WHERE ARE WE NOW?
UK hyperlocal media and community journalism in 2015

by Damian Radcliffe
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In 2012 Nesta published the first in-depth look at the UK’s emerging hyperlocal and community media scene. “Here and Now: UK hyperlocal media today” showed how technology had eroded the traditional newspaper industry, whilst also enabling new entrants to create and distribute local news and information at a low cost. It outlined the potential - and the major strategic challenges - facing this nascent industry, using case studies to highlight ingredients for success.

It was hoped that this landscape report would help stimulate discussion, debate and further research into this embryonic industry. Three years on, that has certainly been the case.

Extensive academic research has been led by Cardiff, Birmingham City and Westminster Universities; with Nesta commissioning a wide range of industry insights. Action research has been undertaken by the Centre for Community Journalism (C4CJ) at Cardiff University, and practitioners have benefitted from training and support provided by organisations such as Talk About Local and C4CJ.

Meanwhile, Nesta, Innovate UK (the body formerly known as the Technology Strategy Board) and the Carnegie UK Trust have each provided funding to test and evaluate new hyperlocal initiatives.

Collectively, these bodies – in conjunction with the Media Standards Trust, Ofcom, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), the Community Media Association, Media Trust and others – have raised the profile, and deepened our understanding, of this maturing media sector.

As a result, awareness of UK hyperlocal media among policy makers, the wider media industry, researchers and consumers is at an all-time high; and we understand the drivers behind hyperlocal markets, audiences and publishers, as never before. We also understand the considerable civic value it creates in the context of general local media decline.

That is why Nesta and Cardiff University have commissioned this report. We feel that there is a strong need to analyse recent developments to assess our collective learning and to better understand the long-term needs of the sector.

This report has analysed more than 40 recent academic and industry reports to provide a definitive view of the UK’s hyperlocal and community journalism sector in 2015. In doing this, we have analysed the current evidence base and identified opportunities and challenges for the future.

Our research shows a sector that plays an increasingly important role in supporting the information needs of communities. Hyperlocal output can be found across all platforms, produced by a mixture of committed volunteers and entrepreneurial journalists, driven by a desire to reflect and enhance the communities in which they live and work. This is particularly valuable at a time of continued cuts to established local media, including newspaper circulation, titles and journalists.

Yet, despite increased awareness and evidence, this remains an industry at a crossroads.

Our report identifies several key considerations that need to be addressed by policy makers, researchers, industry and funders if the UK’s hyperlocal sector is to successfully continue its evolution and fulfil its early promise.
There are more than 400 active hyperlocal websites in the UK, compared with 1,045 local papers. New sites are being uncovered by researchers on a daily basis.

(Cardiff and Birmingham City University)

One in ten say they use local community websites or apps at least weekly (7 per cent in 2013). 17 per cent of UK internet users use websites or apps each week for news about their local area or community; a further 31 per cent do so quarterly. Consumption of this content online is increasing.

(Ofcom)

The most common topic covered by hyperlocal media is community activities e.g. festivals, clubs and societies, local councils and the services they provide.

(Cardiff, Westminster and Birmingham City University)

Functional information about community events, services, local weather and traffic, are the most popular content types with hyperlocal audiences.

(Nesta / Kantar Media)

Audiences aged 35-44 are more likely to have looked at websites / apps for news and event information for their local area or community (77 per cent vs. 69 per cent). Those aged 55-64 and 75+ are less likely to have visited online local community websites, although more than half of this demographic (59 per cent and 51 per cent) has.

(Ofcom)

48 per cent of site owners have journalistic training or experience working in the mainstream media.

(Cardiff, Westminster and Birmingham City University)

Investigation in UK hyperlocal media is less than £5m in the UK over the last three years, compared with more than $400m in the US over two years. UK investments are often one-offs.

(Media Standards Trust)
05
72 per cent of hyperlocal publishers have joined in or supported a local campaign in the last two years. 42 per cent have started their own campaigns.

(Cardiff, Westminster and Birmingham City University)

06
Investigative reporting, which has helped uncover controversial new information about local civic issues or events, has been produced by almost half of the UK’s online hyperlocal publishers in the last two years.

(Cardiff, Westminster and Birmingham City University)

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KEY POINTS:

- The UK has more than 400 active hyperlocal websites, compared with 1,045 local papers.

- On-going research, to be published later this year, has identified more than 500 online hyperlocal services. The fragmented, grassroots, nature of this sector means that capturing exact numbers is difficult and likely to be highly underestimated.

- Community and local content matters to UK audiences; the majority consume it monthly, with Ofcom data from 2012 and 2015 suggesting that hyperlocal audiences are increasing.

- There has been investment in this sector in recent years; but this has often been one-off. Countries such as the USA have seen much larger levels of investment, and a greater recognition of the need for ongoing financial support to sustain local news services.

HYPERLOCAL CONTEXT AND MARKET SIZE

Hyperlocal and community content can be found on dedicated websites, in local print publications and across social networks and audio services. This content pertains “to a small community such as a town, village or single postcode” and is often supported by activity and engagement on social media.

There are 408 active hyperlocal websites in the UK, although due to lack of regulation and registration requirements the real figure may be much higher. Based on current completed data, Birmingham has 20 known active sites, the most in any UK authority area; while London is home to at least 85 active hyperlocal websites.

Overall, an average of 15 items per hour is produced by these hyperlocal websites; rising to 24 items an hour between 7am and 7pm, akin to one story every two minutes.

The Carnegie UK Trust is working with Talk About Local to more effectively map the current sector. A new hyperlocal media map will be published this autumn. Initial efforts have identified - among other locations - 48 previously unrecorded websites in Scotland and nearly 100 in Devon and Somerset. This supports the assumption that the extent of UK hyperlocal media has previously been under-reported.

Creation and consumption of highly localised content is a global phenomenon. Around 18 per cent of the Centre for Community Journalism’s (C4CJ) network of community news services are from outside the UK. A Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on community journalism run by Cardiff University in 2014 and 2015 attracted more than 22,000 learners worldwide, including existing and aspirational publishers of hyperlocal media.

COMPARISON WITH TRADITIONAL LOCAL MEDIA MARKETS

Whatever local media sector you’re in, the financial dynamics - for most players - remains challenging. This has had an impact on the amount of local content available for audiences.

The UK is home to 1,045 local and regional newspapers (2011 Newspaper Society figures), but between 2005 and 2012, 292 papers closed and only 40 new titles launched. Circulation data for 2014 from the ABC showed that 93 per cent of newspapers have a falling readership.

Emily Shackleton, writing for TheMediaBriefing, found that
the sector has seen a net reduction of 177 titles in the past decade, and that this trend shows no signs of abating:

“The UK is also still losing more papers than it is gaining, with 2014 being a particularly worrying year for the industry with a net loss of 15 newspapers.”

Many local commercial radio stations reduced their levels of local news and production after Ofcom revised its localness guidelines in 2010. Ofcom notes: “networking has become far more prevalent, and some operators have chosen significantly to reduce the length of local news bulletins.”

Meanwhile the success of the new tier of Local TV broadcasters has been mixed. Although 16 stations are now on air, Birmingham based City TV failed to launch23 and London Live’s CEO has admitted that its future is under “constant review”.24

LOCAL CONTENT MATTERS TO AUDIENCES

Research by Ofcom and Nesta has identified the value placed by consumers on hyperlocal content.

