

**Hyperlocal community media audiences:
An ethnographic study of local social media
spaces and their place in everyday life**

by Jerome Turner

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In Memory of
Steph Clarke
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Abstract

Hyperlocal media is a form of online, alternative community media created by citizens to service their locality. To date, much of the scholarly work in this area has focused on editorial practice, non-UK contexts, or frames these practices as response to receding mainstream local journalism and concerns of civic engagement. In this study I take a different approach, exploring instead the everyday, functional and social contexts which are established in the audience's highly participatory use of hyperlocal Facebook Pages. I conceptualise such spaces as fields which are integrated both in the individual user's media ideology, but also amongst a wider sense of overlapping fields of local information and socialities, both online and offline. This work emerges from ethnographic studies of two hyperlocal communities in the West Midlands, in which information was gathered through participant observation, interview, and via an innovative Community Panel approach.

I argue that Facebook Pages play a key role for many people in engaging with their neighbourhoods, but not exclusively so, as I demonstrate their place amongst other sources of information and social life. The Pages benefit from being mediated by their editors to create online spaces that welcome participation partly shaped by the audience's engagement and contribution, thus creating alternative streams of local information that challenge agendas set out by mainstream media. These become integrated into the everyday practices of the audience, therefore, care must be taken to recognise to what extent the broader experience of the neighbourhood is represented in such online practices, and I argue that certain narratives and discourses of the locality are contributed to and *constructed* online, and not always helpfully so, as in depictions of crime. Where the audience might challenge such depictions, and hold authority to account (the police, for example), this public sphere ideal is not typically acted through. Whilst this does not bode well for the literature's hopes for political or civic engagement, this thesis demonstrates that audiences develop such spaces in their own vision, to enact and share a capital of local knowledge and information, sometimes innovating in their own ways using mobile technologies in order to do so. This thesis concludes by saying that such online spaces demonstrate the role of media technologies in everyday life, and the extent to which they are perpetuated and maintained by practitioners and their increasingly capable and enabled audiences.

Contents

Abstract.....	3
Contents.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
List of illustrations.....	6
Chapter One - Introduction.....	7
Introducing the field.....	7
Defining the research problem.....	9
My research.....	11
Chapter Two - Literature review.....	18
1. The wider theoretical landscape.....	18
2. Approaching hyperlocal media.....	32
Chapter Three – Methodological engagement, and research design.....	57
Epistemology, ethnography, and community media.....	58
Research design and practice.....	74
Chapter Four – Hyperlocal media spaces and the audiences that participate there.....	96
1. Local people and local media: the context of hyperlocal media practices.....	96
2. Hyperlocal editors, and the Facebook spaces they create for participation.....	108
3. Audience practice in the hyperlocal space.....	121
Chapter Five - The construction of the space by the audience.....	141
1. Hyperlocal media reflecting the neighbourhood.....	141
2. The constructed locale.....	146
3. Local Facebook Pages as public sphere.....	160
Chapter Six - Power relationships and voice.....	173
1. Hyperlocal media for the community.....	174
2. Social capital and voice.....	178
3. Technical expertise as a way of overcoming barriers to participation.....	189
Chapter Seven - Conclusion.....	196
A route to hyperlocal media audiences.....	196
Conclusions and contributions.....	197
Recommendations for further research.....	209
References.....	211
Appendices.....	229
A: List of materials gathered in ethnography.....	229
B: Interview questions.....	232
C: Posters used for participant recruitment calls.....	238
D: Screenshots of online blogged participant recruitment calls.....	241
E: Screenshots of each hyperlocal Page.....	243
F: Screenshot of community panel group.....	245
G: Images of visual methods used, including how/where I used them in the Pages.....	246
H: Consent agreement documents.....	247
I: Anonymised list of interviewees.....	252
J: B31 Selfies.....	253
K: Other local media.....	254
L: A brief guide to Facebook, including Groups, Pages, and Visitor Posts.....	255
M: Map showing catchment area (pink), populations, and number of Page followers.....	257
N: Definitions of terms used.....	258
O: Outputs and presentations.....	260

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List of illustrations

Figure 3.1: Facebook Insights showing the Reach (audience quantity) and Engagement (audience interactions) for each of a sequence of stories.....	62
Figure 3.2: Screenshot of Twitter Analytics showing Impressions (views) and Engagements (interaction).....	63
Figure 3.3: Rubery New Road (the 'high street'), 100 metres from our vicarage.....	71
Figure 3.4: My Rubery writing space, overlooking the local park / pedestrian thoroughfare ..	84
Figure 3.5: Screenshot from Nvivo analysis software showing codes organised into themes ..	89
Figure 4.1: Facebook and Twitter followers as percentage of the population of each area	105
Figure 4.2: B31 Voices repost of a Birmingham Mail story, shared 32 times, with 14 Likes and 17 comments.....	114
Figure 4.3: WV11 repost an Express and Star article, adding their own introduction to contextualise it.....	115
Figure 4.4: Comparing political and everyday stories, showing: Reach as the yellow bar; post clicks in blue; reactions, comments and shares in pink.....	117
Figure 4.5: The editors mediating one of their own stories	118
Figure 4.6: The interface for reposted stories allows the source to take dual credit for the story, with the editors	123
Figure 4.7: A sample of 310 WV11 Visitor Posts categorised by 'type'.....	124
Figure 4.8: A call for volunteers generating 8 Likes (names anonymised in comments).....	131
Figure 4.9: Expanding on Like, other 'reactions' were added in February 2016	132
Figure 4.10: A lost dog story with 144 shares from the audience	134
Figure 4.11: Comments are often not like conversation and turn-based, but respond to the editors.....	135
Figure 5.1: Reader photos of a 'supermoon' crowdsourced and posted by the editors, resulting in further photo comments	145
Figure 5.2: Emotive responses to crime stories, sometimes perpetuating crime narratives..	148
Figure 5.3: B31 Voices branded designs for #positiveB31 stories.....	152
Figure 6.1: Audience, editors and platform pulling and pushing towards the goal of creating a space for citizen voice	173
Figure 6.2: A reader thanking someone for their kindness on the Visitor Posts.....	175
Figure 6.3: Reader responses blaming the council after a tree falls on a car	185
Figure 6.4: The uncomfortable turn of conversation following my post about littering	187

Chapter One - Introduction

This is an audience study of hyperlocal media, which has been defined as: “Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community” (Radcliffe, 2012: 6). I explore this from a perspective that recognises the highly participatory nature of such media amongst local residents when they are created on social media platforms, namely Facebook Pages. This allows me to fully investigate not just the ways that people engage in this media, but the significance of knowledge sharing, communication and activism using increasingly mobile technologies such as smartphones, enabling integration throughout everyday life. In this I follow Certeau’s (1984: xi) concerns, that “everyday practices, “ways of operating” or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity”, and I similarly focus on “modes of operation or schemata of action, and not directly the subjects [...] who are their authors or vehicles”. This framing of these practices in the everyday pushes back against much of the scholarly work in this area, which sets up expectations that hyperlocal media should be thought of in terms of ‘journalism’, rectifying problems of receding local news media and civic engagement, or otherwise holds up mainstream counterparts in comparison.

Introducing the field

The civic nature of hyperlocal media is most readily observed in the use of social media such as Facebook Pages to set up communicative spaces, and this is the focus of my research. To date, hyperlocal media in the form of blogs have been understood as a challenge to conventional mainstream news media by virtue of their independence and unique participatory offering in neighbourhood contexts. These sites are framed as “alternative media” (Atton, 2002) by dint of differing approaches, subject areas and voices. However, given the receding nature of UK local media (Metzgar et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2015b), and resulting concerns of media plurality, hyperlocal media practice is often approached from a journalistic ‘news’ context. In some international contexts hyperlocal media addresses concerns of political engagement or social change, and supports ideals of ‘public sphere’ i.e. creating spaces to oppose authority or strive for democracy (Dahlgren, 2009; Postill, 2011; Sutton, 2006), although we should be careful not to assume too much, as in ‘Arab Spring’ discourses, given that some argue the role of social media in overthrowing governments has been overlaid (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013). UK hyperlocal media, however, operates at

more of a civic level; whilst this does sometimes include investigative journalism, it is as much about keeping residents informed.

Hyperlocal media services are widespread in the UK, so it is a key concern to better understand the value and uses of these services by audiences. Such websites and services are numerous and hard to quantify: in 2014, 408 active UK sites were counted from a map of self-identified 'hyperlocals' (Ofcom, 2014), but this does not include every village website, for example, who might not identify in this way. Indeed, in the course of my studies, most people I explained the work to had not heard the term 'hyperlocal' but could still tell me about a local page or blog that featured in their everyday practice. The phenomenon has also received attention from researchers and their funders. In 2015 a major AHRC research project exploring 'Creative Citizens' focused specifically on hyperlocal media practice in one of its three strands - I worked on this with Dave Harte and Andy Williams (Hargreaves and Hartley, 2016). Harte's own thesis (2017) explores similar themes to mine, of the everyday, banal media, and authenticity in hyperlocal media, but is more focused towards practitioners, and as a recent, unpublished (as yet) thesis, has not been highly formative of my work. Radcliffe revisited his report in 2015 to profile the scene, additionally pointing out how bodies and organisations such as "Nesta, Innovate UK (the body formerly known as the Technology Strategy Board) and the Carnegie UK Trust have each provided funding to test and evaluate new hyperlocal initiatives" (Radcliffe, 2015: 3). Efforts to support practitioners and deal with issues of sustainability are also being made in the creation of a representative network (Abbot, 2016). However, much of the research still focuses on editorial practice; the few audience studies emerging call for more qualitative and narrative insight in this area (Harcup, 2015), and this is the gap my work addresses.

Summarising research to date

The term 'hyperlocal' with relation to journalism has emerged relatively recently (Gillmor, 2004). Although the majority of the work in this specific area started around 2010, there is a larger body of scholarship that speaks to similar concerns. My review of literature in the next chapter first provides a grounding for much of the (often more empirical) work I later explore in studies of journalism, communities, technology and media. Manuel Castells' (2000) work on the technology "revolution" and resulting "network society" describes the transformation of work, and then, later, (Castells, 2002) the Internet as a tool of the people. His conception of the ways people increasingly curated their "mosaics" of content (Castells, 2000: 370) speaks to Raymond Williams' (1990) theory of "mobile privatisation", a uses and gratifications

perspective that understood media in terms of the individual's collection, ownership, curation, and personal media use. In understanding how such media are then constituted in communicative spaces (such as Facebook Pages), I turn to Jurgen Habermas' (1991) conception of the "public sphere", which must also be understood in terms of the "front region" of the Page where citizens perform their participatory roles and social interchanges (Goffman, 1959). Most significantly though, Bourdieu's (2010) work on the field as a space enacted through the individual's formative "habitus" and maintained in re/productive action (Giddens, 1984), has become a focal point for studies of hyperlocal media (for example, Postill, 2011) and provides the central grounding for my work. It is in framing 'hyperlocal media' in such ways, and throughout my thesis, that I demonstrate the term needs to symbolically encompass the emerging social media local spaces I describe, as much as the preceding forms of online alternative journalism e.g. blogs. The second part of my literature review draws further on some of these ideas via more recent empirical work, and frames hyperlocal media in terms of alternative media and conceptions of 'the field', everyday media and communication. I also focus on studies of hyperlocal media that provide context close to my subject area, with regards to the value, practices, and contexts of such media.

Defining the research problem

Studies of hyperlocal media often concern themselves with the notion that hyperlocal media can 'fill the gap' left by a receding local mainstream media (Metzgar et al., 2011). The gap in itself is problematized by studies demonstrating, for example, that "a diminished news environment depresses [political] engagement" i.e. people are less likely to vote (Hayes and Lawless, 2015: 447; see also Nielsen, 2015b). But such expectations that hyperlocal media will be provided and maintained as an alternative, and that it will promote civic and political engagement, put undue stresses on the practice. Studies emerge that hope to quantitatively measure the impact or effects on what can often be very large audiences e.g. Hampton and Wellman (2003) studied "neighbouring" through community media (partly) by way of surveys. Yet, the editors of such media typically seem unaware of these academic discourses. I have attended the annual UK Talk About Local 'unconferences' – learning and sharing gatherings of hyperlocal practitioners from around the UK - and found attendees to often be more concerned with discussing technology or sustainability of their organisation. When asked about audiences, they sometimes pointed to the convenience and availability of their online data and analytics, whilst recognising that 'follower numbers' were not the only measure of successful engagement. It was just as much in the narratives of the audience's

everyday contextual use, and working together in the space, that the editors found meaning and were motivated to continue. But as much as practitioners understood this in passing, they (at the aforementioned un conferences, or in my case studies) rarely described talking *directly* to their audience about the hyperlocal space they co-habit. Many of the studies I explore in the following literature review chapter offer insight but focus on the editor practitioners, rather than the meaning, issues and concerns inherent to individuals and the collective neighbourhood. Such studies do not allow for the multitude of narratives, meanings and value that can be gleaned from exploring everyday use, and it is here that I respond.

In as much as we can only learn so much from studying editorial practices, we can also not simply extrapolate findings from international case studies to UK contexts of hyperlocal media. Much of the existing research I explore in the following chapter helps with understanding hyperlocal media's role in countries striving for political freedom or democracy, or countries with different cultures and social norms (Israel, Kuala Lumpur, Korea, Australia, etc). Even in America, which we might assume to be culturally quite similar, technologies have rolled out and been taken up in very different ways to the UK (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013: 17; Baron, 2010); economic and technological impacts on US and Europe media ecosystems have also varied (Powers et al., 2015).

Following on from this, UK contexts of hyperlocal media created through social media are often situated in the more banal. Here, I refer to Banaji and Buckingham's (2013: 65-6) definition of the banal; they recognise that, aside from discourses of "the miraculous possibilities of the Internet" for social or civic change, that "the Internet has become a naturalized, almost mundane part of most young people's everyday lives across Europe". As we learn to live with new technologies such as the Internet, they become "no longer novel, generally exciting, or even interesting, and in fact could be quite boring" and I am open in my ethnographic approach to observing these equally significant uses and narratives, as much as the extraordinary.

I make the social media distinction because hyperlocal media news *blogs* have had their success measured in terms of journalism standards (Williams et al., 2015b), but this framing limits our understanding and criticism when applied to the context of social media spaces. I rather ground my study as one of community, socialisation and communication. UK studies such as mine offer new perspectives on what we mean by 'political' and 'civic' engagement at a local level (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015a), and the resulting value of 'banal' media.

Therefore, hyperlocal media must also be situated as complementary to other forms of local communication and information. It is significant in its approach, through websites and social media that interweave with localised socialities and means of staying informed: local television news, local radio, posters, flyers, newsletters, formal attendance of clubs or sports groups at churches or community centres, informal meeting points such as the school 'drop-off', conversations in shops or the bus queue, and a range of other online platforms. In this respect, and in the decision by many hyperlocal organisations to start their own participatory platforms such as those Facebook Pages I studied, hyperlocal media becomes more than a broadcast platform, but a space, a 'field' of communication and participation (Bourdieu, 2010; Postill, 2011). We can only begin to appreciate the meanings, uses and value of hyperlocal media in these differing social contexts when we apply richer, qualitative studies. It has been noted that "a lot of work remains to be done", including studies of "how the sites are understood and used in the community" (Metzgar et al., 2011: 786) and Tony Harcup has built on his earlier work (Harcup, 2011) with a case study of hyperlocal media audiences, recognising that "further audience research is undoubtedly needed" (Harcup, 2015: 694). Chris Atton (2012: 1104) makes a similar call, and Chen et al. (2012: 946) describe a "critical need" for a more ethnographically-situated approach to studying the narratives of hyperlocal media in neighbourhoods. This is what I offer in my thesis.

My research

Given the research problems discussed above, my study poses the primary research question:

How are citizens enabled to participate in their neighbourhoods using hyperlocal media, given the various power dynamics, roles and relationships inherent in such participatory platforms?

This is also explored through secondary questions:

- What relationships do audiences maintain in hyperlocal media, with relation to each other and the editors?
- How are these relationships, expectations and norms of hyperlocal participatory practice defined, understood and controlled by the audience and editors?
- How do these online, definitional practices and relationships then also relate to the offline locality, with respect to civic engagement, local news media, and constructions of 'place'?

Approach

The everyday contexts of hyperlocal media use negate any consideration of traditional, 'lab-based' research methods (Nielsen, 1994) – mobile technologies instead invite methods that sensitively approach from anthropological perspectives (Moore, 1993; Morley, 1980; Hall, 1973). It was in the recognition of media integrating into the everyday that media ethnography developed, with Sarah Pink (2013) charting this around the 1990s. I draw from such approaches and specifically John Postill's work (2011); he sought meaning through deeper, everyday engagement with the key individuals involved in his Kuala Lumpur field site. This sense of embedding informs our understanding of the communities, their participants, their ideals, media ecologies and ideologies, and the media's role in civic engagement, co-creation, and the building of 'third places' (Oldenburg, 2001). Ethnographic approaches such as Postill's also reach beyond the testing of theories, allowing the field site to breathe and organically reveal unexpected insights, and use analytically accurate terms such as "field of residential affairs" (Postill, 2011: 84) rather than making assumptions that romanticised notions of 'community' behaviour will be discovered amongst the participants.

Delimitations

It is necessary to develop some understanding of the editors' practice in that they set up the hyperlocal organisation, and therefore create a relationship with the audience (they arguably create the audience too). These relationships exert power in developing the agenda and identity of the participatory space, most specifically covered in chapter six. Having said this, and also having identified that such editors have been researched to date, I have focused more specifically in observation and interrogation of *audience* members and practice. I also quickly understood that whilst the two organisations ran a variety of platforms and social media accounts, it was in their Facebook Pages that most participation was elicited. These audiences appeared to be made up of residents from across the locales, as opposed to Twitter, which seemed to attract more organisations, businesses, and authorities. The study was carried out in the UK partly because the network of practitioners has been well recognised and celebrated online by organisations such as Talk About Local, but the 'success' of these hyperlocal organisations has not been established based on the reception and use by audiences - to date, those UK studies which have approached audiences have explored reach (Baines, 2012) or were not intended to be extensive (Harcup, 2015).

The two case study locations I chose were hyperlocal services where I lived, in Wednesfield, near Wolverhampton (WV11), and Rubery, south Birmingham (B31 Voices). Both audiences were very active. This decision was not mere coincidence, as I selected these on the basis of my role as a resident participant observer – observing a neighbouring or more distant hyperlocal catchment area would not have afforded me the opportunity to slip between identities of ‘outsider’ and ‘resident’ so flexibly. Finally, I limited my study to 10 months in Wednesfield and then consecutively 12 months in Rubery, partly to coincide with my own personal arrangements, but also the timescale and process of my PhD schedule. This was also defined by a generalised sense amongst ethnographers that fieldwork should be lengthy enough to allow immersion and follow seasonal patterns, or at least until patterning emerged.

Limitations

Hyperlocal media organisations and the services they provide vary greatly across the UK (Williams et al., 2014). Being responsive to editorial practices, audience participation similarly varies, so there is no sense that any ethnographic study can describe ‘typical’ practice. I focus on Facebook, but this was in fact untypical for many organisations that I met at Talk About Local events. They didn’t use Facebook themselves or expressed concerns of being constrained or somehow controlled by the platform. Having said this, although ethnography does not explore scale across a large sample as in other methods such as content analysis, it identifies patterns and also anomalies of behaviour longitudinally and in depth, unearthing those rich narratives that help us interpret meaning – the nature of such ethnography is explored below (p.57).

Whilst I observed practices on a daily basis in the form of a research diary, I was limited to online observation, so that I developed understanding of how the audience collectively acted. However, I was not able to physically be with those individuals as they engaged in those practices, to observe their location, state of mind, time constraints or ease of using the technology, which might have developed an even stronger sense of the way that such practices are interwoven into everyday life. This was impossible partly because of the practicality of being able to organise such contact time, but also because my very act of being present would have introduced an ‘observer effect’ (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982: 46). I was also not privy to all those backstage communications that would have more richly revealed the communication in relation to the online space. For example, police often had appeals posted by the editors, but they were then not present on the Page themselves. People would then comment on the appeal, but I couldn’t establish whether residents also responded to the

appeals or whether they were reluctant to temporarily click 'out' of Facebook, considering that immediate "clicktivist" comments would do (White, 2010). In such cases, I resist the temptation to interpret too far from my materials.

Finally, my study is limited in who participated. I had some initial trouble finding respondents for interview; the editors and other parties sometimes helped me advertise and recruit people they felt might be helpful. It was only near the end of my study that I made contact with groups such as a local art project who could have put me in touch with other local participants, and I regretted not having identified such gatekeepers earlier. This was problematic in that many participants were 'friends' of the editors and, as a result of this relationship, they may have felt the need to praise their work. These people are not a typical cross section of the entire audience. We might assume that those who did see my adverts and selected themselves were those more active members of the audience - there would also have been many unobservable, silent readers of the Page. In efforts to reach them I ran two days of interviews in a pop-up research office on Longbridge high street, but was still not satisfied that I had reached those audience members who I suspect use the service largely to 'keep informed'.

Benefits and implications of the research

The value of hyperlocal media to audiences and the engagement that I identify will be of interest to those working in the fields of journalism studies; I have noted the gap in knowledge identified by scholars. My thesis provides context to discourses around the state of mainstream local media, sustainability of hyperlocal initiatives, and the roles and responsibilities of residents within their communities. There are also audiences for this work in academic fields relating to studies of hyperlocal, alternative and community media and, more broadly, studies of citizenship, community, the 'everyday' and audiences. It is in my framing of the Facebook Page space as one of everyday communication that I hope to expand the vision of journalism studies with regards to hyperlocal media. This, in turn, should also be of interest to research funders such as those described earlier (Radcliffe, 2012). My work sets the scene for funded research in in this area, with respect to audiences.

The methods employed in this study are also notable. Ethnography which spans both the offline and online contexts of digital media has emerged in the last few years, as a way of summatively understanding the role of technologies in everyday lives. However, my work has

innovatively employed Facebook as a platform to engage *with* participants, as well as more covertly observing behaviour there. My development of the Facebook Group diary method combines the structure of a focus group with the longitudinal appeal and immediacy of a research diary, and when I have presented this process at conferences, it has been received with interest. Most importantly, this proved to be one of the more popular ways that my participants engaged with me, couched as it was in their existing everyday practice. I would hope that other scholars would appreciate the value of using social media in such ways to engage participants.

My research also argues a case for further support of hyperlocal media platforms. This is approached in chapter four by identifying the value of the editor's work, and in considering the audience's public space that is created. It is clear that local council services, emergency services, arts initiatives and other organisations benefit from hyperlocal media carrying their messages. Editors take on part of their marketing and public relations work, not as a service to the organisations, but because they feel it is important information for the community. Their reception as editor/residents and understanding of social media are factors that assist with this reach and engagement. This might not be achievable by councils - Firmstone and Coleman (2015b) recognise that councils are increasingly *broadcasting* information through their Facebook Pages, without ongoing communicative engagement. However, rather than assume that citizens such as hyperlocal editors should happily continue to support councils, I would rather hope that my study supports possible remuneration of their digital labour and/or provides lessons that councils and other organisations might learn from them.

I also evidence the benefits of citizens creating social spaces online, amidst concerns of parallel offline spaces such as libraries, leisure and community centres disappearing from neighbourhoods. Online socialisation cannot replace other forms, but it may serve to fill the social gaps for some people, or even allow them to mobilise *in order* to develop initiatives that result in new offline spaces e.g. in the creation of Wednesfield's community hub (see p.160). Hyperlocal media spaces can be seen as addressing problems of loneliness in vulnerable people who might be housebound through disability, mental health issues or old age. This taps again into the concerns of councils, regarding health and wellbeing of their citizens, and so I suggest this provides another argument for resourcing and support. A coda to this raises a general point about the conflicting priorities of the private and public sector. Facebook regularly change the terms or shape of their service, but it may still be one of the most effective ways for councils or organisations to engage their audiences. The implication of this

is that councils might do well to use such platforms to engage (rather than trying to develop bespoke ones), but must be ready to mitigate the risk of using a service that they ultimately have no control over. As much as this provides insight for such municipal organisations, my study also benefits providers such as Facebook with regards to better understanding their use – I discuss platform problems and the audience overcoming these barriers in chapter six (p.133).

My work informs practice, of editors and audiences. Editors typically encounter their audience in the hyperlocal Page space and through observing their Page analytics, but they might not be doing so systematically, or with the specific goals of understanding the value of their efforts. My study highlights which kinds of stories people respond best to, and in which ways. Interview accounts demonstrate the impact of the editors' work beyond the space i.e. in the lives of their individual audience members. Providing narratives of 'successful' engagement, problems, backstage discourses, and theories, this brings the editors closer to understanding their audience's needs. Some hyperlocal organisations may have considered but not yet used Facebook; this study hopes to give them confidence and insight to do so, and help them appreciate the efforts that are necessary in managing such spaces. Relevant findings will be further disseminated in a brief 'best practice' white paper, aimed at hyperlocal organisations.

A better understanding of the way that the collective and also the editors operate in the space should also give audience members pause for thought. B31 Voices' efforts to 'crowdfund' finances from readers (for new equipment) were not entirely successful (p.110); my research might help readers appreciate the efforts that the editors put into maintaining the site, humanising what many people may see as a faceless, self-propagating service. Given that my thesis or typical research output formats might not be approachable for such wider dissemination, it is likely that I will do so via a more open-access publication, web page or site, as suggested by my Community Panel members. In comparison to any findings directed at editors, it is perhaps less likely that I would affect or influence behaviour in audiences. The contextualisation I can offer may, at best, make people think differently about how they respond online, and the ways in which their actions or comments might be interpreted e.g. the myriad ways a Like can be (mis)read, compared to the relative clarity and meaning that can be drawn from a comment. Those who may use a hyperlocal service in the UK but find they would like it to be more participatory might be drawn to start using a Facebook Group or Page or, if one doesn't exist, to start their own.

Chapter breakdown

I start with a review of relevant literature split into two sections. The first half covers the wider theoretical landscape relating to hyperlocal media, recognising that hyperlocal media is tangled in discourses of society, culture, community, media, technology and communication practices. In the second part I address and call on more recent work which is also closer to my subject and often based on empirical study - studies of participatory media, alternative journalism and hyperlocal media, with reference to UK contexts where possible.

Chapter three deals with methodology and research methods. I start by exploring epistemological concerns of audience studies, before then making the argument for a qualitative, ethnographic approach to hyperlocal media audiences. This builds on the work of Daniel Miller, Heather Horst, Tom Boellstorff, Celia Pearce and, perhaps most significantly given the additional local 'community' dimension of their work, Sarah Pink and John Postill. This leads me to introduce my own research design, with an understanding of my position in the work as outsider/insider taking on multiple roles. In addition to ethnographically typical methods of online observation and offline interview, I encouraged relationships of co-creation with participants and developed my Community Panel method. I also describe the ways that meaning is then established from such diverse materials, in analysis and writing.

Chapters four, five and six present a series of arguments based on my empirical work. Chapter four sets context, making the case that hyperlocal media is used by just part of the local population, and in ways that are complimentary to a wider range of news, information gathering and socialisation, both online and offline, mainstream, alternative and banal. In the audience's use of hyperlocal Facebook Pages they are enabled to develop their own media ideologies and modes of communication as best suits them. Chapter five sets out the audience's role in creating the online space, and the extent to which it might or might not be considered a powerful public sphere for challenging authority. In such constructions I also reflect on how this creates or maintains certain discourses of the locality. Chapter six argues that as much as the audience is enabled in the space, they are held in a three-way relationship with editor and platform; they must deploy certain skills and overcome barriers in order to exert voice and participate.

Chapter Two - Literature review

Hyperlocal media in the form that I explore is a relatively recent movement of the last ten years (Metzgar et al., 2011; Gillmor, 2004; Radcliffe, 2012), but is entangled in and informs discourses of society, culture, media and everyday life. My literature review is first framed in an exploration and command of this wider landscape of theory relating to: media space; communication and practice; media technologies; the informationalist, network society. In the second half of this literature review I focus more squarely on studies of participatory media, alternative journalism and hyperlocal media. Much of this work builds on those broader theories as explored in the first half, or applies theory to empirical studies. I identify definitions and taxonomies of community journalism, to establish the positional standpoint of hyperlocal media. Such grounding then makes way for a questioning of expectations that hyperlocal media should 'fill the gap' left by receding local mainstream media; I instead situate my work as much in studies of communication and the everyday.

1. The wider theoretical landscape

Hyperlocal media is a space of audience participation and communication that challenges mainstream print news media's more traditional 'broadcast' model. Even when mainstream organisations distribute their content online, reader comments and feedback are not always encouraged (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman and Hermida, 2010). Although the audience processes such as sourcing or building up a story in hyperlocal media Facebook Pages sometimes can seem to emulate *journalistic* standards (see below, p.120), the intentions, practices and shape of these spaces are otherwise so far removed from fixed notions of 'news' media (Hartley, 1982) that they should rather be situated in studies of communication, locales, and the everyday. With this in mind it is imperative to map out the dimensions of communicative practice, in terms of the idea of space, those actors and relations within it, and the media and technologies in use throughout. My conception of hyperlocal media spaces primarily uses Pierre Bourdieu's (2010) sense of the field as a basis for understanding this communication, also testing against Jurgen Habermas' (1991) theory of public sphere along the way. Also significant here are: Anthony Giddens' (1984) synthesis of the re/productive nature of action and its consequences; Raymond Williams' (1990) theory of "mobile privatisation" as an empowering media practice; Manuel Castells' (2000) situating theory of the network society and the "space of flows".

Space

Many hyperlocal media organisations run Facebook Pages and we should understand them as defined spaces, as opposed to the rather more sprawling entanglements of Twitter communications. However, whilst communication on these Pages is contained within the various posts and discussions, the everyday and local nature of the content clearly leads to a relationship with the physical neighbourhoods. I conceptualise this as a net of communication draped over but also throughout a geographical area. This presents two sides of the same aspects of everyday living: ‘place’ can be understood as “a whole locale whose form, function, and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity” (Castells, 2000: 453); “space is the material support of time-sharing social practices” (Ibid: 442), a product of interpersonal relationships. Practically speaking, we can think of place as ‘offline’, and space as ‘online’, and I use these terms throughout, wherever the distinction is necessary. Castells’ (2000: 407) idea of the “space of flows” described the continuous streams and open lines of communication within networks, initially couched in contexts of urban communications, industry, commerce, the workplace or, at a push, the home. However, as Internet technologies became more accessible and mobile, Castells was also able to track such flows amongst individual citizens in all those spaces in between, for example, “grassroots urban and regional networks” (Cartier et al., 2005: 11). Castells (2000: 436) does set out with some concerns about the “new urban form” of the megacity as typically “globally connected and locally disconnected, physically and socially”. However, it is in his other volumes (1997; 1998) and slightly later work (Cartier et al., 2005; Castells, 2002) that he focuses on the enabling potential for social groups. I draw on the “space of flows” as a concept that breaks free of the determinist “nodes” of network theory to describe the more tangled but still empowered nature of communications within the space, as a place of everyday practice for residents of a neighbourhood (see also, Pink, 2012: 101).

The space of flows can be taken to define communication within a grouping such as a hyperlocal media audience, but also the flows of each individual’s interactions beyond this audience, on other online forums, Facebook Pages or groups, within offline community or social groups, friend networks and family. However, I consider the hyperlocal Facebook Pages of my study as spaces with boundaries; they are in part constituted in the contributions made by the audience as well as those rules of appropriate behaviour as set out by the ‘editors’. With this in mind, I draw specifically on Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the field as the theoretical backbone of such hyperlocal media spaces. The field itself is defined as a relational

network or grouping of fluctuating positions (in this case, people). Stakes are competed for, and power and capital is ostensibly applied and generated in order to hold and maintain them (Wacquant, 1989: 39). It is debatable whether the participants are always conscious of these dynamics, but nonetheless, such forces guide their strategies in interacting within this “field of struggles” (Ibid: 40). Bourdieu (Ibid: 42) goes on to describe “a theory of practice as the product of a practical sense, of a socially constituted ‘sense of the game’”. When we apply this sense of winning or losing to an online discussion, we see immediately how it might ring true; the field, then, as playing field, and one Facebook post and attendant comments as a micro-field – a micro-game – in itself. John Postill (2011: 7), in his study of hyperlocal media in Kuala Lumpur, conceptualises this in terms of “stations” and “arenas”. “Field stations” expand on Giddens’ (1984) idea of communal spaces that are frequented and thus (re)produced by “social agents” (e.g. the Facebook Page). Postill (2011) then points to Turner’s (1975: 132-3) idea of the ‘arena’ as a more specifically “bounded, spatial unit in which precise, visible antagonists, individuals or corporate contend with one another for prizes and/or honour” (e.g. a Facebook post, with comments). When these sometimes escalate into public dramas, they must be addressed and dealt with before the “field station” can return to its normative state. Those who engage play by the rules of the game to seek certain rewards (of recognition, for example), before backing out of the game, hopefully maintaining the balance of the wider space and their own identity there.

Bourdieu also describes a set of cultural and social conditioning which is unique to the individual, informing their practice: habitus. He argues that habitus and forms of capital (e.g. social capital) are largely naturalized elements of interaction, and practice naturally develops with practice, so that the individual learns through playing the game and observing the successful strategies of others. This aligns with Bourdieu’s anti-positivist, anti-structuralist approach - rules of the game as set out by the editors, but which may be added to, broken or applied inventively by the audience. It is the sum of these various factors (literally posed as “[(habitus)(capital)]+field=practice” (Bourdieu, 2010: 95)) that forms my primary basis for the study of the field of hyperlocal media and its communicative spaces.

Spaces or fields of social communication must also be considered in terms of their wider situation and placing within society. Whilst communications about issues such as bin collections are significant to the audience on an everyday basis, we can also identify significance beyond this. The hyperlocal media field has exactly the potential to be a place for

local issues and concerns to be discussed, and then distilled as public opinion. Jürgen Habermas' (1991) conception of the public sphere forms a strong basis for thinking about such spaces; if it is Bourdieu who gives us the meso-focus of the field itself, it is Habermas who situates it within the societal, cultural and civic setting of the wider community. He starts by framing the idea of public sphere in communities and media that have historically provided platforms for communal discussion, so that 'public opinion' can inform the state or hold it to account. Of course, if the public sphere is open, it also provides a melting pot that the state may, by turns, use to monitor citizens as well as hearing their voice (Morozov, 2012). Further to this, Dahlgren (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1991) criticises Habermas' view of the press as a vehicle for public opinion when it was in fact historically "subject to some form of political control by organized interests from the eighteenth century right through to the twentieth century" – in contemporary terms we can recognise this in Facebook's control over their own platform. John Postill (2011: 8) goes on to describe this sense of control in his conceptualisation of the "field of residential affairs". This is mapped on an inverted T shape with the vertical axis representing various tiers of government, while the ground level, horizontal plane refers to local governance, with voluntary sector to the left, private to the right, and local governance at the intersection – the citizens who are governed exist in the junction. Yet, while Postill's view offers a good description of the ways in which citizens are governed, the value of this approach to describing hyperlocal Pages is less certain, given that authorities are often not visibly present. Hyperlocal editors might run police press releases, but the police themselves rarely participated in the resulting comments (see below, p.162). In interview (Jeffries, 2010), Habermas has more recently taken issue with the idea that public sphere can be found online, although admitting "no experience of social networks like Facebook", and this still at a time when many hyperlocal organisations were only just emerging. He did, however, suggest they might *contribute* to public sphere, a nuance shared by Axel Bruns (Bruns et al., 2008: 1), describing hyperlocal sites as "instrumental in developing an alternative public sphere". I draw from this conceptualisation the sense that, for many, hyperlocal media is the only local platform where people will involve themselves in local discussions, developing their own sense of 'being local'. However, whilst this has the potential to be 'pointed upwards', to inform stakeholders in positions of power and influence the state, it also provides a convenient window onto these citizens; those same stakeholders are enabled in their covert surveillance. This is not so much a surveillance that the audience are aware of and can therefore adjust their behaviour, as in Foucault's (1977) panopticon conceptualisation of power arising from surveillance – the analogy might instead be made of

authority looking down onto a fish pond wherein the fish, facing forward, continue their routine, ignorant of being watched. In this though, the watcher *only* has the power to hide and watch, rather than to watch unwanted. But in all of this, even if I have presented the field of the Facebook Page as a space, I echo Dahlgren's question of whether my context of public sphere set amongst multiple neighbourhood socialities can be considered as a finite entity. Dahlgren (2006: 275) instead refers to "publics" as "citizens who interact with each other and with power-holders of various kinds", similar to the multiple and messy, overlapping fields that Bourdieu (2010) describes individuals being engaged in and the neighbourhood media ecologies of my study.

Communication and practice

Dahlgren's (2005: 148) take on public sphere offers a conceptualisation of the hyperlocal space as one of messier communication, which he defines as a "constellation of communicative spaces". He describes three dimensions: the structural, relating to organisations, their ownership, and control over their media; the representative, relating to the content; and the interaction, relating to the audience's relationship, reading of, uses, and engagement with the media. This third interactional aspect resonates with Raymond Williams' (1980) sense of defining a means of communication as distinct from material production. David Baines' (2012: 6) take on this, from his empirical work studying hyperlocal media, is that in the audience's participation, the representation and interaction become blurred. Whilst there is a hierarchy of the editor broadcasting to the audience, the reader's participation challenges notions of traditional broadcast journalism or media, and so Castells' (2000) "space of flows" is a more accurate representation. Readers or, perhaps more correctly, *users* of hyperlocal services consist of passive residents, active citizens, organisations, politicians and local services constantly engaged with the service, in communication with the editors and each other. These modes of communication are powerful in that any ambiguities of meaning, as per the "encoding/decoding" (Hall, 2006) model we recognise from more broadcast media forms, can be clarified through questions and discussion. Take the example of a reader photographing a car crash for their hyperlocal space with a smartphone. The photographer might understand this action along lines of 'journalism', but it is just as likely to be informed by their experience of using their phone, or seeing similar photos posted online. Therefore, they are playing into the "dominant cultural order" of the hyperlocal space, which gives their message the *best* – but not certain – chance of being read as intended, what Hall (2006: 164) called "equivalence". Hall (Ibid; 171-173)

outlined three possible codes of reception: the “dominant-hegemonic position” describes a straight, parallel reading of what is the intended encoded message from the sender; a “negotiated code or position” is more critical of the encoded message, accepting some elements while opposing others; the third, “oppositional code” more wholeheartedly rejects the meaning encoded. The significance with regards to hyperlocal media is that the meaning is not *only* left to the audience’s interpretation. Whether the reader takes the opportunity or not, they can directly question the producer about ‘what they meant’, requesting more details, or, in questioning the meaning amongst other readers, form a public consensus or build on the story from other sources. This participatory formation of the story can often turn it in a new direction – not necessarily a demonstration of mismatched equivalence between producer and reader, as Hall would have it, but rather the audience reflecting in ways that are relevant to them, or using the opportunity to start a different conversation.

The audience’s practices of sporadically or regularly communicating within the hyperlocal media space throughout the day largely appear to them to be naturalised, or by definition do not ‘appear’ to them at all (p.103). That is not to say there is no sense of agency or direction in their practice as it may have a very specific function, as in informing the public by photographing a car crash, discussed above. They may also be aware of the kinds of discourses they speak to, but even in Hall’s (2006: 167) analytical conceptualisation of encoding, he understands them to be naturalised, what Anthony Giddens (1984: 7) further describes as “the difference between what can be said and what is characteristically simply done”. Giddens deals with this naturalisation by separating the monitoring and rationalisation of the actor’s action as distinct from the less conscious notion of motivation. This sense of doing before thinking about doing is certainly assisted by mobile smartphone technologies, the difference between being able to respond to stories as they immediately break throughout the day, and prior means of connecting to online media, via a desktop or laptop machine. In that latter case, the act of sitting and preparing to engage implies a state of ‘connecting to the Internet’. While enabling users, there is also a danger in the ‘constant connection’ model of smartphones, with the potential to catch us off guard if we are unprepared. Hyperlocal media audiences frequently seem to forget they are talking into a public realm when they are physically situated in a private one (the home, for example), and this speaks to discourses of the private/public, and the idea that we ‘overshare’ on social media (Zimmer and Hoffman, 2012). I suggest that the immediacy and ease of smartphone interaction increases such risks of individual oversharing. Hull (2015: 89) explores this in terms of a “privacy paradox”:

Facebook users express concerns about privacy, whilst simultaneously assigning low value to it when they engage in activities such as selling items on Facebook. While Hull (Ibid: 89) expresses concerns about the idea of privacy self-management through the settings and terms of Facebook's agreement with user, the idea of privacy as "individual, commodified good that can be traded for other market goods", at least implies some awareness and control in the user.

Whilst many aspects of communication are naturalised, other, more conscious efforts also come into play. As much as Bourdieu (2010) recognises that the individual's inherent habitus (including education, values instilled by upbringing, family and friends, etc) affects their communicative behaviour, he also recognises the sense of 'playing the game' effectively. Raymond Williams (1980), whilst admittedly presenting an older, pre-Internet position, still offers useful ideas in terms of media as communication platform. Media is described as a means of social and material production in the respect that it involves labour - content is produced as a communicative act. More recently, scholars such as David Gauntlett (2013) present online creativity as similarly social practices. There is, therefore, a social appeal in contributing a story or commenting, and being part of a communal process "which helps people to learn and bond together" (Gauntlett, 2013: 67). Communication can be further broken down into 'natural' modes such as face-to-face spoken word (although Goffman (1959) suggests that no interaction is natural but always performed) and those dependent on the application of labour, often through use of technology: "non-human material" (Williams, 1980: 55). Williams (Ibid: 55) further dissects this latter mode according to three transformative processes. The first two of these rely on technologies: "amplificatory", inherent in broadcasting to a wide audience, and Williams here uses the example of a megaphone; "durative", relating to the recording, capturing or otherwise archiving of an event or materials, for example in tape recording. The third process, "alternative", describes the representation of a message or idea through graphics, audio or text - and here we can reach as far back as early graffiti, or to the process of creating a television drama - as interpretive. In the instance of the car accident photograph mentioned earlier, it is the difference between simply posting the photo, or implying an additional or different "connoted" meaning by cropping the picture or adding a caption (Hall, 2006). This breakdown recognises that the amplificatory and durative processes are enabled by technologies, whereas the alternative process implies *expertise*, and I use this word specifically, rather than Williams' assumptions that skilled application, education, or a sense of professionalism on the part of the individual

are the key dimensions. Ericsson and Smith (1991: 2) define “expertise” in terms of demarking “outstanding individuals in a domain from less outstanding individuals in that domain, as well as people in general” and, here, I recognise the significance of the domain. As practices are situated, it is the field and context that is the relevant determining parameter here e.g. to be an expert in and having first hand experience of everyday neighbourhood life. As experts in the field, the audience develop an understanding of the most appropriate and fitting ways to behave, such as the registers of acceptable language - an overly-formal tone would be overlooked, ignored or mocked as being out of place.

Finally, in describing practice, the picture is not simply ‘labour in; capital out’. We should rather pay attention to the continuous, fluid nature of practice as both productive and reproductive. In my interviews, the hyperlocal service editors described setting up the space for one particular cause and then feeling compelled to continue, even as the agenda evolved (p.109). In this, at least some of the power is in the hands of the audience. Giddens (1984) points out that agency is key to comprehending the sense of power in the actor: while one path of action is carried out, others are rejected – the power lies in the decided response to the available active options. ‘Do I post this photo of the deceased cat? How should I best advertise my church fête?’ This can result in the establishment of “a pattern resulting from a complex of individual activities” (Ibid: 13), whereby normative practices are established through the repetition of these choices made by the audience. Most notably in hyperlocal media we might point to the agenda-setting that takes place in a participatory space when people contribute similar content, e.g. lost dog appeals, so that it becomes normal or accepted to post such stories, in a “feedback cycle (causal loops)” (Ibid: 14; I explore this further on p.121). Ilana Gershon (2011: 6) recognises this in how users manipulate, ‘hack’ and apply lateral thinking to their online practice, imprinting a sense of community identity by use of certain language, for example: “idioms of practice”. However, as much as a sense of agency inherently suggests specific intention, Giddens (1984: 8) also recognises unintended consequences may feed back to condition further, later actions. If we consider the illustrative example of a citizen’s car crash photo described earlier, both a ‘raw’ image or the connoted meanings from an additional caption may produce intended but also unintentional consequences (Hall, 2006). In practice (I explore different aspects of this on p.163 and p.186) it is perhaps unlikely that participants consciously deliberate on the wider, agenda-setting consequences of their labour. Such effects will rather be tied up in a naturalized practice based on habitus and their understanding of the social space.

Social capital is another force we might expect to encounter within the hyperlocal space given the public and communal nature of the forum. L.J. Hanifan's (1916) definition described how an individual's relationship to "neighbour" figures outside of his family benefit the collective body of the community as a whole: "the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbours" (Hanifan, 1916: 130-1). Robert Putnam (2000: 19) similarly stresses that individuals with "civic virtue" or intent are valuable in their own way, but it is in being networked with others that social capital can be created, towards activism. The implication we might extend from Bourdieu's (2011) sense of social capital as applied in the field is that the audience's status is recognised or elevated when they are seen to be benefiting others in their activity, either online or offline. In addition to their habitus, Bourdieu (Ibid: 15) identifies how the individual brings capital, which is the "accumulated labor" which can be applied within the field to "appropriate social energy". He describes three types of capital. *Economic capital* is that which has or can be converted into monetary value, while *cultural capital* is more relevant to the smaller scale of alternative journalism. However, most significant in my study is Bourdieu's (Ibid: 21) *social capital* as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources" which can be derived from participating in a "durable network" or "membership in a group". He describes the capital as collectively owned by the group: members are entitled to "credit, in the various senses of the word" (Ibid: 21) that they earn through "investment strategies" and resulting in relationships and "obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights)" (Ibid: 22). The practice of the individual within the group can be seen to play into those emotive triggers and qualities causing the audience to respond in their various ways. However, conflicting with this in the hyperlocal space at least, is an equally powerful constraint on attempts to generate social capital, that of the audience's attention, given the fast-flowing nature of Facebook content. In Michael Goldhaber's (1997: 1) conceptualisation of the "attention economy" he presents this as flowing in the opposite direction to the new currency (at the time) of information in the digital age. On Facebook, investment strategies must be visible to the rest of the audience to draw their attention - in order for an individual to develop a reputation they would have to repeatedly participate in the space.

Other scholars have also focused their attentions on social capital with reference to online media - labour is clearly applied but not always to obvious returns. Gauntlett (2013: 128) describes this in terms of communal "happiness" or "social wellbeing", and then notes three

perspectives on social capital. Firstly, Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) 'social capital' as an understanding of the strength of social networks (e.g. class) but also recognising the problematic elitism that is sometimes built into such groupings. Secondly, James Coleman's (1988) definition encompasses all social classes, not just elites, and identifies the value of social capital as a resource to be used, alongside their own economic capital and habitus. Social capital is placed as a community resource, in the same respect that Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2006: 57) in their study of Jamaican cell phone use found "that the primary source of survival is other people and social networks". However, in this conceptualisation it must be earned through acts primarily benefitting the community - Postill observed in his Kuala Lumpur study (2011: 92), "residents must donate their spare time, not their money, for the collective good of fellow residents". Gauntlett's third take settles on Robert Putnam's (2000) idealisation of social (and not necessarily political) associations, "whether social, sporting, religious, musical, hobbyist, or whatever" (Gauntlett, 2013:137). Here, social capital is both generated in these interactions, and sustains them. More specifically, in studies of hyperlocal media we see how local social ties can provide support structures. Lending items or time can improve neighbourhood safety and even aid property value: "In general, neighbourhoods with high social capital are safer, better informed, higher in social trust, and better equipped to deal with local issues" (Hampton and Wellman, 2003: 284). Finally, I will explore motivation at the end of this chapter, but Edward Deci (1972) suggests that two people in an exchange relationship constantly evaluate their ratio of input and outcomes, redressing the balance through interaction as necessary. If a hyperlocal media reader benefits from the interactions and actions, online or offline, of another participating reader or the entire group, he may feel that he owes it to the group to redress the balance. Whether such actions within the communicative space result in direct recognition of capital is questionable, partly because someone's action may be lost or invisible within the flow of Facebook Page content. While people often act selflessly, understanding it to be the ethos and norm of the space, I would argue they don't necessarily do so with the idea that they might 'receive' similar acts on their behalf, but rather hope that others would be encouraged to do the same for the group, or that they would at least be somehow recognised for their efforts.

Media technologies

Undeniably, technologies such as the Internet (Castells, 2000) and television before it *have* "altered our world" (Williams, 1990: 13). However, media technologies are not agents in themselves but *enablers* of communication or new media products, which are then distributed

through the same, or other, media technologies. It should be recognised that they are developed as a result of demand or innovation, always from society. Williams specifically critiques two arguments, of technology as determining change, and technology as incidental or symptomatic of a social change that was taking place anyway (in Castells' case, the informational society). Williams' concern is in the separation and isolation of technology development as somehow self-propagating and outside of society, rather than directly and intentionally carried out by people to satisfy cultural and social needs. In some cases these needs are well established and/or may have been hitherto unfulfilled, such as the need to feel well informed about neighbourhood activities when mainstream local press is seen to be failing (Nielsen, 2015b) and so "a new technology allows a previously constituted desire to become realized", a phenomenon Horst and Miller (2006: 64) call "expansive realisation". Such standpoints are key in understanding that technologies are developed, driven, and then used by people and it is in that final use in everyday life that my study of audiences is situated.

While the Internet is not deterministic in itself, Atton and Hamilton (2008: 79-82) suggest two main affordances to suit citizen journalists. Firstly, that the Internet provides a wealth of sources and knowledge, especially when considering the constantly shifting, topical nature of social media. Secondly, eye witness reports and experiences in video, image and words can contribute to a journalism that is "open ended and multiperspectival" (Ibid: 80) and in this we can recognise the hyperlocal Facebook post that is never 'finished', always with potential for more discussion. So, we can understand this as allowing citizens to have voice, but also offering people a sense of belonging in their locality, and a way of defining aspects and discourses within or of that neighbourhood. In identifying the residents' role in placemaking practices (Friedmann, 2010) we can recognise the role of "community media as agents of national identity" (Atton, 2002: 116; see also Anderson, 1983).

As society learns and lives with new technologies, so then groups and individuals find the best ways to work with them. Williams (1990: 130) notes that in the case of constrained or "determined technologies", a solution can be found: "in the young cultural underground, [where] there is a familiarity with media, and an eager sense of experiment and practice, which is as much an effect as the more widely publicised and predicted passivity" (Ibid: 133). It is these creative uses and innovation that we continue to see not only in 'digital natives' but also those simply wishing to bend the technology to their needs. While Facebook allows hyperlocal media audiences to perform functions a, b and c, they might reject or

simply ignore one or more of these, whilst also finding creative ways to carry out x, y and z instead. Whilst their use of the technology might be limited by lack of formal training or education, the way in which they draw on previous experiences of similar technologies such as mobile phone texting, or use available tools such as the camera phone demonstrate the same sense of experimentation and manipulation Williams describes. I echo also my discussion (see above, p.24) of Williams' (1980: 55) interpretive process of the "alternative" as being thought of in terms of expertise situated in the field. Even if such practices sometimes seem messy to the critical academic who judges the efficacy or effectiveness of a particular communicative approach, these were rarely questioned in the space themselves (see below, p.139) as the audience develop a lexicon that goes beyond 'acceptable' to becoming naturalised. Even whilst it is a field outside the scope of my thesis, much of the literature on the enabled and everyday nature of technology use supports my position of describing hyperlocal media as largely naturalised practice (e.g. Bull, 2000; Silverstone, 2017).

One of Raymond Williams' (1990) most significant concepts can be explored in understanding hyperlocal media audience practices. As the antithesis to a view of broadcasting which envisions media dispersal to numerous television sets at a time, Williams' (Ibid: 26) more liberating view of television as paradoxically mobile in taking the viewer 'out of their home', while being firmly situated within the private home, is dubbed "mobile privatisation". Television could satisfy urges to explore and travel through media, exposing the viewer to other cultures, societies and experiences. It was in the home, where living conditions and flexible hours became more common (Castells, 2000) that technologies became increasingly and individually personalised. Our idea of 'home' media as perpetuated in the image of the television as a central point of entertainment (Moore, 1993) is challenged when we identify the increasing use of smartphones to watch video (Ofcom, 2016) and the contexts of use these imply. For example, multiple occupants of a house might be using different media in 'zoned' areas- toilet, bedroom, lounge, kitchen. If we start watching a video at home but continue it during our commute or in other neighbourhood spaces, I also suggest that a sense of home or personalised media travels with us, so that we can feel 'at home' while watching media away from it. Technologies such as the Walkman and then iPod with their single-user headphones clearly point to the significance of this mobility (Bull, 2000; Bull, 2005; Gay et al., 2015) but also important here is the individual's curation of their media, for example through smartphones - audiences consume but they do so decisively, across a variety of modes, and

often to satisfy beyond individual needs, into social organisation (Williams, 1980). We can find echoes of this as far back as Toffler's (1972: 257) vision of "media [...] offered to the consumer on a design-it-yourself basis [...] offering no two viewer-readers the same content", suggesting such developments in technology tap into societal desires and needs. Manuel Castells (2000: 361) suggests that the "communication explosion" heralded by the increasing curatorial choice of television programming trained audiences in the acts of selecting, filtering and trusting their own "mosaics" of media. By the time we come to the Internet then, "we are not living in a global village, but in customized cottages globally produced and locally distributed" (Ibid: 370) - the idea of mobile privatisation again.

What the web offers that television could not is the "groupings of interests and projects" in networks (Castells, 2000: 383). It is in these groupings that we move *beyond* the mere curation of content into mosaics and even Williams' still largely consumption-based model of mobile privatisation, towards everyday media communication and creation, as Castells (2002: 277) puts it: "learning to learn through one's life, retrieving the information that is digitally stored, recombining it, and using it to produce knowledge for whatever purpose we want". In the variety of accounts from individuals in my work we see a leaning towards digital media away from traditional means, but still applied and used in a variety of ways, enabled by the technologies but also the user's inventiveness. It is also in hyperlocal media that we find a push against Williams' concerns of the power that media broadcasters still have as suppliers in his ideal of mobile privatisation. Mainstream stories are sometimes posted into the Facebook Pages, but so too is original content from readers as per Williams' (1990: 149) hopes for 'community media', where it "could so notably contribute to solving the problems of urban information flow, democratic discussion and decision-making and community identity".

Finally, in this first section of literature review, it is important to situate hyperlocal media in terms of larger infrastructures and global concerns. Manuel Castells (2000) significantly tracked the fruition of a technological revolution, in the early stages of the Internet. His work extensively documented post-industrial transformations in global economy, technological infrastructure, industry, cities and the workplace; as these network technologies were increasingly taken up in the home, attention was also paid to the extent to which communities and individuals would embrace them in everyday cultural and social life (Castells, 2000; 2001; 2002). He describes the strength and widespread nature of the network society, the iterative development processes through institutional and state support, and their openness and

flexibility, but it is the social structure of the informationalist network that I draw on as most significant. Castells draws a line of distinction between users and developers, including organisations but also individual garage technologists and hackers (Himanen, 2010), noting that (Castells, 2000: 36) “elites learn by doing, thereby modifying the applications of technology, while most people learn by using, thus remaining within the constraints of the packaging of technology”. However, in hyperlocal media we see producers (Bruns, 2006) blurring the line - their manipulation of the cameraphone and other technologies follows that same hacker ethic, for example sharing information by taking a screenshot of their phone and posting that image (see below, p.192). So it is in the informationalist nature of the network society that hyperlocal media draws its power: audiences talk about it bringing them closer to their communities and the value of ‘information’ linked to their everyday use rather than a ‘news’ paradigm. It is in the third and final volume of the Information Age trilogy that Castells turns to such uses; societies are identified as “cultural movements, wanting to change life rather than seizing power” (Castells, 1998: 375), perhaps a more accurate summation of UK hyperlocal audiences than discourses of the social media revolution of the ‘Arab Spring’ (Fekete and Warf, 2013). Alongside this also are individuals’ desires to establish and contribute to a sense of local, cultural identity, through their own “social mobilization”, engaging and defending common civic interests (Castells, 1997: 64). It is in these recognitions of the more banal, everyday and civic interests that the informationalist society is exercised, just as much as in corporations and the global workplace.

