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## **Alternative journalism as monitorial citizenship? A case study of a local news blog**

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## ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen claims that some examples of online alternative journalism in the form of hyperlocal and local blogs are helping address society's "democratic deficit" by subjecting the actions of the powerful to increased public scrutiny, in a process that has been described as "monitorial citizenship". To explore how this might work in practice, this study examines the origins, motivations and practices of one such site in the UK: the Leeds Citizen. The aim is to provide the sort of detailed consideration in depth that is almost by definition missing from wider surveys of the field. To this end, the case study is based on a series of interviews with the site's creator, augmented by analysis of content, all discussed within the context of scholarly literature on how alternative, non-commercial forms of journalism operate in the digital age. The article concludes that this contemporary form of alternative journalism may indeed be described as an example of monitorial citizenship in action, but there is also a need for further research.

## KEYWORDS

Alternative journalism; Alternative media; Case study; Civil society; Citizen journalism; Hyperlocal media; Monitorial citizenship; Slow journalism.

Much has been written in recent years about the “democratic deficit” that is said to have been caused in the UK, USA and elsewhere by too few journalists being employed to scrutinise and hold to account those in positions of power, particularly at a local level (BBC, 2015: 21). However, alongside gloomy talk of the “economic crisis in the news business” resulting in journalism “failing people where it matters most, namely where people live and work” (BBC, 2015: 6; and 21), some more hopeful voices can also be heard. Participatory forms of online journalism, sometimes referred to as citizen journalism, have been held up as offering new and dynamic ways of fostering civic engagement among citizens (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014: 602), and have even been heralded as having “the potential to democratise both journalism and society at large” (Borger et al, 2013: 125).

For Moss and Coleman (2014: 416), online communications technologies combined with moves towards freedom of official information open up potential for forms of “monitorial citizenship”, in which “making public information and data more widely available is thought to increase transparency and accountability in government, allowing individuals and groups to monitor and evaluate particular policies, services, and the performance of government in general”.

This article is based on a case study of a blog established on a non-commercial basis precisely to carry out such a function in the Yorkshire city of Leeds, in the UK. The site’s creation was prompted by the increased availability of official data and a recognition that it was not sufficient for raw data to be published – it needed to be explored, understood and contextualised, all of which takes time and skill.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is a long history of alternative forms of journalism being produced outside and alongside what may be thought of as a mainstream journalism industry. Susan Forde points out that many practices now considered alternative were once the mainstream (Forde, 2011: xi), and the pioneers of a radical press set up to question the actions of the powers-that-be did so mostly out of political commitment rather than as a way of earning a living (Harrison, 1974). Alternative journalism is a heterogeneous label, covering those elements of alternative media “that involve reporting and/or commenting on factual and/or topical events” (Harcup, 2014a: 11). Together, this diverse range of activities, motivated to a large extent by dissatisfaction with mainstream media (Dickens et al, 2015: 104), comprise “an ever-changing effort to respond critically to dominant conceptions of journalism”, as Atton and Hamilton (2008: 9) put it. Such a response can range from facilitating “local talk” via volunteer-led community radio stations (Meadows, 2013) to the production of more ideologically-driven and investigative “oppositional reporting” (Harcup, 2014b); somewhere near the middle of such a continuum might be the local blog that, although not committed to any particular ideology, may be motivated by a questioning or monitorial approach.

However, participation alone is not enough for some scholars. Christian Fuchs (2010) is dismissive of what he regards as vague definitions of alternative media that put an emphasis on openness and celebrate the small and the local. “This is not to argue that process is unimportant, but that a minimum requirement for speaking of an alternative medium is critical content or critical form,” writes Fuchs (2010: 180). Calling for what might be seen as a more hard-line approach, he warns that small local alternative projects might otherwise become mere “psychological self-help initiatives without political relevance that are more bourgeois individualist self-expressions than political change projects” (Fuchs, 2010: 189).

Fuchs contrasts that with a more “critical media” in which critical form and content are privileged over the participatory processes by which they may be created. The content of such critical media “expresses oppositional standpoints that question all forms of heteronomy

and domination,” writes Fuchs (2010: 179): “So there is counter-information and counter-hegemony that includes the voices of the excluded, the oppressed, the dominated, the enslaved, the estranged, the exploited, and the dominated.” There are some similarities between Fuchs’ critical media and the journalistic concept of “oppositional reporting” (Harcup, 2013 and 2014b). However, not all forms of alternative journalism are as ideologically driven as these, and in any event Fuchs’ model actually extends beyond journalism to take in protest songs, avant-garde films and other forms of wider media output (Fuchs, 2010: 187).

