Click and Connect:

Case studies of innovative
hyperlocal news providers

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Neighbourhood News — 2015

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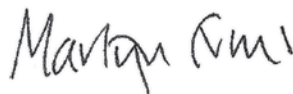This report is printed on paper that is FSC certified.

Foreword: The 21st-century local news landscape

The importance of good-quality local journalism which informs, investigates and inspires community action has never been in doubt. What has been debated, however, is its future in an increasingly digital world.

Consumption of news across online platforms has increased significantly in the last decade, with 69% of UK internet users having visited websites or downloaded apps for news about or events in their local community[1]. Trust in and use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter for local news has also increased since 2013, with 27% now naming Facebook as their top source of local news[2]. As advertisers have followed audiences to online platforms, the business model traditionally used by local news providers has become increasingly challenging, resulting in a net loss of more than 180 local newspapers in the UK since 2005[3] and producing gaps in local newspaper coverage in areas such as London, the North East, Yorkshire and Humberside[4].

However, this only partly explains the change to the local news landscape. The focus of the debate on local news provision has largely been on the market exit of local newspapers and the democratic deficits left behind – with the presence or absence of a local title often seen as the critical factor in determining if a community is covered by local news. In reality, the local news landscape of the 21st century is more nuanced than if the traditional press continued to be based in our towns and cities, with the disruption and dispersion of local news and information production mirroring patterns across many other media markets. Because while newspapers closures, title mergers, moves online and job losses have made headlines, journalists and individuals passionate about the provision of quality news and information have been increasingly and quietly working often out with traditional media organisations. In particular, the UK's hyperlocal media sector has been growing and thriving.

Chief Executive

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A growing sector addressing news gaps

Hyperlocals range from individual bloggers to small businesses, but they have in common the aim of improving the provision of local news and information and increasing opportunities for members of their communities to connect with each other. The content produced by hyperlocals includes community news and events, articles holding local authorities to account, supporting or leading community campaigns, covering elections, providing opportunities for civic engagement and coverage which contributes to a local identity[5].

Hyperlocals have themselves been disrupted by the way news and information is distributed in the 21st century and have managed this successfully by increasingly adopting multiple platforms to syndicate and disseminate their content in a fast-moving market. With hyperlocal sites in the UK collectively producing around 2,500 news stories a week[6], grassroots news groups based in the communities they serve are making a significant contribution to the local news landscape by working on the ground in these neighbourhoods.

As a largely volunteer-led sector, hyperlocals are predominantly started by people who are passionate about their communities and who contribute substantial amounts of time to their local news site. However, the sustainability of the service hyperlocals provide – in terms of the time the teams can commit and the income generated – is a challenge for many in the sector. As the scale, activities and business models of hyperlocals vary, so does the income generated by the sites.

The Creative Citizens project survey of hyperlocals found that while most local news sites are self-funded, 13% of sites generate more than £500 per month[7]. A recent hyperlocal campaign by Crowdfunder backed by 672 people successfully funded seven UK local news projects and raised almost £40,000[8]. This demonstrates a demand, and willingness to pay, for good-quality local news. However, for the sector to reach its full potential and meet this demand, further support for hyperlocals must be forthcoming.

Opportunities for hyperlocals

Eight out of 10 respondents to the Creative Citizens hyperlocal survey had ambitions to expand their site, but nearly three-quarters cited a lack of time as a barrier to growth[9]. Many hyperlocals would benefit from additional support being made available to allow them to spend more time experimenting, learning and developing their work. Increasing interest in the role of hyperlocals in contributing to local media plurality, democracy and accountability has resulted in some opportunities for the sector to be supported and grown.

