A new symbiosis? Opportunities and challenges to hyperlocal journalism in the digital age

Andrea Carson, Denis Muller, Jennifer Martin and Margaret Simons
The University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract
This article draws on ‘hyperlocal’ journalism scholarship to explore the civic functions of Australian local reporting in the digital age. Through place-based case studies based on interviews with media and civic leaders from three disparate communities, we find community groups are engaging with social media, particularly Facebook, to connect locals to services and community news. Community service providers are increasingly adept at using social media and, in many cases, prefer it to legacy media to gather, disseminate and exchange news. Concurrently, legacy media have lost newsroom resources that limit their practice of ‘shoe leather’ journalism and increase their dependence on official sources without independent verification. Yet, journalists are adapting to newsroom cutbacks by forming symbiotic relationships with non-media news providers, including local police. We find there are promising alternatives for fostering civic discourse and engagement through digital technologies despite less traditional local news and a reduced capacity for verified journalism.

Keywords
Australian local journalism, civic function, communicative social capital, community engagement, hyperlocal journalism, local news, public sphere, social media

Introduction
Since the commercialisation of the Internet, the monopoly relationship between advertising and commercially sponsored journalism in developed economies has decoupled, placing many commercial news outlets under financial duress (Picard, 2008). This has led to pessimistic assessments about the viability of traditional news journalism to adequately inform the public sphere and fulfil ‘fourth estate’ functions (Dahlgren, 2009; Franklin, 2008; Schudson, 2008). According to Schudson (2008: 24), these functions include providing information, investigation, analysis, social empathy,
public forum, mobilisation and publicising representative democracy. Schudson’s categories are important here because they provide a conceptual framework for considering how news journalism can strengthen democratic civic society.

However, at the same time, the commercial media’s concentrated ownership structures and reliance on advertising have led some scholars to contend that the political–economic media environment emphasises consumerism and favours supporting elite agendas at the expense of an informed citizenry (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2000). This perspective on news media has some purchase in Australia because of Australia’s high concentration of media ownership. Australia’s two major newspaper companies, Fairfax Media and News Corporation Australia, together control more than 90% of the daily newspaper circulation (Tiffen, 2010: 147). As well as highly concentrated levels of ownership, Australia’s commercial media outlets employ fewer journalists than in the past. An estimated 3000 Australian media jobs have been lost since 2012 (Christensen, 2013), potentially creating pockets of deficits in traditional news coverage, including regional journalism (Simons et al., 2016). Australia’s major media companies have cut costs because of revenue falls exacerbated by digital technologies and fierce competition for advertising that, in turn, has driven down advertising’s unit cost (Carson, 2015: 1035). While online readership of Australia’s daily newspapers is at record highs, revenues from paywalls and digital advertising have not yet matched revenues lost from hardcopy advertising necessary to sustain large newsrooms (Carson, 2015: 1038).

In this environment, the contribution of local journalism to the functioning of a democratic society has taken on greater importance (Friedland, 1996; Harte et al., 2016; Kurpius et al., 2010; Nielsen, 2015). This is particularly salient in Australia, where a small population scattered over a large continent makes localism highly significant. Moreover, there is already a shift by media organisations to concentrate and centralise in large cities what have been, until now, local news operations (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), 2015). This was foreseen by the 2012 Australian inquiry into the state of the news media, which concluded, ‘There is some evidence that both regional radio and television stations and newspapers have cut back substantially on their news gathering, leaving some communities poorly served for local news’ (Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE), 2012: 60).

This article explores the effect of these structural changes to traditional news media and the role and capacity of Australian local journalism, in various forms, to contribute to civic life. The research findings come from three community case studies where we also examine opportunities and challenges for hyperlocal journalism in the digital age.

Scholars who have examined hyperlocal journalism (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014; Harte et al., 2016; Kurpius et al., 2010; Paulussen and D’Heer, 2013) characterise it by its narrow focus on a handful of topics or geographical areas. Hyperlocal media can vary widely in its funding sources, size of staff and audiences and journalism training. For example, in their study of hyperlocal media in a Belgian community, Paulussen and D’Heer (2013: 599) found that citizen journalists selected story topics differently to professional journalists. Citizen journalists were more inclined to write news stories based on personal interests or experiences (characterised in the research as ‘soft’ news) and to use themselves as the source, while professional journalists were more likely to select ‘hard’ news story topics and use official institutional sources like the police and courts.

