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The Value of UK Hyperlocal Community News

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THE VALUE OF UK HYPERLOCAL COMMUNITY NEWS

Findings from a content analysis, an online
survey and interviews with producers

Andy Williams, Dave Harte and Jerome Turner

The public interest value of news is often viewed through the prism of its relationship to democracy. In this respect news should act as: a source of accurate and plural information for citizens; a watchdog on elites; a mediator and/or representative of communities; and as an advocate of the public in campaigning terms. All of these roles are under pressure in the United Kingdom's commercial local news sector. This has led many to speculate, often without evidence, that the output of a new generation of (mainly online) hyperlocal citizen news producers might (at least partially) play some of these roles. To test this assumption, we completed 34 semi-structured interviews with producers, the largest content analysis to date of UK hyperlocal news content (1941 posts on 313 sites), and the largest ever survey of UK community news practitioners (183 responses). We found that these sites produce a good deal of news about community activities, local politics, civic life and local business. Official news sources get a strong platform, but the public (local citizens, community groups) get more of a say than in much mainstream local news. Although there was little balanced coverage in the traditional sense, many community journalists have developed alternative strategies to foster and inform plural debate around contentious local issues. The majority of hyperlocal news producers cover community campaigns and a significant minority have initiated their own. We also found that critical public-interest investigations are carried out by a (surprisingly) large number of community news producers.

KEYWORDS community journalism; democracy; hyperlocal news; local news; public interest

Introduction and Literature Review

There has been increasing attention to hyperlocal news in media and policy circles in recent years (Ofcom 2009, 2012; Radcliffe 2012). Some prominent hyperlocal practitioners have even argued that these services are "a crucial part of the media future as the traditional local media dies or is cut back to a shadow of its former self" (Taggart 2010). But as yet little research has been conducted in a sustained and systematic way to explore this new kind of community-level hyperlocal news in the United Kingdom (UK). This paper begins to address this gap.

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The Crisis in Mainstream UK Local News and Why It Matters

The public-interest value of news is often viewed through the prism of its relationship to democracy (McNair 2009). Key to this is the idea that representative democracy enables good government most effectively if citizens' decisions are based on accurate and reliable (and where necessary oppositional) information (Habermas 1989; Chambers and Costain 2001). McNair identifies four principal (and inter-related) democracy-enabling roles for the news. He sees news: as a source of accurate information for citizens; as a watchdog/fourth estate; as a mediator and/or representative of communities (a role which can help with community cohesion); and as an advocate of the public in campaigning terms (McNair 2009, 237–240). The value of local news has been defined similarly, as indicated by Franklin when he writes, "local newspapers should offer independent and critical commentary on local issues, make local elites accountable, [and] provide a forum for the expression of local views on issues of community concern" (Franklin 2006a, xix).

However, numerous studies have found the on-going crisis in the UK news industry is endangering the "local-ness", quality and independence of local news (Franklin 2006b; Fenton 2011). These studies find that as revenues fall and staff are cut, workloads increase, mainstream local news relies more on official sources and PR, and that only a very narrow range of sources are routinely cited (Franklin 1987; Franklin and Van Slyke Turk 1987; Davis 2008; O'Neill and O'Connor 2008). This news becomes less local in focus as editions are cut, high-street offices are closed and use of cheap news agency filler becomes more prevalent (Williams and Franklin 2007; Davies 2008; Hamer 2008; Franklin 2011). This has all led to increasing concerns about the industry's ability to play its democracy-enabling roles.

That the UK local, regional and national news media face a deep and continuing crisis, and that this is having detrimental effects on news, is now widely accepted. Newspaper publishers have traditionally made their money in two principal ways: by selling news to us (as readers/customers), and by selling our attention to advertisers. But advertisers have left newspapers in numbers, large increases in audience figures for online news have not been translated into profits, and revenues at most major local and regional news publishers in the UK have been hit hard (Williams and Franklin 2007; Freedman 2010; Williams 2012). Many advertisers no longer find subsidising the production of local and regional news to be as profitable as previously and are, quite understandably, migrating to other more lucrative outlets such as online search engines, social networks and classified advertising websites (Fenton 2008; Freedman 2010, 37–9; Mintel 2013). At the same time, many readers no longer feel inclined to pay up front for news, and this has had very marked effects on the profits companies can make from newspaper sales (Fenton 2008; Freedman 2010, 37–9; Mintel 2013). Even though most major industry players report growing advertising profits from online news, and expanding audiences for their websites, they have yet to formulate a reliable business model to compensate for the significant revenue losses caused by the on-going collapse of print (Greenslade 2009; Williams 2012; Mintel 2013). The impacts of such significant changes in the local and regional news industry have arguably been exacerbated by the business strategies pursued by the dominant UK newspaper publishers for much of the last two decades. The most challenging market conditions are a relatively recent phenomenon, and the large local and regional newspaper publishers were pursuing cost-cutting measures to increase profits in the short term, and failing to invest significantly in their journalism,

even while profits were very high between the late 1990s and mid-2000s (Franklin 2005, 2006b; Freedman 2010; Williams 2012). The publishers' unrelenting pursuit of profit has had worrying impacts on the quality and independence of local news.

Harrison, echoing others' findings (Franklin 1987; Franklin and Van Slyke Turk 1987), found that local newspapers' reliance on sources in local government was very high, even going as far as to suggest that the growing power imbalance between local media and local governments means that "local newspapers are unlikely to be able to perform their role as principal institutions of the public sphere" (Harrison 1998, 161). O'Neill and O'Connor (2008) provide the most detailed investigation into patterns of source access to local news. They find that local and regional journalists in the North of England rely very heavily on a relatively small range of official sources, usually those with the most resources to devote to media relations and the production of effective "information subsidies" (Gandy 1982) to journalists (O'Neill and O'Connor 2008). The police, court officials, local government, businesses and those who run public services are quoted the most often, and very few members of the public or local activists were cited at all (491–492). They also note with alarm that the majority of stories (76 per cent) relied on single sources, with less than a quarter of stories employing secondary sources who may provide alternative, opposing or complementary information to that provided by primary sources (492). This suggests a local press that takes too much information on trust, is too uncritical, and provides readers with limited access to the range of the (often competing) voices and perspectives actually present in local public debates.

Scholars have reached similarly gloomy conclusions about the range of topics covered by UK local newspapers. In-depth coverage of local politics and the governance of local communities has gradually given way to a more tabloid-oriented spread of news (Franklin 2005). Franklin uses data from content analysis and interviews with journalists to chart a move towards an increased emphasis on news about entertainment, consumer issues and human-interest stories (Franklin 2006b, 12). Specifically in relation to the coverage of politics, there have also been shifts away from hard news topics often associated with information that equips readers to be informed local citizens. Since the mid-1980s, the local press in the UK has reduced coverage of local elections, produced fewer election stories with distinct local angles and there is a "growing emphasis on trivial and entertaining coverage rather than a sustained discussion of policy concerns" (Franklin, Court, and Cushion 2006, 257).

