

The role of local media outlets and hyperlocal news sites in England during the COVID-19 pandemic

By Rachel Ammonds, University of Worcester

Abstract

The media, particularly news outlets, have played a major role in keeping citizens updated and informed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the national news outlets have looked at the national and international picture, local media have continued to provide the news, both nationally and with a local angle. But local media are declining and resources have been cut in recent years. This paper explores how local media outlets coped with producing regular content for their specific audience in unprecedented circumstances.

Alongside the traditional local media, a sense of community has grown during the lockdown and hyperlocal news sites have appeared and proved a popular source of information amongst smaller communities. This research looks at the rise of these sites and their place in the media landscape.

The research includes interviews with those responsible for production, newsgathering and output, investigating how local communities interacted with news sources dur-

ing the pandemic. To contextualise these interviews and to enable meaningful discussion, it examines from where people received their news on the Coronavirus situation, using data gathered through a questionnaire.

Introduction and Aims

It is not very often that journalists report on stories that they are personally involved in – in fact it is often avoided.

But everyone is part of the COVID-19 story – and all news journalists have had to adapt and play a major role in keeping people updated and informed.

Viewing the pandemic coverage from a local angle and wanting to understand how local newsrooms were functioning and what their aims were led to the research undertaken in this paper.

It is not disputed that local media is declining and resources have been cut in recent years. Times were difficult even before we had heard of COVID-19.

‘Journalists, scholars and pundits of every stripe agree that journalism confronts a global crisis reflecting extensive and rapid developments in media technologies, changing business models, shifting organizational and regulatory structures and the transfer of advertising revenues to online sites’ (Franklin, 2011 pp. 90).

Research by YouGov for The Times found a sense of community has grown during the lockdown (Wright, 2021) and digital hyperlocal news sites have proved a popular source of information amongst smaller communities.

This raises the question of whether they can work together and survive and, indeed, would there be an audience? Is it what people want?

The research aims to investigate people’s consumption of news during the pandemic, going further than the Downing Street briefings.

There is a particular focus on the local picture and how local media outlets, with all the challenges they face, have coped, producing regular content for their specific audience in unprecedented circumstances and what the considerations for those responsible for output were.

It also starts to look at how the hyperlocal news sites have fitted into the media landscape, particularly during the pandemic and what the relationship is between the differing outlets and platforms.

Background

The analytics firm, Comscore’s data for the overall UK local news sector shows the total number of monthly unique visitors grew from 39.4m in January 2020 to 41.6m in June (Comscore, 2021) at a time when people reached for news of Covid, what it was and what it might mean for them.

Ofcom has been analyzing audiences and their viewing habits throughout the pandemic and the figures for June 2021 (when this research was undertaken) show 82 percent of people were still using traditional media for information on Covid (Ofcom, 2021).

As the need and thirst for local news spiked during the pandemic, revenue and funding in the area dropped dramatically. The BBC announced 450 jobs are to be cut in its English regional TV news and current affairs, local radio and online news as it needs to save £125 million because of the financial pressures resulting from the pandemic. (BBC, 2020)

Rescue plans were hatched as it was argued local news cultivated a sense of belonging, providing public interest journalism but also building community identity and cohesion.

Local news is a critical source of information, as well as an area for public discussion and debate, and pro-

vides cohesion in communities (Freeman, Hess and Waller, 2017). And the calls for help included appeals to support hyperlocal media. As Williams, Harte and Turner (2015) discuss thanks to the centralization and consolidation of traditional local journalism, we've seen an increased role for hyperlocal media to provide information and build communities.

'Hyperlocal media operations are geographically based, community-oriented, original news-reporting organisations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement.' (Metzgar et al, 2011 pp. 772).

According to the Independent Community News Network (ICNN) – which has more than 120 members throughout the UK – a 'hyperlocal' news service is one which typically pertains to 'a specific geographic area such as a town, neighbourhood, village, county or even postcode' (Independent Community News Network, 2020).

