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Hyperlocal Community News: Its current state and future prospects

In the second of two essays about local news in Wales I draw principally on my own UK-wide research¹ into the emergent field of hyperlocal community news. Along with my collaborators, and colleagues at Cardiff University's Centre for Community Journalism, I have been researching hyperlocal news in the UK since 2013. In this article I draw on a series of interviews with, and a large internet survey of, community news producers, along with a large content analysis of the news produced by UK hyperlocals, to provide a detailed overview of the growth of this sector, its wide-ranging impacts, its considerable challenges, and future prospects.

Who produces hyperlocalcommunity news, and how do they describe what they do?

Our survey results suggest that the UK hyperlocal news sector is now reasonably well-established, in internet terms, and is dominated by players who have achieved a degree of longevity (nearly three quarters have been producing news for over three years, and around a third for more than five years). Seven out of ten of these producers see what they do as a form of active community participation, over half see it as local journalism, and over half as an expression of active citizenship (Williams et al 2014).

Almost half also have some mainstream journalistic training or experience. So this is not, as it is often assumed, a sector dominated by citizen journalists at the expense of those with more professional training or experience. That said, apart from a growing professional and professionalising minority, this is a sector dominated by volunteers who are not primarily motivated by making money from what they do (ibid.).

¹ This research was part of a big AHRC-funded project entitled Media, Community, and the Creative Citizen.

What, and who, gets covered in hyperlocal community news?

Many thousands of mainstream UK local and regional news reporters have been made redundant in recent years (see accompanying essay about the established news media Wales). Local newspaper editions serving individual districts have also gone, along with the local offices that used to make it easier to meet residents and audiences and to truly embed oneself in a community. As a result local news has become much more remote from the communities it is meant to serve, and independent local stories (which are expensive to gather and source) have been increasingly replaced by cheap wire copy and PR-based churnalism (Williams et al 2015).

By contrast, hyperlocal news is almost always produced by people in and of their communities, and many serve areas which have been hit by the closure of a local newspaper, or where there never was much traditional local coverage in the first place (Harte et al 2017; Williams et al 2014). Almost all the posts analyzed in our content analysis had a very strong local angle. We found that the largest topic of news in our content analysis related to local, day-to-day, community activities and events. These are mainly stories about the meetings of community groups and local clubs & societies (think meetings of the WI or the camera club), or one-off community events held for the general public (such as summer fetes). We also found a lot of stories about local councils and the services provided by local government, so hyperlocal news audiences are exposed to a lot of information that could be high in civic value (Williams et al 2015).

Another common thing to track in studies like this is the use of different kinds of news sources, the people who are quoted in local news, and who therefore have the power to *define* local issues and events on these news platforms. We know from existing studies that more established commercial local news outlets, like newspapers or more professional news websites, are very authority-oriented in their sourcing strategies, sometimes at the expense of regular, everyday, residents of an area. As with the more established press, official sources in government, business, the police are very important in the community news sector. But a key *difference* is the role afforded to members of the public, and to people from local community groups. Ordinary people get more of a voice in UK hyperlocal than studies of more traditional local news indicate, so communities are, in these respects, well represented by hyperlocal news (ibid.).

Campaigning and investigative hyperlocal community news:

In its plurality of voices and topics covered, its coverage of a range of areas of local life, and its intensively local focus, UK community news serves its readers very well. We also wanted to figure out if this emergent form of news played other traditional roles of the local press, such as holding local elites to account, or standing up for communities when things get tough. These are generally seen as difficult and time-consuming things to do, so we were surprised and encouraged to see they were often done very well indeed in this new sector.

Campaigns are, of course, important to the local news' ability to advocate for communities. Despite journalism's traditional commitment to objectivity and impartiality here is a long tradition of established news outlets taking up causes and fighting on behalf of, and alongside, local news audiences in the UK. 42% of our survey respondents have "started a campaign where the site has sought to change things locally in the last 2 years". Far more, 72%, have joined in, or supported, the campaigns of others. Investigations are, of course, important to the news' ability to hold local elites to account. Despite this kind of work being time consuming, and sometimes risky, 44% of respondents have "carried out an investigation which has helped uncover controversial new information about local civic issues or events" in the last 2 years (Williams et al 2014).

As in the mainstream local press, the issues campaigned about, or investigated, are varied. The qualitative evidence around this from our interviews and the survey indicate they can be very small and "hyperlocal" (relating to minor planning complaints, signage, the quality of thoroughfares, or that very British complaint: a surfeit of dog poo on local thoroughfares). But they can also be pretty big, consistently addressing issues in the public interest, and often taking on powerful elite interests (for example, by tackling cuts to public services, major developments, public safety problems, local governance accountability issues, and even instances of official corruption) (ibid.).

