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**Plurality, policy and the local: can hyperlocals fill the gap?**

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**Title:** Plurality, policy and the local: can hyperlocals fill the gap?

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## Abstract

Over the last fifteen years, the acceleration in media consolidation has presented a series of policy challenges around diversity of editorial output. While policy debates on national ownership limits and other regulatory interventions are important, developments at the local level are often marginalised.  And yet, the direction of travel – towards more consolidation and more deregulation – has arguably been more debilitating for democracy at local level, where the vast majority of citizens interact with hospitals, schools, transport systems and local councils. The decline of local media – including, in some towns, the wholesale disappearance of local newspapers – leaves citizens starved of information and local institutions less accountable.

This article uses an existing conceptual framework for assessing whether and how journalism makes a real life contribution to democratic life at the local level (Barnett 2009). Against this normative framework, it then assesses the contribution of hyperlocal media sites to local democracy. We present findings from the most extensive survey of the hyperlocal sector to date, a collaboration with research partners at Cardiff and Birmingham City Universities and Talk About Local, which analysed online questionnaires from over 180 local online media initiatives. Our research offers a unique insight into the funding, operational problems and sustainability of community media sites and suggests they have the potential to fulfill a vital democratic and civic role. These data inform our conclusions and recommendations for policy initiatives that would invigorate hyperlocal sites and therefore provide a real alternative for otherwise democratically impoverished local communities.

**Keywords**: hyperlocal, media plurality, community media, journalism, democracy

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*Steven Barnett and Judith Townend, University of Westminster*

**Introduction: the policy context**
It is axiomatic within democratic nations that a dispersal of media ownership is fundamental to a healthy democracy. The most comprehensive and coherent theoretical analysis of this axiom has been advanced by Edwin C. Baker, who argued that a plural distribution of communicative power was not only an integral element of democracy but also acted as a vital "democratic safeguard" against accretion of untrammelled political power in the hands of a single individual, and in sustaining "watchdog" journalism which holds elites to account (Baker 2007; see also Bakdikian 2004). For this reason, most mature democracies have traditionally been willing to circumscribe media mergers and acquisitions with more layers of regulatory scrutiny and protection than simple competition law, in order to secure a plurality of information and opinion. At the same time, some countries have been prepared to make available subsidies or other kinds of structural assistance to promote new or struggling media organisations which are believed to contribute to democratic pluralism at both national and local level.

Nevertheless, four factors have conspired over the last 10-15 years to accelerate a process of consolidation and present a series of policy challenges around media plurality and diversity of editorial output. First, the growth of multinational corporations in an increasingly globalised economy has resulted in louder calls from business leaders to maximise opportunities for expansion. This has been reinforced by political leaders placing greater emphasis on industrial policies aimed at leveraging foreign investment into home-grown businesses to make them more competitive on the international stage (Barnett 2004).

Second, this increasing emphasis on industrial policy has been accompanied since the 1980s by growing attachment to a free market ideology which emphasises liberalisation and deregulation while opposing any extension to state intervention or regulation (Leys 2001; Freedman 2008). Third, digitalised convergence of computer, screen and print which now permits most creative and journalistic content to be accessed online has led policy-makers to question the efficacy of any intra- or cross-media regulatory intervention. It has also raised separate questions about how these so-called "digital intermediaries" such as Google and Facebook might pose different plurality problems around gate-keeping and access (Foster 2012).

Finally, these imperatives of industrial policy, free market ideology and convergence have been reinforced by a financial crisis in which a structural shift in advertising revenue to online has been severely exacerbated by global recession and fragmentation of traditional mass audiences, placing enormous pressure on traditional media business models (Currah 2009; Fenton 2009). Policy makers are therefore under huge pressure to relax rules still further, despite warnings about the adverse democratic and journalistic consequences of concentrated ownership.

Within the UK these considerations – and the policy framework which currently governs them – assumed far greater political importance during 2010-11, first through the proposed acquisition of the UK's largest pay TV operation BSkyB by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (News Corp), and subsequently by the abandonment of that bid in light of the phone-hacking scandal which afflicted News Corp's UK publishing

arm, News International (since renamed News UK). This attempted deal – combined with a previous acquisition of shares in ITV by BSkyB in 2006 – inevitably focussed attention on the highly political problem of how successive British governments have failed to deal with the power of conglomerates, and in particular the inexorable expansion of News Corp.

