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Rethinking local communicative spaces: reflecting on the implications of digital media and citizen journalism for the role of local journalism in engaging citizens in local democracies

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Introduction

There is concern in the UK about the current and future role of the local news media in informing and educating citizens about local democratic processes and issues. The landscape of the local media is undergoing a multitude of changes. Changes in cross media ownership rules have encouraged media companies to increase their market share and to expand across delivery platforms; hyperlocal news sites are emerging; a recent government-led initiative has created nineteen local TV licences; and local newspapers are struggling to retain readerships or shutting down completely. Coupled with ongoing debates about the inadequacy of the local media in fulfilling their role as informers, opinion leaders and watchdogs, these developments create potential challenges to the established value of local mainstream journalism in mediating between local authorities and the public. It is not just that local media are in a state of flux, but that their normative role of serving citizenship is also changing (Blumler and Coleman, 2013). The need to do more than simply ‘get a message across’ or provide information during elections is compelling local authorities to explore ways of communicating directly with citizens and engaging them in local issues without journalists as intermediaries (Lowndes et al, 2001; Aspden et al, 2005; Michels and De Graaf, 2010). Strategies designed to promote public engagement are now commonplace among local authorities and have become particularly relevant in the context of economic austerity, in which citizens and communities are under increasing pressure to provide and/or manage their own services. Citizenship is no longer conceived in terms of reactive or passive service consumption. As governments have increasingly employed the rhetoric of ‘active citizenship’ and ‘the Big Society’, both citizens and local media have found themselves under pressure to adopt new roles in relation to the democratic polity.

The emergence of digital media has amplified opportunities for citizens to participate in local democracies, both as consumers of increasingly diverse sources of information relating to local issues and in newly configured production roles via social networks. These changes in the context of local journalism raise questions not usually addressed in journalism studies, which have tended to adopt a media-centric perspective. Potential new roles of citizenship and journalism are evolving in a communication ecology in which traditional separations between governing institutions, journalistic intermediaries and citizens are no longer as centralised, linear or manageable as they used to be. In local communication

ecologies the flow of messages, memes and images exceeds the industrial production-distribution-reception model and takes a much more uncoordinated, though still interdependent, form. Whilst there is a widespread sense on all sides that such change is happening, there is much less certainty about how the dynamics of local communications ecologies function in reality, and perhaps most importantly, the implications this may have for the democratic value traditionally attributed to the local mass media. In order to evaluate the changing value of journalism in relation to local democracy, we need to understand better the relational dynamics of a wide range of interested parties in the production and consumption of local news.

The research presented in this chapter contributes to this understanding by examining practices of public engagement as a tangible feature of contemporary local democracy. It draws on theories relating to the normative roles of the news media in order to evaluate the value of local journalism as a contributor to democratic public engagement. Through a case study of the UK's third largest city, Leeds, we evaluate the implications for the roles and values fulfilled by local journalism of three emergent characteristics of the relationship between the news media, citizens, and governing institutions. These characteristics are (1) strategies designed by local authorities with a view to engaging citizens in matters relating to local governance; (2) heightened opportunities for citizens to use digital media in order to become producers and disseminators of local news; and (3) the potential of digital media to allow local government to communicate directly with citizens without journalists as intermediaries. We suggest that these characteristics should be regarded as ideal conditions, not unlike Weber's (1953) 'ideal type'. That is to say, they derive from accounts of how democratic relationships could or should work. We can refer to such ideal conditions as measures to explore and evaluate empirical reality. By identifying elements which contribute to an ideal condition, we might come to see how aspects of the ideal are dependent on a range of structural opportunities and constraints. For example, the *ideal* of representative political institutions using digital media to speak with citizens directly is often predicated on the scope for interactivity afforded by such technologies and the possibility of this generating a permanent conversation characterised by vertical and horizontal communication flows between citizens, governing institutions and other interested parties. The *ideal* of citizen journalism imagines citizens producing a different type of local news from the mainstream media, based upon citizens' ease of access to and familiarity with local information. Thus citizen journalists would produce an alternative source of news, characterised by the wisdom of local knowledge, that would compensate for the insufficiencies in local news coverage left by the decline of the local mainstream media. Each of these projected situations would have implications for the role of the mainstream news media in a local communication ecology, perhaps diminishing their value to governing institutions and citizens in setting political agendas and facilitating democratic debate. We consider the value of local journalism in terms of the normative functions commonly attributed to news, which suggest that journalists should inform local and educate citizens about local issues, be representative of the opinions and voice of citizens, hold governing bodies and organisations to account on behalf of citizens (the watchdog role), and proactively campaign on matters of public interest (Barnett, 2009; McNair, 2009).

