



## Researching Local News in a Big City: A Multimethod Approach

STEPHEN COLEMAN<sup>1</sup>

NANCY THUMIM

GILES MOSS

University of Leeds, UK

Reflecting on recent research in the United Kingdom, we consider how to investigate the mediation of news in a contemporary city. We put forward the notion of a “media ecology” to capture the relationships between varied news media and practices—from mainstream news media and community media to the everyday circulation of news through local grapevines—and to explore how individuals and groups relate to the city and to one another. We outline the methodological challenges and decisions we faced in mapping such a complex thing as a media ecology and then in seeking to describe how it operates and to explain the difference it makes to the lives of city dwellers. We advocate the use of multiple methods because none could have provided an adequate explanation of the media ecology or the mediation of news in the city on its own.

*Keywords: cities, local news, media ecology, multiple methods*

Wordsworth saw that when we become uncertain in a world of apparent strangers who yet, decisively, have a common effect on us, and when forces that will alter our lives are moving all around us in apparently external and unrecognisable forms, we can retreat for security into deep subjectivity, or we can look around us for social pictures, social signs, social messages to which, characteristically, we try to relate as individuals but so as to discover, in some form, community. Much of the content of modern

---

Stephen Coleman: s.coleman@leeds.ac.uk

Nancy Thumim: n.thumim@leeds.ac.uk

Giles Moss: g.s.moss@leeds.ac.uk

Date submitted: 2015-06-23

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful for insightful comments on this article from two anonymous reviewers and the editors of the special section, Giorgia Aiello and Simone Tosoni. We would like to thank the other members of the research team who worked with us on the news ecology research project: Chris Birchall, Jay G. Blumler, Julie Firmstone, Katy Parry, and Judith Stamper. We would also like to thank Steven McDermott who designed and completed online research and network analysis for the study and Josh Herbert and Joe Dempsey who worked as coders on the content analysis.

Copyright © 2016 (Stephen Coleman, Nancy Thumim, & Giles Moss). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

communications is this kind of substitute for directly discoverable and transitive relations to the world, and can be properly related to the scale and complexity of modern society, of which the city is always the most evident example. (Williams, 2013, p. 80)

Cities are conglomerations of people who can neither know nor ignore one another. The circulation of local news is one of the ways by which relations of enduring coexistence are maintained. Both the normative importance of such shared urban narratives (Couldry & Markham, 2006; Dewey, 1927; Friedland, 2001; Kaniss, 1991; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Oliver & Myers, 1999; Rosenstiel et al., 2007; Stamm, 1985) and their empirical forms (Anderson, 2010; Ball-Rokeach, Yong-Chan, & Matei, 2001; Costera Meijer, 2013; Dickens, Couldry, & Fotopoulou, 2015; Franklin, 2005, 2013; Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, 2005; Paek, Yoon, & Shah, 2005; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001) have been the subject of scholarship for almost a century. This article contributes to that research by explaining how a group of scholars set out to explore and explain the mediation of news in a major British city. Our focus in this article is on the theoretically founded decisions that underlay our study; the multimethod approach we adopted; and the potential value of this approach to understanding how city dwellers come to have a sense, however fragile, of common belonging. What follows is in three parts. First, we discuss the ecological approach, positioning our research in the field of news study. In the second part, we discuss how we developed and implemented our ecological approach to understanding news in the city of Leeds. In our conclusion, we address the benefits and the risks of adopting a multimethod approach to social research.

### **Thinking of the City as a Media Ecology**

The metaphor of the city as a media ecology has an illustrious history, connecting to a long tradition of media and communication research exemplified by the Chicago School of Sociology (Nielsen, 2015). Milberry (2012) offers a definition of this rather amorphous concept: "Broadly defined as the study of complex communication systems as environments, media ecology has emerged as a metadiscipline that seeks integrated and holistic accounts of the consequences wrought by the collision of technology, culture, and consciousness" (p. 21).

Ecological media studies are less interested in studying "local media" as institutional disseminators of urban news than in understanding the ways in which communities are communicatively integrated through "a range of communication activities that link networks of individuals, groups and institutions in a specific community domain" (Friedland, 2001, p. 360).