In the light of the phone-hacking scandal, this concern about plurality became an integral element of the Leveson Inquiry's Terms of Reference. Lord Justice Leveson was asked to make recommendations:

> "a. for a new more effective policy and regulatory regime which supports…. the plurality of the media….;" and
> "b. for how future concerns about press behaviour, media policy, regulation and cross-media ownership should be dealt with by all the relevant authorities….".

Given the complexity of his task and the intricate detail with which his final report described a news system of audited press self-regulation, it was probably inevitable that plurality was relegated to a very poor second place. In fact, only 15 of the 1987 pages of the Leveson report were devoted to recommendations on plurality and were pitched at the level of "desirable outcomes and broad policy framework" rather than any policy detail. It was left to government to fill in the policy blank space, a process which they launched in July 2013 with a consultation paper (DCMS 2013).

Unfortunately, the consultation's terms of reference were confined to issues of measurement and restricted to a narrow range of issues around the genres of media which should be covered, whether it should incorporate the BBC, and which audiences should be included. Not only did it have nothing to say about the political decision-making process or overlapping role of regulatory bodies, it was completely silent on the potential for new policy initiatives to promote plurality. Thus, while focussing on how plurality might be approached via a range of consumption measures at the national level, it excluded a whole range of creative policy and funding initiatives that might serve to advance plurality at both national and local level.

There are, potentially, a number of areas in which some kind of policy intervention could facilitate editorial diversity, whether through structural or funding initiatives. This might involve a potential role for charities, trusts, foundations or other not for profit models; the feasibility of partnerships with existing public service institutions such as the BBC and Channel 4, or with existing private media such as local newspaper groups; alliances involving other public institutions such as university departments and libraries; making small subsidies available for entrepreneurial start-ups; diverting existing subsidies into different or more creative structures; or raising money through levies on aggregators or internet service providers which profit from journalism. While there is – justifiably – some concern about the rise of new centres of dominant cultural power in the online world (through global giants such as Facebook, Google and Amazon), it is important to think about how convergence and social media might also be harnessed to create new democratic opportunities.

Some ideas around creating more public funding, new public interest obligations, and creative approaches to ownership models have been canvassed elsewhere. Two House of Lords select committee reports, on Media Ownership and Investigative Journalism, have produced recommendations for significant policy changes in, for example, the decision-making process and organisational funding (House of Lords, 2008 and 2012). The Co-ordinating Committee for Media Reform (CCMR) has put forward

proposals for public interest conditions that might be imposed on media suppliers who exceed acceptable ownership limits (CCMR 2012). And the Carnegie Trust investigated possible routes to more diverse funding models based on charitable giving and foundations, trust funds, partnerships, and news consortia involving collaborations between established news organisations and non-traditional sources (Carnegie Trust 2010).

There was, however, a missed opportunity in a more recent House of Lords communications committee report on media plurality (2014). Although it mentions in passing the importance of new initiatives and interventions to stimulate media enterprises, particularly at the local level, there is little attention paid to the different creative approaches that might be feasible or the potentially enabling role of government policy. Apart from reiterating the charitable funding idea raised in its previous report, it neglected to explore other ways of funding or supporting local media initatives.

## News plurality at the local level: why it matters

Such interventions are particularly urgent at the local level. According to UK Press Gazette, more than 240 local newspapers closed in the seven years from 2004 to 2011 and some areas of the UK "are no longer covered by professional journalists". It identified major towns such as Port Talbot in Wales, Cannock Chase in Staffordshire and Long Eaton in Derbyshire where significant "news gaps" meant that populations were left with little information about their local communities (Ponsford 2012). Whether towns with no journalistic presence or cities with an increasingly emasculated presence, the implications for local democracy are profound. Issues of enormous relevance to citizens in their everyday lives – about their local hospitals, local schools, local transport, police forces, businesses and courts – are simply not being addressed. Local elites and decision-makers are not being questioned or held to account. Drawing on what he called the "classic liberal theory of a free press", Curran (2005) identified three democratic functions of the media as watchdog, voice of the people, and information and debate. In previous work for Ofcom relating specifically to local media Barnett (2009) adapted these and added a fourth in to provide a conceptual framework for assessing whether and how journalism makes a real life contribution to democratic and civic life at the local level. He identified these four areas as: informing; representing; campaigning; and interrogating.

