"Someone should do something": Exploring public sphere ideals in the audiences of UK hyperlocal media Facebook Pages

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Abstract

Hyperlocal media is a form of citizen-led, online community media serving at neighbourhood level. Frequently deployed on social media and resulting in high levels of audience participation, we might assume that such spaces enable residents in a civic and activist mode. This article ethnographically explores hyperlocal audiences to investigate the potential for spaces of public sphere. In studying two Facebook Pages in the West Midlands, UK, I found that, whilst public opinion was formed over civic matters, often in critique of police or the local councils, the ideal of mobilising to directly challenge such authorities was rarely followed through. I therefore question the value or agency in talking *about* authority rather than *to* them. The citizen editors do attempt to encourage activism, but I suggest that audiences become too reliant on their efforts and revert to more passive 'clicktivism'. The article also raises concerns that such online spaces offer authorities opportunity for covert monitoring of citizens, at odds with the public sphere ideal. This article therefore informs wider understanding of the nature of participation. Hyperlocal spaces clearly offer functional and social value, but the idea that this equates to a powerful public sphere is challenged.

Keywords:
hyperlocal media, audiences, public sphere, civic engagement, social media, Facebook

Introduction

Hyperlocal media is a form of community media defined as "online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community" (Radcliffe, 2012: 6; see also Harte, et al., 2019). These services have been feted as the answer to a largely receding mainstream local press in the UK (Metzgar et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2015), but, more recently, have been recognised as socially and culturally significant in their own right (Hess and Waller, 2016), offering points of connection for local discussion or information gathering for often thousands of residents at a time. Given hyperlocal media's participatory nature, there has been a certain expectation that this equates to the gathering of publics in practices of civic engagement and activism (Metzgar et al., 2011: 783; Harcup, 2011). Despite the increasingly messy and entangled nature of this media, some platforms more than others can be conceptualised as social media 'spaces', for example, Facebook Pages. With this in mind, I draw on Jürgen Habermas' (1991) theory of the public sphere, as explored by numerous scholars since (Brenne, 2016; Castells, 2008; Dahlgren, 2018; Kruse et al., 2018; Mahlouly, 2013; McDermott, 2018; Zamith and Lewis, 2014), and ask: In which ways can hyperlocal media spaces be considered public spheres of constructive discussion about local issues and concerns?

I first set the stage by setting up the expectations of Habermas' public sphere theory, and then noting where this has come under scrutiny in studies of online and community media to date. I then explore how the features of hyperlocal media suggest that they would present suitable platform for the practice of public sphere communication, and a vehicle for civic engagement and activism. Finally, I address these expectations directly by presenting findings from two years of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, exploring two hyperlocal Facebook Pages in the West Midlands, UK. The resulting discussion addresses the public's needs for social public sphere spaces, and how this is exercised in hyperlocal media Facebook Pages in the development of public opinion and local identity. I also demonstrate barriers to participation, and concerns about the potential for surveillance of such spaces by the very authorities we would hope publics are challenging. Finally, I explore the extent to which the public sphere ideal is entirely acted out, to test and hold authority to account, and how this reframes our consideration of the potential for powerful online spaces.

Conceptualising hyperlocal media as public sphere

Jürgen Habermas (1991: 27) suggested that the "bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public". He tracked this in an eighteenth-century social shift, from people gathering in literary discussion focused around coffee houses, to the production of daily newspapers – from a cultural public sphere to a political one. The significance here was the press'

new role, extending beyond the newssheet format which simply shared information, to editorial staff dealing in and leading public opinion. The press therefore became "an institution of the public itself, effective in the manner of a mediator and intensifier of public discussion" (Habermas et al., 1974: 53). In the twentieth century, Habermas (1991: 146) recognised that the state's role developed from maintaining order to *forming* it, and so the public sphere became more significant in challenging such authority. This can be expressed as a cycle – a public platform harbouring discussion, which is formed into a consensus of public opinion, to finally be aimed upwards to hold authority to account. It is the potential for completion of this cycle of accountability in online community media that I explore in this article.

Whilst Habermas' ideal is appealing, much critical attention has been paid to the key concepts of public sphere. Dahlgren's notion of the "mediated" public sphere (1995), recognised media as places for publics to encounter societal discourses and participate in them too, as in the case of "arenas" such as radio phone-in shows or televised audience debates (Clayman, 2004: 29). Empirical studies such as those of Bennett et al. (2004) have assessed mediated public spheres according to principles of: access – who is included or excluded; recognition – formal identification of participants and their resulting ability to contribute; responsiveness – communication between actors and participants (I will return to these factors in my own analysis). Other scholars have modelled public sphere according to the role of the mediator and participants, and the scale of their involvement: in Lippmann's *elitist* model (1922/1997), the press monitor elected officials and provide information to publics – see also Garnham's conceptualisation of this in public service broadcasting (1986); Baker's *deliberative* model (2002: 148–149) has the press start to work alongside the public, assessing sources including but also beyond journalism; the *pluralist* model (Ferree et al. 2002) more openly emphasises even more diversity and inclusion, allowing for different sources and types of discourse and debate. Following this, Örnebring and Jönsson (2004: 285) suggest there is a need for "alternative public spheres" (wherein they frame tabloid journalism in this way) to counter the dominant "mainstream mediated public sphere" that occurs through some of these platforms and organisations, but which may not suit all audiences.

