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MAPPING CHANGES IN LOCAL NEWS

Julie Firmstone

Local news media in the UK are undergoing a multitude of changes which have implications for our understanding of their value in local democracies. Despite the potential significance of these changes for those actors responsible for the provision of local news, very little research has investigated journalists' and political communicators' perceptions of the impact of these threats and opportunities. This article addresses this gap by presenting research which investigated the views of key stakeholders in the production of local news in a large city in the UK. The thematic analysis of fourteen interviews evaluates how normative roles attributed to journalism such as representing the public, acting as a watchdog, providing information, and running campaigns are being fulfilled by different news providers in the current news ecology.

KEYWORDS local news; local journalism; citizen journalism; civic news; hyperlocal

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Introduction

Local news media in many Western democracies including the UK are undergoing a multitude of changes which have implications for our understanding of their contribution to the fulfilment of the normative roles associated with journalism. Fragmenting and declining audiences, resource cut backs in television, radio, and most notably newspapers, increased competition, and the requirement to communicate news twenty four hours a day via a multitude of platforms, require the local news media to adapt to a news ecology that is undergoing transformation. This has led to a dominant narrative in industry commentaries and scholarship that journalism and, in particular local journalism, is in crisis (Barnett and Townend 2015; Currah 2009; Franklin 2006; NUJ 2014). Zelizer's (2015) thought provoking interrogation of the notion of crisis to describe the current situation skilfully argues what many journalism scholars already suspected - that the broad brush label of crisis obscures rather than illuminates our understanding of the "diverse set of technological, political, economic, social, occupational, moral and legal circumstances" journalism operates within today (Zelizer 2015, 888). Whilst it is widely acknowledged that the uncertainties brought about by changes in these circumstances are particularly acute in local news, we have relatively little empirical evidence of how the dynamics of local news ecologies are changing.

Without such an empirically based understanding it is difficult to move beyond the deceptive narrative of crisis. This article presents research designed to explore and unpack changes in local news ecologies in order to evaluate how and why these changes matter. A secondary aim is to use these insights to develop priorities for future research. I argue that it is important to place our understanding of local news in a theoretical context which recognises the potential democratic role of news in society. The role of local news in the public sphere is particularly significant because it is considered vital to the functioning of local communities and the engagement of citizens in local democracies (Fenton 2011; Kleis Nielsen 2015; Mcleod, Scheufele, and Moy 1999; Shaker 2014).

In order to explore the impact of changes in current local news production, the research design operationalised four normative functions commonly attributed to news in liberal democratic theory as a measure of its democratic value. These suggest that journalists should inform and educate citizens about local issues, represent the voice of citizens, hold governing bodies and organisations to account on behalf of citizens, and proactively campaign on matters of public interest (Barnett 2009; Barnett and Townend 2015; Gans 2010; McNair 2009; Williams et al. 2015). The research evaluates the way in which local news media fulfil these four roles - informational, representative, watchdog, and campaign. Structuring the analysis of the value of local news around the concept of democratic value provides a clear evaluative framework. This allows us to consider the impact of changes relevant to wider debates about the future of journalism such as declining resources for investigative journalism, opportunities for citizen journalists, and changing audience demands. These and other issues which evoke concerns that "citizens will encounter difficulties in keeping themselves informed and that representative democracy will suffer as a result" (Gans 2010, 11) are explored through a main research question and two sub questions:

Main RQ: What implications do changes in the production of local news have for the democratic value of local news?

Sub questions:

1. How do local journalists and council communicators perceive the local news media to be producing news of democratic value?
2. What contributions do local journalists and council communicators perceive 'citizen journalism producers' make to news of democratic value?

Research design

The article presents findings from 14 interviews conducted in two stages of fieldwork in 2014 and 2015 in the UK's third largest city, Leeds. The research takes an innovative approach in four ways. Firstly, few studies consider local news provision comprehensively enough to provide a picture of the combined practices of local news providers. This research takes one city as a case study and considers the local news ecology of the city as a whole. Although the local media context of Leeds cannot be taken as representative of all UK cities, its relatively large population of over 750,000 supports a mix of news providers representing most types of local journalism found in the UK. Citizens can access local news through a long established city based newspaper, a public service (BBC) television channel and radio station, one commercial television channel, several commercial radio stations, one of the UK's recently launched local TV stations, a diverse range of new hyperlocal news producers, and the predominantly digital products of citizen journalists. The city's news ecology features many of the challenges and opportunities characteristic of that state of flux in local journalism in Western democracies which were outlined above.