One form of journalism that might not fully meet Fuchs’ definition of critical media, but which can arguably still offer a critique of society’s structures, is the local or hyperlocal blog. Hyperlocal media have been defined by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) as “online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, a single postcode or other small, geographically-defined community” (cited in Ofcom, 2014: 51). The UK’s media and telecommunications regulator Ofcom, in its Internet Citizens 2014 report, noted that “hyperlocal media is a growing sector”, with 408 hyperlocal websites active in the UK in 2014, of which 36 were in Yorkshire; however, the situation was “quite fluid, with some sites starting up and closing in quick succession” (Ofcom, 2014: 51-55). Noting that the definition of hyperlocal is “contested” (Ofcom, 2014: 51), the report found on the basis of the latest research into the sector:

Despite these differences in definitions, services described as “hyperlocal” are rooted in place and are more narrowly localised in terms of geographical and story focus. Many of the stories covered may therefore differ from those in mainstream news outlets in terms of content and perspective... The sites are complementing, and in some cases substituting for, a reduction in or absence of traditional local news media... [H]yperlocal media plays an important role in representing communities back to themselves, potentially fostering community cohesion... in some cases, setting themselves up as an alternative voice to critique or contest more established news sources. (Ofcom, 2014: 52-53.)

Whenever hyperlocal blogs are hailed in this way as providing an alternative, it is worth pausing to reflect on the curious fact that so much of the recent treatment of this phenomenon seems to be oblivious to earlier pre-digital forms of alternative journalism. As Clemencia Rodriguez and colleagues observe, researchers have a tendency to think they have discovered a virgin area of study and to write “as if they were the first ones” to explore it (Rodriguez et al, 2014:162).

The concept of an alternative voice is key to much discussion of alternative media – digital or otherwise - and it relates to notions of civic engagement, democratic participation and active citizenship. Having a voice and the space in which to use such a voice is, for Nick Couldry (2006: 326), crucial if people are going to be able to act in any meaningful sense “as citizens”. However, if having a voice is a precondition for citizens’ democratic participation, then so must be having such voices actually listened to (Harcup, 2015). Writing of the connection between participatory notions of democracy and the idea of social justice, Iris Young notes how “in the real world some people and groups have significantly greater ability to use democratic processes for their own ends while others are excluded or marginalised” (Young, 2000: 17). Yet, she adds, this is not inevitable, because by organising to help ensure the public sphere can function “as a space of opposition and accountability”, otherwise marginalised citizens can help create a more inclusive democracy and by implication a more just society (Young, 2000: 3; 17; and 173).

In this sense, as Jurgen Habermas (1992) argues, we might think of “competing public spheres” involving “counterprojects” and “countereffects” rather than the total domination of one “hegemonic public sphere” (Habermas, 1992: 425-427). Of value here might be the concept of “civil society” which, according to Habermas, has come to be identified as being:

constituted by voluntary unions outside the realm of the state and the economy and ranging... from churches, cultural associations, and academies to independent media, sport and leisure clubs, debating societies, groups of concerned citizens, and grass-roots petitioning drives all the way to occupational associations, political parties, labour unions, and “alternative institutions”. (Habermas, 1992: 453-454.)

When put like that, the groups that comprise civil society can be equated more or less to those sections of society from which forms of alternative media emerge and to whom such media are often addressed.

It is not that civil society groups are necessarily always progressive or democratic, argue Downey and Fenton (2003: 192), but that the democratic potential of a public sphere depends on “a favourable organisation of civil society”. Therefore the growth of “public communication” in the form of blogs and other online alternative media “presents both opportunities and dangers to the theory and practice of democracy” (Downey and Fenton, 2003: 200). In other words, it remains all to play for.

If citizenship is conceived of as an active process, a form of agency rather than a passive state (Campbell, 2014; Lister, 2003; Mouffe, 1992; Rodriguez, 2001; Young, 2000), then the production of journalism that stems from a commitment to informing civil society – helping to form an informed citizenry - rather than a commitment to making money from consumers can itself be seen as a form of active citizenship (Harcup, 2011). And if civil society can be seen as “the realm of free association where citizens can interact to pursue their shared interests, including political ones” (Dahlgren, 2006: 271), then forms of media that are produced specifically with the intention of scrutinising the actions of the powerful and/or encouraging the participation and deliberation of citizens might be seen as playing a potentially vital role in nurturing such a realm.

It is often at the local level that such media emerge because, as Dickens et al (2015: 98) note, “it is often audiences’ feelings of not being recognised in national news agendas that drives them to generate and consume news stories more locally”. In their small-scale, localised and often short-lived ways, local manifestations of alternative media can become spaces in which can gather the “real flesh-and-blood people with relevant values, virtues and competencies” that are necessary for genuine democracy (Dahlgren, 2006: 272).

For many commentators it is the internet that is helping some of the people formerly known as the audience (Rosen, 2006) to become more active citizens. For Dahlgren (2013: 159), although “we must avoid reductionist thinking that seeks technological fixes for societal ills... the fact remains that the digital media have altered the way politics gets done and offer possibilities that can enormously expand civic agency.” Similarly, for Dutton (2009: 8), the internet has facilitated “a novel means for holding politicians and mainstream institutions accountable through the online interaction between ever-changing networks of individuals”. Within this context emerges the concept of what is termed “monitorial citizenship”, whereby citizens either individually or collectively act in a watchdog capacity (Moss and Coleman, 2014). This latter concept entails an active, quasi-journalistic form of monitoring power and making information available to fellow citizens. It goes beyond more passive conceptions of the monitorial citizen who is mostly content just to consume information (Campbell, 2014: 8), although even those who appear to be inactive and merely

“keeping an eye on the scene” may be “poised for action if action is required”, as Michael Schudson (1998: 311) puts it.