Closing summary

Hyperlocal media should be approached in terms of a field, in the respect that certain behaviours and practices are expected and appropriate there, but might not be in other apparently similar types of Facebook Page communities, for example. It can also be recognised as one field within a neighbourhood that interweaves with others both online and offline, including a variety of media and social fields. The respect that participants contribute and enter into conversations within the space created by the Facebook Page, to certain ends either functional or social, demonstrate ways of ‘playing the game’, where the rules are established through collective practice. Power and voice is enacted through communication, individuals are not (entirely at least) at the mercy of social structures - these are negotiated and reshaped according to ongoing, recursive actions of productive and reproductive practice. On an individual level, practice is informed through habitus and an innate, learned sense of

the most appropriate way to behave within the field. With this picture in mind, we move on to more specifically setting out the scene of hyperlocal media.

2. Approaching hyperlocal media

Introducing hyperlocal media in context

In many respects it is hard to define exactly what we mean by the term 'hyperlocal media', given the extreme variety of scale, contexts, editorial structures, platforms used and audience types and responses. Even with reference to earlier forms of 'community media', Romy Fröhlich et al. (2012: 1042) note an "inflation of terms": 'citizen' or 'democratic journalism', 'grassroots', 'participatory', 'amateur', and 'hobby journalists'. Dave Harte (2017: 19) recognises a certain elitism in the term 'hyperlocal': practitioners "must consider themselves as part of a very specific movement" according to expectations (as in Metzgar et al., 2011) that they are producing original content, rather than simply aggregating existing information. Given that my study demonstrates the value of both creating new content and aggregating (or "gatewatching" (Bruns, 2005: 11)), I do not concern myself too heavily with such distinctions. However, within studies of community media, there are influences to be tracked that lead us to this term "hyperlocal" (Metzgar et al., 2011; Gillmor, 2004; Radcliffe, 2012) and we can situate such practice within various taxonomies of participatory media (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2005; Domingo and Heinonen, 2008; Flouch and Harris, 2010; Gillmor, 2004). With this in mind I first explore alternative and participatory media practices to date and the extent to which they help us understand an evolution towards hyperlocal media as we know it today.

First of all we must reach an understanding of participatory media that moves beyond Hall's (2006) "encoding/decoding" model of broadcast media and audience response. "Participatory media" goes further than the *readings* of news texts, to describe "a citizen, or group of citizens [...] collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 9), and in this sense they are more empowered along the lines of Williams' (1990) "mobile privatisation". The size or indeed shape of such a "group" is not defined here, thus blurring boundaries between audience and author; the former may include the latter and practices are similarly shared. A distinction is, however, drawn between "participatory" and "civic journalism". The latter "tries to encourage participation" but is an approach owned and edited by a mainstream news organisation, criticised as "too broad, focussing on large issues

such as crime and politics, and not highly responsive to the day-to-day needs of the audience” (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 9). In contrast, hyperlocal media deals with reporting of singular *crimes*. Participatory journalism takes form through “user generated content”, “weblogs” and “collaborative publishing” which we recognise in hyperlocal media today (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 21-25), and since the time of Bowman and Willis’ writing, social media such as Twitter and Facebook have also been instrumental – it is therefore Bowman and Willis’ definition of participatory media that I accept. However, also influential is Axel Bruns’ comparison of civic and participatory journalism. His definition of civic journalism tracks “changes in the research and reporting approaches of journalists” from their traditional journalism origins (Bruns, 2005: 23), even if those news organisations are not always effective in encouraging participation (Thurman and Hermida, 2010). I therefore position hyperlocal media as participatory media which usually has a civic role that is more effectively carried out than mainstream media’s attempts, and differs enough that it should not necessarily be thought of in terms of ‘journalism’ as such.

Hyperlocal media can also be considered in terms of ‘alternative’ as opposed to ‘mainstream’ media. Chris Atton (2002) defines that alternative media: represent marginalised or minority groups; present new interpretations of stories; present stories not usually considered newsworthy; present radical, unconventional or edgy stories; might operate non-commercially, and be otherwise motivated; or might consist of innovative, unusual and creative practices, forms and methods of distribution. In addition to the content itself, Atton (Ibid: 4) also points to the entire “non-standard, often infractory, methods of creation, production and distribution” as being distinctive. He identifies that its power comes from the unique position of alternative media as a culture or community beyond the artefact itself – indeed many hyperlocal audience members talk about the *social* benefits as much as the functional or informative (see below, p.174). Atton (2002) also makes the distinction that alternative media differs from ‘radical media’, as it is not always primarily motivated by a political agenda, revolution or social change – in a study of 123 Dutch hyperlocal organisations (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2015: 192), the top motivation was ‘social/community’, cited by 69%, compared to 31% saying to ‘provide political news’. Therefore, I think of hyperlocal media as a form of alternative media which revels in the banal as much as the extraordinary or ‘newsworthy’. Here I employ Marilyn Lester’s (1980: 984) definition of newsworthiness and news as “a product of reality-making activities and not simply reality-describing ones [...] transformations of the everyday world into published or

broadcasted events-as-stories”, according to certain criteria defined by social and cultural orders, the news organisation’s agenda, or the audience’s tastes (Hartley, 1982; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001; Harcup and O’Neill, 2016).

Susan Forde (2011) draws a definition of alternative journalism from practitioners themselves, that they can be independent or within commercial news organisations, don’t necessarily need to exclusively cover ‘news’ (my case study audiences rather use the term “information”, see p.96), could be created by professionals or amateurs, can be local and banal or global and highly politicised, may reach a large audience or just ten people. The common denominator in both Atton and Forde is the driver of a voice which is alternative to mainstream media, even if neither are well balanced in their standpoint (Harcup, 2005). This potentially provides citizens with a media ecology based on plurality - ‘news’ and information sources both mainstream and alternative, offline and online, casual and deliberate. Media anthropologists such as Sarah Pink (2012) recognise this interweaving, “entangled” nature of an individual’s media use across multiple sources, technologies and platforms. Their ideologies and understanding of media forms is informed by wider personal experience and ecology of media use to date (Gershon, 2011), an aspect of the ongoing evolution of their habitus (Bourdieu, 2010). The extent to which the hyperlocal Facebook Pages of my study can be thought of as alternative media in these moulds is sometimes questionable, when they rather demonstrate traits of a social field, but they certainly come closer to these definitions than those of mainstream media.

Alternative media does not exist in a vacuum and is often relational to the mainstream. Hyperlocal editors sometimes post mainstream news into their Pages, and it has been suggested that such stories shared by opinion leaders can help develop trust in the story (Turcotte et al., 2015). Similar to Luke Goode’s (2009: 1289) accounts of citizen journalism coming “to impact on both the news agendas and editorial practices of the offline news media”, and therefore blurring the boundaries, Axel Bruns’ (Bruns et al., 2008: 1) study of Australian citizen-led political platforms similarly notes that it was “possible to point to signs of a marked impact on the Australian mediasphere”. This demonstrates then that participation in alternative media can impact on mainstream media, politics, and other aspects of society. Alternative ‘social’ and participatory “database” platforms such as reddit are often used as sources, with content reappropriated into mainstream news platforms (Goode, 2009: 1296). However, when hyperlocal media stories are used by mainstream local

media (often without permission), this can create tensions around concerns of copyright and unrecognised digital labour, that I observed in my study and that organisations such as the BBC have addressed by developing cooperative relationships with practitioners (Greenslade, 2015). What is sometimes seen as a symbiotic relationship (when hyperlocals post from mainstream sources), and sometimes parasitic (when the reverse occurs) nonetheless offers a media plurality to the individual but also within the hyperlocal space that includes multiple types of sources.

The relevance of digital media in such contexts requires more focus, for the opportunity it offers in distribution but also participation. Natalie Fenton's (2010) edited collection, following extensive empirical work, is interesting in providing a counterpoint to the picture of hyperlocal I deal with – whilst it discusses the shifts in journalism and democracy in the digital age, story sourcing refers to individual citizen journalist / bloggers informing mainstream media, or notions of user-generated content. At this stage, before the current uptake of social media, the notion that publics and citizens together would create their own news spaces was perhaps not imagined to be viable. However, the Internet has afforded and seen the emergence of participatory practices as “one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many” (Gillmor, 2004: 13). Beyond any determinist views of technology, as per Williams (1990) discussed earlier, recognition must be given to the input from its users and champions. As Banaji and Buckingham (2013: 149) suggest, we cannot assume that by default of being ‘open’, the Internet itself will “inevitably result in democratic and anti-authoritarian practices” – it is their practice that defines these spaces. It is also worth situating the Internet itself as the ‘parent’ technology of the browser-based ‘web’; in much the same way that I recognise people use hyperlocal media as part of their wider media and information ecology, the ‘web’ is one of *many* digital technologies in common use today. For example, mobile phones and texting (Horst and Miller, 2006), and “mundane” Internet technologies such as email (Nielsen, 2011) are more accessible for many users. But it is in the last ten years that we really observe a move from the initial and still largely broadcast position of blogging (Bruns, 2008) to a trend of audience participation, “underpinned by a Web 2.0 technical infrastructure (real-time posting and commenting, hyperlinking, RSS tagging and so forth)” (Goode, 2009: 1289). The transition point between consumption of a passive, broadcast web and a more participatory mode can be seen in early websites that required nominal user input, for example Threadless.com, founded in 2000 (Howe, 2008). Users of the site directly created content (T-shirt designs) but the format was entirely reliant on audience input at a large scale, voting for

the designs. Such shifts set the tone for an online culture that was then ready for the social media of Facebook, Twitter and numerous other platforms in common use today (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Fuchs, 2017).

Returning briefly to that alternative/mainstream relationship in this context of participation online, there is often the desire among mainstream individual journalists to practice a more “open journalism” (Milojević, 2013), but newsroom structures and pressures mean they “tend to fall back on the routines and sources they’re familiar with” (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008: 37). Even as we can chart a twenty-year history of newspapers engaging in multimedia and the Internet (Beamish, 1998), more recent accounts suggest they have not fully grasped the potential. Irene Costera Meijer (2012; see also Williams et al., 2011) describes journalism’s concerns with maintaining a hierarchy; when audiences participate, news content is considered ‘user-generated’ rather than strict collaboration with the reader. In some cases barriers are consciously put in place within such newsrooms e.g. disabling ‘commenting’ on stories, shortening time limits for responses, and even moderating and curating comments to fit the brand – such moderation efforts bear staff costs though, and hence participation opportunities are often stripped back entirely (Thurman and Hermida, 2010). Such barriers to participation in mainstream media must be understood for the relationship they create (or do not) with the public. If certain media suggests that a conversation cannot be had with readers, it is perhaps unsurprising that audiences seek voice and agency in alternative media and platforms.

In addition to understanding hyperlocal media within contexts of news media and journalism (whether alternative or mainstream, broadcast or participatory), we can also contextualise it as part of the “civic web” (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013). In this vein, Banaji and Buckingham explore organisations providing sites that are supportive of governments, trying to engage an otherwise excluded young audience, but also charities, campaigners, NGOs or other organisations who believe governments should be held accountable. Even “civic participation at its most basic level is perceived as a matter of sceptical and critical decoding of mass media messages and government rhetoric,” (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013: 21), but they also scale this up to more direct activism in the mould of the radical media described by Atton (2002) and Forde (2011). The large scale, global issues and organisations under discussion might seem at odds with neighbourhood media practices, and we should avoid looking too hard for these ideals and practices in hyperlocal media, but Pink’s (2012) work on “everyday activism”

demonstrates the connections. For example, a hyperlocal media story supporting a local, independent business can be framed as an act of opposition to multinational high street brands or even e-commerce – the editor’s remit is often towards such civic aims (see how small businesses feature heavily in stories – p.125). Such aims do not always translate through to audiences though. Recent studies of young people generated responses suggesting that being a “good citizen” is about being informed, supporting others and voting, but less to do with being active in offline voluntary organisations in politics (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013). Platon and Deuze’s (2003: 340) definition of “public journalism” mirrors these civically-engaged websites in its intention, but is situated in more mainstream news organisations: “public journalism has two prime goals: the first is making news organizations listen more closely to their audiences; the second is making news organizations play more active roles in their communities”. Whether this applies to hyperlocal media, where the hierarchy of the ‘editorial team’ is not so pronounced and so it is more a question of *working with*, rather than listening *to* the audience, it is the case that editorial practices can encourage civic engagement and participation, even if this is not in such a politicised or direct way as Banaji and Buckingham (2013) describe (the editors of my case studies said they don’t really ‘do’ politics on their Facebook Pages, p. 130). To what extent the audience are responsive to such agendas, in contrast to more everyday and “banal” information-sharing concerns (Postill, 2011; Mesch and Levanon, 2003), is a matter of debate explored in my study (see p.132), as is the notion that they are exclusive of each other within this media.

The preceding descriptions of alternative and participatory media, alongside our understanding of an open, socially engaged Internet with concerns towards civic engagement, draw us now to the final dimension of ‘locality’. Dan Gillmor (2004: 142) describes location-based communities of users by example of the Melrose Mirror, which is “not a weblog”, but rather a “community newsletter”. “Hyperlocal citizens’ media” is here recognised as an emerging term (Ibid: 133)¹. Flouch and Harris (2010) define eight types of “citizen-run online neighbourhood networks”; two of those have specific resonance with my study. Firstly, “placeblogs” are “set up by a single person or small group [...] to report on local stories at a very local level” (Ibid: 5). They are “not designed primarily for user contribution and interaction, but the busier sites do attract a significant number of comments”. “Public social spaces” (Ibid: 7) describe social media accounts used “for sharing information about areas and often light-hearted chit-chat” but there is an implication that a citizen would not set up a

¹ Gillmor attributes this as a quote from peer Richard Gordon, in conversation, April 2004.

placeblog and public social space as an integrated approach, as in my case studies. My own ethnographic study leans most heavily on observing 'public social spaces' such as Facebook Pages as this is where most of the interaction and participation amongst the audience visibly takes place, but also recognising that they are set up by editors who control them. Metzgar (2011) et al.'s definition of hyperlocal media is notable for setting out certain expectations, some relating to audiences. "Geographical elements" are of course significant, mostly tying them down to localised audiences (Ibid: 777-778). Of more significance is the expectation of "civic engagement" (Metzgar et al., 2011: 783; Harcup, 2011). In some cases such media can take on monitorial and civic roles (Harcup, 2016), but Firmstone and Coleman (2015a) suggest that, more broadly, such ideals and demands may be asking too much. Rather, Lopez and Farzan (2015: 240) have recognised the more everyday functional uses as well, in increasing "awareness about local information". Damian Radcliffe's (2012) *Here and Now* report for Nesta, is a commissioned review, but is useful in offering one of the most succinct geographical definitions of UK hyperlocal media: "Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community." (2012: 6). The distinction made here of 'news' as different to 'content services' parallels my own assertion that hyperlocal *blogs* may be more journalistic, whereas related *social media spaces* serve different functions, for 'information'. Radcliffe's definition does not differentiate between independent blogs and sites owned by mainstream media organisations, and is useful in recognising that citizen-led efforts sit alongside or even compete with efforts to create franchise businesses and platforms, e.g. Patch and Everyblock in the US and AboutMyArea and Streetlife in the UK. Domingo and Heinonen (2008) and their typology of "weblogs and journalism" draws a sliding scale with blogs at the "public communication sphere" end and 'proper' journalism at the "institutional media" end, so that the scale reads: citizen blogs, audience blogs, journalist blogs, media blogs. Citizen blogs are described as "Journalistic Weblogs Written by the Public Outside the Media [sic]", with the practitioners identified as "amateur neighbourhood reporters, who offer chronicles on local events they have witnessed or been told about" (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008: 7-8), and it is these activities that I focus on in my study. The "audience blogs" category is also worthy of note for its offer to audiences of a voice on more mainstream news websites, such as the Guardian's 'Comment is Free' section, but whilst they may foster a sense of community amongst readership, it is likely these platforms will still be heavily mediated by the platform's owners. What these definitional works do make clear is that hyperlocal, citizen-led media was not identified as a trend until around 2010. In 1998, Franklin and Murphy (1998) explored local

news journalism and the role of technologies connecting mainstream journalism to individual bloggers or citizen journalists but could not yet envisage a picture that drew active online audiences into the mix. In 2003, Mark Deuze described a typology of “the web and its journalisms” that at no point described hyperlocal media, or citizen-led journalism of any kind, the assumption being that ‘journalism’ online was practiced by professional journalists in mainstream media organisations or shared through websites and platforms. However, he did identify key factors of “hypertextuality”, “multimediality” and “interactivity”, which proved to be defining factors of the more participatory ‘web 2.0 age’ but also the wave of citizen media to follow (Deuze, 2003). In recognising how such technologies in the hands of publics support their framing as *experts* of their local, everyday lives as I posited earlier, we draw a more fully-rounded picture of the enabled, participating audience.

What is new and unique about hyperlocal media?

Given Fröhlich et al’s recognition that adding the new term hyperlocal to an already crowded lexicon doesn’t help clarify this area of media studies, then what does the distinction contribute? Is it simply a new name for practices that have been in place for years? We can track ‘everyday’ use of computers for community networking and information sharing at least as far back as the 1974 Community Memory project (Colstad and Lipkin, 1975) which situated computers in locations such as record shops, allowing visitors to post and search content relating to car pooling or selling musical instruments. In this section I explore what is distinctive about ‘hyperlocal’ media.

It is sometimes claimed that virtual communities are unlike ‘real communities’ because participants don’t benefit from the additional dimensions of face-to-face contact (Ridings et al., 2002). However, there is a real possibility of contextualising or parallel, offline relationships in hyperlocal media, with various risks thrown in as well as benefits (Bakardjieva, 2003; Banaji and Buckingham, 2013: 84-7; Costera Meijer, 2012; Hampton and Wellman, 2003; Mesch and Levanon, 2003). Atton (2002: 133) describes online technologies as an “additive set of processes that supplement and exponentially increase opportunities for sociality, community, mobilization, knowledge construction and direct political action”. Whether those opportunities are always taken up is another question - Kavanaugh (2001) and Patterson were less confident of local social networks’ ability to develop community engagement and attachment, although this work predates many platform developments. Nonetheless those discussions taking place in hyperlocal forums frequently centre around

everyday lived experience, and so the online knits tightly with the offline – as shown by anthropologists such as John Postill (2011). This is often described in terms of the ‘ties’ that are created between people in a neighbourhood, as a result of online and/or offline communications. Mesch and Levanon’s (2003) study of suburban social ties drew on Etzioni and Etzioni’s (1999) comparison of face-to-face and computer-mediated communities. They suggest that a “geographically-based computer-supported network is more likely to contribute to the formation of community ties than is a geographically dispersed virtual community” (Mesch and Levanon, 2003: 337) and that the offline and online sociality complement each other to aid in the development of the community - see also Banaji and Buckingham (2013: 57). Moreover, a “wide ranging knowledge of others” (Mesch and Levanon, 2003: 337) is also deemed necessary, and while the authors may be referring to the ‘community builders’ (i.e. the editors), I suggest that such relationships among the audience would also help - the more a community member understands about their local area, and the people therein, the more indispensable they will become, offline and online. Mesch and Levanon suggest other factors contributing to the development of locally-based social ties: a propensity for ‘neighbourly’ conduct such as door-to-door relationships; length of residence; involvement in community groups; sociality emerging from parenting. Mesch and Levanon argue that, online, it is the weak ties that are most specifically increased and maintained, those profile pictures or names we start to recognise and understand in terms of the ‘cat lady’ or a certain shop owner. Given the significance of such ties in ‘bridging’ an individual across groups, and suggestions that they are just as important as our stronger friendship ties, we should not underestimate their significance in hyperlocal media (Granovetter, 1973; Kavanaugh et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000). Hampton and Wellman’s (2003) study of a “wired suburb” with Internet access explored how an online discussion forum supported “neighbouring” – in other words, embedding themselves in discussion and mobilisation around local, shared concerns. There is certainly a sense that much of the hyperlocal media audience I spoke to already used Facebook and, therefore, relatively seamlessly involved themselves in the hyperlocal Pages, using them to ‘catch up’ on threads of conversation as they might with a friend. Whether these individuals could map out their ties if I’d asked them is debatable, but the entangled nature of their communications shouldn’t be seen as problematic. Rather, it is reflective of these online communications as key to their everyday practice.

The 'hyperlocal' is sometimes considered to represent a mindset or certain kind of practice – as Sarah Hartley (2010) puts it, “it’s no longer necessarily defined by a tight geographical area, but instead seems to have evolved to describe more of an attitude than a place”. Furthermore, David Baines (2012) describes the 'glocalized' nature of hyperlocal, a medium primarily intended to serve a geographic neighbourhood, but not escaping the fact that as online content it has the potential to be read by and influence international audiences, whether those non-residents with a historical or family tie to the area, or those readers with an interest in the broader and shared issues being discussed. Susan Forde (2011: 79; see also Pink, 2012) further similarly identifies “how local issues can be extrapolated out with national and international ramifications”. Whilst the geography of a group that collects or is formed online may be the most significant factor, these are others to keep in mind too.

I have already discussed how the structures of mainstream media organisations, if not the journalists themselves, curb the potential of their audiences. It might be argued that mainstream media has over time developed a better understanding of how readerships may provide sources or first-hand experiences as content, but content is still typically edited, curated or otherwise controlled before it is 'ready' for the mass audience (Domingo et al, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). In contrast, hyperlocal editors and readers alike use everyday online platforms such as blogger, Facebook and Twitter, for sourcing, writing, contextualising and discussing stories. David Baines (2012) cites these “changes in relations of power” as significant in the “collaborative” practices of hyperlocal media, changing the “content and purpose of the site”, and supporting Chris Atton’s (2002: 147) view that online alternative media serves to inform, but also to mobilise and connect publics.

David Baines (2012: 3) indicates that concerns of civic engagement are not unique to hyperlocal media practitioners, but can also be found in definitions of other 'local media' with a role in “building networks and maintaining connectivity, generating and reinforcing representations of place and community”, and in “[reinforcing] people’s sense of belonging”. Significantly though, Baines (Ibid: 4) notes that mainstream local media is likely to be owned and even written by those outside of the circulation area, whereas hyperlocal media benefits from native reporting, and everyday “local knowledge”. Susan Forde (2011: 80) similarly notes that the “value added component” is that such media “involves the locals, either as sources, or producers”. In making such distinctions we should also note that 'civic' and 'political' engagement are not the same: Banaji points to Dahlgren’s description of “civic

cultures” (Dahlgren, 2003) including acts such as “volunteering, debating social issues, or participating in community organisations” as “parapolitical” or “prepolitical” (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013: 94), but always towards a common good, and this will be a familiar concept for hyperlocal media audiences. Political action is presented as distinct in working towards social change that is *not necessarily* always for the common good, e.g. propaganda supporting a dictatorship. As a coda, it is also worth noting those situations when expectations of the Internet are not met: Banaji and Buckingham (2013) identify that while online civic action seems to have increased in recent years, digital media can’t be held entirely responsible in situations such as the Arab uprisings circa 2011, given that it was combined with previous, traditional media forms and offline communications. Young people are seen as less politically motivated or civically engaged, but Banaji and Buckingham (2013: 5) suggest that, if this is the case, part of the blame may lie in social and political elites who (they may feel) have abandoned them, or attempt to enforce top down efforts to engage them. By contrast, Jeremy Corbyn’s presence on social media and other more suited forms of engagement during the 2017 general election have been suggested to be partly responsible for a greater youth turnout (Banaji and Mejias, 2017; Margetts, 2017). One would hope, then, that it is in hyperlocal platforms that people might engage - conditions are ripe for political discussion even if the editors do not push this themselves. However, my study suggests that when events such as hustings or local elections are posted it remains to be seen that they create much impact (see below, p.116). Atton’s (2002: 117) discussion of a “web-based network of community reporters” from Newcastle suggested they “often appear to have little interest in political activism of any kind”, and in my own case studies, politics was often seen as too messy and divisive an area for audience or editors to have to manage. That is not to say that hyperlocal media fails its audiences, but that they shape the media space in their own image rather than according to expectations of civic and political engagement set by academia and the ‘receding local media’ narrative.

Hyperlocal media is typically delivered through accessible Internet platforms so that the audience’s experience is ameliorated by the affordances of the social and mobile web they are already engaged in, e.g. a hyperlocal Facebook Page or Twitter account can be easily checked, despite otherwise busy lifestyles (Postill, 2008). Firmstone and Coleman (2015a: 136) are cautious in assuming that the existence of technologies by default leads to a “transformation of citizenship” – however, such mobile technologies clearly present a stark contrast to the idea of setting aside time to ‘sit down with the newspaper’ or watch a television news bulletin.

The audience's desire to use platforms in these ways comes from a shift in their understanding of what they consider to be 'local media', based on what has gone before (and in the case of many local newspapers what has literally 'gone'). Ilana Gershon (2011) explores these changes in her study of Facebook relationships, citing Bolter's (2000: 62) definition of "remediation" whereby new media are appropriated and made meaningful in relation to the individual's prior understanding of other media. McCollough et al. (2017: 112) express this in terms of a "complex interplay of old and new means of accessing and sharing local news". Given the shifting array of technologies and influences informing local media, they can be seen as formulating part of an individual's understanding of their locality.

The hyperlocal media space

Research of online hyperlocal media is usually situated within the field of journalism, and this grounding is likely to have been established from inevitable comparisons with mainstream local media but also those expectations that this citizen-led activity is filling the gap of receding local mainstream output (Metzgar et al., 2011), whilst others approach such optimism more cautiously (Nielsen, 2015b; Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2015). This follows similar hopes of alternative journalism (Atton and Hamilton, 2008), although here mainstream media is more squarely criticised for its "standardised and limited repertoire of news" due to its "conglomerated nature" (Ibid: 79). However, hyperlocal practitioners do not always frame themselves as 'journalists' (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015a: 128; Harte et al., 2016) so can their work be considered 'journalism'? Johnson and St John (2015) suggested in their US study that whilst citizen journalists consider journalistic standards to be important, it is not necessarily the case that they adhere to them in their output. If a type of journalism at all, we might apply Atton and Hamilton's description of "native reporting", written by alternative journalists (citizens) who typically live within the community they are writing for, and present stories in a meaningful manner with the community's support (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 127). Another framing might be that of open-access journalism: "open publishing deals with issues of truth and objectivity and assumes a close and non-hierarchical relationship between reader and content" (Platon and Deuze, 2003: 350). In some cases, the 'editor' is done away with as a concept altogether and "horizontal communication amongst producers and audience" is employed, as in the Leeds Other Paper (Harcup, 2005: 134). While this might present an ideal in the face of mainstream equivalents, it is quite usual for such platforms to be in some way mediated by an editor. Nonetheless in these cases, the writers,

audience and subjects covered are not distanced from each other because they are often one and the same, embedded within, if not part of, the story.

I argue then that hyperlocal media spaces should be considered in a context apart from journalism, given the contribution and place in the everyday lives of those involved. I also reject thinking of the audience simply in terms of 'readers', as this denies the conversations, interactivity and relationships within the space. On one level, even the most passive 'reader', who reads the text of a blog post or the title alone - given that this media is often offered as a database of news rather than presenting full narratives (Goode, 2009: 1296) - can be seen as participating through their choice (Bruns, 2008: 23). They gather, and curate their "mosaic" of media and content (Castells, 2000: 370), and these are made meaningful in their everyday life, responding to their own needs and concerns (Katz, 1959). In a study exploring the role of reader participation in mainstream media, "residents" expressed not necessarily a need for suppressing negative news or encouraging positive news, but "an ardent desire for realistic news, for knowing what really went on in their neighbourhood" (Costera Meijer, 2012: 21). In such conceptualisations then, the audience pushes away from mainstream media agendas, and rather shapes the hyperlocal space in their own image and concerns.

Hyperlocal spaces can also be framed in the mould of 'third places' situated aside of the home or work (Oldenburg, 1997). Following Habermas' work, Oldenburg identifies these in barbers, cafes and other places where people would congregate and, without them always being overtly political, often discuss their locality in everyday terms. A more recent UK study still argues for their social significance and that they should be protected under such terms (Hickman, 2013). By 2001, Oldenburg (2001) was expressing concerns about the declining use of such spaces, citing the Internet as a potential factor, in keeping people confined to their home-based computers. Putnam (2000: 174) similarly cites "challenges to the hope that computer-mediated communication will breed new and improved communities" but does at least admit that "the timing of the Internet explosion means that it cannot possibly be causally linked to the crumbling of social connectedness in physical communities" (Ibid: 170). He was clear on the difficulties of making such assumptions, similar to Castells' (2000) assertion that early Internet studies didn't support such fears. More to the point, Coleman and Blumler (2009) overlook Oldenburg's concerns that physical interaction is an all-determining factor of communication - as we see the social web evolving, we appreciate the unique accessibility benefits of the web e.g. for users with disabilities (Ginsberg, 2012). David Baines' (2012: 12)

study of hyperlocal media also found that hyperlocal media could sometimes help where “word of mouth” communication failed; everyday face-to-face relationships were often banal to the point of skimming the surface, without residents necessarily ‘knowing’ each other better for it. Hampton and Wellman (2003) and Dahlgren (2009) support a view of Oldenburg’s, that not only the use of these physical, third places is in decline, but the places themselves are too, so they suggest the Internet can provide alternatives and Charles Soukup (2006: 432) has most specifically identified how hyperlocal community websites share “third place” qualities of “localization, accessibility and presence”. It remains to be seen though, whether describing hyperlocal media as a ‘third place’ space such as this assumes certain subject areas for discussion or limits its uses too much, and excludes relationships it may have to work and home, as well as other more public areas of civic life.

Another factor to take into account is the difference between broadcast and intercast communication, and how this affects our understanding of the hyperlocal space as a ‘community’. For Clay Shirky (2002a), readers commenting on a blog are not enough to constitute ‘community’ online, suggesting that this is still a broadcast model and that “real community is a self-creating thing, with some magic spark, easy to recognize after the fact but impossible to produce on demand, that draws people together”. Honglei Li (2004) supports Shirky’s view, arguing that virtual communities that have come together through that ‘magic spark’ are distinct to “virtual teams” or groups that are organized together for a purpose or task, whether work or leisure-related. So, if we summarise that communities are small-scale, intercast spaces of communication and production, are hyperlocal spaces communities? While they may often occur through some spontaneous means, UK services are usually initiated by some citizen editor deciding to ‘start something’ i.e. not as entirely spontaneous as Shirky describes. The fact that the space is mediated is also not necessarily of specific concern, as Bakardjieva (2003: 293) points out that the “majority of the so-called ‘real-life’ communities are in fact virtual in the sense that they are mediated and imagined”. It is also worth noting that this mediation process does not just result in curated content (Bruns, 2005), but also encourages audiences to participate and is therefore more inclusive than mainstream media (Harcup, 2011). Early studies of virtual communities often focused on online forums that involved the mediating editor being less prevalent and transparent to the wider readership, but in hyperlocal Facebook Pages the editor is present as a controlling or “gatewatching” force (Bruns, 2005: 11). Even if studies have suggested that civic engagement *requires* mediation of some kind to at least initiate activity (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013: 158), it is this heavily

mediated sense that means we might be cautious in referring to the hyperlocal space as a 'community'. In contrast, David Gauntlett's (2013: 107) assertion that "the internet has given us a forum where people can do [making] without gatekeepers[...]" applies in some contexts such as Youtube, but not so much in hyperlocal news communities - some guidance is still required. However, it is in appreciation of the work of those who have most closely (and ethnographically) observed hyperlocal media practice that I steer *away* from the romanticised way that the editors, audience, and scholars such as Putnam (2000) sometimes use the phrase 'community' to imply togetherness. Postill (2011) instead opts for the more accurate terminology "field of residential affairs" and Dahlgren (2005: 148) describes the "constellation of communicative spaces". Both terms describe the interplay of relationships, communication, activism and participation between state and non-state, citizen and organisation; hyperlocal media is just one of many overlapping media and communication practices. Many sources shape a neighbourhood's civic activity, offline and online. Postill (2011: 103-9) considers it too restrictive to consider 'the network' or mobilisations of residents as one 'space', and instead describes "residential socialities" in a broader interweaving of connections and communication.

I use the term 'audience' with reference to my study, as analytically more correct than 'community'. The output is 'performed' by the editor according to the expectations of the space, and the audience respond to it in an ongoing relationship, as per Goffman's (1959) conceptualisation of self-expression. The audience's equally active, communicative role gives off signals to the editors that they are reading and listening (commenting on or Liking stories on a Facebook Page), but also in interpersonal communication with each other, through comments. In such uses of the media the audience are empowered and not simply passive (Katz, 1959; Moores, 1993). It is in their communications, combined with an online persona's potential to perform a part, or hide a facet of themselves, that we can identify these audiences in relation to Goffman's (1959) distillation of relationships, and as more recently applied in studies of social media (Baron, 2010: 82; Gershon, 2011: 87; Hei-Man, 2008). Goffman talks about the impressions we give off in how we interact - social media such as Twitter and Facebook allow us to curate what we express about ourselves, and what we miss out.

We can also "control the volume" of otherwise noisy and needy incoming communications (Baron, 2010: 31) e.g. turning off Facebook notifications. However, Baron also points to the dangers of written social media communications, the extent to which this records and

archives us online at our worst as well as our best. Admittedly we usually have the power to delete our own regretted communications, but given the regular flow of communications and the extent to which audiences sometimes forget the public nature of the platform, this is not usually demonstrated in practice. Ilana Gershon (2010: 188) in her study of Facebook breakups similarly references how “the authors of these texts were not anticipating multiple audiences when they wrote; they were not imagining these conversations as public”. Returning to Goffman (1959: 109), we can understand the editor as creating “fronts” to present in a certain way, according to the established norms of the “front region”, the Facebook Page. Audiences, too, will be expected to respond according to these norms. While this plays out on the ‘official’ platform of the hyperlocal media stage, my study also reflects how individuals present themselves differently in a more relaxed “backstage” area, namely their own personal and privately locked Facebook profiles. This is especially relevant when we consider the hopefully responsible and trustworthy presentation of the editor/writers in their “front regions”, and the social capital potentially at stake amongst participating audience members. So, the backstage presents a cathartic and necessary counterbalance to the perceived efforts of such “front region” presentation in the hyperlocal community space but, in doing so, the differing forms of presentation must be practiced correctly and cautiously. If we see the mask slip at points of temporary crises, flashpoints or “communications out of character” (Goffman, 1959: 166), damage is temporarily done to the space in those temporary “field arenas” (e.g. Facebook conversations), and the involved parties must strive to end amicably to preserve the wider “field station” space, as discussed earlier (Postill, 2011: 7).

The audiences of hyperlocal media

Hyperlocal Facebook Pages are spaces initially set up and run by editors - my study focuses on their nature as communicative spaces. I argue that it is the contribution of the audience, as communication and production, that is unique in such spaces. With this in mind, I now focus more squarely on these audiences and related empirical work.

As I have explored through Goffman’s (1959) work, it is in the interplay of communications in a communicative space that we take on roles. Some are clearly defined, and others less so. At a base level, we can identify the editors and the audience, but within the audience are further varying levels and types of participation. Chris Atton (2002) struggles with terminology given that people often take on multiple roles, as in other everyday forms of communication both online and offline. Referring to anarchists on the online Spunk Library, “those working for it

might be seen as authors, editors, publishers, disseminators, 'facilitators', organisers" and "a shifting population of – what do we call them? – contributors? communicators? activists? archivists? reporters? readers?" (Atton, 2002: 140-1). This unresolved grappling with terms seems to suggest that audiences are increasingly engaged in multiple acts and behaviours as circumstances arise, and as habitus informs how they will engage. More recently, models of personality have been correlated with differences in how people post to and use platforms such as Facebook (Marshall et al., 2015). Similarly, Susan Forde's (2011: 6) study of alternative media observed that journalists "identified their journalism as an extension of what they otherwise were: an activist; a community aid worker; an Aboriginal person representing their community; a freelance 'writer' and so on". The same might then be assumed of readers and producers who bring to their contributions expert, everyday working knowledge of their locality. In cases of political activism the audience may compel figures of authority to be responsive, given the power in their dual role of 'citizen' (Bruns et al., 2008). This does not necessarily make their efforts more credible than another, a journalist's, for example, but we should recognise such experience as influential: "native reporting" (Atton and Wickenden, 2005: 349). David Gauntlett (2013: 84) notes that in such contexts the "online community are forgiving about formal quality issues" - 'quality' might be perceived in terms of timely content, rather than polished production e.g. an immediate photo of a neighbourhood incident. In fact, Gauntlett (Ibid: 87) goes as far as to suggest over-production can "deaden" the human connection, because it is seen as too unattainable and alienating. i.e. not 'of the community'. Bakardjieva's (2003) work relating to forums and web sites, rather than social media, identified roles as a function of motivation: the "infosumer" seeks accurate information; others accept opinions and first hand experiences, even when they don't come from 'experts'; "chatters" are drawn by a desire for information, but then shared interest makes them stay to socialise; the "communitarian" goes online specifically to connect with a support group. In the audiences I studied I recognised all such roles at one time or another, but perhaps the main distinction is the difference between those who contribute based on their understanding that they are allowed to, and those who would rather not be committed or exposed to potential online friction - participation and activism is something others are seen to be undertaking.

Whilst much research has already focussed on the practice of those who initiate alternative media projects rather than the audience (Harte, 2013; Metzgar et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2015b), it is worth understanding those audiences in terms of their relationship to the

editors. Given that alternative media is often studied within a frame of journalism and media plurality, comparisons are naturally made with mainstream media, whereby we assume the editorial position to be one of overt control. However, even in the most open-access, alternative media platform there is still a power dynamic in the editor / audience relationship, recognised by the readership even if not explicitly voiced (Platon and Deuze, 2003). Axel Bruns (2005: 11) conceptualises the editor's role as "gatewatching" – in hyperlocal media we might recognise this as those sources provided by readers which are then reproduced as stories. Chris Atton (2002) points out that some alternative media follow a 'letters to the editor' model of reader participation, but that others are more likely to value reader input based on their experiences and knowledge, similar to Harcup's (2011: 22) description of "alternative media leading to a blurring of roles between journalist and source and between journalist and audience". Such flat structures are seen to benefit discussion. In Bruns et al.'s (2008) study of an Australian platform, some content was sourced by "staff", and drew in new readers, while other stories were "crowdsourced" and drew in more comments, presumably due to a shared understanding of interests. Bruns (2005: 28) has also gone some way to reference the audience roles in "collaborative news websites", which incorporate "users as information gatherers, editors, or commentators", and then "producers" who engage in "consumptive and productive modes (and often in both at virtually the same time)" (Bruns, 2005: 23). However, it is not usually the case that major editorial roles would be taken on by active producers, as "the tendency to let go of editorial control is more pronounced at the input than the output or response stage" (Ibid: 192), and Guy Berger (2011) similarly suggests that providers of sources, however useful, are unlikely to be thought of as 'authors' of content. Thus stories are received, but not always necessarily reposted.

I have discussed Goffman's theorisation of self-presentation in social spaces above (see above, p.46), but it is worth noting that beyond the functional roles of producer, source, etc. discussed, a number of "discrepant roles" describe those who might be acting for various causes (for the editor, the audience, or an organisation). When such roles are harboured in the online space, the 'truth' behind the façade of performances is even harder to pin down, especially without the benefit of the 'tells' of face-to-face or vocal communication, and this needs to be taken into consideration, especially given that studies such as those of Ridings et al. stress the importance of trust online (Ridings et al., 2002; Ardèvol-Abreu and de Zúñiga, 2016). Trust can be understood as a currency, along the lines of 'do unto others as you would to unto yourself', with the payoff that "in a trusting environment, people are more inclined to

help others and to request others' help" (Ridings et al., 2002: 279). Hyperlocal media goes further than a typical media broadcast model to encourage participation and inclusivity but, in the case of the Facebook Page platform, is still partially controlled by the editors. A variety of roles and interactions come into play in the audience's response, however, so it is still important to understand this all in terms of relationships and communications.

In the general ongoing activities of the hyperlocal space, certain participants might become ever more present, whether political individuals such as local councillors, or organisations and businesses who feel a need and requirement to position themselves as part of the community or at least serving it (Postill, 2011). In Postill's (Ibid: 56) study these are described as "champions", put into place by government structures as part of a top-down influence online – see my concerns of surveillance via public sphere (see below, p.166). However, if these figures become overly-influential in the space, they can be seen as "elites [with] privileged access to the media", problematized as "primary definition" (Atton and Wickenden, 2005: 348; Hall et al., 1978). Atton and Wickenden (2005: 352) identified that the Schnews activist newssheet gathered sources from a broad spectrum – "email list, personal contacts, activist networks and personal experience and knowledge" – but that certain organisations such as Greenpeace became primary definers in favour of less-established citizen voices. In hyperlocal media, I will later illustrate those occasions when organisations develop relationships with the editors, and then might find their contributions favourably promoted for visibility e.g. police, council, politicians, church leaders – as well as the place of such organisations more generally in the space. This reflects once again those concerns of the mediation of community media spaces, given that they are edited and curated by the few controlling individuals with ownership and publication rights.

Finally, in discussing who does use community media, there will also be those within the local neighbourhood who don't, for any number of reasons: those who would like to discover local news but aren't 'digitally included'; those who are digitally included but choose not to use this particular news source they've heard about; those who may be completely unaware of their local news source. Postill (2011: 64) does passingly reference those "excluded" from online local connections. He suggests, supported by Banaji and Buckingham (2013: 90), that it is an engagement in offline everyday activism and interest in local affairs that draws people towards similar online circles (Postill, 2011: 81). He also recognises that it is outside the scope of his ethnographic study to observe those excluded properly, a difficulty I also

encountered. However, I was sometimes surprised not so much by the *number* of people I came across who had never heard of their local Facebook Page when asked, but the *types* of people e.g. where I would expect a local, small business to be aware of the promotional opportunity of hyperlocal media. Nonetheless this serves as reminder that hyperlocal media merely presents one narrative of the locality, its media, and its community.

What do audiences do with hyperlocal media?

If we recognise that media play an everyday role in people's lives, especially in the case of mobile technologies, then we must also explore the ways they use it. Mesch and Levanon's study of Israeli local forums references this as "community building" in the ways that people disseminate information (e.g. politics) and share knowledge. Further to my earlier argument that social capital has the potential to be generated in such spaces, they also describe how online forums "can increase social capital as geographically-based electronic networks promote civic engagement and interaction between citizens. Issues critical for the development of the local community, such as solidarity, altruism, loyalty, and reciprocity, may be developed." (Mesch and Levanon, 2003: 337). The following section will explore these dimensions, sometimes drawn from wider contexts of the Internet.

In its infancy, arguments regarding the enabling potential of the Internet as a participatory platform came down on two sides, "boom" and "doom" - an open and idealistic platform or a problematic gated media, only accessible to those with the wealth and knowledge (Atton, 2002: 134-5). Concerns of accessibility were valid as bandwidth-heavy, rich media was fêted but far fewer people had home broadband to deliver or consume it - the "network society" typically described commerce and industry (Castells, 2000). Eventually the "breathless, utopian enthusiasm subsided" (Coleman, 2010: 489) following the bursting of the dot com bubble, only to rise again with more accessible web standards in web page design and the arrival of social media. As uptake of various Internet technologies and social media platforms increased, with it arose a variety of discourses, which I will explore here.

One common concern about technologies - not necessarily just digital technologies, and these are concerns recurring through history - is the effect they have on aspects of everyday life to date, how society is affected or damaged. Sherry Turkle (2012: 11) perhaps most notably presents a dystopian, determinist view of network technologies: "how we are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face". Many of these

concerns have assumed that time spent away from friends and family or other more 'worthwhile' activities is not time well spent. Discourses abound that the Internet makes us either more or less sociable, depending on factors such as who is under scrutiny, geography, family life, friends, membership of community or religious groups, etc. (Mesch and Levanon, 2003). Even as long ago as 2003 though, Mesch and Levanon (Ibid: 336) were able to point to studies that suggested online communication in "geographically-based communities" had the potential to positively impact on offline relationships by providing opportunities for political and local participation, a source of information, and opportunity for new, local social ties - online communication was presented as complementary and not a replacement of offline sociality. Others, approaching from ethnographic perspectives, have argued there is no longer a distinction to be made between offline and online socialities, that they contribute to one everyday lived 'reality' (Atton, 2002: 150; Horst and Miller, 2013; Miller and Slater, 2000) - not so much complementary as intertwined. Naomi Baron (2010) explores discourses suggesting that standards are slipping in language use as a result of new technologies, but finally posits that our attitudes to the written word have changed. Written texts are not considered artefacts in the same way they used to be as the cost and effort of producing printed text has reduced, and materials such as junk mail, letters and messages are customarily discarded. This is even more so the case with digital technologies; text or 'instant' messages are immediately read and then forgotten - a case in point is the Snapchat mobile phone app, where messages disappear shortly after delivery. Paradoxically, Ilana Gershon (2011) points to the truism that online texts are archived - but even when we have opportunity to delete or edit Facebook posts, we rarely do so, *because* of this sense that they are 'throwaway'. Finally, Baron notes that we tend to write online according to principles of a "whatever" approach to language; immediate, speedy communication is often valued over literary 'correctness'. An understanding of appropriateness in the field is applied - just because someone is relaxed in their Facebook spelling doesn't mean they will necessarily make the same 'mistakes' in a job application (Baron, 2010: 166-70). Given the heavily text-based and mobile communications of hyperlocal media, we can appreciate how it develops its own sense of normalised communication in the space.

Another discourse of the Internet is as a place of civic engagement and activism. Hyperlocal media offers the potential for people to feel that they engage in politics, on a peer-to-peer level that gives them voice to inform organisations, policy, and government (Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Banaji and Buckingham, 2013; Postill, 2012) - this accords with Habermas'

(1991) vision of public sphere. It also feeds into desires amongst young people to behave and participate locally as 'good citizens' (Davies and Evans, 2002). However, they may not always identify with political platforms that have been set up for civic / political engagement whether mainstream or independent. Sometimes they will find such material or interactive opportunities elsewhere: Bruns et al. (2008) describe Australian young people engaging with YouTube, for example. It is also more likely that efforts to engage will be effective when they meet people in their existing media (push), rather than assuming audiences will specifically seek out political material (pull), as in Wells and Thorson's (2015:12) study suggesting that Facebook audiences don't choose to sign up to mainstream "news and civic/political Pages", but might instead see such content via their friends' posts. This echoes my discussion (above, p.23), of the immediacy of smartphones in comparison to desktop computers. The Internet also offers the potential for mobilisation when there is clearly a shared goal affecting everyday concerns: "banal activism" (Postill, 2011: 56). In this vein, Postill describes how residents in his study of a Kuala Lumpur municipality successfully protested online (through gathering data and communication) about tax hikes in their locality. Kaufhold et al.'s (2010: 522) study of both professional and citizen journalism and "its role for political knowledge and participation", found that both forms of journalism led to: better understanding; offline activism (voting); and online mobilisation. Banaji's work on young people and the civic web collected survey data identifying activity types and is noteworthy on two points. First, working class youth demonstrated "a stronger *interest* in civic issues both offline and online" (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013: 49, my emphasis), but reported problems of online access, reinforcing Habermas' concerns about elitist middle-class access to public spheres. Secondly, young people did not show overwhelming interest in politics and civic action, or when they did, it was in the mould of clicktivism, such as signing online petitions or forwarding emails online, and volunteering, donating or boycotting offline. Such gathered bodies of literature then assume a lot of such civic spaces, making these specific demands for engagement.

The reality of online spaces beyond any such expectations of civic engagement is that audiences also (or perhaps exclusively) use online hyperlocal systems in a number of more everyday ways. Mesch and Levanon's (2003: 341-2) study found postings on "consumption issues like information on local businesses", "community meetings, courses and other activities at the community center", "information on professional help: doctors, dentists, tutors, child-care assistance, and domestic repair services" and "mutual help among local residents, such as lifts, carpools, and lost and found", more broadly categorised as

“information seeking, household aid, shopping and consumption, and expressing one’s opinion”. My own study observed similar interests and so we develop a picture of hyperlocal media playing a key role in the creation and sharing of local knowledge. Another element of this is in the audience response. As citizen journalism offers Internet users the opportunity to provide sources for stories, and create their own, Goode (2009: 1288) also notes how audiences participate through “re-posting, linking, ‘tagging’ (labeling with keywords), rating, modifying or commenting upon news materials”. His study focuses on wider, global platforms such as Digg and Reddit, but the principles also apply to hyperlocal media and Goode (Ibid: 1290) even specifically suggests that such *responsive* practices are just as valid as the initiating work of the “heroes of ‘authentic’ citizen journalism”, counting amongst their number the “hyperlocalists”. He describes such micro-interactions on Facebook as “metajournalism” - it starts or contributes to a “conversation” (Ibid: 1294). Even though some dismiss these acts as mere ‘clicktivist’ curation of the web, they are in some respects no different to the gatewatching, mediating, editing and sourcing practices employed by mainstream media and ‘real’ citizen journalists. Berger (2011: 709-10) similarly distinguishes “‘citizen journalism’ as just one distinctive form of user-generated content”; “a great deal is constituted by personal chit-chat, rather than publicly oriented news”, and such contributions can be thought of as sourcing stories rather than actual journalism.

Finally, I close this review of literature by exploring the question of audience motivation. Aside from stories which make specific calls, such as police appeals, the motivation and suggestion to participate comes from the editorial and audience practice, which forms a welcoming space. We can understand participation, then, following Edward Deci’s observation of intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation i.e. the audience are not paid for their efforts. Deci (1972: 119) recognises the value of first “structuring situations that are intrinsically interesting and then [being] interpersonally supportive and rewarding toward the persons in the situation”, familiar to users of hyperlocal media. A monetary value system would be hard to apply in paying the audience for their contributions – whilst I have recognised their expertise, this is distinct from the idea of professionalism, even before we ask where such funds would come from.

Setting aside social capital as discussed earlier, people are also socially or affectively motivated to participate. Both Clay Shirky (2010) and David Gauntlett (2013) point to the social reward of creating and sharing online, drawing parallels with craft-life activities, citing: a sense of “personal endeavour” (Ibid: 99); a desire for social connection; recognition and

validation, e.g. in the form of an audience member 'Liking' your comment. Naomi Baron aligns this with people's social motivations to 'call in' to a talk radio show – "seeking companionship, [having] something to say" (Baron, 2010: 104-5), which we can set alongside Shaun Moores' (1993) appreciation of the social role of daytime radio in UK households. A study of a German hyperlocal platform found that participants talked about a "simple desire for expressing values", without necessarily being concerned by the weight of their influence (Fröhlich et al., 2012: 1058-1059). Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2015) found that Facebook users were drawn to share content in more public ways (on friends' walls), rather than privately via direct message, for the sense of influence they then felt.

Uses and gratifications theory conceptualises an audience's use of media in terms of their needs and requirements; technologies sometimes even satisfy previously unrecognised needs anew as per Horst and Miller's "expansive realisation" (2006: 64). Shaun Sutton (2006) recognised how communities turn to the Internet in response to such needs, in his case of a country (South Korea) in the process of attaining democracy, where newspapers were banned. He explored participation in the OhMyNews platform with self-centred actions at one end of a scale and more social ideals at the other - self gain, personal development, community interaction, information dispersal, social reform - and found that citizen journalists were *not* merely self-motivated in their actions. Given this, we might also consider the uses and gratifications of the collective audience, as well as each individual. John Postill (2011: 80) describes how these activities are often played out through "action sets", groups who come together to achieve a specific goal, only to disband once the goal has been achieved. Some of these action sets or groups might be involved in civic engagement. Chris Atton (2002: 130-1) describes, in his studies of alternative (radical, activist) media, that readers look to it with a specific need or desire to gather information, become mobilized and network with other activists i.e. they are focussed on their task. However, other readers wanted to remain informed, but had no intention of taking part in activism themselves, and so we can't always assume that such efforts benefit everyone, in the same respect that the hyperlocal audience frequently start appeals for their own causes e.g. a lost pet. Again pointing to Deci's discussion of intrinsic motivation, Banaji and Buckingham (2013: 61) found that young people cited as a motivator the "internal efficacy" of challenging political systems, for example, often regardless of successful outcome – simply being involved was important. Young people further cited threats to people's livelihoods or human rights as motivating factors to engage civically, or other factors based on "personal experiences rather than an abstract sense of duty or

responsibility”(Ibid: 72) – it is often such crisis or tipping points as experienced by citizens that causes them to start hyperlocal platforms in the first place. I will explore such ideas through my case studies, in the analytical work which follows the explanation of my methodology.

Chapter Three – Methodological engagement, and research design

My review of literature in chapter two explored alternative media, the spaces they create, and the ways people act in those spaces. I have developed my methodological approach informed by the ways that scholars have approached such areas. This has resulted in a research design that takes into account the everyday nature of hyperlocal media, and the need, therefore, for ongoing engagement with participants over an extended period of time, namely ethnography. I deliberately do not use the term *digital* ethnography here, given that this might be understood as an ethnography *of* the digital - my study spans both the on- and offline contexts of hyperlocal media, necessary in understanding the contextual and interwoven nature of these local practices, which I explore further in the next chapter (p.138). Across two field sites where I was resident from 2013-16, Wednesfield and Rubery, I carried out observation (by research diary) of the online hyperlocal Facebook Pages, and used online media such as email or Facebook Groups to communicate with my participants, as befitted their own media ideologies (Gershon, 2011; Pink, 2013). I also observed offline contexts of everyday digital media use in neighbourhoods, and how these fit into wider discourses of the locales. Whilst some methods such as discourse analysis and content analysis were not initially designed into the research plan, ethnography is malleable enough to allow for unexpected iterations and features of such methods to be recognised and embraced as fieldwork unfolds, as I explore later (p.77). The research design described in this chapter sets out my strategies for working with participants and observation (fieldwork), as well as the organisation, analysis and interpretation of data materials in ethnographic writing. Such resulting materials for analysis included informal online discussions with the editors, 25 interviews with audience members, 11 additional email discussions with audience members, two extensive online research diaries, the proceedings of a Facebook Group used as group research diary, and various fieldwork notes from active engagement in the field through attending events, or more casual reflections from the resident perspective (Appendix A). However, before focusing on such fine details of research design, I open by considering the epistemological concerns of the research challenge.

Epistemology, ethnography, and community media

In the last chapter I defined the hyperlocal space in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's (2010) field theory. As much as the audience's ongoing practice sets out the field, so this practice becomes the focus of study. However, it is necessary to explore the epistemological concerns of understanding the communication and practice taking place there, before I focus on practice in itself. Hyperlocal media services are set up and managed by citizens in a variety of ways, using a variety of technologies. Outlets cannot yet be neatly defined or categorised according to practice or delivery patterns, even if we can make superficial observations that some use social media while others use bespoke franchised platforms, or some seek revenue whilst others treat it as neighbourhood volunteering. I suggest that hyperlocal media will continue in coming years along the same vein, typified by differences based on local culture, the editor's lifestyle and media preferences, and those of the audience. With this in mind, the rules, routines and structures are constantly produced, reproduced and negotiated by editor and audience practice, rather than rules determined by the field itself. This draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of practice, borne of his anthropological work; sociological analysis observes practices and an individual's culture, rather than assuming a structuralist approach of binary positions, laws and rules in the social space (Jenkins, 1998). Similarly, Anthony Giddens' (1984: 2) work on agency and structuration is critical of functionalism and structuralism: "structure [...] has primacy over action, and the constraining qualities of structure are strongly accentuated". In this respect then, a research approach that sought structures in the space, rather than starting in observation of practice, would be similarly constrained. Observing practice, then, is the most appropriate approach to examining these hyperlocal media Facebook Pages which are inherently shaped by reader participation.