Secondly, whilst journalists and news producers are often interviewed by researchers to gain an understanding of news production practices, they are rarely consulted as experts in their field. Here, journalists (News Producers) are interviewed as authoritative sources of opinion on the impact of recent changes, threats, and opportunities faced by local news media. Thirdly, the research moves away from a media-centric approach and considers the perceptions of other actors interested in communicating with citizens for different reasons than journalists. Here communications professionals from the local authority (Council Communicators) are interviewed as actors who co-exist with and face similar challenges to local news providers in engaging with the public, and have a strong interest in the maintaining a well-functioning local public sphere. These Council Communicators are able to draw on a different, more detached view of the local media landscape which provides a valuable alternative perspective in evaluating the current provision of local news. In the first stage of the fieldwork, three News Producers and three Council Communicators were interviewed (see Table 1). Eight interviews were conducted in stage 2: six with News producers - journalists, producers and editors from local television, radio, print, and online news outlets; and two with communications specialists from Leeds City Council's Press Office and Corporate Consultation team.

A set of open ended questions guided the exploratory interviews in stage 1 aimed at gathering initial perceptions about the role of the local news media, the challenges facing local news media now and in the future, and the role of "citizen producers" in local democracy. In stage 2 a semi-structured interview schedule encouraged interviewees to reflect on local news in relation to key concepts developed to evaluate the concept of the democratic value of journalism. Interviewees were asked to explain their perceptions of how local news and journalism can serve the public interest, to comment on the performance of the local news media in fulfilling four normative expectations of local news, and to discuss changes in audiences for local news.

Finally, the news ecology approach attempts to move our understanding of local news closer to the experiences of the audience who remain neglected by much journalism research (Harcup 2015). Considering the value of local news from the audience's perspective requires recognition that audiences draw local news from multiple outlets and platforms. Therefore the questions in both stages were designed to encourage interviewees to discuss the entire landscape of local news provision in the city rather than just their own organisation or one type of news. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The discussion of findings is based on a qualitative analysis which organised comments into thematic categories.

Table 1: Stakeholders interviewed

	News Producers	Council Communicators
Stage 1. Exploratory interviews	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Local TV station (Producer) 2. Local TV station (Station Manager) 3. Hyperlocal news A (Freelance Journalist) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Head of Communications 2. Senior Communications and Marketing Manager 3. Corporate Consultation Manager
Stage 2. Semi- structured interviews	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BBC local radio (Assistant Editor) 2. Local commercial radio (News Editor) 3. Local newspaper (Political Reporter) 4. Regional ITV news (Producer) 5. Local TV station (News Editor) 6. Hyperlocal news B (Founder) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Head of Press Office 2. Corporate Consultation Manager
Total 14	Total 9	Total 5

Findings and discussion

Interviewee’s responses to questions designed to explore their perceptions of the four normative roles of local news are analysed first to explore the question: how do local journalists and council communicators perceive the local news media to be producing news of democratic value?

Informational role

The majority of interviewees perceived the mainstream news media fulfilling less of an informational role than it has in the past due to changes in audience demands. All recognised that digital media creates competition with a vaster quantity of sources of news than ever before. As a result news providers have moved away from producing information orientated news, with some seeing information as an “add on” and others only providing informational news when it can be produced in a way that is perceived to appeal to audiences. Radio news providers in particular described information orientated news as an “add on” rather than a driver of their news bulletins with additional information provided online for the audience to access separately. Additionally, several news providers talked about the importance of producing news that is distinctive (e.g. “a bit different”, provides a “fresh view”) in order to engage audiences:

“People aren’t tuning in anymore to hear a list of things that are going on in Leeds today. They want to hear about what the issues of today are and what can I get angry about?, and what can I talk about over the water cooler?” (Commercial radio)