The internet has been hailed for making possible active monitorial citizenship in the sense used by Moss and Coleman (2014) in part because of the democratic implications of wider dissemination of data online and in part because the internet hosts spaces that seek “to raise people’s awareness, to give a voice to those who do not have one, to offer social empowerment, to allow disparate people and causes to organise themselves and form alliances, and ultimately to be used as a tool for social change” (Fenton, 2008: 233). Among such heterogeneous spaces are what Engesser (2014: 575) labels “participatory news websites”, which are being “constantly established, modified, and dissolved”. With this context in mind, let us now turn to explore in depth how all this has played out in one example of such online local media.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY**

The research question for this study is:

How can non-professional forms of journalism subject the actions of the powerful to public scrutiny?

For the purposes of this research project, the term “non-professional” will be taken as referring to journalism produced outwith, and independent of, the established commercial and/or professionalised structures of mainstream journalism. The specific form of such journalism to be studied in this instance is an example of that which is sometimes referred to as “citizen journalism”, “alternative journalism”, “hyperlocal journalism” or “local political blogging”, among other labels.

Other questions likely to arise in the process of addressing the central research question may include whether such journalism has the potential to help fill the so-called “democratic deficit” by fostering civil society, encouraging democratic citizenship, and making up in some ways for the perceived inadequacies of a mainstream news industry that is neither sufficiently resourced nor sufficiently critical.

Alternative forms of journalism are often described or analysed in rather broad terms that can tell us much about the bigger picture but, arguably, rather less about the little details. By taking a case study approach to explore the research question in relation to a single project, this study is aimed at filling in some of the detail by prioritising focus and depth over breadth. Such focus on a single case study can be at least as valuable as large surveys when it comes to achieving insight, argues Bent Flyvbjerg (2006: 226), although no one method will provide all the answers:

The case study is a necessary and sufficient method for certain important research tasks in the social sciences, and it is a method that holds up well when compared to other methods in the gamut of social science research methodology... The advantage of large samples is breadth, whereas their problem is one of depth. For the case study, the situation is the reverse. Both approaches are necessary for a sound development of social science. (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 241.)

The case study described in this article presents us with an opportunity to hear at first-hand, at length and in depth, from a practitioner of alternative digital journalism. Any insights gained may then be considered alongside findings of wider studies of alternative journalism, each informing understanding of the other.

The study that follows focuses on the motivations and methods behind one city-based online site that was set up specifically to scrutinise the actions of a local power elite. The

philosophy and practices of the Leeds Citizen blog will be explored by interviewing the site's creator and by detailed consideration of the site's content. Through a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, together lasting several hours, augmented with email exchanges, the man behind the Leeds Citizen explains his thinking and his methodology. In addition, an entire sample year's output of the Leeds Citizen is analysed in terms of topics covered, frequency of publication, use of sources and styles of writing and presentation. Material gathered from this qualitative content analysis and the interviews is introduced, discussed and analysed in relation to ideas about citizenship, democratic participation, hyperlocal blogging and alternative journalism.

This article is part of a larger project - aimed at deepening our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of alternative forms of journalism - that includes audience perspectives on the Leeds Citizen (Harcup, forthcoming).

## **THE LEEDS CITIZEN: A CASE STUDY**

The Leeds Citizen is a website that has been published using Wordpress blogging software since July 2011. It describes itself as “a minor irritant on the flesh of the body politic of Leeds”, a city in Yorkshire, in the north of England in the UK. It was the creation of Quentin Kean after he returned to the city of his birth upon semi-retirement from paid work; his previous jobs included a lengthy stint at the BBC monitoring service in Reading many years ago. Production of the Leeds Citizen blog and its parallel presence on Twitter and Facebook is essentially a one-person operation, to which Kean estimates he devotes between 20 and 40 hours every week, unpaid. The site is open access, non-commercial and unfunded, with the only cost being Kean's time.

In one sense it can be seen merely as the hobby of one individual. But in another sense it might be seen as an example of what a questioning journalistic approach to power can achieve even without a fraction of the resources available to mainstream media.

The Leeds Citizen has been described as “an inspiring feat of perseverance”, a “rigorously researched and engaging website”, and a “single-handed mission to bring accountability to Leeds civic life” (Hughes, 2014: 36). Kean himself is reluctant to make such grand claims, saying when interviewed for this study: “Work dried up so I had time. I do feel a bit of a fraud because it's just a poxy little blog, it really is. I do it for my own pleasure most of the time, or distraction, so I don't want to make it out as being more than it is.” Such self-deprecation fits well the character of the site and appears to be part of its charm, helping to distinguish it from the “shouty propaganda” found in some other online alternatives (Harcup, 2014c).

When setting it up Kean was aware (unlike some recent scholars of online media, it seems) of earlier forms of alternative media such as the print newspaper Leeds Other Paper, which operated in the same city from 1974 to 1994 (Harcup, 2013). He took that earlier generation of alternative journalism as something of an inspiration, and it is his similarly questioning approach to power that helps distinguish the Leeds Citizen from some less political blogging voices in the city. “Endless people are publishing about cakes and restaurants and gigs, all of which is fine,” he says, “but people aren't doing blogs of this kind or providing news.” Not many people are, at any rate, and this is something he finds both surprising and disappointing given how easy it is to publish online compared to the days in which a physical product had to be laid-out, printed, collated and distributed. “I miss the fact that there are now so few independent voices talking about the kind of stuff that Leeds Other Paper was interested in. Where are they? What's happened?”



