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A New Symbiosis? Opportunities and Challenges to Hyperlocal Journalism in the Digital Age.

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Abstract

This paper draws on “hyperlocal” journalism scholarship to investigate aspects of the civic function of Australian local journalism in the digital age. The paper uses case studies based on interviews with media practitioners and civic leaders from three disparate communities. The interviews are thematically analysed to understand the civic functions of local journalism and news media and the effects on these functions caused by digital disruption. The research finds community groups are engaging with social media, particularly Facebook, to connect locals to services and community news. It finds community service providers are increasingly adept at using social media and, in many cases, prefer it to legacy media to gather, disseminate and exchange news information. Concurrently, legacy media have lost newsroom resources and journalists, hampering their capacity to practice “shoe leather” journalism and making them more dependent on official sources without independent verification. News outlets are adapting to a reduced financial base to support their journalism including forming symbiotic relationships with non-media news providers. This paper finds that as legacy media news coverage shrinks there are promising alternatives for fostering civic discourse and engagement in local communities through digital technologies but reduced capacity for verified, independent journalism.

Keywords

Local Journalism, Hyperlocal News, Civic Function, Public Engagement, Democracy

Introduction

Since the commercialisation of the internet, the monopoly relationship between advertising and commercially sponsored journalism in developed economies has decoupled, placing many commercial news outlets under financial duress (Picard 2008). This has led to pessimistic assessments about the viability of news journalism to adequately inform the public sphere and fulfil “fourth estate” functions (Dahlgren, 2009; Franklin, 2008; Schudson 2008 and Street, 2011). According to Schudson (2008, 24) these functions include: providing information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, public forum, mobilisation and publicising representative democracy. At the same time, the commercial media’s concentrated ownership structures and reliance on advertising to mass audiences has led some scholars to contend that this political economic media environment creates an emphasis on consumerism and supporting elite agendas at the expense of an informed citizenry (McChesney 2000; Herman and Chomsky 1988).

In Australia, major newspapers and commercial television have shed substantial numbers of hardcopy news readers and lounge-room viewers since the 1990s (Simons 2007, 51). Newspaper revenues from Australia’s two major newspaper companies, Fairfax Media and News Corporation Australia, which together control more than 90 per cent of the daily newspaper circulation, have fallen sharply (Tiffen 2010, 147). An estimated 3000 Australian media jobs have been lost since 2012 (Christensen 2013).

While Australia’s daily newspapers’ online readership are at record highs, revenue from paywalls and digital advertising has not yet matched the revenues lost from hardcopy advertising (Carson 2015).

Often singled out in contemporary debates about the democratic functions of news outlets is the state of local journalism (Kurpius et al. 2010; Nielsen 2015). This is a particularly salient question in Australia because of highly concentrated media ownership and a tendency for media companies to save costs through local newsroom cutbacks and centralised operations (MEAA 2015). The 2012 Australian inquiry into the state of the news media made this observation: “There is some evidence that both regional radio and television stations and newspapers have cut back substantially on their news gathering, leaving some communities poorly served for local news” (DBCDE 2012, 60).

This article explores the effect of these factors on the role and capacity of Australian local journalism to contribute to civic life. In doing so it examines opportunities and challenges for hyperlocal journalism in the digital age. Scholars who have examined hyperlocal journalism (Firmstone and Coleman 2014; Kurpius et al. 2010) characterise it by its narrow focus on a handful of topics or geographical areas. Hyperlocal media can vary widely in its funding sources, size of staff and audiences and journalism training. Notwithstanding these differences, its broad aim is to “fill the gap in public affairs coverage left by the shrinking traditional media.”(Kurpius et al. 2010, 359). We are exploring both traditional forms of local reporting and new forms of sharing local information by non-media entities such as community groups seeking to communicate with local citizens and so we recognise that the term journalism now has a broader application than in the pre-digital era. With this in mind, we have developed two research questions: Has the fractured business model of market-driven traditional news media impacted on its civic functions in local communities? What are the opportunities (and challenges) for hyperlocal journalism to perform a civic function in the digital age?