On the face of it the provision of less informational news might seem like one of the least problematic ways in which news production has changed. Interviewees, however, commonly raised two concerns about the implications of these changes for the role of news in providing citizens with adequate information about local issues. First, it was acknowledged that news providers find themselves in a difficult position where it is hard to strike a balance between producing news that appeals to their readers and covering issues that are in the public interest. Whilst it is hardly new to propose that audiences are not overly interested in civic news, there was a perception among some interviewees that local news has become increasingly sensational in order to retain the attention of fragmenting audiences. Secondly, although Council Communicators considered the local news media

to be providing the public with good access to information, there was some concern about the extent to which news organisations were providing audiences with “enough” information for them to understand and engage with some of the issues that the city is dealing with. All local newspapers, not only the one in the locality, were perceived as struggling to cover complex issues, with the result that newspapers are finding it difficult to “get underneath the skin of things”.

Campaigning

The move away from information provision appears to be driving a greater level of news which is campaign orientated in order to appeal to audiences, and there was a sense that major long running campaigns on specific issues are less common. Instead, radio and newspaper journalists described pursuing a different kind of campaign role producing more regular campaign orientated news as a way to create a distinctive product. The pursuit of campaign orientated news has both beneficial and detrimental implications for the democratic value of local news depending on the motivations driving the campaign. On the down side, some news organisations, particularly commercial radio, perceive news that takes a campaigning stance as a simple tool to attract audiences. As highlighted in the “water cooler” quote, this approach may see issues turned into campaigns simply to sensationalise and dramatize the issue, as a technique to “stand out from the noise”. On the other hand, several news providers (BBC radio/newspaper) described a more public interest orientated approach to campaign news which builds on their established and trusted relationship with their audiences. Campaign news driven by public interest ideals is seen as providing the bonus of increasing audiences at the same time as facilitating greater audience engagement with specific civic issues which hold the potential to affect change in society. Indeed, the local newspaper described itself as a “campaign newspaper” and had recently launched a joint campaign with a local charity to tackle a range of issues identified by its readers as being of importance to the city. The ongoing campaign aims to re-connect with the audience, promote the role of the paper as acting in the interests of the community, and provide news content (Firmstone, 2015).

Representing

There was an overall perception that the combined efforts of the local news media in Leeds fulfil the role of representing the views of the public very well, with each catering for a different section of the population. In terms of recent changes, social media has significantly amplified journalists’ capacity to connect with and represent the interests of their audience. It is used to gather public opinion (an alternative to vox pops), encourage audience participation, and measure the popularity of stories far more efficiently than was possible pre Web2.0. Council Communicators raised concerns about the representativeness of such interactions. They suggested that unless news organisations take some editorial control over the audience’s contributions through social media and commentary functions, they may only represent “the usual suspects” and/or people with extreme views. In addition to this risk, the concentration of representative practices on digital media limits the representative potential of local news by continuing the power of journalists as gatekeepers, and the exclusions created by the digital divide and inequalities for engaging. Perhaps surprisingly, journalists did not mention any concerns about the potential exclusionary bias of these practices. Although there may be a greater level of engagement with the public than previously, the nature of the engagement raises age old questions about empowerment and representativeness which point to local news facilitating “upscale democracy” (Gans 2010, 13) where not everyone is able to participate.

Watchdogs

The reduced capacity of news providers to pursue investigative journalism and fulfil the role of watchdog was universally described as the most important and concerning change affecting the democratic value of local news. All interviewees talked about the impact of falling resources on the ability of mainstream news organisations, particularly newspapers, but also television, to hold those in power to account as often as in the past. Several of the most experienced News Providers voiced concerns about whether large corruption cases unearthed by resource intensive watchdog journalism would be exposed in today's pared back news industry. For example:

“It is a challenge for anybody in the journalism industry now to actually take the time out to do the proper full background on stuff. You just wonder whether the Poulson affair¹ would ever have been found out now.” (ITV news)

Concerns about hard hitting investigative journalism were matched by similar concerns about the day to day scrutiny afforded by current resources. Many interviewees painted a familiar picture of what Gans (2010) calls “everyday watchdogging” being restricted by an increase in desk based journalists reliant on press releases and unable to invest time to attend council meetings, court hearings or get out into the community. Several interviewees described how time constraints result in press releases being directly replicated in news coverage without journalists being able to take the time to scrutinise the “story” or put the “other side” across. Journalists’ widespread regret that the capacity for watchdog journalism has decreased was nevertheless defended by the perception among journalists that “no one is doing it better than us”, which leads us to the contribution of citizen producers.