In the same respect that structures of *the field* can't be safely assumed through a determinist approach, *individuals and their practice* must also be approached through observation and interrogation. Assumptions we might make according to class, gender or race are not exclusively safe ways to interpret or predict behaviour. Whilst we recognise that individuals might be considered 'members' of a certain social grouping, that they recognise in themselves or I recognise from my position as researcher, this is not wholly determinant of how they read and use hyperlocal media content. Rather, the individual's practice is conceptualised in Bourdieu's sense of "habitus", a set of cultural and social conditioning which is unique to the individual. We might assume someone belongs to a certain "objective class" (Bourdieu, 2010: 95) or group, but these are supplemented by "secondary properties" such as sex, geography

and “a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated” (Ibid: 96). These are real and influential properties, even if we cannot always identify them. For example, I was surprised by many negative responses to a ‘Calaid’ appeal (below, p.164): in this case my prior observation of the audience was not enough to second-guess their reaction - it may have been more deeply rooted in upbringing, their habitus. This again demonstrates Bourdieu’s argument for anthropological observation, reaching beyond primary structuralist categorisations to identify how at least some secondary variables are translated into field practice. This process is made all the more efficient for participants by the fact that these variables “function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will” (Bourdieu, 2010: 468) – the process is naturalised. The dilemma for the researcher of course is in not being able to identify these properties either, but we must at least be aware of their presence. By contrast, some people more actively occupy a role in a social space, performing as (in the case of hyperlocal media) the reader, the source, the joker, the conversationalist, the shamer, or a variety of other “discrepant roles” (Goffman, 1959). In such cases, Bourdieu identifies habitus as influential in practice if not fatalistically all-determining, as people develop their own strategies: “We can always say that individuals make choices, as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principle of the choices” (Wacquant, 1989:45). In terms of hyperlocal media though, it is not so much that the space is devoid of structure, but that these structures are not determining – we might speak instead of Giddens’ (1984: 17) “structural properties”, declaring that we can “regard the rules of social life [...] as techniques or generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices” (Ibid: 21). My method, then, starts with a position of observation and enquiry, in order to identify the normative structures of the space.

Building on these epistemological concerns of understanding practice, my methodological approach must also recognise that trying to pin down an individual’s sense of identity in relation to the field is no easy task. The hyperlocal Pages, whilst structured as per the Facebook interface, are places of ‘messy’ communication - the audience are diverse and hard to categorise. While each audience member is drawn into the collective, the notion of the romanticised ‘community’ should be resisted, as John Postill (2012: 167) has suggested; the sense that ‘we’re all in it together’ can just as easily exclude individuals who do have opposing views. Stuart Hall (1991), like Bourdieu, picks away at notions of the objective class or similar

structures, to reveal the individual's identity, but with a focus on how we *actively* situate ourselves or identify with a group. Hall suggests that we must pay as much attention to differences as homogenous similarity – the fragmentations, separations, contradictions and means by which we individuals can operate within various identities, overlapping groupings or socialities. It is in recognition of such malleable variables that I argue for an immersive, embedded, ethnographic approach in order to properly observe practices, rather than make assumptions. We should also not assume our identities are entirely formed from the social identities we might feel ourselves aligned to. Rather, Hall (1991: 46-7) embraces the “increasing social diversity and plurality, the technologies of the self which characterize the modern world in which we live” and the extent to which identities are a constant work in progress, “always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation” (Ibid: 49). One additional discourse might be presented here, that the anonymous context of the Internet means that the influence of habitus might be overshadowed by overt desires to roleplay online, rather than reflect our ‘true self’. Sherry Turkle (1995) suggested this in her early Internet work, but also later added that platforms such as Facebook allow us to present the “fantasy of who we want to be” (Turkle, 2012). However, I suggest, and will go on to show, that the everyday and embedded nature of these technologies and media means that audiences more often than not operate naturalistically, with their guard down.

Finally, a note is required here, to examine not only the way that meaning is made from observation and interrogation of individuals or a group, but also the relational position of the researcher. Bourdieu described this as “participant objectivation” (Wacquant, 1989: 33) - a desire to understand the anthropologist's subject, and then take a step back to also understand the researcher's relation to that subject, rather than assume that observation leads directly to ‘knowledge’. This process is necessary not because of any distance created by the mismatching class of the researchers in relation to the subject, or other differential properties, but because of the very act of the “scholarly gaze that he or she casts upon the world” (Wacquant, 1989: 34). In my case, in addition to the scholarly gaze projected on participants who have probably not been involved in research before, there might be other ‘gazes’ – that of the ‘outsider’ moving into the area, or as someone involved in the community as the vicar's husband. Sometimes the gaze is of course tied up in the researcher's assumptions. Therefore, methods of observation must be complemented by interrogation, giving participants opportunity to speak for themselves; if spelling and grammar in audience comments are not expressed in the same way that the researcher would write, can it be

assumed that they are poorly educated, or might this be better understood as naturalised 'speech'? There may be no immediate fix to this situation, and it might be debated that this isn't a problem *to* be fixed, but it is necessary to recognise these factors of the researcher/participant relationship. Beyond the mere recognition of 'the gaze', these relationships are sometimes more actively discussed in terms of reflexivity and positionality, which I come to later in this chapter (p.69).

A qualitative rather than quantitative approach

My study concerns itself with the communicative and participatory dimensions of online local media, and the extent to which citizens are not only informed but given voice. A qualitative, ethnographic approach is required to explore the variety of narratives. It is a study of 'voice' as encountered in journalism (Ross et al., 2007), but also *voices*, those varied concerns that are lived out by individuals through participatory community media, often challenging mainstream media concerns (Rheingold, 2008). Online hyperlocal media is, for many residents of my case study areas, tied up in their everyday use of social media, namely Facebook. It is only through being similarly immersed in a qualitative research approach that I can observe, interrogate and discuss these practices, and so we arrive at ethnography. Before exploring ethnography in more detail though, it is first worth theorising as to why such approaches have not been applied to hyperlocal media to date, and how my study is valuable in understanding these audiences.

The convenience of web site analytics and online data means it is not surprising that we use them to try and make sense of audiences. But in doing so, it is all too easy to overlook the narratives and meanings beyond numbers of followers, shares and Likes. As Tony Harcup (2015: 681) puts it, "it is that audiences tend to be more often written about than heard from in their own words". Hyperlocal editors might know how many people follow their stories, and even start to recognise regular readers, but I suggest they don't always *know* them, or understand why certain stories generate interest. Typically, web analytics describe *what* is happening, in presenting and comparing post activity (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). Some platforms reliant on 'upvoting' content, such as Digg and Reddit, are constructed on numerative approaches, so it is hardly surprising that audience activities are sometimes approached through analytics (Goode, 2009; Massanari, 2013). However, they cannot reveal the significance of communication within the comments. They cannot identify what those comments tell us about the reader, community identity, and local discourses. Nor can

analytics ‘zoom out’ to explore how these communications are then reflected back through the wider social, everyday practice of readers, alongside other online and offline media, as per Moores’ (2000) contextualisation of media ecologies. Even when studies apply their own quantitative measures to attempt correlations between local Twitter use and community wellbeing (Farnham et al., 2015), they claim it is unsafe to do so unless neighbourhood Twitter activity is very high. So there is a need for a qualitative approach that explores *how* and *why* practice unfolds in a particular form amongst audiences. The otherwise unseen “backstage” conversations (Goffman, 1959) are key in assisting with the flow of communication in sourcing hyperlocal stories, so as the origin of much of the ensuing participation, these flows of conversation need to be well understood. My research design, as we will see, responds to this need in both the editors and the research area of community media, to know more *about* the audiences, but to also *know* them, to get to meet them. By offering them this voice, I have made my participants central to negotiating and shaping the outcomes of this research.

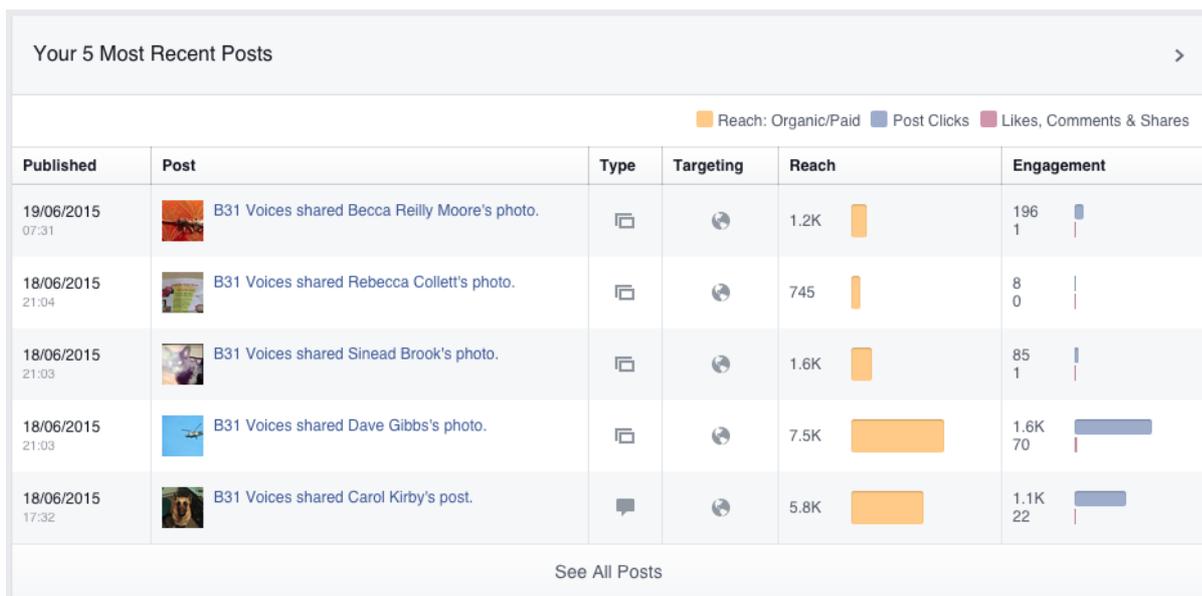


Figure 3.1: Facebook Insights showing the Reach (audience quantity) and Engagement (audience interactions) for each of a sequence of stories

Tweet Activity

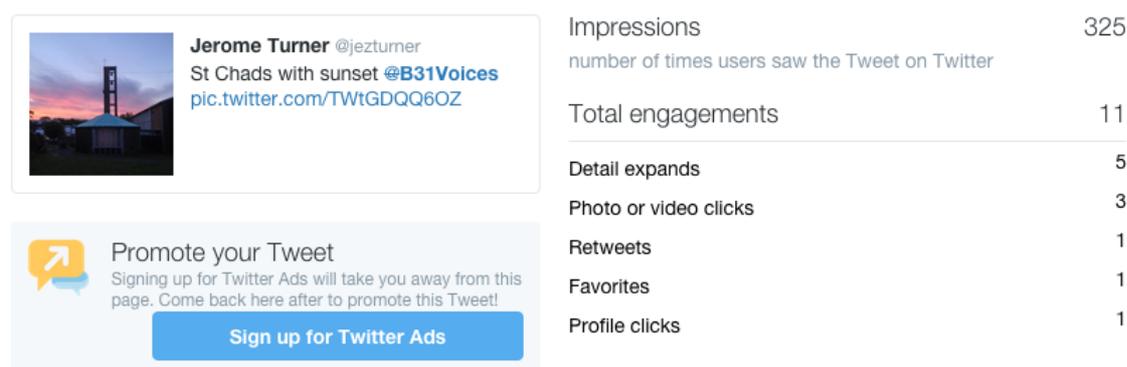


Figure 3.2: Screenshot of Twitter Analytics showing Impressions (views) and Engagements (interaction)

A second temptation in such studies is to approach the few (practitioners) rather than the many (the audience). In those cases where qualitative methods are applied to hyperlocal media, these are often directed at editorial practices (Baines, 2012; Williams et al., 2015b). Given the size of hyperlocal media audiences (Radcliffe, 2015) quantitative approaches might seem logical, but my study seeks to more holistically understand the audiences and their experiences. In doing so I observe and interrogate the practices in their entirety, from editor to audience members, in the individual and the collective, in the everyday and the extraordinary or activist practices. Of course it is entirely acceptable to use quantitative approaches in some cases, or as part of mixed methods, and I recognise how one of my research diaries took on such aspects, namely those of content analysis methods (p.77). However, used alone or as the primary focus of a study, such surveys can raise concerns, as per Shaun Moores' (1993) critique of Bourdieu's (2010) large-scale questionnaire study of consumer cultures. Moores recognised the value in reaching a large number of respondents, but was concerned with the relatively binary approach to exploring "the complex meanings which underpin instances of consumption in specific situational contexts" (Moores, 1993: 124). It is with many of these concerns that media ethnographers such as Moores (1993) and more recent scholars of digital and online media approach their work (Horst and Miller, 2013; Pearce et al., 2011; Pink, 2013; Pink et al., 2015; Postill, 2011). Interrogative, qualitative work with the audience themselves is key to a richer understanding. Such approaches follow the channels of communication through "field stations" and "field arenas" (Postill, 2011), where stories and neighbourhood dramas are played. It is not enough to only offer a simplistic

typography of one individual being a 'reader' and one a 'sourcer', or to attempt to locate the audience on a sliding scale of passive/participatory. Although much of the literature makes such attempts to compartmentalise, my study applies a deeper, embedded and longitudinal approach of ethnography to understand more fully the audience experience, as I will now explore.

Ethnography as an approach to studying online, everyday media

Ethnography is a method of largely qualitative research that is typically grounded in participant observation, usually taking place through an extended period of engagement within the field (O'Reilly, 2012; Wolcott, 2005). In this respect participant observation can be taken to mean two things: observation *of* participants, and the observer's role *as* participant (Moore, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 3). Ethnography draws its value by attending to usually one field as case study for deep, detailed, contextual and typically longitudinal engagement, rather than larger sample sizes (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). Findings are not assumed to be generalisable across all similar fields, but the observance of patterns and narratives offers insight and speaks to the wider contexts of that field. However, while we seek patterns, the practice of ethnography can be seen as a "messy business" (Pearson, 1993: vii), being complex and multi-layered; Postill and Pink (2012: 1) look beyond the limitations of "dominant paradigms of network and community in internet research, [to instead] propose engaging concepts of routine, movement, and sociality". For example, data is collected through interviews, but we can also understand something of the interviewee by reflexively examining how those interviews were negotiated within the space, and the participants' perception of us as ethnographers in their space.

The ethnographic researcher is one who enters into the field, or one who is already embedded in it: outsider and/or insider. In the former case, the ethnographer benefits from a critical distance, to take the role of "stranger" in order to identify those characteristic phenomena that are naturalised and invisible to participants (Schuetz, 1944). The researcher can of course play into this role by suggesting to participants that they don't know about the field, so perhaps the participants could better inform them. However, there is also benefit in experiencing the field *alongside* participants, exposing the researcher to those same lived experiences (Goffman, 1961). Kanuha (2000: 439) frames this as the difference between "going native" and more simply "being native" but, even in studying a field we are currently a member of, the relationships and roles change as soon as we declare ourselves as researchers

too. In reality the researcher is likely to make claims as an outsider observing (etic) and also from the perspective of insider participating (emic) and there are times when this should be clearly demarcated in ethnographic writing, to assist the reader's understanding (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 16). In my case this might be the difference between me posting something to the Facebook Page because I know it to be appropriate (as participating insider), or more directly asking a casual but exploratory question of the audience in the space. Both allow me to draw meaning, but my interpretation must be sensitive to those methodological differences. Drawing on my experience as both insider (resident) and outsider (researcher) also benefits the ethnographer's concern of identifying the familiar in the strange – those unique practices that are commonplace to local residents using the hyperlocal page – but also seeing what is strange in the familiar – removing practices from their context to explore their nature (Van Maanen, 1995).

Ethnography is interpretive. Tied up in the researcher's duality as outsider and insider is the need to understand that only "partial truths" of the field pass through the ethnographer (Clifford, 1986). We understand and also value participant accounts as re-presenting interpretive 'truths' of the field; it is also necessary to recognise the researcher's work as interpretive in their processes of engaging, recording, collating, sorting, analysing and writing (Hobbs et al., 1993). In accepting this, the ethnographer is freed to push beyond a sense of entering the field to simply capture data, to one that is more grounded in "experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, the embodied, sensory and affective experiences" (Pink, 2013: 35). This idea of experiences contextualised is most commonly referenced in Geertz's (1973) notion of "thick description". For example, in one of my case studies I noted a Facebook comment buried in a flow of conversation following a car crash, someone who had witnessed the incident but said they had felt uncomfortable taking a photo and posting it online. Others might have more happily done so, but this person was reflecting on what they felt to be appropriate. But from my own position as embedded ethnographer I also recognised her as someone I had seen in discussion online before, and around my neighbourhood, and who was much younger than most of the audience. It is debatable whether other readers would also have picked this up, but the maturity she demonstrated in her ethical reflection seemed to me to challenge local discourses of selfish, ignorant teenagers, and wider stereotypes of the young person 'glued to' and living through their phone (Turkle, 2012). Such insight and reflection was only possible in being engaged in the field and its participants. Sociological approaches also recognise that in such observation and

interpretation, close attention should be given to the extraordinary and ordinary, the everyday and banal, as meaningful (Boellstorff et al., 2012). It is in studying the everyday that ethnography “functions as a reminder that reality is always more complicated and diversified than our theories can represent” (Ang, 1989: 189). Typically understood or expected laws are just as likely to be ignored or challenged by the actors in the field as they are followed, and we should rather expect and look forward to being surprised (Willis and Trondman, 2002). Given the situated nature of hyperlocal media in the everyday, an embedded, ethnographic approach is the most appropriate way to interpret meaning from these fluid practices, constantly negotiated as they are in the online space.

Ethnography is specifically suited to my research setting because of its flexibility in being situated within the field. There is a lack of ethnographic work exploring such contexts of hyperlocal media, with the possible exception of John Postill’s research (2011). Ethnography allows me to follow the hyperlocal Facebook space as a flow of communication, conversation, and action situated alongside other local resources and communicative spaces as used by local residents - I am free to explore avenues as necessary. To take on that role of observer but also participant as described earlier, is to apply methods that follow that everyday flow. Hyperlocal audiences read about their locality whilst *in* their locality, using any range of web hardware, but also often contribute *to* the service within that context, posting about incidents as they occur. Therefore, context is key to our understanding, and so contexts of research methods must also be considered. It is unfortunately impossible to observe an individual’s online practice without constant overt and literal ‘looking over the shoulder’, thus introducing ‘observer effect’ (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Instead I treat the Facebook Page as a platform which presents this communication to me; the distinction is in observing the *collective* responsive rather than the individual. Individual narratives are additionally sought out in interviews and other one-to-one communications, but these also benefit from being contextualised in the neighbourhood, in a café or their home. Those environmental factors may trigger the participant’s own memories and thoughts in a way that a sterile interview room couldn’t, or afford me insight into their lives, for example observing the location of mobile phones and tablets in the lounge (Miller, 2008). Such factors - of my research setting being one of online media and also recognising the connection to everyday participation situated in neighbourhoods - lead me to an ethnographic approach.

However, these contexts of use must also be problematized if we consider the wider political economy of Facebook as a global platform. In chapter four I discuss this in relation to the editor's choice to use Facebook (p.111), but the researcher should also be aware that, as much as online ethnography conveniently serves up a space for observation, Facebook still ultimately control the space. When the Page design changes, the researcher shares the editor's and their audience's confusion and unease, both at the level of a peer resident affectively immersed in the space, both also as the researcher with concerns that they may be losing control of the fieldsite they thought they had understood. If a post is observed on one day, there is not necessarily a certainty that the researcher will be able to return to it later, either because it has been deleted by the editor, or somehow lost via Facebook. Therefore, the researcher must record at the actual time of the fieldsite event or experience, rather than assume the content will be archived in perpetuity, hence I often screengrabbed posts and comments, as well as recording the hyperlink in my research diary. Taking this to its logical extreme, there is also the very real possibility that Facebook itself will close down as a platform, or be superseded by competing platforms, and so I stress that this thesis does not present a study of Facebook in itself, but the ways in which audiences increasingly embrace and use participatory platforms of all kinds in everyday life, alongside a variety of other analogue, offline media.

The evolution of ethnographic media studies can be charted to David Morley's (1980) study of *Nationwide* television audiences. His dissatisfaction with the notion of audiences as anchored to and "prisoners' of the text" (Ang, 1989: 177) led him to seek understanding of audience experience as active. My study is similarly concerned with the contexts of media embedded in everyday life, informed by Shaun Moores' (1993) work exploring technological forms in the home and the extent to which studying use of the remote control, for example, reveals understanding of familial and social hierarchies. Internet technologies developed, leading media ethnographers to recognise the opportunity for studying resulting fields (Baym, 1999; Hine, 2000) and what commonly became known as the 'virtual world' - and even at this stage digital technologies were recognised as vehicles for representing offline localities (Moores, 2000). However, separations of 'virtual' and 'real' have been problematized by many scholars, increasingly demonstrating that online media is part of 'real life', interwoven and complementing everyday practice (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pearce et al., 2011; Pink et al., 2015; Pink, 2012; Postill, 2011). Such is the case in hyperlocal media, a bridge by which the truly roaming mobile web physically and conceptually allows us to place ourselves *within* at

the same time as connecting us *to* the localities we inhabit, in extension of Williams (1990) “mobile privatisation”. As such, ethnographers’ modes of engaging with online media audiences developed accordingly (Pink, 2013). Whether such studies base themselves primarily online (Pearce et al., 2011) or offline (Postill, 2011) they recognise that the researcher must straddle both – in effect, the same, full lived experience of the community and its participants. The opportunity for the researcher then is one of covert and sometimes more overt observation of the online field, with all the ethical issues that arise, namely the ways in which we sensitively declare our presence. As the opportunities and methods for engagement have developed in recent years, so also have the researcher’s awareness of their presence, the ways they would be received and the extent to which their work with participants was participatory, a co-production (Pearce, 2011; Pink, 2013; Sobers et al., 2016). Internet studies once meant lab-based studies using desktop computers; the range of contexts, platforms and devices now means that we must find new ways to observe such practices, as well as deploy them in our own efforts to engage.

Finally, there are a few additional concerns to consider here given the local contextualisation of the work. For example, how can ethnography help us understand the extent that online local media is representative of the broader experience of living in a neighbourhood or the ways in which it contributes to ‘placemaking’, the ways in which “people create and experience a ‘sense of place’ in relation to material localities” (Pink, 2012: 3)? Ethnography reaches beyond any academic or social discourses of such media to identify ‘truths’ as best they can be represented and voiced by the field and its participants. Take the example of crime stories. If ten are posted in a week, does this helpfully warn people to be vigilant, or create an over-inflated sense of fear on the streets? It is in the ethnographic perspective that we gain insight here, in the ways that “a phenomenology of place can enable us to comprehend how ‘local’ people experience, construct, understand and embed meaning in specific localities” (Pink, 2012: 102), and others have also employed ethnographic methods to explore such relationships (Hampton and Wellman, 2003; Postill, 2011). One concern I have with Hampton and Wellman’s study was the use of survey data to identify supposed “neighbouring” effects of local media. Such approaches seem to ignore the individual differences of motivation, needs and gratifications amongst the audience – some people will happily ‘keep to themselves’ as readers, while others are naturally drawn to socialise and participate. Everyday media is *not* easy to quantify but must rather be expressed in terms of emergent themes and participant narratives, hence ethnography. It is John Postill’s (2011)

work in a Kuala Lumpur neighbourhood that most directly achieved this in my mind. He sought meaning through deeper, everyday engagement with some of the key individuals involved in community media and related activism there. His approach transcended ideas of ‘testing theories’ or ‘answering questions’, rather allowing the field to breathe and reveal unexpected insights. This sense of embedding informs our understanding of the field, its participants, their ideals and media ideologies. My approach draws on this combination of distinct methods of observation (research diaries, fieldnotes at public meetings) and interrogation (through communicating and participant interviews). But there is also room for those experiences that come from making myself part of that community, by participating online as they do, by walking the same streets, by discussing local events and incidents with them, and by noting how the online media is as distinctive a part of my everyday life as it is theirs.

The researcher in community media

In my ethnographic approach to hyperlocal media audiences, three parties come under scrutiny: the editors, the audiences, and the researcher. The audience are my key concern, but they are responsive to the editor/writers of the hyperlocal service. Even if we suggest that hyperlocal media is co-produced by the readership, the service would not exist at all without those owners, and they mediate the space. However, ethnographers (Blackman and Commane, 2011; Horst et al., 2012; Pearce et al., 2011; Pink, 2013) also appreciate a need to be aware of the researcher’s own multiple positions and practices within and as part of the community, building on Bourdieu’s notion of “participant objectivation” (Wacquant, 1989). To address this (as I do in this section) helps understand 1) how participants respond to the researcher and 2) how and why the researcher makes certain inferences. This reflexivity needs to be present throughout the research process (Blackman and Commane, 2011): at the point of making fieldnotes; when posing interview questions; in understanding how the researcher’s habitus invokes certain interpretations. Sometimes we might ask, how would another researcher or even a participant from the field have asked this question, and what would they have made of the answer? It is in considering this question that the significance of reflexivity and positionality is revealed; we benefit from “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England, 1994: 244). Given this, I now set out such details of my position that were relevant to my relationships in the field. These were not details I always appreciated at the time, and perhaps reflexivity was not as key a consideration of my research design as it would have been had I

spent extended periods of time in more direct contact with individuals, for example, as in Alice Goffman's (2015) ethnography of black communities "on the run". Nonetheless, I am able to address various aspects of my relationship with the locales and their participants that are relevant to the reader's understanding of my findings, as well as ways that I shifted in and out of roles according to the demands of the research. In addition to these discussions, a few accounts revealing points of reflection are found in later chapters (p.157, p.164, p.186), and I may return to such methodological concerns in future outputs of this research.

My personal context in the locales was initially as an 'incomer'. In both of my field sites of Wednesfield (Wolverhampton - 2013) and Rubery (south Birmingham - 2015), I had quite recently moved to those towns. Prior to this, my upbringing had been in largely white, middle-class neighbourhoods in Bedfordshire, and then Exeter and Poole; a 2003 move to the Black Country was differentiated for me by an awareness that I was living amongst a more multi-cultural population. Aside of the reflexive need to understand how this might affect my reading of observation or discussion with people, being a newcomer initially also offered me the status of "stranger" (Schuetz, 1944). From an assumed position of ignorance, I could ask people about local life, and they would provide answers couched in their own local knowledge and expertise. The longer I lived in each field site, the more I was able to present myself as increasingly 'local', in empathising, or sharing my own experiences with participants. This also increasingly meant that *any* everyday conversation could provide narratives for my work, at which point I would consider whether that conversation could ethically be included in anonymised field observations. Moores (1993: 26) refers to "mundane interpretive activities" such as Peter Dahlgren's (1988) methods of engaging in 'chit chat' at social functions. These are valuable in presenting personal and informal modes of narratives, the ways that people naturally talk about their experiences in everyday life, rather than preparing a more specific interview performance. Perhaps the most obvious social group I belonged to in that respect was as a 'parent'. Having children in one of the local primary schools afforded me a status which other residents could associate with, and may have helped with my embedding - Mesch and Levanon (2003: 338) identified that parenting young children affords "social ties" in neighbourhoods. Meeting people while I did the school run or took my children to local parks was ethnographically useful in giving me opportunity to communicate my position as researcher, as well as resident/participant.

In addition to being a parent and resident in my field sites, I was also the husband of the local curate (priest-in-training) in Wednesfield: my wife then became ‘the new vicar’ in Rubery. This initially had us living on a housing estate in Wednesfield, relatively typical of the area. Unlike many clergy spouses, I am not a church-goer but nonetheless, some local residents or participants in my study there might have assumed I was. Therefore, I may have been perceived as being ‘part of’ the community by default of my wife’s involvement e.g. in church activities such as fairs or toddler groups. Our move to Rubery in 2014 was my wife’s first parish of her own as vicar and very squarely positioned us socially and geographically in the centre of the community on the high street, compared to the relative camouflage of our Wednesfield house. The status of *vicar’s husband* similarly implied expectations of involvement in community life beyond ‘resident’ status – the reality was that I was not involved heavily in local social groups beyond attending some public meetings for my fieldwork and a few family events.



Figure 3.3: Rubery New Road (the ‘high street’), 100 metres from our vicarage

My relationship as researcher with local residents was sometimes tied up in my conceptualisation of the Community Panel research method, which I will come to shortly. To others, those who were introduced to the idea of a researcher in their midst via my Facebook posts, there was less opportunity for discussion. Further explanation could of course take

place if and when they got in touch with me, but in order to do this they would first need to process their perception of what a researcher was, and this possibly explains why many of the relationships were instead set up through third-party gatekeepers, which I will come to.

Resident, participant, participant researcher, researcher – spanning the continuum

In addition to the extent that I might have felt like ‘a local’ or a researcher, I also slipped in and out of various roles throughout the progress of my work, from fieldwork right through to analysis and later stages of writing. “Participant / observer” describes a member of a community also researching it (O’Reilly, 2012: 110). However, I also note various additional nuances of role and behaviour. These were necessary for different kinds of insight, but I also had to appreciate the potential they had in affecting the field site or participant responses. Some of these were self-imposed, conscious, and even intentionally disruptive, while others emerged more naturally. I describe this as a continuum, with ‘resident’ at one end and ‘researcher’ at the other - sometimes observing, sometimes interrogating. In between are various shades of participation and visibility, more in line with Fuller’s (1999: 226) notion of the constant “reassessment, renegotiation and repositioning of a researcher’s various identities” than Breen’s (2007: 163) fixed sense of the researcher sitting somewhere “in the middle” of the researcher/participant divide. It is unlikely that I ever entirely ‘switched off’ one role or identity in favour of another, but I will now unpick how different viewpoints were engaged and practically useful.

In viewing hyperlocal stories in my Facebook stream (on my phone or computer), this appealed to my own everyday practice and consciousness as a *resident*. In both cases I lived in the area a short time before starting the research. I attended local meetings, talked to people in their own familiar places (their lounge, cafes, etc), noted the information shared in public noticeboards or simply walked the streets - all valuable in understanding hyperlocal media’s place in the wider context of everyday living for residents. Sixsmith et al. (2003) applied such immersive methods to access participants, but I rather benefited from the experiential value of “being native” (Kanuha, 2000: 439). I was situated as part of the audience and reacted accordingly in my approach: when I made and shared a short video of the Lickey Hills, it was because I remembered others had referenced their enjoyment of nature in the area. When people were angry online at the high rents leading to empty shop fronts, or the proliferation of takeaways, I experienced this for myself on a daily basis as I walked the street. I would browse online for events suitable to my family, or specifically mentioning Rubery. In some of

my 'resident' interactions I went beyond reading to participate by asking questions. Events sometimes lacked necessary details, for example if my 'outsider's' perspective meant I couldn't find a location without a postcode. This in itself revealed something of the inclusivity of local knowledge – only a local would know the location of the “top shops” and “bottom shops” of Wednesfield's Ashmore Park estate, as they were often referred to online. As my practice developed through learning the normative practices of the space, I increasingly posted my own Visitor Posts, and this engagement through practice provided its own insight. I followed the unwritten rules, and acceptable norms of behaviour, as suggested in the space via audience practice (Bourdieu, 2010; Giddens, 1984), for example posting a 'typical' sunset photo. At other times I pushed beyond to suggest new forms or practices. One example of this was in posting images of myself picking rubbish with my children, in an attempt to instil some of that civic engagement expected of hyperlocal media (Metzgar et al., 2011). In such instances, there was a part of me that was aware of my performance. My practice was not always naturalised – it is clear I sometimes 'played the role' of resident.

In some instances my contributions to the Facebook spaces were informed by a desire to 'give something back' to the space I was profiting from as a researcher. Boellstorff et al. (2012: 146) speak of ethical responsibility to at least present neutral impact on the fieldsite, but to also more actively 'do good', and ethnographers often grapple with reciprocity in their work (Brereton et al., 2014; Huisman, 2008). Tied up in this was also my concern to be *seen* to be doing good; this might afford me visibility and social capital to help draw in potential participants. For example, the same questions were often repeatedly asked by people on the Facebook Pages, such as recommendations for the best plumber or takeaway. I was able to refer to my diary notes and paste in relevant answers from previous discussions. These I offered as appropriate - I was rarely called on for specific requests or information from my data, and so I never really felt that my status was elevated as a result of such engagement.

In other situations I made myself more explicitly known as 'the researcher'. Tied up in this is the ethical concern of studying the Facebook Pages, 'public' online spaces which were sometimes used by people in ways that suggest they were not always conscious of the open nature of the platform, problematized by Zimmer (2010: 323) as “the contextual nature of privacy”. Therefore, in order to legitimise my online covert observation I declared my presence in ways that were elegant and infrequent enough to avoid 'observer effect' (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Sometimes these reminders of my presence were quite distinct, such as my early blog and Facebook posts into the Pages that informed people about my work

and invited participants for interview. I regularly pointed out online, but also with a poster in the Rubery high street village noticeboard, that I would be available certain days for interviews. On other occasions I would intervene in stories through comments, reminding people of my research role and then outright asking questions. For example, this might be to dig into the unseen 'backstage' machinations of a particular lost dog story, if it was unclear how it had resolved. In offline contexts such as public policing or hustings meetings, I was not always confident enough to declare myself as the note-taking researcher at the back - I only made such a statement once. Whilst these were public meetings, we might argue (as in the online spaces) that participants there did not expect to be observed in this way, and so in recognition of my covert position of power here, I ensured my notes and resulting writing remained as anonymous as possible. In all then, an awareness of these issues must be applied, appreciating the understandable impacts of taking on these different roles - as Murthy (2008) argues, it is not to suggest that such ethically-challenging practices should be avoided, but that they should be approached with sensitivity to contexts.

Research design and practice

The following section describes how my research methods were designed and put into practice, through fieldwork, analysis and writing. We might think of interviews, content analysis or textual analysis as distinct types of research methods; ethnography is rather "the written product of a palette of methods, but also a methodological approach in which participant observation is a critical element, and in which research is guided by experience unfolding in the field" (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 15). Whilst writing, analysing, recording and observing might not be "autonomous operations" (Geertz, 1973: 317), it is necessary to describe here those distinct components of fieldwork as I designed them, as well as recognising where my experience of other approaches such as discourse analysis and content analysis meant that flavours of such methods were often suitably folded into my fieldwork and writing (explored further on p.77). Other forms of engagement evolved and responded to the participants' own input e.g. suggesting where or how we could 'talk'. My everyday lived experience could also be framed as fieldwork, in the respect that Pink (2013: 35) notes "there is no simple answer or definition of what it is that makes an activity, image, text, idea or piece of knowledge ethnographic". The idea that I could always potentially 'switch on' to that kind of sensibility has its own ethical concerns, as I casually observed people in the park using smartphones and might muse on whether they were engaged in local news. In such cases, I would translate such observations into heavily anonymised field notes, and only if they

contributed to my research concerns. But this opportunity for full immersion allowed me to explore the complexity and layered nature of narratives as they unfolded in everyday life. This layering can take on various forms. In one day I might conduct an interview with one member of the audience (micro level), observe the hyperlocal Page and write up my research diary (macro level) and finally relate the discourses seen online to my offline experiences of going to the high street shops (meso level). The layering is inter-related and it is in being able to engage at all levels that real meaning is made (Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000). The following chronologically describes early stages of the fieldwork, before describing more concrete methods and modes of engagement.

Fieldsites

I have already noted that part of my selection process for these two cases was based on my position, living in the Wednesfield and Rubery areas, and the ethnographic familiarity as resident and closeness this afforded me. Given the variety of local community media practices in the UK, my cases cannot be considered 'typical'. However, neither were they untypical, both being independently set up by citizens with no financial backing, to serve the community - one study found that 63% of UK hyperlocal organisations did not raise money at all (Williams et al., 2014). I considered other hyperlocal organisations such as Connect Cannock (neighbouring Wednesfield), but I had observed in prior work that their Facebook Page was not as participatory (Turner et al., 2016) – a comparison to establish the reasons for this would be of value, but is beyond the scope of this study and impossible given they have since stopped operating. This demonstrates one of numerous variables that might have yielded different findings, for example, hyperlocal organisations with paid advertising, those which ran parallel print newspapers, or those in rural contexts. As much as this leads me to suggest that further audience studies would therefore elaborate on these contexts, many of the concerns I explore in this thesis are transferable, such as the issues of participation, mediation, trust, local knowledge, and the role of such media in contexts of local, everyday life.

In both case studies I did not start my ethnographic fieldwork on immediately moving to the area. I moved with my family to Wednesfield in 2011 and then started in 2013. My Rubery study commenced March 2015, having lived there seven months. The first study was ten months and the second lasted a full year. The delayed start allowed me to do two things. Firstly, this 'bedding in' period meant I could experience using the online hyperlocal service as a resident. Relating this to earlier discussions of the researcher as outsider or insider

(above, p.64), this afforded me local knowledge and perspective – even an incoming resident is resident of some kind, with relatable experience in the eyes of participants (Kanuha, 2000). This period of *not* researching meant my shift from native participant to ‘participant / observer’ (O’Reilly, 2012) was nuanced - people might recognise my face (on the street) or name and profile picture (online) as someone who had participated online before, but was now just participating in a different way. In Rhoda MacRae’s (2007:53-55) terms, this bedding in marked my turning point from being “outsider in” towards “insider in”. When I talked to residents I could choose to talk with at least some expertise of the local media, and as a way of demonstrating my status as ‘insider’. Then, on the other hand, I sometimes related that I was ‘only quite new to the area’, in order to put the participant in the position of power as the expert, inviting them to fill in the gaps of knowledge. Throughout such processes of engagement, there was a need to be critically reflective of this position, as I became increasingly insider but also ‘researcher’ at the same time (Macrae, 2007).

Secondly, this period was useful for ‘soft trialling’ elements of my research design, such as my research diary, i.e. grappling with the practical and workload dimensions of such a task. I also made decisions about other methods, given that they “are often best made once researchers are in a position to assess which specific methods will be appropriate or ethical in a particular context” (Pink, 2013: 49). In both case studies, the bedding-in period allowed me the opportunity to identify where resident participation took place, guiding me towards the Facebook Pages, rather than their other social media platforms (see below, p.105). At this point of the process I was also noting the various dimensions of the Pages, how they differed to Groups, and their makeup – for more specific details of Facebook see Appendices L and N.

Online observation

It was important to understand the distinction but also the inherent relationship and power dynamic between the Visitor Posts and the main stream, because they were interrelated parts of the Page (Appendix L). Therefore, both required observation. My first case study in Wednesfield started with an online research diary that I kept as a private Wordpress blog, allowing me to make fieldnotes regarding online Visitor Posts, editor posts or comment discussions (Appendix A: RD/WV11). These diary notes ranged from several a day, to several a week, depending on what I observed and found significant. This was initially driven by my research questions and theory, but the space and its participants were essentially allowed to reveal their nature to me, which I noted as in a field diary (Burgess, 1981). As these diaries

developed, I identified emerging patterns and documented new unexpected behaviours or dramas that were likely to unfold longitudinally e.g. following a particular crime story. While I did not set out with these categories in mind, in retrospect I appreciate that these observations dealt with:

- *behaviours*, what was being done or expressed by the audience, or how, e.g. thanks, angry, passive-aggressive;
- *locations*, to identify whether certain localities could be tied down to certain audience narratives from the data e.g. Northfield and crime;
- *subjects*, such as crime, housing, immigration, terrorism;
- *themes*, not just those found in hyperlocal story types but also in other observation of the wider field, and sometimes speaking to theory e.g. voice, civic engagement, creativity, citizenship, parenting, youth;
- *story types*, usually referring to the types of stories being discussed or emerging from stories, such as news, events, or appeals.

I also included hyperlinks to the Facebook posts, so that I could return to the conversation during analysis. Screenshots helped record the flow of such conversations, and images. In the last few months of the WV11 case study, I had concerns that I was focusing too much on the extraordinary and ‘exciting’, rather than recording the entirety of activity including the ordinary and “banal” (Coleman, 2010; Postill, 2008). For example, I might be drawn to a crime story that had unfolded in the space, but overlooked what was equally significant about bin collections during that time. To deal with this concern, I increased activity to log a diary entry (Wordpress post) for *every* new WV11 Visitor Post and editor post. This was certainly useful in going some way towards defining a typology of Visitor Post participation, drawing on aspects of and my prior experience of content analysis, even if it had not been initially designed from the outset in that way i.e. with coding sheets and coding manual. This is not untypical of ethnography in that it can encompass a rich and varied set of approaches and methods that emerge as being suitable or appropriate across the longitudinal fieldwork; another example of this was the considerations of the media space at the macro level, considering the *discourses* of the local that were constructed, reflected or reinforced – again, not specifically designed but naturally occurring in fieldwork and writing. Whilst this typology of participation emerging from the research diary was useful in framing later thinking, that process did eventually feel like I was looking too hard in each post for

something that was not necessarily there, I was becoming blind to the richness of what I observed. Therefore, I refined the diary process again in Rubery to keep a *daily* research diary instead. Each entry was an observation of the previous day's activity in the space, but disregarding any notion that I should force or look for something interesting about *every* interaction. I rather allowed the space to speak to and affect me with interest, disgust, sympathy, curiosity or in others ways concurrent with audience reactions, as participants described to me in interview. This proved a far more accurate simulation of the user who is drawn to only parts of the content throughout their day, whilst also applying an ethnographer's critical stance. I made these notes at my home computer in the evening, in a similar pattern to many of my participants, and so I felt this more relaxed, thoughtful mode of observation closely immersed me in the audience's practice of reading, using and participating. The diary was also used for fieldnotes of other related online narratives, for example, Facebook Pages or Groups speaking to similar themes or covering the same stories but in different ways. My observation work here does not treat the hyperlocal Pages as a silo, but recognises they relate and demonstrate one narrative of the locality, amongst other media and sources. The offline fieldwork I describe next was also recorded in this research diary, given that the offline and online observations were so frequently connected, rather than drawing a virtual/real world distinction (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pearce et al., 2011; Pink et al., 2015; Pink, 2012; Postill, 2011).

Being offline in the neighbourhood

The online space is representative of the offline, everyday experience of the neighbourhood. Online narratives also make us feel differently about our other experiences of the locality, or vice versa. Therefore, I recorded observations of the offline experience. This was sometimes carried out in note form on my phone, with a photo, or on paper, and would then be written up in my online research diary. In both case studies I attended events that had been advertised on the Facebook page, whether civic meetings such as Partners and Communities Together meetings (PACT), political meetings such as election hustings, or social events such as meetings of a local historical society. In principle, any experience could be thought of as observational work, so that, for example, I found myself reflecting on the nature of local print media when visiting my newsagent. Taking my children to the park allowed me to mentally (and later physically) take note of neighbourhood practices and experience. When young people congregated around the skate ramps, often not skating at all but just chatting, I mused as to whether this was because no other community spaces existed in the neighbourhood, or

because they preferred to mark out their own territory (Johnston, 2016). I would then relate such observations to online and offline local discourses of young people, crime, respect, parenting, nature, or ideas of urban/rural. This ability to triangulate experience and materials at the later analysis stage demonstrates the rich, interwoven approach that ethnography affords.

Interviews in Wednesfield

In observing the WV11 Facebook Page, it was clear that interviews would help reveal motivations and narratives of use. Without such interrogation I would fall into the trap of making assumptions based only on observations, of what is seen at face value on the Facebook Page. Much of the Page activity was there as a result of audience practice; Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (2010) both recognise the role of the participant at micro level, in developing the space at meso level – so interviews were key in unpicking this. Given this, I interviewed ten individuals near the end of my ethnographic period, so that issues raised through observation could be explored in discussion. I initially attempted to recruit through the WV11 Facebook Page itself, but had little uptake, maybe because this was a community of people not used to being asked for interview. In some cases people would click Like on my posted requests for interview but wouldn't respond, telling in itself of the clicktivist attitudes to some of the calls to civic engagement I observed in the Pages (Karpf, 2010; see also p.131). I made these interviews as comfortable as possible (Appendix B.1), but I was only really successful when I employed the help of trusted community “gatekeepers” (e.g. priests and their congregations) to widen the reach but also help people realise the opportunity was ‘for them’ (Arcury and Quandt, 1999). Although this wasn't directly addressed, I did not get the impression on meeting that any of the interviewees felt pressured to attend as a result. I offered use of a room in a local community centre, or to visit them at home if they were more comfortable, consciously seeking ways to engage that were “suitable” to them, a sense of the fieldwork being embedded just as much for the participants as for myself (Pink, 2013: 147). In four cases this afforded me insight to their home, with the potential ethical problem of being an outsider encroaching on their space - it was possibly harder for them to disengage from the interview if they so wished. Each one-hour interview started with a short introductory script, to ensure clarity and fair treatment. Consent was agreed using a form before interview to enable them to tailor their responses accordingly as we spoke (Appendix H.1). The interviews were “semi-standardised” (Fielding and Thomas, 2008: 246) in the respect that they were loosely formed around six questions, but these questions were skipped if they were covered

in our conversation as we progressed, or added to when it was helpful to probe for more information (Appendix B.1). The first three questions primarily served my research, and the second three additionally acted as 'market research' for the editors themselves. This idea of interviewees 'giving something back to the editors' was something I had added to later recruitment efforts. There may have been some suspicion in the audience or lack of understanding as to why they should talk to a PhD researcher, so this slight shift was intended to help with recruitment. Interviews were audio recorded to allow for transcription. Most interviewees opted for the anonymity offered to them at the start, or said that they didn't mind; for uniformity, all participants were made anonymous, with pseudonyms chosen by me to reflect something of their real name.

Seeking new forms of engagement in Birmingham

My Wednesfield interviews - taking place near the end of the ethnographic period, and only one interview per person - did not offer the potential to interrogate longitudinally, serving rather as an end bracket. In order to try and engage with all areas including the silent and passive readers on a more participatory level, I sought another method for my second case study in Birmingham. It was not surprising to find that those who had put themselves forward for interview in Wednesfield were either highly participatory on the Facebook Page or might be thought of as "primary definers" (Atton and Wickenden, 2005: 348) (a member of the clergy, a local politician, a council worker) but this was not representative of the entire audience. It risked focusing on organisations and stakeholders with specific agendas, clearly at odds with my concerns of exploring voice. Therefore, in my second study I sought to engage in a way that could invite more participants, and conversations spanning the whole year-long period. I also wanted people to contribute in ways that they were comfortable with, adopted from Sarah Pink's (2013) approach to visual ethnography. This makes them more likely to volunteer in the first place, but also ensures they are happier to engage throughout. Pink does point out that in some cases introducing the 'innovative' or 'unusual' to a participant can helpfully disrupt or provoke reaction (for example filming with a 'state of the art' camera rather than a 'point and shoot' may add a sense of wonder), but given my experience with recruitment in WV11, I sought rather to approach on their terms. By playing to their comforts I was afforded insight to their everyday lives, their media, and their technology ideologies. If someone could only meet me on their lunch break in their work's canteen, but would rather do so than conduct a Facebook or email interview, then this in itself contributed to my understanding of them.

The B31 Voices Community Panel

I initially ran into similar recruitment problems in Rubery to those in Wednesfield; participants were not quick to come forward following my introductory Facebook posts. The breakthrough came when the B31 Voices editors started a Facebook group chat with 26 readers they knew and me. I had not suggested the editors do so, and there was the potential for people to feel they were being coerced or should be helping for the sake of the editors (Miller and Bell, 2002), but this was an acceptable payoff for the relationships I struck as a result. I had to remember some of them might be considered 'friends' of the editors and look beyond the praise they sometimes heaped on the editorial efforts, for example when Agatha, in her opening email to me wrote: "I would like to thank the dedicated team who run this group, and to tell them that they do an amazing Job" (E11/B31). This was one of those situations when it was important for me to take Bourdieu's (Wacquant, 1989: 33) reflexive step back of "participant objectivation" to accommodate for the researcher/participant dynamic. This also possibly set out a misconception in my participants that I was more interested in the editorial practices than those of the audience. Harcup's (2015: 693) study of a hyperlocal media audience similarly benefited from the input of "committed members of [the Leeds Citizen blogger's] audience who volunteered to participate in this study" but implied here is a recognition that they may, in part, be performing praise, hence my triangulation with observation methods. What I did benefit from here though was narratives of those 'friends' the editors had developed online and offline over the years; they might be seen as playing roles in the online space, as confidantes as well as sources, for example. This was also a key turning point for me with the realisation that I could continue to use Facebook as a platform to conduct research, as well as it being the *object* of my study. This group of people introduced by the editors formed the first of what I then called the Community Panel, an umbrella term for all participants that recognised them as part of a sometimes collaborative, sometimes individual discussion about their communities, their lives, their technologies and media, and the role that B31 Voices played throughout. Having initiated on Facebook, it then continued as a Closed Facebook Group there, so that the content could only be seen by members. Literature regarding Facebook and research methods typically describes its value in helping recruit participants, or as a vessel of data (Kosinski et al., 2015), but my approach was unique in using it to communicate in a 'group research diary' model with participants in this Group. People responded to my questions there, but also made their own observations and started new conversations. These did not follow any specific, predetermined structure but instead sprung from: the flow of the hyperlocal space; my fieldwork; those

occasions when my own research diary required contextual input from my group; or where participants commented on specific issues on the platform. The overall effect was that of a year-long focus group that suited the participants' everyday media practice - the best time for an immediate turn-based discussion often coincided with my own observational research diary around 8pm, when others were also online. They dropped in and out of the conversation as appealed to them, with about half of the group regularly contributing (as of 02/12/2017 the Group had 51 members). This group platform also allowed for certain visual methods (Pink, 2013): I was able to share screenshots or photos for response, or participants were able to share images from their mobile phones with contextualising descriptions, for example.

Contributing to the Panel in other ways

The Community Panel allowed people to be part of a collective voice, offering me their individual narratives as they saw fit. The participants' means of communication differed in syntax or modes of formality, being broadcast or turn-based, and so in later triangulation of materials and interpretation the task was in identifying similarities and patterns. This contributed to the sense of ethnographic "thick description" (Geertz, 1973: 1) - the context and surrounding communicative practices were often as significant as the immediate focus of what they told me. Some people didn't use the Facebook Group but instead met me for interviews or what I called 'chats', usually over refreshments. These were in public places at the convenience of the participants - tearooms, McDonalds, Sainsburys for a group discussion. In the last week of fieldwork, I conducted interviews in a public art space 'shop front' in Longbridge on a drop-in basis, speaking to five people across two days. Again, interviews were semi-standardised, using scripted questions (see Appendix B.3 for the final set used), but these were more likely to be used as a loose guide than in Wednesfield. In my first meeting with Clive (I5/B31), he spoke solidly and largely off topic for forty minutes and I treated this as an exercise in relationship building. My printed sheet of interview questions remained folded on the café table; we then proceeded to communicate with more focus via email (see list of EI/B31 interviews). Others told me their stories and answered my questions over email, or the phone. This range of modes of engagement between researcher and participant, and between participants in group discussion through the Facebook Group, not only allowed people to participate at their comfort, but also co-produced the knowledge (Pearce et al., 2011; Sobers et al., 2016) and so there was less the sense in south Birmingham that the power lay quite so squarely with the researcher. When I went on holiday and returned a week later, I explained I had not been able to write my usual observational research diary and asked them to take up this role, picking up on what they remembered. This

had the dual effect of documenting online activity, but also allowing me to observe what my participants found to be significant, and then benefited from being discussed in the Panel Group. I would not entirely describe my overall approach as one of co-creation (Sobers et al., 2016), with any assumption that the participants had been involved at every stage of the process, but a more nuanced take might be that of Celia Pearce's "native assistance", the sense that participants help decode meanings but also become part of the research team (Pearce et al., 2011: 204). When participants are given the opportunity to contribute as much and as often as they like, with whatever means they prefer, then they are empowered in their voice, in being an active and 'heard' representative of the community.

Exiting the field, but not exiting

My approach to analysis of my ethnographic materials recognised the transition from fieldwork, but not so much a case of exiting the field, as re-connecting in a different way, returning "to the field through the research imaginary" (Blackman and Commane, 2011). Fieldwork (I use the term to describe all my practices in the field, offline and online) ended in March 2016. I then collected my materials around me: audio and transcription, fieldnotes, emails, research diaries and online communications with participants. Even at this stage, this reminded me of the field and started a process of immersion back *into* the space that was not clinical or ostentatiously scientific, but more akin to "becoming friends' with the data" (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 165). I was also still situated in the field; other ethnographers might return to their home or office to write up, instead I continued to live as a local resident in the same house embedded within the community. My office window overlooked the local, busy park where members of the community passed by (see Figure 3.4) and I continued to use the same mobile technology to keep up to date with local information, as a resident. During my final, intensive period of analysis and writing, I would often remove myself to Rubery's local library when the house became too noisy or distracting, placing me once again within the community. However, the main difference in this transition is that by stopping fieldwork, the mode of analysis shifts. It can be likened to leaving the busiest room of a party - you have been one and part of it, and then enter the quieter study next door, while leaving the door open to overhear the chatter and reminisce over your recent conversations. This removal from the space offered critical distance. I entered into a position of awareness, of what participants told me, but also of how I elicited such responses through my own participation, questions and interventions, as per Bourdieu's "participant objectivation" (Wacquant, 1989; discussed above, p.60). The time this offered for reflection was significant in the analytical process.



Figure 3.4: My Rubery writing space, overlooking the local park / pedestrian thoroughfare

Analysis during and as part of fieldwork

I refer to this transition as an analytical shift, rather than the *start* of an analytical process – in ethnography, analysis starts and is afforded during fieldwork. Some descriptions of thematic (Braun and Clarke, 2006) or framework analysis (Smith and Firth, 2011; Ward et al., 2013) compartmentalise the process to only come *after* fieldwork in a linear fashion, but I draw from ethnographic approaches that allow for the emergence of themes *during* fieldwork, to then build on them with more focus once fieldwork is complete (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pearce, 2011). Such themes and patterns can be described as ‘emerging’, but this shouldn’t be thought of as passive. Some of these analytical processes, such as immediately asking participants why they think I am seeing certain behaviours or patterns online, can *only* take place during fieldwork (Pink, 2013). The nature of ethnographic fieldwork – with the field being studied over a period of months - lends itself to iterative and cyclical communications with participants, and such processes were borne out of my increasing understanding of the ‘rules’ of the field, a process that Becker (1971) frames as “sequential analysis” and Pearce (2011: 205) calls a “synergistic feedback loop with fieldwork”. For example, if a run of car thefts were observed in the hyperlocal space over several days, I would observe the trend for reporting crime, the ways people responded in their comments, and I would sometimes directly ask questions about this *within* this flow of

comments. Then I would carry these observations over to also address attitudes to such crime stories with my Facebook Group participants or during interviews. As observation continued, I could develop a sense of whether such patterns changed, even in the tone of reports and so through such ongoing analysis, the focus of fieldwork can be seen to shift; we observe in ethnography until we see patterns, or new behaviours, but then once these have been determined, our focus can be allowed to shift in other directions as necessary.

Participant voice

As part of this iterative, guided approach to analysing during fieldwork, I also recognised the need to allow the field and its participants to speak for themselves, contributing to a “multivocality” that seeks to present academic, local and individual narratives (Pink, 2013: 171). As a researcher I play an active role and the scholarly gaze must be recognised, but given that this study concerns itself with platforms of citizen voice, it was deemed appropriate to also afford the audience’s voice in the fieldwork/analysis. A comment during one interview might spark a new consciousness in my ongoing research diary or a question for other interviewees within the Facebook Group, for example. Even though participants were unreceptive to my idea of trying out a collaborative video method, this was telling of their attitudes towards their mobile phones and their comfort of using them only in some contexts, in much the same way that Horst and Miller (2006) found, in their Jamaican study, that not necessarily all functions of cell phones were deployed. At the point of re-immersion with my collected materials after analysis, I also benefited from being able to take my time, identifying concerns or turns of phrase that might have been earlier overlooked. Having said this though, this final thesis does not present everything said by all voices. In much the same way that my research diary developed into a selective and interpretive practice based on what I observed online, the same can be said of my participants and their contribution. The data speaks to me but is curated and put to use in the way I identify patterns, and then draw out certain narratives or examples to make a point. There will inevitably be felt in me a certain tension at the point I present findings back to the participants and wider group, as I suggested I would. If I am critical of their practice or make certain observations, they might be surprised or offended that I would see it that way. Therein we recognise the responsibility of the ethnographer, to tell their story and give participants voice, but not to the extent of sacrificing a necessarily distanced and critical understanding of their practices.