The most promising approach to community integration has been advanced by McLeod and colleagues (1996) at the University of Wisconsin, who define the concept as "a multidimensional, multilevel phenomenon" (p. 183) involving "the exchange of communication and influence directed toward social control and/or social change" (p. 181). Nardi and O'Day (1999) refer to an information ecology as "a complex system of parts and relationships, it exhibits diversity and experiences continual evolution. Different parts of an ecology coevolve, changing together according to the relationships in the system" (p. 51). As McLeod and colleagues recognize, "On an individual level, integration is the presence of

intrapersonal feelings of local attachment (as a source of motivation) and maintenance of interpersonal relationships in the community (as a basis of participation)" (p. 183).

Communication theorists have long been interested in this relationship. Simmel's (1955) work on webs of group affiliation and Lazarsfeld's studies of the role of "personal influence" in the diffusion of publicly circulating ideas were foundational. More recently, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1987) have demonstrated empirically how political information is encountered within social networks composing crossovers between personal interaction and media exposure:

Political information is processed and integrated not by isolated individuals but rather by interdependent individuals who conduct their day-to-day activities in socially structured ways and who send and receive distinctive interpretations of political events in a repetitive process of social interaction. (p. 1197)

The ecological perspective has long been used to explore the ways in which different communities in a city read and speak to—or ignore—one another. The seminal research in this context was undertaken by Robert Park in his Chicago studies. Exploring the "moral distances" between "cities within cities" that turn a city into "a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate," Park (1915, p. 608) undertook a detailed empirical inquiry into the ways that coexisting communities and populations managed to avoid one another's interests and values. Park maintained that

What is achieved by communication is understanding and the ability of one individual to understand another is the measure of the distance between them. This differing ability to understand one individual or another is a matter of observation but it is also a matter of feeling. We can see the distance that separates A from B, but we can sense the distance that separates us from others. This individual seems reserved and distant and insofar incomprehensible. (As cited in Lindner, 1996 p. 108)

Much valuable research has been conducted on changes in the diffusion of local news, especially since the advent of the Internet. Whereas the path from source to journalist to audience was once fairly linear (one might say industrial), it is now the case that a range of media technologies, practices, and genres is available to people hoping to make, circulate, and receive news. Anderson's (2010) illuminating discussion of one local news story in Philadelphia (which was a major inspiration for our own study) suggests that sources are becoming increasingly "savvy" about the best ways to gain public attention by using different media. Whereas media organizations might perceive themselves to be in fierce competition with one another to "deliver" the news, an ecological perspective suggests that different media fulfill different functions in the bid to reach public attention. For example, news blogs might seem to be very weak competitors in relation to well-resourced mainstream news providers, but as a means of reaching the latter, some of them are highly significant. Recent studies in the ecological tradition (Anderson 2010, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2010) suggest that the overall media ecology is becoming more like a division of informational labor than a war of each against all.

As the process of producing, filtering, and circulating news becomes less industrially monolithic, so do patterns of news consumption. In their study of media effects on civic life, McCombs, Holbert, Kioussis, and Wanta (2011) observed how citizens use news media to complement one another. Media scholars and commentators need, they argue, "to abandon the idea that the various news media are in competition with one another for the attention of the news audience" (p. 62). They refer to the "unequivocal empirical fact" that "most members of the audience engage multiple information outlets in order to remain up-to-date on public affairs. . . . It is necessary to understand these relationships among different types of media use" (p. 62). The breadth and eclecticism of these relationships are borne out by a Pew Research Center study of 2011 that found that its American respondents relied on a range of media sources to find information about their local communities:

Americans appear to discern significant differences in the strengths of different information sources. They recognize that there may be more information about their child's school on a parent-run listserv than on television or even their neighborhood weekly paper. They recognize that if they want information about zoning or local government, it may be more available in the newspaper they do not regularly buy than on the television station they watch many days for traffic and weather. (Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell, & Rainie, 2011, para. 17)

The ecological approach foregrounds the question of the roles and rationales for various performances and practices, offering the suggestive implication that the production and circulation of news might entail a combination of institutional, generic, and locally situated efforts rather than an industrially cohesive operation. Might it be that radio or television news are bound to break news faster and more effectively than newspapers or news blogs and, therefore, the latter should cease to aspire to become newsbreakers? Might it be that council websites are capable of providing certain kinds of local service-related information, but that public discussion about council service provision or policy is more likely to be open and trusted when it takes place on third-party blogs or discussion fora? Might it be that local radio is well placed to invite public comment about news stories, via phone-ins and user-generated content, but that it will never be as good as newspapers at conducting the kind of investigative journalism that takes time and probing expertise? There are no simple, generalizable answers to these questions, and the local contingencies and practices of media ecologies from one locality to another might suggest quite different responses. However, an ecological approach seems relevant to the complex contemporary configuration of media platforms and sources precisely because it enables questions relating to the social value of media forms to be addressed.