Nesta’s work in 2013 with Kantar outlined the often highly functional nature of hyperlocal media consumption. Among survey respondents, weather, news and entertainment were the most popular types of content being accessed.25 Hyperlocal media also plays an important civic role which helps root people in a community and reflects a sense of place.26

Ofcom’s 2015 report into ‘Adults’ media use and attitudes’ reported 17 per cent of UK internet users use websites or apps each week for news about their local area or community; a further 31 per cent do so quarterly. These numbers were up year-on-year.27

The regulator’s Internet Citizens 2014 report28 had previously recorded that 51 per cent of UK adults browse online for local news at least monthly, and that one in five say that online is their most important local news medium. Perhaps most significantly their report revealed “one in ten say they use local community websites or apps at least weekly (7% in 2013).”

Separately, Ofcom’s 2012 Commercials Market Report stated that “use of hyperlocal websites is growing”, and identified “around 1 in 7 (14 per cent) of people state that they use a local community website on at least a monthly basis.”29 This data reinforced earlier Ofcom research (2009) which established that - while consumer definitions of local are blurred - 92 per cent of adults consume local media with 88 per cent using multiple sources for local news and information.30

INVESTMENT IN HYPERLOCAL

Since 2012 we have seen a number of investments designed to grow UK hyperlocal media, and to further understand the sector’s potential. This includes grants from Nesta and Innovate UK, partnership funding from the Carnegie UK Trust, as well as support from Cardiff University.

Investments have funded editorial overheads, service development, technical innovation, training and provided opportunities for practitioners to come together. By creating a space for hyperlocal journalists to share and showcase work, C4CJ has, for example, developed detailed case studies which highlight innovation, breadth of content and evolution of practice.

The Media Standards Trust has determined that “altogether this amounts to less than £5m in the UK over three years, as compared to more than $400m in the US over two years.” As a result:

“The funds invested in the transition of local news and information to the digital era in the US are at an entirely different scale to the funds invested in the UK.”
Although this UK figure excludes private investment, a survey of UK hyperlocal publishers found that this type of income is seldom seen at an ultra-local level.31

This conclusion reflects several major differences between the UK and US and the remedies available to address challenges in the provision of local news and information. These differences include: recognised need, charity status for non-profit news organisations, support from large foundations and the availability of contestable funding.32 Few of these mechanisms are available in the UK, even though the need is just as acute. Moreover, most investment in the UK has been one-off. As a result, ongoing support - designed to grow and sustain the sector over the medium to long-term - is probably what is now most needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 Revisions of http://localweblist.net/ by the Carnegie UK Trust and Talk About Local will provide a richer understanding of the size and scale of the UK’s hyperlocal sector. However, there is a need for more regular monitoring, with incentives for publishers to self-register, so that this map does not go out of date.

1.2 Researchers should undertake a regular census of sites – including the frequency and types of content they produce – based on the revised map.

1.3 Ofcom’s consumer research should continue to chart usage of hyperlocal and community media, as well as more traditional media outlets, giving us a valuable longitudinal dataset.

1.4 Without a different mindset, or approach to intervention, investment in this space will still fall considerably behind other markets where similar local media issues are being addressed.
WHAT CONTENT DO HYPERLOCAL CHANNELS PRODUCE?

KEY POINTS

- Hyperlocal publishers produce a wide range of content, in line with the types of output historically produced by local newspapers and other local media.

- The most common topic covered by hyperlocals relate to community activities (e.g. festivals, clubs and societies), local councils and the services they provide.

- Publishers also engage in campaigns and investigative reporting. 72 per cent have supported a local campaign in the last two years. 42 per cent have started their own. Nearly half have engaged in investigative reporting; a mainstay of public service news provision.

TYPES OF OUTPUT

Hyperlocal media outlets in the UK produce a variety of valuable content. This includes traditional news reporting, sport and other subjects – such as events, arts, links to local services, property, food and drink features and what’s on guides – which have always been provided by local media.

“... this is a sector that produces valuable work, and which consistently contributes to civic discourse and dissemination of information in the public interest. In doing this, the sector is generating content which creates the same civic, cultural and community benefits that traditional media has been delivering for decades.”

These outputs are accompanied by storytelling, local history, the running of campaigns and traditional outputs of the fourth estate; holding authority to account by reporting on electoral hustings, using open data to act as “armchair auditors” and live reporting from planning, local and parish council meetings.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

To better understand this output, researchers from Cardiff University and Birmingham City University held 34 semi-structured interviews with producers, completed the largest content analysis to date of UK hyperlocal news content (1,941 posts from 313 sites), and worked with colleagues at Westminster University to produce the biggest ever survey of UK community news practitioners (183 responses).

Their content analysis coded every other story (odd numbers) on each site, a total of 1,941 posts from 3,819 posts published on 313 active websites between 8 and 18 May 2012. It showed the most popular subject covered was local community activities (13 per cent), followed by stories about local councils and council services (11.7 per cent). Other notably large categories included crime and business news entertainment, and the arts.

“This kind of coverage of local government contrasts somewhat with
the UK’s mainstream local news media, which has scaled back its coverage of local politics in recent years."

These findings were reinforced by a 2014 survey of 156 hyperlocal news producers. It found that the most covered topics, as self-declared by website owners, in the past two years related to local community events (97 per cent), local government council meetings or decisions (81 per cent), local government planning issues (79 per cent) and local businesses (75 per cent).
CAMPAIGNS

Alongside these activity areas, a significant number of sites run local campaigns and/or engage in investigative reporting. A 2014 survey of hyperlocal practitioners discovered nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of them had joined in or supported a local campaign in the last two years.

“Moreover, 42 per cent had “started a campaign which sought to change things locally” in the same period, an impressive figure given the time and effort involved in starting, building, and sustaining a new campaign.”

These campaigns cover a wide variety of topics; ranging from planning and licensing to public services, improvements to amenities, Council accountability and local business issues. Publishers reported that the most important of these topics were planning and licensing issues, although local public services, business and environmental issues were also ranked highly.

The average number of campaigns run by hyperlocal sites in the past two years was five, with the mean number of campaigns initiated directly by these sites being three. As the report authors’ note: “though apparently small numbers, we should remember that campaigns are often long-running stories which are covered repeatedly over time.”

For audiences, campaigns are broadly viewed as less valuable than local news information or community events, although older audiences have a higher level of interest in local campaigns. Nesta’s research revealed that “compared to 35-54 year olds, those aged 55 and older are more likely to select local politics, campaigns and elections as their most important genre of information.”

Nonetheless, the social impact of campaigns can far outweigh audience interest levels. Campaigning activities - such as the successful effort to save a community ambulance in Alston - are an intrinsic part of local media’s role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Re-run the 2012 content analysis - using the revised Weblist database - to see if there have been any changes in the types of stories being covered.

2.2 Share more widely case studies captured by C4CJ, the Carnegie UK Trust and others, highlighting examples of great stories and content innovation from hyperlocal publishers.

2.3 Identify the societal impact of campaigns, including influential case studies, to more effectively demonstrate the role of this sector at a grassroots level.
**KEY POINTS:**

- There is an active audience for online hyperlocal media; although different studies report very different consumption figures.
- The growth of mobile devices is a key driver in increased frequency of consumption.
- Different topic genres appeal to different age groups, but functional information about events, services, local weather and traffic, tends to have the broadest appeal.

Audience research consistently demonstrates the regular consumption of hyperlocal media and that readership is increasing. Because “hyperlocal” is a vague label disliked by many content producers and not necessarily understood by audiences - consumption levels may well be underestimated.

**OFCOM AUDIENCE DATA**

The regulator found in 2012 that “use of hyperlocal websites is growing” and that “around 1 in 7 (14 per cent) of people state that they use a local community website on at least a monthly basis.”

In 2014, this time using a weekly metric, Ofcom recorded one in ten saying they use local community websites or apps every week. A separate 2014 study disclosed “almost half (48%) of those who say they use local media say they use the internet for local news information now more than they did two years ago.”

More widely, in 2015, 69 per cent of UK internet users stated they have visited websites or downloaded apps for news about or events in their local community.

