

Where's the fake news in hyperlocal media? Trust amongst citizen journalists and participatory audiences in local Facebook Pages.

Abstract

This chapter explores the nature of hyperlocal media content on UK Facebook Pages and Groups, and how audiences read and use it. We specifically explore this in relation to discourses of fake news and misinformation in mainstream media, noting the risks of open, citizen-led, participatory platforms such as Facebook. The chapter draws on two ethnographic studies of local Facebook Pages in the West Midlands, UK, including analysis of posts and interactions, and interviews with editors and audience members. We discuss factors likely to engender trust in the shared content in these spaces: the editors' identity as peer residents of the neighbourhood, online and offline; the audience's molding of the spaces in their own vision, as they source stories for inclusion. The risks emerge when we recognise that the editors are unable to monitor all interactions and resulting Facebook comments, even if a story started with their initial 'facts' – thus, a competency-based trust model (trusting in someone's shared experience or reliability) must be considered alongside an integrity-based trust model (trusting someone's motivation). Therefore we recognise the potential for 'fake news' in such platforms, even at a local, everyday level, but also that mainstream media might learn from practices and approaches in hyperlocal media that largely engender trust.

On 8th December, 2019, the Yorkshire Evening Post (Sheridan, 2019) published a story: the focus was a photo of a four year old boy resting on a Leeds hospital floor due to lack of beds. The boy's mother had not contacted the newspaper to attack the hospital itself, but to demonstrate an NHS in "crisis" (Ibid.), and the story was soon taken up by national mainstream media outlets. However, we took additional notice, as scholars of hyperlocal media, when numerous, identical claims started to appear on local Facebook Pages and Groups, suggesting the photo was faked (Mitchinson, 2019). Some started with "I am a former paediatric A&E nurse, and ..." or "I have a good friend who works at LGI, and ...", but when one of these sources was tracked down, she claimed her Facebook account had been hacked. We will perhaps never know the truth of this, the agenda or motivation of someone who would go to such efforts to post these identical stories and ensure they're shared across local outlets, but it certainly led us to wonder where "fake news" - "the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design" (Gelfert, 2018: 84) – might be encountered in hyperlocal media, whether in overt forms like this, or perhaps more softly and covertly in everyday sharing of information and opinions.

Trust in news media has never been more of a contentious issue, a subject wrapped up in discourses and labels of fake news and disinformation (Brennen et al., 2020; Fletcher et al.,

2020; Toff et al., 2021). In broader reviews of cross-disciplinary conceptualisations of trust, some definitional factors are agreed upon (Mayer et al., 1995; PytlikZillig and Kimbrough, 2016): a communicative relationship between trustor and trustee; a situation containing risks for the trustor; the trustor's experience of trust being voluntary (suggesting agency); this communication consisting of different types, forms, or sources of trust. Further to this, and with a focus on news media, Strömbäck et al (2020: 148) suggest these broad definitions can be built on with an understanding of "the specific nature and function of news media in democratic societies [...] that the focus should be on trust not in media as institutions or in the people running media institutions, but trust in the information coming from news media". This focus on the *information* is significant for our discussion, given the variety of trustors, trustees, and types of communication inherent in the participatory spaces such as the Facebook Pages and Groups explore here.

As Gelfert (2018: 113) has noted, although social media may add to the "potency" of fake news, it is not a new phenomenon. Historically, the sharing of information through communities has always been subject to rumour and gossip, a way of exercising social power, argues Amy Milne-Smith (2009) in her study of nineteenth century male gossip. But as journalism became a more structured means for communicating to audiences, the development of professional standards did not necessarily equate to veracity at every turn, even if the idea of the 'trusted source' developed. Margaret Van Heekeren (2020) notes that that widespread use of cable communications technology (telegraphy) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw newspapers publish fake news on the basis of sources that appeared trustworthy but often came from propagandists (2020: 310). It was the: "speed, reach and potential for anonymity of telegraph communication that enabled its [fake news] escalation" (ibid.: 309). With uptake of the Internet, whilst journalists could more effectively and quickly fact check stories before publication, fake news has found spaces other than mainstream media to present itself to audiences. What constitutes news and what are legitimate sources has become muddled in the social media age. As the barn doors have been flung open and the Internet flooded with new users – professional journalist or otherwise – significant, fact-checked investigations can get lost in an open flow of mis- and disinformation. What matters on social media is popularity more than truth: "Popularity on social media is thus a self-fulfilling cycle, one that lends well to the propagation of unverified information" (Tandoc et al., 2018). In recognising that social media platforms such as Facebook field a flow of news, information and data on a previously unimaginable level and from all kinds of sources, we explore here one particular area that serves to illustrate concerns of trust in news media practices: how trust plays out in the creation, sharing and valuing of different kinds of everyday media in local Facebook Pages.