A Dutch study found hyperlocal news can counter community harms caused by ‘professional’ norms of news selection by mainstream media (Meijer, 2013: 25). Meijer argues that continuous, sensationalised negative news coverage can be ‘painful’ to local citizens and negatively distort how residents view their neighbourhood. She found hyperlocal journalism, by its participatory nature, can facilitate and more accurately represent reflections of everyday life to create a more nuanced account of ‘neighbourhood reality’.
Some also see hyperlocal journalism as providing an optimistic narrative about the future of journalism that contrasts with pervasive narratives of traditional media decline described earlier. Harte et al. (2016) argue that ‘hyperlocal’s promise is articulated as an innovative, bottom-up, technology-led, alternative to the institutionalised model of news production’ (p. 234). Kurpius et al. (2010) consider the broad aim of hyperlocal journalism as to ‘fill the gap in public affairs coverage left by the shrinking traditional media’ (p. 359). This study explores this broad aim by examining both traditional local reporting and new forms of sharing local information by non-media entities, such as community groups seeking to communicate directly with locals, in three disparate Australian communities. In doing so, it is recognised here that the term journalism has a broader application than in the pre-digital era.

To define civic function, we begin with Friedland’s (1996) notion that civic/public journalism is inclusive. It must be, by necessity, because civic journalism ‘revolves around the proposition that news institutions depend on a vibrant public and civic life for their own survival’ (p. 46). While news outlets may be neutral on what solutions best fix community problems, they are not neutral on the desire for public life to flourish (Friedland, 1996: 46). Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ thesis and the pivotal role of newspapers to support the ‘imagined community’, Friedland argues that local media are vital to how citizens come to understand their communities beyond their own personal experience. If, as Friedland proffers, local news journalism is invested in civic life, we argue that one way to ascertain local journalism’s contribution to democratic civic society is by reference to the ‘ideal’ functions of journalism identified by Schudson, as described earlier.

Of course, these functions are not necessarily limited to traditional news media but can be fulfilled by social media and hyperlocal news platforms. What is more, digital media are challenging the underlying, long-held principles of journalistic objectivity, once central to legacy media’s methodology. Online discussion groups, political blogs and online deliberations, both within (i.e. below-the-line comments) and outside mainstream media, have opened up new fora for political discussion and everyday talk about politics that can lead to greater public participation and engagement (Wright and Street, 2007). Some studies (see Domingo et al., 2008; Lewis et al., 2010) explore hybridity between new and old forms of local news reporting and have examined how local newspapers approach citizen journalism in their publications. They have found mixed results with some editors rejecting incorporating citizen journalism precisely because of professional journalism concerns relating to objectivity, accuracy and ethical considerations. Other editors were accommodating, often for practical reasons. They used citizen journalism to overcome staff and resource shortages and to extend the community reach and expertise of the newspaper. In these cases, many citizen contributions were still subject to an editor’s overview, thus demonstrating the continued existence of media gatekeeping.

Molyneux and Holton (2015) also remind us that journalistic practice and norms are changing in the digital environment. Journalists use social media to develop their own brand identity and/or to promote their organisation’s brand. In their study of 41 reporters and editors from US newspapers, they found many journalists engaged in individual branding practices by promoting themselves as special information providers and/or they used social media to promote their role within their media organisations (organisational branding). The researchers noted that ‘such behavior does not fit within long-held notions of journalistic objectivity and the separation of editorial and advertising practices in many parts of the world, both of which continue to be reshaped by technology and audience expectations’ (Molyneux and Holton, 2015: 226). However, they concluded positively, arguing that journalists ‘are uniquely positioned to offer both personal and organizational branding that can enrich the relationship between news creators and consumers’. In these ways, the boundary between professional and citizen journalism is blurring.
Hyperlocal journalism is also linked to social capital. Rojas et al.’s (2011) recent studies of communicative social capital find that the interplay between mass media, personal networks and political talk at the micro, meso and macro levels, as well as the effects of these factors individually, can build social capital (p. 695). As Putnam (2000) and others have argued, social capital is both a ‘private good’ and a ‘public good’ (p. 20). The latter is necessary in democracies to facilitate collective engagement to address societies’ shared challenges. It is the emphasis here on both institutionalised forms of mediated communication and more direct, individual forms of social communication in building social capital that we maintain allows for Schudson’s ‘ideal’ journalistic functions to be a useful conceptual framework for analysing our broadly defined notion of hyperlocal journalism in the digital age.

At this point, we should note that public engagement has contested meanings in the scholarship. As Firmstone and Coleman (2014) argue, there are degrees of public engagement. At the minimal end, it might be a one-way flow of information from government (or another authority) to citizens. At the other lies the ‘creation of citizens who are not only listened to through consultation, but empowered as partners in decision-making’ (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014: 596). We do not measure engagement here, but rather we gather local communities’ perceptions of hyperlocal media’s contributions to public communication and engagement.