The Rise of Hyperlocal Community News

But the Web has enabled a new generation of community-oriented local news outlets, often termed hyperlocal news (Kurpius, Metzgar, and Rowley 2010; Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley 2011; Thurman, Pascal, and Bradshaw 2012). In the United States, as early as 2007, Schaffer produced survey-based research on 500 hyperlocal citizen media sites which found this kind of news outlet to be "a form of 'bridge' media, linking traditional forms of journalism with classic civic participation" (Schaffer 2007, 7). By 2009, distinguished commentators had already accepted that such community news operations had a role to play in sustaining US democracy (Downie and Schudson 2009). Although the market for local news in the United States is still in steep decline, and

community news start-ups face many challenges around future economic sustainability, there have recently been some signs that smaller local news publishers may be weathering the storm better than some of their mainstream counterparts. The Pew Research Centre recently identified 438 digital organisations that produce original news regularly, most of them local in orientation, and found that these smaller, often non-profit, news sites are the biggest component of a growing US digital news sector (Jurkowitz 2014). Contrasting somewhat with this more mature and established hyperlocal media market, hyperlocal community news media are also a part of distinct European national media systems. Fröhlich, Quirling, and Engesser (2012), along with Bruns (2011), have researched the large German community news network *MyHeimat*. In 2010, Fröhlich's team found a national network of 37,000 citizen journalists collaborating with a number of regional news operations as well as publishing directly to a series of hyperlocal audiences (Fröhlich, Quirling, and Engesser 2012). In the Netherlands, Kerkhoven and Bakker identified 350 hyperlocal news websites publishing in 199 municipalities (Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014). These sites offer diverse, and often very locally relevant, news, but in common with many community news outlets worldwide, they often struggle to maintain themselves financially.

In the UK, hyperlocal community news is less well understood but still attracts sustained interest from the news industry, investors and policy makers. In their 2012 overview of the emerging network of hyperlocal websites, the communications regulator Ofcom claimed 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 2012, 103). Ofcom devoted a chapter (103–111) of their annual *Communications Market Report* to hyperlocal news—a recognition that draws on some of the research outlined in this paper. As well as publishing new information on the scale of hyperlocal production in the UK, Ofcom carried out some useful audience research to provide initial scoping information about the size of the audience for what it calls "local community websites" (Ofcom 2012). Such data suggest this a form of news that is growing in popularity. Seven per cent of adults in the UK currently access these sites once a week or more, and 14 per cent at least monthly. This is nowhere near the size of the audience for regional television news (which 76 per cent of people access weekly, and 80 per cent monthly), but it is actually quite close to the size of audiences for the websites of UK local newspaper publishers (13 per cent weekly and 19 per cent monthly) (Ofcom 2012). By contrast, three years previously Ofcom described the hyperlocal sector as nascent when compared with a stronger US scene.

Many have suggested, often without adequate data to prove their case, that some of the problems associated with the contraction of mainstream local news publishers can be solved with the advent of online local citizen news. Eulogising about a "blossoming of hyper-local online ventures", Beckett and Hevre-Azevedo (2010, 11) claim that "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". Fenton et al. (2010, 2) state that independently financed news consortia (which were central to the previous UK Labour Government's plans to reinvigorate local news) could "develop and support hyperlocal media through the sharing of resources and on-line link up to encourage alternative voices". In 2009, the then Labour Government, in its *Digital Britain* report, cited the "medium-term potential of online

hyperlocal news” to contribute to a gap in the provision “between the old and new” news media (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2009, 150). Writing about the US context, Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley (2011) build on accounts of how the internet facilitates new forms of news participation, and argue that hyperlocal news can contribute to undermining, but also adding public value to, the kinds of news provision normally offered to communities, specifically in the way they are often intended “to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement” (774). It is the filling of such real or perceived “gaps” that concerns Ofcom and other actors who are keen to scrutinise the development of hyperlocal media in light of the decline of commercial local news (Ofcom 2012, 103).

We believe that the scale of UK hyperlocal news production and consumption, as well as the general lack of hard data which allow us to characterise its nature accurately, warrants research that views the sector as distinct from, yet comparable with, the mainstream local news media. In short, our research was designed as a first step in understanding trends in the content of UK hyperlocal news as well as the motivations and practices of those who produce it, but also to test empirically whether, in what ways, and to what extent, this online local community news can plug the gaps left by the retreat of local news from many UK communities.

Methodology

This paper draws on data generated during a large research project which investigates hyperlocal news and creative citizenship in the UK. Our overall research question asks what value hyperlocal news generates for local communities within a changing media landscape since the advent of, and large uptake of opportunities provided by, new social media platforms. Our broader project approaches the complex issue of value in a number of ways, seeking to understand the term in relation to local civic, political and cultural life, as well as in relation to notions of economic value and sustainability. We have focused most of our research on the *content* of local community news, along with its *production*. More specifically, the paper draws on data derived from a large content analysis of UK hyperlocal news, along with an online survey of, and 34 semi-structured interviews with, producers of such news. We felt that as this was the first large project of its kind in the UK, it was important to generate findings that were broad in scope, and as representative as possible of this heterogeneous field of cultural production. But we also thought it important to triangulate our quantitative insights with richer and more in-depth qualitative data from interviews. There is, of course, a very strong case to be made that richer perspectives on the value of community news could be gained from close attention to hyperlocal audiences, and we aim to carry out more quantitative and qualitative research with hyperlocal audiences in future.

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). We coded each story “live” on the sites in question and did not generate our own archive of this material. Analysis of live website content can be risky because online news, unlike printed or broadcast content, can be amended or changed, often without any external sign of editing. This is a minor limitation of our work, but not a serious one as our plan involved aggregating trends across a large sample rather than close attention to the evolution of community news items.

Openly Local does not comprise a full list of hyperlocal publishers in the UK, and we are aware that many are not included. There is, as yet, no comprehensive list of community journalists in the UK because the sector is so young, informal and subject to such rapid change. Some entries on the site 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 post-code areas, are covered); a (very) few cover single issues, or limit their output to cultural issues and events. The network is embodied in an openly accessible online map to which local news producers can add their sites should they wish to—it is, in essence, a self-selecting sample. But even with this limitation in mind, we are confident that this large sample allows us the most comprehensive insight yet into the unstable and shifting cultural form of the UK hyperlocal news blog.

