'Artisanal' local news: how to sustain and grow an emerging hyperlocal sector?

IAMCR 2014

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Community media in rural areas

- UK context: small, niche 'hyperlocal' media operations, *exploiting online and social media technology,* springing up and engaged in journalistic activity **but** short of resources

- Community and non-mainstream media allows the world "immediate and direct contact with citizens in crisis in local contexts"(Sigal 2010)

Global-local spaces

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpzEF0D2xfE

Global-local policy

- The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) 2003-5 paid attention to media pluralism and media based in local communities, focusing on language, heritage, environmental diversity and rural populations
- How to achieve media plurality and diversity of voice in rural places with small populations (even assuming relative wealth and online reach in advanced economies)?

UK policy context

Government consultation paper on media plurality published in July 2013, focused *only* on plurality 'measurement'

- the types of media it should include
- the genres it should cover
- the types of organisation and services to which it should apply
- the inclusion of the BBC
- the audiences with which it should be concerned

Three gaps…

- Nothing about potential for new policy initiatives to promote plurality, e.g.
  - Charities, trusts, foundations, nfp models
  - Partnerships with public or private sector
  - Subsidies for start-ups
  - Levies to raise additional revenue

House of Lords Report – Feb 2014

- HL communications select committee has since reported on media plurality although a government response to its recommendations is still awaited
- HL report also has some gaps – "little attention paid to the different creative approaches that might be feasible or the potentially enabling role of government policy" (Barnett 2014)

Particular problem at local level

- 240 local papers closed 2004-11
- Major towns with “news gaps”
- Local people uninformed, local elites not being held to account.
- Four democratic functions of media at local level (Barnett 2009, building on Curran, 2005):
    1. Information
    2. Representation
    3. Campaigning
    4. Interrogation

Needs creative policy intervention

Public benefit potential of local media is recognised:

- UK Community Radio Order 2004
- DCMS community radio grants
- Local TV (subsidised from BBC licence fee to 2016)
- Local subsidies (notices) generally confined to the press

Hyperlocals offer a potentially exciting new approach for fulfilling democratic needs – part of our *bottom up* examination of the plurality problem - to increase diversity of voice at local level

‘Hyperlocal’

- “Online news or content appear, sometimes where there may be gaps in services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community” (Radcliffe 2012)

- “In many areas, ‘hyperlocal’ websites are beginning to appear, sometimes where there may be gaps in provision of news or information from other sources, these can receive high user figures and become a key source of information for people in specific communities” (DCMS 2013)

- A metonym, not a literal label (Perrin 2013)

Research questions

As part of a research collaboration with Talk About Local and researchers at Cardiff University and Birmingham City University, our survey operationalised two questions:

i. What democratic roles do online hyperlocal sites actually play, if any?
ii. How successful and sustainable are these sites in practice?