Although the Leeds Citizen has been included in a recent study of community-oriented “hyperlocal news” websites - alongside a disparate range of what the researchers describe as “the unstable and shifting cultural form of the UK hyperlocal news blog” (Williams et al, 2014) – the label seems an inexact fit and is not one that Kean himself fully embraces. It would be hard to describe the Leeds Citizen as “hyperlocal” in any meaningful sense when it covers a large metropolitan area of more than 500 square-kilometres with a population of more than 750,000 people making up many diverse geographical and cultural communities. Nor does the Leeds Citizen offer much in the way of what might commonly be regarded as “news” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001), making little or no attempt to keep up with major events or to cover the tales of crime, human interest, weather or sport that unfold daily in any major city.

If it is uncertain whether the Leeds Citizen ought to even be described as belonging to the category of hyperlocal news blogs, perhaps there is a case for it to be seen as sharing the much-trumpeted potential of such sites “to foster citizenship, democracy and local community cohesion” while “producing news which fulfils the watchdog function of holding local elites to account” (Williams et al, 2014)? The creation of the blog was largely prompted by a change in UK government policy that, since January 2011, has required local authorities to publish details of all their spending above £500 (Pickles, 2010).

“Information is power”, goes the legend, but commentators point out that access to data is not sufficient to understand its meaning or significance. As Moss and Coleman (2014) argue, the mere fact of public authorities making raw information publicly available – or, at least, less hidden than it was previously - might not on its own greatly enhance democratic citizenship and deliberative democracy. They write: “Being able to access information and public data is one thing, but realising the benefits of increased openness depends on citizens being able to interpret and understand the meaning of information and data” (Moss and Coleman, 2014: 417). They refer to the possibilities of what they term “monitorial citizenship” being facilitated by official data being made more publicly available, but warn of the danger of such material being scrutinised wholly negatively, whereby “positive political agendas degenerate into unreflective and reactive forms of populism” (Moss and Coleman, 2014: 418).

The Leeds Citizen might be seen as an example of such monitorial citizenship in action. When introduced to the term monitorial citizenship, Kean immediately sees the resonance with his own practice:

Absolutely. The phrase monitorial – I used to work at the monitoring service at the BBC which had a similar sort of function. It is watching stuff and seeing what’s interesting, and then condensing it. So it’s a bit similar in that way. Yes, I think that’s pretty much a good description.

Not just watching for what might be interesting but also aiming to act as a sort of watchdog on those in power? “I do see that as being what I do,” he says. “I’ve always taken an interest in how the places I have lived work, how power operates. I’ve always dug around a bit.”

Kean explains that his creation of the Leeds Citizen was prompted by the introduction of rules requiring local authorities to publish details of all their spending above £500:

I started looking at that partly just out of interest at the beginning. They were a complete mess, it was almost impossible to find out anything significant. There are thousands of lines of data every month, so unless you know what you’re looking for it’s very difficult, but I started playing around with what they were spending on

construction. Then I started to look at council reports that related to the data, and found a couple of stories.

Having previously set up a specialist musical site as a hobby, Kean knew how easy it could be to publish online. So he decided to self-publish the council stories he had found and established the Leeds Citizen on which to do so. “I’d done a blog before but on music, so I thought, ‘Why don’t I do it?’ I like writing, so I’d set something up and just see what happens. It was done on Wordpress, cheap as chips, and the technical side held no problems for me really.”

Apart from curiosity about power and the coincidence that he enjoyed writing and had some time on his hands, another motivating factor was the “cosiness” that Kean has long observed in much mainstream media coverage of local power structures. He says the city’s main commercial newspaper, the Johnston Press-owned Yorkshire Evening Post, tends to report at face value the line that “everything in the garden is rosy, and I think people ought to have another view available”.

When the Leeds Citizen appeared online on 13 July 2011 his debut post set the tone for what would follow. Under the headline, “HOW much per house?”, the first story examined the details behind a new social housing development in a poor part of the city known as Beeston, on streets where existing houses had been demolished. The item used official figures that had not featured in the council press release to estimate the cost of building the 55 new houses at more than £17m, or £315,000 per home. Contrasting this figure with the £25,000 per house spent by a nearby community housing project on renovating rather than replacing properties, the Leeds Citizen asks: “Surely that can’t be right? Have I done the sums wrong?” (Leeds Citizen, 2011a.) The evidence was presented and linked to, enabling readers to judge for themselves.

Despite using the word “I”, Kean’s name did not appear on the site. This initial anonymity caused some consternation, as he recalls:

It was a bit of a game in a way, people did start asking on social media, “Who is this?” Particularly from the council, you know, people were saying, “You’re a coward for not putting your name to these things”. But also I thought there’s no point to it, nothing is any further forward with having my name on there, perhaps it’s almost a distraction from the story. What happened was, that it made it increasingly difficult to get decent responses from the authorities when I wrote to them without putting my name on, and that was complicating things, so in the end I just quietly started writing to people in my own name.

