

'Tell it like it is': The role of community not-for-profit media in regeneration and reputational change

Castle Vale is an edge of city, 1960s-built, housing estate in Birmingham that has historically suffered from a poor reputation for crime and social problems. A regeneration initiative in the 1990s sought to address this and community media (consisting of a radio station, newspaper and news website) were funded on a not-for-profit basis to help improve the estate's reputation. Whilst much research has focused on the civic value of this type of 'hyperlocal' media, the outputs of the media in Castle Vale have been contested by citizens. This case study, which draws on interviews and workshops undertaken with media practitioners and citizens, reveals the ways in which assumptions about the democratising functions of such media come up against the tensions over representation that exist between readers and producers. The research here forms part of a UK Research Council funded project into the role of local community media as an aspect of 'Creative Citizenship'.

Key words: community, hyperlocal, media, news, regeneration

Introduction

You live 'on' The Vale, as though it's a ship. ... As though you have to take a step up to get towards it (Clive Edwards, journalist, *Tyburn Mail*).

This case study focuses on the role of community media (a radio station, a newspaper, a news blog and associated social media outputs) in the context of a major regeneration of a working class neighbourhood in north east Birmingham in the United Kingdom. The media operation discussed here was initially set up as an adjunct of the non-profit organisation undertaking the physical regeneration of the Castle Vale area (known locally as 'The Vale'), and was designed in part to offer redress to the ways in which mainstream media had portrayed this edge-of-city estate. The media organisation has negotiated the politics of the regeneration

exercise while at the same time reforming itself to become a limited company, a charity, and then a limited company again, in order to survive a funding landscape that has become increasingly austere.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the challenges faced by non-profit, embedded, community news operations whilst also offering a critical case study of how citizens can become sensitive to what David Parker and Christian Karner have described as externally-imposed 'negative reputational geographies' (2011: 309) and how they negotiate their identity as a result. While one might expect community media to be seen as the 'voice of the people', such assumptions belie the reality of how the norms of journalism practice come up against the expectations of audiences. The paper draws on a series of interviews undertaken in 2013 with community media workers, and workshops and co-created research interventions with residents of Castle Vale.

About Castle Vale

Adam Mornement's (2005) account of Castle Vale's post-1990s transformation from troubled high-rise housing estate to a less imposing mix of suburban houses and low-rise flats is entitled 'No longer notorious', reflecting the widely held belief among citizens of Birmingham that for much of the estate's history it was considered something of a no-go area. Mornement, a respected voice on regeneration issues in the UK, was commissioned by the Castle Vale Housing Action Trust to write an account of the estate's physical and reputational transformation. He does not hold back on the role that mainstream local media played in painting the area in a bad light: 'The media didn't help. Castle Vale was constantly portrayed as a den of iniquity by local papers' (*ibid*: 84). Ali Madanipour, writing for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2005) about the importance of 'physical capital', offers a description of Castle Vale that shows how much it had in common with many other 1960s failed estates that were already looking tired within 20 years of being built: 'The neighbourhood suffered from poor quality infrastructure and buildings, lack of services, fear of crime and vandalism, poor health, unemployment, low educational standards, and a poor image' (*ibid*: 51). The building of the largely council-run estate had begun in the early 1960s following extensive slum clearances of inner-city properties in Birmingham. By the time it was completed in the late 1960s it included 34 high-rise blocks and housed circa 20,000. Mornement (2005) highlights how the estate's social issues were exacerbated by the poor condition of the housing stock. It was clear something had to be done.

For years Birmingham City Council had been aware of the gravity of Castle Vale's problems. Final confirmation came in 1991 when a chunk of concrete fell from one of the tower blocks. There was nobody underneath, but Castle Vale was falling apart (*ibid*: 9).

