

New Knowledge Networks in communities – the role of ‘hyperlocal’ media operations in facilitating everyday digital participation.

Seed Project Final Report – July 2014

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**Communities &
Culture Network+**

Executive Summary

This is a report from a short research project funded by the Communities and Culture Network+. The research involved a researcher from Birmingham City University spending time investigating the complex online/offline interactions that give strength to the relationships between hyperlocal media practitioners and the communities they serve. Research methods involved participating in two 'social media surgeries', interviews with the organisers of these surgeries, a participant in them and also an interview involving visual ethnography with the editors of the B31 Voices hyperlocal media operation. In addition there was an analysis of the discussions and interactions generated on social media platforms during a one month period. The project found that this particular hyperlocal media operation could be seen as situating itself within a 'civic web' field, rather than a 'journalistic' field. The research approaches taken in the project offer some insight into the everyday nature of doing and engaging with hyperlocal and the value it creates for citizens. The project's findings contribute to debates around the role of technology as a tool for participation in the process of doing journalism.

Aims and Objectives

The project had two aims:

- to test a new ethnographic approach to understanding the relationship that small media operations such as hyperlocals have with their audience.
- to consider the role that a hyperlocal website might play in fostering digitally-enabled, citizen-based networks of knowledge about place and space.

The project's objectives were to enable the Principal Investigator (Harte) to spend time studying the workings of a specific hyperlocal practitioner – B31 Voices. Two 'surgery' style workshops (see figure 1) would be held in the community following a format developed by the project partner, Podnosh Ltd.

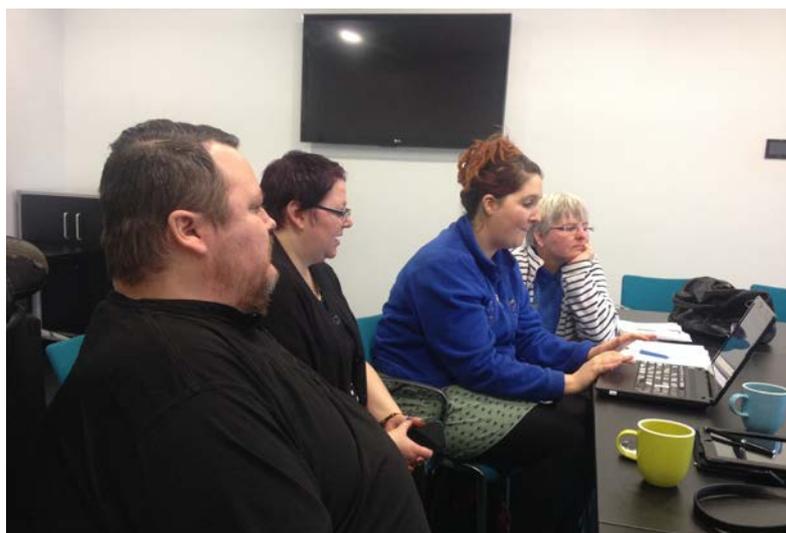


Figure 1: Sas and Marty Taylor from B31 Voices participating in a Social Media Surgery in the Longbridge area of Birmingham.

Key Findings

The B31 Voices hyperlocal website (b31.org.uk) covers events and news in a number of suburbs in south Birmingham. The editors are a couple, Sas and Marty Taylor, who have run the site since 2010 for no financial reward. The hyperlocal site has a regularly updated news blog and associated social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter. During March, April and May 2014 a series of research methods were used to investigate B31's production context, its production practices, and the degree of citizen engagement with its content. In the course of the research the following findings emerged:

B31 Voices reflects hyperlocal's shift from the newsroom-centric culture of local journalism.



Figures 2 & 3: Photographs of domestic spaces taken by Sas Taylor to reflect where B31 Voices content is created and published.

