The semi-professional journalist: An investigation into the practice and experiences of independent local news journalists.

Ross Hawkes

Birmingham City University

Abstract

This study examines how local journalists can be identified as semi-professionals in the independent, hyperlocal UK news sector by identifying and framing their labour against a backdrop of change within the professional local newspaper publishing industry. It addresses wider debates around the ways in which participants enter and exist in the liminal space between amateur and professionalism, and considers how their prior experience and knowledge shapes the way the semi-professional can be defined.

Academics have sought to chart the hyperlocal news sector and understand the relationship it has with the wider local news environment at a time when professional publishers have faced disruption due to the changing nature of audiences, long-established business models and the emergence of digital tools. Scholars have highlighted the financial uncertainty faced by independent publishers and the precarious nature of production and business models and practices used to deliver original content to local audiences. The hyperlocal sector has been associated as a potential route between amateur and professional journalism as part of efforts to address the potential loss of local news provision in communities, but I seek to explore whether an alternative semi-professional position allows former professional journalists to occupy the space in a different way.

This study explores both how independent publishers impact the local news landscape and also how the very same landscape impacts them as individuals. It does this by examining how semi-professional journalists identify their own personal lives, career ambitions and understanding of their labour in the wider context of local news discourse. The work draws on a range of methods including an autoethnographic account on my own position as a hyperlocal journalism practitioner; an analysis of a reflective diary charting a unique 12 month period as a semi-professional reporter during an accelerated period of change during the COVID-19 pandemic; and semi-structured interviews with others who are operating in the space between the professional and amateur.

I argue that the emergence of the semi-professional journalist can be framed through understanding of factors such as prior knowledge and experience in the field, while also recognising the need to consider more broadly the nuances within the increasingly liminal space of local news journalism in the independent sector. While regularly framed as hyperlocal, this position has emerged to create a sector of local reporting which is far more complex than a singular, catch-all terminology. I also suggest that the labour utilised to produce and sustain independent journalism in the hyperlocal sector by such individuals is not wholly motivated by the prospect of financial gain or progression into the professional sector, nor is it aligned initially to any sense of civic or community duty. Instead, I suggest that while such factors may be by-products and that the desire to recreate the experiences of their past, either as a participant in the production of or as a consumer of local news, is the central basis of the framework to define the semi-professional journalist. Because of this, more consideration needs to be given to the significance of the semi-professional hyperlocal journalist in sustaining the longer term provision of local news.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisory team for this thesis for their support and guidance throughout the process of developing this thesis. The invaluable contribution of Dr Oliver Carter in both setting me off on this journey at the very start and then taking me through each and every step with exceptional patience, unparalleled knowledge and hugely-appreciated support and good humour is something I shall be forever grateful for. The insights of Dr Dave Harte and Dr Jerome Turner have also allowed me to navigate the many challenges and moments of self-doubt with their expertise and support proving invaluable throughout. I also thank those colleagues at Birmingham City University and beyond who have given me confidence and support when I needed it most. Included in those are my former Staffordshire University colleague Professor Mick Temple, who first started to make this former 'hack' think about the work he was doing in a completely different way.

The contributions of those who agreed to be interviewed for this thesis are also recognised in enabling me to help shape both my own practice and the landscape we all exist within as reporters working to continue to deliver the vital news on which communities depend. By sharing their views and thoughts and giving up time - which I know only too well is a scarce commodity - they have all helped to add insight and help us to understand the local news landscape we all love so dearly so that future audiences may continue to be served trusted news and information from those who care as much about their communities as they do. I also give thanks to the many reporters who I have had the privilege to work alongside during my career as a journalist; all of whom have helped shape my career and ultimately this study in one way or another.

Much of the decision to embark on this thesis was down to the work I have carried out on *Lichfield Live* over the past 15 years or so and a desire to understand the reasoning for me doing it in the first place – and then continuing to do so ever since. Therefore, thanks also go to those who have facilitated my adventures in independent media, particularly Philip John who has overcome my many

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Introduction

This study examines the way semi-professional journalists working in the local news industry in the United Kingdom occupy a space in the local news ecosystem. Whereas past academic studies of local journalism production have focused on the production methods and business models applied to the space often referred to as hyperlocal, this thesis instead places a greater focus on the individual in order to understand how factors such as existing knowledge, personal circumstance, and the overall precarity of the landscape shapes the way in which they seek to occupy and transition through the space. It utilises a unique triangulated methodological approach, drawing upon autoethnography, the analysis of a personal research diary, and semi-structured interviews with practitioners who either work in or have worked in the hyperlocal sector in order to begin to identify how we might frame the semi-professional journalist as a figure within the broader local media ecosystem. It also allows for questions to be asked of the sustainability and future of the independent local news sector and those individuals within it.

I argue that the emergence of the semi-professional journalist can be framed through understanding of factors such as prior knowledge and experience. I also suggest that the labour which produces and sustains independent journalism in the hyperlocal sector by such individuals is not merely motivated by the prospect of financial gain or progression into the professional sector, nor is it aligned to any direct sense of civic or community duty. Instead, I suggest that the desire to recreate the experiences of their past, either as a participant in the production of or as a consumer of local news, is the central basis of the framework to define the semi-professional journalist. Because of this, considerations need to be given in Journalism Studies to how semi-professionals operating within this space may align with views around the role of hyperlocal publishers in the longer term provision of local news.

The basis for this study emerged from my own personal experience, having worked as a professional journalist for more than a decade in large regional and local newspapers during the advent of the digital era of news, something explored in depth in chapter five. Having seen first hand the challenges to long-established models and audience patterns, the move into becoming an amateur reporter and

starting my own blog, which later became hyperlocal news website *Lichfield Live*, offers a unique lived

experience perspective of how different factors can shape the journey into semi-professionalism. As I

became a scholar and entered the arena of academia – to become a "hackademic" (Harcup, 2012) who is

able to to fuse the two landscapes – my desire to understand and make sense of my own practice

alongside others framed within the hyperlocal terminology began to emerge. Why was I so invested in an

activity which offered little in terms of tangible rewards, particularly in a financial sense? Why was I

spending hours toiling over a publication which increasingly placed demands on me as an individual?

Having operated *Lichfield Live* for more than 15 years, many have asked me for advice on how to launch

and sustain a local news site; rarely have I been able to provide an answer that truly explains why

someone would want to devote so much time to something that offers more in terms of risk than it does

reward. The desire to answer these questions began to frame themselves in more academic terms and

brought me to question how my own experiences might offer insight for others who may occupy the space

between amateur and professionalism in local journalism.

Through my research, I recognise the need for greater nuance around the consideration of those

who exist beyond the fringes of established journalistic production. While this space has been

increasingly covered by the framing as hyperlocal, I argue that this increasingly liminal area of local news

reporting demonstrates the need for an increased focus on the actions of journalists who may or may not

be considered as professionals or amateurs. With existing examinations of the sector (Harris, 2012;

Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022) already highlighting the ways in which journalists might enter or exit the collective

space, it is clear that there is not a singular entry or exit point around which a definition of hyperlocal can

be constructed. Therefore, it is necessary when considering the continually evolving nature of local news

reporting to better understand the nuances within the liminal space covered by this thesis and indeed the

wider research community examining journalism at such a level.

The local news landscape has been a key point of focus for journalism scholars and industry

commentators seeking to make sense of the scale of change that has taken place across the industry in

recent decades due to the emergence of digital platforms creating disruption to traditional models and

formats (Grueskin et al, 2011; Hess, 2013; Pavlik, 2013; Harcup, 2016; Jenkins and Nielsen, 2018; Olsen,

2021). Considerations around this have allowed for insight into how local news is produced in the contemporary landscape as well as how it is sustained. Understanding this has a benefit not only to the journalism industry, but also to the communities who consume local content. The importance of local news provision in the United Kingdom was highlighted in the 2023 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee's *Sustainability in Local Journalism* report:

> Local journalism is vital to democracy, enabling people to hold local government and public services to account for decisions that can affect their everyday lives. It can also help to build community cohesion, support local economic activity, and provide an entry route into journalism as a profession.
>
> (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2023:3)

Despite this apparent importance of local news to society more generally, the report highlights the closure of hundreds of local newspapers in the past two decades and the collapse of revenues across the local news landscape. However, it also recognises the ways in which publishers are adapting alongside the growth of independent, hyperlocal journalism publications to ensure "the sector has a sustainable future if it is properly supported to adapt to the new market" (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2023:3). However, the precarity of the hyperlocal sector is clear to see with the evidence in the report from the Public Interest News Foundation's chief executive, who warned that current levels of turnover for such publications was not sustainable in the long term. Similar tales of challenge in hyperlocal field have been discussed ever since its emergence as a strand of local journalism (Kurpius et al, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Harte, Turner and Williams, 2016; Hess and Waller, 2016; Cook and Bakker, 2019; Harte, 2023), all of which bring questions around the reason why participants enter, exist in and eventually depart the hyperlocal sector if there is not a readily-available financial reward for their labour.

The emergence of the hyperlocal sector has led to many predictions on how the future of local journalism will be framed in the short, medium and long term (Ali, 2016; Hess and Waller, 2016; Everstijn, 2022; Neff and Pickard, 2023), while suggestions of alternative models of sustaining journalism or even producing it have been equally as plentiful (Phillips and Witschge, 2011; Franklin, 2014; Price, 2020). However, much of the focus on the structures and architecture surrounding the process of publication have meant that a key component of such publications has the potential to be overlooked. The narrative

around hyperlocal has also had a tendency to focus on the amateurs in the space (Paulussen and D'heer, 2013; Hujanen et al, 2019) rather than former professionals who may also exist within it and cannot be considered as amateurs. By examining the past experiences of those individuals who occupy what has become an increasingly diverse sector in terms of the hyperlocal journalism arena as the likes of Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) have begun to do – in a way which aligns to my own research – it is possible to consider how the landscape between amateur and professional is being occupied by what I term semi-professional journalists.

This thesis looks to explore a central research question:

How can journalists working in the UK hyperlocal sector be defined as semi-professionals?

From this, a series of sub-questions have also been formulated to offer insight and understanding about the factors involved in semi-professional journalism:

- *To what extent are hyperlocal journalists transitioning into, across, and out of the space between professionalism and amateurism?*
- *In what ways are the past experiences of semi-professional journalists shaping their present practice?*
- *What can a year long analysis of semi-professional journalism practice tell us about how journalists manage change?*
- *In what ways do the activities of semi-professional journalists impact on considerations around the future of local journalism in the UK?*

In order to answer these questions, I have drawn upon my own journey into and through different strands of journalism that have shaped my current position as an academic and semi-professional journalist working as the editor and publisher of a hyperlocal news website serving a small UK city. While Journalism Studies have often explored the hyperlocal space, the ability to take an autoethnographic approach and analyse reflections from the semi-professional journalist in action alongside others who occupy a similar position, my own study provides a triangulated approach created through my own position as an academic and a semi-professional journalist with a background as both an amateur and then professional reporter. The theoretical framework for examining the space between amateur and

professional is examined in chapters one, two and three, where I explore how journalism has evolved to create the space termed as hyperlocal, as well as examining how amateurs and professionals are framed in other sectors through concepts such as fandom. In chapter three, I identify how semi-professionalism is considered through different lenses such as prosumerism and co-creation, as well as considering how the space between amateurism and professionalism may be navigated by the individual. Chapter four sets out my methodological approach which is designed to focus the study on the individuals participating in the semi-professional space in order to answer the primary research question effectively. This offers an introduction into my rationale for utilising a personal approach through autoethnography and the analysis of the research diary, as well as providing consideration for testing some of these initial findings through the semi-structured interviews with other practitioners.

Although autoethnography is not a common approach in journalism, those who have adopted it have recognised it as a way to truly interrogate the role of experience (Brouwers, 2017) as part of a wider perspective on a particular situation or event. By taking such an approach in chapter five, I am able to consider how elements of past experience can help shape future practice, even where the activity being undertaken may differ in terms of format. It also allows for discussion around how semi-professionalism may begin to emerge from prior knowledge and how that may shape longevity, sustainability and liminality within the space between amateur and professional in a journalistic sense. I argue that while entry to semi-professional space does not necessarily feature gatekeeping in the way professional journalism often can, many of the traits required for longevity in the space are actually embedded in past experience and create a less-formal barrier to entry.

The ability to understand the role of the past allows for a wider examination of the present in chapter six, where I analyse a reflective diary kept during 12 months working on hyperlocal news site *Lichfield Live* in a period which coincided with major changes in the local news landscape in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through analysis of the diary it is possible to deliver key insights into the lived experience of a semi-professional journalist and identify how challenges beyond those posed by the oft-debated structures and business models can impact on the success or sustainability of the publication as well as the motivation and restrictions for the individual behind it. I suggest that the liminality of the

semi-professional space is not necessarily driven by factors such as financial reward or a desire to disrupt and challenge the established local media industry, but rather by the desires of the individual to participate in the production and retention of local journalism provision for more personal reasons. In chapter seven, I examine a series of seven semi-structured interviews carried out with those who are working in the space I term as semi-professional, those who are seeking to enter it and those who are no longer a part of it. In this chapter I argue that a more nuanced approach to framing journalists previously termed by the catch-all hyperlocal categorisation as semi-professionals instead offers a greater understanding of the precarity of the local news landscape than is afforded by the more structural examination of processes and business models that have been carried out by scholars previously.

The research concludes by suggesting that a view of hyperlocal publications as being restricted by financial or other reasons should actually be reconsidered by understanding the role of individual semi-professional journalists and their reasons for participation in the space in the first place. I suggest that the field of Journalism Studies around local journalism should now focus on how the past and present experience of individuals offers both opportunities and restrictions with regards to the long-term sustainability of the local news sector itself.

1 Journalism in the digital age

This is the first of three chapters that will examine the disruption to the local news sector in the UK by considering the work of scholars examining both the industry and the role of amateurs, professionals and semi-professionals within it. I will initially explore how the journalism landscape has been reconsidered by Journalism Studies academics through the introduction of digital tools and platforms to enable those beyond the professional realm to engage with the sector. In subsequent chapters I consider how scholars have sought to understand the differences between professionals and amateurs, before exploring the discourse around semi-professionalism as a concept and the ways in which considerations around theories such as co-creation and prosumerism can be viewed against a backdrop of the change experienced in the local news sector. In this chapter, I examine considerations around changing business models, production methods and discourse around news audiences to create an understanding of how the local news industry has evolved to its current state. This recognition of the way in which alternative ways of creating and delivering content in the local journalism sector is being developed draws on ideas around the rise of things such as citizen journalism and hyperlocal news provision. Such changes in the local news industry are worthy of consideration in order to understand how provision and ownership of news providers have created a framework within which non-professionals can participate in the sector, allowing for consideration in subsequent chapters of the way those individuals are being framed by scholars in work around the non-professional arena. I also explore debates surrounding the evolution of journalism as an industry and the production of local news in the digital era.

By examining the way in which both models and production methods have evolved to meet the changing demands of the digital generation, it allows for a consideration of the pathway which local journalism has taken to meet the demands of a changing audience, the opportunities generated by new tools, technologies and platforms, and recognise the ways in which these have led to an adaptation of methods utilised and individuals engaged in the sector. The transition from early-adoption bloggers

through to the hyperlocal publications and semi-professionals now occupying spaces beyond the traditional local newspaper publishing sector will also be examined in order to develop an understanding of the current discourse surrounding the space between the professional and the amateur sphere. The concept of the 'grey area' between both the professional and the amateur will be considered by identifying those who operate in this space in both media and other sectors in a bid to identify where there may be correlation between the way different participants are viewed elsewhere and how we may then consider them against a backdrop of local news.

1.1 Digital disruption to local news provision

The landscape of local news provision and indeed news provision more broadly in the UK and around the world has changed significantly from the days of mass consumption newspapers, with Guimera, Domingo and Williams (2017:4) highlighting "profound changes in local ecosystems" when seeking to explain the ways in which news provision in such an arena has evolved to meet the needs of a new, digital audience. Although consideration of digital tools may focus on the internet and social media arena as we currently know it, Carlson (2003) identifies how these winds of change are far from a modern phenomenon by pointing to Teledata (which would later become the BBC's Ceefax service) as offering an early glimpse into the disruption capable of being caused by an alternative way of delivering text-based news content to an audience.

Early scholarly debate on digital change in news provision centred around how tools and technologies might influence or enhance the practices and functions of journalism (Pavlik, 2000; Schultz, 2000). However, the role of digital platforms expands beyonds just the mechanisms of reporting, influencing both individuals, organisations and widely accepted norms, with Zelizer (2019) pointing to a need to break the connection between journalism and the arrival of different technologies. The concept of contextualised journalism is already evident via collaborative production through comments, social media and user-generated content (Thurman, 2008; Jenkins and Graves, 2019; Mesquita and de-Lima Santos,

2021). It is not just the concept of the hyperlocal, amateur or citizen journalist that has emerged as a result though. The scope and role of the traditional journalist working in local newsrooms has also developed in tandem with those in new digital formats. Although the introduction of internet tools and formats to newsrooms emerged towards the end of the 1990s and the new millennium, the impact they had were largely ignored by editors and proprietors initially at least (Picard, 2010). Indeed, Regan (2000) points to online journalism being a supplement to the more traditional print and broadcast formats. Even more recent studies have questioned how the relationship between the internet and the journalism industry will ultimately play out (Hirst, 2020; Perez-Seijo and Vicente, 2022). The negative connotations surrounding the early era of digital journalism is evident in the work of Kramer (2002) who questions whether the internet would be a weapon in the arsenal of journalists rather than a new standalone publishing platform capable of sustaining models of reporting. This was a debate Scott (2005) soon felt had been answered, suggesting that the rise of digital news has exceeded all expectations. The digital landscape has been one of evolution according to scholars such as Cottle (1999), Scott (2005), Nielsen (2015) and Franklin and Canter (2019) who have discussed how the rise in popularity of digital news formats may have heralded a new era of journalism where lower production costs also came with new challenges. Although the reduction in costs allowed for leaner publishing models (Harper, 1998), journalism was deemed to be an industry at risk of losing out on its traditional advertising revenue to the internet (Silk et al, 2001; Pavlik, 2003; Brock, 2013; Hardy, 2017; Olsen et al, 2021). This risk was all too real, particularly when compounded by other fundamental changes in the way journalistic content was being delivered to the audience as Scott (2005:94) points out:

> News on its own has never been profitable. Though revenue in the news business comes partly from subscription and sales, it comes predominantly from advertising dollars that are protected at all costs. Hence, news has traditionally functioned as a natural monopoly.
>
> (Scott, 2005:94)

Such a narrative often paints a bleak picture of local news, but the challenges facing the local and regional media companies are by no means a localised issue, with many countries in the western world are seeing a decline in traditional publishing (Nielsen, 2015). Such change has been felt firmest in those

nations with strong journalism markets (Elvestad and Blekesaune, 2008), and the challenge of negotiating the introduction of digital tools and platforms has not been without difficulty. Wadbring and Bergstrom (2015) claim that analogue business models in the media world are simply not adaptable to the modern, digital landscape. However, the picture across the media landscape is not necessarily an even one. Nygren et al (2017) suggest that while regional and local newspapers are seeing a decline in advertising and sales, the scale was not on the level of larger newspapers covering broader regions. However, the authors do offer a reason for this perceived robustness within the marketplace, suggesting that the ability to downsize and centralise has ensured that profit margins have been able to remain at a relatively sustainable level. While this particular study focuses on a Scandinavian research base and offers some crossover to the UK market, there is evidence that a continued decline in the traditional local newspaper business is being felt at a greater level in the UK (Fenton, 2011; Harte et al, 2018; Edge, 2022). The reasons for such a decline in the UK market are debated both within the academic and professional spheres. Cushion, Franklin and Court (2006) suggest a forced change in provision to more trivial coverage as a result of challenges to newsrooms and the sourcing of content, while O'Neill and O'Connor (2008) make the case that a reliance on a narrow field of sources has led to single source stories that failed to offer a critical voice, meaning the reality of a local media voice that potentially fails to fulfil the need to offer perspectives and fully represent the views of its audience. The reason behind such a switch likely lies in the move towards the digital arena, with the advertising market in this sector requiring visitor numbers in order to generate income, leading to a rise in elements such as clickbait (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020) in order to create an audience rather than serve an existing one.

While no singular reason behind local news decline in the UK or across the globe can be pointed to with any certainty, the argument that audience habits are changing is one that crops up throughout previous studies (Lee and Tandoc, 2017; Zamith, 2018; Diez-Gracia and Sanchez-Garcia, 2022), both in terms of the relationships between audiences and the journalists who serve them (Pavlik, 2004) and the habits of those audiences more broadly. Wadbring and Bergstrom (2015) point to the various factors of change coming together to create distinct media audiences across the generation gaps. The concept of

the "DotNet" generation (Wadbring and Bergstrom, 2015:181) and their alternative ways of selecting and consuming media show a clear turning point. The authors identified that while previous generations had stable viewing and consumption habits, the DotNets were continuing to follow a downward trend in regular newspaper readership, instead seeking out alternative sources away from the monopoly of the traditional, mainstream media. Tied into this change in media habits from this generation was a recognition of an increase in their engagement with the broader communities they occupy and a desire from those individuals to "reverse the generational slide into political indifference" (Zukin et al, 2006:8).

Geyskens et al (2002) identify a self-cannibalisation culture as websites spawned from print publications were pitched against each other in the wake of disruption to the sector in a bid to stave off the loss of the monopoly on local news provision. This has led to discussion and debate in both the academic community and industry circles since the turn of the millennium around the idea of a crisis looming for the future of newspapers (Franklin, 2008; Meyer, 2009; Curran, 2010; Thompson, 2013; Othman et al, 2019; Finneman et al 2023). As more and more publishers went online and a new breed of blogs and non-traditional outlets appeared in the same space, a key issue saw supply of news far outstrip demand (Small, 2000). While this sense of 'too much content, not enough readers' may seem an obvious conclusion to draw from the issues journalism has had with navigating the uncharted landscape of the internet and digital platforms, the actual causes of the perceived crisis in print journalism are still areas under debate. While technology and changing audience habits are oft-discussed (Pavilik, 2000; McCollough et al, 2017; Jenkins and Nielsen, 2018), Picard (2001) suggests the cause could in fact be related directly to models of journalistic production that are no longer fit for the contemporary marketplace. Other factors are also considered, such as changing commuter habits (Anderson et al, 2007), as well as the aforementioned reduction in readership among younger demographics such as DotNets (Wadbring and Bergstrom, 2015) also being cited as a factor in diminishing newspaper sales (Ahlers, 2006; Fenton, 2011).

These generational and technological developments have moved local journalism to a position where society's wider digital revolution has impacted on the structure and shape of newsrooms and news

organisations by changing perceived norms and challenging long-accepted models of production and business (Kirchhoff, 2009:5). This change is also deemed to have had wider political connotations as coverage of issues and topics has changed and evolved (Stepp, 1999; Compton and Benedetti, 2010; Ewens et al, 2021) to meet the demands of an ever-changing audience and the broader disruption of journalism production caused by technology. However, the business of news was not the only facet of the industry facing upheaval as a result of the changes to the publishing landscape. As Prensky (2001) identifies, reporters too were expected to make the transition from traditional print and broadcast journalists to become inhabitants of a landscape commandeered by a new digital audience. At the forefront of this issue was a cultural resistance to change in newsrooms (Killebrew, 2003, Lawson-Borders, 2003; Gade, 2004; Saltzis and Dickinson, 2008; Hofstetter and Schoenhagen, 2017; Bunce, 2019). This has often led to an exploration of the way in which digital mechanisms and opportunities are helping to solve some of the perceived crises in newspaper journalism or enhancing the decline in both sales and audiences for such outlets.

Scott (2005) paints a bleak picture of journalism as an industry, suggesting that many of the tools and technologies deemed to be heralding the arrival of a new golden era for news reporting had in fact actually conspired to make a difficult period of transition worse. Such a concept of 'friend becoming foe' is echoed when looking at the roles reporters play in a media arena where news is deemed to be democratised. Fenton (2010) acknowledges this very theme when examining how digital tools should be creating a more diverse media but are in fact having the opposite effect. This leads Curran (2010) to identify a brand of creative cannibalisation which sees reporters having to be more streamlined in their approach to production, meaning stories in need of greater breadth can often be jettisoned in favour of more speed-friendly and easily-recognised topics and issues. This echoes across into the broadcast arena too, where Higgins-Dobney and Sussman (2013:859) reveal the findings of their own exploration of the changing face of the television journalism arena: "Station managers are not willing to invest in time-consuming, well-investigated stories." Such a point demonstrates that while discussions around the rise of clickbait may be focused primarily on the reshaping of digital news models (Barnett and

Greenslade, 2020), the sector as a whole faces challenges in terms of funding in-depth, local content when a more cost-effective 'fast news' option able to be produced by fewer reporters (Ewens et al, 2022) is available in order to generate an audience.

It would be easy to assume from the discourse around the emerging digital formats that local news journalism is at a critical juncture whereby stories not deemed profitable or able to deliver a quick return are no longer afforded the coverage or prominence they may once have demanded due to advertising-funded news media being deemed to be on a downward spiral (Nerone, 2009). This is an issue that has been considered throughout the period of digital disruption of the local news industry (Hayes and Lawless, 2018; Ardia et al, 2020). There is also the increasingly explored concept of the news black hole created by such a move away from local reporting in the digital landscape, both in terms of overall content and localities. Williams, Harte and Turner (2015:12) discuss this notion of the "ever-widening gaps in UK local and regional news provision", while the study of such a news black hole by Howells (2015) makes a convincing case for the reason such media spaces begin to open up due to a perfect storm where the cost of producing local media had increased, leading to a decline in coverage but a rise in the price for readers. These almost accelerant factors being described as contributors to a decline in local media news coverage, content and publishing are, according to a blog post by media scholar Andy Williams (2017), being further complicated by the push for popularity driven by click-led editorial policies enforced as the digital advertising market impacts on newsroom decisions. This is not merely a scholarly viewpoint though, with industry figures such as former National World reporter Abi Whistance also citing the challenges of the modern local news environment in larger media groups (Sharman, 2023).

There is another avenue in the news production discussion that is also being explored around the way new digital technologies could bring about alternative journalism formats (Atton, 2002). Studies progressed this consideration of the post-traditional area of reporting by examining areas such as the social media-inspired networked journalism (Heinrich, 2011; Russell, 2013; Waisbord and Russell, 2020) and the alternative local news landscape (Peters and Broesma, 2013). These considerations of how

journalism may look in the digital space have focused on providers beyond the professional sphere such as citizen journalists (Thurman, 2008; Robinson and Deshano, 2011; Wall, 2015; Miller, 2019; Salaudeen, 2022) and hyperlocal journalism publishers (Glaser, 2010; Paulussen and D'heer, 2013; Nielsen, 2015; Hess and Waller, 2016; Harte, 2023). Even in areas such as citizen journalism, however, there are calls for a reconsideration of the terminology (Mutsvairo and Salgado, 2022) to reflect the pace of change in both the industry and scholarly thinking. Citizen journalism as a concept is not something directly correlated to the digital arena though, with Gillmor (2006) pointing to the roots of such activity being found in the 18th Century with the rise of affordable printing presses. It is notable that Witt (2004) points to the falling cost of technology allowing for a renaissance of citizen journalism in the digital era. The re-emergence of discourse around citizen journalism in the early 2000s is not only aligned with the influx of blogging tools and the rise of the internet and mobile coverage; a raft of open source and collaborative tools in this online space also helped would-be publishers to access material and develop knowledge in a way they may not have done in a pre-internet age (Bruns, 2010). However, the usage of such tools and technologies do not necessarily relate directly to the production of fully-fledged journalistic content. Some scholars have sought to frame citizen journalism as an activity more concerned with participation through things such as the submission of elements of content like photographs as user generated content (Jurrat, 2011; Nah et al, 2015; Thomas et al, 2019). Indeed, Glaser (2006) points to the assassination of John F Kennedy and the police brutality of Rodney King in the United States as instances where the public turned news provider by capturing the footage which told the story of the event in a way the words of a journalist alone could not. This concept of the non-journalist shaping the reporting of events and news more generally has gathered pace ever since. Allan (2015) uses the London Bombings in 2005 as an example of the way the modern smartphone has put citizens at the heart of storytelling.

Others have sought to reconsider the framing of such reporting though, with Kaufhold et al (2010) highlighting the inconsistencies around citizen reporting, suggesting that the terminology covers everything from taking pictures, writing stories or even commenting on articles. As Tilley and Cokley

(2008) point out, the original notion of the citizen reporter role as one providing on the spot details and information for desk-bound professional reporters to craft into polished journalistic packages and stories, soon evolved to create not only alternative methods of production but also alternative sources of news. Weeks, Adrevol-Abreu and de Zuniga (2017) identify how the rise of citizen journalism initiatives and work produced by those not defined as professional reporters coincides with a period where concerns were being raised around trust and perceived bias of traditional, mainstream media outlets. While this may not be a sole factor in the emergence of publishers in the space beyond professional journalism, it does offer some context around which to consider how and why audiences may have been keen to seek out new sources of news and create them where they did not exist.

Writing in an online blog post, Jay Rosen (2008) attempts to define citizen reporting as "when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism". Although Rosen's definition is constructed to define one element of the evolving journalism landscape, it highlights the crossover of ideas and concepts that have allowed other areas of reporting, such as hyperlocal to evolve. Often the literature surrounding both citizen and hyperlocal journalism is intertwined with no clear delineation between the two. However, Harte et al (2018) make a case that hyperlocal has now become a fully formed area of the media landscape in itself meaning it must also be considered when seeking to understand the relationship between the digital era, journalism and the ways in which non-professional participants are engaging with the sector. It is clear that digital disruption carried over to the debates around such activities. As this section of the chapter demonstrates, while some scholars pointed to the opportunities created by new methods of publishing, others were keen to sound a warning regarding the disruption this could cause to established norms within the local news sector. The range of terminologies applied, be it citizen journalism or networked journalism, demonstrated that the space was opening up for new participants in news to begin to operate. These included hyperlocal news outlets, which are discussed in the next section of this chapter, offering an alternative in a range of ways from the format through to the reporters delivering the news to their audiences.

1.2 Hyperlocal: A new format for local journalism?

Any rise in alternative providers of media other than the traditional, large-scale newspaper publishing groups leads to the discussions and debates over the potential loss of the monopoly around news and journalistic content mentioned earlier or when considering the democratisation of news (Flew, 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle, 2010; Jonsson and Ornebring, 2011). It is an interesting area of debate worthy of further exploration when examining the role non-professional journalists may or may not play in the modern media landscape. Any potential demise of traditional news providers and platforms is not merely being examined as an 'in memoriam' section in the wide repertoire of texts covering the journalism industry. Instead, scholars are looking beyond such outlets to see where an evolved form of reporting may go next, with Shirky (2009) suggesting that journalism's future is merely different rather than doomed, with alternative providers ready to step into the gaps left by an industry of change. However, others suggest that outlets focused primarily on localised coverage should not merely be viewed through the prism of replacing existing outlets, instead identifying them as a more marginalised method of media production (Hess and Waller, 2016).

The definition of hyperlocal journalism itself is something that has been the subject of debate within the Journalism Studies community. A widely accepted viewpoint is that of Metzgar et al (2011: 774) who describe such activities as "geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news reporting organisations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement". Radcliffe (2015) accepts the perspective of the hyperlocal sector being made up of outlets covering a locale which could even be as small as a postcode area. However, he also broadens the other aspects by suggesting that "hyperlocal and community content can be found on dedicated websites, in local print publications and across social networks and audio services". This challenge to aspects of the definition and the framing of hyperlocal news itself evidences that there is scope to further consider and enhance understanding of the way in which we may seek to understand and further nuance the sector in the way Freeman (2020) has by considering how distance between

producer and audience may impact on the way content is created, delivered and consumed. While there may be differences emerging in how hyperlocal is defined as knowledge develops (Negreira-Rey and Lopez-Garcia, 2021), there is a clear recognition that whether it be due to platforms or production methods, an emerging group of publishers and journalists have arrived within the local news sector and should not be regarded as merely a passing development within reporting, and instead thought of more as "a potential amelioration of the drastic problem of declining professional regional and local news media" (Beckett, 2010:11). The non-prescriptive nature of this type of journalism production is further debated by Bruns et al (2012:1) who point to hyperlocal outlets helping to create an "alternative public sphere". However, Turner (2021) reflects on the audience experience of alternative public spheres by highlighting the way in which people are more likely to become lost in a way that may not necessarily be the case in more mainstream media activity. It is interesting to see that Turner's exploration of the subject matter is viewed via the lens of Facebook pages, further stretching the aforementioned definition of this emerging sector. This in itself raises points for discussion on whether the liminality of the space considered to be hyperlocal requires greater nuance in order to fully understand it by recognising the past and present activities of those occupying the increasingly liminal space as examined by the work on origin stories by Wahl-Jorgensen (2022).

The debate around the rise of hyperlocal (Radcliffe, 2005; Paulussen and D'heer, 2013; Nielsen, 2015; Hess and Waller, 2019; Clark, 2023) is an area that has already been explored in relative depth, but there are still questions to be answered around the shape and sustainability of such models in the longer term. Harte et al (2018) question how, several years since the emergence and attempted categorisation of hyperlocal journalism, such efforts are sustained in the long term, despite the rise and formalisation of such projects. This observation follows regular research into the shaping and scale of this independent mode of journalism production (Thurman et al, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012; Williams et al, 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021), particularly in relation to its size, audience and growth, as well as attempting to put a value, both monetary and social, on these hyperlocal media operations. Many of these studies have pointed to a sustained growth in both the core number of sites operating and the overall audience figures

they achieve, but continue to have areas of debate about the financial sustainability of such work. Kurpius et al (2010) suggest a subsidy-funded model is often utilised more effectively than traditional advertising-driven modes of funding local news reporting. While they also recognise the challenges this poses, they conclude that the challenge of persuading grant-issuing bodies and other funding portals is no greater than the effort required to convince businesses to take out advertising in the mode often used by more traditional outlets. Even broader, alternative methods of funding hyperlocal publishing may not always be able to be considered as Harte (2016:45) points out in his case study of the *Tyburn Mail* in Birmingham. Despite having a relatively established, albeit fragile, operation this particular publication had, Harte claims it had "not quite built up the level of trust where funding through citizen patronage or crowd-funding are likely options" (the publication closed in 2018). The challenges of independent journalists funding their work are clear when considering the limitations of those operating within a sector where digital has often equated to free in the eyes of the audience. There are, however, publications such as The Bristol Cable who have managed to create a seemingly financially sustainable publication through the use of a co-operative model (Konow-Lund, 2020) in a way that the *Tyburn Mail* had not.

By exploring studies into hyperlocal mentioned throughout this chapter, there is a consideration that growth in terms of the number of outlets is not being hampered by the prospect of a perceived lack of financial gain or longer-term sustainability, either for the individual or the relatively conceptual organisations they exist within. This sense of scale and output with regards to hyperlocal outlets is regularly explored as a way of justifying the presence of such enterprises in the complex and troubled journalistic landscape (Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). However, the definition of those behind such endeavours and the driving forces which develop them is still somewhat uncertain. This is where the concept of the citizen journalist and hyperlocal media begin to intertwine. As mentioned in section 1.1, Kaufhold et al (2010) highlight the inconsistencies around citizen reporting. In the same way as the debate around hyperlocal publishing raises questions around accepted norms of professional journalism production, Parr (2005) discusses how the rise of the citizen journalist had seen the role of gatekeeper removed from such traditional outlets and publishers. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the role change

plays in positioning both the traditional and emergent journalism framework is at the heart of much of the discussion. However, the focus can often be found on either side of a centre ground between the two. For example, McNair (2012) warns of the potential dangers facing professional journalists should they see the removal of their role as trusted guides to news; a point developed further by who suggest we are already at a stage where that trust has diminished in those considered to be mainstream media reporters due to concerns over ownership and the impact on neutrality this may bring (Ojala, 2021).

Anderson (2008) makes clear the challenge facing journalists at the birth of the digital publishing age by suggesting that everyone from bloggers to citizens are questioning the entire suggestion of journalistic expertise completely. Such a view of the way in which professional journalists face challenges to their authority by external players is evidenced by the suggestion that there is an uneasy interplay between the new collaborative digital landscape and the role of guardians of news previously occupied by professional reporters (Hujanen, 2018). The apparent 'them and us' relationship between traditional media and citizen journalists is also examined by those who argue that blogs are challenging more traditional journalistic publishers from the outside (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008). However, the drawing of a front line in the battle for local journalism and audiences is not a one-sided affair. The creation of the Independent Community News Network in the UK in 2017 saw a coming together of independent and hyperlocal publishers with much made of the need to represent the views of such outlets in the evolving media landscape and the increasingly competitive marketplace. A look at the terminology used suggests one of conflict, however, with a press release regarding the creation of the organisation outlining a need to "fight for better opportunities" (ICNN, 2017) highlighting that there may still be a disparity between the perceptions of the new breed of publishers and their more established media brethren in the eyes of policy-makers and other stakeholders.

The creation of a body such as the ICNN for publishers points to a more formalised approach and a move away from the amateur connotations of the citizen journalist and blogger and into a new and more structured section of the media landscape, but still beyond the professional boundaries. This is supported by an ICNN survey that saw 88% of respondents suggesting that a recognised National Union of

Journalists press card would be of value to their work and add legitimacy (ICNN, 2017). However, the results also showed the current state of transition facing such publishers, with less than half of respondents being eligible for one. The suggestion that the results point towards a move away from what has previously been categorised as an amateur endeavour in the terminology of citizen journalism is echoed by an examination of the development of citizen and hyperlocal journalism in Australia (Bruns et al, 2017), which identified that the latter was helping to extend and deepen some of the debates around the shape, focus, role and credibility of the former. The authors identify with the views of industry commentator Dan Gillmor (2006) of the changing face of expertise in the journalism sector; namely that readers were beginning to challenge the role of professional experts in the political arena. Examples from Australia fly against the notion that "citizen journalists are often depicted as amateurs attempting to do the work of professionals" (Bruns et al, 2008:3). This statement points to one of the key interventions in the debate around the role of citizen reporters within the broader media sphere. Harte (2017: 51) describes a tension around the way in which members of the public who are given a platform and actively engage with a publishing enablement through technological means are perceived by the established order of traditional media outlets, something borne out in the aforementioned comments of the Independent Community News Network. The point is also made by Hess and Waller (2016:195) who suggest the dominant discourse around the role of this emergent sector of local journalism "effectively consigns hyperlocal news to the growing gap between the realities of journalism and its official presentation of itself". Such views speak to the tension which can be considered to exist between hyperlocals and those professional outlets seeking to retain the marketplace they have dominated for so long. It also suggests that such friction may not solely be related to a generational shift in the use of platforms and new technology.

If we are to consider hyperlocal as a branch of journalism native to the internet and the opportunity for people to become publishers in an affordable and achievable way, then it would not address the changes already seen within the sector which have seen some publishers focus on a printed product. Firmstone (2016) identified that hyperlocal producers were operating in the digital and local

magazine sphere, while Barnes et al (2022) point to the rise of independent print publications in the wake

of closures by large media groups due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such studies question the view of

local news reportage in the hyperlocal and independent sector as a digital-only activity. This leads to

questions around the accepted definitions that have emerged of this strand of journalistic practice as

outlined earlier in this chapter. It is notable, however, that there are greater echoes in the terminology

applied to community newspapers than their digital counterparts, with Lewis et al (2010) opting to classify

them as serving a defined geographic readership within a physical location. One potential challenge in

seeking to understand hyperlocal as both a digital and print endeavour, however, is that the former

platform has the ability to connect audiences and publishers beyond traditional geographic boundaries.

There is some suggestion that the way in which hyperlocal publishers are able to connect local

communities through such a technology can be classified as a form of glocalisation (Baines, 2010).

However, some hyperlocal producers, such as Phillip John, questioned the context of such reporting as a

primarily geographical and digital in production activity, by suggesting the output could vary with social

activism and local influence being by-products of the genre (John, 2011) more broadly.

It is evident that hyperlocal may have begun as a way to categorise a small branch of new

journalism production to emerge alongside the advent of increased accessibility to digital publishing tools.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that hyperlocal has evolved at pace and has now encompassed more than

just someone starting a Facebook page for their area or running a blog with snippets of local information.

Therefore, in the next section I will begin to explore how the hyperlocal landscape is emerging and

evolving to raise questions around its own development and place in the broader local news ecosystem.

1.3 Examining hyperlocal

Part of the problem with developing a catch-all terminology for hyperlocal appears to be in characterising

what may well be different avenues within a wider field. For example, the suggestion is made that there

are 11 layers within citizen journalism alone (Outing, 2005), while a study by Williams, Harte and Turner

(2014) recognises a number of different pathways within the hyperlocal journalism strand. The sense of uncertainty when it comes to definition has led some to question whether the term has become a shorthand for a portion of the media which is not fully understood. Although the definition by Metzgar et al. (2011) of hyperlocal as being digital production to fill a gap in coverage is often cited within studies around the hyperlocal landscape, it is not the definitive descriptor by any means. Jim Brady, former CEO of the Washington Post who then went on to become one of the founders of American hyperlocal site *BillyPenn,* suggested in 2014 that hyperlocal's lack of definition meant the term itself was in danger of becoming redundant, saying "hyperlocal is now as useless as 'convergence' in that it's used so broadly as to be meaningless" (Brady, 2014). This is a view that echoes the perspective that there is a continued state of flux around the media landscape that is not defined by professional norms (Price, 2010). The sense that hyperlocal may already have grown beyond its initial descriptive boundaries is interesting given the relative youthfulness of this type of journalism. A study by Schafer (2007) of 500 citizen-led American sites began to identify an already-diverse range of outlets in terms of their shapes and distinguishing structural features. This has since been followed by a number of similar studies exploring the UK market (Thurman, Pascal and Bradshaw, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012; Williams, Harte and Turner, 2014; Arnold, 2019; Harte, 2023) which paid particular attention to the size, audience and growth potential. Many of these studies have pointed to a sustained rise in both the core number of sites and the overall audience figures.

While many studies have explored the sector generally, the focus on the individuals engaged in the hyperlocal landscape has been somewhat overlooked. Some have examined the role of the individual in terms of the ways in which journalists are having to diversify their skillset (Chadha, 2016) or by examining their origins (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022), but there is a clear need to further understand the positioning and drivers of those who provide the labour for this sector of the local news landscape. Examination by Tenor (2018) suggests the hyperlocal sector is one of diversity, but there is scope for a more bottom up rather than top down approach to understanding how that diverse range of individuals perceive their labour in terms of their personal progression rather than as part of a broader narrative on the industry itself. Given the often small-scale and independent nature of hyperlocal endeavours, defining

what is meant by success or failure in terms of the individual is not a simple task when explored beyond

the accepted norms of the terms in a traditional commercial sense. Tenor's report also examines how

hyperlocal publishers identify non-revenue methods of sustaining such outlets through their own labour,

but raises the question of whether community publishers can continue to survive without a focus on the

commercial side of the news production business, something highlighted through the Department for

Media, Culture and Sport report discussed in the introduction to this thesis. If the discussion around the

overall picture of hyperlocal is not as defined as it may have previously been thought and remains an

undefined one in terms of both current existence and future direction even within its own ecosystem

(Cook et al, 2016), then the understanding of the individuals behind the projects is even more fractured

and gives rise to my own work seeking to recognise the way in which the labour of hyperlocal is tied into

the success or failure of such publications and the personal positions of those engaged in such practices.

By seeking to clarify nuances within the terminology such as citizen journalist and hyperlocal media it is

possible to better understand the ways in which we might define those operating beyond the boundaries

of professional publications as semi-professionals, particularly in light of some of the aforementioned

debates around these areas.

There is also the opportunity to understand how participants in the hyperlocal and

semi-professional arena may be contributing to the development of the wider journalism sector as well,

given Shaw (2007) highlights that hyperlocal publishers can be among the most innovative and can often

outshine their more established media counterparts when it comes to the use of video and other new

media platforms. This view is supported by Jati (2022) who identifies the way in which hyperlocal had

taken community media from a solution-based necessity to one which is innovation-focused by giving

participants a space they own and mould where they were not previously afforded it by mainstream media

publications. However, others (van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014) suggest the complex and often

unstructured nature of hyperlocal outlets, particularly those where they are run by an individual as a

one-person enterprise can often lack the commodities required to create genuine disruption to normative

production or distribution methods:

On the one hand, a true entrepreneurial spirit is evident which seizes opportunities

wherever they are, sometimes half-heartedly but mostly with initiative and enthusiasm. On the other hand, we see as a permanent underperformance; sites with no contact information, sites with advertisements but no information about how to place them, sites with few or no advertisements.

(van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014:306)

This view suggests that the ability to exploit opportunities presented by affordable technologies and platforms are not always determined by the models applied to production or the business of content creation, but more to the individuals who often underpin the publications. Therefore it is important to consider how we best contextualise those participants termed as hyperlocal reporters to understand if they are amateur citizen journalists, semi-professional participants or those transiting the space either towards or away from either the amateur, the professional or the existing associated definitions. These are areas I explore in more depth in chapter two. Although the idea of the citizen journalist and the hyperlocal publisher have been widely recognised, as outlined previously in this chapter, there are still question marks around the idea of a seamless transition between citizen journalist and hyperlocal reporter. As Beckett (2010) points out, not many citizens want to be journalists for much of their time. This concept is explored in the work of Williams et al (2014) who identify that more than a fifth of those they surveyed worked more than 31 hours a week on their hyperlocal endeavours. The authors identify that figure as being the equivalent of the working week, but this can often be unsustainable. A statement on the demise of hyperlocal site Love Wapping highlights some of the pressures facing hyperlocal publishers:

Bottom line is that this site, like its illustrious forerunner What's in Wapping and most other hyperlocal sites across the UK, is unfunded. Until our dedicated research team can work out how to provide local news to local people without becoming poor in the process it will remain closed.

(Love Wapping, 2016)

Such an acknowledgement of work being carried out without financial reward is at the crux of many of the discussions around hyperlocal journalism, such as a NESTA report (Radcliffe, 2015:33) that admits the monetary value of the advertising spend and volunteer time committed to such reporting was an unknown

figure. There is some recognition from high profile figures such as a former BBC controller of the English Regions of the need to support hyperlocal endeavours (Holdsworth, 2015) due to the role they play in connecting with audiences. More recently, Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) has discussed the ways in which entrepreneurs are driven by a range of factors, including those which are commercially-focused and those which are more closely aligned to personal goals. The latter of these would suggest that financial rewards are not a necessary element for some of those working in the hyperlocal sector, therefore the question of why people engage in it in the first place is an intriguing one that is worthy of further examination. Bruns (2008) suggests the idea of the 'prosumer' may offer some clues as to why individuals exist in this media space, even if it does not directly address the way journalism has developed within it. This is a point I will explore further in chapter three, but an examination of this merger between consumer and producer points to a number of reasons why such work exists, including the concept of "open participation and communal evaluation" (Bruns and Schmidt, 2011:6), which speaks to the idea of community put forward by hyperlocal producers and scholars alike (Summerfield, 2014; Durrant, 2014; Kim et al, 2022).