Veronica Coatham and Lisa Martinali outline how by the early 1990s there was 'an identified need to develop a long-term strategy for Castle Vale encompassing the key priorities of a regeneration initiative' (Coatham and Martinali 2010: 91). The solution was the development of a Housing Action Trust (HAT), of which there were only six in the UK (see Evans and Long 2000 for an overview of the HATs). These trusts were a policy of the 1980s Conservative government, designed to deal with problematic estates by providing investment but taking them out of local government control into the hands of a non-departmental public body. Tenants in estates where a HAT was proposed were given a vote on whether to leave the control of the council. As well as new funds, the HAT promised a more holistic approach that saw social problems as related and encouraged partnership working with police, education and other parties (Mornement 2005: 15). In 1993, Castle Vale residents voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining the HAT: 'The residents of a 1960s experiment in social housing had voted to be part of a social engineering experiment in the 1990s. It was a leap of faith' (*ibid*: 14).

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Local media and improving the image of Castle Vale

The Castle Vale Housing Action Trust saw its role, as did the other HATs, to be the 'redevelopment of the social infrastructure and combating social exclusion from the outset' (Evans and Long 2000: 309). The importance of emphasising citizen participation was central to how the HAT began to regenerate the area. The 1995 Master Plan for the area made clear that the future for the estate would mark a move away from central control and towards a more significant role for citizens:

A revitalised Castle Vale ... must engender a greater pride of place and community spirit than at present. In turn this may lead to the residents assuming greater responsibility for setting standards and taking wider responsibility and authority for the future management and maintenance of the new Castle Vale (Castle Vale Housing Action Trust 1995: 2).

While improving local social capital was seen as a central part of the regeneration process, it was also clear that the external perception of the area needed addressing. Adam Mornement (2005: 82-93) describes the role that public relations and art played in helping shift the 'story' of 'The Vale' to something other than crime and depravation from the mid-1990s onwards. The area, however, also developed its own media outlets. Firstly, a community radio station, Vale FM, was established in 1995. Its manager at the time, Neil Hollins (interviewed in 2013), describes its early development: 'Vale FM was borne out of an idea by local residents who were maybe involved in pirate radio or who were maybe mobile DJs and believed that a community radio station would be good for Castle Vale.'

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Hollins became the station's first employee in 1996 and was employed directly by the HAT. The station broadcast on the basis of applying for 'restricted service' licences, which confined its output to a 28-day period at any one time (this was the most common way for community radio stations to legally operate at this time). Whilst the station might have initially been developed out of concerns to address wider public perceptions of the area and to give voice to residents, it also provided training and development for individuals who might then go on to fulfil educational or creative ambitions: '[From 1998] we began running training courses under franchise contract radio courses for unemployed people to use it as a way of developing skills, confidence, employability' (Hollins 2013). By the time it was applying for one of the new community radio licences in 2004 its role in supporting Castle Vale's transformation was recognised by a local councillor in the licence application: 'CVCR has been an important player in the regeneration of Castle Vale since the mid-1990s' (Castle Vale Community Radio 2004: 24).

In 2001, a community newspaper was developed (with just four pages at that stage and called *Vale Mail*), again, directly linked to the HAT. Hollins argues that there was initial distrust about the impartiality of the newspaper: 'It was still under the control of the HAT, so wasn't particularly trusted, it was seen a bit of a propaganda sheet, and it was rather disorganised and didn't look very nice really' (Hollins 2013). There was little citizen participation in the newspaper which, in 2004, took on a trained journalist, Clive Edwards, as editor. Edwards describes the role of the newspaper before he arrived:

[It was] closely edited and controlled by the Housing Action Trust entirely as promotional material. No indication of any bad news or anything. Its function was to improve its reputation ... All the work that the Housing Action Trust did to regenerate Castle Vale in terms of its buildings and its organisations, they thought would be well served by a monthly newspaper.

The newspaper under Edwards expanded in size (to 24 pages eventually), in area (to cover nearby council wards outside Castle Vale to increase revenue from advertising) and in editorial confidence in subsequent years. Edwards is clear that the newspaper's role is to provide critical commentary on the on-gong regeneration of the estate: 'Our independence is crucial to providing a sensible and level-headed critique of the progress that is or isn't being made.' Whilst there is a reliance on local residents as paid door-to-door distributors of the monthly newspaper, it has only occasional written contributions from citizens who sometimes write column pieces on fashion, music, history and suchlike. Although *Tyburn Mail's* digital outlets (website, Facebook page, Twitter account) prove useful both for newsgathering and for gaining a sense of

which content its audience is most interested in, it is the newspaper that remains the focus of its operation: 'There are some stories that we leave out of the web, because we want the print version to have impact when it comes out. ... I think the newspaper has got more status than the web output' (Edwards 2013).

