

# **Unravelling the discourses of hyperlocal journalism**

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## **Introduction**

In the early 2000s there emerged the notion that an informal, community-focused, experimental, largely amateur, “hyperlocal” journalism might offer a viable answer to the question of what would fill the gap left behind by a diminishing local and regional press that on its own admission could no longer fulfil its role of providing newspapers “of record” (Sharman 2015). Commentators and scholars seemed caught between whether hyperlocal journalism was a sign of the market reforming itself around new business models that were more lightweight and responsive in nature (Cook and Sirkkunen 2013), or whether this marked the start of a viable alternative journalism movement focused on creating impact with audiences and stoking activism (Harcup 2016). Either position suggested that hyperlocal journalism came invested with hope, just at the moment that the future of the local press seemed rather hopeless. One might therefore expect it to be easy to identify precisely what it was about hyperlocal journalism – its practices, its organisation, its ideologies – that made it such a powerful contender to solve critical issues of the future of local news. However, the reality was that a very wide set of practices and contexts were encompassed in the term, with the result that, in seemingly offering something to everyone, hyperlocal has become something of an “empty signifier” (Ali 2017: 49), put to use by practitioners, funders and the established news industry with little in the way of “meaningful and reflexive articulations of the intended good” (Rodgers 2017: 86).

The focus of this chapter is on the experience in the UK where the hyperlocal “movement” has involved such a wide variety of actors – practitioners, academics, policy-makers, funders – that it lends itself to an overarching assessment of whether it has lived up to its potential. The critical issue for exponents of hyperlocal journalism has been whether it can play an important part in sustaining and diversifying the local news landscape while offering an effective route for participation in the public sphere for marginalised communities and voices. This chapter sets out how the debate on the value of hyperlocal journalism in the UK has drawn on a series of overlapping discourses to explain the value of these emergent online local journalism initiatives and to foster their further development. These are: discourses of media plurality associated with journalism’s normative role in holding power to account and supporting the democratic engagement of citizens; an enterprise discourse associated with the digital economy, offering potential for entrepreneurially-minded technologists and journalists to develop new business models; and a civic and community discourse that frames hyperlocal journalism as a mechanism to strengthen community cohesion and offer a route for citizens to work collectively for the benefit of their communities. This chapter will explore the consequences of hyperlocal journalism’s engagement with these discourses and outline how, to a degree, its potential has been muted by its failure to satisfactorily meet the expectations of any of them.

## **The roots of hope in hyperlocal journalism**

An overview of 21st Century discussions related to journalism reveal that the potential transformative nature of the internet and social media technologies are very much at the heart of a kind of scholarly technological determinism. In the early 2000s, something of a utopian

discourse emerged about the potential of the Internet to give voice to ordinary people via blogs and emerging social media platforms. As John Hartley argued, the technological landscape now makes “everyone a journalist” (2009: 154). Dan Gillmor, in his influential 2004 book *We The Media* (2006), makes the connection between the alternative radical press of the late 18th Century and what seemed like an inexorable rise of bloggers and citizen journalists in the early 21st Century, focusing on the disruptive role that technology played in helping individual citizen-publishers find wider audiences for their often personal concerns. Borger et al. (2012), in what they describe as a “Genealogical Discourse Analysis” of scholarship on participatory journalism, argue that scholars tend to display a “strong faith in the democratic potential of digital technologies” (Borger et al. 2012: 125) and such technological optimism encouraged “internet enthusiasts... who voiced great expectations regarding the reinvigoration of the public sphere” (ibid). Hyperlocal publishing, as a form largely native to the internet, inevitably gets caught up in these utopian discourses about technology. Early US studies of online hyperlocal news operations lauded their ability to reinvigorate the mainstream, with Jan Schaffer arguing that they were acting as “a form of ‘bridge’ media, linking traditional forms of journalism with classic civic participation” (Schaffer 2007: 7). US scholars claimed enthusiastically that community news operations had a role to play in sustaining US democracy (Downie and Schudson 2009) and were also weathering the financial storm better than some of their mainstream counterparts. By the time that Emily Metzgar et al. (2011) set out a definition of hyperlocal journalism they note that the word hyperlocal is already “appear[ing] regularly in discussions about the future of the news media and potential alternative models” (2011: 773). In general, those discussions refer to hyperlocal journalism as a kind of hybrid form of local newsmaking that has elements where “alternative newspaper movements combined the interactive and broadcast abilities accompanying Web 2.0” (2011: 774). They settle on a definition that is then tested on a range of US local, community news operations: “hyperlocal media operations are geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement” (Metzgar et al. 2011: 774).