Having identified the threats to traditional local media and discussed new forms of hyperlocal media and having highlighted the connections of local media to civic function, and, thus, its contribution to building social capital, we now develop two research questions. First, has the fractured business model of market-driven traditional news media altered locals’ perspectives about journalism’s capacity to fulfil its civic functions in local communities? Second, what are the emerging opportunities (and challenges) for hyperlocal journalism to perform its civic functions in the digital age?

**Research design**

We use a comparative case-study approach focusing on geographical places in outer metropolitan, regional and remote communities of similar population size. This study presents ‘place-based’ findings and is the first stage of a national study of the civic functions and impact of news media that will take several years to complete.¹ The selected communities experience varying degrees of social disadvantage or isolation for different reasons and share income and employment levels below national averages (see Table 1). They are Broadmeadows (outer Melbourne low socio-economic status (SES)), Byron Bay (New South Wales high-growth regional coastal town) and Moree (New South Wales small, remote, inland town). In places like these, with varying degrees of disadvantage, it was hypothesised that any changes (positive or negative) in journalistic activity would be identifiable. For example, Broadmeadows was the focus of a substantial Victorian Government initiative in the late 2000s to build a positive, functional neighbourhood; Byron Bay is the scene of long-running battles between environmentalists and developers; Moree has a history of racial tension and was a destination of the ‘freedom rides’ in the 1960s that drew attention to systemic discrimination against Aboriginal people.

We undertook 31 in-depth interviews across the three communities between December 2014 and May 2015 with local media professionals, including journalists, broadcasters, editors and media proprietors. We also interviewed civic and community leaders, including mayors, police officers, community activists, chambers of commerce, real estate agents, property developers, school teachers, community workers, and indigenous and other local representatives, such as service and sporting club leaders.

We chose the case-study model because it suits exploratory research and enables social scientists to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2014: 12). We devised two interview schedules
<table>
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<th>Place and population</th>
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<th>Brief description and demographic features</th>
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<td>Broadmeadows (VIC) population 10,578</td>
<td>Outer metropolitan suburb, 16 km north of Melbourne</td>
<td>Broadmeadows is a multicultural low socioeconomic region within the municipality of Hume. Hume residents represent 170 different countries of origin and 110 spoken languages. The most commonly cited religious belief is Islam (30%) and 68% of residents had both parents born overseas. Broadmeadows has one of the lowest numbers of households connected to the Internet at 63%, compared to a national average of 83%. Average weekly household income is $746 and unemployment is 13.5%, both outside the national average of $1234 and 5.6%, respectively.</td>
<td>Two local radio stations: 3NRG 99.3FM; North West FM 98.9 which provides ethnic radio programming. Two local weekly English-language newspapers: the <em>Hume Leader</em> (News Corp) and <em>Northern Star Weekly</em> (Independent). Foreign newspapers: two Turkish newspapers, one Italian and one Greek (^*). No local TV.</td>
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<td>Byron Bay (NSW) – permanent population 9420</td>
<td>Seaside town in the far-northeastern corner of NSW, 175 km south of Brisbane, QLD</td>
<td>Byron Bay is a popular tourist destination with more than 1 million visitors a year generating more than $380 million annually (Byron Bay General Information). The town’s population increases fourfold during peak season and strategies to cope with this influx is a top priority for the council and major concern for residents. Increased traffic, high commercial and private rentals, a need for more police officers, parking problems and the threat that increased numbers pose to the area’s ecosystem are issues regularly canvassed in the local media. The most commonly cited religious belief is no religion (32%) and 27% of residents had both parents born overseas. Median weekly household income is $871 and unemployment is 8.7%, both outside the national average of $1234 and 5.6%, respectively.</td>
<td>Three local radio stations: Bay FM Community Radio and the commercial station ZZZ FM (Broadcast Operations Group) and the public broadcaster ABC North Coast broadcast out of Lismore. Three newspapers including the <em>Byron Shire Echo</em>, a free locally-owned weekly print paper, <em>Byron Shire News</em> (News Corp.) a free weekly newspaper, daily newspaper the <em>Northern Star</em> (APN Media) printed in Lismore. No local TV.</td>
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<td>Moree (NSW) – population 10,500</td>
<td>Remote rural town, principal industries are cotton and wheat crops, 300 km from the regional city of Tamworth, NSW.</td>
<td>Moree is a remote town that lies within the Kamilaroi Aboriginal nation, and a fifth of its population is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Historically, relations between the Aboriginal people and white townspeople were poor. The most commonly cited religious belief is Catholic (31%) and 7% of residents had both parents born overseas. Median weekly household income is $1084 and unemployment is 6.4%, both outside the national average of $1234 and 5.6%, respectively.</td>
<td>Local bi-weekly newspaper the <em>Moree Champion</em> (Fairfax Media). Commercial radio station, 2VM (Broadcast Operations Group). No local TV.</td>
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\(^*\)Circulated but not produced locally.  
Source: Authors compiled from Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011.
– one for media professionals, the other for civic leaders (available on request) – comprising semi-structured questions to allow for sufficient flexibility to explore pertinent issues to each case as they arose.\textsuperscript{2} Both schedules canvassed themes concerning the perceived state and functions of news media in local communities. Interviews averaged between 30 and 45 minutes in length and were recorded. We identified commonalities and differences between the cases and thematically represent those findings in the next section. We do this in three parts. First, we provide an overview of each community’s perspectives about available media options and their quality. This addresses the first research question. Then, we address the second question by listing what we identify as five key opportunities for local and hyperlocal journalism in the digital age arising out of the cases. Finally, we highlight the key challenges for hyperlocal journalism.