Funding opportunities

In a bid to reflect the changing patterns of local news and information consumption in the 21st century and improve local transparency, in December 2014, the Department for Communities and Local Government invited expressions of interest[10] from partnerships of local news providers to pilot innovative approaches to hosting statutory notices. The successful 24 pilot programme teams, including online and hyperlocal news providers, received £950,000[11] to innovate how residents are informed about decisions taken by their local councils. Funding for hyperlocals has also been made available from the third sector. In July 2015, Nesta opened a new grants programme[12] for hyperlocals to explore how a more strategic use of website and social media analytics could assist the groups to define and measure their success online; improve their service, audience engagement and reach; and, in turn, their sustainability and legacy within their local community. Funding of up to £6,500 is now being provided to up to 10 hyperlocal news organisations.

Partnership and networking

In addition to financial support, partnership and networking opportunities are increasingly available to the sector. The BBC has recently completed a consultation[13] on how it can work in partnership with hyperlocal news providers to support independent, high-quality local news provision, direct its audience to the best online sources of local news and correctly credit the work of hyperlocals on its website. Current proposals for partnership working include hosting joint training and events, ensuring that all local BBC teams are aware of hyperlocals working in their area and establishing a Hyperlocal Forum to meet twice a year. The Carnegie UK Trust and Talk About Local have published a directory of hyperlocal news providers across the UK and Ireland. The aim of Local Web List[14] is to make it easier for policymakers and mainstream media outlets to engage with the hyperlocal news sector, help hyperlocals to establish stronger links with each other if they wish to do so and make it easier for citizens to identify new, reputable, independent sources of local news in their area. Talk About Local have also been conducting outreach activities[15] to identify hyperlocals which were not listed on the site's predecessor, Openly Local. The details of over 500 active hyperlocal news providers across the UK and Ireland are currently listed on the directory.

Peer to peer learning and support

Hyperlocal media organisations are themselves increasingly attracting the interest of journalists; academics; and the third sector, which also provides an opportunity to develop the sector. The aims, activities, business models and future plans of hyperlocal news providers have been profiled in Online Journalism Blog's Hyperlocal Voices interview series[16], Nesta's Destination Local programme[17], conferences[18], blogs[19] and MOOCs (massive open online courses)[20] by the Centre for Community Journalism, Creative Citizens Fairs[21] and the evaluation reports[22] of the Trust's Neighbourhood News project. Such resources can help with peer-to-peer learning and support in the hyperlocal sector, as the lessons around managing workload, effective platforms and recruiting individuals with skills which supplement core

journalism skills, such as advertising sales and IT ability, can be drawn on in starting or developing hyperlocal projects.

By highlighting five short case studies of innovative practice, this report seeks to add to the evidence base about the types of activities that hyperlocals news providers are undertaking and the impact they deliver for citizens. The case studies represent a range of hyperlocal news organisations in terms of size, scale of activities and reach into the communities they serve. The local news providers were chosen as case studies due to being innovative or noteworthy in terms of impressive content, such as:

- General Election coverage or extensive coverage of local council meetings

- use of an interesting business model

- impressive traffic numbers

- experimenting with new platforms or tools

- high levels of community engagement.

The case studies are not intended to demonstrate how local news ought to be provided – different methods or approaches are likely to appeal to different providers and different communities. Instead, they are outlined here to help inspire those who are considering starting a hyperlocal news group, seeking to expand their organisation's activities and to demonstrate the success of hyperlocal practitioners in bringing a greater plurality of voices to the UK journalism sector.

We would welcome your recommendations on what additional evidence would be useful for hyperlocals and how the sector can be further supported and grown. The feedback we have received to date includes Governments across the UK and Ireland building on the statutory notices pilots in England, revising the application process to give hyperlocals more time to apply and not restricting partnerships to include local newspapers, an overview of upcoming court cases and their outcomes being provided to hyperlocals, and more funding programmes for hyperlocals focusing on increasing capacity and improving the skills of team members. Please get in touch at policy@carnegieuk.org to help us to continue the debate around how to support hyperlocal media in the UK and Ireland.