The ability or otherwise of hyperlocal initiatives to “fill the gap” also permeates research in Europe where there have been useful examinations of how local and regional news media corporations have undertaken participatory experiments in hyperlocal journalism. Fröhlich et al. (2012) found that the scale of participation of German citizens in the *MyHeimat* website was evidence that working at the hyperlocal level was both economically viable and evidence of the potential for participatory approaches to reinvigorate the public sphere. The content produced by citizens moved away from established news genres and contributors were acutely aware of “the need to provide an opposition or alternative to traditional mainstream media” (Fröhlich et al. 2012). In the Netherlands, Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014) identified 350 hyperlocal news websites offering diverse and often very locally relevant news, but in common with many community news outlets worldwide they struggled to maintain themselves financially. As with Fröhlich et al’s (2012) research, Paulussen and D’Heer (2013) noted the differences between the type of stories covered by professionals and non-professional journalists participating in hyperlocal projects, with citizen journalists more likely to report on soft news: “coverage about daily community life has become the domain of the citizen reporters” (2013: 599).

This focus on the everyday has been the focus of my own research (Harte et al. 2017), examining the practices of hyperlocal journalists who have started publishing ventures on

their own initiative rather than in partnership with mainstream news publishers. I noted that many hyperlocal publishers seemed to focus on the “banality of the everyday” (Hess and Gutsche Jr 2018: 485) and I sought to draw attention to both the everyday topics covered by UK hyperlocal journalists and the everyday physical (the home, the pub, local shops) and online (social media) spaces in which they produced their journalism. Many hyperlocal publishers facilitated participatory community-building activity beyond their news operation (Harte et al. 2017: 172), creating measurable impact on citizens’ lives. Drawing on work by Hess and Gutsche Jr (2018), I (Harte et al. 2018) have argued for a perspective that requires a shift away from a technologically determinist approach or one that solely looks for citizen participation in news in political terms, to one that attempts to identify the wider value of journalism in forming collective community identities.

### **Championing hyperlocal journalism**

If the potential for developed citizen participation was a key aspect of hyperlocal journalism, then so too was the sense that what was emerging was a renaissance in the radical alternative local press; or at the least, the development of alternative local information ecologies. Radical and alternative news has always been a feature of the news landscape and has been the focus of much research (Atton 2002; Atton and Hamilton 2008; Harcup 2013). Counterculture movements in the US and Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s saw a flourishing of radical magazines and newspapers, many focused on local communities. Again, the emergence of a specific technology played a part. Offset litho printing had become widespread and relatively cheap by the early 1960s, placing it within financial reach of community and small political groups. Tony Harcup (2013) outlines how alternative local media flourished in the UK in the 1970s and early 1980s: “an alternative local press was springing up in towns and cities across Britain, challenging the social, political and journalistic conservatism of mainstream media” (2013: 33). He sees the buoyancy of the movement as evidence of alternative media’s ability to create alternative public spheres to compete with “the dominant hegemonic public sphere” (2013: 78). Contemporary writers agreed that the alternative local press offered something distinct to the mainstream. In his 1974 bibliographic guide to alternative media, John Spiers (1974) is equally effusive in his praise: “[they represent] the genuine, unbought voices of their communities” (1974: 21). The report into the alternative press by 1977 Royal Commission for the Press also saw value in Britain having a vibrant alternative local press, stating that: “the community press performs an important function” (1977: 49). But such hope foundered when faced with the economic realities of sustaining even small-scale news publishing services. The Comedia group (Landry et al. 1985; Comedia 1984), examined the failure of a large number of UK alternative press titles in the 1970s and early 1980s, noting how the lack of attention to economic sustainability resulted in a tendency for workers in small, radical organisations to “exploit their own labour to a high degree” (1985: 97). Local and national alternative press titles may well have been successful at representing alternative politics and serving local communities that felt unrepresented by the mainstream but in failing to develop a sufficient economic base: “marginality becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Landry et al. 1985: 98).