As technologies such as the Internet have increasingly afforded the creation of new spaces, scholars such as Gitlin (2002) have wrestled with the notion of a single public sphere increasingly fragmenting into alternative "public sphericules" (Ibid: 170). Couldry and Dreher (2007) suggest that the community radio examples they studied in Sydney, Australia, did not exemplify one broad sense of public sphere *or* 'sphericules', but were further entangled and networked with other fields and sources (see also Pink, 2012). Bruns and Highfield (2015) have also similarly pointed

out that the expansion of modern online media ecologies means any current understanding of public spheres must recognise them as numerous, overlapping, and both dispersed and relational; in the context of local Facebook Pages, there may be a number of online spaces covering one geographical area or having slightly differing interests, but also interspersing with other offline information sources and media such as local newspapers, leaflets, and friendship groups. A concern here is that Internet technologies offered opportunity for publics to contribute to this sense of a "networked public sphere" (Benkler, 2006: 8; see also Gordon, 2007) and create public spheres tailored to their own special interests (or locality), but these affordances also potentially disturbed or drew them away from valuable engagement in the mainstream public spheres noted above, as feted by scholars such as McNair (2012) – in hyperlocal media terms, this might result in a resident's introverted gaze on everyday neighbourhood news, while losing focus of national and global events and politics. The open and often unmediated nature of these fragmented spheres, especially in the case of online spheres, also raises concerns from some camps about the reliability of information, its provenance, and potential for manipulation (Benkler et al., 2018; Bimber and de Zúñiga, 2020), and has resulted in calls for citizens to combat "fake news" in today's public spheres (Chambers, 2021).

Civic engagement and activism in hyperlocal media

My argument draws on discussion of hyperlocal media theorised as public sphere, through two specific 'flavours' of the expected practice this entails: civic engagement and activism (Metzgar et al. 2011: 783; Harcup, 2011; Rheingold, 2008). David Baines (2012: 3) tracks a definition of civic engagement back to forms of local media with a role in "building networks and maintaining connectivity, generating and reinforcing representations of place and community", and in "[reinforcing] people's sense of belonging". Significantly, Baines (2012: 4) notes the value of residents reporting "local knowledge", in comparison to mainstream local media likely to be owned and written by those outside of the circulation area. When mainstream media do make efforts towards what Bowman and Willis (2003: 9) call "civic journalism", they are described as "too broad, focussing on large issues such as crime and politics, and not highly responsive to the day-to-day needs of the audience". It is therefore reasonable to suggest, as I explore in this article, that citizen reporters can not only better understand and communicate with their audiences, but also civically engage them. In practice, such engagement efforts are perhaps less conscious than we might assume, riding on streams of everyday media such as Facebook, in a mobilisation towards shared goals, which John Postill frames as "banal activism" (2011: 56).

Keeping this picture of the public sphere ideal in mind, hyperlocal media offers citizens space to meet, and then voice their consensus directly towards organisations, policy, and government - practices documented by numerous scholars (Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Banaji and Buckingham, 2013; Postill, 2012). This creates a route for citizens to respond to everyday issues and wider societal discourses – Sarah Pink (2012) draws linkages between localised everyday activism and global discourses in this way. The hyperlocal media field therefore has the potential for local discussions to be distilled as public opinion – Mahlouly (2013) suggests even more so in the age of open digital platforms than in Habermas' original conception. These platforms are significant, given that efforts to engage citizens have been found to be effective when they are introduced into their existing media practices, as in Wells and Thorson's (2015) study suggesting that Facebook audiences don't sign up to mainstream news, civic or political Pages, but might instead engage via their friends' posts. All of this suggests that hyperlocal Facebook Pages would perform well as spaces of public sphere.

However, if the public sphere is open, offering the potential for established public opinion to be 'pointed upwards' to challenge authority, it also provides a melting pot that the state may, by turns, use to monitor citizens, as Morozov suggests (2012). Similarly, Brenne (2016: 271) expresses concerns that, "while social media creates a structural platform for a public sphere, political discussion on social media is subject to forms of power that inhibit what Habermas defined as public opinion." Here, Brenne draws on Foucault's (1977) conceptualisation of surveillance and examination to understand how external agencies are able to covertly monitor publics but also that the nature of social media is for users to seek visibility, therefore being complicit in such attention (Brenne, 2016: 272-3). In the case of the Facebook Pages I studied, where anyone can *observe* the communication therein, this offers convenient window onto these citizens. Authority figures are enabled to carry out covert surveillance, and I will demonstrate how this plays out later. This is not a form of attention that the audience are aware of so that they can adjust their behaviour, as in Foucault's (1977) panopticon conceptualisation of power arising from surveillance. The analogy is rather of authority looking down onto a fish pond - the fish, facing forward, continue their routine, unaware of being watched from above. Dahlgren and Sparks (1991) present another problem, that Habermas viewed the press as a vehicle for public opinion when it was in fact historically under some form of political control from the eighteenth century through to the twentieth century – in contemporary terms, we can recognise Facebook's control over their own platform and its content (Fuchs, 2012). Given these concerns, it is with some caution that I explore my case studies in the remainder of this paper. Some scholars suggest that hyperlocal media *can* take on monitorial and civic roles (Harcup, 2016), but others, such as Firmstone and Coleman (2015), are concerned that such ideals

may be asking too much. Given that even quite recent encyclopedia entries tend towards a utopian view of the online public sphere and its potential (Iosifidis, 2020), I suggest that further real critique is required, based on empirical studies.