Facebook as a space for news and information

Facebook as a platform was originally touted and therefore understood as a social space, somewhere to keep in touch with distant friends and family (Miller, 2011). However, the platform has also been recognised by numerous scholars in terms of the opportunity for mainstream news outlets to develop their audiences, in some earlier studies framed as "audience distribution" rather than "audience participation" (Hille and Bakker, 2013: 663). Audience uptake of news media on Facebook was initially slow, with Ju et al. (2014) suggesting that Facebook wasn't a particularly effective way to reach new audiences even if

newspapers made efforts to do so. More recently, news outlets have grappled with the algorithms which they now find themselves at the mercy of if they continue to use social platforms such as Facebook (Brake, 2017; Meese and Hurcombe, 2020). There are politics to grapple with as well. In 2021, this was made clear when Facebook temporarily blocked news outlets on its platform in Australia, in response to a planned law that would force it to pay for news content (BBC, 2021). Services were restored only after negotiations between the government and Facebook, demonstrating that agency, control and economics are critical issues for news media outlets, when considering how to get their stories in front of Facebook audiences.

The experience in Australia may be a precedent for further battles to come, since Facebook is now notably used by audiences globally as a way of keeping informed about the world at various scales – local, national, and global. If we take Ofcom’s (2020) report of *News consumption in the UK*, their survey data shows Facebook to be the third most-used news source among all UK adults (36%) after BBC One (56%) and ITV (41%) television channels. The same Ofcom report (ibid: 4) suggested that “news consumed on social media [was] more likely to be from news organisations than ‘friends/family’ or ‘others you follow’.” Other studies tell a slightly different story, finding that people encountered mainstream news stories by discovering them and being influenced in their news selection practice through social recommendations (Kaiser et al., 2018). Part of our concern is the extent to which social or other influences then affect whether Facebook users stop to interrogate the news they consume or trust it, taking actions to ‘Like’ or share it further, thus compounding potential spreading of ‘fake news’.

So far, we may be picturing a relatively fixed idea of news media posted by mainstream outlets, and this public notion of what we mean by ‘news media’ perhaps accounts for Ofcom’s report suggesting less engagement with news via Facebook in 2020 than in previous years (their survey requested responses about ‘news and current affairs’). If we broaden the field, to consider the increasingly messy practices of engaging with and sharing news and more ‘everyday’ information through Facebook, we would perhaps develop a picture that more realistically reflects people’s media and social practices, as enacted in overlapping fields (Bourdieu, 2010) and/or communicative entanglements (Pink, 2012). We can explore how trust is woven through and enacted amongst such practices, and we do so here through the prism of UK hyperlocal Facebook Pages.

Messy hyperlocal media

Keeping up to date with local life isn’t just about reading the news. On the level of a city, town, suburb or village, we can recognise that online media is used alongside offline print media, ‘small media’ such as flyers and posters, and social interactions with family, friends and peers (Alevizou et al., 2013). But, as much as these may be functionally valuable and useful interactions for residents, they cannot always be understood in terms of news media and journalism. Users of hyperlocal online spaces such as Facebook Pages are more likely to talk about the “information” rather than “news” that they consume and engage with (Turner, 2021). The Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2020) helps with developing this picture in the respect that this neighbourhood information often doesn’t come from specific news outlets, but directly from various sources: “Facebook groups, political parties, local enterprises, schools, and churches now represent important