Despite history demonstrating that small-scale, alternative, local news media were difficult to sustain, UK media commentators began to take an interest in how hyperlocal journalism might contribute to supporting a more plural media landscape. The notion that an army of small businesses and volunteers would help bring about a new era in local news drew on

discourses of both the free market and “big society” (Thurman et al. 2011). Charles Beckett (2010) gave an upbeat assessment of hyperlocal journalism’s potential to address the issues of a declining local press, eulogising about a “blossoming of hyper-local online ventures” and claiming: “hyper-local journalism is not simply a hobby or a pleasant localist addition. It is a potential amelioration of the drastic problem of declining professional regional and local news media” (Beckett 2010: 11). Roy Greenslade in the *Guardian* newspaper drew attention to a potential civic value of hyperlocal: “I do think the growing belief in hyperlocal media needs much more thought, especially in Britain. We have fractured communities here and there is an urgent need to find some glue” (Greenslade 2007). Further enthusiastic support came from civically-focused, influential consultants (Talk About Local 2011) and enterprise-focused investors (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013; Radcliffe 2012).

The consideration of hyperlocal journalism as playing a role in diversifying the local news sector came at a time when owners of the mainstream local press were closing or merging titles and reducing editorial staff, leaving the communications regulator Ofcom worried about how the newspaper industry would emerge on the other side of the recession: “operating margins are likely to be much reduced, and some currently unprofitable titles could continue to lose money for some time” (Ofcom 2009: 5). In their review of ‘Local and Regional Media in the UK’ (Ofcom 2009: 45) they are tentative in their assessment of the value of hyperlocal journalism, describing hyperlocal as an emergent element of an existing local media landscape but noting that much of the UK material was “hard to find, either because it does not attract a lot of traffic, or because it fails to deploy the strategies required to get a high ranking in traditional search engines” (Ofcom 2009: 45). They also had concerns about the sustainability of hyperlocal journalism, citing the need for more robust impact data as an issue affecting all aspects of community media: “it is difficult for community media to quantify their impact in order to make a case for funding” (Ofcom 2009: 129). Ofcom drew on two contrasting perspectives to set out potential futures for the local media landscape in a post-recession, digital era, both of which drew on ecological models in anticipating future media landscapes. Firstly, they cite US media commentator Steven Johnson (2009) who drew on a techno-utopian discourse to set out a vision of exponential growth in the number of local bloggers and commentators who would eventually cover all aspects of everyday life, leaving nothing more than a curation problem for citizens as they pick their way through the information on offer. Making sense of such a rich news information ecology would be mainstream local newspapers, now better able to fulfil their role in holding power to account: “I suspect in the long run they [newspapers] will be as sustainable and as vital as they have ever been” (Johnson 2009: par 33). Johnson saw a role for volunteers and interested groups in generating local news as a kind of enthusiastic but unpaid labour force of amateur journalists.