The project was interested in the production culture of B31 Voices. Their operation is managed from the home and therefore there was the opportunity to examine the role played by the everyday spaces in the production of content. The project drew on research methods by Pink (2012) and Gillarova et al (2014). Sarah Pink has written extensively about visual ethnography but it was recent work (Pink and Mackley 2012) about the home and the environment that had relevance here. In attempting to reveal how energy is used in the home Pink shoots short videos of participants re-enacting their bedtime routines. It works to reveal the less visible dimensions of everyday life. Gillarova et al (2014) asked journalists to take photographs of the spaces in which they worked which then formed the basis of photo-elicited interviews. Their work is of course a contribution to the shift away from newsroom-centricity (Wahl-Jorgensen and Bird 2009: 22) and they argue their method allowed participants to reveal 'feelings' about work and working conditions and in particular the role played by technology. In the B31 project the photo-elicitation technique, whereby Sas Taylor was asked to photograph the spaces where their hyperlocal practice happens, produced images of the technology B31 uses placed in the domestic settings of the bedroom, the bathroom, and the living room (see figures 2 & 3). In simple terms the research reveals how the 'habitus' of hyperlocal is free from the hierarchies of traditional newsrooms and its working

practices. Instead, other rules and social structures come into play about how and when hyperlocal content can be gathered, made sense of, and published. Hyperlocal news-making practices for operations similar to B31 Voices are likely also to be bound up in the domestic lives of the publishers. The impact of this emerging habitus on the kinds of content produced is worthy of further study.

B31 Voices operate within the field of the 'civic web'

Through interviews with Sas and Marty Taylor it emerged they situated themselves closer to what we might call the field of the 'civic web' rather than the 'journalistic' field. The research approach in the project was designed to build on recent work that has attempted to utilise Bourdieu to examine the journalistic field. Ida Willig (2013) has argued that using the perspective of Field Theory overcomes the methodological problem found in earlier newsroom studies in which the ethnographers rarely investigated the wider cultural implications of the daily practices of journalists. For this study it was felt that Field Theory might not only help explain the dynamics between those running the hyperlocal practice and their audience, but also help conceptualise context. Although the work of B31 Voices is informed by the textual norms of journalism (seen in the standard journalistic construction of stories on its website) the production culture was very different – situated as it is in the everyday surroundings of the home. Further, the Taylors cited as key the influence of Birmingham's blogging 'scene' and initiatives such as the Social Media Surgery, with its discourse of enhancing the 'civic conversation'. It would be fair to say that their 'capital' amongst exponents of the civic web is very high (evidenced through the interview with Nick Booth who runs the Social Media Surgeries).

Use of Social Media is central to B31 Voices' success.

The research found that such an operation generates a great deal of interaction amongst citizens via the use of social media. By way of example, during the month of March the Facebook page generated 2,399 comments on 223 posts in contrast to a mere 20 comments on the website. Likewise the twitter account saw 1293 mentions of @B31Voices. The subject focus of these interactions tends towards everyday, even banal, concerns such as the whereabouts of lost pets and information on local events. However, participants in the network include local politicians, public sector workers, police and other official sources of information who tend to treat B31 Voices, despite the informality of its set up, as they would any other media organisation. The project produced an infographic detailing B31 Voices' social media use (see appendix).

Key Issues

By and large the project was concerned with examining issues around research methods. Much research into journalism is concerned with the media's role as 'fourth estate', but to consider research into hyperlocal within these same confines limits our understanding of the ways in which this emerging form of DIY journalism creates value. The project's case for

support (see appendix 2) argued for an address to the ways in which an ethnographic approach to examining hyperlocal practices might reveal how digitally connected communities act as new knowledge networks with a role to play in the public sphere.

In taking a field theory approach the project needed to examine more than just the working practices of the hyperlocal. The PI's participation in two Social Media Surgeries (see figure 2) was an attempt to undertake ethnography in what we might frame as a 'civic web' field and it did give insight into the ways in which social media is positioned by some as a tool that can transform relationships and empower citizens. The organiser of the surgeries (Nick Booth) describes the surgeries in the following way: "what we're interested in is more people being involved in a much wider civic conversation in all sorts of different ways [...] skilling up active citizens to use the web better". The surgeries then are an attempt to situate social media as the central vehicle through which the 'civic conversation' happens. Likewise the notion of spreading expertise is central to the surgeries: "there is something very powerful about helping someone who in turn will help someone else" (Nick Booth). So in order to understand the 'field' within which B31 Voices operates, the surgeries are part of "conceptualising context" (Willig 2013: 376) for the researcher.

Whilst the research with B31 Voices iterated on established ethnographic methods for newsroom research, the project also wanted to better understand how citizens engaged with B31. The decision was made to veer away from a traditional online ethnographic approach (which might have meant spending time as a participant observant on the Facebook page for example) and instead scrape social media data in order to acquire a sense of the scale of participation. Such an approach has the potential to reveal 'big data' in small communities. The infographic (see appendix 1) shows the detail of social media interaction in March 2014. In this data one can see how the seemingly banal stories of everyday life are actually the points at which the wider network of citizens come together. As trivial as such stories might appear, it's arguable that they represent the points at which the networked potential of communities come to the fore and create 'new networks of trust' (Couldry 2004).