## Location of hyperlocal case studies

CASE STUDY: MY TURRIFF

With no independent, online sources of local news, information and events, My Turriff developed from Visit Turriff, a site which was established in 2011 to help promote the Aberdeenshire town. Local news in Turriff is covered by the weekly printed local newspaper, with some additional coverage by daily regional newspapers from Aberdeen. However, the local newspaper, while having a very loyal local readership, does not currently publish news online. My Turriff contributes to the local news landscape by providing local news, information, and events online, while offering immediate access to related online content.

Strong civic content

My Turriff is run philanthropically by Mike Rawlins, but features some Google adverts to help cover the costs of the site. The site has strong civic content, covering local news from Aberdeenshire Council, Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, as well as the details of local public consultations. Local organisations are invited to upload the details of community events on to the site's calendar[23], while the details of classes run by the local leisure centre, services by a local church group and information on local farmers markets and car boot and craft sales are regularly hosted on the site. My Turriff also engages with its audience by hosting guest posts from members of the community, and returning to local news stories which have proved particularly popular with readers.
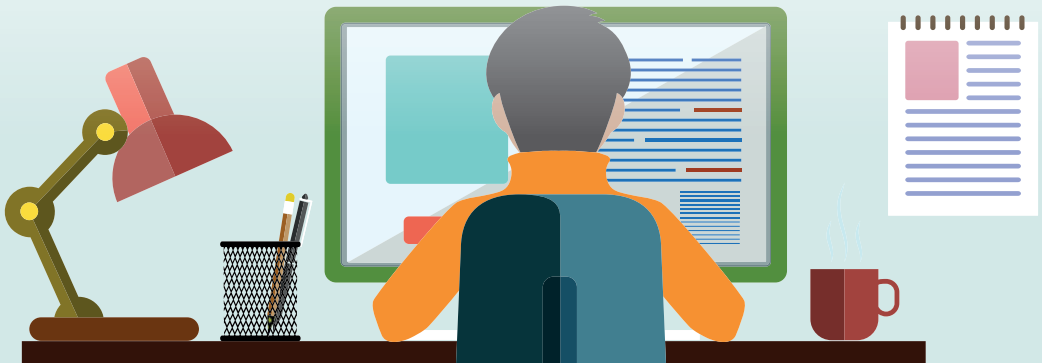
Traffic numbers and traction in the community

The traffic numbers My Turriff generates in serving a town of 5,000 people are impressive. New content is uploaded on to the site in the first instance, and signposted to My Turriff's Twitter followers, before being posted on to the site's Facebook page.

Traffic to the site varies from a couple of hundred visitors a day, to up to 3,000 when the site features a breaking news story.

To optimise the site's local news and information for search engines, keywords are used in the content and meta descriptions. Facebook is an important platform for the site, with the My Turriff page attracting over 1,220 likes and providing the main source of traffic to the site.

Challenges and next steps

However, with the opportunity provided by Facebook comes My Turriff's greatest challenge. Large numbers of the community in Turriff predominantly use Facebook for local news and information but if they do not subscribe to My Turriff's posts, they are largely unaware of the site's

content. With the relative decline of Facebook among social media users[24], moving current subscribers from the My Turriff Facebook page to the site will be important in continuing to reach the local community and encouraging it to engage with the content produced.

My Turriff would like to improve its coverage of the work of Turriff and District Community Council, and believes it has a role in improving democratic engagement with the Community Council. As a new member of the Community Council, Mike aims to improve the culture of transparency around the Community Council's work, and its relationship with the local press.

Find out more:
https://myturriff.co.uk
@MyTurriff
My Turriff

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CASE STUDY: THE LINCOLNITE

the LINCOLNITE

Since being set up in April 2010, The Lincolnite has transformed the local news landscape across the city of Lincoln. While served well by BBC Radio Lincolnshire, a large commercial radio station, two community radio stations and a local weekly newspaper covering the county, it is The Lincolnite that has become the city's most popular source of online local news, having developed the greatest social media presence. Despite being in competition with each other, the various local news outlets have a good working relationship and have collaborated on several projects to the benefit of their collective audiences.