The role of theory

In the same respect that analytical processes and the presence of the community run throughout fieldwork, analysis and writing, so also does the presence of theory, with a role as “precursor, medium, and outcome of ethnographic study and writing” (Willis, 2002: 396). My review of literature started before, and continued during, my two case studies. At the fieldwork stage it drew focus in specific directions and framed my way of thinking about the field and practice, providing an “orientation” (Cohen, 1993: 133) or ways to interpret materials (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 139). This is another cyclical loop where theory both informs and is responsive to the data and research interests. For example, when participants gathered the online community in dissent against their local council, this led me towards theory of public sphere, but, in turn, Habermas’ (1991) concerns with elitism in such spheres remind us that not *all* local citizens are present in this collective voice. Theory’s role in ethnography must therefore be situated and inform thinking and analysis, rather than be forced on the data for its own sake (Willis, 2002).

A model for analysing the corpus, as well as data sets / instances / events

It is in the nature of ethnography that we invite and expect participants to communicate and create materials in various forms (Pink, 2013). This then demands some unifying approach whereby materials can be analysed as a corpus of data speaking to the same themes, as well as sometimes focusing on specific dramas, instances and events as illustrative or extreme cases (Postill, 2011). In my case, materials were varied - a full list can be found in Appendix A. From these materials, certain themes or narratives emerged during fieldwork, such as ongoing crime concerns in Northfield or stakeholder/community frictions in placemaking efforts in Longbridge. Other themes were challenged or re-interpreted as they were engaged throughout the study, for example, the way that people talked about antisocial behaviour as a problem of people’s upbringing, parenting, respect for others, or as a comparison point with the past. My understanding of the field could often be triangulated from my different experiences and participations, akin to Jane Fountain’s (1993: 160) “cross-checking procedure when faced with data from solicited and unsolicited accounts, field-notes from observation, and hearsay”. As I re-immersed myself in the data, I was able to draw on themes that had been addressed in multiple interviews, or in a change of opinion in one participant across time. This developed a rounded picture of the audience as a whole, and the extent to which they were made up of individuals with sometimes conflicting, differing approaches, motivations and practices. However evident those themes sometimes seemed, I also required an approach to thematic analysis that was systematic without being overtly clinical. Using Nvivo qualitative analysis software, I first

marked up my materials according to ideas or themes they contributed to, for example, all instances of 'crime' in my materials', or anything relating to discussion of 'public sphere'. I then organised these codes into broader parent themes. These two processes, and maybe most specifically the second stage of thematic development, are guided by theory and a structure predicated by my relatively early-forming chapter outlines. It is understandable that ethnographic monographs rarely go in for detailed accounts of such analytical processes when ethnography often presents itself in narratives or being highly reflexive (Finnegan, 2007; Pearce et al., 2011; Postill, 2011). However, when ethnographers do describe systematic analysis methods (Boellstorff et al., 2012) there is an understanding that across the rich variety of materials, there is real value in applying a rigour at least *informed* by thematic analysis approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Smith and Firth, 2011; Ward et al., 2013), whilst still retaining the richness of narratives we seek in ethnographic writing. The primary focus is still to create ethnography: "Analysis is not primarily about tuning coding schemes or tweaking data analysis software packages. It is about finding, creating, and bringing thoughtful, provocative, productive ideas to acts of writing." (Boellstorff et al, 2012: 159).

The first stages of re-immersion with materials start with an openness, as I collect the materials together and am reminded of the experience of the field. For example, viewing visual materials such as photographs, or listening to audio recordings, is most immediately evocative. Such acts, including the transcription of audio into notes and direct quotes when relevant, can be thought of as the first immersive pass through my data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This draws on my own involvement and embodiment within the field; in the same respect that I participated in fieldwork, I participate in analysis (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 169). The organisation and collation of other materials such as emails and the Facebook Group text into readable text files is functionally necessary but also a process of familiarisation.

Within Nvivo, I then went through each of the materials and marked up passages, quotes or whole sections to note those features or distinct parts of the data that were significant or interesting. Sometimes a section would be given more than one of these 'codes', or coded sections might overlap with each other. The use and naming of these codes was informed by theory, themes and patterns already emerged from fieldwork, or new patterns emerging as I coded. Coding marked up emergent behaviours, geographic locations, subjects, themes, and story types. Some takes on thematic analysis suggest either content or form should be the focus

of the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006); my approach was more open and recognised the significance of both; content tells us about the concerns of participants in hyperlocal practice and form (language used, the flow of discussions and comments) reveals more affective relations to their responses, everyday neighbourhood life and a sense of place. Some codes became obviously significant as I went through the data and it could be envisaged quite early on how they would contribute to larger themes. At other times, I did not necessarily assume a particular code would reveal a strong pattern but rather applied it in a more descriptive or summative fashion, noting the scene, event or activity as it appeared from my fieldnotes or interviews, taking care to hear what the data told me and look for subtle differences as much as finding similarities (Wolcott, 1994). For example, I discussed earlier how, during fieldwork, crime seemed to be a prevalent and common story type. At the Nvivo coding stage though, I was allowed more time to re-address this, the extent to which it could be confirmed or questioned across my multiple materials, and the frequency of occurrence.

The next stage, still undertaken in Nvivo, was a re-arranging and organising of these first codes into new parent codes, which were representative of wider *themes* or “patterns, critical moments where a phenomenon is echoing through the culture in a significant way” (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 166). In the screenshot from Nvivo below (see Figure 3.5), we can see how a number of codes contribute to the wider theme Online Constructing Offline. We also see how many different materials those have been gathered from (Sources), and how many excerpts from the data overall have been coded in this way (References).

Name	Sources	References	Created On
▶ EDITORS PRACTICE	0	0	27 Sep 2016 10:23
▶ ISSUES AND CONCERNS	0	0	27 Sep 2016 10:25
▶ LANGUAGE	0	0	19 Oct 2016 13:43
▶ LIMITS OF HYPERLOCAL	0	0	19 Oct 2016 21:56
▶ LOCAL AREA AND PEOPLE	0	0	27 Sep 2016 10:11
▼ ONLINE CONSTRUCTING OFFLINE	0	0	19 Oct 2016 13:47
offline identity is constructed not reflected	10	23	8 Sep 2016 16:22
online changing what we do or reactions offl...	3	17	9 Sep 2016 13:34
longbridge regen tension	5	16	8 Sep 2016 17:08
online leads offline conversations or friends...	9	15	9 Sep 2016 14:40
placemaking	7	13	9 Sep 2016 09:35
jorgie mcMahon	4	10	8 Sep 2016 14:19
negative Northfield	3	10	8 Sep 2016 11:04
Northfield murder	3	10	9 Sep 2016 09:31
positive Northfield	3	8	8 Sep 2016 11:05
Rubery coffee war	1	7	9 Sep 2016 13:51
Hawkesley shooting - murder	1	4	17 Sep 2016 08:20
HL useful for people new to area	3	3	14 Sep 2016 09:11
people act diff online to offline	3	3	14 Sep 2016 09:38
▶ ONLINE REFLECTING OFFLINE	0	0	19 Oct 2016 14:29
▶ OTHER MEDIA PEOPLE USE	0	0	27 Sep 2016 10:27

Figure 3.5: Screenshot from Nvivo analysis software showing codes organised into themes

This was systematic in the sense that I started with writing chapter four, so I first looked to group codes in ways that spoke to the focus of that chapter. This process involved iteration and review; sub themes could be merged into larger themes or large themes might be broken down. As I then wrote each of the next two chapters, I sometimes found myself rearranging these child codes out of one into a new relevant and emerging theme. It is here that Braun and Clarke (2006: 87) discuss phases of “reviewing themes” and “defining and naming themes” but where their approach becomes too systematic I rather treat this as the cyclical and iterative process of organisation, identification, mapping and organisation of themes that leads into ethnographic writing (Pearce et al., 2011; Wolcott, 1994).

Writing

Ethnographic writing starts with the taking of fieldnotes, the developing of ideas in research diary, the brief questions posed and thought through with my Community Panels in the Facebook Group. However, in final presentation, data, coding and themes are turned into “narrative and arguments” with a sense of flow and order (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 174), through a mixture of description, analysis and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994). Wolcott (Ibid: 11)

describes these three modes as “*emphases* that qualitative researchers employ to organize and present data”. Whilst ‘description’ is easiest to ‘get right’ in the respect that it passes the data along, the problem of such “heaped data” (Ibid: 13) is just that – it can suggest that the researcher has been unable to develop their own meaning or insight from the materials and that the reader should take up this part of the work. Ruth Finnegan’s (2007) ethnographic monograph of music-making in Milton Keynes starts by literally setting the scene in descriptions of groups and activity by musical genre; my fourth chapter similarly partly focuses on *descriptions* of online and offline practice. The level of descriptive detail and depth, as in Geertz’s (1973) idea of “thick description”, is applied as suitable and relevant to the account. Building on description, Wolcott then uses the term ‘analysis’ to describe the more interrogative identification of “essential features and relationships”. This seeks to more specifically satisfy the purpose of the enquiry, to “identify patterned regularities in the data” or “contextualize in a broader analytical framework” (Ibid: 33-4). Finally, Wolcott presents *interpretation* as a third mode, extending from ‘analysis’, for example, by making intentionally outrageous extensions of an idea to make a point or raise questions, as in my concerns that authorities such as the police or council might be using the hyperlocal Pages to surveil the audiences, even if it was only suggested in a couple of instances from the data. Mills (2000: 215) similarly extols “the release of imagination” in stretching data and ideas in such ways, “insights by considering extremes” (Ibid: 213) as I do on p.107. My ethnographic practices did not allow me unlimited access, so it is in interpretation that I am able to suggest what is unseen, as much as what is observed. Having said this, it is *not* always appropriate to go so far, and I have also recognised when to stop, so that an argument can be made with confidence – interpretation should be undertaken with caution, lest we speculate too far beyond the data. It is at this stage that theory is put to use again, as a way of linking ideas and structure. These demarcations of description, analysis and interpretation allow for an iterative approach to writing; one cautiously but naturally leads to the next, even if I have not always set them out so, but rather interweave them throughout the writing.

How my materials are used in my writing: a guide to reading chapters four to six

I refer to my data materials in chapters four to six in particular ways. At the point of writing I had all materials imported to Nvivo, which then led to a list of codes organised into their wider themes. The exception to this is the WV11 research diary which I did not import and code, partly due to the flawed nature of this research diary process, as described earlier. I do sometimes refer to this research diary in my writing, referring to or searching the Wordpress to illustrate points.

In Nvivo, the entire materials are searchable to identify quotes or parts of notes, but I was just as often searching for a particular code. The value of referring to how these codes apply across the entire corpus of data is that I was each time able to identify 1) how many times a code was used or Referenced (i.e. how many times that idea or theme emerged but also 2) how many different Sources the code spanned (see Figure 3.5 above, p.88). This is the difference between one person saying the same thing multiple times in one interview, and the opinion of the collective community that might be implied from a theme being triangulated across multiple sources. In writing then, I often illustrate the strength of a theme by noting how many times a theme ‘came up’ across my materials i.e. the number of times a code was Referenced across the corpus – I often directly refer to the name of the code or theme, indicated by single ‘quote marks’. In this though, let me be clear in saying that if I describe that a code of ‘crime’ came up 80 times, this doesn’t mean that 80 crimes were committed, but that the code occurred in my and other participants’ accounts 80 times. In ethnography we deal with such accounts rather than necessarily factual data. These are the experiences, representations and interpretations by the participants and the researcher, those which Clifford (1986) calls “partial truths”. A participant remembers, correctly or otherwise, about crimes in their area and tells me about them; similarly in my research diary I summarise the day’s activity and note some crimes but maybe overlook others. Having identified how many times a code occurs, I then often call on coded passages to illustrate and demonstrate the nuanced ways that those themes emerge, by directly quoting or indirectly describing the account. In addition to identifying whose voice is heard in these accounts (giving their pseudonym each time), I also use a referencing system, so that it is clear whether the quote is from a physical interview, phone call, research diary, email, etc. The shorthand reference can be checked against the list of my materials in Appendix A. For example, a “quote” (Jean, I5) tells us it was spoken by Jean, in face-to-face interview number 5 – Appendix A gives more detail.

Ethical concerns

There are a variety of ethical concerns in undertaking ethnographic work, whether offline or online. Some of these are tied up in the positioning of the researcher within the work, their relationship to their participants, and the respect that they are interpreting the practices of other non-engaged participants of the space. The responsibility of the researcher is to remain critical but also to truthfully present the practices and nature of the field. Other concerns relate to the methods that are used to communicate the intention, progress and dissemination of the research to participants both overt (interviewees, Community Panel members) and

covert (those observed online but not always engaged with directly). A balance must be sought between informing (potential) participants and introducing “observer effect” as discussed earlier (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). The worst-case scenario would be to constantly remind the audience that you are watching them so that they either stop posting altogether, or play into a role of what they assume might be expected of them. Such damage to the space would also raise issues of the legacy of my work once I remove myself from the site. My applied procedures for managing such issues are informed by Birmingham City University’s (2010) own research ethical framework, but also guidelines and case studies relating to: online research with respect to “human subjects” and “public/private” concerns (Association of Internet Researchers, 2012); social research regarding “obligations” to various parties (Social Research Association, 2003); community-based research (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, 2012); additional review of relevant literature (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Ethical dimensions were additionally informed by discussions with various senior staff at Birmingham City University and the editors of the two hyperlocal organisations of my study, and were assessed throughout the work.

Interview participants (including interviews, focus groups, etc.) were recruited according to the demands of the research, and as much as possible, carried out at the comfort of the interviewee, whilst also regarding the safety of the researcher. For example, in Wednesfield, some participants invited me into their homes; in Rubery other participants preferred to meet in a neutral place such as a tearoom. In Wednesfield, participants were interviewed only once each, so it was relatively straightforward to inform them of the terms, including the likelihood of publication, the need to record, and their right to anonymity and withdrawal. Their consent was collected via a signed agreement form (Appendix H.1). Those interviewed as part of the B31 Voices Community Panel method required a different treatment that took into account possible multiple discussions, and the nature of the fractured, micro-conversations that took place on a daily basis on the Facebook Group which could not practically be ‘consented’ each time (Appendix H.2). In this respect these relationships developed more towards those ethnographic friendships that can bring us closer to understanding the audience, but I also had to consider that these participants might not always remember or appreciate that they were ‘on record’ (Blackman and Commane, 2011). As much as a longitudinal agreement was used to cover an individual’s engagement across the year, I still took into consideration that their various accounts should be anonymised. In some cases, for example, if I asked just one or two questions of the editors but of a sensitive nature, I would additionally check that they were okay with me

possibly using their responses. It is worth noting that the B31 Voices editors had been the subject of academic research quite recently prior to my own work, most notably in Dave Harte's (2017) PhD thesis. However, while the editors sometimes jokingly mentioned their popularity amongst academics, it was unlikely that audience members had been involved in research before as this wasn't the focus of previous studies. Therefore, I felt a responsibility to treat them with care and ensure they understood the significance of our conversations ongoing. To my knowledge this was also a new experience for the audience of WV11.

Offline (e.g. attendance of public meetings) and online (e.g. 'watching' audience comments on a public Facebook page) observation poses specific problems. Interviews can be thought of as private data and constitute meetings between researcher and participant; the research is described, and consent sought. Participant observation online is more problematic, most notably because I could observe the Facebook Page without being visibly present, unlike Celia Pearce's (Pearce et al., 2011) study of the 'virtual world' platform Second Life. My studies took place in the 'public' online forum of Facebook Pages but in the same way that I highlight concerns of authority figures such as the police surveilling the space, we might have the same concerns of my own observation work, especially considering some of the interpersonal discussions people carried out. Given that the participant observation here was so regular, constantly drawing the audience's attention to the researcher's position and activity would have soon contaminated the research, so a 'best fit' was required: in both case studies I wrote an ethnographer's statement, which appeared as a blog post written by WV11 and B31 Voices and was posted on their various platforms. This introduced me in my role as researcher and my work, and served as a way of informing participants of my observation action; the closest I could come to 'consent' or at least recognition here was the handful of positive but brief comments or Likes on each such post. Each introductory blog post stayed online throughout the work so that I could easily link to it, in order to remind people of my role, or to reintroduce myself as necessary. I applied this method in both studies, to no objection. I have already discussed the extent to which I slipped in and out of roles while conducting this observational work, and in those participatory practices I was also often able to remind people of my work. In other instances, I would mention that I was presenting interim findings at an academic conference, ask a direct question, or invite new participants for interview – these kind of reminders were effective in softly but regularly declaring myself in the space. Offline, I employed similar techniques, such as mentioning my work context if I asked questions at a public meeting or when talking to a parent in the park.

All participants were given a pseudonym that allowed me to refer to them across the materials without entirely dehumanising their voice. I attempted to choose names that I felt were similar or evoked something of their identity or age. My ethnographic work wasn't specifically representing sensitive areas as can often be the case in such studies (Goffman, 2015; Hobbs and May, 1993) but nonetheless I had to be prepared to encounter unexpected accounts and, as such, expectations of anonymity were set out from the start. I also ensured that the context of any quote meant they couldn't be identified: I indirectly quote, paraphrase or entirely omit accounts as necessary. Interview recordings and data were stored on a local rather than networked machine, for security. One final note with regards to anonymity is worth making: the Community Panel was a Closed type of Group, meaning that people outside the Group could become aware of its existence, and ask to join but could not read or participate unless they were then admitted to the Group by myself. This was less accessible than the Open style of Group but allowed people to be more openly candid in their discussions. The editors of the hyperlocal Page were not members of the group.

Participants were made aware of the likelihood of their comments or discussion being published in academic research papers and at conferences. Drafts and final publications were provided to the audience by way of the hyperlocal organisation's usual channels for their consideration e.g. posting research posters or presentation slides to the Page. This did not necessarily assume that their suggestions would always be acted upon, but they would be considered in any final edits before submission for publication. In reality, people at most clicked Like or left a brief positive comment, but said nothing beyond this.

Finally in my ethical consideration is the concern of this study within a larger field of hyperlocal / alternative / community media studies and also certain pressures from organisations such as Ofcom and Nesta to identify the value of hyperlocal media to communities (Ofcom, 2015; Radcliffe, 2012; 2015). Such organisations are often concerned with the extent of digital labour citizens provide in a media landscape where local news is seen to be lacking i.e. if hyperlocal media is providing a valuable civic service, should it be supported by government? Whilst hyperlocal owner / practitioners and their 'product' have been studied in some detail, there is a "huge gap in our research knowledge" about audiences (Harcup, 2015: 5), at a qualitative level at least, and it is here that I must be aware of the 'knowledge' my study may be seen as providing. If this study is likely to be of significance on publication, I must also be clear about what it sets out and is capable of doing, and its

limitations (see above, p.13). I have attempted to keep these matters in mind in the analysis that follows.

Chapter Four – Hyperlocal media spaces and the audiences that participate there

In this chapter, my core argument is that hyperlocal media and the audience's participation must be contextualised in a number of ways, that such media cannot be considered in a vacuum. Rather than framing these social media spaces in terms of journalism, I rather look to the participatory aspects of the way people find out "information" relating to their neighbourhood, as they tend to put it (rather than "news"). These practices are interwoven with uses of other media and resources, and tied into everyday living and their perceptions of the locality.

This argument is demonstrated in a variety of ways, which I will expand on throughout the chapter. First of all, hyperlocal media is situated alongside other local media and information sources which appeal to audiences. The communication therein is tied up in localised discourses and identities of place, and so I offer such cultural contexts of the two case study neighbourhoods. Hyperlocal media sits, for many individuals, within a wider range of means for keeping in touch with and informed about the neighbourhood; the ways we also choose to use social media and hyperlocal platforms similarly demonstrates an empowered practice. Given this, I then explore the relational aspects of the space from both sides. Firstly, editorial practice in the space invites participation, as it is about sharing information. Secondly, the audience's response to the hyperlocal space is to participate in a variety of ways. As well as aggregating and curating their flow of incoming media, in hyperlocal media they become part of the service or community – this is active practice, not just consumption, not just reading but also communication.

1. Local people and local media: the context of hyperlocal media practices

As we will see throughout the progress of this analysis, hyperlocal media is so strongly situated in the everyday practices and contexts of local life, that it is necessary to start out by understanding the wider context. This media is situated within a variety of other online and offline practices approached in different ways by individuals but often speaking to collective localised or wider discourses.

Two neighbourhoods: Wednesfield and Rubery

The audiences participated in the hyperlocal media Pages partly informed by their existing perceptions of the local area, but also in perpetuating and maintaining certain ideas online. I experienced these concerns of local identity slightly differently in the two case studies (see Appendix M for maps). In Wednesfield, more specifically than Rubery, people often aligned themselves with an identity that informed their media practice in the Page, that of belonging to the area known as the Black Country. The picture I develop of the audience in this section is largely drawn from my research diary, from online and offline contexts (RD/WV11). The Black Country area of the West Midlands and its boundaries are perhaps determined best by those who live there – as Esther Asprey (2007: 3) puts it, “the Black Country exists only in abstract terms”. It was often referred to (RD/WV11) in terms of its history and contribution to the Industrial Revolution, sports (namely football), dialect, food, and a sense that it is *apart* from Birmingham, in more ways than simple geographic location. For many local to Wednesfield, it was considered an insult to be considered a ‘Brummie’ and, embedded as I was, I also felt this defensive pride when my family from the south of England assumed me to be living in Birmingham. Wednesfield History Society regularly drew a large pub crowd, and the Wednesfield Past and Present Facebook Group was similarly active. Local identity was threatened when the Wednesfield Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries were due to be redrawn before the 2015 General Election. Residents responded with a petition of 700 signatures – it wasn’t necessarily clear what the redrawing of such boundaries would mean for local people, but the very idea was enough to provoke a reaction. All this suggested a strong sense of pride in place, but also a genuine confusion amongst some Wednesfield locals as to why they would need to go to Birmingham, or outside of their neighbourhood. As I drove around the area, towns seamlessly blended one into the next without breaks of countryside - signage only suggested leaving one area as you entered the next, and roundabouts were adorned with large public art in attempts to mark out local industrial heritage. Given these fuzzy borders, local people were afforded an opportunity to define their *own* boundaries and groupings in the communications they took part in, and the language they used, offline or online. It was in such communicative spaces as Facebook Pages that people were afforded something beyond Anderson’s (1983: 6) sense of the “imagined community”, given that “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”. Anderson traces this through the development of mass media - an example he gives is the reader’s sense of being part of a collective readership of a novel - but the Facebook Page not

so much allows the participant to *imagine*, but to more strongly *see and evidence* a collective identity that they may associate with, in the profile pictures, names, and discussion of others.

In Rubery, by contrast, people chose from *numerous* local discourses or identities to align with. In many respects, Rubery is not so different from Wednesfield, in its physical makeup or the way people related to it, and here I similarly draw on my research diary from that case study (RD/B31). Like Wednesfield's high street area, New Road is also often referred to as "the village", with its charity shops, butchers, pharmacies, pub, cafés and small supermarkets. Both high streets are serviced by nearby retail and leisure parks. However, in Rubery and its neighbouring areas (those covered by the B31 Voices hyperlocal service) people used geography to determine some presumptions about class. One of the people I spoke to, Sandra, described how the A38 split Rubery into the Birmingham side which has "never been a rich population" and the Bromsgrove, more "rural" side being more affluent (I8/B31). Standing on New Road, a local person could literally turn about face to view one aspect of the wooded Lickey Hills, or the other of that A38 dual carriageway, and such choices were made, for example, in choosing shopping destinations (I13/B31). The marked difference then as I experienced it in conversation with locals, or observing online discussion, was that residents might choose to associate with identities of Rubery in terms of its geographic relation to other areas. However, in Wednesfield, residents associated themselves with a stronger, existing identity i.e. the Black Country.

Such differences to approach can be explained partly in terms of habitus (Bourdieu, 2010). Many of the people I spoke to had lived in these areas for some time and, therefore, their own sense of safety, trust or comfort was informed by their upbringing. Based on this habitus they would then identify online or offline socialities to associate with, such as Terry's interest in photographic history leading him to a Northfield history Page (I15/B31), or those who attended history group meetings (RD/WV11). Robert Putnam (2000) was concerned with the disappearance of physical communal sociality and Stuart Hall (1991: 44) perceived an "erosion of collective social identity", but online hyperlocal media goes some way to unite people in their geography and, with increasingly affordable technologies, transcends otherwise divisive or segregational factors such as class. The identity that is influenced and developed in the communication of the hyperlocal space is not that of the individual, or even necessarily the online group, but ideas of the local and the neighbourhood – Hall (1991) describes such collective identities as constantly in flux as both narrative and representation.

These are fuelled by the capital of 'local knowledge' and experience that the audience wield there, something that I will explore in more detail later in this chapter.

Local news media and socialities in context

Whilst I will be exploring the relationship between hyperlocal and mainstream news, it was not a polar position of people using either one or the other, and a messier entanglement of additional local online sources were also involved. These constituted what Peter Dahlgren (2005: 148) calls a multi-faceted "constellation of communicative spaces". People used outputs of: mainstream news organisations, namely local newspapers; the police; local councils; Pages representing neighbourhood locations or groups, such as Friends of Cofton Park; local 'buying and selling' Groups; history groups; churches; venues such as pubs and social clubs with events; small businesses such as cafes and hairdressers (RD/WV11; RD/B31). In the case of those small businesses, they used social media to attract customers and promote events, but there is also a recognised social and wellbeing value to local people in "helping people develop trusting relationships through frequent, serendipitous exposure to each other in a trusted third place" (Farnham et al., 2015: 49). In practical terms then, audiences might be encountering such Pages and their content 1) because they have chosen to Like and therefore follow the Page, or 2) because content from this secondary Page has been pasted *into* a hyperlocal Page they follow, a very real sense of overlapping fields as per Bourdieu, and others since (Bourdieu, 2010; Dahlgren, 2006; Pink, 2012). As of 2013, 28 hyperlocal websites had been counted in Birmingham, "the most for any single local authority area" (Harte, 2013: 8), and so neighbouring Pages also sometimes factored into B31 Voices.

Given the above consideration of other media, it then stands that hyperlocal media only present one set of narratives of the locality, alongside other online *and* offline means. It is understandable that expectations are made of hyperlocal media to "fill the gap" (Metzgar et al., 2011) left by receding local mainstream journalism (Nielsen, 2015b). However, as Mary (I3/B31) put it, "I don't think the Internet is the answer to everything [...] I don't agree with over reliance on it." As a regular Twitter user, she took interest in volunteering activities in her community, but still recognised that there were other ways to stay connected. The Internet has clearly affected and broadened people's individual media ideologies (Baron, 2010), but there is no reason that older methods should not still be effective; empowered uses of media predate the Internet after all (Toffler, 1972; Williams, 1990; Moores, 1993). People from both of my case studies used physical noticeboards, attended local events and chatted to

each other during school drops and pickups, as well as digital methods such as messaging or using other online groups or pages (RD/WV11; RD/B31). The persistence of these traditional methods was made clear when I visited Wednesfield Community Team, responsible for organising activities at a local tower block estate (RD/WV11). Whilst they were plugged into online networks, when it came to advertising a facepainting course, they instead placed two posters in local corner shops. Expecting four to six people to attend, they were somewhat overrun with 34 attendees, and this seems to counter any assumption that it is only in new, technology-driven spaces that we will be increasingly informed. In Northfield, part of my B31 Voices study (see Appendix M), Andrew described having used online resources to research the area, including web searches, crime figures and council statistics. However, he also physically visited for a more “rounded understanding of the area... but it's only when you come to live here that you get that I think,” (I2/B31) – media can tell part of the story and assist with communicating an identity of a place, but our attachments and associations are only completed when we live there. Many have argued the case for online sociality as additive to offline experiences of a locality (Bakardjieva, 2003; Banaji and Buckingham, 2013: 84-7; Costera Meijer, 2012; Hampton and Wellman, 2003; Mesch and Levanon, 2003), and I also argue that it offers a more rounded plurality of ideas, information and socialities to engage in both. To assume information can be provided online alone is to deny ourselves the richness that we benefit from in exposing ourselves to multiple views and sources. Whilst we can think of the hyperlocal Page in itself as a field of communication (Bourdieu, 2010) or public sphere (Habermas, 1991), we should remember that individuals operate within wider numerous socialities, evidenced in the richness of new information and local knowledge people bring into the hyperlocal spaces from ‘outside’ them, which I will come to shortly.

In the next chapter I explore representation of the locality more thoroughly but it is worth noting here that hyperlocal media narratives are only partly representative in being built up from part of the local population. The populations of Wednesfield and the south Birmingham area covered by B31 Voices are 22,646 and 101,422² (Appendix M). Compare this to Facebook followers³ of 9,251 and 31,779 respectively and we see that a significant number of people are using the hyperlocal services, even taking into account those outside the area who might be following, and those who initially followed but have since ignored or turned off notifications (see Appendix L). I might have hoped to replicate Anderson et al.’s (2015: 89)

² Figures from 2011 Census for Wednesfield and the Northfield constituency, which covers Kings Norton, Longbridge, Northfield and Weoley, but not Rubery or Frankley which is also part of their coverage.

³ As of 11 January 2017.

observations of “interpersonal conversation” as key in the “movement of news through the media ecology of a city” to help reach the rest of the local population. However, there were only a few instances of people saying they sometimes shared information through word of mouth with family (I5/WV11; I4/WV11; I6/WV11) or with neighbours, about local criminal activity (I4/B31). Despite this partial nature of the audience, Habermas’ (1991) concerns of the public sphere being populated exclusively by middle class elites are less of a concern as online access becomes increasingly affordable and mobile. Finally, those residents not engaged in hyperlocal media cannot be assumed to be ‘disadvantaged’ because this may simply be an active decision not to use Facebook or that particular service, or a satisfaction with those other means of keeping informed that I have already discussed.

Before squarely approaching hyperlocal media in itself, it is necessary to understand people’s comparably negative attitudes to local mainstream media, given their relationship and/or opposition in the eyes of the audience. My argument later in this chapter (p.120), that these Facebook Pages differ from mainstream news media, is partly grounded in their shapes and practices, but also in the audience’s undeniable desire to treat them as performing different roles in their lives. Marie in Birmingham perceived that mainstream news was constructed for various reasons, with biases and agendas that she didn’t recognise in the hyperlocal service:

“News reports [talking about mainstream media] are slanted - everything that’s reported on the telly now, they’re after a particular reaction and I think that reaction is generally negative, whereas things like B31 Voices are actually reporting the facts and after a positive response.”

Marie (I1/B31)

In her narrative was a sense that hyperlocal media from native reporters goes further than just informing, to facilitate feelings of connection, place, and relatability. This will be explored further in the following two chapters, but even on a ‘news’ level, Marie perceived that the editors were doing a better job of “reporting the facts”. The implication is that mainstream television has the ability to also do so but curates their content to a particular end – as John Hartley (1982: 9) said: “The news is, inevitably, what they [the news producers] say it is.” Hartley describes the cul-de-sac of topics mainstream news has created for itself – politics, the economy, foreign affairs, domestic news, occasional stories and sport. It is in defining ‘the news’ in such terms that mainstream media excludes other concerns; events “must fit into

what is already there” (Ibid: 75). Even as mainstream news has evolved, possibly influenced by online culture, to take into account factors such as “shareability” and “audio-visuals”, typologies and structures were still key (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001: 13; see also Harcup and O’Neill, 2016). Or as one person commented on a B31 Voices repost of a police release about anti-terrorist operations: “When you watch the news, you watch for the non stories an [sic] wonder what we are not being told. I would rather the media just stopped spreading propaganda [...]” (RD/B31). There were of course occasions that the stories or people’s discussions on the Pages were equally ‘depressing or negative’ (coming up 12 times across all materials), but this was more easily overlooked by the audience given the comparative benefits e.g. crime incidents as a warning to others. The audience’s response to negative discourses will be explored further in the next chapter (p.109), but it is likely that they are partly drawn to alternative strands of media due to the “bad news” identified in newspapers, for example (Harcup and O’Neill, 2016: 1478).

In addition to the agenda of mainstream news, format was also important - local newspapers were considered by many to be less accessible than online formats. Paul in Wednesfield had the free Chronicle delivered but said it went straight from the doormat to the recycling pile (I8/WV11), whereas Rose used to get it delivered but now doesn’t (I4/WV11). Emma (I13/B31) didn’t use the train, so the national, free commuter Metro tabloid wasn’t available to her. There were other options, e.g. buying newspapers from local shops, but such narratives generally suggest that the physical attributes and issues of accessibility meant that newspapers didn’t feature heavily in people’s media ideologies, even if they liked the content, as evidenced by response to online versions of the same print articles. Such accounts situate hyperlocal media as one of the ways that “local journalism is changing today because of the larger changes underway in our media environments” (Nielsen, 2015b: 17) – when technologies but also offline methods can keep us informed in our neighbourhoods, it is perhaps unsurprising that print newspapers suffer. In fairness, it is also worth noting that the local newspapers were not limited to print. Nielsen suggests that increasingly newspapers are not “mainstream”, because they don’t provide the direct source of daily information for people, but through other dissemination and engagement activity through their websites and social media, they are significantly “keystone media”, with “‘ecological’ consequences that reach well beyond their own audience.” (Nielsen, 2015a: 51). In both my cases these organisations (what I will continue to refer as ‘mainstream local media’) made some attempts

to at least disseminate their content in such ways, even if they didn't then *engage* audiences in dialogue, as hyperlocal media editors do.

Mobile Facebook as everyday local media

In contrast to the above attitudes to mainstream media platforms, Facebook was a more embedded way for people to both read but also respond to hyperlocal content that was delivered to them via mobile technologies. Horst and Miller's (2006) study of Jamaican cell phone use demonstrated how mobile phones have become integral and also inventively applied in everyday practices, something I will explore further in chapter six. Even considering that some local newspapers feature a morning and second edition later in the day, Facebook is clearly more immediate, in a constant state of flux as people add details, comments, witness statements, and opinions. As news broke it was posted online, perhaps not always helpfully in the case of accidents or crime I observed - family members might prefer privacy (RD/WV11; RD/B31). This sense of Facebook as a medium embedded in everyday lives was apparent throughout my materials, with 'everyday use' evidenced 29 times. It was often easy for people to describe their broader use of Facebook but then hard to identify at which points they were referring specifically to the hyperlocal Pages; they did not always make a clear separation between the two. Barbara and Abigail, two of the older residents I spoke to in Wednesfield (I3/WV11; I5/WV11), used Facebook to keep in contact with family away from home. Another older lady, Rose (I4/WV11), switched on her desktop machine at home in the evenings to continue the day's offline conversations at the local community centre, reflecting the ways that Chris Atton (2002) talks about online participation building on offline socialities. Narratives of routine use throughout the day also proved revealing, such as Ellen's confession that "I check it all the time. [...] I'm so dependent on it. I rely on it for everything. Like if someone phones me, emails for work, contacting my clients, I don't even have to get out of bed!" (I7/B31). Horst and Miller's (2006) study demonstrated (at that time) a relative novelty in the many uses of mobile technology, but narratives like Ellen's (I7/B31), suggested a more begrudging acceptance.

There were also participants who suggested they set time aside for these Facebook sessions, dictated by their access, such as Harry's use of library computers (I10/B31), or by their preferences - Marie's more leisurely use in the evenings "curled up on the sofa" (I1/B31). But more common were the descriptions of less definable everyday use enabled by the technologies. This was determined by available time, and people described 'reading the feed

in passing' 19 times in my interviews across both cases, as opposed to 'specifically checking the hyperlocal Page' (9 times). This reinforces the theory of such communication as organically woven throughout everyday practices (Pink, 2012), but does not come without its problems. Some people used Facebook in work and also for their own personal use: Sandra in her community role for a local supermarket, or Ellen in her freelance work as a designer. They sometimes found it hard to draw a line between the two, as per Castells' (2000) concerns of the network society enslaving as much as enabling society in an 'always working, always socialising' model. For most though, it was an enjoyable activity they took part in, during short breaks at work (I6/WV11), or specifically demarking it as *away* from work activity – Marie would "switch screens [from a computer], and will flick through Facebook [on her phone]" (I1/B31). For others it was more clearly an evening, home routine – Facebook Insights data of the hyperlocal Pages revealed peak visitor times of 8pm. All in all then, people were clearly already comfortable with Facebook before they signed up to another (hyperlocal) service as part of that practice. They would come to find that there were ways of behaving there to be learned through practice, as we will see in chapter six, but in the first instance, the attraction would have been instantaneous.

Mobile technologies enable these everyday usage patterns described, and even more so in hyperlocal contexts. Some people suggested they use the Internet more now that they were able to do so on a smartphone (I1/B31; I4/B31), supporting theories that habitual changes in news reading practices are related to such developments in technology (Eitzinger, 2015). A few of the older people I spoke to still preferred or also used a laptop or desktop computer (I15/B31; I11/B31; CPG/B31), but this wasn't always the case; my meeting with Barbara in Wednesfield demonstrated that, in the same respect people could draw from a number of media sources, they also chose from an array of increasingly affordable hardware solutions (I3/WV11). My visit overlapped with her family (children and grandchildren) leaving and I couldn't help noticing the tablets, phones and other devices they carried between them. Then when we chatted in her lounge, she talked about the "notebook" style small laptop she had been using for some time but which was now relegated to the side table in deference to her iPad, literally at her right hand on the arm of the chair. During the conversation her hands regularly went to it, sometimes out of habit, sometimes to demonstrate something she was talking about; living on her own, it was clear this had become a social comfort to her during the day. In such narratives, the iPad can take on an identity of 'lounge furniture', in much the same way scholars such as Shaun Moores (1993) treated television and radio as more than

just carriers of content but objects of significance in the home. The difference here is in the mobility of newer technologies, both in size and their wireless nature, so they are also increasingly accepted as more than just accessories but also tools, as per Horst and Miller's (2006) observations. The enabling potential of these devices also suggests a further extension of Williams' (1990) mobile privatisation theory. His vision was driven by increasing media content choice; we are also now further enabled by the routes to access that are offered, and opportunities for participation.

The hyperlocal Facebook Pages were more heavily used by residents than Twitter, and Harte et al.'s (2016: 149) case study of B31 Voices confirms this weighting of use. In my own comparison, WV11 had 3,029 and B31 Voices 9,612 total Twitter followers, significantly less than their Facebook followers as a percentage of the population figures cited on p.100 (see Figure 4.1). Even ignoring that some followers are extra-geographical, the Facebook hyperlocal service was used by more people, although another study suggests inverse UK national trends (Williams et al., 2014: 22).

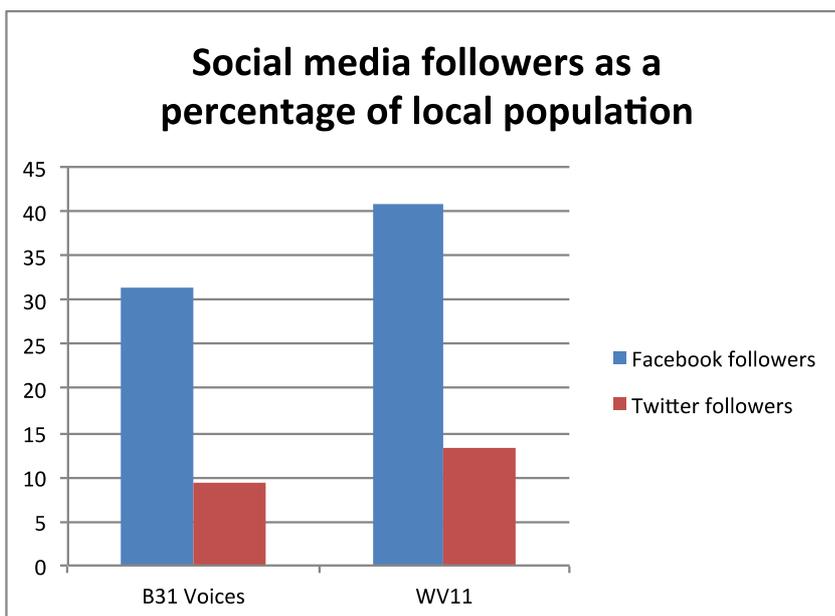


Figure 4.1: Facebook and Twitter followers as percentage of the population of each area

From my own observation, Twitter was more likely to be used in the hyperlocal context by local organisations, businesses, politicians or groups, and the hyperlocal organisation wove themselves into a network of information sharing there (RD/WV11; RD/B31). Those 'tweeters' I spoke to fitted that model. If people did use both platforms they described slightly

different practices, such as Gemma (I1/WV11) who sometimes replied on Twitter but not on Facebook, where she was concerned about being drawn into unwelcome conversations. Another distinction was that Twitter would often be used as a backstage line of communication to source stories for the “front region” (Goffman, 1959: 166) of the Facebook Page, this being more common in B31 Voices (RD/WV11; RD/B31). Such traffic from Twitter to Facebook has the potential to develop an idea of tweeters developing kudos as ‘journalists’ or sources, and Facebook as the receiving audience, but given that stories also regularly came in from Facebook means, this was not a major concern.

Two factors create these differences in the user base of hyperlocal Twitter and Facebook. Firstly and quite simply, more adults in the UK use Facebook than Twitter, and for longer periods daily (Ofcom, 2016). Facebook was so heavily woven into everyday practices as to become a norm for many residents. Williams (1990) and Moores (1993) recognise how people are enabled by media and its technologies; part of this is also choosing what *not* to use; the case of Clive, which I’ll come to shortly, demonstrates the danger of succumbing to the constant flow of media. Given that people’s interaction with the hyperlocal organisation followed their general social media habits, I would suggest that there wasn’t enough of a draw to start using a new platform just to follow more hyperlocal conversations. As long as Facebook continues to dominate in the everyday practice of a wider section of people in the UK, this will likely be the preferred option - its use as a social tool amongst friends and family invites similar participatory practice in hyperlocal media spaces.

Secondly, as much as we have explored in the literature that people create and control their own media ideologies, there was also suggestion that the audience were content with how the editors edited and curated the Facebook stories for them. There were 19 instances across my materials of people suggesting they read the hyperlocal content that comes to them through their own feed, compared to nine instances saying they specifically clicked through to the hyperlocal Facebook Page, and only six where they referenced clicking through to the Visitor Posts (see Appendix L regarding such posts). Facebook is largely a push medium in this respect, whereas seeking out local information on Twitter requires more work. Breaking crime stories in the B31 Voices area would sometimes come in via the editors’ conversations with the Birmingham South Police Response team, @bsresponse. Although the editors made the audience aware of this relationship, the audience did not use that open resource themselves, either because they didn’t use Twitter or perceived it to be one such backstage

relationship that the audience should not be privy to. As we will see, this is just one demonstration that the audience not only appreciated the position of the editors as “native reporters” (Atton and Hamilton, 2008), but actively allowed hierarchical relationships if they felt that others could or should be finding out information for them. I would question here whether they are denying themselves the agency to find out such information themselves (Giddens, 1984), or whether they in fact demonstrate *more* agency in delegating information-gathering to the editors. Harcup (2015: 693) problematises this, wondering whether “consuming alternative journalism might act not as a spur to civic participation but as a substitute for it”. However, I would suggest that, for a large part of the audience, consuming such alternative media is better than no exposure to these alternative sources at all.

Managing the flow of media

I close this section with a vignette that demonstrates the extreme situation individuals might encounter if they did not make choices and were simply open to every incoming source. This is very much in line with Sherry Turkle’s (2012: 151) somewhat dystopian take on the consequences of being “always on”. However, we should take heart here that Clive was very much an unusual scenario – most people I spoke to or observed instead supported Naomi Baron’s (2010) assertion that we largely have control over such flows. Clive wasn’t aware of the B31 Voices Page until I showed it to him – during our first interview he described his own media practices, and then followed up later with numerous emailed thoughts on the B31 Page. His rich account of everyday life and media practices lasted 45 minutes, and I’ve attempted to distil a flavour of this, if not all the main points:

“I go to sleep on the sofa, wake up at 2 or 3 [am], and work out should I go to bed or not. I get up, try and watch Bethany Hughes, on Confuscious [a BBC documentary], then I’ll try and watch Newsnight, [...] then try and watch all the other shit I’ve got recorded, then watch obsessively World Business Report at 5.30-6 before [my wife] gets up. Wife goes off to work [...] I miss Business Report because I’ve overslept. [Describes picking up the Birmingham Mail and I newspapers]. What I’d like is a frigging great screen where you had to press a button to flip over. And then I want to be able to curate where it’s your version, so it’s your version of the I [tabloid newspaper]. So I cut it out. I go round with my highlighter. I also get the Birmingham Post, which is weekly. [...] Then I go home... how I allocate my time until 12 o’clock [pm] is media shit. I’ve got a media box,

half a terabyte and that spends all its time 95% full. And we have a miserable time trying to get stuff off when it's full.”

(I5/B31)

This narrative starts and ends with a picture of constant media consumption, with hardly enough hours in the day to consume everything that he records. Sleep and time with his family is slotted in wherever possible. It is unclear what his family think of this routine - it may actually suit their collective lifestyle within the home and we shouldn't necessarily assume otherwise. There is a mixture here of both global and local news, which seems to teeter on the verge of being unmanageable, at “95% full”, a practice of heavy, begrudging consumption of “shit”. However, within this narrative is also a sense of empowered choice and control (Castells, 2000; Williams, 1990); Clive records only what he wants and literally highlights the news that is of interest and meaningful to him. His wish for “a frigging great screen where you had to press a button to flip over” that he could “curate”, almost perfectly describes the use of a tablet with an RSS aggregation application such as Flipbook or Feedly - it was unclear if he was aware of such technologies. When I then introduced Clive to the B31 Facebook Page and blog he came back to me a few days later, instead referencing several times the new UK Streetlife hyperlocal platform that emails users with notification of new daily content. The B31 Voices content appealed, but for it to suit him, he would need something even more direct than the push model of the Facebook Page content that I described above: “My news alert portal(funnel) is email” (E15/B31). Clive's practices help to demonstrate how people personalise their media practices by aggregating, editing and curating ‘always on’ sources into their individual media ecologies, but the difference here was that he didn't participate in the media or use media *social* spaces, and so he was maybe unaware of what might be considered a ‘normal’ level of consumption. By comparison, audiences of the Facebook Pages develop their own media ideologies communally, learning and consuming through observation of the collective practice.

2. Hyperlocal editors, and the Facebook spaces they create for participation

Meet the editors

The hyperlocal media editors' effectiveness in achieving audience participation is tied up in the deployment of platforms described above, but is also partly due to their dual role as residents. Beyond the fact that the editors had no journalistic training, the audience perceived

them as people of and within the community, doing a service for others as native reporters (Atton and Hamilton, 2008). In the case of WV11, the editors lived on the local Ashmore Park estate and through their involvement offline, they were seen as contributing to a bottom-up and well-received regeneration of the area. Their style of online practice demonstrated an understanding of their audience, which helped develop participation, further explored in Turner et al. (2016). This is synonymous with definitions of “public journalism” that seeks to play active roles within the community, and listen to audiences (Forde, 2011; Platon and Deuze, 2003), but as native, resident reporters, such efforts are more likely to be effective than any attempted by mainstream media.

It is also in the editor’s affinity with local people that we can understand their motivations for setting up these blogs or social media spaces; Van Kerkhoven and Bakker’s (2015) study cites social and community concerns as the greatest motivation for hyperlocal editors. In WV11 and B31 Voices (both were run by couples), the services were started following events at local schools, but then maintained once people continued to use them. Richard, a WV11 audience member and friend of the editors, recalled a conversation with one of the editors prior to setting up their blog “about frustrations of the local community in accessing information from the [Wolverhampton] council corporate website”, (I10/WV11), and they squarely decided that someone could do a better job. Studies of similar European municipality (i.e. council) Facebook Pages found that whilst they provided information, they did not match citizens’ everyday needs (Bonsón et al., 2015), or residents’ expectations and desires for communication with the municipality (Lovari and Parisi, 2015). It is worth noting that the council’s Wolverhampton Today Page is followed by 43,062 of its 252,987 population (17%), whereas Wednesfield’s population of 22,646 is followed by 9,257 (40%)⁴. The main difference between the editors of WV11 and B31 Voices is that the former were increasingly active in running social media surgeries, the new community centre, or other events, but this was not always possible for the latter due to their personal circumstances and the scale of their area – more details of the B31 Voices editors’ lifestyle and editorial practices can be found in Harte et al.’s (2016) case study. However, this possibly freed them up to spend more time in running their hyperlocal Page, where they ran more Facebook stories per day than WV11.

However, as much as the editors could be thought of as citizen peers, they were not always explicit with their identity and, as such, the audience sometimes assumed them to be more of

⁴ Wolverhampton population provided through mid 2014 estimate, based on 2011 census. Followers accessed 21 January 2017

an 'organisation', demonstrating that they could appear professional as well as 'native'. Not all of the people I spoke to knew about the editors, so the assertion that the audience trust the space through empathic response doesn't always apply. This misapprehension is not surprising given that some local councils also run Facebook Pages and may, on the face of it, not seem so different to the output of the hyperlocal service – Terry in Longbridge said "I don't know who does [the B31 Voices Page], but they seem more professional" (I15/B31). Pete in Wednesfield, who had a good on- and offline relationship with the editors of WV11 was nonetheless falsely under the impression they had started out with "commercial" interests (I7/WV11).

The reality beyond such audience perceptions was that both editors of WV11 had 'day jobs' using the Internet and social media - the B31 Voices editors shared some "basic design skills from college" and a "basic Open University web design course so knew VERY minimal amount of html" between them (EdI2/B31). They were otherwise early adopters of social media and self taught. While the WV11 editors had the benefit of using computers in a home office setup as well as tablets and smartphones, B31 Voices were limited to purely mobile hardware for a period because circumstances of illness meant that one of them couldn't use their desktop computer, and their laptop had broken: "We spent around 6+ months of just me on my mobile plus [male editor] for a few hours a day when he could roll on his side and use his mobile!" (EdI2/B31). When the audience did understand such labour as voluntary they appreciated their efforts, and might be intrinsically motivated to try and maintain balance in that exchange relationship i.e. put something of their own into it too, as per Deci's theory (1972). In fact neither hyperlocal service made money from their venture: WV11 had tried it in the past through advertising, but then abandoned the idea. B31 Voices' crowdfunding venture was intended to supply them with an improved website and new, much-needed laptop given the circumstances described above. However, as much as people often recognised the efforts of the B31 Voices editors and thanked them throughout my fieldwork (RD/B31), B31 Voices posts about this crowdfunder often fell flat, reaching £3249 only when a few larger donations were made, as opposed to numerous micro £1 donations from readers as might have been hoped. It is likely that here, as maybe with others cases of hyperlocal organisations attempting to crowdfund (Cook et al., 2016) and introduce forms of revenue, that people don't understand why the editors can't just 'carry on as they are', given the otherwise largely 'free' nature of their Internet experience.

Before exploring more fully what it is the editors do with the Facebook Pages they create, their decision to use this platform in the first place must, in part, be problematized. Having established that the editors are largely understood as peers of the audience, it is not surprising that they would also understand that Facebook is the platform to deploy if they are seeking reach and engagement, given its widespread use. However, what they create in doing so is a space of “small scale (restricted) production” (the Page) that is in turn within and supported by Facebook itself, a structure of “large scale (mass) production” (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 131). Whilst the editors themselves are in a position of power and control within their Page, they are in turn controlled and at the mercy of the platform itself, and any changes to the format, interface and algorithms that present their content. When Mark Zuckerberg (2018a), Facebook’s CEO, announced in January 2018 that the platform’s content feed would be changing to present more local news, it was unclear whether this would favour small enterprises such as hyperlocal media Pages, or attempt to promote more mainstream local news outlets. Just days prior to this, Zuckerberg (2018b) had made a seemingly conflicting statement: “I’m changing the goal I give our product teams from focusing on helping you find relevant content to helping you have more meaningful social interactions” – the implication for owners of Pages or Groups is that they would have to pay to boost their content if they wanted it to be seen. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that some hyperlocal organisations are reluctant to use Facebook at all given this uncertainty as to how their content might be owned, delivered, and shared (see above, p.120). Some of those I met at the Talk About Local unconferences considered the lack of control and design (compared to their Wordpress blog, for example) to be a huge downside.

The wider political economy of Facebook was also sometimes exposed to the user. On at least one occasion, in my observation of the B31 Voices Page, I felt I wasn’t seeing posts that the editors informed me had been posted - they didn’t appear in my stream but I could still see them if given the direct link. Given the changing nature of those items such as advertising and promoted features, as well as friend and Page posts that appear in our stream, it was not always clear how Facebook presented the information and what would be ‘seen’ whilst other posts were relegated. This sense of the audience being unsettled by these changes isn’t strongly evidenced in my materials, a few times in my interviews and twice in my B31 research diary (RD/B31), but it is worth noting that this unease may have also been present, even subconsciously, amongst others members of the audience. It is testament to the effectiveness of the platform, or at least the extent to which it became so embedded in

people's everyday media use, that any such concerns in the eyes of the editors and audience were generally outweighed by more broad satisfaction with the platform. The audience's resilience and agency in overcoming any barriers presented by the features and interface of Facebook (explored in chapter six, p.189) demonstrate their understanding that such Pages have become *their* spaces. It is in the audience's collective communicative practices that the real power is unlocked.

Facebook Pages: editorial practices

One of the most efficient ways editors provided timely content for their audience was by reposting existing, external mainstream sources. This created the potential for tension, given the audience were being presented with stories from mainstream organisations that they'd otherwise sometimes criticised (see above, p.101), but this was not really observed in the space as a problem for the audience (RD/WV11; RD/B31). These stories were typically from the website of local newspapers such as the Birmingham Mail or Bromsgrove Standard in Birmingham or the Express and Star in Wolverhampton, and occasionally from national sources such as the BBC website (RD/WV11; RD/B31). There were times when the editors and audience alike would rather distance their practice from that of mainstream media, as in negatively skewed coverage of events such as crimes in Northfield. In many cases though, stories wouldn't have been known to the editors at all without that initial coverage – in order to present an alternative take on the news, as per Atton's (2002) conceptualisation, we must learn of it in the first place, and it can be in comparing hyperlocal media's fresh perspective to the original that audiences find value. These stories were emailed in, posted or sent via Facebook message to the editors - the audience 'writing or sourcing stories' in some way came up 43 times in my materials, 26 of these from my B31 Voices research diary (RD/B31).

The frequency of such sourcing practices was indicated by the number of posts, but also the fact that the editors didn't need to set up Google Alerts for 'Rubery' news stories (Ed1/B31), as I had done in my own form of "gatewatching" (Bruns, 2005: 11). What emerges in this submission process is two levels of gatewatching: firstly, when the reader filters and submits a story from their own online intake and, then, when the editor similarly decides what should be reposted. Here then is evidence of the space as defined by ongoing audience communication (Bourdieu, 2010; Giddens, 1984) rather than a more structuralist approach defined by set rules. Looking at the B31 Voices screenshot below (Fig 4.2; RD/B31), responses to these mainstream posts help us recognise the space as one of participation. It is often the

case that when such news stories are situated in mainstream media platforms, they don't have comments enabled, due to newsroom practices, technical restraints, or because the story is of a sensitive nature (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman and Hermida, 2010). Or they may invite comments, but the lack of them implies it is not invited or expected, those observed "structural properties" that Giddens (1984: 17) speaks of, setting the audience's understanding of appropriate behaviour. Even when these mainstream organisations posted their own stories from their websites into Facebook, it was often comparably less effective in engaging audiences and starting conversations than when a hyperlocal organisation posted that same story into their page (RD/B31), a factor of the media trust that is ameliorated in having a mainstream news story shared by a friend or opinion leader, as per Turcotte et al.'s (2015) study. In the image below (see Figure 4.2), B31 Voices reposted the Mail story and this was shared 32 times, generated 14 Likes and resulted in 17 comments. The Mail's own Facebook Page, where they posted the same story, generated 57 shares, and 49 Likes, but only 6 comments – not forgetting that the Mail Page has 250,000 followers compared to B31 Voices' 31,000. The difference is partly in each audience's differing perceptions of the two Facebook spaces – hyperlocal media and mainstream - and the extent to which discussion like this is seen as appropriate. Where we see a lot of comments, this practice is suggested as normative, and so we are invited to comment.