The social spaces of hyperlocal media

An understanding of the structure and practices of hyperlocal media is necessary to contextualise my remaining discussion of public sphere evidenced in Facebook Pages. Some early studies of hyperlocal media practices focused on what Flouch and Harris (2010: 5-7) refer to as "placeblogs", but with the advent and increasing popularity of social media from circa 2004, Flouch and Harris also made the distinction between these blogs and "public social spaces" (2010: 7), described as social media accounts used "for sharing information about areas and often light-hearted chit-chat". Audience participation in hyperlocal, social media spaces has thus developed and been tracked in global studies (Kamarulbaid, et al., 2019; Mudliar and Raval, 2018), with some (De Meulenaere, et al., 2020) suggesting that civic engagement and activism is engendered. As Banaji and Buckingham (2013: 149) suggest, however, we cannot assume that by default of being 'open', the Internet itself will "inevitably result in democratic and anti-authoritarian practices" – it is the audience's practice that defines what happens in these spaces.

Hyperlocal media services are, typically, not set up by trained journalists, but are often studied through the prism of journalism studies, with an expectation of filling a gap in the local news landscape (Baines, 2012; Nielsen, 2015; St. John et al., 2014; Thurman and Hermida, 2010). The problem of such expectations is that they are set too high: David Harte (2017: 19) recognises the assumption by some scholars (Metzgar et al., 2011) that hyperlocal organisations should be producing original content rather than aggregating or "gatewatching" stories from the Internet or reader sources (Bruns, 2005: 11; see also Goode 2009). In reality though, the editors should be understood as peers of an audience which collaborates by "collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 9), embedded in the neighbourhoods they operate in.

As Facebook use has increased in recent years, hyperlocal media services also developed a taste for the platform, beyond or in addition to operating their blogs. Whilst a definitive content analysis and/or further specific interviews with hyperlocal practitioners would be welcomed in order to track these practices from blogging to social media and also how this affects audience participation, a brief count of the convenience sample of 124 hyperlocal organisations signed up to the UK's Independent Community News Network (ICNN, 2021) shows that around 98% of these services operate a Facebook Page as well as their blog. There is therefore *some* flattening in these hyperlocal media spaces of what is otherwise presented in

mainstream media as a journalist/audience hierarchy. However, we must recognise that the practical structure of Facebook Pages, and a tendency for Facebook to treat their users as consumers, still enforces a sense of editorial control (Valtysson, 2012), with the Page administrator ultimately deciding which stories get posted. Nonetheless, when we explore the fluidity of participation and conversations in many of these Facebook Pages, we should understand hyperlocal media services as creating communicative spaces. John Postill (2011) demonstrated this, in his studies of citizen-led, local online media in Kuala Lumpur. He framed hyperlocal media as field "stations" (2011: 7), which conceptually expand on Giddens' (1984) idea of communal spaces that are frequented by social agents who: observe the field to understand normative practice; participate on that basis; renegotiate their behaviour based on the success or failure of such participation.

Investigating spaces of hyperlocal media with ethnographic research methods

As much as we must contextualise such online spaces as part of a wider neighbourhood's media and information ecosystem, as in Bruns and Highfield's (2015) aforementioned call for a new approach to public sphere that goes beyond the singular to a "a more complex system of distinct and diverse, yet inter-connected and overlapping, publics", for the purposes of this article I focus on hyperlocal Facebook Pages, with their own sets of undefined rules, established by the writers and audience in their co-relational practices.

This article draws from my fieldwork exploring online local media audiences, specifically in Facebook Pages, where participation was high. Given the everyday and pervasive nature of Facebook use, it was only through being similarly immersed in a qualitative research approach that I could observe, interrogate and discuss practice with residents. Therefore, I applied ethnographic research methods, taking into account the need to engage over an extended period of time (O'Reilly, 2012; Wolcott, 1994). I undertook fieldwork in the small towns of Wednesfield (near Wolverhampton, UK) and then Rubery (on the outskirts of Birmingham, UK), lasting ten months and then a year respectively, 2013-16.

These two ethnographic cases were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, in both cases, I had very recently moved to the area and used these Facebook Pages, so was able to play the role of "stranger" in order to identify those characteristic phenomena that are naturalised and invisible to participants (Schuetz, 1944), but also benefited in experiencing the field alongside participants (Geertz, 1973; Goffman, 1961; Pink, 2013: 35). Kanuha (2000: 439) frames this as the difference between "going native" and more simply "being native". For example, this allowed me to ask people in interview why they thought something happened on their local Facebook Page, while then reflecting on how I'd seen and experienced the same

phenomena as a resident and how that impacted on my broader everyday life. Studying platforms outside my residential area would not have afforded me the same experience as resident and researcher, identifying the familiar in the strange – those unique practices that are commonplace to local residents using the hyperlocal Page – but also seeing what is strange in the familiar – removing practices from their context to explore their nature (Van Maanen, 1995). Secondly, given the variety of local community media practices in the UK, my cases cannot be considered 'typical', but neither were they untypical, both being independently set up by citizens with no financial backing, to serve the community - a study found that 63% of UK hyperlocal organisations did not raise money at all (Williams et al., 2014). This demonstrates one of numerous variables that might have yielded different findings, for example, hyperlocal organisations with paid advertising, those which ran parallel print newspapers, or those in rural contexts, but I suggest that many of the concerns I explore here would apply in those contexts too. Thirdly, I spent a pilot period of a few weeks with each case study to test and refine my research and data capture methods, but also to establish that the audiences were sufficiently active in order to suit the demands of the study. I had considered neighbouring hyperlocal organisations such as Connect Cannock (neighbouring Wednesfield), but had observed that their Facebook Page was not as participatory (Turner et al., 2016), and I would also not have benefited from the experience of being resident, as discussed above.