In line with our wish to produce findings which are comparable with historical content analyses of mainstream local news in the UK cited above, our content analysis pays particular attention to: 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 (principally, here, in relation to coverage of politics). The detailed content analysis coding frame was drawn up inductively after immersion in the sample. The validity of our coding categories was tested using a pilot sample of 100 stories 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 from the main author on request). The research was carried out in Cardiff and Birmingham with coders in contact with each other constantly via Google Hangouts. Regular formal coding review meetings were held and the researchers held routine informal conversations to maintain consistency. Overall inter-coder reliability tests showed our reliability rates were high: most variables were over 90 per cent reliable, and all were more than 80 per cent reliable. One weakness of the analysis we carry out here is that our work involves comparing current online community news with findings about (mainly) print commercial local news generated a number of years ago (notably O’Neill and O’Connor 2008). This was unavoidable given our lack of resources to carry out a current content analysis of commercial local news, and the lack of more recent studies in this area. That said, the underlying economic trends which are seen by many to have caused the problems outlined in these older studies (staffing decreases, workload increases) have continued to worsen since they were conducted, and are known to have led to further such problems in the context of online

newsrooms in the local media. However, future research in this area would benefit from direct comparative analysis with other contemporary sources of local news.

Interviews

We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with hyperlocal news publishers in the UK. 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 very long-established); the professional backgrounds of producers (some with varying levels of journalistic training and/or experience, some with none); and approaches to sustaining their operations (some who see their sites as hobbies, some as businesses, Table 1).

Interviews were conducted and recorded over the telephone between October 2013 and May 2014 and later fully transcribed for analysis. They lasted one hour and four minutes on average, and were designed to gather information from those who produce UK hyperlocal news about: motivations for doing this kind of work; the day-to-day practice of hyperlocal news work; workloads; relations with audiences; uses of social media; principal challenges faced; and the economic value of hyperlocal news. Here we focus on findings which relate to motivations, sourcing strategies, opinions of and relations with local mainstream media outlets, and discourses about and examples of campaigning, critical and investigative hyperlocal journalism in order to triangulate our findings with relevant parts of the content analysis.

Online Survey

The survey data interrogated here focuses principally on the content of community news in order to supplement, contextualise and explain gaps in knowledge generated from the content analysis. More broadly, our survey was split into sections which covered the running of the site; site reach; site content (split into three categories: information, campaigns and investigations in order to echo the democratic roles for local news outlined by McNair above); site sustainability and profitability; and economic and human resources expended on community news sites. The range of questions invited single and multiple responses, as well as more expansive qualitative answers in selected cases, principally to elicit examples of practice. This gave us a good quantitative overview in key areas, but also allowed participants to submit longer discursive answers which, in some cases, we subjected to a secondary level of coding and categorisation. It was also important that questions were worded so as to gather insights which give us a more longitudinal perspective on the subject matter than the short-term snapshot of community news our content analysis allowed.

Conducted using online survey tool Survey Monkey, it sampled active sites on the Openly Local network and members of the Talk About Local mailing list (Talk About Local are a hyperlocal advocacy and consultancy group who now manage and update the Openly Local map).¹ The design and circulation of the survey was a collaboration between our own research team, Steven Barnett and Judith Townend at the Arts and Humanities Research Council Media Plurality and Power Project at Westminster

TABLE 1
List of interviewees

Interviewee	Community news outlet	Web address
Rachel Howells	<i>Port Talbot Magnet</i> , Port Talbot, South Wales	http://lnpt.org
Richard Coulter	<i>Filton Voice</i> , Bristol	http://filtonvoice.co.uk
Richard Gurner	<i>Caerphilly Observer</i> , South Wales	http://caerphillyobserver.co.uk
Anna Williams	<i>The Ambler</i> , Amble, Northumberland	http://theambler.co.uk
Pamela Pinski	<i>Digbeth is Good</i> , Birmingham	http://digbeth.org
Gareth Jenkins	<i>The Kirkbymoorside Town Blog</i> , North Yorkshire	http://kirkbymoorside.info
Ray Duffill	<i>Hedon Blog</i> , East Yorkshire	http://hedonblog.co.uk
Quentin Kean	<i>Leeds Citizen</i> , Leeds	http://theleedscitizen.wordpress.com
James Clarke	<i>WV11</i> , Wednesfield, Wolverhampton	http://wv11.co.uk
Guy Phillips	<i>Bitterne Park Blog</i> , Southampton	http://www.bitternepark.info
Mark Baynes	<i>Love Wapping</i> , London	http://lovewapping.org
Daniel Ionescu	<i>The Lincolnite</i> , Lincoln	http://thelincolnite.co.uk
Geraldine Nichols	<i>Roath Cardiff</i> , Cardiff	http://roathcardiff.net
Ben Black	<i>Cwmbran Life</i> , South Wales	http://cwmbbranlife.co.uk
Steven Downes	<i>Inside Croydon</i> , London	http://insideCroydon.com
Jonathan Sheppard	<i>Deeside.com</i> , North Wales	http://deeside.com
Rob Taylor	<i>Wrexham.com</i> , Wrexham	http://wrexham.com
Gareth Morlais	<i>Abergele Post</i> , North Wales	http://abergelepost.com
Tom Rodgers	<i>Salford Online</i> , Manchester	http://www.salfordonline.com/
Tom Kihl	<i>Kentish Towner</i> , London	http://www.kentishtowner.co.uk/
Stuart Littleford	<i>Saddleworth News</i> , Yorkshire	http://www.saddleworthnews.com/
Stephen Kingston	<i>Salford Star</i> , Manchester	http://www.salfordstar.com/
Sas Taylor	<i>B31 Voices</i> , Birmingham	http://b31.org.uk/
Robin Byles	<i>Crosspool News</i> , Sheffield	http://crosspool.info/
Neil Cooke	<i>Balsall Common</i> , West Midlands	http://www.balsallcom.com/
Malcom Knight	<i>Bexley is Bonkers</i> , London	http://bexley-is-bonkers.co.uk/
Julian Horne	<i>Wayland News</i> , Norfolk	http://www.thebrecklandview.com/wayland-news-print-edition/
Jonathan Turton	<i>West Hampstead Life</i> , London	http://westhampsteadlife.com/
Jonathan Farber	<i>Knutsford Times</i> , Cheshire	http://www.knutsfordtimes.com/
Jeremy Leach	<i>Southwark Living Streets</i> , London	http://southwarklivingstreets.org.uk/
Des Scholes	<i>Gurn Nurn</i> , Scottish Highlands	http://www.gurnnurn.com/
Ally Tibitt	<i>Greener Leith</i> , Edinburgh	http://greenerleith.org.uk/
Allan Mackintosh	<i>Broughton Spurtle</i> , Edinburgh	http://www.broughtonspurtle.org.uk/
Erica Roffe	<i>Bedford Clanger</i> , Bedfordshire	http://thebedfordclanger.wordpress.com/

University, and Will Perrin and Mike Rawlins at Talk About Local. Firstly, an online request was delivered from Talk About Local to 455 members of its email list. Secondly, a more personalised online request was successfully delivered to 216 sites listed on Openly Local, either via email or the contact box on their sites. Finally, we advertised the survey on our blogs and Twitter accounts, which generated 24 additional

responses. A total of 183 responses were received altogether (76 per cent finished the survey).² We therefore achieved a response rate of around one-third of the original target population (based on Harte's figure of 496 active hyperlocal sites in the UK), making this the most extensive survey of hyperlocal media in the UK to date (Harte 2013b).