B31 Voices
 Published by Hootsuite [?] · 6 November 2015 ·

Anti-crime smoke screen fills CEX Northfield shop - Birmingham Mail
<http://ow.ly/2bw9N1>



Choking customers flee as anti-crime smoke screen fills CEX Northfield shop
 Dramatic pictures show smoke billowing out into street in incident
 BIRMINGHAMMAIL.CO.UK | BY BRETT GIBBONS

13,442 people reached Boost post

Like Comment Share Buffer

14 Chronological

32 shares 17 comments

Figure 4.2: B31 Voices repost of a Birmingham Mail story, shared 32 times, with 14 Likes and 17 comments.

The editors also often contextualised the mainstream sources in their own ways and enabled new conversations as a result (RD/WV11; RD/B31). Their efforts to summarise or contextualise a reposted web page link with a few words of their own reminded the audience of the editor’s relatively peer status. This practice sometimes added local context, posed the story as a question or call to action, or summarised it in language that spoke to local people (Figure 4.3). As well as drawing in news stories from mainstream media in this way, editors used ‘official’ press releases from the police and, less frequently, the council, fire or ambulance services to generate their own blog posts.



WV11.co.uk

Published by [redacted] [?] · 14 May 2014 ·

Hmmm - The Mander Centre is up for sale, what do we think of this?
Beginning of the end for the city centre or a smart move for regeneration?



Wolverhampton's Mander centre to be sold

Wolverhampton's Mander Centre has been put up for sale with a £50 million price tag, it was revealed today – weeks after Debenhams announced it would be opening a store at the site.

EXPRESSANDSTAR.COM

Figure 4.3: WV11 repost an Express and Star article, adding their own introduction to contextualise it

Inviting and maintaining participation

In creating such online spaces, and writing or sharing content to fill them, the editors had to be careful. They rarely had the resources or time to fact-check or seek out balanced sources in a more traditional journalism model, and in this respect they faced the same pressures as local newspapers heavily relying on council press releases (Harrison, 1998: 167). In reality the hyperlocal editors reported only what they safely could – this can be seen as setting the flow of a story in motion, inviting and leading to further audience participation. Shirley Harrison framed her discussion of council press releases in terms of their control of the agenda; I suggest the audience similarly has influence in these online participatory formats – we will explore their specific practices in the next section (p.121). Being online, the stories are also immediate, but with the understanding that they can be updated or edited at a later date, and so the editors appear to be ‘on top’ of the story – the perception and often reality of mainstream media is that the story is finished once broadcast (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008;

Thurman and Hermida, 2010). This sense of immediacy and responsiveness in hyperlocal media stories is in part afforded by its unconstrained nature – I have previously alluded to the topics that mainstream media stick to (p.101). However, the nature of the Facebook Page format, and the ability to serve very localised areas also means that everyday, banal events and issues can be uniquely covered, in comparison to Sandra's assessment of the Bromsgrove Advertiser: "[It] just takes the pick of what story is the best for the newspaper. Whereas B31 will put every thing that's going on" (I11/B31). The point that will be expanded in chapter six (below, p.184), is that as much as the editors only start a story with what can be safely and accurately reported, leaving these discussions open for audience participation can be dangerous. As Rose put it, stories often start as functional, then become human interest, "and at the end, it's not the truth." (I4/WV11)

The editors also invited participation by including stories, questions or appeals sourced from the audience, aside from the mainstream media sources discussed above. These would not be enough to sustain an audience alone, but I often noticed a story relating to politics, for example, receiving far less visible attention than the next question about local plumbers or the weather, similar to content that Mesch and Levanon (2003) discovered in neighbourhood forums servicing everyday needs. This was easily evidenced in Page Insights, showing the Likes, Shares and/or comments generated in each story (Figure 4.4). Specifically note the second and third story in this list. The first of those is about a hustings, with a Reach of 766 and barely any interaction; the second is more functional on an everyday level and Reaches 11,000 people, with 1,200 clicks.

16/11/2015 21:49	 Are you watching I'm a celebrity get me out of here?!			3.2K		631 95		
16/11/2015 19:12	 LIVE NOW: Birmingham leadership hustings Hear from the 5 candidates hoping to be the next Birmingham City			766		1 0		
16/11/2015 18:42	 From Andy Vail: "A word of warning for bus users- major local changes commenced on Sunday: 29A renumber			11K		1.2K 136		
16/11/2015 18:13	 LIVE 7pm Birmingham Leadership hustings. Follow live blog from BCU media students on B31 Voices here: htt			1.9K		26 1		
16/11/2015 14:36	 Bellfield Infant School - Open Days for Reception September 2016 B31 Voices http://ow.ly/2bwj5z			1.2K		12 4		
16/11/2015 13:03	 Today 7pm. Northfield Ward public Meeting. Longbridge Lane, Northfield baths, West Heath library & more			3.3K		65 7		
See More								

Figure 4.4: Comparing political and everyday stories, showing: Reach as the yellow bar; post clicks in blue; reactions, comments and shares in pink

Whether driven by the editor's curation of incoming content, or the audience steering stories their way, I would suggest that 'heavier' content such as mainstream crime stories needed to be lightened by juxtapositioning with the banal, e.g. a reader's sunset photo, or narrative of citizens doing good deeds for each other. Mary described this as, "light relief from the horror" (I3/B31). Crediting such stories to other readers suggested again to the audience an invitation to participate. These took a variety of forms, for example: requests for local tradesmen (26 instances in RD/B31); appeals regarding lost pets, or people who had found pets trying to match them to their owners (98 in RD/B31); postings about local events such as fairs or charity fundraisers (27 in RD/B31). Many of these fell under the banner of 'banal' but were hugely significant in allowing the audience to easily participate and feel included, whether in recommending the best local Sunday lunch, sharing photos of local children in World Book Day fancy dress for school, or reporting obstructive parking on pavements. The last of these examples comes closer to Sarah Pink's (2012: 131) observations of everyday *activism* supported by digital technologies but even if we instead frame the participation as *action*, her notion still rings true, that "social media platforms and the technologies through which we access them make digital activism interweave with our everyday media practices and the environments in which we participate". The editors' efforts to curate a selection of official, 'newsworthy' posts alongside such everyday content are effective in engaging audiences.

In earlier describing the discussion that might follow the 'bare bones' start of a story, it should be clarified that the editors frequently participated in the unfolding comments as well, as a form of mediation. The editors' presence helped develop trust and a sense of safety in the participants. John Postill's (2011: 8) description of the relation between the immediate handling of a "field arena" conversation, and how this might affect our developed response to the wider "field station" (Ibid: 7) comes into play here – trust the conversation, trust the space it took place in. However, the editors could run into problems. Certain stories might seem necessary but would polarise the audience, creating conflict. Therefore, crime stories, for example, often required 'after care' from the editors given that they would start with an initial police report giving very few details, and the comments would sometimes run to speculation. In these cases, even if the audience had been witness or knew those involved, it was not always appropriate to post them. Following the death of a man in a Wednesfield local park, the initial post was soon followed by more grisly 'accounts' from those on the scene (RD/WV11). In these kinds of situations, the editors, assuming they had seen the discussion or been alerted to it backstage somehow, typically stepped in with their own comment, asking people not to spread rumour or give personal details (Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5: The editors mediating one of their own stories

I only actually noted seven such cases of 'the editors moderating discussion' on B31 Voices (RD/B31), possibly because those dramas or situations that did arise may have served to set an example for the audience. Sometimes I was late to observing these, and would only find references in the aftermath; one editor described a situation when they were "deleting the slurs as fast as [they] could" but even in this case, they "didn't change the outcome, just deleted posts where names were thrown" (EdI1/WV11). Editor intervention sometimes created conflict with those offending parties, but readers were generally supportive of their efforts. The sense that the editors had a difficult job came up in 11 of my interviews, across both case studies - as Emma put it: "don't shoot the messenger" (I13/B31). An editorial presence which watches, but also steps in when necessary, creates a welcoming space for people to feel they can comment or otherwise participate.

A final revealing practice to note is the editors' backstage activity, where they could cathartically discuss their audiences and exposed their identity as mediators of the space. Erving Goffman's (1959: 110) descriptions of the "front regions" of social interaction are clearly recognised in the public Facebook Pages; the editors performed and conveyed a sense of laidback control. But each of the editors also had their own Facebook personal accounts which I could see as I had made Facebook friends with them (and so too could some of their audience, who also counted as friends). Their personal posts were sometimes about their hyperlocal Pages, so this can be considered as a "backstage" (Ibid: 114). When the editors' Facebook friends and Page audience create a Venn diagram like this, we might then question whether backstage really is such a safe space to talk openly. The editors sometimes vented about the behaviour of people on the Page (racism, for example) or about people putting pressures on them to repost stories, and in such cases it was clear that backstage discussion was cathartic for the editors. In the case of WV11, their time was strained across work and other voluntary activities, and as much as people could see this from their WV11 posts often promoting these, the audience did not always appreciate the implication for their practice as editors. On one occasion someone felt their post deserved attention or some kind of response from the editors, and in seeing the editors commenting in a different post, chased them up on it with a comment there (RD/WV11). One of the WV11 editors told me the curatorial process was "a combination of how charitable we're feeling [...] and how much the person bugs us via private messages on Facebook," - gently reminding could soon be read as nagging and inversely affect chances of success (EdI/WV11). The difference in tone and the sense of the

audience as something the editors discussed backstage demonstrates that as much as they are considered publicly as native reporters, there is still a mediating power dynamic in play here.

Hyperlocal media: 'other' than mainstream media

In their study of Netherlands hyperlocal media, Van Kerkhoven and Bakker (2015: 185-6) ask whether “these hyperlocals take over the role of traditional media, or is another contribution to a local news ecosystem possible?” Here, I have presented the editorial practice in its relationship with mainstream media, and audience participation does sometimes result in a balanced set of sources or witnesses contributing to the story, that we might recognise as being *journalistic* (see below, p.121). Whilst Johnson and St John (2015) identify journalists sometimes recognising the value of journalistic standards even if they don't apply them, perhaps the inverse is true of hyperlocal media audiences, not always aiming for mainstream media standards, but sometimes achieving them anyway. However, the Facebook Pages of my case studies (more so than their blogs) are clearly 'other' than mainstream media, whether I judge this by: the differing story types and subjects I identify (see below, p.124); the communicative and messy flow of participation (p.137); or the audience's motivations, which are just as likely to be based in a desire to be heard or connect, than to contribute to balanced reporting (p.143).

In performing a brief, informal content analysis of a few issues of the Wolverhampton Chronicle free newspaper (covering an admittedly wider area than Wednesfield), only two stories matched with the WV11 page. This suggests everyday value to residents in terms of media plurality, but the Pages also prove themselves to be more obviously “small scale production” that concerns itself with cultural and social rather than economic capital (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 131). The WV11 Page shared stories immediately, and newsworthiness was not weighed against print costs. Banal, everyday stories and events were featured, while the Chronicle tended to document *after* they had occurred, as much as before. In this sense, hyperlocal media spaces do not replace but perform a different role to the 'news' journalism of local newspapers. The Facebook Pages also performed a different role to the more formal blogs that the editors ran (e.g. WV11.co.uk). Most significant here was the sense they had created, and maintained with the audience, a more immediate and participatory space of communication and information. Irene Costera Meijer's (2010) study identified that journalists and journalism scholars' expectations of local journalism matched what people more broadly expected, but that their case of Netherlands television also demonstrated

additional audience concerns, for example regarding representation and the potential to provide inspiration. Given this, it is hardly surprising that when audiences shape a local medium through their own participation, it tends to look different to mainstream equivalents, as we will see in the remainder of this thesis.

3. Audience practice in the hyperlocal space

In the remainder of this chapter I explore audience practice, which further demonstrates the Facebook Pages as communicative spaces. A model of media audiences that looks beyond mere 'consumption' is not new (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2005; 2008; Domingo and Heinonen, 2008; Flouch and Harris, 2010; Gillmor, 2004; Moores, 2003). However, hyperlocal media participation cannot be merely contained in the finite ideas of sourcing or writing a story – both the practice and resulting content are developed and continuously changing, as per Pink's (2012) descriptions of "entangled" local communications that reach beyond neater network theory models (Castells, 2000). Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2015: 248) noted four key Facebook elements in "breeding user involvement with news content: (1) wall; (2) likes; (3) tags; and (4) comments". I extend on this in the nuanced ways that I saw the audience participate in the space.

The audience sourcing stories

I have touched on some of the editor/audience relationships, including the backstage methods, but it is worth stressing that the audience contacted the editors in a variety of ways, demonstrating varied idioms of practice informed by their understanding of normative behaviour. If the audience member had a story to be posted and knew the editors, either through other relationships or as Facebook friends, they could message them directly via Facebook. This increased their chances of a repost, being more visible than Visitor Posts. However, accounts of this very direct approach through interview were possibly because some of my participants were friends with the editors. Nonetheless, these back channels were important as informal discussion with the editors, without having to adhere to the appropriate performances of the Page. Other means of providing story sources were sometimes more subtle, for example adding @b31Voices or @wv11 to a tweet, or using B31's much anticipated #b31snowwatch hashtag. These tweets were then sometimes cross-posted to the Facebook Page. Interestingly, although the function works in exactly the same way on Facebook, in alerting the editors with a notification, people didn't similarly 'mention' B31

Voices or WV11 in their own Facebook posts (RD/WV11; RD/B31). Whilst we will see that people often mentioned friends' names in comments to alert them to stories (noted 25 times in RD/B31, and explored further on p.88), using the same method to address the editors like this was alien to them, I would suggest simply because they had not observed it as normative practice. This sense that people only did what they knew to be acceptable or 'normal' in the space supports Bourdieu's theory of the field, and the significance of practice in shaping it (2010); we can also look to Giddens' (1984: 14) theory of agency and practice in "feedback loops".

Visitor Posts were another way the audience sourced stories and started conversations. There was a visibility problem with the feature (see Appendix L), but it was still used as an additional noticeboard where people posted stories, observations or questions with the hope of finding an audience, either amongst those few who read Visitor Posts, or by being re-posted by the editors. The latter can be interpreted as validation, 1) that the person submitted something appropriate, 2) that it is deemed worthy and of interest, and 3) that it is timely – in the case of photos of traffic accidents or sunsets, it was often the *first* photograph that the editors saw that got reposted, rather than the 'best' (RD/B31; RD/WV11). This sense of having wider influence by posting using more public Facebook means (rather than sharing something to one friend via Direct Message) is affective for the audience, as per Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar's (2015) study, but I would question if this has any longer-term effect in the person posting, e.g. social capital, and I explore this in more depth below (p.179). However, on a more immediate level, being reposted can be seen as the first point to be scored in the temporary "field arena" of a post (Postill, 2011: 7) - the participant visibly takes some credit, along with the editors (Figure 4.6) through 1) Facebook's interface design for sharing posts and 2) any additional thanks or credit the editors may add – although we should not forget that the editors then retain control over the repost and resulting comments.



Figure 4.6: The interface for reposted stories allows the source to take dual credit for the story, with the editors

These Visitor Posts demonstrate how the space's use is continuously negotiated by the re/productive practices of the audience (Giddens, 1984). Both WV11 and B31 Voices included a statement on their Page to explain the geographical and story remit, with a call for people to contribute. However, it is unlikely the audience read this. Rather, the audience recognised through observation that this was a space of audience practice. As well as understanding what was considered appropriate, they also sometimes pushed against this, and I explore this agency further in chapter six (below, p.183). These are not always conscious efforts to 'break the rules' but given that I have previously noted some participants' perception of the space as one of leisure, it may be seen as acceptable to test the waters or apply something akin to Naomi Baron's (2010) theory of the "whatever" attitude to online language. This was most

obvious when people sometimes prefaced a Visitor Post with “I don’t know if this is allowed but...”, typically followed by something that 1) clearly wasn’t (selling personal items), 2) tested the limits or 3) was in fact perfectly acceptable. In the third scenario, these may have been new visitors, saying: ‘I’m new here, be gentle.’ In cases where people more consciously overstepped the mark, they might understand the rules (both written and unwritten) but hope that the editors choose to post their ‘unacceptable’ story anyway, such as trying to repeatedly promote a new business. I frame this alongside Brenkert’s (2009: 1) discussion of “creative destruction” in entrepreneurship circles that actually helps the audience to push against but also understand, value, and renegotiate the rules of the space as necessary.

The story types and subjects that the audience introduced to the space demonstrated their tastes, and how these also were reproduced in the field. During my WV11 research diary (10 months, RD/WV11) I took note of 310 Visitor Posts⁵, representative of the stories the audience put forward but also what they were *comfortable* putting forward, based on their assumption it was appropriate “performance” (Goffman, 1959). As part of this observational work, I categorised each submitted Visitor Post according to story type (Figure 4.7).

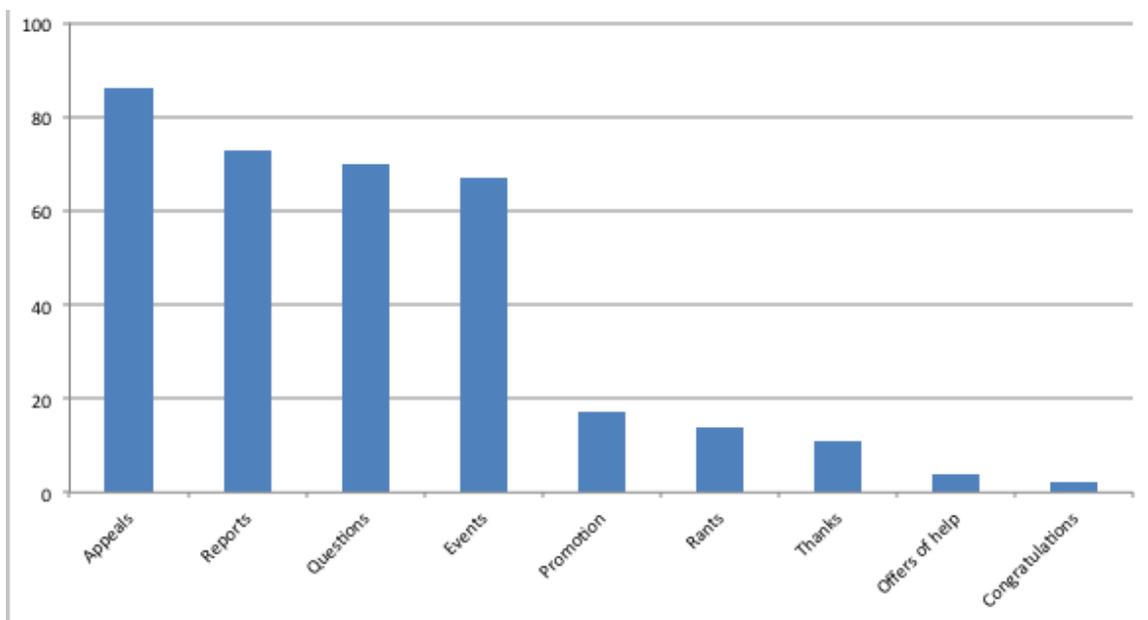


Figure 4.7: A sample of 310 WV11 Visitor Posts categorised by ‘type’

⁵ This was not the entirety of Visitor Posts during the course of the WV11 fieldwork. I only started systematically recording each Visitor Post after a few months – see p.75 for details of the research diary observation.

Appeals describe reader calls to action, maybe for the owner of a lost animal to come forward, or for people to look out for their lost animal, the kind of posts that signpost the blurred edges between the online and offline that Postill recognised (2011). This also covered crime appeals, or an appeal to borrow something. These require more effort to respond to than mere Questions – see below. *Reports* were also common, something people had witnessed, such as an accident, crime or flooding, often with a sense it might help others practically, but also in a mode of ‘general interest’ we might expect of mainstream news (Hartley, 1982). *Questions* were more passing e.g. “anyone know about the helicopter hovering over ashmore for??? [sic]” (RD/WV11). It is in such brief conversations that hyperlocal media demonstrates its unique qualities over mainstream local news; the technology affords immediate interactions. *Events* covers the advertising of any business, charity or community events. Beyond these four main categories is a tail of less significant ones: *Promotions* - other ways people promote their businesses; *Rants* – audience members venting about something but no response was expected other than maybe agreement; *Thanks* - to community members or the editors for some act; *Offers of help* - someone with something spare they can give away, for example; *Congratulations* - to those partaking in charity, or for other success stories. The point to be made here is that the sharp drop off from those first four main categories clarifies how some story types became normative over time, informed by the audience practices. In looking briefly at story *subjects* of the B31 Voices page, the top categories coded (RD/B31) of police, lost items, traffic or accident info, small businesses, stolen cars and bikes, and weather similarly suggest that the audience is in a position of power in helping to shape these tastes, at odds with those topics enforced in mainstream media (Hartley, 1982: 38) e.g. sport was not a typical subject for hyperlocal stories.

The capital of local knowledge

In both providing stories but also in their commenting (as we’ll see shortly), the audiences exercised not necessarily a social capital, but *local knowledge*. This situated them as part and of an area. Their particular contributions defined them as experienced and expert in a variety of ways, through sharing historical or everyday functional knowledge. As well as the value of this to others, the social nature of the space is also denoted here. Despite Oldenburg’s (1997; 2001) concerns about the Internet’s effects on socialisation, it is here, like Soukup (2006: 421), that I conceptualise the online spaces in terms of “third place”. Experience could be used to contribute to a shared understanding of the neighbourhood, or might be seen as a route to commanding status if it demonstrated that one person was ‘more local’ than another

(RD/B31; RD/WV11; I15/B31). In discussing a fire at “The Manor House”, people connected through personal experience of it, their family’s connection, or by accurately locating it geographically (CPG/B31). Those who could recall playing as children in a certain part of Wednesfield’s Ashmore Park similarly pointed to their neighbourhood roots (RD/WV11). In this sometimes competitive nature, the audience are not necessarily achieving a social capital that has actual currency in the community, as some would have it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1988). However, there is a sense that ‘goals’ can be scored in the game being played in the “field arena”, even if the idea of a ‘win’ is less tangible (Postill, 2011); photos had credence as witness and experience of a current event such as a fire in a Rubery quarry, whilst recalling previous fires there suggested having roots in the area - both present and past experiences were valuable. I would suggest, though, that hierarchies or the participant’s status in the field station is not greatly affected. The flow and transience of the Page communication makes it hard for someone to create themselves an identity as the ‘wise old owl’ who has lived in the area a long time and can draw on their memories – the young mother who provides details of a good window cleaner is just as likely to be thanked for her input.

Nostalgic perspectives were also a point of comparison for those attempting to understand the *current* state of their neighbourhood – instances of ‘history’ discussions or observations came up five times in my materials, but ‘nostalgia’ was more prevalent (21 times). Ana Maria Alonso (1988: 50) suggests that, in communities, “meaningfulness is neither fully linked to the present agent nor totally contained in the present time but inextricably interwoven with social memory” and the ways in which we can navigate and negotiate memory and signs is “indexical of one’s membership in a social group” (Ibid: 50). More problematically for the community, though, I would also agree with Alonso’s point that this *generates* representations and discourses, for example of crime ‘getting worse’. As Ellen in Northfield put it: “when I was little my mum never used to lock her door” (I7/B31) – although beyond the scope of my work here, it would be worthwhile examining the extent that hyperlocal media (as well as the audience’s response) feeds moral panics regarding crime, in comparison to mainstream local media, as explored in Welch et al.’s (1997) content analysis.

In other situations, local knowledge acted like a currency akin to social capital, sought by readers who used the Pages “to find out what's going on in the area” (I2/WV11). In turn, local information was offered, and the most obvious example of these were those Visitor Posts

asking for recommendations, for example, of local plumbers or “a man with a van” to help move a sofa (26 instances of tradesmen recommendations were documented in RD/B31). This was firstly functional to the people posting, like Jean, who couldn’t rely on other sources of information due to their relatively limited offline sociality (I4/B31). This, however, assumes they can tell the difference between someone recommending their own company, and more genuine testimonials from previous customers - the latter might be seen as the more trusted, objective response, in the role of “information gatherer” (Bruns, 2005; 28). The trustworthiness of such “crowdsourced” information (Howe, 2008) is debatable, but the ease of this method outweighed any audience concerns. Marie compared such online conversations with tradesmen listing sites, but liked being able to ask a wider audience online with direct experience: “it’s a real person not just a random review” (I1/B31). When companies did respond directly, the post became a space where details could be arranged in the thread or, more commonly, backstage via direct message, email or phone. Such conversations demonstrate something uniquely afforded by hyperlocal media – a combination of crowdsourcing and evaluating information around a specific theme or task. This became such a common occurrence that when the audience repeatedly asked for similar kinds of tradesmen, they were referred to previous conversations. These threads of conversation could therefore be seen as replacing Yellow Pages printed directories as lives are increasingly part-lived online, but also due to the fluid, localised nature of this information - a ‘man with a van’ might not be registered as a business at all. What I was not also privy to was any similar recommendations offline, given that Eisingerich et al.’s (2015) study demonstrated Facebook users being happier to suggest brands offline through word of mouth, rather than on Facebook. Some might prefer offline means of sourcing a company, or other regulated listings, being put off by the relative messiness in online conversation, where the trusted, ‘objective’ reviews must be weeded out. In the context of Castell’s (2000: 14) idea of the “informationalist society” based on knowledge and information, these accounts also demonstrate his recognition that “societies are organised around human processes” – as human process, communicated information might easily be laced with sub/conscious agendas. Such ‘information’ in the hyperlocal media space then cannot be taken as ‘truth’ but must be understood as a communicative act – although in some cases such as the sharing of local event details, we might expect there to be less concern of agenda.

Equally significant on a social if not functional level, were posts or questions concerning the everyday. Banal posts initialised conversation, creating a temporary space for people to be

counted as part of the collective, a place for social interaction when others might not be provided offline, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Hyperlocal media was one of the few communal platforms where people could exercise their local knowledge as described above – someone in my Facebook Group said that “in today’s society with much less of an actual community it’s so nice to have a digital community” (CPG/B31). The levels of participation I observed support views that people take part for the feeling that they are able to help, connecting themselves to the community (Fröhlich et al., 2012; Gauntlett, 2013; Shirky, 2010; Väättäjä, 2012). Examples include discussing the best place for a local Sunday lunch (RD/WV11) or posting a photo of a striking sunset or rainbow, and I will explore the use of such photos in chapter five (below, p.143). Such conversations are levelling, reaching beyond those objective class structures that concerned Hall (1991) and Bourdieu (2010). The property that draws them together into group social identity here is not wealth, gender or age, but geography. In some cases, of course, class structures were implied; people might be thought of as living in a ‘posh’ or ‘run down’ neighbourhood. However, given the anonymity afforded online, it was up to the participant whether they discussed where they lived, thus aligning to certain identities – I certainly didn’t observe Habermas’ (1991) concerns that public sphere was exclusive to the middle classes in these acts of collective social identity. In participating, they demonstrate their expertise in the local area, and also their pride in belonging to that population. Mary, in south Birmingham, described a (geographically) external agency being brought into a part of Birmingham to run projects, but was critical of their understanding of the neighbourhoods: “They were working in Kingstanding and Ladywood. And they’d put the two areas together because they said the statistics were similar. And I thought the levels of poverty may be, but the populations are quite different.” (I3/B31). In this respect, I frame residents as experts of their city beyond statistical data, through their lived experience. Alongside the more distinct discussions of crime, politics and wider national issues sometimes held in hyperlocal media, stories and discussions built on unique local knowledge and experience are the social “glue” of hyperlocal media (Baines, 2012). They create a bonding, collective experience within the online space because such everyday narratives are easy to participate in. People sometimes commented that certain discussions created too much conflict (e.g. discussing immigration or terrorism). In this I recognise the difficulties in building a sense of ‘community’ on divisive discussions; the common ground of ‘the everyday’ was more likely to engender a welcoming environment online.

Audience participation: the significance of clicking, Liking, and sharing

People were not always drawn to click on hyperlinks, demonstrating their tastes, but also discomfort, in being drawn out of the Facebook space. During the course of my fieldwork I did occasionally look at the Facebook Insights (editors had allowed me to view these data analytics), and was always surprised by how infrequently people clicked the links featured in posts (RD/WV11; RD/B31). Ellen in Longbridge reported that she did so to expand on a story if it was “interesting” or something was “going down locally” (I7/B31). This suggested she might hunt out information on the Page on issues that were already of concern to her, as in the nearly 1000 clicks through to a local councillor’s statement about proposed Syrian airstrikes (a national debate at the time) (RD/B31). As I didn’t systematically analyse all links, it is hard to judge whether some story types or the timing of posts at peak hours would result in better ‘click rates’. Nonetheless, I suggest that the audience were also not clicking ‘out’ because they didn’t want to be removed from their Facebook stream - it would be both physically and cognitively cumbersome to return to it afterwards. As we have established, Facebook as a platform has a place in the everyday practices of many people and to be removed from it is to be jarred from that flow of communication - the payoff must be deemed worthwhile.

Another factor for low ‘click rates’ may be that the editor’s own introduction appearing alongside links in the post were deemed sufficient information for the reader. Therefore, if editors want to drive traffic to their or other people’s sites, they must tease with enough information, whilst calling on people to click links – the fact that none of the editors engaged in ‘clickbait’ practices such as leading titles (Blom and Hansen, 2015) suggests a certain respect for their audience. Occasionally, when people asked for more details that they found to be missing in a Facebook post, or made certain assumptions based on the shorter introductory text, the editors or other readers had to point out that they would find the information if they clicked through. This lack of deeper engagement in stories is troubling given studies suggesting that apathy towards local media has an impact on voting numbers (Hayes and Lawless, 2015) - for the most part, political stories listed in the Page Insights did *not* engage people, either in comments and Shares, or from people clicking through to the larger story, where applicable. When B31 Voices offered political parties ‘500 words’ of their say in blog posts in the run up to elections, most of them received little interest, except for the Conservative candidate in Northfield, with 600 clicks to the story (RD/B31). This is maybe to be expected given Leticia Bode’s (2016) assertion that, whilst Facebook offers opportunity to

learn political information, users don't always take up the offer. As a result, both sets of editors were often amused by the effort they put into certain stories only for them to fall flat, compared to a very popular 'Which is the best takeaway?' conversation they might start immediately afterwards in the same space (EdI2/WV11; EdI1/B31). With this in mind, their decisions to not heavily overload the space with certain topics, such as politics, are perpetuated partly through those stories and participations that the audience provide, but also a sense of understanding the audience's tastes. As editors, they do not force an agenda, but rather respect the interests of their audience.

If we establish that readers were not always clicking on provided hyperlinks, another course of action was to 'Like' a post, even though the encoded meaning is sometimes hard to interpret. This is the first of three participatory interactions that develop a Facebook post from broadcast to a more communicative Internet model of Gillmor's (2004: 13) "one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many". The value of such platforms that allow for broadcasting out to a wide audience, where information is then up for discussion and reappropriation, is significant, especially given mainstream media often falls flat in this respect (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman and Hermida, 2010). Liking a post is the least physical load on the user. The difference in labour and time between clicking Like and typing a few words of comment might seem negligible but when we consider that some people were responding to Facebook posts in between other everyday events, such as during the school run (I13/B31), during work breaks (I1/B31), or while walking the dogs (I8/B31), this can make a difference. In contrast to the way that clicking links might remove them from the Page, Liking happens within the user's stream. However, what people gain in this ease of operation, they lose in nuance: "Likes and other kinds of lightweight affirmation serve as social cues of acceptance and maintain interpersonal relationships, but may mean different things to different people" (Scissors et al., 2016: 1501). Lee et al.'s (2016: 332) study suggested that amongst Facebook friends, people clicked Like to "express enjoyment" or "for pleasing others" depending on their character – two very different intentions and encodings. In the Facebook Page space, relative anonymity means we can't identify which of the two models someone is applying – and more might be implied, such as simply saying, "I have read this". The encoded and decoded meanings may be far from equivalent, as per Hall's (2006) theory of communication, given it is left to the viewer to work it out. Examples of stories that generated a lot of Likes are: a photo of an unusually shaped flower (186 Likes); a story about armed forces accommodation being built in Longbridge (472 Likes); a 'thank you' to someone who gave

CPR to their father on the bus and saved his life (this story remained on the Visitor Posts but still gathered 2,200 Likes) (RD/B31; RD/WV11) – and these demonstrate this variety in ‘Like intentions’. Part of the problem of this ambiguity relates to the concern of ‘clicktivism’ (White, 2010). In appeals, clicking ‘Like’ alone may make people *feel* they have connected or interacted, when the person appealing might have hoped for more. On WV11, May 2014, the editors put out an appeal for volunteers to help clear up a graveyard that was overgrown and often the cause for complaint by those with family there (RD/WV11). Several people Liking this (eight in this case) might suggest that they would attend but only two did, and so it is hard to correlate in such posts between Likes and further action (Figure 4.8).



Figure 4.8: A call for volunteers generating 8 Likes (names anonymised in comments)

The value of a Like is also unclear. To Like is to be part of the collective consensus, to contribute to the sense that ‘we like this’ as an audience – and in this it might be seen as developing public opinion, even if this does not follow any further, as I discuss below (p.167). Perhaps less helpfully though, as we scan the stories, it may be the case that we are drawn to those stories which have already been ‘Liked’ and thus sanctioned by others, and so posts can generate interest in a feedback loop. Finally, it should be noted that what might seem to the

user an action that will earn or contribute to their social capital or standing in the field as per Coleman's (1988) suggestion, or a performance of the self and identity (Zhao et al., 2013), is most probably in vain. Whilst it is possible to see exactly who has Liked a story by hovering over the Like button on the post, neither audience members nor editors I spoke to reported ever doing this, challenging the notion in Scissors et al.'s (2016: 1501) study of personal Facebook account use that people "care more about who Likes their posts than how many Likes they receive". Therefore, clicking Like is akin to tipping a glass of water into a lake – unless someone saw you doing it, your contribution is not noted.

A coda to this is the introduction in late February 2016 (after my fieldwork), of additional 'reactions' that users could choose from (Figure 4.9). This helped with the problem of, for example, 'liking' that a crime story is being covered, but clearly not 'liking' crime.

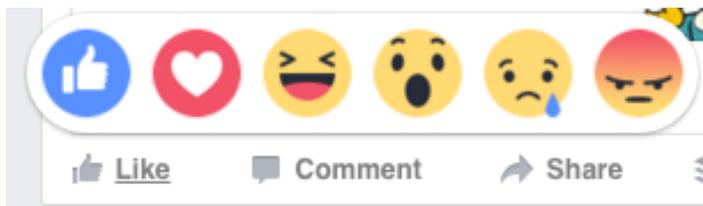


Figure 4.9: Expanding on Like, other 'reactions' were added in February 2016

The second interaction that readers made was in 'Sharing' posts, assisting with reach and also engagement. Sharing a post means that it will appear in the individual's own personal Facebook stream, reaching their family and friends, both in and outside the hyperlocal Page's audience. Extending the previous note that Liking a post is unlikely to affect the individual's social capital, the difference here is in the individual more selflessly acting for others. Putnam (2000: 20) defines social capital as the difference between acting for "a 'private good' and a 'public good'", but in Sharing a post to our variety of Facebook contacts, a story is made 'public', dispersed through often more private networks *as well as* weak ties. Given that sharing a story will widen reach, it is worth remembering that around a third of the population in the B31 Voices area and half in Wednesfield are signed up to the Pages. The question then is, who sees those stories that the audience re-shares, and does this reach more of the local population as a result? We can assume this to be the case sometimes, given that people I spoke to said that some of their Facebook friends were local (who would therefore see such Shared stories), even if some of the older participants such as Sandra, Rose and

Barbara also used Facebook to keep in touch with friends and family from further afield (I11/B31; I4/WV11; I3/WV11).

Given that some people reported Facebook friends to be mostly local, the audience's Sharing might not always be about improving 'reach', but rather an easier and more immediate way of communicating information quickly rather than trying to remember it later on, in offline contexts. In some cases they might not reconnect online later - Mesch and Levanon's (2003) recognised that "weak tie" relationships increased through online interaction, so local Facebook friendships may sometimes have been entirely based online. I personally rarely shared hyperlocal posts, primarily because information about a local event or lost dog was irrelevant to most of my friends, around the country. There may be other barriers to this participation though. If we relate this to my discussion of Likes, Sharing is more of a commitment in that it 'performs' something visible in the individual's feed. This practice has the potential to create confusion with that individual's friends who are not a 'member' of the hyperlocal Page field, who do not recognise the practices, norms, language, etc. of that space, so it is understandable that some stories are shared more than others. However, those stories most typically shared in large numbers were local appeals, sometimes relating to crime, to look out for a lost pet in the area, or to reunite a found one. I noted 'lost pet stories' 98 times in my Rubery research diary (RD/B31). These were often accompanied by a photo, which I would suggest helped them to be shared, supporting Bonsón et al.'s (2015); study demonstrating higher user engagement in municipality Facebook posts that included images (see also Buffer, 2016). Examples included: a lost, one-eyed cat which may have generated more shares because of that quirk (184 shares); the initial reporting of a murder in Northfield (471 shares); theft of a lawnmower from a van (160) (RD/B31; RD/WV11). As calls to action, people shared the stories because they knew others could help or that it might be relevant to them. In other situations, such as news of crime, it was more likely to be situated as gossip, having social value in itself (Foster, 2004).

Regardless of the intention though, sharing content assists the hyperlocal platform in its reach. This may be the best means to wider audience engagement, especially set against studies such as Wells and Thorson's (2015), which reported that Facebook users didn't sign up to new and political/activism pages but instead were exposed to such content through their friends' posts. However, as I argued above (p.84), this does not necessarily express an audience desire for civic and/or political engagement – posts that called for such activism (e.g.

voting, street cleanups) were not shared very often. Rather, people were drawn to share those stories where they could define a calculable goal and contribute to that with little effort e.g. helping to find the lost dog, and also empathise with the person in need, hoping they would be treated in the same way themselves (see Figure 4.10).

#B31LOST Bailey. Lickey Hills.



20,077 people reached

Boost Unavailable

Like Comment Share

80

Chronological

144 shares

View 15 more comments



Brilliant news x
Like · Reply · 12 March 2016 at 20:38

Figure 4.10: A lost dog story with 144 shares from the audience

Commenting on stories: local conversations

The third possible participation was to comment on a story and the immediate visibility of the act meant this was the most significant commitment a reader could make in the space. While it is true that sharing a story means that your entire (possibly uninterested) Facebook friend base will see it and possibly judge you by association, commenting on a post is equivalent to speaking aloud in a public conversation rather than merely nodding in consensus (Like). In commenting, the reader moves from scrolling to typing but there is also a social commitment

made - they present themselves in the space, giving off signals to all, including the editor, that they are listening, engaged, and responsive, in much the same way that Goffman (1959) talks about an audience's understanding of 'front region' performances. In those cases of comments adding context to the story, corroborating, or opposing a sentiment, they built on it in the role of "producer" (Bruns, 2006), and such constructive practices were identified 22 times (RD/B31), also coming up five times in conversations with people. However, the audience often favoured the editor's input over audience comments; only five of the ten people I spoke to in Wednesfield said they actively read comments. This may be due to some people's perception of them in comparison to the editor's input: "a little bit just chat and stuff, and I'm more interested in the facts" (Tom, I9/WV11).



Figure 4.11: Comments are often not like conversation and turn-based, but respond to the editors

Although they are read in chronological order, there were six occasions I noted (RD/B31) where people were clearly not responding to other comments when they commented (see Figure 4.11, responses to a story about plans for a shopping centre). They did not so much add to the conversation as singularly respond to the original post (in chapter six I discuss this in terms of visible acts of social capital). It is understandable that the audience's focus is not always drawn to comments, when they can be based on rumour (a concern arising 12 times in RD/B31), or create friction and conflict (noted 21 times across my interviews, and 20 in RD/B31). Therefore, as much as I frame the space as one of socialisation and communication,

it was often the case that the audience were ignored in favour of the editors, and so their role as mediators is valued and important.

Despite some of the audience reception to reader comments discussed, the audience did collectively build on stories through their comments. I noted above (p.115) that the editors frequently only post the initial bare bones of a story, and it is here that readers often filled in the gaps with their own experience or commentary. I explore citizen voice further in chapter six, but it is worth noting Williams et al.'s (2015a: 219) study of UK hyperlocal websites (not social media), which found that whilst editors often didn't include multiple sources as per traditional journalistic standards, "some hyperlocal producers have developed alternative means to foster and inform plural debate". Williams et al. (2015b) don't mention it specifically, but I would count the provision of social media spaces as such alternative means. In mainstream media the journalist has responsibility to present the various positions of a story through sources, even as it is seen to be currently failing in this respect. However, in spaces like the Facebook Pages, the audience step in to corroborate and contextualise (noted 7 times across my B31 materials) but also contest or oppose the presented narrative (11 times). This latter practice does not suggest the stories posted were 'wrong' or somehow mismatched the concerns of the larger collective, but I would rather point to the role of the hyperlocal space in at least *providing a platform* for such voices. e.g. in taking shape as a public sphere opposing mainstream news or authority (Habermas, 1991).

In some cases, comments from those involved were accurate and helpful. During a school closure due to heating difficulties, an official statement was passed through B31 Voices. The school were not then able to provide updates on Facebook, but parents built on the information in comments, adding details that had been texted to them by the school (RD/B31). Less helpful were those occasions where comments might seem to be adding context, but pushed a certain narrative, as explored below (p.123). The nature of threads was that they were fluid, updated and ongoing, until such time as the next story grabbed the attention of the reader/commenter and they disengaged – Judie described revisiting the stories to look for updates as the narrative unfolded (I13/B31). Given the nature of some stories to break very immediately with little more than a few words from an eyewitness, this sense of the work in progress was an important factor for the audience. This is evidenced not just in the continuation of comments over a few days, but also in the interest that is shown in

the editor's 'update' posts, often over the space of a few months e.g. in the case of a crime being committed, then arrest, trial, and sentencing.

While many comments were simply made to signal agreement or consensus, people's self-regulation in commenting was an important practice observed in my interview corpus. People described to me (it came up 12 times in interviews) how they would do so: "I don't comment on everything I'd want to comment on, I do hold myself back a lot of the time" (Judie in I13/B31), so there was a sense of weighing up risk in participating. Diane felt that in some cases such as discussion of the Paris attacks, "I think people are sensible enough on B31 not to stir things up" (CPG/B31). Mary avoided any conversation on migrants and benefit claimants, with a sense she could guess how they would run (I3/B31) and these *were* in fact typical of those threads most likely to polarise opinion, as well as those about refugees (see below, p.164) and terrorism (RD/B31). The problem this presents in terms of reading the Page posts is that whilst they may seem to reflect public opinion of the locality as a whole (as per public sphere ideals) (Habermas, 1991), it may simply be the case that whoever got to the story first also started to set an agenda or shift the focus of the story in a new direction – the following chapter explores in more detail the extent that the content is 'representative' of local people. Once a string of comments was heavily balanced in one direction, people sometimes found it hard to speak out in opposition, and I experienced this myself on many occasions, also respecting my position as observer (RD/B31; RD/WV11).

Participation: more than just clicking and typing

Despite the distinction that we can make in these three actions of Liking, Sharing and commenting, to reduce participation along these lines is to over simplify the communication in the hyperlocal space – hyperlocal media participation is at least as complex and messy as everyday conversation. Harte et al.'s (2016: 149) case study of B31 Voices starts by describing it in terms of a network with active nodes, but at the same time more accurately calls Facebook a place where interaction "explodes into a continuous noisy conversation about everyday living". The Page in itself exists as a walled garden, a field or "field station" in the truest sense (Postill, 2011), but the ways that people cross-posted content in and out demonstrates how fields do intersect (Bourdieu, 2010), which Dahlgren (2006) refers to as a wider spread of "publics". The practices of reading and responding to those posts fed to their streams via everyday technologies speaks of a naturalised practice (Giddens, 1984) – just as much reactions as actions, which are learned from observing practice. They read stories

before understanding how best to respond to them, if at all. But they also continually noted the consequences of their and others' actions. For example, Sandra (I11/B31) told me, "I look at comments and think 'That didn't need to be said', but I don't say anything because I've watched before how one little comment can escalate." In this sense then, the audience's practice is in a constant state of adjustment and learning, regulating their behaviour as per the normative practices of the space. However, this messiness also extends beyond and across offline practices too as the boundaries between online and offline are increasingly blurred. Atton (2002: 133) suggests that online activity is "additive" to offline experience, but I rather present the two as interwoven. For example, items found in the street are often set to one side in plain view and to protect them from being trodden on - when someone found a pair of glasses in the B31 area, they placed them on a bin, but also photographed them and posted into the hyperlocal Page for further reach and engagement. On the same day, a separate reader used the online space to try and thank the person who had posted their stolen and discarded wallet back through their letterbox (RD/B31). The first incident demonstrates how the use of mobile technologies allows for new lateral thinking and problem solving, while the second is more suggestive of how members of the community supported each other in everyday life. In this respect then, these narratives feed ideas and suggestions of normative practice into the online space. It is unclear who that 'wallet finder' was, but it is possible they were readers of B31 Voices, and their action may have been inspired by practice observed there. The interconnection between such online and offline practices is further explored below (p.141).

As much as it is necessary to understand communication as I've set it out above, we should remember that this is the scholarly gaze drawing focus and 'making important' those practices which would largely seem naturalised or invisible even to the participant. The picture that I create reinforces the idea that those who would wish to connect themselves and feel informed about their community must negotiate and navigate a number of "residential socialities" (Postill, 2011: 103-9). Online we can relatively easily turn Facebook notifications on or off. Setting privacy levels affords and enables people to literally control the volume, as Naomi Baron (2010: 31) describes it. If we are sensitive about our privacy, the potential anonymity of online communication for the most part also assists with the impression management that Goffman describes (1959). Essentially though, spaces such as the hyperlocal Facebook Pages involve large numbers of people participating and content flowing at speed, and so efforts to constantly and actively manage self-perception - as Turkle (1995, 2012)

assumes us to be doing - are possibly unnecessary. The reality is that, partly assisted by the embedded nature of mobile technologies, practice is more reactive and naturalised than we might imagine, as per Giddens' (1984) notion that we *do* before *thinking* about doing. Most of the people who I asked to describe how they used hyperlocal media described it as part of everyday activity, seeing content in passing, only becoming more specifically directed when they had something to report or ask themselves.

Closing summary

In this chapter I have set the context for hyperlocal media practice as situated in every life. Where local identities are more uniformly set, as in the Black Country, the online space may allow audiences to perpetuate this but, in other locations such as Rubery, wrestling with dual identities, people identified with and contributed to various discourses. Only part of the local population use hyperlocal media but it is still representative of the wider neighbourhood, sampled as it is from geography rather than other segmentations. I also recognise that hyperlocal media is just one of many narratives available to local people; they might feel equally informed through other fields, media, or socialities. In understanding its place alongside these sources, hyperlocal media is clearly an alternative to mainstream local media; people rarely reported accessing newspapers and found other national broadcast media negative or depressing, but instead appreciated the immediacy and participation of the Facebook Page. The Pages offered news about crime, political hustings and leisure events, as well as the more banal lost pet stories, traffic incidents and crowdsourcing of local tradesmen. The editor's decision to use Facebook as a platform that invites participation is significant as it recognises the everyday use of social media, combined with smartphone practices – suggesting that the best way to engage audiences is to meet them in their own spaces, those that they already use. Whilst it is tempting to understand this hyperlocal space as one of passive delivery of news to the individual's Facebook stream, the audience demonstrated agency in their consumption. Supported as these practices are by mobile technologies whereby the media travels with us, this suggests a more literal versioning of Williams' (1990) theory of "mobile privatisation". The audience looked for connections and a sense of 'community'; they sometimes exerted or worked towards social capital, but I rather found that there was a stronger currency of 'local knowledge'. This was typically expressed in terms of historical knowledge or in everyday practice. This participation is invited through the editor's identity as native reporter, sharing or creating stories containing appeals or questions, as well as mainstream news sources. Then in exploring the audience's practice in

response, we can understand the space as one of communication - in addition to sourcing stories, the three key interactions of Liking, sharing or commenting on a story present different levels of commitment and function towards the online space. Finally, two observations should be noted as problematically conflicting. Firstly, there were those I spoke to who said they found most value in the editor's input, and did not tend to read audience comments. However, given that readers do contribute to stories and narratives through their comments (see below, p.136), we might assume that such audience input is passing lots of readers by. If I was treating such content as news journalism, I would have concerns of the visibility of such journalistic sources. However, this is not the whole story. In establishing the Page space as one of communication, I will explore in the next chapter those other communicative, social and affective factors tied into such participation, people informing each other but also connecting to their local community.

Chapter Five - The construction of the space by the audience

In this chapter I look more closely at the impact and relationship of the audience's participation with the locality and its representation. Firstly, I explore the extent to which the online space represents or reflects certain ideals, issues and concerns from the offline, everyday experience of the locality. As a reflective 'mirror' of the neighbourhood, it is clear that many stories, from official and reader sources, are based in fact. Secondly, though, I argue that hyperlocal media audiences and editors more strongly contribute to *constructing* an identity of a place, whether negatively or positively. Stuart Hall (1991) has suggested that we actively seek out such group social identities, but once there we also shape them too. Such representations can transform people's everyday practices and perceptions, their sense of awareness of crime for example. Thirdly, I determine the extent to which we can say the space functions as "public sphere" (Habermas, 1991). There is evidence that this is partly achieved, for example in gathering public opinion, but this potential for collective power is typically not pushed further.

1. Hyperlocal media reflecting the neighbourhood

In the last chapter I described that one motivation of creating such online spaces is in recognition that concerns of local people should be better covered and communicated. In many ways, these spaces reflect and represent the wider experience of neighbourhood life both offline and online. As Jean told me, "it mirrors it quite well" (I4/B31). Mark talked about "authenticity" in the way that B31 Voices could be seen to represent a picture of local life that other residents would recognise (I14/B31). In this respect, authenticity must not be thought of as a factual accuracy or 'true' sense of the place, but an experience that situates us amongst and with others similarly experiencing it – E. Doyle McCarthy (2009) defines authenticity in terms of a "modern culture of emotion, [...a] language of the self, [...] a way of speaking about who I am, my identity". From my own position as a researcher living in these localities during my fieldwork, I noted those online conversations about things I'd experienced, such as someone's post about the mess left by travellers leaving a park, which I then saw as I cycled through that same park on the way to work (RD/B31). Such everyday representations and connection to our offline lived experience cement the idea that taking part in the online space is to take part in the wider community. This is reflective of Anderson et al.'s (2015: 91)

suggestion that citizen journalism's role may be to provide us with "authentic content [rather] than to rewrite the rules of news production as such", as I will explore in this section.

Reflecting local events and discourses

At a primary level, story subjects often clearly reflected local events. We can judge the extent to which the online spaces reflected the offline experience by way of the topics, events and incidents covered. It was very rare that a story had no basis in actual incident or event, even if it was then subject to exaggeration or 'speculation and rumour', which was a theme that came up 15 times in my materials, mostly observed in RD/B31. It did sometimes feel like crime was overrepresented on the Pages - it did not always feel balanced out by coverage of local sports, for example, or other events. However, many crime stories were sourced via police statements or releases before appearing in Facebook. Many such stories appealed to the public for information; details and photographs bring us back to Mark's idea of authenticity described above - 'it happened like this'. When it was the *audience* sourcing a story with a photograph, the sense of "equivalence" between that message which is encoded by one reader and then decoded by another (Hall, 2006: 164) can be assumed to be stronger because of their nature as peers. As a result, I recorded no instances of the audience challenging the veracity of an image (RD/B31; RD/WV11). In such photographic participations, and audience participation in general that was then reshared by the trusted editors, the audience tended towards a "dominant/hegemonic" decoding of posts, rather than "negotiated" or "oppositional" (Hall, 2006: 171-173). I evidenced this from comments that were more usually in agreement (RD/B31; RD/WV11); the audience contesting or opposing a story in comments came up just 7 times (in RD/B31). The subjects covered in these stories and discussions (RD/B31) were typically concerned with local occurrences that might impact or be relevant to the population, whether this was in terms of appeals that people could be made aware of as they were out in their neighbourhoods (lost pets, crime) or more personally useful information like traffic problems (see above, p.124). These subjects can therefore be seen as relatable, in comparison maybe to subjects covered in national and international mainstream media.

Such reflections of everyday local events do not suggest, however, that local people were not interested in 'bigger' subjects, but when I asked my Community Panel Group why they felt the Paris terrorist attacks of 2015 hadn't come up more in the B31 Voices Page, for example, they said it wasn't an appropriate or desirable place for such discussions (CPG/B31). Five of the six

people in this Community Panel conversation said it was too likely to cause arguments, while Jean framed this in terms of her expectation of the Page. She had been discussing Paris more widely with local and international friends online, but “would never think to look on B31 Voices about Paris nor would I expect to see anything on there because it isn’t relevant to our locality” (CPG/B31). The general impression these conversations created, and one I also got from observation, was that, despite the efforts of the editors, local concerns were rarely informed by or driven towards national or global concerns by the audience. When the B31 Voices editors shared their own story about the aforementioned MP voting against Syrian airstrikes, one person commented “is this really the place for politics ?...” (it was the top comment out of 24, with 10 Likes) and someone else commented the MP should concentrate on local issues first. Similarly, calls for aid to Syrian refugees often resulted in comments that local homeless people should be helped first (RD/B31; explored in more detail on p.164). These last two examples of ‘unwelcome’ stories were sourced and written by the editors in a mould of “glocal” activism, similar to Pink’s (2012: 88) observation of “how a ‘local’ suburban neighbourhood is connected to global flows in ways that are not immediately visible”, even if they were rejected by many. When the audience resist such stories, there is suggestion that activism can be introduced by the few (editors), but the wider audience of these hyperlocal Pages are more concerned with keeping the space they have helped create ‘authentically’ local.

Socially connecting

As well as providing witness of events, photography was a way of individuals making a social connection. For example, weather photos came up regularly in both my B31 Voices and WV11 diaries, 23 and 20 times respectively (RD/B31; RD/WV11). Asking my Community Panel Group why they felt people responded to sunset pictures by posting similar ones of their own, Susan suggested: “Theirs are better? Not bothered to look at what's already there? Share an event?” (CPG/B31). She frames it as competitive, or as indicating how readers will not read other comments, as discussed above (p.134). But her third point is also correct: the photographic act can be seen as a social communication that others can appreciate in itself, or further partake in with their own image. Given that the photos were often so similar and that they accompanied them with the name of their area, there was sometimes a sense that they were contributing to a photographic conversation of affective connection. My Community Panel Group (CPG/B31) reported that they ‘loved’ those kinds of posts and Jean described that during a storm, she “drew the curtains as it was so dark but heard the rain and the

thunder, didn't see any hail but did see the pics on B31" - the social, collective experience online was more appealing to her. Here then, I suggest that we can extend on Williams' (1990) notion of "mobile privatisation" as a combination of 1) private choice that 2) exposes us to the outside world – in addition, Jean, like others, is 3) enabled to experience and connect with others through such media. The extent of this connection is demonstrated in collections of otherwise relatively meaningless photographs, as seen in the documentation of a 'red moon/supermoon' event (see Figure 5.1). The thread of such comments clearly situates readers as part of a local collective - they had to be in that area to take the photo, so they present themselves as part of a shared experience by posting to the page. While their study focused more squarely on citizen "photojournalism" in disaster or crisis situations, Allan and Peters (2015: 15) similarly identified as part of the citizen's motivation "a desire to share a personal perspective or experience with wider publics" and "a commitment to civic duty or related forms of obligation". When these motivations are combined, as in hyperlocal media spaces, we can understand them as part of those naturalised practices that are "simply done" (Giddens, 1984: 7) that become reflexive in assisting people with their connection to and understanding of the neighbourhood. Regardless of motivation though, this contributes to a collective narratisation of the locality, significant in the recording of such events, but also in the recording of people's response.