Research methods and resulting data capture was carried out in various ways but typically resulted in text files and transcripts. I carried out observation (by daily research diary) of the two, prominent online hyperlocal Facebook Pages in Wednesfield and then south Birmingham. I recruited and organised consent with participants through these Pages, with some assistance from the editors, and, in south Birmingham, created a new Facebook Group to communicate with these residents, as befitted their own media ideologies (Gershon, 2011; Pink, 2013). This Group additionally acted as an online 'community panel', a hybrid of participant research diary and group interview, with all (myself included) reflecting on their experiences of using the hyperlocal Page throughout the year, and this discussion also formed part of the data for analysis. I conducted and recorded semi-structured interviews with audience members (ten in Wednesfield, 19 in south Birmingham), and with the editors of each Page. These were mostly in person in neighbourhood cafes, but some were by phone, and some additional participation was by email interview. In short, people were invited to participate in ways that were most comfortable to them, with all participation covered by a consent agreement that covered the entire relationship and capturing of data. I also observed and documented in my research diary offline contexts of everyday digital media use in neighbourhoods and how these fit into wider discourses of the locales, given that

online ethnographers increasingly demonstrate how online media is interwoven with everyday practice (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pink et al., 2015). Such methods resulted in a rich variety of largely qualitative, written and transcribed materials. Following each period of ethnographic fieldwork, I then thematically analysed these materials using Nvivo, with the emerging themes initially informed by theory, hence my resulting interest and concerns regarding public sphere with regards to hyperlocal media.

The local context of my ethnographic fieldwork helps us understand the public sphere dimensions I might have expected to encounter. Wednesfield's population during the 2011 census was 22,482[1] and the local WV11 Facebook Page had 13,431 followers (as of 06/05/2021). The Birmingham area covered by B31 Voices had a population of 101,422[2] in 2011 and 56,419 Facebook Page followers (also as of 06/05/2021). These seem significant numbers using the services but we should remember that hyperlocal media narratives of place and local identity are of course just *partly* representative in being built up only from the local population who use the Pages. We must recognise that use of such online media forms only part of a resident's media ecology, overlapping with a range of news, information gathering and socialisation, both online and offline, mainstream, alternative and banal. It is also worth noting that in some cases, such as Bingham-Hall's study of the hyperlocal service Brockley Central, in London (2017), they have more 'followers' on Twitter than on Facebook, but Bingham-Hall's case describes relationships with the editor, rather than discussion between residents i.e. reciprocal public sphere.

In framing this methodological approach, I must also be clear on the limitations. Firstly, hyperlocal media services vary greatly across the UK (Williams et al., 2014). Being responsive to editorial practices, audience participation similarly varies, so there is no sense that any ethnographic study of two cases can be extrapolated more widely. Having said this, although ethnography does not explore scale across a large sample as in other methods such as content analysis or surveys (which would have both been possible), it identifies patterns and also anomalies of behaviour longitudinally and in depth, unearthing those rich narratives that help us interpret meaning. Secondly my online observation method of research diary was limited to developing an online understanding of how the audience *collectively* acted; I was not able to physically *be* with those individuals as they engaged in those practices, to observe their location, state of mind, time constraints or ease of using the technology, which might have developed an even stronger sense of the way that

[1] Wolverhampton City Council, Area Profiles: Wolverhampton Wards https://www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/sites/default/files/pdf/All_Areas.pdf [Accessed 03/04/20]
[2] Birmingham City Council, Northfield Constituency https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/directory_record/6166/northfield_constituency [Accessed 03/04/20]

such practices are interwoven into everyday life. This was impossible partly because of the practicality of being able to organise such contact time, but also because my very act of being present would have introduced an 'observer effect' (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982: 46). I was also not privy to any "backstage" (Goffman, 1959: 109) communications that would have more richly revealed the communication in relation to the online space. For example, police often had appeals posted by the editors, but they were then not present on the Page themselves. People would then comment on the appeal, but I couldn't establish whether residents also responded to the appeals or not. In such cases, I resist the temptation to interpret too far from my materials. Thirdly, my study was limited in who participated. I had some initial trouble finding respondents for interview; the editors and other parties sometimes helped me advertise and recruit people they felt might be helpful. Therefore, we might assume these self-selecting participants were those more active members of the audience - there would also have been many unobservable, silent readers of the Pages. In efforts to reach such 'silent readers' in Birmingham, I ran two days of interviews in a pop-up research office on Longbridge high street, but was still not satisfied that I had reached those audience members who I suspected used these services largely to 'keep informed'.

Local Facebook Pages as public sphere

The remainder of this article draws from my findings, studying two hyperlocal Facebook Pages and their audiences, to test against expectations of hyperlocal media in fulfilling a public sphere role. On one level, the Pages I studied *can* be understood in terms of an online public sphere representing the locality, in that there was some evidence of group discussion and reaching of consensus. The audience used the Pages to post stories onto a Visitor Posts section within the Page interface or message the editors directly, thus sourcing stories. The administrator (or citizen writer/editor, as we might think of them) posted content to the Page, which the audience could then comment on, share online or like, so this suggests Dahlgren's (1995) mediated public sphere model but at the scale of one of Gitlin's (2002) 'sphericules'. Through these practices, there formed a sense of collective identity or ideals being established and expressed, what we think of as public opinion, whether this was regarding audience responses to crime, historical perspectives on the neighbourhoods, or thoughts on regeneration following the closure of Birmingham's Longbridge car plant. So far, much of this is familiar in various conceptualisations of public sphere. However, the evidence from my ethnographic work merits further interrogation at various levels. This is drawn from a range of my research materials, captured during the fieldwork I described. All participants discussed here are anonymised.