Since the first 18 months or so Kean’s emails and Freedom of Information requests to local authorities have included both his personal name and the Leeds Citizen label. Many of the site’s followers now know his “real life” identity although the site itself still appears only in the name of the Leeds Citizen. He explains that this is because the content itself is more important, and “most people don’t know or don’t care” who has written it, “and that’s the way it should be – the brand comes from the content and from the fact that nobody else is doing it”.

There is also the fact that he wishes to keep his distance from those likely to come under the scrutiny of the Leeds Citizen, which means that, although his identity is no longer secret, he still prefers to keep himself in the background. He explains:

One of the reasons I remained anonymous was because I knew there’d be repercussions in getting to know people, especially those who work in organisations

that I might want to write about. Once you meet them, and particularly if you have a social relationship with them, however vague, you are compromised in terms of what you feel you can say. Some sort of “loyalty” thing comes into play, which shields them from being a target. So I have consistently turned down offers to meet people working in organisations that I might want to look at on the blog, even though it might help me keep informed. I feel I have to keep myself apart, and the anonymity is a way of helping to maintain that.

This approach may go against much traditional advice to journalists on the importance of maintaining sources and contacts at all levels, but it is not without precedent: Paul Foot of *Private Eye*, *Socialist Worker* and *Daily Mirror* fame was said by his colleague Richard Ingrams (2005: 95) to have been reluctant “to meet any of his potential victims because he was afraid he might like them too much”.

From its first story onwards the *Leeds Citizen* combined the revelation of what can be obscured in the small print of officialdom with an analysis of detailed figures and other evidence, all employed to question the thinking behind a publicly-funded project. It set the pattern for the *Leeds Citizen*’s subsequent output, and other typical devices present from day one include the use of colloquial and rhetorical questioning within the text (“Well, yes...but...”, for example, or, “How many empty homes could the council...have brought back into use for 17 million quid?”); the use of a specially created table to detail the figures, linked to the original source; and an analytical approach combining what might be termed book-learning with a personal view from the streets, as with the story’s payoff:

The council admitted recently that there’s a “desperate need” for affordable housing in the city. With almost no cash available for new-builds, isn’t this the time for them to finally get to grips with the empty housing problem? They’ve been promising to do it for decades. They’ve written strategy documents about it, appointed special teams of people to work on it, but somehow it’s always turned out to be too difficult. Why is that? And why is it that today’s crop of Leeds councillors – just like the aldermen who ripped Woodhouse and Hunslet apart in the name of progress when I was a teenager – still seem to be in thrall to the bulldozer? (*Leeds Citizen*, 2011a.)

In common with all posts on the site, the story gave readers the opportunity to post comments. That first story attracted three comments by readers which prompted three responses by the *Leeds Citizen* itself.

Five more stories were published in that first month, three of which were about Leeds City Council and two of which were about lobbyists for a highly-contested high-speed-rail link to London. That is largely the pattern that the site has followed ever since, focussing on the local authority and other significant players in the Leeds political power structure. There have been forays into a few other topics, including local history, plus the occasional experiment with presenting information in different ways. One of these was as a quiz (with spoof prizes) asking a series of pointed questions about who had been involved in a range of publicly-funded projects, the answer to each one being the same private consultancy firm (*Leeds Citizen*, 2011b). However, despite such diversions, the content and style established at the beginning have remained in place.

Not that there seems to have been much of a grand vision about it. “I didn’t have a picture in my head of what it might end up being, not a clear one,” recalls Kean almost four years later. He continues:

It's not driven by an ideology of any sort but it's driven by trying to work out how power works, work out how things work, how all the different forces in the city operate. I am interested in ideas-driven journalism, in a way, and always have been. I've always been interested in how non-traditional media have tried to get alternative ideas or new ideas out there to people.

How does he decide what issues to cover?

It's a mixture, sometimes you just see something and nobody has reported on it. There are a lot of things I don't even bother to report on, but if I was doing something that I find interesting, even if it's not actually giving any clues to the way the city is run, but if nobody else has reported it then I'll report it. I've done stuff for example about Leeds Metropolitan University changing its name - that sort of thing I'll put out because I haven't seen it anywhere else. It's interesting of itself but it also shows how the university is managed.

Each item tends to be in written form, typically somewhere between 500 and 800 words, sometimes also showing data in tabular form, and always including links to original documents. Stories tend to be illustrated with a standard stock photograph and the site has only occasionally featured more multimedia ways of storytelling, as Kean explains:

I've dabbled. I've done a couple of video interviews with councillors on particular stories. They really didn't work at all, on the council steps, holding the tablet. No, it's just such a faddadde getting it uploaded to YouTube, and it ended up being a bit wonky so the face was distorting. "Oh, do I really want to do this?", you know. What is this adding to the story? There's a lot of this "me too" stuff about new journalism. You can do anything you want so people think, "I've got to have video, you've got to have audio, you've got to have a podcast", but I'm not that bothered about it. Does anybody ever look at the videos on the [Yorkshire] Evening Post website? Mostly if it's a shooting in Hyde Park, for example, they post a video of the back of policemen's helmets, with a taped-off street, pan around and that's it. And you've got to sit through an advert before you get to it. I mean, who possibly wants it?