Hyperlocal landscape

Restrict to independent sites

Hyperlocal Sites in UK & Ireland

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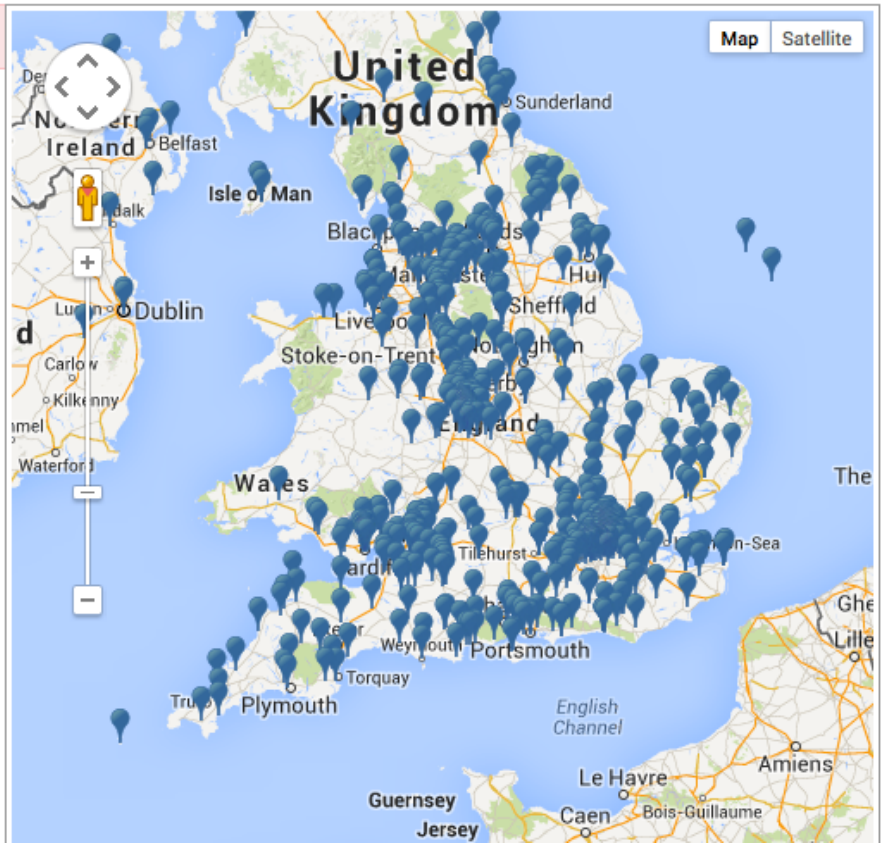


Sample size

With first data collection exercise, we reached over one third of our target (183 of 496) via two email lists (plus social media sample)

i. Talk About Local mailing list - answered by 69 of 455, 15.2% response rate

ii. Customised mailing list using Openly Local directory – answered by 90 of 216: 42% response rate