Findings and Discussion

What Gets Covered?

In terms of the topics covered by hyperlocal publishers, we found that the largest category of news in the sample related to local community activities (13 per cent). This is, on the whole, a very geographically focused, community-oriented, journalistic form. This category includes stories about local non-political civil society groups (e.g. the Women's Institute, community groups, and local clubs and societies) as well as stories about community events like local festivals (Figure 1).

We also found many stories about local councils and the services they provide (11.7 per cent), so we know that hyperlocal audiences are getting a lot of information that in principle could be of civic value. Indeed, this would have been our largest category if we had not separated out stories about local planning (3.3 per cent) which falls under the remit of local government in the UK. This kind of coverage of local politics contrasts somewhat with the UK's mainstream local and regional news media, which has scaled back such coverage in recent years. Other notably large categories included crime

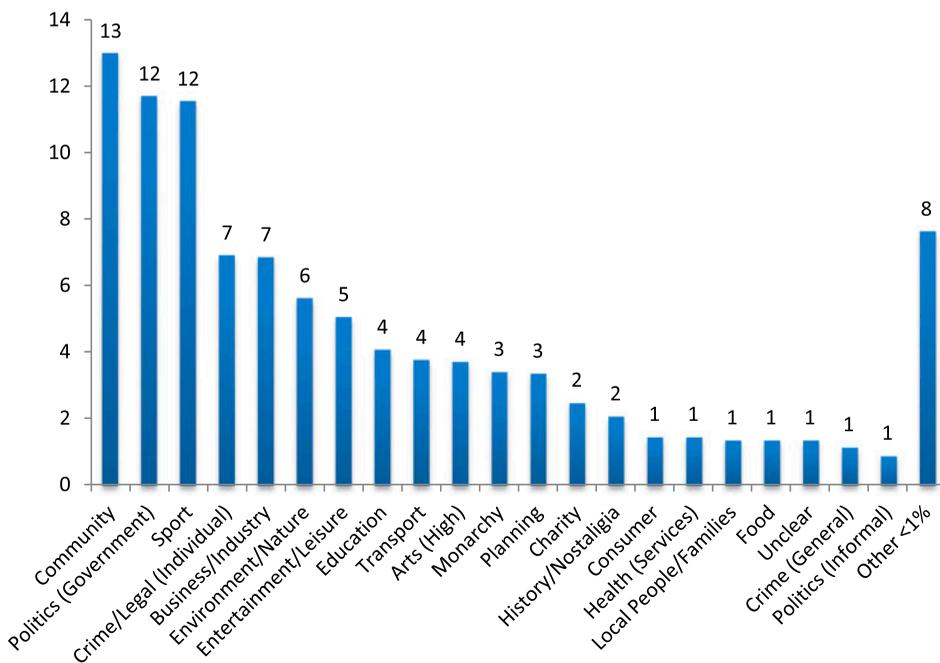


FIGURE 1

What gets covered? Percentage of topics covered by hyperlocal blog posts ($N = 1941$)

and business news, entertainment and the arts. These figures are usefully contextualised with reference to our survey data. Our content analysis gives us a very condensed snapshot of coverage across the output of all news outlets over a short space of time. In order to get a more longitudinal insight into the same issue, we asked hyperlocal news producers what topics they had covered in the last two years ($N = 156$). As with the content analysis, we found a clear emphasis on local community events (97 per cent), entertainment and culture (86 per cent), local government council meetings (81 per cent), local government planning issues (79 per cent) and local businesses (75 per cent) (Barnett and Townend 2014). Such data strengthen the evidence of the content analysis and suggest these findings are generalisable in these regards.

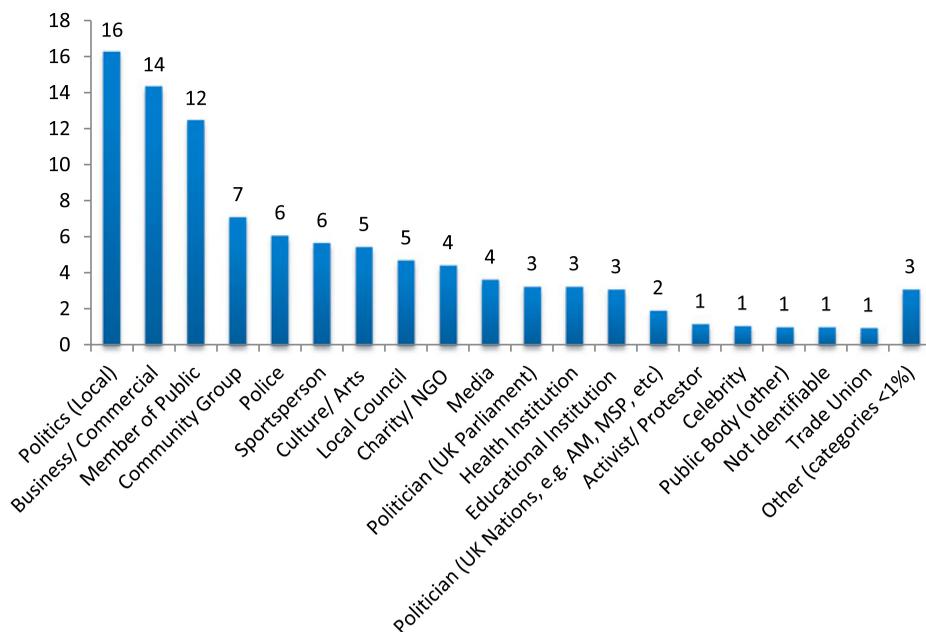
Putting the “Local” Back in Local News

We have seen clearly from the data on story topics that readers of hyperlocal news are getting a large amount of information about politics, particularly the politics of local government, which relates to the news’ ability to foster informed citizenship. To investigate this further using content analysis we looked for stories that made any reference to politics and determined whether or not they had an angle that was explicitly locally relevant. Here we generated further indications of the strength of this kind of news when it comes to reporting about local mainstream political spheres. More than a third of stories in our sample make reference to politics (39.1 per cent), and most reference local politics (26.9 per cent). This is encouraging, especially because many of these sites exist in places where depleted local newspapers are operating on skeleton staffs, where they have already been closed down or where there was never much local news coverage to speak of in the first place.