A contrasting position was set out in the same Ofcom report, this time drawing on Steven Barnett (2009) who at first was excited by the alternative potential of hyperlocal journalism: “exciting, innovative, open and non-hierarchical” (2009: 12). However, their contribution to plugging the democratic deficit was limited given the kinds of journalism that genuinely holds power to account is the kind that requires training and funding to sustain: “They cannot interrogate, they cannot report in any depth, nor can they properly represent given the generally small number of people participating in such sites. (2009: 12). Both of these positions saw a continuing need for professional local journalism yet Ofcom noted just a year later that the audience for local news was now fragmenting “due to the large number of new media services” (2013: 5). It cites both the rise of independent hyperlocals, digital news sites, and social networks as part of the “key trends in local media” (2013: 5) that have seen

citizens turn away from traditional newspapers. Furthermore, while noting in 2014 that research to date suggests that hyperlocal websites currently have only small audiences, “most are seeing audience growth on both their sites and social media, and some are branching out into offline publishing as a way of increasing their reach into their local communities and generating more advertising revenue” (2014: 53).

### **Audiences for hyperlocal journalism**

Understanding consumption of hyperlocal content has been complex. As a largely online phenomenon, one would think that measuring engagement with hyperlocal journalism was possible. However, a survey by Williams et al. discovered that a third of hyperlocal publishers “do not know, wish not to know, or don’t know how to find out, about the kind of website analytics that are necessary for generating income” (2014: 20). There was some indication of numbers of visitors to hyperlocal websites but the data was self-reported by publishers rather than collated independently. It found that: “the median number of monthly unique visitors is 5,039” (Williams et al. 2014: 4) and that “the great majority of sites have relatively small audiences” (2014: 20). In 2015 the Talk About Local consultancy listed the amount of Facebook page ‘likes’ and Twitter followers of 37 hyperlocals, set against population estimates. This seemed to show that some hyperlocals had significant reach which one might infer is local but may not necessarily be so. But as valuable as such insights are, it remains the case that properly audited data for hyperlocals does not exist. Some data for the hyperlocal sector on “who reads what” came in the 2013 Nesta and Kantar Media report, based on a survey of 2,248 people to ascertain the degree to which they engaged with online hyperlocal information from a range of media sources. They found that 45 per cent of adults had accessed hyperlocal media of some form with two-thirds of those doing so at least weekly (2013: 6). The report also found that mainstream media was the key source that most people (65 per cent) cited they turn to in order to find out what was happening in their local areas. Online “native” hyperlocal media – “The website or app of volunteers or people with an interest in the local area / from the local area” (2013: 30) – was cited by 24 per cent. The research noted the growing number of native hyperlocals entering the news and information space yet their findings suggested: “that audiences tend towards using traditional media brands for their hyperlocal consumption” (2013: 4). The authors recognised that their findings were limited by the potential confusion over which platforms “native” hyperlocals use (newspapers, social media) with some possible mis-categorisation as a result. However, the research did return some demographic data, noting: “it appears those who are more affluent and in the 35-54 age group are more likely to consume hyperlocal media” (2013: 8). Other data emerged from Ofcom, who in 2012 produced research that said 7 per cent of people had looked at “local community websites, e.g. news website run by volunteers” at least once a week (Ofcom 2012: 104). However, only 1 per cent said that such websites were their most important local media source while the figure for paid-for local newspapers was 12 per cent (2012: 106).

### **The hyperlocal entrepreneur**

Despite the evidence base beginning to concede that the ability of hyperlocal journalism to engage with audiences was limited, there remained a view that supporting its continuation was vital in order to help citizens form their views about democratic processes at local level and understand the political alternatives facing them: “it is clear that the hyperlocal news sector has a considerable contribution to make to media provision, plurality of voice,