Research design

We chose two dimensions in which to consider the way in which journalism interacted with civic life: “place” and “function”. For the latter we created five functional categories of journalism, influenced by Schudson’s seven categories. The five were: campaigning, investigative, civic forum, reportage and comment/opinion. While recognising there are overlaps, we considered this gave us a starting point for identifying the ways in which journalism interacts with civic life.

The research reported on here comes entirely from the place-based dimension of the research, and represents the first findings from what is a large national study. The three places were Broadmeadows (outer Melbourne low SES), Byron Bay (New South Wales high growth regional coastal town) and Moree (New South Wales small, remote, inland town).

An important criterion for selection was that each had circumstances that suggested the likelihood of substantial journalistic activity, the rationale being that in places like this any changes in journalistic activity would be relatively easy to see. Broadmeadows was the focus of a substantial Victorian Government initiative in the late 2000s to build a positively functional neighbourhood; Byron Bay is the scene of long-running battles between environmentalists and developers; Moree had a long history of racial tension and was a destination of the “freedom rides” in the 1960s aimed at drawing attention to systemic discrimination against Aboriginal people. As it happens, the selected communities also share population income and employment levels below national averages (see Table 1). Our aim was to examine what conventional local media exists in these disparate communities and opportunities and challenges for new hyperlocal journalism to provide public interest information to facilitate citizen engagement.

Data were collected through on-site observations and 31 in-depth interviews conducted between December 2014 and May 2015 with media professionals such as journalists, broadcasters, editors and media proprietors. We also interviewed civic leaders such as town mayors, police officers, community activists, representatives of the chamber of commerce, real estate agents, property developers, school teachers, community workers, indigenous and other local representatives such as service club members.

We devised two interview schedules (available on request), one for those who worked in media organisations, the other for civic leaders, but both schedules canvassed similar themes about the diversity and role of news media in local communities.

[Table 1 goes here]

Results

Perspectives about local media’s civic functions and journalistic capacities

In every place, civic leaders favoured local media over state or national media for reflecting the needs of that community. Local media’s effectiveness in fulfilling basic civic functions varied across each locality, but in each place community leaders recognised local media had fewer resources than in the past.

Byron Bay

Byron Bay mayor Simon Richardson had a “very good” relationship with local media. He said, however, that his press releases were often reported verbatim. “It’s great for me,” he noted but added that it “wasn’t so great for the community” and suggested to him that local newspapers’ resources were “really stretched”.

Dalian Pugh from the Byron Bay Residents’ Association used local media to “bring the community along” about the value of a grass-roots project. Similarly, Cate Coorey, also of the Byron Residents’ Association, favoured the *Byron Echo*, for public communication and engagement because it showed “sympathy for our cause” and had wide readership.

Independent councillor Diane Woods said the *Byron Bay Echo* was “biased” and “inaccurate”. “It is a Greens dominated paper and it does not report accurately or fairly.” She partly attributed misreporting to insufficient journalistic training, noting that the journalist who reported on council meetings was a musician and not a trained news reporter.

Local real estate owner and co-chair of the Byron Bay Writers’ Festival Chris Hanley, said local media were very supportive of the festival, and that local coverage contributed to its success. President of the Byron Bay Chamber of Commerce, Michael O Grady, also had “a good relationship” with local media but was wary of being misquoted after negative experiences. Businessman Ed Ahern saw the local media as a part of the town’s life but that the *Echo* was biased towards “greenies” and “lefties”. He said he didn’t think it was worth spending money on advertising.

From the media perspective, the sole reporter at *Byron Bay Shire News*, who did not wish to be named, said cost-cutting had meant his role now included taking photographs and writing

advertorials. “The reality is you do [sic] less stories and less in-depth coverage [and] ... that just means you have less time to spend on everything”.

In this case study, civic leaders identified the importance of local radio and newspapers for community engagement, but also said that media resources were so stretched that there was less independent verification of material, and professional shortcomings resulting from inadequate journalistic training.

Broadmeadows

Broadmeadows is 16kms from Melbourne’s centre and so locals can access metropolitan as well as local media. However, community leaders uniformly described the metropolitan media outlets as unwelcome because they perpetuated negative stereotypes about the area.