One of the complaints made about the decline of local and regional mainstream news in the UK is that it is becoming increasingly less local in its orientation, at least in part because of the continuing cuts to newsroom resources and the increasingly desk-bound nature of local and regional journalism work. This is not a charge which can be levelled at hyperlocal news. We aimed to assess the “local-ness” of public discourse on these websites. Firstly, we coded each source utterance for whether it was talking about the local area, and found almost all (87.2 per cent) of these citations had a local angle. Likewise, most posts (96.8 per cent) were published because of something that happened at a local level. There were some stories of national or international significance, but almost exclusively they were covered with a local angle that would make the story more relevant to local audiences. This may be encouraging in terms of hyperlocal news’ role in representing communities back to themselves, potentially fostering community cohesion.

Who Gets to Speak?

News sources are important indicators of social power. Who gets to define news events can affect public opinion, bolster authority and assign cultural meaning, and as such sources are a key indicator of civic and political value (Franklin and Carlson 2011). We coded for all directly quoted sources, but also all examples of indirect reported

**FIGURE 2**

Who gets to speak? Percentage of sources either directly quoted or indirectly cited in UK hyperlocal news ($N = 1873$)

speech. We deemed this important in order to test whether hyperlocal sourcing practice differed substantially from mainstream news journalism (which places a high value on quotations as an indicator of transparency in sourcing, and as a way of enacting professional norms such as impartiality and objectivity). We found that there was no substantial difference in this case as 93.8 per cent of citations employed direct quotation (Figure 2).

When we compare our broad findings on sources with studies of mainstream local news there are some continuities, but also important differences. As in the commercial local news, official sources in government, business and the police are very important: politics at various levels accounts for around a quarter of all sources cited (27 per cent), with business (14 per cent) and the police (6 per cent) also being very influential. But a key difference is the expanded role afforded to members of the general public and to representatives of local civil society groups in this emergent sector (12 and 7 per cent, respectively). We expected to find more influence for members of the public actively organised in political struggles or campaigns, but explicitly political activists were thin on the ground in this sample (fewer political activists were quoted than recorded in a number of studies of UK mainstream local news). Informal political activists (those engaged in oppositional politics away from the mainstream) and trade unionists each make up just 1 per cent of the sources cited in our sample.

A Plurality of Voices?

The overall number of news sources found in the sample was quite low when compared with the number of stories in the sample, and this seems to signal a

TABLE 2Functions of secondary source intervention in UK hyperlocal blog posts ($N = 421$)

	Frequency	Percentage of whole sample
Contextualisation	358	18.4
Corroboration	304	15.7
Oppositional	60	3.1

difference in practice between these emergent community news sites and more established providers of local news. Just over half of posts cited any news sources (56.3 per cent), meaning that many did not contain source input at all. Just as importantly, only around a fifth (21.7 per cent) cited more than one source. Studies of traditional news have been very critical of such under-sourcing, worrying that it leads to a lack of transparency, a lack of plurality in the sources of information to which audiences are exposed and a lack of opportunity for audiences to learn about conflicting perspectives on particular issues.

We also set out to track the different functions of secondary source intervention, and asked whether each utterance from such sources was: corroboratory (in broad agreement with the primary source); contextual (adding further information to that provided by the first-quoted source); and/or oppositional (expressing disagreement with the first source, Table 2).

Overall, the sourcing of UK hyperlocal news in this sample seems to display a high level of consensus. In terms of the level of debate and the amounts of alternative viewpoints presented on any given story, this journalism, on the evidence of this content sample, seems quite uncritical. Most of the interventions of secondary sources added context and further information to that provided by the first source. Many were in broad agreement with primary sources, giving corroboratory information, however, only 3 per cent of all stories in our sample included disagreement between social actors. This further suggests that when it comes to sourcing, audiences are not being exposed to a wide range of alternative viewpoints in relation to the news they read. But the seemingly uncritical nature of the news in this sample needs to be understood in the context of our interview and survey findings.

Balancing sources is, of course, one of the principal ways in which mainstream professional journalists have performed their commitment to airing a plural range of perspectives on issues of public importance. However, hyperlocal news outlets take a variety of different positions on the issue of providing journalistic balance. Firstly, many hyperlocal news producers have a certain amount of journalistic training and experience, and these are more likely than others to both quote and balance news sources. But we were also told on numerous occasions that not all local news *demands* the use of multiple, or even single, sources. A key role that many (perhaps even most) hyperlocal sites play is the provision of often quite uncontroversial information about everyday life and activity in their communities. For instance, we found many posts consisted of promotional trails for, or *post facto* accounts of, events organised by broadly non-political community groups. We were told in interviews that where a post was not contentious the use of multiple sources, whether to introduce corroboration, contextualisation or opposition, is unlikely to be needed, even if professional journalists may habitually

include quotations in such stories. In the words of one interviewee, “if I’m telling people about a local event I don’t need to be getting extra quotes for balance. I don’t need to be quoting people”.

We also found some evidence that this seeming “under-sourcing” of individual posts represents a (sometimes unconscious) rejection, or a critique in praxis, of some elements of mainstream journalistic sourcing strategies (Forde 2011, 118–140). For example, Daniel Ionescu, the editor of the *Lincolnite*, told us of an example of a contentious story where he felt his team achieved fair coverage of key differing perspectives by covering competing local points of view in different stories, on different days. His team wrote posts about a large street protest organised by librarians against County Council plans to close 30 out of 44 libraries in the area as part of their ongoing coverage of the campaign, but they put their commitment to providing fair coverage into practice by providing space for the local authority to have its say in a follow-up story the next day. It is unclear how widespread this practice is, but our content analysis coding frame is insensitive to such an approach to balancing.

Others, especially those who produce critical investigative hyperlocal news, take a much less conciliatory stance when it comes to providing space for the perspectives of those they critique. For instance, Quentin Kean of the *Leeds Citizen*, a retired journalist who describes himself as someone who produces critical news the mainstream local media “haven’t got either the resources or, in some cases, the interest to cover”, is clear in his rejection of the need to offer an automatic right to reply in his coverage of local government.