The political economy of Castle Vale's community media

The HAT was designed to have a limited life span with residents allowed to choose to go back to local council control or to a housing association at the end of the HAT period. On the winding up of the Castle Vale HAT in 2005, almost all residents agreed for their properties to be managed by Castle Vale Community Housing Association. This also resulted in change for the community media operation. 'Castle Vale Community Radio Limited' had been set up in 1999 as the vehicle to bid for grant funding that wasn't directly from the HAT. Hollins became adept at securing external funding ('a mix of funds, which would be regional and European, and then some which were more local') and at expressing the value of Castle Vale as a place where funders could see the potential for interventions to transform lives: 'This is about putting out an image of Castle Vale as a vibrant creative place, where things are happening. It might not be the best place in the world but things are happening' (Hollins 2013). Different funders might require different articulations of place but the desired outcomes were always the same: 'The primary benefits were very much about the personal outcomes for beneficiaries. The secondary ones ... were about reputational aspects and challenging negative stigmas' (*ibid*).

It was expected that the HAT's closure would result in the likely withdrawal of funding for community media in Castle Vale. However, the HAT had surplus funds from the sale of its stock to the housing association and these funds were to be distributed via a charity called the Castle Vale Endowment Trust Fund. Some funds from this have gone towards maintaining the radio and newspaper in each year since 2005 but it is expected that in 2016 no more funding will be available via this route (the trust's 2015 accounts say: 'Working capital is currently sufficient to cover the day to day running of the charity until 2016'). A change to charity status (and a renaming to 'Headline Media') in 2008 was part of a strategy to target lottery funds but two bids were unsuccessful. In 2010, with a crisis in funding looming, the charity came under the sole control of Castle Vale Community Housing Association: 'We were subsumed into this large organisation. Huge change, for all sorts of reasons ... that was a massively difficult period for the organisation but we survived, we came out the other end' (*ibid*). Yet during this time, which saw problems with trying to get the radio station permanently on air, the newspaper went 'from strength to strength', argues Hollins. It became 'the predominant form of communication in Castle Vale at the time' (*ibid*). In doing

so it reached a level of securing advertising income in the region of £33,000 in the financial year up to March 2012 (according to its published accounts), compared to only £3,000 generated by the radio station.

By 2013, another change would happen, this time separating out the radio and newspaper operations and severing the formal link with the housing association (though it remains one of its biggest advertisers). Headline Media was wound up as a charity and Topcliffe Media was established (named after the tower block that houses its offices) to run just the news operation. In 2016 it has just two employees: one journalist (Clive Edwards), and a manager who sells advertising space and runs the operation on a day-to-day basis.

Hyper(g)local media

The news operation of *Tyburn Mail* could be described as 'hyperlocal' since it covers a fairly small geographic area of a city (about 24,000 residents). Hyperlocal media are the subject of much attention by media commentators (Greenslade 2007), lobbyists (Talk About Local 2011) and academics (Baines 2010, Barnett and Townend 2015, Bruns et al. 2008, Kurpius et al. 2010, Metzgar et al. 2011, Williams et al. 2015). In a report written by former Ofcom employee Damian Radcliffe he argues that hyperlocal can be defined as: 'Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other, small geographically defined community' (Radcliffe 2012: 9). This focus on 'online news' marks a tendency in the commentary to situate hyperlocal media as a space for digital innovation and enterprise:

The 20th century model was for news to be gathered and delivered by institutions, very much shaped by the technologies available to them. The 21st century model shaped by new technologies is for news to be gathered and delivered by individuals and small specialist organisations and networks (Carnegie UK Trust 2014: 2).