Overall, the project raises research methods issues relevant to those wishing to study non-mainstream media organisations. The methods described here represent an attempt to address hyperlocal through the lens of field theory. The findings suggest B31 Voices is caught awkwardly between the fields of the civic web, whose actors position technology as a key driver for 'connected communities'; and journalism, whose professional practices and 'rules' seem uncomfortable and alienating to those wanting to be helpful communicators in the civic space.

Next Steps

Whilst the project has focused on just one hyperlocal media operation the methodology described here might be applicable to others. The findings from this project have been used to inform understanding in the 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project where the PI leads the strand on hyperlocal media.

Impact

The production of the infographic was intended to be central in producing impact of the project. Upon its publication it produced 8,672 impressions on twitter (from four tweets). Amongst those retweeting the infographic were the Head of News of Twitter. During a journalism industry conference at the BBC (Revival of Local Journalism - 25 June 2014) the PI made reference to the research in a question at a panel discussion. Both Nesta and Ofcom representatives were at this event and showed interest in the research. Given the debate about the decline of mainstream journalism there is potential for the project to produce a modest impact at a policy level. B31 Voices themselves have made many references to the research on social media and two hyperlocal publishers in Birmingham attended the research seminar (mentioned below) at Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research. The BBC have taken an interest in the work and have asked the PI to partner on a new project looking at community news in the West Midlands.

Dissemination

Presentations:

Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (regular university research seminar) - 18 June 2014

Hello Culture (short presentation of this work as part of panel discussion on big data) - 10 July 2014

Web-based dissemination:

Publication of Infographic about the project at <http://daveharte.com/ccn/b31-voices-hyperlocal-blog-the-infographic/> (published on June 18 2014; 135 views up to July 18 2014).

Blog post with video embed of presentation to Birmingham Centre for Media & Cultural Research <http://www.interactivecultures.org/2014/02/new-knowledge-networks-active-citizenship-and-hyperlocal-publishing/> (no analytics available)

Video of presentation to research centre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bw5wstlP56l> (published 19 June 2014, 13 views up to July 18 2014)

Planned dissemination activities:

Abstract submission to 'Local and regional journalism after Leveson' conference (5 November 2014, University of Chester).

Google Hangout with hyperlocal practitioners (date TBC)

Funding

Funding is being sought for a Follow-On project (with AHRC) to the 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project. Findings from the CCN+ funded project are cited in the Case for Support.

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Appendix 2: Case for Support

Case for Support: New Knowledge Networks in communities – the role of ‘hyperlocal’ media operations in facilitating everyday digital participation.

Principal Investigator – David Harte, Birmingham City University

Partners – B31 Voices, Podnosh Ltd.

1) Context and Rationale:

The term ‘hyperlocal’ has entered into relatively common use in commentary about the role of journalism in localities. Rather than serving the often large geographical areas covered by the local press, ‘hyperlocal’ media are more likely to focus on much smaller geographical areas. Further, they are usually native to the web and often published by non-professional journalists. The UK has over 600 hyperlocal websites (see analysis in Harte 2013) covering small geographic areas from rural villages to urban housing estates – many are run by non-professional journalists. Indeed, within ‘hyperlocal’ there is emerging a set of practices that often sit at odds with the professional norms of journalism. Emerging research has focused on either the civic value of hyperlocal (Metzgar 2011, Kurpius, 2010, Thurman et al. 2011) or has argued there are economic gains to be had from unlocking its digitally-enabled potential (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013, Radcliffe 2012). But given the UK newspaper industry’s trend towards closure and retrenchment of their local and regional press titles¹ there is concern about the subsequent impact this may have on the public sphere (Siles and Boczkowski 2012). Seemingly, hyperlocal has much riding on it, yet our understanding is limited by the ways in which Journalism Studies has traditionally sought to validate the democratic norms underpinning its practices. John Hartley (2009) has argued for new perspectives to be brought to the study of journalism in the digital age. In order to understand the impact of what happens “if everyone is a journalist,” he suggests we turn to cultural studies’ interest in aspects of everyday cultural life, rather than Journalism Studies’ interest in “producer and practice” (2009: 154).