I’m scrupulous that everything I write is always accurate, nobody has ever challenged me about the accuracy of a story I’ve written. I’m choosing stories that are nearly always about the way interest groups, or political power, works. [But], for example, if I have a story about council stuff, I don’t immediately slap off an email to them to the press office for them to give me a quote because they’ve got plenty of outlets for all of their stuff.

This unwillingness to balance sources in critical reporting is rooted, in part, in a pragmatic expectation that the PR office in question will not take any questions or allegations seriously (Kean talks of “bland meaningless responses”), but also in a certain amount of contempt for the uncritical way in which local newspapers already routinely provide a mouthpiece for the output of local government communications officers. Mark Baynes, of campaigning London blog *Love Wapping*, shares these critiques. When asked whether he balances his critical coverage of Tower Hamlets Council with quotes from relevant officers he told us:

I don’t see why I should, as a resident, ring the town hall up or anybody else ... Because I know all they’re going to give me is the usual bullshit. So what’s the point? And they’ve got a huge media machine ... I don’t see, to be quite honest, why any hyperlocal should. Because if you look at it in the broader context of media and communications in our society: if Tower Hamlets wants to get on TV, they can get on TV. They can send a press release to the *East London Advertiser* [the local weekly newspaper] ... and they literally print the press release.

Steven Downes, freelance sports journalist and editor of local investigative site *Inside Croydon*, elaborated on this, suggesting that the journalistic norm of providing balance

through a right to reply sometimes offers council PR offices a way to “close down” critical reporting by simply refusing to comment. In such cases these hyperlocals have borrowed from the approaches of professional investigative reporting by relying on the quality of their documentary evidence as a way of guaranteeing accuracy and fairness. Referring to balance, and in common with others, Downes told us, “I’ve adopted a different attitude ... In the end, it comes down to editorial judgement in terms of how you assess a source and the documentation ... documents are the thing. If you get the document, you’re away.”

Hyperlocal Campaigning

The dearth of non-party political activists and campaigners cited in our content analysis sample initially led us to suspect that campaigns may be under-represented in hyperlocal news. We were wrong, however. Data generated with the survey and interviews suggests there are two broad ways that hyperlocal news outlets cover campaigns: they actively campaign for change themselves; and/or they cover existing local campaigns. Campaigning journalism itself, where a news outlet takes an overt stand in public debate with a view to changing things, is very common in the history of the commercial local and regional press in the UK. Even so, it is not something that many commercial local or regional publications enter into on a very regular basis. The same is true for hyperlocals, which seems to be one reason why our 10-day sample did not uncover much of this kind of coverage.

In order to glean a fuller picture of hyperlocal news practice in this area, we asked our survey respondents whether they had started campaigns, or covered the campaigns of others in the last two years ($N = 159$). We found that most UK hyperlocals have joined in, supported or publicised the campaigns (73.3 per cent) of others, and a substantial minority (40 per cent) have taken part in their own originally instigated campaigning journalism (Barnett and Townend 2014). We also asked them how often they undertook such journalism. The average number of campaigns instigated by hyperlocals themselves in the last two years is 3.3 ($N = 55$), and the average number of campaigns they have “joined in or supported” was 5.07 ($N = 81$). It is clear from the interviews, as well as the more qualitative survey answers, that the subjects of these campaigns vary greatly in size, range and impact. Some are very local in their focus on issues likely to affect a small number of people, often in quite minor ways, and other issues are more wide-ranging in their effects and more explicitly political in focus.

The raw figures only tell us part of the story. We also asked survey participants to give us a qualitative insight into the campaigns they have run on their community news sites by noting down examples of the most recent and the most important campaigns they have initiated and supported. These qualitative responses were then analysed, categorised and coded (Table 3).

Campaigns around planning and licensing are both supported *and* initiated by community news producers, and mainly consisted of planning issues around contentious local developments. Many also included an environmental aspect to do with the protection of local green spaces, or were related to local businesses (e.g. local opposition to the proposed opening of chain supermarket outlets), but a few were

TABLE 3

The focus of campaigns initiated and supported by UK community news producers (coded from 285 qualitative responses)

Focus of campaign	Most recent initiated (N = 64)	Most important initiated (N = 54)	Most recent supported (N = 93)	Most important supported (N = 74)
Planning/licensing	13	14	30	19
Local public services	11	11	23	18
Improvements to infrastructure	8	7	18	6
Local business issues	6	5	13	9
Local charity	2	1	9	2
Environmental issues	7	3	4	7
Community action	4	2	4	4
Improvements to amenities	10	12	3	5
Council (other)	3	2	2	5
Council accountability	11	4	1	1
Council malpractice	0	2	1	2
National political issues	3	0	1	1
Other	8	6	9	4

about minor local issues such as the granting of alcohol or take-away food licences. Campaigns around local public services (largely in opposition to *cuts* to such services) were also common in both categories. For instance, there were many campaigns against library closures, and a significant number around perceived threats to the provision of health-care and education services. Campaigning for improvements to local infrastructure were more commonly supported rather than initiated, either calling on authorities to make—or lobbying against—substantial changes to local roads, train lines or provision for cyclists. Local business campaigns normally involved calls to promote local independent shops and restaurants, and included numerous “shop local” campaigns. “Community action” campaigns were either in favour of, against or linked to the activities of local neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood forums, entities enabled under the Localism Act which are designed to enable more democratic control of planning issues. The numerous campaigns against these bodies, however, suggest concern in some communities about how democratic they actually are in practice. Community news producers were quite likely to initiate campaigns which called for improvements to local amenities such as signage, local parks, car parking, play areas or the cleanliness of a local area (e.g. in relation to those favourite UK hyperlocal preoccupations: litter and dog poo). A number of campaigns dealt specifically with local council responsibilities. Several called for greater transparency and accountability from local government

institutions, calling on councils to allow the filming, recording or live coverage of meetings. It is perhaps unsurprising that these were among the most likely to be initiated by community journalists, as restrictions on reporting directly affect their abilities to cover the affairs of local political institutions. There were also a few instances of much more serious council-related malpractice such as campaigns around the misuse of public funds, or illegal payments made to local businesses.

Hyperlocal coverage of many of these issues, it is claimed, was instrumental in numerous full or partial victories by the campaigners, but even when campaigns were unsuccessful much of this coverage is likely to have led to an enriched local public sphere in the affected communities. There is also evidence to suggest that coverage of campaigns, tapping in as it does, to existing networks of active citizens with an interest in local public life, and covering issues which are of common concern to many, can help hyperlocal producers gain wider audiences, generate social standing, trust and respect, and become more visible in their communities. Ray Duffill told us his audience grew, and became more engaged, after his *Hedon Blog* started a successful campaign against a pollution-based stench from his local sewage works. The coverage also prompted those in local political power to take his news outlet more seriously. "Since then", he said, "the audience for the blog has just kind of grown and grown. [And] the blog has actually got some influence ... so people, now, in authority, I think, are not wary but respectful".