### **An Ecological Approach to Understanding News in the City**

Drawing on the ecological tradition explored in the previous section, we set out to describe three sorts of relationships. The first concerns integration (e.g., McLeod et al., 1996) between individual-level interpersonal communication and city-wide-level shared knowledge. Without some degree of micro-macro integration, the conversations, grapevines, and idiomatic expressions that occur in the context of interpersonal communication would be unrelated to the circulating stories transmitted by local media.

The second relationship explored in our theory of media ecology is the one between communities, a concern at the heart of Park's work in Chicago. We focused as much on the everyday circulation of local accounts and mundane practices of public connection (and disconnection) as on traditionally linear flows of news production and reception, which entailed sensitivity to local conversation, rumors, expectations, anxieties, and collective framings that are not always apparent. The notion of distance is highly relevant to the city that we were researching. Leeds is a city in which 170 languages are spoken, particular communities and their events are widely associated with ethnic or religious traditions, and the local member of the European Parliament at the time of our study represented the racist British National Party. How do people in Leeds come to terms with these differences and distances? How do they come to know the strangers who are their fellow citizens? How well do communities feel that their stories are told and received? What efforts are made by local media to translate stories across cultural distances? In what sense is the local public sphere characterized by the ease of the "completely understandable" or the apprehension of the culturally uncomprehended? These were key research questions for our study.

The third relationship concerns changes in the diffusion of local news and blockages in that diffusion. At the start of the study, we considered the possibility of pursuing a network analysis to map the diffusion of news across the city. Ultimately, we rejected this focus on digital networks for two key reasons. First, we were concerned about the lack of attention to meaning and context that such analyses deliver. As Stephansen and Couldry (2014) observed,

while quantitative metrics can provide important insights into the *form* that online communities might take and the extent of their interactions, an ethnographic and hermeneutic approach is needed to understand *how* Twitter and other digital platforms become embedded within particular contexts and used by social agents for their own purposes. (p. 1224)

We found that the analysis of where news comes from and where it travels across electronic networks could not tell us much about the meaning (or indeed insignificance) of any of the particular nodes in the network for different groups, communities, and individuals in the city. It could not tell us how actors themselves perceived the Leeds media ecology and their role within it.

Second, we rejected a focus on networks because of the fact that digital methods are not comprehensive. In studying the movement of news through the media ecology of Leeds, it would be a mistake to assume a priori that the media ecology is "digital" and so makes our city—to borrow Fotopoulou's (2014) phrase—"digital by default." Our primary interest in this study was in addressing the question of how news travelled through the media ecology of the city—not the question of how news travelled through digital networks. And, indeed, we found that news in Leeds travelled through digital networks, but was certainly not limited to them. We were also interested in nondigital sources: Word of mouth, papers, and street posters were all found to be important to what news is and how it travels between people in a cosmopolitan, and divided, city.

Having rejected a network analysis, we approached our theory of a media ecology via a multimethod approach largely reliant on the generation of rich qualitative data, but with some crucial

contextual material in the form of a content analysis of a week in news and a survey of a representative sample of Leeds citizens. In short, we settled on a "small data" approach as opposed to the "big data" mapping of outlets and nodes for news in the city.

During the early stages of our research, online research was useful in helping us understand and chart the Leeds media ecology, and we used a range of digital methods: from queries on search engines and following links and RSS feeds to identifying and analyzing social media and Web networks through the use of NodeXL and IssueCrawler software. This research proved valuable in identifying relevant sites of local news: It indicated to us that news was told and discussed in expected places such as a BBC local news website and even, also expected, in community blogs and Facebook and Twitter networks, but could also be found in less obvious places, such as the forums of football supporters. Through network analysis, it also began to suggest possible connections between different local sites and actors within the media ecology. Indeed, if a media ecology is a complex network of communicative relationships and flows, the visualizations of networks generated through digital methods were a useful provocation in beginning to think about and map the Leeds media ecology, but they could not address all the questions in our theory of a media ecology (see the three relationships, described above).