supplements, and sometimes serious competition, to traditional local news online as they provide important hyperlocal information” (Newman et al., 2020: 48). The problem, when we consider the embedded nature of a platform such as Facebook within all of this, is that people increasingly lean on such platforms in their everyday practices, but do not necessarily have the skills or motivations to engage in fact-checking or verification. Ofcom suggested that “at a platform level, measures such as quality, accuracy, trustworthiness and impartiality tend to be weakest among users of social media” (Ofcom, 2019: 3). Yet, narratives of fake news and misinformation are usually associated with those portrayed within mainstream media and by politicians, who in turn invoke the term “not only in efforts to point out false information but also in efforts to demonize traditional news organizations” (Tandoc et al., 2018: 140). Beyond the grand narratives and sensational examples presented by these parties (see examples in Tandoc et al., 2018 and Van Heekeren, 2020), users of local Facebook platforms would not necessarily expect the same problems to arise when checking school opening times or seeking recommendations for home renovations. Kaiser et al.’s study (2018) found that in news stories posted or recommended by others, the users placed “more importance on whether an article is likely to contain relevant than credible information” (2018: 23-24). We might assume that in the context of everyday local content, where users might be less likely to expect misinformation, their levels of trust would be even higher. While experimental studies such as Mena’s (2020) suggest that flagging or labelling news shared on Facebook as ‘false news’ does then reduce people’s desire to share it, for the most part, users must make their own decision as to the veracity of content. Typically, they don’t engage in such fact-checking practices for a variety of reasons, such as lack of skills or motivation, or platform affordances i.e. the platform doesn’t easily allow or invite such practices (Geeng et al., 2020). So what exactly is the problem or maybe opportunity of hyperlocal, and what can we understand about trust in media, by exploring it?

Hyperlocal media on Facebook

The term ‘hyperlocal’ was initially applied circa 2010 to describe local news websites set up by citizens, often featuring in-depth investigations, and supporting civic and political engagement. At that point, such outlets were positioned as ‘filling the gap’ of a declining local mainstream media (Beckett 2010: 11; Metzgar et al., 2011). More recently, scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which hyperlocal spaces are distinct from mainstream media and, as such, tend to be less about contributing to local democracy than they are about creating community: “characteristics [of hyperlocal spaces] include: marginalized and non-normative practices; resistance to massification; [...] and generating a sense of shared identity and belonging often tied to physical territory” (Hess and Waller 2016: 200). Although hyperlocal media initially made use of free blogging software, social media platforms such as Facebook have more recently afforded the establishing of numerous local or special interest Pages and/or Groups for any locality. Type the name of a city, town, suburb or village in the UK into the Facebook search engine, and a variety of different spaces will be offered, often defined by an interest in local history, events, selling or swapping items, or parenting interests. These groups are also differentiated in how they set out or apply particular rules for appropriate subject matter and behaviour in the group, some being markedly more relaxed or aggressive, formal or ‘jokey’ in their tone. It is here, in these participatory spaces of produsage (Bruns 2006), where we see both the potential of public sphere ideals (Habermas, 1991) to be played out, and the potential for active

citizenship to be realised through engagement with alternative journalism as a space for: “prompting, reinforcing and reflecting readers’ active democratic engagement as citizens.” (Harcup, 2016: 693).

Research by Harte et al. (2017) has noted that many journalists operating in the hyperlocal media space develop reciprocal, participatory relationships with their audiences (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2014). This happens through engagement with everyday, non-news, information and discussion. As one practitioner put it: “[it’s] just banal chat half the time, but that’s a big community building aspect” (Harte et al., 2017: 172). Understanding information exchange within hyperlocal spaces as being reciprocal provides a useful theoretical lens to understand online social relations and shed light on the ways in which ‘social capital’ is accrued, something seen as crucial “for the vitality of communities of all kinds” (Lewis et al, 2014: 237). 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:

“Users witness their fellow community members come together to discuss issues relevant to them and, over time, begin to reciprocate that discussion with trust that it will be received in the same spirit. In this way, direct and generalized forms of reciprocity, re-engaged over time, can lead to sustained reciprocity and, in turn, more sustainable spaces for community interaction.” (Lewis et al., 2014: 236)

The social media spaces we examine in this chapter operate on a similar basis of reciprocity with a focus on the “banality of the everyday” (Hess and Gutsche Jr 2018: 485). Many such spaces facilitate participatory community-building activity beyond their news operation (see examples in Harte et al., 2017: 172), creating impact on citizens’ lives. Thus, hyperlocal media spaces such as Facebook Pages are a useful way to explore trust because they are often impactful in relation to the communities they serve, both online and offline.