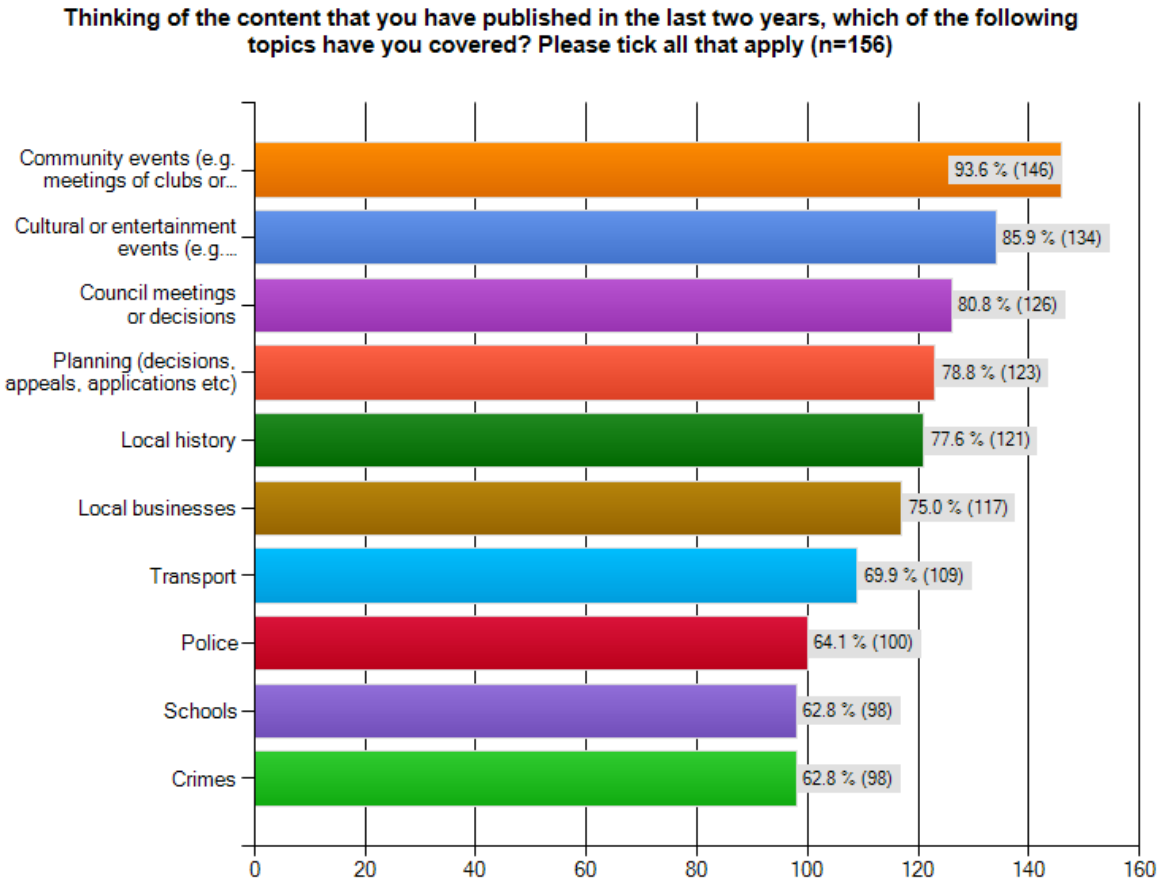
Survey scope

- Site reach and profile
- Site content (split into three categories: information, campaigns and investigations)
- Site sustainability and resources
- All results anonymised, although many respondents left contact details for follow up

Needs

- The majority are spending under 10 hours a week on running the sites, and doing so for less than £100 a month out of their own money, very few currently have the personnel, skills or revenue to pursue sustained reporting
- Big range of target population (160 to 2 million!) and levels of site traffic

Content: informational topics



Content: campaigns

- Four out of ten said they had started a campaign in an effort to change things in the last two years (n=159)

- Campaigns covered a range of issues including re-siting of a BT cabinet placed in a conservation area without planning consent, saving a local pond and stopping the mayor from wearing real fur, improvement of council standards and traffic calming

- Although most had not started their own campaign, nearly three quarters said they had supported an existing campaign (n=159)

Content: investigations

- Over four out of ten respondents said they had carried out an investigation in the last two years (n=154), with an average of 6 for each one (n=55)

- Responses included a local waste incinerator breaching national emission limits; problems with reliability of a broadband service; uncovering a deal between a council and a ferry company; council use of a greenfield site; cost of consultants used by the council; over-spending on a local railway station development; cuts to the local youth service; and exposing plans to turn primary schools into academies

Definitions of hyperlocal activity

- “community participation” (70%)
- “local journalism” (57%)
- “active citizenship” (55%)
- “local conversation” (55%)
- “citizen journalism” (43%)