Chief Executive Officer of Broadmeadow’s Banksia Gardens Community Services Gina Dougall manages more than 40 community programs that assist 80,000 residents each year, including Victoria’s largest asylum seeker cohort. She said local journalists did not have time to meet weekly with her as they once had. She observed that the residents she worked with no longer read local papers, and so she had cut her organisation’s newspaper advertising with them.

Historically Broadmeadows has had few local media options. It has two weekly newspapers — the more widely distributed free paper the *Hume Leader* is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation Australia. Like many newspapers *Hume Leader* has lost editorial staff through cost-cutting and centralisation of its newsroom in the past five years. This has left existing editorial staff doing more with less. Editor Liam McAleer said: “We are fairly flat out most of the time, so a lot of the stories are done from the office over the phone. But we try to make an effort to get our guys out to at least two or three stories a week ... but obviously there’s time constraints and there’s resource constraints, so it’s not always possible. Plus our physical location as well – we’re removed from our stories in the centralised office.”

The other newspaper, the *Northern Star Weekly*, syndicated some news stories with six other mastheads in its ownership group. The civic leaders interviewed had a very limited relationship with it.

Broadmeadows’ Community worker Jaime de Loma Osorio perceived traditional media were unable to report local news as comprehensively as they once did because of syndication and cutbacks. “The *Hume Leader* and *Northern Star* have changed from being really locally based productions to something that looks, you know, the same because now everything is centrally organised. Who is filling that vacuum? Nobody here. Well, that’s my perception. It would be really good to have alternative voices providing really good information.”

Mr de Loma Osorio said he tried to fill the gap by setting up a blog and broadcasting a community radio program about environmental issues. He was amazed at the number of listeners who downloaded the podcast. “If we got 15 or 20 people coming to a public lecture we probably would be quite happy with that. But if we run a radio show, a good show will be downloaded by 150 people, so I think, that’s the potential of this technology.” Operating the small community radio show from a shed, de Loma Osorio said: “Being on the internet means we can reach so many more listeners.”

Broadmeadows police sergeant Ivan Petrunic said the station had a “good relationship” with the *Hume Leader* but, at times, he found Facebook and the police website more effective for public engagement and even solving crimes: “In terms of most of our messages we just get them straight out direct to the community via our [Facebook] EyeWatch page.” Up to 30,000 unique viewers clicked on the Facebook posts: “Often we go back and look at what the comments are and see what community perceptions are surrounding the posts. We also use it for crime solving, so if we’ve had an offence occur somewhere, we’ll put that out,” he said referring to the act of posting a short story and uploading CCTV footage to the site.

The general perceptions of mainstream local media’s role in Broadmeadows in terms of civic leaders’ contact with journalists, use of the media for public engagement, and advertising was that each of these functions had diminished with time. Journalists had also experienced a reduction in their editorial resources. The *Hume Leader*’s adaptations to produce stories to deadline with fewer staff included more syndication of stories from mastheads within its newspaper group, and less “shoeleather” reporting with more time on telephones than streets.

Moree

While Moree is a community with limited local media, and what exists is owned by major conglomerates as is typical of Australian regional press, the majority of interviewees referred to the local newspaper, the *Moree Champion*, in terms that indicated they considered it to be indispensable as a local news source. They might read *The Daily Telegraph* from Sydney for national and statewide news, and the *Northern Daily Leader* from Tamworth for regional news, but neither of these newspapers, nor the radio station, nor any other media outlet provided them with news about their community. On the rare occasions that Moree made it into the wider media it was invariably negative, usually associating the town with racism, and couched in terms that local people said were unfair and lacked context. The local commercial radio station 2VM proved indispensable in times of disaster, such as floods, when it was the only means by which vital local information could be communicated to those that needed it to make informed decisions about how to respond, and to find what help was available.

Outside times of disaster, Radio 2VM's broadcasts from its Moree studios were confined to business hours. News director Stephen McPherson was the only staff member of seven who dealt with news. He had no formal journalism training. It had been promised but not delivered when he joined the station six years ago from the spare-parts industry. Instead, he had learned on the job. He produced two local news bulletins a day, each of about five stories. He was also responsible for two hours of live broadcasting each weekday. This, combined with the time pressure to produce daily bulletins, kept him studio-bound. The net result was that he is more of a news taker than a news maker.