The entry of individuals into the hyperlocal sector through the vehicle of publications has been the subject of much scrutiny (Shirky, 2009; Radcliffe, 2012; Williams, Harte and Turner, 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022) in relation to the vehicle used and the market conditions. Chadha (2015) suggests the decision by traditional media publishers to pull back the level of local coverage should be viewed as one of the primary factors leading to the growth of a hyperlocal project and therefore the decision of an individual to participate in the sector. While this may be considered part of the core foundation of the entire hyperlocal movement there are also challenges to the assumption that such producers are merely feeding off the discarded leftovers deemed unprofitable by the larger news publishers and producers. Radcliffe (2015) warns that the contribution hyperlocal producers make to the UK's media landscape should not be overlooked. This echoes the views of others (Kurpius et al, 2010; Carson et al, 2016; Karlsson and Rowe, 2019; Linden et al, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022), who recognise that the reliability of hyperlocal sites cannot be guaranteed and that many funding challenges continue to lie ahead, but who also identify the role such sites play in filling gaps in public affairs reporting.

The concept of hyperlocal outlets reporting in areas often associated with the traditional local newspaper industry, particularly in relation to the coverage of public affairs, supports the view of that there is a blurring of the lines when it comes to defining the boundaries of citizen journalism and hyperlocal reporting (Lasica, 2003; Blaagaard, 2013; Canter, 2013; Darbo and Skjerdal, 2019; Maares and Hanusch, 2022). However, a study by Kaufhold, Valenzuela and de Zuniga (2010) suggests that while citizen journalism had a role to play in political discourse and had an overall positive impact on the media spectrum, those who consumed professional journalism were more likely to have a higher level of political knowledge. When considered alongside the views of those examining the DotNet generation and their move towards becoming an audience more engaged with community causes and activism (Zukin et al, 2016), the potential for a 'perfect storm' of conditions for emerging media producers to flourish via an engaged audience and publishers driven by alternative motives to those that are merely financial becomes evident. The retraction of traditional publishers from local areas and the accessibility of publishing tools through new digital platforms allows for the creation of what Shirky (2009) hyperbolically describes in a blog post as providing a fertile ground for allowing "1,000 flowers to bloom to replace newspapers". However, there are some challenges to the concept that the traditional press decline has been the direct cause of the rise of the new wave of journalistic producers. Although Williams (2016) suggests the retraction from local news markets has created a marketplace for the former, this view is at odds with the view of Bruns (2009), who says that a study of German community journalism outlets shows that partnership with traditional publishers rather than working against them is actually one of the core reasons for its success. The study of outlets by Bruns shows that the development of journalism from sources that are not from a purely professional background does not necessarily make them a completely amateur endeavour, particularly in the eyes of the audience; something which is also evident in the UK media landscape.

In 2009, the Northcliffe newspaper group had experimented with hyperlocal publishing through its Local People franchise. The websites were initially launched as a pilot (Oliver, 2009) with the publisher targeting smaller towns without a dedicated traditional news outlet. The project quickly evolved, although

within three years it had been restructured with some freelance publisher roles being removed and other sites being offered out as franchise opportunities. Thurman et al (2011) examine the rise and eventual fall of Local People and conclude that the success of hyperlocal is not reliant on purely journalistic endeavours alone, with elements such as community management deemed to be key factors. The comparison within this study suggests that hyperlocal sites with a more distinct link to their communities often fared better than similar outlets offered up by major mainstream media players; something echoed in the work Karlsson and Rowe (2019) who discuss how community news can be retained by alternative participants when mainstream outlets opt to centralise or retreat from a local community. The view is also offered by Baines (2012), who identifies the correlation between corporate and community drivers in such comparative examinations of hyperlocal publishing on an amateur and professional level. The UK market is not alone in this; John et al (2014) point to the concept of the giant Patch.com hyperlocal network's decline as being down to a failure to understand the forces at play within the communities being served.

Although there is recognition that the audience is there for independent hyperlocal publishers to potentially thrive (Radcliffe, 2015; Tenor, 2019; Freeman, 2020), earlier work by Kaye and Quinn (2010:45) suggest that the editorial success of hyperlocal ventures is not being matched in terms of commercialisation. Harte et al (2018:187) agree, concluding that questions still remain over the ability of these publishers to either exploit this into sustainable business models or fill perceived democratic deficits left by a reduction in traditional reporting outlets. Further weight is added to the suggestion that hyperlocal publishers cannot necessarily continue to be immune to the challenges facing the industry more broadly with the claim that there is not a "silver bullet solution" to hyperlocal success (Tenor, 2018:12). Tenor's work also recognises that while such publishers may not have the overheads of their more traditional brethren, they face many of the same challenges on a comparative scale.

Through these discussions and debates around citizen journalism and hyperlocal reporting, the question of sustainability is a recurrent theme and it continues to be at the heart of both scholarly writing and industry commentary on the subject. Newspaper editor Marc Reeves argued in 2012 that hyperlocal outlets lacked the traditional media structure required to succeed. Scholars exploring the sector in the

early 2010s had identified some of the conflict existing between those who sat on either side of the local news divide separating professional outlets and their hyperlocal counterparts. Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa (2010) questioned the value of commentary on citizen journalism (and therefore hyperlocal journalists) from those who are based in traditional reporting backgrounds, suggesting that whatever the terminology, such media has a dismissive approach to non-professional and semi-professional counterparts, with editors dismissing the use of their content due to potential pitfalls in their work and a wider cultural attitude towards people outside of the traditional journalism circle. Bruns, Wilson and Saunders (2008) also make the clear point that citizen and non-professional journalism faces a continuing criticism regarding its ability to carry out staples of the traditional professional reporter's role, such as first-hand coverage and investigative, in-depth pieces, although this is challenged by Radcliffe (2015) who found that almost half of UK hyperlocal projects had engaged in investigative reporting in the two years prior to his report.

An examination of views around the roles of citizen reporters (Blaagaard, 2013) found that while there was recognised journalistic practice in the activities being carried out by amateurs, it could not be classified as real journalism. This perception of the non-professional journalist as seemingly inferior to their established counterparts in print, television and radio lends itself to the views of hyperlocal producer Philip John (2011), who warns many of the terms associated with non-professional journalism (and often applied to hyperlocal and semi-professional reporters by proxy), such as blogger or hobby journalist are being used as dismissive phrases by mainstream media to indicate amateurism and a perceived lack of quality due to the work not being created by a professional reporter. The debate on the definition of journalists who may not conform to professional norms within the broader journalism industry is further complicated by the views of Goode (2009:1291) who examines how the internet and digital tools have merely shifted the entry points at which citizens can engage in the multi-layered news production process.

A study by Paulussen and D'heer (2013) makes the case that there is a clear dividing line between professional and non-professional publishers, suggesting that so-called 'hard' news such as crime is still the primary domain of traditional outlets while community publishers are now colonising 'soft'

news about daily life within the locality of the publication. Although recognising that hyperlocal publishers have begun to bridge the reporting gap that may have existed at the time of Paulussen and D'heer's examination of the sector, the report by Tenor (2018) suggests that a divide may still exist, pointing to the bureaucratic nature of the BBC-funded Local Democracy reporting scheme. Tenor anticipated that the structure of the scheme, whereby reporters were hosted by other outlets, would see the majority of funding going to the big, traditional publishers rather than those independent outlets categorised as non-professional. However, the 2023 Department for Culture, Media and Sport report into the sustainability of local journalism found that more publishers were now having access to services such as the Local Democracy Reporter Scheme and the BBC Shared Data Unit thus opening them up to a greater level of content usually associated with the professional journalism sector. This move towards consideration of hyperlocal as a more accepted element of the local news ecosystem by audiences, journalists and policymakers, suggests that the mid-2010s predictions of such sites as short term solutions without the robustness of more established models of news provision were wide of the mark. Cook and Bakker (2019) highlight this progression, suggesting that hyperlocal outlets are increasingly able to diversify their income streams in order to generate a sustainable income to underpin their work.

1.4 Conclusion

While much of the work identified within this chapter reflects on the past of hyperlocal journalism in an attempt to understand the present, the future is also explored by scholars and industry commentators (Mair, Keeble and Fowler, 2013; Radcliffe, 2014; Albeanu, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2020), particularly in relation to the long-term vision of such publications. These often outline how the facets of success and sustainability are intertwined, particularly in the evolving word of digital and hyperlocal journalism. Whereas print journalism has sales and circulation to quantify success and broadcast is able to rely on audience figures, the move to digital has often seen things such as page impressions and unique users used to create a similar gauge or metric of success. However, as Graves (2010) highlights,

internet audiences can be manipulated depending on the methodology used, providing a particular challenge for smaller, online-only publications. This leaves an opportunity to explore how hyperlocal producers in the chosen region of study are considering the concepts of success and sustainability on a personal rather than publication level. Such examination will help to understand how the individual and organisation set their own goals and targets in the short and long term. The question of whether the need of the outlet or the individual is the greater driving force in terms of longevity becomes particularly pertinent when considering the work of Leckner et al (2019) who make the case that despite an economic viability, hyperlocals in a Swedish study had publishing patterns and journalistic output was of a level that they should not be seen as a substitute for traditional, professional publishers. However, the authors also make clear that there is still a valuable role for hyperlocal to play in the media landscape as well as in the world of those behind such endeavours.

The role of the individual is a point which is often overlooked in the debates around hyperlocal and citizen journalism, as outlined throughout this chapter, with markets, formats and models at the heart of many debates. However, others draw comparisons not with journalism itself, but with other parts of the creative sector:

> In this enterprising economy, entrepreneurial journalists increasingly start their own companies - somewhat similar to their colleagues elsewhere in the creative sector starting advertising agencies or independent record labels.
>
> (Deuze and Witschge, 2017:11)

In the same way as small, sometimes solo, enterprises open in alternative areas of the creative economy, Deuze and Witschge's perspective on the role of the start-up journalist as an almost artisan rather than a professional or amateur is one that has the potential to pose as many questions as it may even answer in terms of plotting creators of non-traditional journalism on the map between professionalism and amateurism. The assumption that hyperlocal producers are all striving to become "professional media actors" (Nilsson, Stur and Jangdal, 2017:11) is an area worthy of further research and examination in order to fully understand if this is the ultimate goal or not for those participants in the sector. For example,

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Jerome Turner (2013) writes in a blog post that digital labour means that some hyperlocal producers may see their work as a hobby or project, a point that is similarly made by Williams et al (2015) who identify a diversity of hyperlocal setups, from those who are seeking to create models and develop and entrepreneurial future through to those who have a more amateur approach to their work. The latter of this grouping opens the discussion not only on topics such as sustainability, but also around personal longevity. There is also a consideration to be given on the role of participants in the hyperlocal sector. Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) identified in a series of interviews with those in the sector that around 60% of them had some form of professional background, while 19% had studied a journalism or media-related degree:

> They were frustrated with the lack of viable jobs and/or increasingly difficult working conditions in the mainstream news industry. The data thus suggests that while local journalism entrepreneurs have been shaped by conventional professional norms, they also embody a distinctive role conception which is tied to their attachment to the community.
>
> (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022:6)

Such a point questions the links between citizen journalism and hyperlocal reporters as being natural evolution from one position to the other. Wahl-Jorgensen's findings suggest not a bottom-up construction of a new sector within the local news arena, but rather an extension of the ways in which professional journalists are seeking to adapt to changing employment conditions and opportunities. This raises questions around the positioning of those individuals if they have been professionals but are no longer aligned to an outlet considered to have a professional status. The debates around journalism as a profession through the eyes of those who occupy or seek to occupy a position within it are not new, however. A study involving high school students by Kimbal and Lubell (1960) introduced the notion of journalism as a hobby or secondary activity rather than a full-time career path. This concept of secondary or alternate profession offers some opportunity for further exploration through the hyperlocal lens in order to understand further the way in which such publishers and individual content creators are seeking to direct their own routes through the media landscape and may be classified as semi-professionals.

Williams, Harte and Turner (2014) suggest that a majority of publishers from this non-traditional area of the media landscape are also non-professional and are therefore at the mercy of factors such as lifestyle changes. Former hyperlocal publisher Richard Jones (2012) echoes this view in a blog post for the BBC where he identifies the value of hyperlocal news production for the producer and the audience, but raises a clear question over the long-term opportunity for professional-standard news production. However, this does not address those who are not transitory and are attempting to develop their hyperlocal publishing as a core or semi-core activity to their daily lives, while also not fully exploring those who are looking to make a journey towards a more professional journalism existence in terms of their careers. The *Hyperlocal News - After the Hype* report seeks to confirm this stance of community publishing in this format being unable to echo other industries in creating a model that can be sustained through voluntary labour, claiming it to be a "fragile solution" to the ongoing challenges of sustainable journalism in a digital area (Tenor, 2018:6). However, given much of the literature, including the *Hyperlocal News - After the Hyper* report, suggests hyperlocal publishing is not showing signs of disappearing or even retreating into a niche, there are a number of questions that remain largely unanswered, such as the role of amateurism and those who operate between the lines in what has been considered a professional industry. This offers a clear opportunity to explore the space between the two polar ends of the journalism spectrum and examine the presumptions that such methods of media production can only ever be categorised as either professional or amateur. This increasingly liminal space referred to via the catch-all terminology of hyperlocal clearly requires greater nuance in order to recognise the ways in which the space beyond professional journalism reporting at the local level is evolving and consolidating as changes happen in the broader journalistic and societal landscapes.

By identifying how scholars have sought to frame the disruption caused by the emergence of new platforms and technologies within the local news sector, this chapter has recognised the ways in which this change has created the opportunity for amateurs to not only emerge but also evolve. By creating opportunities for alternative participants to become local journalism producers, the changes to the landscape in the digital era have questioned everything from the individuals engaging in such practices to

the models used to sustain and grow outlets. The emergence of hyperlocal is far from the end of the story, however. The wider variety of stakeholders in the hyperlocal sector identified by Harte (2023) demonstrate that the relationships between those who are amateurs and professionals, as well as those who may sit in the semi-professional space between the two arenas, continue to require exploration. While hyperlocal itself became an extension of the efforts to categorise non-professional or amateur reporting as terms such as hobby journalism (Brandt, 2004) or experimental reporting (Jones, 2012) have done, it is evident that understanding the ways in which amateurs and professionals are considered both by scholars, the industry and the individuals themselves is a key component of understanding a developing local news landscape that has become increasingly complex and nuanced.

In chapter two I begin to consider this relationship between amateurs and professionals in order to identify how the space between the two may be framed. While the amateur beginnings of bloggers and experimental publishers seeking alternative ways of reporting (Jones, 2012) in a world of opportunity created by the digital era in local news, the emergence of publishers able to generate income or access industry funding models previously only the domain of traditional print publications (DCMS, 2023) demonstrates that there is a clear movement away from hyperlocal as a purely amateur endeavour, although this does not necessarily mean a straight route to full professionalism. In order to explore this semi-professional landscape though it is crucial to recognise how amateur and professionalism are framed and how the different participants may challenge normative views of professionalism itself within the established local news sphere. The alignment, crossover and possible conflict between professional and amateur will be examined in the next chapter by exploring how both journalism and other sectors identify, manage and realise benefit from the ways in which both amateurs and professionals are framed.

2 Amateurism versus professionalism

The context of hyperlocal, community or even independent journalism sits alongside more central discussions and debates around the roles of professionals and amateurs in the various facets of reporting and media creation. In this chapter I set out debates on how the role of amateurs and professionals are considered and framed in relation to this, not only against the backdrop of journalistic practice but also in other sectors such as music where the delineation of the two is more clearly considered. While the discourse around amateurism and professionalism in local news reporting is an emerging area of academic debate, in sectors such as sport, music and the arts there is a greater history of exploration of the relationship and differences between the two. For this reason, it will be necessary to explore some of the literature from these fields throughout this chapter in order to be able to identify how concepts from more established areas of debate may inform the consideration of amateurism and professionalism in local news. This will mean exploring sectors away from the core domain of this particular area of study such as fandom. However, this will not be the overall focus of the chapter in itself which will instead seek to explore the role of amateurs in a professional landscape more generally and to question how they might apply to or help shape the consideration within the local news arena. By taking this approach it will also be possible to consider how debates around amateurism and professionalism may offer challenges to existing viewpoints related to journalism and identify areas where further examination can take place in order to understand how alternative perspectives may challenge accepted norms within local news reporting.

Discussions around the professionalisation of journalism are long-standing ones and pre-date many of the digital challenges that have tended to be linked to the rise of amateur reporting. Weaver, Drew and Wilhoit (1986:145) make a case for journalism being "of a profession but not in one". However, Schudson and Anderson (2009:91-92) suggest this viewpoint has been reached by drawing on employment data rather than reflecting on the cultural history of journalism, the role it plays in a greater

societal sense and identifying ways it might be attempting to increase professionalisation. The discussion around the roles of amateurism and professionalism in a digital and media environment may, as highlighted in the last chapter, be relatively contemporary in their timeframe when compared with other debates circling the journalistic environment such as news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; O'Neill and Harcup, 2019; Allern, 2002). However, the discussion around the roles these different elements of the participatory production process play is an area which has been studied in other facets of media and beyond and is already well developed in comparison.

The categorisation of professional and amateur as a broad term in journalism may look to be obvious from the outset; skilled and trained versus the opposite. This is a viewpoint reflected very much in my own experiences within the local newspaper and hyperlocal sector, although one which is being challenged in more recent times with greater recognition of the latter through inclusion in policy-level initiatives such as the Local Democracy Reporting Service and the Google Showcase work to explore alternative funding sources for hyperlocal news outlets. There is, nevertheless, still a fluid nature to the discussions and debates around the terming of activities as amateur in different sectors such as the arts and cultural arena (Stebbins, 1977; Meyer, 2008; Ramsden, 2013; Figueira et al; 2022) due to differences in where the activities might take place or the way they manifest themselves in terms of display or performance to the audience or consumer (Jackson, 2008; Ramsden, 2013). Amateurism on the other hand may be viewed as doing something for reasons other than monetary gain (Finnegan, 1989; Stebbins, 1992), giving rise to the viewpoint that financial transactions, either as payment for labour or the product of such labour could be viewed as a determining factor. This ties in to the view that the financial restrictions often used to frame amateurism are now being removed through flexible approaches to the terminology, but there are a number of challenges facing non-professional participants in a sphere where commercial activity is increasingly relevant (Eitzen, 1989).

The consideration of journalism as a permeable profession (Abbott, 1988) where it does not have the solidified regulatory or educational barriers to entry as seen in other industries is notable when considering the previous chapter's discussions around the ways in which digital platforms have allowed

participants to engage with local journalism to create the publishing area known as hyperlocal. This

permeability has challenged the landscape of professionalism by engaging others who may not receive

the financial reward but are participants in the professional landscape in areas such as that seen through

the use of user generated content (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Ugille, 2017; Santos, 2022). Alongside

the discourse around transactional framing of amateurism and professionalism, there are also alternative

explorations of the way in which quality is perceived as a differential between the two positions.

Journalistic publications have traditionally been considered to have developed norms of production as a

way to create professional standards which the industry can adhere to and use as a way to differentiate

between other media participants (Breed, 1955). The use of quality and production techniques as a point

of difference is further outlined in other sectors away from journalism by Pearlman (2007) who describes

amateur musicians as fanatics with a love of the subject but without the ability to reach the standards of

the great performers in the field in terms of production values. However, this is challenged in other

domains. Looking at the division between the two areas in other media production areas, Citron (1999)

also points to amateurism as being viewed as more truthful and original in style or offering a greater

sense of authenticity when viewed through the eyes of a committed and often supportive audience. Enli

(2017:58) explains this position further due to the fact that the "the term 'amateur' refers to someone who

engages in an activity for pleasure and not as a paid job" therefore making them seem more authentic in

their approach.

      The idea of amateurism taking an alternative viewpoint on a subject can be part of a desire to

highlight elitism within a sector and allow those to wear such a position as a "badge of honour" (Koreman

et al, 2023:4). This belief in amateurism containing a potentially purer and authentic form of activity or

production away from the refined processes of the professional sphere crosses over into the sporting

context too where, the amateur is often defined as someone who competes for the love of their game or

their chosen sport rather than for any financial motive (Gladner, 1978). In the next section of this chapter,

the ways in which alternative sectors frame amateurism and professionalism, as well as the relationships

between the two disparate areas of the discipline, are examined.

2.1 Sport, music and arts - lessons in professionalism and amateurism

In order to be able to underpin any consideration of journalism's contemporary relationship with amateurism and professionalism, it is important to examine other areas of academic work where the debates are more refined in order to be able to challenge and contextualise the broader discourse. Throughout this section, in order to recognise how journalism may best identify the spaces within its own arena, I consider the ways in which amateurism and professionalism have been debated in other areas. Sport is a particular landscape where the relationship between amateurism and professionalism has been examined in considerable depth, and where the discourse has often been surrounded by change through the advent of digital and alternative platforms such as those outlined in chapter one.

An examination of the historical context of amateurism makes the case that the very roots of amateurs and sport are intertwined due to the need for such activities to be "about gentlemanliness, leisure, loyalty and decency" (Allison, 2001:5) by providing a moral activity with a sense of right and fairness. However, as Pope (1996) points out, historians have regularly questioned this perceived sense of purity and untainted activity from events such as the early-Greek Olympics where gambling and corruption were both rife. Lucas (1992) argues that the idealistic view of amateurism in sport is not as rooted in the historical context of the Olympic Games as many might think, instead pointing to the modern version of the games trading off such a viewpoint while actually utilising a view of amateurism more linked to bias through social class. The deconstruction of the so-called Olympic ideal as one of an amateur competing for love rather than monetary gain allowed for the creation of a more open if not equal playing field, according to Real (1996), who argues that the removal of the amateurism legislation around the Olympics merely highlights trust funds and other financial mechanisms that were being used to improve an athlete's performance by circumventing the rules around amateurism or moving away from the broader acceptance of what it takes to be an amateur. Any perceived sense of fairness and an almost utopian

ideal of amateurism for the greater good is further questioned even when explored away from the grand

scale of the Olympics by Eitzen (1989), who examines the way in which exposure through cable and

satellite TV had allowed amateur sporting competitions to be broadcast around the globe, thus bringing in

a financial factor to the table through sponsorship and exposure that questions the very amateurism such

sporting endeavours may have built a reputation on. This in itself draws comparisons to the media

landscape where outlets and individual reporters perceived as amateur by the core definition of the terms

suggested above are delivering some financial gain and greater levels of exposure via the digital

landscapes and platforms they are utilising, opening clear spaces for debate around the framing of

amateur in arenas where there is a blurring of the traditional lines marking out the local news spaces in

which different types of producers operate.

There are also comparisons to be drawn with sport when looking at the way in which the

organisation of amateur activities can develop and influence the practices and behaviours of participants

and policymakers in much the same way as we are seeing in the journalism sector. The Department for

Media, Culture and Sport (2023) report into the sustainability of local news highlighted the need for

long-standing positions to be reconsidered due to the emergence of non-professional outlets in the local

news market. The report also includes a challenge from publisher trade body the News Media Association

which highlighted that removing restrictions on statutory notices so they could be published by digital-only

outlets would have "damaging effects for many local newspapers". This viewpoint of challenge to

established normative policy is worth considering alongside the work of Kahn (2007) in the sporting

arena, who highlights how the work of organisations such as the National Collegiate Athletics Association

in the USA is dividing opinion of scholars and athletes alike. The study identifies how economists view the

restrictive policies of the organisation as being akin to a cartel controlling the financial capabilities of the

athletes involved, while also acknowledging that others recognise the NCAA for preserving elements such

as fairness and competitive equality in line with the definitions of amateurism previously referred to.

These two juxtaposed viewpoints offer an insight into the blurring of the boundaries and the conflict that

can exist between professionals and amateurs in different sectors and industries.

A study of amateur rugby clubs in New Zealand (Cordery and Davies, 2015) also identified the potential for influence, with a recognition that the actions of professional participants was impacting on the actions and behaviours of their amateur counterparts, something which was identified in the previous chapter as a factor in the way the actions of different sides of the journalism divide can influence and mimic each other and challenge any perception that new agents in the local news sector are purely about disruption and new models of working. Cordery and Davies (2015) found that, as in the media domain identified previously, this was neither exclusively a top down nor a bottom up effect, with both ends of the spectrum working in equal measure to remould and reshape the centre ground or production space and define the way in which it exists within the ecosystem of a particular arena. The relationship between the influence of both professional and amateur bodies on the activity as a whole is also examined by Misener et al (2022:3), who highlight how the "interconnectedness" of organisations combines to create overall influence in much the same way as we have seen local news reshaped by both ends of the spectrum in local news.

The need of journalism to clearly define the boundaries of amateurism and professionalism may not be as obvious as in sectors such as sport where participation may be controlled in some aspects based on the categorisation of the individuals. Other areas where this delineation of the two elements are clear within sport are particularly notable in the American sporting and education sector. The National Collegiate Athletics Association handbook (2018) says that due to the need for the educational integrity to be underpinned there is an identifiable need to "retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports". Yet others suggest amateur sport is finding ways to utilise new technologies such as live-streaming to intrinsically alter the subject itself (Young, 2022). Any separation that does exist also points to a gateway to professionalism through the mechanism of education and the belief that there is a need to nurture talent (Keen, 2007; Pruna et al, 2018) in order for it to move beyond amateurism. While Breed (1955) highlights the way in which journalism has developed production norms in order to create professional standards, the educational gateway does not exist in the same way as a barrier to participation; something the rise in hyperlocal publishing, outlined in chapter one, has only served to highlight even further.

While there has been discussion of the role education should play in the development of journalists able to meet the challenges facing the industry (Reese, 1999; Macdonald, 2006; Mensing, 2010; Creech and Mendelson, 2015; Hanitzsch and Ornebring, 2019), others argue that change is required in how the education of reporters is considered due to audiences no longer being dependent on professional journalists for news (Picard, 2015). This viewpoint suggests that not only is the idea of a gateway to journalism now more difficult to enforce, it also recognises that there has to be a reconfiguration of how we consider the role of amateurs and other non-professional participants in the arena of local news. Indeed, we may even need to explore whether those descriptive boundaries remain relevant or whether there is a need to consider how the potential erosion of the positions may need to be examined as a co-existence rather than a potential rivalry. These echo the discussions taking place around the ways in which American collegiate sports are having to address challenges to the long-established positions of amateurs as being outside of the boundaries of professionalism (Sun, 2022).

Along with sport, music and performing arts are among the other areas where the amateur and professional fields have the capability to co-exist both as companions and competitors. This has led to many of the debates around amateurism in sport outlined above being revisited through an alternative lens, sometimes providing different perspectives and conclusions. While the aforementioned Olympic ideals are questioned by historians and scholars, similar views on the importance of the non-professionals to the broader success of an area are shown by the likes of Sir Ian McKellen (2010) who questions the impact a decline in amateur actors may have on the standard of the professional industry. However, the value of amateurism in performing arts is not traditionally as recognised as it may be today, with the suggestion that historically the value of such performers and audience of such performances is often "pushed to the margins of history" (Cochrane, 2001:234). While this sense of marginalisation of amateur activities is being highlighting, an interesting point in the theatrical context is made by Brecht and Mueller (1961:15), who claim that experimentation in amateur theatre across aspects such as techniques and production has led to simplification of many aspects of the model used by both amateurs and professionals. Such a view offers an interesting historical perspective in terms of the way the relationship between amateurs and professionals may be that of a reciprocal learning environment rather than merely

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one focusing on replication. A study of the work of the Royal Shakespeare Company (Nicholson and Holdsworth, 2016) echoes this theme of collaborative practice by identifying how both sides of the divide were able to benefit from a shared approach, with amateurs enjoying the knowledge of the professional rehearsal scheme, while professionals found the experience of working with their counterparts as "inspiring, challenging and eye-opening". Collaborative approaches within the media and journalistic sphere are not as common, although Williams and Harte (2016) do offer up the suggestion that the different sides of the divide could be co-producers of content. This is a point which is examined in chapter three in more depth to consider how alternative agents have the capability to co-create in a journalistic sense.

The correlation between amateur and professional provision in the fields of sport and theatrical performance identified above are not dissimilar to that found in the music landscape, which is another area where the two parties can operate in close proximity and with shared practice. An exploration of the work of amateurs and professionals in the folk genre saw claims of a distinction between the vocational professional and the hobbyist amateur (Seeger, 1949). Although this does not resolve any debate around quality or standards, it does lead to an observation that the common ground between the two can often be the discipline of production, something which echoes in the discussions of the relationship between the citizen (or amateur) and the professional journalism news production process (Goode, 2009), as well as finding similarities with the views of Brecht and Mueller (1961) on the sphere of amateur theatre. Comparisons between the fields of journalism and music can also be made when looking at the way in which societal behaviours have changed to draw up the landscape of and between amateurs and professionals. Regelski (2007) suggests that within classical music, a move towards educational standards via degrees and certificates had demoted many enthusiasts to the role of passive consumers rather than active participants, thus taking ownership of the thing they created away from the domain of the amateur. As with sport, the role of education as a factor in perceptions around amateurism is an interesting space worthy of further exploration through the lens of local media, to identify the role this may or may not play in the development of semi-professional reporters. This is particularly the case when considering how Lehmann and Ericsson (1997) stand at odds with Regelski by claiming that, while

learning environments experienced by professionals and amateurs may differ considerably, the incorporation of training methods employed in the professional arena allows for an overall improvement of quality regardless. The debate of how training is carried out is of particular interest when considering the way in which independent community and hyperlocal journalists may or may not be operating and where any training or skills development may or may not be coming from, particularly when, as mentioned in the previous chapter, access to knowledge through digital channels is allowing for growth and development into spaces previously held as the preserve of professionals.

It is evident that while journalism may still have an uneasy relationship between amateurs and professionals, in other sectors the relationship is a more mature one where there is a recognition and, at times, celebration of the benefits both bring to the overall quality of the activity taking place. However, as demonstrated in discussions around the ways in which amateur ideals in sport may not be quite as pure as initially considered due to sponsorship, the arrival of financial opportunities or the ability to utilise amateur endeavour to seek out professional benefits at a later date, the liminality of the position must always be at the forefront of considerations. Nevertheless, in other sectors there is a recognition of the benefits brought by both amateur and professional participants in driving forward change and normative practice in areas such as production. As I outline in the following section, in order to achieve this sense of a greater good resulting from the efforts of alternative stakeholders though, there needs to be a recognition of how participants enter the sector as amateurs in order to exert influence or enable change.

2.2 Activating the amateur

The role of content produced by amateurs and the way in which they exist alongside the output of their professional counterparts has been examined in other sectors as previously outlined, but if we are to recognise the value they bring then there is also a consideration required of the factors that allow for them to participate in the first place. Understanding from the outset what drives amateurs across a variety of arenas is an important part of trying to identify and position amateurism within the broader discussion.

Leadbeater and Miller (2004) argue that cultural capital has been the key factor in the rise of the amateurs by allowing people to stand out as individuals and participate in activities where financial or social capital may otherwise repress such a desire, while a more recent study explores how technology and new platforms have introduced the lure of the creator economy (Rieder et al, 2023). Such a viewpoint echoes those who consider the value of online spaces as places of opportunity, although not necessarily ones where financial reward is the result, with Prior (2010) instead aligning amateur participation in such arenas as a gateway to realms of creativity and cultural production.

Viewing amateurs as having the potential to be creators or cultural producers is evident in the work of Hackney (2013) who makes the suggestion that the existence of counter-cultures becomes more evident at times when society's norms are being challenged. This poses an interesting question around the rise of movements in sectors across the amateur landscape, particularly within journalism where, as discussed in the previous chapter, changes to societal and technological habits are combining to create challenges to media ownership and production. The views of Hackney and Prior identify how digitalisation through access to knowledge and availability of the work produced by amateurs is developing the understanding around cultural capital. However, others have recognised the ways in which professionalism of labour across different spheres is driven by factors which pre-date the evolution of digital platforms (Comedia, 1984; Landry, 1985; Harcup, 2003). For instance, Kotler (1986) also offers a pre-cursor from a pre-mainstream internet era by identifying how a personalisation of services and products and the readily available nature of such items would be expected by the modern consumer. This is a viewpoint that the relationship between the user and the organisations they engage with has changed, pointing to specialist digital platforms such as social networks and the likes of eBay and online selling sites which have seen markets facilitated by organisations but fuelled and driven by the audience and contributors at both a social and transactional level (Alderete, 2017) . Such a position echoes the view that digital platforms are part of a contribution culture which develops through participatory fun rather than a profit-driven desire. Zittrain (2009) points to the output of such activities then catching on and spreading through a process of normalisation that sees the power of the market then engage these amateur ideas to take them to a domain greater than the one for which it was originally intended.

However, such views of digital landscapes empowering the amateur are not accepted by all. Keen (2007) questions the very notion that the internet and associated tools have given authority to amateurs, describing them instead as mere hobbyists who cannot truly be classified as experts even if they do have knowledge about a particular subject area beyond that which might reasonably be expected. While Keen identifies the internet as the driving force around which amateurism has been facilitated in journalism without necessarily gaining the validity of professionalism, alternative perspectives are put forward by the likes of Rieder et al (2023) when considering the growth of the creator culture on YouTube and Buckingham (2009), who uses an exploration of media consumption in the home to identify a shift from consumer to producer as a way of justifying the rise of non-professional content generation. Others have also looked at the digital platform as a key factor in allowing the fans (or passive consumers) to begin to become active producers (Wang, 2020). The switch from consumer to producer is not necessarily in the production of the overall output though, with others using examples such as the marketing knowledge garnered by those selling through platforms such as Facebook marketplace (Piranda et al, 2022). Such scholars, although looking at amateurism through different lenses, have drawn their findings in a way which offers clear comparisons to the technological and social audience changes journalism is currently seeking to understand and harness.

The suggestion has been made previously that technology is activating what Ross describes as "the rise of the new amateurs" (Prior, 2010:400) who were utilising digital opportunities to reframe both their own participation with a particular sector and the ways in which they were engaging with it. This manifested itself, Prior claims, in a shift in power which is unlikely to be fully reversed:

> When Time Magazine made "you" the person of the year in 2006, it bucked the popular trend of identifying "great men" as sole influential agents of history, placing ordinary people, instead, at the centre of an upsurge of productivity and innovation."You" were the passionate producers of a range of cultural forms and media, from home videos to personal blogs, bedroom songs to podcasts. Harbingers of a "digital democracy," ordinary people are making culture with an energy and in quantities never seen before, Time suggested. They are forming collaborative communities, customising their own content, and shifting the principles upon which creativity rests.

> (Prior, 2010:400)

With long-established journalism norms of production and ownership facing disruption to changes to the very processes and methods utilised as outlined in chapter one, the role of the same technology which created such disruption in activating and empowering amateurs to reach new heights of participation as Ross suggests is an important one to consider. Ren, Zhu and Yang (2022) highlight the advantage younger people may have in being able to exploit opportunities created in an era where familiarisation with platforms and new tools is key, while others suggest that regardless of age, sectors such as the fandom community are well placed to capitalise on digital opportunities due to the combination of their passion for the subject matter and the ability to create to a professional standard thanks to the accessibility of knowledge online (Vadde, 2017). It is evident that the reasons why an amateur can be activated to become more than a passive consumer are varied and do not necessarily have the same motivational factors as those who seek to participate on a professional level. However, it is clear that technology has played a role within sectors such as journalism as opening a gateway to production through affordable methods and technology. Such a position has allowed people who may have been perceived as the audience or fans to play a more active role in the landscape as Vadde (2017) suggests.

2.3 Fandom

The definition of amateurs within journalism has taken many turns, with chapter one outlining how everything from the hobby journalist through to the blogger or even the hyperlocal reporter had been created as a terminology which could be used in a bid to create clarity and understanding. Others suggest that amateurism itself is actually a step up from the idea of dabbling in an interest (Stebbins, 2013) to taking a more formalised approach. When identifying the ways in which amateur journalists may be activated by factors other than education or financial reward, the concept of fandom is worth considering given it can blur traditional lines around amateurism and professionalism (Vadde, 2017). Some connections have been made around the ways in which journalism might link with fandom, with Riddick (2022) aligning citizen journalism with such activities. In this section I will look to consider how fandom

may provide relevant insights into the rise of amateurs and their impact on professional journalism more broadly.

Be it as an online expert or, as Keen (2007) suggests, a so-called hobbyist riding the crest of a digital wave, there are considerations to be made around the driving force behind such activity by participants without professional qualifications in media production. The understanding of such motivation is relevant whether producers position themselves as enthusiastic amateurs or challengers to professional norms. Fiske (1992) offers some perspective on the subject though via fandom. He suggests that "all popular audiences engage in varying degrees of semiotic productivity" (Fiske, 1992:30) which can then manifest in textual output. If news content can be perceived as popular culture then it may as a result create a genuine area for debate and discussion in terms of whether audiences of news could engage in fandom activities as seen in other sectors, be it through association with a brand, community of interest or a geographic location. This raises questions over whether hyperlocal and semi-professional journalists may be considered as fans of a place and are therefore seeking to move from the dabbling phase identified by Stebbens (2013) to something more aligned to the normative processes of the contemporary local news industry (Karlsson et al 2023; Vos and Thomas, 2023). Some have already suggested that the role of creators on online platforms such as Reddit has already begun to create synergies between fandom and journalism (Bent, 2022), which adds weight to the belief that such a route is moving content creation away from amateurism, but not necessarily through to professionalism completely.

Scholars have sought to place fandom in areas surrounding media, such as looking at the way in which major organisations have attempted to harness fans in the promotion of their products (Meehan, 2000; Murray, 2004), but this is often in terms of the way in which they interpret and develop existing texts or media items; or as Carter (2018) frames the viewpoint of such theorists: "Fans are therefore nothing more than promotional agents who are being used for capitalist good" (Carter, 2018:37). Such a position makes sense in relation to journalistic content as a commodity being shared or enhanced, but there is potentially a closer correlation to the practices and debates around amateur and hyperlocal journalism where fan production is portrayed as being more akin to a cottage industry rather than a fully-fledged production industry: "Fans do not produce in order to make a profit; indeed fan production is characterised

by 'a distaste' toward making a profit" (McKee, 2004:171). The sense of fans engaging in original production rather than merely repurposing existing material allows for the idea to be explored that an alternative economy can emerge through fandom and could be viewed as a standalone economy rather than being tied to existing ones (Carter, 2018). This viewpoint offers a point of further exploration around the discourse of non-professional journalism production by considering whether hyperlocal sites are contributing to existing media landscapes or are creating new ones entirely.

Amateur journalism and media-making has been examined with fandom as a concept elsewhere (Riddick, 2022) and indeed, Harrington et al (2007) make a clear link between fandom and the evolution of media by identifying how the actions of users on social media platforms who are encouraged to be the creators or co-creators through reshaping of content are actually being examined in the same way as fandom scholars have sought to create understanding around fan actions in traditional areas such as music, film and literature. However, the authors also make the point that fandom is a term rarely used to define many of the actions identified in studies around the changing shape of media production. In the same way that fans of bands might share and ultimately shape elements the music landscape (Wall and Dubber, 2010:161), so Shirky (2009) opines that a media power-shift is taking place as the passive participants – readers, listeners and viewers in the case of journalism and the media – have shifted recalibrated their position because of the internet and the variety of associated tools have allowed people to be engaged with rather than merely consuming content. The consistent framing of the discourses around music fandom and media are not always considered to be merely evolutionary developments which fall into place through bohemian ideals, though. As Jones (2000) claims, fandom remains at the mercy of technologies and business practices.

If we are to accept that there may be a clear correlation between the development of things such as music fandom and new waves of journalistic practice through amateur domains, then it is necessary to understand the constraints and leylines of fans as communities. Fiske (1992) points to the way in which those engaged in fandom draw clear and distinct boundaries around what they perceive to be within or beyond the remit of their own interests, while others suggest identity can be altered through effective participation in fan culture (Grossberg, 1997), a concept which offers some areas for further exploration

around how digital journalists in both the hyperlocal and citizen sphere may or may not be aligning or re-aligning themselves within a community, either geographically or topically. Some of the previous chapter's exploration around hyperlocal and citizen journalism points to this sense of interest and belonging being a key element of participation, but the framing of news and place as fandom is not as clearly defined. It may seem obvious to link fandom with subjects and topics, but the discussion around this in relation to place is not as clear-cut. It has been explored to some extent by Sandvoss (2015), who puts forward the notion that the identity created by connectivity with locations does allow them to be classified as texts. While Sandvoss' study may relate to Ibiza as a cultural object rather than a location in terms of geography, the ideas around belonging and identity could potentially apply to any geographical location where a group or an individual may feel an affinity for it. This idea of the relationship between fans and a place is supported by Wiltse (2004:2) who identifies "communities of appreciation" developing "around every possible hobby, avocation, cultural pursuit". There is also a recognition that sports fandom is rooted in loyalty and affinity to a place rather than to the activity itself (Allwine, 2022) offering a suggestion that those who engage with journalistic practice at a local news level could potentially be considered to be doing so as a result of fandom.

Whether we seek to categorise communities as audiences, contributors or even fans, the concept of creativity and the groups of individuals that spring up in digital spaces surrounding them is explored further by Prior (2010:401) who describes the rise of an apparent new breed of amateurs by the repositioning of so-called "ordinary people" as "passionate producers" of a range of media and cultural products which are now able to exist in a low-cost and socially-engaged digital landscape. Such a 'do it yourself' digital landscape which can be associated with fandom may have contributed to the traction gained by amateurs to colonise space previously held exclusively by the professional producers, with so-called 'maker cultures' allowing people to reclaim power (Chidgey, 2014). This builds on the views of Gauntlett (2013) who highlights the social power of community and creativity as driving forces behind the engagement of communities with cultural activities. These ideas point to a suggestion that a creative audience of journalism fans could well have risen up to generate new and alternative forms of reporting communities in order to challenge perceptions of what news should be and how it is disseminated. It is an

idea supported by the analysis of the alternative local press during the 1970s and 1980s (Harcup, 2006) where those on the fringes of mainstream media content were mobilised to create their own forms of journalism through a series of publications across the UK (Franklin and Murphy, 1991:126). There are echoes, once more, of the current debates around hyperlocal publishing with Harcup pointing to the fact that the success of such outlets was varied: "Some lasted barely a handful of issues, others survived more than a decade; sales ranged from a few hundred to several thousand" (Harcup, 2006:131).

If there is evidence that journalism transposes in some ways to fandom, I would suggest there are others where the crossover is not as clear or does not align at all. In the sporting arena amateur activity is often enhanced by professional success. Frick and Wicker (2016) describe the trickle-down effect in German football which sees participation increase as activity in the professional ranks offers up an aspirational desire among potential participants. However, journalism bucks the trend on this front with little direct evidence to suggest that success of mainstream media has enhanced the desire of amateur or citizen journalists to become producers directly. In fact, the rise in hyperlocal publishers has been set against the backdrop of rapidly declining sales of newspapers (Meyer, 2009; Curran, 2010; Schlesinger and Doyle, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Edge, 2022). The concept of ownership is another point where the world of fandom does not appear, at first glance at least, to naturally crossover into the journalism sphere. In other arenas such as film, music and TV, the subjects of the output are often owned by an external entity. Pearson (2010: 90) outlines the move by some copyright owners to prevent fan content websites from breaching their rights. This is where I would suggest local news, in general terms, is very different. Much has been written about the ownership of news providers (Franklin and Murphy, 1991; Schultz, 1998; Noam, 2016; Pickard, 2019) that it does not need covering again in depth as part of this study, but the ownership of news ideas is not clear cut beyond the core constraints of copyright, meaning the restrictions often felt by fandom projects cannot necessarily be felt by those potential fans who are embarking on journalism work. There is a case, however, that the discussion around fandom and place (Sandvoss, 2015) might suggest that if producers can be supporters of geographic locations then there is the potential where place, and affinity with it, can be owned in some form or another on specific platforms by non-professional publishers.

2.3 Commercialisation and perception

The economy of fandom is often considered through the relationship fans can have with the likes of music artists or sports (Galuszka, 2017). However, when the role of fans as producers is considered, the narrative is often aligned to one of an extension to content which already exists through things such as fan-fiction or artwork (Stanfill and Condis, 2014) or the translation of media into a new language for an audience (Baruch, 2021). While it might be suggested that those embarking in hyperlocal production in the early stages of the digital changes within journalism may have been deemed to be extending the reach of content to new audiences, they were doing so through original content creation rather than redevelopment of work produced by professional publishers. Where amateur fans transition to become producers rather than mere consumers, the commercial challenges aligned to professional enterprises begin to crossover into the amateur landscape (Sugihartati, 2020). Therefore, such a shift in the liminal space between amateur and professional becomes an area of consideration. In this section, I explore how the commercialisation of production by such individuals can impact on the perception of both the individual and their work more broadly, as well as considering how this requires us to reconsider some of those within the local journalism sphere who may previously have been considered as amateurs.

The desire to commercialise activity of amateur producers is evident in the case of FanLib, a project designed to aggregate fan-created content and monetise it through advertising. The move went against the ethos of such content and therefore failed to provide a sustainable model to professionalise the work of those engaging in fan activities (Cupitt, 2008) . The idea that amateurism may be defined by payment (Finnegan, 1989; Stebbins, 1992), combined with the experiences around the FanLib project, suggest there may be a tangible difference between the way professional and amateur organisations are viewed, interacted with and engaged in their core activities. A study of amateur theatre by Walcon and Nicholson (2017) recognises that an obvious shift occurs in the way organisations behave and are perceived by stakeholders when they are put on a business-like footing. It is this transition, if indeed it

were to exist in the journalistic environment, it may offer some value in helping to understand those engaged at the fringes of both the professional and amateur sphere of reporting, be they as hyperlocals who are developing or experienced reporters who are branching into alternative domains. It also leads into some of the debates around sociability in this domain which argue that reporting is now intertwined with such concepts (Phillips (2012).