Following a description of the research method, this chapter is set out in four sections. First, we define public engagement and discuss how various actors in a local communication ecology regard the roles of digital media and local journalism in facilitating democratic engagement. Next, we construct a typology of citizen journalism, considering the various roles that citizens can assume in the creation and circulation of local news. This typology is used to evaluate the structural reality of the way that different forms of citizen journalism contribute to engagement. Third, we consider the implications for the role of the mainstream

local news media of one local council's current use of digital media to communicate directly with citizens. The chapter concludes by evaluating the implications of our findings for the value of mainstream local journalism in engaging citizens in local democracy.

Method

Our case study centres on one local council in the UK. Whilst we think that this case is indicative of opportunities and constraints in similar cities, we do not claim that it offers a complete picture of relationships between citizens, local journalists and governing bodies across the UK or globally. Rather, we aim to provide some empirically grounded reflections on the changing role of local journalism in contemporary local democracy.

We focus on the large post-industrial city of Leeds (also discussed in chapter 4), situated in the north of England in the county of West Yorkshire. The city has a fast growing, ethnically and culturally diverse population of 751,500 (as of the 2011 census) and is the third largest city in both England and the United Kingdom. Leeds City Council (LCC) is responsible for providing all statutory local authority services, including education, housing, planning, transport and social services. Although each of the three main political parties in the UK (Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative) are represented on the Council, LCC has historically been governed by a Labour majority, with the party being elected in to power in each election between 1980 and 2004 and again in 2010 and 2014. In spite of its recent economic success as a financial and commercial centre, the 'Indices of Deprivation' for 2010 reveal high levels of poverty in parts of Leeds and there is evidence of a large digital divide. The mainstream local broadcast media in the district comprise two regional television news programmes (BBC *Look North* and ITV's *Calendar*), BBC Radio Leeds and several independent radio stations with limited news output. The BBC also has an online news service based in the region. The most popular daily newspapers are the *Yorkshire Evening Post* (focussed on the locale covered by LCC), its sister publication the *Yorkshire Post* (covering the region), and two local papers in the outlying towns of Morley and Wetherby. Like most UK cities, the hyperlocal news, citizen journalism and blog sector in Leeds has grown in recent years. It ranges from arts and culture orientated sites and hyperlocal news sites to online versions of magazines advertising local services.

Three different semi-structured interview schedules were designed to investigate public engagement from the perspective of actors fulfilling a variety of roles in the engagement process: council based actors involved in engaging the public on behalf of the council; actors who fulfil a role in engaging citizens in local issues through the media, digital and mainstream (journalists and citizen journalists); actors who are neither part of the media or the council but have experience of public engagement exercises (local NGOs). Twenty-three face to face interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in the summer of 2012¹. During the hour long interviews all actors were asked the same questions, with the wording of some questions tailored to their role. Interviewees were selected to represent the three functions described above. The twelve council interviewees included elected politicians (councillors) (3), council engagement strategists (2), members of the council communications team (3), heads of directorates (2), frontline council workers (2), and, as the lowest tier of local government, parish councils (2)². Outside of the council the sample focussed on media actors from the mainstream local news media and new digitally based forms of citizen-led

¹ Funding for these interviews was gratefully received from the EPSRC Digital Economy Communities and Culture Network

² See Appendix for details of interviewees.

news media. We selected four journalists who report on local politics for interview, one from BBC TV, one from BBC Online, and two from the YEP. Our interest in citizen-led media was limited to those sites whose content contributes to debates about local democracy. This led us to select interviewees from two hyperlocal sites, Beyond Guardian Leeds and South Leeds Life, as well as the author of a well-known civic orientated local blog. In addition, we interviewed two locally based NGOs. Interview questions were designed according to a constructivist approach. Thus, in addition to asking explicitly about perceptions of the local media's role in engaging the public in local issues we attempted to detect how actors understood the role of different media from broader questions about public engagement. Actors were also asked to give practical examples of contributions of the news media to engagement, and to think about how this has changed and may change in the future. The following discussion is based on a detailed reading of the transcripts from which a set of common themes were identified.