Alongside our digital research, we conducted 17 "scoping interviews" to help develop our understanding and initial map of the Leeds media ecology. Employing a snowballing sampling method in which we asked people where we should go next, both in electronic networks and off the grid, we selected people in Leeds who seemed to play a role in the mediation and circulation of local news. Interviewees included mainstream news providers: senior editors from the local BBC and radio news providers, the ITV commercial news provider, and the main local newspaper (the *Yorkshire Evening Post*). But they also included a range of more peripheral, sometimes eccentric local mediators: These included a local artist who draws pictures and writes poems about local events on people's shopping bags, the director of an evangelical Christian radio station, the editor of the local "what's on" magazine, and several bloggers. These interviews were invaluable in giving us a sense of how news practices often transcend the limits and routines of conventional news production. They reminded us of the importance of the hyperlocal, such as neighborhoods in the poorer peripheries to the east of the city for whose inhabitants "going to Leeds" is regarded as a major excursion, and the different ways the Leeds media ecology is imagined by its participants.

Through these scoping interviews, we developed a map of our media ecology. Our picture was incomplete and defeasible (we would need to return to and adapt it throughout our research), but it was something that we could take with us into the field and use to orient our subsequent research. Although the meaning of "Leeds" is clearly contested and defined in multiple ways, we eventually settled on the outer ring road of the city as its boundary because this was cited as significant by our research participants, although we made an exception in the case of news media that fell just outside this boundary but still appeared relevant. Our definition of what local news media might be within the media ecology had been developed bit-by-bit, both through digital methods and in response to what our growing set of interviewees told us it is, and now encompassed a broad range of media technologies, practices, and genres. Having developed this initial understanding, the next step was to explore and explain the media ecology of Leeds.

Inspired particularly by the Pew Research Center study of Baltimore, we monitored news in Leeds over the course of a single week. Focusing on a single week was limiting in some respects: There was no guarantee the week we selected was “typical.” However, studying news in a more concentrated and comprehensive way over a shorter period gave us the best chance of being able to understand and explain how a media ecology—in all its diversity and complexity—actually works. We wanted to understand the news that circulated through the media ecology during the week: What did people say, what issues were covered, and what groups did local news speak to and ignore? We also wanted to understand how different news producers explained, defended, and understood the news they constructed and circulated. Finally, we were interested in how media users and audiences related to news, taking into account the diversity of people in the city as much as the diversity of media outlets. Achieving these goals in a credible way required a range of methods, none of which would have offered us adequate explanatory material on its own.

The first aspect of our research involved recording and analyzing the news produced over the course of the week by a wide range of local news providers, including both mainstream and nonmainstream news media. During the week itself, the research team monitored news output and identified and tracked stories and emerging themes. Then, in the weeks that followed, we conducted a more systematic content analysis of a broad (if not exhaustive) range of these news outlets. By itself, content analysis can be a limiting technique, fragmenting aspects of new stories into predetermined measures and categories, in a verifiable yet uninspiring manner. However, in keeping with our ecological perspective, data from a week of media content were analyzed as an initial resource through which to explore the stories that were told, and the stories that people told themselves, about their local area. A content analysis across media forms and genres allowed us to track the travel of such stories as they interweaved within the media ecology. Our content analysis set out to answer the following questions:

- What kinds of stories are covered by which local media? Where do we see similarities and differences in the way that these stories are told?
- How are cultural or community events represented within the local media ecology?
- Do blogs challenge the traditional sense of mainstream media as the hub of communicating news?

Our content analysis pointed to the variety of news channels and sources calling for public attention within the city of Leeds, but also the ways in which quite different forms and narratives are fused as “news.” Within the context of “the glocal city” (Brenner, 1998), wars in the Middle East compete with ice on local roads for significance as shared knowledge; the fate of the Leeds United football club, long regarded locally as a victim of commercial neglect, helps to frame an understanding of irresponsible global bankers creating a crisis that has to be paid for by the poorest local citizens. Urban stories do not emerge or circulate in discrete bubbles; they inform one another and contribute to an aggregate social mood—or, more accurately, a range of distinct, but intersecting local moods.