The work of Simmel (1947) sought to examine the associations between individuals and organisations, a concept which is used as the basis of the view of Crouch (2009:13) that creative participation itself leads to amateur creativity through "different registers and intensities of experience". Others suggest that by considering sociability's role in amateur theatre and the freedom that such a vehicle affords its participants, it "might redefine its social significance and help to explain its affective power" as a form of expression (Walcon and Nicholson, 2017:32). This is an interesting proposition when considered alongside the view that sociability in more traditional media formats is often limited (Hall, 1993; Morley, 2000), although news itself is still considered a key factor of sociability by younger audiences (Schwaiger et al, 2022). The suggestion has also been opened up that alternative platforms allow for a more representative style of sociability to emerge in the media landscape (Harari et al, 2020; Kanapathipillaii, 2021), with McClean (2011:1663) identifying how the freedoms of anonymity and the lack of constraints afforded by the digital medium are broadening the debate and representation of different sections of society: "As a result, a greater range of perspectives, forms of self-expression and types of interaction tend to take place online, in an often chaotic cacophony". The use of the term 'chaos' is an interesting one when considering how the production of amateur content is viewed.

The perceived value of digital content is discussed by Brownlee (2016), who makes clear that non-professional YouTube producers were regularly avoiding the professional norms in terms of production, but that this was, at times, done deliberately as a way of providing a clear point of media democratisation Despite this sense of disorganisation as a marker, this is juxtaposed somewhat in a media landscape by the view of scholars who offer suggestions that the internet would have the capability to re-energise and even increase participation in political issues in a way that traditional media formats have struggled to do (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Zhang et al, 2010; Zuniga, 2012). It is a position that

is tempered somewhat by the view that the engagement of social media users (and therefore a blend of professionals and amateurs) has led to a form of political engagement that is tailored toward ease of use rather than full activism (Vitak et al, 2011), while other scholars suggest barriers exist between political discourse in a new social media-driven landscape (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). This could account for some of the challenges facing the monetisation of all content, and in particular amateur content, through different channels if an audience is perceived to not be as engaged as has been the norm through traditional channels. Cunningham et al (2016) highlight the point when examining the way in which amateur producers on YouTube are feeding into the broader visual economy, suggesting that the monetisation of such content, both for the platform and the creator, are offering a professionalisation of amateur practice. Such an observation in itself has the potential to challenge many of the conceptions around the definitions of professionalism through the traditional lens, particularly, as the authors point out, because these amateur creators now have greater control over the way their careers as producers will pan out. Even considering the concept of the term 'career' in connection with amateurs is potentially worthy of further exploration when considering how definitions of amateurism and professionalism may be reshaping or reforming.

There are clearly parallels to be drawn between some aspects of fandom studies and the engagement of unpaid, non-professional participants in local news. This chapter has highlighted how other areas of fandom in sport, music and the arts have created enthusiastic content producers who face a variety of challenges (Kehrberg, 2018; Wang, 2020; Kellett, 2021), many of which echo those which amateur and hyperlocal journalists also engage with. It is also evident that such participants are also well positioned to take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves. However, it is clear that commercialisation of their activities by those same creators is also not without difficulties. The suggestion that amateur and semi-professional journalism do not have some roots in fandom should not be discounted merely because it has not been explored fully so far. The motivations to engage in what is, initially, unpaid labour activities (De Kosnik, 2012; Spence, 2014; Derbaix et al, 2023) has clear parallels with the rise of the hyperlocal movement discussed in chapter one. However, it is not immediately clear whether amateur local reporters should be considered as fans of place or production. Understanding how

and why amateurs might engage in journalistic practice, be it through fandom, cultural capital or other previously explored areas, also needs to offer consideration around the ongoing decision to commit to long term labour often without prospect of significant remuneration. While amateurism may be defined as not being about direct financial gain, it is a point made often in studies relating to the role of hyperlocal and/or amateur reporters or even audience contributors in the broader journalistic ecosystem (Radcliffe, 2014; Williams et al, 2014; Thomas, 2022). The desire to monetise hyperlocal journalism has been evident in some quarters, as outlined previously, but the perceptions of audiences to such a move from the traditional concept of amateur to that of a monetised professional producer are worthy of deeper examination to see whether community can be interpreted as commodity in a way that Hellekson (2009) says ultimately brought about the demise of FanLib.

Such discussions tie into some of Terranova's (2004) observations around free digital labour and the rise of the factory society, which draws an interesting comparison with the NESTA report in 2015 into hyperlocal media which showed that more than 62% of those engaged with the sector did not even see their projects repay some of their associated costs, let alone a salary. The survey by Williams et al (2014) makes similar suggestions around the level of payment being made to producers in the hyperlocal sphere, but while Wahl-Jorgensen (2019:12) found that the numbers making money had risen and that this "suggests that the sector is increasingly professionalised", there was also recognition that "financial viability is still some way off". These industry specific reviews would indicate that the push for commercial success is still not the driving force behind many of the cultural entrepreneurs developing this strand of local news media. It might, therefore, be easy to suggest that journalism has another area of comparison with some of the ideas around individuals volunteering for fan or creative activities online. However, the solution that the free labour argument must be the driving force can potentially be countered given much of this discussion is based around the traditional models of commercial success rather than a sense of social or civic duty or other reasoning. For example, a study by Gault et al (2000) explores the role internships play in the future success of undergraduate students, finding that experiential learning did have a bearing on metrics such as pay and progression. In this sense, Terranova's questioning of free labour is not necessarily as clear cut as it may seem at first when applied to the journalistic world. There

is a space for consideration of the way in which digital labour and cultural capital manifest themselves as media products in this environment, particularly in terms of a continually evolving professional industry with emerging demands placed upon participants.

A further challenge to the concept of free labour comes from Bruns (2007) who identifies with the creation of a so-called 'Generation C'. He argues that the rise of open source projects and citizen journalism itself can be attributed to this loose grouping of individuals who are not bound by age or societal measurements, although this is questioned by Ren, Zhu and Yang (2022) who point to the distinct advantage younger participants have in a landscape determined by technological knowledge. The abbreviated form of Gen C is also recognised by Google too, who describe them as a YouTube generation "who care deeply about creation, curation, connection and community" (Google, 2013). This description supports the idea of Bruns that the social grouping of these people are more based around ideology than anything else. The so-called Gen C are also evident in other areas and their methods of enhancing production are boosted by the ability to access information via digital platforms. Even in the seemingly gentile world of crafts, Hackney (2013) disseminates evidence of challenge to the professional ranks by their amateur counterparts:

> Everyday activism, agency, and ingenuity, and a desire to act independently are all defining characteristics of the new super-connected amateur who, while not necessarily a trained craftsperson, draws on a wide range of knowledge and experience to contribute to an expanded notion of what craft might be.
>
> (Hackney, 2013:183)

These discussions and debates show that the delineation between amateur and professional is not as clear-cut as it may have once have been. The internet and technological advancement has created a new "generation of digitally networked technically skilled" media producers who are challenging the conceptions of the capabilities of amateurs (Pink, 2011:92).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the relationship between amateurism and professionalism in a local news sense is a complex one which requires further consideration to understand not just how the two are connected, but also how participants are perceiving their own activities in the broader context. It has also demonstrated that further clarity is needed in order to understand how the terminology may be applicable to a journalism setting. While other sectors such as sport and the arts have clear distinctions between the concepts of amateurs and professionals through elements such as regulation, training or other enforcement methods, there is not a strong enough evidence base on which to draw assumptions on the way journalism might differentiate and contextualise non-professional participants in the contemporary, digital industry, particularly those who may fit a semi-professional descriptor rather than a professional or amateur label. That is not to say that it is a complete unknown within the media landscape; indeed, as this chapter has identified, much of the writing on the apparent rise of amateurism within journalism and the broader media points towards a sense of perception being a key consideration. For example, Leadbeater and Miller (2004:21) seek to formalise how amateurs will often engage in typically professional endeavours - the so-called pro-am world - but that these activities often take place outside of normative working hours, meaning they are regularly identified in the mainstream as non-professional. However, the authors point towards the levels of commitment betraying any sense of amateurism as those engaging seek to improve and develop their skillset in whichever field. Looking again at journalism's relationship with these points, if the sector is considered to be aligning itself around the poles of amateur and professional, then Leadbeater and Miller challenge this concept of 'one or the other'. Similarly, NESTA's 2015 report and the work of Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) also identify that while swathes of money are not being made by hyperlocal, some are covering costs or paying a moderate dividend and therefore may well be perceived as the first breed of modern, pro-am or semi-professional reporters who are now occupying the local news space and beginning to force a reconsideration of the boundaries between

journalism amateurism and professionalism. Indeed, it may even mean an exploration over whether such boundaries exist at all in a contemporary local news context.

While there may be an unease around how to define the amateurs and professionals of local media, when looking at the arts and sport the delineation is clearer, mainly due to policies and regulations which may exist to outline the two distinct areas (Cordery and Davies, 2016) and the role education and talent nurturing can play as a routeway between the two. However, a similar evidence base is not immediately evident in journalism. The National Union of Journalists utilises the term "professional principles" when referring to its code of conduct but offers no full explanation of how this manifests itself in terms of the expectations, roles and development of reporters, particularly those who may not be aligned with a traditional, professional publisher. The concept of professionalism is often based around the usage of professional traits surrounding education, ethics and licensing (Barber, 1963; Wilensky, 1964), but as McQuail (2000) rightly points out, there are a variety of entry routes into journalism, meaning there is no way of controlling the pathway into the industry and exerting the control and application of professional traits as there might be in areas such as law or medicine. As a study of those in the hyperlocal sector (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022) demonstrated, less than a fifth had a journalism or media-based degree, thus evidencing that education could not be considered the sole gateway into local news production either.

Friedson (2001:12) summarises professionalism as an arena where it can be determined "who is qualified to perform a defined set of tasks, to prevent all others from performing that work, and to control the criteria by which to evaluate performance". For this reason Witschge and Nygren (2009) support the case of journalism as a 'semi-profession' due to the inability to exclude non-professionals from the process of creating journalism. That is not say the permeability of news production means that it should be considered as an open arena, as evidenced by a 2023 article on the *Holdthefrontpage* industry website where a National Union of Journalists regional representative said "news journalism is too serious a business for amateurs seeking a new hobby" (Sharman, 2023a). This demonstrates the need for a greater understanding of not just the definitions within local news but also in terms of understanding how the middle ground between amateurism and professionalism in journalism is being occupied as well as who is operating in this 'grey area' between the two.

Another strand around the perception of the role of the amateur and the professional is the personal view and value for those who engage in the activity rather than those who consume or observe the result of such practice. Juniu et al (1996) discuss a distinction between work and leisure for musicians who perform, highlighting how tasks are often categorised differently by those who are directly earning from their creative skills to those who are producing as a leisure activity or hobby. A key exploration of this point is made by Neulinger and Thomas (1976), who looked at how perceived freedom to engage in an activity might influence their perception of it as a leisure activity or otherwise. Such a model is one which could be explored further alongside the discussions around hyperlocal sustainability as a way of explaining why some publishers continue to serve communities and produce content even though their endeavours do not facilitate financial reward or professional success over, in some cases, relatively lengthy periods.

The review of debates surrounding amateurism and professionalism shows that there are a diverse range of factors to be explored and that while some areas may have the clear markers through either regulation, training or other enforcement methods, journalism does not appear to have the range of study required to generate a clear evidence base on which to draw assumptions around the role and shape of those considered to be non-professionals in the contemporary and continually evolving local news landscape, or those who might exist in a third semi-professional space somewhere between amateur and professional. It is this space that is of particular interest in order to offer greater identification to those who may sit within the divide, with chapter three examining how those who exist between amateurism and professionalism are currently framed. By identifying the perceptions of such producers of content it will allow for greater understanding of this evolving phase of the journalism industry, by highlighting both the personal perception of the role of the individual, their activities, their output and the personal and/or professional trajectory of their own actions as producers of journalistic content.

3 Prosumers, semi-professionals and the middle ground

In the previous two chapters, I have explored both the changes brought about within journalism by the arrival of the digital era, and the way in which amateurs and professionals are considered within the landscape of both journalism and other sectors through academic literature. The disruption to the local news landscape by the arrival of affordable digital tools and access to audiences has recognised that there is a gap between what, in chapter two, I examine as professionalism and amateurism. While recognising that these two elements may exist, it is clear that there is a space between them too. There is, therefore, a need to further understand the 'middle ground' between amateurism and professional where much of the hyperlocal news sector may be considered to operate. In this chapter, I will explore the way in which prosumers and semi-professionals exist in order to demonstrate how we can reconsider the definitions of journalists operating beyond the boundaries of professional local news. Such examination will allow for consideration of those operating as semi-professional journalists in subsequent chapters through my own research and open debates within the wider field of Journalism Studies.

The apparent 'third space' of journalism is not as well defined as either the professional or amateur sectors of the journalism landscape. This is not to say that there is no academic examination taking place in the local news landscape; indeed the exploration of the area is one of the focuses of this study and those of others who have looked towards the edges of what is defined as mainstream journalism (Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Nicey, 2016; Ahva 2017; Maares and Hanusch, 2020). As with other areas around amateurism and professionalism previously discussed, though, it will be possible to draw areas of interest and knowledge from other sectors and so it is important to look at these in this chapter as part of the overall review of the existing literature relating to the positioning and framing of activity which may be perceived as semi-professional and existing beyond the professional sector. By exploring this it will allow for consideration of alternative debates around the space such as the role of

semi-professionalism. Therefore in this chapter I seek to explore the ways in which work on

semi-professionalism, prosumerism and co-creation are offering potential insights into the framing of

reporters working in the hyperlocal sector, as well as identifying areas within the field of study where there

are opportunities to further understand how these ideas can crossover to the local independent news

sector, particularly those areas defined as being on "journalism's edges" (Ferron, Kotisova and Smith,

2022: 213).

3.1 The semi-professional

Historically, terms such as semi-professions (Etzioni, 1969) and aspiring professions (Goode, 1969) were

used to categorise activities which may, in terms of a more modern perception, be identified as sitting

between the amateur and professional poles. While these categorisations aim to create a nameplate for

such activities, others seek to reflect a more social element to the tasks being undertaken in this area. For

example, Riessman and Pearl (1965) identify such activities as careers for the poor, which is of note

when viewed alongside some of the commentary in previous chapters around how financial status and

models impact on perceptions of amateur and professional activities. However, these terminologies, while

textually linked to the semi-professionalism being explored, offer more of a viewpoint on the professions

themselves rather than branches of them being examined as alternative ways of working alongside or in

competition to professional activities. This is not to say that lessons cannot potentially be taken from the

analysis of such terms. Indeed, Gray (1988:199) suggests that a semi-professional position could be

linked to whether or not an individual is considered to be from "governable people rather than

self-governing". However, this also lends itself more towards a comparative approach between

professions rather than within them in the way experienced in terms of the relationship between

hyperlocal journalism and the sector more broadly.

More contemporary perspectives around semi-professionalism can also be considered when

seeking to understand how such a categorisation may exist in the digital landscape. Work looking at the

music sector has sought to highlight how semi-professionals are not merely frustrated professionals

awaiting their opportunity, but are actually content with the creative outlet while also working in a more

stable job and fitting their endeavours around a family life (Miller, 2016). This view challenges some of the

concepts discussed in chapter one whereby hyperlocal journalism is perceived as a route to disruption

rather than, as such studies in music suggest, one of contentment. Previous work in the field has also led

to this view of semi-professional musicians, who are able to make money but not necessarily a

sustainable income from their labour, as not actively seeking a professional career (Finnegan, 1989;

Nash, 2012).

Further examination of semi-professionalism as a consideration within different sectors also offers

insights into potential areas where it could be viewed through a lens of journalism. Similarly emerging

areas in the digital landscape, such as e-sports, have begun to grapple with the idea, recognising that one

of the key differences between semi-professionals and professionals relates to the time dedicated to not

only their participation within the activity, but also the time spent skilling themselves for it (Pluss et al,

2022). The fact that they participate in their online contests alongside each other demonstrates that the

status of the semi-professional does not necessarily prevent them from challenging professional norms,

but it recognises that the quality they are able to deliver due to the restrictions on the time they can

commit may make it difficult for them to classify themselves as equals. Other suggestions place

semi-professionalism as a context aligned to the employer rather than the individual (Malele and

Noorbhai, 2023), thus questioning whether local journalists working independently or for organisations

lacking what might be considered recognised professional structures can even be considered as

semi-professionals. Perceptions of how the work of semi-professionals can be considered are also

explored in studies around the role of reviewers, with the suggestion that "information quality, argument

quality and source credibility can directly influence customers' perceptions of usefulness" (Parkikh et al,

2017:499). Given this is an area perhaps more closely linked to the practice of journalism, then it is worth

considering how semi-professionals are viewed in terms of trust and validation of the content they

produce, particularly given the view that the quality of user-generated material is considered lower unless

it is peer-reviewed or has been through an editorial process (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Smith, Menon

and Sivakumar, 2005). If we consider this view of process as a key component, then there are clear points of reference around how semi-professional and hyperlocal journalists may not conform to organisational norms within local news but are nevertheless working within a recognised editorial process.

Despite there being areas of similarity in the subject matter when considering semi-professionalism in alternative sectors, there is a lack of examination about how this could be framed in a more specifically journalistic context. However, it is notable that there has been exploration of the ways in which journalism educators have dismissed the suitability of semi-professional existence as a route for students to pursue and have therefore not considered it as a part of the learning for would-be reporters (George, 2011). It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that scholars have not examined in greater detail the role such semi-professionalism may play in the journalism sector if there is not the desire to instigate such learning amongst students about the role such a pursuit may play in their careers. This is not to say that journalism and semi-professionalism are not considered together; in fact Ahva (2017) points to students themselves being among those who could be considered as semi-professionals, alongside activists and even those academics – or hackademics (Harcup, 2012) – who teach them. Instead, there is a suggestion that "what ties this group together is a shared sense that important topics are not well represented in the mainstream media" (Ahva, 2017:148). Such a view suggests that the desire to occupy the semi-professional space may not be directly related to any sense of civic duty or personal development, so it could therefore be considered that hyperlocal journalists who are working in local communities may be aligned to semi-professionalism for reasons of conservation of local news values through either the practice of production or the creation of journalism artefacts themselves, something which is explored through the interviews carried out with local news providers in chapter seven of this thesis.

Although semi-professionalism may suggest some earning potential, it is notable that in other sectors, such as sport, this is not identified as a core driver for participants, with remuneration described as "among the least valued motivators" (Taylor et al, 2023: 534) for those choosing to occupy a semi-professional position. Hallam (2016) defines motivational factors for participants in music, where many may be semi-professional or even amateurs, as either developing an identity, learning or satisfying

personal needs. Others, such as Cushion, McDowell-Nayor and Thomas (2021) and Ihlebæk et al (2022) discuss how semi-professional news can be driven by the desire of participants to pursue alternative ideological goals around media and its purpose within society more broadly. The desire to contribute to a community of interest is also considered by scholars as a way of understanding the relationship with participants classified as semi-professionals to their industry (Herbst, 2021), while the need to protect the needs of those peers are also suggested as reasoning for the utilisation of such labour by individuals (Nicey, 2016).

Consideration of the semi-professional must also be viewed against a backdrop of alternative terminology that refers to those operating beyond the professional realm. As discussed in chapter one, journalism has experimented with categorisation around citizen and participatory reporting (Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Nicey, 2016), as well as blogging (Andrews, 2003; Lowrey, Parrott and Meade, 2011; Ashe, 2023) and hobby journalism (Hooffacker, 2022). Others have sought to consider the 'in-betweeners' of journalism who operate beyond the professional sector (Ahva, 2017); the breadth of descriptions in itself showcasing the uncertainty over a defined way of describing the activity in the space between amateur and professional as identified in the previous chapter. Because of this, it must be recognised that semi-professional discourse could be described in alternative ways by some scholars, just as we see in the other sectors which opt for alternative terms such as non-professional (Dewar and Clark, 1992) instead of using the semi-professional terminology directly. It is for this reason that concepts around the prosumer must also be considered when attempting to define and contextualise some of the meaning behind semi-professionalism.

3.2 The prosumer

Given the consideration in chapters one and two around the ways in which technology and audience behaviour have created disruption within the local news sector, the idea of the prosumer has particular relevance in terms of understanding whether the space at journalism's edges is being inhabited by

readers who have risen up to find their own way or other participants who may be empowered by the

tools being made available to them. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that participation in the

prosumer sphere is a key component of the skillset of the contemporary journalist (Ishikawa et al, 2022;

Moyo, 2023), while others have suggested that citizen journalism is clearly aligned to prosumerism (Ugille

and Raeymaekers, 2009; Cesareo, 2011). The idea that citizen journalism is a natural fit for prosumerism

highlights the need for discussion around whether or not the evolution of amateur reporters into

semi-professionals who operate between amateurism and professionalism has retained traits previously

considered as part of examinations of the activities of prosumers.

Regardless of the views on whether or not amateurism is validated or enhanced by the power of

digital tools and the internet, there is a traceable line back to the work of Toffler (1980) who questions

whether consumers are merely a product of the industrial revolution and whether a pure version of this

notion still exists in the post-modern era. While Toffler's vision of the so-called 'prosumer' as a consumer

who begins to produce by carrying out core tasks for themselves is rooted in physical acts of doing and a

movement of the relationship between provider and audience, there are also more contemporary

examples of discussions around digital platforms in a social media and Web 2.0 landscape which may be

enhancing the capabilities of this type of creator. As Alderete (2017:2) points out: "The prosumer is

capable of creating content, opinions and comments about goods and services which are shared in a

community with similar tastes". Although this sense of communal appreciation is recognised by Alderete,

the work also identifies that the financial value of such products and activities are not comparable to more

professional and traditional methods, highlighting how the community does not expect to pay a high price

for what it consumes within digital landscapes, as well as suggesting that the prosumers behind the work

do not expect payment for their efforts. Both points are where comparisons can be drawn with

perceptions around the cost of producing news versus the desire of the audience to pay for journalism

online (Picard, 2016; Davoudi et al, 2018; Munger, 2020; Murschetz, 2020; Jenkins, 2023). Studies which

predate the mass uptake of digital platforms and the internet do not necessarily share this view of

prosumerism as a transaction free activity, though. Kotler (1986) instead points to two types of prosumer

activity; one for use and one for exchange. Kotler argues that the former involves no transaction, but the

latter is used as a way of funding future production via payment. This is a point for exploration within my own work in later chapters in relation to the role of those who currently occupy hyperlocal spaces, by considering how those producers see their labour in terms of whether they are trading in social capital, financial, or some other alternative value.

While Toffler suggests the rise of the prosumer as an individual capable of producing and creating their own goods and services in a way previously only accessible to the professional provider, he seeks to define this grouping as one of the largest societal sectors, with sub-sections of the group having particularly specialised skills linked to an individual area of expertise, even when considered as a non-professional. However, Bruns (2009) argues that Toffler's position has become outdated and that a new breed of produsage is being ushered in thanks to areas such as citizen journalism and open source programmes and production processes through collaborative tools such as Wikipedia. Such a viewpoint ties in to that of Witschge and Nygren (2009) who articulate the way in which journalism's ability to be conducted by those beyond the professional realm may create a semi-professional status for the industry. More recently, the prosumer has been identified as a defined participant in the sharing economy (Xiang et al, 2022). However, while Ramirez (2022) highlights the rise of the sharing economy alongside the development of new digital platforms utilised by reporters, he suggests the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) is more closely aligned to the work carried out in the journalism sector, bringing into question once more the motivating factors behind those participants in the middle ground as discussed in previous chapters.

The historical position surrounding Toffler's idea of the prosumer is able to be traced back to studies around the way in which emerging technologies have impacted on the relationship between the individual and the powers of industry and society. Bell and Kristol (1965) suggest that information technology could open the door to allow objective knowledge to play a stronger role in society; a step which appears on the surface not too far from the emergence of creative citizens operating in and around professional arenas such as journalism today. This idea resonates given the fact that the development of tools enabling the rise of the prosumer has allowed the evolution of a generation who are able to create content and artefacts in increasingly creative ways (Jenkins, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Seran

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and Izvercian, 2014; Chan et al, 2022). However, the importance placed upon the theory of the rise of the prosumer as a phenomenon is challenged somewhat by those who suggests it is actually nothing new, with history pointing to numerous examples of people creating for consumption without remuneration (Comor, 2011) . Indeed, audience participation has been a regular part of the thinking surrounding areas such as the entertainment industry (van Dijck, 2009) by showcasing the way in which the emphasis of the activity and those engaging with the performance can combine. However, the rise of social media as a platform for prosumerism is worthy of consideration given the ability for those partaking in such activities to share the space more directly with those from the professional ranks (Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011; Cotoc and Radu, 2022). Connections have also been made between the way prosumers in the social media landscape operate and the fandom discussed in the previous chapter as a way to understand the activities taking place in these digital spaces (Daros, 2022), which raises further reasons to explore the factors behind those spaces to understand the differences and similarities of those participating in journalism in the middle ground between professional and amateur.

Discussions around the context of semi-professionalism and prosumerism often focus on the role of the individual within the broader scheme of the industry they are operating in. Macpherson (1962:3) points to a sense of "proprietary individualism", a concept which fits well alongside the view of Toffler (1980) in his perception of the societal Third Wave where citizens would go beyond creation and begin selling their products back to the market to create prosumerism in its clearest form. There are some examples, however, where the notion of the prosumer is not as clearly defined. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that prosumerism can appear in other aspects of the production process, suggesting that the way social media users engage with digital platforms shows that they are prosumers of information about projects rather than prosumers of the product itself. This is of interest when considering the previously discussed views of Cotoc and Radu (2022) about the use of digital platforms to allow individuals to be participatory prosumers in the overall narrative of the message delivered via such platforms, particularly in terms of providing information and knowledge to their peer groups on social networks. The concept of sharing as part of the prosumerism movement is also discussed by Garcia-Galera and Valdivia (2014:11) who make the point that "it doesn't make sense to create without

sharing", while Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) discuss how informed and engaged consumers are working with organisations and businesses to co-create value.

While much focus is on the role of the individual in the rise of the prosumer, this viewpoint suggests that changes to the production schemes cannot be ignored in the context of the way in which roles and knowledge transfer have developed. Comor (2011:11) argues that "since scientific management methods were introduced more than a century ago, capitalists have become less reliant on their employees' knowledge and creativity". This viewpoint opens questions around whether the absence of outputs for these elements has created a void which creative citizens are filling or whether there is a semi-professional journalism at play in local news which should be looked at in a different way to existing categorisations. When considering this through the journalism lens in relation to potential semi-professionalism and the hyperlocal movement more broadly, there is plenty to consider around the phases of the process to understand how journalists view both their own creative process and the role sharing the outcome with their audience may play in their motivations to engage with such activities in the first place. Through self-reflection and analysis, as well as questioning the perceptions, backgrounds and motivations of those occupying the local news third space, it may be possible to understand points of difference between prosumers and semi-professional journalists in order to better define them going forward.

The considerations of prosumers as citizens empowered by circumstance are explored by Gabriel and Lang (2015:252) who point to the changes in consumer behaviour and the creation of the so-called "unmanageable consumer". The suggestion identifies a change in both the consumer and producer landscapes which allowed for the development of the active audience (Bird, 2011) recognised within Journalism Studies. These evolutions of the role of the audience in a digital age are also explored as fanification (Nikunen, 2007), although it is accepted that not all active audiences rely on online platforms to create activity by others at a similar time (Gray et al, 2007; McBride and Bird, 2007), suggesting that tools may be an enabler but are not an essential factor in the development of prosumer behaviour. Regardless of this, the ability of prosumers and active audiences to influence behaviours and industry trends is accepted by Costello and Moore (2007:140) who suggest they have the ability to create "unified

centres of resistance to influence the global industries of cultural production". This correlates to the way in which journalism newsrooms adopted some of the processes and ideals promoted by the audience around social media usage and user generated content as discussed in chapter one. Lewis (2012) framed this position as one where the journalism industry began to look beyond its own borders and boundaries to seek solutions which had previously come from internal problem-solving, while others point to the need to take a more collaborative approach in order to safeguard the longevity of local news (Jenkins and Graves, 2022). Comor (2011:12) echoes the sense of shift in power and control of the commodity of news by suggesting that traditional corporations and organisations will "lose control of established levers of power" in an audience-driven media landscape. Even in the perhaps negative connotations of the journalism industry through aspects such as validation and fake news (Zannettou et al, 2019), some have suggested that the role of prosumers in disrupting the professional monopoly can be seen, with Araujo, Wihbey and Barredo-Ibanez (2022) suggesting that the only difference between propaganda and controlled media messaging of the past and the current digital landscape is the involvement of the audience as active subjects and consumers who can create rather than merely being told.

Although much of what has already been discussed in this and previous chapters explores issues such as circumstance and technology, there is also a personal element to the prosumer worthy of consideration. When discussing produsage in the social media realm, Wiertz and de Ruyter (2007) steer away from any notion of opportunity or a sense of greater good, instead identifying how personal recognition is one of the main drivers. This is echoed in the way in which Andrejevic (2003) examines stardom sought via the means of the rising trend of reality television programming at the time as a form of prosumerism. However, changes to traditional habits and organisations are more regularly identified as methods through which prosumer activity is given the mechanism to flourish (Ritzer, 2007; Cotoc and Radu, 2022). It is not to say that prosumerism has been a mere replacement for established industries and organisations though, as there is some suggestion that such activities have merely accelerated to meet the demands of rising consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) or factors such as the search for fame in a social media world (Torhonen et al, 2020).

The argument around technological enablement cannot be ignored either with the advent of user-driven platforms such as Facebook and Youtube all being identified as key factors in the shift from consumer to producer (Boyd, 2006; Konieczny, 2009; Buzetto-More, 2013; Weeks et al, 2017; Lam, 2019, Islam et al, 2022). While the split between the forces behind a rise in prosumerism are debated, Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010:20) are clear in their view that while the modern internet landscape was not necessarily the cradle of such activities "it can be argued that it is currently both the most prevalent location of prosumption and its most important facilitator as a means of prosumption". Paltinieri and Esposti (2013:30) are even more evangelical about the power of digital platforms to create media provided by alternative voices and agents, saying "the internet has become a setting for citizenship, providing an opportunity to observe events that happen in the world in a critical tone, and a setting for the empowerment of citizens, understood as communicative empowerment". These viewpoints demonstrate that there are alternative ways in which prosumerism can embody itself in different sectors allowing for considerations on everything from individuals to organisations, technologies, structures and platforms, all of which have played a part in the changing shape of local journalism as outlined in chapter one.

While the narrative around much of the work exploring the rise of the prosumer landscape in the digital era is, on the whole, positive in tone, this is tempered somewhat by discussions around other issues aligned to it and the fact that such views can be technologically deterministic. Tapscott and Williams (2009) are among those who identify with the exploitation of those who might be categorised as prosumers in the digital age, suggesting a culture of generosity wherein free labour was being considered as a given needed to be overcome. It is a point echoed by Andrejevic (2011:278) who describes the use of work created by prosumers as "extraction of unpaid, coerced, and alienated labour", although Roberts (2016) offers a caveat to the view of exploitation of prosumers by pointing to the fact that it is delivered voluntarily and without coercion from those who may be the beneficiary of such activities. An alternative take on this is the viewpoint that the exploitation of prosumers is no longer confined to social exchanges in digital arenas and therefore needs to move beyond the argument of paid labour versus unpaid labour (Fuchs, 2010). This point is positioned interestingly alongside the view that an explosion in online and offline prosumerism activities has increased the opportunities for the exploitation of associated labour to

take place. Much of this debate around when creation becomes exploitation is fused around the blurring of the lines between what constitutes work and what we actually classify as leisure (Fuchs, 2014); a position that offers an interesting link to work which looked at how different generations approach their activities in both of these areas (Twenge et al, 2010), suggesting that younger people are now embarking on activities with a different set of values and may therefore not see creative exploitation in the same way that some traditional theorists have. The idea of perceptions of exploitation are further examined by Dusi (2018) who identifies the role of the individual in the process of identifying how their work is or isn't being used by third parties in an exploitative manner. Others suggest that contemporary capitalism requires a rethink of the way we consider and protect the prosumer (Ritzer, 2019).

The sheer abundance of content created by prosumers on digital platforms such as Facebook and other social media channels (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010;Lam, 2019, Islam, 2022) offers an idea that the prosumer movement is showing no signs of receding and is in fact increasing engagement through community media forms (Rennie, 2007), which may help to understand the longevity of some outlets and reporters within the hyperlocal sphere. The potential generational change in approach also may offer some insight into why those engaging with semi-professional journalism may not necessarily be driven by the same reasons as others who have gone before them in different sectors. Such an indication of large scale engagement with prosumer activities and creative formats has allowed scholars to suggest that work and leisure are no longer necessarily exclusive counterparts, with a study by Kucklich (2005) of fan-modified computer games arguing that although the activities would potentially be categorised as work in the purest sense of the term, the act of creation and the empowerment offered as a valued member of modification community is actually perceived by those engaging as a leisure activity.

3.3 Liminality

When considering the concept or idea of an alternative space for production within journalism by those considered as semi-professional in a development stage as well as within the space recognised as

hyperlocal in chapters 1.2 and 1.3, the work around liminality offers areas worthy of further examination too by providing consideration around how the location as an individual can move. From my own experiences as outlined in chapter five,it is evident that there are points at which an established position can change which might take a journalist from amateur to professional and then to semi-professional or vice-versa. Van Gennep (1909) identified the way in which individuals might encounter or occupy a space which forms part of a transition or in-between stage of development or production; a theory which was developed further by Turner (1974) who explored the ways in which stages of social life can create activities which may be classed as taking liminal forms. Papacharissi (2015) supports this notion by pointing to liminality being a limited period situated between beginning and end. It is these descriptions of liminal individuals which offer an interesting segway between the study of such areas and journalism which may exist in the middle ground between amateur and professional practices. Of particular interest in relation to my own study is the way in which the individual is framed in studies of liminality, such as Beech (2011) who looks at the way such activities allow for identity construction and reconstruction of identities, in particular the role of the change process between two different guises. Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) demonstrates that the movement within the space considered as semi-professional may not be a set route, creating an opportunity to further understand and challenge notions around a single definition of hyperlocal by considering how liminality and semi-professionalism may align in a journalistic sense.

The discourse around acts pertaining to liminality, such as those by Beech (2011), might be seen to suggest that the process is one which can be applied to social activities. However, others make the point that entering the liminal stage and experiencing it is not a natural process, rather one that is the result of a structure and framework facilitating it (Szakolczai, 2009). A study of the rise in night-time economies in towns and cities by Hobbs et al (2000) adds weight to this idea of a structure surrounding such activities, suggesting that such zones of liminality allow for the cultivation of actions within them. Other authors in this field have suggested there may even be custodians of liminal zones (Malbon, 1998). Within journalism and media itself, questions have been raised around how liminality is helping to redefine how news is produced and by whom (Belair-Gagnon et al, 2019). As a tool to learning, liminality is tackled in studies looking at the way in which people move across an in-between space to develop knowledge

(McWhinney and Markos, 2003; McCartney et al, 2009; Horvath et al, 2022). The suggestion is of interest given the area of study for my own work, particularly in relation to the role emerging platforms have played in challenging norms of training and access to the news production process, as well as being able to chart and draw knowledge from the route in and, equally as importantly, out of the spaces defined as amateur, professional and semi-professional within journalism. Similarly, the work of Wood (2012), who identifies the ways in which blogs have empowered students to cross into a higher level of work through the use of creative and liminal spaces, offers points to consider when identifying how semi-professionals in a journalism context may not be static or fixed. This is of particular interest when examining the role past experiences or future aims may or may not have had on the development of individuals who are semi-professional and working on non-traditional journalistic outlets in areas such as hyperlocal journalism. It also raises questions around the relationship between work-based actions and those which may tie closer to leisure or hobby endeavours.

The idea put forward by Kucklich (2005) of carrying out activity which could be defined as work, is challenging when considering the examinations of amateurism carried out in earlier chapters. Some scholars (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2008) argue that the notion of value can be overridden by the way in which activities can offer both economic and social benefits to the creator and the community in which they engage, with others identifying how younger participants can find value through resistance to providers of texts and artefacts often produced by professionals (Sugihartati, 2020). While these notions of almost noble actions for the benefit of a broader group might offer some solutions to the factors behind them, work in the video game modification landscape has questioned whether developers who allow for such activity to take place – and create toolkits to allow for it to be encouraged – are arguably exploiting the free labour of those who make use of the opportunity to do so (Thomke and von Hippel, 2002; West and Gallagher, 2006; Poretski and Orazi, 2017; Dewalska-Opitek and Hofman-Kohlmeyer, 2021) rather than any greater desire or transactional plan to enhance the skills of the participants. It is an idea of relevance when considering digital journalism and the rise of citizen journalists and hyperlocal providers, where tools such as social media networks and blogging platforms have openly invited what could be viewed as free labour (Bruns and Highfield, 2012) and filled the gap left behind by the demise of local

newspapers, but where other activities may be deemed to have a developmental value to those engaging with such processes (Woods, 2022) by offering opportunities for learning or progression.

The sense that the actions of participants are not considered as work (or at least professional work), though, does not necessarily mean that they may never be conceived as such. While a study by Postigo (2003:594) around those who modify video games categorised individuals as "video-game programmer hobbyists", the work of Sotamaa (2010) instead looks to explore areas where monetisation of such actions could occur, either through a transaction with creator or with audience. This position feeds well into the notion of the hustle (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005; Wilson, 2009; Baskaran, 2018; Sessions et al, 2021), a phrase often attributed to the working methods of younger generations in a changing employment and social environment. Watkins (2019:11) further examines the way those communities of younger people are carrying out actions which reflect "the side-hustle ethos common in the innovation economy". There is a suggestion from such a position that the side-hustle is a tactic employed by educated young people when the employment market becomes uncertain or during times of austerity (Mwaura, 2017). Both are pertinent points in relation to the media and local journalism landscapes when considering the context of changing job roles, as discussed in previous chapters, and uncertainty around areas such as the education and employment security of journalists which have led to the rise of hyperlocal and semi-professionalism. This would also question whether the aforementioned prosumers are akin to those keen to provide free labour within communities, either online or physical, or are actually seeking a side-hustle by which to ensure their continuation in their communities of practice.

The impact of socio-economic policies on the labour market can open up avenues, both in terms of necessity and entrepreneurial opportunity, for a side-hustle culture to exist where opportunities in traditional employment are diminishing (Berlant, 2011). It can be argued in relation to the changes within the journalistic sphere that these views echo those around the rise of hyperlocal and semi-professional journalism forms within markets previously occupied by more formalised institutions and practices where opportunities have been lessened due to economic and social factors. Interestingly, in terms of the way these manifest themselves, Thieme (2017) challenges the notion that there is some form of geographical framing to the side-hustle rising to the fore within communities, instead identifying how localised increases

in such behaviour can occur but are linked more to a form of globalised "contemporary urbanisation", which again offers consideration for future chapters around the way in which liminality allows participants in the local news space to enter and exit when viewed as seeking a benefit from a side-hustle rather than any sense of civic duty or value.

These suggestions of the side-hustle as a broad route to monetising the activities which may otherwise fall under the guises of produsage or prosumerism do question somewhat the view that financial rewards can act as a demotivating force (Benkler, 2006), offering a point of questioning around whether social or financial factors might be the greater force in terms of influencing those engaging in creative activities and therefore their desire to enter such spaces. The point is tackled by Banks and Humphreys (2008) who open a debate on the need for new labour relations and a rethink of roles such as the prosumer in the contemporary landscape (Ritzer, 2019). The view of Banks and Humphreys around institutionalised methods of working not being welcoming spaces for those used to a more fluid and almost ad-hoc environment of creative working are worthy of examination in order to see how the bridging of an apparent middle ground of semi-professionalism might be achieved, particularly in relation to journalistic work. Thieme (2017) says that it is important for policy makers and those studying the modern labour market to recognise the changes to the concept of value and jobs as a whole in order to fully recognise the significant part such hustle activities can make in empowering, engaging and employing young people in a creative, cultural and economic environment which is going through a particular period of change and upheaval.

Liminality discourse offers a clear link to the ways in which local news journalists are transiting the space beyond the professional landscape. While not considering myself as an amateur or a professional, it could be argued that my own journey as outlined in chapters four and five has stopped in all of these descriptive positions at some stage. It also identifies with work on origin stories of hyperlocal journalists by Wahl Jorgensen (2022) and, I would suggest, highlights the process reporters in this semi-professional space between amateur and professional go through as part of their own efforts to create an identity around which they can engage with the creative process of their own work. In the next

section of this chapter, I explore how those reporters are able to utilise their positioning at any particular point to engage with production and potential collaboration with others in a creative setting.

3.4 Creativity, creation and co-creation

If empowerment is one of the perceived positives of technological advancement, the flip-side of the debate is the suggestion by Comor (2011) that technology and industry are evolving to remove the need for the individuality of workers and producers; a claim which has, in the general sense, the potential to take the discussion away from the position of the individual when considering prosumerism and semi-professionalism as a whole. Untangling the role of the individual and any notion of the prosumer then has the ability to take the discussion around the activities being carried out into a realm that is closer to one of co-creation (Ind and Coates, 2013; Cheung et al, 2021). The act of co-creation is a collaboration between professional and non-professionals to create or enhance existing products (Piller et al, 2011), while Sanders and Stappers (2008:6) define co-creation as "an act of collective creativity", although they stress that the term is broad and can have crossover meaning with other descriptions. When considered via the views of Leino and Puumala (2021) of co-creation as a multi-directional response to problem solving, it may be suggested that the way local news has seen activity in the semi-professional space previously occupied by newspapers may be as a result of co-creation where participants are seeking to resolve concerns and issues around the demise of provision rather than purely as a creative process.

To understand co-creation, it is important to examine the issue of creativity within it, particularly in relation to the role of the user in shaping this process. Creativity is often acknowledged as the development of ideas in different domains (Stein, 1974; Woodman et al, 1993; Amabile et al, 1996). The relevant skilling and motivation are considered by Amabile (1983) to be the key factors in creativity, with Sanders (2006) building further on this point by attempting to define creativity in everyday life through four channels - doing, adapting, making and creating. These ideas around creativity could easily be dismissed as being mere thought processing, but de Bono (1995) makes a strong case that there are key

differences, namely that creativity is carried out to create practical solutions, whereas brainstorming is

designed for short-termism in areas such as marketing where the need for novelty often overtakes that of

longevity. Interestingly, de Bono does also point to creativity being the domain of both the individuals and

the collaborators, offering a suggestion of a middle ground between the different participants in the

creative process; a point which offers a crossover of consideration around whether those occupying

journalism's edges should be considered as a singular entity such as hyperlocal or something more

nuanced. Journalism's relationship with creativity as a notion is not as clear cut though, with Fulton and

McIntrye (2013) and de Burgh (2003) both arguing that print journalism in particular is not seen as a

creative activity due to the often structured nature of the production methods employed and the

professional norms accepted across the industry as a whole. However, certain aspects away from

traditional hard news reporting have generally been perceived as having a more creative spark to them

(Lichter et al, 1986; Schumacher et al, 1989; Niblock, 2006, Gutierrez Lopez et al, 2022), with much of the

more standardised print journalism formats perceived as being too formulaic and constrained to allow for

actual creativity at any great level (Hirst and Patching, 2005). While previous chapters have explored the

role education and skilling has played in journalism's evolution, de Burgh (2003:110) makes the case that

the industry's creativity is linked to the education of those performing such tasks by suggesting that

skilling and academic knowledge provide a platform for creativity. It is interesting to view this work

alongside previous studies in Australia which have found that a perception of entering a creative industry

was one of the reasons students gave for taking up journalism as a degree programme (Pearson, 1988;

Grenby et al, 2009). The idea of creative journalists dovetails well into the suggestion made that the

convergence of digital formats and changes to the roles of journalists as they become more

multi-platformed in terms of output has brought about a new era of creativity in the sector (Markham,

2012).

The role of journalists in engaging with audiences through social media also has the potential to

offer an insight into the way they engage with such platforms, particularly given the fact that creative

production methods are beginning to emerge from the formats delivered by the internet (Greenhow,

Robelia and Hughes, 2009). This may also start to explain why the idea of co-creation has emerged in the

journalistic vocabulary and a broader societal push towards ownership of spaces and challenges to creative norms through tools such as Creative Commons licensing, which Elvin-Koren (2006) suggests was formed to overcome the barriers to creativity posed by copyright laws. Platforms cultivated by users and non-professionals, such as Wikipedia, might also be considered when looking at the way in which subjects and areas traditionally owned by professionals are being colonised and redefined by others. Kuznetsov (2006) points to the altruistic nature of such activities together with the autonomy provided by a user-operated network. As discussed in previous chapters, areas such as user-generated content offer a clear link between some of the discussions around co-creation and journalism, but by examining other fields it is noticeable that partnership between non-professionals and the journalistic industry are perhaps not as advanced. Hoyer et al (2010) point to how new product design is increasingly being used to tackle industry challenges through the use of the knowledge-base within the consumer groups. The use of consumers – and therefore the change in their role to prosumers or co-creators – in development work is in order to succeed, with failure to understand consumer needs cited as one of the key factors in product failures (Ogawa and Piller, 2006). Although this sounds a positive note around co-creation, it points to the activity still being instigated by the professional partner with the user being invited to collaborate rather than necessarily create from the outset in a way seen in areas such as hyperlocal journalism. Prosumerism offers more obvious parallels, but where work is taking place amongst creative members in areas such as community radio there are clear links to the notion of using co-creation as a method to solve problems and create new products (Rennie, 2007). This development of new work is fundamentally linked to the ability of those keen to co-create to engage with the process, usually through the introduction and accessibility of technological tools (Lessig, 2001). The ability to engage in the creative and developmental activity is, according to Benkler (2006), seeing the use of a broad range of methods carried out by individuals and cooperative groups in both tight and loose collaborative structures. The focus on the relationship between the creator and the user is complicated by the links both will have with a wider network in the digital landscape (Paltinieri and Esposti, 2013) and how their work may be perceived beyond their own creative combination, a point which is interesting when considering how Granovetter (1973) alludes to the value of broader networks, suggesting that they offer opportunities and

richer feedback for those engaged in prosumer activities. Cheung et al (2021) suggest that the value in

engaging with the co-creation process in a digital landscape may even come from the entertainment value

which can be drawn from such activity. This is a point of interest when drawing links around the liminality

of journalists who may be entering the semi-professional sphere as potential co-creators seeking value

which may not be financial or even developmental.

Much of the problem around defining co-creation in a journalistic sense is down to the variety of

topics it could potentially cover, with Rennie (2007:27) saying there is a "real danger that community

media will be confused with social networking and other forms of amateur media production". However,

there is a considerable amount of activity around co-creation in relation to media frontiers which is

focused around social media and the role it plays in the development of products and ideas (Hatch and

Schulz, 2010; Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012; Lorenzo-Romero et al, 2014' Moghadamzadeh et al, 2020).