The relationship between public engagement and modes of communication

Before turning to an evaluation of the ways in which local journalism contributes to public engagement, it is important to consider what this term means to the various actors involved in local democracy. Although public engagement is increasingly expected and required of local authorities, we found significant variations in the ways that the term is understood, both by actors within local government and the local media. As we have written elsewhere, it is clear that the construction of the concept of public engagement is highly contested, reflecting a range of normative approaches to democracy that might not be compatible with one another (Coleman and Firmstone, 2014). To capture this, we have developed a simple typology to describe three contested conceptions of engaging the public. Depending on which of these conceptions is being used at a particular moment, actors will envisage different criteria of success and thus have differing expectations of the role of communication in realising them.

A first definition of public engagement, according to our typology, is mainly *informational*, entailing a one-way process of disseminating useful knowledge to citizens. By ensuring that citizens understand the role and actions of the council, interviewees considered that expectations could be managed with a view to facilitating a positive relationship between the council and the public. Thinking of engagement as a linear process of information dissemination mainly entails a monological use of digital technologies by the council, with interactivity limited to users' capacity to navigate their way to personally-relevant data. The role of local media in facilitating informational engagement is as a medium for the provision of civically relevant information.

A second definition of public engagement is more active, with the objective of enabling citizens to have a *conversation* with the council about local issues. The aim here is to enable citizens to contribute their views to policy processes from which they had been hitherto excluded. The most obvious form of this is through consultations where the public is encouraged to feel that they are able to 'have a say', with the expectation that they will be listened to. Crucially, for consultative engagement to be considered successful, it is important that the public understand how they have been listened to, and in what ways, if any, their contributions have been acted upon. Feedback, or at least some form of dialogical communication, is therefore a key characteristic of successful consultative engagement. This calls for the inventive use of dialogical communication paths that can encourage not only one-to-many messaging by the council, but many-to-one and many-to-many.

The third and least common conception (and practice) considers engagement as a partnership between governing institutions and citizens, through which the latter are *empowered* as partners in decision making. This requires the council to do more than just

listen. It requires citizens to take responsibility for their input into decision-making and to have a considerable degree of control over technologies of interaction – for it would be rather meaningless to speak of ‘partnership’ if only institutionally-embedded partners are able to manage either the decision-making process or channels of communication through which policies are formed and debated.

In the latter two, more active forms of engagement, the local media could add value by not only providing critical information about policy options, but helping to publicise opportunities for participation, providing channels for feedback and negotiation, and comparing and contrasting the diverse sources of opinion, experience and expertise gathered from individuals and communities, as well as governing institutions. This need not place the local media in a position of merely advertising the council’s attempts to generate public engagement. They would continue to have a crucially critical role, but one that also acknowledges the existence and consequence of new democratic pathways.

The relationship between citizen journalism and public engagement

The term ‘citizen journalism’ is defined in many different, sometimes contradictory, ways (see Robinson & Deshano, 2011; Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011 for useful summaries of citizen journalism). Whether described as participatory journalism, user generated content, hyperlocal news, or citizen journalism, the only point that scholars seem to agree upon is that digital media have changed the nature of the relationship between consumers of news (the audience) and those who traditionally produced news, information and critical commentary (journalists). Given the pace of change in the technologies affording non-professional journalists a vocal role in the media ecology, such role instability is unsurprising. However, in order to consider the relationship between the multiplicity of non-professional journalist identities and mainstream journalism, and the resultant implications for the value of mainstream journalism in local democracies, it is necessary to untangle the various definitions and interpretations of citizen journalism. Accordingly, we have developed the following typology of citizen journalism based on our interviewees’ perceptions and understandings of the roles citizens can now play in news production:

Table 1: Typology of citizen journalism

When citizens contribute to the news media as (usually) collectively organised producers of information and opinion independent of mainstream news media through hyperlocal news sites and (usually) individually organised civic orientated blogs we call them <i>CJ producers</i> .
When individual citizens contribute to mainstream and citizen journalist produced news media as active and deliberate sources of information through the provision of unsolicited content be that photographs/video or text we call them <i>CJ contributors</i> .
When individual citizens’ participation in Twitter, Facebook or other social media is used as a news source by mainstream journalists we call them <i>CJ sources</i> .
When individual citizens engage in a participatory role in local news and opinion through posts in the online forums and social media of mainstream news media we call them <i>CJ participants</i> .