Development and community contribution

The Lincolnite developed from a student newspaper at the University of Lincoln, which progressed when its co-founders graduated and started a publication outside of the campus to cover local news across the city. Within three months of going live, the site had attracted around 5,000 readers and the decision was taken to incorporate the company and turn the project into a business. Its primary source of income is from display advertising, which the team initiated after the first year when the site had established an audience. Income is also generated through jobs and events listings; a digital weekly business magazine, Lincolnshire Business, which hosted the first Lincolnshire Digital Awards this year; and the new The Lincolnite Shop. Six full-time and two part-time staff, all with a journalism background, are involved in running The Lincolnite and Lincolnshire Business, along with a bank of volunteer column contributors and a number of freelancers, from photographers to feature writers for individual projects. Members of the audience across Lincoln are also welcome to write columns for the site and regularly engage with the team and the content produced on social media.

Innovative live coverage

The team routinely provides traditional local news coverage such as community activities, crime, traffic, health, education, court reporting and local public events. The Lincolnite has also pioneered innovative, live coverage of one-off events such as the 2012 Olympic torch relay covered from six different locations across the city[25]; protests; and local elections since 2010. In partnership with BBC Radio Lincolnshire and The Lincolnshire Echo, the team organised The Lincoln Debate[26] in which all of the 2015 General Election parliamentary candidates for Lincoln took part in a debate before the election. The event was streamed live on The Lincolnite and Lincolnshire Echo websites; local radio; and online on BBC Radio Lincolnshire using Periscope, and uploaded on to YouTube thereafter and linked to columns and analysis of the election by The Lincolnite team. This collaboration was built on a similar partnership with the University of Lincoln and a local community radio station for a live television debate[27] between the East Midlands European Parliamentary candidates in May, 2014.

Online content is promoted by social media activity on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, to around 70,000 followers, to help generate an average of 500,000 visitors per month and more than a million page views for local news covering a population of 100,000 people.

As the audience has grown, the demographic spread of the readership has also expanded, with 40% of The Lincolnite's audience under 30 years old.

Challenges and next steps

The greatest challenge for The Lincolnite is to grow the business and to maintain financial stability as the team expands. To help address this, the team is continuing to develop the Lincolnshire Business magazine and is looking into options to further diversify its income.

Find out more:
http://thelincolnite.co.uk
@thelincolnite
The Lincolnite

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The Charlton Champion

The Charlton Champion was set up in 2010 to address the lack of independent, comprehensive local news coverage in the South-East London area, due in part to the dominance of Charlton's higher-profile neighbours, Greenwich and Woolwich.

Unusual local news landscape

The local news landscape in Charlton is unusual in that the Royal Borough of Greenwich is one of the few councils in the UK to publish a weekly council newspaper, Greenwich Time, which includes any big announcements from the council, is delivered to all households in the area, and is available online. The two traditional local newspapers are based outwith Charlton and have seen their circulations decline, and broadcast media from London doesn't often feature stories from the local area. The Charlton Champion has a good relationship with the local newspapers, with limited overlap in content and the site focusing on a smaller geographical area, and the team believes it offers important additionality to the council publication.

Community campaigns

Two regular writers, Darryl Chamberlain, a trained journalist, and Neil Clasper, run The Charlton Champion on a voluntary basis, which means they have to be selective in what the site covers. Content on the site includes the extensive redevelopment currently taking place in Charlton, planning issues, transport, local consultations, community events, and coverage of council meetings, including video footage[28]. The Charlton Champion also helps to initiate and support community campaigns. The site has played a key role in campaigns against the threat to a local children's animal park[29] after revealing plans to cut its funding in the council

budget, and the proposed renaming of the local lido[30], a campaign which was subsequently covered by other independent local news outlets.

Members of the community are also involved in writing guest posts for The Charlton Champion and have been invited to meet-ups to learn about becoming more involved in the work of the site.