The second aspect of our research aimed to understand the perspectives of different news producers about the news they constructed and circulated over the course of the monitoring week. We

conducted a series of six unstructured, but preplanned and broadly comparable interviews with leading personnel from the mainstream local news media in Leeds (*Look North*, *Calendar*, Radio Leeds, and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*). These covered the informants' perspectives on their outlets and their own work in respect to such topics as recent developments in their outlets' situations, including the main sources of change; the outlets' overall roles and purposes, actual and preferred, and forms of public service envisaged, if any; the most satisfying types of stories to present (and least), including especially lead items (top of bulletin or front page); local story priorities and preferences, related perceptions of a Yorkshire character, relations to available national stories and how the latter might be "localized"; types of "voices" (or actors) preferred and to be avoided in the output if possible; perceptions of and relations to their audiences; uses of social media; and any lines of self-criticism. In analyzing the transcripts of these recorded interviews, we were struck by a discrepancy between what news providers thought (or said) they were doing and what they actually delivered. This led us to probe what we regarded as fundamental and endemic tensions between a set of genuinely meant public purposes and a capacity to implement them.

As part of our 17 scoping interviews, we conducted 6 interviews with local alternative news providers with a view to understanding how mainstream and nonmainstream norms converge, conflict, and fit together. It was clear by now that we were not witnessing a transformative displacement of mainstream local media in the way that some, mainly U.S., studies have suggested is prevalent. These channels and sources perform a supplementary role, providing much-needed information for minority communities and playing some part in challenging dominant news agendas. Yet, news sources reaching small audiences can often have an impact disproportionate to their reach within a broader media ecology (e.g., one political blogger was mentioned as a significant actor to us by local council representatives, even though they probably constituted a significant proportion of his readers). Our analysis of alternative news providers moved away from a conventional focus on competition for public attention and pointed to some emergent news practices that challenge traditional notions of news as the circulation of packaged stories.

The third aspect of the research examined the views of media users and audiences. We conducted six focus groups that provided valuable insights into how people make sense of the news, relate it to their own lives, and fit it into their everyday routines. Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalize on communication between research participants to generate data. The method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think, but also how they think and why they think that way. For example, the groups helped us understand much more clearly how, for many people, grapevines are crucial for both the acquisition of local information and the ways in which they make connections in their communities. For most of our focus group participants, *local* meant "my street" or "my neighborhood"; it almost never meant the city of Leeds as reported in the local paper, the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, and certainly not the vast regions of Yorkshire and beyond covered by TV news programs such as the BBC's *Look North* or ITV's *Calendar*. Above all, our focus groups helped us capture the sense in which local narratives are often defined by miscommunications and misunderstandings. More than through content analysis or survey research, focus groups reveal the ways in which the seemingly absent, unsaid, or even taboo features of the city contribute greatly to people's sense of where they live. Surveys tap into what people can remember about

their own and others' actions; focus groups all too often stumble on what is forgotten, misremembered, or systematically distorted.

The focus group provided us with important qualitative insights into the mediated experience of feeling part of a major city, but were not intended to be representative of the Leeds population. We conducted a survey of a representative sample of the Leeds population, therefore, to understand how prevalent different practices and views were and to explore differences among sociodemographic groups. The survey asked (1) how often respondents accessed various media, such as local and national newspapers, radio, television, blogs, and so forth, and whether they ever listened to any of the city's nonmainstream local radio stations; (2) the sources to which respondents would be most likely to turn to find out more information about a local issue that concerned them—and which sources they trust most, nationally and locally; (3) the main reasons that respondents looked regularly at news in general and local news specifically (e.g., catching the headlines of what's going on; being reminded of local characters and places; finding out about weather and traffic conditions; having something to talk about with others; following the pros and cons of local issues, keeping up with local sports, following the dramas—the tragedies, problems, and triumphs—of local people's lives; keeping up to date with recent crimes, accidents, and scandals; learning about developments that might affect them or the city; keeping up with Leeds City Council decisions); (4) features of local life that respondents thought local media should cover and did cover well or badly; (5) whether respondents had encountered the media or local government in the past six months by, for example, being asked for their views by a media organization; contacting a local councilor, official, or MP; becoming involved in some form of community action; or writing a comment about local news in a blog, Web forum, e-mail list, or on Twitter or Facebook; (6) which local media respondents they thought represented the city of Leeds best and which represented them best as individual citizens; and (7) whether respondents had come across recent local headline news stories (such as those considered in detail in our two case studies), from which media they had heard about them first, and whether coverage of these stories was informative or balanced, unfair or confusing, relevant to the respondent's own life, too brief or too detailed, or a stimulus to action.