Much of this work is framed within the marketing and community management spheres of study, however,

although there are examples looking at areas such as the magazine publishing landscape, where

Aitamurto (2013) discusses changes to the transactional roles of the professional producer and the

amateur consumer when co-creation is employed as a method of collaborative publishing, pointing to the

way in which journalistic organisations have actively sought to reshape this relationship (Boczkowski,

2004) through a form of open journalism.

Aitamurto (2013) also seeks to explore the co-creation of journalistic work through different

stages of the process from pre-publication to post-publication, offering a suggestion that open journalism

or work created in a collaborative way between professionals and non-professionals may only be open at

points which are pre-determined by the organisation enabling the cooperative approach. This is a view

explored by Lewis (2013) who questions the openness of open journalism, suggesting instead that

boundaries are still set by the professional side of the collaboration, work which echoes that of others

within the journalism academic community who have explored the juxtaposition of a move towards

so-called open reporting and the control exerted by professional outlets (Neuberger and Nuernbergk,

2010; Singer et al, 2011; Graham et al, 2019). It also points to the professionalism element of

semi-professional being a key factor in seeking to differentiate between factions within the hyperlocal

arena. Some scholars have also suggested that the co-creation we are seeing within the journalism

sector is actually delivered alongside curation:

> While everybody thinks that they can learn to communicate and that citizens' participation
> is important, they tend to prefer being those who control the quality and scope of what is
> published.

(Vazquez-Herrero et alt, 2022:235)

The suggestion questions whether journalism has the capability to be a genuinely collaborative space

where the audience and reporters of professional, amateur and semi-professional positions can co-exist

in a way other than as editorial rivals seeking to get the exclusive before one another or suppliers and

consumers. It also asks questions around news values and the ownership and setting of these when

considering which content can get through a filter applied by a producer in either the amateur,

semi-professional or professional definition.

By examining ideas around co-creation and creativity on the back of considerations around

amateurism, professionalism and liminality, it is evident that the grey area beyond these defined

boundaries is key to understanding many of the facets of the space I suggest can be considered as

semi-professional. While this may not be considered a catch-all term for the space, by using it as a

starting point for the consideration of what such a status may look like for journalists, it offers a greater

opportunity to understand and decipher broader terminology such as hyperlocal.

3.5 Conclusion

The literature examined in this chapter and previous ones make clear that there is the opportunity for the

middle ground between professionals and amateurs to be a fertile area for development or new models

and ways of considering how local journalism may be framed, particularly when examining the structures

and changes to technology, society and the journalism industry itself. However, it is not immediately

apparent how a notion of semi-professionalism directly fits into this context of collaborative co-creation, particularly in a local news landscape dominated by large publishing groups. There are suggestions that activists moving into the media sector are creating prosumer journalism (Pearce and Rodgers, 2020), but the links to a more standardised set of activities aligned with the production of local news are not as clearly defined. There are some suggestions that prosumerism is demonstrating a blurring of boundaries between professionalism and amateurism through the monetisation of formats such as YouTube (Delgado et al, 2021) where production norms are being challenged by a new generation of creators (Arteaga-Huarcaya, Turriate-Guzman and Gonzales-Medina, 2022), but while this is a space utilised by local journalists and amateurs, it is more aligned to the format than the content being produced and does not necessarily signal a move away from the concept of journalism producers as gatekeepers. However, Ugille and Raeymaekers (2009) suggest there is a broader move towards prosumerism in the digital age which is converting everyone to a position of gatewatchers instead. As previously discussed, prosumerism is a concept which offers many insights into the changing behaviours of different actors within the sphere, but it has become tied up in debates around organisational and societal changes and technological empowerment. While these are all areas which tie into this particular study, what is not fully tackled is how the personal perception of those who might identify as a semi-professional, prosumer or any other definition, is considered in relation to them. By seeking to understand this we will better understand what lies in and beyond journalism's edges (Ferron, Kotisova and Smith, 2022) in order to help shape thinking on the future of the industry as a whole and help to understand how discourse around sustainability, shape and funding may be impacted by better understanding those individuals who sit on the fringes of a much discussed sector, but are, I argue, being incorrectly considered as a singular entity.

As this chapter has shown, much has been written about the way semi-professionals are tied into key debates in particular sectors, be that around their performance in terms of their area of specialism in sport or the arts for example, or the way they engage with political economy in the wider sense. However, the literature surrounding the way semi-professional status might influence the choices, ideals and goals of journalists operating under this terminology is not as well developed. I suggest that the semi-professional local news journalist can be considered as someone who follows the established norms

of professional reporting in terms of production processes and audience recognition, but does not necessarily have the reliance or even desire to generate a full-time living from their labour. Similarly, there is a need to steer away from any notion that semi-professionalism is merely a stopping off point between amateur and professional or that the journey can only be travelled in one direction. As identified through this and the previous chapter, as well as later chapters, the routes travelled will be individual and may see people approaching semi-professionalism for reasons aligned to theories around fandom or the prospect of the side hustle. Similarly, as other scholars have shown, the semi-professional status could be applied to those who are moving from the professional world into a new and in some cases uncertain future.

By defining and understanding this apparent middle ground between amateurism and professionalism through recognition of how entry and exit points exist for individuals, as well as their experiences in the space, it will be possible to better define those we classify as semi-professionals. This then has the potential to open up further areas of exploration which look beyond merely the role of journalists in the wider media economy by focusing instead on how defining their existence can also challenge considerations on the way individuals can transition in and out of different sectors and liminal spaces, providing potential influence on everything from the way reporters are trained to the way they might help construct the future direction of the industry and the role it plays in wider society. It may even offer consideration around the future of local journalism as a whole.

4 Researching the story

This chapter builds on the theoretical framework I have laid out in the previous three chapters to outline how I address the ways in which semi-professionalism in journalism can be framed and seek to offer clarity on the space between amateurism and professional in the UK local news landscape. In order to understand how the individual journalist operates in this space and transitions through and within it, I utilise different methodological approaches to draw on both my own knowledge and background and the insight of others who have either occupied or currently occupy the space I term as semi-professional. Through the methodological approach used, I seek to refocus discourse on non-professional journalism, often framed as hyperlocal, beyond an organisational or practice-led approach and towards a greater emphasis on the individual in order to recognise how and why participants enter, exist and ultimately exit a semi-professional space.

As outlined at the outset of this thesis, my work seeks to examine a range of stages within the journey to and from the semi-professional space in order to address the leading research question:

> *How do journalists working in the UK's hyperlocal sector define themselves as semi-professionals?*

From this, I have identified a number of sub-questions which will seek to address associated points regarding local news and those who produce it in the contemporary, non-professional marketplace:

- *To what extent are hyperlocal journalists transitioning into, across and out of the space between professionalism and amateurism?*
- *In what ways are the past experiences of semi-professional journalists shaping their present practice and future plans?*
- *What can a year long analysis of semi-professional journalism practice tell us about how journalists manage change and the production of news?*
- *How does semi-professional status impact on the short, medium and long-term within the hyperlocal journalism sector in the UK?*

As indicated, I have utilised a triangulated methodological approach, recognising my own position within the sector alongside that of others in order to address the questions my research poses. Such triangulation is recognised as a way of seeking out knowledge by utilising alternative perspectives and methods in order to mitigate the limitations of a particular, singular method of research (Webb et al, 1966; Denzin, 1970; Opperman, 2000; Thurmond, 2001; Heesen et al, 2019). By drawing on my own experiences as well as those of others who are familiar with the space through their own activity within it at different stages of their own lives, it is possible to offer a unique insight into the realities of semi-professional journalism for the individual participating in it through the use of triangulation. Such an approach includes an autoethnographic observation of my own arrival into the hyperlocal realm of local news in chapter five, as well as an analysis of a 12 month reflective diary from my own work as a semi-professional journalist as outlined in chapter six. Semi-structured interviews with other journalists with links to the space are then utilised in chapter seven in order to juxtapose alternative perspectives on life as a working semi-professional reporter in the UK local news landscape.

When embarking on the study, the importance of the role of the individual was of particular interest. While many have examined the hyperlocal landscape, a number have focused on the overall status of this area of the non-professional journalistic field through facets such as production methods, business models, output or overall sustainability (van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014; Hess and Waller, 2016; Leckner et al, 2019). The approach has allowed for a categorisation of work in this sector to emerge and an area of scholarly activity to flourish. However, there is the opportunity to utilise unique first hand-experience as a former professional journalist-turned-active participant in the hyperlocal news sector who identifies as a semi-professional to gain understanding of how factors influence this journey to the sector beyond the professional news provision realm. By then taking the knowledge from an understanding from the past and the present to recognise the development and creation of the semi-professional journalist, it is possible to further consider the activities they undertake in more detail by exploring other individuals behind some of the titles that have emerged within the oft-explored hyperlocal sector (Kurpius et al, 2010; Metzgar et al, 2011; Paulussen and D'Heer, 2013; Harte et al, 2018; Hess and Waller, 2019; Harte, 2023). By utilising personal knowledge as both a practitioner and now educator in the

field of journalism, as well as lived experience as a professional and non-professional reporter covering local news, there is an opportunity to further understand and more clearly define the sector and differences between different agents and actors with it.

4.1 Finding the angle

Journalism Studies has drawn on a range of methods in order to make sense of opportunities, challenge and change caused by factors both internal and external to the industry itself. Many of the studies are carried out using established methods such as interviews and content analysis to examine the impact of disruption to the sector, be it through the closure of traditional newspapers (Harte et al, 2018; Edge, 2019; Kim et al, 2021; Heese et al, 2022) to the selection of news for publication (Bohle, 1986; Welbers et al, 2016; Thurman, et al, 2019). However, as explored in the following section of this chapter, despite being an industry built on storytelling, journalism rarely seeks to tell its own stories through research via the means of autoethnography. Jackson and Mazzei (2008) warn that telling the story of self runs the risk of merely moving the narrative from one voice to another rather than adding genuine insight. However, the use of an autoethnographic approach alongside data collection through semi-structured interviews and the analysis of a research diary allows for the impact of engaging with emerging models of journalism on the individual to be explored further and my use of triangulation ensures the data remains robust and able to be challenged by alternative perspectives.

The use of autoethnograpy is somewhat of a reversal of study to existing works in the field, where the role of individuals have usually been examined and decoded by a third party to explore issues such as sustainability and methods of production as outlined above, or have sought to view the production process or structure of organisations through the lens of the participant. By reframing the examination to one focusing on how such activity shapes the individual rather than vice-versa, it will be possible to better understand and categorise the diverse range of labour being utilised in hyperlocal journalism. There is a need to understand the impact of the field on the individual to ascertain how the activities they undertake

influence their lives beyond the publications they produce and the processes they follow. Some scholars, such as Wahl-Jorgensen (2022), have already begun to examine the impact of such activity on the individual in order to understand the precarity of their labour and journalistic output, offering a demonstration of the need to consider further the role of the individual reporter rather than merely their publication. By utilising an autoethnographic approach alongside the analysis of an active research diary covering a 12 month period as a semi-professional journalist and a series of interviews with other practitioners working in local journalism outside of the professional realm, it is possible to shed further light on both the lived experience and thinking of such producers, as well as understanding further the concept of liminality within this space.

The autoethnography in chapter five was created by focusing on the phases of my own development within journalism, covering my initial entry into the industry as an amateur, my transition to a professional and then my move into the hyperlocal sector. Although the data is essentially autobiographical in nature, these recollections utilised additional data such as cuttings, personal documentation and diaries to ensure accuracy of detail in order to ensure the robustness of my reflections on these points within my own past. The use of vignettes and then analysis of them allows the data to be considered as autoethnographical rather than merely autobiographical. Such a layered approach to authoethnography demonstrates the difference between the approach and autobiography by utilising "the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature" to create wider understanding (Ellis et al, 2011:278). The decision to use vignettes from my own past in order to then offer a broader scholarly analysis and create findings within them also sits alongside the view of researchers that such first person narratives can be classified as robust texts in the same ways as other, more traditional data, may be considered (Ronai, 1995).

My own role as a journalist who has identified as both a professional and non-professional reporter, as well as what I now frame as the semi-professional, at a time of rapid change and evolution within the industry is a key part of this thesis, enabling the exploration of first hand experiences on the front line of semi-professional journalism production to be examined from alternative perspectives than they have been previously. This journey from professional, to amateur, through to a semi-professional

positioning has also coincided with my work in educational settings teaching student journalists about these alternative spaces to the traditional publishing organisations many of them seek to position themselves within as graduates. The semi-professional positioning of my own role as a local journalist, while neither amateur nor professional in terms of the classifications explored in the previous chapter, showcases an alternative existence which may be available for journalists as the industry continues to evolve and reshape, both in terms of the long-term challenges to journalistic production more broadly (Nielson, 2015; Hastjarjo, 2017; Hess and Waller, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Jenkins and Graves, 2020; Jeronimo et al, 2022) and the contemporary challenges posed by the legacy of the impact of coronavirus on the industry in the more immediate term (Radcliffe, 2020; Hess and Waller, 2021).

While the scale of the hyperlocal arena as a whole is beginning to become known, there is still much to be considered around how the act of the individual ties into this part of the local media framework. As outlined above, the position I occupy as a researcher within this sector is a relatively unique one as someone who remains an active participant, but is not knowingly seeking to move directly between the amateur and professional in either direction. In order to fully utilise this position, it has required the unpicking and analysis of my current and historical practices through a comprehensive authoethnographic study. Reed-Danahy (1997) makes clear the fusing of traditional ethnographic approaches and autobiographical methods allow for the development of an understanding of how the concept of self can be intertwined with the cultural and political landscape. While there may be a challenge to autoethnography due to the use of an autobiographical approach, by using a triangulated approach it is possible to utilise such a research method as a way to identity areas through the autoethnography before investigating the findings further through alternative methods.

By building upon this autoethnographic approach and then engaging the triangulated approach through the use of a reflective research diary and semi-structured interviews with other practitioners in the semi-professional space it is possible to examine the impact of practice and on the individual rather than merely of the individual on practice. Given a large section of the focus of the research is on the ways in which individuals move, enter and depart along the transitory line between amateur and professional journalism, and the potential middle ground between the two binary poles, my own experiences in the

traditional media landscape and the emergent digital platform as the creator and editor of a hyperlocal site which has been celebrated for its longevity is worthy of exploration through such a method of study, while the data gathered from semi-structured interviews will also create a robust set of data around which to create a framework for the semi-professional journalist.

4.2 The personal perspective

Through autoethnography there is an opportunity to examine both process, product and person (Ellis et al, 2011) as well as "filling a gap" in knowledge by hearing the researcher's own voice in a way not normally seen in alternative methods (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022:198). It is for this reason that there is validity in opting for this approach, given it allows for the chance to fully explore more than 20 years of practice in different forms of journalism and journalistic education in order to analyse the processes and actions that have shaped the transitions between local news spaces by creating a bridge between lived experience and cultural curiosities (Boylorne and Orbe, 2016). As Raab (2013) identifies, the personal story of the researcher is crucial to the success of the autoethnographic approach to study. Chang (2008) suggests that the goal of this method is to create personal discovery through reflection. However, Raab (2013:4) points to a broader aim: "By sharing his or her story, [the autoethnographical researcher] may shed some light, and ultimately offer hope to those who encounter a similar lived experience". This viewpoint ties in well with the desire to understand the cultural and societal link between amateur journalism practitioners and their output, meaning this method offers an opportunity to find ways in which my own journalism work has developed as a cultural, as well as practical, experience (Wall, 2006). It also offers an opportunity to fill a gap in knowledge through the use of the author's own experiences in a way which is "compelling and impactful" (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022: 198).

There is also a further opportunity to broaden the boundaries of existing research, which are often encompassed by the framework of amateur and professional as outlined in previous chapters. This can be carried out by expanding the autoethnographic approach to my own pre-hyperlocal career, as well as

the concurrent journalism education career, and the junctions between the strands of my own development. Ellis (2007:14) describes this method as a "back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience". As a journalist who is, it could be argued, a hybrid of the professional, semi-professional and amateur strands of the industry, there is real value in exploring, understanding and challenging the drivers and factors which have shaped this unique journey of crossover and transition between alternative positions. Researching this area will allow not only for a greater knowledge base around an alternative route journalists working in more traditional outlets could follow, it also has the potential to impact the way journalism education is targeted by better understanding routes into local news provision which may not necessarily serve as a primary employment but can offer alternative benefits to the individual. As an educator with knowledge of a number of journalism programmes, many such courses look to prepare students for further study or careers within the full-time journalism arena via traditional routes or freelance roles. By recognising the option for the potential for a semi-professional to exist, we are able to consider an alternative route for those studying journalism to utilise core skills within an alternative employment method. By juxtaposing this autoethnographic study to the perceptions of others through the additional methodological approach of semi-structured interviews, there will be a broad spectrum of viewpoints to analyse and draw from.

As part of the autoethnographical study it is important to fully explore the impact of one's actions in a broader sense. This, as Raab (2013:14) points out, can lead to "difficult moments" as part of the work, with memories otherwise consigned to history being reopened for the purpose of reformatting and rethinking the past in relation to the future (Custer, 2014). Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013) suggest the possible pain of this aspect of the process of autoethnography is heightened further by the challenges within the academic community to this method as a mode of research, as well as urging those pursuing autoethnography to be aware of the barriers and questions their work may face as a result. The alternate views on authoethnography disseminate through the broad spectrum of writing on the methodological approach as well as the studies which utilise it, with consideration given to limitations and pitfalls of such work in areas such as ethics (Denejkina, 2016). Others warn against the risk of self-indulgence posed by

autoethnography (Ademowo, 2023), but it is for this reason that my own work seeks to challenge the findings generated through the use of other complementary methods to validate and avoid the dangers of seeking to generalise based purely on this approach (Price, 2022).

While autoethnography is more commonly found in arenas of study around anthropology and sociology, the scope of this methodological approach is now expanding to other areas (Ellis, 2004), such as market research, although it is still not a widespread approach within journalism. There are many debates about the usage of autoethnography in scholarly circles, such as the questioning around how ethnographic fieldwork can take place to begin with. However, this is countered by Jones (2016), who suggests that the fieldwork can take place anywhere which creates memories or allows the author to re-encounter moments through such an approach. Utilising diaries, documentation and archival material from my own career allows these trigger points to both emerge and be validated, and also open points for discussion elsewhere in the thesis. The use of this as a route of recollection itself is, however, also the subject of questions from those with a critical view on the autoethnographic approach. By not having a direct record of all conversations and moments across almost two decades, it could be argued that an editing of history can occur (Raab, 2013), but Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that this verbatim record does not necessarily impact on the validity of the research being carried out and the recollections taking place. It is, however, important to ensure some form of verification takes place where possible, be it through the use of third party interviews, as this study carries out, with those close to the decisions and moments being explored (Ellis, 2004). This concept of triangulation by utilising alternative sources as part of an autoethnographic approach is one which can ensure increased transparency (Eitzel, 2023).

Having a digital record of work as a hyperlocal producer has enabled me to employ an alternative method of verifying these areas of recollection and memory. This sense of moving away from the solo viewpoint of the 'auto' in autoethnography is not without precedence. Kempster and Stewart (2010) co-created an autoethnographical study, while others also used a similar collaborative approach (Lapadat, 2017; Roy and Uekusa, 2020). The possibilities within this study of a period of hyperlocal and professional activity are to add perspective and validity to the points tackled and the issues raised by utilising alternative sources. This allows me to give a fully rounded approach and analysis of my own

professional and amateur actions. It is noted that, like any individual reflecting or reminiscing, there is the potential for bias (Poerwandari, 2021) and alternative perspectives to cloud memories and viewpoints, but by utilising some of the aforementioned documentation as anchor points it will be possible to identify the journey into the semi-professional arena via autoethnography. Even where memories may be tainted in some way, Denzin (2014) suggests that the autoethnographic approach should be a route to begin conversations rather than necessarily provide the full answers a researcher may be looking for. This is why the use of this approach is combined with others to test and explore further the outcomes of the autoethnographic recollections in a broader context.

While an autoethnographical research method may, quite rightly, be initially focused on the experiences I have as an individual through my own lens, it is important that sight of the broader landscape isn't lost. There is also a need to ensure that the findings and study keep in mind the opportunity to understand the cultural perspective surrounding the activities of the researcher (Austin and Hickey, 2007; Pathak, 2010). Striking the balance between autoethnography and autobiography is part of the planning and the process of carrying out such a study, with the recognition by Morse (2002) that this is a thin line to tread as experiences and story can vie for position in the make-up of the autoethnographical study. Winkler (2018) makes clear that the balance must work on both sides:

> By putting too much emphasis on the "auto", hence, personal feelings, impressions, thoughts, attitudes, experiences, and so on, authors may become accused of conducting autobiography not autoethnography. However, this coin has two sides. Therefore, too much emphasis on the "ethno," in turn, may lead to the charge of slipping into more traditional forms of ethnography. How to achieve or maintain an appropriate balance between the auto and the ethno is difficult to determine.

> (Winkler, 2018:237)

When considering the positioning of the different facets of an autoethnographical approach there is value in considering ownership of information. By making public reflections on lived experiences, they cease to be private and are therefore shared. The case is made that stories are no longer able to be considered to be the author's own once they are published, given they contain interactions with those on the periphery of the issues being discussed (Sparkes, 2013). This opens up the discussion around the ethics of autoethnography as a methodological approach, particularly where representations are made

about those who are not directly linked to the key body of the research (Wall, 2008). If peripheral figures are being introduced to the story, as they are likely to be in my own journey, the issue of consent for inclusion in the study is a pertinent one (Edwards, 2021). Retrospective consent is one approach put forward (Tullis et al, 2013), but this is questioned by Winkler (2013) who points out that contact with some participants may have been lost if an autoethnographic study is carried out covering a significant timescale. Such views are a point of particular interest within my own research, where the passage of time has played a role in the ability to obtain any form of retrospective consent from some figures. The solution to solving this issue is not a simple one to find, with the uncertainty over how content produced about those on the periphery of the autoethnographical story might be used going forward (Hernandez and Ngunjiri, 2013). The concept of relational ethics has been introduced as a way of countering some of the ethical issues such studies may face (Ellis, 2007). Such an approach was considered in depth by Denshire (2014) who also opines that the use of fictional versions of key figures interweaved with facts within the story is a route which can be used where the opportunity to seek any formalised ethical consent cannot be pursued for whatever reason. However, when considering the role of the journalist working beyond the norms of the established media structures and frameworks, it could be argued that Denshire's idea of "speaking back to power" (2014:841) may turn the focus more sharply onto one's own experiences rather than becoming overly embroiled in the social and relational factors associated with it.

The authoethnographical route pursued in my own study allows for the use of a reflexive approach to understanding and contextualising my personal journey along the route between professionalism, amateurism and the 'middle ground'. The introduction of individuals connected to this progression will allow for validity, authenticity and challenge to be offered to some of the perceptions raised, while also ensuring that the perspective is balanced and appropriate. This creates the opportunity for the study to move above mere epiphanies (Bochner and Ellis, 1992) and create a disciplined approach which moves beyond storytelling and into genuine research findings (Harte, 2017). Part of the steps towards ensuring a disciplined approach to the research, particularly in relation to the latter phases of the autoethnographic approach mentioned above, was the decision to utilise a diary as a method of data capture (Bolger et al, 2003; Breakwell, 2012; Bartlett and Milligan, 2020). However, this document will

also serve as the basis for chapter six to offer reflective insight into the day-to-day practice of a hyperlocal journalist. Capturing thoughts, developments and viewpoints from journalistic activity, it offers an insight into a prolonged period of activity during a period covering the initial outbreak and subsequent fallout from the impact of COVID-19 on local news provision. By capturing this data there has also been a chance to shape the context of the autoethnographic section of study by offering areas of insight worthy of further exploration and questioning in relation to the broader questions of this thesis. Areas such as the civic role of journalism, the challenge of sustainability and the relationship with traditional media outlets are all captured within the diary, alongside more practical examinations of the realities of news production at a hyperlocal level for the individual reporter.

The reflective diary was deliberately created as a flexible way of capturing data. Not only does this allow for a more natural approach to the information gathered, it is also more accommodating in terms of the often ad-hoc nature of the hyperlocal content production process which can lack normative structure as seen in more established newsrooms. Similarly, the desire was not to prescribe the content at the outset; instead the aim was to allow the data capture to identify a broad range of topics which could be analysed further and help inform debates worthy of examination in other areas of the data gathering process for this thesis. The usage of reflective diaries is a recognised approach in areas examining factors such as workplace enhancement (Daniels and Harris, 2005; Poppleton et al, 2008) and even in journalism education (Stewart et al, 2010), although issues can be found with the reliability of participants in keeping such documentation (Steel et al, 2007). For this reason, the value of a personal reflective diary kept by myself as a practitioner and a researcher in the section will have a more robust and reliable outcome. The method of collecting data to inform the process also helps to mitigate any concerns over legitimacy of the information being considered, as outlined previously. It is important to note that this process of data collection is, by its very nature, self-selective, and is not intended to act as a diary in the traditional sense of being a document of complete record, more as a way to drive internal reflection through the broader process. Allen-Collinson (2013) recognises that this could be seen as a self-indulgent approach to research by examining the individual, but they also identify value in such approaches to seeking out new and unheard of voices, while also democratising the arena of research to people. As a

journalist, this concept of unlocking the hidden voice which may not have been heard resonates clearly as a way of deconstructing my own lived experiences within the broader context of the fast-paced change within the journalism industry in order to draw meaningful conclusions to how my own present position aligns to views around semi-professionalism.

While the reflective diary is designed to shape the structure and direction of aspects of the research, such as the semi-structured interviews in chapter seven, it is not intended to be a complete process examining output as a whole. While such an approach would allow for comparisons between different types of outlets and sectors of the journalistic industry, there would be little to be gained in carrying out a similar study at this stage given the focus of this thesis and the work of others within the field. Instead, by offering a reflective approach on my own practice, there is an opportunity to explore areas of hyperlocal production in new ways. Wall (2006:157) examines a number of authoethnographic studies to consider the validity of these as methods of research in the traditional sense. Her findings seek to offer a middle ground to the debate:

> Knowledge does not have to result from research to be worthwhile, and personal stories should have their place alongside research in contribution to what we know about the world in which we live.

> (Wall, 2006:157)

This desire to expand horizons of knowledge through alternative research methods offers a clear understanding of the value of such approaches. As long as they are countered and tested by alternative methods, they offer validity through the understanding they are able to provide when different perspectives are examined. Journalism is about perspectives and voices; therefore through the use of an autoethnographic method, reflective diary and interviews with other hyperlocal producers, there is an opportunity to both provide rigour and new and interesting insights into the research of this area of local journalism in the UK.

4.3 Semi-professional voices

The awareness of the limitations and criticism of the autoethnographic approach and personal reflective diary discussed previously means that the use of research interviews are an essential part of providing both balance and challenges to the inward reflection offered throughout the other methodological approaches. Semi-structured interviews, conducted side-by-side with the autoethnographic research, allow for the personal perspective to be challenged and/or validated by the experiences of others. Such an approach also opens up the opportunity for comparisons to be drawn and greater understanding of personal factors to be offered up through the research process. More importantly, the use of interview as a research method allows participants to "speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings" (Berg, 2007:96), although there remains the risk that the conversation can be driven by the interviewer rather than the interviewee (Knott et al, 2022). It is important to recognise such potential pitfalls in the approach at the outset. If, through my triangulated approach, the autoethnographic method can be deemed to be placing the focus on self, the interview should perform the alternative function of switching the focus to other subjects. However, it may be argued that the sense of self which, as outlined previously, is sometimes criticised in relation to autoethnography, may not necessarily be lost in interviews given the process turns the viewfinder onto someone else's self rather than the researcher. Kvale (1996:16) summarises the act of interviewing as "an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest". This linked interest, particularly when the researcher is entwined in similar practices to the subject of the study as I may be, might pose similar questions around legitimacy and impartiality. However, O'Leary (2004) suggests that when carried out appropriately, the interview can demand its own type of rigour. It also has the potential to offer expert insights from a particular field (Von Soest, 2023), in this case local news. Other scholars suggest that interviews with those deemed to have a high level of knowledge about their own practice require such knowledge from the interviewee too in order to draw understanding from the data being gathered and the discussions being had (Low et al, 2019).

One of the primary challenges as an interviewer is to identify the differences in purpose and activity between journalistic interviewing and carrying out such actions in the name of research. There are undoubtedly some areas of commonality in both processes to suggest a relationship between the two (Feldstein, 2004), particularly when considering the aim is ultimately to elicit information from the interviewee (Altheidie, 2002; Adams, 2012; Carpenter et al, 2018; Sedorkin, 2020). This does not mean to say that the activity in itself is an exact replica, however. Journalists may often approach the interview knowing the answer but needing to both validate it and seek additional lines of inquiry. This opposes the view of David and Sutton (2004) who point clearly to the fact that semi-structured interviews are not used to explicitly test a theory; instead they are utilising this method of data collection as a way of creating order to the process while also having the freedom to explore issues and topics as they might arise.

The interviews, each lasting between one and two hours in length, with participants asked fixed questions aligned to areas such as their route to, and in one case from, the semi-professional journalism landscape, the role their reporting activities play in their wider lives and how this aligned with their other commitments either through work, family or social life. They were all conducted in full compliance with the ethics policies and procedures required by Birmingham City University, with interviewees being made aware of how their responses would be used and their right to withdraw consent at any stage. In seeking informed consent from the participants, disclosure of the objectives of the study were also made, with interviewees invited to freely and voluntarily consent to their information being used for the purpose of the research and additional work which may come from it. The interviews, which were carried out via video services due to pandemic restrictions, also allowed space to look deeper into particular aspects where necessary, such as the experiences beyond semi-professional existence for the two interviewees who had now moved on to alternative roles. All interviewees were given the space and opportunity to reflect on their labour within their communities and the industry more generally, with the latter point being particularly revisited with those interviewees who were either beginning or exploring the prospect of launching their own publications. Due to the position of some of the participants who were in existing employment which may create difficulties should their hyperlocal activities become public, the opportunity for anonymity was granted. Such an approach is not unusual in research (Walford, 2005; Alshenqeeti,

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2014; Saunders et al, 2015) and allowed those participants who engage more openly, or even at all, than they might otherwise have done. The decision to anonymise is recognised as a way of protecting the confidentiality of participants (Wiles et al, 2008), therefore it was important to ensure steps were taken within chapter seven to ensure they were not identified. For this reason, some quotes are unattributed in order to ensure no identification is possible.

By using a semi-structured interview, it was possible to ensure that participants were able to both address areas aligned to this study as well as create narrative around other aspects of their semi-professional existence. However, the value of the responses can be limited by the way in which they may or may not be interpreted; as Hughes et al (2020:542) rightly highlight "It is not just what people 'do' at interview, it is what we as researchers do with this that also warrants careful consideration". The coding of the interviews sought to seek out commonality or clear differentials within viewpoints, both within the interviewees themselves and my own reflections in chapters five and six. The analysis of interviews is not a prescriptive measure whereby researchers must follow a set pattern; indeed Alshenqeeti (2014:41) identifies that "the analysis process should also be reflexive" and recognise the interaction between interviewee and interviewer. Each of the interviews was transcribed in full to ensure full analysis, although some scholars point to transcription as lacking the dimension by which meanings, such as body language or delayed responses can be missed (Roulston, 2014). However, others suggest the quality of the data itself is not necessarily weakened or strengthened by one particular method of analysis or another (Rapley, 2001). As with the autoethnography, however, the use of triangulation is a way to ensure that data collected from interviews can be considered within a wider context (Low et al, 2019). It is important to ensure

The interviews sought to examine the journey of those participants within journalism more broadly before focusing on the experiences of the participants within the semi-professional space. They also explored some of the themes identified within the autoethnographic study and the reflective research diary in order to identify areas where personal viewpoints can be challenged or reinforced. The use of such a triangulated approach allowed for the study to be robust and create rich data from which the findings could be gathered by ensuring that there was not an over-reliance on my own personal

perspective in terms of the overall thesis. The analysis of the data gathered provided an opportunity to group different responses together in areas such as the role of the individual with the semi-professional journalism landscape and the way the relationship with their labour can evolve and change due to social and other factors.

4.4 Conclusion

By taking a triangulated methodological approach, my research is able to demonstrate both insight and a robust position around which to test and juxtapose the findings gathered relating to the role of individual semi-professional journalists operating in the local news sector in the UK. Such an approach is borne out of the need to progress discourse around the space between the amateur and professional activities taking place in the journalism industry being focused mainly on the structural and production processes being utilised by those previously categorised as hyperlocal. This chapter has demonstrated how such a methodological position allows for an increased understanding of the local news landscape which will provide additional insight into independent local news provision by semi-professional journalists in both the short and long term.

While autoethnography may not be an approach commonly associated with journalism research, the use of such a methodology is not uncommon in other sectors (Mendez, 2013; Jones et al, 2016; Adams and Herrmann, 2020). This therefore raises the question of why journalism should not make better use of the stories from the front-line of non-professional journalism in order to better understand the ways in which it currently operates and may be able to in future. While the limitations and questions about authoethnography (Hayano, 1979; Walford, 2004; Muncey, 2005; Mendez, 2013; Roy and Uekusa, 2020) are worthy of consideration, the usage of alternative checks against existing data and as part of a varied methodological approach has allowed me to ensure the data gathered is robust and reliable, as well as being able to be tested through a triangulated approach as evidence by the findings of this thesis in chapters five, six and seven.

As with any research, a methodological approach is not without limitations. As outlined within this chapter, autoethnography, research diaries and interviews are all deemed to have potential flaws which the researcher must be attentive to. However, a triangulated approach as outlined initially by Webb et al (1966) creates opportunities to ensure a robustness to the data. I argue that the use of autoethnography offers an opportunity for Journalism Studies to create greater understanding of the role of individuals within the liminal reporting space. However, the way in which I am able to draw on a unique, yet privileged position of having a lived experience of my own area of study is one which may need consideration for future autoethnographic explorations of others within the industry. Similarly, it should not be discounted that my own position and direct experience of the different aspects of the study may have an impact on my personal viewpoints when it comes to reflecting on my past experiences. It is for this reason that the thesis seeks to take advantage of my own unique perspective while also ensuring it is balanced out through the use of interviewees as part of the triangulated approach. It is also recognised that the diversity of the interviewees as a predominantly white, male group may be an area for future consideration in terms of understanding the impact of an individual's own position on their own position within the liminal local news landscape as well as broader questions around inclusivity and opportunity in the semi-professional space.

5 The journey to semi-professional journalism

In the following three chapters I present the findings from my research, taking a triangulated approach to frame the semi-professional journalist and their journey to the space between the amateur and professional sector of the local news industry. In this chapter, I will take an autoethnographic approach in order to identify how my own journey in and out of the different facets of journalism have created the landscape within which a semi-professional position can form. In chapter six, I utilise a reflective diary covering a 12 month period to demonstrate the ways in which the past experience can shape the present of the semi-professional, before expanding the boundary of the study by utilising semi-structured interviews with other journalists who have occupied, currently occupy or hope to occupy the space often referred to as hyperlocal journalism.

This chapter draws up on my own memories and recollections of the various phases of my journey into local journalism, both as an amateur contributor and then a professional reporter, with the analysis allowing consideration of a Community Interest Company[1] delivering local news for more than 15 years. By exploring and analysing this progression and the unique perspective it offers of different phases of the development of the semi-professional, it is possible to create a foundation on which later findings chapters are built. The autoethnographic approach is based around my own recollections, as well as personal diaries and documents, such as cuttings, news reports and industry interviews. Discussions have also taken place with family, colleagues and friends to help ensure clarity of the information contained within my own memories. Such an approach will allow an understanding of how an individual can undertake progression into the world of semi-professional journalism. Although efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of recollections, there is a recognition that memory can create an inconsistent approach. However, the importance of such work is not to become preoccupied with accuracy (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011) but rather to begin a conversation (Denzin, 2014) on issues

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[1] A Community Interest Company is an organisation which focuses not on profit for shareholders but on generating funds to be reinvested either into the organisation or the wider community.

arising as a result. By doing so, this examination of my own past will start the process of shaping the understanding of the journey of the semi-professional journalist and inform subsequent chapters of this thesis.

This chapter utilises vignettes from my own backstory to create a foundation on which analysis of those experiences can be carried out in order to offer insight into the journey to semi-professional an individual journalist may take. The autoethnographic examination identifies areas where changes to the technological landscape had removed barriers to enable semi-professional journalists to participate in the sector (Forde, 2011), but has challenged the views of such reporters engaging with the practice for entrepreneurial reasons (Chadha, 2016; Harte, Turner and Williams, 2018; Mutiara and Priyonggo, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). Through the autoethnographic study of my own experiences it has also been possible to challenge preconceptions around the professionalism of journalism linked to education (Herbert, 2000; Mensing, 2010) and identify how the semi-professional can be framed through past experience within the broader journalism industry.

5.1 It all starts here - the birth of a journalist

The buzz of seeing the words I'd created on the page; knowing that the sentences I'd constructed were being used to shape the view others had was a moment of realisation. The fact those words were only about a small, non-league football team, and that most of the people who were interested were likely at the match was not important at this moment in time. No, as far as that schoolboy was concerned, he'd made it. The world was now his oyster and the fame of being a leading sports journalist was certain to follow. Although this may well have become stage one of a journey to what would ultimately become semi-professionalism rather than professional journalistic stardom, the exact starting point isn't as easy to pin down. While some journalism scholars have explored the apparent origin of those who travel the road to semi-professionalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022), these stories often start with an entry into journalism in one format or another. While my own pathway at stages echoes such tales of becoming a journalist and

no longer being one before opting for an alternative route, the past offers evidence of the early development of some of the factors I would later come to rely on in my semi-professional existence. Even before I'd considered my career path I'd become engaged with the power of stories and information to a community, albeit one which might be considered to be even smaller than the hyperlocal space I would eventually occupy.

As a student I was solid if unspectacular. I'd always excelled at written tasks and throughout my career I would often refer to doing "words not numbers" as a self-deprecating way of highlighting my weaknesses in some areas. The written word was not a skill I had necessarily inherited though, with no family background in any industry which would align itself to journalism. What I did inherit however was a sense of the value of news. Car journeys were not accompanied by music playing from the radio, with various radio news programmes being my father's output of choice. While this did not thrill a young teenager in a world where the technology was yet to be in place in order to choose an alternative media, it introduced me to journalists who were recognising the role audiences could play in shaping output. The Australian twang of BBC Radio WM's Ed Doolan and his consumer-driven brand of mid-morning phone in was a familiar sound. Hearing how this reporter was tackling the issues faced by listeners in order to use his platform for their benefit was evidence that user-generated content long before theories around the use of such material was being considered through the lens of the digital journalism sector (Thurman, 2008; Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa, 2010; Ots and Karlsson, 2012; Ugille, 2017; Riedl, 2023). While it is too simplistic to create a direct line between the sounds of Ed Doolan righting wrongs of his listeners to my own desire to develop a hyperlocal website, there are points at which the broadcaster's desire to ensure knowledge was available that echo my own later strides into semi-professionalism.

Another inheritance I received from my father was one of technology and an obsessive streak, both of which did draw more direct lines to what would follow. He was a collector of things, usually relating to sport. The loft was a space in the house where his love of collating developed. Not satisfied with one football programme from a game, he would need to get them all for a season. Then he would need to get the season before or the team they played against. In no time, these printed booklets designed to engage the community of fans around football teams would begin to stack up and become a part of my life as I

explored the information within them. Similarly, there were the Rothmans Football Annuals, packed with the sort of statistics which are now a mere digital fingertip away, but at the time they were his personal encyclopaedia of stats and figures. While these lacked the gloss and glamour of the programmes or the glitz of the Sky Sports football era we were entering, they did provide an opportunity for me to dig deep into a topic in a way which I would later need to when examining various council agendas and reports. The desire to know more about the footballers named on the many pages, particularly those who were not the big names of the time, was embedded in me through my father's own desire to have complete oversight and understanding through the completion of a collection. I would take the books and the information within them to generate my own narratives, carefully writing out details of each team into a page of a notebook with little reason to do so other than a sense of being able to. The obsessive desire to know as much as you can is something identified by journalism scholars considering hyperlocal, particularly when considering what Ginosar and Reich (2022) term as obsessive-activist reporting. While my activities then and now are not necessarily activism linked, the obsessive nature is one evidenced in my own work as outlined in chapter six, as well as that of others in chapter seven, suggesting that the need for the semi-professional to do something may be more powerful for them as an individual than any perception of reward or benefit at the end of the process. The desire to collect and create was about the process of doing so rather than any tangible benefit when the task was completed other than reaching that stage.

The love of sport permeated into my life in more ways than just the collections of sporting items meticulously put together by my father. It also created opportunities to take those first steps as a journalist. Both of my parents had run junior football teams and were now involved in a local non-league football team where I would go each Saturday to become one of an average crowd of around 60 people and a handful of dogs. Being around a small club such as this means you inevitably get involved in doing little jobs. It started with "go and fetch that corner flag in from the far side" at the end of games, but soon developed into taking on more regular roles. It was one of these which, unbeknown to me at the time, would shape my entire future after the usual fan with a pen who kept notes during the game was unavailable to provide a half time and full time update to the Sports Argus pink newspaper that came out

at 6.30pm that evening. I stepped into the breach, carefully delivering my swiftly-written and crafted prose to the copytaker at the other end of the phone line at the two allotted points in the afternoon. I might have imagined my story about Chasetown's defeat to Bridgnorth might have made them sit up and take notice of this hotshot schoolboy reporter, but if it did, the paper was not showing it as my words were cut to two paragraphs. The deflating feeling was one I'd come to learn to live with later in my career as sub-editors and later readers in the comments section would let you know your writing was nowhere near as good as you thought it was, but in the short term, the buzz of seeing my words in print (even if they didn't say I had written them) had given me a sense of pride and an appetite for more. When I discovered that I was also due to be paid a modest sum for my efforts on this, the desire to write more words suddenly became greater than ever. I really could make money by writing about things I'm interested in?

From that first two paragraph stopgap appearance, I eventually went on to become the long term reporter for my local team, providing a blend of on the day reports to the weekend sports newspapers and full match reports for the local weekly publication, the latter being without payment despite being a more labour-intensive process. It was those weekly reports that also provided a glimpse of what Carlson (2018:1879) called the "social value" journalism could provide because these were my stories, my words, connecting me to my community. It was a moment of being recognised as having value within my community and a chance to understand the power of my words to others. Regardless of the relatively small size of the audience, it was the first time I had experienced a position of authority and value beyond my own existence. It triggered that addictive streak in me, except this time it was my own published reports I was collecting in a scrapbook of clippings rather than notebooks of information drafted from documents in the loft.

5.1.1 Obsession and liminality in local news reporting

Obsession is a consideration given to work carried out by amateurs who have a desire to progress and develop (Merrifield, 2018) and echoes my experiences in a journalistic sense at the time. The desire to

collect, collate and complete that my father had shown had transferred into my first steps into journalism; wanting to report on every match or cover every game being evident from the outset. The consideration of obsession within journalism is often linked to the topics they cover or the focus of the industry on particular subjects based on a point in time (McNair, 2009; Waisbord, 2011; Waisbord and Russell, 2020). However, the personal experiences of my own development as a journalist suggest that the obsession can be based on the individual journalist's own views around content rather than necessarily via the lens of the industry as a whole. Other journalism scholars have discussed the passion of reporters to carry out their work and the desire of the industry as a whole to employ those with such a trait (Linden et al, 2021)

Despite my career being at its infancy at this stage, there were echoes to my current semi-professional position to be found. While the differences between amateurs and professionals are explored in chapter two, the consideration of semi-professional amateurs by Nicey (2016) offers the suggestion that the different positions an individual might occupy can create points of crossover where skillsets and ideals can be utilised. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that traits created or first emerging within a period which may be defined by amateurism can later be rediscovered or carried with an individual if they transition into a space where they are considered as a semi-professional journalist. Such a position also suggests that the liminality of the semi-professional space in local news explored in chapter three may not be governed by specific entry points, rather that the experiences provide the opportunity and confidence to enter the space.

The view of liminality as a location between beginning and end (Papacharissi, 2015) supports the suggestion that amateur journalists can subsequently reframe their positioning in local news through their progression and development as either a professional or semi-professional. However, it does not fully consider how such a transition between different categorisations can replicate or adapt over time due to changes in experience or personal circumstance and the impact of external factors. The suggestion has been made that those engaging in the hyperlocal sector who might be considered as semi-professionals can be "inspired by past volunteering experiences" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022:2102). Such a viewpoint suggests that any repositioning in the liminal space of local news will allow an individual to draw upon past experiences which may be found in a previous phase of existence; in my case, the amateur football

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reporter. The stage of this repositioning from amateur to professional on the journey to semi-professional will be explored in the next section where consideration is given to how participants are able to engage with and enter the local news sphere.

5.2 From amateur to professional

Despite dreaming of the career I hoped to create, I didn't really know what a journalist did beyond writing. It was never a vocation spoken about at secondary school and beyond thoughts of studying media at college, my knowledge of how to crack into the industry I had decided to join was non-existent. So when the school said I needed to find a work placement, it looked likely I'd be joining every other kid in class and doing what their parents did for a week. The thought of working in legal services in the housing department of Birmingham City Council didn't really appeal, so my mother stepped into the breach and knew someone who knew someone else in advertising and landed me a placement at *The Chase Post*. This local weekly newspaper was one that had published my football reports, so it was a good chance to get a foot in the door and find out what else Tony Larner, Pete Bate, Martyn Leek and Mike Lockley – those reporters whose names I'd seen so often in the local paper – actually did.

Sometimes in life you have sliding doors moments; those 'what if?' things you look back at in life. *The Chase Post* work placement was one of those. It wasn't that I got thrown in at the deep end and created hard-hitting investigations (in fact my first story was a golden wedding anniversary interview), but I loved the camaraderie of the small office dealing with mundane local news, the chase to get the story and the buzz of a deadline. There's the old phrase that it's not what you know, but who you know. For me, *The Chase Post* was a prime example of that. Working alongside some excellent news hounds – and people who would regularly pop up in other guises as my career progressed – was the perfect way to light the fire under my career ambitions. It was a week that told me what I wanted to do, but it was also just a week, so it was back to writing football match reports again and wondering how to actually turn the dream

into reality; a reality that was increasingly going to be a college course. The doors may not have slid just yet, but they were soon to open once more.