Hyperlocal Accountability Reporting: Investigations

Our findings relating to the lack of conflicting perspectives among sources, as well as those which indicate low numbers of non-party grassroots or alternative campaigners, raise the possibility that UK hyperlocal news, on aggregate, may be unlikely to undertake very much critical, accountability journalism. The content analysis findings are suggestive in this respect, but again, the limitations of the sampling strategy necessitate further investigation. A more nuanced and differentiated picture can be obtained when triangulating these research findings with those from the survey and interviews, which allowed us to investigate two broad areas of hyperlocal practice in this regard: investigative hyperlocal news; and non-investigative news which is nonetheless critical of local institutions.

In order to address the issue of investigative hyperlocal news, and to interrogate hyperlocal producers' willingness or ability to carry out this form of watchdog reporting, we asked survey respondents whether they had carried out investigations in order to uncover controversial information of local concern in the last two years (Barnett and Townend 2014). It seems that a substantial proportion of hyperlocal news producers are carrying out investigations. Indeed, around the same proportion (42 per cent), and similar numbers (55), of survey respondents who have started local campaigns also undertake this kind of critical journalistic research (Barnett and Townend 2014). The average number of investigations respondents said they had undertaken in this period was 6.04 ($N = 47$), around three in four of which went on to be published (the average number of investigations which did *not* go on to result in the publication of news stories was 1.48 ($N = 42$)) (Barnett and Townend 2014).

TABLE 4

The focus of investigations carried out by UK community news producers (coded from 100 qualitative responses)

Focus of investigation	Most recent investigation (N = 56)	Most important investigation (N = 44)
Planning/licensing	10	9
Local health/social care services	6	3
Council malpractice	6	7
Council cuts	6	6
Local infrastructure	6	6
Council accountability	5	5
Local amenities	4	2
Local business issues	4	2
Local education services	3	2
Local police	3	1
Environmental issues	3	3
Council waste	2	0
Other	4	2

As before, respondents were asked for brief details of their most recent, and their most important, investigations (Table 4).

Examples of investigations survey respondents cited included: environment stories such as a waste incinerator breaching emissions guidelines and plans to develop land poisoned by previous industrial owners; council stories about lack of transparency, or involving (documented) secret or illegal payments; planning issues around supermarket developments, the proposed High Speed 2 railway line, and greenfield sites being re-allocated as brownfield in order to allow developments; as well a range of data-led stories about issues as diverse as parking fines, environmental enforcement activities, numbers and rates of crimes solved by local police, use of local libraries in order to argue against cuts to services, and lift failures in council-owned flats.

It is difficult to say with certainty with reference to our data whether certain kinds of hyperlocal outlet, or producers with particular skill sets or professional backgrounds, are more likely than others to produce investigative local accountability news. We have found numerous examples of sites with quite a broad remit for general news provision which occasionally undertake investigations. In one high-profile example, the *King's Cross Environment* blog investigated the serious issue of Transport for London's culpability for a large number of cycling deaths on its patch (Perrin 2012). The investigation was long, multi-faceted, employed numerous investigative tools and led to a Metropolitan Police investigation of Transport for London for corporate manslaughter. An example of a far less serious story, which nonetheless employed investigative tools, can be found on North Wales' *Deeside.com* (Sheppard 2013). For a story entitled "Has Shotton Got the Dirtiest Street in Wales? 21 'Loads' of Dog Dirt in a 4 Minute Walk", the author, editor Jonathan Sheppard, walked down the street, measured it, photographed, catalogued and then digitally mapped every dog poo he encountered. He then dug out contextual data specific to his county, Flintshire, from the Local Authority Cleanliness Index and the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, as well as gathering and publishing critical comment from the Carnegie Trust and a defence from the local council cabinet

member responsible for Public Protection, Waste, and Recycling. The story led to the road being cleaned of the offending excrement within hours of publication.

As well as there being generalist hyperlocals which occasionally carry out investigations, there is a small but influential group of community news sites in the UK which devote themselves almost exclusively to the production of critical and investigative news. Examples include *Inside Croydon* and *Broken Barnet* in London, the *Leeds Citizen* in the North of England, *Carmarthenshire Planning Problems and More* from rural West Wales, and *Real Whitby*, a seaside town in North Yorkshire. All of these sites have investigated and broken stories of local and national significance, chiefly about political corruption and transparency issues. One might expect, given the demanding, risky and resource-intensive nature of the research needed to take on local elites that all of these hyperlocal producers would be trained journalists—this is not the case. The most commonly cited methods used in hyperlocal investigations during our interviews are: the careful analysis of public institutional documents and data; Freedom of Information Requests to public bodies (mostly councils) to obtain unpublished documents, data and correspondence; and leaks and tip-offs (mainly from within local councils, occasionally from private bodies). More risky methods such as undercover work were not encountered.

Hyperlocal Accountability Reporting: Critical News

In order to explore the production of *non-investigative* news which nonetheless still includes source input critical of local institutions, or which may take an explicitly critical editorial stance, we asked a series of open questions in the interviews about producers' day-to-day practice, how their work relates to the output of other local news producers, as well as their aims and motivations. Many were unequivocal about the need for local news producers to ask awkward questions, to air difficult issues and hold elites to account. Rachel Howells of the *Port Talbot Magnet* in South Wales told us "Somebody's got to be there asking those questions ... saying, 'well, hang on a minute you've broken the air quality limits three times this month, what's going on?' ... You've got to have somebody there [to] hold these people to account and have a public forum for that debate." Howells also told us that the production of such watchdog news can also lead to hyperlocal news outlets being taken more seriously by official sources: "what we've found to be generally true is that the more firm and journalistic we are, the more critical we are, the more seriously they take us".