These differing types of citizen journalism are distinguished by whether they are organised collectively or individually, and whether their content requires a host media (CJ contributors, CJ sources, CJ participants), or is independently mediated (CJ producers). They are also differentiated by the contributions they make to the ideal of citizen journalism. Goode suggests that ‘citizen journalism feeds the democratic imagination largely because it fosters an unprecedented potential, at least, for news and journalism to become part of a

conversation' (2009: 8). However, the contribution of citizen journalism to this conversation or, more precisely, to public engagement in local issues, is determined by a number of elements which determine how far citizen journalism can contribute to the realisation of a more engaged local democracy. These elements include the extent to which citizen journalism i) empowers citizens by bolstering their participatory role in setting the news media's agenda; ii) establishes valued and trusted channels through which local authorities are prepared to communicate with citizens; iii) establishes citizen journalism in a 'replacement' role to fill the gaps left by the decline in local mainstream media (Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley, 2011; OFCOM, 2012); and iv) encourages active citizenship by facilitating dialogical communication between local authorities and citizens. In what ways did any of these elements of citizen journalism contribute to public engagement in our case study?

Participating in setting the agenda

In principle, citizen journalism could play a part in reshaping the local media agenda. Mainstream local news organisations could incorporate contributions from citizen journalists as a new element of news production. This might involve either mainstream journalists including CJ content in their own stories or CJ producers becoming established within the local communication ecology in their own right. However, we found that, although the journalists we interviewed did not consider CJ producers as competitors, they had not nurtured working relationships with hyperlocal news sites and blogs and did not see CJ producers as a regular or reliable source in news gathering. Journalists also raised concerns about the validity of using other forms of citizen journalism (CJ contributors, sources and participants) in professionally produced news. They were concerned that information and news available from individual citizens may be at odds with their obligation to produce news according to the professional norms of objectivity and impartiality. Several journalists pointed to the need for caution in using material produced by citizens, including information given by individuals on Twitter, due to the often biased motives of the producers who were perceived to be pursuing their own agendas rather than public-interest values. These perceptions echo findings from other studies which have suggested that mainstream journalists' caution about the value of much content produced by citizen journalists serves to heighten the role of mainstream journalists as 'gatekeepers' (Hujanen, 2012; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010). Another way for mainstream journalists to represent the views of citizen journalists in news could be by hosting 'conversations' in which citizens can comment on the news as it seems to them. When describing the ability of audiences to reflect on news stories via comment boxes and social media journalists were silent about their own participation in this. The fact that audience participation in news is not seen as an interactive or dialogical process suggests that journalists do not see engaging with the audience as part of their professional role. A superficial analysis of comments from the audience on news pages suggests that they are rarely responded to by journalists or by key local actors, such as councils. At best, they are horizontal conversations between the audience, and at worst they are 'one off' comments thrown into a black hole which is unlikely to convince anyone that their voices are being heard. This suggests that journalists have a perception of their role in public engagement which is limited to being a source of information, and although they consider themselves to represent the public interest this does not involve engaging directly with the public. This supports claims by Paulussen et al. (2007) that mainstream media have been slow to embrace the possibilities for interaction and the hosting of citizen-generated conversations. It also seems to replicate journalists' reactions in the past to non-digital forms of audience engagement, such as letters to the editor. Wahl-Jorgensen (2007) suggests that

most journalists do not embrace engagement with their audiences, who are often dismissed as ‘cranks’ when they voice their opinions. The lack of a visible dialogue between journalists and citizens perpetuates the distance that classical studies of journalism suggest exists between those who have the power to construct the news and the ‘other’ who remain in a passive role as consumer.