**Results and discussion**

*Perspectives about local media’s capacity to fulfil civic functions*

In each community, civic leaders favoured local media over metropolitan, state or national media when engaging in public communication. Local media’s perceived effectiveness in fulfilling this basic civic function of conveying local information varied across localities; however, in each case, community leaders recognised local media were under pressure with fewer resources than in the past. We find, like Paulussen and D’Heer (2013), among others, that although the Internet allows for a ‘global village’, people still want information about their ‘local village’ (p. 589).

*Byron Bay.* The township of Byron Bay provided a revealing insight into the ways in which legacy local media are attempting to survive in the digital era and the impact that transition has had on resources and news coverage. Three newspaper reporters and a local commercial radio journalist from three different news outlets told a broadly similar story: revenue was down, there was acute pressure of time and journalists had to do more with less, including being able to write, take photographs and produce online content. One reporter remarked that ‘The reality is you do [sic] less stories and less in-depth coverage [and] … that just means you have less time to spend on everything’. This had the overall effect of fewer stories being covered, and those that were selected were reported on more superficially. For example, Byron Bay Mayor Simon Richardson remarked that he had a ‘very good’ relationship with local media; however, his press releases were often reported verbatim. ‘It’s great for me’, but he noted that it ‘wasn’t so great for the community’. This suggested to him that local newspapers’ resources were ‘really stretched’.

Yet, many of the local community leaders acknowledged the indispensability of the local media for the publicity of their various, and sometimes competing, interests. Byron Bay Residents’ Association member Dalian Pugh engaged local media to ‘bring the community along’ about the value of grass-roots projects. Likewise, Cate Coorey, also an Association member, favoured the *Byron Echo* for public engagement because it showed ‘sympathy for our cause’ and had wide local readership. A local businessman spoke of a split between ‘greens’ and ‘pro-developers’ in the community and the important role the local media played in covering competing interests.

Conversely, independent councillor Diane Woods was unimpressed with the town’s newspaper, the *Echo*, describing it as ‘biased’ and ‘inaccurate’. She said, ‘It is a Greens’ dominated paper and it does not report accurately or fairly’. She partly attributed misreporting to insufficient journalistic training, noting that one journalist who reported on council meetings was a musician, not a trained reporter.
Local real estate owner and co-chair of the Byron Bay Writers’ Festival Chris Hanley felt that local media supported the festival, and their coverage had contributed to its success over the years. Byron Bay Chamber of Commerce President Michael O’Grady also had generally ‘a good relationship’ with local press but was wary of being misquoted after negative experiences. Businessman Ed Ahern saw the local media as a part of the town’s life, but felt that the *Echo*’s coverage was skewed towards ‘greenies’ and ‘lefties’, and it was not worth spending his money advertising in it.

Pressure on revenue and the concomitant need to keep advertisers satisfied meant, in the case of the radio station, that journalists shied away from stories that might upset advertisers. It was understood at the station that, on these matters, the advertising department ‘called the shots’. While multi-skilling of journalists was a reality – and technology had made this easier – it was not enough to enable journalists to report with the breadth and depth that had been possible in the past.

In this case study, civic leaders identified the importance of local radio and newspapers for community engagement, but also perceived that media resources were stretched, with less verification of information, and professional shortcomings resulted from inadequate journalistic training. It was clear that, as in the Moree case study presented next, local journalists in Byron Bay were hostage to a lack of time and resources, eroding their capacity to independently verify or question material sent to them by official sources or interested parties, which limited their breadth and depth of their coverage.