As far as audiences were concerned, at face value their conversations were more

often than not situated in the banal and everyday functionality, than in the arts, culture, or politics. While many scholars recognise all these aspects to be relational (Fuchs, 2014; Pink, 2012: 98-100), this banality does potentially give credence to concerns that alternative public spheres risk drawing publics away from the important mainstream public sphere concerns of the day (McNair, 2012). For example, on 16th November 2015, one story about imminent changes to a bus route received 136 reactions, comments and shares; a live stream of a Birmingham political election hustings posted half an hour earlier received zero, and only one click. To some extent however, the Pages fill a void and help deal with the problem - felt by some residents and in common with Ray Oldenburg's concerns (2001) - that spaces of local discussion and socialisation were lacking in their neighbourhoods, what one resident called "actual community". Another interviewee perceived this as a problem with the availability of physical spaces - while he felt there was a *sense* of community, there were no community places in Rubery i.e. no building where events might be held, other than the social club. In Wednesfield, the hyperlocal editors were actually part of a team setting up a 'community hub' building, which was built, but also maintained and populated, by formal and informal social groups and activities.

Given this perceived lack of physical community locations, people did talk about the hyperlocal Pages in terms of these social expectations, and here we can recognise Hess and Waller's (2016) appreciation of the cultural value of such spaces – as one B31 Voices reader said, in thanks for the editors' service: "You have brought back a sense of the community". When I asked another audience member to try and visualise the Facebook Page as a physical place, she said it was "like a community centre, but then there are sometimes discussions more suited to the pub. They're more adult rather than community based. And then some of it is just pure nonsense". In this, she expressed the potential for residents to discuss civic concerns, but also recognised the Pages as spaces of leisure and more casual conversation. Such discussions, often tied up in local knowledge or everyday experience, can be thought of as binding individuals to these hyperlocal socialities – David Baines (2012: 152) actually refers to hyperlocal media as a "glue to hold rural communities together". Whether the fabric, structure and support of 'community' ideals in neighbourhoods is the responsibility of authority (the council) or citizens themselves is one issue, but where the Internet here provided means for people to mobilise themselves in the functional and social aspects of their lives, they clearly did so.

Publics, public opinion, and authority

As I've discussed, Habermas (1991) presents the development of a consensus of public opinion as one of the stages of the public sphere, on the road to then wielding

this as power that might be applied to authority figures. In this respect, the comments that flow beneath a Facebook story give the audience voice, but also help readers understand the audience's collective response and decide whether to similarly contribute, challenge the discourse, or remain passive readers. On a functional level, this sets the agenda and formed identity for the space as a whole – if one story received very few Likes compared to another, that implied interest in certain directions. The Pages could therefore be thought of as spaces demonstrating what readers of B31 Voices or WV11 thought about crime, immigration, bins, or lost pets – somewhere to contribute as a member of the community, and establish resulting public opinion.

Habermas (1991) also described the public sphere as a space for citizens to speak collectively and freely about authority figures, and in this respect I recognise my Facebook cases according Ferree et al's *pluralist* model (2002), allowing for a diversity of voices, sources and experiences to contribute. For example, public opinion was sometimes established regarding the police and the corresponding city council. When bins in south Birmingham were not being collected properly, people were just as likely to use Facebook posts and comments to lay blame on the Council responsible for the service, as the individual employees on the street, a sense of us (residents) and them (authority). The freedom to talk in this way was possibly enabled by the audience's understanding that the Council rarely took part in conversations on the Page - the Council's messages were distributed via shared posts, but they were otherwise not visibly present in the hyperlocal Page, leaving them exposed to be safely talked *about*, an example of the audience taking part in "exclusionary othering" (Canales, 2000: 16).

In the case of the local police, their absence on the Pages (particularly in B31 Voices) meant the audience developed their own ways of dealing with situations. Reports of stolen cars or bikes were frequently posted by victims (I recorded 36 instances of this in my south Birmingham research diary, over a year). The audience described what had happened and where, asking people to look out for their items, and sometimes with a secondary warning that others should watch out too that might be framed as "banal activism" (Postill, 2011: 56). But when readers responded by asking if the victims had reported the matter to the police, the victim sometimes admitted they hadn't (this came up at least 11 times). Talking this through with someone in Rubery, she felt that victims would be "afraid of repercussions or maybe they think somebody else will [report] it". One lady on the Page asked about "who I contact apart from the Police" - people in her street felt the police had not been able to address crime issues there, a notion more widely perpetuated on the Page. Such discussions left unchecked could then generate similar comments or people recounting their experiences. This was exacerbated by the fact that the police