And, when launching the National Union of Journalists' *News Recovery Plan* last year, Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary of the NUJ, said: "Specific intervention is needed to protect and invest in hyperlocal and community enterprises. These have provided much-needed diversity and proactivity in the press sector yet are especially vulnerable." (National Union of Journalists, 2020).

It could be seen as a sector in crisis at a time when it was needed most and change in production was inevitable.

When the BBC cuts mentioned above were announced, Helen Thomas, Director of BBC England commented: "We are in the age of the Facebook community group and the WhatsApp neighbourhood chat. We must adapt to better reflect how people live their lives, how they get their news and what content they want." (BBC, 2020)

Methodology

An online questionnaire was distributed gathering data on people's news consumption during a set period until the end of the last lockdown in England in March 2021.

It is recognised the data has limitations because the questionnaire was made available online only. However, one hundred respondents completed the survey – all were over eighteen and a range of ages, ethnicities and employment statuses was achieved.

The questionnaire was kept short and consisted of a range of multiple choice and single answer questions alongside those that gave respondents the opportunity to expand on answers given and give opinion.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were then conducted with editors at local and regional news outlets in England, including both print and broadcast, to discuss their experiences leading a newsroom during the pandemic and to gather their views and opinions on local coverage and audiences' responses. Data from the questionnaire was analysed prior to the interviews taking place to enable findings to be shared with editors and their opinions on them sought.

The interviews also covered the editors' perspective on hyperlocal news and looked ahead to possible outcomes for local news providers in a post-pandemic media landscape. Interviews were carried out online via video and audio conferencing platforms.

Findings

The online survey conducted provided data on news consumption, specifically regarding news on the pandemic, up until the end of the lockdown in England in March 2021 and twelve months since the first lockdown.

Unsurprisingly, news consumption was very high. Until the Euro 2020 group match between England and Scotland on 18th June, the Prime Minister's statement on 4th January announcing the third lockdown was the most viewed programme on TV so far in 2021 with 14 million people tuning in (Ofcom, 2021).

92 percent of respondents said they kept up to date with news on Covid and almost three quarters of respondents checked the news at least once a day, with a third checking for updates more than once a day.

(Figure 1 over page).

This was an increase for just over half of respondents to their pre-pandemic news consumption. (Figure 2, over page).

As was expected, the main source of news on COVID-19 was national television, with other traditional platforms of national and local radio, local television and national and local newspapers only used by 9 percent of respondents between them (Figure 3). Their online offerings did contribute to the online news sources used by 34 percent of respondents, though the main website used was BBC online. This is evidence that it is still the case that in times of crisis or news of great note, the BBC is the favoured option for information in the UK.

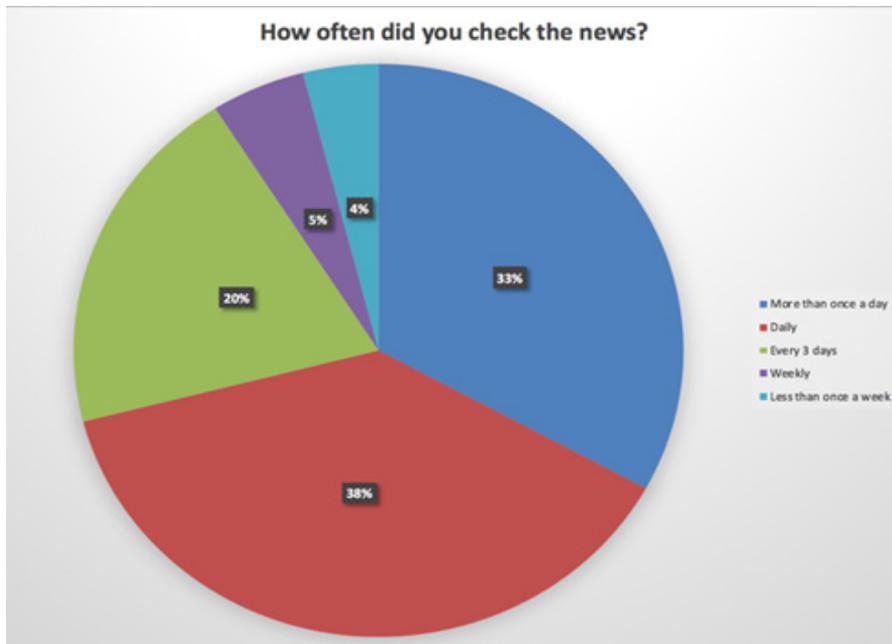


Figure 1: How often do you check the news?