*Informing*. Relevant information can take a number of forms. For citizens to understand and participate in their local communities requires that they are kept informed about issues such as major planning applications, new local transport initiatives, proposals to close a new hospital wing or change the style of local policing. Such information need not even be instrumental, but able simply to generate greater awareness: at both local and national level, people want to be informed – succinctly, accurately and accessibly – about the world around them and often rely on the simple journalistic act of reporting for their knowledge.

*Representing.* Information should also flow in the opposite direction, conveying the popular voice from citizens and voters to local and national elites and thereby both facilitating the expression of popular opinion (e.g. through letters pages, discussion programmes or Facebook pages) and ensuring that the collective view is passed on to key decision makers. Local newspapers or radio stations with their roots in the community have historically been crucially important vehicles for large-scale

expressions of dissatisfaction over, for example, a major stadium building project, or the inadequacy of a local hospital or care home.

*Campaigning.* A more pro-active version of representation encompasses the media as instigators of public interest campaigns. Both at local and national level, newspapers in particular have a tradition of identifying issues directly relevant to their readers, and demanding political action. At the local level, such campaigns may involve charity appeals or campaigns for action on an unsafe road, or against the proposed closure of a local amenity. Local papers in particular have traditionally regarded such campaigns as an integral element of their rootedness in the local community.

*Interrogating.* An integral part of the media's contribution is its watchdog role, holding public authorities and private corporations to account and conducting independent investigations to uncover corruption, miscarriages of justice, public waste, corporate greed and other examples of wrongdoing. This interrogation role applies equally at local level, from elected council officials, school governors, hospitals and police forces to county courts, social services, major employers and retail stores.

One example of how a small but effective public policy intervention might contribute to local democracy is Community Radio. The Community Radio Order of 2004 gave Ofcom the power to license not-for-profit community radio stations according to strictly defined criteria relating both to "social gain" and to restrictions on generating income from on-air commercials and sponsorship (mostly set at a maximum of 50%). Community radio providers cannot be motivated by financial gain, must demonstrate that members of the community have been given the opportunity to participate, and must be accountable to the community they serve. There are four mandatory social gain objectives: providing a service to a community otherwise underserved; facilitating "discussion and the expression of opinion"; providing education and training; and "achieving a better understanding of the particular community and strengthening the links within it." (DCMS 2004).

Each station has a set of key commitments relating to these social gain objectives, and Ofcom monitors performance through annual reports submitted by licensees. By November 2011, Ofcom had licensed 231 such stations, with about a quarter of the sector's funding coming from public sources such as Local Authority grants (Ofcom 2012). A small Community Radio Fund is made available from DCMS (£321,500 in 2010/11) which is administered by Ofcom in the form of grants, typically around £15,000 per station. These stations are potentially well suited to the campaigning and informing roles of journalism outlined above, but are insufficiently resourced (and not designed) to play a serious representative or interrogative role.

While the DCMS grants represent an explicit (albeit tiny) intervention to support plurality at the local level, long-standing implicit subsidies to the local press in terms of exemption from VAT and statutory notices tend to be overlooked and have never been properly quantified. Figures from a Reuters Institute study put this figure for the whole UK press at £594m per annum in 2008 (Nielsen and Linnebank 2011, 8), though it is not clear what proportion of that figure might be subsidies to the local and regional press. In addition, the statutory duty on local councils to place notices in the local paper on planning, licensing and traffic orders is likely to be worth around £45m per year. Following vigorous lobbying by the Newspaper Society, these subsidies are generally available only to hard copy newspapers.

**A new approach to the local - hyperlocals**

More recently – and to date with very limited help from public funding or policy interventions – a potentially new source of local information and democratic enhancement has emerged: hyperlocal news sites. The term, which originates from the US, describes online local news and information services, normally independent from large media owners. It is, according to William Perrin, founder of Talk About Local[1], a metonym rather than a literal label (akin to using "the press" as a category of media) that can describe sites and services covering big as well as small places (Perrin 2013). In the first extensive report on the hyperlocal sector in the UK, Radcliffe gave a more conservative definition, excluding cities or areas larger than towns: "Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community" (2012, 6).

Radcliffe does, however, acknowledge that "audience perceptions of what constitutes "local" vary considerably" (ibid); the same could be said for "community". A further complication is that producers of some sites and services that appear to fall under the hyperlocal umbrella dislike the term, and would not necessarily promote themselves as such (see, for example, John 2011). Nonetheless hyperlocal has emerged in the last few years as a dominant and widely recognised term to describe local and community online media, to the extent that it is specifically mentioned in the recent DCMS consultation document on media plurality (DCMS, op cit). Moreover, the Technology Strategy Board, working with NESTA, is planning to invest up to £2.5m in projects that "demonstrate the potential of hyperlocal media technologies to serve communities across the UK" (TSB 2013).