(whether through staffing capacity or operational strategy) rarely involved themselves in these conversations to provide balance. Returning to Bennett et al.'s three principles of public sphere (2004) the police, if they *access* the sphere at all, only do so to ask for witnesses and then don't continue to *respond* or, if they do, it is only in covert observation of the ongoing conversation (a concern we'll come back to shortly) – but they are essentially not *recognised* as contributing to the sphere. 'Reporting' crimes to peers on Facebook is therefore likely to have minimal effect, and police officers at a Rubery neighbourhood PACT (Partners and Community Together) meeting I attended did express their frustration that they couldn't allocate localised policing unless crimes had been reported properly by the public. This again demonstrates how people may become lost in introverted alternative public spheres, when there would often be more mainstream spheres to effectively engage in. Vigilantism (or the potential for it) was also discussed, for example, the post by a man whose "sisters pomeranian [was] ripped to bits by 2 fukin dobermans off there leads" [sic], and his appeal: "…….any info would be grateful" certainly suggested a desire for retribution. Nonetheless, despite concerns often voiced that police were generally unresponsive, there was rarely any indication that the audience individually or collectively approached the police with such complaints, for example in writing or in petitioning.

Exclusion and withdrawal from the public sphere

In order for hyperlocal media to be considered a public sphere of constructive discussion about local issues and concerns, readers must feel that they are able to participate, but in some cases they didn't and were therefore excluded. Aside from their physical ability or technical expertise with their phone or tablet, there were instances I observed in the Pages but also heard in my interviews, when people felt unwelcome or disinclined to take part in the conversation, something we might recognise from any social gathering, offline or online. There are various reasons for this. Naturally, not all stories are relevant or interesting to every reader - within hyperlocal media as in other previously studied media practices, audiences are drawn to only parts of the available resources (Williams, 1980). However, two of my interviewees also recognised that their participation could create tension or be quashed if they didn't agree with the homogenous discussion (see above, Ruiz et al., 2011: 20). On at least 20 occasions in my observations during the year in Birmingham, I noted conflict flaring and tension in online discussions, but it is also notable that it came up a further 21 times with my interviewees - the audience was clearly aware of the consequences and regulated their behaviour appropriately. They might have hoped the readership would come to their support but, knowing the difficulties that the editors had in monitoring every discussion, they instead held back rather than aggravating an issue.

In addition to this, the dual threat of people identifying each other via their Facebook names and possible spillage into offline confrontation (or stalking, as documented by Lyndon et al., 2011) was a real concern for several people I spoke to, beyond the usual limitation of harassment in public spheres to the online context (Vitak et al., 2017). Someone's name in a Facebook conversation could act as an easy hyperlink to their own account if they hadn't set it to be only visible to friends, and there was also the potential to actively track people down in the neighbourhood if people. These concerns were borne out in at least one case on B31 Voices, whereby people got into an argument that then drew them into each other's personal Facebook profiles, commenting on their appearance based on other photos or online activity. In a WV11 incident, readers who clearly knew each other outside of the hyperlocal space swapped slurs, questioning their parenting and personal family life in a public string of comments, to the point that the editors stepped in with warnings and deleted comments. Therefore, while the hyperlocal space was framed as a space of open discussion, only those readers who were comfortable or confident to participate would do so, and it is clear that engaging in these types of localised public spheres clearly presents unique risks. This reflects other studies such as Kruse, et al. (2018: 62), who identified that concerns about tensions, possibly leading to online and offline harassment, were some of the factors disengaging young people from political discussion online. The citizens' selective use of the spaces demonstrates a mature understanding of the problems Agger (2015) discussed in the "oversharing" of private information into public spaces online. In both these and the hyperlocal media contexts we can therefore appreciate the agency in making such selective decisions. One man I spoke to said that past experience had shown him it wasn't worth getting into arguments online - his conscious choice *not* to speak was as significant as a decision *to* speak in other situations, and I frame this as a perfectly valid response to what Ruiz et al. (2011: 20) problematised as "homogenous communities" of commenters they observed on European mainstream news websites, who largely reinforced and locked down one position with brief comments rather than engaging in a dialogue of multiple positions. I suggest then that withdrawing from online discussion *cannot* be truly framed as passive, and the audience's decision to remain informed without revealing too much of themselves brings to mind Bruns' (2008) theorisation of silent readers of alternative media as being active in their choice. My own way of dealing with a story that I disagreed with led to me taking offline action. When an appeal for Syrian refugees was largely rejected by the audience, with discourses that we should 'look after our own homeless first' and fear of terrorism, this felt such an affront to my own echo chamber of Facebook content and expectations of the Page, that I was spurred on to act. Rather than expressing this online, knowing it would create the kind of tensions my interviewees had described, I instead donated clothes to the collection centre.

Being 'private' in the public space: a platform for covert surveillance

Two more factors must be taken on board in considering the hyperlocal space as public sphere. First of all, there was a potential for authority figures to use the Facebook Pages as a means of surveillance. Given the nature of these spaces as woven into everyday routines and practice, people often slipped into relaxed dialogues that would be more typical of private, one-to-one conversations, such as this response to someone having left a bag on a bus: "U have 2 just go up an they will check the lost and found.....but dnt hold ur breath my son lost 2 on the bus an no1 handed them in....". Some conversations suggested friendships continued both offline and online. Such communication, relaxed spelling, and punctuation were very rarely flagged up as unusual by the audience in the Pages - Naomi Baron (2010) calls this the 'whatever' attitude to everyday media practice, but we can also understand this as naturalised practice carried out through observation of the space's norms. These attitudes, along with the ways people sometimes entered into one-on-one conversations to organise their social lives, demonstrate the extent to which people were comfortable in the online space of the Pages, somewhere they felt they inhabited and owned. The problem in this sense of security is that their guard is down, and this then creates potential for authorities to covertly surveil the audience. This is, of course, at odds with the public sphere ideal of a channel the public can use to challenge authority - in effect, public sphere is turned on its head. Goold (2002: 21) explores similar surveillance issues in his discussion of closed circuit television conceptualised as the "unobservable observer" – it is impossible for the audience to know when their comments might be lifted and used out of context, as I would suggest that authorities are outside the remit of the user's "imagined audience" (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 115). I also, of course, recognise the irony in doing this myself, as a researcher - this ethical issue was dealt with by various methods of declaring myself in the space.