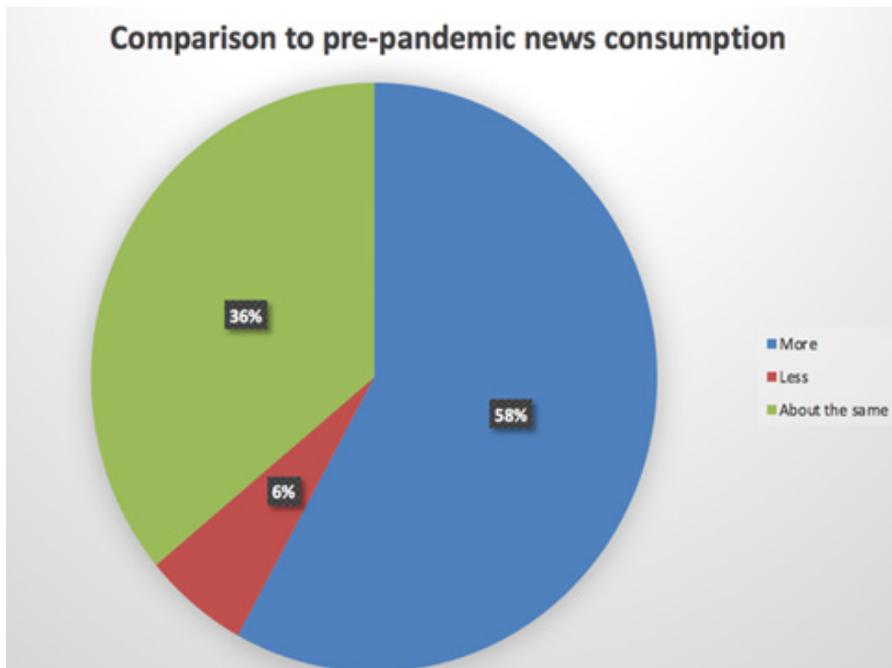


Figure 2: Comparison to pre-pandemic news consumption.

Third for main source of news on Covid was social media (Figure 3). Those who selected social media as their answer were asked to name the platform used. Facebook named most, followed by Twitter and Instagram. Again, this is not surprising given the situation we were in with many people at home, not going out and using resources readily available to them via computers, telephones and other devices.