democratic scrutiny, accountability and information provision at a local level” (Carnegie UK Trust 2014: 13). The Carnegie Trust, itself a modest funder of hyperlocal journalism projects, argued that, as well as “filling the gap”, hyperlocal publishing could provide a fruitful career for journalists made redundant by the decline of the local press. It recommended that the National Union of Journalists “should consider how it can work with employers and the government to support its members who lose their jobs in a news institution to become entrepreneurs running hyperlocal media” (Carnegie UK Trust 2014: 16). Thus, the normative journalistic discourse that had dominated discussions of hyperlocal journalism’s value morphed into something closer to an entrepreneurial discourse. Journalists were seen as “looking to reinvent their careers” (Pekkala and Cook 2012: 114) with the reconfigured journalist entrepreneur having a real chance to act “as a connector: between audiences, services and revenue streams. This triangulation requires a new emphasis on business skills to complement those already honed through journalism” (Pekkala and Cook 2012: 114). Success of funded initiatives has been mixed with some welcoming the market opportunity that presents itself as the mainstream press retreat from the local advertising market, while others offer vociferous resistance to any form of income generation, rejecting in particular established advertising-based funding models. Cook and Bakker (2019) looked at hyperlocal news operations across Europe and found a complex picture emerging of an ecosystem where a single typical hyperlocal business model could not be identified (2019: 45). However, they did note that hyperlocals were adept at reacting to local conditions and able to extract value (be it financial or volunteer labour support) from their localities to sustain their operations and make them resilient to the shifting loyalties of audiences in the digital era (2019: 45).

Investment and subsidy for hyperlocal journalism came via government - and charity - funded initiatives supporting experimentation in business models and technologies in the hyperlocal sector. Goggin et al. (2015) note how funders of hyperlocal media operations were drawn towards experiments that attempted to create value from the intersection of locative digital technologies and the embedded hyperlocal journalists. They recognised that “locational information is an important part of news production and consumption – with the emphasis on being ‘local’ the compelling offer of these initiatives” (2015: 51). This helped thinly-staffed hyperlocals create virtual news maps of their areas making the most of curated user inputs – helping “make sense for people who are out and about in their neighbourhood with their own social reporting device in their pocket” (Tibbitt in 2015: 49). In the words of one of the funders themselves, the intention of the injection of research and development funding was “to act as a catalyst for that sector, in terms of investment, experimentation, research and evidence base” (Damian Radcliffe in Rodgers 2017: 77). The overarching aim of such investment was to find a solution to creating a more plural local media landscape, the dream being that a market and innovation-led approach would produce a buoyant, sustainable hyperlocal journalism sector capable of enriching local media ecologies and countering the trend towards conglomeration of the local press.

### **Building local social capital**

While it is clear that many effective but lightweight hyperlocal news operations have emerged since the late 2000s, the attitudes of hyperlocal publishers to financial sustainability has been variable. In describing their commitment to producing hyperlocal journalism, there has been a tendency to reject discussing financial motives, with the majority of those interviewed drawing on a civic discourse whereby they see their work as creating other forms of value for the community they write about and engage with (Harte et al, 2018). Central to

the discourse was an emphasis on developing reciprocal, participatory relationships with their audiences (Belair-Gagnon et al. 2018; Lewis 2015). An alternative theoretical lens that marks a move away from public-sphere dominated positions within studies of journalism, theories of “reciprocal journalism” claim particular utility for “studies of community journalism, as scholars seek to untangle the complex set of relationships and interactions that embody each particular community” (Lewis et al, 2014: 237). Such a lens examines the social relations developed as a result of the specific practices of the hyperlocal journalist, shedding light on the ways in which “social capital” is accrued, something seen as crucial “for the vitality of communities of all kinds” (ibid). At one level there is a direct exchange of information from audience to producer but in a more developed, sustained, reciprocal relationship, audience members become networked nodes themselves, using social media to not just exchange information but to act on it and create real-world impact in their communities. Social networking tools have the potential to replicate the way local networks were once nurtured on a face-to face basis and sharing social media updates from locals is a useful form of “gatewatching” (Bruns 2003) that makes clear they share the same values as their audience. But this is not unproblematic; one can be too embedded – “I am so deeply embedded in the community, that actually is a problem to me and I don’t know how to deal with that” (hyperlocal journalist in Harte et al. 2018: 133) – with the result that the journalist avoids news that can be uncomfortable for local audiences to hear with the result that bad news is downplayed. Belair-Gagnon et al. (2018) point out the issues of journalists who over-invest in building authentic community relationships: “When journalists determine that how they engage with people is as important as the news they produce for them, they inadvertently put themselves in the position of determining which voices get heard, under what circumstances, and on whose terms” (2018: 15).