Establishing a valued role in the media ecology

If individual citizen journalists only very rarely contribute to the mainstream news agenda, are collectively organised citizen journalists any more effective? Might such CJ producers be regarded by the council as having a significant position in the communication ecology and thereby able to be used as a new channel through which to engage with citizens? Our research showed that CJ producers are not perceived by the council as alternatives, future substitutes, or even additional outlets to the mainstream media. Council officials, elected representatives and spokespeople from local third sector organisations were not widely aware of the local CJ producers operating within their area. Although the changing nature of the local news media landscape was recognised by those involved in communications and engagement at the council, relationships with CJ producers had not been established and were not being pursued. Overall, the contribution of CJ producers to public engagement was perceived as at best a way to access niche audiences. For example, *“I think it’s potential at the moment and I think most of it reaches a very niche market.”* (Engagement strategist, senior). Although one of the disbanded hyperlocal news sites had piqued the interest of several interviewees and was perceived as providing some new connections with citizens, the current activities of CJ producers were not perceived to be of any significant value to the council in terms of reputational management or informational engagement. For example: *“That [Guardian Leeds – now closed] was really good actually because daily it would really tap into what was happening in Leeds that day and we’d get a lot of people contributing to it. It was much more interactive than anything that had gone before.”* (Communications team, press). The press team and representatives of hyperlocal news sites corroborated each other’s descriptions of a distant, arguably non-existent, relationship, characterised by a lack of dialogical contact. *“They publish their own views but they don’t actually come to us for comments or interaction on stuff. We’d certainly help them out if they did but they’ve never really felt the need to.”* (Communications team, press). There had been no conversations between the council and local citizen producers about public engagement. One of the hyperlocal news site did not think the council ‘cared’ about their role in public engagement, and only knew that the council was aware of their existence from analysing their web traffic and identifying some users as being from the council: *“From the council’s point of view, I don’t think we even signify [in public engagement]”* (Hyperlocal journalist B). Comments from the council’s press team revealed scepticism about considering CJ producers’ activities as journalism. Perhaps unfairly, there was an expectation that despite the non professional and community based (non-profit making) nature of CJ producers, they should adhere to professional journalistic norms and values such as objectivity and transparency when contacting sources. For example: *“I’m tending to find there seems to be a slipping of standards where, because it’s open to anybody now, people don’t really understand how they need to be honest and ethical, although actually I do find a lot of student journalists also are a little bit questionable like that. It’s not just citizen journalists.”* (Communications team, press). The expectation for citizens to conduct their communications with the press office according to norms and values associated with professional journalism is an indication of the need for councils to think about how to ‘demediatize’ their communications or, in other words, how they communicate with citizens without the journalists as intermediaries.

Filling the local journalism gap

A third element of the ideal type of citizen journalism is that it would ‘fill the gaps’ left by the often commercial, partisan or resource-starved mainstream local media. Based on interviewees’ perceptions of the perceived deficiencies of mainstream local news in Leeds, this would require CJ producers to take a more locally orientated approach to news than the regionally organised television media; represent the voice of citizens in certain areas of the city that are perceived to be under or mis-represented by mainstream news; and attempt to hold the governing institutions to account by resuming regular attendance at official council meetings which has been abandoned by many mainstream news organisations in recent years. By exploring the motivations and practices of CJ producers, we found that hyperlocal news sites and local bloggers are not necessarily attempting to replace or compete with existing mainstream journalism, do not identify themselves as journalists, have very few ties with mainstream journalism, and often have clear civically orientated motivations (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014). CJ producers, although often referred to as citizen journalists or hyperlocal journalists, do not all consider themselves to be producing news according to professional journalistic conventions and/or values. For example: *“All we’re doing is taking news that has been created by other people and aggregating it. That is in the process of changing this year, we’re going to start doing...going out and finding stories rather than passively regurgitating it, but for the time being we are a news aggregation service, we’re not journalists.”* (Hyperlocal Journalist B). Whilst some would like to move towards a more journalistic function in the future, such as acting as a watchdog and reporting on council meetings, most recognised that their skillsets and business models prevent them from operating as news media organisations in the traditional sense: *“Well, we had some fairly limited objectives when we set up, one of which was a sort of village noticeboard, making sure that people could find out what was going on. And part of it was about counteracting what we saw as a bias against South Leeds in the mainstream press and providing good news stories”* and to *“help people have a voice”* (Hyperlocal journalist A). Our case study suggests that citizen produced news media in Leeds are being formed to represent the interests of a small minority of the population whose views and interests are neglected or misrepresented by mainstream local media. In many ways, such hyperlocal news sites and civic orientated blogs are more akin to interest groups, run by volunteer citizens (not paid professionals), in the interests of a specific group of people with the aim of helping their audiences ‘have a voice’. Indeed, mainstream journalists see this knowledge as one of the strengths of CJ producers and one of the ways it can be more valuable than mainstream journalism. For example: *“Obviously they [bloggers/hyperlocal new sites] are able on some specific campaigns to be, I won’t say better than the BBC, but they’re able to – like on planning arguments – really get involved with the Council and hold them to account, particularly on very small things; or not small things things that are important to them, specific areas”* (BBC journalist, Online). Whilst this may suggest that CJ producers are fulfilling a democratically valuable campaigning or watchdog role, we should look more closely at the methods, motivations and professional values of citizen journalists before concluding that they are pursuing such roles according to the same role orientations, norms and values as professional journalists.