The reality of the situation was that the police and councils had working relationships with the Page editors in running their stories and appeals, so those organisations were aware enough to potentially surveil the audience without declaring themselves in the space as per Bennett et al.'s principle of *recognition* (2004). The police very rarely directly posted or commented into conversations, even when their press releases posted by the editors led to them being challenged in the comments, as in a fatal collision following a police chase. Like the audience, they may have fallen into the security of seeing the editors as gatekeepers who could disseminate their messages and, as Firmstone and Coleman (2015: 134) established in their study of Leeds Council, authorities do not always appreciate the value of further engaging in dialogue with citizens. Like the audiences I've just been discussing, the risk associated with engaging in online public discussion may have been too problematic. In fact, my fieldwork only hinted at covert observation by

authorities on two occasions, the first being a local councillor who found that reading the pages "helps to develop your attitude and response", whereby he used the Page as "a great reference point for neighbourhood politics" and "public opinion". The second was a council neighbourhood worker who felt able to legitimise his practice of gathering public opinion by copying and pasting comments from the Page and presenting them to the local police sergeant. The intention in both cases was honourable, to better understand or engage with the audience and, therefore, the neighbourhood communities they hoped to serve. However, let us compare the situation with Kathryn Flynn's (2006) discussion of investigative journalists and their unofficial public sector sources or 'leakers'. Although the relationship in that case is not balanced, due to the leaker's necessary anonymity, a certain level of trust can be established and so the leaker has some control. If a hyperlocal audience's content is lifted covertly, no such control or consent is offered to the audience member. Coming back to Goold (2002: 25), his solution to the covert surveillance problem of CCTV is in regulation where possible, in the form of a "watchdog". Given that such regulation of public spaces online is not yet in place, we can only hope that authorities treat such spaces sensitively, or we should otherwise remind audiences that their contributions might be taken out of context.

Public opinion, but to what end?

The second and more problematic issue was that the audience did not wield their public opinion in action, to challenge authority. Habermas (1991: 82) describes public opinion as "neither a check on power, nor power itself, nor even the source of all powers. […] rather, the character of executive power, domination itself, was supposed to change". Public opinion is therefore a vehicle for change, not change itself, and further steps must be taken to effect this. When the audience seemed to reach consensus on an issue online, there was rarely an understanding that they would then communicate this to the police, council or other authority in order to hold them accountable – thus the utopia of a mobilised public (Iosifidis, 2020) fell flat. Much of their practice can therefore be framed as a type of "clicktivism" commentators such as White (2010) have described, whereby commenting, liking or resharing a post gives the individual an inflated sense that they have acted or contributed. In the same respect that Splichal (2010) recognised public sphere as the environment, but the publics assembled there as the true actors, public opinion is the vehicle that requires driving to reach its destination.

Sometimes concerns would be raised regarding a local issue and public opinion developed amongst the audience, but it would rarely travel any further than this i.e. 'up' to directly challenge the authorities being discussed. There were six instances I observed on the B31 Voices Page, and occurring in seven of my interviewees across both case studies, of the audience suggesting that 'something should be done', but

with the implication that they were not necessarily the person to do it. These attitudes were explored further when I asked some of my interviewees what else they would like to see on the Pages and they suggested additional subjects or story types. I pointed out that these were stories they might source or write themselves, given the participatory nature of the platform; one cited "shyness" as a barrier and that she "wouldn't know where to start," despite admitting that she was no less technically or 'professionally' competent than the editors. We might read this as a matter of confidence.

However, the real issue was that readers were happier to *respond to*, rather than *initialise* activism. They enjoyed the mediated, curated nature of the Page and its editors doing some of the "gatewatching" work for them (Bruns, 2005: 11) in sourcing and covering local stories. When these norms are set, it suggests that the editors will take charge, or share information, and this becomes the expectation of a service provided. As one person put it, in interview: "People will say, 'The police helicopter was about last night, what was it doing?' so we know if we ask on B31 Voices, they'll find out for us". This also extended to attempts by the editors to encourage activism: when the WV11 editors invited people to help with a graveyard cleanup, this resulted in eight likes, but only two attended to help. Mere days later, someone was posting again that 'something should be done' to tidy up the graveyard. This reliance isn't necessarily a phenomenon specific to online spaces, but rather frames the hyperlocal space as one of social communication - not every user feels enabled or inclined towards activism in the same way. Part of this might have been a misapprehension that the editors were somehow more 'official' or otherwise responsible for providing these services. The danger in this is that it removes a sense of agency from the residents, as it becomes harder for them to understand that they are allowed to do those same things, such as setting up the relationships with police and councillors as the hyperlocal editors do. It appears then that in the case of banal posts about the best local restaurants or even missing pets, the audience is able to follow the non-hierarchical *pluralist* model (Ferree et al. 2002), but if mobilisation and activism is to be initiated, editorial input needs to be scaled up to the *elitist* model, in providing initial information and organisation (Lippmann, 1922/1997. This reliance on the editors puts strain on them, as they become stuck with the audience in this naturalised and normative, hierarchical practice. When these citizen editors can afford to apply more time and energy, such as Harcup's (2016: 639) account of hyperlocal "monitorial citizenship", this reliance may not pose a problem, but my interviews with both sets of editors and their own personal Facebook activity backstage frequently stressed the frustrations and labour they had set themselves up with. Given that 11 of my interviewees recognised the difficulties that the editors encountered in their practice, there was maybe also a fear that by putting themselves out there, the audience would become drawn into those time-draining