Hyperlocal's function is also expressed in terms of its benefit to the community in a wider sense: 'The value and role of this type of community media may go beyond the provision of content, with the potential for specific value in the social capital generated through the production of hyperlocal websites' (Ofcom 2012: 111). This leads Metzgar et al. (2011) to note how 'grant-making organizations have hailed HLMOs [Hyper Local Media Operations] as a potential saviour for the struggling news industry. Scholars have proclaimed HLMOs a 21st century breeding ground for civic engagement' (2011: 773). The emerging narrative around hyperlocal echoes the technological optimism of journalism scholars writing about the emerging importance of the internet to journalism in the 1990s and

early 2000s. Borger et al (2012) have noted that scholars tended to display a ‘strong faith in the democratic potential of digital technologies’ (2012: 125). Such technological optimism ‘can be traced back to internet enthusiasts of the 1990s who voiced great expectations regarding the reinvigoration of the public sphere’ (Borger et al. 2012: 125).

In his analysis of a hyperlocal news blog in Leeds, Tony Harcup (2015a) argues that we need to resist simplistic categorisation of alternative forms of news production: ‘They do not form a uniform “sector” any more than mainstream media are all the same, and it is only by exploring specific examples in depth that we can hope to dig beneath the labels to see what we can discover about the possibilities and potential of such journalism’ (Harcup 2015a: 16). Kristy Hess sees the emergence of the term hyperlocal as being evidence of ‘a reinvigorated interest in geography as media industry and entrepreneurs experiment with new business models in the changing technological landscape’ (Hess 2012: 53). Borrowing from the work of Manuel Castells, she argues that small local newspapers act as nodes, holding: ‘a degree of symbolic power in constructing the idea of “community” and the “local”’ (Hess 2012: 56). Hyperlocals are, in some sense, ‘local and global at the same time’ (Castells 2012: 222). David Baines similarly emphasises the ‘glocalised’ nature of being on the internet where there is the potential not just to reach make local connections but to draw potentially on any useful sources of information:

In a ‘glocalised’, networked society, even relatively isolated communities will have a large range of networks and sources of information, from direct social interaction, business, professional and civic contacts and customers; to regional, national and global networks occupying numerous channels of communication, some one way, most two way (Baines 2010: 584).

Ultimately, Hess argues that it is timely to ‘take a step back and view hyperlocal not as a product or object, but as a cultural phenomenon’ (Hess and Waller 2015: 13). The focus in hyperlocal on the ‘excessively’ local means that the ‘types of news featured in many hyperlocal publications provide a challenge to the very nature of news itself’ (*ibid*). In this sense, our examination of the relationship between news makers and citizens in Castle Vale is timely, as despite Castle Vale being a part of a larger city (Birmingham’s population is approximately one million), it is, as Neil Hollins says, ‘a unique place’.

Research with residents

Our research focus was on the role that *Tyburn Mail* played in creating a sense of place in Castle Vale and involved a series of interventions. Firstly, we undertook two exploratory workshops

with citizens during 2013 to help us understand how *Tyburn Mail* was perceived. This involved two groups who were asked to map out how they engaged with a wide range of news media throughout the day and how *Tyburn Mail* fitted into that. Further, they were asked to imagine what kinds of stories they might write for *Tyburn Mail*, with the research team prompting them to mock up a newspaper from cover. Secondly, we organised a 'news café' where the journalist from *Tyburn Mail* (Edwards) would meet local residents and see what stories emerged from conversations with them. We attempted to further facilitate this by creating a blank space in the monthly newspaper, into which citizens could write their own news stories. Chris Atton describes a similar project in a New York underground paper of the 1960s: '*Other Scenes* once offered an entirely blank set of pages for readers as a do-it-yourself publishing project' (Att1on 2002: 24). Readers were then asked to bring their completed pages to the news café event organised in a local supermarket.