The site is supported by social media activity on Twitter and Facebook, which have proven to be effective platforms for distributing content quickly and building the site's audience. The site attracts around 300 unique visitors a day, mostly driven from search engines, social media and other local websites. User numbers have grown steadily since 2010 and increased significantly during the 2011 London riots and following coverage of the opening of a new supermarket in the local area. The team measures its success by the fact that members of the community are engaging with their content and provide positive feedback on the site.

Challenges and next steps

The greatest challenge for The Charlton Champion has been the lack of engagement from

some local groups and services and local councillors. The council reserving local news and information on events for its own weekly publication has proven to be a barrier to engaging with particular groups and producing related content for the site. This issue, in addition to a lack of time and resources, has meant that the team is unable to cover as much local news as they would like to.

The Charlton Champion team aspires to make it easier for members of the community to upload information about local events on to the site, but is currently limited by its Wordpress template. The team would also like to produce a print version of its content, if sufficient time and resources were available.

Find out more:
http://charltonchampion.co.uk/
 @CharltonCSE7
 The Charlton Champion

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CASE STUDY: ONTHEWIGHT

Before September 2005, there were just two sources of local news for the 140,000 population of the Isle of Wight – The Isle of Wight County Press newspaper and Isle of Wight Radio. With the introduction of the award-winning[31] VentnorBlog, rebranded to OnTheWight in August 2012, in order to compete, the local news landscape on the Isle of Wight was forced to shift to a culture of more immediate and comprehensive local news provision, with outlets publishing more content online, at a faster rate; highlighting exclusive content; and using social media to cover council meetings in real time.

Core team and contributors

The core OnTheWight team - husband and wife Simon and Sally Perry - evolved the site with the aim of building and then maintaining the trust of the reader; improving openness and transparency among those with decision-making powers on the Island; and stimulating local news provision; as well as giving local residents a

voice by publishing their articles and giving them the opportunity to freely-comment on local news stories. To date, articles have been published from 1,400 contributors, and the site has attracted over 120,000 comments on over 24,000 news stories. The community is so engaged with the service that the team is currently

'We like to innovate, so trialling WhatsApp as another channel for news delivery made perfect sense – it's direct, and importantly in the world of Facebook distribution-throttling, it's unfiltered.

'It has achieved what we wanted, but others should be aware that the building and maintenance of distribution lists can be quite a hurdle.
Simon Perry, co-founder, OnTheWight

trialling local groups having access to the site to allow them to upload their articles directly.

OnTheWight's main source of income is generated from display advertising by local businesses and sponsored features, supplemented with consultancy work and helping

local businesses develop their online presence. The team is also exploring expanding public access to open data and the possibility of offering subject-specific publications and a local business directory. Recently, the team have been able to pay themselves a modest salary, in return for each working over 10 hours a day on the site.

Content and platforms

The site provides broad coverage of traditional local news, including community news, travel information, business and culture content, live coverage of council meetings, opinion pieces, sports coverage, Letters to the Editor and a Flickr Group of 'Picture of the Week' featuring over 32,000 images. Audience demand for more civic news such as planning applications, council meetings and Island-wide changes to education refocused the content produced, addressing this perceived local news gap. The team's investigative reporting, as well as the innovative live spreadsheet of how each Isle of Wight councillor voted at a meeting on budget cuts[32], has won the team national recognition[33].

Keen to innovate, the platforms used by OnTheWight have also changed over time as new channels have become available. In addition

to online publishing supported by extensive social media activity on Twitter, selective posts on Facebook and YouTube and, to a lesser extent, activity on Instagram; Pinterest; and Google+, for urgent or major news stories the team are also one of the few local news providers in the UK to reach their audience through WhatsApp. The use of a range of dissemination tools leads to traffic to the site peaking at over 100,000 unique visitors a month, and attracting over 500,000 page views per month.

Challenges and next steps

The greatest challenge OnTheWight faces is financial – ensuring sustainability and growth. While the team are now in a position to draw salaries from the site's operations, funding of additional staff or reporters is a challenge, and the inability to finance new equipment and implement new ideas are also barriers to expanding the service to the next level.