The value of digital media for communicating with citizens

A fourth ideal condition of citizen journalism would be to facilitate a style of dialogical communication between local authorities and citizens that allows the consultative and co-productive aspects of public engagement to be realised. Digital media such as Facebook,

Twitter, and discussion forums create the possibility of a permanent conversation between a variety of local actors and citizens through horizontally and vertically structured communication. Such a conversation would afford local authorities three ways of encouraging public engagement in local issues. First, there is an opportunity for direct communication with citizens through websites and social media. Second, digital media have the potential for councils to foster two-way relationships with citizens which would enable the essential conditions for consultative engagement - a dialogue between those in power and those they are supposed to represent. Third, the public-facing nature of digital media enables councils to analyse communication about local issues as a source of public opinion, even when councils are not directly involved in the communication. This latter surveillant function might take the form of sentiment analysis or the mapping of social networks.

Limitations of digital media

Given the potential of digital media to allow governing institutions to ‘cut out the middle man’ – journalists – and communicate directly with engaged citizens, we were interested to discover how committed Leeds council was to pursuing this approach. Council actors were certainly aware of the potential for digital media to contribute to an interactive and dialogical relationship with the public, but pointed to three important constraints. First, they had some difficulty developing a coherent strategy that could nurture interactive relationships with citizens via digital media. Secondly, they expressed concern that the digital divide would exacerbate existing social inequalities and believed that the mainstream local media are still likely to reach the kind of mass public consistent with democratic communication, at least for the foreseeable future. Thirdly, they lacked the resources and skills needed to manage online public engagement and interpret the vast range of opinions and sentiments expressed by citizens online. The combination of these factors resulted in limited and incoherent use of digital media and suggests that the mainstream media continue to be valued as the dominant means of communicating with citizens.

Leeds City Council has yet to establish a coherent strategy for direct communication with citizens through digital media (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015). Current use is highly fragmented and does not offer a viable alternative to communication through the mainstream media, even at the basic level of informational engagement. The motives for using digital platforms such as the council website and social media (two Twitter feeds and a Facebook page) have not involved any consistent attempt to exploit the dialogical potential of digital media and have therefore failed to contribute to consultative engagement. The absence of a clear strategy for digital media is linked to the uncertainty among those people fulfilling different engagement functions within the council about what public engagement means. The diverse range of uses of digital media by council actors include a mix of one-way information dissemination for reputational management by the press office; attempts to offer service provision and ensure customer satisfaction by the council’s website team; and a variety of uncoordinated uses by different council departments. For example, the council website (which functions separately from the press office, despite being part of the same communications team) is used principally for service related transactions and information provision communication – e.g. paying for school dinners online and providing information on dates for refuse collection. The website team runs one of the council’s two branded Twitter feeds, but only uses them for service related information management. Another Twitter account is run by the press office where it is principally viewed as a way of publicising press releases, although they are slowly beginning to address the potential to communicate directly with citizens through this platform. However, they are aware that this requires them to develop a new set of communication skills which they have not yet fully

understood. Until now the council press office has been locked into a mediatized form of communication, with journalists as the key targets of their messages. They are gradually adapting to what we have called a *civic demediatization strategy* (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015) which requires messages to be tailored to a new logic whereby information is packaged in ways that appeal directly to the sensitivities of the public.