The form of content as well as the size of the area covered varies significantly from site to site: from online versions of parish newsletters to projects developed by professional journalists, such as the Guardian's short-lived local sites in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Leeds. Hyperlocal initiatives are not necessarily based on a single website: they might be a Twitter account, a Facebook page or a discussion forum. They may not be designed as "journalism" or "news" and producers may not wish to be pigeon-holed as "citizen journalists" (see, for example, Radcliffe 2012, 10).

On the whole, the most successful hyperlocal ventures have been independent. There is little evidence of success in attempts by media companies to roll out hyperlocal-style sites across the country. Local World has recently scaled back the hyperlocal initiative Local People, first launched by previous owner Northcliffe Digital in 2009 and publishing 100 sites by 2010, following an initial pilot of 23 sites in 2009 (Luft 2010). In June 2013, Local World decided not to renew 25 contracts with freelance publishers running these sites; this followed a previous restructure by Northcliffe Digital, in which 75 freelance publishers lost their roles (Lambourne 2013). In the US there is a similar story at AOL, which has let go hundreds of staff working on its Patch local news initiative, with questions raised over the local news network's future (Carr 2013). For journalist Mathew Ingram, hyperlocal journalism may have more chance of audience and advertising success if it is "artisanal" rather than "mass-produced", is based on a close relationship with a local audience, and is driven by residents' passion: "Whether it's in print or online, no one is going to connect with a "local" news site if it is a cookie-cutter version stamped out by an assembly line" (Ingram 2013).

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[1] A company providing training and resources to local community sites and services, with which the authors collaborated to design and disseminate the research survey.

Given the vagueness of the hyperlocal label, it is difficult to estimate a population size of hyperlocal sites operating in the UK. The most reliable indicator is an online directory hosted by Openly Local and currently curated by Talk About Local. Including non-independent sites, it contains over 700 URLs to local sites and platforms. However, not all these sites are active. In June 2013, Harte established that of 632 hyperlocal websites listed on the Openly Local database, 496 were "active" and operating in the UK while 133 were no longer active (Harte 2013, 2)[2].

**Our research**

Despite definitional difficulties, these community-based sites and services are clearly relevant to ongoing analyses of the UK media landscape, including the government's consultation on media plurality. To this end, more data about their democratic role and functionality is needed. Pearson at al have argued that there is a "strong role for both industry and policymakers to come together to aggregate research on audiences, viable business models and successful content so that the social and economic aspects of hyperlocal media are better understood by potential advertisers and investors" (2013, 11). With the aim of informing the debate about relevant and appropriate policy interventions around media plurality at the local level, we wanted to gather empirical data about how hyperlocal sites contribute – or aspire to contribute – to local democracy, within the conceptual framework identified by Barnett (outlined above); and what sort of resources, financial and technical help would ideally be needed to sustain these sites.

We therefore collaborated with Dr Andy Williams of Cardiff University, Dave Harte of Birmingham City University from the Creative Citizens research project, and William Perrin and Michael Rawlins from Talk About Local to create a survey that was designed (amongst other objectives) to operationalise two overarching research questions:

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

Building on previous research by Williams et al (2013) and NESTA (Pearson et al 2013), the research sampled active sites on the OpenlyLocal directory[3] and members of the Talk About Local mailing list, which we consider captures the majority of active hyperlocal and community sites. First, a generic online request was successfully delivered from Talk About Local to 455 members of the Talk About Local list. Second, a more personalised online request was successfully delivered to 216 sites listed on OpenlyLocal, either via email or the contact box on their sites. Third, we advertised the survey on our blogs and Twitter accounts, which generated 24 additional responses. A total of 183 responses were received altogether (with 76% finishing the survey)[4].

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[2] "Active" was defined as "a website having posted a news story at least once in the 5 months prior to the sample period or functioned as a forum-only or wiki-based website". Inactive sites had either closed, or had not published in the 5 months prior to his sampling.
[3] The directory, which have been added to since our research, can be viewed here: http://openlylocal.com/hyperlocal_sites.
[4] The response rate was higher from the list compiled from the Openly Local directory (90 of 216: 42%) than from the Talk About Local mailing list (69 of 455: 15.2%). There are two main reasons that could explain the low response to the TalkAboutLocal mailing list. First, the request for participation took the

We therefore achieved a response rate of over one third of the original target population of 500 (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. As noted above, the total population of local sites and platforms is likely to be much larger but no alternative reliable central source exists.