### **The civic motivations of amateurs and professionals**

The emphasis on engagement and community-building has been particularly prevalent among hyperlocal journalists who do not have professional backgrounds as journalists. A feature of hyperlocal news operations in the UK is that many have been developed by non-professionals motivated by a range of personal and community-orientated reasons which relies on the goodwill of volunteers and a collective belief in working for a “greater good”. Harte et al. (2018) explored the practices of professional (often former professionals) and non-professional hyperlocal journalists in their UK-focused research, noting key differences and similarities in practice and motivations. A desire to shine a light on everyday people and activities was cited (Harte et al. 2017) as a key motivating factor for the amateur hyperlocalist. Many were driven by a desire to situate themselves as the authentic voice of communities and offer up alternative representations of place to the one created by mainstream media. Those attempting to cover local life in areas that suffered from high levels of poverty and crime were particularly sensitive to how the local press had failed to express a positive, strong local identity. This was felt to be something that a hyperlocal might do given much of the minutiae of everyday life was beyond the capabilities of the local press to adequately cover. Living in the places they operated from resulted in a strong sense that the role of the hyperlocal journalist should be focused on protecting reputational geography. Effective hyperlocal journalism could: “bring people together to some degree... it could create some sort of sense of place I suppose” (hyperlocal journalist in Harte et al. 2018: 117). This strong connection to place is enacted in journalist practices such as walking the “beat”. While the economics of modern mainstream journalism might leave journalists tied to their desks, many hyperlocal journalists have recognised the value of making regular visits to both

real-world and online spaces in their community. Hyperlocal journalists cite working from local pubs and cafes and building up relationships in order to find a steady supply of news titbits. As well as making themselves visible in the real world, they also demonstrate their embeddedness through use of technology. Murray Dick (2012) identified how engagement via social media and the searching out of local user-generated content was a digital form of re-invigorating the beat, re-connecting journalists with their audience.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those with professional experience tended to be motivated by normative professional ideals and a desire to keep their skills fresh after leaving mainstream journalism (through choice or redundancy). The emphasis was partly on repetitional geography, but with a greater concern about communities not being adequately served with news and information given the decline of the local press. “Local news is dying on its feet”, (in Harte et al. 2018: 121) as one hyperlocal journalist put it, lamenting the drift to more centralised content from the mainstream local press and wishing to “fill the gap”. They saw the accountability journalism that many of them had produced as professionals now being in short supply. Indeed, the lack of coverage of local council proceedings was of sufficient concern to the news industry themselves that they sought public subsidy to shore up their provision via the Local Democracy Reporter Service in 2017 (Harte 2022). But it was not just the fourth estate-type journalism that was not being covered; for many with professional experience of the local press, they were keenly aware that a degree of local “colour” was now missing and they too saw value in a kind of journalism of the everyday: “There are characters from the area, there are people that have done unusual stuff, and it’s almost the sort of thing you would make a 350-word page lead with a picture. It was just different, it was either really small or it just wouldn’t fit in with what a newspaper would normally do” (hyperlocal journalist in Harte et al. 2018: 123). Whatever the background of the hyperlocal journalist, they shared a sense that there is significant value in creating what Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller called “excessively local news” (Hess and Waller 2016). Hyperlocal journalism within this discourse seems to have an authentic desire to champion place and develop social bonds between citizens and in that sense, hyperlocal is more a subcultural practice than it is a journalistic one. Although often underpinned by journalistic norms, it is sustained by civic and cultural ones.