Concerns about the digital divide are used to justify strategic inertia around digital engagement. In order not to overlook the digitally disenfranchised, the mainstream media continue to be valued as democratic channels. Like many cities in the UK, Leeds has a diverse population, with significant sections rarely or never accessing the internet and lacking the skills needed to exploit the potential for digital engagement. Digital technologies clearly provide opportunities for the council to communicate directly with communities who are online, such as the thriving Leeds-based Twitter fora which focus upon local arts and culture. But the vast majority of people in Leeds do not access local news online: *“Well there’s a massive digital divide in Leeds.... a report was done a couple of years ago on digital disenfranchisement in Leeds and there’s whole postcodes that really don’t care and there needs to be more engagement in those communities.”* (Hyperlocal journalist B). Thus, perceptions of the advantages of digital media were offset by overriding concerns about the difficulties of engaging the ‘hard to reach’ – which, in our interviews, seemed to include most of the city’s population.

Even putting concerns about the digital divide to one side, interviewees commonly perceived mainstream media as the most trusted source of local news for citizens and therefore the most promising space for engaging with the public. This view was voiced by almost all interviewees, with comments suggesting that the local news media still has a greater ability to get information across to citizens than the council do themselves: *“I would think if you take the media as a whole that might be a lot of the contact that an ordinary person has is reading about what the Council has done. So I think we play a very big part because some of the other stuff that the Council do directly themselves probably isn’t read as much or seen as much”* (Journalist, BBC Online). This view is supported by audience research which continues to rank mainstream local news media as the most common source of information about local issues, with television remaining by far the most important source of local news (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002; OFCOM, 2013). Whilst people access local news from many sources, including online versions of newspapers and the internet in general, 46% cited television as the most important source of local news to them in OFCOM’s 2013 survey (OFCOM, 2013).

Overall, then, council actors were aware that citizens’ voices are increasingly conspicuous in digital media and some understood that this could provide valuable new ways for councils to interact and engage with citizens in dialogical forms of engagement. However, our case study suggests that the council does not yet have the skills, resources or will to exploit digital media in this way. At best, the council is monitoring social media to gather information that may help in its reputational management, and in some isolated cases with service delivery. Interviewees suggested that this is mainly restricted to council-based Twitter and Facebook feeds, with no one mentioning monitoring the activities of CJ participants in digital versions of local media (mainstream or CJ produced) or other non-council hosted social media sources. From the perspective of our typology of public engagement, it would seem that citizen journalism is acknowledged as a contributor to an expanded space of information pluralism, but that it thus far lacks the reach or legitimacy to serve as a meaningful consultative or co-productive decision-making channel. As such, the council’s approach to citizen journalism can be summed up as reactive and cautious. Citizen journalists as sources, contributors, and particularly as participants provide the council with a source of public opinion that can be analysed, but does not require any active engagement on the

council's part. Without developing a mechanism to react to this type of engagement, citizen journalists will remain unaware that the council is listening to them. In the case of those citizen journalists who do not necessarily intentionally engage with local issues (CJ contributors and CJ sources), this is perhaps not expected. However, existing media forums (CJ participants) present a potentially viable platform for councils to engage with citizens who have signalled an interest in an issue by posting a comment and could be a valuable way of convincing citizens that councils are listening to them. Whilst the democratic potential of citizens' participation through digital media has been heralded, such participation does not necessarily lead to meaningful or successful engagement without some form of dialogue. Put simply, the following quote can only be true if someone is listening: *"Anybody who's got a mobile phone can now comment on any story via Twitter or Facebook and so it is democracy in action on the largest scale ever really because everybody who previously had an opinion but didn't necessarily express it can now do it."* (Reporter, YEP).