The summer of 1998 was one I was looking forward to. The end of enforced education and the chance to take my first steps on the career ladder. Plans for a long summer of very little soon faded as it became clear I needed to occupy the space in those weeks before my dreams of a media career would begin. My first trip to the Job Centre saw me realise just how much I needed a career rather than some of the 'opportunities' that lay before me. Eventually, there was something that looked vaguely in the same sort of discipline as I was interested in ultimately, so off I went to my interview for a job in a book warehouse. The link was tenuous, but it was at least dealing with words. I got the job and marvelled at the thought of my own money to enjoy my new found freedom with. It was a job I'd never start though. I'd continued writing my football match reports and some other bits and pieces for the local newspapers and assumed I'd just continue doing that as I prepared to embark on my first proper job. In the days leading up to that first day at the book warehouse I got a phone call from the sports editor at the local paper I'd been supplying match reports for, telling me I should come in and do some work experience the next week. I told him I was due to start a new job, but he said I really should do a week with them instead. It was a tough call. Here was a job that I didn't really want to do but that would be paying me; but here was also a chance to do a week of what I loved doing but unpaid. It was a gamble, but I contacted the book warehouse on the morning I was due to start and said I couldn't take up the position. When I finally arrived at the newspaper offices, it became clear my gamble had paid off. It turned out the sports editor was leaving at short notice and they needed someone quick; that's where I came in. A backhanded compliment perhaps, but one I was more than willing to take. So with little more than a week of work placement and some badly written match reports under my belt, this 16-year-old was not only a fully-fledged journalist, but a fully-fledged sports editor to boot.

My time at *The Chase Post* series, single-handedly looking after the sports pages on four newspapers was the perfect grounding for what would follow in my later years. In pre-internet and emerging internet days, the only way you could find out how the local team had got on in their Sunday league kickabout was via the pages of local newspapers. I was seeing first hand the value of localism and

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the precious nature it held in the hearts of those communities. These small Sunday league teams, the fishing reports and the bowls round-ups might not have been the journalistic glamour I had anticipated, but they demonstrated the value of information and news to the audience. Miss one of them out and you were getting letters, phone calls and people through the door. In those early days we weren't really needing to look for stories, they came to us. I suddenly found myself as an important figure in the community I was serving and it was a great feeling. The idea of being central to something and being valuable to those around you overcame the relatively low pay and long hours. Being invited to sporting functions and important local events was alluring. As a teenager it gave me a sense of status that I couldn't have imagined just months before. That desire to be important to people I didn't even know had well and truly been born.

It was during this time that I also started to develop the multi-skilling which – although I didn't realise it at the time – would be essential to my future in the industry. I spent hours as the last person in the office teaching myself how to sub-edit and design pages. I never wanted to be a page designer and I was never particularly creative in terms of design in any other strand of my life, but I knew I wanted to control my content rather than leave it to a faceless layout person in the central Wolverhampton office. The ability to see my articles through from conception to layout and then to print was subconsciously alluring. However, the new-found skills were opening new doors for me and showing me an opportunity to develop in new directions and, more importantly at the time, earn more money. There's no doubting that those early days as a local newspaper journalist were enjoyable, but they were certainly not well paid. The cost of getting to and from work was virtually destroying the salary I received, so the need to find a leg up the career ladder was necessary. Not for the last time in my career, I needed change.

5.2.1 A route to professional journalism

The value of local news is a topic which Journalism Studies has considered in depth, particularly given the challenges established models of publishing have faced in the digital era (Allen and Johnson, 2008;

Goyanes, 2015; Olsen, 2021) as outlined in chapter one. However, the consideration is often through the lens of audience or structure rather than the individuals producing such content. That is not to say that studies have not examined the role of experiential learning within journalism, with Feldman (1995) highlighting the way in which a first reporting job can have a profound impact on the future career path and direction an individual takes. It is clear from my own journey that the connection to the value of local, even hyperlocal news, was something which would permeate throughout my own career and beyond; a point which is highlighted in chapter six where the connection to a community – the same one as I began with – remains a relevant one.

The entry into semi-professionalism I would ultimately arrive at may not have been one governed by a more formal educational route as described by scholars examining the training of reporters (Herbert, 2000; Mensing, 2010). This in itself may suggest an alternative route to those who enter and remain in the professional sphere, something evidenced by a more experiential route I have taken where 'on the job' education has created the opportunities to progress and move around the journalism landscape. When considering how the entry route into journalism itself may focus the future entry into semi-professionalism, it is notable that Josephi (2019:55) explores the way in which education focuses on "the efforts to turn journalism into a profession" as well as creating a "need to mediate between industry and the academy". Indeed, Josephi also suggests that education allows professional journalists to set themselves apart from other agents in the news space. Such a suggestion is challenged by my own experience of transitioning from amateur to professional, but it does open up considerations around the ways in which the gates to alternative spaces within journalism may be controlled by past experiences and knowledge, creating an opportunity to consider how semi-professionalism may also be defined by prior understanding.

To suggest semi-professionalism is solely defined by education is a step too far, but there is consideration to be given to how removing such a barrier can create a diversification of local news provision as seen during the rise of digital agents such as those occupying the hyperlocal space. The suggestion that such a section of local news is one of diversity is not a new idea (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014), but if we consider that semi-professionalism is a facet within such a landscape, then it is apparent that increased diversity of news producers may be a component of this approach. While my own

journey as a white, middle class male reporter may not, on the surface, suggest a diversification of the journalism industry, it is clear that while my own direct entry into the professional sector preceded the growth in university journalism training programmes (Frost, 2017), it was a route which would be soon be closed off by increased attempts to professionalise the industry in the ways Josephi (2019) identifies. The need to better educate journalists beyond a purely vocational approach was something suggested by de Burgh (2003) as a way to ensure understanding of local communities. While such an approach may seem commendable, it can have an adverse effect if considered as the only route into local news by potentially blocking access to individuals who may not – as was my own experience – be from a background where the university route was considered not to be an achievable one. The reopening of the gates to the industry through semi-professionalism may actually be evident in my own backstory given I was able to enter through a route which would soon be closed either fully or increasingly due to the race for professionalism and standardisation of production norms. The next section of this chapter will examine how alternative factors such as the introduction of digital tools and platforms to the industry created a new opportunity for individuals to ultimately explore the liminality of local journalism and redefine the ways in which individuals could participate in the production of news for communities.

5.3 Chasing the buzz and recognising the challenges

The ability to take on a multitude of roles and work within a newspaper group meant there were opportunities for me to take on shifts elsewhere and seek out new opportunities. I began to work design and subbing shifts at weekends for the *Sports Argus* and *Sunday Mercury*, dealing with live reports as they came in an experiencing even more of the buzz of beating the deadline as things changed with last minute goals and breaking stories. Taking on these shifts at the heart of the *Birmingham Mail* newsroom also opened up new opportunities for a more permanent role, with a spell on the secondment launch team at the daily *Metronews* giving me an insight into a new product launch and identifying how to create an audience from nothing, moving beyond just the cut and thrust of the story, through to the strategy and

business considerations involved in creating a title. This was followed by a move to Deputy Editor at the weekly *Birmingham Metronews*. I've never lacked in ambition and the relatively quick rise from almost-book-warehouse-man to deputy editor on a weekly newspaper in the second city gave me a belief in my own abilities that was likely beyond what it should have been. So when the opportunity arose to take on an editorship before I'd reached my 21st birthday, I was desperate to grasp it. My move to head up the *Coventry Citizen* was the first time I'd ventured out of sport full time and I found, surprisingly, I enjoyed it. I thought the ability to lead a title would give me the kind of buzz I'd had from being at the heart of a community again like those days I'd spent in Lichfield with *The Chase Post* series. I enjoyed the remit to redevelop the paper, but the first steps to reversing what had gone before were soon to follow as I returned to Birmingham with a role as a page designer on the *Birmingham Mail*. The chance to work on a multi-edition daily newspaper was expanding my knowledge of my industry and offering me insights that - at the time - I never really knew I'd need further down the line.

A pattern was emerging though. No sooner had I opened the door to another new role than I was looking for something else. Why was I jumping around so much? I'd spent a period of time in my first job and then just moved at every opportunity rather than trying to bed in and consider my future more fully. On reflection, I wasn't enjoying what I was doing and I was becoming more and more aware of the challenges facing the local and regional newspaper industry in the early part of the century. More and more consultants were appearing with tasks that had names like *streamlining* or *efficiency mapping* attached to them. It soon became clear that these were glorified terms for a cuts culture which continues to this day (Ponsford and Maher, 2023). Circulations were dropping, while the first inklings of newspaper closures and centralisation were also beginning to surface. Perhaps I had developed a survival instinct I didn't know I had? Or was I looking for something which gave me more control over my own destiny? Nevertheless, when the opportunity came to work on the digital arm of the *Birmingham Mail* as the newspaper's first dedicated Multimedia Editor it was another move I wasn't about to turn down.

The online landscape at the time was nothing like the seamless integration and even digital-first narrative we see in newsrooms today. At the time, my new role was bridging the gap between those who had been employed specifically for digital tasks and those hardened newshounds who viewed the internet

as another passing phase that wasn't worth giving much time to. To put it into perspective, the role was advertised internally at a time when job security was never far from anyone's thoughts, yet only two of us applied. The appeal of the role for me was back to the earlier point of being in control of my own destiny and shaping my own product. In the early period of this role I couldn't fail because no-one knew (or cared) what I was doing with content online. All the editorial leaders knew was that I was growing readership in the online space and therefore they didn't need to worry about it. The audience continued to grow and grow, but even with my own self-belief I can't claim too much credit; it wasn't my content and it certainly wasn't my audience engagement. All that was happening was the internet was becoming more and more of a factor in the everyday lives of most people. While I may not be able to lay claim to single-handedly conquering the internet on behalf of the *Birmingham Mail*, looking back I can now see that I was identifying how to fill a content void. People wanted their news and sport coverage about their area through a new medium. The audience wanted their consumption not to be governed by a circulation boundary in the way it had previously. They also wanted to engage with the content and participate more greatly in the news production process by commenting and submitting material. Launching a photography club where we set a challenge to online readers each week and then featured their shots online and in print was an early example for me of the way participatory production and the concept of user generated content could be a central part in the development of a news plan and the way a local reporter could operate (Jonsson and Ornebring, 2011; Manosevitch and Tenenboim, 2017; Cohen, 2019).

The understanding of how to formulate and develop a news product to achieve the best possible outcome would be enhanced further as my role developed into more of a regional post, working with other newsrooms to launch their own websites. It was great to see the creation of so many new brands, but there was an underlying discomfort I had in the process. By now, the larger national group had recognised the value of digital and the freedom I had in creation was now being superseded by more structured plans. Sites had to look the same, feel the same and share content in some cases; it went against everything I'd done previously in terms of finding a strategy that worked for a specific audience and developing that, even if it went against what was considered to have worked elsewhere.

5.3.1 Precarity, change and a new space

The links drawn between the precarity of the industry as a whole and the ways in which the digital tools were developing my own skillset are a relationship scholars such as Hunter and Nel (2011) suggest have the potential to create the entrepreneurial journalist. While there are clear correlations between the two, it is evident that this alone was not enough to enable me to take the step towards what would become a semi-professional position within local journalism. Nevertheless, these were times of great uncertainty and insecurity as journalists such as myself and the industry as a whole began to seek solutions to a fast-changing marketplace where traditional models were being challenged in new and seemingly continuous ways (Singer, 2008; Franklin, 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2016; Deuze, 2017; Jeronimo et al, 2022). Whether it be the fight or flight instinct or a more considered approach, the challenges of job security for journalists particularly in local news was clear to see as digital change created uncertainty. It is a point examined in the work of Nick Mathews, Valerie Belair-Gagnon and Matt Carlson (2021) who interviewed a series of former reporters to understand how their decision to depart the industry was arrived at. While my own departure from the professional sector will be explored in the following section, it is clear that the points I have already made in this chapter about the desire to move and change in order to survive had echoes of some of those interviewed by those scholars. The conclusions of Mathews et al create a stark picture of those journalists who have departed the sector:

> These former journalists are not generalisable to ex-journalists as a whole, but represent voices that otherwise might be ignored, lost to omnivorous demands brought by the industry's digital transformation. Originally perceived as a dream job and a path to help cover and empower communities, in their narratives, the former journalists expressed how difficult their profession had become because of the demands of the market and unending work. In that context, these former journalists left journalism partly because they felt that they were failing their audiences.
> Mathews, Belair-Gagnon and Carlson (2021:73)

Such a viewpoint identifies the challenge between the desire to create journalism and the potential barriers that exist due to change within the local news landscapes. Reporters were facing the choice of adapting and continuing or leaving the professional journalism sector altogether. Even where reporters

have not departed the industry, the insecurity of the sector has the potential for professional journalists to

consider their commitment to their role as a whole (Ornebring and Moller, 2018). While some scholars

point to the decision to leave the industry for alternative sectors such as public relations (Viererbl and

Koch, 2021), others suggest the professional identity created by journalism meant reporters attempted to

ride out the the reshaping of the news landscape in order to maintain and evolve their own position within

it (Pereira, 2023). At the heart of such a suggestion is one of choice, with the view that the decision is to

stay or go for the local news reporter existing in an industry of change. However, my own experiences

suggest that circumstance can be as much a factor as personal choice when it comes to the liminality of

the local news space. While the views of Mathews et al above echo many of the points raised through my

own journey via the uncertainty of the professional journalism landscape and may be considered as

factors in my own departure from this phase of my career, they suggest that an 'either/or' approach is the

only option. As I define in the next section, while such factors may have resulted in an end to my

professional journalism existence, they created the opportunity to reinvent myself as a semi-professional

rather than create a permanent end to my personal story within local news.

5.4 Breaking out

I didn't leave full time journalism because of any noble belief in my own views on digital strategy in

newsprint. Nor did I leave because I felt I had a greater calling in higher education. I left for job security

and family reasons. The irony of the latter is not lost on me when considering what was to follow,

particularly given my desire to enjoy more of a nine to five existence to enjoy time off with the family. The

former did play a big part though. Although the digital audience was continuing to rocket, the sums still

weren't adding up and rounds of job cuts were continuing to be a semi-regular occurrence. With the birth

of my first child, I needed a greater sense of security and working in a university gave me that at the time.

I could easily have cut my ties with 'get your hands dirty journalism' when I went into academia. My view

of higher education had previously been not too dissimilar to that of my last editor when I broke the news

to him that I was leaving to work in a university: "Don't you think you're a bit young to be retiring?". It was a throwaway line from him, but one that probably wasn't too far removed from how some of my contemporaries felt, with academia seen as a way to seek an alternative to the day-to-day pressures of journalism while still being able to engage with the industry at arm's length. However, I quickly recognised that if I was going to 'talk the talk' to students then I also needed to demonstrate that I could walk the walk as well. My mantra was always that I would only ever ask them to undertake a task I could do. Not only was I keen to keep writing for them, but I also knew I needed to keep writing for me. That obsessive desire to see my words being read and valued had never gone away, but now I didn't have a publication through which to meet that personal need. The options available were few and far between; I could have gone freelance, but it was never an area of journalism that had appealed. I was also acutely aware that others who I had worked alongside that had subsequently been made redundant were in far greater need of the financial aspect of freelancing than I did. So I launched what would eventually become *Lichfield Live*.

When I discuss my website it can often seem like it was a planned launch that I'd carefully considered, but it most definitely was not. In fact, I wasn't even sure what I was doing when I set up a site on a free online platform and decided to write down some thoughts. I look back at those early posts (some of which I admit I have since deleted through shame) through my fingers. I was the epitome of everything the traditional journalism industry had claimed about blogging – I was ranting into space with little consideration for the purpose of such an activity. Eventually, *The Lichfield Blog* (as it was originally titled) began to form a little more shape. I was never a witty columnist with clever things to say, so I eventually reverted to type and started reporting on the things that were happening. The launch of Twitter helped me to find an audience I admit I wasn't sure was there and I began to see people reading and interacting with my words once again. The thrill of the audience was back and was every bit as addictive as it had been previously. Those early days I had never had a plan; I was muddling along writing what I could when I could without any real belief that I'd be doing it beyond the end of the month, let alone more than a decade later. *The Lichfield Blog* years are at best described as raw. A free website on a free platform always lacked the professionalism I increasingly wanted to see from my work. To begin with I

wrote under a pseudonym. The reason for this? A mix of shame and fear. I'd been a professional journalist who'd risen through the ranks and left local journalism behind, yet here I was writing about the same lost dogs and local planning rows as I had been as a 16-year-old work experience kid. In my own mind, although I had a stable job that was better paid than any of my reporting roles, I'd failed professionally.

Hiding behind a pseudonym meant I could say what I wanted, write what I wanted and not have any real fear of backlash. However, as the audience grew and my little website became more than just a rogue corner of the internet, the desire to enjoy some of the plaudits for my work wasn't far away. That desire to be recognised and valued began to surface once more. I also became acutely aware that not only could I not carry out interviews pretending to be a man who died centuries before (I'd taken on the pseudonym of Samuel Johnson due to his links to Lichfield), but I also needed to come out of the shadows in order to access some of the places I needed to so I could tell the stories I wanted to tell. Stepping into the spotlight was both daunting and thrilling. I wanted the kudos, but I didn't want the responsibility and risk that would come with being the publisher. I'd only ever worked in large organisations with the various protections that afforded. It's fair to say that in those early days, the content was safe; stories were limited to the various aspects of life in Lichfield. I was writing and publishing with no real idea of what I wanted it to become. However, it was becoming clear that things were moving at a pace, with people sending me tips on stories and information that might be useful. This culminated in the city's MP proactively making contact to discuss how the work we were doing was supporting the community in Lichfield and how we wanted to see how he could support me to do that. The thought of someone wanting to support what I did was an eye opener; I'd never considered that what I was doing had a value beyond keeping me engaged in something I'd done since I was a teenager. Others too were starting to get engaged with the prospect of an alternative to the local newspaper. The most important of these people was Philip John, who came forward at a time when the site was beginning to outgrow my basic knowledge of how to get the best from a website.

Looking back, it's bizarre to think that I effectively trusted the work I'd created to a stranger given the desire I'd had to develop my own efforts from inception to delivery and the stranglehold I'd always

craved and then held in terms of the fruits of my labour. However, the simple fact is that I had reached the

limitations of my own knowledge in terms of developing the platform for my work and I needed the support

of others. Given the continued support and ongoing workload Phil has undertaken, had I not accepted his

offer of help I'm not sure *Lichfield Live* in its current guise would have ever existed or still be going today.

The concept of partnership working was not one I'd sought out, nor one I'd really wanted, but the benefit

of working with Phil was that he had no desire to take ownership or influence content. Even now, I might

persuade him to take the odd photo, but the thought of writing words probably still sends a shiver down

his spine. Phil's work with community groups and voluntary organisations meant he could see a greater

value in the media access we were providing for the local community than I could too. This relationship

was an intriguing one for me, given I had come from a landscape of commercialism of content rather than

necessarily the civic value of it. As *The Lichfield Blog* developed, we were keen to steer ourselves away

from the notion of profit being our driver. This was something that showed in our content choices. Those

early days saw my news agenda driven by whether or not at least one person would want to read it. I also

stuck firmly to the geographic boundaries, ensuring that the content would not fall into the trap as I saw it

of the pooled content model I'd seen emerging at traditional publishers where material would be shared in

what many now consider to be a clickbait approach. I really had gone from a journalist who saw a sense

of shame in local news reporting to the extent that they wrote behind a pseudonym, to someone who was

prepared to be a flagbearer for it.

As *The Lichfield Blog* audience began to grow and the concept of hyperlocal entered the media

lexicon, a spotlight was firmly shone on to my role, with media industry organisations, such as the BBC,

wanting to speak to me about how it was done. As an early career academic I was aware of the imposter

syndrome that can strike and was initially worried that people were overthinking what I was doing with

The Lichfield Blog. I was always keen to point out that I wasn't making any money and therefore I couldn't

quantify what I did as a success story in the way others were. That background in newspapers where the

commercial link to news is the key driving force would not leave me for a number of years. The sheer

volume of talking I did about hyperlocal in those early days was, at times, baffling. The truth is, however,

that I never felt qualified to do so. I also felt I didn't fit the mould of those pioneering independent outlets

that were creating movements such as *Talk About Local*. One of the first times I spoke about *Lichfield Live* was at a networking event and it quickly became apparent that my journalism background did set me aside from some of those who were engaging in the playfulness of the emerging and experimental models of journalism being seen in those early hyperlocal days. There were people talking about disrupting the norm and challenging established media models in a way that I couldn't relate to. I wasn't changing the world, I was just doing what I did and always had done as a journalist. There wasn't a revolution happening in Lichfield and I certainly wasn't going to be running the local newspapers out of town. Well, at least I didn't think I was.

The growth of my imposter syndrome within the hyperlocal sphere was only being matched by the growth of my audience. Despite seeing numbers increase, I still didn't see the value in my own work. As someone who had never been a freelance reporter, I found the connection between labour and direct income a difficult one to make. The suggestion came that we should start selling advertising to help monetise what we had. Rick Waghorn, of the Addiply network, told me that going for a "not for loss" status should be the priority. His words, and the realisation that growth in audience meant growth in costs, led to the first attempt to monetise my work. We sold adverts for around £10 a month to small local businesses, mainly because we didn't have the infrastructure to sell to organisations that wanted invoices and other such real world evidence. I'll be forever grateful to the maths tutors, singing teachers and other groups who, without knowing, changed the future direction of *The Lichfield Blog* forever. Had they not taken up advertising I'm not sure we'd have got to the financial position we are in today and we may well have stumbled to a premature end. These organisations and individuals opened the door to a new world that showed there might just be more to my efforts than just keeping me entertained.

5.4.1 Steps to semi-professionalism

The impact of change on journalists operating in the professional industry has been discussed by journalism scholars who put forward the concept of "presentism" (Goyanes, 2021:53) as a way of them continuing to carry out their job in the here and now despite the uncertainty which might surround it. For

those where such an approach does not prevent them from opting to leave the professional landscape, consideration has been given to what the reasons are for doing so (Nygren, 2011; O'Donnell et al, 2016; Woodruff, 2020). The reasons for seeking alternative employment or career options are often centred around factors such as pay and long hours. There is also a recognition of the search for an improved work-life and professional-personal life balance (Mathews et al, 2023) which provides a link to my own experiences of exiting the professional landscape. Such considerations offer a point where semi-professionalism may provide a natural destination for those departing the professional sphere by allowing them to continue with their craft while also ensuring they are able to align their work with other aspects of their lives.

Enough has been written regarding the entrepreneurial potential of hyperlocal journalism (Chadha, 2016; Harte, Turner and Williams, 2018; Mutiara and Priyonggo, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022) to suggest that there may be a commercial consideration to many of the publications within it. This is not to say that it is a prerequisite, however. My experience as a local journalist in this landscape suggests that entry to the semi-professional space is not necessarily governed purely by a desire to commercialise local news content in order to seek personal financial gain. As my own comments earlier in this section demonstrate, the concept of entrepreneurship was not the determining factor in pursuing what would become a semi-professional existence. The view of hyperlocal as a sector of local news seeking to disrupt traditional media landscapes (Linden et al, 2019) is also at odds with my own experiences on entering the space, suggesting once again that nuances exist within this area of local news and opening up the possibilities that the semi-professional may not be seeking to be a disruptive force but rather one of continuation. Based on my own experiences, it could be argued that semi-professionalism may have closer relationships with social rather than commercial entrepreneurship. Such an approach looks to enhance communities rather than necessarily creating personal gain (Ghalwash et al, 2017), although Boluk and Mottiar (2014) identify how social entrepreneurs can receive benefit through the acknowledgement of their work. This is evident in my own story through the decision to cease writing under a pseudonym due to the desire to receive recognition. As with many of the factors of potential difference between amateurs, professionals and semi-professionals, there are also areas of potential

crossover. For example, the desire to seek acknowledgement for output is not necessarily confined to one particular space, in much the same way as journalistic authority may be considered to belong to professional reporters but can also be found in other participants in local news production (Ornebring, 2013). Similarly, the pursuit of recognition may not be solely the preserve of the semi-professional, with Stringer (2018) identifying similar traits in professional journalists working for digital platforms.

While this section has offered a recognition that reporters who cease to operate in a professional publication can find ways to continue their work, it challenges the perception of such individuals as entrepreneurial innovators who are seeking to create change or disruption. Instead, the semi-professional may be considered to be seeking to take greater control over their labour and working patterns (Mathews et al, 2023). Such a position may create opportunities for those transitioning from professional to semi-professional, but as the next section of this chapter explores, while a move may remove some challenges it can pose new ones which the semi-professional journalist is not necessarily anticipating at the outset of their journey through the liminal journalism space.

5.5 The downside of the upside

One of the reasons I left newspapers was to allow me to spend more time with my family. A young baby actually proved to be a perfect foil for an independent publisher. The routine of publishing had become apparent. I'd work in the day job, finding time to write some pieces during breaks etc, and then I'd write the bulk of my articles late into the evening for scheduling in the following days. When my daughter was little, it often meant the usual routine of getting up with her for a feed then not being able to go back to sleep saw me sitting doing articles instead. People often asked how I found time to write *The Lichfield Blog* content, but I was actually just filling my own dead time, while the volume I was writing was not a patch on what it would become as *Lichfield Live* became the product it is today.

Children don't stay young forever though and as my daughter grew and my son came along, the time I'd previously had wasn't quite so plentiful. The late nights were replaced by early mornings and the

website became something of a millstone around my neck. Over the decade since I began as an independent publisher, the site had become a fixture in the Lichfield news landscape and people had expectations – and I felt I had to meet them, even though there were times that I really shouldn't have. The work was becoming all consuming and overtaking my life. I was sacrificing the very thing I'd changed career to protect in order to provide some form of service that I was never really sure why I was so determined to provide in the first place. It was towards the end of *The Lichfield Blog* days and the transition to *Lichfield Live* that I probably came closest to throwing in the towel and walking away, but I could never quite hit the delete button. Instead, the pace slowed down. The site became lazy as I struggled to juggle commitments and find the space to create content. This certainly wasn't the proudest moment of my life as an independent journalist, but a conversation with a friend later essentially got me to the place where I could accept it: "Remember, you aren't a public service provider."

Forget the knowledge I might have gained on developing a new website from scratch or creating a network of contacts; this piece of advice was among the most powerful I ever received because it created a comfort in what I was doing. If I didn't publish a set amount of stories every day would the world end? Most likely not, but I was at least able to reset and rethink for the first time since I'd started on this journey. I needed to remember that my reasons for doing what I was doing were primarily my own. It is a concept I still struggle with and I'm not sure I'll ever fully go to the point of saying 'I don't fancy this so I'm having a day or two off' but I've now reached a point where I can, begrudgingly, accept it if it does happen. I do not confuse acceptance with allowance though; changes in circumstances have given me the opportunity to create in new ways. In the pre-pandemic days, commuting to the day job by train had offered a new one hour creative slot in my day and the railways quickly became the *Lichfield Live* office in the morning and evening. As my children got older, I also found new ways and locations to work; outside dance classes, waiting for football training sessions to end etc. The flexibility of technology has opened doors for me to continue doing what I do. There are some habits that die hard though.

The growth of *Lichfield Live* has only served to increase the demands on my time as an individual. With a rise in the audience has come an equivalent rise in content, both that being published and the administrative task of sifting through the various emails to decide what to report. Many of the

challenges I faced in those early days have not gone away. I'm still seeking out wifi locations and working hours where most people are busy relaxing. The challenges of running the website remain as they ever were; sustainability and time. The positive side of growth has allowed an increased monetisation through advertising, reader donations and philanthropic funding support. On the surface this seems like a success story, but they have merely added to the challenge of wanting to do journalism but having to also factor in the time taken to deal with the administrative side of running such a site. It is somewhat ironic that after the desire to leave a world of unsociable hours and other similar factors, my journey has gone full cycle – but without the benefit of being paid for the privilege.

While I may no longer be considered a professional journalist in the eyes of the industry, the question of 'am I still a journalist?' is one that crosses my mind on a regular basis. It's also a question where the answer has changed considerably over time. At first, I certainly didn't consider what I did to have a value to myself or anyone else for that matter, but the passage of time has changed perceptions across the board. Despite my non-professional journalism position, as a semi-professional I now create more journalism than ever before and have a greater say in how and why I cover certain stories. At the start of my journey the thought of getting to a professional status was so great that any consideration of willingly giving up that position would have been unthinkable. However, the change within the industry has been significant during the same time period and many of the things I was perhaps embarrassed by at the outset, such as working in car parks, libraries and on trains are now a norm for reporters whether professional or not.

5.51 Evolutions in semi-professional journalism

The narrative of scholarly studies of hyperlocal news (Baines, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Hess and Waller, 2016; Harte, Howells and Williams, 2018; Harte, 2023) has varied from one of consideration and celebration, to one of challenge; a journey which mirrors my own experiences. The initial freedom created by opportunity to allow one to take back control of their own creative labour (Mathews, 2023) does not mean that the practitioner will remain in such a status indefinitely. As evidenced by my own

considerations, the change to semi-professional can be deemed to coincide with the formalisation of the activity which separates it from amateurism.

As outlined earlier in the chapter, while this position of commercial entrepreneurship is not a necessary factor in the beginning of the journey into the space, it can be recognised that such an approach is necessary as the formalisation of publications becomes a necessity in order to access funding or pay contributors. The evidence from my own experience is that the awareness of this as a requirement does not necessarily change the position of the semi-professional journalist or their ability to excel as a journalism entrepreneur. Given the failure of digital media startups in the early stages of their development (Buschow, 2020), it could be argued that semi-professional journalism is aligned to the requirement to adapt to a more entrepreneurial position in order to ensure the individual can continue to exist in the journalism space. Such a consideration would perhaps explain the desire to continue to operate as a reporter even where the initial reasons for doing so have been diluted by alternative challenges or where the joy of engaging in the journalistic process has faded, suggesting that the survival in the space and the retention of the news publication process is a key factor in framing the semi-professional journalist rather than any desire for development or disruption.

The ability to survive in such uncertain entrepreneurial environments is one which O'Brien and Wellbrock (2021:1) put down to key elements of success which include "experience, skills, personality, product, business model, company organisation, and broader environment". While some of these traits are beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that the experience and skills are facets which align to my framing of the semi-professional journalist as someone who is able to utilise prior knowledge and understanding of the sector to define their own position within the landscape. This may go some way to explaining why those semi-professional journalists who do not necessarily possess the entrepreneurial skills required to succeed are able to exist and sustain their labour over lengthy periods of time. As earlier chapters have identified, the broader environment of change, which is also explored in chapter six, enhances the opportunity to survive and in some cases even thrive.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the semi-professional or hyperlocal journalist is not necessarily a destination arrived at as a result of a specific career choice or decision, but rather a journey that organically manifests itself through factors such as past experience and social positioning at any given time. The desire to become someone who might be defined as a creative citizen, while not explicit in the terminology used, is offered up throughout, particularly in terms of the early desires to work voluntarily and perhaps set the scene for future labour in such a way. As Hess and Waller (2016) identify, the value of hyperlocal news as having a purpose beyond mere sustainability means this desire to engage in practices of journalism, even without pay, appear at different stages throughout the autoethnographic exploration and identity why the prospect of working without financial recompense in the semi-professional sphere does not, ultimately, prove to be a barrier to production of local news.

Such a position then leads to the question of what the factors driving an individual towards a semi-professional relationship with journalism may be, particularly when an individual has existed in the professional landscape previously. The autoethnographic approach demonstrates some of the concepts identified in earlier chapters with independent journalists working in the non-professional arena, especially around the views of Forde (2011) that the internet had brought down the barriers for producers to engage with audiences and Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) in terms of the different origins within the hyperlocal and semi-professional sphere. However, there are also other factors which have allowed this transition and creation of an alternative identity to take place. It is clear from my own experiences in an early phase of digital development of professional local news production that I had become unintentionally aware of the ability of the internet and social media to reach audiences in the way Forde (2011) suggests, while also identifying the role digital platforms have in all phases of the process of contemporary journalism production, from sourcing of content through publication methods and processing. This understanding did not manifest itself in a wholly commercial manner though and as evidenced above, such an entrepreneurial consideration is one which arrives as a later by-product of the transition to an alternative

place in the local news landscape. The autoethnography suggests that the factors behind the move into this arena were coming from an alternative direction rather than one of commercialisation and entrepreneurship. It is, of course, only one perspective and therefore consideration needs to be given to the limitations of the approach. However, it does offer an insight on which future debates and discussions can be based around the liminality of the space and the ways in which participants do engage in semi-professional journalistic practice.

Harte, Howells and Williams (2019) suggest that previous scholarly interest in the area has often been focused purely on the ways in which the democratic deficit created by the demise of local newspapers had manifested itself. However, there is little to suggest that this was another key factor in the development of my own journey, with the desire to create content initially driven by personal rather than community factors. This point that aligns with the view that journalists operating outside of the professional journalism sphere can be driven by a myriad of reasons which may set them apart from their professional peers, such as education within media or journalism, while also recognising how their activity also has comparisons with the activities being carried out in some cases (Nicey, 2016). It is this individual perspective which, while limiting as a singular snapshot within this autoethnographic exploration, offers an example of the differences and similarities between journalists operating within the local news sector who may not be classified as either amateur or professional and should therefore be considered as semi-professional.

A key emergent point from this chapter is also around the sense of how and why journalism should be produced, as well as that of a professionally-transient individual seeking a place within the increasingly diverse journalism ecosystem. Coming as they do at regular times of change in terms of the evolution of the local news industry into the digital domain and the rethinking of the production methods of journalism, these reflections suggest that while the use of 'ambition' as a term to explain regular career change is used, there is arguably a greater sense of seeking identity and belonging or allowing for obsession rather than any desire for professional acceptance. There has been discussion around professional journalistic identity previously, with Sherwood and O'Donnell (2018:1023) suggesting that professionalism largely rests on a "common set of ideals and values" and that "professional identity is

more clearly linked to journalists' work routines and practices". However, there is evidence within the autoethnography to question the suggestion that such labour activities and considerations around the concept of ideals and values are the sole domain of the professional journalist. Indeed, the semi-professional status appears to have created the identity as outlined by Sherwood and O'Donnell in seeking to create working practices, albeit not always normative ones, and upholding a perceived view of how news should and should not be produced for a defined audience. This idea of being empowered by personal actions within a wider journalistic environment in order to regain a sense of power (Mathews et al, 2023) perhaps offers a greater explanation of how the transition from professional to semi-professional may provide benefit in a way which is not financial.

It is notable that while hyperlocal might be seen as a contributor to change in local news production and provision, Sherwood and O'Donnell (2018) suggest that professional identity is actually a barrier to change and is a point of conflict within traditional newsrooms. When viewed alongside the autoethnography in this chapter, this suggests that the semi-professional may exist in a space which fuses the two viewpoints; on one hand they are participants in evolution when it comes to local news provision, while on the other they are retaining a historical view on concepts such as news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1980; Herbert, 2000; Harcup and O'Neill, 2017) in order to preserve a view of how local journalism should be approached, valued and delivered. Indeed, this chapter highlights that the sense of "doing what I've always done" as a barrier to engagement with the hyperlocal scene can actually be considered as more of a barrier put in place to prevent change rather than necessarily facilitate it as a force for disruption. I argue that this suggests there is the capacity for an alternative provision for journalism as an activity that I have defined as semi-professional, wherein the journalist is unable or unwilling to define themselves as professional but does not necessarily recognise what they do as anything beyond the continuation of a labour and production activity they have previously engaged with. With this concept of semi-professionalism comes an acceptance of limitation which may also explain the desire not to seek change from recognised activities and practices and moves away from visions such as those of Harcup (2016) that the activity in this space may be akin to active citizenship. The positioning of journalists in this way does not necessarily mean that the semi-professional reporter is completely

unwilling to change or develop themselves when occupying such a space, however. Indeed, there is

evidence within the autoethnography to demonstrate that there are aspects of change required,

particularly around production patterns and the concepts of creating a mobile newsroom wherever it is

possible. What manifests as a result, however, is a working practice, albeit an unusual one to ensure the

consistent approach of news production using established values and methods is able to be maintained

for both a defined community and the individual producer, something which also helps to differentiate

semi-professional from concepts around amateurism. By understanding how this chapter has been able

to identify the importance of the individual in the journey towards semi-professionalism, there will be the

opportunity within chapter six to build on this foundation and examine how the concept of past experience

can influence the habits, activities and thoughts of the present. By exploring the ways the previous

journalistic existence can facilitate activity in the semi-professional space, it will be possible to further

consider how we can reframe and nuance this area of local news provision.

6 Pandemic,precarity, professional perceptions and identity - 12 months as a semi-professional journalist

In this chapter I examine the collection of more than 140 entries in my reflective research journal covering the period of publishing as the editor and reporter for the *Lichfield Live* hyperlocal website between January 2020 and January 2021, a sample of which can be seen in Appendix A. As well as examining themes emerging from the entries themselves, the published output and emails relating to content produced and issues being tackled by on the editorial side of the website during this period are also used to demonstrate how operational, structural and personal challenges can impact on the work of a reporter creating journalistic content in the semi-professional arena. By analysing the diary and associated material linked to the production period, it is possible to explore the way in which different aspects of semi-professional journalism can create value through culture, labour and community, both as an individual worker and for the broader public sphere of communities served. This creates the opportunity to develop an understanding of the positioning of both the work being produced and individuals producing in this space between the amateur and the professional areas.

From the initial analysis of the diary entries, it has been possible to break the reflection into key themes to emerge from the posts - the pandemic, precarity of publication, perceptions of semi-professional publishers and the uncertainty of identity for an individual operating in this way when viewed via an internal lens rather than through a purely external observation. These themes emerged after the diary entries were tagged as part of the analysis in order to allow for identification of narratives appearing throughout the 12 month period covered. As discussed in chapter four, the analysis of diaries provides a reflexive ability to explore the data gathered during the timeframe of the entries. Examining data such as this allows for "interpretation of interpretation" (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000:6) and for meaning to be found from a document that is both descriptive and reflective throughout. The research diary was a digital record of activity and thoughts based around my production of journalism for the

Lichfield Live publication. The entries were produced as separate entities and the document was not read back during the process in order to allow for a fully reflexive approach to be taken.

Although initially aiming to capture an understanding of the perspective of the individual in terms of practice in the hyperlocal landscape, the diary also captured, unintentionally, a period of significant disruption due to the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent national lockdowns in the UK, creating a position where hyperlocals and non-professional outlets were seen by many as a crucial source of local information, news and community mobilisation (Almonds, 2021). Given the overwhelming nature of this situation, the pandemic is examined initially before considering the additional themes to emerge from the diary.

6.1 "I've become acutely aware of the amount of times I've written the C-word"

The COVID-19 pandemic overlaid much of the timeframe of my research diary and inadvertently captured a key moment in the evolution of the field known as hyperlocal journalism. Although obviously not planned to coincide, the journal entries do demonstrate some of the ways in which the role of semi-professional journalists operating outside of the boundaries of traditional, commercial local news publishers changed and diversified during this period and have the ability to be influenced significantly by external factors. The pandemic period also served as an opportunity to test some of the suggestions made about non-professional reporters and news publishers regarding their sustainability, robustness of business practices and ability to adapt at short notice (Kurpuis, Metzgar and Rowley, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Hess and Waller, 2016; Harte, Howells and Williams, 2018).

The reflective journal entries show that the lack of any formal or recognised business model proved to be a useful tool in allowing the *Lichfield Live* outlet to not only survive but also thrive during the pandemic period. An example of this is the reference to "increased demand" appearing in eight entries from the April to June 2020 period. This manifests itself in different ways, where I discuss how traditional

traffic spikes were being replicated in ways not usually seen in the standard production of content. As a post on 16th April 2020 highlights:

> *The demand for content is becoming insatiable. Readers are coming in their droves and we're seeing the sort of traffic we only usually see around things such as elections.*

Website traffic data supports this, with a clear spike in audience during the pandemic period. For example, the page impressions rose by more than 141% from 71,891 in March 2019 to 173,736 in the corresponding month in 2020. By analysing *Lichfield Live* traffic data from 2020 and the diary entries it is clear that the pandemic was a moment of change where a semi-professional publisher was occupying a new and uncertain space within a local news community. The pandemic posed unique challenges to newsrooms – hyperlocal or otherwise – across the globe due to an uncertain advertising and readership market (Olsen, Pickard and Westlund, 2020; Radcliffe, 2020), and the UK was no different. Despite Government efforts to support traditional, commercial local news publishers through a COVID-19 advertising spend scheme (News Media Association, 2020; Heawood, 2021), many were forced to furlough staff and shutter publications either temporarily or permanently (Hare, 2021). For independent publishers the situation was somewhat different given the restrictions placed on support funding schemes and the often unconventional structures used in areas such as non-professional journalism. A study in the United States by Kristen Hare (2021) found that more than 100 newsrooms had closed during the pandemic at the time of publication. The origins of the crisis facing local newspapers was exacerbated by the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic created pressures on traditional business models causing either unexpected or expedited closures of long-standing publications. As Finneman and Thomas (2021:13) suggest "the impact of COVID-19 on journalism was immediate".

The UK market was facing similar challenges as temporary closures and longer-term shuttering of print publications came into force as publishers sought to switch to a survival mode. Such conditions offered a potential realisation of the view of Shirky (2009) that hyperlocal and alternative journalism models could flourish by existing without the shadows of established publications over them. However,

the periods both pre and during the pandemic cannot be seen as a simplistic like-for-like examination of the journalism space and the role of publishers within communities. While the competition from more established publishers evaporated during this period, the semi-professional reporters continuing to occupy the space were also contending with a landscape where potential sources of news were also diversifying, evolving and, in some cases, reducing due to lockdowns and other restrictions. The pandemic is by no means a standalone factor in the evolution of local news and the role of semi-professional journalists within it. As explored in chapter one, the market for local news had been evolving over a number of years due to the growth of large publishers buying up smaller outlets (O'Hara, 2020) and then reshaping the model for news production to create a greater focus on a regionalised or centralised one. The direction of travel of larger media group ownership in traditional newspapers and their subsequent digital platforms was evidenced in a May 2022 Press Gazette report outlining how regional reporters, who deliver the localised content to a range of titles, were being seconded to support national titles in the company's suite of publications. The company outlined how the focus was on supporting a central network of content provision which would then be packaged to support regional and local titles. The move away from traditional local newspapers pre-dates the pandemic (Nielsen, 2015; Harte, Howells, Williams, 2018), but this reflective diary identifies that for the semi-professional journalist the pandemic shifted the focus from being a news option within a wider media offering to being a more central and critical point in the local news landscape for a community. As one entry described it, the pandemic may not have been creating new business models but it was allowing semi-professional journalists to move beyond a core audience and reach a new readership. Such a change would create opportunities, but they would continue to challenge the fragility and underpinning uncertainties surrounding the semi-professional model.

The scale of the role the pandemic plays in the reflective process is also clear throughout the 140 entries within the diary, with 78 separate uses of words and phrases associated with the pandemic such as COVID and Coronavirus. Categorisation and theme-tagging of the entries shows that following the first two months of the period covered, where there were no mentions, but then a large number of entries all contain some reference to either articles on the topic or the way in which semi-professional working

practices have been disrupted due to societal changes such as lockdowns and home-schooling. While not necessarily anticipated at the outset, this diary offers a first-hand insight into a unique period in UK local and hyperlocal semi-professional journalistic practice. The first recorded mention of the term "Coronavirus" within the diary appears on 4th March 2020, although there is no recognition of the scale of what is to come at this early stage:

> *Coronavirus is the latest dose of scare-mongering to infect the Lichfield Live audience. Reports of a student being sent home from a school in the city to self-isolate had the potential to explode on social media when we were tagged in it. A quick check with the headmaster found that there was no basis in fact whatsoever to the rumour and we posted to say as much.*

Despite this almost off-hand dismissal of what would ultimately become a global pandemic, there was an awareness of the role journalism at all levels would play in a society increasingly seeking information on the topic as it traversed from an international, to a national, local and then personal story for the readership. The same entry on 4th March 2020 continues to point out that "communities need effective local media" in order to be able to verify facts from fiction and prevent hysteria and panic. The recognition of the role semi-professional reporters and outlets could play in terms of providing essential information alongside standard news demonstrates the way in which such producers were having to occupy new spaces and potentially open themselves up to greater public scrutiny in areas such as accuracy and impartiality. While the professional is defined in ways explored through chapters one, two and three, it is worth considering Aldridge and Evetts (2003) who point to one of the differences between the amateur and their professional counterparts being the requirement to follow rules. Diary entries such as the one above demonstrate that as the pandemic progressed, ethical consideration was being given to the roles and responsibilities of a semi-professional publisher, therefore testing the theory that such action was solely in the domain of professional journalists.

Even in the early days of the pandemic, this point of access to verified information via journalism was described as "a national and international battleground of a struggle against misinformation" by Luengo and Garcia-Marin (2020:46), who also identify that independent journalism would be a key

weapon in the fight against rumours and conspiracy theories. Although the broader national and international picture may be a more obvious home for such misinformation, the appearance in the journal of 15 references to the sense of expectation placed on a semi-professional journalist were demonstrated together with evidence of the pace at which the situation was developing. Less than a month after that first mention of coronavirus in the diary, a post on 1st April 2020 demonstrates a sense of fatigue and personal challenges being faced.

> *I've become acutely aware of the amount of times I've written the C-word. I'm fed up of it. I don't want to write about it anymore. But I know we have a duty to do so. Continuing to push coronavirus isn't ideal, but there's not much else to write about really.*

It is worth recognising that this COVID-19 publishing fatigue came only a week after the UK Government announced the first nationwide lockdown; one that would ultimately last until mid-May. The diary entries during this period of restrictions build on the earlier recognition that the role of *Lichfield Live* and the semi-professional journalist reporting for it would need to evolve to meet a new set of audience needs. References to this appear in three subsequent diary entries in April 2020, the first of which saw a change in the language used from phrases such as website or publisher to "community hub" where people go to access more than just the usual mix of theatre previews, crime stories and political infighting. Studies have looked at the way in which audiences demand trust and objectivity from local news providers (Wenzel et al, 2017; Callison and Young, 2019). The pre-pandemic entries in the diary speak to this sense of creating authority through authenticity and professional aims, recognising the need to "uphold standards" when spending time working with submitted content from a contributor and moderating comments. Despite this mention of engagement with contributing actors, the term collaboration only appears within the journal during the period of this first lockdown; and only then when discussing non-journalistic activities such as an online quiz organised for readers.