Items seem to appear on the Leeds Citizen site only when they are ready rather than to fit in with pre-planned deadlines or routines, and Kean believes that "people know by now that I'm erratic." This might be seen as an example of what is sometimes called "slow journalism" (Harcup, 2007: 142); a non-hurried form of journalism that "takes its time to find things out, notices stories that others miss, and communicates it all to the highest standards" (Greenberg, 2007). The slow journalism label sounds "very accurate", says Kean with some amusement; he reveals that he was once an aficionado of the slow food movement while living in Spain. But the Leeds Citizen is not always quite so unhurried, he points out:

I think there are different kinds of stories, in a way. For example, when the agenda of the [council] Executive Board meeting comes out every month, I do like to get the stories that I'm going to cover out of it up on the site before the [Yorkshire] Evening Post gets them up there.

He admits that this may partly be due to the sort of competitive journalistic instinct that risks sacrificing the "completeness" of a story, but he says it is also because "even in a very limited

way given the numbers of people that I reach, it can sort of lead the agenda. Because I know pretty much in every case I'll have a different take on what the story's significance is."

So speed is sometimes important even for the Leeds Citizen, but more often stories are the result of painstaking research that can take days, weeks or even months before it is ready; slowish journalism, perhaps? At the time of the interviews Kean was working on updating data on the state of education in Leeds. "It's taking ages," he says, "but nobody else is going to do it so there's no rush, and I'd rather get it right and get it as balanced as possible."

Analysis of the Leeds Citizen's entire output for the calendar year 2014 shows a total of 66 written posts, averaging 5.5 stories per month, with no use of audio or video material. The tags that are attached to each item to facilitate online search can be taken as indicating content, and of the 66 stories, 49 were tagged "Leeds" and 40 were tagged "Leeds City Council", far and away the most frequently used tags. The third most common tag during 2014, at six uses, was "Leeds and Partners", referring to a council-funded agency that was paid to attract business to the city, followed by the mainstream "Yorkshire Evening Post" newspaper with five tags. Tagged four times apiece were "Yorkshire", the "Yorkshire Post" newspaper, "Leeds Met University" and the "Tour de France" cycle race that began in Leeds that year; more than 200 other tags were each used once, twice or thrice. The numbers of readers' comments on items ranged from zero to 20, with between three and nine being the typical range.

Kean describes his Leeds Citizen writing style as "a cross between accurate reporting and a conversational tone," adding:

I think most people want to be entertained, or vaguely entertained. I think people are put off by a lot of straight reporting, and so if you've got even poxy little things to liven it up – asking pointed rhetorical questions, or sighing, a bit like the sort of stuff you sometimes get in Private Eye stories, "erm" and "er". They can be very dry topics, a lot of the ones I'm interested in.

If the subject matter itself is "dry", that is nothing compared to the official documentation that he must read to enable him to produce his condensed, more readable accounts of what is happening. He describes the process:

That's what I spend most of my time doing. I read loads of stuff every week, I read absolutely loads – it never goes below 20 hours. But I read much more than I write. A lot of the stuff I read doesn't go anywhere apart from I make a note of it on my computer and save it for later, because it doesn't feel like it amounts to a story. Every day I get an email, at midnight it comes in, with all the new council meeting agendas, all their latest decisions, I'll look at every single meeting agenda pretty much, on the off chance that there might be a story in it.

He thinks the 17 years he spent at the BBC, monitoring overseas media and the speeches of world leaders for items of interest and significance, was good preparation for what he now does on a local scale on the Leeds Citizen:

I suppose it taught me you couldn't recognise a story without knowing what was going on. So, before a shift for example, you'd have half an hour to do what we used to call "reading in", where you would keep yourself up to date. Because unless you were up to date you wouldn't be able to find the news story. That's similar to this [ie the Leeds Citizen] in that loads of what I read doesn't produce anything but it does give me the context so that when something does happen I can recognise it as being

different and new. A 30 page [council] strategy document very often reads like a [Leonid] Brezhnev speech. I think it's almost impossible to come to this stuff cold and read a report in isolation and know what it actually signifies.

He had no formal training for that monitoring task, learning on the job much as he has subsequently learned how to produce a blog - by just doing it.

But one difference from his BBC job – apart from the obvious absence of a boss or salary – is that he can go out and report in person on the local authority meetings that consider the issues contained in many of the documents he monitors. This led to his ultimately successful campaign to be allowed to make audio recordings of those council meetings that were open to the public, as he recalls:

There were rumblings here and there nationally about people being thrown out for trying to record meetings. But for me, there was the nonsense side of it - that this was an anachronistic thing that I ended up with a bee in my bonnet about - but the other one was terribly practical. I haven't got shorthand, I go to these council meetings and I always want to be as accurate as I possibly can be. I was going to council meetings, trying to get quotes in longhand, not daring to use them because there was no way of going back and checking that they were accurate. So it made my attendance at council meetings, apart from saying they voted this and they voted that, it was seriously limiting.