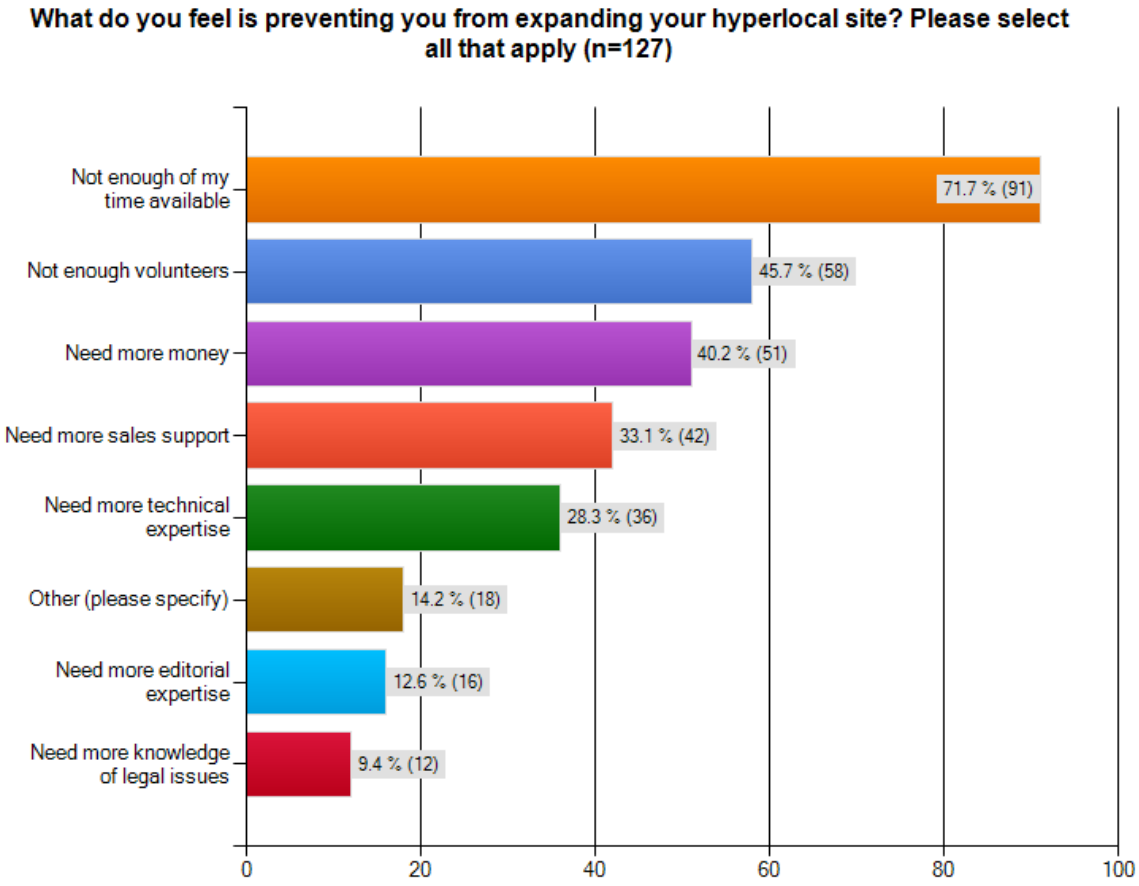
Other unprompted self-descriptions offered were “community engagement to improve local place”, “artisanal local journalism”, “event listings” and “local enabler” (n=141)

Ambitions for growth

- Four out of five respondents would like to expand their site: 42% would like to expand it “a little” and 38% “a lot”. One fifth said they were content with the current size and scope (n=168)

- Most were optimistic about the next 6 to 12 months. Just over half the sites (53%) thought they could sustain and perhaps increase their output, while 36% thought they could only sustain it at the current level. A further 9% thought the current level would decline, but reassuringly only 4 sites thought there was a ‘real possibility’ they would close (n=165)

Factors limiting expansion



Survey conclusions

- Difficult to generalise about the focus, form and size of hyperlocal sites
- Should be careful about imposing the "journalism" label on self-publishing activities which do not fit traditional norms and ideas of reporting or investigating

BUT

- A potentially major role in compensating for the decline of traditional local media and making a genuine contribution to local plurality

Survey conclusions

- Hyperlocal sites can provide additional voices in a local community which contributes to local knowledge, to the accountability of local elites, and to the ability of local people to lobby for change, with the potential to fulfil journalistic norms – whether or not we call it “journalism”
- So what would maximise the potential of existing operations as well as provide seed funding for new ones?

UK policy recommendations

- Potential for funding these types of initiatives through Community Radio type model
- Could open up revenue from statutory notices, beyond hard-copy newspapers
- Partnerships with the BBC (cf. James Harding's comments, 2014)
- Fresh examination of the rules surrounding charity status for journalism

UK-specific detail

- UK case study shows that small media initiatives can thrive independently, but struggling to expand without policy intervention
- These initiatives rely on high level of internet access (73% adults in GB use internet every day)
- Skilled volunteers and ability to self-fund

International implications

- UK case study shows potential for these types of media in areas of high internet access with self-funding and skilled volunteers, but that policy intervention is also needed
- This model would not necessarily translate in all environments, but serves as a policy/ research case study in self-starting online media fulfilling the democratic needs of communities – from the bottom up

Contact

Paper in *Journalism Practice* (Barnett and Townend, forthcoming) and co-authored open access report of survey findings:

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