> *It's been a simple idea, but a real collaborative approach with local community leaders helping to plan and organise, with the council leader agreeing to be quizmaster from his living room! So popular have these events become that we've decided to 'charge' an entry fee to donate to charity.*

The placement of journalism within communities at a local level was examined by Wenzel and Crittenden (2021:2031) who documented a community-centred journalism project over a year-and-a-half period. Participants in that study spoke of the need to recognise informal networks and opportunities as part of the wider "local storytelling network". The diary entry relating to the creation of the quiz identifies this sense of collaboration with different agents, not necessarily on the production of journalism content, but as a way of community empowerment and engagement with the *Lichfield Live* brand more generally. This offers an interesting insight into changing habits when considering the sense of personal ownership identified in chapter five. Despite this desire to control the production of news, a number of entries in the journal during the pandemic period show that there was an increasing desire and willingness to co-exist with other individuals and organisations due to the necessities of the lockdown and COVID-19 pandemic which had provided opportunities for diversities of output to create positives during a period where, as previously mentioned, traditional commercial publishers were experiencing significant challenges and threats to longstanding operational structures and business models.

For example, on 16th April 2020 there is a reference to an emerging partnership with a talking news service for the visually impaired due to the lack of newspapers available to supply content for them. This point is followed by the recognition that the temporary closure, which would eventually become permanent, of *The Lichfield Mercury* newspaper was "opening doors" for *Lichfield Live* by allowing it to move "out of the shadows and into the mainstream". The tone shows a clear recognition that there is a change of focus in the way semi-professional labour had been carried out and the way in which it might be exploited to evolve into a new and emergent area which could crossover into spaces occupied by professional outlets. A diary entry later in the year, on 28th August 2020, shows that the desire to seek out alternative opportunities did not cease, with the post celebrating the successful organisation of a community awards ceremony planned during lockdown as a way not to create journalistic content but to "raise spirits and celebrate the community". The entry also identifies an unwillingness and discomfort from operating in such a space as a semi-professional journalist, but recognises a value in collaboration that

had not been there pre-pandemic, as demonstrated in chapter five, in order to utilise the social standing as a producer within a broader network. This new-found willingness to experiment with new formats is also demonstrated later in 2020 as a newsletter was launched and began to help generate income and a further growth in readership. Such moments demonstrate the way in which the pandemic was forcing evolution and revolution within the semi-professional journalist as both a producer and a figure within the social hierarchy of a local community. Such activities and positive responses, both through the reception to new products and the transactional response to them, highlight how the semi-professional journalist was being challenged to move in new directions, although still without any formalised plan for such developments.

When combined with the audience growth reflected earlier in the chapter, which eventually saw *Lichfield Live* experience a year-on-year increase of 65% between 2019 and 2020, and the opportunities to reach new audiences through new initiatives, the diary increasingly explores issues of finance, revenue and opportunity from April 2020 onwards. While early entries in January lament the time-poor nature of a semi-professional reporter without the opportunities afforded by a full-time salaried journalism role, later posts show an increasing awareness of value being apportioned to the content produced and the opportunities to monetise labour in a way that had not been possible, or even desirable, before. An entry on 20th May 2020 highlights a confidence in surviving and even thriving in a local journalism landscape where traditional commercial business models had been unable ride out the swirling coronavirus storm due to disruption within the marketplace:

> *The lack of money in hyperlocal has, perversely, been one of the benefits - we have no staff to furlough or print product to pause. Low costs mean low risks, but they also mean low opportunity. That's something we're working to change.*

While the diary points to efforts to diversify output and create opportunities, it is clear from earlier entries before the first mention of Coronavirus that there was a desire to grow the platform and identify new ways to seek out an increased audience within the personal, social and employment limitations when operating as a semi-professional. The theme of funding appears 32 times throughout the journal and emerges

increasingly as a key concern as the research diary period progresses, but the first mention comes on

28th January 2020 where reflection is being made on the impending second edition of a small publication

run of a printed magazine funded by an organisation aiming to promote efforts to clamp down on loan

sharks. The project is described as one which demonstrates that print could be a "lucrative" future

avenue, with the money earmarked to potentially create a more sustainable and profitable income stream

which would, potentially, challenge the semi-professional status of the publication. It is notable that the 18

mentions of print in the diary are weighted in the first two months of 2020. The word appears 12 times

before March, but in the remaining ten months it appears just six times, with four of those contained in a

post criticising Government funding during the pandemic going to print publications rather than

non-professional digital producers. The remaining uses represent a reversal of views from the January

and February entries, focusing more on why the lack of print had allowed for an agility rather than the

initial viewpoint that they were the key to long term sustainability.

The lean towards newsprint as a potential route from semi-professional to a more commercial

and sustainable way of working is of interest given it emerged at a time when so many newspapers were

being forced out of the marketplace. However, any suggestion that COVID-19 would be a final nail in the

coffin of print publications is questioned by Barnes et al (2022) following their exploration of established

Australian local newspapers switching to digital delivery during the pandemic, only for grass-roots

independent publications to spring up to fill the printed void in a reversal of positions. However, the study

suggests that these replacement newspapers are not merely mirroring those they are following into the

print arena, but are instead focusing on a more social good function rather than a merely one-directional

content transaction with the audience. This in itself aligns to some of the ways in which semi-professional

and amateur publishers have sought to fill news deserts (Mathews, 2022). While the UK lockdown

created practical barriers to getting print publications into the hands of readers, the Australian study by

Barnes et al (2022) suggests that the inability of newspapers to function may not have been a given.

Despite the diary suggesting that the *Lichfield Live* semi-professional setup was able to navigate the

Covid period due to the lack of a physical product, it may be the case that the non-traditional model and a

more collaborative outlook than those traditional publishers may have had would have allowed some aspect of print to survive the pandemic. Such a lack of recognised organisational structure, while identified as one of the limitations of accessing funding and new markets such as print, is also recognised as a potential benefit for those working in the semi-professional area of journalism production during the period covered by the diary, with 15 separate entries referencing opportunity. While the pre-pandemic period sees opportunity framed around entry into alternative publishing platforms, from March onwards the tone is notably different and considers how the existing digital output can move forward.

> *The Lichfield Mercury has bitten the dust after more than 200 years. This is obviously horrendous news for those employed there, but it opens up a genuine opportunity for us to fill the gap.*

This entry on 6th June sparks a flurry of consecutive entries that explore what this new local media landscape would look like, with the admission that "the mind is whirring with possibilities". This is another clear point at which the lure of an alternative to the semi-professional world becomes an appealing proposition. The sense of potential recalibration of the role of journalistic labour in the local, non-professional sector grows as the diary reveals how approaches to be part of a consortium to buy a former print title and relaunch it are considered. A trait throughout the diary – and explored later in this chapter – often halts any real proposition of breaking from the semi-professional norm though. Such moments of excitement are tempered by discussions of the "gamble" any change of methods or models would be on a personal level. This does not stop the inherent optimist within the semi-professional reporter from dreaming of something different, however, with the focus on opportunity continuing to gain traction through the summer months and into autumn. The concluding viewpoint on all occasions, where such moves to change from a semi-professional existence, does return each time to reasons why such a route cannot be travelled. While the analysis of the diary demonstrates the coronavirus pandemic has impacted the semi-professional news reporter and publisher, it also demonstrates that it opened up a sense of opportunity and entrepreneurial thinking that had not been evident in the earlier sections of the

journal. However, it becomes clear that there are other factors, often external, that temper any thoughts of seeking new ways of working and developing beyond the current position.

It is clear from the analysis of the research diary that the obvious challenges facing some publishers became opportunities for those semi-professionals occupying the hyperlocal space (Pal, 2020; Ammonds, 2021), with the agility enabled through necessity creating opportunities due to the situation being faced. Regardless, the diary recognises that the fragile and complex eco-system within which the semi-professional journalist operates may offer some insight into why those opportunities were not necessarily taken up. Commentary in the diary is often tainted by restraint for fear of unbalancing the different factors of the personal, social, economic and professional life of the participant at a time when uncertainty permeates other aspects of their life. While pre-pandemic and lockdown there was a narrative linked to a desire to level the playing field in terms of competing with professional commercial publishers, the instigation of national lockdown regulations creates a narrative of the situation being reversed despite the opportunity to do just that or even grasp the local news power completely. This meant that rather than taking an envious stance of seeing stable, structured commercial organisations, the semi-professional journalist was now capable of playing to the strengths of the somewhat organic nature of their publishing methods and working models. However, while these opportunities may have presented themselves, the precarity of the very structures on which the semi-professional journalist operates continued to be evident throughout the period covered by the journal. By exploring this position in the next section of this chapter, it will be possible to consider how the agile methods of production and sustainability within the semi-professional space proved to be potential barriers to making liminal moves as discussed in chapter three.

6.2 "Everything looks like it's one thing away from coming crashing down"

Precarity of publication within the independent and hyperlocal journalism field has long been at the heart of discussions surrounding such sectors. Harte, Turner and Williams (2016: 243) identify how producers are "exploiting themselves" due to the reliance on volunteers, with their interviews suggesting there is a desire to move towards some form of financially sustainable model, but without full confidence in being able to do so. The precarity of journalism as a producer is not something restricted to this single aspect of the landscape, however. When considered more broadly, precarity in the labour market is identified by Kalleberg (2009:2) as a position when people "fear losing their jobs, when they lack alternative employment opportunities in the labour market, and when workers experience diminished opportunities to obtain and maintain particular skills".

The rapid pace of change within the journalism industry as outlined in chapters one, two and three, demonstrate why such precarity might exist due to changes within the broader local news landscape. Such reductions and changes in the types of roles within the journalism workforce has led to reflection on the way in which areas such as civic engagement and representation are impacted (Nel, 2010; Reinardy, 2010; Spaulding, 2016; Toomer, 2023). It is put forward by Cohen (2015) that the rise of entrepreneurial journalism, of which hyperlocal is recognised as one such aspect, is closely aligned to the rising precarity of the traditional reporting mechanisms and outlets rather than necessarily being constrained by them. However, while precarity may create opportunity, it comes with an alternative set of potentially precarious positions the semi-professional journalist can find themselves in too. While the business model is one consideration which crosses the line between the professional and non-professional sectors of journalism, this research diary identifies the ways in which social and economic precarity can take the place of the more commercial considerations. The positioning of social and economic considerations at a personal level does not mean the broader issues of precarity within journalism can be dismissed though. Indeed, the research diary recognises that concerns over the longevity and commercial sustainability of semi-professional journalism are strong considerations

throughout. Precarity of publication appears in 52 entries throughout the year-long journal. These vary

from explanations of processes of production, such as the commuter train being a de-facto newsroom,

through to the financial sustainability and threats posed by both internal and external factors. Beyond the

previously mentioned pandemic references, this topic proved to be the most regular occurrence when the

entries were analysed. This demonstrates that while the semi-professional may be afforded more of an

ability to take risks in their activity as discussed by Marx (2015) in his examination of

semi-professionalism within the music industry, the volume of consideration within this diary demonstrates

that a journalist operating in this space also has a strong consideration and awareness of longevity and

sustainability. Marx's perspective on the semi-professional looks at musicians in this space as creative

collaborators able to enjoy the freedoms afforded by their position without the shackles of traditional

structures. Such consideration offers some unexpected juxtaposition when considering

semi-professionalism in journalism via this research diary. While these freedoms clearly exist, as

demonstrated in chapter five, due to the semi-professional reporter being able to shape and mould

production practices to their own lifestyles and personal preferences, the journal shows that there is also

a recognition of a need for the semi-professional to conform to some norms that might otherwise be

viewed as professional standards. This blend of flexibility and focus is of particular interest when

considering the view of Standing (2011:26) on how precarity has the potential to erode notions of

professionalism:

> Once jobs become flexible and instrumental, with wages insufficient for socially
> respectable subsistence and a dignifying lifestyle, there is no "professionalism" that goes
> with belonging to a community with standards, ethical codes and mutual respect among
> its members based on competence and respect for long-established rules of behaviour.
> Standing (2011:26)

Standing's views are of interest when considered alongside the recent evolution of semi-professional

journalism, particularly during the aforementioned COVID-19 pandemic. Previous reflections in this

chapter demonstrate that the semi-professional does not enjoy many of the things Standing perceives as

being hallmarks of professionalism. This in itself would suggest that the very nature of semi-professional

reporting is therefore embedded in a culture of precarity, but there are challenges to this viewpoint given

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collective efforts within sectors such as hyperlocal to create communities of production through

organisations like the Independent Community News Network. Such communities are enabling

independent and non-professionals to take collective positions and actions as a sector within the local

news industry; something which questions the perspective of hyperlocal journalism as a digital disruption

to traditional journalism (Hess and Waller, 2019; Anandya et al, 2020) given the desire to create an

informal media group suggests that a grouping of media organisations, as seen in the professional

sphere, is therefore not necessarily a factor distinguishing between professional and semi-professional

journalists.

The issue of precarity beyond the professional journalism landscape is one that has been

examined previously within Journalism Studies as a barrier to success. Williams and Harte (2016)

highlight the lack of long-term certainty for producers in the hyperlocal and non-professional sectors of

journalism through the lens of financial stability. Timed funding periods and impatient investors can often

leave semi-professional reporters using personal funds which, as their study reveals, also lacks longevity

and is at the mercy of external factors. It is for this reason that the consideration of how the

semi-professional journalist is afforded the chance to grasp opportunities when they present themselves

is of interest when considered against the backdrop of the uncertainty caused by factors such as

publishing methods and organisational structures. As mentioned in the analysis of the diary's

coronavirus-related entries, the growth during the 12 month period created clear points where opportunity

was identified, be it for expansion, development or general funding. However, an entry in June

demonstrated the juxtaposition between the situation and reality.

> *We now have this sizeable audience - but the time I need to spend with Lichfield Live is*
> *increasing in almost equal proportion. I'm starting to fear that I'm not doing any part of*
> *what I do justice. The plates are spinning, but they're not moving with any real conviction;*
> *everything looks like it's one thing away from coming crashing down.*

Entries such as this demonstrate a developing discourse within the diary of the conflict between desire

and reality as the semi-professional recognises the value of growth but also understands that change

comes with an alternative set of challenges that may not be found directly in the professional arena. The

recognition of the competing demands of the semi-professional to satisfy both their self-imposed production methods and their broader responsibilities in other aspects of their life, be they social, economic or labour-orientated, demonstrates that the fear of change is often greater than the potential opportunity such change may bring. This draws into doubt the view from other areas of the creative sector that risk-taking may be an inherent trait of the semi-professional. Marx (2015) identifies how musicians in such a position can be afforded the opportunity to take risks and experiment on stage, but this appears not to be mirrored in the diary when looking at semi-professionalism from a journalism perspective. Some of this may allude to the framework surrounding the semi-professional or non-professional journalist as being at odds with other creative industries where risk may be seen to be more inherent. A group of art students, for example, were more likely to take creative risks due to them "producing for an audience that was not previously known to them" (Broadhead, 2019:61).

The suggestion that the level of risk-taking aligned to semi-professionals can be shaped by their prior knowledge may explain why the diary demonstrates a "safety-first approach" to many situations where the reader may otherwise expect an entrepreneurial spirit to come to the fore as various factors created the fertile ground on which Shirky (2009) suggested alternative models would grow where previously the landscape had been colonised by large media publishers. It appears from the diary that – as an author who had experienced the precarity of journalism within the professional sphere – the move into the semi-professional realm has brought with it a recognition of how that precarity can play out in reality. This manifests itself in a reluctance to risk what the diary demonstrates is a balancing act of competing priorities for the semi-professional, where change could create confusion or challenge to the established norms of production, resource or personal position. The semi-professional's alignment within this journalistic space is therefore an unusual one given they are afforded a creative licence that their professional counterparts do not have, but are not necessarily utilising it in an experimental way as has been highlighted by those looking at areas such as hyperlocal, which sits outside the recognised professional sphere (Bruns et al, 2008; Jones, 2012; Hess and Waller, 2016).

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The conflict in the positioning of the semi-professional is expressed in the entries linked to precarity within the diary, with 12 highlighting explicitly a discourse between professional standards, the devotion of time, and audience expectation. Of particular note are a series of posts where the production process coincides with a trip abroad. Writing during this period, there is a sense of frustration and reference to "kicking myself" at the inability to cover the stories I want to at a time that I feel I should be. This aligns with a reference in one entry during this period to "guilt" at the knowledge that my time should be spent with family rather than trying to sacrifice such periods for "a website hundreds of miles away". A telling point comes the night before heading abroad for the holiday where a point is made to working in a dimly-lit airport hotel while the family are sleeping to schedule articles because "if I don't do it, no-one will". While these examples offer insight into the challenges of the semi-professional journalist at work, they also question the lens through which a reporter in this sphere views the value of their work and the sense of commitment they have. As Bruns (2011) highlights, dedication is something visible within professional journalism as reporters commit themselves to stories and issues. The diary entries linked to the concept of devotion are more concerned with commitment to production which, when considered alongside the previous chapter, offer insight into what drives the semi-professional to echo or mimic perceived professional standards, even where they may have evolved or changed from what they once were. While the individual may view their actions as commitment and some form of almost journalistic martyrdom, others may perceive such comments as examples of self-exploitation and a desire to create a self-importance around their actions.

The concept of self-exploitation is already recognised in some areas of non-professional journalism such as the hyperlocal sector, with Tenor (2019) highlighting it as a strategy for sustainability alongside civic duty. Cook et al (2016) point to precarious business and funding models as a reason why such alternative strategies may need to exist in the first place, while others highlight this self-exploitation when considering alternative economies of hyperlocal publishing (Harte et al, 2016). The diary offers insight into the mindset from the perspective of the producer rather than through the lens of the business. Of the entries linked to this concept of precarity, they are evenly split between personal and

product, highlighting the complex nature of the challenges being faced in the hyperlocal sector and the

often intertwined nature of reporter and publication in small, independent publishers. The journal

discusses the personal challenges faced by those working in the unpaid journalism sector, although not

for the financial reasons that may be anticipated and, indeed, have been explored through other

examinations of the hyperlocal landscape. The diary does not use financial precarity as a route through

which to explore personal challenge. Instead, it examines the practical challenges of journalistic

production as a volunteer. One entry on 1st June 2020 highlights the "toll" of working to create journalism

while also balancing other aspects of life:

> *I'm never switching off. Getting up early to get Lichfield Live work done so I can then do the day job and the family jobs, then going to bed late so I can trawl through the mountains of emails coming in. This isn't good and I know it isn't sustainable. But the genie is out of the bottle and people are now finding out about us and are expecting a level of reporting and standards from us.*

The context of broadening appeal forcing a change of mindset echoes the suggestion that the

value of such cultural labour in the internet age is very much "the dirty secret of the digital

revolution" (Dyer-Witheford, 2014:169). There is a sense of discomfort in the diary when this idea

of appealing to a wider audience is broached, demonstrating a sense of unease in the way the

labour will be viewed by readers and whether it will be valued by them at all. The perception of

audiences may also be considered as a term more broadly when considering how the

semi-professional frames their labour and role through the diary. The so-called "competitive and

complementary" views reporters in the professional sphere of sports journalism have of bloggers

in their field (McEnnis, 2017:556) is of interest when considering the journal in connection with the

previous chapter and the challenges working in a semi-professional manner create for an

individual, particularly one with links through a past and current career with the industry on a

professional level. The sense that cultural labour may not have the value by those perceived as

peers, as well as those identified as the more traditional audience, points to a personal discourse

surrounding the value the semi-professional journalist puts on their labour to create the dirty

secret explanation offered by Dyer-Witheford (2014).

Secret or not, the next portion of the diary entry recognises that something will ultimately have to give, but, perhaps tellingly, it does not offer up solutions. Indeed, the question is not answered in the post, or indeed in the remainder of the diary. It does, however, begin to hang over the reflections from this point on, where it becomes clear that uncertainties in other aspects of life, such as how the pandemic might have impacted on long term employment status, are becoming more apparent at a time when the demand for the unpaid labour of the semi-professional journalist is increasing. An example of this comes when the entry bemoans the various aspects of *Lichfield Live* that now have to be taken care of beyond the things that readers and commentators see on the site itself, pointing to the moderation of comments and dealing with complaints and queries, leading to my reflection that "I didn't sign up for this - but then I didn't actually sign up for anything when you think about it". Such entries offer links to the cultural labour reflections of Oakley (2009:7) who identifies how such activities are "described in terms of love or passionate attachment to work" but recognises the uncertainty around whether such labour is the domain of either paid or solely unpaid workers. Participants interviewed by Ursell (2000) also distance themselves from financial gain being the driving force behind their labour, indicating that work within the cultural sector can offer recompense, but that this may not be a key component when considering cultural labour. This would suggest the semi-professional journalist is able to be considered as someone providing cultural labour and actually challenges the diary itself where entries point to a sense of commitment to audience and community. When viewing it through the lens of cultural labour, it becomes more apparent that the driving forces may be more akin to a "love or passionate attachment to work" (Oakley, 2009:7). Evidence of this view can also be found in some studies of the hyperlocal sector that have explored the perspectives of journalism producers, including Khan (2020:49) who identifies how the labour on one website was "much more than what is socially necessary and creates a spectacle that culminates in the extended labour time and tasks". The viewpoint offers reasons why the diary may reference demand and an increase in the labour required to produce journalism, but does not evidence demand beyond a rudimentary reference to increasing page views. When considered alongside

the previously mentioned perspectives on cultural labour, this leads to the question of whether the demand is being driven by the audience or a perceived view of demand from an individual caused by their desire to validate their own activities, either through their personal perspective or that of their peers and an audience.

The internal discourse between the challenges facing an unpaid reporter being essentially funded through alternative employment draws sharply into focus in later diary posts as the professional employment enters busier periods. The tone of the posts becomes more resentful of *Lichfield Live* as an entity, with four entries between September and October, the start of the academic calendar, all using terms linked to annoyance at having to carry out journalistic work at a period when time was a more precious resource than usual. Similarly, in the run up to Christmas, three consecutive entries express frustration at not being able to relax in the same way as those reading the content being produced might be, highlighting a tense positioning of producer and consumer. However, it is notable that despite this somewhat negative tone being taken, it does not slow down the output. Data from *Lichfield Live* at the time shows that the average story count remained consistent during this period. The negative tone mentioned may be symptomatic of a wider view on the way in which journalists frame their own labour and that of their peers. Örnebring (2009:1) suggests that journalists are "perpetually concerned with the decline of their occupation" and have a nostalgic bias to a time when they considered journalism as a traditional industry to be better than they may currently view or experience it. The apparent role of the semi-professional in seeking to uphold standards of both content and levels of delivery is a reversal on the position researchers have taken of identifying the ways in which reporters beyond the professional landscape are seeking to reach certain standards (Metzgar et al, 2011) rather than necessarily enforcing them. Through analysing the diary, it is apparent that the cultural labour and links to community has created a desire by the semi-professional to position themselves as something of a self-appointed guardian of a declining sector of the media landscape, and may represent one of the key definitions of the semi-professional journalist in the uncertain space outside of professional reporting, particularly when considering how the work of

citizen journalists may not be deemed to provide the "standards that can be expected of professional journalists" (Jurrat, 2011:13).

The work of Engesser (2008) also suggests there is an additional space where semi-professionals may operate within journalism by highlighting different categorisations of reporters, the majority of which reflect on an aspirational relationship with the professional domain. However, the examination of this diary suggests aspiration is not the determining factor for the semi-professional who may instead see themselves as that keeper of some of the traditional roles played by local newspapers which were then forced to relinquish these spaces due to changing market conditions and evolving business models (Daum and Scherer, 2018). That is not to say, however, that tensions around personal precarity are any less of a factor in the way the semi-professional journalist operates, but it does offer some understanding of the reasons behind the cultural labour of reporting and the political economy of this space. This manifests itself not only in the recognition of the impact the role has on both the social and professional life, but the journal also identifies the position confidence and standards plays, particularly when embarking on new and unknown ventures. Again, this points to a sense of familiarity with methods gleaned from the traditional reporting career outlined in the previous chapter as a factor for existing in this space rather than seeking to grow and explore beyond the self-assumed role of gatekeeper of local journalistic standards. Of the entries relating to the potential to expand the *Lichfield Live* operation, all offer reasons not to take the step into new arenas and areas. For example, when discussing the rise in advertising, an August entry highlights that "the advertising is out there, but as a journalist I don't feel comfortable going out and trying to sell adverts". This tension between the known and the unknown is demonstrated as a later entry highlights a frustration at the lack of value placed on local news:

> *All the traffic and all the eyeballs, yet we still have to rely on goodwill in the main to keep going. Content costs, but getting that home to people is difficult.*

The juxtaposition of the two entries and the aforementioned views of Engesser (2008) is of interest when considering whether the journalism labour supplied by the semi-professional should be aligned to the

discourse around local news from a traditional media perspective, or whether there is a closer alignment with existing, emerging, or even new views on what local journalism is or should become, particularly given the multifaceted nature of the experiences described in the diary. Advertising, marketing, social media, complaints, legal and ethical responses are all discussed across the period of the diary, with all being seen to prove challenging when set alongside the traditional journalistic skills of reporting and interviewing. The journal entries may well seek to draw links to the local news landscape in terms of newspapers as a term of reference, through examining in detail the content of the entries, it is clear that there is a closer link to the entrepreneurial journalism sector rather than the purely local, mainstream one, although it is easy to see, given the reflections in chapter five, why the diary may seek to align itself to considerations framed around local newspapers.

While Anderson (2014) suggests that entrepreneurial journalism raises as many questions as it does answers is a term of reference rather than a clear practice, Ruotsalainen (2023) argues that they are participants who can be described as such, and identifying how they are helping to make sense of journalism's future opportunities. Singer (2016) points to the ways in which journalists occupying such a space are being forced to revisit long-held views on how journalism is produced and funded in order to reinvent themselves in an unfamiliar landscape. The challenge of reinvention is one that features in the diary with uncertainty over how to move from a journalist with a point of reference in the traditional local newspaper landscape to carve out an opportunity in the still emerging hyperlocal arena. There is an admission in a post on 14th September that questions whether the desire to make that jump from "a local news hack to a jack of all trades who definitely masters none" actually exists. The entries in the later months of the period covered begin to demonstrate a tension between the ongoing growth of both readership and output, and the way in which this will place restrictions on the ability to continue delivering the service at a level deemed acceptable for the author if not the audience. The move towards a more entrepreneurial discourse brings into consideration the way in which Singer (2016) examines the disruptive nature of such activities to legacy news organisations. However, when considering the semi-professional via the diary, it becomes apparent that an individual with experience within such legacy organisations can be as equally ill-prepared to tackle the entrepreneurial challenges presented as those

from other backgrounds. As well as the demands placed on the semi-professional and hyperlocal

producer to diversify into new areas in both production and entrepreneurial approaches, the journal

demonstrates other aspects where semi-professional journalists working independently face challenges

they may be uncomfortable with. The time period covered references to two formal complaints made

about *Lichfield Live* and its coverage. The first, in January 2020 is in regards to a complaint regarding a

planning story, while the second, referenced later in 2020 related to incorrect data being shown with

regards to councillor attendance. While complaints are experienced by journalists in all newsrooms at

various stages (Ettema and Glasser, 1987; Palau-Sampio, 2016), the diary entries show that the lack of

the infrastructure for the semi-professional to deal with issues as easily as they may be in more traditional

publishers is an area where there is a susceptibility and area of particular precarity. The first complaint is

referenced with a recognition that while there was clear evidence that reporting publicly-available planning

documents was not an issue, the seeds of doubt were nevertheless sewn by legal threats issued by the

complainant.

> *I know there is no case for us to answer, but we - and certainly I - don't have the money*
> *to defend any action if someone with deep pockets decides to try and shut us down.*

Discussions around hyperlocal funding are often linked to the precarity of operating models and meeting

running costs (Radcliffe, 2012; Harte et al, 2016), although it should be noted that precarity is broader

than just this sphere of journalism (Harcup, 2023). However, the diary demonstrates that these funding

concerns can run deeper than the obvious costs associated with a local news operation. Support from the

Independent Community News Network, of which *Lichfield Live* is a member, provided basic legal support

to craft a reply to the initial legal letter, but the reflections in the diary demonstrate that the financial

requirements to defend either a complex legal issue or even a speculative attempt is an area where the

fragility of independent media operations and the semi-professional journalists operating them could face

genuine risk in terms of longevity. The role of journalistic legal knowledge at whatever level is worth

considering when trying to frame the semi-professional reporter or identify skillsets they may possess.

Barnett and Townend (2014) identify how hyperlocal publishers wanting to carry out investigative

reporting find themselves often restricted by a wait on legal advice. While professional reporters may also

experience such delays, the infrastructure supporting such journalists and training programmes will also aid them in the way their semi-professional counterparts may not enjoy through such mechanisms. Barnett and Townend also found that around a quarter of people they questioned cited a desire for support in law training. While it could be suggested that legal knowledge or education and support in this area is a component of the semi-professional, the working understanding of law alone is not a sole factor in facilitating growth as a publisher in this sector. This is something supported by both the diary and the findings of Barnett and Townend's study which saw just 9.4% of respondents cite it as a factor limiting their growth, with the three largest factors being time, resource and funding. However, if considering how the semi-professional may be defined, there is a recognition that the legal knowledge ties in to some of the previous discussion earlier in this chapter around the ways in which the semi-professional seeks to provide a functioning replica of local news reportage. Such acknowledgement of a skillset more aligned with the professional sector puts the description of the semi-professional journalist at odds with other, more-established concepts of activities such as para-journalism, amateur journalism or layman journalism which seek to provide an alternative to the professional sector (Frohlich et al, 2012).

While differences may help to define the semi-professional journalist from others operating within the space outside of the traditional professional sphere, there are nevertheless similar areas of discourse when considering the precarity of operation. As mentioned during the reflections regarding the pandemic period earlier in this chapter, there are a number of references to funding within the diary entries. These mentions are split into three main areas; aspiration, concern and criticism. Despite their differences, all demonstrate a link to the precarity of publication and concerns around stability. Aspiration and criticism references are mainly aligned to a recognition of the need to access funding streams and the inability to actually do so. However, they offer an insight into the ways in which the producer views their own activity and suggests that it moves away from the notion of such non-professional publishing as being journalism pursued as a hobby in the way described when considering early amateur journalists working in fields away from the professional environment (Isaac, 2016). Posts in February, July and November are notable in their reference to the "job of running *Lichfield Live*". While Harte et al (2016) found that volunteer labour remained a key ingredient of the hyperlocal sector, the use of language within the diary

argues that there is something of an identity crisis for those working as what we may term as semi-professionals in the field, with unpaid work still being viewed as work in the traditional sense nonetheless. The journal points to "structure" and "tasks" in a way that could be viewed as being work-like in their approach, but others explicitly point to the semi-professional journalism participation being undertaken as an alternative type of activity with a recognition that it does not fit the traditional patterns seen in the professional journalism workplace. When considered with the outlining in chapter five of the use of a pseudonym in the initial history of *Lichfield Live* it shows that there is an uncertainty for an individual who has operated professionally to then seek to reframe their labour when it sits in an area other than the traditional workplace. This again manifests itself in an entry discussing how the efforts of the semi-professional may be perceived: "More readers are good but it also means more scrutiny of the standard of my writing and newsgathering".

The analysis of the diary does demonstrate an uneasy alliance about how the role of a semi-professional journalist should be viewed from the outside but also, importantly, from the personal perspective. The references to the challenges, labour and time demands are plentiful throughout and almost revel in a sense of near-martyrdom at periods that question the motivation of a semi-professional journalist where the transactional payment for the work, as might be found in the professional sphere, is not the driving factor. As Nicey (2016) suggests, finance is one of the key separators when considering the differences between the professional and amateurs operating within journalism. It is however, notable, that for the recognition of the work that goes into balancing the demands placed on an individual by semi-professional operation, there is also a sense of value placed on the activities being carried out, particularly in relation to the position it places the individual in within the broader community. This points to the value extracted from the labour of the semi-professional being closer aligned to the cultural capital, which Throsby (2020) suggests is more akin to a centre point between economic and cultural value.

When analysing the diary, it is clear that there is a real temptation offered by growth and opportunity, even when a semi-professional journalist recognises that the risk of leaving full time employment in another sector would be too great a step to take due to the precarity of the situation. The diary entries highlighting "the thrill of the chase for success" and the desire to "stay in the game just in

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case" point to a suggestion that fear of missing out on an opportunity further down the line can push the semi-professional journalist to continue with their endeavours beyond what might otherwise be deemed a reasonable period of time. Such motivations may not necessarily be purely financial, but the opportunity to build on growth and create a monetary sustainability in order to potentially secure reward for production is evident in the bid to move from the precarity of publishing to a more identifiable method of working:

> *People now see us as an outlet above what we perhaps are. At some point, the two viewpoints need to merge - we either need to be recognised as a bit of a small scale outfit trying to find our way by muddling through without any real authority, or something with aspirations to become more professional and sustainable.*

The journal entry highlights the challenge of identity facing the semi-professional journalist. Despite the view of Gillmor (2006) that non-professionals can sometimes create an output similar in standard to or even in excess of that delivered by professionals, the view from the inside can be different to the perceptions of external analysts, thus demonstrating the value of such first-person accounts. Despite the opportunities created through the agility and autonomy of the semi-professional journalist, the diary contains strong tones of self-doubt caused by the very nature of the act of creating journalistic material outside of the realms of industry-defined models and structures. The research diary illuminates such descriptive power struggles by not only exploring the precarity and, at times, a lack of confidence through the inability to rely on traditional newsroom structures, but also through the creation of a determination to overcome the barriers and obstacles often observed from the outside as a point of difference between the work of the semi-professional and their professional counterparts.

Such viewpoints manifest themselves in a number of traits that suggest the production of the semi-professional is as far as, if not further from, the amateur position as it is from the professional. Evidence of a selfishness and an almost ruthless nature are provided by the reflections on the limitations of potential contributors and the demise of organisations also serving the same news audience, highlighting that the semi-professional may operate via a route considered as a community or community-centred publisher (Radcliffe et al, 2023), but this does not mean that they are without some of the competitive aspects of traditional commercial outlets. This narrative, which emerges often on the back

of a posting highlighting a more negative approach, also suggests a desire to to find a way of ensuring the

view of those looking at the product externally is as something far more professional than it may be in

reality. In itself, this speaks also to the relationship between the perspective of both the publication and

the journalist when considered alongside more established journalism industry peers.

6.3 "Perhaps we are now starting to go beyond a hobby and into something more akin to semi-professional?"

Just as the semi-professional journalist faces an internal unease over identity, so does the emergent

journalism sector as a whole. Areas such as hyperlocal, which is a location of many semi-professional

and amateur journalists operating in the UK, have struggled with a clear, overarching definition for a

number of years due to the diversity of models used by independent publishers to both operate and

sustain themselves (Radcliffe, 2012, Arnold, 2019). Such challenges to categorisation are also active

when considering the individuals who operate within such non-traditional structures and organisations as

identified elsewhere in this study. While professional and amateur are widely recognised terms as outlined

in chapter two, others have sought to define those existing in the hyperlocal space as entrepreneurial

journalists or even pioneer journalists (Hepp and Loosen, 2019) looking to bring alternative and fresh

ideas to the way journalism might be practised in a field free of some of the restrictions of traditional

reporting norms. This sense of the semi-structured nature of hyperlocal publishers is reflected within the

research diary, where the diversification of activities features throughout, particularly when reflections are

considered through the lens of professionalism. Derivatives of the term 'professional' appear on 31

occasions throughout the document, with the entries they feature in being both aspirational and reflective

in equal measure.

Despite a background as a professional journalist, there is a sense of belief that professionalism

once an individual steps outside of the formal mechanisms of commercial news production either

disappears or declines when it is no longer aligned to media outlets such as newspapers and broadcast

media, even where some of these organisations have exited print and moved digital themselves. Such a viewpoint speaks to some of the discussions around the value of print when compared to digital outlined in chapter one. There is a clear shift to the online space as a platform within journalism at a professional level due to the changing nature of audiences (Picard, 2014; Nielsen, 2019; Rios-Rodriguez et al, 2022) and at a non-professional level due to the low-cost nature of digital publishing. This has given rise to the semi-professional as a concept due to the ability to monetise labour without necessarily doing so on a scale to deliver it as a full time profession. It does, however, leave an uncertainty over how semi-professional should be categorised as an activity within local journalism, particularly given the regularity of change and emergence of new platforms and methods of telling stories which were often the domain of the large commercial publishers. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the struggle to create an identity when considering the standard views of professionalism within journalism is evident for those operating within it. The diary demonstrates a desire for professionalism while also being cautious about the way it might impact on what is described in one entry as a long-established "certainty through chaos". This aligns with the evidence from the diary of on one hand frustration at non-traditional working patterns, while on the other a recognised method of working adapted to lifestyle and external factors which might otherwise impact on the semi-professional reporter. Examples such as being able to report without the mechanisms of large, professional newsrooms are candidly juxtaposed with the reflections on the way some of the work carried out during the research period may not have been possible within the constraints of such setups.

The search for understanding of personal practice and a desire for recognition is identified and begins to manifest itself as a search for credibility; a term which is not seen until July and then features on multiple occasions as consideration is given to the journey to, and potentially from, semi-professionalism:

> *Perhaps we are now starting to go beyond a hobby and into something more akin to semi-professional? We're not earning the money to be classified as such yet, but I do think there is a clear recognition from the broader audience that we are now a credible local media source. I do have to consider whether Lichfield Live becomes more about work than joy though if we find a way to develop the publication further.*

The aforementioned description of the production of journalism as work within the diary as a way of categorising the activity with a link to professionalism and even semi-professionalism is not insignificant. However, such entries referencing the labour of non-professional reporters in this way are tempered by views expressed alongside them that the concept of the work constituting a "paid job" is a merely aspirational position and, ultimately, an out of reach proposal. The final entry in the journal strikes an almost melancholy tone, suggesting that the finance to allow for either part-time or full-time employment is something likely to remain beyond reach, and that there is a begrudging acceptance that the activities being undertaken will be "well-meaning, but fruitless". Such a viewpoint is challenged by Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) though, who points to the volunteer-labour of such independent publishers being superseded by "a growing number of providers able to devote themselves to working full-time on their community news startups". Wahl-Jorgensen's findings are tempered though by a recognition that the financial uncertainties continue to loom large over those publishers who are able to move into the paid, professional arena. Uncertainty around the monetary sustainability of the independent publisher is also evident in the research diary. Concern and criticism-themed entries account for 12 of the posts linked to funding within the journal. In the majority of these cases, this is referenced alongside the growth in traffic and readership of *Lichfield Live*. Of the entries on these themes, they cross into the challenges of areas such as a lack of infrastructure to source revenue, central funding and support schemes from Government and other agencies proving difficult to access, as well as fears around the impact of funding through other sources to allow the work to be carried out.

The precarity of publishing for sectors such as semi-professional and hyperlocal outlets due to finance is highlighted within this chapter and previous ones, but it also comes against the backdrop of broader questions about the financial sustainability of the journalism industry as a whole. A Media Reform Coalition (2022) report points to the external funding opportunities afforded by schemes such as the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service as ways journalism as a profession is seeking to address "the ongoing struggles they face" by "changing [the] economic fabric". It is notable, however, that the report frames local media primarily through the large media groups, but does recognise the increasing prevalence of hyperlocal and alternative sites becoming recognised as mainstream players in such

discussions. It adds that while "these are often financially strapped and unable to reliably fund decent salaries or large-scale investigations, they have nevertheless managed to maintain quality output". The description of the journalistic standards being defined as quality output is of interest when considering how the diary identifies the work being carried out as a semi-professional journalist. Although not paying wages or fitting other norms which may be associated with professional reporting, an entry on 20th August offers an insight into this aspect of sitting outside of normative professional journalism structures while also seeking to maintain standards associated with outlets which do operate in these fields. The post ponders on "the challenges of being held to the standards of professional publishers". Does this mean there is a desire to move to professional status through the work carried out? It may seem so on the surface, but there are other entries which sit uncomfortably with this proposal of a semi-professional producer and publisher as a whole striving to attain a different position within the broader journalism landscape through the liminality discussed in chapter three.

There are examples in April and June of potential funding routes being rejected, both due to a desire to provide free advertising for a community-led organisation and due to an advertiser not fitting the remit of localism laid out by the site's management team. These suggest that there is not a drive towards growth for entrepreneurial reasons at all costs for the semi-professional journalist. While Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) uses the work of Granger et al (1995) to frame community publishers as converts who had sought to embark on their ventures due to disruption within the professional journalism industry and a desire to become entrepreneurs, the analysis of the diary points to alternative evidence, such as the rejection of funding, which does not fit a purely commercial drive for profit or growth. That is not to say growth does not feature in the considerations; indeed as a term, it appears 13 times within the diary throughout the 12 month period. It is, however, suggested via the entries that the labour of the semi-professional journalist speaks to alternative narratives rather than just those outlined above when considering the metrics of success from professional publishers of journalism. This creates a need to fully understand the narratives of the individuals who make up this sector of the local news landscape which have become increasingly relevant in a post-pandemic world (Yeoman and Morris, 2023).

6.4 "If I stop what I'm doing the only real loser will be me"

The research diary identifies something of an identity crisis for the semi-professional journalist, which has likely evolved at a greater pace due to the backdrop of unique change in society and the industry at the time it was produced. As identified earlier in this chapter, the semi-professional in journalism terms is not currently defined with any clarity. While studies explore types of journalists based on their platform of production (Willnat et al, 2019), they are often focused around professional reporting frameworks. There has been discourse around the space outside of the professional landscape through the lens of amateurs blogging (Griffiths, 2004; Atton, 2009;) or more recently via the studies of the emergent hyperlocal arena (Williams and Harte, 2016; Harte, 2017; Hess and Waller, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). The research diary, however, indicates an alternative perspective on this space where semi-professional journalists are working in ways associated more closely with their professional peers than amateurs rising to challenge the normative models and processes, suggesting that catch-all terminology surrounding hyperlocal as a sector may require a greater unpicking and understanding.

As identified earlier in this chapter, the removal of the high water line of professional publications during the COVID-19 pandemic may have been a major factor in allowing journalists across the media landscape to reposition their activities and help to frame how they are viewed by themselves, their audience and others in the industry. While the task of producing articles as a secondary activity or role may sit outside the professional sphere, the diary demonstrates the shift towards a more professional way of thinking that is more closely aligned to traditional journalism discourse, where sustainability and entrepreneurial consideration come to the fore. By opening up of the local media landscape as established newspapers vacated the space, either temporarily or permanently, it has created a recalibration of journalism production for local audiences. The rise of the alternative media (Boberg et al, 2020) during the pandemic period saw amateurs and Facebook pages become a recognised arm of reporting with greater authority than beforehand, while semi-professionals were given an opportunity to see a route to professional status as the journal highlights during this period. It is important not to confuse

the opportunity this created for the semi-professional with confidence and desire to capitalise on such

opportunities, though. Throughout the period covered by the diary, it demonstrates a clear concern over

the impact of change, be it in terms of processes, perceptions or models. As evidenced by the diary's

entries exploring production practices in trains, cars and other non-newsroom spaces, the

semi-professional reporter is forced to adapt in order to create space for the provision of labour at

different levels and different times due to conflicting responsibilities. It demonstrates how they are forced

to skill in areas where they see value rather than necessity, often seeking to avoid those areas which

might take them to a different space within the journalism production sphere, particularly as mentioned

elsewhere in this chapter in areas such as the monetisation of their labour. The reason for this may be the

lack of traditional professional status meaning they are not necessarily beholden to pre-requisite activities

and therefore are able to exist in a comfort zone, even if such working practices may look "chaotic"

(Stepp, 2011: 22) from the outside at times. However, by evolving techniques and adaptations to

recognised working practices developed through education and professional work, the semi-professional

has created an ecosystem within which their labour can exist. The diary demonstrates the fragility of this

space, however, with some of the reflections mentioned in this chapter pointing to the recognition of the

impact change in a small way could impact on the longevity of the semi-professional reporter and their

identity as such, as highlighted by entries discussing why "the real pressure is uncertainty over the future"

or when examining one of the latter entries in the journal:

> *When I worked in industry full time, I always worked on a survival basis; make yourself*
> *relevant to prevent you being cut when cuts were needed. I wonder whether I'm starting*
> *to develop this strand to my Lichfield Live work? The uncertainty in the current climate*
> *has made me think about the future. What if the university needs to reduce the staffing it*
> *has? What if I need to find another alternative? Perhaps this has made me start to think*
> *about the feasibility of pushing Lichfield Live into something more than the oft-mentioned*
> *side-hustle?*

Although the side-hustle has been explored across the cultural sector in areas such as the gig-economy

(Bates, 2019; Ravenelle, 2021), journalism as an activity considered as a side-hustle is not as widely

examined. Interviewees in a study in Taiwan by Ma, Lu and Lee (2023) spoke about their journalism

activity in such terminology, but their reasons for entering the space were more enforced and seen as a

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pre-retirement necessity due to the professional industry evolving and forcing them to occupy a digital space. While the stages of such a side-hustle may be different to that of the semi-professional within the diary, this concept of retaining a position in an industry they are familiar with offers some insight into how and why semi-professionals might operate in this space. The side-hustle concept does not regularly feature in the diary, but one entry does offer a demonstration that the period allowed for an individual to seek to contextualise and categorise their own labour. The post continues to explore the ways in which this framing of the activity is beginning to evolve from what may have been considered amateur to something that is not professional, but is occupying the space between the two points:

> *I've always felt taking Lichfield Live to something that was more akin to employment would be a very difficult decision due to the financials. But this is possibly the first time where I've thought there may be a need to make that decision because of the risk of losing the main job I have. Would any 'normal' job unassociated with journalism give me the scope to do Lichfield Live as I do now? Probably not. Therefore I'm aware that the site (and the unofficial sponsorship it has from my employer via my salaried wage) is not the way to create something sustainable.*

The entries demonstrate the ways in which minor social, personal and economic alterations have the potential to unsettle the developed practices, position and identity created by the semi-professional. This leads to the consideration of whether the individual is actually a potential barrier to the kind of growth aspired to in other entries rather than a vehicle by which such growth could be obtained. The diary often alludes to unorthodox production practices and personal challenges of which the analysis offers more than a few points where there is almost a desire to be seen to be doing so much for so little. However, this entry does demonstrate an increasing recognition of the way in which those external factors are crucial to the role of the semi-professional journalist and their ability to engage in their cultural labour practices and draw benefit from such activity. The diary demonstrates these benefits through being seen as a "key community figure" and having "access to decision makers". It is apparent from the journal that while the desire to "find a way to make it pay" may exist, it is not necessarily the only metric by which the semi-professional journalist seeks to draw value from their labour or contextualise its purpose in their own lives and development. The view of Marx (1867/1976: 644) that being someone who seeks to be productive in order to create value from their efforts "is not a piece of luck but a misfortune" highlights why

the diary offers both highs and lows in terms of opportunity that could provide financial value and the resistance to change that may ultimately prevent this from coming to fruition.