Hyperlocal Facebook spaces in the West Midlands, UK

The remainder of this chapter explores how trust is enacted through hyperlocal Facebook spaces, and what we can understand about news and media practices as a result. We make use of two ethnographic studies of hyperlocal Facebook Pages in the West Midlands, UK, undertaken between 2013 and 2016. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was undertaken of textual materials (posts, comments, interviews), with issues of trust emerging prominently as a theme and thus leading us to the discussion we present here. The first study lasted nine months and was carried out in a suburb of Wolverhampton called Wednesfield, which is served by a blog called WV11 and also run as a Facebook Page. The second study took place in south Birmingham in 2015, for a year. The blog serving that area was called B31 Voices, and again, the main focus was on the Facebook Page. Both of these studies involved the researcher living in the neighbourhood and daily observation of the Facebook Pages, alongside interviews with the four editors and 29 of the audience members. Other participatory methods involved the audience taking part in discussion on a new Facebook Group set up for the research and response through images and photography. We also present an analysis of audience posts to the Facebook pages of WV11. The authors’ interpretation of observations also draw on our experiences of being

involved in running hyperlocal media operations – Harte with his Bournville News blog and Facebook Page (since 2010), and Turner being one of a team of administrators of a local Facebook Group in south Birmingham (since 2019).

In order to situate the trust that is engendered in these spaces, it's important to understand something about the role of 'editor'. In the case of Facebook Pages we do refer to them as editors because they have ultimate control over what they post to the Page, even if these stories are sourced from external companies, agencies, or the readership; there is still a great deal of that hierarchy in place that we might associate with a news editor / reader model. For similar reasons, we call those participating the 'audience'. Although there is a strong participatory element to the audience's role, there is still a hierarchy, implemented and managed through the control of the editor via Facebook's management tools. It is also worth noting the distinction between Facebook Pages and Groups. The latter have more of a peer-to-peer identity and structure, theoretically allowing anyone to post wholesale to the Group. Yet, even these are bound by rules set up by the Group administrators, such as who can join in the first place and requiring that posts are pre-approved before being posted. It is notable that editorial practice in the Pages we studied didn't end with posting stories – the editors were often also active in responding to reports of inappropriate behaviour, and following up ongoing stories through the comment threads, for example giving updates of a breaking crime or traffic incident.

These editors were able to engage effectively in these ways because they were peers with their audience, with an understanding of the local geography, culture, and identity – and this is typical of hyperlocal organisations at this scale. WV11 and B31 Voices were both run by married couples and, again, this isn't unusual for such spaces given they're often initiated through local community concerns, and studies have demonstrated these to also be the strongest motivators for people setting up hyperlocal services (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2015). Harte et al. (2018: 116) noted that a key motivation for hyperlocal journalists was a desire to redress mainstream media's negative accounts of the place where they lived, as opposed to, for example, a desire to develop a journalistic career or generate income. The editors in our cases lived in the communities they were writing about and, more than that, were often involved in offline as well as online contexts, helping to run community hub spaces, attending local community meetings, running competitions, and being involved in public arts projects. They were also quite up front about their identity and their place in the community; for example, the B31 Voices describe themselves on their website as "a Yorkshire lass, who settled in Birmingham in 1997" and "a Brummie born and bred", while also noting the area they live in and football teams they support (B31 Voices, 2021).

Editors as trusted peers

Many of the audience members interviewed during the ethnographic work clearly had some kind of relationship or awareness of who these Page editors were, either as a result of seeing the 'About the team' pages noted above, perhaps having met them directly, or having observed their visible presence in posting and being part of conversations in the Pages. Perhaps unsurprising then that the editors of B31 Voices were described by audience members in interviews as "reliable" and "good at stemming rumours". This notion of the editors being peers also seemed to make them more approachable than some other organisations when it came to reporting events or incidents, with one of the WV11 audience