As well as questions designed to operationalise the conceptual framework outlined above, our online questionnaire sought information about funding, operational problems, sustainability, and publishers' self-perceptions about their activity and motivations. It was split into sections which covered the running of the site; site reach; site content (split into three categories: information, campaigns and investigations); and site sustainability and resources.

The total sample size was 183 publishers of hyperlocal sites and services in the UK, surveyed online from 5 December 2013 – 24 February 2014. For simplicity, the questions and the results refer to "sites" although some respondents publish on other types of platforms such as Facebook pages, rather than a standalone website. Where percentages total more than 100, respondents were given the opportunity to select more than one option. Not all questions were compulsory or relevant, so the number of respondents (n) to a question is noted after each set of answers.

## Site profile and reach

*Longevity*: Just under three quarters of respondents had been running their site for more than three years (41% for 3-5 years and 32% for more than 5); slightly fewer than one in five had been going for 1-2 years, and just 8% for less than a year (n=176).

*Time*: A majority (57%, n=175) spent less than 10 hours working on their site per week, with just over a quarter (26%) spending between 11 and 30 hours. A small though significant number (17%) worked the equivalent of full-time hours, over 31 hours per week.

*Personnel*: For over half the sites (51%) only one person is involved, while over a third (40%) used 2-6 people and just 9% used more than 7 people (n=149)[5]. Asked to calculate how many person hours in total were invested in the site in an average week, 43% thought it was less than 10 hours, a third calculated between 11 and 30 hours, and a quarter said over 31 hours (n=167).

Asked about professional experience or qualifications, just over half said they had no journalistic training or experience (52%), while around one in six mentioned an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in journalism or media (16%) and slightly more said they had worked for local media (19%). One in six had worked at a national media outlet (16%) and just over one in ten had freelanced for national media (13%). Others mentioned short courses in journalism, work experience, and professional experience in marketing, advertising and communications (n=140).

*Costs and revenue raising:* Excluding their own and others' unpaid time, the vast majority of respondents spend less than £100 on running costs each month (78%). A further 16% said that they spent between £100 and £1000, and 6% said more than

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form of a generic newsletter (only 115 of 455 recipients opened the email); second, the mailing list contained contact details for people were interested in hyperlocal media, but do not publish sites themselves.

[5] There was a slight ambiguity in the question here, where some respondents were unsure whether to include themselves. Total responses are therefore slightly lower because some respondents skipped the question.

£1,000 per month (n=164). Most paid all the costs themselves (63%), while a further 10% raise money from the site but not enough to cover costs. A significant minority, 28%, said that they raised enough money from the site to cover costs (n=171). By far the most popular source of funding for those who did raise revenue was advertising, followed by their own money, and then sponsored features, voluntary donations and grants. Even then, the amounts raised were insignificant: just 24 of the 62 sites which generated income raised more than £500 per month.

*Site reach:* Average target population was 130,994, ranging from 160 to two million (n=135).  Around a third had no idea about their unique visitor numbers per month, and around a quarter did not know how many page views they received. Of those who could estimate a figure, average unique views were 22,057 (ranging from 30 to 450,000[6], n=91) and average page views were 78,590 (ranging from 100 to 1.8 million[7], n=99). There was considerable uncertainty about accuracy, however, because many respondents indicated that traffic could fluctuate or that they did not monitor it closely. Additionally, the highest figures cited were significantly bigger than the next highest.

Eight in ten said they used Facebook for hyperlocal activity (n=145), and nine out of ten used Twitter. Respondents mostly used a dedicated Twitter account rather than their own, with an average following of just over 3000. Encouragingly, all but 5% said that they had seen growth on at least one of these platforms in the last 12 months: over 8 out of 10 on Twitter and nearly 7 out of 10 on Facebook (n=138).

*Summary*: While hyperlocal sites, by definition, do not have the reach or resources of traditional local newspapers or local radio stations, they do seem to offer the prospect of an alternative media source at the very local level. Although most are in their infancy, the overall pattern appears to be one of growth rather than stagnation or contraction, with creative use of social media to reach (and expand) their audiences. There is still, however, a huge disparity with legacy local media in terms of resources: with the majority spending less than 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.