**NESTA / KANTAR HYPERLOCAL REACH**

Research published in 2013 by Nesta echoes Ofcom’s earlier view that capturing audience attention is a challenge for the sector. Despite this, Kantar’s fieldwork provided a number of positives, including:

1. Forty-five per cent of all UK adults (53 per cent of those with Internet access) had accessed some form of hyperlocal media.
2. Mobile devices are increasing consumption levels; including frequency of usage. Among those who said that they consumed more hyperlocal content than two years ago, fifty-five per cent claimed this was due to them getting a smartphone and/or a tablet.
3. “Twenty-nine per cent of hyperlocal media users who use a smartphone say they use it to access hyperlocal content every day (equivalent to 7 per cent of UK adults).”

Given the continued growth in take-up of mobile devices - Ofcom notes that 66 per cent of UK adults now own a smartphone - these figures may well have increased in the last two years.
PRACTITIONER SURVEY

Understanding the size of hyperlocal audiences is complicated by the fact that a quarter of online publishers are unaware of their website analytics. The reasons for this may include lack of skills or a lack of interest in traffic data. Nesta’s efforts to explore “a more strategic use of website and social media analytics” may yield some valuable outputs for the sector.

Among publishers who are aware of their audience size, there is considerable variance.

- Two producers claimed a monthly average of over 100,000 unique users
- 33 reported claim between 10,000 and 100,000
- The remaining 55 were below 10,000.

The average number of unique visitors to UK hyperlocals is 17,270, although, as the researchers note, “this is skewed by a small number of sites with large audiences.” The median number of page impressions in this cohort was 5,039.

WHAT AUDIENCES WANT

Ofcom has attributed key benefits of local media as being “things I need to know to help me live in my local area” and “things I want to know to feel like I belong in my local area.” Nesta’s work with Kantar reinforces this view. Survey respondents identified, weather, news and entertainment as the most popular types of content they accessed.

Not surprisingly, Nesta found that different topic genres appeal to different age groups. Their analysis found that “life–stage factors influence consumption of hyperlocal media.” For example:

“Younger respondents (16–34) place a greater importance on information about restaurants, clubs and bars and sports than those aged 35–54, while those aged 55 and over place more emphasis on local arts and cultural events than the youngest age group (16–34).”

Figure 2: Hyperlocal media use ranked by topic genres
THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL

Social media is increasingly important as a tool for sharing and finding content. Subsequently, it is no surprise that hyperlocal publishers are active on these mediums. 91 per cent of UK producers featured in 2014’s publisher survey reported that they use Twitter and 79 per cent use Facebook.

Despite being a smaller social network across the general population, Twitter is a more popular social channel for UK hyperlocal publishers than Facebook.

- Nine per cent of respondents have more than 10,001 Twitter followers;
- Thirteen per cent between 5,001 and 10,000;
- 37 per cent between 1,001 and 5,000 followers;
- The remaining 40 per cent have attracted fewer than 1,000.

On Facebook, six per cent of the practitioner survey respondents have more than 10,000 likes, 32 per cent have between 1,001 and 10,000; and the majority (62 per cent) have fewer than 1,000.

Given the greater popularity of Facebook with the overall internet population, this may be an area where hyperlocals should focus more attention.

THE RISE OF VIDEO

The advent of smartphones and tablets, cheaper data packages and 3G/4G mobile connectivity have all contributed to changes in online content consumption. Alongside greater social media usage, video is increasingly popular, particularly in bite-sized chunks on sites using responsive design.

Given these trends, hyperlocal publishers need to ensure that they are not left behind, and that they provide content in the formats that reflect consumer habits and preferences. Cisco predicts by 2018, globally, video will account for 80 per cent of all IP traffic. They also note that “last year’s mobile data traffic was nearly 30 times the size of the entire global Internet in 2000.”

Although there are exceptions such as Your Thurrock, the majority of hyperlocal websites are still very text heavy, with little video or multimedia content; partly because of the time and skill required to produce this material. However, there is a risk that audiences will see sites as old fashioned and irrelevant if they do not accommodate these wider trends.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Publishers may benefit from focusing more of their social media activity on Facebook.

3.2 Further, on-going, research into hyperlocal media consumption will be welcome, using consistent metrics, which will allow for more longitudinal analysis. This should include analysis of the total size of the UK hyperlocal market (no of publishers, income + audience). 500+ websites will, collectively, enjoy substantial reach.

3.3 Tailored tools and training to enable publishers to benefit from consumer trends in mobile, social and video consumption could help to ensure their on-going relevance to local audiences.
PUBLISHER CHARACTERISTICS AND EXPERIENCE

There is no such thing as a typical hyperlocal site; and no such thing as a typical hyperlocal publisher. Just as sites deploy a wide range of different business models so it’s also difficult to apply labels to the people behind them.

This loosely defined sector is made up of many constituent parts. New research by Cardiff University, and others, has provided greater clarity about the background and motivations of this cohort.

KEY POINTS

• Producers of hyperlocal content include trained journalists, community activists and concerned citizens. They do not necessarily describe their work as journalism.

• Seven out of ten producers identify their work as a form of active community participation; more than half define it as local journalism, and more than half as see it as an expression of active citizenship.

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MOTIVATIONS

The drivers behind producing hyperlocal content can vary considerably. Publishers include entrepreneurial journalists, reporters already deeply steeped in a community, as well as community activists, concerned citizens and people with no previous media experience.

These groups have taken advantage of easy to use digital tools such as WordPress, Twitter and Facebook to create hyperlocal channels. Many of them have also embraced opportunities such as C4CJ’s MOOC to more develop their skills and enhance their knowledge. Retired journalist Geraldine Durrant, Editor of East Grinstead Online, is just one person who fell into this camp:

“As weekly print editions across the UK continue to fold, I have long thought it was about time someone – and I had no thought at all of it being me – started an online news site covering the town from within the town, and not from miles away. So for the past two or three years I have been waiting for someone to do just that, and had someone done so I would have been delighted to pile in and give them a hand. But no-one did. And eventually I realised no-one was better placed to do it than I was.”

Geraldine took part in C4CJ’s 2014 MOOC in community journalism and kept in touch for further support and advice. Her site now attracts c.50,000 unique visitors a month. More than 10,000 people participated in 2015’s MOOC and analysis by Cardiff University found “over 40 per cent of learners are already community journalists, or intend to set up or contribute to a community news site.”

PREVIOUS MEDIA EXPERIENCE

Respondents to 2014’s Hyperlocal Practitioners survey reflected the diversity of the sector; with respondents split almost 50:50 between those with previous - and current - media experience and those who stated that they had no formal media - or journalistic - training.
SELF-DEFINED LABELS

Interestingly, many publishers would not describe what they do as journalism, even though much of their output would seem to be highly journalistic in practice. In a post-Leveson world, there remains a deep distrust – in some quarters - of these labels. Instead, the survey revealed:

- Seven out of 10 producers identify their work as a form of active community participation, more than half define it as local journalism, and more than half as see it as an expression of active citizenship.
- 56.7 per cent self-identify as producers of local journalism, and 42.6 per cent as citizen journalists. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Figure 3: What sort of journalistic training or experience have you had, if any? (n=144)

RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Repeating the Hyperlocal Practitioner Survey every couple of years will enable us to observe change in the sector over time. This will include the media experience levels of practitioners, subjects they cover, audience reach, income levels and their specific needs.

4.2 This evidence base should subsequently be used as the basis for determining the most beneficial areas of on-going support and intervention from funders and policy makers.