## **Conclusion**

The enthusiasm for hyperlocal journalism, particularly in the UK as set out above, has sat refreshingly in contrast to the ongoing “narratives of decline” (McNair 2002: 9) around the local press whereby the perspective on the press is almost always pessimistic. This chapter has sought to outline how hyperlocal journalism became the focus of attention from policy-makers, funders and scholars, each investing it with a degree of hope that the bleak outlook for local news provision could be reversed by the development of an independent local news media movement. Irrespective of their organisational set up or the degree of professionalism of their journalists, research has found that hyperlocals generally fulfil journalistic norms: “[They] contribute to local knowledge, to the accountability of local elites and to the ability of local people to lobby for change” (Barnett and Townend 2015: 344). However, practitioners have found themselves caught between a series of competing discourses as they attempt to navigate the complexities of trying to sustain their operations in a funding landscape where traditional revenue sources (advertising) are as difficult to come by for them as they have been for incumbent news providers. Competitive funding initiatives, when available, have tended to offer support to hyperlocal projects that spoke to a utopian,



technologically-determinist discourse that bought into the notion of a “shared technological future of digitized location as the primary background infrastructure for a UK hyperlocal media space” (Rodgers 2017: 76). Rodgers’ valuable critique of Nesta’s Destination Local programme of support reminds us that the unspoken discourse of localism “can be retrograde, conservative or inward-looking just as often as it is virtuous, progressive or outward-looking” (ibid: 86). Funders might have had little interest in examining those more problematic aspects but they have also been somewhat ignored by scholars who instead have been seeking in hyperlocal journalism an echo of previous historical moments of thriving, although short-lived, alternative media scenes.

Audience engagement with hyperlocal media remains as difficult to track as ever – although there are claims that the form reaches “five million people online each month and over half a million in print” (Abbott 2020: par 5) – and some of issues that piqued Ofcom’s interest have since given way to more pressing concerns as the networked news space has become more distributed and trust and truth have become more pertinent concerns (Ofcom 2019). But the central issue of how to address the continued decline of the local and national press in the UK persists. The Cairncross Review (Department for Digital Culture Media & Sport 2019) into the future sustainability of journalism outlined in stark terms the potential damage to democratic participation by citizens should the UK’s news media continue to retract in scale and scope. While the UK news industry continues to make profits from their businesses (Edge 2019), this has been largely through a programme of rationalisation. Expensive investigative and public interest journalism has found itself having to be supported through the diversion of existing public funds through funding from the companies that were central to the erosion of newspaper advertising revenue – Google fund a range of public-interest journalism projects via their Digital News Initiative and Facebook have (since 2019) funded community reporter posts in local newspapers. It is to this discourse – addressing journalism’s normative role in holding power to account and supporting the democratic engagement of citizens – that hyperlocal practitioners themselves have spoken most coherently to. More than 100 (122 as of August 2022) hyperlocal publishers are part of the Independent Community News Network (ICNN), a representative body seeking to “promote the interests of community and hyperlocal publishers and to champion new sustainable forms of local digital and print journalism” (ICNN 2017). The body has been developed by the Centre for Community Journalism at Cardiff University which asks its members to be “independent, community-focused, and should provide a high standard of quality public interest news” (Abbott 2017: par 4). Should the hyperlocal sector continue to grow it will rightly lobby for a more level-playing field. Local mainstream news has long benefitted from a range of hidden subsidies and tax breaks that have been denied to new entrants, particularly digital-first news organisations. However, although hyperlocal journalism may not wholeheartedly share the radical, alternative edge of some of the content of previous alternative media movements, many do share a similar resistance to established production hierarchies and in their positioning of citizens as participants. Their radicalism is in offering the opportunity for audiences to not only see their everyday lives and places reflected back to them, something the mainstream is less able to do, but to facilitate “wider social participation in their creation, participation and dissemination” (Atton 2002: 25), an opportunity that should not be lost.

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