For its news content 2VM depended almost entirely on media releases sent by Moree Plains Shire Council; local, state and federal politicians, and anyone else sending in press releases, such as sporting and service clubs. McPherson did what he could to convert these into news items but he had neither the time, resources nor training to independently verify the material, obtain reaction, or augment it with original content.

Because of staff cuts, the *Moree Champion* no longer covered all council meetings or magistrate's court hearings, instead relying on the council's website for its council stories, and publishing a weekly list of convictions in the court. However, we identified three civic functions that it did fulfil, which neither the local radio station nor larger media outlets could. One is that of chronicler of events for the benefit of posterity. For example, it will be the local newspaper's coverage of the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Freedom Rides that will provide historians with material on which to base research — even though the regional and metropolitan media covered it too. Another, in keeping with Schudson's functions, is that of a forum for the exchange of ideas or the pushing of people's campaigns and causes, such as the advancement of local Aboriginal employment.

A third function, not cited by Schudson, concerns reinforcement of people's sense of place and identity. The white people of Moree talk of themselves as "black soil plains people". Tamworth, in their worldview, belongs to the high country of the Northern Tablelands. It is not their country. Aboriginal people in Moree identify as Kamilaroi people. While the Kamilaroi nation is large enough to include Tamworth, that town is too far away for the people of Moree to feel the same sense of identity with it as they do to the area in and around Moree.

Identity has an institutional dimension as well. The federal and state electorates, the local council boundaries, the police district all broadly share the same geographic footprint, from Goondiwindi in the north to Narrabri in the south and Collarenebri in the west. This provides a commonality of interest for the community, and is reflected in the reach of the local media.

For all that, the *Moree Champion* and the commercial radio station 2VM are seen to have significant shortcomings. In this respect, the newspaper comes in for more criticism than the radio station. Paradoxically, this arguably reflects a greater degree of engagement with the paper, a greater reliance on it, and higher expectations of it than of the radio station.

Discussion

In all three cases, civic leaders' perceptions of traditional media were mixed, but shared a view that local outlets still provide news that larger media outlets do not, and in this way are fulfilling some civic functions. There were commonly identified deficits too. Local media's journalistic capacity for independent reporting was diminished. Limited resources caused by organisational cost-cutting had led to local journalists being desk bound and more likely to be news takers than news makers. This meant there was more journalism that simply regurgitated press releases or was based on official sources, such as council websites. Journalists and community leaders alike observed that local advertising had declined, which did not augur well for a recovery in journalistic resources. The cases also provided examples where the digital space could fill some (but not all) reporting gaps, which we now discuss.

Opportunities for hyperlocal media in the digital era

1. *Low entry costs and timeliness*

The internet cuts the traditionally high economic barrier to entry of mainstream media. Broadmeadows council, Banksia Gardens Community Services and local police identified their websites and social media as relatively cheap ways to communicate and engage with locals quickly and effectively without the constraints of traditional media's weekly deadline. This was true for traditional media too. *Hume Leader* editor Liam McAleer said: "Things go online as soon as they're written, pretty much. So there's no holding stuff for the paper."

2. *Sharing content*

McAleer and Broadmeadow's police Sergeant Ivan Petrunic saw community benefits in sharing content for crime detection and prevention. The local paper published "Street Watch" which was based on the popular news items from the police Facebook page EyeWatch. Petrunic said Facebook gave the public vital information about current dangers in the community, how to prevent harm such as fire prevention tips during the Bushfire season, and details about unapprehended offenders.

3. *Editorial control: working around the media*

Community organisations used their website and social media to reframe news stories to counter predominantly negative reports about their communities in the larger media. In Broadmeadows, Gina Dougall said her community organisation was empowered to tell their own stories, their way, using online tools. "This way you can control your own stuff ... because the papers can get it wrong." Sergeant Petrunic also found social media platforms useful for promoting positive policing stories and tackling social stigma often associated with living in Broadmeadows. However, writing for the webpage had sharpened his "news values" skills to learn that news items about "blood and guts" attracted the most page views.