4.3 The work of C4CJ shows the benefit of providing on-going advice to (often lone) publishers and offering a platform for networking and discussion. The Centre currently has 3,350 Twitter followers and 760 subscribers to its regular newsletter. This should continue.
KEY POINTS

- There are a wide range of different business and service models across the sector. They are often unique to a given locality and not necessarily replicable or scalable.

- Publishers are embracing different income sources to achieve sustainability; although not everyone is doing this to make money.

- There is a strong current of volunteerism, but there is also a growing cohort of entrepreneurs who work full-time in the sector, often with little long-term job security.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

Just as audiences have very different perceptions66 of what constitutes local, so hyperlocal publishers also define their coverage locality in different ways.

“This suggests that the phrase “hyperlocal news” might be better understood as referring to an emergent generation of community journalists, and perhaps their approaches to news production, rather than their geographical space.”67

INCOME LEVELS

Not all publishers are involved in hyperlocal to make money, although some are. This finding from 2014’s Hyperlocal Survey found that “not enough time available” was the key barrier to expansion identified by publishers, rather than “more money”. Eight out of ten had ambitions to expand their site, but nearly three-quarters cited lack of time as the principal barrier to growth.68

Figure 4: In general, which of the below best describes the sort of geographic area your content covers? (n=157)
For those wanting to engage in hyperlocal media as a full-time, or part-time job, there’s no doubt that “making it pay” - in the form of grants, sponsorship or advertising - can be an issue. The number of publishers doing this full-time has grown, but “most community journalists cannot devote the same level of human resources to news production as their professional counterparts.”

Reasons for this include financial stability, the long-term sustainability of their business model and the lack of editorial and institutional support (e.g. legal, technical, business development etc.) that larger organisations enjoy as standard. These issues can lead to a vicarious existence.

“Around a third of our participants make money, mostly quite modest amounts: 12 per cent say they make less than £100 per month, for instance, but 13 per cent say they generate more than £500 per month.”

Others, accounting for nearly two thirds of respondents (63 per cent) reported that they pay all site associated costs themselves. “Just one in six,” the survey found, “make enough to return a profit, whether that is paid to themselves or others, or reinvested in the site.”

Figure 5: Do you pay all the costs yourself, or do you raise money from the site to cover them, however small (excluding the cost of your own time)? (n=171)
INCOME SOURCES

Many hyperlocal publishers have become adept at creating a diverse income base. This can include print products, secondary consulting/training services and digital advertising for their primary online output.

In the past year we’ve also seen examples of successful crowdfunding efforts from both A Little Bit of Stone and Brixton Blog and Bugle to help cover staff costs. The Crowdfunder platform has, to date, successfully supported seven UK hyperlocal initiatives, raising just under £40,000.

One of these, The Bristol Cable, raised £3,300 in April 2014 and now receives around £300 every month from regular membership contributions. It publishes a quarterly magazine with a print-run of 10,000, as well as online content. The resilience of print as a hyperlocal platform is noticeable, and a number of outlets have deliberately included this in their publication mix to attract digital-wary advertisers.

The hyperlocal publisher survey only found a “small sub-sample” generating income. Those who did were asked about their sources, which were led by advertising and publishers own money.

INCOME POTENTIAL

In 2013 Nesta published detailed insights, produced by Oliver and Ohlbaum, into the UK’s hyperlocal advertising market. Prior to this there had been no independent assessment of the potential for the sector to attract sufficient revenues to grow and expand.

Nesta reported that “advertisers who are most likely to be interested in hyperlocal advertising are those who serve a small geographic catchment area.” However they also found that:

“The research we have published does not provide heartening reading for hyperlocal media services. It suggests that big brands will place their ads on location-based platforms rather than spend money with geographically-specific services. Facebook and Google are much more likely to collect advertising spend by providing content relevant to your location than, say, a blog about Birmingham.”

They also asked small, local, businesses across the UK if they advertised with local hyperlocal publishers.
Responses revealed that although some do, these numbers were unlikely to increase significantly.

Any potential increase was likely to be instead of using current local advertising channels (e.g. directories, search, social networks or local papers) rather than supplementary spending, or through the identification of a new - as yet untapped - class of local advertiser.

THE FINANCIAL FUTURE

Nesta’s research, lessons learned at C4CJ, and the work of the Carnegie UK Trust in working directly with publishers, suggests that for the majority of hyperlocal publishers some sort of public financial intervention will be needed to help sustain - and potentially grow - the sector.

This may come from, as yet unexplored, sources of income, or areas where precedents for intervention already exist. This could include:

- Usage of unallocated funds set aside for local digital television programme services (L-DTPS), from who the BBC can buy and publish/broadcast content.
- Fair access to local government and NHS advertising budgets, including for health campaigns and statutory notices.
- Partnerships with other local organisations - such as the Tinder Foundation and Digital Unite - who have an interest in community and capacity building.
- Contestable funding, innovation prizes, a one-off contribution from Google and/or other intermediaries or industry levies.

These approaches merit consideration given the continued precarious nature of most hyperlocal sites, including those that have been established for a long-time. Addressing this is important for the long-term sustainability of the sector as well as ensuring that old, experienced, hands – as well as new entrants – are all able to make hyperlocal a commercially viable reality, should they wish to do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Successful business models need to be further analysed so that the lessons learned from these case studies can inspire, and inform, entrepreneurs and other publishers.

5.2 The financial value of the sector - in terms of hyperlocal advertising and volunteer time - is currently unknown. This would be valuable to understand and monitor over time.

5.3 There is a need for ongoing financial support to help fund the sector, using new – or tried and tested – interventions. This could aid salaries, overheads, training and other critical needs such as indemnity insurance and legal support.
**KEY POINTS**

- Hyperlocal media helps to hold local bodies to account. They do this through covering political issues, campaigns and investigative reporting.
- The advent of bottom-up hyperlocal services may help to offset job losses and content gaps from traditional media.
- Hyperlocal sites can encourage participation from audiences who otherwise might feel disenfranchised from the political process or previously disengaged.

The media plays a vital role in holding political bodies to account and encouraging an informed citizenry. This function is especially important at a time of cuts to services, the continued devolution of powers at a national and city/local level, and important debates such as the in/out EU referendum.

Yet, the majority of citizens are increasingly disengaged with the political process. Although there are exceptions – such as the Scottish Referendum for independence in 2014 – voter turnout since 2001 has consistently been below previous levels.\textsuperscript{56} This is matched by reduced numbers of political party memberships\textsuperscript{67} and the public continuing to hold politicians in low esteem.\textsuperscript{81}

**PROVIDING A NEW TIER OF LOCAL REPORTING**

Hyperlocal media can address some of these local reporting needs “at a time when traditional local media providers continue to find themselves under financial pressure”.\textsuperscript{82}

Of course hyperlocal publishers also find themselves under pressure, often financially and in terms of time. But they can, nonetheless, provide valuable content and engage audiences who are not your typical local media consumer. Of The Lincolnite’s audience, for example, 40 per cent are under 30 years old\textsuperscript{83} and the site has 70,000 followers on social media in an area of 100,000 people.

Sometimes the lines between this reporting and campaigning can become a little blurred. But this combination has often been necessary in order to engage audiences with important local issues. Sites like Broughton Spurtle in North Edinburgh, through their more localised output, have sought “to stir the neighbourhood up a little bit, to try and get people interested and proactive about issues such as politics, planning and the local environment.”\textsuperscript{84}

**REMOVING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION**

Media analyst Claire Enders told the Leveson Inquiry that 40 per cent of jobs in the UK regional press have gone over a five year period\textsuperscript{75} and these losses continue on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{66} This results in citizens having reduced access to local information and diminished accountability mechanisms.

Ofcom’s Internet Citizens Report 2014 found that 12 per cent of online users have contacted their local Councillor...
or MP, with only 3 per cent doing so on a quarterly basis.87

This suggests that intermediaries continue to matter.