Find out more:

http://www.onthewight.com

@onthewight

Isle of Wight News from On The Wight

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CASE STUDY: THE BRISTOL CABLE

With city-wide news publications, culture magazines, regional offices of national broadcasters and a range of hyperlocals all based in Bristol, the city may not immediately appear to have a local news gap or democratic deficit. However, analysis by the team behind The Bristol Cable found there to be a lack of coverage of issues affecting under-represented communities, broadly-sourced content and investigative reporting across the city. The Bristol Cable addresses these gaps by undertaking local investigative reporting and covering under-represented issues and groups in collaboration with other local media groups dedicated to serving under-represented members of the community, such as Ujima and BCfm community radio stations and the Bristol Somali Media Group.

Co-operative structure

The Bristol Cable, incorporated as a Community Benefit Society in July 2014, has also sought to provide an alternative model for media ownership which could address the quality and quantity of local news provided; produce multimedia content; and engage the local community. From late 2013, The Bristol Cable was developed through consultations, events, and workshops with local organisations and individuals across the city; successful grant applications from the Lush Charity Pot and Cooperatives UK; £3,000 raised through crowdfunding; and inviting those who were interested to become part of the team to develop the website and produce the first print edition.

The Bristol Cable launched its membership scheme with its first edition in October 2014, and now has 400 members paying on

average £3 a month for local news and information. In addition to the monthly membership contributions, income is generated from advertising by ethical organisations and businesses, grants and donations and payment for presentations and workshops delivered by the team. If the target of 1,000 members by summer 2016 is reached, sufficient income will be generated for all contributors to The Bristol Cable to receive payment for their work. A core team of seven volunteers are involved in the day-to-day operation of The Bristol Cable, with three having recently received a payment of £70 per week for three months paid from a funding grant, for their respective 40 hours of work. Each printed edition sees the involvement of an average of 40 contributors, with more members involved in monthly decision-making forums.

Investigative reporting

The team's commitment to raising traditionally unheard local voices and investigative reporting has led to content such as the experiences of the Kurdish community in Bristol[34], research into the poor working conditions of those working in the local catering sector[35], and investigating the funding allocation process of Bristol's Green Capital grant programme[36]. The team also organised and filmed an audience-led question and answer session with the Bristol West General Election candidates[37], in partnership with Acorn Bristol, Bristol Somalia Media Group and Ujima Radio, which was attended by 400 local people from a range of backgrounds. Articles are also commissioned from people on relevant topic areas and submissions of stories and ideas are welcomed from people across the city, which are reviewed by and worked on collaboratively with the editorial team.

thebristolcable.org hosts innovative multimedia content such as podcasts, slideshow photo essays, films and interactive infographics, which are distributed through Twitter and Facebook and increase traffic to the site.

To date, the site has attracted 102,000 unique web hits since its October 2014 launch and an average of 1,000 unique visitors now log on to the site per day. The Bristol

Cable also publishes a free, quarterly magazine and distributes 10,000 copies in public spaces across the city, after which traffic to the site routinely increases.

Challenges and next steps

Having experienced a great deal of success in a short period of time, the greatest challenge The Bristol Cable faces is sustaining the quality and quantity of local news provision; presentations; and workshops delivered without over-stretching its volunteers. The core team is seeking to address this challenge by increasing membership which would move the project towards sustainability and allow contributors to be paid for their work, developing a broad base of volunteers with specific responsibilities, such as co-ordinating working groups on events, website design, and advertising, to increase capacity of the core team, and exploring partnerships with the University of Bristol's journalism school and the Centre for Investigative Journalism.

With additional resources, the core team at The Bristol Cable would like to pay its contributors for their work and acquire the hardware, software and training necessary to develop its multimedia output.

TO FIND OUT MORE

http://thebristolcable.org

@TheBristolCable

The Bristol Cable

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