The contribution of citizen journalists

One response to the perceived decline of local mainstream media has been to look at alternative ways that the news needs of local citizens may be served. The opportunities created by digital media have led to suggestions that citizen journalism can perform a “replacement” role to fill the gaps left by the shrinking mainstream media (Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley 2011; OFCOM 2012). A growing body of research has explored the potential for citizen journalists to produce news that meets the needs of local communities by analysing the content of hyperlocal news and the motivations and business models of such sites (Williams et al. 2015). Less is known about how such new players are perceived by local mainstream news producers or other key stakeholders such as local authorities (Chen et al. 2015). Exploring one of the four ways that citizens can contribute to the production of local news suggested by Firmstone and Coleman’s (2014, 2015) typology of citizen journalism, the research asked “What contributions do local journalists and council communicators perceive “citizen journalism producers” make to news of democratic value?” Citizen journalism producers are citizens who contribute to the news ecology as individual or collectively organised producers of information and opinion, independent of mainstream media (Firmstone and Coleman 2014, 2015). At the time of the research citizen producers in Leeds were typically operating as online hyperlocal news organisations or locally based magazines/lifestyle publications produced in digital formats and/or in print.

Citizen producers are perceived to add a valuable set of new voices to the news ecology, but the perceived democratic value of these voices is limited by their reach, motivations, professional values, and sustainability. They are perceived as being good at providing news on very local events, but the relatively small size of their audiences raised questions about their ability to adequately fulfil an informational role. Interviewees thought that citizen producers can and do perform the watchdog and campaigning role effectively but their potential to replace the contributions traditionally made by local newspapers in holding power to account and running campaigns is restricted. Concerns

related to the differing motivations, professional values and business models/resources of citizen producers in comparison to mainstream news organisations. Several interviewees' scepticism was based on the perception that watchdog and campaign news produced by citizen producers is motivated by interests other than the wider public interest commonly associated with mainstream journalism. Many also think the niche audiences and niche campaigns of such journalism make it unrepresentative. Even some citizen producers were sceptical of the democratic value of some citizen journalism and were concerned that such news is often produced according to an alternative set of motivations to those of professional journalists:

"Some blogs are just very, very opinionated whereas I at least try and be balanced and there is some journalism there." (Hyperlocal journalist A)

However, some new entrants aim to add something that is missing from the news ecology rather than replace the old functions of mainstream media. Defining output as "news features" not "news", and contributors as "storytellers" who do not identify as "journalists" this hyperlocal print publication said:

"What we're looking at is why did it happen and what happened afterwards and exclusive stuff, so if we do feel that there is something that we can explore that somebody else is not exploring that's where we'll go." (Hyperlocal News B)

While their additions to the local news ecology were broadly welcomed, the professional practices and values of citizen producers were of concern to Council Communicators who described difficulties in their interactions with some citizen producers. An example was given of a local blogger who did not act in accordance with the codes of professional journalism and published a story before an embargo had passed - such practices put the Council in a difficult position when it comes to engaging with citizen producers:

"And that then leaves us with that quandary of we'd like to treat you the same, because actually I'm all for openness, transparency, let xxx have it in the same way. However, if you expect to be treated the same you need to behave in the same way [...] there's a set of behaviours that come along with that [acting in a journalistic role], a set of responsibilities, on our side but also on yours." (Head of Communications)

Coupled with concerns about the public interest motivations of citizen producers this points to a question at the very core of re-evaluations of the democratic role of journalism: what is a journalist? (Shapiro 2014).

Perceptions of the impact of changes

Towards the end of the interview each interviewee was asked for their view of the suggestion that journalism is in crisis, and that local news is in a perilous situation. News Providers commonly perceived this as an exaggeration of the current transformations in local news provision where, in their view, any serious problems are confined to the newspaper industry.