One striking trend in our interview findings, however, does initially seem to lend credence to the suggestion in our content analysis data that this is a largely uncritical, and non-progressive, form of news. There is a very common tendency among hyperlocals to want to portray the place they live in a positive light. Pamela Pinski from the Birmingham blog *Digbeth is Good*, for instance, is motivated by "improving perceptions of Digbeth", a suburb of which she is "very proud" and for which she is a "passionate" advocate. Anna Williams, the editor of Northumberland seaside town Amble's 14-year-old community newspaper and website the *Ambler*, similarly speaks of a conscious editorial decision to "promote the good things that were happening in Amble". It may be tempting to see this widespread trend as evidence of toothless local news producers who are unlikely to fulfil the critical watchdog function of accountability news. In most

cases this would be a mistake. Closer examination of the interview data suggests this tendency is in many cases more accurately interpreted as a reaction to the perceived practice of journalists in the local and regional newspaper industry. It is not just the practice of balancing with which makes many hyperlocal news producers uncomfortable. When prompted, many define themselves, their working practices and the news they produce, explicitly against the working routines and news output of mainstream professional local news companies. This is expressed in (sometimes quite vehement) critiques of: local press intrusion; exploitative treatment of community members at the centre of human-interest stories; distant coverage which is not reflective enough of community life, is too reliant on press releases and is too deferential to authority; and coverage which is sensationalist and overly negative. Anna Williams expands the last point: "The only time you ever read anything in the local mainstream press [about Amble] was when some things had been vandalised, or some kids had been nabbed for doing something. It was always doom and gloom."

Some of those who had previously worked in the commercial newspaper industry described changes in their outlooks, approaches and practices since becoming hyperlocal news producers. Richard Coulter of the *Filton Voice*, a news magazine and blog based in a suburb of Bristol, is a former regional newspaper journalist who remains a keen advocate of the industry and its place in society. He describes his news-gathering routines, and the output of his hyperlocal news service, as very similar to the work he did as a newspaper journalist, with one exception. "The one area where I think possibly I am slightly different", he said, "and I'm kind of pleased that I'm doing it this way. [In the local press] there was a lot of the kind of attitude of, 'who can we stitch up today?'" To illustrate the difference between his previous and current practice he cited the example of a local school where a teacher was under investigation over irregularities in exam results. Because of the amount and intensity of local public debate he felt it was an important story to cover, but not in an overtly negative, critical and personalised way:

I felt that it was in the public interest to publish it, but I thought there was also an issue that I had to publish it in a very responsible way, and in a way that wasn't all about trying to put the nail in the coffin of this particular school.

He is clear that this reticence was not motivated purely by the need to maintain good relations with a local institution. He continued,

that's not because I'm going to have to deal with them next month, it was just because I felt that maybe the days of let's go and stitch everybody up, that's not for me anymore ... You've just got to stop thinking, how can we stitch somebody up and get a good front page.

Many of those who express a wish to represent their communities to themselves, and to the outside world, in a positive light are also keen to point out that this does not imply they shy away from critical coverage where they feel it is appropriate. Gareth Jenkins, who edits *The Kirkbymoorside Town Blog* on the edge of the North York Moors in Northern England, for instance, discussed how he was partly motivated to set up the blog to collate information about "all the things you could get involved in" in the "buzzy little town" he clearly loves. But this does not, however, mean he is reticent to cover, and facilitate debate about, controversial issues in public life. During our

interview he cited numerous examples of news stories which included negative comment and critique, including around a controversial housing development, the arrival of a new Tesco supermarket, and divisive and expensive plans to convert a disused library building into new offices for the town council.

Conclusion: The Democratic Value of Hyperlocal News

In terms of hyperlocal news' ability to (at least partially) plug the ever-widening gaps in UK local and regional news provision, we have generated some promising, and some less clearly encouraging, findings. Hyperlocal news, on the whole, is very community- and locally oriented. By contrast with much professional commercial news, which has become progressively less local in its focus and depth of coverage as resources decline, hyperlocal audiences get lots of locally sourced stories with strong local news angles. Members of the public and local community groups tend to get more of a say as news sources than in the mainstream local and regional news. Official sources in local government, business and the emergency services still get a platform, but so do many local citizens. These blogs produce and circulate a good deal of news about politics, civic life, local economies and the business of local government (which is an area of life in the UK that has been under-reported as the crisis in local commercial news has developed).

While some of our findings seem to suggest a rosy picture in terms of hyperlocal news' ability to foster citizenship, democracy and local community cohesion, others were less unequivocally positive. One of the ways professional journalists provide us with a plurality of perspectives on local life is to speak to numerous news sources to gather the raw materials of news, many of whom they go on to quote in their stories. In our sample, many hyperlocal news producers quote relatively few news sources, and when they are used they rarely provide conflicting or oppositional viewpoints in the same posts. But our interviews suggest that some hyperlocal producers have developed alternative means to foster and inform plural debate around contentious local issues, for example opting to enact source balance by spreading interventions from opposing voices out across different stories. In the case of more overtly critical investigative hyperlocal sites, the practice of balancing sources is often rejected on practical and ideological grounds: because council PR departments cannot be relied upon to engage meaningfully with questions, or they use the expectation of being given a right to reply as a tactic to close down debate by stonewalling journalists; because balance is a practice associated with a largely uncritical local mainstream press; and because local elites have enough of a platform for their carefully crafted communications messages in mainstream commercial news media anyway.

Whilst our content analysis findings seem to suggest a lack of critical, investigative and campaigning journalism, however, the interviews and survey yielded clear data to the contrary. Many hyperlocal news producers cover the campaigns of others and a significant minority have initiated their own campaigns. Critical investigations are also carried out by a (perhaps surprisingly) large number of UK community journalists on a wide variety of issues of public concern, and a small but effective group of hyperlocal sites devote themselves almost entirely to this kind of public-interest news production. We found no evidence that any particular kind, or model, of hyperlocal outlet is more

likely to produce campaigning, or critical, local news (e.g. sites run by former journalists seem no more likely than those run by hobbyists to carry out such “watchdog” journalism).

We found a strong tendency among many community sites to want to produce news that paints their local areas in a positive light, but this does not generally mean they shy away from writing critical stories where necessary. Many hyperlocals are, on the contrary, committed to producing news which fulfils the watchdog function of holding local elites to account. Indeed, many are also producing news about their local areas that could fulfil many of McNair’s (2009) above-mentioned commonly accepted social and political roles for journalism. There remain doubts around whether online community news can actually play these roles in an even and meaningful way because of a range of potential problems, principally around economic sustainability and audience reach. But these issues deserve detailed consideration beyond the scope of this paper.

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NOTES

1. “Active” was defined as “a website having posted a news story at least once in the 5 months prior to the sample period”. Inactive sites had either closed, or had not published in the five months prior to his sampling (Harte 2013b).
2. The response rate was higher from the list compiled from the Openly Local directory (86 of 216: 39.8 per cent) than from the Talk About Local mailing list (69 of 455: 15.2 per cent). There are two main reasons that could explain the low response to the Talk About Local mailing list. Firstly, the request for participation took the form of a generic newsletter (only 115 of 455 recipients opened the email); and secondly, the mailing list contained contact details for people who were interested in hyperlocal media, but do not publish sites themselves.

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