telling us that “people don't trust agencies” such as police or the local council, but felt they were more likely to trust the hyperlocal editors, where the shared experience was valuable to the audience in a “competence-based trust” model (Lui and Ngo, 2004). We can read this as an extension of the idea that there is value in journalists living in and being part of the patch they cover (Atton and Hamilton, 2008), and Harte et al. (2018) noted how walking the “real-world beat” was used by hyperlocal journalists as a mechanism to gain trusted status amongst audiences (2018: 131). It's worth noting that recent critiques (Ramsay and Moore, 2016; Simons et al., 2020) of mainstream local journalism focus on the increasing disconnect between audience and publication as small towns lose their local newspaper offices and journalists have to cover multiple ‘patches’ remotely. By way of contrast, and specifically in our case studies, hyperlocal editors often live in the area all their lives, had their children at the same schools as the readers, and use the same shops and amenities. In comparison, when local police forces run their own Facebook Page, or would sometimes spread messages out to the community *through* the hyperlocal pages (recognising the positive impact and reach), the police would then rarely continue to engage in dialogue through the ensuing comments, so there was a sense this gave the impression that they were ‘switched off’. However, it wasn't necessarily the case in these audience interviews that *everyone* understood or knew who the editors were. Some assumed they were a council service, or a business, or were somehow remunerated for their time, in order to justify their commitment to running the Page. Therefore, people's trust of these spaces can't be entirely down to the editors. We need to look at audience practice too.

Audience practice in local Facebook Pages

At the time of the ethnographic work, both of the Facebook Pages had a ‘Visitor Posts’ section, which many readers assumed was a practical way to get messages directly to the community. The reality is that Visitor Posts were somewhat buried in the interface, only visible to those specifically clicking through to the WV11 or B31 Voices Pages, when in fact most people would just be seeing editor-posted content flowing through their stream. However, Visitor Posts were useful as a place for the editors to source stories, sometimes just sharing them into the stream wholesale, sometimes using elements of the wording to create a new post with credit to the source as appropriate. These Visitor Posts were also a useful way of understanding what readers were submitting as stories for the space and their content tastes and expectations.

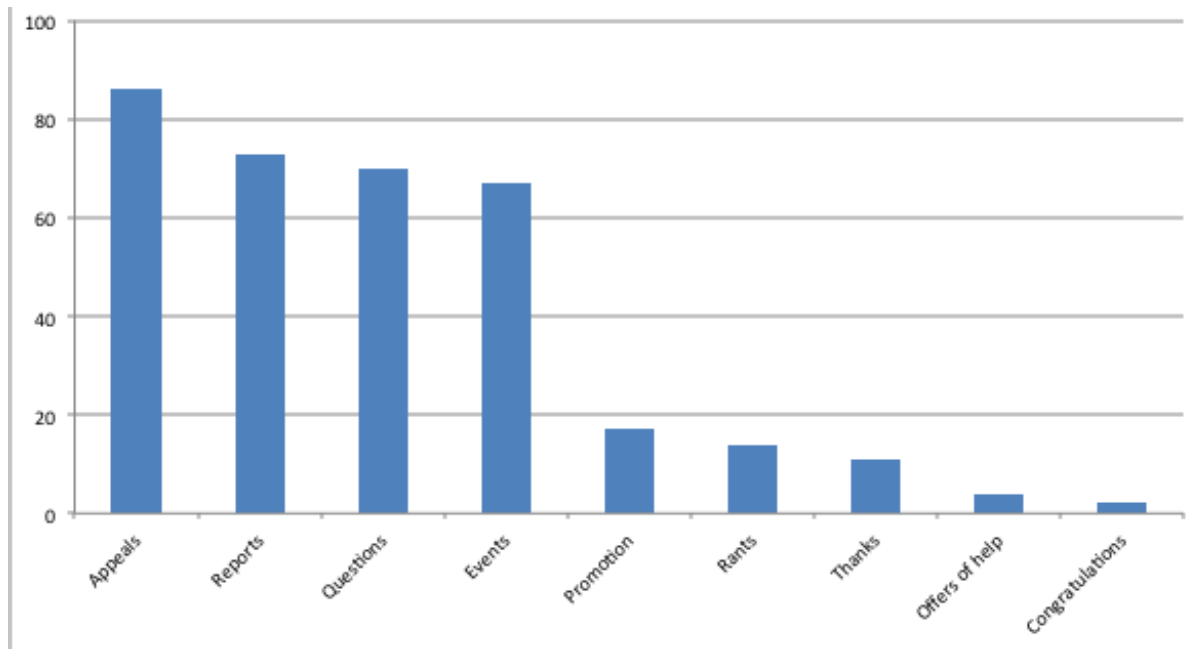


Figure 1: Number of posts to the Visitor Posts section of WV11, categorized by story 'type', 2014. n=310