**Broadmeadows.** Broadmeadows is 16 km from Melbourne’s centre meaning that locals can assess metropolitan and local media. However, community leaders uniformly described metro media as perpetuating negative stereotypes about the area. This observation is consistent with Meijer’s (2013) findings that mainstream professional media practices can ‘hurt’ local communities through their continuous negative portrayals.

Chief Executive Officer of Broadmeadows’ Banksia Gardens Community Services Gina Dougall manages more than 40 community programmes that assist 80,000 residents annually, including Victoria’s largest asylum seeker cohort. She said larger media outlets generally portrayed the community negatively: ‘All the commercial media stuff that we’ve had has been really sensational and horrible’. She said local journalists did not have time to meet weekly with her, as they once had, and sometimes reported inaccurately. Therefore, her organisation was producing its own news on its websites: ‘A lot of organisations are doing what we’re doing and trying to manage our own stories, our own content, our own marketing … this way you can control your own stuff’. Dougall observed that the residents she worked with no longer read local papers, and so she had cut back her organisation’s newspaper advertising with them.

Broadmeadows has two weekly newspapers. The first of these, the widely distributed free paper, *Hume Leader*, is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. Like many newspapers, it has lost editorial staff through centralisation of its newsroom in recent years. Editor Liam McAleer said,

> We are fairly flat out most of the time, so a lot of the stories are done from the office over the phone. But we try to make an effort to get our guys out to at least two or three stories a week … but obviously there’s time constraints and there’s resource constraints, so it’s not always possible. Plus our physical location as well – we’re removed from our stories in the centralised office.

Broadmeadows’ other newspaper, the *Northern Star Weekly*, syndicates some stories with six other mastheads in its ownership group. The interviewees had a limited relationship with that newspaper and were rarely interviewed by the newspaper or advertised in its pages.
Broadmeadows’ community worker Jaime de Loma Osorio perceived traditional media were unable to report local news as comprehensively as they once did because of cutbacks and syndication:

The *Hume Leader* and *Northern Star* have changed from being really locally based productions to something that looks, you know, the same because now everything is centrally organised. Who is filling that vacuum? Nobody here. Well, that’s my perception. It would be really good to have alternative voices providing really good information.

Mr de Loma Osorio started a blog and was broadcasting a community radio programme about environmental and local issues. He was surprised at the number of listeners who downloaded the podcast:

If we got 15 or 20 people coming to a public lecture we probably would be quite happy with that. But, if we run a radio show, a good show will be downloaded by 150 people, so, I think, that’s the potential of this technology.

Operating the radio station from a suburban shed, de Loma Osorio stated that ‘being on the internet means we can reach so many more listeners’.

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

General perceptions about local media’s role in Broadmeadows in terms of civic leaders’ contact with journalists, use of the media for public engagement and advertising were that each of these functions had diminished with time. Editors and journalists had also experienced fewer editorial resources. The *Hume Leader*’s adaptations to this environment included more syndication of stories from mastheads within its newspaper group and less ‘shoe leather’ reporting, with more time on telephones than streets.

**Moree.** Moree is a community with limited local media. The local media that do exist are owned by major media companies, as is typical of Australian regional press. Most interviewees expressed fondness for the local newspaper, the *Moree Champion*, and, notwithstanding some criticisms of it, still considered it an indispensable local news source. They might read *The Daily Telegraph* from Sydney for national and state-wide news and the *Northern Daily Leader* from Tamworth for regional news, but neither of these newspapers, nor the radio station, nor any other outlet offered the same level of local news about their community. On the rare occasions that Moree made it into the wider media, it was invariably negative, usually associating the town with racism and couched in terms that local people said were unfair. The local commercial radio station 2VM proved crucial in times of disaster, such as floods, when it was the only means by which local information could be communicated to those that needed it to make informed decisions about how to respond and to find help.

Outside disaster times, Radio 2VM’s broadcasts from its Moree studios were confined to business hours. News Director Stephen McPherson was the only staff member of seven who dealt with news. He had no formal journalism training. It had been promised but not delivered when he joined
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the station 6 years earlier from the spare-parts industry. Instead, he had learned on the job. He pro-
duced two local news bulletins a day, each of about five stories. He was also responsible for 2 hours
of live broadcasting each weekday. This, combined with the time pressure to produce daily bulle-
tins, kept him studio-bound.