Hyperlocal publishers can help remove barriers to participation and engaging audiences where they already are; through the use of embedded widgets such as FixMyStreet, alongside the opportunity to put questions to your local councillor.

"We keep a rolling survey of our users at FixMyStreet, and consistently, over 50% say that they’ve never contacted their council before – so FixMyStreet is opening new channels, and empowering people."88

On Facebook the Port Talbot Magnet provides a space where locals can create and publish their own news, as well as content produced by the PTM team. "The result is a more organic participatory shaping of the community’s news ecology from the bottom up, rather than one dominated by individual professional journalists and traditional one-to-many modes of publication."89

2015 GENERAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

The potential of hyperlocal media90 was evident during the 2015 general election.91 Trinity-Mirror’s David Higgerson, writing on his personal blog, provided an excellent round-up of examples of hyperlocal election coverage.92 This included:

- A Little Bit of Stone’s candidate interviews for the local elections
- Wrexham.com’s round-up of coverage from other media outlets in their area.
- Bournville Village opting for a detailed Q and A format among candidates.
- Audioboom interviews with candidates on The Edinburgh Reporter.

Other examples of General Election coverage from hyperlocal publishers included:

- Live coverage of the count from Newport, Isle of Wight
- Creation of a dedicated election hub by Tongwynlais for Cardiff North; and
- Live tweeting from hustings and details of where to vote (Kings Cross Environment)

Perhaps the most high profile event during this period was a partnership between The Lincolnite and BBC Radio Lincolnshire and The Lincolnshire Echo. This resulted in The Lincoln Debate,93 in which all of the 2015 General Election parliamentary candidates for Lincoln participated. The event was streamed live on The Lincolnite and Lincolnshire Echo websites; local radio; and online on BBC Radio Lincolnshire, uploaded to YouTube94 and linked to in online columns and analysis.

PLURALITY OF VOICES

Outside of these election periods both mainstream and hyperlocal media tend to provide reduced coverage to a range of different voices. Mainstream local news increasingly relies more on official sources and PR as a result of their being fewer journalists on the ground.95

Some hyperlocal outlets have a good relationship with local Councils. Others often by-pass them in the story process as they feel that Council press offices are increasingly just PR machines.

"When asked whether he balances his critical coverage of Tower Hamlets Council with quotes from relevant officers he (Mark Baynes of Love Wapping) told us:"
I don’t see why I should, as a resident, ring the town hall up or anybody else … Because I know all they’re going to give me is the usual bullshit. So what’s the point? And they’ve got a huge media machine … I don’t see, to be quite honest, why any hyperlocal should. Because if you look at it in the broader context of media and communications in our society: if Tower Hamlets wants to get on TV, they can get on TV. They can send a press release to the East London Advertiser [the local weekly newspaper] … and they literally print the press release.”

Improving relationships between hyperlocal publishers and local authorities may help address concerns about the declining number of sources used in local media, although neither party is necessary clamouring for any change in dynamic. This may mean that these types of concerns are more academic and theoretical, rather than a reflection of the continuing day-to-day reality for publishers and public bodies alike.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

6.1 The loss of traditional media, particularly newspapers, may impact voter turnout and political engagement. More research needs to be undertaken in this area, to see if there is a direct link between media not spots and turnout and what difference hyperlocal can/cannot make.

6.2 Hyperlocal outlets should be further included in academic analysis of local media content (e.g. plurality of voice, original reporting, number of sources spoken to etc.)

6.3 Case studies showcasing the work produced by hyperlocals during the 2015 election period would better inform practitioners and policymakers about the value of this output.

6.4 The sector could benefit from the creation of more plugins like the FixMyStreet widget, which they can deploy directly on their site.
MEDIA PLURALITY

KEY POINTS:

- Plurality of voice matters at a local - as well as national - level.
- Hyperlocal publishers contribute to media plurality by providing secondary - and sometimes - the only voice in the reporting of local issues.
- Plurality matters to audiences. Ofcom identified in 2009 that 92 per cent of adults consume local media, with 88 per cent using multiple sources for local news and information.

POLICY CONTEXT

In June 2012 Ofcom published their first report on measuring media plurality,98 followed by further supplementary advice in October 201299 and a proposed measurement framework for media plurality in March 2015.100 This work derived from formal requests by the Secretary of State (Culture, Media and Sport) to explore these issues.

As Ofcom notes: “Media plurality helps to support a democratic society by ensuring citizens are informed by a diverse range of views and by preventing too much influence over political processes by one media owner or outlet.”101 The regulator also states “the availability, consumption and impact of news media are all relevant measures of plurality,” concluding that “consumption measures, such as volume, reach and how consumers multi-source news, are the most important.”

Ofcom’s media plurality work has covered both online and offline media, given the role that digital channels play in news consumption. 90 per cent of the UK’s adult population is online; and research from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has reported that 70 per cent of the UK’s online population consumes news from online sources on a weekly basis.102

LOCAL AND HYPERLOCAL CONTEXT

Although much discussion of media plurality focusses on UK-wide media, its sentiments are equally applicable to the devolved nations as well as the local and hyperlocal news arena.

Ofcom - with a predominant focus on media plurality through an ownership - has suggested “for local areas (below the level of a nation), we believe the issues facing local media are more about sustainability than plurality.”103 However, a number of advocates for the hyperlocal and local media sector take a different view, arguing this approach may result in vital local issues going unreported.

“...It is at the local level that the vast majority of citizens interact with hospitals, schools, transport systems, the police and elected council representatives,” a recent University of Westminster project exploring Media Power & Plurality has noted.104

“...And yet, the direction of travel at local level – towards greater consolidation of media enterprises, relaxation of ownership regimes, lack of support for small media initiatives – has arguably been more severe and more debilitating for democracy than at national level.”

Plurality issues at a local level are inextricably linked with concerns around the democratic deficit, a reality acknowledged in a 2014 report, “Addressing the Democratic Deficit in Local News through Positive Plurality” from the Media Standards Trust.105

Local newspapers, they said, were “increasingly unable to perform the role we expect of our Fourth Estate at a local level”106 and this gap is not being filled by armchair auditors (as the Government had hoped)107 or the UK’s new local digital television sector. With the right support, they felt, “hyperlocal sites may become central to maintaining the accountability of public authorities in the future.”
It’s a view shared by UCL’s Judith Townend, who has argued:  

“...both the current activities and aspirations of most hyperlocal sites suggests a potentially major role in compensating for the decline of traditional local media and making a genuine contribution to local plurality, by providing local knowledge, holding local elites accountable and helping local people lobby for change.”

NEW ENTRANTS, PERSPECTIVES AND VOICES

The relatively low cost manner in which hyperlocal content can be published has helped to democratise media creation. Anyone can create a Tumblr, Facebook, WordPress or Twitter feed which tackles local issues and provides local news and information. This enables communities without independent online media such as Turriff in Scotland, or where traditional media has exited an area – as in Port Talbot – to have a voice.

In turn, these low barriers to entry can encourage different voices and communities to be involved in news creation. It is no longer the preserve of trained journalists, local elites or existing media companies. Groups underrepresented in the media industry such as BMEs, people with disabilities or older demographics, can all benefit from this democratisation. The progression route hyperlocal can provide to mainstream media may also help tackle diversity in the wider industry too.

A FRESH APPROACH

To fully unlock the democratic and human capital potential afforded by UK hyperlocal media will, however, require a different attitude to plurality issues. As the Media Standards Trust has noted:

“Plurality in news and information is generally discussed in negative terms. In other words, policymakers tend to think about how to reduce or break up media monopolies or oligopolies. Positive plurality, in the sense of encouraging new entrants and helping smaller players to grow, is far less often discussed.”