To some extent we were interested in what potential there might be in Castle Vale citizens playing more of a 'produser' (Bruns 2008) role in their local media. Axel Bruns has described the importance of the 'produser' function: 'the capacity to be an active produser ... equates increasingly with the capacity for active, participatory citizenship' (2008: 339). He cites citizen journalism as a key example of how produsage behaviour 'can be seen to help build the capacities for active forms of cultural and democratic citizenship' (2008: 398). The ideal of the 'active' citizen is explored by Tony Harcup (2011) who argues that alternative media are awash with examples of it being fostered but that it remains 'little discussed within mainstream literature about relationships between journalism and politics' (2011: 15). To be 'active' requires both agency and participation according to Harcup. He draws on the work of feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1992) who claimed that 'a radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who acts as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking' (Mouffe 1992 in Harcup 2011: 17). The possibilities of active citizenship are that it opens up opportunities for alternative voices in the public sphere. Harcup makes clear that alternative media has a central role to play:

It is by encouraging and reflecting a culture of participation that alternative media projects can be seen as supportive of active citizenship; and it is by being participatory forms of media that such projects themselves constitute a form of active citizenship (2011: 27).

Harcup later goes on to ask the question: 'To what extent can an engagement with alternative journalism foster active citizenship?' (2015b: 2). Drawing on his audience study of a hyperlocal website

in Leeds, he notes the valuable role that this website plays in holding local power to account. However, he has concerns that although the audience self-identifies as active, he questions whether 'some people choose to consume alternative journalism not as an integral part of their civic activism but as an alternative to engaging in civic activism at all' (*ibid*).

Findings

Across the workshops and the news café we found a tension between the ways in which *Tyburn Mail* represented Castle Vale through the prism of normative news values, and the expectations of citizens that it should play a more effective role in redressing the historic representation of 'The Vale' as a 'no-go' area. While one resident (in their written response on the newspaper's blank page) argued that the *Tyburn Mail* should 'tell it like it is' and worried about problems being 'swept under the carpet', this largely proved an exception. Most citizens were concerned that there was 'too much focus on individual crime' (newspaper blank page response). The issue of crime and how much of it gets covered was a recurring theme. One resident argued that the coverage of crime on the estate was disproportionate: 'The problem is it's no worse than others, but it gets reported more, so it makes it look worse. ... It's reporting more giving it a worse opinion of Castle Vale' (workshop respondent).

During the workshops residents were asked to react to example stories from the *Tyburn Mail* news blog as points for discussion; the first story was about local crime: 'It gives a bad name to Castle Vale. ... Someone from Castle Vale is always getting arrested for doing something, always.' Though considered essential by the *Tyburn Mail* journalist, coverage of crime can be problematic in creating an informed citizenship: 'The focus on the spectacular rather than the typical – endemic in news coverage of crime, for example – rarely implicates citizenship in useful or informative ways' (Lewis 2006: 315). As with Irene Costera's Meijer's (2012) research in Utrecht, we found that the people of Castle Vale were acutely aware of the mediatisation of their locality. Limited as it was by its one-off experimental nature, the blank space in the *Tyburn Mail* did at least offer readers a modest role in countering the 'problem neighbourhood frame' (Costera Meijer 2012: 18).

The workshop exercise to create a citizens' version of the newspaper revealed examples of citizens as both active community members (one person talked about their attempt to tackle local traffic speeding) and potential chroniclers of the everyday (another talked about wanting to write about a local homeless person who had not been seen for a while), often mixing fact and fiction to create alternative narratives about life on the estate. One resident, in filling in the blank space we created, came up with a whole list

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of story and content ideas that could be taken up: 'Maybe have a panel of moms review baby groups. ... The children's centre is going through major cuts and changes and this needs covering ... More coverage on what's on for under fives ... Advice on how to pick nurseries and schools.' Such content may seem rather banal but John Postill has argued that there is much value in studying 'emerging forms of residential sociality linked to "banal activism" – the activism of seemingly mundane issues such as traffic congestion, waste disposal and petty crime' (2008: 419). He makes the case that, with very few exceptions 'banal activism has been neglected by internet scholars' (*ibid*).

It was clear that there was a degree of confusion about how *Tyburn Mail* was organised and whom it represented. Some thought it was still linked to Castle Vale Community Housing Association: 'Lots of peoples' negative articles or opinions are being filtered out, especially if it's against the housing and social,' said one resident in our workshop. Likewise there were concerns that coverage of the city council tended to shy away from controversy: 'There's always something about what the council are doing. They print all the good things, of course. It's very, very rare you get failings, unless it comes from the locals.'