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

Because of staff cuts, the Moree Champion no longer covered all council meetings or magis-
trate’s court hearings, instead relying on the council’s website for its council stories and publishing
a weekly list of convictions in the court. However, we identified four civic functions that it did
fulfil, which neither the local radio station nor larger media outlets could. The first of these func-
tions is that of providing information and a chronicle of events for the benefit of posterity. For
example, it will be the local newspaper’s coverage of the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Freedom
Rides that will provide historians with local material on which to base future research.

Also, in keeping with Schudson’s model, a second function identified was the newspaper’s role
as a forum for the exchange of ideas, and a third function was that of engendering social empathy
within the readership community. For example, the newspaper, at times, served as an advocate for
local people’s campaigns and causes, such as the championing of local Aboriginal employment.

A fourth function, not specifically listed by Schudson but building on Anderson’s notion of the
media’s role in creating ‘imagined communities’ and recognised by other scholars researching
Australian local media (see Hess, 2013), concerns reinforcement of people’s sense of place and
identity. For example, the white people of Moree talk of themselves as ‘black soil plains people’.
Tamworth, in their worldview, belongs to the high country of the Northern Tablelands. It is not
their country. Aboriginal people in Moree identify as Kamilaroi people. While the Kamilaroi nation
is large enough to include Tamworth, that town is too far away for the people of Moree to feel the
same sense of identity with it as they do to the area in and around Moree.

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

For all that, the Moree Champion and the commercial radio station 2VM are seen to have sig-
nificant shortcomings by locals. The newspaper comes in for more criticism than the radio station.
Paradoxically, this arguably reflects a greater degree of engagement with the paper, a greater reli-
ance on it and higher expectations of it than of the radio station.

Local news matters

In the above three cases, civic leaders’ perceptions of traditional media were mixed, but shared a
perspective that local outlets provided news that larger media do not and, in this way, are fulfilling
some civic functions and building what Rojas et al. (2011) termed communicative social capital.
Through these cases, we find that geography is especially important in defining people’s news
interests. Related to geographical significance, we also find a social dimension exists, or what
might be described as a ‘sense of place’. Hess (2013: 49) coins the term ‘geo-social’ to describe the
role of local news outlets, which have a solid link to a physical place and can also occupy a wider
social space with influence in certain ‘social movements and flows’ that are not geographically
bound. Hess’ characterisation reflects the notion that local news is today consumed in the boundless
and open social space of the Internet (Paulussen and D’Heer, 2013: 589). The term ‘geo-social’
better portrays the role of some local media in Byron Bay particularly, for while it is a geographical
place, it is also where the social movement of environmentalism is given voice. As some locals’
comments in this article indicate, such as those of Coorey and Pugh, there is a degree of support
for the Byron Bay paper occupying this geo-social space.

In Byron Bay, the local media provided platforms for community information and debate,
although the quality of their performance was open to question. For the mayor, they were not much
more than an extension of his public relations machine; for the business community, they were
valuable as a promotional tool for the town’s festival; for the residents’ association, they helped
generate support for grass-roots projects. In Moree, the local media were essential sources of com-

munity information in times of natural disaster, especially floods, and providers of a common com-

munity conversation. In Broadmeadows (and Moree), they were valued for giving a more nuanced
account of neighbourhood realities than did the media from outside, who only paid attention to
these places when the reports were negative (see Meijer, 2013).

Conspicuous by its absence was evidence that the local media in these places were performing
the ‘fourth estate’ function of holding power to account. In fact, as we have seen, it tended to be the reverse:
local power elites exploited the media for their own purposes. This is related to another
recurring weakness, namely, the absence of independent verification of source material, especially
material from official sources like council websites, as was happening in Moree. This, combined
with the statement by Byron Bay’s mayor that the local media ran his press releases virtually
unchanged, is the basis for a finding that in Byron Bay and Moree the local media are ‘news takers’
rather than ‘news makers’. This means they republish what they are presented with from official
sources and publish it as news, instead of breaking stories, verifying and challenging information
before publishing it and performing a watchdog function.

One reason for the lack of verification was limited resources caused by organisational cost-
cutting that had led to local journalists being desk-bound as expressed by Hume Leader Editor
Liam McAleer. In Moree and Byron Bay, poor or non-existent training also meant that people with
no journalistic background were learning on the job, trying their best with minimal resources and
no professional support. Journalists and community leaders alike observed that local advertising
had declined, which did not augur well for a recovery in journalistic resources. The cases also
provided examples where the digital space could fill some (but not all) reporting gaps, which we
now discuss.