Connecting communities, online and in the real world:

In addition to examining whether, and how, community news might be playing *traditional* democratic roles we have also found evidence that hyperlocals are fulfilling *different*, and in some cases *new*, civic functions related to their position as key nodes in real world and virtual local information networks. We established strong evidence of the use with social media and new technology to engage and interact with audiences in the sector (Cable and Williams 2014). Much research into

the community-building, and community-enhancing, potential of new media has stressed how digital and social platforms allow journalists to connect audience and community members together, strengthening community bonds (Hermida 2012).

Dominant trends in the research base suggest that local news audiences, and the content they provide, tend to be understood by established professional UK local news companies in two primary ways: as untapped editorial commercial opportunities (with UGC to be “harvested”); and/or quantifiable units in the attention economy (with clicks to be monetized) (Harte et al 2017). Relationships with audiences have tended to be vertical, and extractive, rather than collaborative and dialogic (Howells 2015; Nicey 2016). Local legacy media experiments with community hyperlocal news have correspondingly been found wanting, often because audiences have not responded well to news experiments whose clear main aim is to extract and monetize their value while cutting the costs associated with traditional news gathering (Baines 2010, 2012; St John et al 2014).

Our research suggests that much UK hyperlocal news is more horizontal, dialogic, rooted in physical and online local everyday community spaces, and based on more equal & socially embedded reciprocal exchange relationships (sometimes in ways which evoke long-lost professional journalistic practices such as walking “local news beats”; sometimes in ways which harness the connectivity and power of the internet to bring people in communities together). We also find that hyperlocal news practices often blend on- and offline journalistic & community activist practices in mutually re-enforcing ways (e.g. by running online appeals for support when community members need help, running social media surgeries and supporting local organisations in their digital communications, organizing Facebook school uniform exchanges to allow local parents to save money by recycling childrens’ clothes, etc.) (Harte et al 2017). All of this means that much hyperlocal journalistic activity is actually or potentially effective at strengthening community bonds, and encouraging relationships of reciprocal exchange and mutual aid so essential to community cohesion and increasing social capital (Lewis et al 2014).

How is hyperlocal funded?

Given the serious economic decline in the wider local news industry it is important that we understand the economic strength of this sector. Despite the impressive social and democratic value of hyperlocal news content, community news in the UK is generally not a field rich in economic value. There exists a growing group of professional and professionalizing entrepreneurial local news startups (a think of

light in a gloomy and darkening local news market). But the sector is, on the whole, dominated by a large pool of volunteers covering their own costs, and doing what they do for the love, rather than money (Williams et al 2014).

Around a third of our survey participants make money, and most of these only make quite modest amounts. At the top end of the earning spectrum just over one in ten say they generate more than £500 per month in revenues. Most community news producers fund the running costs of their sites from their own pockets (further suggesting high levels of volunteerism), with around one in four raising enough money to at least cover their costs, and a further 16% “more than covering” their costs (ibid.).

While many employ a mixture of revenue streams, online advertising is the dominant form of income generation among those who seek to make money. A problem here is that, because hyperlocal outlets often suffer from a lack of visibility and penetration in their areas (Radcliffe 2015), those who do seek to make money from their sites with online ad revenues often have an uphill struggle. A number of other revenue streams are also used, such as:

- crowd funding (a disadvantage of crowd funding is the time-intensive nature of campaigns, coupled with the short-term, one-off nature of the revenue stream; an advantage is that funding drives can help increase audiences and drive audience loyalty);
- forming audience co-operatives (this is also hard work, but can guarantee a steady stream of income, and engages audiences with a local news service by giving them unprecedented opportunities to own and influence policy and coverage);
- getting grant money from charities & foundations (organizations such as Nesta and the Carnegie UK Trust have provided valuable targeted funding to help hyperlocals develop and become more sustainable);
- charity funding through local community development trusts (such as the long-standing *Ambler*, in Amble, Northumberland, where Anna Williams a journalist and community worker is paid to produce a news website and printed paper, and to encourage broad community participation in the project);

- cross-subsidizing local news work with other streams of income (such as training or consultancy work); and, increasingly
- print advertising models using free newspapers delivered through doors, or regularly distributed at fixed points in communities (this can hugely increase readerships, making it easier to convince local advertisers to become clients, and can also help overcome a widely-reported and somewhat conservative reticence among smaller advertisers to pay for online-only ads).

Overall, our data suggests that while the UK local news market may sustain some community news outlets under some conditions, it's currently unable to sustain this kind of news on a large scale, consistently, across the country. Unlike traditional commercial local newspaper publishers (which attract public subsidies such as statutory notices and VAT breaks), no subsidies are routinely available to smaller independent online news providers in this sector (Williams and Harte 2016).