He wrote to Leeds City Council asking for permission to make an audio recording of a meeting simply for his own purposes, to check quotes and so on. When the council refused he continued to make similar requests, all the time covering the saga on the Leeds Citizen site itself. The story was picked up by the mainstream Guardian, among others, “which I think caused embarrassment”. Simultaneously, the UK government was making noises about ensuring the public's right to record – even film – council meetings, and after several months Kean himself finally received permission to do so (Leeds Citizen, 2014).

This little local difficulty over the right to scrutinise those in power could be seen as the latest in a succession of struggles, including the campaign by the alternative Leeds Other Paper in the 1970s to be recognised as a newspaper and supplied with information by the same Leeds City Council (Harcup, 2013: 44). Such battles date back to the National Union of Journalists' 1908 success in establishing for the first time the right of the press to attend local authority meetings (Gopsill and Neale, 2007: 283), and have echoes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century “Wilkes and liberty” agitation that helped establish the right of the press to report on proceedings in the UK parliament (Harrison, 1974: 14-25).

Since winning the right to make his own audio recordings of council meetings Kean has made use of this freedom several times, but not as often as he would like:

When there's a story I've trailed I do try to go along to the meeting and see what happens to it. But as anybody knows, it takes a lot of time out of your life, especially if you're doing it for free... 95 times out of 100 you know pretty much what the outcome's going to be, but that's not a good enough excuse not to go.

Apart from his occasional attendance at the meetings themselves, his sources are overwhelmingly online ones in the shape of the data and documents made available by the council or other authorities. However, he often has to dig and delve beneath the surface and behind the more readily accessible agendas and reports to see what is really going on. He cites as an example a series of posts he wrote about council plans to cut library services, for

which he compiled disparate pieces of data into reader-friendly tables. That took many hours, as he recalls:

I wrote the libraries story because nobody knew what was being proposed. It wasn't in the public domain, not generally, about where the cuts were planned to happen. That was an information piece, it wasn't a campaigning piece. [It was] information, that might be useful to somebody else, that I find interesting. The first one I did when they announced the consultation, to get a table that had the existing opening hours compared with their options and what that meant for each library, it took ages because you had to go through each page for each individual library on the council's internet thing and log it in. None of that stuff is made easy - ever. By and large they're not bad at publishing information but it's usually impenetrable and you've got to know where to find it.

Another example he points to is the local authority's annual budget, because "there's so much in there that's not said, that it's very difficult to say something sensible about it".

Having persevered, located, compiled and analysed the relevant information on any chosen topic, the Leeds Citizen then acts as "a sort of signposting service" to help other citizens find their way to – and through – such dense material. Kean recognises that, because he has the autonomy to choose what, when and how much to cover, he is liberated from some of the time constraints felt by journalists who have to do it for a living (and for a boss). That is not the only difference. Although he questions the council in the quest for further information he does not routinely contact the authority to seek comment on stories he is preparing, as he explains:

I'm endlessly badgering people in the council to explain things and verify things in the reports. The council officers are really very good in responding, although I'm sure their heart sinks... I've occasionally got quotes from the council about stories but they've got the [Yorkshire] Evening Post so whenever they want to say anything they can just ring them up and they'll publish it. So I don't want to get into the habit of – I think most of the time the story doesn't actually need a quote from somebody in authority because I could write it myself, I know what it's going to say.

Perhaps a more surprising absence, when compared to alternative press predecessors such as Leeds Other Paper (Harcup, 2013), is the voice of the "ordinary people" directly involved in stories, be they residents of Beeston, the people who use libraries, or campaigners against the cuts or on other issues. Why do we not read much input from them? Kean explains:

I've chosen not to go out and report on most stories. I don't think that's what my blog is about. One, I don't think I'd have time and, I don't know, I can't think of a story in which - I don't do many sort of campaigning stories, where you would want the voice of the campaigner. My sources are pretty limited to stuff that I can get on the internet, basically, so stuff that's published by the council, by the hospital, by academic institutions, anybody who's publishing stuff that doesn't normally see the light of day, and I always link to the original documentation.

He says that some local campaign groups sometimes seem to expect the Leeds Citizen to become a mouthpiece for them, whereas he sees the site as being very much an independent voice.

Hits on the blog range from around 400 on an average day up to 5,000 on the highest day ever, attracted by a 2014 story about arts funding that was shared more than 1,000 times on Facebook (and tweeted a further 165 times). Kean estimates that roughly 60% of his readers arrive via online searching for particular topics, with the remainder being people following links or shares via Twitter or Facebook. “Some stories are very Twitterish,” he says. “Stories about arts funding go down well on Twitter because that’s who’s on Twitter.” Every story on the Leeds Citizen site is tweeted by his @leedscitizen Twitter account which has more than 3,000 followers and, in addition to promoting the blog, offers a more frequent yet similarly questioning commentary on local goings-on. He recognises the potential of such social media but clearly also has some misgivings:

One of the reasons I get a lot of followers on Twitter is because if you work at it, you’re not just posting stories, you’re posting links to other stuff you’ve found interesting and you end up having conversations with people about stuff. But that all takes time, and half the time I think, “What am I doing reading this nonsense?” They suck you in, these social media things, and Twitter is a complete and utter wind-up most of the time. There’s an audience for the blog and another for me on Twitter and they aren’t necessarily the same thing although one does help to advertise the other. Initially the stories were only promoted through Twitter, I took ages to take Facebook really seriously. Part of the Twitter thing is that you develop an online personality, so the stories may be the anchor but there’s lots of chat inbetween - useless nonsense that goes on.