"No, the crisis really is the papers. Nobody else is really facing an issue like that because we've all found ways to tap into what people are demanding now. And as I say, I think the crisis is as a result of people not demanding what they're [newspapers] trying to sell now." (Commercial Radio)

Similarly, Council Communicators also felt that labelling the current situation as a crisis was too strong. However, based on a far broader view of the local news ecology, they expressed a significant degree of concern about the impact of changes in local news on the council's ability to communicate with citizens and the recent decline in the performance of the local news in engaging local citizens in local democracies.

Discussion

The empirical evidence presented in this article confirms that the narrative of local news in crisis is unhelpful in two ways. Firstly, it is not a narrative that those with a vested interest in the future of local news identify with. Secondly, the label of crisis risks oversimplifying the complexity of the implications of ongoing changes in local news revealed by the thematic analysis of interviewees' perceptions. Yet the notion of crisis is helpful in lending a necessary sense of urgency to debates among academics and policy makers about the future of local news.

On balance, the analysis points to few changes that represent improvements in the democratic value of news and to more features of the shifting news ecology which cause concern for the quality of news available to the public. These include an inevitable yet potentially detrimental decline in the informational role of local news; a growing gap in the ability of local news media to fulfil the watchdog role due to an increase in desk based journalism, over reliance on PR/pre-packaged news, and a lack of resources to investigate stories in depth; a perceived decline in the quantity of major news campaigns, a shift towards more frequent dramatized campaign orientated news; and, an improvement in the representative role of news brought about by social media but with the benefits largely restricted to the digitally active.

Amidst these changes, the stronger emphasis on running "public interest" campaigns stands out as a beneficial implication, with the local newspaper's "Voice of Leeds" campaign fulfilling a potentially new role as a site of civic participation. By hosting monthly summits about key issues of public interest on "neutral territory" in partnership with a local charity, the newspaper has moved beyond the usual aim of campaigns to raise awareness or drum up support for an issue. Such campaigns are a direct reaction to the heightened need for local news organisations to maintain a trusted relationship with citizens to ensure their long term legitimacy and economic success (Hermans et al. 2014), and are a valued strategy to show readers that "we care, we are responsible and we are accountable" (Local Newspaper).

The findings suggest three priorities for future research. Firstly, an empirically based picture of how news content contributes to fulfilling the democratic value of news is required to establish how perceptions of changes in practices translate into changes in news content. Perceptions of local news that is increasingly dramatized, sensationalised and campaign orientated in order to retain audiences suggest a continuing emphasis on entertainment, consumer and human interest news found by Franklin a decade ago (Franklin 2006). Similarly, content analysis could show how local news content is shaped by the perceived proliferation of news unfiltered by the professional journalistic values of balance, fairness and verification, and processes of "everyday watchdogging" (Gans 2010).

Secondly, the findings highlight the value of the news ecology approach in building a comprehensive understanding of local news. In considering multiple forms of news provision the approach allows us to understand the wider implications of changes in the practices of one source of news. The comparison of emerging forms of local journalism with mainstream news media has shown that new news forms are not yet seen as fulfilling or replacing any of the democratic roles of news which are in decline in the mainstream media. Some citizen producers are, however, attempting to add value to local news ecologies in ways which may be innovative in providing democratic value. Seeing local news as a jigsaw puzzle, with each provider representing different pieces of an interlocking news ecology, allows us a more accurate insight of the consequences of removing a piece of the puzzle. Interviewees were particularly concerned about a decline in

watchdog and campaigning news provided by newspapers. Such news is the most difficult for non-press news providers to fulfil due to either a lack of resources and expertise (in the case of hyperlocal news) or regulatory constraints for broadcasters to remain balanced and impartial. Indeed the valuable position of newspapers as free to take sides in campaigns in a way that public service media cannot should not be forgotten in debates about the future remit of the BBC (Greenslade 2015), and local news industries generally. Shaker (2014) has highlighted the problematic consequences of the closure of local newspapers in the USA where he found a correlation between the absence of local newspapers and falls in civic engagement.

Thirdly, whilst interviewees agreed that audiences for local news are larger than ever, the challenge of making content about civic issues interesting to them persists, highlighting the need for a fuller understanding of local news audiences. In short, it is necessary to establish “what needs saving and why” (Currah 2009, 27) to ensure that future policies and actions to bolster the democratic value of local news can be clearly justified.

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ⁱ A 1970s corruption scandal about an architect in Northern England