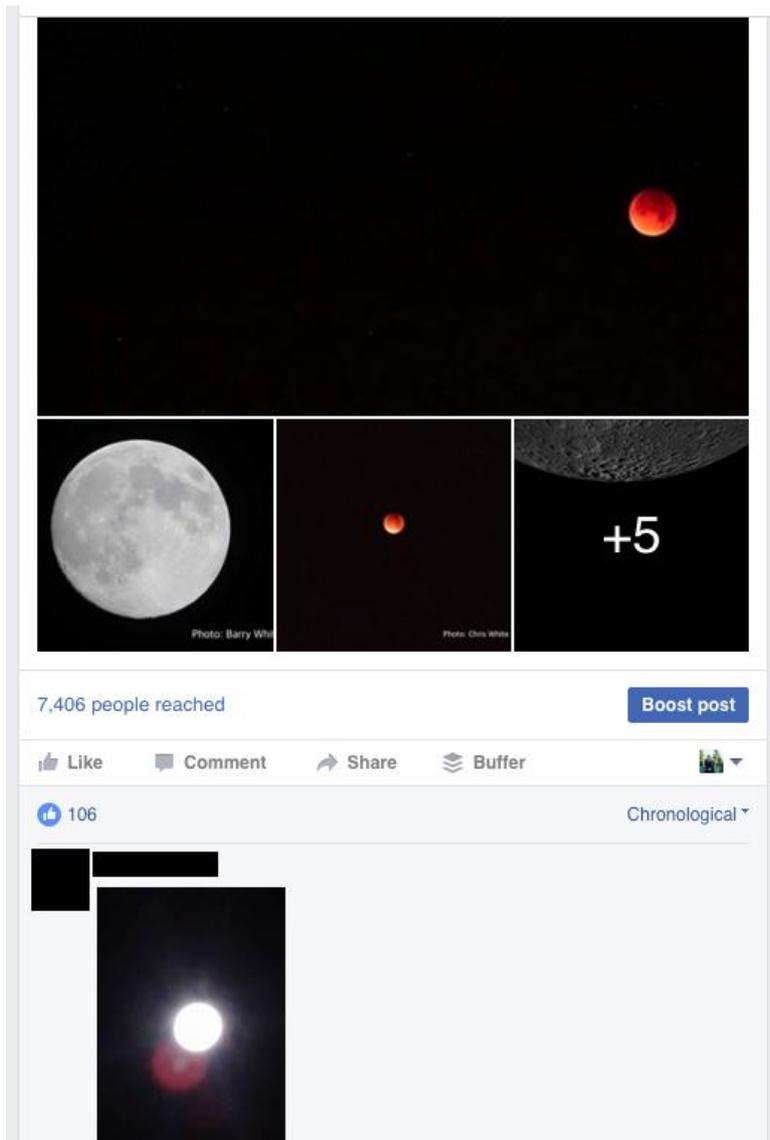


Figure 5.1: Reader photos of a 'supermoon' crowdsourced and posted by the editors, resulting in further photo comments

I discussed the role of local knowledge in the last chapter, but here I add to this, that local knowledge as presented in the Pages is based on local experience, and therefore representative of everyday life. On a couple of occasions when I complained about the littering in our park, others said it was also a problem in their neighbourhood (RD/B31). Whether they intended to say that it was not worth complaining about, or it more helpfully gave them a window to voice concerns about their localised area, the resulting conversations demonstrated that litter is a widespread problem. Even my quite immediate experiences as a researcher and new resident could contribute to or start discussions that had not been broached before, or maybe required rejuvenation. Whilst local people might not always be considered 'expert' in other fields (i.e. with professional qualifications, training or education),

they can be considered “local experts” of everyday local life, in much the same way that Fischer (2000: 147) values citizen expertise. I illustrate this in a post I made to the B31 Voices Page about a roundabout near the Longbridge development where traffic moves unusually across the junction (RD/B31). I was nearly knocked off my bicycle by a driver who misunderstood the junction, and I felt the need to share the experience, wondering whether ‘outside’ visitors to the new Marks and Spencers would not have that lived experience of regularly using the roundabout, and should be told about it. It is of course debatable whether such outsiders would be using B31 Voices, so there was also a sense that I simply wanted to share my experience (having exhausted the conversation with my family). The story generated 14 comments in the Visitor Posts where I posted it, with people corroborating with similar stories. One comment in particular there demonstrated the way that I was certainly mirroring pre-Internet local discourses: “It's probably always been an issue, just that FB wasn't around to complain about it” (RD/B31). The Facebook Page enabled me to demonstrate my own local expertise, and others to join me in this – by contrast, the car driver as incomer or outsider (as I have assumed her to be) causes the problem – see also the ‘outsiders’ perceived as responsible for the Northfield murder, which I will come back to shortly (I8/B31). However, given that it is largely people *of* the hyperlocal area who post to the Page, it is natural that it partly represents the wider experience of the locality.

2. The constructed locale

Whilst the opening section of this chapter has demonstrated that in some contexts the hyperlocal Pages were clearly representative of the offline context of a local area, there was a stronger sense that certain discourses and ideas about the locality were introduced and *constructed* online. While Sherry Turkle's (1995: 14) early work explored the Internet as “a place for the construction and reconstruction of identity” in the individual user, the same idea applies to identity of the collective. I present this sense of constructed narratives as a polar opposite to *reflecting* everyday offline experience, and found it to be a more strongly evidenced position.

The ‘crime-ridden’ locale

I have established that crime was a common story subject on the Pages (p.125), but participation, whether through appeals from the police or self-reporting residents, gave an

over-inflated impression of a 'crime-ridden' locale. I wasn't alone in recognising this. Dave in Birmingham noted that such crime would have always happened, but the online platform afforded a kind of selective memory of it (I2/B31). Agatha said, "It is disturbing when so many crimes are reported, stolen vehicles seem to be on the rise, but perhaps it is because news travels fast via a community group, and so we hear more about them" (E11/B31). Susan similarly understood that "the repetition can often make it sound like multiple tragedies when heard again and again" (CPG/B31). Although they would not necessarily be reconciling this in their everyday practice, it is still significant that, in the reflective space of the research interview, they recognise this as their *perception* of crime and that they are then able to follow through to the root of it. As one of the older participants, Agatha might have benefited from pre-Internet perceptions of the locality as a comparison point, and a couple of others in commenting on crime stories (RD/B31) similarly suggested that Facebook perhaps unhelpfully afforded visibility of crime narratives. Regardless of the basis for such high perceptions, it is worth noting that this follows patterns identified in an Australian study, that "individual's perceptions of crime in their local area are far greater than actual levels of crime" (Ambrey et al., 2014: 877).

In some online conversations, the negative perceptions were not even limited to specific areas but a broader sense that 'today's society' was somehow damaged – therefore, trying to address anti-social behaviour or vandalism at a local level were deemed by some a waste of time. Efforts were made by the audience and the editors to post stories of 'good deeds' or acts of citizenship in the community. The B31 Voices editors achieved this by encouraging typing of the hashtag #positiveb31 into stories and comments. A Twitter use of hashtags has dual roles of 1) functionally allowing users to click on them and see all tweets of that kind but also 2) offering meaning through language. On Facebook, users could theoretically click to see all #positiveB31 posts, but in reality the value was more in that second role, the symbolic. I noted use of that hashtag 23 times in RD/B31 and such practices were also praised in four of my B31 interviews. However, they were sometimes met by passive aggressive comments (noted on nine occasions in RD/B31), such as, "There are some good people still out there" - I am drawn to the 'some' and 'still' in the statement. Emma and Judie called those people "mood hoovers" for their ability to dampen the otherwise positive atmosphere of such posts (I13/B31). In looking at local crime figures during my fieldwork I found that despite this

perception of crime 'getting worse' (which came up eight times RD/B31), this wasn't true⁶. Crime stories, even when they are temporary and comments will trickle off after a few hours, encourage a discourse of crime being a current phenomenon in the area, or part of a wave; this is afforded in the comments of each post - one comment will invite others in the forming of a public opinion. Any functional aspect, given the intention may have been to appeal for witnesses or warn people to be on their guard, were sometimes lost in the general crime narrative or vitriolic responses. As in my discussion of public sphere coming in the next section, opinion was formed regarding crime, but to what end (Figure 5.2)?



Figure 5.2: Emotive responses to crime stories, sometimes perpetuating crime narratives

Here, it is worth referring back to Bowman and Willis' (2003: 9) distinction between "civic journalism" and "participatory media". The editors' practice in posting crime stories fits the civic journalism definition in attempting to encourage participation, but it may rub up against

⁶ I compared a month in one year to the same month in previous years as recorded in <https://www.police.uk/west-mercia/PAD11/>

the audience in the “participatory media” space where they may decode the story differently to that intended (Hall, 2006). In this mismatch of communication then, the audience is enabled to contribute to this sense of the ‘crime ridden’ community. The point of consideration here is whether the crime stories serve enough functional purpose, or one of helpful ‘awareness’ to be worthy of the risk they carry in perpetuating crime discourses, as we will see next.

Whilst there were a few crimes reported in the Rubery area during my fieldwork, it was Northfield that was most associated with crime on the B31 Voices Page, just one of about half a dozen neighbouring areas that B31 Voices covered in south west Birmingham. This reputation was partly due to a run of three violent crimes, and demonstrates how incidents can develop or perpetuate a neighbourhood reputation. These occurred over the summer of 2015: a murder by stabbing, a shooting, and a bullying incident amongst teenagers that was video recorded and then shared online (RD/B31). The video was hosted on Liveleak.com, viewed there 193,801 times (as of 13/02/17), but was shared on Facebook too. The murder and bullying stories had a long life on B31 Voices: the incidents broke in various posts, were then followed by appeals, the investigation by police, and court proceedings. This focus on Northfield and the conversations that ensued suggested the area was dangerous and that people should be careful there. My own personal experience of using the High Street where the stabbing had taken place was that I felt no less safe there than in many other urban shopping centres; like me, Sara did not “feel threatened” (I11/B31). Similarly, one person, commenting on an unrelated and very speculative photo of emergency vehicles on Northfield high street that was posted, said that “just because more things are being reported on fb doesn't mean that it's not safe. This could've just been a typical fight where a few people disagreed. I was up Northfield today with my kids. And other than a poorly made mocha I am fine.” (RD/B31). In this case, it was notable that 50 people Liked her comment, very rare numbers on these Facebook Pages. But as much as she lays part of the blame on open technologies like Facebook, we should also note that it was the editors who choose to share these stories. Here we can draw on research that has demonstrated increased fear of crime since the 1960s, but declaring reactions to media coverage (in this case newspapers) as complex, with “some forms of coverage of crime increasing fear and other forms of coverage decreasing fear” (Liska and Baccaglioni, 1990: 360).

Crime stories did not always create fear though – they sometimes served as a central point for the editors, at least, to quash rumours. The bullying video had already been widely seen online by the time the B31 Voices editors came to it, but their blog post organised the facts together and responded to direct questions about ‘what’s going on’. On other occasions, the editors may have felt pressures to share police appeals in the interest of the community. Perhaps most significantly for the editors and audience, though, was the sense that, over time, it had become normative for crime incidents to be posted and discussed (RD/WV11; RD/B31). These were typically discussions of neighbourhoods within the catchment area, “inclusionary othering”, sometimes directly resulting in “attempts to utilize power within relationships for transformation and coalition building” (Canales, 2000: 16). They did *not* also partake in “exclusionary” othering practices, of pointing at areas outside of the catchment as worse or otherwise comparable i.e. the audience focused on and took ownership of their own locality through their experience (Ibid: 16). The next two paragraphs explore some of these inclusionary ways that the audiences responded.

Local identity and ‘othering’

People’s opinions of their local area demonstrated pride of place, which we can explore through shifting and negotiated complexities of ‘othering’ practices. Emma said, “I don’t necessarily feel safe [in Northfield]” but then admitted “I’m not saying I feel safe at home [she lived elsewhere]. [...] I’d feel that way if B31 Voices didn’t exist” (I13/B31). Along with Judie in the same interview, they both felt Northfield was “chavvy”. Although they suggested these were opinions they’d have of the area anyway, similar to Sandra’s assertion that “it has a bad reputation and always has had” (I11/B31), Jean admitted more openly, “I am not so keen on Northfield now mainly due to the recent trouble caused by out of towners - I just don’t feel safe there” (CPG/B31). Given that Jean’s sociality was limited mostly to her mother and a few face-to-face Rubery relationships, it is likely she learned of these Northfield crimes and hence developed these ideas through hyperlocal media (including a local Group she ran). Also significant is her ‘othering’ of those non-resident interlopers. She defines geographical borders but also borders of behaviour - outsiders causing trouble that she would like to think is not compliant with local behaviour (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002; Canales, 2000). Also typical in many of the online comments portraying Northfield (‘negative Northfield’ occurring 10 times in my research diary, whilst ‘positive Northfield’ 8) was that they blamed the area, rather than the *people* of the area, as if the geography itself was the problem. They may have felt that criticising people could lead to retribution online or offline, and so it may

have appeared safer and fairer to more abstractly lay blame on the neighbourhood, with the potential to suggest what authorities such as the police or the Council might do.

If we compare these Northfield crimes to a shooting murder in another nearby estate, the reception was quite different (I8/B31; RD/B31). This victim was also a young male but this time comments were more typically in expression of sympathy for the victim rather than criticism of the area. I discussed these differing comments online in my group interview (I8/B31), and there was again desire to identify the perpetrators as 'not local':

Speaker 1: "They were from Coventry."

Speaker 2: "They were arrested in Coventry. [...] They could be local but then they've done a runner to Coventry."

These differing factors affected the online reaction: 1) that the Northfield victim had not been of the area, while the second one "was a local lad, apparently he was well known," and 2) that "Northfield has such a bad reputation at the moment, and [name of housing estate] hasn't, its is dying down. I think that's why people didn't comment" (I8/B31). That second murder gained much less traction, and a later editor's update story on court proceedings garnered only 8 Likes but no comments or shares at all, possibly reflecting the audience's desire to try and brush over any idea that problems on that estate might be rising again (RD/B31). In these examples then, we can see how people contribute to the participation and resulting representation of the area and constituent parts of a hyperlocal catchment area.

In some cases, such as the latter shooting, audiences demonstrated sensitivity, the notion that this was 'someone's son' deserving of privacy and respect. Just as likely though, is that the audience felt that in comparison, they could talk about Northfield and its problems of crime without feeling they were introducing a wholly new idea, that this was part of an established discourse both offline and online. Of course the problem is that when they responded in agreement or corroboration of these narratives, audiences were helping to maintain the position; I would like to think that "alternative media" has the potential for citizens to voice and create oppositional stances (Atton, 2002), but maintaining these discourses suggests that crime stories have become normative practice in the space. Here, though, I also refer back to the previous chapter (p.66), where I identified the ways in which people would identify with certain representations in Rubery. Othering can be applied as exclusionary or inclusionary, as

discussed earlier (Canales, 2000): Northfield is sometimes portrayed as the rough, urban part of the B31 Voices catchment that can put other neighbourhoods in a more favourable light, but when trouble enters from *outside* the area, then the authors of that trouble become 'other' and Northfield is drawn into the fold, to become part of 'home'. Given that othering has been defined as a development of self-identity in relationship to the other (Heartfield, 2005) audience members can identify and associate with certain positions as they see fit (e.g. Rubery residents feeling 'rural' or 'urban', see p.98). As well as allowing for such shifting identities of the locales, othering must also be understood as a practice of power and subordination (Spivak, 1985) – despite the fact that outsiders to the Facebook Pages cannot feel controlled if they are not aware they are being discussed, the ways in which the audience felt empowered and developed collective representations was significant.

Redressing negative news: #positiveb31

Northfield's perceived crime problem was perpetuated by the editors through the stories they ran but also the audience in their participation, sourcing and commenting on such stories. However, the editors and audience made attempts to redress the balance of crime narratives by posting #positiveb31 stories too. In light of the three Northfield incidents, the editors encouraged people to share their own stories with the hashtag #positiveb31, discussed above (p.147). The symbolic role of these posts were further accentuated by the editors creating their own designs and branding (Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3: B31 Voices branded designs for #positiveB31 stories

Examples of such audience posts included: celebration (and by default promotion) of local community events; advice on helping hedgehogs in your garden; witnessing acts of kindness such as people buying each other a beer in a restaurant; thanks back at the editors for helping reunite lost pets (RD/B31). Sometimes the audience spoke to wider discourses, such as the reader who described the rescue team and NHS workers who helped them following a car crash: “bad press is always shown but good stuff is always forgotten” (RD/B31). In their practice then is the sense that they can do something to redress this balance. Four of the people I spoke to specifically praised and enjoyed those ‘positive’ posts, and they have remained a regular feature of the B31 Voices content since.

Other audience members sometimes engaged in further activism. It was an ITV television local news broadcast negatively portraying Northfield that led Andrew, a local church leader, to take more direct action against such representations. He emailed the journalist and also posted the email online in an ‘open letter’ format. This challenged the representation of Northfield that mainstream media offered, and it worked: “[The journalist] rang me within two hours of me sending him the email and putting it online” (Andrew, I2/B31). Alongside those #positiveb31 posts, such action suggested that crime was not the only story to be told about Northfield. Andrew then organised a second act of community coalition in response to online discourses at the time which he found to be “horrific, damning, unjustified. And there were a number of us [business, church and political leaders] over the weekend who said this is not an accurate portrayal of the area, we need to respond to this [...] we put together a joint statement for the press” (I2/B31). The two different intentions in these acts are significant. In the first open letter, he challenged the mainstream media in their representation of Northfield; in the second they sought to address the public grief of the murder, but also urged people to “celebrate” the “lively, creative and caring community” of Northfield – “what makes Northfield unique: its people, its passion and its real sense of togetherness” (quoted from his post, RD/B31). Such efforts weren’t always well received by the readership, for example, one #positiveb31 post received six comments, but only half of those were positive, with one comment reading: “As long as you dont mention the rapes muggings shootings knifeings thefts and bullying its ok”(RD/B31), much in the vein of Emma and Judie’s “mood hoovers” (I13/B31; see also p.147). Nonetheless the ‘positive’ narratives are activist. Some might present this as ‘clicktivism’ (White, 2010) because they were confined to the Facebook space, but they had the intention of transforming audience perceptions. These efforts were not so much about representing the ‘true’ or authentic sense of an area that Mark noted earlier

(p.92), but drew attention to the positive, working towards an idealised sense of community, in line with that nostalgic impression people had of the 'safer streets' of years gone by. In this respect, these positive messages must *also* be recognised as constructing narratives rather than being reflective. In these stories of crime and then 'positive' community, the way they are posted, responded to, argued against and sometimes repurposed, strengthen the sense of the hyperlocal space as one of entangled, messy communication (Pink, 2012). As much as practice develops and creates the structures of the space (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 2010), and participants seek to ensure that the equilibrium is maintained - in much the same way Postill (2011) discusses "field stations" - the sense of 'the game being played' can involve a great deal of pulling and pushing, tackling and misfires in order to do so.

Influencing perceptions and everyday behaviours

Given my assertion that ideas about the locality are constructed in the space, it is perhaps not surprising to find that these ideas are influential – content can lead to shifts in perception of the locality amongst the audience. I noted this most specifically in some of the individuals I spoke to, especially those who might not be heavily involved in numerous social groups. Jean was somewhat reliant in this way but recognised that the Internet "clouds your judgement sometimes [...] when you see there's a spate of mobile phone robberies in Rubery, it makes you think do I really want to go to Rubery" (I8/B31). This was similar to Agatha's recognition discussed above (p.94), but with the specific sense that her time online made her feel differently about the neighbourhood. Conversely, Sandra's professional role in a local business integrated her within the community in more varied ways, and she felt Rubery had improved in her thirty years there: "Absolutely hated it. Worst place I could have moved to. There were lots of drugs, burglaries. It's reversed a bit now" (I11/B31). These changing perceptions could most obviously be observed in how people reacted both online and offline, and how their everyday practice was changed in the short and long term. For example, some people described changing their route to work when they heard of traffic incidents causing delays (I3/B31; E11/B31; I5/WV11). In other cases, shifts in perception are more problematic, such as when the "field arena" of a post escalates into unsavoury dramas and the participants do not seem to fully grasp what it at stake. In one neighbourhood, several businesses of the same kind opened up over the space of a few months, and there was some public questioning on a Facebook Group of whether this created a saturation effect. This came partly from the audience, but the business owners themselves then got involved in these online conversations, and described how the conflict had spread offline to confronting each

other in their shops. As a result I felt very differently about using either business (where I had happily before), and this concern was also voiced by another in the Facebook Group, with others in agreement (CPG/B31). Such dramas were not common, and in fact it is worth noting that this was carried out on a Facebook Group that covered an even smaller geographical area than my two main case studies so there may be a sense that the drama was 'contained'. However, we shouldn't dismiss such cases as insignificant given the importance of such spaces for new, local businesses. The nature of Groups is also that they are relatively autonomous compared to Pages (see Appendix L), so there is a sense here that the field arena got out of control as there was little editorial mediation.

While communication in the online space influenced audience *perceptions*, in some cases online discussions could affect everyday practices and behaviours too. Given that I only saw the first part of the process from the online input, these were harder to observe in the offline and also more nuanced than we might expect. In the same respect that the editors do not always successfully engage audiences in civic activism, people are informed in the online space, but their wider practices might not be entirely transformed. Their habitus informs what they uniquely offer into the space (Bourdieu, 2010), but whilst they continuously adapt this participation through practice as per Giddens' (1984) conceptualisation of re/productive action, their identity in itself is unlikely to be transformed. For example, an obvious effect of online behaviour influencing offline might be in people finding out about local events to attend. However, Vicky (I16/B31) said she was unlikely to go to any posted events unless they were in her specific neighbourhood, while Tom in Wednesfield said that these postings served to *remind* him of events that he already knew about (I9/WV11). For Abigail, the knowledge that events were organised and attended in her neighbourhood was affective for her, communicating something of an identity of 'community', even if she didn't then attend them herself (I5/WV11). A richer example of influencing everyday practice can be found in online communication about lost pets. For those established members of the audience who *found* a dog 'lost' in the street, the Page indirectly suggests what is the normative action for them to take. Sometimes it is impossible for them to do anything other than either write a text post about a dog they've seen, or, as in one case, hastily photograph the dog on the way to work (RD/B31). Such reports have value to other readers nearby, or the owner themselves, who might then be able to catch the dog.

On one level, these are naturalised practices, based on the audience's use of the Page but, on another, they may be more consciously playing into certain discourses, especially in B31 Voices with its #positiveb31 agenda and the understanding that actors have been praised in the past. The audience are not just contributing to or responding to a story - in finding an animal they become the story. With this interpretation in mind, I was sometimes intrigued to read about cats that are "sat around a reader's house all night, very friendly" (WV11 editor's repost) or "sitting along the curb [...] meowing very loudly" (WV11 reader report) (RD/WV11). Readers believed they might be lost or in need of feeding, and so they would take them in. Two people I spoke to stood out as being more directly active as a result of such online posts. Katrina was a Wednesfield local with dogs of her own, and this made her more sensitive to the issue, along with her involvement in an online network, www.doglost.co.uk. She admitted to driving the streets of Wednesfield looking for lost dogs when she saw them posted online. One of my B31 Voices interviewees, Diane, worked for a local animal rescue organisation and described the way that the B31 Voices space and its audience helped in their offline practice. This had been a learning process for her, given that they'd previously seen online engagement as a distraction from their work of finding lost animals. For them, time online had been considered "sitting down to look at Facebook" i.e. unproductive (I6/B31). The turning point came when a white shepherd dog was spotted and reported in Longbridge and the editor also posted it to into the animal rescue's Facebook Page. The ensuing complex mobilisation of the B31 Voices editors and audience, continuing to phone or text locations the dog had been seen until it was found, was the first case that made her realise the value of such engagement in their offline practices.

In some situations, new local practices informed by the online activity developed a sense of agency and empowerment in the neighbourhood. I have discussed lost pets; such narratives came up 52 times in one research diary alone (RD/B31). In these practices, local people sometimes 'owned' processes and practices that would have historically been dealt with by other authorities. Gemma in Wednesfield (I1/WV11) recognised that people were more likely to respond on the WV11 Page if they saw a dog in the street now, partly because of practicality, speed of response and the editors' helpful mediation. But Gemma also felt this might have been because "people don't trust agencies". I also picked this up from crime narratives when people had not bothered to report to the police, seeing them as ineffective, but instead talked of installing CCTV or threatened vigilante behaviour. In short, many considered they could deal with it better themselves. However, just because people are

enabled, they did not always make the best decisions, and so it is clear how 'proper routes' have their value as well. Sometimes the tension came from the personally exposing nature of the online discussions - a woman who was reunited with her lost dog via B31 Voices took issue with its photo being posted online (RD/B31). Other similar situations such as online photos of a found maternity ward wristband in Wednesfield (RD/WV11), or an opened wedding card in Northfield (in order to find the correct person to send it on to), were not of obvious ethical concern to the audience (RD/B31), demonstrating that my own scholarly gaze is sometimes at odds with that of the inhabiting audience.

The problem of being drawn into these practices was demonstrated to me one evening in Rubery when we found a cat scratching at our back door. I turned to B31 Voices to see if it matched any reports, partly in a desire to immerse myself in one of the situations I had thus far only observed, but also through a sense that this was appropriate practice. What then followed was two evenings of Facebook messages and texts with a woman who then didn't turn out to be the owner, and an uncomfortable sense that I had burdened myself with a responsibility, and also exposed myself by revealing my mobile phone number to a stranger. So as well as constructing perceptions, we can appreciate how the hyperlocal space also constructs new but eventually normalised communication practices and behaviours that would not have been possible in the same way offline, practices we might think of as "creative citizenship" (Hargreaves and Hartley, 2016). This is not citizenship through creative practice in the way that we might typically think of in online practices (Gauntlett, 2013; Hartley, 2010), but rather creative ways of being a citizen in their approach to laterally applying the technology and platforms available to them in solving problems, and communicating with peers, as I will explore further in the final chapter.

Non-residents in the hyperlocal space

The sense of the constructed locale was also contributed to by non-residents, but they were less concerned with upholding the collective identity that was worked towards by residents. If we return to the narratives of Northfield as a crime centre (RD/B31), many of the accounts were from locals having pride in their area, but outsiders felt they could criticise it safe in the knowledge that they don't live there (if they ever did before). Judie recognised: "it's always people who've left who make the comments like 'I'm not surprised it happened there'" (I8/B31). Part of the problem of non-residents commenting and contributing to local discourses is that they rely on recall or secondary representations rather than experience.

When someone reported not getting their post in their particular tower block flat due to broken lifts (RD/B31), others who *had* lived there replied they were amazed to see the lifts were still a problem. There may even be a sense of relief amongst some non-locals that they don't live there, those who have moved away or even now live abroad and follow the hyperlocal page to stay in touch with the locality or friends, but also to remind themselves of what they have left behind, in their own practices of othering. It is in their interests to dwell on those negative representations and make comparisons, maybe even in order to justify their decisions to move. I point to these outsider commentaries for the way they were countered by locals with pride in their area - Emma said she was happy "walking [her] dogs over Waseley Hills in the pitch black" but wouldn't be comfortable doing the same in Birmingham, where she didn't like the crowds (I8/B31). That particular group conversation led to several first hand experiences of crime in the south Birmingham area, a sense that I also got in Wednesfield that it was ok to draw attention to and criticise aspects of your neighbourhood if you lived there and took some responsibility for that, similar to the way that we can criticise our own family, but take offence if others do too. This demonstrated once again the extent that local people identified with identities as established offline and online, and how such associations made them feel part of the neighbourhood.

The other difference in non-residents is that they are immersed in the neighbourhood from afar. Paul worked outside Wednesfield but lived there and so still had that experience to draw on in his participation but also his *reading* of the area (I8/WV11). I earlier established the significance of the idea of authentic renditions of the locality by local people as developing collective identity. However, a local person might question the authenticity of an outsider's Page comment because they do not share the same broader, lived experience. When outsiders see a lot of crime reported, it is therefore not helpful in reflecting a rounded picture of the locality if they feed into negative discourses. It would have been perfectly understandable if local people had rejected their participation. But the reality is that, in the constant flow of communication and comments on the hyperlocal page, it was hard to determine the location of other participants unless they give it up themselves and it is unlikely people paused long enough in their practices to consider this. This favours the participant, in their complete presentation of themselves (or representation of the locality) in the "front region" (Goffman, 1959: 166), but not the individual reader's decoding of communications. Readers can tell very little about other audience members at this level.

However, even if the audience did not deliberately exclude people from participating, one set of circumstances did mean that a group was represented by the audience, but they didn't have voice themselves: travellers. Typically reports came in via Visitor Posts, as a log of where they had been spotted arriving with their vehicles, usually a local park - I noted seven such reports (RD/B31; RD/WV11). The function of these posts wasn't always clear but the emotion communicated was, in comments such as: "Oh dear we have visitors arriving at Fairfax park again" (RD/B31). These posts sometimes went further to suggest that this meant local children couldn't use the park, or described the mess the travellers left behind, and other antisocial behaviour. Some people spoke up to defend the travellers. However, there was no evidence that the travellers themselves were part of those B31 Voices conversations, defending themselves. If they were not local to the area, they might not be aware of the relevant hyperlocal Facebook pages where they were being discussed (I don't make the assumption they're not digitally engaged though). Judie disagreed when I presented this theory that they didn't have a way to reply: "They do. For some of the nasty swearing, I'm sure it's them" (I13/B31). Similarly Jean suggested that the editors had been approached by the travellers backstage (I4/B31), but nonetheless this occurrence (rarely observed in my fieldwork), of a whole community being 'othered' by the hyperlocal readership, highlights concerns of narratives constructed without impartiality and balance. It is here we might yearn for those balanced sources of the mainstream journalism ideal (Franklin and Carlson, 2011). Perhaps the fact that discussing other communities in this way was a relatively rare behaviour implied that individuals or the audience as a whole understood how far a discourse could be pushed before it was challenged. Another similarly critiqued group were young people with regards to anti-social behaviour, but given that this follows wider and more generalised negative narratives of youth (Stephen and Squires, 2004), I found this to be less troubling than the *potential* for the travellers to be directly victimised or confronted offline by a local group mobilised online, even if there was no evidence of this happening. A second explanation for the travellers' silence is just as troubling, that they may be reading such discussions online but feel (as I've discussed hearing from some of my participants) that it would create too much conflict to become involved. Such concerns of voice will be further explored in the following chapter.

3. Local Facebook Pages as public sphere

The hyperlocal media Pages can be understood in terms of an online public sphere representing the locality - such spaces offline were felt to be lacking. This is perhaps the clearest example of how theory has informed my approach to my materials, given expectations of hyperlocal media derived from Jurgen Habermas' (1991: 30) conception of the public sphere, which in turn relates to the idea of "third places" (Oldenburg, 1997). In Habermas' vision, such spaces allowed for unmediated literary and cultural discussion away from the authoritarian gaze of the courts, supported by an emerging media of printed journals or public letters. Through group discussion, disagreement and/or reaching of agreement and consensus, a collective sense of identity or ideals might be established and expressed, what we think of as public opinion.

Spaces and places for local discussion

As I've identified, the conversations in hyperlocal media were more often situated in the banal and everyday, as arts or politics. What we can point to though, is the feeling of some people (RD/B31) - in agreement with Oldenburg (2001) - that spaces of local discussion and socialisation were lacking in their neighbourhoods, what Hope called "actual community" (CPG/B31). So, hyperlocal media offered a space of local discussion within their neighbourhoods but also within their existing social media practices that was lacking elsewhere. On two occasions I noted these concerns regarding offline spaces. I was attending a children's birthday party shortly after moving to the area. One of the parents, Toby (even before I had described my research in any great detail), said that, while he felt there was a sense of community, there were no community places in Rubery i.e. no community centre, where events might be held, other than the social club or Royal Legion club (RD/B31). This was entirely his perception based on his expectation of what a 'community centre' might feel or look like, but perhaps the extent to which people created the opportunities for gathering were rather the problem, in Toby's mind. I have addressed how some of the audience hold onto nostalgic perceptions of the locality being 'safer' in the past, and similarly, it may be that people hold onto post war ideals of 'Blitz spirit' in their vision of a community coming together, as per Putnam's (2000) idealisation of post-war community togetherness. As one person posted on B31 Voices, in thanks for the editors' service: "You have bought [sic] back a sense of the community" (RD/B31). Compare this picture to Wednesfield, where the hyperlocal editors were part of a team setting up a 'community hub', in response to youth

funding cuts, but also included in neighbourhood volunteering activities. In this case, the hub was not just built, but also maintained and populated by a number of formal and informal social groups and activities, rich, fertile ground for public sphere. My second exploration of offline spaces comes from my own experiences of going to the local barber opposite our house – such places are typically held up as those where people might engage in local conversation or activism (Oldenburg, 1997). While I established that the staff themselves used B31 Voices, there was no sense that local events or information gleaned from there or elsewhere bled into the banter amongst the staff and customers – the same can be said of various cafes and tearooms I frequented.

However, people *did* talk about the hyperlocal Pages in terms of these ‘community’ or social expectations. When I asked Mary to try and visualise the Facebook page as a physical place, she said it was “like a community centre, but then there are sometimes discussions more suited to the pub. They're more adult rather than community based. And then some of it is just pure nonsense” (I3/B31). So she expressed the Pages as a social space relating to community and civic concerns, but also a place of leisure and more casual conversation. I have described the local knowledge (see above, p.125) that can be thought of as binding individuals to these hyperlocal socialities, making them welcoming – David Baines (2012: 152) actually refers to hyperlocal media as a “glue to hold rural communities together”. Whether the fabric, structure and support of ‘community’ ideals in neighbourhoods is the responsibility of authority (the council) or citizens themselves is one issue, but where the Internet provides means for them to mobilise themselves in the function and social life of the area, they clearly do so.

Gauging public opinion

Public opinion can most clearly be seen as developing through audience response to local stories. In the last chapter we identified how comments could contribute to the bare bones of a story, but conversations also developed in ways that meant new readers could understand something of the readership’s collective response. Having established this, these new readers could then choose to contribute or challenge it. The Pages become a space demonstrating what readers of B31 Voices or WV11 thought about crime, immigration, bins, or lost pets. On a functional level, this was part of that agenda setting and formation of identity for the space as a whole, discussed in the last chapter – if one story got very few Likes and another got more, that implied interest in certain directions (see Figure 4.4). Although readers could not see the

Insights, those hoping to participate there might mentally log a sense of popular subjects and ideas about appropriate behaviour. Given this, and despite the fact that some readers reported taking no notice of comments (see p.134), a common thread across my materials was the idea of the hyperlocal space being one of conversation (with 18 references in interviews and a further 13 in RD/B31), where commentary of local life was carried out and public opinion established.

Habermas described one of the ideals of the public sphere as a space for citizens to speak collectively and freely about authority figures. With this in mind, I now explore how at least a first stage of public sphere was enacted, forming public opinion regarding authority figures such as the police and the council. When there were problems with refuse collections in south Birmingham not being collected properly, people were just as likely to lay blame on the (faceless) Council responsible for the service, as the individual employees on the street, a sense of us (residents) and them (authority) (RD/B31). In this we might recognise another flavour of the othering described earlier (p.150), with some security in blaming the authorities in these ways because they rarely visibly surfaced on the Pages themselves.

In the case of the police, their absence on the Pages (particularly in the case of B31 Voices) meant the audience developed their own ways of dealing with situations. Stolen cars or bikes were frequently posted (36 instances appearing in RD/B31). The audience gave details of what had happened and where, asking people to look out for their items, and sometimes with a secondary warning that others should watch out too. But when readers responded by asking if the victims had reported the matter to the police, they sometimes admitted they hadn't (coming up 11 times in RD/B31). Talking this through with Jean in Rubery, she felt that the local factor might come into effect, that victims would be "afraid of repercussions or maybe they think somebody else will [report] it" (I4/B31). One lady asked about "who I contact apart from the Police" given that people in her street felt that, along with the Council, they had not been able to address crime issues there (RD/B31), a notion more widely and regularly perpetuated on the Page. Such discussions left unchecked could then generate similar comments or people recounting their experiences, alongside a few urging the victim to report it. Vigilantism (or the potential for it) was a theme that emerged 13 times in RD/B31. Posts such as the man whose "sisters pomeranian [was] ripped to bits by 2 fukin dobermans off there leads", and his appeal: ".....any info would be grateful" certainly suggested that, if anyone had given details, the situation might not have ended well.

Developing on my earlier discussion of crime representations (p.96), such posts contribute to discourses of crime with the potential to warn but also increase tensions and make people feel they are not safe in their neighbourhood – those unintentional consequences of practice that Giddens (1984: 8) warns us of. The picture that this presents as a whole, of the individual developing ideas based on what is currently occurring in the space, also speaks to Giddens' (1984) wider theorisation of social communication, and therefore supports once more my theory of hyperlocal media online spaces as communicative, rather than 'broadcast' journalism platforms. The final word here must be offered to the police themselves. Whilst they did not tend to present themselves in hyperlocal media (although one of the WV11 PCSOs was better engaged), their frustration was that they could only respond to crime if it was directly and officially reported. Officers described the problem at a Rubery neighbourhood PACT (Partners and Community Together) meeting I attended (RD/B31). Their policing priorities (areas, crime types, etc.) were partly derived from those public meetings, but also from crime reports. So, the discourse that the police 'do nothing' may have some mileage, but it was partly due to the fact that the police were not informed of those crimes and therefore could not prioritise their efforts in those geographical areas. An increased police presence on the hyperlocal Pages might have assisted with such communication and their reputations, and I will come to this later in this chapter.

Exclusion and withdrawal from the public sphere

In order for hyperlocal media to be considered a public sphere of constructive discussion about local issues and concerns, readers must feel that they are able to participate, but in some cases they didn't, and were therefore excluded. Aside from their physical ability, technical expertise with the phone or tablet, I have previously noted (p.137) that they didn't always feel welcome or inclined to take part in the conversation, something we might recognise from any social gathering, offline or online. To expand, there are various reasons for this. Naturally, not all stories are relevant or interesting to every reader - within hyperlocal media as in more commonly explored media practices, audiences are actively drawn to only parts of the available resources (Williams, 1980; Castells, 2000: 370). But also expressed was the understanding or expectation that sometimes their participation would create tension or be quashed if they didn't agree with the majority, as Mary (I3/B31) and Judie (I13/B31) noted earlier (p.94). The occasional flaring up of conflict and tension in discussions came up as a theme observed 20 times in RD/B31, but it's notable that it was a concern in interviews a

further 21 times - the audience are clearly aware of the consequences and regulate their behaviour appropriately. They might hope the readership would come to their support, but knowing the difficulties that the editors have in monitoring every discussion, they would rather hold back than aggravate or feel threatened. In a WV11 incident, readers who clearly knew each other outside of the hyperlocal space swapped slurs, questioning their parenting and personal family life in a public string of comments, to the point that the editors stepped in with warnings, and deleted comments. In this case I learned of the editor's intervention through talking to them (EdI1/WV11), so it is not always clear to the audience that the editors are defending the public sphere in this way. When others do observe such situations and check their own behaviour, they may exclude themselves, and so hyperlocal media cannot entirely be thought of as a welcoming, autonomous public sphere that is representative of the entire audience's local concerns.

Another notable tension point was the comments that followed a 'Calaid' appeal, collecting items for Syrian refugees (RD/B31). My own assumption, given the reader support and participation in the #positiveb31 stories and support of local charity events, was that the audience would also support this. It was not the case. On one level many of the comments implied that the editors shouldn't be condoning such action, but more specifically, typical comments ran along the lines of "we need to look after our own first", citing UK homelessness as a more pressing concern (RD/B31). Comments were also laced with fears: "refugees who are isis soliders watch what happens when they come over here it will be to late to save peoples lives then!" [sic]. Later similar posts of such appeals did include those people with more supportive views of the appeal, but it is notable that in the first instances, around two thirds of comments were not in favour (RD/B31). In the hyperlocal space then, the audience can just as easily reject those global issues and agendas that they similarly described veering away from in mainstream media. They may also speak more openly about such 'other' groups as relatively abstract, faceless concerns, as opposed to the travellers discussed earlier who are more immediately 'on their land'. It is also worth noting that, for me, this was a direct affront to my own 'echo chamber' of personal Facebook practice and content. Therefore, my personal response was one of shock and surprise, and then defiance. However, rather than expressing this online, knowing it would create the kind of tensions my interviewees had also described, I instead took clothes to the appeal.

As much as I have just established that the audience sometimes held themselves back from participation, this does not necessarily always equate to the audience being disempowered. Terry was a user of B31 Voices who also contributed to other local Facebook Pages. He recognised the problems of “idiots” on some of those, equating a larger sized community with more people likely to cause trouble (I15/B31) – we might recall Clay Shirky’s (2002b) assertion that a large group acts more like an audience than a community. Terry’s experiences advised him on the best course of action; he’d previously been involved in arguments on Birmingham City football sites, so that he now recognised when “it’s not worth it.” His conscious choice not to speak was as significant as a decision *to* speak in other situations; he recognised it might cause trouble in the community and also to himself, and his partial justification is found in belittling them as “stupid” or “idiots”. In this respect I suggest that such decisions to withdraw from online discussion cannot be truly framed as passive. The audience’s decision to remain informed without revealing too much of themselves supports Bruns’ (2008) sense of silent readers of alternative media as being active in their *choice*, and this goes some way to refuting Castell’s (2000: 401-2) segmentation of “the interacting and the interacted”. In addition to this, the dual threat of people identifying you via your Facebook name was a real concern for Terry, as potential invasion of privacy, voiced by others in interview (I8/B31; I9/B31; I11/B31; I5/WV11). Their name in the conversation acts as easy hyperlink to their own account if they haven’t locked it down to be only visible to friends, and there is also the potential to track people offline in the locale, or even bump into them on the street. These might appear to be unwarranted concerns but in at least one case on B31 Voices, people got into an argument that then drew them into each other’s personal profiles, commenting on their appearance based on other photos or online activity (RD/B31). Therefore, while the message that came repeatedly through my research materials was one of a space that is *for* conversation, only those readers who are comfortable or confident to participate will do so.

Most of these challenges and checks on participation will be familiar and transferable to many forms of social communication, for example where I’ve presented the Page as a front region (Goffman, 1959). However, it is finally worth noting one difference, that unless we change our mind and return to delete a post or comment, our words, however easily ‘spoken’ into the conversation, remain online for all to see and judge us by. Baron (2010) frames online type as ‘speech’ rather than writing, and I can understand this given the fluidity enabled by the immediacy of the smartphone and platform combined in everyday contexts. However, there is

an archival permanence in our interactions on such Pages. After our comment or post, the conversation can continue without our knowledge; we may be criticised without right to reply, especially if we have limited the Facebook notifications we receive. Given these factors and the conflicts we've discussed that can arise, it is hardly surprising the audience sometimes exercise caution in their participation.

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

Two more factors must be taken on board in considering the hyperlocal space as public sphere. First of all, there was at least a potential for authority figures to use the Facebook Pages as a means of surveillance, partly afforded by the audience sometimes seemingly forgetting the public nature of the Facebook Pages. Given the nature of the Pages as woven into the 'everyday', people often slipped into relaxed dialogues that would be more typical of private, one-to-one conversations (RD/B31; RD/WV11), such as this response to someone having left a bag on a bus: "U have 2 just go up an they will check the lost and found.....but dnt hold ur breath my son lost 2 on the bus an no1 handed them in...." (RD/B31). In other cases conversations suggested friendships beyond the space (I addressed the overlapping nature of such local social fields on p.99). Such conversations, relaxed spelling, and punctuation were very rarely picked up on by the audience in the hyperlocal space - what Naomi Baron (2010) calls the 'whatever' attitude but what we can also once again understand as naturalised practice through observation, according to the space's norms. These attitudes, along with the ways people sometimes entered into one-on-one conversations within comments to organise their social lives, discussed earlier (p.127), demonstrate the extent to which people were comfortable in the space. This was a space they felt they inhabited and owned. The problem in this sense of security is that their guard is down, and this then creates potential for the police or other authorities to covertly surveil the audience in their space, rather than following the public sphere ideal of a channel whereby the public could challenge them, in the way that Pink (2012: 9-10) recognises urban movements being "influential in state and government bodies". In effect, public sphere is turned on its head. Goold (2002: 21) explores similar surveillance issues in his discussion of closed circuit television, the "unobservable observer" - not only does the covert nature of such practices make it hard for me to examine them as a researcher, but it is equally impossible for the audience to know when their comments might be lifted and used out of context.

The concern I present here is informed by the knowledge that the police and councils do have frontline relationships with the Page editors in running their stories (see above, p.114), so they are aware enough to potentially surveil the audience. The police very rarely appeared online in conversations, though, even when the stories they ran through the Pages led to them being challenged, as in a fatal collision following a police chase (RD/B31). I've discussed the audience sometimes finding the stage too fraught to enter, but the police may also be under-resourced to do so, or find it legally problematic. Like the audience, though, it is also likely they have simply set into a pattern of seeing the editors as gatekeepers who could spread and also sanction their messages but, as Firmstone and Coleman (2015a: 134) establish in their study of Leeds Council, sometimes authorities will not appreciate the value of further engaging in citizen media dialogues. My fieldwork only hinted at the covert observation by authorities in two examples, the first being a local councillor who found that reading the pages "helps to develop your attitude and response" and used the Page as "a great reference point for neighbourhood politics" and "public opinion". The second was a council neighbourhood worker, Richard, who described his practice of (in his mind) gathering public opinion by copying and pasting comments from the Page and presenting them to the local police sergeant. The intention in both cases was honourable, to better understand or engage with the audience and, therefore, the neighbourhood communities they hoped to serve. However, let us compare the situation with Kathryn Flynn's (2006) discussion of investigative journalists and their unofficial public sector sources or 'leakers'. Although the relationship in that case is not balanced due to the leaker's necessary anonymity, a certain level of trust can be established, and so they have some control. If a hyperlocal audience's content is lifted covertly, no such control or even awareness (i.e. consent) is offered. Coming back to Goold (2002: 25), his solution to the covert surveillance problem is in regulation where possible, a "watchdog". Given that such regulation of public spaces online is not yet in place, we can only hope that authorities treat such spaces sensitively, or we should otherwise remind audiences that their concerns might be taken out of context.

Public opinion, but to what end?

The second and more problematic factor to be taken on board is that it was unclear whether public opinion developed in the space was acted on to challenge authority. Habermas (1991: 82) describes public opinion as "neither a check on power, nor power itself, nor even the source of all powers. [...] rather, the character of executive power, domination itself, was supposed to change". Public opinion is therefore a vehicle for change, not change itself, and

further steps must be taken with it to effect this. When the audience came to agreement or seemed to reach consensus on an issue online, there was rarely an understanding that they then communicated this to the police, council or other authority in order to hold them accountable, and so I frame this as another flavour of the “clicktivism” described previously (p.131; see also White, 2010).

Part of the lost opportunity was in the respect that such communications and sense of sociality was limited to the Facebook page – I noted that people rarely described carrying those conversations outside the online arena to friends or family unless it was specifically relevant. Therefore, I suggest that, as with the limited access problems of any conceptualisation of public sphere, the fact that it can *only* include the digitally engaged means it doesn’t serve the entire neighbourhood. More commonly though, concerns would be raised regarding a local issue and a public opinion would be developed, but it might go no further than this. There were six instances in RD/B31, and occurring in seven of my interviewees across both case studies, of the audience suggesting that ‘something should be done’, but that they were not necessarily the person to do it. These attitudes were explored when I asked some of my interviewees whether they would change anything or make suggestions for the hyperlocal services they used and they noted that certain subjects or story types could be introduced. I suggested that these were stories they might source or write themselves, given the participatory nature of the platform; Rose cited “shyness” as a barrier and that she “wouldn’t know where to start,” despite admitting that she was no less technically or ‘professionally’ able than the editors (I4/WV11). We might read this as a matter of confidence, and this resonates with the more tentative ‘not sure if this okay’ Visitor Posts I described on p.124.

However, in addition to such hesitancy, and in the same respect that readers clearly enjoyed the mediated, curated nature of the Page doing some of the “gatewatching” work for them (Bruns, 2005: 11), the audiences were more willing to respond to, rather than initialise activism, as in the poorly attended graveyard cleanup (see above, p.131). When the norms are set, that the editors will take charge, or share information, then this becomes the expectation of a service provided. As Jean put it: “People will say, ‘The police helicopter was about last night, what was it doing?’ so we know if we ask on B31 Voices, they’ll find out for us” (I4/B31). This reliance isn’t necessarily a phenomenon specific to online spaces, but rather frames the hyperlocal space as one of typical social communication i.e. not every user feels

enabled or inclined in the same way. Part of this may be a misapprehension that the editors are somehow more 'official' or otherwise responsible for providing these services. The danger in this is that it removes a sense of agency from the residents; they fail to understand that they are allowed to do those same things and set up the same relationships with police and councillors as the hyperlocal editors do. Such reliance on the editors also puts strain on them, whereby they become stuck with the audience in this naturalised and normative, hierarchical practice. When these individuals *can* afford to apply more time and energy, such as Harcup's (2016: 639) account of hyperlocal "monitorial citizenship", this reliance may not pose a problem, but my interviews with editors and their backstage Facebook account narratives frequently stressed the importance but also frustrations and workload of the task they had set themselves up with (RD/WV11; RD/B31; EdI3/WV11; EdI1/B31). Given that 11 of my interviewees recognised the difficulties that the editors encountered in their practice, there was maybe also a fear that by putting themselves out there, the audience would become drawn into those time-draining practices and a role of responsibility. One local businesswoman in Rubery described to me her professional background that suggested she would be adept at organising community events, and whilst she had certain ideas of what could be done for the village, she openly admitted that she wouldn't head them up herself (RD/B31). So we can understand all of this in terms of a certain complacency that sets in to communities both online and offline, with regards to initiating activism. When Oldenburg (2001: 2) talked about "the habit of association" provided by third places "where people may gather freely and frequently and with relative ease" being key to collective activism, he was referring to physical neighbourhood cafes and shops. Whilst I also recognised these affordances in the ways editors create their own online spaces, association or membership of the Pages didn't foster online activism in quite the same way.

I have established, then, that public opinion may be formed in the Pages, but that this is public opinion that doesn't directly challenge authority, even if it doesn't accept it. If they are public spheres, then the conversations are also often circular in the respect that discourses are repeated and agreed, but not pushed upwards in challenging acts of civic activism as is hoped or otherwise presented in much of the literature (Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Banaji, 2013; Dahlgren, 2005; Postill, 2011; Postil, 2012). Civic engagement occurs in the respect that the population is engaged with this information and participates in other ways, but they rarely demonstrated that they were inspired to start their own projects or acts of civic activism or "creative citizenship" (Hargreaves and Hartley, 2016), despite the example set by the editors.

One person on B31 Voices took on a role of being unofficial assistant in the case of lost pet stories, always commenting on them with advice, and another was often posting notice of local public consultations, but aside of these, people rarely stood out in fully exercising the enabled, empowered ideals of public sphere.

Closing summary

In this chapter I have argued that representations are constructed in hyperlocal media rather than reflecting offline or online experiences of everyday local life. This can be demonstrated in one final comparison. In south Birmingham, B31 Voices involved different content and conversations than those found in the Rubery Present Facebook Group. Jean was one of the Group administrators but also a user of B31 Voices, so we might expect her to be inspired by the agenda or content there, carrying stories across. However, the discussions started in her Group, by herself or other Group members, often focused on issues pertaining to Rubery's high street (again that sense of 'the village'), or were otherwise more parochial concerns of annoying street parking, the opening of new shops, and concerns about the shopping district in itself being undervalued by the local council. These discussions were echoed in local PACT (Partners and Communities Together) meetings and even the local mainstream media (print and online), but not always in B31 Voices. Similarly, WV11 typically carried different content to the local free newspaper. So we can see that while Rubery is in the wider B31 Voices catchment area, those who might want very localised discussions of maybe a more social rather than informative nature will not always be served well by hyperlocal services such as those in my study. This may be a question of scale. Some of my participants suggested that they engage most directly with news of upcoming events that are within their neighbourhood, and the *idea* of neighbourhood as a walkable local is significant (Mayol, 1998) - a larger proportion of Rubery Present stories related to places, shops or people I experienced offline every day. In discussing hyperlocal media with academics and non-academics alike, others have described Facebook Groups or Pages to service single residential streets. In this respect there is maybe some typological work to be done (elsewhere), identifying the variety of hyperlocal and local news / information services and an understanding of their various offers. It is likely they may overlap, and categorisation of a 'hyperlocal service' becomes increasingly problematic.

What is clear though, is that different audiences will develop different ideas about their neighbourhood based on platforms they engage with, and which conversations they notice or

partake in therein. As they situate themselves in and as part of these online spaces, they align with the collective social identities and must decide whether they feel broadly at home there and tend to contribute to a public consensus or public opinion, or sometimes feel a need to challenge representations. Many of these practices are naturalised so that as each audience develops, the editors and audience work together, unconsciously, to develop the agenda and get a feel for tastes. Whilst editors are responsive to tastes, which they observe or seek 'proof' of in analytics and level of audience participation, we should not assume they are by turn held to them in their ongoing practice. In the case of crime stories, they are relatively easy to disseminate once police relationships have been established, and there is a sense that they should be communicated accurately as soon as possible *before* local resident rumour starts, but the editors still have a responsibility to consider in these representations. The push and pull of the editor and audience's power in this relationship (and the role of the platform itself) are something I come to in the following chapter. My final thought, though, is in the significance of these representations in the wider neighbourhood. The audience has power in these hyperlocal media constructions, in sharing and developing stories and a capital of local knowledge – but it is unclear to what extent they are more widely powerful in placemaking (Blokland, 2009; Pierce et al., 2011). Such representations are valuable in the short term, in those everyday situations when the collective can help find a lost pet, or the space can be used to promote local causes and events but beyond this there isn't always the sense that conversations bleed out into the neighbourhoods, into other media, and conversations. As such, their representations as just one narrative amongst many circulated in the locality should not always be assumed to be ultimately transforming the neighbourhood and local practices, negatively or otherwise.

I also approached the space from the perspective of "public sphere" (Habermas, 1991). Whilst the audience did sometimes collectively rail against a particular figure of authority that was usually not present in the space (the council or police, for example), the ideal was not then followed through, to form a collective voice of dissent and I am rather as much concerned by the idea that the space may be treated as a pool by which those authorities might covertly observe publics. The sense that the audience is in a position of power in the way they construct these representations or exercise their voice in a form of (limited) public sphere should not be a problem if we can always assume that they do so with interests of positive social change or helpfully sharing information, but as this was not always the case, audiences should approach with caution the online narratives they present. Nonetheless, there is clearly

value to the audience when they do discuss situations and concerns, even if they are not directly challenging them. In those cases, the space is more clearly identified in Oldenburg's (2001) conceptualisation of the social third place.

Chapter Six - Power relationships and voice

In the preceding two chapters I have explored hyperlocal media audiences and how their participation reflects or constructs certain identities, narratives and discourses about their local area. In this chapter I argue that such practices demonstrate that the space is created and then maintained *for* the community. It serves the collective, but in order for the audience to contribute to this, there are certain skills to be learned, and barriers that must be overcome. I most simply illustrate this as a three-way relationship between audience, editors, and platform provider (Figure 6.1). Whether unintentionally, or as an exercise of their individual power, these three pull away from or push towards the collective goal of creating a space for neighbourhood citizens to have voice and participate, on- and offline. Therefore, the extent to which these voices are expressed can be seen as a measure of that balance of power, whereby the audience should be able to claim their stake.