How sustainable is hyperlocal community news?

In a sector that is largely underpinned by volunteer labour, sustainability is not only a question of money. In our interviews, we couldn't help but be struck by numerous indications of the precarious nature of many community news operations. People's professional and personal circumstances change, many "burn out", and the quality, consistency, and longevity of hyperlocal news sites can vary because of this (Harte et al 2016). UK community news is largely non-institutional by nature, and because these services are so closely tied to the personal circumstances of individuals there's no guarantee that a news outlet will survive the loss of a key contributor (Williams and Harte 2016).

Widespread voluntarism is producing much public value in the community news sector, but it's a fragile foundation on which to base something as important to democracy, civic, and cultural life as the generation of local news. Some argue that volunteer labour can underpin this field in much the same way as it already does with other areas of UK public life (elements of the local justice system, school governance, etc.). I fear that it may not be enough to sustain community news sites in the long term. Local news has never before relied to such an extent on the pursuits of private individuals – it has always needed strong institutions, backed up the power and social capital of a newspaper office with all its editorial, legal, and institutional support mechanisms. Without the profits needed to remunerate people the sector may well be too precarious to sustain the kind of institutions

which have previously been necessary prerequisites for a strong, independent, and critical local news.

Hyperlocal community news: Plugging news black holes?

In regularity and volume of publication, and geographic consistency of coverage across the UK, the community news sector is somewhat patchy and variable. The overall numbers of hyperlocal news producers, as well as their labour power, should also be put into perspective. One way to do this is to compare the numbers of new hyperlocal news producers with the numbers of redundant professional journalists in an area: I did this with my own city, Cardiff and its surrounding valleys towns, to give a rough indication of what's been lost and what is being gained there.

According to their own annual accounts, Trinity Mirror news subsidiary Media Wales, which serves this region, employed almost 700 journalistic and production staff in 1999; this figure had fallen to just 100 by 2015 (when they published the most recent figures). How many community journalists have taken their place? The LocalWebList map of community news sites lists 20 sites in Media Wales' patch, and they're run by no more than 40 regular news contributors, most of them working part time for little or no money.

Hyperlocal in the UK produces much news of great public value. But In terms of the *numbers* of news producers, and their *capacity* for (mainly part-time) work, community news can only *partially* plug growing local news deficits caused by the widespread withdrawal of established professional journalism from communities.

Conclusion: the future of UK hyperlocal news

Looking at our data you see three broad groups. Firstly, there is a small group of, themselves small, often precarious, but crucially economically viable community news services. This a rare good news story about local news in the UK, and we should do everything we can to foster and support this group, as well as to encourage others to join them. Secondly, we have a number of sites run by hobbyists who are now trying, in difficult market conditions, to professionalise in different ways (numerous community journalists who have been happy to produce their sites for free in their spare time are now developing the confidence and ambition to join the ranks of the more entrepreneurial start-ups mentioned above). Thirdly, we've got a larger, also precarious, group of volunteer-led sites that have no interest in making money, who'll carry on doing this as long as they want to,

before closing their site or transferring it to somebody else to run and produce (Williams and Harte 2016).

Players in all three groups are producing public interest news, often of impressive quality and quantity, but it faces significant challenges, and its promise should not be over-stated. The sector has benefited from varied kinds of support, and many hyperlocals have so far been able to work with groups like Talk About Local, Nesta, the Carnegie UK Trust, the Media Trust, and my own University's Centre for Community Journalism (which is also submitting evidence to this committee) to access practical help, guidance, and in some cases funding in a range of areas.

Those seeking to make money face serious challenges and a tough market dominated by established news publishers who have long dominated local and regional advertising systems. I believe that our combined knowledge about the mainstream traditional, and emergent community news sectors allows us to see local news in the UK as a public good: something that society needs, but which the market can no longer provide in sufficient quality or quantity. This logic arguably underpins existing public subsidy to local newspaper groups, but we have a paradoxical situation where our current local news policies protect entrenched, declining interests, while not supporting new, emergent players no matter how beneficial they are to the communities they serve.

I think that to support and foster local news as a public good in the 21st Century we will need a re-evaluation of local news policies to encourage newer entrants to the market, to foster experimentation with different funding models, and stimulate independent, plural and truly local news in print *and* online. It's clear that the professional and professionalising part of the sector would benefit from a range of policy interventions but the most useful might be smart, independently-administered, contestable, funding to help them try out, and test, different models for funding and distributing independent public interest local news in different places to help the sector as a whole develop and become more sustainable.

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