Far from arriving at a neat picture of "how the city gets its news," rigorous probing of the survey data (alongside the focus group transcripts) allowed us to explore the multiple ways in which individual citizens make sense of their collective experience. In asking our respondents how and when they accessed news, it became very clear that people do so in countless ways, sometimes using several media sources and platforms to piece together a version of local reality; sometimes trusting some sources or platforms more than others; sometimes looking for different emphases and perspectives than the ones on offer; sometimes regarding the news as a kind of background white noise that assures them that nothing too awful is about to disrupt their lives; and sometimes using the news as a basis for personal action, such as talking to others, challenging media accounts, protesting, or engaging in the formal political process.

It is in response to this inchoate, pluralistic, fragmented approach to local news that the notion of a media ecology really comes into its own. The media themselves and the audiences to whom they speak (and now increasingly speak to one another through social media as well as in other ways) are both interdependent and uncoordinated. How they relate to one another depends on a complex set of actions

that, we suggest, are best studied in all of their rich, qualitative detail and then joined to create a picture of media ecology through which various kinds of news travel that is greater than any of its units.

Finally, and also inspired by the Pew Research Center (2010) study, we identified two “news stories” to explore in more depth. These stories not only dominated the headlines during our monitoring week, but also raised important issues in response to our overarching research questions concerning news in the media ecology of the contemporary city.

In the first case study, we set out to focus on Leeds as a democratic city, governed by an accountable elected council. We wanted to ask questions such as the following: How well is local representation mediated? What does democratic accountability look like at the parochial level? Our case study considered media coverage of a series of major cuts in council services specifically related to residential care homes for older people. We were interested in exploring how this story became known and understood by local people. The decision to close local care homes (in response to swinging cuts in public expenditure imposed by the national government) had been preceded by a public consultation, but few people had heard about it or taken part. Only when news stories about the effects of the cuts became headline news were most local people engaged by it in any meaningful way. But that was rather too late. We found that, despite much professed commitment by the city council to engage with the public, this notion had several contested meanings, ranging from a one-way flow of information from government to citizens to the creation of a citizenry that is not only listened to through consultation, but also empowered as partners in decision making. This uncertainty about the meaning of public engagement left both local government communication strategists and journalists somewhat confused about their roles in relation to local civic participation (Coleman & Firmstone, 2014; Firmstone & Coleman, 2014, 2015). Where does that leave norms of accountability, and could we, by means of this case study, propose ways in which it could be strengthened? After much reflection, we decided to conclude this case study with a counterfactual account of how a city facing such financial dilemmas could establish a more conversational mechanism for public involvement in the policy process.

Our second case study was the annual Chapeltown Carnival, which is the longest running African–Caribbean carnival in Europe, having been going since 1967. The carnival is held in the Chapeltown and Harehills area of Leeds every August bank holiday weekend and regularly attracts crowds of around 150,000 people. We wanted to explore the role of local media in bridging distances of “race,” ethnicity, and class in their coverage of this event. Focus group participants told us that they had no sense of local media performing this bridging role. Even when local media present the carnival as “a colorful display,” this tends to be regarded as cliché; pictures of happy carnival goers are received as a cover for what really goes on “down there” (see Anderson, Coleman, & Thumim, 2015, for a further development of this idea). Moreover, there were mixed views as to whether bridging distance is even something that the media should be doing. Media workers absolutely see this as a part of their role, and community activists agree. Focus group participants expressed a range of views on this subject, but what did seem to be (largely) agreed on was that local news media representations contributed to an idea of Chapeltown (and its annual carnival), which, at the very least, did not break down distances of race, ethnicity, and class and, at worst, fostered them.

### **Conclusion: A Multimethod Approach to News in the City**

Our research set out to explore and explain the mediation of news within a British city through the notion of a media ecology. Mapping the Leeds media ecology and the actors involved in it was a challenging task, but then explaining what difference it makes to people's lives in the city was more difficult still. Achieving these goals, as we have argued, required the use of multiple methods and a small data approach. And we think this approach might usefully be replicated in other cities.