Opportunities for hyperlocal media in the digital era

Low entry costs and speed. Digital technologies and the Internet have cut the traditionally high eco-

nomic barrier to entry of mainstream media and made it easier for locals to participate in producing
and disseminating news. In accordance with Harte et al.’s (2016) observation that hyperlocal jour-
nalism is an innovative, bottom-up, technology-led alternative to professional news production
models, we observe the example of de Loma Osorio’s use of digital technologies such as podcast
and digital radio to produce niche news to the Broadmeadows’ community and to digital audiences
beyond Broadmeadows.

Other community groups, including Broadmeadows council, Banksia Gardens and the local
police, identified websites and social media as relatively inexpensive tools to communicate and
engage with locals quickly and effectively. This was true for traditional media, too. As Hume
Leader Editor McAleer noted, ‘Things go online as soon as they’re written, pretty much. So there’s
no holding stuff for the paper’.
Sharing hyperlocal content and crowdsourcing information. Paulussen and D’Heer (2013) found amateur and professional reporting can co-exist in local news production, and this was evident, we found, with the Leader’s publication of ‘Street Watch’ (p. 600), the crime news page adapted for the newspaper from the local police Facebook page EyeWatch. While studies (Lewis et al., 2010; Paulussen and D’Heer, 2013) have found community newspaper editors have mixed reactions towards publishing user-generated content for local news, some community newspaper editors, as happens in this example, are experimenting with user-generated content for practical reasons – to overcome their own diminishing resources, expertise and time constraints: Hume Leader editor McAleer and Broadmeadows’ police Sergeant Petrunic saw community benefits in sharing content for crime detection and prevention. Petrunic said the Facebook page gave vital information about dangers in the community, how to prevent harm, such as fire prevention tips during bushfire season, and details about wanted offenders.

McAleer also crowd-sources information. He said that while his newsroom had fewer reporters due to cost-cutting, as advertising revenue migrated online, the upside of the Internet was its information gathering capabilities.

We get tons of news tips through our Facebook page, whereas 5 years ago, they might have been reluctant to let us know because they might not know how to contact us or they might not be bothered making a phone call to someone. Now it’s simple. It’s just writing a little message and we can take it from there.

Byron Bay’s Northern Star editor said, using social media to promote the published stories by encouraging below-the-line audience comments and uploading photographs had engaged readers. In this way, the journalists were behaving in ways described by Molyneux and Holton (2015) and using social media to promote their organisation’s brand and, in doing so, arguably ‘enriching the relationship between news creators and consumers’ (p. 226).

Editorial control: working around mainstream media. In accordance with Meijer’s (2013) findings, community organisations used their websites and social media to reframe news stories to counter professional media’s often negative reports about their communities. In Broadmeadows, Dougall said her organisation felt empowered to tell their own stories using these online tools. Sergeant Petrunic also found social media platforms useful for promoting positive policing stories and for tackling social stigma often associated with living in Broadmeadows. However, through the act of writing for the webpage, he observed why professional journalists might prioritise negative stories because when he wrote news items about ‘blood and guts’, it attracted many more page views and clicks than his ‘good news’ stories. This observation fits with Paulussen and D’Heer’s (2013: 599) findings that newsworthiness was often valued differently between professional and citizen journalists.

Public engagement and interaction. The Hume council identified social media, in particular, Twitter and Facebook, as useful tools for better understanding residents’ concerns. Hume Councillor Adem Atmaca³ said some locals also set up rival Facebook pages to complain about council: ‘I don’t really get upset with those sites because … it’s good that we know that there are people out there who are upset about some procedure’.

The local paper also found social media useful for engaging new readers: ‘A lot of our traffic to our web stories now comes through our social media stuff, so people aren’t going straight to the website. They’re reading it on Facebook and then clicking on to it’, McAleer said. Consistent with the findings of Molyneux and Holton (2015), Byron Bay’s ZZZ FM broadcaster said her radio station’s online presence was important for engaging audiences beyond the broadcast. Another Byron
Bay community radio programmer, Ashley Thompson, used online media to ‘keep in touch’ with her listeners when off air. In Broadmeadows, Dougall found, through experience, that their neighbourhood house website connected disadvantaged residents to community programmes more effectively than using local media advertising.

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

**Challenges for hyperlocal media**

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

A second, related challenge was finding sufficient resources to deal with Internet bullying and trolling online. Sergeant Petrunic said he regularly monitored the site and was concerned about posting information that might encourage vigilantism. It had not yet happened, but he saw the potential for it. The Broadmeadows council also monitored social media comments and moderated them when they thought it appropriate, thus taking on a gatekeeping role akin to traditional media.