4. *Crowdsourcing information*

Hume Leader editor McAleer said that while his newsroom had fewer reporters due to cost-cutting as advertising revenue migrated online, the upside of the internet was its usefulness to crowdsource information and get 'scoops':

We get tons of news tips through our Facebook page, whereas five years ago they might have been reluctant to let us know because they might not know how to contact us, or they might not be bothered making a phone call to someone. Now it's simple. It's just writing a little message and we can take it from there.

At Byron Bay's *Northern Star*, journalists with online skills made it easier to manage a smaller newsroom with limited resources because it was such a powerful aid to quick research.

5. *Public engagement and interaction*

The Hume council identified social media, in particular Twitter and Facebook, as useful tools for better understanding residents' concerns. Hume mayor Adem Attema said many locals set up rival Facebook pages to complain about council: "I don't really get upset with those sites because I think people are venting their frustrations and, you know, it's good that we know that there's people out there who are upset about some procedure."

The local paper also found social media useful for engaging readers: "A lot of our traffic to our web stories now comes through our social media stuff, so people aren't going straight to the website. They're reading it on Facebook and then clicking on to it," McAleer said. Similarly, a Byron Bay ZZZFM broadcaster said her radio station's online presence was important for engaging the audience beyond the broadcast. Byron Bay community radio programmer Ashley Thompson also used the station's website to "keep in touch" with her audience when off air. In Broadmeadows³, Dougall found that their neighbourhood house website connected disadvantaged residents to community programs more effectively than advertising in local media.

6. *Targeting messages - overcoming language barriers*

The Hume municipality has people from 170 different nations speaking 110 languages. Community groups and the local council saw benefits in translating their local information on the internet into other languages, although none have done so yet. Rather, they used hardcopy translations in targeted magazines and pamphlets to reach non-English speaking residents. Attema said he was investigating using the council websites in the same way they currently talk to local ethnic media to promote council activities to the large number of non-English speakers. Sargent Petrunic said social media was very useful for targeting youth with specific messages.

Challenges for hyperlocal media

Across the cases, we identified three key challenges for hyperlocal journalism. One was sustainability, both in terms of funding and human resources to produce, upload and moderate websites and social media. Presently, staff juggled several work responsibilities and online media tasks were usually in addition to their regular workload. Many, such as Sergeant Petrunic, took on these extra responsibilities because of a personal commitment to using new technologies for community engagement.

The second issue, relating to the first, was finding sufficient resources to deal with internet bullying and trolling in the comments areas of websites and social media. Sergeant Petrunic said that he regularly moderated the site and was concerned about posting information that might encourage vigilantism. He said it had not yet happened, but he saw the potential for it. The Broadmeadows council also monitored social media comments and moderated them when they thought it appropriate.

In the same municipality, online bullying was such a prevalent problem among the parent and student communities at Meadows primary school that Facebook and other social media sites were banned from use. Students' mobile phones were collected each morning and returned at the end of the school day. This was a contrary, but important example whereby the digital sphere was viewed negatively rather than as a positive tool for community engagement.

Further, a senior teaching staff member³ said the school's text-based website was of limited value because literacy rates in English were so low. Instead, the school used television screens in its foyer to broadcast daily communications. The vice principal was considering introducing audio announcements on the school website, but had not yet because community internet access was among the state's lowest (see Table 1).

The final issue for hyperlocal media, which again relates to the issue of resources, was media fragmentation. While this can be viewed as an opportunity for targeting messages to specific community groups, it could be costly to set up multiple online channels and develop separate communication strategies to engage different demographics. Further, there was a general awareness that communications needed to be targeted to non-resident audiences, but these audiences were

³ The teacher did not wish to be named

diverse, ranging from: local media, business community, philanthropists, government agencies and other politicians. At times, effectively communicating with each of these groups required costly professional communication strategies.

Conclusion

This paper synthesised three in-depth case studies with the aim of exploring the challenges and opportunities for hyperlocal journalism in communities vulnerable to losing local media because of the fractured business model evident in the digital age. Consistent with recent scholarship, we identified hyperlocal journalism as having a focus on geographic location and niche or specific issues. Funding sources, audience reach, journalism training and staffing numbers were challenges faced everywhere.

