B31 Voices* seem to undertake little in the way of gate-keeping and consciously retweet or share just about any content requested of them. In an analysis of data from their Facebook group in March 2014, we saw that stories about pets got more shares and comments than any other genre of story—pet stories received 76 per cent of the total shares for March 2014 (for a detailed discussion of the value to local online networks of "banal pet stories", see Turner 2015). As another hyperlocal producer put it regarding their use of social media: "[it's] just banal chat half the time, but that's a big community building aspect" (Int-32). In updating their research on news values, Harcup and O'Neill (2016) discuss how "shareability" has become a contemporary news value. In the case of hyperlocal news, it is often stories or communications about the everyday that get most shares, but this allows for indirect reciprocity to take place.

Social media's value as a participatory news platform was also seen in more serious hard news examples. During the United Kingdom's 2011 summer riots, one hyperlocal publisher used Twitter as a way to counter emerging myths about the extent of rioting in their locality. They identified tweets that were based on rumours and retweeted them with additional fact-checked input to counter the circulation of myths and untruths. Ironically, in this example it was the mainstream media that initially tweeted that the rioting had spread to this producer's area:

Because the Guardian Tweeted this, it got a huge amount of reaction and, frankly, panic and nervousness, and people getting very anxious about this. So I ended up, not really deliberately, sitting at my desk all evening and well into the night just kind of keeping a track of what was actually happening, what people were saying was happening, and trying to dispel the myths. (Int-32)

Unable to rely on mainstream media for a true picture of what was happening, the hyperlocal publisher drew on local volunteers, as well as trusted local eyewitnesses on social media, to provide their own verification: "a friend of mine ... basically got on his bike and cycled up and down the high road and reported back to me what was going on so I could keep people up-to-date; I trusted his reports" (Int-32). Another London-based hyperlocal publisher, with previous experience as a professional reporter, gave a similar account of using people he knew in order to provide eye-witness accounts:

I sat at my desk that night and my older boy, who hadn't yet gone off to university, and his mate were sent out. I told them, under strict instructions, to observe and not engage and to text me and phone me with updates, send me pictures back and to be back here by 9.30. (Int-17)

In each of these cases the online practices of the hyperlocal have been centred around using indirect reciprocity as a strategy to counter rumours. That is, using their own networks to identify trusted sources and combining those with the eyewitness accounts of their volunteers in order to create new, more accurate and reliable, content that is then circulated within the network and beyond.

### *Sustained Reciprocity*

In this paper we have drawn on the framework of reciprocal journalism of Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014) in order to examine the production practices of hyperlocal journalists. We found that hyperlocal publishers engage with people offline through embedding themselves in everyday places in their communities, as well as online through equally everyday places (Facebook, Twitter). Direct reciprocation often happens on a unilateral basis, with publishers offering the implied promise of giving attention to a citizen's story or issue (by verbally promising to write it up, or by having the potential to retweet or share it on social media). The risk of getting nothing in return is acceptable, providing there is sufficient evidence of reciprocation to "encourage others in the community to more actively reciprocate" (234). There is commonly active gate-keeping by the hyperlocal in this form of reciprocal exchange, with the decision as to whether to amplify a story ultimately resting with the hyperlocal.

As our case study of *B31 Voices* illustrates, there is also evidence of indirect reciprocity that suggests the notion of "sustained reciprocity" of Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014, 235–236) is achievable. Whether a hyperlocal is writing about soft or hard news (lost pets or riots) they act in ways that chime with Lewis's (2015, 2) suggestion that the route to sustained reciprocity is through community-building: "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". Indeed we found many examples of hyperlocals creating wider community benefit. It was common for publishers to cite the community value of their work as a motivating factor: "we started out with this being of community benefit and us giving something back to the community" (Int-34). This often moved beyond journalistic initiatives, and was followed through with offline action that helped build local social capital, and strengthen communities in concrete ways. In one case, for example, we found that a hyperlocal publisher had created a range of social media-facilitated, offline community enterprises to supplement their news coverage such as: a school uniform exchange service using Facebook to connect families wishing to swap clothes their children had grown out of, avoiding expensive purchases; social media calls to audiences to (successfully) help local victims of a house fire replace belongings and find temporary accommodation; and smaller instances of matching individuals with common community resources such as wheelchairs. Other relatively common examples include hyperlocals setting up, or participating in, social media surgeries to help community groups, businesses, and individuals learn new online skills, or working directly with community groups to improve internet literacy and digital communication (e.g. by teaching them to set up websites). The kind of networked, participatory, civic news spaces created by *B31*

*Voices*, as well as the community-activist, networked mutual aid that the school uniform exchange represents, would not be possible without deep and lasting relationships of direct and indirect mutual exchange repeated over time.

## Conclusion

Our research shows how reciprocal participatory exchange, both online and offline, both traditionally journalistic and less so, underpins the work of many hyperlocal publishers. The potential of well-developed indirect reciprocal practices and strategies can lead to a point where interaction between citizens is sustained in its own terms. The reciprocal journalism framework therefore is a useful model to better understand the everyday nature of community journalism as it allows the researcher to consider hyperlocal journalism as a cultural practice that has as much to do with place-making as it does journalism. Melissa Wall (2015, 807) has argued that scholars should note the importance of the “contingent places” in which citizen journalism takes place. The pubs and shops that seem to be a site of reciprocal exchange for the hyperlocal journalist are examples of such places, but so are the (now very normalised) social media spaces of the hyperlocal Web. Indeed, we have found evidence that suggests hyperlocal reciprocal practices in both spheres can be mutually reinforcing. We have also shown some of the ways that hyperlocal journalism practice innovates with, extends, and (in the case of local beat reporting) revives disappearing, journalistic norms. Further research might continue to explore this through an examination of the everyday reciprocal news-making, and place-making, practices that take place both online and offline within local communities. We concur with Hess and Waller (2016), who call for a re-situating of the debate about hyperlocal news within a different framework from that which has occupied journalism scholars to date. To accompany the (ever-relevant) concerns of democracy and the public sphere we also need a “greater focus on the social and cultural dimensions of hyperlocal news” (206). This paper has demonstrated the notion of reciprocal hyperlocal journalism allows for such a focus.

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