At the most pragmatic level, we wanted to use mixed methods because we believed that they would help us focus on the complexity of our research questions and would help steer us away from predetermined assumptions about the meanings, functions, and practices of both cities and their media. As Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) put it,

Mixed methods research . . . is an attempt to legitimate the use of multiple approaches in answering research questions, rather than restricting or constraining researchers' choices (i.e., it rejects dogmatism). It is an expansive and creative form of research, not a limiting form of research. It is inclusive, pluralistic, and complementary, and it suggests that researchers take an eclectic approach to method selection and the thinking about and conduct of research. What is most fundamental is the research question—research methods should follow research questions in a way that offers the best chance to obtain useful answers. (p. 17)

Of course, such an approach entails risks and compromises. Findings derived from different methods do not always align neatly. The researchers' feel for meaningful confluences are even more sensitive in this context than others. Qualitative researchers' constructivist aspirations can be undermined by the investigatory preconstructions that are implicit in quantitative methods, such as content analysis and survey design. In our study, we had to work hard to maintain our focus on practices, given the prevalence of routines and institutions that dominate both the city and the local media. As ever, negotiating these risks and compromises worked best when the research team did a lot of collective talking and, at times, internal translating.

We do not claim to have succeeded at every point, but we do consider that by the end of our research we had arrived at a richer and more nuanced understanding of how local news is mediated in the city of Leeds than we could have done using any one of our applied methods. We had identified an array of actors, technologies, practices, and genres that are involved in making, circulating, and consuming news, and we have shown how these contribute to the Leeds media ecology in different ways. Where mainstream news organizations might see themselves as being in competition with other news providers, an ecological perspective indicated that the relationship between these practices can be more complementary and productive. Although a great deal of effort is being made by a range of actors to produce and circulate local news, the resources and public attention available to be shared between the various media outlets are limited. A recognition that emergent, digital, and other news outlets were struggling within Leeds to make any significant impact on public attention led us to resist the increasingly common U.S. narrative of a media ecology transformed by the presence of new players.

During our research, it became clear that media ecology in Leeds is not fulfilling all people's informational and communicative needs adequately. Much effort is being made by a range of actors to produce and circulate local news, but the resources available to these media outlets are limited, and those that are available are distributed unequally. At the same time, not all groups are represented or addressed equally across the media ecology, and local news too often fails to provide sufficient resources for individual and groups within the city to come to terms with their differences, distances, and divisions.

These questions are as important as ever, we suggest, because inequalities in the big cities of the United Kingdom remain wide. An analysis of the UK general election of 2015 suggests that local media have a role to play in telling stories that represent and are useful to people living in poverty in the United Kingdom who are otherwise disenfranchised (Jackson & Thorsen, 2015). The understanding of local news developed in our research enables us to address the question of how such stories come to be told, received, understood, misunderstood, rejected, and passed on by different (conflicting) communities in the city.

### References

- Anderson, C. W. (2010). Journalistic networks and the diffusion of local news: The brief, happy news life of the "Francisville Four." *Political Communication* 27(3), 289–299.  
doi:10.1080/10584609.2010.496710
- Anderson, C. W. (2013). *Rebuilding the news: Metropolitan journalism in the digital age*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Anderson, C. W., Coleman, S., & Thumim, N. (2015). How news travels: A comparative study of local media ecosystems in Leeds (UK) and Philadelphia (US). In R. K. Nielsen (Ed.), *Local journalism: The decline of newspapers and the rise of digital media*. London, UK: I. B. Tauris.
- Ball-Rokeach, S. J., Yong-Chan, K., & Matei, S. (2001). Storytelling neighborhood paths to belonging in diverse urban environments. *Communication Research*, 28(4), 392–428.  
doi:10.1177/009365001028004003
- Brenner, N. (1998). Global cities, glocal states: Global city formation and state territorial restructuring in contemporary Europe. *Review of International Political Economy*, 5(1), 1–37.  
doi:10.1080/096922998347633
- Coleman, S., & Firmstone, J. (2014). Contested meanings of public engagement: Exploring discourse and practice within a British city council. *Media, Culture & Society*, 36(6), 826–844.  
doi:10.1177/0163443714536074
- Costera Meijer, I. (2013). When news hurts: The promise of participatory storytelling for urban problem neighbourhoods. *Journalism Studies*, 14(1), 13–28. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2012.662398