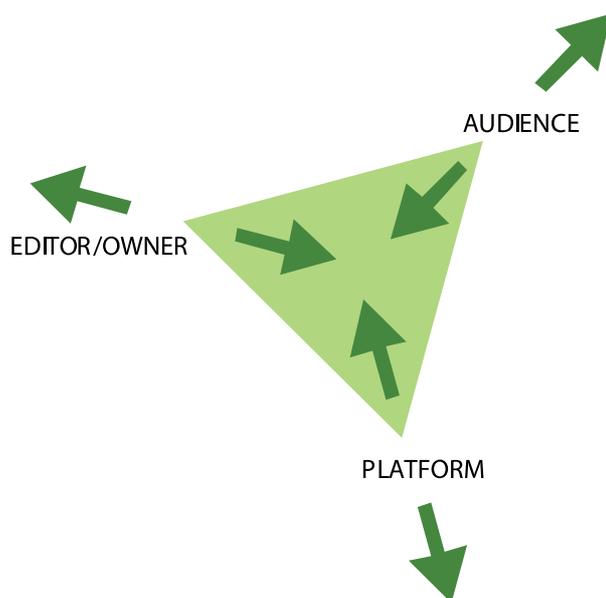


Figure 6.1: Audience, editors and platform pulling and pushing towards the goal of creating a space for citizen voice

I argue this case by exploring three key factors in this relationship. Firstly, I evidence those demonstrators of the space serving the community, whereby it seeks to improve the neighbourhood, share information, or provide voice for those living there. Secondly, those participating can be identified as negotiating their way through the space by exercising power

and capital, achieving some status through individual stories or communication – as per Postill’s (2011) conceptualisation of micro “field arenas”. Practice gives the audience voice in their communities. Thirdly, I identify the extent that this must be maintained through a certain level of technical expertise or otherwise re-appropriation of technology to serve the end, because the platform sometimes presents a physical barrier to participation, alongside other barriers such as concerns of trust and security, or the limited resources and time of the editors.

1. Hyperlocal media for the community

I have identified in previous chapters how the space is created by and *in the image* of the audiences and their tastes, but it also *serves* the community. Most clearly, it is for the people who live in the neighbourhood. Atton and Wickenden (2005: 348) had concerns that organisations sometimes abuse their relationships of authority in attempting to become over-represented in such community spaces – but this requires only a brief mention because I did not observe such primary definition strongly evidenced in my field sites. The few organisations or individuals who did engage or had stories posted (e.g. clergy, politicians) were generally not over-represented.

A sense of community

Having set these primary definition concerns aside, I can rather say that the space served residents, and they at least *felt* it brought the community together. Certain efforts have been made in studies of hyperlocal media to focus on quantitative measures of improving civic engagement or social ties in a neighbourhood (Hampton and Wellman, 2003; Mesch and Levanon, 2003; Vääätäjä, 2012). However, I challenge the notion that engagement in hyperlocal media directly correlates to such ideals. The idea that ‘hyperlocal brings community and people together’ *did* come up across my materials 25 times. Unusually though, only three of these occurrences came from my own observation, in RD/B31. The remaining 22 were from other participant accounts from both fieldsites, and so this implies that these were statements of audience *perception* rather than fact, that people *felt* the Pages brought them closer together. This is important in itself of course. Mary talked about the access to the neighbourhood afforded to those less “privileged” or those unable to participate in other ways, for example due to illness: “social media is a real outlet” (I3/B31). Rose, being an older

user of WV11, said the dark winter nights put her off going out, so this was her way of engaging; unable to attend the pub-based history club meetings, she could follow them online (I4/WV11). In Jean's online conversations, she tried "to picture where [other readers] are" (I4/B31). Asking her to describe them in more physical terms, she said it felt "sometimes like they're dotted around, but other times it feels like they're in my front room, or they care - when I posted about those guys helping me the other week [she had a fall] and one lady said I hope you're feeling better now." This *idea* of people caring or listening to each other and conversing is clearly important to her, even if it is not always borne out, given that people often commented online regardless of the existing flow of discussion (see above, p.88). However, in those situations where people feel they had connected, they were lasting interactions. Sometimes it was incidences of people helping each other out offline that were memorialised online, when people used the Pages to thank or try and identify someone who had come to their or a family member's aid (Figure 6.2).



Figure 6.2: A reader thanking someone for their kindness on the Visitor Posts.

The word 'community' came up a lot in these discussions, but people didn't always equate this with individuals or specifically personal contact. In this respect I can't support claims, for example, that "the higher the number of close friends and neighbors that are known and live nearby, the higher the attachment to the neighbourhood" (Mesch and Manor, 1998: 504). Rather than citing seeing *people* specifically, for many audience members, it was more about getting out of the house and into the neighbourhood *space*, and becoming involved in events. Paul, who had previously lived in a village "where everyone knew everyone", admitted that in Wednesfield "you might not know neighbours and faces, but you get an idea of what's going on in the area" (I8/WV11). Abigail similarly felt the use of hyperlocal media didn't necessarily connect people to their neighbours, but did bring people out into their community. In this she

expressed a person's physical movement into a place as an idea of becoming a member of the community (I5/WV11).

The idea that hyperlocal media brings people together, can also, of course, be demonstrated through narratives of reach. As noted earlier, B31 Voices' Facebook Page (at the time of writing, 11 January, 2017) had 31,779 Likes, ostensibly those following the Page; WV11 had 9,251, covering a smaller geographic area. Facebook offers page administrators details of Reach, which Facebook describe as "how many people saw your posts, as well as how many liked, shared and commented on them" (Facebook Business, 2017). Taken as a random sample, on 23rd November 2016, B31 Voices had a Reach of 58,682 people with its stories; WV11 reached 7,300 people on the same day. Without considering too much the discrepancy here, which might be down to more engaging stories being posted in the two localities on that day, or the large potential for spread when the audience size is increased, my point here is that the stories reach a large section of the population. A few instances demonstrated this reach in my fieldwork. BBC's DIY SOS television programme films at residential homes around the country to renovate them for families in need. When it filmed in the B31 area, the spread of this news was possibly too effective, to the extent that local people were complaining about too many visitors on site (RD/B31). Particularly shocking or powerful stories that resonate with easily relatable concerns are also likely to be shared a lot and reach wider audiences. An example here is the Northfield bullying incident (see above, p.149), with its shareable video format and how it allowed people to expound with popular theories of bad parenting, or 'the disrespectful youth of today'. More positively, one story of a local boy returning a found iPad to its rightful owner but refusing the reward offered, found its way onto a national television news programme.

The danger of such a wide reach is that it can draw in people who would not otherwise be participating, and they take offence or otherwise create conflict. For example, when the B31 Voices editors posted a police press release about a drugs raid in Birmingham and Liverpool, it reached family members of those involved, resulting in them "getting mouthy and threatening people" (Jean, CPG/B31). In this discussion with my participants, the group recognised there was often such "trolling" and "vile mentality", but that it was a function of the stories reaching wider areas (CPG/B31). It is here that we can identify a difference between some of the more radical alternative media that Atton (2002) or Susan Forde (2011) describe, and the more everyday and open nature of formats such as hyperlocal media. A

radical activist use might require it to be private and 'locked down' if activism is being mobilised therein (as in Atton describing Greenpeace); hyperlocal media has the very real potential to become more public than expected, partly due to the shareable nature of Facebook. This is testament to the significance of the content there, feeding local and national discourses and tastes.

Good news as a "panacea" for negativity

Even though crime stories were very prevalent, I have also addressed that people I spoke to *recognised* how this constructed a reputation (p.96). People may have been setting aside such negative constructions then, when they expressed that being engaged in the online Pages made them feel better about their community: Marie liked how the more positive stories acted "as a panacea for the negativity pushed by [other] media" (CPG/B31). Despite those three major incidents in Northfield I described earlier, I only recorded 'negative Northfield' narratives seven times in RD/B31; 'positive Northfield' came up a roughly equal five times. The way crime stories were received and responded to by the audience gave people faith that most in the local area were not involved or supportive of crime (especially in the case of violent crime or theft, less in cases of 'victimless' crime such as cannabis factory raids). The Northfield 'bullying' incident (see above, p.149) can be drawn on again here; Judie said such stories "make me feel good about the local community, not because it happened, but because of the support of the community for the victim and the willingness to name and shame the offender" (CPG/B31). In this case many people were equally criticised for then attacking the bully online but the resounding voice, possibly as many of the readers would have been parents themselves and could empathise, rallied against the perpetrators. As an aside to my main point here, this may be viewed as exclusionary othering (Canales, 2000), with the potential to silence any younger, teenage voices who might have given some context to the situation - such is the nature of an older audience claiming ownership of their space and making clear what discourses are acceptable there.

People also framed their positive perception of their community based on the information they received - Hope said "I didn't know so much went on so close to where I live" (CPG/B31). It is in some of these functional but also banal stories that people found positive messages about their neighbourhood. Examples of the former were instances when people had lost items, including pets (occurring 52 times in RD/B31). If the 'finder' posted about the item, that suggested altruism. If such items were then reunited with the owners, (as recorded in

RD/B31 28 times) any reader might feel an additional empathic satisfaction in the outcome. Regardless of the outcome of such posts, the comments that followed (often by readers not connected to the situation) suggested these stories made them feel better about people, or the state of 'society' (RD/B31; RD/WV11).

Alongside the perception that people feel better about their neighbourhood as a result of using hyperlocal media (noted 20 times across materials), was the idea that hyperlocal media also more concretely *improved* the community (eight times across all materials). In Wednesfield, Abigail appreciated the efforts of the WV11 editors "trying to make the area more of a whole rather than little pockets" (I5/WV11) and Gemma felt "they genuinely want the best for the community and their area", referring to them as "champions" of the area, and "advocates" (I1/WV11). Those WV11 editors were physically involved in offline activities in Wednesfield, and this was quite well known to much of the audience; in the case of B31 Voices many of the people I spoke to knew less about the editors, although this disparity of visibility might also have been due to the smaller, more 'local' area covered by WV11. Regardless, this sense of improving the community was usually discussed in terms of the editors and their voluntary efforts, rather than the audience.

2. Social capital and voice

In studies of community, there should be an awareness of the power that is held and exercised by all participants – in my cases I explore the potential for social capital and voice. I have discussed public sphere, but even if I identified that the audience didn't exactly exert power in *that* respect, the agenda, subject matter, and content of the Pages are clearly heavily informed by the audience. More specifically, in an alternative media that encourages participation (compared to local mainstream media), the audience is offered "public voice", and here I use Howard Rheingold's (2008: 101) definition: "the unique style of personal expression that distinguishes one's communications from those of others" and which can be applied as "the bridge between media production and civic engagement". In hyperlocal media this also encompasses all forms of participation, whether to act as source and writer, or witness bearing evidence. Another aspect of this is the assumption that social capital is tied up in such practices. I observed practice that I associated with the earning of social capital, but this did not seem to be overtly wielded as power in the space, so I start the discussion here first. The presence of audience 'voice' is stronger and I will deal with this second.

Recognition and social capital

Social capital is hard to generate in a messy, fluid space like Facebook, but people still made attempts for 'recognition'. The difficulty in the Page space was that unless you were constantly visibly present in conversations and successfully sourcing stories that were reshared, it was unlikely an individual's actions would be recognised by the readership as they casually took in those stories flowing through their Facebook stream. Therefore, it was hard for social capital to be generated at one point, and then expended at a later date, as per Coleman's (1988) conceptualisation. If someone was kind or helpful to you online, it was just as likely to be due to their habitus or that they had learned this behaviour to be appropriate.

However, people did make *attempts* towards recognition for their efforts. For example, a charity challenge appealed for people to drop off teddy bears at a supermarket location. Therefore, people could have simply responded offline but they also accompanied this with comments making their effort public, such as: "I've got a couple of bags of teddies your welcome to have x" and "Had 5 teddies donated at 3pm today" (RD/B31). In the case of reported deaths, for example in a traffic accident, a common list of comments was "RIP"; each individual utterance added nothing new, when readers might just as easily have Liked a previous RIP comment, but new comments are more visible (RD/WV11). Another reader posted multiple but not very descriptive photos of a fire in a field, performing as witness or reporter, but also giving them credence in this activity (RD/B31). Comments to stories often suggested what the reader would have done in the situation, for example saying "I would have handed in" the money that has been reported lost. It might be seen as unnecessarily cynical to interpret all of these as acts of gathering social capital or at least satisfaction in feedback from others - for many, this is the only way to make a connection following an event that has since passed in the physical neighbourhood. But whether any such actions can go beyond self-satisfaction to practicable social capital is another issue. One particular example helps explore this. Henry was someone I observed posting on B31 Voices' Visitor Posts, and his behaviour stood out immediately (RD/B31). He wrote in quite specific detail about aspects of his life that he wanted to correct, implying the posts would have specific meaning for one person close to him, rather than expecting a 'return' on his investment or the "the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbours" usually associated with social capital (Hanifan, 1916: 130-1). In follow-up posts he said he wanted to give back to the community through volunteering, appealing for ideas - and this is where the online community were asked for help, in giving him platform for his efforts. A couple of days later he posted again to

thank people for their input: “im gonna do what no one has done before im going to help anyone i can for no charge”, clearly keen to impress on people the significance of his offer. The fact that I hadn’t noticed him active on the Page before suggested he was not a frequent user, and was therefore oblivious of the voluntary or charitable work often done by others. In a later Visitor Post Henry posted photos of someone’s garden he had voluntarily cleared, announcing, “Here some pics to show that my heart is pure and I cherish helping people.” A dozen such posts were spread over a six-month period, always with the implied subtext for that one reader - the Visitor Posts weren’t reposted by the editors and some of them didn’t attract Likes, let alone comments. The extent to which his participation was aimed at impressing other members of the audience is debatable, but there was clearly capital here to be gained, something he possibly failed to achieve over this period. The extent to which he was new to the group seemed to be problematic for him though – Hanifan, again (1916: 130), and also Oldenburg (2001: 2) talk about the importance of first associating oneself in a group before engaging in such efforts for social capital. As a non-member of that group, things did not then quite work out as planned.

Although my own ‘resident’ practice didn’t go as far as Henry’s, I find it hard to criticise those seeking or enjoying satisfaction from their participation because I also sometimes found myself in this position. I can tell myself that this was part of my research, to experiment in the space, such as when I tried to reunite the cat with its owner (see above, p.121), but undeniably I also wanted to be recognised as a ‘good citizen’. However, this idea of recognition is where attempts would generally fall flat, or at best, be limited to the immediate “field arena”, partly due to the messy nature of the Facebook communication flow – and I will explore how this affects voice too shortly. Rather than Coleman’s (1988) interpretation of social capital, as a more lasting shift in identity so that favours from the individual might be returned by the collective, I instead identify the observed practices as motivated by “happiness” or “social wellbeing” (Gauntlett, 2013: 128). Marie in south Birmingham was driven by this very real sense of what she called “satisfaction”, making her “feel good” when she participated, but also “karma [...] so I believe if I’ve helped somebody else, then [...] not necessarily they’ll remember me but the universe will know. It’s a cosmic thing” (I1/B31). The question of cosmic balance is of course not up for debate here, but it is worth noting that she is motivated despite the fact that people won’t remember her actions.

Public voice in the hyperlocal space

The balance of power tied up in the Facebook Page spaces, then, is not so much a question of social capital, but rather the affordance of voice. This came up nine times in discussions across both case studies, and a further eight in my research diary (RD/B31). Sometimes this involved mediation by the editors - Gemma in Wednesfield appreciated the value of the editors live tweeting proceedings from a local PACT meeting, as it gave readers an opportunity to pose questions back into the meeting as it happened, to organisations such as the police or housing associations (I1/WV11). In this example the editors offered up the opportunity to complete the public sphere picture I presented, making it easy for residents to directly challenge these organisations in that 'live' situation. In other cases, the editors posting an external blog post or mainstream news story into Facebook meant a conversation could be started where it wasn't previously happening, sometimes because other platforms had no commenting or had switched it off, as per Thurman and Hermida's (2010) concerns regarding online mainstream news. When a local MP blogged about the possible closure of a medical centre, and received no comments - it was the B31 Voices Facebook repost that generated 58 shares and 45 comments. The Page is therefore seen as a place where such conversation and voicing of opinions is 1) normatively permitted and 2) technically possible.

Another story covered by the Birmingham Mail was that of bin collections being missed over Christmas, due to staff avoiding shifts because of new enforced drink and drugs tests. The Mail's story was notable for only quoting various councillors, and one of the three comments on the Mail's story included a refuse collector opposing some of the story's claims. When the same story was brought up on the B31 Voices page (without linking in the Mail's web page though), this resulted in 20 comments, including perspectives from those who hadn't had their bins collected, a woman whose brother was a refuse collector, and others praising them for their good work (RD/B31). In such examples we see that when mainstream media stories don't always provide balanced sources or opportunities for voice, hyperlocal media can address those concerns at some level. In Firmstone and Coleman's (2015a: 125) UK study, mainstream journalists were "concerned that information and news available from individual citizens may be at odds with their obligation to produce news according to the professional norms of objectivity and impartiality", so clearly there is a difference and opportunity in what Facebook Pages can achieve. The Page audiences tended to appreciate reader participation in terms of 'information' and 'communication' rather than according to news values. I have already described instances of my interviewees demonstrating a critical distance, for example

in favouring the editor's input as more trustworthy than the audience's (see above, p.135). As long as the audience understand the different role of the Page space within a wider, local plurality of information, and can also find use, value or pleasures from being engaged there, then this lack of journalistic standards in hyperlocal media is not problematic.

I have discussed how the audience sometimes relied on the editors when they could be taking up concerns themselves with various authorities (see above, p.106), and how easy it was as an audience to fall into those accepted patterns. However, I also recognise that the Pages were an important support for people if they were less confident or otherwise unable to speak out, given they may have tried all other avenues. Friends or family would sometimes post 'by proxy' (observed 23 times in RD/B31), on behalf of someone else, helping to overcome such confidence issues but also demonstrating again that not everyone is directly engaged in these Pages. Examples include a woman trying to reunite her elderly mother with family members, and another posting for someone who is "a bit unsure of technology" (RD/B31). The Pages were supportive spaces in line with local needs sometimes revealed elsewhere. Tracy in south Birmingham was someone else who required such support. I heard from her via email when she misunderstood my call for research interviewees: she appealed for B31 Voices to "do a blog about all the good things that have come to longbridge!" (EI9/B31) before more specifically asking that they cover concerns of local council tenants trying to get repairs dealt with at their properties. She had contacted the council, local MPs and the local newspapers, but to no avail: "They won't cover one story as their is [sic] many more people in the same boat as me." One reading of this, of course, might be that the issue is newsworthy because so many people are affected, and the newspaper might potentially provide voice for a large section of its readership. Tracy asked if B31 Voices could cover it: "I feel this is my last resort to be taken seriously" and in declaring that "I am happy to stand for the people in Rednal who need this brought to the media" she recognised B31 Voices, as servicing and empowering their audience and the wider locale beyond those mainstream media agendas. Such instances of the audience appealing to the hyperlocal space as one of representation, along the lines of Atton's (2002) ideals of alternative media, were relatively rare though. It was instead more common for local discourses to be discussed as per my conceptualisation of the part-public sphere, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Agency: the audience shaping the space and its discourses

The audience's voice was also used to demonstrate their agency in the space. I have described how they sourced stories via the Visitor Posts and then added to them through comments. However, I also observed that despite rules of engagement set out by the editors or norms being established through audience practice, there were instances when participants renegotiated, ignored, and tested the rules in their practice. Sometimes this suggested the normative behaviour settling into new patterns, for example the proliferation of lost pet stories (Turner, 2015). In neither of the Facebook Page 'About' sections did the editors initially suggest such subject matter was suitable, and in discussing with the WV11 editors, they said they had to be careful (EdI3/WV11): "If we get one lost dog post, we're guaranteed to get more." In this respect individuals were adept at curating their own media *consumption*, in Castells' (2000: 370) vision of media "mosaics" (as discussed in chapter four) but they didn't necessarily see it as their responsibility to contribute to a broader plurality of story types or subjects on the Page. It is in repeatedly posting similar stories into the space that norms and certain discourses are established – while I suggested in the opening to this chapter that primary definition was not observed, this is a different kind of primary definition by subject matter. The WV11 editors' strategy was that they "don't post every single thing we receive in quick succession because of this" (EdI3/WV11), exercising their prerogative to steer in certain directions, or away from them – and attempt to break the feedback loop. We see the power of audiences in setting the agenda here; it is hardly surprising that mainstream media often opt for control (discussed on p.36), rather than opening up their space to a call of citizen media and participation.

In some cases, audience members found ways to push harder against the accepted norms of the space, in order to secure their voice. On 29 occasions I noted people posting or commenting something twice or more (RD/B31). Sometimes this could be attributed to technical faults or misunderstanding on the part of the user. Others reported an incident twice because they were simply unaware that others had already posted it. However, there was sometimes a clearer sense that when someone's Visitor Post wasn't reshared or responded to within a matter of minutes, they would post it again, or get family and friends to do so. The intention seemed to be to make the situation significantly more visible to the audience or to the editors, but given the visibility problems of the Visitor Posts in general, this was unlikely to be effective. Rather, both sets of editors reported that this persistence was just as likely to cause irritation and reduce the chances of a repost (EdI2/WV11; Edi1/B31). Some

readers might have had valid concerns that their post should reach a wider audience as soon as possible if it was time sensitive, but this wasn't always the case. For example, the theft of a garden gnome might not appear to be high priority news, but several members of a family reported this to the Visitor Posts, and this followed the owner's first post being reshared 18 times already. In other situations, people adjusted the wording to imply more information or an update, or added or changed the photo that was used. Such instances demonstrated that there are canny ways to 'play the game' of the field. In taking a relatively simple message but finding the most effective way to try and communicate it, the audience here also apply Williams' (1980: 55) transformative process of the "alternative", an interpretive representation of text and/or image. However, it did seem that individuals understood how far they could push with their participation, as such strategies didn't create problems for readers – if anyone picked up on a multiple posting, it was usually the editors simply pointing out that they had shared the story already but the 'poster' hadn't noticed, or that people might be more patient (rare, their frustrations were usually kept to their own personal accounts, see p.78). The audience themselves were either able to gloss past any such indiscretions, or did not notice them in the first place.

Perhaps the strongest sense of exercising voice as power is in the ways that Facebook comments could shift the focus of a story. In many cases (noted 28 times in RD/B31) the comments would go off topic in some unexpected way. As individuals, people might not oppose a stream of comments but as a collective they were more comfortable with opposing the original agenda of the story. In this respect, whether the story originated in source material from mainstream local media, the editors, local leaders or other 'everyday' residents, the narrative could easily take one or more turns through discussion. A relatively common occurrence in WV11 (less so in south Birmingham) was people asking whether schools were open on a particular day, due to various circumstances (RD/WV11). However, given that many parents didn't have other spaces to more widely discuss (largely criticising) the schools or teachers, there was at least one instance whereby they used these information appeals to do so. When authority figures came up in the subject of Facebook stories, it was maybe not surprising that the audience were reminded and compelled to voice their concerns. On B31 Voices, a story about a tree falling on a car generated a 'council shaming' response, that they didn't look after the trees better (Figure 6.3). Such is the risk authorities take in asking a public platform to disseminate a message but then not being present to see through the discussion – as Lovari and Parisi (2015) identified in their study of Italian municipality

Facebook practice, the audience favour ongoing dialogue, but I would also suggest it is, or at least should be, in the interests of the authorities too.



Figure 6.3: Reader responses blaming the council after a tree falls on a car

Despite my concerns that such gripes were not acted on more proactively in the mould of the public sphere ideal (e.g. by emailing the council directly, and see p.167), this connection of the individual to the community consensus via everyday concerns contributes to the identity of the space, and the represented wider neighbourhood. Through such shifts, the audience took control of the discussion, at least, if not the wider situation that was being discussed. In some instances the figures being presented were so at odds with the general public opinion, such as photos of the Conservative Prime Minister visiting Longbridge's Labour heartland (RD/B31), that a larger proportion of the audience would speak out in challenge. Such subversion also

demonstrated how banal stories could sometimes open up and explore political issues, for example discussions of the Longbridge development spanning everyday shopping and traffic concerns, but also long-seated concerns about what various political parties had done for manufacturing in the area and nationally. As much as I earlier identified that more overtly political content (in the eyes of the audience) was not always popular (see above, p.116), such observations support ideas that banal and political concerns are not divorced from each other – the former can harbour and enable discussion of the latter (see also Postill, 2011; Pink, 2012).

Intended and unintended consequences of participation

In situations of stories shifting focus like this, the original source or writer would usually be aware of it, and the outcome of participation might affect the individual's desire to participate in the future. Even if audience members did not usually read comments or follow the progress of other stories, they were likely to be alerted to the progress of their own posts, either through automated notifications by Facebook (four people in my interviews reported using such Facebook notifications), or because the editors had tagged them in the story. One of my own experiences of this made me think more carefully about participating in the future (RD/B31). I was in a Rubery skatepark with my two young sons on a Saturday morning and they noted the amount of litter, with bins very close. Initially I just took a photo and posted it, as seen below. My sons then asked if they could clear it up. It occurred to me to take more photos of them doing so, partly through parental pride, but then also considering how I could turn this into a more public message along the lines of: 'if a four year old can see this is a right thing to do, why can't others?' I initially just posted the first picture seen below to the Visitor Posts; it was also reposted by the editors to the B31 Voices stream, resulting in two separate flows of conversation. On the Visitor Posts I initially just showed the rubbish without the narrative of what we had done about it, as shown below (Figure 6.4).



Figure 6.4: The uncomfortable turn of conversation following my post about littering

One girl tagged another in the comments, and this second said she would clear up (second and third comments above): I pointed out I had already done so but appreciated the sentiment. What then followed was adults criticising those children who use the skatepark, labelling them as having “no manners”, being “obese” and “lazy”, and the young girl trying to defend herself – and here we might recall the othering that adults had applied in their criticism of Northfield bullies online (see above, p.177). Needless to say, such conflict was not my intention. I felt I had lost control of the situation and it had become damaging rather than helpful. In the reposted story comments, the story moved in a similar direction, but this time with additional turns, addressing problems of: “brainless drunken idiots” in the park; litter left by those attending the football matches; stereotyping or assuming the worst of young people; smaller children getting in the way on their scooters in the park. From that point on I

was far more aware of my participation in the space, both as researcher potentially stirring up the waters of my field site, but also as a resident. Living directly next to the park and often going there with my children, I was also aware that my profile picture might result in some awkward offline situations too, and I changed it to something less descriptive. Months later, I challenged some young people there who I witnessed dropping rubbish, and photographed again another particularly bad day for litter, but this first incident was enough to make me think twice with regards to posting on the B31 Voices Page, an example of those direct consequences of practice that Giddens (1984) suggest shapes ongoing action. I have discussed how crime stories can develop concerns of safety in the neighbourhood (p.146), but this experience demonstrated to me how participation might unwittingly contribute to this, and how this affects the audience's decisions to engage in the future.

Given that comments are not always read by the audience, our voice might not then be heard in the space and is disempowered – as Rheingold (2008: 99) puts it: “It isn't “voice” if nobody seems to be listening”. Nonetheless, and most easily observed in stories that do not have obvious motives or functions, participation is cathartic for the individual. This first of all comes from a person's realisation that they are *allowed* to take part, as part of the balance between “connecting with community leaders” but also “an involvement and engagement with the wider public who are expressing their views or input” as Andrew put it (I2/WV11). Clive also liked “the idea of people having a voice” (I5/B31). When I asked Diane to visualise the Facebook Page as a building, she described one area being a relaxed space, for conversations where they could say what they wanted and be heard, and it is significant that she called it a “therapy room” indicating a level of catharsis in speaking out. Online, this was often expressed in the form of ‘rants’. The person posting wouldn't necessarily expect a response but had something to be expressed and given that some users described few other means of socialisation, it is logical they might do so online; ‘rants’ occurred 21 times in RD/WV11, 12 in RD/B31, although some of these were admittedly by the editors, backstage. While it is debatable whether this contributes anything specifically to the audience, beyond setting out that such behaviour is allowed, it is significant to note that the audience felt they could safely express themselves in these ways on their ‘home’ turf.

3. Technical expertise as a way of overcoming barriers to participation

I have discussed the significance of the technologies in the hyperlocal picture, and most specifically how people's widespread adoption of tablet and smartphones has woven their use into various aspects of everyday life (see p.104 and 'selfies' showing contexts of use, Appendix J). However, these technologies demand some understanding with regards to the three-way relationship I set out at the start of this chapter between audience, editors and platform. Similar to the audience's enjoyment of the mediated nature of the *content*, (see p.135), user difficulties may partly explain why "communities may struggle and often rely heavily on key creative citizens [...] to act as champions, editors" (Turner et al., 2016) in creating these spaces. I explore this here, followed through with stronger evidence of the audience's expertise and appropriation of the platform to their own ends and needs.

Overcoming Facebook's barriers to participation

Facebook does prove to be a powerful tool for reaching local audiences. The social and interactive affordances are significant in allowing audiences to share and engage in this content (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar, 2015). However, Facebook comes with its own problems and creates barriers to effective participation. Some people had issue with the cultures of Facebook that have developed, such as the "keyboard warriors out there who are just out to cause trouble" (Diane, I6/B31), and Vicky was "fed up with all the food photos people seem to do [on her wider feed]" (RD/B31). It is necessary to also describe the barriers that might pull away from the collective cause of hyperlocal media (it may be useful to refer to Appendix L). I have explored the problems of visibility with Visitor Posts earlier in this chapter, and this echoes Lev-On and Steinfeld's (2015) findings that engagement of Visitor Posts on Israeli municipality Facebook Pages was significantly lower than on Page posts. Other issues included a variety of different user approaches to setting up Notifications for the hyperlocal Page's content, ranging from understanding and control of the situation, to confusion or ignorance of the settings altogether. Messaging between audience members was also tricky if they weren't Facebook 'friends', as a message would be sent but often lost in a hard-to-find area of the interface. If a story generated numerous comments, they would often be collapsed into a smaller space, or long text was truncated with a 'See More' link, essentially hiding content. Such issues, alongside Facebook's relatively regular changes to the interface without warning, sometimes led to issues of trust: Emma from south Birmingham said, "i think the way fb is posting has changed and less things are getting shown generally...I havent relied on

the internet to get ideas of what to do” (CPG/B31). B31 Voices could previously be relied on to keep her informed, but she was now less sure.

The audience demonstrated an adequate level of expertise to overcome these technical barriers. In discussing the digital skills of the audience with Mark, he wondered whether different generations might perceive the smartphone differently. Being a similar age to me, around 40, he described “growing up with computers in the home” and that each new technology is added to the range available for use, but has to be learned, including the emergence of the mobile phone, and then the smartphone (I14/B31). Given then that many of the people I spoke to were also near to my age or older (my assumption drawn from profile pictures and meeting in person), it is hardly surprising that they described a wide range of technologies and contexts of use as they came to terms with and embrace mobile devices. Three people I spoke to talked about a distinction they made that desktop computers or laptops were for work, and mobiles (even during work time but used in breaks) were for leisure or social time and activities (I12/B31; I1/B31; I2/WV11). Kayleigh, who used social media as part of her work, admitted it put her off then using it more heavily at home in the evenings, the idea that she creates her own boundaries in practice (I12/B31). Others used combinations and ranges of hardware, including smartphones, iPads or other tablets. Some described technology that was at their disposal but they didn’t make the best use of, such as Emma’s mother who “has a laptop but she just doesn’t GET the Internet”, using it for shopping but not trusting enough to use it for banking (CPG/B31). Terry discovered Skype only very recently when a friend showed him how to use it to talk to relatives in Australia (I15/B31). This range of uses varied so greatly it is hard to identify patterns - the messiness of everyday communication and online social practices are reflected in the methods people choose. This variety is defined by individuals’ and groups’ differing “idioms of practice” (Gershon, 2011: 6). One group might meet physically, while others mobilise online; we might phone family in the UK, but Skype family abroad.

The audience’s approaches are also determined by their habitus, prior practices, skills and experience, as much as cost and availability. The one common factor that did emerge though, was the way people showed some pride in their embracing of technology, Facebook and hyperlocal media, the extent to which they might think of themselves as experts compared to other less engaged friends or family. For example, Emma described her sister “who doesn’t use Facebook and she wouldn’t know to use the website [...] she uses the Internet, just not

Facebook” (I13/B31). Barbara, in Wednesfield, was something of an advocate for technology at the local community centre: she encountered peers who told her “I couldn't do it [use an iPad]” (I3/WV11). These approaches suggested a picture of everyday media technologies more in line with Williams’ sense of the individual gathering up and accessing media for their own use and consumption of “mobile privatisation” than Castells’ (2000) vision of networked citizens, even if sociality takes a large part in this.

Learning through practice

I have suggested this throughout, but the audience’s technical expertise in using Facebook, and the hyperlocal Pages, is clearly something they learn through practice. One such appropriation of the tools was a practice I call the *mentionshare*. I have described the Twitter practice of tagging someone in a post; on Facebook this is called a ‘mention’. If someone includes a friend’s name in a comment, the system will notify that friend – in offline contexts this is akin to tilting your phone towards the friend: ‘Look at this’. One of the most common uses of the mentionshare was to suggest to someone that you attend an event together or that they apply for an advertised job – I noted this 25 times in each diary (RD/WV11; RD/B31). This is one of a number of nuances of hyperlocal Pages they may have picked up through observing the hyperlocal space but, until they understood and accepted the normative behavioural practices, it is likely the audience would have used the Facebook Page like any other. In fact, none of my interviewees noticed a distinction that their hyperlocal Pages were specifically different to other kinds of Facebook use, but it is in observing the practices discussed on p.88, whereby the audience regularly builds up and communicates content around a story, that I suggest hyperlocal media Pages are a unique kind of space on Facebook. There are of course more direct routes available to learning new technologies, taking courses in IT or seeking specific assistance. In the case of WV11 some of their audience may have attended local ‘social media surgeries’ (Clarke, 2013) or benefited from more casual support at their community centre. However, none of those I spoke to in either town said they’d been formally trained in the use of Facebook (or IT at all for that matter). Their narratives all spoke of understanding and learning through use. People tended to read the hyperlocal Page’s posts in passing, as they appeared in their own personal stream (described 19 times in interviews across both sites). This is hardly surprising given their narratives of mobile and Facebook use intertwined with everyday practice and rhythms. They might then supplement and further this by clicking through to certain stories or going ‘into’ the Page when an event happened, or when specific information was required e.g. a journey into the centre of Birmingham that

might be affected by poor traffic. In this practice of fishing stories from the stream, there is an ongoing process of ignoring or filtering out Facebook's advertising content, and more legitimate content posted by friends or other Pages or Groups they follow. Therefore, their exposure to the hyperlocal Page is constantly negotiated - in their changing tastes depending on previous stories, given the vast range of story types and subject matter encapsulated on the hyperlocal stream.

If sometimes audience approaches seemed inexpert, this may have been because Facebook was not specifically designed to service hyperlocal media. In 2016, Facebook introduced a Marketplace functionality (Facebook Newsroom, 2016), which I would suggest is in recognition of citizens setting up their own 'facebay' type selling Groups or Pages - the name coming from Ebay. The same attention has not been paid to hyperlocal media uses. For example, people often commented 'shared' in response to appeals but they also sometimes included their postcode. They may do so in order for their efforts to be recognised but it may also be the only way they can genuinely help to visualise the coverage; Facebook could theoretically map this from geolocated comments via a phone or device's GPS. I've also discussed the way that some readers became reliant on someone else dealing with a problem for them - in this respect the Visitor Posts might be seen as a way of reporting but also handing over and divorcing them from responsibility. A Facebook functionality that could offer up local authority contacts or make the connection for them might help to remove some of the strain from the editors.

Despite some of the difficulties encountered, the audience often inventively re-appropriated the technology to reach an end that was suitable for communication, however messy their solution might be. Here I borrow a phrase from computer science, a "kludge" being "something rather disgusting used to achieve some specific, often short-term, goal" (Clark, 1987: 227). Disgusting may be going too far, because solutions are only required to allow communication to the audience's satisfaction, but everyday hyperlocal media is certainly all about the immediate goals described. I have discussed photography in terms of witnessing events (p.126), social functions (p.143), or how it affects a post's chance of being shared (p.133), but the ways in which some images were created is also significant. Sometimes these practices were determined by what was physically possible for the person to carry out, for example, calling on a prior photo of their stolen vehicle. In one case the photo of a reader's lost cat was on an older feature phone (not Internet enabled), and the most practical way to

share it was to photograph the screen with a smartphone. Mark had also noted such practices and he described it as an incremental step in learning the technology: “Fifteen years ago they'd have made a poster and stuck it on a school noticeboard. And now they've scanned that poster and put it on a Facebook page. [...] Part of me thinks it is quite nice in a way because it's very authentic” (I14/B31). Given Mark's previous discussion of authenticity as representing a 'true' picture of the locality (p.141), this suggests a certain humility or honesty in such practices. There is something in the amateur, unpolished effort that focuses on the content rather than the 'showiness' of something well-designed – see Gauntlett's (2013: 87) suggestion that over-production as might be found in mainstream media can “deaden” the human connection.

On other occasions, it was clear that people had simply photographed a printed poster, sometimes sharing other people's events as well as their own, to help spread information, such as the photograph of a scout event poster attached to a tree (RD/B31; RD/WV11). One final example, demonstrating this inventiveness in extremis, involved an A4 poster on a charity shop counter. This was a print-off of a screenshot from a mobile phone, showing a 'lost cat' post on a local 'Facebay' page. It contained text, and a photo of the cats, and the 'edit' symbol over the image, indicating this was the person's own post they'd printed. They had added the landline phone number in pen, along with the message: “I am lost without my sister, please help me find her xx”, appealing to emotions beyond the pure details and facts (RD/B31).

Using screenshots from a phone or computer was also a relatively popular way of creating images (11 instances in RD/B31, compared to 110 instances of me noting other types of 'images and photos'). These were either: to share otherwise unavailable images e.g. the brand of a lost bike, found on an online shopping website; or to share threads of text from their phone, given that a 'one-click' capture and posting an image is less effort than trying to copy and paste text. These practices alongside others, such as the prevalence of the 'mentionshare', demonstrate how certain behaviours and tropes are established within the hyperlocal space. Some might frame this in terms of lacking media literacy; the reality, as David Buckingham (2007: 43) presents it, is that the idea of literacy as “competence-based” needs some rethinking, taking into account a variety of social contexts: “multiple literacies” (Ibid: 53). Those participants who surprised me with their uses of Facebook should be celebrated as

innovative and creative practitioners, in negotiating their way through new and acceptable uses of the technology (Turner et al., 2016: 252).

As equally significant as these 'innovative' practices themselves is the unquestioning nature of the audience's response. As an ethnographer I identified patterns, but also what could be gleaned from the unusual, and so it may be that I was more specifically attuned to these instances than the average reader. However, even if I found these practices to be 'messy' from the reflective position of my office and desktop computer, this was possibly a different experience to that of a mobile reader, where they might empathise and understand it was an efficient way to post. Readers sometimes commented on the *content* of unusual stories, but methods were never brought up, either in the hyperlocal space or in any participant discussions. People may have thought it but deemed it as insignificant because they found that the information had been effectively communicated, or simply recognised that it was an appropriate behaviour in the space, acceptable as part of that audience-established normative practice. For Tom in Wednesfield, the means of communicating were less of a problem than the sometimes debatably trustworthy nature of the communications themselves (I9/WV11). Richard similarly reflected with regards to unusual or grammatically incorrect spellings that, "Facebook language is quick, sharp and to the point, rather than an essay" (I10/WV11). In the respect that we have come to understand journalism standards as an important assessment of value and quality, then the standards of hyperlocal media spaces as we see them here are set by the editors *and* audience. Such allowances by the audience demonstrate the extent to which these online practices are easily naturalised and made invisible to readers as they become entangled in everyday communications.

Closing summary

In chapter six I have dealt with some of the more problematic aspects of hyperlocal media for audiences, namely that, whilst it is a space created for the people of a local area, there are barriers to overcome in participating. It cannot be denied that this form of media does bring people together, assuming that they have shared interests in the local area and events, and given that it effectively reaches a large part of the population. For the most part, positive agendas are pushed. As noted earlier though, the audience's motivation was not necessarily in generating social capital that would be 'paid back' to them, but they did describe enjoying the positive feedback from their social and selfless acts online. There was also a sense that the space provided voice for those who would not usually find places to socialise in their locality,

or who had opinions they might like to share with others. However, this also sometimes came with tensions and dangers of becoming involved in a conversation; stories could shift their focus throughout the input of the audience and it was disappointing to discover that this sometimes put people off speaking out altogether if their views did not follow the consensus. As such, outcomes of situations, sometimes affected people's desires to participate in the future, supporting Giddens' (1984) notion that the consequences of our actions in such social situations affect our desire to engage, a constantly negotiated experience. Finally, I refer to the technological barriers of participation. The audience's strategies in overcoming these were notable, reinventing Facebook in combination with their phone, when neither software nor hardware was specifically designed for such group communication practices. Turner et al. (2016: 252) present this in terms of opportunity, first, one of "free and quick" platforms such as Facebook, but also "to use tools creatively, exercising their full potential". As long as a balance of powerful tools can be handled in the context of everyday technology, audiences should be and *feel* enabled.

The audience's practice in the hyperlocal space can therefore be understood as a learning process and one that is ongoing. But rather than people taking on the role of more passive reader until they feel expert enough to participate with comments or their own posts, they tend to contribute in response to their own immediate needs or ability to do so based on their own everyday experience, and their local knowledge, resulting in sometimes messy but nonetheless communicative practice. The large number of active contributors on an everyday basis is evidenced by the fact that I rarely recognised names or key contributors, and the relaxed and naturalised modes of practice displayed welcome the audience to contribute (although I have also discussed situations where they are put off). The extent to which the audience accept these communications at face value suggests they are for the most part significant in constructing normative behaviours of the space, and acceptable routines.

Chapter Seven - Conclusion

A route to hyperlocal media audiences

This work started for me in 2013, when I was already engaged in hyperlocal media research as a research assistant on the Media, Community and the Creative Citizens AHRC project, at Birmingham City University. I had attended my first Talk About Local Unconference at this stage, and had moved to Wednesfield a year earlier, so I was already a practicing member of the WV11 audience and appreciated some of the significance of these online spaces. As we explored research literature pertaining to our project, it struck me that audiences were not in focus. I felt strongly that whilst we were investigating the efforts and time put in by hyperlocal editors, that their work couldn't be valued without some understanding of its reception. From a personal perspective, this approach may have also been influenced by my previous role in user-centred-design research, largely investigating how people used websites. The results of user-testing sessions taught me that whatever we might expect from people's behaviour, even based on past investigation, there is little validity to claims until we have observed their practice and engaged them in conversation. Admittedly, the literature I encountered on hyperlocal media did *not* make assumptions about audience practices. I did have concerns, though, that the expectations of civic or political engagement, and that the local news media gap would be filled, would not be borne out on the reductive basis of 'if you build it, they will come'. However, even as resident, I did recognise there was value to audiences and perhaps entirely different, uncharted practices that were in play. These factors combined were the initial basis for my study, and point to wider implications for understanding media and cultural studies – whilst we can speculate as to the value of media practices, it is only in audience studies that we can more definitively understand their value.

As I explored the literature, a number of other factors guided my research approach. My experiences of using hyperlocal media, and talking to practitioners did not always describe 'journalism'. Some of them rejected the label altogether (Williams et al., 2014), and yet much of the relevant literature was based in journalism studies. Where hyperlocal media was presented as a solution to problems of local news media plurality or civic engagement (Hampton and Wellman, 2003; Mesch et al., 2003; Metzgar et al., 2011; Väättäjä, 2012), there didn't seem to be enough solid evidence that the expectations were always met in practice. Much of the work at that time pertained to blogs or 'websites' when, increasingly, the combined use of smartphones and social media suggested usage models that became more

intertwined with everyday practices. Where Bruns (2006) and Atton (2002) spoke of 'producers' operating as sources in often politically-motivated alternative media contexts, others pointed to more casual, banal uses (Pink, 2012; Postil, 2011; Horst and Miller, 2006). As well as sourcing important local stories it was just as likely that the audience would talk about them, share with friends, or reject them in favour of other conversations. This then defined the need to better observe the hyperlocal spaces that have been created in social media in recent years, and how these might be conceived. It was here that I understood the significance of theories of practice as being informative and formative of these spaces (Giddens, 1984) and also how people used media and technologies in these contexts, alongside other online and offline media (Anderson et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2016; Williams, 1990). I came to understand the hyperlocal Facebook Pages as public spaces of self-representation (Goffman, 1959), where people might collectively be gathering in formation of public opinion and local identity (Habermas, 1991). Perhaps strongest of these theories was the sense of the space as 'field', where practice was observed as that which constitutes the norms of the space and rules of play, where status or social capital could be earned (Bourdieu, 2010). With this grounding in place, I conclude by explaining where this study has contributed new knowledge.

Conclusions and contributions

This study breaks ground in studies of online media and local communities in a number of ways. I will address this initially with reference to my aims and research questions as defined in my Introduction, before exploring four additional points of significance.

To recap, my primary research question asked:

- 1.0 How are citizens enabled to participate in their neighbourhoods using hyperlocal media, given the various power dynamics, roles and relationships inherent in such participatory platforms?

With reference to this primary question (1.0), residents are *enabled* to participate. The question, firstly, of whether they then take up that offer is key, as is the second question of what they are participating *in*. In one respect, online discussions inform the audience's everyday life, but wider offline lived experience and the sense of 'community' is shaped by their participation too. The space of participation online is just that, a field with its own shape and norms as manifested in the practices of the editors but also those intentional and

unintentional consequences of the audience's responsive practice as well, in turn shaped by their habitus. The editors may suggest or encourage certain behaviours, in discourses of improving neighbourhoods, or at least improving perceptions and attitudes with relation to crime and safety, for example. However, the audience's power in pulling discussions back to the practical and everyday (handyman recommendations) or daily events (traffic accidents, fairs, charity events) cannot be ignored, and these clearly influence editorial decisions too.

To return to that first point, though, there wasn't strong evidence in my study that the audience take up the calls according to the academic concerns of civic or political activism. Where activism was alluded to by the editors or others, it did not usually directly lead to people acting in those ways, even if they applauded others for their efforts. There is even a sense that a more passive clicktivism is unwittingly *encouraged* in the formation of such online spaces. The refrain that 'something should be done' appeared on a few occasions, but rather than the audience understanding that they could take this action themselves, there was often feeling that others (namely the editors) inhabited this role more appropriately. The editors then, create for themselves the role of mediator between audience and organisations such as the council or police. The wider implication is that this sheds light on how we think of 'community'. Where an ideal would suggest that all participants contribute fully to the goal of helping others, and would also therefore benefit from such a structure, the reality is just as likely that only a minority of truly engaged individuals or organisations participate fully, where the remainder exhibit traits of an audience i.e. they benefit from the efforts of others. As much as Bakardjieva (2003) recognises that we should not be too concerned about the mediated nature of communities, in this respect there is enough power in the hands of the editors that there is an editor/audience model in play. My work also critiques wider assumptions that space of public sphere can be found or built on the Internet, even as physical places or mainstream media are seen to be failing. Without motivations, or activist individuals leading the way for the group, such spaces do not necessarily herald a new dawn for empowered citizens.

These concerns were also explored through secondary research questions:

1.1 What relationships do audiences maintain in hyperlocal media, with relation to each other and the editors?

Two key relationships need to be addressed here, audience with editor, and audience members with each other, setting aside for the purposes of this discussion the more nuanced flavours and roles that people would find for themselves in the space. I have noted the editors' position of power, most directly illustrated by the fact that only they can post to the Page's stream. It would be possible but time-consuming for the editors to source stories entirely themselves, from mainstream local media, or from organisations such as the police or council; the content is supplemented from the suggestions and sourcing of stories by the audience. Beyond just the question of the audience's labour input, is the sense of a perpetual feedback loop of practice – the audience learn how to use and respond to the space as a result of content they see there, where this normative content has been defined by the audience e.g. the more lost cats we see, we understand it is a place for this, and post more. While I've suggested that the audience don't always follow ideals of community activism, this should not necessarily be problematized if they instead demonstrate through their practice that they would rather it acted as a space of information-sharing and socialisation. The engagement happens when the editors are sensitive to the audience's input, only applying their own gentle pressures towards shaping transformative discourses of the locality with that in mind. The picture I present of 'the editor' in a position of power, but also a native reporter and peer to the audience, sheds new light with regards to wider conceptualisations of the role of editors, journalists and 'content creators' in journalism and media. Audiences can be given space to shape and participate in their own media, where a 'light touch' can be applied in some situations, allowing them to create narratives and self-police, but it is still clear that they appreciate a model of news and information that is 'delivered'.

The audience's awareness of each other is another matter. Many of the people I spoke to said they liked those stories that demonstrated 'the good' in the neighbourhood. In this is a sense that they thought of themselves as individuals, but also part of the larger collective. However, the individual's behaviour in the Facebook Page space often suggested a stronger relationship with the editors than with other audience members – not so much a group of people in communication with each other, but mediated by the editors. Some of this is couched in issues of trust, where my interviewees took the editors to be the more official or accurate voices of

information, and where they recognised that audience comments could lead to rumour or unhelpful opinion. So, the audience largely tends to recognise the editor's role in terms of the 'truth' of a story – the implication then is that such spaces of communication require the input of some mediating figure to prove to be valuable to the audience. This does raise concerns however, if we extend the discussion more widely to societal discourses of 'fake news' and trust in media. My thesis is reflective of the public's loss of trust in an established, regulated and traditional form such as mainstream media journalism. However, we should be equally attentive to hyperlocal media and their acceptance of local information that is likely to affect them and shape their views on various levels, but which is essentially curated and delivered by peers, often with no journalistic training.

The mechanics of the Facebook Page and resulting interaction are also partly responsible for this sense that audience members tend to speak back to the editors, but less so each other. Therefore, we cannot assume that participation is only informed by the individual's habitus, the affordances of the space imply how to participate, as do the individual's observation and easing into the conversations. A long list of comments to a story will typically be collapsed down to show just a few. The editor's contribution to the story is the first thing the individual sees in their own personal Facebook stream. The Visitor Posts section is largely hidden to users, even more so since changes in 2017 removed it from the Facebook Page layout – posting into that space is entirely possible without seeing what already exists there. These factors partly account for the audience's lack of awareness of each other, for example where multiple posts give the same information, or people ask for information which had been provided in another comment. This is not to say the audience were completely ignorant of each other, but to extend the analogy to one of community or a pub conversation as per Oldenburg's (2001) ideals of third place is going too far. My study has demonstrated concerns of dwindling physical third places in communities but it is unlikely that digital media can entirely fill that gap or social role – the best that can be afforded is a type of alternative. The space is, in this respect, valuable and meaningful for the audience. When they do participate, they are exercising and contributing with local knowledge and this developed in them a sense of being part of something. On the individual, micro level, this is a space to socialise where they might not otherwise be able to, and they are able to situate themselves within collective identities of the local. On the meso level of the collective that is representative of the wider neighbourhood, the space develops a sense of activity and agency, where even simply reading

can equip the audience with relevant and immediate information contributing to their everyday practice.

1.2 How are these relationships, expectations and norms of hyperlocal participatory practice defined, understood and controlled by the audience and editors?

I approach this question in terms of the formative practice that defines the space. As discussed above, control of the space is ultimately via the editors, but with input and shaping from the audience in their practice. Whilst the editors post stories, they are not practically able to monitor comments and discussion throughout each of these. When they do, or are alerted to inappropriate behaviour, they do sometimes step in to intervene, with the ultimate power of being able to delete comments if necessary. The audience's role in sourcing stories, but also responding to posts, make their gratifications clear - those issues that directly affect them such as housing, jobs or crime, and events which similarly speak to everyday and functional experience and concerns, such as lost pets, social events and new shops opening. When someone uses the page to ask for recommendations of local traders or new sports clubs for their children, this sets the tone, and also gives the opportunity for information to be shared, where those businesses then benefit from the discussion too. However, when stories are shared that are of less interest to the audience, their disengagement can be understood in the lack of clicks, Likes, Comments, and Shares. This then suggests new ways of understanding the role of media audiences - whilst online mainstream news envisages a connection through ideals of user-generated content or citizen journalism, there are more nuanced ways of understanding the audience's response as well as such direct participation. Standards of presentation must be understood on different terms to those of mainstream media. Where typographic or grammatical mistakes in mainstream journalism would be picked up on, they are largely overlooked in the posts and comments of hyperlocal media, as normative of everyday communication. Sharing screenshots from phones, or photographing printed posters might not seem the most elegant way of sharing information, but they easily become naturalised standards.

1.3 How do these online, definitional practices and relationships then also relate to the offline locality, with respect to civic engagement, local news media, and constructions of 'place'?

This online media clearly has relationship with other experiences of the locality. In chapter four I established that hyperlocal media is situated amongst other online and offline media, where it can only be seen as representing one set of discourses and narratives of local life. But further to this, the audience's practice constructs and supports ideas about the locality that affects perceptions of aspects such as crime, safety and discourses of 'the youth of today'. The editors attempt to counter those crime stories in the role of moderator as well as mediator, feeling that such stories should be reported lest they be subject to unsubstantiated online gossip. Efforts such as their #positiveb31 hashtag demonstrate the struggle to keep residents connected and socialising, but in a mode that is supportive of the neighbourhoods. However, it is not always possible to use hyperlocal spaces to push new agendas or ideas, such as the literal 'placemaking' efforts in Longbridge, when residents still feel affected by the closure of the car plant there ten years ago, and this was demonstrated in their response to stories shared from the land developers. Nonetheless, such organisations might learn something in terms of audience engagement here. Whilst I suggest that the narratives or efforts towards civic activism in my case studies didn't always connect directly, hyperlocal media Pages are a space to softly introduce ideas or discussions, gaining support for charities, new businesses or other causes 'under the radar', within the immersive media of the everyday. Identities of place are developed in approaching local issues and themes over a space of weeks, months and years. Even if hyperlocal media does not breed activism directly, a heightened awareness and exposure to local issues is still significant. Thus we develop a sense that the Internet can be persuasive and formative of identity through gradual and ongoing engagement, just as much as through high-impact 'social change' videos on Youtube, for example – both approaches may prove to be effective.

Having established that the neighbourhood is *represented* and *perceived* in certain influential ways through online discourses, it does not also follow that participation in the online space inspires participation offline too. This point contributes to current and wider considerations of activism. The hyperlocal audience participates, but they do so on terms that *they* recognise as useful or helpful, or in ways that will service their own needs (to advertise their event, for example). My study didn't demonstrate that such participation in the online space positively rubs off on, or impacts the wider neighbourhood – events posted to the Page didn't usually

generate multiple shares, Likes or comments, so it was hard to identify the impact of posting these online. Some people reported that event listings *reminded* them of those they already knew about, and were only relevant to them if the event was within their extreme locality. Those people weren't pulled out of their existing routines and literal comfort zones.

Where research has demonstrated that Twitter, Facebook or other social media can't be treated as instigators alone of revolution or democratic change (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013), my work follows suit at a more parochial level, where civically-engaged residents would even have trouble inspiring other residents to pick up litter from their park. We should be warned from such cases that Liking a comment is to be involved in that online discussion, but is not necessarily to be an agent of change. Even in the case of a tweet being retweeted thousands of times, the message has little legacy in a constant flow of digital media. This is not to suggest that social media does not have its place, it clearly does, for example in mobilising those already connected. But to assume it can take on the role of, and do the job of social change for us, is to ask too much. It is one thing to be made aware of the public meeting, and read the follow-up report – it is another to attend and ask your own questions.

Having addressed the research questions, I set out four conclusions of this study, which contribute in various ways.

First of all, hyperlocal media should not be thought of in terms of merely filling the gap of receding mainstream media, or maybe not even as alternative media, but as something other. In chapter four I push beyond the idea of an audience consuming news through traditional broadcast means. Rather, I present a more inclusive picture of stories sometimes entirely developed in the audience's work, from the originating photo or few words from an eyewitness, to the 'fleshing out' of the story from other contributors. Comments can be informative, as well as demonstrating the affective power of sharing such information, where the audience might be left feeling more concerned for their safety as a result of reading about crime, or more engaged and integrated in their communities when they are made aware of local events. Thus, we develop a picture of online participation that extends on the idea of audiences sometimes simply sourcing content for professional journalists, to entire spaces that are truly 'user-generated' and shaped according to their interests only.