This project intends to examine, through a case study, the complex online/offline interactions that give strength to the relationships between hyperlocal practitioners and their communities. In doing so it will seek to test an approach to ethnography that may uncover the everyday nature of doing and engaging with hyperlocal. The project will engage with the tensions in the debate around the role of technology as a tool for participation in the process of doing journalism. Although there is much work in this field (summarised in Borger et al. 2012) this is often from a technological determinist viewpoint. Borger et al. argue that scholars tend to display a “strong faith in the democratic potential of digital technologies” (Borger et al. 2012: 125). The context and framework for this study then are ideas of alternative and idealised public spheres.

Chris Atton’s work (2002, 2004, 2008) is focused on articulating the value of the alternative public sphere as a model for understanding alternative media practices. He makes the case that there should be a focus on “process and relation” in alternative media studies (Atton 2002: 30). Peter Dahlgren sees an “empirical permeability between public and private” (Dahlgren 2006: 276) and argues that not only the Internet, but DIY media forms such as pamphlets and “neighbourhood bulletins” (2006: 275) now come under the analytical gaze. Indeed, the everyday activities of identity creation and engagement with culture is now something to be considered: “If this whole side [the private] is walled off analytically from our understanding of politics, then we will never be able to understand, for

¹ <http://www.journalism.co.uk/news/third-of-local-newspapers-to-have-disappeared-between-2002-and-2013-says-enders-chief/s2/a533054/>

example, the motivations, identities and passions that can launch people into the public sphere” (Dahlgren 2006: 275).

This project’s short intervention is intended to address the ways in which an ethnographic approach to examining hyperlocal practices has value. In turn, such an approach might be considered of wider value in studying digitally connected communities and the extent to which such communities can be seen as new knowledge networks with a role to play in the public sphere.

2) Aims:

The project has two aims:

- to test a new ethnographic approach to understanding the relationship that small media operations such as hyperlocals have with their audience.
- to consider the role that a hyperlocal website might play in fostering digitally-enabled, citizen-based networks of knowledge about place and space.

These aims address issues around the transformational impact of digital technologies on aspects of community life. Hyperlocal websites often see themselves as media through which citizens can highlight matters of public concern, acting as conduits to the public sector and to mainstream media. In this sense they are embedded both within their community and within a recognised network of knowledge and power, in some sense acting as ‘bridges’ (Putnam 2000) between the two.

Through the case study of the B31 Voices hyperlocal blog, the project will identify the function and impact of digital technologies in the context of their use in everyday life. The intention isn’t to map their ‘bridging’ potential. Rather, the project will draw on conceptual framings by Sarah Pink who argues that ‘place-making’ happens as much through the ways in which people utilise online, social technologies as through mainstream media. People utilise these media in a multifaceted way on an everyday basis: switching between platforms, reading from a wide range of sources, making contributions in social media updates or in posting photographs. Pink asks that we see that these online practices happen simultaneously with an offline engagement with place-making (Pink 2012: 131). Prompting us to rethink our approach to a study of online activism she argues: “Contemporary social media platforms and the technologies through which we access them make digital activism interweave with our everyday media practices and the environment in which we participate” (Pink 2012: 131). The project’s novel ethnographic approach, partly utilising a method established by those working professionally in online citizen engagement, will look for incidences of ‘digital activism’ in the context of discussion about everyday place-making. This approach speaks to concerns with the Communities and Cultures Network with regard to developing new approaches to research ‘with’ rather than ‘through’ communities.

3) Format

The project will work in one area of south Birmingham, in around the B31 postcode area (largely the areas of wards of Longbridge and Northfield). This area of Birmingham is undergoing significant regeneration investment following the closure of the Longbridge car factory in the mid-2000s. The seed funding will enable the PI to spend time studying the workings of a specific hyperlocal practitioner – B31 Voices, b31.org.uk – and to connect to its audiences. It will do this through an ethnographic engagement during two ‘surgery’ style workshops in the community. These surgeries will partly follow a format developed by the project partner, Podnosh Ltd – a specialist advisor to the public sector on citizen engagement issues. The intention is in part for the PI to test out the value of such surgeries as a tool for ethnography but will also evaluate such approaches as a form of civic engagement.

4) Outputs

In addition to reporting requirements of the fund-holder the project will produce a case study report (up to 4,000 words) on the outcomes from the workshops and the insights offered into the practices of B31 Voices. Dissemination of the report will be through the Communities and Cultures Network and also via the 'Out of Hours Hyperlocal Hangout' webcast (via Google Hangouts) that takes place online as a form of engagement with the wider hyperlocal practitioner community.

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