Yet, as Ofcom has acknowledged, any measurement framework for media plurality needs to consider both "defensive measures which prevent actions taking place that would reduce media plurality... and mechanisms to promote media plurality..."  

Positive plurality, in this sense, can be derived at by ensuring that hyperlocal outlets can access competitive funding pots - such as the local TV subsidy - as well as technical support from Facebook, Google and other technological gatekeepers.

To do this, as the Carnegie UK Trust has said, Ofcom’s assessment of the media market must include hyperlocal outlets in their analysis of media availability, consumption, and impact. Ofcom’s own research has consistently shown there is a small, but growing audience for these local news and information channels. Overlooking this audience in any assessment framework therefore risks providing an incomplete picture and further reducing sector visibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Media plurality needs to be mapped at a local, as well as regional and national level to ensure diversity of voice and ownership.

7.2 Given the popularity of hyperlocal services we encourage Ofcom to include these in any media plurality framework.

7.3 Funding may be needed to encourage new voices and market entrants in order to preserve, or facilitate greater plurality at a local level.
Discoverability has long been an issue for the UK’s hyperlocal media sector. Yet evidence suggests that some audience members are regular hyperlocal consumers. A key challenge for hyperlocal publishers is therefore to increase consciousness of their offering.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL VISIBILITY**

Search engines and social networks are increasingly the gatekeepers to online material. As a result, all publishers need to understand the algorithms that drive these content discovery systems. This is essential to ensuring your content is visible and highly ranked in search results. For hyperlocal publishers the geo-tagging of content is also becoming increasingly important.

Major media companies have dedicated teams to focus on search engine optimisation (SEO), audience analysis and big data, as well as changes implemented by major platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Google. In contrast, hyperlocal publishers do not enjoy the same levels of technical or human resources. Subsequently, they risk being left behind.

A 2013 report commissioned by Nesta, and produced by Mavens of London, identified the critical importance of appropriate SEO if audiences are to find hyperlocal content. Their analysis also highlighted how national platforms tend to dominate search results ahead of local publishers.

**AN UNDER-APPRECIATED SKILLSET**

Arguably many hyperlocal outlets underestimate the importance of these digital skills and the role that they can play in bringing wider audiences to their content. “Need more technical skills” was ranked fifth, out of eight potential options, in a 2014 survey of practitioners, where publishers were asked “What do you feel is preventing you from expanding your hyperlocal site?”

Technical skills - which could include a myriad of other abilities such as filming, video editing, or coding - was identified by just 28.3 per cent of respondents as a barrier, behind “more time,” “more volunteers,” money or sales support.

**GOING BACK TO PRINT**

One method deployed by some hyperlocal outlets to increase their visibility with audiences is through the creation of their own print publications. This has been a recurring hyperlocal trend.

Examples include “print-first” titles such as Filton Voice and others like HU17.net and Hackney Citizen who...
have found that a good print product can attract new advertisers, reach audiences who are not online, and facilitate a different route to their digital channels.

The Carnegie UK Trust’s funding for a printed version of the Port Talbot MagNet, for example, meant that hyperlocal news - in an area with a lower than average take up of internet compared with the rest of Wales - could be accessed by everyone.122

PARTNERSHIPS WITH TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Few hyperlocal services enjoy content sharing relationships with larger media organisations. There are exceptions, such as the Birmingham Mail’s Communities Initiative,123 and an informal arrangement between Hedon Blog and the Hull Daily Mail124 (Hedon Blog’s founder, Ray Duffill, also acts as the Hedon correspondent for the weekly Holderness Gazette), but these are in a minority.

Interestingly, a number of these partnerships – such as the relationship between Archant and EverythingEppingForest,125 or that between The City Talking and the Yorkshire Evening Post, involve the distribution of a print product.126

Arguably, partnerships are an area where the BBC can help to take the lead. Nesta has consistently called on the BBC to link from its websites to a broader range of hyperlocal media organisations.127 More recently they have worked with the Carnegie UK Trust and others128 to support the BBC in the Corporation’s efforts to improve linking to external local news stories.129

The BBC’s current consultation “to formalise its commitment to ‘hyperlocal’ bloggers and community news providers online” is a welcome development, as are their plans to establish a twice yearly Hyperlocal Forum, as part of wider efforts to “ensure their [hyperlocals] strongest stories can be showcased on the BBC website.”130

RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Tech companies can support the sector by helping make hyperlocal content more discoverable through the provision of training (e.g. SEO and geo-tagging) and by modifications to their content discovery algorithms.

8.2 Hyperlocal publishers may underestimate their technical training needs. Training from tech companies and others in this arena could, therefore, be particularly beneficial.

8.3 Commercial media players can partner with hyperlocal publishers; thereby improving coverage of ultra-local communities or areas that are not commercially viable to cover.

8.4 The BBC can more actively link to hyperlocal content and purchase material from the sector - using a principle established by the License Fee supported fund for Local TV operators.

8.5 The BBC could also open its archive to hyperlocal publishers. Unlike many of their commercial rivals, who seek to monetise these assets, the BBC is unlikely to monetise old local content.
KEY POINTS

- Many hyperlocal services have delivered campaigns that meet local needs.
- Sites contribute to active communities and the creation of social capital. Their content has civic as well as news and democratic value.
- Local media plays an important role in community identity. The absence and disappearance of local papers can negatively impact on this. In some cases gaps are filled by hyperlocal outlets.

The work of hyperlocal publishers can have a discernible contribution to an area; going beyond news reporting to have a social impact that positively affects local communities. Hyperlocal media also has an emotional function, helping to root people in a community and reflecting a sense of place.

CAMPAIGNS

The most obvious example of the local impact delivered by hyperlocal publishers is through campaigns. Kings Cross Environment has tackled noise pollution from the Cemex concrete plant, while the Hedon Pond campaign saw Yorkshire Water invest £3.5m in odour control and provide compensation in the form of a £50,000 community grants fund as a result of Hedon Blog’s efforts.

A 2014 survey of practitioners revealed a third of hyperlocal publishers have run local campaigns that champion community needs. Many more have covered other people’s campaigns.

These activities can make a substantial difference in the visibility of a hyperlocal outlet. Tipping points for raising awareness can include local campaigns such as Brixton Blog’s successful effort to Save the Lambeth Country Show, or the investigative journalism manifest in The Bristol Cable’s analysis of the University of Bristol’s “ethical investment” policy and other exclusives.

BUILDING ACTIVE COMMUNITIES

Alongside more formal campaigns, hyperlocal sites also provide opportunities for communities to come together to discuss important local issues and to share information. The value of this is especially evident in the on-going success of forums.

Although a hangover from Web 1.0, these platforms - such as East Dulwich Forum or Sheffield Forum - remain remarkably resilient providing a simple, but effective, means for netizens to discuss local news and share tips and local recommendations with one another. Since 2002, 180,000 people have produced nearly 7.6 million posts, on more than half a million topics, on the Sheffield Forum.

Other opportunities to promote engagement include using tools such as the FixMyStreet app. Produced by MySociety, this widget can be embedded on a website so that hyperlocal audiences can report local problems including graffiti, fly tipping, broken paving slabs, or street lighting.

“An ongoing internal survey of our users consistently shows that over 50 per cent have never contacted their local council before,” My Society reports.
**REFLECTING CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Just as local newspapers have historically acted as a record of local life, so hyperlocal websites are also providing a valuable everyday snapshot of everyday life. In recognition of this, the British Library is creating an archive of online hyperlocal content, which will provide a digital record for the nation.

This archive will include local news, as well as other hyperlocal efforts that tell the story of the people and places across the UK. This includes the daily stories produced by Spitalfields Life and the "Voices from the Motherland" strand on Digbeth is Good, both of which offer us an in-depth cultural insight into the rich tapestry of their respective communities.