While the personal gain of the semi-professional may not be financial, it is too simplistic to suggest that there is no benefit for the individual as a result. Indeed, both the diary and the previously examined autoethnography demonstrate that there is value gained by the production of journalism via this method through both personal development in the educational field and opportunities generated in a way more closely aligned to the creation of social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The analysis of the diary makes clear that the transactional value of labour is not necessarily deemed to be a financial one, but there are references within it to show that there is a personal value to the activity being undertaken in raising status within a community and generating cultural capital and a sense of belonging, value and hierarchy, both as a member of a locality but also of an industry linked to but not directly operating within traditional journalism structures. A passing reference in one entry identifies this connection between the professional life and the semi-professional one by describing how "I wouldn't have the opportunity to do this journalism if I didn't have the job I have – but I wouldn't have the job I have if it wasn't for this journalism". The links between the identity of the professional journalist and the semi-professional are explicit in entries such as this as they demonstrate how the individual is able to draw direct lines to their practice, either previous or current, and their current journalistic work. It is for this reason that the "so much for so little" point offered within the diary can be challenged. The semi-professional journalist may not be able to capitalise on their labour in a financial way, but they are certainly able to benefit from it via other social and even professional means in alternative spaces beyond traditional journalism.

Such points call into question whether the real value in semi-professional journalism lies with the individual or the organisations they operate within. They also explore how the individual and their organisation co-exist both in the moment and in the short, medium and long term. The diary clearly points to an often complex relationship between the semi-professional journalist and their publication. Despite being a sole editorial figure on *Lichfield Live*, the diary refers to 'we' with regularity throughout. While this is around a third of the times an individual descriptive term is used, it does point to an intertwined existence between reporter and outlet that may be seen as offering both potential and also operating a

barrier for development beyond the semi-professional space. While having an engaged and committed producer offers a high level of output, it could be argued that the individual being unable to separate themselves from their publication is problematic for growth where change may be reliant on an alternative skillset or direction. The co-reliance of individual and organisation on each other as outlined in the diary means their success or failure is similarly linked but that the individual considers that the risk is not necessarily shared equally:

> *If I stop what I'm doing the only real loser will be me. I'll have wasted years of my life and have little to show for it. Lichfield Live could live on, but my identity of Lichfield Live would not. I think not having a central role in my own creation is the scariest thing to consider.*

6.5 Conclusion

The potential definition of the semi-professional within journalism can be explored through the diary and demonstrates the way in which such participants can draw comparisons with amateurs and professionals already operating in defined areas. However, the entries showcase how and why a semi-professional may view their own activity differently and why it should be considered as an alternative practice of journalism rather than being purely assigned as either amateur or hyperlocal because it may fail to meet certain criteria around professionalism. The diary demonstrates how the semi-professional has come to the fore as changes to the broader journalism landscape have been accelerated by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic (García-Avilés et al, 2022; Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). The retraction of traditional publishers from local communities have also given rise to the emergence of the semi-professional who is seeking to not only provide a journalistic service to a defined community, but also to replicate aspects of local news provision from their personal past which may no longer be in operation more widely.

The argument could be made that the semi-professional journalist is actually an outdated journalist or a "carping critic" (Waschková Císařová, 2023) as they cling to normative, heritage, almost idealistic, views that may be seen as a nostalgic perspective on what local news provision should look like rather than what it may now be or will ultimately become. There are, however, examples within the diary

that show the semi-professional is looking to retain aspects of the role of the local journalist while also

utilising modern storytelling platforms and tools in order to do so. Such reporters are still employing

contemporary skills as seen elsewhere in the news sphere, but are not necessarily being driven by the

metrics of success that traditional publishers may be. An entry in the diary points to being "able to operate

without the pressures of targets placed on those toiling away in newsrooms". In the same way as labour

can be linked to an interest in heritage activities in other areas, the semi-professional deems there to be

value in upholding methods and values within journalism. Bottom-up approaches to retaining links to the

past through heritage activities in other areas draw similarities to the experiences of the semi-professional

journalist. Beel et al (2014:459) describe how strong place identities can see volunteer heritage

organisations expand into other areas in order "to have grounded 'impacts' that move away from heritage

interests alone". This mirrors the experiences found through the diary where the core role of producing

local journalism for reasons of personal continuation or retaining power over their own labour (Mathews et

al, 2023) expands to enter other areas such as community quizzes during lockdown and awards

ceremonies to celebrate local successes. Throughout the diary there are other ways in which the work of

the semi-professional is manifesting itself as an activity deemed to be retaining a link to the past by

discussing "securing *Lichfield Live* for the community in the long term". The desire to create what is

essentially an archive of local or hyperlocal news is aligned to the links the semi-professional has with

their subject location by existing within the community from where value of the labour may also be

derived. Cresswell (2012:165) points to this view of retaining the mundane in order to preserve "things

that do not make it into official places of memory". Local, community news has always been a relatively

disposable commodity, but in the same way newspapers have been archived, the diary highlights how the

semi-professional journalist is identifying value through readership and audience rather than monetary

gain or more contemporary metrics usually seen within professional newsrooms. While the analysis

through this chapter demonstrates how and why the semi-professional may exist, be it to retain a

presence within an industry or almost heritage service in and for a local community, it does not offer an

explicit definition that would be universal. The links between the semi-professional and their standards of

practice and belief in the value of their work will be aligned to their own individual experiences of

journalism. This means that everyone who aligns to the semi-professional space may have differing perspectives of what those standards and production levels may look like due to their own individual reference points and experiences, as well as the specificity of their own areas of work, as outlined in chapter seven.

When viewed alongside the autoethnography in chapter five, the analysis of the diary demonstrates that the local media landscape has evolved and the process of this change had been accelerated during the unique time period covered by the diary. The understanding of the landscape where the legacy of journalism practice and process is a key consideration may be a clear factor in identifying and framing the semi-professional. As outlined in chapters one and two, examinations of activities in the amateur and even hyperlocal sector previously have pointed to the disruption being caused to the local journalism sector by those carrying out the practice and the technology that allows them to do so (Pavlik, 2021; O'Reilly and Vine, 2022; Harte, 2023). From analysing the diary entries, this point can be challenged given the semi-professional journalist is seeking to create continuity at a time of disruption within society and the journalism industry. This is evident in entries where the plight of those professional reporters during and beyond the pandemic is identified as being potential job losses that would have an impact on both those individuals and the local community more broadly. There is no sense that the semi-professional has 'won' or achieved any form of victory through disruption; the tone is more akin to the semi-professional seeking to keep local news above the waterline and prevent it from being washed away entirely by factors such as changing business models rather than celebrating chaos within the sector.

While continuation rather than disruption may be considered a difference between the semi-professional and other disruptive producers in the space outside professional journalism, this is not to say the semi-professional is in a fixed position within this arena; a point which echoes considerations around liminality in chapter three. There are references within the reflective diary to seeking a move towards a more professional approach through either employment or long-term sustainability, but these are often tempered quickly. The barriers to the semi-professional journalist taking their labour to a more professional setting are the same as the driving forces behind their desire to uphold the legacies of a

journalism industry they are familiar with, even if it is not necessarily the one being widely utilised in the broader contemporary local news landscape. The semi-professional journalist is a potential professional or, indeed, amateur, but the desire to make a move in either direction is, as the diary suggests, "not the only end goal". The semi-professional status has the ability to be an evolutionary stage between alternative spaces in journalism, but can also be considered a semi-permanent position where journalists can operate without the need to necessarily engage with new and alternative methods of production, or to apply alternative perspectives on the production of local news. The diary suggests that the semi-professional local journalist sees an alternative position as a guardian of both theirs and their community's access to local news and its production. For this reason, a move towards creating a professional career from their labour is not a key component, but may simply become a by-product over time as other factors change within the landscape of the local news industry.

The chapter has identified a series of key themes around agility, precarity, liminality and identity which are factors within the experience of the semi-professional reporter. These points are given further consideration in chapter seven, where interviews with other publishers operating in alternative locations and points in time are analysed. This will allow an understanding of whether there are commonalities between different individuals and their experiences or whether the diversification of the space between professional and amateur is even greater than has been previously considered.

7 Too obsessed with running my own little private newsroom - reflections from the semi-professional space

In this final chapter, I examine a series of seven semi-structured interviews carried out with practitioners who operate or have operated as a journalist outside of the professional landscape occupied by traditional media publications within the local news sector. While chapter six explored the research diary of my own experiences within this arena, which saw themes emerge around precarity, identity and perceptions of what semi-professional journalism may look like in practical terms, this chapter offers a broader examination of the experiences of such practitioners. By analysing the themes to emerge in chapters four and five through the lens of other practitioners operating in similar spaces elsewhere in the UK it is possible to identify the ways in which their experiences may differ or even offer similarities from which it is possible to better understand the utilisation and meaning of the labour in this sector of local journalism.

These interviews were carried out with a range of reporters at different stages of work within the space often referred to as hyperlocal, including some who have now moved into other areas of the journalism sphere or to connected industries such as education or communications. The interviewees are from across different titles across the UK and were selected to give a cross-section of publishers working in a range of areas using alternative methods and models to enable their reporting. Some were also chosen due to their time in semi-professional journalism now being at an end. The reason for this was to observe the reflections of those who have experienced the space but are no longer linked directly to it, while also being able to contrast their own views with my own as evidenced in previous chapters. By examining the timeline of hyperlocal reporters it is possible to gain understanding of the ways in which semi-professional journalists may differ in terms of their expectations and understanding of their own labour at alternative periods in their journey through this space. Although a conscious decision was made

to seek out reporters working via alternative models, including self-funded and crowd-funded, as discussed in previous chapters the aim is not to echo previous studies around structures and models; the interviews are instead designed to examine the individuals who operate in such organisations and their perspectives on their own activities and the landscape they exist within, as well as adding to the field of knowledge regarding this area of local news provision. This will also allow the views of these other producers to be examined alongside those identified through both the previous autoethnography and research diary chapters in order to seek out similarities and differences in the lived experience of reporters who may identify as semi-professional.

While some studies have looked at those participating in an arena which might be perceived as semi-professional journalism, these often explore it through the lens of hyperlocal in a bid to examine issues such as sustainability in the sector rather than the position of the participant as an individual. Some work, including a series of interviews titled *Hyperlocal Voices* (Radcliffe, 2015) on the *OnlineJournalismBlog* and a more recent exploration of origin stories of producers (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022), have examined the ways in which reporters in the hyperlocal and non-professional sector have entered the space and their plans for their publications in the longer term. However, the interviews carried out have often centred around the structures and the relationship the organisations have with the broader journalistic landscape. By focusing these interviews more to the lived and personal experience it is possible to utilise what Bruner (2002:8) identifies as the human desire to tell stories in order to "tell each other about the expected and the surprises that upset the expected". By seeking to bring an approach which may be more narrative in terms of outcome, there is the opportunity to observe how those engaged in the process interpret their actions and make them "personally meaningful" (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006:479) rather than considering how their output may be observed by the broader industry or the context of their work within a larger structure or sphere.

Through the interviews carried out for this chapter, it is possible to analyse the personal perspectives of practitioners who have either existed in or currently exist in this space in order to understand the role of the semi-professional reporter, not just within the sector but within their own lives through a more social and personal context to their work. Due to this, some of those interviewed have

asked for some or all sections of their responses to be anonymised. The interviews offer an expansion on

some of the previously identified themes and create discourse around perceived views about the driving

forces behind individuals wanting to occupy a journalism space, either through hyperlocal or other

activities outside of the traditional publishing industry which may not be as well-defined by scholars and

the broader journalism community. It also allows for a demonstration of how some journalism production

previously categorised in the non-professional or hyperlocal sector may actually be part of a different area

of the reporting industry which draws on concepts around heritage in production and news values.

7.1 Individuality and livelihood

The role of the individual as part of the hyperlocal ecosystem has been recognised in previous studies

(Radcliffe, 2012, 2014; Williams et al, 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022) which have explored the

sustainability of the non-professional journalism arena in significant depth. As with the aforementioned

Hyperlocal Voices (Radcliffe, 2015) series of interviews, these often see them examined not as

individuals, but rather as representatives of the sites and publications they operate or a collective group

operating as a non-cohesive sector of the local media. As previous chapters examining a research and

production diary as well an autoethnographic exploration of work in this space have shown, there are

often a complex series of personal perspectives running alongside the nuanced production of journalism

in the semi-professional sphere, be they work-life balance, changing personal circumstances or struggles

to identify within a landscape which has traditionally been the preserve of professionals. It is not as simple

as separating out the personal from the publication, however, with the two often becoming intertwined as

the internal relationship between competing factors highlight. This was summarised by Jamie

Summerfield, former editor of Staffordshire website *A Little Bit of Stone*, who suggested reflecting on his

life in the semi-professional and hyperlocal scene had been akin to "recounting my Vietnam experiences".

Similarly, Anna Williams, editor of *The Ambler* community newspaper points to her being referred to as

"Anna from The Ambler" rather than Anna Williams, so much so that even her personal accounts, including her email and social media now utilise this organically-obtained moniker.

Although those spoken to over the course of this process alluded to the "challenges" and "battle scars" of working in the semi-professional sector, most of the interviewees had entered the space for similar reasons, with all highlighting issues such as a desire to fill the editorial gap left by other publishers in various ways or to provide a service to their local communities rather than any drive for personal gain or desire to exploit the space for commercial reward. Such a sense of almost civic or community duty is of interest when considering studies around professional journalism that have explored this concept. For example, Voakes (1999) found in his examination of more than 1000 newspaper reporters that those linked to smaller local titles placed greater value on the civic responsibilities of their role than others. The changes in the local media landscape since that work took place have been documented in previous chapters; such decline and regional consolidation in traditional local media publications has been cited as a potential reason behind the reduction in engagement with local government and other civic issues (Hayes and Lawless, 2021). It is of interest therefore, to consider how this perceived deficit is drawing in those who seek to occupy the semi-professional space too, even if they do not necessarily recognise it as such at the outset.

Both Jamie Summerfield, formerly of *A Little Bit of Stone*, and Pete Leydon, founder and editor of independent outlet *Nantwich News*, identify with this concept of filling the gap in local news provision as a result of a switch in strategies from local newspapers and other commercial outlets such as local radio. However, both had previously worked in such sectors. Of the participants interviewed for this study, the majority had come from a background with some form of direct link to the local media or journalism industries, therefore it could be argued that their approach had been shaped by past experiences. Others did have some relationship to local news provision, but not necessarily through prior professional experience. Ed Walker founded *Blog Preston* during his university studies, while Anna Williams admits her two decades of experience with *The Ambler* community newspaper had been shaped by a life on the periphery of news production as a designer. Only one of the interviewees did not have such a direct link to journalism in a format other than that of a consumer originally, with Andy Smith having developed *Telford*

Live after purchasing a domain name and originally utilising it as a discussion forum having operated business locally in the digital sector.

Studies have already explored the ownership of the reporting space, with the suggestion from Hartley (2009) that everyone was now a journalist thanks to digital tools, while Harte (2015) asserts that "journalism isn't the preserve of journalists" any more. Others have suggested that participants beyond the professional landscape can be described as media workers (Nicey, 2016) or alternative journalists (Sarmento, 2023). While many of those interviewed for this study identified as journalists at some stage in their careers, it cannot be said that there is any real gatekeeper restricting the ability to publish in the digital world due to the emergence of online and mobile technology as well as affordable platforms and social media to connect content with audiences and consumers. However, there is increasingly not such a locked approach to more traditional formats either. Anna Williams, now employed by a community trust after a period as a volunteer for *The Ambler*, a community newspaper and digital website, highlights how she did not have such an explicit link to the journalism landscape, arriving instead through a more design-led approach to then take on an editorial leadership role. Her perspectives on the role of journalists operating outside of traditional large media groups did not differ greatly from others interviewed though, although she was one of two interviewees in the study who was employed in her role rather than taking on a more semi-professional position, which may be a way to explain why her viewpoints were more closely aligned than might have been expected. Others were either working as volunteers or taking a small and inconsistent financial reward at most from their endeavours which would not constitute full or part-time employment in the obvious sense. This stance suggests that an understanding of the role of local journalists was not pre-determined by their entry into the sector, even if the majority of those involved in it do have a more direct connection to reporting in one way or another.

There were notable differences in the terminology used between Anna Williams and others in the study, however. While some of those with past experience in professional journalism spoke about "old-fashioned patch reporting" and "telling the stories people needed to hear", her perspective was more geared towards the needs of the community and the need to fill a space within the landscape more generally. However, she did identify how the changing shape of local media provision and the increasing

regionalisation and departure from locality of traditional newspaper publishers had forced the community newspaper she operates to redefine its role from "cheerleader for community groups to a publication with a duty to ask questions of those making decisions". It is perhaps surprising that the views of those from alternative backgrounds in terms of journalistic exposure are not alternative in their views overall or their desire to move into a more critical approach to their area. Seeing the transition to more hard news-style reporting echoes the findings of Andy Williams et al (2016), who identified that no form of hyperlocal publication, whether run by a former journalist or not, were more likely to carry out watchdog-esque journalism than any other.

Despite the recognition from many of the interviewees of a need for local news provision in the wake of the reshaping of the professional local media marketplace in recent years, the driving factor did not manifest itself as a commercial, profit-driven approach at the outset for any of the seven interviewees within this study. None of those interviewed who either occupy or had occupied the semi-professional space had initially done so or sought to do so from a business perspective, or even for a desire to create competition within the sector. All had either identified a gap or sought an outlet for their own labour. Jamie Summerfield highlights this when reflecting on how he had begun *A Little Bit of Stone* at a time when the area's last local newspaper office had closed while other titles had gone altogether, creating what he describes as "a retreat" for his own activity rather than an over-riding desire to become "a civic hero":

> That was my main driver, but then on a personal level I'd left journalism a couple of years before and I was working in a press office at a local council feeling very uninspired, missing writing, interviewing and doing that journalism thing.

This was a common theme among those interviewees who had previously worked in the professional journalism field. While the by-product of their labour had been carrying out a civic duty, the outlet for their own creative skills as a journalist was, initially at least, a greater force for action, suggesting that there is an inherent drive within such journalists to continue operating even when the reporting role, in professional terms at least, has ended. Such challenges of reporters leaving the industry on a personal level are explored by Örnebring, Möller and Grip (2015) who suggest studies of journalism are too focused on a "workplace-centric" approach to such studies. Their follow-up work six years later explores

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journalism through the lens of livelihood, with the view that the concept holds greater value by drawing on more than just professionalism (Örnebring, Möller and Grip, 2021). Such a perspective echoes the way those interviewed for my own study discuss journalism with no less enthusiasm or recognition of the sector than those who may be perceived as more traditional participants in local reporting or commentators from within the industry itself. The way in which generating financial benefit and broader personal issues combines through livelihood (Lipton and Maxwell, 1992) certainly offers a more appropriate way to try to understand the complexities of contemporary local journalism by encapsulating the work of those in the semi-professional and indeed amateur sectors during the explosion of opportunity from aspects such as the arrival of affordable digital publishing tools as highlighted in previous chapters.

The livelihood consideration also speaks to the "balancing act" one interviewee described between meeting their own needs as a reporter but also their responsibilities in both their working life away from journalism and the demands of their home environment. This suggests a different relationship to the standard transactional one of professionalism where a motivating factor is more likely to be the monetary gain (Juniu et al, 1996). While the work/life balance is applied within both the professional and non-professional landscape, the nuanced challenges of often unpaid or comparatively micro-reward labour experienced by those interviewed for this chapter and those participants in previous studies who are operating in hyperlocal or semi-professional fields, means that such balances become even more difficult to find. Without the standard reward of salary for their endeavours, the longevity and work of reporters in the semi-professional space needs further consideration to understand the motivation to operate publications which do not make and may never make a significant monetary benefit for the semi-professional journalist. While some have found financial benefit over the years, with the likes of Pete Leydon's *Nantwich News* enjoying strong advertising support, it would appear from the interviews conducted that the monetary reward is not the key element, with none of the participants pointing to this as a determining factor in their ongoing or long term aims. The individuals who were interviewed and identified as having a previous relationship with journalism in the professional sphere attributed their link to the profession as being a determining factor in the decision to utilise their labour with their own publications in order to retain their links to a past experience. Their position echoes the view that

journalists leaving traditional employment undergo a "break-up" from their profession that can be akin to a more social experience of loss and longing which they may struggle to move past (Örnebring and Möller, 2021:1054).

There is a correlation between such a view and the interviewees from the UK media sector in this study, with one describing journalism as "an itch that I just have to keep on scratching". This inability to detach fully from their previous professional lives is clearly a key component of the journey into the semi-professional and other spaces operating in the local media arena. Therefore, the concept of livelihood is worthy of consideration when examining the journey of individuals such as those examined as part of this research. However, using livelihood as a term of reference for journalists who are often still working in well-paid, full-time employment alongside their reporting should be treated with some caution due to the connections the traditional examination of livelihood has within the framework of studies around poverty in countries around the globe. Despite this, Carney (1998) points to a definition of livelihood as something which is about skills and physical items required for a means of living. It is notable that the reference is to 'means of living' and not merely means of earning a living, allowing for flexibility in the consideration when utilising such terminology. Indeed, others exploring the sector have already sought to diversify the way livelihood can be perceived beyond just efforts to escape poverty and more into broader themes around development (Kaag, 2005). The use of livelihood is not fully owned by discourse around poverty and development, however, with the journalist Daniel Schorr (1977) discussing whether reporting was a livelihood or something more akin to frame of mind. The term livelihood has a variety of connotations that can be nuanced to different situations and perspectives, so it is therefore not without merit that the concept of livelihood may have a relationship to the actions of the semi-professional journalist who sees their work as crossing the boundaries between employment and social life (Juniu et al, 1996), and that the act of moving into the semi-professional landscape and finding a new way of engaging with their skillset is merely part of the break-up process described by Örnebring and Möller (2021). For those interviewees who had worked in the professional journalism sector, it is clear that such a change from their traditional employment had not been an easy uncoupling to make.

Although the likes of Pete Leydon and Jamie Summerfield had continued to be employed in

related sectors such as journalism education and communications, they both highlighted the challenges of

leaving behind something which had been a key function of their lives both in and out of the newsroom for

a number of years, with the latter saying the desire to publish had not gone away because "this is what I

do… I'd been doing fanzines and little magazines from when I was 12 years old, so reporting is just

something I've always done". It is interesting to note that others who took alternative routes into the sector

also had this view of their activity being something more akin to livelihood, but in reverse. Despite using

Blog Preston as a springboard to a career as a senior figure with the UK's largest local newspaper group,

Ed Walker admitted he still desired a closeness to the site which helped him to make his way in the

industry. Although not directly aligned to journalism, the suggestion that a livelihood is sustainable when it

is able to "maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not

undermining the natural resource base" (Carney, 1998:4) does offer some points for comparison. By

assuming the knowledge and skills required to be a journalist are the resource, then the development into

new areas with these skills does allow journalism as a livelihood to be maintained or even improved. This

is not to say that there cannot be such experience for those travelling through the semi-professional

space via an alternative route to Ed Walker. In the case of Anna Williams, she identifies how the growth of

skills and the development of knowledge have come not because of prior experience, but instead

because of the lived experience of journalism allowing her to learn those skills on the job over a period of

time, meaning she can "now do the things a reporter does". There is a caveat to Anna Williams'

viewpoints however, given that although she recognises that her activities are replicate of journalism and

journalists, she does not perceive herself as such:

> I never call myself a journalist as I'm not trained as one. It's not fair to those who study
> the subject, but I've been doing journalism stuff for 20 years. I don't call myself a citizen
> journalist either - I run The Ambler. That's how I describe myself.

Her comments draw into clear view the identity crisis often facing those I frame as

semi-professional journalists. As previous chapters explained, even among those with a

journalistic background, framing oneself as such is not necessarily a desirable step to take. Even

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from the anonymised reporters in this chapter hoping to embark on a journey into independent

media (or in one case doing so while still working for a professional publisher), there was an

uncertainty around the connotations of moving between something widely identified as

professional into a more unknown, liminal space. One said that "leaving journalism will be hard"

even though the path they were seeking to follow was actually leading into an alternative strand

of journalism. This inferiority viewpoint of the activity being undertaken is interesting when viewed

alongside others within the interviewee group who had already made that step, as well as the

observations made in chapters five and six. While Jamie Summerfield said he knew he could do

what local journalists did, he too initially questioned the broader, societal value to such action and

that it created a reluctance to describe the activities being pursued as journalism in the initial

stages of his work with *A Little Bit of Stone*. It was notable that this distancing from the desire to

be identified as a journalist was not down to any negative connotations with the industry as a

whole, with Anna Williams keen to recognise the skillset of those who do operate professionally

as such. However, despite her earlier observation that she and *The Ambler* were intertwined, it is

clear that this is now a position where she finds comfort and even pride in the identity created.

Such a view is echoed by Andy Smith, the other participant without a formal journalism link prior

to starting their publication. Despite having reported on hard news topics such as the grooming

gangs scandal in Telford, Smith also refuses to refer to himself as a journalist "for fear of meeting

a real journalist". The evidence of the imposter phenomenon identified by Clance and Imes

(1978) is visible in the two participants without the journalistic background, with both struggling to

define a clear identity within the landscape they operate in, despite the outputs of their labour

mirroring and in some cases exceeding that which might be expected of professional journalists.

The sense of enhancement described through scholars exploring livelihood (Carney,

1998) is evident in the interviews conducted, with respondents highlighting how operating outside

the professional realm had delivered new skills and an opportunity to venture into alternative

arenas within the industry and "experiment with journalism" in ways they may not previously have

been able to. Although the growth of *A Little Bit of Stone* would ultimately lead to the departure of

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Jamie Summerfield from the site in order to pursue opportunities back in the more clearly defined professional ranks, he insists the time spent as a semi-professional had been "nothing but a help" to his development as a professional further down the line by providing a greater insight into the wider landscape within which journalists operate by forcing him to take on different aspects of the role within the site. This is echoed by Pete Leydon's perceptions on *Nantwich News* where necessity had required him to take on alternative roles he might not otherwise have done in a traditional newsroom: "Whereas it was someone else's job before, when you run a site like this you quickly learn there is not a someone else, so you learn to do it yourself or find someone who can help you do it." Anna Williams, one of the participants without the professional journalistic background prior to engagement in local news production arena, identifies both the work to create content but also develop a community of correspondents and contributors, such as members of a local church group, in order to enhance the output as ways in which the work on *The Ambler* had taken her in new and often unexpected directions.

The desire and ability to acquire new skills and create a fertile ground for the production of content without clear monetary benefit at the outset may go against previous discussions around motivators within professionalism, but it is aligned to discourse around journalism itself as something more than either a skill or a profession. Broadcast journalist Daniel Schorr (1977) even suggests it is more akin to a frame of mind than any other element attributed to being a journalist. Indeed, one interviewee currently working as a local reporter on a newspaper while developing plans for their own news site describes how the desire to cover local news for a community "is not too dissimilar to why people become parish priests - it's a calling rather than something you do because there's money in it". The interviewee describes how the desire to be a local reporter for "the right reasons" is driving them to explore giving up the relative stability of a large media group in exchange for a "passion project". It is notable, however, that there is a recognition that such a jump will necessitate a need to find alternative employment that could work alongside the desire to produce journalism rather than be a straight replacement. Andy Smith, who owns businesses alongside his journalistic endeavours, points to the correlation between the time he can devote

his work with Telford Live and the demands of his other businesses which mean that the consideration of sustainability of his activity is as central to his thinking as it is to others who might have come to the space via an alternative route.

The interviewees make it clear that the kind of origin stories explored by Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) and through this thesis are relevant to understanding the liminal semi-professional space and offering greater definition to those operating in the area. However, it also demonstrates that the nuances of individual experiences and the personal position of those participating in the sector are as relevant, if not more so, than the considerations given to business models and structures (as discussed in the next chapter) when considering the future of local journalism as a sector of the industry and area of study.

7.2 Sustainability of production and the individual

Throughout the course of the interviews the topic of sustainability would often become a central point to which many of the participants would return. Whether it be points related to the long term or short term aims they have or in some cases had previously, the need to underpin such activity was never far from the mind of the interviewees. Even where a site such as *Telford Live* had taken a conscious decision to shun financial transactions such as advertising in a bid to "protect" their independent nature, Andy Smith recognised it was a decision that had potentially prevented him developing the platform into something different:

> If I knew then what I knew now I would probably have monetised it earlier and taken it down a different route if I knew it was going to get this big. To be honest, I'll feel like I've almost painted myself into a corner because I've always said no to advertising.

However, Andy Smith is in a position which, by his own admission, allows him to take such a stance. As a business owner he is able to fund his labour and the site more broadly and without some of the challenges of those who may have an employer rather than being the employer.

However, the balancing act between the two remains a challenge with him admitting that the

growth of his other companies has reduced some of the work he would like to be able to do with

Telford Live. While the other interviewees may not have had their own external business

supplying the financial foundation on which they could carry out their work, they all benefited from

the financial safety net of other activities, be it through employers or, in the case of Jamie

Summerfield during his time with *A Little Bit of Stone*, a successful crowdfunding project. The

ability not to have to rely on their outputs directly for a salary was described by one participant as

an "undocumented benefit" that allowed them to pursue such projects. This demonstrates that the

motivating factor, as outlined earlier in the chapter, is not necessarily a financial one and is more

tied to their commitment to the practice of journalism rather than any reward arising from it. The

rise of small digital start-ups across diverse local media landscapes around the globe (Hess and

Waller, 2019) suggests the passion for such projects as those being developed by one of those

interviewed is not diminishing, and those wishing to pursue semi-professional journalism as a

livelihood if not a career is continuing to draw people into such endeavours.

The Department for Media, Culture and Sport's Sustainability in Local Journalism report

(2023) highlights the disruption taking place as a result of the changes being made within the

digital sector, but insisted that the future of local news was in safe hands:

> News publishers' traditional print revenues have collapsed as people increasingly read
> news online. The smaller audiences for local news make shifting to digital business
> models based on online advertising or subscriptions particularly difficult. Despite this, in
> this inquiry we have encountered many new local news publishers with a variety of
> innovative business models, demonstrating that the sector has a sustainable future if it is
> properly supported to adapt to the new market.
> <div align="right">(Department for Media, Culture and Sport, 2023:3)</div>

Despite the review pointing to some examples of innovative models, there is still some way to go to

determine whether they represent a truly sustainable future for the individuals on whose labour such

publications have been developed and risen to be noticed through such high level reviews. The

discussions around the sustainability of independent media outlets are already well established (Albeanu,

2016; Cook et al, 2016; Hess and Waller, 2019). However, the definition of sustainability is open to

question when considered on a personal level. Even within the series of interviews conducted there were variations on how this point was perceived. While Jamie Summerfield utilised the example of the *A Little Bit of Stone* crowdfunder to pay for him to dedicate time to create a model that would make the site a more sustainable operation for him as an individual, Ed Walker's experience with *Blog Preston* was more about finding a way for the site to reduce the reliance on him as an individual: "The question was how do we get the blog to the point of sustainability? Sustainability for me, was always being able to not have to do what I was doing." Similarly, Pete Leydon also discussed how success and sustainability with his website would not be linked to personal achievement, rather than the ability to create a legacy that could be "handed on to someone else in the next ten years".

Such perspectives challenge some of the views about the ways in which semi-professional and hyperlocal journalists are driven to be engaged in the production of journalism publications. The perception of entrepreneurs spotting a gap in the market (Harte et al, 2016) may only partially explain how and why such endeavours continue in the longer term, particularly when considering the liminality of the space. The interviews demonstrate that while the gap exists, journalists are spotting it from a news and editorial viewpoint rather than a purely commercial one. It is evident through the different participants that the commercialisation of their various publications had not been a factor, particularly in the early stages of their operations, while some suggest it has been even longer before such a realisation has come to the fore. However, the growth of such publications has forced those in the space to consider the factors which create sustainability, not just in terms of their own labour but also of the very vehicle on which they share their creative outputs. The need to mimic some of the administrative and support structures in professional journalism that many were seeking to move away from was reluctantly recognised, with interviewees discussing the challenges of "having to learn about accounts" and "liaise with advertisers". This commercialisation of such hyperlocal labour (Harte et al, 2018) was seen by one participant as a "necessary evil if you want longevity".

Although none of the interviewees point to the commercial opportunity as an initial determining factor in their decision to engage with journalism production in the guise of their independent publications, It is evident in the interviews carried out that while using semi-professional journalism to open up a route

back into the professional sector is not a key driver of their participation, there are different models being experimented with in order to create longevity in the reporting activities being carried out. All but one of those interviewed who had or currently were operating publications were utilising advertising models in the way traditional publishers had, but others had or were experimenting with crowdfunding and or other models of paying not for their own labour, but the platforms on which they were operating. While there are comparisons between the ways in which semi-professional journalists and freelancers are seeking alternative methods of funding a vehicle for their output (Hunter, 2015), there is a clear line between what is being experienced by the semi-professionals I interviewed when compared to alternatives to in-house professional activities such as freelancing, which also exist outside of the standard journalism newsroom environment. None of the participants saw themselves as freelancers, even though some of their activities could be defined as such in a broader sense. The Association of Independent Professionals and the Self Employed (2016) describe how there is no widely accepted definition of freelancing in the UK, instead highlighting that it was considered by them as "genuine business owners without employees". While such characterisation might frame semi-professional journalists operating in the local media arena as independent publishers, it is more commonly accepted that the role of freelancers in journalism is more easily defined as backfilling staff roles or providing specialist content for existing publications (Holmes, Hadwin and Mottershead, 2013). The views of those I interviewed were more that they were backfilling news production for audiences rather than for specific publications, thus drawing that clear distinction between the two activities within the local journalism space.

By creating their own differential between being a semi-professional and a freelancer, all of the interviewees demonstrate alternative factors more closely aligned to the perception of journalism in this sector as being more closely linked to livelihood than anything else. However, if these are projects of passion they do not come without cost, both financially and personally. All but one of the subjects of this study used the term "impact" when considering the role of their journalism alongside their own lives. Some instances were regarding the ways in which such labour had created additional opportunity, but negative connotations were also evident on several occasions. Jamie Summerfield highlighted how everyday tasks became more challenging due to becoming a recognisable figure in a small community

through his journalism: "I couldn't walk from the top of the high street to the bottom without losing the wife and daughter because someone's grabbed me or I've grabbed someone because I'd need to speak to them." The ability of unpaid or low-paid journalism production to provide disruption within social settings was not unique though. Another added: "When I'm at my worst I don't go out. I'm chained to the computer at all hours and so my family know to just go on without me when I'm in that sort of space." It is clear from the interview responses that working in the semi-professional area had both positive and negative aspects with the "ego boost of being someone everyone wants to talk to" being countered by "not being able to go out without being someone everyone wants to talk to". Pete Leydon discusses the way in which family and social experiences had been forced to adapt to his role as an unfunded local reporter:

> I strive to find a balance like everybody does, so I'll do things with the family like going away for four or five days with the family and the dog to a little cottage in Wales. It's lovely because it's nice and quiet. But I take my laptop; I had to take my laptop. And for every holiday I've had since 2010, I've taken my laptop. My wife and my family have recognised that it's my passion and I would be lost or I'd be a very grumpy person if I was on holiday without my laptop being able to check emails or look at stories.

The adaptation of not just the individual but those connected to them is also identified by Anna Williams, who highlights that her work with *The Ambler* has seen her face increased pressures as a member of the community and has led to involvement in a broader range of activities: "These often take place on a Bank Holiday, so everyone knows I can't take those off even if I wanted to." Pete Leydon suggests that in his case the willingness of those personally connected to the semi-professional journalist may accept the challenges of production without the financial reward experienced by, for example, a freelance journalist are due to his background as a former professional reporter "where unsociable and unpredictable hours" were always part of the life he and his wife had known. These views draw clear parallels through my own experience as documented in the exploration of my research diary in chapter six where adapting to life in the semi-professional arena is not just a task for the individual, but also for those connected to the individual as a family member.

While freelancers have the opportunity to seek additional work in order to increase their income through additional activities such as newsgathering, the semi-professionals approach the value in their reporting somewhat differently. Pete Leydon's experience demonstrates the sacrifice of community

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journalists (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021), which is clearly visible from the participants in that study who discuss how their goal can often be little more than "keeping the lights on" or "finding a way to pay a contributor" rather than seeking to boost their personal pay packet at the end of each month. The sacrifice pointed to by Wahl-Jorgensen does not mean that financial benefit is completely ignored, however. Pete Leydon recognises how an organic rather than planned approach has led to some financial benefit:

> If I hadn't made any money from it after 12 years of running the site, I'd have been flogging myself to death for nothing. I'm still a very passionate journalist and, like other people who run these sites, I'm not in it for profit. Over eight or nine years of earning an income from it, that income hasn't paid the hours I put into it. If you think about the number of hours we put into the site, which is at least 20-odd hours a week, the money that we make and the advertising revenue we take does not cover that at all. So I'm not making a profit here, but it is a small reward for the amount of effort we do put it in.

The financial sustainability of start-up journalism initiatives is the subject of much discourse (Abernathy, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022), particularly in relation to longevity. While the suggestion of Wasserman (2011) that going "to rich people periodically to ask for money is not a real business model" holds merit, previous chapters and those interviewed for this one demonstrate that similar methods can provide a kickstart to further efforts to seek sustainability or provide a more fertile environment for the production of journalism in the local sector in particular. Jamie Summerfield points to this when considering how *A Little Bit of Stone* delivered success through a crowdfunding campaign in order to "provide some security and some level of certainty", while Pete Leydon also identifies how funding had allowed him to gradually upgrade his site in order to generate more investment, and Anna Williams points to the financial backing of the trust which underpins *The Ambler*, meaning the need to seek funding through other routes such as advertising is reduced. This supports the view that while financial gain is not the determining motivation (Harte et al, 2019:187) in journalists whom we may categorise as semi-professionals, those same individuals are actively aware of the need to seek financial benefits to exist rather than necessarily thrive or grow in the way a commercial, professional organisation might when driven by shareholders or other benefactors. The precariousness of models of journalism such as those utilised in the independent sector (Kurpius et al, 2010; Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014) is understandably a determining factor, but the role of the semi-professional and their labour within the mechanism which enables organisations, such as

those making up the hyperlocal sector, to exist cannot be underestimated and certainly should not be overlooked when examining the local news landscape.

Although the precarity offers flexibility to those interviewed where they are not necessarily bound by restrictions experienced in the professional sector around audience growth and product development (Petre, 2021), in cannot be ignored that such an artisan existence comes with inherent risks and a consideration of what happens when change or disruption arrives to the individual in the same way it has done through other mechanisms in the local news sector (Hess and Waller, 2018; Anderson, 2019; Harte, 2021). As one interviewee described it: "I don't want to have to think about the day I can't do this anymore." While the impact on the individual would undoubtedly be considerable, the potential space left behind by the loss of a site or publication cannot also be underestimated. In the next section I will examine how the point of departure is perceived by those at different stages of their semi-professional journey.

7.3 Departure points

While the existence in the here and now of local news is a relevant place from which to explore the issues around the labour and viewpoints of semi-professional journalists, some of those interviewed were chosen because they were no longer occupying the semi-professional space despite having done so previously. This offers the benefit of being able to detach themselves from the immediate vicinity of such projects in order to achieve what Schon (1987) identifies as the beneficial role a reflective approach can have to the development of expertise and knowledge. Such reflections on evolutions within this sector of journalism demonstrate how the individual and the organisation can be linked closely in ways in which do not replicate in the professional industry, where a journalist can effectively be replaced from a production line of younger staff often willing to work for less than those they are taking the place of (Cushion, 2007). However, in the semi-professional and independent news production sector, the primarily volunteer-led, individual approach has created part of the precarity facing the sector due to the reliance on an individual

(Harte et al, 2019) within an independent publishing organisation. Nevertheless, it is not the case that the removal of a semi-professional reporter from their post always has a terminal effect on the publication they are linked to.

As previously indicated, Jamie Summerfield outlines challenges that were linked to his position as a representative of his then publication. His departure, however, did not see the demise of the site, rather a new phase of its development. The concept of the break-up from the journalism industry (Örnebring and Möller, 2021) is therefore not limited to the professional ranks as might have been perceived previously. Jamie Summerfield highlights attempts to walk away before finally making the ultimate decision to leave behind a journalism world he had helped to shape and hand it over to others, describing it as a 12 month process.

> It was such a difficult decision because something you've built up and so much of yourself is invested in it, it's very difficult to let go. It was a combination of things that just came together. After making the decision I worked with the team for four or five months because they wanted to keep it going, which I was pleased about.

His departure from *A Little Bit of Stone* came after his role had become a high profile one when a crowdfunding campaign saw local residents and businesses hand over more than £15,000 in just 42 days to enable him to devote more time to his work as a local reporter for the site and kickstart efforts to seek longer term funding solutions. The explanation at the outset was that such an initiative would take one semi-professional journalist and his site to "the hallowed ground of real sustainability" (Summerfield, 2014) meant that achieving such funding success within little more than a month and a half had been heralded as a flagship moment for those working in the semi-professional sphere and a beacon around which they could all gather to see a brighter future. Indeed, it also allowed the suggestion that an alternative model could emerge (Radcliffe, 2015). However, Jamie Summerfield highlights this moment as "the beginning of the end" for him as a practitioner within the hyperlocal landscape, pointing to the change in his own role within both the community and *A Little Bit of Stone* itself, due in part to the fact that the crowdfunding campaign had drawn in around 80% of the money from local businesses. Although many such companies often form a key part of the ecosystem for the funding of local news, the demise of such advertisers and potential funding options has since been cited as a reason for the decline of many

traditional print publications, particularly during the pandemic (Olsen, Pickard and Westlund, 2020).

However, the recognition for Jamie Summerfield that capturing this previously lucrative market had been

a curse rather than a blessing was an unexpected response:

> Whereas before it might have been three or four [businesses supporting the site] and you can juggle them and keep them happy, all of a sudden we had about 20-odd businesses with a vested interest in A Little Bit of Stone doing something for them. I don't blame the businesses because that's what they'd paid and signed up for, but it created a real shift in the dynamics. Suddenly, I was spending more and more time doing the things I'd promised I'd do in the crowdfunding campaign rather than the things the campaign was set up to support in order to enable me to report more local news. That never quite happened really. The businesses weren't complaining, but the expectation to deliver was always there. It definitely changed things and I didn't quite recover from that if I'm honest.

Although his eventual departure from his role with the title was ultimately hastened by something which

had been initially seen as a success, Jamie Summerfield says he had not fully considered an exit plan at

any earlier stage of his work with *A Little Bit of Stone*. Unlike their professional counterparts, the concept

of an exit strategy for hyperlocal and community reporters in the non-professional realm has connotations

of failure, with one editor at a conference describing such a move as embarking on a "do not resuscitate

strategy" (Harris, 2012). However, in the same way as Jamie Summerfield successfully negotiated a

departure that did not represent failure, Ed Walker also found a similar handover the way to map out his

route away from semi-professionalism by allowing others to "drive it forward".

For those interviewed who are still actively engaged in the day-to-day production of journalism,

that moment of departure has yet to arrive. However, for some the concept of planning for it is not beyond

consideration. Pete Leydon's *Nantwich News* site has begun to generate financial benefit but he

recognises that he will not be at the helm forever, insisting that his retirement from his full-time career in

journalism education will likely coincide with a similar move away from his semi-professional world too.

Anna Williams also recognises that a departure date will arrive, but what is notable from both is that while

they highlight the entanglement of their own identity with those of their publications, the two components

will not necessarily have a mutual end point when any exit strategy becomes a reality. Such differences of

positions around how an individual and a site are connected mean that while the impact of any departure

from the hyperlocal and semi-professional space would be significant for both the community and the individual, the ability to define a direct entry point is as difficult as the discussion in chapter six showed it was to carry out a similar task to the entry point, thus making the challenge of defining the semi-professional ever greater.

7.4 Beyond a hobby - the semi-professional journalist

Through interviews with both those who currently work within the sector, those who previously did and those who are yet to, it is clear that there is not a simple catch-all terminology for the practitioners who are operating in this space. However, this challenge to categorising activity taking place in the local news space from such participants is also clear. The changing shape of the business of journalism, particularly at the local level, and the emergence of alternative individuals within it has given rise to attempts to frame the activities taking place. Among the concepts put forward is that of Hepp and Loosen (2021) as pioneer journalists who are also utilising the knowledge and skillset of other actors such as technicians and software engineers in order to utilise contemporary reporting skills linked to areas including visualisation and data. However, there is no sense that those I term as semi-professional are embarking on a pioneering endeavour; indeed, the suggestion was more of remaining in a reporting status rather than breaking new ground. The majority of participants interviewed point to the fact that the work they are undertaking is not perceived as groundbreaking or new apart from by external figures and industry commentators seeking to understand the reconfiguration of the local news landscape caused by changes in the sector. Indeed, the argument is put forward by both Pete Leydon and Jamie Summerfield that their activities are merely a replication of the work they had previously carried out as professional journalists rather than breaking new ground. For both, the concept of doing something new related more to their own relationships with their labour; the scope for financial reward being removed giving them something Jamie Summerfield describes as "freedom" in the way in which he reported and the subjects he covered, a point aligned to those of Mathews et al (2023) around departing journalism as being as much about regaining

power an individual has over their own labour as anything else. However, he also highlights that sense of uncertainty, even in reflection about how his work was perceived on a personal level:

> It was definitely a hobby to begin with - a passion project, vanity project whatever you want to call it. It was something I was doing for the love of it even if I'm not sure what it was then or now.