Hyperlocal media is not entirely divorced from mainstream media, however. Hyperlocal Pages regularly share (through editors and audiences alike) online stories from local newspapers,

the council, or the police. Yet, the fact that this only constitutes a part of the Page content tells us firstly that there are simply not enough of these local mainstream stories coming through to satisfy audiences, and secondly, that their content and/or subject matter does not entirely satisfy audience needs. The immediacy of the online Facebook stream makes it suitable for breaking stories of lost pets and other banal narratives that would be impossible for local newspapers to carry. It does not necessarily follow, though, that hyperlocal media follows the ideals of “alternative media” either, which Atton (2002) suggests implies dissent or alternative voices to the mainstream agenda. For the most part, the subject matters and approaches of these Pages are so much more immediate and often more parochial than mainstream media that they are not necessarily oppositional but something ‘other’. The closest conceptualisation of this to date is Couldry and McCarthy’s (2004) definition of a “MediaSpace”, as a space created by media, but one which can encompass a virtual sense of spatiality.

This sense of an evolving, new form of audience contributes to ideas about hyperlocal media in itself, and online audiences more widely. The hyperlocal Facebook Page model clearly appeals to the audience. The comfort in knowing that an editor will forward on relevant content into the Facebook stream which has become a part of daily, regular habit, is significant. Where Williams (1984) presented mobile privatisation as a more active behaviour in the respect of those media we choose and aggregate, there is also a more passive element here, slightly at odds with McCollough et al.’s (2017: 113) picture of a local news audience aware of the need to “do work on their own to effectively stay informed”. People reported that they didn’t click through directly to the Page but rather read what came through their stream. Others seemed reluctant to take part in conversations that might result in conflict. Such factors, and this acceptance of the editor’s role, suggest that tastes towards Internet behaviour and online sociality are increasingly shaped by the convenience and flow of social media, where we might expect information to be pushed our way, rather than searching for it ourselves – as suggested in studies of American and Canadian social media news audiences (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016: 2; Hermida et al, 2012). This is perhaps most alarming when we place such assertions in the context of wider Facebook use and discourses of the ‘echo chamber’. One aspect of hyperlocal we can take comfort in here is that the Page brings people together under the broad umbrella of a wide geography, and has the potential to cut across class divides, exposing and involving them in a richer variety of sources and opinions.

In presenting hyperlocal spaces as something other than journalism, *this study also contributes to ideas about the nature of mainstream media, and how traditional forms might be remoulded*. Where mainstream media often appeals for user-generated content, the newsroom is still resistant to completely open use of platforms as demonstrated in hyperlocal Pages. Many of the local newspapers in my case study neighbourhoods ran Facebook Pages of their own, but their approach was merely to recirculate their content, those same stories appearing in their print newspapers, similar to Lovari and Parisi's (2015) observation of municipalities reaching but not engaging their audiences. Rather, mainstream media might be encouraged to open their doors to participation and maintain it more actively on a regular basis. The value this creates for the audience and their propensity for further participation (e.g. in creating a channel for sources to 'come forward') might at least provide part solution to the problem of covering additional staffing costs required to maintain such channels. If mainstream outlets expect and invite engagement they might take a lesson from editors of hyperlocal services, in being conversant with their audience, in reducing the perceived distance and hierarchy between journalist and reader.

Secondly, it then follows to affirm that this study of *UK* hyperlocal media demonstrates uses and gratifications of the audience as couched in the everyday, rather than politics or activism. These are spaces for people to be informed, and inform each other. In the sourcing of stories, and the audience's response, it is clear that content affecting immediate, everyday practice was of most significance. For example, news of school closures due to bad weather would often be shared in the space. Finding out about local events might at least offer options for socialising with others, even if they were not taken up – and such social, as well as functional, affordances were also key in making people feel connected to their neighbourhoods. However, if an individual's engagement with the world is to be entirely immersed in the banal and everyday, does this, in turn, disengage publics from wider concerns that they might not see as immediately impactful, such as politics? It is perhaps no surprise then, that we start to point to the increasing influence of a populist flavour of politics (Clarke and Newman, 2017).

This contributes to discourses of civic engagement and community spaces. In Wednesfield, Putnam's (2000) and Oldenburg's (2001) concerns of receding physical spaces of socialisation (even if caused by different forces) were borne out by the closure of various community halls and rooms, and a threat to children's services. The editors of WV11 became involved in the rejuvenation and creation of a 'community hub' project on a local housing estate, but it is also

clear that their hyperlocal Page, and that of B31 Voices, took on a social role for the audience. Whilst it is not to say that neighbourhoods should *accept* such cuts to valuable services, the opportunity of online spaces can provide an alternative. Their value to those who might otherwise be excluded or exclude themselves from other social spaces is clear. Where some international studies would situate expectations in terms of how online spaces can foster civic or political activism, or assist in striving for democracy (Postil, 2011; Sutton, 2006), it is in the more directly social return that we might value UK online local community media.

My study also contributes to notions of online public sphere; I assert that online participatory spaces do not always, by their default of being open and accessible, empower publics. As I reject determinist discourses of technology that has 'changed society' (Turkle, 2012), so we must also recognise that any online activism is driven by the people not the platform. The Page discussions did sometimes work towards a development and shaping of public opinion. However, those conversations would often end in internalised complaints *about* the council or police, rather than directly addressing those organisations in the mode of Habermas' ideal (1991). At best, there came the suggestions that others might take up the cause on their behalf. Therefore, such online spaces require drive and direction, and a desire for change, in order for such transformations or challenges of power to take place. There does, however, seem to be a mismatch between academic concerns to find in such spaces a redressing of media plurality or satisfaction that communities are engaged in certain ways, and the audience's own desires. Where the space and its content is so responsive to and receptive of the audience's participation, these spaces may be exactly those that are needed by people who do not otherwise feel connected to people in their neighbourhoods. There, the audience members find others with comparable and shareable experiences of the everyday locality, sometimes tempered in geography via discussions of streets or particular neighbourhoods. Others find meaning in their collective historical accounts, building a picture of the offline places. But perhaps most significant are narratives that connect people through their experiences of the very immediate and banal. The multiple witnessing of a rainbow, for example, can place the individual within their community, and alongside others.

Thirdly, the study identifies the ways in which everyday technologies enable us to participate in socialities, but recognises that there are still barriers to overcome or mitigate for in doing so. The editor's guidelines for participation are open, and it is through practice that the newcomer learns appropriate behaviour. However, even as the technology affords interaction

in the space, the individual must understand that they can contribute via the Visitor Posts or by sending a Direct Message to the editors, but that there is no guarantee their story will be reposted. Even if the subject matter, language used, or use of a photo are deemed to 'fit', the timing of the message might pass the editors by.

In my Introduction I suggested that Facebook as an organisation might learn something of the problems caused by regular changes to their interface. As much as the audience attempted and sometimes succeeded in overcoming such barriers, *this situation of unhelpful disruption does contribute to more generalizable discourses of risk and trust in media use*. Hyperlocal Facebook Pages are appealing to new users because they were already part of the Facebook audience – the labour/payoff ratio of 'Liking' a new local Page is attractive. However, there may be a period of adjustment due to the slightly unusual and novel uses of the platform in the local context, for example remembering that a throwaway remark on any other Page might be acceptable, but less so on a hyperlocal Page where others might identify the user through other friendships (e.g. offline). Therefore, this reframes ideas about the risks of engagement in community media – the same can be applied to other media 'spaces', even those as loosely defined as Instagram or Twitter hashtags. Socialising online has the benefit of involving the user with others and feeling connected, but it can also open them to criticism or even threaten their safety e.g. the social use of Snapchat by young people, which can enable sexting and unwanted drama. Given this, individuals must perform a balancing act, where engagement should be considered in terms of the potential audience for each interaction but on an everyday basis, it is rather more likely that they slip into comfortable routines and don't always demonstrate this awareness. This is not necessarily to suggest that they are naïve, but where they have not personally experienced problems from 'oversharing', they will continue to do so as the social benefits outweigh the risk. Even more broadly, the act of becoming involved in any collective or a group requires commitment and participation – it may be that those who would prefer not to do so in neighbourhood third place contexts (e.g. social groups or Neighbourhood Watch meetings) would be more comfortable doing so in online equivalents such as hyperlocal spaces.

The extent to which this media is interwoven into everyday practices is of course further enabled by the mobile technologies used. *This then contributes to discourses of smartphone use, challenging the notion of the person with their nose buried in their mobile phone being disengaged with 'real life'*, or that which is going on around them (Turkle, 2012). Rather,

people described feeling closer to or involved in their community as a result of using hyperlocal media, where it might be something they turn to as they woke up, during work break times, or in the evening as they relaxed in their lounge. Their engagement with these hyperlocal discussions were more likely to be described in terms of leisure or 'downtime' rather than work, literally a 'light touch' way of connecting to others sharing experiences of the locality. Furthermore, some of the creative ways they demonstrated using the phone's camera or other functions of the phone or Facebook platform demonstrated the extent to which they manipulate new technologies to new ends.

Fourthly, studies of audiences must go beyond analytics and quantitative data to explore richer narratives and meanings of the media space, especially when the subject matter situates itself in nuanced everyday practices. Where others have reduced audiences to 'measures' of sociality and "neighbouring" through surveys (admittedly alongside other methods) (Mesch and Levanon, 2003; Hampton and Wellman, 2003), my study contributes ethnographic insight to the wider field of participatory audience studies, one of the first of its kind to question expectations of this media in the UK. With this in mind, the research question and methodology were formulated in parallel, tackling the problem of how to best observe and understand those relationships and practices in the hyperlocal media space.

My study therefore contributes to the field of online media research, but also that of research methodologies. My ethnographic work has allowed for a deeper understanding of how hyperlocal media is relational to the wider community – explored through the micro (user, and their mobile technologies), meso, (hyperlocal Facebook Page) and macro (wider community, local discourses, and other media) levels of engagement and relation. In total, this demonstrates how hyperlocal media has place in, responds to and might transform discourses of the local beyond any online presence – in this respect hyperlocal is situated within, rather than entirely representative of, the local neighbourhood. Such layering is important to consider because all these elements *are* relational, but it is only through ethnography employing a variety of methods that we can bring them into relief.

The study also contributes to the problem of researching online, everyday technologies such as smartphones without introducing 'observer effect'. Where it would have been too intrusive to literally look over the shoulder of an audience member, I instead invited the audience to approach me, suggesting those methods they would find most comfortable, for example,

meeting and engaging with participants in their spaces. This led to a core of around a dozen participants in my second case study in ongoing conversation with me, whether through interviews in cafes, or in the online Facebook Group. My own approach was similarly nuanced and shifted in mode quite regularly. I benefited from accepting my position as resident, one who could experience the media space as others did, but also distancing myself in more critical, observational and analytical approaches when necessary.

One of these modes of engagement was the Facebook Group representing the Community Panel. This contributes to current thinking about the role of social medias research tool. Platforms are often discussed in terms of the ease with which data regarding online users can potentially be 'served up' for researchers (Kosinski et al., 2015). My approach, however, made a logical leap, that if I wanted to engage with people who are comfortable in using Facebook spaces, I should create a Facebook Group for us to do so. This operated as a backstage area of the B31 Voices community, where participants could safely discuss what happened on the actual B31 Voices Page. While research diaries might otherwise seem an onerous and alien task for research participants, engaging in just another Group amongst many they may already be using online tends to meet them in their own space, where they are more likely to participate.

Recommendations for further research

My work contributes to a corpus of emerging, qualitative audience studies of digital media, but I would hope that others add to this. As much as I suggest that the problems of utilising a platform such as Facebook are outweighed by the benefits in terms of reach and engagement, I would similarly like to explore the potential for hyperlocal video, rarely encountered in my study or in the prior Creative Citizens content analysis work I was involved in (Williams et al., 2015b). Although people I spoke to rejected the idea of co-creating video work in our research together, Youtube is a platform increasingly used in and out of the home in place of or additive to 'television' as we might traditionally understand it (Ofcom, 2016). As such, creating and disseminating local news via Youtube might prove to be another case, like Facebook, of introducing new ways of using established, habitual media to engage local populations. A project more akin to practice-based rather than exploratory research might, for example, start a local Youtube channel, drawing on the participation of readers or trained citizen journalists to provide reports which are maintained and edited in daily local online bulletins. As much as we must recognise the limitations and risks of using such global

platforms, it may be that they provide part of the answer to concerns regarding local media plurality.

More broadly, my fieldwork here has charted and described how audiences create and contribute to online spaces that help them make sense of the world they inhabit. We can think of this in terms of the local level, but also a set of participatory practices that are indicative of how we engage with wider, global news and media discourses. As 'fake news' and the agendas of media are discussed and supposedly exposed to audiences, further research could explore how audiences make value judgements regarding news media before they read or otherwise 'consume' it, and then extend the conversation further as they pass it on. Hierarchies of journalism could also be better defined and updated with these structures in mind, where I have discussed that native peers are often seen to be more influential than mainstream media. In turn, our emerging understanding of the role of 'source' or 'writer' also requires further updating, as does our understanding of the editor's role in mediating and feeding stories on to wider publics. As much as Facebook may not survive as a platform, the participatory nature of the web appears to be a lasting phenomenon, and therefore I suggest that future research should take some of these broader questions into consideration.

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Appendices

A: List of materials gathered in ethnography

p.87 explains how these codes are used to refer to materials in this thesis. See Research Design and Practice section of Chapter Three for details of how these materials were gathered.

RD/WV11: Research Diary – Wednesfield – August 2014-September 2013. Includes observation of online Page, but also other fieldwork notes and writing, based on online and offline and offline experience

RD/B31: Research Diary – Rubery – March 2015-March 2016. This followed similar format to that above, see p.56 for differences.

CPG/B31: B31 Voices Community Panel Facebook Group – 26th March 2015-14th March 2016, 51 members as of 02/12/2017

Email discussions with:

EI1/B31: Agatha – 21st February-20th May 2016

EI2/B31: Clive – 20st July-24th July 2015

EI3/B31: Clive – 21st August 2015

EI4/B31: Susan – 19th June 2015

EI5/B31: Clive – 19th September 2015

EI6/B31: Clive – 11th November 2015

EI7/B31: Clive – 13th September 2015

EI8/B31: Clive – 24th-25th September 2015

EI9/B31: Tracy – 26th February-26th April 2016

EI10/B31: Clive – 24th August 2015

EI11/B31: Marie – 4th-5th March 2016

Interviews with:

I1/B31: Marie at a Birmingham Costa Coffee - 8th May 2015

I2/B31: Andrew at his Northfield office - 12th August 2015

I3/B31: Mary by phone – 7th March 2016

I4/B31: Jean at a Rubery's Polly Put The Kettle On tearoom – 29th September 2015

I5/B31: Clive at Rubery Signpost Cafe – 2nd October 2015
I6/B31: Diane by phone – 1st December 2015
I7/B31: Ellen at Longbridge Public Art Project space (drop in)– 15th March 2016
I8/B31: Group interview with Sandra, Susan, Emma, Jean and Anita in Longbridge Sainsburys café (part 1) – 13th October 2015
I9/B31: Group interview continued once some had left, with Susan and Jean in Longbridge Sainsburys café (part 2) – 13th October 2015
I10/B31: Harry at Longbridge Public Art Project space (drop in)– 15th March 2016
I11/B31: Sandra at a Rubery cafe – 2nd October 2016
I12/B31: Kayleigh at Longbridge Public Art Project space (drop in)– 15th March 2016
I13/B31: Emma and Judie at Rubery’s Polly Put The Kettle On tearoom – 8th May 2015
I14/B31: Mark at Longbridge Public Art Project space (drop in) – 11th March 2016
I15/B31: Terry - Interview via phone, rerun of interview at Longbridge Public Art Project space I accidentally deleted - 30th June 2016
I16/B31: Vicky at McDonalds fast food restaurant, Longbridge – 9th October 2015

(Interviews below all took place in Wednesfield locations)

I1/WV11: Gemma at her office – 18th July 2014
I2/WV11: Katrina at a church – 23rd August 2014
I3/WV11: Barbara at her home – 22nd July 2014
I4/WV11: Rose at a community hub – 22nd July 2014
I5/WV11: Abigail at her home – 24th June 2014
I6/WV11: Daphne at a community hub – 8th October 2014
I7/WV11: Pete at his home – 3rd July 2014
I8/WV11: Paul at a community hub - 13th June 2014
I9/WV11: Tom at his home - 24th June 2014
I10/WV11: Richard at his office – 3rd October 2014

EdI1/WV11: Facebook messenger discussion with WV11 editor – 26th November 2013
EdI2/WV11: Google Mail chat with WV11 editor – 4th September 2013-25th September 2015
EdI3/WV11: Facebook messenger discussion with WV11 editor – 18th November 2013
EdI1/B31: Facebook messenger discussion with B31 Voices editor – 1st February 2015-2nd September 2016
EdI2/B31: Email conversation with B31 Voices editor – 2nd December 2016

M1/WV11: Miscellaneous field notes not entered into research diary, following meeting people at a community centre – 7th November 2013

M1/B31: Notes from an election hustings at Northfield Methodist Church as I wrote them up for a post on B31 Voices – 24th April 2015

B: Interview questions

B.1: WV11 interview questions

Hi, my name's Jerome. I'm doing some research towards a PhD I'm studying for at Birmingham City University. My work is about local websites that are becoming increasingly common in communities, but there's not very much known yet about people's use of them, so that's my focus. These interviews I'm doing are going to be really useful in exploring why and how people use these online services, I already have an idea of what people are doing from what I've seen online. (I might use that phrase 'online services' again, I'm just using it as a phrase that means all the different kinds of things that WV11 does - the blog, their Twitter account, Facebook page, Youtube account, etc.)

Have you got any questions so far?

Ok, could you please start by reading, and completing this consent form, or I can read it for you if it's easier. I just need you to circle Yes on each to confirm you understand. And take a copy for your own records too please.

Part 1

I've got a set of six questions for us to go through in the next hour so that gives us roughly 10 minutes for each question, but hopefully it will feel a bit more like an open conversation. There might be times when I feel we're going a bit off track, or I want to make sure I'm not using too much of your time, so then I'll pull us back on to the question, or go on to the next one. But really, I'm interested in your own personal experience, things you do, that kind of thing. And remember, this will all be made anonymous afterwards.

Question 1: First of all, I'm interested in how people use the WV11 website, and the WV11 Facebook and Twitter. I was wondering if we could start out with you talking me through how you use it?

Prompts:

- Do you use a mobile phone or computer, or even an iPad to access it?

- Maybe you could describe typically when in the day you use it and what for?
- Is it just when you have time, or do you make time for it?
- Do you actively look up the stream or page, or do you let it pass you by in your stream?
- What motivates you to look on the site as often as you do, or to participate?
- Do you read the Wall or tweets about @wv11 or #wv11, even if you 're not about to post something there?
- What is the Wall / hashtag for?
- When you post on the wall, or post a comment on something, do you read the comments other people have put there first?

Question 2: I'm also interested in how using a site or services like this relates to your everyday life, either around your home or when you're out and about.

Prompts:

- Is there a relation between what you do online, and offline?
- Do you use other sites, social network groups, etc in a similar way?
- Have you ever been to events you've seen advertised on WV11?
- Are you more aware of certain things in your everyday life, as a result of things you've seen online e.g. looking out for lost dogs or scam crime?
- Do you talk to people, either online or not, about things you've seen or discussed on WV11?
- Have you met people, joined groups, etc as a result of using or reading WV11?
- Can you give me an example of something where you feel you 've "given" something to the community, through your use of WV11?
- Is the WV11 community the same as the community in the physical world, in Wednesfield? If so/not, how?

Question 3: What are the benefits and drawbacks of a service like WV11?

Prompts:

- Do you think the WV11 sites / services are important? Why?
- Which people do they affect? Residents? Organisations? Politics? The council? Other media like local newspapers?

Part 2

Okay, in this second part of the interview, the typed transcripts will also later be shared with the people who run WV11.co.uk but again, it will be made anonymous so they won't know who you are. I'll let you see the transcripts before they go off to them, in case you're concerned about that and would rather remove anything you've said that you feel might identify you.

Question 4: What do you think is the purpose of WV11?

Prompts:

- What role does it have within the community? Functional (finding out about events, and news, or getting help for yourself)? Social (making friends)? Political (informing you)?
- How much do you feel WV11 represents you or is for you?
- Do you feel that the stories on WV11 are relevant to their readers, or resonate with the community? If so, can you give me an example. If not, why not?

Question 5: What would you change?

Prompts:

- What do you think could be covered less, or people could talk about less on WV11?
- And what would you like to see more of?
- What (local or otherwise) issues need to be raised but aren't?

Question 6: Where else do you find out local news and information?

Prompts:

- If there wasn't WV11 site / FB / Twitter, where would you find out local news and information?
- Do you read local papers, in print or online?
- Local radio / TV?
- Or word of mouth?

B.2: Initial B31 Voices opening script used in B31 Voices interviews

Hi, my name's Jerome. I'm doing some research towards a PhD I'm studying for at Birmingham City University. My work is about local websites that are becoming increasingly common in communities, but there's not very much known yet about people's use of them, so that's my focus. These interviews I'm doing are going to be really useful in exploring why and how people use these online services, I already have an idea of what people are doing from what I've seen online. (I might use that phrase 'online services' again, I'm just using it as a phrase that means all the different kinds of things that B31 does - the blog, their Twitter account, Facebook page, Youtube account, etc.)

Have you got any questions so far?

Ok, could you please start by reading, and completing this consent form, or I can read it for you if it's easier. I just need you to circle Yes on each to confirm you understand. And take a copy for your own records too please.

I have got some questions to go through but hopefully it will feel a bit more like an open conversation, we shouldn't be more than an hour. There might be times when I feel we're going a bit off track, or I want to make sure I'm not using too much of your time, so then I'll pull us back on to the question, or go on to the next one. But really, I'm interested in your own personal experience, things you do, that kind of thing. And remember, this will all be made anonymous afterwards.

Questions - used March-Sep 2015

First could you start just by telling me a bit about yourself, as much as you're comfortable with.

Do you live locally, have you always lived here?

How did you start using B31?

And how do you use it? I mean what you use it for, but also whether on a computer or phone?

And do you take part as well as read? What ways do you do that?

And what kind of relationship do you think the online activity of B31 has with what I'd call offline, the everyday living, out and about? Does it make you think differently about the area, or does it represent it quite accurately?

What are the issues that really strike a chord with you, the ones you stop to read, rather than skimming past?

B.3: Questions used Sep 2015-March 2016

First could you start just by telling me a bit about yourself, as much as you're comfortable with.

How did you start using B31 Voices?

And how do you use it? I mean what you use it for, but also whether on a computer or phone? Do you read the stream, or the wall itself? How do you 'see stuff'?

how do you picture yourself in the space

how do you see yourself in relation to other people?

what do the terms virtual reality / online / offline mean to you?

If B31 Voices was a house, what would it look like, what would the rooms be? Who would be in each room and what would they be doing?

And what other ways do you feel you keep in touch with, find out about or have a voice in your community? Are there other online and offline things?

I know you take part in conversations, and you post things as well, maybe you could talk us through what you've done on there or used it for in the last couple of days?

And what kind of relationship do you think the online activity of B31 has with what I'd call offline, the everyday living, out and about? Does it make you think differently about the area, or does it represent it quite accurately?

For example, when there are stories about crime, what are those for do you think? Why do people post them?

And do they make you think differently about the area?

In your mind, who controls B31 Voices? Do you feel like it's the editors, or the people who use it? What control do they have?

Is there anything you'd like to see or more of on there? In terms of types of behaviours? Or types of stories?

C: Posters used for participant recruitment calls

C.1: A call for interviews used in WV11 online Facebook posts

**DO YOU USE
WV11.CO.UK**

**or their Facebook page, Twitter
or mobile phone app?**

I'm doing research into how people read and use local websites as part of my personal study towards a PhD, and I'm now looking for people to talk to about their experiences.

This would mean a chat of around an hour, in an informal setting such as a cafe. Tea and cake will probably be involved!

In the first instance, if you're interested in this please get in touch and I can give you more details.

**Email: jerometurner77@gmail.com
Phone: 07747 164135**

C.2: Longer version of the call used in WV11 to encourage more participants

Do you use WV11.co.uk or their Facebook page, Twitter or mobile phone app?

I'm a researcher based at Birmingham City University's School of Media, looking into how people read and use a local website or social media like Facebook, at a time when there are fewer places these days for people to find out and share local news. What role and value do these websites have, not just as news sites, but in building and representing the community? The research will inform and provide insight into how local organisations and WV11.co.uk can run their site to the maximum benefit of their readers, as well as providing useful information for the hundreds of other similar websites around the UK. On a wider level, it will investigate the role of digital and social media in everyday society.

So far I've been doing my research by looking at the website and social media, but I'm now looking for people to talk to about their first hand experiences as readers and users of the WV11 services. Even if you usually read the pages, rather than commenting or 'Liking', that's fine. I'd still love to hear from you.

Interviews will be taking place over the next couple of months. This would mean a chat of around an hour, in an informal setting such as a cafe. The first half of the interview is to discuss how you use and feel about your use of the WV11 services (for my research) ; the second half is an opportunity for you to more generally air your views, ideas or issues about how WV11.co.uk is run, and suggest any improvements, and would then be fed back to the editors to help them improve the site for the good of the community.

Your name won't be used in any reporting of the interview, so that your comments can't be identified. I can provide more details about this.

Tea and cake will be provided!

If you're interested in taking part please get in touch and I can give you more details. If we then continue, we can find a place and time to suit you.

**Email: jerometurner77@gmail.com
Phone: 07747 164135**

C.3: Call used as a printed leaflet and online in Birmingham

Do you use B31 Voices? 

I'm doing research into how people read and use local websites as part of my study towards a PhD, and looking for people to talk to.

This could mean a chat in a café over a cup of tea and cake, or something as simple as a few emails, and can be totally led by you.



If you're interested please get in touch and I can give you more details.

Jerome Turner
Email: jerometurner77@gmail.com

C.4: my poster (yellow) on the Rubery village noticeboard



D: Screenshots of online blogged participant recruitment calls

D.1: Blog post by WV11 after I provided them with the text. Then posted into the WV11 Facebook Page by the editors:

<http://www.wv11.co.uk/2013/11/12/introducing-new-community-researcher/>

Published on November 12th, 2013 | by Steph Clarke

Introducing our new community researcher

✓ Like 13 Tweet Pinit Share 1

Jerome Turner lives in Wednesfield, regularly comments on our pages, and has even written **a couple of blog posts** for us.

What you might not also know is that he's a researcher at Birmingham City University, and this year he started studying for his own PhD. His work explores community media audiences, and namely something called "hyperlocal", which is essentially what we do through our site and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. Hyperlocal has been defined as:

"Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community."

'Here and Now: UK hyperlocal media today' report.

This year, and through to late 2014, Jerome will be doing an ethnographic study of WV11 audiences.

Ethnography

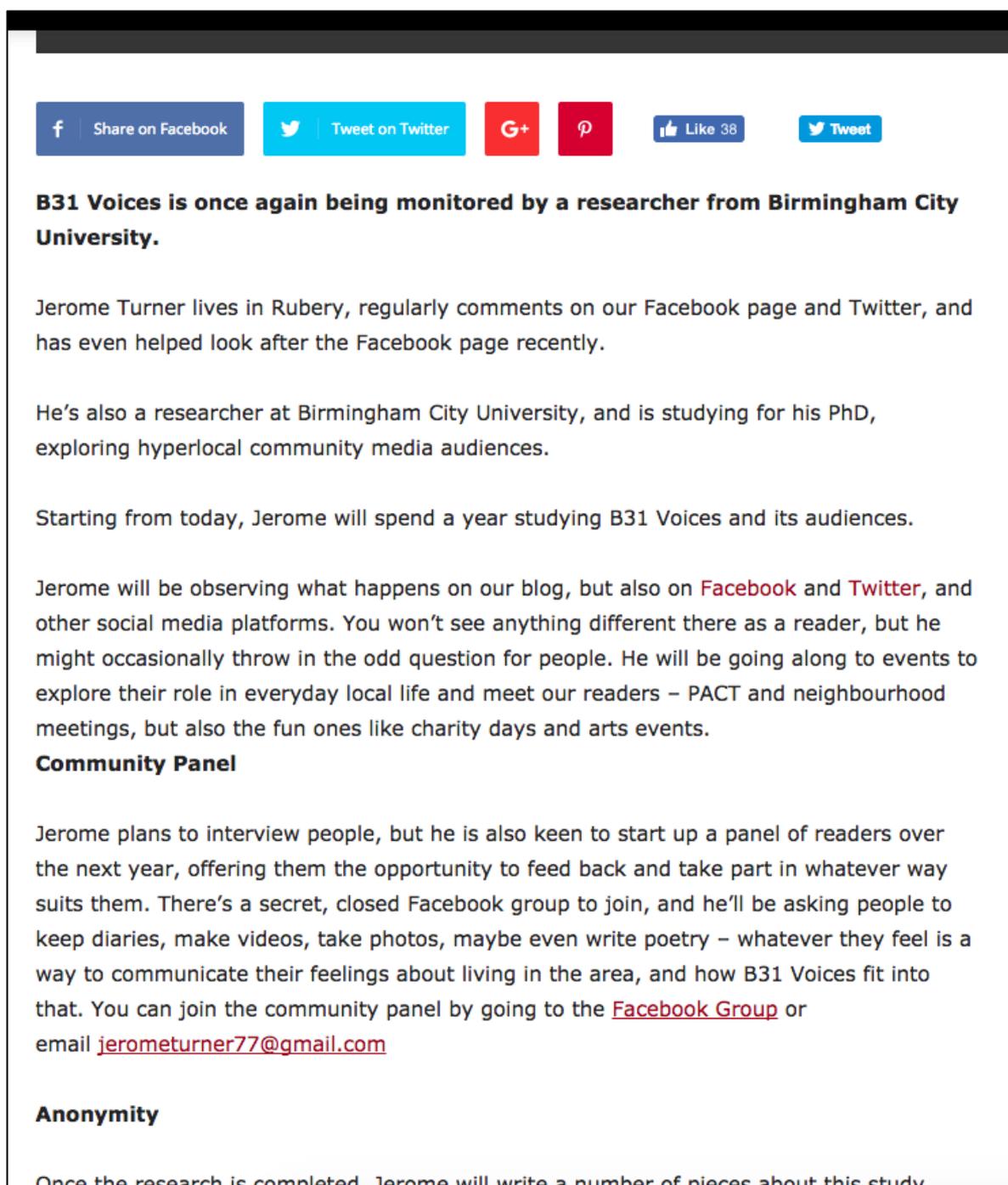
D.2: Blog post by B31 Voices after I provided them with the text (I didn't choose the headline).

Then posted into the B31 Voices Facebook Page by the editors:

<http://b31.org.uk/2015/04/b31-voices-under-the-researchers-microscope/>

A second post appeared near the end of my fieldwork:

<http://b31.org.uk/2016/02/last-chance-to-talk-to-researcher-about-how-you-use-b31-voices/>



[Share on Facebook](#) [Tweet on Twitter](#) [G+](#) [P](#) [Like 38](#) [Tweet](#)

B31 Voices is once again being monitored by a researcher from Birmingham City University.

Jerome Turner lives in Rubery, regularly comments on our Facebook page and Twitter, and has even helped look after the Facebook page recently.

He's also a researcher at Birmingham City University, and is studying for his PhD, exploring hyperlocal community media audiences.

Starting from today, Jerome will spend a year studying B31 Voices and its audiences.

Jerome will be observing what happens on our blog, but also on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), and other social media platforms. You won't see anything different there as a reader, but he might occasionally throw in the odd question for people. He will be going along to events to explore their role in everyday local life and meet our readers – PACT and neighbourhood meetings, but also the fun ones like charity days and arts events.

Community Panel

Jerome plans to interview people, but he is also keen to start up a panel of readers over the next year, offering them the opportunity to feed back and take part in whatever way suits them. There's a secret, closed Facebook group to join, and he'll be asking people to keep diaries, make videos, take photos, maybe even write poetry – whatever they feel is a way to communicate their feelings about living in the area, and how B31 Voices fit into that. You can join the community panel by going to the [Facebook Group](#) or email jerometurner77@gmail.com

Anonymity

Once the research is completed, Jerome will write a number of pieces about this study

E: Screenshots of each hyperlocal Page

E.1: Screenshot of WV11 Facebook Page – taken 29/10/2017

The screenshot shows the Facebook page for WV11.co.uk. The top navigation bar includes the Facebook logo, the page name 'WV11.co.uk', a search bar, and user information for 'Jerome'. The page header features a 'Liked' button, 'Following' status, 'Share' options, and a 'Send Message' button. The main content area is divided into sections: a 'Status' section with a 'Photo/Video' filter and a text input field; a 'Photos' section displaying two posters. The first poster is a historical 'WE NEED YOU!' recruitment poster for Willeshall Memorial Park, dated Saturday 18th November 10.00-2.00 at Willeshall Library. The second poster is for a 'DARTS TOURNAMENT' on Saturday 19th September at The Ashmore Inn. The right-hand sidebar contains community statistics, including 'Very responsive to messages', '10,050 people like this', and '9,890 people follow this'. It also includes an 'About' section with contact information and a 'Pages liked by this Page' section listing 'Events in Wolves', 'Wolverhampton T...', and 'Tettenhall'.

E.2: Screenshot of B31 Voices Facebook Page – taken 29/10/2017

The screenshot shows the Facebook profile for B31 Voices. The page header includes the name 'B31 Voices', a search bar, and navigation options like 'Home', 'Find Friends', and 'Contact Us'. The profile picture is the B31 Voices logo, which reads 'Connecting Communities across South West Birmingham'. The main content area features a post from B31 Voices, dated 7 hours ago, announcing a Halloween costume competition. The post text says: 'Send us your scary #Halloween dress up photos for a chance to win a voucher of your choice! 1st £20 2nd & 3rd £10 ENTER NOW! #HCC17'. Below the text is a promotional image for the 'HALLOWEEN COSTUME COMPETITION 2017' with contact information: 'ENTER NOW! TW: @B31VOICES, FB: B31 VOICES, E: COMPETITIONS@B31.ORG.UK'. The image also notes that entries must be received by 5 PM on Wednesday, 1st Nov 2017. The post has 1 like and 12 comments. The right-hand sidebar contains community information, including a 4.9 star rating, 37,759 likes, and 38,117 followers. It also lists 'Pages liked by this Page' such as 'R.I.P Kyle Sheehan (S...', 'University of Birmingh...', and 'K9 Search UK FO...'. The footer shows language options and a chat notification for 12 active chats.

F: Screenshot of community panel group

For my own anonymity, some Groups/Pages I belong to are blacked out – other names are not, as they were covered by participant consent agreements.

The screenshot shows a Facebook group page for "B31 Voices - Community Panel". The page is set to "Secret group" and is currently in "Discussion" mode. The group has a search bar and a list of shortcuts on the left sidebar, including "B31 Voices", "B31 Voices - Communit...", several redacted group names, "Rubery Present", "Rubery Past", and "Rubery's Communi...".

The main content area features a post by Jerome Turner from 10 September 2015. The post text reads: "Hi B31 Voices - Community Panel Today I posted a story to the wall from the Bromsgrove Advertiser, about a violent incident in the park in Rubery. I posted it because I think I felt it was of public interest, that some people might have been interested but not yet seen it. As I use the park myself, and know others do too, it seemed relevant. But there was also a part of me that didn't want to spread a story that might make people feel nervous about using the park, or encoura... See more". The post has "Like" and "Comment" buttons and is marked as "Seen by everyone".

Below the main post are two replies. The first is from Clare Povey, dated 10 September 2015 at 21:13, with the text: "What happened in the park as I take kids there". Jerome Turner replied with 4 replies. The second reply is from Donna Laundon, dated 10 September 2015 at 21:14, with the text: "no if i think its important to inform people of danger i do, would hate for something to happen and feel guilty because i didnt warn people". Jerome Turner replied with 1 reply.

At the bottom of the main content area, Jerome Turner shared a link on 29 November 2015. The text of the link post reads: "Hi again B31 Voices - Community Panel - there are a few people here who I've not heard from in conversation, or chatted to. That's fine, but I just wanted to see if anyone fancied a cup of tea and cake or a phone chat, emails even, to let me know their story, how they use B31 Voices, what they get out of it, how they participate, how it makes them feel about their area? Maybe those who have already spoken to me could vouch that it's quite a painless experience!!".

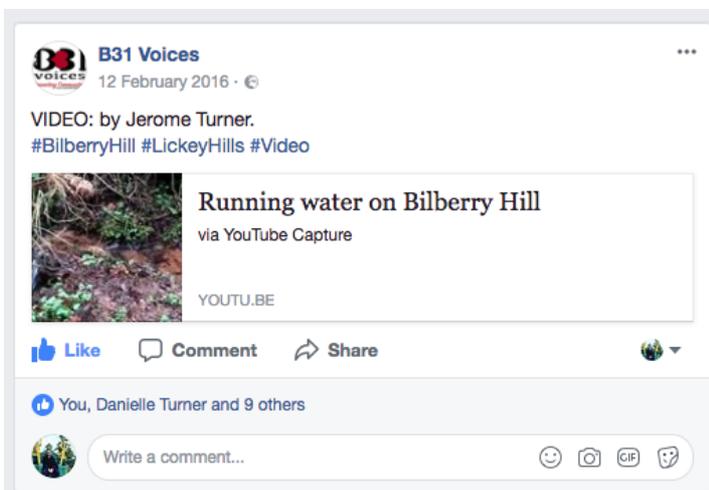
The right sidebar contains several sections: "LOCATIONS" with an "Add locations" button; "CREATE NEW GROUPS" with a "Create Group" button; "RECENT GROUP PHOTOS" with a "See all" link and two photo thumbnails; "Suggested Pages" with a "See All" link and a thumbnail for "Lyndsey Michaels - Bid Writer for UK SMEs"; and a language selection menu with options for English (UK), English (US), Polski, Español, and Português (Brasil). At the bottom of the sidebar are links for "Privacy", "Terms", "Advertising", "AdChoices", "Cookies", and "More", along with the Facebook copyright notice "Facebook © 2017".

G: Images of visual methods used, including how/where I used them in the Pages

G.1: Posted into my Community Panel Facebook Group



G.2: I made a short video of running water whilst on a walk and shared it to the Page



H: Consent agreement documents

H.1: WV11 Interview consent form

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM (COPY)

Name of Researcher(s) <i>(to be completed by the researcher)</i>
Title of study <i>(to be completed by the researcher)</i>

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, ring the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask.

- I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and / or written form by the researcher. **YES / NO**
- I understand that the research will involve an interview of roughly 1 hour, that it will be audio-recorded, and will last an hour. **YES / NO**
- I understand that, where appropriate and with my consent, I may need to illustrate a conversational point by using a website or social network e.g. Twitter / Facebook, but that, aside of note taking, photos or screenshots of this will *not* be made. **YES / NO**
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to give an explanation. This will not affect my future care or treatment. **YES / NO**
- I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study, unless I demand it. If context of even an unnamed quote means I can be identified, then I reserve the right to ask that that instance should be indirectly quoted, paraphrased, or completely omitted. **YES / NO**
- I understand that any audiotape material of me will be transcribed (typed up) and that such transcriptions may appear in research publications accessible to academia and/or the public. **YES / NO**
- I understand that the researcher will be discussing the progress of the research with others **YES / NO**

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my own information.

Name:

Signature: **Date:**

H.2: B31 Voices participant agreement form

This form was more detailed, to cover participation across the ethnographic period.

COMMUNITY PANEL PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT

This document serves to tell you about the research project, and the way you will be contributing and helping. It also lays out the terms of your participation, which you will need to demonstrate you understand by ticking boxes alongside statements, signing (if possible) and returning to the researcher Jerome Turner in order for you to take part in the research. This can be by email or printed and posted document.

About the research

B31 Voices is one of numerous websites around the country run by citizens for residents in a local area. Whilst research has been carried out about those owner/editors who run the sites (and their associated Facebook/Twitter accounts), there is less known about the people that use them. This research seeks to explore how B31 Voices is used, largely focussing on the Facebook page, but also looking at Twitter, the blog, and other associated local media both online and offline. The research will be identifying the various ways people not only use the pages to find out about local events, but also contribute to the discussions online.

This research will last a year (ending April 2016) and partly involves observing what happens on the B31 Voices Facebook page on a daily basis. In addition to this, the researcher has also put together a group of people to participate from the audience called a **Community Panel**. Depending on how people want to contribute, they might never meet either the researcher or other members of the panel, but this is a useful term for the pool of people to potentially be involved.

This research is for Jerome Turner's part-time PhD at Birmingham City University's School of Media. Contact details for the school are at the bottom of this page.

How can I take part?

Research into communities often involves the researcher doing one-to-one interviews or focus groups with people. However, in recognition of the fact that this might not always be practical or appealing for people who'd like to participate, the Community Panel allows people to contribute in ways they feel comfortable with. This might include, but is certainly not limited to:

- one-to-one or Skype interview
- email or online messenger interview
- sharing and talking about photography, or other visual forms like drawings
- recording and sharing videos or audio
- keeping 'research diaries' where participants write / photograph / record on a more regular basis

- taking part in community walks, bike rides or picnics where discussion can take place
- taking part in the Facebook Group (which is a private group, for confidentiality) or
- making things

But if there are any other ways you think you could talk about how you use B31 Voices, and what it means to you and the way you live in your local area, these would also be welcomed.

Because of the fact that people taking part might be doing so on numerous occasions and in different ways throughout the year (or might equally just do one interview), the following agreement serves to cover the relationship with the researcher for the duration, rather than just a one-off consent document that might be used in a single interview context.

In order to take part and agree to these terms, please read the following, tick the boxes, complete and return to the researcher Jerome Turner asap. Please read and complete this form carefully. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask first.

Agreement and consent

I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in this document. YES / NO

I understand that by joining the Community Panel I am providing responses potentially including, but not limited to, text, images, video and audio, that will be used as data in the B31 Voices research. YES / NO

I understand that in taking part, I may be participating with other members of the Community Panel, whether online or offline, and as a result, they may see, hear or otherwise be privy to my contribution/s. YES / NO

I understand that recordings may be made by the researcher during the research. In some cases these may be transcribed and quoted, but in other cases, such as video shot during photowalks, the researcher may ask for permission to use the recording itself in the writeup, publication and/or dissemination. YES / NO

I understand that quotes, photos or other elements of my contributions may appear in research publications or other publications and online, accessible to academia and/or the public. YES / NO

I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any work arising from this study, unless I request it. If context of even an unnamed quote means I can be identified, then I reserve the right to ask that that instance should be indirectly quoted, paraphrased, or completely omitted. YES / NO

I understand that my level and methods of involvement in this study might be advised by the researcher, but it is entirely at my discretion how much and how I contribute. YES / NO

I understand that I should only show or tell the researcher those things that I would be happy being used in the research. YES / NO

I understand that the researcher will be discussing the progress of the research with others. YES / NO

I understand that research publications and other writeups of the work may be posted within the B31 Voices community as a way of feeding back findings. YES / NO

I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to give an explanation. I will need to make this withdrawal clear in communication with the researcher (email). YES / NO

I understand that in withdrawing from the study I reserve the right to also withdraw all or some of the research data collected from me to date, so that it will not be used in the study. YES / NO

However, I am not able to request the removal of data which is in the public domain and freely available e.g. posts to the public B31 Voices wall. YES / NO

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my own information. YES / NO

Name _____

In addition to entering your name above, please also indicate how you would like us to refer to you if mentioned in the research.

1. no name used
2. your own name used
3. another name used - choose one! _____

Contact details _____

Sign (if printed) _____

Date _____

Please return by email to jerome.turner@bcu.ac.uk or via post to:

Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research
Room MP345, School of Media
Faculty of Performance, Media & English
Birmingham City University
Millennium Point
Birmingham B4 7XG

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the researcher Jerome Turner:

jerome.turner@bcu.ac.uk or call 07747 164135

Jerome's PhD research is based at Birmingham City University - you can contact them at

nick.webber@bcu.ac.uk or call 0121 3317280

I: Anonymised list of interviewees

Pseudonyms	Sex	Case Study
Mary	Female	B31 Voices
Gemma	Female	WV11
Andrew	Male	B31 Voices
Jean	Female	B31 Voices
Clive	Male	B31 Voices
Diane	Female	B31 Voices
Katrina	Female	WV11
Barbara	Female	WV11
Marie	Female	B31 Voices
Harry	Male	B31 Voices
Agatha	Female	B31 Voices
Rose	Female	WV11
Abigail	Female	WV11
Sandra	Female	B31 Voices
Susan	Female	B31 Voices
Kayleigh	Female	B31 Voices
Daphne	Female	WV11
Judie	Female	B31 Voices
Mark	Male	B31 Voices
Emma	Female	B31 Voices
Ellen	Female	B31 Voices
Terry	Male	B31 Voices
Anita	Female	B31 Voices
Pete	Male	WV11
Paul	Male	WV11
Tom	Male	WV11
Tracy	Female	B31 Voices
Richard	Male	WV11
Vicky	Female	B31 Voices

J: B31 Selfies

I shared a photo of myself on the B31 Voices page and asked people to share theirs too, demonstrating their contexts of use.

J.1: My selfie at my home office.



J.2: Participants (clockwise from top left): at home; at work; commuting by train; at home; out shopping.



K: Other local media

The following were other forms of media or socialisation that participants used:

Facebook Pages or Groups

Wednesfield Past and Present

Wednesfield History Society

Connect Cannock

Rubery Present

Rubery Past

Rubery's Community Group

Northfield Past, Present and Future

B14 News

Stirchley (neighbouring hyperlocal further into Birmingham)

Newspapers

Wolverhampton Express and Star

Wolverhampton Chronicle

Birmingham Mail

Bromsgrove Advertiser

Bromsgrove Standard

Metro

The I

Magazines

Wednesfield Magazine

L: A brief guide to Facebook, including Groups, Pages, and Visitor Posts

Facebook is a social media platform whereby individuals create accounts, and then post content – short messages sometimes know as status updates, stories, images, videos or web links. Those other users who are Friends with you will see your content appearing on their personal Facebook ‘stream’. As a result, each person’s stream is individually and chronologically made up of content from their friends, but also Facebook Pages they may have ‘Liked’.

Facebook Pages

A Facebook Page is similar to a personal account, but may be run by numerous people, as an organisation – in both my cases, the Pages were run by couples. Anyone who Likes (follows) a Page will see the content in their stream. They can also additionally opt to be notified - either visually on the Page, or by an alert sound on their phone – when new Page content is posted or their content is acted upon, although very few people reported turning this on for the hyperlocal Pages they followed. This in effect counts as subscribing to a Page, and is often described quantitatively as the number of overall followers (subscribers) a Page has. Anyone can also interact with this content in the usual way, by Liking, Sharing or adding comments, but in addition to this, the Page has a Visitor Posts section (previously called Posts to Page). This was, during my fieldwork, found as a ‘sidebar’ on the Page, on the left or right of the main content – it changed at one point.

In order to see all the posts of one Page, or to see the Visitor Posts, it was necessary for users to click through to the Facebook Page itself i.e. as opposed to just viewing the Page’s stories as they appeared in the individual’s stream. As many participants I spoke to did not report specifically visiting the Page like this, there is a problem of visibility with Visitor Posts. i.e. unless the editor reposts the story, it is unlikely many readers will see them.

Facebook Notifications

If a user is particularly interested in the content of a Page they Like, they can also opt to get Notifications. If they use the app on their phone, this might mean they are getting sound and vibration alerts when new stories appear on the Page – or at the very least, when they open Facebook, they will be alerted to new content by a red icon on the page, amongst other Facebook notifications they may have requested.

Facebook Changes

In 2017, after my fieldwork, the Facebook interface changed and Visitor Posts were further hidden deeper in the interface. They were no longer on the 'front page' of a Page – users had to click Posts from a new left-hand navigation. This took them to a display showing all the Page posts, and Visitor Posts in a sidebar, as before. However, the need for this additional click has further hidden these Page contributions.

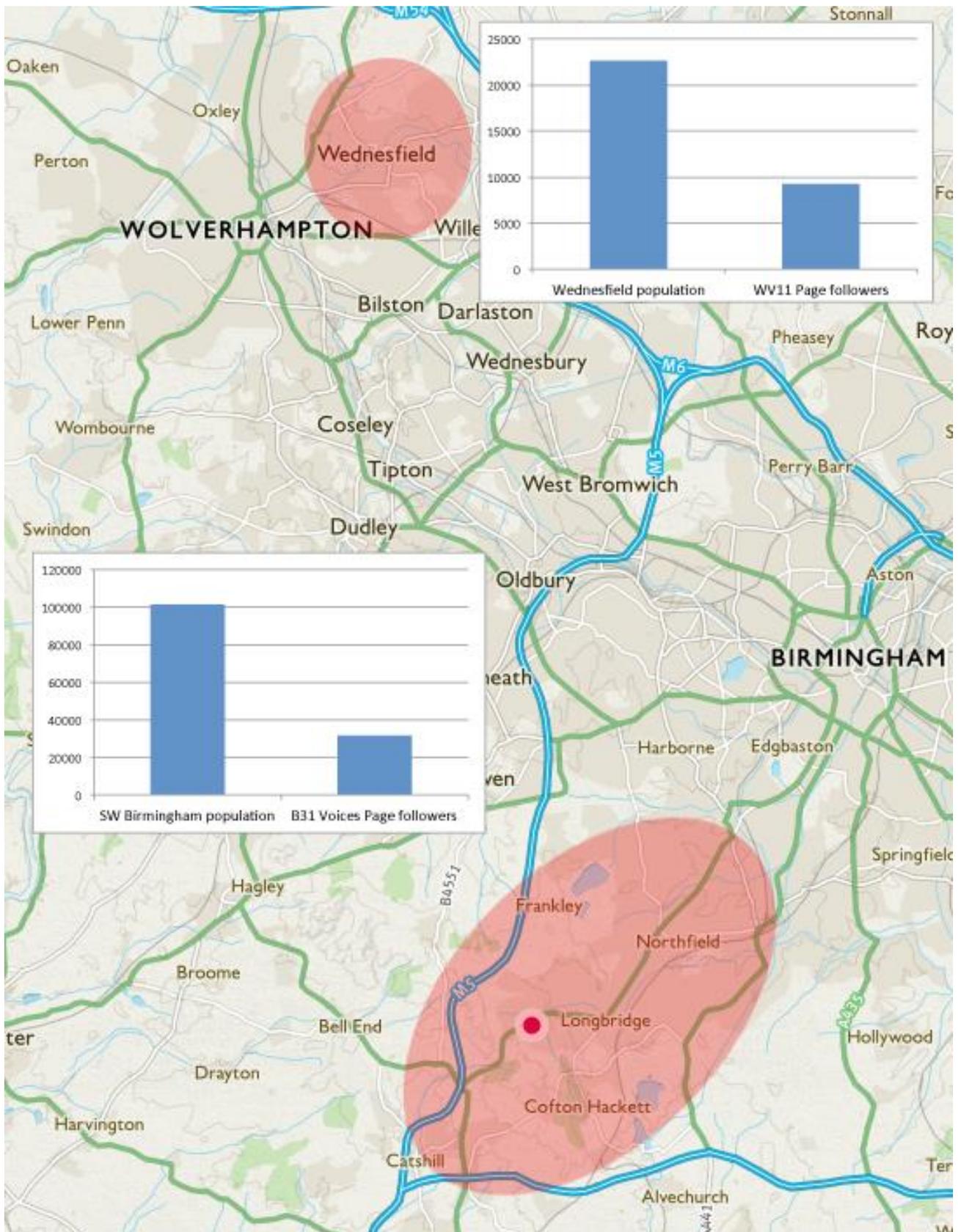
Facebook Pages vs Groups

It is worth noting the differences between Pages and Groups because local people also used Groups, as well as Pages, but also to understand the workload and relationship for the editors of each system. In Groups, they usually refer to themselves as administrators because the structure is more of a flat one, whereby anyone can post to the Group, much like an Internet forum. Administrators can choose to moderate submitted posts *before* they are then published to the Group, or they can more broadly moderate activity afterwards. A Page offers more control to the editor, in that only they choose what gets posted through to their stream, whether their own content, or things picked up from Visitor Posts. However, the payoff of this power and control is increased workload, an expectation in the audience that those editors will keep content flowing through the day.

Groups: Secret, Closed or Open

Facebook Groups can be Secret, Closed or Open. Secret Groups are not visible, even in Facebook searches, and new members are by invite only. Closed Groups can be found by outsiders, but the content can not be viewed. Open Groups can be viewed from outsiders, as well as their content. With my Community Panel I briefly had this set to Secret before realising it was stopping new members joining – the Closed setting instead sufficiently protected the members and their content from being viewed externally.

M: Map showing catchment area (pink), populations, and number of Page followers



N: Definitions of terms used

- Hyperlocal media – I use Radcliffe’s definition: “Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community” (2012: 6).
- Hyperlocal organisation – those individuals working as a team to run a hyperlocal service. For my two case studies, each was run by a husband and wife team.
- Hyperlocal services – any and/or all of the hyperlocal organisation’s output, across website, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, etc. This also includes their mediation/running of such services.
- The hyperlocal space – as I conceptualise the Facebook Pages in terms of field theory, I sometimes refer to a Page as a space, where activity and discussions occur.
- Facebook Page - a type of Facebook account typically run by an organisation, which other Facebook users can ‘Like’, meaning that the content appears in their timeline. Pages also have Visitor Posts noticeboards, through which people can interact with the page – see Appendix L.
- The editors – those individuals of the hyperlocal organisation running the Page. I sometimes refer to ‘the editors’ collectively, which unless otherwise stated, will describe something common to both case studies.
- The audience – the term I use to describe anyone who has Liked and is therefore ‘following’ the Facebook Pages. Whilst the practice is participatory, the editor still mediates the activity for the readers in a way which tends towards descriptions of ‘audience’ rather than online ‘community’.
- Readers – members of the audience, including those who may read the content, but not otherwise participate.
- Sourcers – members of the audience who have provided a source for a story that might then be reposted or made into a story by the editors.
- Facebook Followers – those who have clicked ‘Like’ on the Facebook Page and therefore become part of the audience.
- Poster – a person who has posted a story, most typically into the Visitor Posts.
- Like – to click ‘Like’ on a story, either in Visitor Posts or stories posted by the editors.
- Comment – typing a comment in response to a Facebook post, that appears in a box below the post. Comments can also be made as replies to other comments.

- Share – clicking Share on a post, which posts the story to the user’s own personal Facebook stream, or that of another page they manage. Increases reach of that story.
- Re-post – another term for ‘sharing’ a story, but which I tend to use in the context of stories that have been posted into Visitor Posts, which the editors then share into their Page stream
- Unconference - a conference format with very loose structure, often attended by practitioners or experts of a particular theme or discipline, where the agenda is usually set on the day, to exchange information and ideas amongst the participants.
- Facebay – Facebook pages that take on the function of e-commerce selling sites (e.g. Ebay), typically to sell used or second hand goods locally.
- Clickbait – content or web stories structured with the intention of drawing user’s attention i.e. to notice the headline and link posted into a Page, and click it to read the whole story.
- Stream – the ongoing content (posts, links, images, video) that flows through a personal Facebook account as the user posts there, or a Page as the editor posts/reposts stories there. The most recent content appears at the top.

O: Outputs and presentations

The following are outputs as a result of work undertaken during the PhD process.

Journal article:

Turner, J. (2015) Good dog, bad dog: Exploring audience uses and attitudes to hyperlocal community news media through the prism of banal pet stories. *Anthropological Notebooks*, 21(3).

Conference presentations:

Engaging and working with community participants in ethnographic contexts: The Community Panel method: Presented at: How To Play Knowledge Conference, Birmingham City University, 2015.

Stolen cars, lost cats and sunsets: The role and tensions of audiences in defining hyperlocal online media spaces: Presented at: MECCSA Conference, Canterbury University, January, 2016.

Exit, pursued by data: Reflection on the last weeks of an ethnographic study of online local community media audiences: Presented at: 'Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork' Conference at Birmingham City University, June, 2016.

Taking a horse to water: A screening of 3 ½ very short, ethnographic films. Presented at: Research Matters Conference at Birmingham City University, July, 2016.

The audience's active role in local Facebook pages: findings from an ethnographic study of West Midlands hyperlocal news media. Presentation at: Researching Journalism and Media in a Digital Age at University of Sheffield, January, 2017

"Someone should do something": Exploring civic engagement and activism in the audiences of two West Midlands hyperlocal Facebook Pages. Presented at: 12th Annual International Ethnography Symposium at University of Manchester, August, 2017