practices and a role of responsibility. One local businesswoman described to me her professional background that suggested she would be adept at organising community events, but, whilst she had certain ideas of what could be done for the village, she openly admitted that she wouldn't head them up herself. So we can understand all of this as a certain complacency that sets in to communities both online and offline, with regards to initiating activism. When Oldenburg (2001: 2) talked about "the habit of association" provided by third places "where people may gather freely and frequently and with relative ease" being key to collective activism, he was referring to physical neighbourhood cafes and shops. Whilst I also recognised these affordances in the ways editors create their own online spaces, *membership* of the Pages alone didn't foster online activism in quite the same way he describes.

I have established that public opinion was formed in the Pages, but that this public opinion didn't directly challenge authority, even if it didn't accept it. If not public spheres, I found the conversations in Pages to be at least often circular in the respect that discourses were repeated and agreed, but not pushed upwards in challenging acts of civic activism as is hoped or otherwise presented in much of the literature. Civic engagement occurred in the respect that the population was made aware of information and participated in other ways, but they rarely demonstrated that they were inspired to start their own projects or acts of "creative citizenship" (Hargreaves and Hartley, 2016), despite the example set by the editors. One person on B31 Voices took on a role of being unofficial assistant in the case of lost pet stories, always commenting with advice, and another was often posting notice of local public consultations, but aside of these, people rarely stood out as fully exercising the enabled, empowered ideals of public sphere.

Conclusion

I entered into this study with the understanding that certain public sphere expectations are made of hyperlocal media, but that the field of study is lacking in-depth audience studies that reveal such narratives in practice. Further to this, while many studies explore Facebook vis-à-vis public sphere, they often treat Facebook as a generalisable space (Valtysson, 2012), rather than pinpointing Facebook Pages as fields for observation and study. Where others have reduced hyperlocal media audiences to 'measures' of sociality and "neighbouring" through surveys (admittedly alongside other methods) (Mesch and Levanon, 2003; Hampton and Wellman, 2003), the varied and nuanced nature of everyday local Facebook practice demands ethnographic insight in order to explore the richer narratives and meanings of these media spaces. My findings therefore help to argue a case for immersive, ethnographic approaches, given that they raise concerns about any assumptions we might make of hyperlocal media's ability to enable activism and engagement. The article also starts a conversation about public sphere ideals in hyperlocal media

spaces, suggesting areas of concern that might be taken up further, for example, in a wider-reaching quantitative survey of UK online spaces and their users across the UK.

My study suggests that, even with efforts in place by key citizens (as in the aforementioned *elitist* public sphere model) *and* perhaps *because* of them taking leadership roles, we cannot assume that the public sphere ideal will play out in its entirety. The audiences in my study were drawn to the online social spaces and developed consensus, but less frequently mobilised this into directly addressing the authorities they might have had issue with, even in the form of letters, petitions or campaigns. The concern, therefore, is that such spaces become fields for circular conversations, where authorities are, at best, not present or, at worst, able to covertly surveil. This of course tells a different story to other narratives of online activism, such as the #metoo, #slutwalk and Black Lives Matter movements (Freelon et al., 2016; Keller, et al., 2018), and further comparative study would be required to identify the significant differing factors, whether in: the hierarchy of the hyperlocal Page's organisation; the audience's desire for more banal, functional content at neighbourhood level; or the difference between Facebook and Twitter audiences (Kalsnes and Larsson, 2018). An additional point should be noted: whilst there are no studies or reports on the volume of local Facebook Pages and Groups in current use (either nationally or globally), it is this author's ongoing observation that *pluralist* (Ferree et all, 2002) Groups with perhaps less editorial control and oversight are becoming more normative, as opposed to the Pages used by the more established hyperlocal services I studied in 2013-16. Given that this article suggests that a public sphere benefits from some hierarchy and editorial guidance, as in the *elitist* or *deliberative* models, subsequent audience studies of such Facebook Groups would be welcome. While Gitlin's (2002: 170) public "sphericules" and subsequent discourses suggest a certain autonomy of spaces 'springing up' through shared interests, my study suggests that mediation (Dahlgren, 1995; Clayman, 2004) is often required to maintain focus and drive.

Such insight contributes to wider discourses of a culture of online participation that gives publics the impression of being involved, but without recognising that they could do more, for example, to achieve the levels of activism displayed by individuals such as the hyperlocal editors. This then raises the question: if audiences and communities do not pick up the mantle of direct activism and civic engagement, what efforts can or should be made to encourage this, and by whom? In this critique however, I do not ignore the value of local publics discussing community concerns, even if they are not directly challenging them. In those cases, the space is more clearly identified in Oldenburg's (2001) conceptualisation of the social third place than Habermas' public sphere; the audience clearly described that the functional

and social aspects of hyperlocal media helps them in everyday practice, and allows them to feel connected to their community.

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