## Site content

*Scope*: Around three quarters of the surveyed sites described themselves as either quite or very local, defined respectively as based in a town or city suburb (59%) or relating to just a few streets or village (16%). A further 17% said they were city based, while 8% extended to county level or beyond (n=157). Just under half publish fewer than five pieces of content per week on their blog (46%), while 33% publish 6-20 and 21% publish more than 21 (n=159).

*Information:* Asked specifically about what kinds of information items they have published in the last two years, community events were cited by almost all the sites, with cultural or entertainment events, council meetings, local planning and history not far behind. Figure 1 lists the ten most popular topics and percentages, and reveals a wide range of relevant local information from sporting events to crime issues.

SEE END

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[6] 450,000 was the highest cited figure by some way; the next highest was 160,000.

[7] 1.8 million was the highest cited figure by some way; the next highest was 660,000.

*Campaigns:* Campaigning appears to be a minority exercise, with just four out of ten saying that they had started a campaign in an effort to change things in the last two years (n=159). The average number of campaigns amongst those who did was three covering, as might be expected, an array of different issues. These ranged from the very specific, such as 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, to more wide-reaching and traditional local issues such as improvement of council standards and traffic calming.

Other examples of what respondents deemed to be their most important campaign included the dismissal and conviction of a council leader and road and cycle safety. One example described how the site had helped change a local school to an academy, gaining national and political attention.

Although most had not started their own campaign, nearly three quarters said they had supported an existing campaign (n=159), with an average of five such instances in the last two years (n=93). A similarly wide range of examples were given, ranging from fundraising for a food bank and finding a bone marrow donor, to campaigning against local library closures and building demolition.

*Investigations:* As with campaigning, just 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). There was a wide range of examples, but virtually all of them qualify as good illustrations of watchdog or accountability journalism at the local level. 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. Asked if any investigations were not published, just 22 said this was the case. One respondent said that this tended to occur "where FOI requests don't come back with anything interesting - but often information gets used later on as background for other stories".

Finally, we were keen to discover how those who run hyperlocal sites identify their activity in relation to mainstream definitions of journalism. Of the five choices offered (not mutually exclusive), the most popular response was "community participation" (70%), followed by "local journalism" (57%), "active citizenship" (55%), "local conversation" (55%), and "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).

*Summary:* Although many do not readily identify themselves as journalists, the great majority of sites clearly engage in activities which would qualify as mainstream reporting. Given the tiny budgets and relative lack of resources, it is perhaps particularly surprising to see the number of sites which have adopted both campaigning and investigative roles across a wide range of issues. Given the sometimes complex issues on which these sites reported and their techniques (some respondents volunteered that that they had used Freedom of Information requests to acquire information), even though many preferred not to identify themselves as "journalists", many sites demonstrate impressive levels of sophistication and understanding of traditional journalistic approaches.

**Growth, sustainability and resources**

The vast majority of sites have some ambitions for the future. Asked about their plans, four out of five respondents would like to expand their site: 42% would like to expand it "a little" and 38% "a lot". Only one fifth said they were content with the current size and scope (n=168). Figure 2 shows the most popular reasons given for expansion being hampered, with time being by far the most important limitation followed by lack of volunteers and lack of money. Other unprompted reasons included lack of access to events by official bodies, lack of community interest and a lack of public data.

*SEE END*

Despite apparent barriers to expansion, 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). Reasons for decline or closure varied, including change of circumstances, declining participation, and lack of time, but one respondent gave some valuable insight into the pressures of running a successful operation:

"The site has grown so much over the three-and-a-half years it's been going, so much that I struggle to stay on top of it. I'm looking to work two days a week on the site, paid for by advertising and other revenue, but it's difficult to grow the income - I'm not a sales person and would much rather be developing the site editorially. I'd like to bid for grant funding but I'm not sure where to start."

Content mentioned by respondents hoping to expand included: local history, articles using open data/data journalism, high street regeneration campaigning, council meetings reports and an events diary. One respondent wanted to feature more "journalistic" stories and "investigative, questioning pieces"; others mentioned "civic engagement" and "campaigning, more in-depth reporting".

Ideas for improving the site if time and money were no object included more video and audio content, better performance on mobile platforms, paying a full-time editor, developing a bespoke site, selling advertising space and improving design and layout. Some clearly aspired to running a more professional journalistic operation. One respondent said that they "would run it as a properly funded, professional news operation" another that they would "pay myself and staff to run it and venture into print. Fill the role that used to be taken by the local newspaper". Several repeated this desire to go into print. One said: "I feel that a hyperlocal website can only be monetised if it is run in conjunction with a print edition." A couple mentioned wanting to produce more original content rather than relying on press releases.