- Couldry, N., & Markham, T. (2006). Public connection through media consumption: Between oversocialization and de-socialization?. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 608(1), 251–269. doi:10.1177/0002716206292342
- Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. Denver, CO: Alan Swallow.
- Dickens, L., Couldry, N., & Fotopoulou, A. (2015). News in the community? Investigating emerging inter-local spaces of news production/consumption. *Journalism Studies*, 16(1), 97–114. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2014.890339
- Firmstone, J., & Coleman, S. (2014). The changing role of the local news media in enabling citizens to engage in local democracies. *Journalism Practice*, 8(5), 596–606. doi:10.1080/17512786.2014.895516
- Fotopoulou, A. (2014). Digital and networked by default? Women's organisations and the social imaginary of networked feminism. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1461444814552264
- Franklin, B. (Ed). (2005). *Local journalism and local media: Making the local news*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Franklin, B. (Ed). (2013). *The future of newspapers*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Friedland, L. A. (2001). Communication, community, and democracy toward a theory of the communicatively integrated community. *Communication Research*, 28(4), 358–391. doi:10.1177/009365001028004002
- Heider, D., McCombs, M., & Poindexter, P. M. (2005). What the public expects of local news: Views on public and traditional journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 952–967. doi:10.1177/107769900508200412
- Huckfeldt, R., & Sprague, J. (1987). Networks in context: The social flow of political information. *American Political Science Review*, 81(04), 1197–1216. doi:10.2307/1962585
- Jackson, D., & Thorsen, E. (Eds.). (2015). *UK election analysis 2015: Media, voters and the campaign—Early reflections from leading UK academics*. Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK. Retrieved from <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ud8j5bxp42hadwa/UK%20Election%20Analysis%202015%20-%20Jackson%20and%20Thorsen%20v1.pdf?dl=0>
- Johnson, R., Onwuegbuzie, A., & Turner, L. (2007). Toward a definition of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1(2), 112–133. doi:10.1177/1558689806298224

Kaniss, P. (1991). *Making local news*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lindner, R. (1996). *The reportage of urban culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School* (A. Morris, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

McCombs, M., Holbert, L., Kiousis, S., & Wanta, W. (2011). *The news and public opinion: Media effects on civic life*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

McLeod, J. M., Daily, K., Guo, Z., Eveland, W., Bayer, J., Yang, S., & Wang, H. (1996). Community integration, local media use, and democratic processes. *Communication Research*, 23(2), 179–209. doi:10.1177/009365096023002002

McLeod, J. M., Scheufele, D., & Moy, P. (1999). Community, communication, and participation: The role of mass media and interpersonal discussion in local political participation. *Political Communication*, 16(3), 315–336. doi:10.1080/105846099198659

Milberry, K. (2012). *Media ecology*. *Oxford bibliographies in Communication*. doi:10.1093/obo/9780199756841-0054

Nardi, B. A., & O'Day, V. L. (1999). *Information ecologies: Using technology with a heart*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Nielsen, R. K. (2015). Preface to Part 1: Local media ecosystems. In R. K. Nielsen (Ed.), *Local journalism: The decline of newspapers and the rise of digital media* (pp. 27–29). London, UK: I. B. Tauris.

Oliver, P. E., & Myers, D. J. (1999). How events enter the public sphere: Conflict, location, and sponsorship in local newspaper coverage of public events. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(1), 38–87. doi:10.1086/210267

Paek, H., Yoon, S., & Shah, D. V. (2005). Local news, social integration, and community participation: Hierarchical linear modeling of contextual and cross-level effects. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(3), 587–606. doi:10.1177/107769900508200307

Park, R. E. (1915). The city: Suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the city environment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 20(5), 577–612.

Pew Research Center. (2010). *How news happens: A study of the news ecosystem of one American city*. Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Retrieved from <http://www.journalism.org/2010/01/11/how-news-happens/>

Rosenstiel, T., Just, M., Belt, T., Pertilla, A., Dean, W., & Chinni, D. (2007). *We interrupt this newscast: How to improve local news and win ratings, too*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Rosenstiel, T., Mitchell, A., Purcell, K., & Rainie, L. (2011). *How people learn about their local community*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/09/26/how-people-learn-about-their-local-community/>
- Shah, D. V., McLeod, J. M., & Yoon, S. (2001). Communication, context, and community: An exploration of print, broadcast, and Internet influences. *Communication Research, 28*(4), 464–506. doi:10.1177/009365001028004005
- Simmel, G. (1955). The web of group affiliations. In *Conflict and the web of group affiliations* (pp. 125–195). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Stamm, K. R. (1985). *Newspaper use and community ties: Toward a dynamic theory*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Stephansen, H., & Couldry, N. (2014). Understanding micro-processes of community building and mutual learning on Twitter: A “small data” approach. *Information, Communication & Society, 17*(10), 1212–1227. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2014.902984
- Williams, R. (2013). *What I came to say*. New York, NY: Random House.