Beyond our research interventions, there is little sense in Castle Vale that citizens were active players when it comes to contributing to their community media. Mechanisms for input (comments on the blog or Facebook) were never used by any of our workshop participants and, indeed, it is clear that in comparison to some other hyperlocal media operations, *Tyburn Mail* does actively facilitate reader interventions. Yet as an artefact, the newspaper was very much part of people's lives with everyone having clear views about its worth and some people even involved in its distribution.

Our research interventions were an attempt to intervene in the well-established, professionally-prescribed routine of making news at *Tyburn Mail*. To a degree, the news café helped to place the organisation more centrally in people's gaze and Edwards continued to run the news café on a monthly basis for a short period after our intervention (a column called 'News from the café' was created). At least one news story from the blank pages was followed up and in the subsequent interview with Edwards he was clear that citizens could not only play a role in newsgathering, but that the initiative had changed perceptions of the *Tyburn Mail*:

Clearly the news café is a good idea. We feel that it has worked for us in terms of opening us out and saying we are after domestic stories. ... It may well be that we are now being perceived as a voice of the people, as opposed to a voice of the council, or a voice of the councillor (Edwards).

Yet the nature of the journalism at *Tyburn Mail* remains the same. As Michael Schudson's critique of the US public journalism movement pointed out, despite the strong desire and concrete initiatives to engage the 'public' in the co-production of news, 'authority about what to write and whether to print stays with the professionals' (Schudson 1999: 123).

Conclusions

This case study has offered up rich detail into the precarious existence of one particular example of a hyperlocal media operation. It is an operation that has shifted from a not-for-profit arm of a non-departmental government body (the HAT), to a limited company scouring for grant funding, to a charity, and back to being a limited company. Its existence throughout has been precarious and it is now reaching a point where its only consistent source of funds (the endowment trust fund) may be coming to an end. Yet unlike similar operations¹ it has not quite built up the level of trust where funding through citizen patronage or crowd-funding are likely options. Whilst *Tyburn Mail* does an excellent job of fulfilling a 'fourth estate' role for its citizens, it comes up against the tensions in the area's troubled history. As Adam Mornement points out, 'the tangled knot of notoriety cannot be quickly be undone' (2005: 82). Residents are clearly conflicted about the extent to which 'bad' news should be talked about. Whilst there's a shared desire to 'tell it like it is', the residents of Castle Vale seem to contest the idea of what 'it' is.

In their examination of a nearby suburb of east Birmingham, David Parker and Christian Karner (2011) reflected on the notion that 'localities contain multiple "subjugated knowledges" [drawing on Foucault 1980: 82] and previously largely private, rarely heard memories of social struggle, exclusion and self-assertion. Such subjugated knowledges need to be excavated, captured and articulated' (2011: 308). They claim that such an excavation needs to take place online via the social web as much as offline through located local cultural expressions such as graffiti. The point is to counter the partial accounts of communities that come through mainstream media and too often position places such as Castle Vale within a very narrow representational frame in the public gaze. Instead, richer 'spatial biographies' might have a counter-hegemonic role in working against dominant external myths and instead 'recognise the intertwined histories of places and people, roads and their residents' (Parker and Karner 2011: 309). Peter Matthews' (2014) account of research interventions in Wester Hailes in Edinburgh notes how working-class residents 'resist the discourses of policy-makers that seek to denigrate their neighbourhood to justify intervention' (Matthews 2014: 25). In Castle Vale, we witnessed similar resistance from residents to the ways that journalism tells stories that denigrate rather than

celebrate. Having been established to help change perceptions about Castle Vale in the light of its regeneration, *Tyburn Mail* still has a vital role to play in charting the effect of austerity on what remains of local public services. To do so it must engage with, and perhaps confront, the notion of what it means to be from the 'The Vale', and what it means to practice a normative model of journalism. Perhaps by refocusing on the banal, hyperlocal media operations such as *Tyburn Mail* have a chance to articulate a citizen-led vision of what everyday life in areas such as 'The Vale' is really like.

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