Hyperlocal services also shine a light on geographic areas – such as the village of Parwich in Derbyshire through to communities such as Port Talbot in Wales which have been deserted, or are too small to cover, by mainstream media. Their presence can be instrumental in helping communities to understand what’s happening in their area, as well as giving people a sense of pride in their locality.

**INSTILLING CIVIC PRIDE**

Hyperlocal websites such as Kings Cross Environment and the erstwhile More Canals than Venice have purposely set out to change perceptions about the beats that they cover.

Perhaps the best manifestation of this ambition was found in the memorably named Birmingham: It’s Not Shit, which spent over a decade covering the UK’s oft-maligned second city. Similarly, Stoke’s Pits ‘n’ Pots, showed there was more to the city than a failing local government.

Meanwhile, after terrorism ‘expert’ Steven Emerson told Fox News viewers earlier this year that Birmingham is “entirely Muslim” and that non-Muslims don’t go into the city, Birmingham Updates encouraged him to apologise and to make a donation to Birmingham Children’s Hospital; which Mr Emerson duly did. His apology, posted by the site, has been retweeted 1,189 times.

Local media plays an important role in helping to forge and reflect local identity. The loss, therefore, of local newspapers can have a noticeable effect on a community. By the same token, the community benefits of hyperlocal websites include information sharing, neighbourly relations, collective efficacy, social inclusion and diversity, belonging and attachment.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

9.1 Research is needed to evaluate the financial value of social capital created by hyperlocal.

9.2 These types of case studies would also benefit from wider distribution.

9.3 This impact should be tracked and reported to show the long-term impact. Such measurement is especially important if there’s increased intervention in the sector, bringing it in line with research into public funding for the Arts, or the impact of National Lottery good causes.
CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

KEY POINTS

• Hyperlocal publishers are often unable to access funds or non-financial resources that other local media outlets can. This needs to be addressed.

• Publishers need to be equipped with the skills to prosper in the current internet age. This includes SEO, audience analysis and provision of video and mobile tailored content.

• The impact of the current and proposed regulatory framework on hyperlocals is confusing and needs urgent clarification.

• Hyperlocal publishers need to be able to share learning and innovation and have a way of organising collective representation and voice to unlock opportunities and tackle barriers.

SECURING THE FINANCIAL FUTURE

“Making it pay” remains the biggest challenge for most publishers. Not everyone is interested in commercialising their approach, but those who are will often find this an uphill struggle.

In markets such as the USA grant funding has helped to ensure a greater level of sustainability for some publishers. It has also inspired new approaches, business models and technologies. Blending sustainability, with mechanisms to drive innovation, would bring multiple benefits to the UK sector.

ACCESS TO LOCAL MEDIA FUNDING

Hyperlocal publishers could benefit from access to unallocated funds set aside for L-DTPS as well as efforts to reform the publication of statutory notices. Both of these endeavours have established the precedent for innovation and a fresh approach. Involving hyperlocal media in this mix could provide tangible financial benefits to the sector.

As the Media Standards Trust notes: “Though no aggregate figures are available it has been estimated that this [statutory notices in local newspapers on traffic, planning, alcohol licensing etc] equates to £45 million to £50 million a year.”

Meanwhile financial support for the UK’s new Local TV network is £40 million for the first three years.

COLLECTIVE VOICE

Unlike other sectors such as newspapers or commercial radio, this emerging sector does not have a trade body in the UK.

“As the hyperlocal industry continues to grow and mature, it may find it beneficial to have a body which can provide publishers with a voice, and which can lead on work with government, policy makers and regulators.

“Given the ‘cottage industry’ nature of hyperlocal media – with many practitioners working in silos – this body could also help share best practice and promote cross-sector debate and discussion...

“Funding such a body will probably not be easy, but the potential merits of such an organisation mean the idea is worth exploring. Having a more cohesive, unified, voice may be needed if hyperlocal media is to move to the next level.”

Some steps have been made in this space, with groups coming together to respond to Ofcom consultations and a joint letter to the new Secretary of State, but these efforts remain embryonic. Further analysis of efforts such as LION Publishers, a US association of Local Independent Online News Publishers, could also yield useful insights that the UK can benefit from.
ACCESS TO LOCAL POLITICAL EVENTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The last UK Government made a number of statements about opening up Council meetings in England to hyperlocal publishers and citizen reporters. These moves - along with efforts to close “Town Hall Pravdas” - appeared genuine, but the reality on the ground has often been more challenging. No such initiatives have been introduced in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Despite the great local reporting undertaken by many hyperlocal outlets - including coverage of Council or planning meetings, election counts and hustings - access and accreditation can still be a challenge. Hyperlocal reporters are often the only media present at some of these events. As a result, support from policy makers and the NUJ in promoting equal access would be welcome.

TO REGULATE, OR NOT TO REGULATE

The new, post-Leveson regulatory world is a potentially complicated one for hyperlocals. But it’s also an area that they need to engage with, given changes in the libel laws later this year which David Wolfe, chair of the Press Recognition Panel (PRP), has said will make it “even easier” for people to take news publishers to court.

It’s a complex arena, with C4CJ and others, seeking to get to grips with the implications of forthcoming legal and regulatory changes, who they will affect, the problems that might raise, as well as the potential benefits available to publishers as a result of joining a regulator.

Key issues to consider include: determining if you are a “relevant publisher,” understanding the possible protections afforded by The Crime and Courts Act 2013 - such as the independent arbitration of complaints which previously may have ended up in court - and deciding whether to “opt-in” and join a regulatory body, even if you are potentially exempt.

Although it looks as though there may be benefits to publishers from this new regime, the regulatory burden - in terms of expense and time - may be off-putting for both existing publishers and those interested in setting up their own site. As a result, more work urgently needs to be done to provide clarity and awareness in the coming months around this vitally important issue.

GATEKEEPERS

Increasingly access to content is being controlled by a number of major technological gatekeepers; such as Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple. There are concerns about the implications of this for journalism and advertising revenues, particularly at a local level.

Nesta’s research has already shown the frequent dominance of national platforms as a source of local advertising, while the Media Standards Trust has talked of a “closing window of opportunity” for “intervention in local news and civic technology”. This is because “transnational new media behemoths are quickly colonising the space.”

As Nesta notes, the biggest risk in this arena is “that advertising revenues which flow to them are leaving the UK’s content economy, reducing the sums available for investing in hyperlocal news and other socially valuable services.”

The potential impact of this could be detrimental to both consumers and content creators alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The opportunity to sell credited content to bbc.co.uk would potentially be a huge boon using a principle for buying local content which has already been established.

10.2 Access to even a small percentage of the £45 million to £50 million a year spent on statutory public notices could also have a demonstrable impact.

10.3 Clarity is needed from politicians and regulators, alongside a clear communications plan, to enable hyperlocal publishers to understand the new press regulation regime and how it impacts on them.

10.4 NUJ accreditation and recognition would boost the standing of the sector and provide much needed support to independent local news publishers.
Since 2012 we have seen a step-change in the empirical evidence base for UK hyperlocal media.

Research by academic institutions, NGOs and regulators, have all deepened our understanding about the audiences, content and business models found across this sector.

As a result, we have the strongest indication yet of the civic and public value UK hyperlocal media creates in undertaking a range of journalistic and community outputs; from holding authority to account, through to running campaigns and reporting on local events.

However, despite this increased recognition and understanding, the core issues that challenge the ongoing success of UK hyperlocal media remain unchanged. These issues include:

- Sustainability - both financial and personnel
- Funding
- Discoverability
- Access to non-financial resources and services
- Recognition by traditional media, politicians and regulators

There has been progress in all of these areas in the past three years. But, this progress has not been sufficient to provide the sector with any degree of long-term certainty. For too many providers their existence remains hand-to-mouth and this has an inevitable impact on both sustainability and the appeal of the sector to new entrants.