An analysis of visitor posts provides a useful indication of how, to some extent, the audience create the space in their own vision. Figure 1 shows a categorisation of these Visitor Posts by their function or 'type'. Many of these posts would subsequently get reposted into the Page by the editors. Two of the topmost types, Appeals and Questions, were aimed at requesting help of some sort from the public audience, such as help with finding a lost pet, or a question about the best local takeaway. The distinction between Appeals and Questions was largely that the former implied additional offline support or input from people, whereas Questions could be answered online. In this respect then, these posts were open-ended rather than reporting anything, so scrutiny of accuracy or trust doesn't apply here. Similarly, for anyone posting about an Event, it was in their best interest to do so accurately, although there were occasions where key details were missed out and the readers would comment to that effect.

Stories categorised as Reports were also clearly popular – events 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). Here, editors had to take extra care and make judgement calls about what was being reported and how. Given that the editors recognised they didn't usually have the time to check on claims made in these reports, they would ensure that they only posted the facts, even if this resulted in an initially very brief story. It was better, for example, to report only that an accident had taken place on a particular road (perhaps with the focus on avoiding that road for travel), than to add any suggestion by the source that one car or the other had been to blame or that people had been killed as a result. At least one of the audience members interviewed was fully aware of this practice of reporting the facts. The story was only fleshed out on Facebook with additional facts when an official source was available, from the police, for example.

Engendering trust

Hyperlocal media has been framed in terms of its banality and serving everyday practice (Harte et al., 2018; Hess and Waller, 2016), something observable in the use of hyperlocal Facebook Pages. In simple terms, people are least likely to expect sinister agendas of ‘fake news’ in the spaces and media they use throughout the day on a social and functional level, whether it was people posting bin collection times or asking for help finding their lost cat. The fact that people didn’t expect fake news in these hyperlocal spaces doesn’t mean they consumed the content there without being selective and critical. Many interviewees suggested an awareness of what they were reading, that the original post of a story from the editor could largely be trusted – one of the WV11 readers telling us “I pay scant attention to people's comments [...] If it's an important matter I'll look at comments, but the comments are a little bit just chat and stuff, and I'm more interested in the facts.” This demonstrates an awareness that comments sometimes played the role of adding justifiable context to a story, (“I saw that happen too” or “I know who that person is”) but were just as likely to be responsive or otherwise unverified opinions, thoughts or commentary from local people. Even as such comments are valuable as the social “glue” holding hyperlocal and local communities together (Baines, 2012: 152), we should treat them with some caution. As another WV11 reader said, she felt audience comments frequently went beyond the initial function of a story, with people getting carried away unnecessarily. She found that stories would start as functional, and then become public interest, prone to gossip: “And at the end, it's not the truth.”

One of the issues with the affordances and setup of many of these local Pages is that the comments are relatively hard for the editors to monitor. Whilst we’ve established some audience members ignored them altogether in favour of the original post content, others would frequently read or engage in comment dialogue – but so frequently that it becomes very hard for editors to monitor those manually. In reality, cascades of comments were likely to continue throughout a day without the editors knowing any better, unless comments became such a problem that they were reported. But even in these cases of reported content, it was usually due to personal attacks between readers or swearing, as opposed to readers checking links to external sources that might have been used to support an argument. Some of the people we spoke to in our ethnographic study said that comments sections were often so laden with conflict or tension that they felt put off posting their own thoughts in opposition, suggesting that the micro ‘space’ of a post and its comments couldn’t be considered representative of the local populace; perhaps only the strongest voices have the potential to be heard, irrespective of their accuracy.