When asked what support they would exploit if it were available, the most popular response was funding for their own time (63%), followed by help for promotion and marketing (61%), advertising (50%), paying contributors (42%), technical help (42%), help with formally registering their site (32%), and training in areas such as web or Wordpress design, law, journalism or publishing (23%) (n=128).

There were some interesting reflections in concluding comments about their status within the news environment and relationship with commercial media. One respondent said: "I don't think of [my site] as a hyperlocal website but as a local news website. It covers a larger area and population than many local newspapers. Often it breaks stories faster than the local daily newspaper or the BBC, the main conventional

media in the area." Another continued the theme of alternatives to traditional forms of local journalism: "Hyperlocal sites are replacing rural newspapers - they are valued, respected and considered not only by readers but by police, councils, NHS, sports clubs and major local organisations - on same footing as regional press."

*Summary*: Overall, although these are mostly shoestring operations run by volunteers, there appears to be a great deal of ambition for expanding both scope and content into areas that would usually be identified as "journalism" (even if the term is not explicitly used, or is regarded with suspicion). There is both optimism about the future and an appetite for growth which would be greatly assisted by some kind of financial or resource support – whether for paid labour, design, marketing or training. A number of respondents described how they saw their service as comparable with that of local newspapers.

## Conclusions and policy implications

Our research demonstrates how difficult it is to generalise about the focus, form and size of hyperlocal sites. Both in terms of their own self-images and in terms of the functions they perform within their own community there is a huge range and diversity of operations, from city-wide enterprises publishing dozens of items each week to single-person part-time projects publishing one or two items a week to the local parish. We should also be careful about imposing the "journalism" label on self-publishing activities which do not fit traditional norms and ideas of reporting or investigating. While many were comfortable with the "campaign" and "investigation" terminology used in our survey, a couple of respondents questioned the relevance of these terms to their activity.

On the other hand, a broader view of both the current activities and aspirations of most hyperlocal sites suggests a potentially major role in compensating for the decline of traditional local media and making a genuine contribution to local plurality. In the general comments, several respondents took the opportunity to discuss their relationship with existing commercial media outlets, seeing themselves as comparable players in the local media landscape. As we saw, many are comfortable with the journalism label and nearly half had some kind of journalistic experience or training. There is a long-standing debate both inside and outside the academy about what constitutes "journalism" in an era of social, mobile and online media and the role of professional training versus first-hand citizen experience. Perhaps, in the context of hyperlocals and plurality, we should regard this as a sterile debate and focus on what really matters: output. If hyperlocal sites 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, then they fulfil the journalistic norms outlined above – whether or not we call it "journalism".

This raises important questions about policy interventions which would help to maximise the potential of existing operations as well as provide seed funding for new ones. In their six-country comparative study of public subsidies, Nielsen and Linnebank concluded that:

> "In all six countries covered, the main recipients of these various forms of public sector support for the media in 2008 remained largely the same incumbent organisations who have been benefiting from them for years – primarily public

> service broadcasters and secondarily private print publishers. Very few new entrants receive any significant public support" (2011, 15).

This is certainly true for the UK local media where, as we have seen, Community Radio attracts small direct subsidies and local newspapers benefit from implicit subsidies through VAT exemption and statutory notices. Both these subsidies are predicated on the democratic and citizenship value of local media to their respective communities, and we have shown here that this value is at least replicated – and arguably enhanced – in most of the hyperlocal sites. Policy thinking is therefore lagging well behind real-world media activity, and currently takes little account of emerging forms of local and community online initiatives which can potentially achieve greater success in fulfilling those democratic roles.

We have seen some welcome movement in that direction through the NESTA/TSB funding initiative outlined above, but £2.5m pales into insignificance when set against the local press subsidies and the BBC money now being used to capitalise and fund a network of around 30 local TV stations with very few community criteria to fulfil beyond profitability. Consideration should also be given to whether large scale grants are appropriate for small sites and platforms whose editorial, training or technical needs are often very straightforward. One respondent in our survey commented on past funding by NESTA, suggesting that it had been too focussed on larger players and institutions, such as universities:

> "It felt too big. Not everyone interested in hyperlocal are interested/competent in technology and some felt excluded. Money would have been better spent in seed funding, kick-starting ten or 20 different hyperlocal business models. Not everyone's interested in tech, augmented reality, the next gen of hyperlocal etc. - they just want to tell stories/impart information to local communities in an easy way where there are no barriers (either technological or otherwise) and in a simple way their readers understand."