Unlike other media groups, hyperlocal publishers do not belong to a trade body, and they do not have ready access to politicians to help make their case. As a result, their contribution to UK journalism and our local communities can be easily overlooked.

This report has analysed the current evidence base and identified opportunities and challenges for the future of hyperlocal media and community journalism in the UK.

In doing this, we have sought to show their impact and to demonstrate what we know about the sector. We believe that this shows a vibrant sector that delivers public value to society.

But if the UK’s hyperlocal media industry is to grow it is likely to need help. At a time of continued pressures on traditional media and media plurality, and increased devolution of political powers at a national, regional and local level, the need for hyperlocal media is greater than ever.

It’s time for politicians, policy makers and public media players to give them a helping hand. The value derived from this activity could benefit everyone. What happens next is up to you.
## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO.</th>
<th>RECOMMENDATIONS</th>
<th>RESEARCHERS / ACADEMICS</th>
<th>POLICY MAKERS</th>
<th>HYPERLOCAL PUBLISHERS</th>
<th>INDUSTRY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Regular monitoring of size and scale of sector; including incentives for publishers to self-register.</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
<td>Regular census of sites – including the frequency and types of content they produce.</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
<td>Ofcom to continue charting usage of hyperlocal and community media, alongside traditional media.</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>New mindset, or approach, to intervention to avoid investment falling further behind other markets.</td>
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<td>2.1</td>
<td>Re-run 2012 content analysis, using the revised Weblist database, to observe potential changes.</td>
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<td>2.2</td>
<td>Share more widely case studies captured by C4CJ, the Carnegie UK Trust and others.</td>
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<td>2.3</td>
<td>Identify the societal impact of campaigns to demonstrate the role of this sector at a grassroots level.</td>
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<td>Publishers may benefit from focusing more social media activity on Facebook.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Analysis of the total size of the UK hyperlocal market (no of publishers, income + audience) for 500+ websites to show collective reach, income etc.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>4.1</td>
<td>Tailored tools and training to enable publishers to benefit from trends in mobile, social and video.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>4.2</td>
<td>Repeated Hyperlocal Practitioner Survey every couple of years to observe change over time, including media experience levels of practitioners, subjects they cover, audience reach, income etc.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>4.3</td>
<td>This evidence base should be used as the basis for determining the most beneficial areas of on-going support and intervention from funders and policy makers.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>The work of C4CJ should continue as it shows the benefit of providing on-going advice to publishers and offering a platform for networking and discussion.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>The financial value of the sector - in terms of hyperlocal advertising and volunteer time - is unknown. This would be valuable to understand and monitor.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>There is a need for ongoing financial support to help fund the sector; using new – or tried and tested – interventions to provide support for salaries, overheads, training and other critical needs.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>6.1</td>
<td>The potential of traditional media may impact voter turnout and political engagement. Research if there is a direct link between media not spots and turnout and what difference hyperlocal can/cannot make.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>6.2</td>
<td>Hyperlocal included in academic analysis of local media content (e.g. plurality of voice, original reporting, number of sources etc.)</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>6.3</td>
<td>Case studies showcasing the work produced by hyperlocals during the 2015 election period would better inform practitioners and policymakers about the value of this output.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>6.4</td>
<td>Creation of more plugins like the FixMyStreet widget which hyperlocals can deploy on their site.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>7.1</td>
<td>Media plurality needs to be mapped at a local, as well as regional and national level to ensure diversity of voice and ownership.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>7.2</td>
<td>We encourage Ofcom to include hyperlocal services in any media plurality framework.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>7.3</td>
<td>Funding may be needed to encourage new voices and market entrants to preserve, or facilitate greater plurality at a local level.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>8.1</td>
<td>Tech companies can support the sector by making hyperlocal content more discoverable through training (e.g. SEO and geo-tagging) and by modifications to their content discovery algorithms.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>8.2</td>
<td>Hyperlocal publishers may underestimate their technical training needs. Training from tech companies and others in this arena could, therefore, be particularly beneficial.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>8.3</td>
<td>Commercial media players can partner with hyperlocal publishers; improving coverage of ultra-local communities or areas that are not commercially viable to cover.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>8.4</td>
<td>The BBC can more actively link to hyperlocal content and purchase material from the sector – using a principle established by the License Fee supported fund for Local TV operators.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>8.5</td>
<td>The BBC could open its archive to hyperlocal publishers. Unlike many of their commercial rivals, who seek to monetise these assets, the BBC is unlikely to monetise old local content.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>9.1</td>
<td>Research is needed to evaluate the financial value of social capital created by hyperlocal.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>9.2</td>
<td>These types of case studies would also benefit from wider distribution.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>9.3</td>
<td>This impact should be tracked and reported over time to show the long-term impact. This is especially important if there’s increased intervention in the sector, and is in line with research into public funding for the Arts, or the impact of National Lottery good causes.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>10.1</td>
<td>The opportunity to sell, credited, content to bbc.co.uk would potentially be a huge boon using a principle for buying local content which has already been established.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>10.2</td>
<td>Access to even a small percentage of the £45 million to £50 million a year spent on statutory public notices could have a demonstrable impact.</td>
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<td>✔️</td>
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<td>10.3</td>
<td>Clarity is needed from politicians and regulators, alongside a clear communications plan, to enable hyperlocal publishers to understand the new press regulation regime and how it impacts on them.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>10.4</td>
<td>NUJ accreditation and recognition would boost the standing of the sector and provide much-needed support to independent local news publishers.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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ENDNOTES


87. http://www.guardian.co.uk/campaign/2013/feb/11/newspaper-closures-what-happens-to-advertisers-

88. http://www.guardian.co.uk/campaign/2013/feb/11/newspaper-closures-what-happens-to-advertisers-

89. Zamperelli, Theodore, Katerina Alexiou, Gota Alexandre, Caroline Chapman, Shawn Sobers and


91. CAJ provided a useful guide for community journalists on how to cover the election


94. Schulhofer-Wohl, Sam, and Miguel

95. Analysis of the 2007 closure of The Cincinnati Post, by Princeton economics Professor Sam Schulhen-Wohl was determined to have resulted in lower voter participation. Schulhen-Wohl, Sam, and Miguel

96. attended an independent/fee-paying school, double the proportion of the UK population (7%).

97. over 35, this compares to 64% of the UK working population” and that “14% of the workforce

98. the 11% across the wider UK working population.” It also reported that “52% of the workforce are aged

99. See, for example, the House of Lords Communications Committee 2014 report on Media Plurality, HL

100. http://www.lords.parliament.uk/communities/communications


108. http://www.filtonvoice.co.uk/

109. http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/in-your-area/

110. http://kingscrossenvironment.com/ and http://morecanalsthanvenice.wordpress.com/2014/06/30/so-

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154. Professor Steven Barnett, evidence to House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, Inquiry


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159. http://mediastandardstrust.org/mst-news/addressing-the-democratic-deficit-in-local-news-through-


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166. http://mediastandardstrust.org/mst-news/addressing-the-democratic-deficit-in-local-news-through-


This report has been written for Nesta and Cardiff University by Damian Radcliffe.

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Damian has written and spoken extensively about hyperlocal media and community journalism for organisations such as for Nesta, Cardiff University and C4CJ, BBC College of Journalism, TEDx Reset (Istanbul), journalism.co.uk, TheMediaBriefing, Online Journalism Blog, Street Fight, Abramis Academic Publishing and the Centre for Research on Communities and Culture at Canterbury Christ Church University.

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