He is aware that among those reading the Leeds Citizen site are quite a few journalists from mainstream media as well as people who work for the local authority, plus some elected councillors.

Having established the site and maintained it for several years, what now? Kean’s self-deprecation returns as he ponders the future and even whether or not the Leeds Citizen could be described as useful:

I’ll bumble along. In sort of darker moments I think, “What the fuck are you doing, why don’t you just ditch it and do something sensible with your life?” Which I may do. I may pull the plug on it. It’s got its own momentum now. I wouldn’t go so far as to say useful. I’m the last person to know whether it’s useful or not, I’m too close, but my guess is probably not. I think it annoys some of the people in the council, some of the stuff I do, and I think it sometimes informs people. I think the main thing it achieves is that it gets them sometimes to think twice about how they go about their business. Really, I think there should be somebody nipping at the heels of these people who’ve got so much power. Even if it’s just in a minor way, it’s for them to know that somebody’s reading the stuff.

## CONCLUSION

Nipping at the heels of those in power might simply be a less polite way of describing what Moss and Coleman (2014: 416) had in mind when referring to the potential of online “monitorial citizenship” sites to inform people and also, to some extent, empower them as active citizens. Either way, such monitoring could arguably be seen as both precursor and outcome of what is known as public engagement or democratic citizenship. Public or civic engagement may be “highly contested” concepts that mean different things to different people, according to researchers who studied relations between citizens and the local



authority in Leeds, but - contested or not - they hold out the hope that online local media could play a facilitating and enabling role in creating “a more dialogical democracy” (Coleman and Firmstone, 2014: 840-842).

At a time when local mainstream news media are far from healthy, to what extent can alternative, independent, non-commercial and non-professionalised forms of digital journalism make up for a perceived democratic deficit? On the basis of their own study of the role of media in Leeds in enabling civic participation in the digital age, Firmstone and Coleman (2014: 603-604) conclude that, although “we are in a period of transition, characterised by role instability and new notions of democratic citizenship,” non-traditional media such as hyperlocal blogs are not yet capable of “filling the gap” (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014: 603-604). The bloggers and “citizen journalists” featured in their study “all recognised that in their current form they are only able to make a very limited contribution to widespread and ongoing relationships of public engagement” (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014: 602).

Limited, perhaps, but history suggests we ought not dismiss the potential significance of what might appear small and amateurish, nor assume that critical voices are automatically rendered insignificant if they are heard by relatively few at first. Creating a more dialogical democracy is certainly a bigger claim than Quentin Kean would ever make himself about the Leeds Citizen blog, but the evidence suggests his site is contributing (albeit in a limited way) to monitoring the local power structures, asking some of the questions that tend to be ignored by mainstream media and circulating alternative ideas.

This study has recorded and discussed some of the ways in which an alternative form of journalism, in this case the Leeds Citizen, can create some kind of space of accountability within which to subject the actions of the powerful to public scrutiny. Notwithstanding a lack of financial resources, the Leeds Citizen can be seen as a form of monitorial citizenship in action. Its reach is limited but even an outlet with a relatively small readership may still help inform and even empower those members of civil society it serves, because small does not have to mean totally insignificant (Harcup, 2013: 52).

Four years of the site’s existence have demonstrated over a sustained period what even a lone but motivated individual citizen can achieve: critical yet evidence-based reporting that scrutinises the actions of the powerful in a specific locality. And all for the investment of little more than time, a questioning approach and a willingness to engage in sustained “reading in” before writing about a topic. However, there is an important caveat, which is that Kean is not an entirely random citizen; not only did he once spend 17 years at the BBC monitoring service but he was also a keen reader of the earlier alternative press. This suggests that a mixture of an alternative viewpoint with some form of journalistic skill may in fact still be necessary if non-professional journalists are to become investigators into or monitors of the powerful and not merely either shouty propagandists or bloggers about cupcakes.

Acknowledging the journalistic contribution that an unpaid individual can make by engaging in some slowish journalism because he has the time and the inclination does nothing to help mend what increasingly looks as if it is a broken economic model in mainstream news media, at least in the commercial sector at a local and regional level. Given that it is produced by somebody who is semi-retired and is not seeking to make a living out of it, studying the motivations and methods behind the Leeds Citizen may not help save an endangered journalism industry. But then journalism was not always an industry. Journalism as a practice did not begin as part of a commercial media industry (Forde, 2011; Harrison, 1974), and even the decline of much commercial mainstream news media need not mean the death of local journalism itself, except perhaps as something resembling a career.

Further research is needed into the range of what are sometimes referred to as alternative journalism, citizen journalism, hyperlocal journalism, local political blogging and

so on, including in “non-Western political and social settings” where experiences and expectations might be quite different (Wall, 2015: 8). But even in one western country such as the UK, such labels can cover numerous different forms and practices. 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 journalisms. This study is offered as a modest contribution towards that end, as is the related audience study of what readers of the Leeds Citizen make of its contribution towards local journalism and monitorial citizenship (Harcup, forthcoming).

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