Any public investment plan therefore needs to be careful not to alienate smaller players. This suggests that a similar model to that currently operating for Community Radio, perhaps also administered by Ofcom, might be appropriate as long as it was sufficiently flexible to allow for the many different incarnations of hyperlocal sites. A good start to the funding question would be to open up the revenue from statutory notices: it is absurd that in the 21st century online world, it is assumed that councils and other public bodies will use tax-payers' money solely to advertise in local hard copy newspapers which in some geographical areas no longer exist! Moreover, while we do not favour top-slicing of BBC revenue, the revenue currently earmarked for a widely criticised experiment in local television could also be opened to online operations.

A much more productive and less institutionally damaging use of BBC resources would be a series of local partnerships in which those running hyperlocal sites could take advantage of BBC expertise in editorial, web design, legal advice, promotion and marketing. BBC Director General Tony Hall has made it clear that he sees such partnerships – where the BBC acts as enabler rather than "senior" partner – as an integral part of its future as the UK's leading cultural institution. Such partnerships would inevitably involve tension with the major newspapers groups, and would require both central and local government support.

Beyond the BBC, some kind of organisational assistance might also be appropriate for those tasks which fulfil manifestly democratic functions but which small sites sometimes struggle to achieve: activities such as following up FoI requests, running local campaigns, reporting on council meetings or local courts, gaining access to official records or local public bodies, might all be rendered more accessible through some kind of publicly funded centralised support structure.

Finally, we believe there is ample scope for a fresh examination of the rules surrounding charity status for journalism. The Charity Commission has tended to be very conservative in its interpretation of the Charities Act when considering requests from organisations involved in journalism, and the laws themselves are ambiguous. Charitable status brings financial benefits as well as valuable reputational gains, and the vast majority of hyperlocal sites are clearly making important contributions to information, knowledge and democratic accountability in their local area. These civic benefits need to be recognised through a more flexible charitable regime which would not only enable existing sites to grow but would encourage new initiatives.

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*Figure 1: Information-based topics covered (ten most popular topics shown)*

**Thinking of the content that you have published in the last two years, which of the following topics have you covered? Please tick all that apply (n=156)**

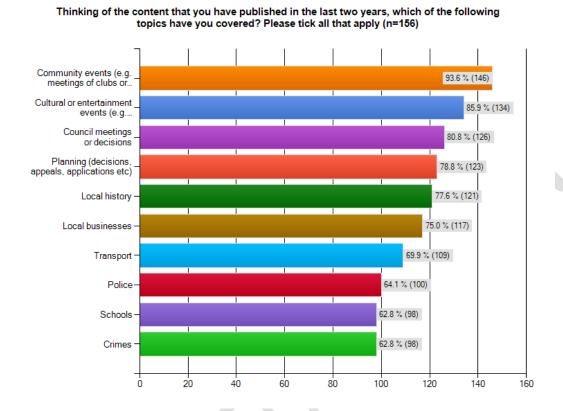| Topic | Percentage (count) |
|---|---|
| Community events (e.g. meetings of clubs or… | 93.6 % (146) |
| Cultural or entertainment events (e.g.… | 85.9 % (134) |
| Council meetings or decisions | 80.8 % (126) |
| Planning (decisions, appeals, applications etc) | 78.8 % (123) |
| Local history | 77.6 % (121) |
| Local businesses | 75.0 % (117) |
| Transport | 69.9 % (109) |
| Police | 64.1 % (100) |
| Schools | 62.8 % (98) |
| Crimes | 62.8 % (98) |

*Figure 2: Factors affecting site expansion*

**What do you feel is preventing you from expanding your hyperlocal site? Please select all that apply (n=127)**

| Factor | Percentage (count) |
| --- | --- |
| Not enough of my time available | 71.7 % (91) |
| Not enough volunteers | 45.7 % (58) |
| Need more money | 40.2 % (51) |
| Need more sales support | 33.1 % (42) |
| Need more technical expertise | 28.3 % (36) |
| Other (please specify) | 14.2 % (18) |
| Need more editorial expertise | 12.6 % (16) |
| Need more knowledge of legal issues | 9.4 % (12) |