Also consistent with other research, we find local journalism not immune to the altered economic landscape for traditional media organisations. Local news outlets were generally doing more with less and had adapted their journalistic practices accordingly. Despite this, challenges for local media included insufficient journalism training; reduced capacity for independent journalism, and a loss of institutional authority in some places.

But it was not all bad news for local traditional media in the internet age. Social media enabled legacy outlets to crowdsource information and reach beyond their geographical boundaries connecting with potentially new audiences through third party hyperlinks, but also through below-the-line reader comments. In doing so, despite local reporting gaps, local media were able to fulfil many civic responsibilities in accordance with Schudson's seven functions of news media, as well as serve an identity function — not listed by Schudson, but identified by other scholars (Nielsen 2015). Local media can help citizens imagine themselves as part of a community, and this was most evident in Moree.

Digital affordances were also enabling local organisations to directly communicate with local communities, and in some instances, engage citizens in dialogue and debate. In some instances, relationships had formed between traditional media and non-media entities through sharing of public interest content. This hybrid model of local news gathering and dissemination was exemplified with the Broadmeadow's police station and local paper sharing news stories with mutual benefits of fighting crime and increasing the reach and impact of local news, respectively.

The case studies identify that hyperlocal journalism derived from community providers can fill some gaps in local news provision. The challenges for hyperlocal journalism are similar to those of traditional news providers: revenue uncertainty and lack of journalistic capacity. Even so, as legacy media news coverage shrinks there are promising alternatives for fostering civic discourse and engagement through local communities' uses of digital media and, most encouragingly, the possibility of symbiosis between local and hyperlocal news sources.

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Table 1: Case studies: Location, basic SES and local media options

Place and population	Locality	Brief description and demographic features	Local traditional media outlets in 2015
Broadmeadows (VIC) population 10,578	Outer metropolitan suburb, 16km north of Melbourne	Broadmeadows is a multicultural low socio-economic region within the municipality of Hume. Hume residents represent 170 different countries of origin and 110 spoken languages, 68% of residents had both parents born overseas. Broadmeadows has one of the lowest numbers of households connected to the internet at 63%, compared to a national average of 83%. Average weekly household income is \$746 and unemployment is 13.5%, both outside the national average of \$1234 and 5.6% respectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two local radio stations: 3NRG 99.3FM; North West FM 98.9 which provides ethnic radio programming • Two local weekly English language newspapers the Hume Leader (News Corp) and NorthernStar Weekly (Independent). • Foreign newspapers: Two Turkish newspapers, one Italian and one Greek*. • No local TV
Byron Bay (NSW) – permanent population 9,420	Seaside town in the far-northeastern corner of NSW, 175 km south of Brisbane, QLD	Byron Bay is a popular tourist destination with more than one million visitors a year generating more than \$380 million annually (Byron Bay General Information). The town's population increases four fold during peak season and strategies to cope with this influx is a top priority for the council and major concern for residents. Increased traffic, high commercial and private rentals, a need for more police officers, parking problems and the threat that increased numbers pose to the area's eco-system are issues regularly canvassed in the local media (Gardiner 2013; Evans 2013; Chigwidden 2010). Of residents, 27% had both parents born overseas. Median weekly household income is \$871 and unemployment is 8.7%, both outside the national average.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three local radio stations: Bay FM Community Radio and the commercial station ZZZFM (Broadcast Operations Group) and the public broadcaster ABC North Coast broadcast out of Lismore • Three newspapers including the Byron Shire Echo, a free locally-owned weekly print paper, Byron Shire News (News Corp.) a free weekly newspaper, daily newspaper the Northern Star (APN Media) printed in Lismore. • No local TV
Moree (NSW) – population 10,500	Remote rural town, principal industries are cotton and wheat crops, 300 km from the regional city of Tamworth, NSW.	Moree is a remote town that lies within the Kamilaroi Aboriginal nation, and a fifth of its population is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Historically, relations between the Aboriginal people and white townspeople were poor. Only 7% of residents had both parents born overseas. Median weekly household income is \$1,084 and unemployment is 6.4 %, both outside the national average.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local bi-weekly newspaper the <i>Moree Champion</i> (Fairfax Media) • commercial radio station, 2VM, (Broadcast Operations Group) • No local TV

Source: Authors compiled from Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 *Distributed but not produced locally