Any idea that we should be able to trust hyperlocal media spaces because the content there is unlikely to be laden with agenda, is problematic. As noted, it is possibly more of an issue because people use these spaces so heavily and they become part of everyday life, but also because they often engage there in a very relaxed mode. One WV11 reader told us: “I feel like it's a site you can trust.” This perhaps epitomises the emotional relationship audiences have with these spaces but also raises a concern that this may leave them more open to misinformation (unintentional inaccuracy), even if not deliberate disinformation. Audiences are not necessarily prepared to interrogate content, being likely to post events they have witnessed or share news from other sources with the idea that it’s ‘just Facebook’ – a fleeting trickle of content that will be forgotten five minutes later, so it doesn’t matter if it’s

not 100% accurate. In addition to the competency-based trust model that allows the trustor to assume the trustee is trustworthy due to their shared experience or reliability (Lui and Ngo, 2004), we must also consider “integrity-based trust” whereby the trustor assesses the trustee’s motives (Sitkin and Roth, 1993). In the case of trust in the hyperlocal spaces, both competence-based and integrity-based trust are combined, in the respect that the participants rarely questioned why their peers would be motivated to provide false information. Perhaps the best example of this comes from people asking for recommendations. We discussed, with one of the interviewees, the practice of asking for tradesmen recommendations, and then getting responses from peer members of the audience. They suggested, “there’s no payoff on B31 Voices, so there’s no reason for them to be dishonest.” We pointed out they might lie when making their recommendations, purporting to be a previous customer when they were actually posting good reviews on behalf of the business itself, and the interviewee’s suggestion that you could continue the conversation with people on Facebook and interrogate further seemed to satisfy any concerns. Something about the agency to engage in that dialogue seemed to suggest transparency and trustworthiness, and they finished by commenting that “it’s a real person not just a random review”.

Conclusion

Our research into how audiences and editors undertake production, reception and participation practices in hyperlocal Facebook Pages offers insights into how trust is engendered – either deliberately or as by-product – through everyday engagement with these spaces. Our observations of these public-service orientated, mature and well-managed hyperlocal media operations point to a need for new perspectives when understanding how community-orientated social media spaces can be both highly trusted sources of local information yet also, potentially, spaces in which fake news and misinformation can be easily spread. In common with Hess and Gutsche Jr (2018), we are arguing 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 banal news and information in forming collective community identities.

There are two key characteristics to take into consideration when considering trust in hyperlocal Facebook Pages. Firstly, the participatory role of the audience is significant. Trust is built on a capital of local knowledge where ‘expertise’ is often measured simply in the experience of the local area – knowing what events are on, who saw what happen, who knows who, the rumour mill. Dialogue functions more as “co-orientation than about exchanging information, everyday talk, or chit-chat” (Kent and Lane, 2021: 3), while the affordances of Facebook Pages place a strong emphasis on the value of local experience where knowledge is distributed, to some degree offering opportunities for “public discussions in productive ways” (Kent and Taylor 2021: 6). Often, it’s not about verifying facts about incidents and events but in adding local detail such as correcting geographic details or providing historical context. Through the reliance on audience peers, rather than the mainstream media or ‘official’ sources (eg: local police or council), Pages become an everyday space people generally feel they can trust. Secondly, the role of the editor is key. They are active in managing their Page and situate themselves as authentic community members. Rarely was their role and status questioned and their actions speak to the value

of an approach reliant on indirect reciprocity: “journalists were trying to ‘make a difference’ in the community without any sense of reporting a story.” (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019: 569). As Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller have noted, hyperlocal media spaces are those where both audiences and editors feel marginalised by mainstream media (2016: 200), where the news and information that makes up much of content in hyperlocal media is “excessively ordinary” (ibid.: 202), where banal content is the key non-story content that editors use to engender trust.

Our argument here hasn’t been to point to hyperlocal Facebook Pages and accuse them of being hotbeds of misinformation. Rather, we point to their highly trusted nature and thus they should fall within scope of studies that seek to argue that social media and fake news are inexorably linked. Also, if hyperlocal media is the subculture to the parent culture of local mainstream news (as Hess & Waller, 2016 argue) then perhaps it is timely for the latter to understand from the former about the ways in which content that it might otherwise dismiss as trivial and peripheral, seems to be what audiences care about and trust most.

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