Conclusions

Discussions of the role of media in local democracy tend to paint a bleak picture of readers abandoning newspapers, television news struggling to cover wider and wider regional remits, and newsgathering operations of local independent radio becoming more regional as they are merged with local sister stations (Aldridge, 2007; Franklin, 1998, 2006). There are particular anxieties about local newspapers, with Franklin concluding that 'Local newspapers are increasingly a business success but a journalistic failure' (Franklin, 2006, p. 4). Whilst these concerns are well founded, and indeed exacerbated by current economic pressures, our case study suggests that it would be unwise to assume that the normative democratic value of mainstream local media in relation to public engagement is any less important than it used to be, or that it is being displaced by citizen-driven digital media. While it is alluring to assume that the communication ecology within which local democracy operates is being reconfigured around the participatory potential of digital media, thereby diminishing the value of mainstream media, our evaluation of the structural opportunities and constraints which shape the local communication ecology in Leeds suggests that this is not (yet) happening. Mainstream local news remains the dominant and most trusted way of councils communicating with citizens. Digital media have certainly broadened the communication ecology, but a combination of a lack of understanding of new forms of media, limited resources to implement a digital strategy and conservative perceptions of the media preferences and skills of the public serve to maintain the value of mainstream news media above that of digital media. Actors within the council perceived that the mainstream local media had an important historical relationship with local citizens which has established them as trusted voices in the communicative space of the city: *"I think the local newspaper, although its circulation has shrunk a lot, it still gets a lot of interest and it has a website and there's a lot of interaction there and they are still seen as an authoritative voice of Leeds and therefore it's important for us to work with them."* (Communications team, senior). Mainstream news organisations were trusted brands partly because their motivations, values and limitations were widely recognised and understood by the political class. Journalists' roles in representing the public, acting as trusted sources of public information and campaigning on local issues were seen as underpinning their contribution to public engagement. In comparison, there was uncertainty about the motives, legitimacy, and credentials of citizen produced journalism. Interviewees clearly identified with professional journalists as operating according to a recognised code of conduct, according to professional ethics which serve as some of guarantee that they will facilitate fair and impartial communication with citizens. Whilst no one suggested that citizen journalists are

unscrupulous, a lack of familiarity and understanding of their purpose in the communication ecology limited the value ascribed to them in relation to public engagement. This suggests that further research should investigate the motivations, routines and practices of citizen journalists to establish their contribution to democratic debate.

In one sense, it is reassuring to see that those responsible for public engagement are not blinded by the rhetoric of transformation and empowerment that surrounds discussions of the potential of digital media to increase participation. Our interviewees highlighted the realities of the digital divide and the enduring preference of the public to access local news via mainstream journalism as important reasons why the participatory potential of digital media does not necessarily translate into increased instances of active citizenship. There were also indications that citizens not only still turn to mainstream news media for information, but also assign news organisations a continuing powerful voice as trusted mediators on behalf of the public. For example: *“They [readers] look to us in terms of engagement to help them to engage because they do feel if it’s in the paper the Council take more note than them alone.... I don’t know how many times I’ve had people say, “Get it in the paper, they [the Council] won’t listen to us but they’ll listen to you,” (Veteran journalist, YEP).* This quote and other findings caution against attributing a greater opportunity for individual political efficacy to the participatory potential of digital media.

Our typology of citizen journalism differentiates between participation in news production by collective and individual citizens. The analysis suggests that the voices of citizens acting as individuals have not yet been enhanced by their participation as citizen journalists or commentators. Digital media do not necessarily heighten individual citizens’ access to the news media as sources, participants or contributors. Due to the current structural characteristics of the council’s media use, neither one-way nor dialogical uses of digital media are systematically used to engage with individuals. There are also few indications that current opportunities afforded by digital media for citizens to participate in the construction of news, either as CJ sources, CJ participants or CJ contributors have eroded traditional barriers between media professionals and citizens. This further reinforces the notion that we should be cautious in assuming that the existence of technological capability will necessarily result in a transformation of citizenship or an increase in individual efficacy. More research is needed into audiences and their democratic engagement with representative institutions via digital media. There is a need for audience research into how citizens themselves feel about where they get their information from, what role they want different media to play, and what role they themselves want to play in the production of such information. How do citizens perceive their contribution to the communications ecology through citizen journalism and other participatory digital media – do they feel listened to, empowered? Such research must inevitably take on board continuing challenges of unequal access to digital media as well as pervasive problems surrounding attempts to incorporate citizens’ experience and expertise in the most efficient and transparent fashion.

Most importantly, we conclude that all of the relevant actors discussed above – council, mainstream local media, citizen journalists, communities – are operating within a diverse and dynamic communication ecology. The days of evaluating local news and opinion circulation in linear terms of monological transmission are fast disappearing. The pressing need is for all actors to think about their democratic roles in the context of an interdependent communication ecology that transcends the institutional control of any one of them. Finally, given the valuable role attributed to mainstream journalism in our study, it is reassuring that despite the challenges they face in fulfilling a democratic role in society, some of them remain committed to doing so: *“We are the eyes and ears of the public, of the tax payer, and it’s our job to represent the facts of what the Council is doing to better life for them.[...] My*

job as a journalist should be to get facts out there and to try and increase people's understanding of things that they might not otherwise understand." (Reporter, YEP).

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