The use of hobby has traditionally had connotations to amateurism within journalism (Faig Jr, 2005). While Jamie Summerfield himself raises the prospect of his labour fitting into such a framework, other aspects of his work challenges viewpoints on the actions of hobbyists within the journalism landscape. Prades, Farre and Gonzalo (2014) seek to differentiate between hobbyists and the professionals they occupy the media landscape alongside. They suggest the use of sources and verification of information is a primary difference. This proposal does not echo the evidence put forward by those I interviewed who highlight the very journalistic practices discussed as the preserve of the professional. Therefore, if they cannot be classified within the realm of the professional, as Anna Williams alludes to by refusing to describe herself as even a journalist, nor the hobbyist as Jamie Summerfield suggests he may have been at the outset, then it is clear that an alternative categorisation is required in order to represent the labour and activity of journalists who are using widely recognised techniques but without the framework or models operated by traditional newsrooms. There are undoubted similarities and points of crossover between amateurs, semi-professional journalists and their professional counterparts as recognised when interviewees discussed stories they were working on and the practices they were undertaking. Even between different participants occupying these spaces, there are also nuances in approach to be observed too. While the sample for this research has limitations due to scale, there is evidence to support the suggestion that views around labour and enterprises linked to such individuals are not nuanced enough to fully represent the narrative given by those operating in the semi-professional space. There has been recognition previously of the role journalistic values play in the motivation for individuals to enter routes such as hyperlocal media (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2015), but the experiences of those interviewed for this work suggests that a move towards full commercialisation of their activities from those journalistic principles is not always a natural next step as might be envisaged as their work begins to

accrue social and financial value through growth and audience recognition. Evidence from another of those not from the journalistic background originally recognises that changing direction towards commercialisation for a relatively established outlet is not an easy task, with Andy Smith's suggestion of his site as being something that developed organically, but not necessarily in a way that has allowed him to reap any direct financial reward from his activities.

There are similarities to be drawn between the lived experience of the interviewees and in my own experience as a practitioner working in the semi-professional sphere as outlined in previous chapters. The balance between identity and sustainability is echoed by the participants spoken to as part of this section of the study. In the same way as Pete Leydon discusses the way in which *Nantwich News* has created fundamental changes in his personal life and the acceptance that has required from his close family, so too does the research diary in chapter six recognise the pressures facing those indirectly linked to the production of journalism in the semi-professional sphere. It is also evident that the financial benefit for those engaged with the production is not a factor, even with Anna Williams recognising that her work with *The Ambler* may not necessarily end should the paid role she currently has come to a conclusion at some point due to the connection her work has created within the community. The interviewees demonstrate that the driving factor for journalists operating in the landscape often defined as hyperlocal goes beyond some of the views around civic duty, commercial opportunity and professional development (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2015; Williams and Harte, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2022).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, many of those interviewed spoke to their work in the semi-professional sector being a continuation of personal activity and a link to the past through either their previous journalism activity or their knowledge of a different time in journalism. For this reason, it is notable that Ed Walker, given his journey from hyperlocal to professional rather than the other way round, did not refer back to previous experiences when discussing *Blog Preston*. Instead, he recognises that "because it was not my livelihood at that stage, the drivers were a bit different; I didn't follow the same route as others who had a clear route of what they wanted to do". While others interviewed did not identify as having a pre-determined route of growth, it is fair to draw the meaning from Ed Walker's comments that those with a longer backstory in their previous professional experience had perhaps followed a more

clear route through their hyperlocal and semi-professional experiences. Perhaps understandably, among

the other participants there was a greater sense of nostalgia in their reflections on their own work, with

Jamie Summerfield pointing to a return to the journalistic desire of "chasing the scoop" but, as with my

own reflections in previous chapters, he insists that the drive to operate in the space beyond the

professional arena was not related to a desire to reinvent the local journalism model:

> I just wanted to do what the paper used to do but better. But when I spoke to others and
> thought about money, I felt like a fraud in the hyperlocal community at times because I
> admired those who did it differently and looked for different models. I couldn't do that
> because I was too obsessed with running my own little private newsroom.

Jamie Summerfield is not alone in measuring his work in the sector against traditional publishers. Andy

Smith and Pete Leydon both refer to the decline of newspapers in their area, with the latter also

demonstrating a sense of nostalgia for a local news landscape that no longer exists by reflecting on his

past experiences in local newsrooms. Such focus is described by Hewison (1987:9) as being a cultural

obsession with the past when unable to face the future: "Instead of manufacturing goods, we are

manufacturing heritage". There is evidence to suggest the actions of some of those are linked to this

desire to recreate a previous experience in this way.

Despite working independently outside of a traditional newsroom structure, both Summerfield and

Leydon discuss the concept of newsrooms and referenced change in traditional publishers, with the latter

reflecting on the way they now pay "lip service" to truly local content. He believes that his site has

benefited from the retreat in some areas of the major publishing groups in favour of "big city hubs". Much

like my own reflections on Lichfield as a city with an older population, Pete Leydon references the role

news plays with older readers and the switch to a focus on "clicks and league tables" rather than the other

factors local news provision delivered to a community for a broader benefit:

> People come to me thinking I'm the local paper and wanting a funeral notice published or
> a letter. They are traditional and that heart of the community that local news was would
> be gone if it was not for Nantwich News, certainly for the older generation - and Nantwich
> is a town of generally older people. I don't know whether those mainstream companies
> have really, truly recognised what they've done in terms of not covering local community
> news properly.

This idea of a certain readership being familiar with a recognised form of news production, delivery and style may suggest points of difference within hyperlocal which can offer a way to define the semi-professional journalist as employing such proven techniques and methods in order to meet the demands of a defined audience. While greater exploration would be required to test such an idea, it recognises that the value of what may be seen as traditional or even outdated methods of journalism production may be beneficial not just for the producer as a semi-professional but also for the audience they seek to serve.

Glancing back in the way some of those interviewed do to a time before their activity in the semi-professional space might often be framed as little more than nostalgia and longing for a past which no longer exists. There may be some merit to the argument that people can be "condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach" (Jameson, 1993:198). Interviewees with those past links to the professional news industry point to what they perceive as a better time for local journalism previously, while Andy Smith and Anna Williams identify not with their a professional past but their historical connection to the industry as consumers of news in a way which offers some sense of this nostalgia for a declining and, in some areas, potentially lost local news landscape. However, it cannot be ignored that those occupying the semi-professional space are identifying with a past which, commercially at least, is not as sustainable as it may once have been (Beckert, 2023). This opens the question and debate around why those utilising such labour are potentially producing and trying to sustain something which may not actually have any realistic prospect of long-term sustainability.

There are many factors around why the clock cannot be rolled back to the return to a time many of those interviewed refer to where reporters were on the beat and at the heart of their communities, including the rise of user generated content and social media fighting for attention alongside traditional journalism publications. Indeed, a swathe of redundancies at regional and local arms of the UK's largest newspaper publishing group *Reach PLC* in 2023 were blamed by

senior managers in an email to staff on "the online attention recession" (Sharman, 2023b).

Although this announcement came before the interviews for this study were carried out, there were enough references from those who did offer a view around "clickbait" and a model based on "unreadable websites with pop-up adverts everywhere" to raise questions around whether the blame for change in the local news environment was being driven by publishers or reader habits. As media commentator Esther Kezia Thorpe wrote in the wake of the Reach PLC decision: "Once the trust of local readers has been lost in a firehose of irrelevant crap, it is very difficult to win back" (Kezia Thorpe, 2023). However, while many will see merit in such forthright views, there is a juxtaposition to be recognised about why those nostalgic views of journalism production for local communities by those interviewed are no longer deemed viable as business models. As Usher (2010:913) points out: "Legacy journalists are thinking about a world of journalism that no longer exists, are blaming the wrong people for their demise, and are failing to self-reflexively examine what about their occupational cultures they might adapt in order to be more flexible in a new media economy."

It can be argued from analysing the interviews I carried out, however, that the new media economy discussed by Usher is not where semi-professional journalists and those in the hyperlocal sector seek to position themselves in any case. While the occupational culture may be changing in mainstream traditional publishers (Chew and Tandoc Jr, 2022), it is clear from hearing about the growth of publications written by the various interviewees that there is still an appetite for such content and therefore there is an alternative reporting culture that is emerging in the semi-professional space which may not be as commercially-driven as those in the mainstream. There is no evidence from the majority of interviewees that they are viewing their labour as an occupation that needs to be reconfigured or evolve in the way traditional publishing groups may be; in fact, the freedom for it not to be a job was highlighted by different interviewees over the course of the discussions and aligns with the perception of Mathews et al (2023) on why journalists do depart the professional industry. Andy Smith points to the ability to "not write anything for a few days if I need to" due to the lack of advertisers he needs to serve, while Pete

Leydon and Jamie Summerfield both reference the reluctance to engage with the commercialisation of their news beyond a certain scale due to the way it would create an evolution that may force a change in activities and motivations. There is, however, no doubting their commitment to the tasks they undertake and the communities they serve.

The suggestion that those in the hyperlocal and semi-professional sphere who are unwilling to pursue the new models of journalism being championed by traditional publishers are "limited by nostalgia for the past" (Usher, 2010: 925) does not sit easily with the growth reported by all of those interviewed in their various platforms. It may, however, suggest that the limitations are more aligned to the mass production model used by large publishing groups to deliver local news on a scale not required by these emerging semi-professional reporters. The concept of looking at the past as a negative in journalism is challenged by the reality experienced by those interviewed. A definitive suggestion that a form of heritage local journalism culture is emerging is perhaps a step too far given the sample size of the interviewees, but it is clear that some audiences and semi-professional journalists operating outside of professional, full-time roles are committed to preserving and upholding perceived values around news and the broader community benefits of local reporting (Mathews, 2022). While these are primarily driven by those engaging in the production of journalism, there is also a receptive audience to this nostalgic style of community-based reporting rather than a more centralised, shared content model operated by larger media groups. Indeed, a study for the Public Interest News Foundation (2021) found that 58% of respondents said they would trust a news organisation more if it was based locally. Indeed, others suggest that building relationships with the local community is the key to halting the decline in local news audiences (Stroud and Van Duyn, 2023). This highlights that it is not just the semi-professional and hyperlocal journalists who are still nostalgic for journalism produced and curated within their community for their community, suggesting that news production may not be a purely commercial industry and may represent a more cultural value to those who are consumers, particularly in terms of the local media landscape.

It is, however, recognised that there may also be an audience link to this heritage method of news production, with Jamie Summerfield and Pete Leydon echoing my own research diary views in chapter six around the role a predominantly older audience play in supporting publications which deliver content in a way and format they may recognise if not always in print publications, although Anna Williams does point to the reasons why the priority for *The Ambler* remains its newspaper rather than website due to the age range of its readership. For other areas such as Stone, Lichfield and Nantwich, where newspapers have declined to the point of little or no local coverage in print, audiences are migrating to new platforms where content is being delivered in ways they may not be as unfamiliar with as they once were, particularly in the wake of the lockdown during the pandemic which saw audiences identify with alternative communication methods as outlined in chapter six. That is not to say that growth is only linked to those areas though, given Andy Smith's *Telford Live* has seen such increases in audience and engagement despite utilising alternative platforms such as Facebook Live, but it can be argued that the nostalgia of community news is a phenomenon being felt by producers and audiences alike.

7.5 Conclusion

It is evident from the interviews, when considered alongside previous chapters, that there is a need to reconsider the categorisation of reporters operating outside of the professional landscape in light of their retention of practices and news values more aligned to local newspapers of yesteryear, albeit on alternative platforms. If, as the interviewees indicated, their primary purpose for being producers of local and community news is not commercial or due to notions of civic pride, then it could be argued that there is indeed a sense of heritage and preservation of the cultural rather than commercial practice of local journalism being evidenced. When considered alongside the suggestion of Zelizer (1993), that journalists should be considered as a community

with views on how appropriate practice should be defined, there is an identifiable need to re-categorise those previously considered under the catch-all term of hyperlocal.

Those interviewed carry many of the traits of their professional predecessors and peers, but offer a recognition of the value of some digital platforms, if not the usage of them, by those traditional publishers. By framing such reporters as semi-professional journalists there is the potential to understand better their commitment to some traditional practices even where they may not make sense in a standard, mass-produced commercial mindset, in the same way as other more widely-recognised heritage areas such as steam railway are able to conserve public goods through practice (Tillman, 2002). It can be argued that while commodities such as newspapers might be considered private goods, the practice of production exhibited by the semi-professional journalists in this study are considered by the participants as public goods in need of preservation. The concept of heritage consideration of journalism production may be unfamiliar, but it does respond to some of the considerations given to more accepted norms of heritage and preservation where the efforts of volunteers supplement the work of professionals (Rhoden et al, 2009) in order to sustain a section of a particular industry or sector.

It is not as simple, however, as suggesting that all of those operating in a semi-professional or hyperlocal field are engaging with such labour in order to act as conservators of a method of production that is changing due to commercial challenges and a rethinking of the local media landscape (Kaye and Quinn, 2010; Franklin, 2012; Picard, 2014; Berglez et al, 2017; Villi and Picard, 2019; Waschková Císařová, 2023). Nevertheless, it is clear that the by-product of their activity is in preservation of news production for communities, largely as unpaid volunteers who are not driven by digital metrics or commercial success in the way larger publishers might be. The views of interviewees that they are "doing what newspapers used to do" and "simply reinforcing what local news should be" demonstrates that while digital disruption to journalism (Bastos, 2016; Downman and Murray, 2017; Pavlik, 2021) suggests hyperlocal and similar developments in local news media are about change, this evolution is not coming at the expense of the preservation of established views on news values and the

production of content. This change may ultimately force us to rethink whether or not such sites

will create a future in the sector in the way scholars and commentators have previously

suggested could be the case (Radcliffe, 2015; Kamarulbaid, 2019), particularly given many

remain small operations even after a number of years of production. Indeed, even in my own

research diary in chapter six it was clear that the view of how news should be produced was a

personal one and not necessarily compatible with a more collaborative approach in this sector.

It is notable that engaging additional players in the process of producing local journalism

through the nostalgic norms of their own careers has been challenging for some. Jamie

Summerfield describes a "revolving door of contributors" during his time with *A Little Bit of Stone*,

and Pete Leydon identifies contributors but recognises he continues to carry out "the majority of

the work", others have had more joy in creating a more collaborative approach, particularly in the

case of those who did not come into the sector via a more direct line to local news provision in

traditional newspapers. Anna Williams at *The Ambler* and Ed Walker at *Blog Preston* both

highlight the contribution of others to their publications, with the latter having engaged with a

wider range of individuals as part of the development of his publication: "As it kind of grew, I

guess I grew and it became more about giving people opportunities". Anna Williams also

recognises the value of others and expanding the production team behind the development of

The Ambler:

> We were lucky because we got people who wanted to get involved as a group
> from the church. Then we managed to get some younger people involved and we
> decided to let them produce their own section in The Ambler that said the things
> they wanted to say. Getting those groups to come together has made it so much
> easier than trying to seek individuals and make them all work together, it has
> allowed us to utilise existing networks and friendships.

While *Blog Preston* always sought to provide paid employment to contributors, other titles run by

the interviewees spoke, as my own reflections in chapters five and six did, of payment being a

goal and target to aim for rather than a founding principle of the production process. This may be

where the difference in how journalism by some semi-professionals can begin to be defined. If we

subscribe to the view of Zelizer (1993) that reporters have a strong view on the definition of how

journalism should be produced, we may be able through these interviewees and their experiences with the production of news prior to their engagement with their publications begin to explain why some outlets are able to engage others in the process of production more easily than others.

This chapter has offered the suggestion that while semi-professional as a term should be used to categorise some elements of the landscape between professional and amateur, there are potentially strands by which the semi-professional is being motivated to engage in the production of news. There are those who are not shaped by past experience in terms of the labour of journalism and those who have a clear definition of the way such labour should be carried out. All those who had the previous experience of journalism through traditional local newspapers discussed expectations they have over those who engage in various ways, be it through "editorial controls" or "upholding standards". While such semi-professional reporters often sought support from other sources in areas such as technical development, it became clear that they were, in the main, single person endeavours editorially, often through choice. It is notable, therefore, that those who perhaps best embody the concept of a journalist seeking to retain an era of local reporting from a bygone period may face the biggest challenges in preserving such activities in their own titles due to their own strength of viewpoint on what exactly should be being preserved. From the interviews carried out it is apparent that the concept of production and labour in this space is not as defined as it may have been considered during previous examinations of this area of local news production. While there have been studies demonstrating the diversity of the sector known as hyperlocal in terms of models and approaches to production (Paulussen, S. and D'heer, 2013; Radcliffe, 2015; Carson et al, 2016; Harte et al, 2018), these have often been more focused on the structures and sustainability when aligned to normative views of commercial success and comparison. While my findings are related to a relatively small sample, it is apparent that the experiences of the past are still shaping the present and indeed future for those who are participating in the labour of semi-professional journalism.

It is notable that while much focus is made on the need for financial sustainability of the sector, as demonstrated by the report of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2023) being titled 'Sustainability of local journalism', the findings show that any drive to commercial provision of local news by those engaged in the hyperlocal space is intertwined with the experiences of the individuals behind such activity. It is quite right that a broader conversation about the evolution of the local news sector and the impact of it declining due to loss of commercial revenue is a key consideration for society more broadly. However, the evidence from the participants in my study demonstrate a greater emphasis needs to be placed on whether the non-professional, independent journalists are always seeking to create change for the greater good of the industry rather than merely creating a personal project of passion aligned to their own needs and desires to publish journalism in the way they may have done previously or in the ways they have consumed it in the past. Previous explorations have suggested that hyperlocal journalism maturing into "a sector that simply replicates mainstream news media and its practices" (Harte, Howells and Williams, 2019:202) will mean something has been lost. There is some merit to this when examining the opportunity offered to rethink the ways in which delivery of local news provision has been provided in such spaces. However, with the sample group containing many who had previously worked in a declining local newspaper industry, it is not clear that there is a narrative around the greater good of the sector as a determining factor for those interviewed with such a background. Indeed, with the exception of *Blog Preston, Telford Live* and *The Ambler,* which were the preserve of individuals without such explicitly direct lines back to local journalism of a previous era, those interviewed were more focused on preserving the opportunity for their own labour in a way which they determined to be based on a valid version of news values and production methods formulated from their own personal experiences. Even those without past links to the professional journalism industry were also shaped by their views of the role of journalism as consumers, recognising the decline in the sector and the impact this has on communities.

The need to understand the semi-professional as an individual is a central theme emerging from this research. Their work is often shaped not by any planned effort to rethink or reimagine the sustainability of local journalism, but rather by their own circumstances and past experiences. While not all in the sector can retain the delivery method of news provision through newsprint, the desire to retain and uphold their individual views on news values and the role of local reporting as a key component in a community is clear to see from the findings. This points to sustainability being more closely aligned not with commerciality, but with individual circumstance and a desire to recreate and reinforce norms from a particular era of local journalism at the cusp of the transition from print to digital media.

Conclusion

The examination of the space between professional and amateurs in local journalism in this thesis has demonstrated that the usage of hyperlocal as a catch-all terminology may be neglecting to fully create the nuance required in order to define those who operate within it, opening up considerations of how semi-professional journalism may be framed and why it is necessary to do so. Such a recalibration of thinking is required in order to recognise that not all who I frame as semi-professional participants, including myself, are necessarily innovators in the way that consideration around digital disruption to the journalism industry has suggested they could or even should be (Radcliffe, 2015; Hess and Waller, 2018; Pavlik, 2021; Toomer, 2023; Waschková Císařová, 2023). Instead, the purpose of this thesis has been to identify semi-professional journalism and understand how those individuals engaging with it perceive their own activities within the sector, as well as recognising the ways in which their labour may offer suggestions for how local journalism will be considered going forward.

While it may be a noble position to consider local journalism as a purely public service delivered for the good of a community or audience (Pew, 1931; Ferrucci, 2017; Reid, 2018; Harte, 2021; Zeng and George, 2022), it is clear from my research that there are often more personal reasons for participating as a semi-professional journalist which can be more easily understood through the knowledge of past experiences and the current situation of such participants. As a result, I suggest semi-professional journalists are not always filling the space for entrepreneurial or purely altruistic reasons to serve a community, rather they are identifying a need to continue with their own journalistic endeavours. That is not to say that such positions do not evolve over time to incorporate such elements, but there is no clear evidence from the participants in this study, nor from my own reflections, that they are determining factors at the outset of the entry into the space beyond professional journalism. Instead, semi-professional journalists are often seeing their journey map out organically and align with their personal circumstances rather than as part of any greater masterplan for commercial gain or community benefit at the outset. I

suggest that the semi-professional journalists are instead influenced by the value and production of journalism based on their past experiences rather than any desire to be a disruptive actor within the local news landscape.

Although not approaching the semi-professional position from a commercial perspective at the outset, such journalists are a key component of the hyperlocal environment and the local news sector more broadly. Therefore, the need to better understand their motivations, limitations and challenges will provide opportunities to understand how news production can be sustained in the longer term, particularly given ongoing change and uncertainty within the local journalism industry. Similarly, the view of hyperlocal or independent journalism as being motivated by altruism (Smethers et al, 2017) is also a factor I argue is a by-product rather than an initial point of consideration. I suggest that rather than seeking an entrepreneurial or altruistic position, semi-professional journalists are instead utilising personal experiences of previous professional journalism engagement, as either producer or consumer, in order to seek to retain a method of reporting which is not necessarily considered commercially viable or sustainable without the labour donation of the semi-professional in the long term. This is a position those engaging in such practice are personally aware of, but is one which does not appear to restrict either their enthusiasm for, or activity within, the local journalism landscape. However, such an approach raises questions about whether semi-professionals are able to deliver a long-term, financially sustainable future for local news or whether they are merely placeholders until alternative and perhaps more commercially viable options can enter the market.

8.1 The semi-professional journalist

In order to investigate the position of the semi-professional journalist, my research utilised a triangulated approach drawing upon my own unique experiences in the local news industry as an amateur, professional and then semi-professional reporter, before then drawing upon the experiences of others through semi-structured interviews. Such an approach allowed for an alternative perspective on the hyperlocal space to be considered and allow for the framing of the semi-professional journalist to take

place. My personal journey is one which is set against the backdrop of change to the news landscape as outlined in the review of existing literature. The evolution of digital platforms and tools has facilitated a period of significant change within professional news provision which has challenged both views on what journalism is and who is producing it (McNair, 2006; Curran, 2010; Deuze and Witschge, 2017; Perreault and Ferrucci, 2020). The development of opportunities within which the landscape could be diversified through alternative approaches such as hyperlocal provision (Baines, 2012; Hess and Waller, 2016; Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2017; Tenor, 2018; Harte, 2023) created opportunities for amateurs to operate in a space previously occupied by professional journalists. However, as discussed in chapters two and three, the blurring of the boundaries caused by the reframing of the local news landscape and the evolution of some of those outlets operating within it has created potential for the semi-professional reporter to be defined due to the way in which those who may have been perceived as amateur have begun to utilise some aspects more closely linked to professional participants.

In the first of my findings chapter, my autoethnographic exploration recognised the ways in which traits developed during the early phases of a journalism journey can create a foundation on which a semi-professional existence can later be created. The passion of an amateur to create news and content can, when fused with a later understanding of the mechanisms of professional journalism – such as law, ethics and an understanding of audiences – create a position where monetary gain can become secondary to the creative process of journalism. This allows for the semi-professional journalist to see the act of reporting as more important than the job of reporting. However, it challenges the assumptions that professional standards and normative processes are the preserve of professional reporters alone (Schudson and Anderson, 2009; Hanitzsch and Ornebring, 2019; Kustermann et al, 2022), instead suggesting that semi-professionals are driven by similar values and governed my similar rules, but are able to break the connection with journalism as a profession and create an alternative position whereby journalism is an informed passion instead. By examining the autoethnography, it is also possible to see how the semi-professional journalist is shaped by previous experiences in either professional or amateur contexts. For example, the desire to seek ownership of my own activities and the values I placed on news

provision, production and the role it had within local communities created the basis on which my current

position as a semi-professional local news reporter is built.

Although semi-professionalism may create insight into how individuals are navigating the liminal

space of the journalism industry, the reflective diary I drew upon in chapter six demonstrated how finding

ownership of labour and taking control of personal views on news values and normative production

processes is not without challenges. While I suggest the desire to be semi-professional may not be driven

by commercial or entrepreneurial aims initially, it is evident that this becomes a consideration for such

reporters as they achieve growth in audience and greater recognition of their labour. This chapter also

demonstrated that the semi-professional position may not be a static one; indeed, the liminality of the

local news sector shows that a reporter occupying this space has a requirement to seek similar solutions

to professional concerns such as commercialisation and sustainability which they may have initially

sought to move away from. It therefore suggests that the liminality of the space between amateur and

professional journalism explored in chapter three can also continue within different sectors of journalism

itself. For example, the considerations of change due to external factors such as the impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic found within the research diary demonstrate how the semi-professional can be

motivated through an initial position and then have to evolve and adapt due to external factors. The

reflections contained within the diary demonstrate the ways in which these factors can be wide-ranging

and occupy participants. When considered alongside the interviews in my final findings chapter (seven), it

highlights that while semi-professional journalists may have the skillset required to be sustainable in terms

of production, their susceptibility to change and commercial challenges means that the precarity of their

position remains an area of concern.

Despite this sense of uncertainty for the individual, the COVID-19 pandemic period captured

through my research diary demonstrates that the role of the semi-professional journalist in sustaining

local news for a community can increase in importance as well as allow the individual to serve a key civic

role. While not a prior consideration at the outset of this thesis, capturing this period of significant

disruption within both the hyperlocal news sector and the local journalism industry itself demonstrated the

impact of change on those classified as semi-professional or even hyperlocal. The renewed focus on

localisation during this period (O'Hagan et al, 2019; Masullo et al, 2022) created both opportunity and

challenge to the local news sector, whereby newspapers were not publishing and reporters were

furloughed, leaving journalists considered as non-professionals to fill the void; a role many have

continued to fulfil since as the newspaper industry continues to face challenges in a post-pandemic world

(Finneman and Thomas, 2022). However, rather than being considered as entrepreneurial figures

identifying a gap in the market, I suggest that the evidence collated in my findings chapters demonstrates

that semi-professional journalists are merely seeking to create personal consistency through both views

on the value of local news and its delivery. This is not to say that the semi-professional is not aware of the

importance of their work to a community more broadly, but the need to serve an audience is not

necessarily placed ahead of the need of the semi-professional journalist to create an outlet for their own

endeavours. As outlined in my autoethnography, while the commercial entrepreneur may not be evident in

the semi-professional at the outset of their journey through the liminal space, the continuation of such

participants often comes to rely on an understanding and ability to operate in some ways which may be

considered entrepreneurial. It does not mean that the semi-professional switches to a more commercial

mindset necessarily, rather that they require either an ability to navigate such a position or to seek others

who can support such activities.

　　　While growth may be considered as a point around which to build a narrative of success around

hyperlocal publications (Barnett and Townend, 2015; White et al, 2017), the views of those individuals

operating as semi-professionals examined within this thesis demonstrate that publication and audience

growth also increases scrutiny of what may have previously been viewed as their niche outlets. While the

semi-professional journalist with a professional background can draw upon knowledge of legal and ethical

training (Keeble, 2008; Ramaprasad, 2019) and experience as a reporter, the almost artisan nature of

their current production processes and structures means the confidence to deal with challenges may be

lacking, as evidenced by Jamie Summerfield's view on how a crowdfunding campaign had been the

beginning of the end for him as a semi-professional journalist by changing his relationship with his own

labour and diminishing the passion he had for his project. Such realisation and understanding of the

precarity of the local news semi-professional reporter due to factors often beyond their control is inherent in such individuals.

Through the interviews conducted in chapter seven it is clear that there are differences between the way scholars have sought to frame non-professional reporters through catch-all terminology around hyperlocal journalism and those I suggest are better defined as semi-professional. The key consideration is not necessarily linked to educational background or financial recompense, rather the semi-professional is best aligned to the personal view held by individuals on local journalism. Such a position and series of viewpoints are based on the links these reporters have to the professional industry through prior experience and may be founded in a particular point in their past, with interviewees citing their labour as a continuation of previous activities. There is no sense from participants in this study that their semi-professional status, which allows them to perform within a self-created series of views on production methods and newsworthiness, is aligned with any attempt to deliberately disrupt or reconfigure the local journalism landscape or create new models. The desire to retain a link to previous processes and practices could easily be considered through the lens of platforms rather than people. However, as chapter seven identifies, what is being retained is not a particular platform of publishing necessarily. Semi-professionals within this study show they are able to utilise alternative digital platforms such as social media and email newsletters in order to engage with their audiences, moving them away from views around those reporters in professional outlets who are grounded in the past and may be resistant to any change (Waschková Císařová, 2023). Instead, semi-professional journalists are differentiating themselves by utilising platforms often considered as digital disruptors in order to retain a connection to familiar processes and practices from their own past experiences as demonstrated in chapter seven.

It is clear from both my own personal experiences in chapters five and six and those of the interviewees in chapter seven, that the voices of those occupying the semi-professional space need to be heard in order to fully recognise what the opportunities and limitations may be for the future of the local news industry in the UK, which continues to face ongoing challenges on many fronts (Picard, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Jeronimo et al, 2022). By recognising how and why semi-professional journalists are participating in news production, there is an ability to better consider a range of factors around the

local news ecosystem such as funding support schemes, the education of future reporters and even the opportunities to participate with the practice and function of local journalism production.

8.2 Identifying the semi-professional journalist

While the triangulated approach used to gather findings within this thesis has allowed for an opportunity for an alternative view on the hyperlocal space, the research methods utilised also seek to consider alternative ways of researching the journalism landscape. Autoethnographic examinations, while not a common occurrence in Journalism Studies, offer an opportunity for scholars to examine how the journey of those semi-professionals and their production techniques can be shaped by past experience. The use of autoethnography more broadly as a research method has limitations which must be considered when investigating this data, such as bias and selective decision making (Butz and Besio, 2009; Mendez, 2013; Chang, 2016; Bochner and Ellis, 2022). However, by utilising additional material such as cuttings, documentation and discussions with others engaged at the time, it has been possible to minimise such limitations and ensure reflections are accurate wherever possible. A triangulated approach has also allowed for the consideration of an alternative role autoethnography can have to open the door to broader discussions and begin conversations around a subject matter (Denzin, 2014). The findings of chapter five have provided the basis on which chapters six and seven can test and challenge the ways in which past and personal experiences can intertwine to help define and allow for further conversations around the semi-professional journalist in future studies.

Initial considerations around the use of two methods drawing upon personal experience had led to concerns that such a study could be seen as lacking in breadth. However, the importance of considering both the autoethnographic approach and the analysis of the reflective diary has been demonstrated in the ability of the thesis to highlight the journey of the semi-professional as a whole rather than merely as a singular point in time. While chapter five examined the foundations on which such a reporter is built, the reflective diary shows how those experiences manifest themselves in the day-to-day workings of the semi-professional journalist and their views on their own futures and the industry more

broadly. The reflective diary as a tool to offer insight into how individuals cope with challenges and

pressure (Travers, 2011) or to understand how they may or may not be perceived as entrepreneurs

(Hagg, 2021) highlights the value such data can have when exploring the liminal space of journalism

beyond the professional sector. Future examinations may benefit from the use of a wider pool of reflective

diaries in order to test further the ways in which semi-professional journalists are navigating the

challenges of an evolving local news landscape.

In order to ensure robustness of the findings, the use of semi-structured interviews with those

operating in the hyperlocal space as semi-professional journalists has allowed points of similarity and

difference to be found and to test some of the findings from the autoethnography and reflective diary.

While a relatively small sample size when compared to the work of scholars such as Wahl-Jorgensen

(2022) on origin stories of hyperlocal practitioners, the data gathered provides an opportunity to

understand how those who may be considered as semi-professionals can be influenced by their personal

views and experiences on local news as an industry, as well as recognising how their links to journalism

more broadly may lead to views in areas such as news values and production methods. As with any

investigative method, there are potential limitations which must be considered, particularly around

selection of participants (Ahlin, 2019). Due to the networks within independent local journalism, some of

those individuals interviewed were people with whom I had previously engaged with, therefore others

were specifically selected in order to ensure the robustness of the data and reduce any risk of prior

knowledge influencing the data gathering. The selection of interviewees was also based on individuals

who were using different platforms such as social media, self-hosted sites and newsprint, and who were

at different phases of the semi-professional journey, including one who no longer worked within the

sector, those who were active participants and others who had previously sought advice on setting up

their own publication. This approach allowed for a breadth of experiences to be considered, although

future research may require greater sample sizes within each area to draw further understanding and

conclusions around the semi-professional journalist. It is, however, recognised that there is an imbalance

between genders, with only one female interviewee, as well as in terms of the ethnicity of participants.

However, there are broader questions around participation and inclusivity in hyperlocal and therefore

semi-professional journalism which have not been fully explored by scholars, and this study does not seek to investigate this particular aspect of the field. These may be areas for future consideration within Journalism Studies around how inclusive the emerging local news sector is.

8.3 New directions for Journalism Studies

Examining semi-professional journalism has outlined the need for greater consideration in Journalism Studies of not just the organisations operating within the local news landscape, but also the individuals behind such outlets. There is no shortage of exploration of the hyperlocal space as a potential route to ensuring longevity in the local news sector (Barnett and Townend, 2015; White et al, 2017; Harte, Howells and Williams, 2018), however much of the focus has been around business models and processes as a way of considering sustainability and longevity. Even where the individual reporter has been considered, the context has often been linked to the ways in which their skillset aligns with more commercial aspects rather than purely journalistic ones, such as the explorations of entrepreneurial journalism (Hunter and Nel, 2011; Briggs, 2012; Brouwers, 2017; Witschge and Habers, 2018; Ruotsalainen et al, 2023). Through this thesis, however, it has become evident that a more nuanced approach to the hyperlocal landscape to recognise the liminality within it is now required. While the terminology may have allowed for consideration to the non-professional journalism sector to be initially framed, it is evident that there are now alternative points of entry and exit, as well as existence, to the liminal space previously described as hyperlocal.

Other scholars have focused on the social value for the audience of reporters working in the liminal space I suggest is occupied by semi-professionals, with Toomer (2023) discussing the support required to ensure hyperlocal journalism can be provided for specific communities. Such a position aligns to the views around the civic role or duty of hyperlocal publishers and the journalists working for them (Barnett and Townend, 2015; Kamarulbaid, 2019; Hujanen et al, 2021). However, my own investigations have indicated that while such factors are elements to be considered as part of the existence of the semi-professional journalist, their own individual desires and obsession or passion relating to the

production and value of journalism are greater determining factors for their entry into and continuation within local news provision. This suggests that an alternative approach and recalibration of the view of journalists in the hyperlocal landscape is required to fully understand the motivations behind them, the ways in which they operate and the external social and cultural factors which may limit their longevity or restrict their labour.

Through this thesis it has become evident that an increased focus on the role of the semi-professional reporters as individuals rather than their publications can provide new insight and understanding into the ways in which local news provision can be retained and supported. Other scholars such as Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) have begun to take such an approach of exploring the origins of reporters in order to nuance the hyperlocal sector, but by examining semi-professionalism as a specific strand and identifying the ways in which it can be defined by past experience, there is an opportunity to reconsider the role of journalists beyond the professional landscape as being linked purely to digital disruption (Downman and Murray, 2017) or as a challenger to established production processes and values (Paulussen and D'heer, 2013). Through this thesis it has been possible to utilise an examination of past and present practice of individual semi-professional journalists to recognise the ways in which their motivating factors may be almost selfish in approach rather than aligned to either financial or social benefit. Further exploration of the semi-professional journalism sector will allow for increased consideration of the concept I propose of such reporters being motivated by a desire to retain and protect a version of news provision they are familiar with as a result of connections to the professional industry. Defining the semi-professional journalist as a personally-appointed guardian of local news processes and production methods, rather than purely as an agent of change or a facilitator of alternative methods of sustaining local news, offers the ability to reconsider their position within hyperlocal and the local news industry itself. While some have previously celebrated such the rise of hyperlocal news provision as "a potential amelioration of the drastic problem of declining professional regional local news media" (Beckett, 2010:11), I argue that some of those I define as semi-professional are seeking to provide a safety net with which pre-existing norms of local news production and delivery can be retained rather than disrupted or even enhanced. Further studies into the local journalism sphere will need to consider how the role of

semi-professional reporters may impact on their longevity as news providers or as a way of ensuring provision is provided to communities at the mercy of a news desert (Mathews, 2022). The framing of journalists operating in an increasingly permeable position on the fringes of traditional local news reporting (Riedl, 2023) is key to understanding both the individuals engaging in such production and the ways in which they might contribute to and influence the direction of the local news sector as a whole. I argue that the consideration of whether semi-professionals are facilitators of change or guardians of a diminishing form of journalism can be found in the past experiences of those individuals.

Examinations of change in professional journalism has seen journalism scholars consider how understanding can be gained from the reasons why reporters leave their posts (Hodierne, 2009; Davidson and Meyers, 2016; Mathews et al, 2023). Now, in the same way as my own study and that of Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) have considered entry points into the hyperlocal and semi-professional space, so too should consideration be given to the other end of the journey. My research has recognised the liminality of the space, therefore there is relevance in future consideration of whether semi-professionalism is the final stage of the journey or if those journalists are continuing to transition across and within the media space once they depart the stage of semi-professionalism. The very nature of exiting the scene questions the viewpoint that hyperlocal may be a long-term solution to declining local news (Beckett, 2010). Examinations in this area are of particular importance in the UK at a time when policymakers such as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are seeking solutions and a strategy which may support those hyperlocal innovators who are creating a "sustainable future" (DCMS, 2023:12) for local news. However, this questions the role of semi-professional journalists who are continuing to serve local communities but are not necessarily viewed as innovators who are creating alternative media formats or utilising new production methods. An examination of the ways in which semi-professional journalists exit as well as enter the landscape will allow for greater understanding of the role they play in the production of and the concepts of what news is in a contemporary landscape. It will also provide an opportunity for scholars to consider the social, commercial and democratic role semi-professionals play within journalism and their communities more broadly, as well as understanding the potential limitations due to the very nature of the status they occupy as semi-professional reporters.

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Appendix - Diary excerpts

It's been a strange few weeks in Lichfield Live land. We've served up great audience figures, but I've felt a little underwhelmed in terms of the enjoyment levels. Starting and continuing Lichfield Live has been about enjoyment for me. It's back to that point of loving what you do being the only reason to do something if you aren't getting paid. I say to students who take on their final major project that they have to love it, so it's pretty pertinent that I make this point to myself.

Part of the problem is that it's been a quiet time in terms of content coming in, but also that my own time has been pressed. A new role at work and a busy home life have combined to mean that my Lichfield Live time has been reduced. School runs with the wife working more hours have meant driving to work rather than getting the train. Given the train is my newsroom a lot of the time, these sort of external factors have knocked off my available hyperlocal time. Perhaps when driverless cars come in, I'll not have to worry about such issues! We've also had to put together the second of our print editions. Although this doesn't mean new content, it does need to be repurposed and designed for the publication - a huge challenge when you're already pressed for time. I do think the content for the website slipped as my focus was divided, which probably didn't help the feelings of going through the motions rather than being creative.

In football, there's a saying that you're only as good as your last game - in hyperlocal, my mood is only as good as my last story. So thankfully, I've been snapped out of my malaise a little by a decent tip off on a school changing its name and uniform locally. That buzz of getting a story first and being told something you - and others - might not otherwise know is something that's hard to explain. It's a legal high of sorts. When we talk about enjoyment, it's this that I'm referring to.

When I left full-time journalism to become an educator I had a fear of missing that buzz. You get some of it when you help a student get their news fix, but to truly still feel it running through my veins I needed to get my own dose. It's part of why Lichfield Live was born. And it's part of why I still carry on. Part of me feels like my life would have so much time if I didn't have Lichfield Live - but another part worries about how I'd fill it and replace those great thrills and highs it gives me when a story works out.

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A new month and no sign of the challenges letting up. The battle for my time is now becoming more evident than ever. I'm currently playing house-husband, school teacher, dog walker, full-time university worker and editor of a news site that is continuing to see demand rise.

I've started to think more and more about the impact of all of this on me. There is no doubt that it's taking a toll. I'm never switching off. Getting up early to get Lichfield Live work done so I can

then do the day job and the family jobs, then going to bed late so I can trawl through the mountains of emails coming in. This isn't good and I know it isn't sustainable. What gives? Well time will probably be the decider in that. Hopefully, the kids will go back to school at some point. Hopefully, I won't need to write 10 stories a day on coronavirus in the not too distant. But I'm also aware that the genie is out of the bottle in terms of Lichfield Live.

More older people who may not have seen us before are now reading us as they become more digitally engaged in their communities. This means we now have this sizeable audience. But in the same way the demand of my kids means their need to be fed with time is increasing, so too is the time I need to spend with Lichfield Live - my digital child. I'm starting to fear that I'm not doing any part of what I do justice. The plates are spinning, but they're not moving with any real conviction; everything looks like it's one thing away from coming crashing down.

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Everyone keeps telling me that the growth in Lichfield Live is something we should celebrate; something we should be immensely proud of. But with great power comes great responsibility. Lichfield Live's growth has come with a set of challenges we never really had before. We've seen more challenges, complaints and general moans than we've ever had. This is one of the sides of being a hyperlocal producer which has changed with growth.

There was a time when it was just about the journalism. Me, interviewees and stories were the key components. But I'm not becoming a bit more of a community manager. Fielding reader complaints is something I - naively - imagined I'd left behind when I left newspapers. But it probably makes sense that the more people read us, the more they find that's wrong with what we do or that we don't agree with.

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Content has become a real mixed bag at present. I wondered at the start of the current coronavirus crisis whether I'd experience a shortage of leads and ideas. We had a little bit of that to begin with, but we're now seeing an overload of content. There's probably a couple of reasons for this - firstly, we're seeing coronavirus stories mingling with an increase of non-COVID articles. Secondly, we're starting to see a lot more live articles coming in too (illegal raves in our patch are an example of where we suddenly have stories of national importance coming in). The rave articles are examples of the way hyperlocal reporting needs flexibility - they break at strange times and show a need to have a network of people providing tips. We're blessed with that and have a number of readers and groups who are our eyes and ears on the ground. The other factor in all of this is that the local newspaper is still MIA, meaning those who want to speak to a local audience are needing to do so via us.

This has created the biggest challenge at the minute - people wanting a vehicle for their news and us not having time to get through it all. We're inevitably missing some bits, but time is very finite right now. I'm increasingly seeing my hours on Lichfield Live increasing. Supply and

demand is the nature of the beast and at the moment we are about the only people offering the supply to meet the increasing demand.

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Pressure hasn't been something I've really associated with the work I do with Lichfield Live. If anything, it's usually been my release from pressure. But in recent weeks there's been a sense of needing to get our act together and start taking this seriously.

Traffic figures have gone through the roof and we're breaking records left, right and centre in terms of audience and engagement. We've also become a CIC and have to have formal meetings. There's a sense that my role is changing from well-meaning residents providing some updates, to trusted news source people are reliant on.

This is all well and good, but as the Government slowly moves the UK out of lockdown and we edge nearer towards a point where I return to work in the traditional sense, I start to wonder how this balancing act will work in the long term.

It may, ironically, be that a return to normality will help create a better environment for my Lichfield Live work. After all, my daily commuting practice of preparing stories to be scheduled may return.

At present, the schedule is erratic. I'm juggling a working environment where there seems to be more to do than ever as we prepare for a million different possibilities; a home environment where my wife's role as a nurse has me playing home keeper, parent and school teacher (even while writing this entry I've had to go and explain what a farmer who grew a giant pumpkin might write if he kept a diary!), and a Lichfield Live role where the demand for my content is greater than ever.

It's beginning to feel like breaking point.

But the real pressure is uncertainty over the future. I'm fortunate to be in a job that pays well and celebrates my work in the journalism sphere. The current situation has created a huge fear of sweeping redundancies as students decide to avoid university. From this fear comes a sense of needing to fast-track Lichfield Live into something greater that could, potentially, provide some sense of an income. Yet the other pressure is that I could be throwing myself into something I can't sustain if the threat of being jobless disappears at some point in the future.

It's nice to be useful at work, in journalism and at home. But there's a real sense of loneliness from working in this way at present. This is somewhat ironic given the hyperlocal work is a way of keeping others connected.

If I were much of a gambler, these feelings of pressure and uncertainty would be known as the thrill of the chase. But as someone who is pretty 'steady Eddie' it's an altogether different proposition.

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I have previously talked about the new and emerging pressures in our very own hyperlocal 'new normal'. One thing I didn't cover was the personal stress. This comes in many forms, from wanting to meet the demands of an ever-hungry audience, through to ensuring that the big stories don't get me sued.

The current landscape is one of unbelievable pressure. I'm getting sleepless nights. Not always about negative things, but generally lying awake thinking of whether I've made the right decision on a story or whether I've got to follow up on a story. These definitely weren't the things I anticipated over a decade ago. Maybe these are signs that we are moving into a new period for Lichfield Live? Perhaps we are now starting to go enter a new phase of what I do? I do think there is a clear recognition from the broader audience that we are now a credible local media source.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. Part of me loves the adulation of the crowd a little, but I'm not sure I love the attention when it all goes the other way. Criticism is still difficult to take. I'm still very protective of what I do and I usually opt for the 'we are volunteers - do it better if you can' defence. But I'm increasingly aware that this isn't necessarily the solution any longer. People now see us as an outlet above what we perhaps are. At some point, the two viewpoints need to merge - we either need to be recognised as a bit of a small scale outfit trying to find our way by muddling through, or something with aspirations to become more professional and sustainable.

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Perception has been a key part of how I've approached Lichfield Live. I've spoken about how I don't want down time so we can take a holiday because I don't want to be seen as a "tin-pot" publisher, but similarly I've spoken about the challenges of being held to the standards of professional publishers. This is the grey area for me on a personal level. I receive a lot of calls and emails from people, some of whom I just can't get back in touch with - not because I don't want to, but because I don't have the time to. As my career has pushed on, this pressure on my time has increased.

I should be celebrating the rise in both my career and the website I've nurtured from nothing. Sometimes I do, but more often than not I find myself struggling to balance the two. The family life added into this is another aspect where I'm having to find more balance. I'm trying to build in more structure so I have Lichfield Live time ring-fenced, but that's easier said than done. It's another aspect of the work I do where I've had to think hard about value. When discussing the time I spend on the site with my wife (who cannot understand the lack of pay for the work I do),

I've said that Lichfield Live is what has made me employable rather than the work I did in an industry that has moved considerably.

When I worked in industry full time, I always worked on a survival basis; make yourself relevant to prevent you being cut when cuts were needed. I wonder whether I'm starting to develop this strand to my Lichfield Live work? The uncertainty in the current climate has made me think about the future. What if the university needs to reduce the staffing it has? What if I need to find another alternative? Perhaps this, combined with the Lichfield Mercury position, has made me start to think about the feasibility of pushing Lichfield Live into something more than it is? I've always felt taking Lichfield Live to something that was more akin to employment would be a very difficult decision due to the financials. But this is possibly the first time where I've thought there may be a need to make that decision because of the risk of losing the main job I have. Would any 'normal' job unassociated with journalism give me the scope to do Lichfield Live as I do now? Probably not. Therefore I'm aware that the site (and the unofficial sponsorship it has from my employer) is not the way to create something sustainable.