In the same municipality, online bullying was such a prevalent problem among parent and student communities at Meadows primary school that Facebook was banned from use. Students’ mobile phones were collected each morning and returned at the end of the school day. This was a contrary, but important example whereby the digital sphere, without any moderation of comments or other gatekeeping function, was viewed negatively rather than positively as a tool for community engagement.

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

The final issue for hyperlocal media, which again relates to the issue of resources, was media fragmentation. While this can be viewed as an opportunity for targeting messages to specific community groups, it can be expensive establishing multiple online channels and communication strategies to engage different demographics. Furthermore, there was a general awareness of the ‘geo-social’ capacity of the Internet, with Broadmeadows council and Banksia Gardens acknowledging that their communications needed to be targeted to various groups, including those beyond their community. These non-resident groups included media, businesses, philanthropic organisations, government agencies and politicians. Effectively communicating with each group might require more costly and targeted professional communication strategies.
Conclusion

This article reports on three place-based case studies with the aim of exploring the challenges and opportunities for hyperlocal journalism in communities vulnerable in the Internet age to losing local traditional media because of media’s fractured business model. Consistent with recent scholarship, we identified hyperlocal journalism as having a focus on geographic location and niche or specific issues (Hess, 2013; Kurpius et al., 2010).

Also consistent with existing scholarship, we find traditional local journalism was adversely affected by the altered political–economic landscape of traditional media organisations. In the selected communities, local news outlets were generally doing more with less. Challenges for local media included insufficient journalism training, reduced capacity for independently verified journalism, less story diversity with centralisation of newsroom operations and more story syndication and a loss of institutional authority in some places.

However, the findings here reveal it was not all about a decline in resources or capacities for traditional local media in the Internet age. Social media have enabled legacy outlets to do things not previously possible, or easy to achieve, such as reach audiences beyond their geographical boundaries, connect with new audiences through third-party hyperlinks and below-the-line comments, and crowd-source information. Despite local reporting gaps, local media were fulfilling civic responsibilities, many in accordance with Schudson’s (2008) ‘ideal’ functions, as well as providing a ‘geo-social’ role (see Hess, 2013). Local media help citizens imagine themselves as part of a community, and this was most evident in Moree, but also apparent in Byron Bay and Broadmeadows.

Where there are traditional reporting deficits, we find digital technologies enable local organisations (non-media entities) to directly communicate and engage with citizens. We find, like Meijer (2013), personal stories told via organisations’ websites can counter professional media’s negative portrayals of a community, providing a more nuanced account of ‘neighbourhood reality’.

In other instances, we find relationships have formed between traditional media and non-media entities through the sharing of public interest content. This hybrid model of local news gathering and dissemination was exemplified in the case of the Broadmeadows’ police and local newspaper sharing stories with mutual benefits. For the police, sharing stories increased a news item’s reach and helped the police fight crime by crowdsourcing information and raising public awareness. For the newspaper, publishing the police stories meant the paper’s limited resources, and staff could turn their attention to other matters. Here, journalistic professional norms are challenged and undergoing transformation, both in terms of what is considered news (i.e. ‘newsworthiness’) (Paulussen and D’Heer, 2013) and what it means to be a journalist (i.e. journalistic identity). Like Molyneux and Holton’s (2015) finding, we also find a blurring of the boundaries between professional and citizen journalism.

Our case studies show that hyperlocal journalism derived from community providers can fill some gaps in local news provision. Yet, we also find the challenges for hyperlocal journalism are similar to those of traditional news providers: revenue uncertainty and lack of professional journalistic capacity. Even so, as legacy news coverage shrinks, we have observed promising adaptations in local newsrooms and alternatives for fostering civic discourse in local communities, which can build social capital. This is evident through non-media organisations’ many uses of digital media and, encouragingly, symbiotic relationships emerging between legacy media and hyperlocal entities to produce public interest news for local communities.
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Notes
1. For the larger national study, which is still underway, we examine two dimensions of how journalism interacts with civic life: ‘place’ and ‘function’. For the latter, we specifically investigate five functional categories of journalism influenced by Schudson’s seven identified in this article. For that study, our five categories are campaigning, investigative, civic forum, reportage and comment/opinion. For more details on this methodology and purpose, see Simons et al. (2016).
2. Interview subjects were identified through desk research, and interviews were arranged before arriving in the field. Ethics approval from our host university was obtained prior to interviewing. The interviews in each community took many days. Additional interviews were scheduled through the snowballing method if thought necessary during the data gathering process to capture issues specific to that community.
3. Adem Atmaca is a Hume councillor at the time of printing; however, at the time of interview, he was the mayor, which is a rotating position.

References