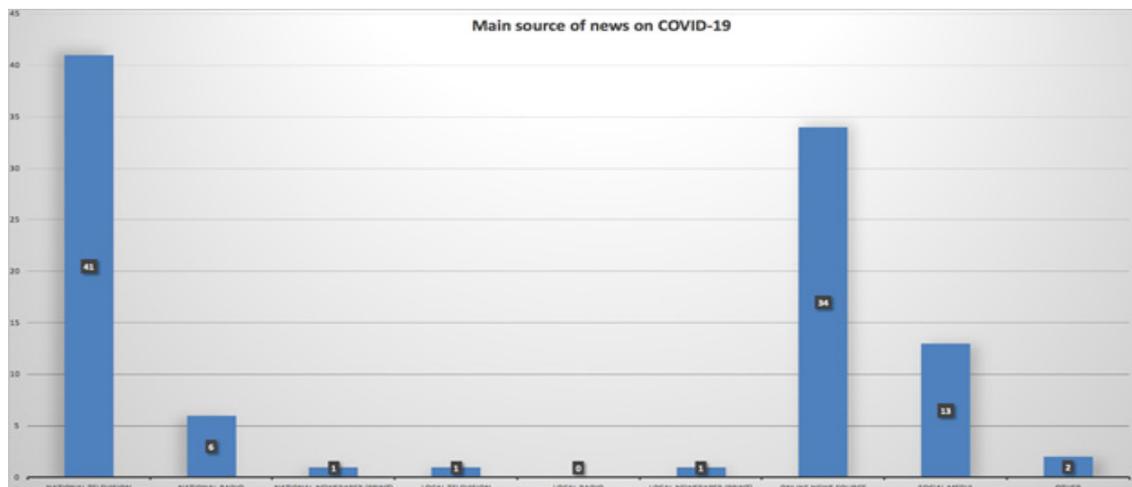


Figure 3: Main source of news on Covid-19

The next questions in the survey shifted the focus to look at what other sources were used alongside the main one, and a much broader spread can be seen.

Figure 4 shows the options available and respondents were asked to tick all those applicable.

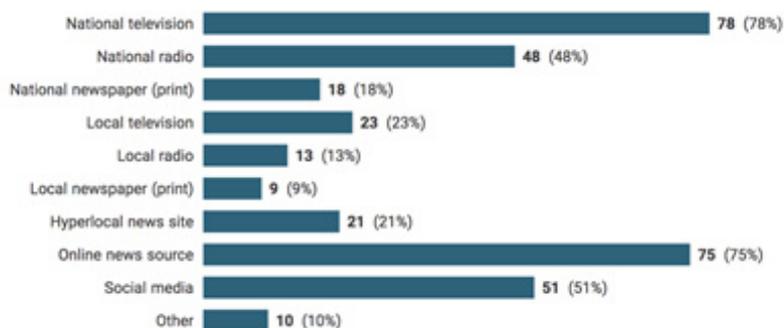


Figure 4: Type of media

Evaluating the responses shows people were getting information from multiple sources. The majority were watching television and checking online sources and many were listening to news on the radio as well (Figure 4).

It is at this point in the questionnaire where responses started to give an idea of the local picture, with hyperlocal news sites being almost as popular as local television and significantly more so than local radio or local print newspaper. It must be noted the online news sources named were a combination of broadcasting media websites, along with national and local newspaper sites.

More than half of respondents used social media to check Covid news, with Facebook being used the most, followed by Twitter and then Instagram. The sources named in the 'other' category, which 10 percent used, were mainly family and friends, with two respondents using medical and scientific journals as well.

Qualitative data was captured in the form of additional comments respondents were able to provide. These show evidence of Covid news fatigue amongst some and it must be noted this survey asked people for their news consumption right through until the end of the third lockdown in England in March 2021.

Comments included:

- *I watched / listened to the news much less because Covid was the only story for several weeks but there*

wasn't enough to fill a bulletin and not much seemed to change from day to day so I partly stopped listening to the news.'

- *'I became fed up with the news and began to reduce my intake online towards the end of lockdown.'*
- *'Halfway through lockdown I quit looking on social media and following news on the pandemic.'*
- *'I felt the news has been repetitive.'*
- *'I became fed up with the main (BBC) news and eventually decided to stop watching.'*
- *'Sometimes there has been news overkill.'*

The data also shows some were unhappy with coverage given to COVID by the media as can be seen by the comments provided below:

- *'As the pandemic progressed all news outlets concentrated on tripping up the government by asking questions no one could answer. Too much emphasis on what was going wrong not was going right. Eventually became pointless questions & no longer informative. Too many big egos with journalists.'*
- *'Social Media played a large part in news consumption during the pandemic, especially Twitter. However, after too much false information was being consumed, I chose to remove my account.'*
- *'I avoided some news and information sources because of their alarmism and obsession with body counts.'*
- *'Paranoia on the situation led me to constantly check the news, but sometimes it was just scaremongering.'*

Questions in the survey then focused on the local landscape, aiming to gauge how important the local information on Covid was to people in comparison to the national picture.

It was interesting to discover only just over a third said news on the local situation was very important to them (Figure 5).

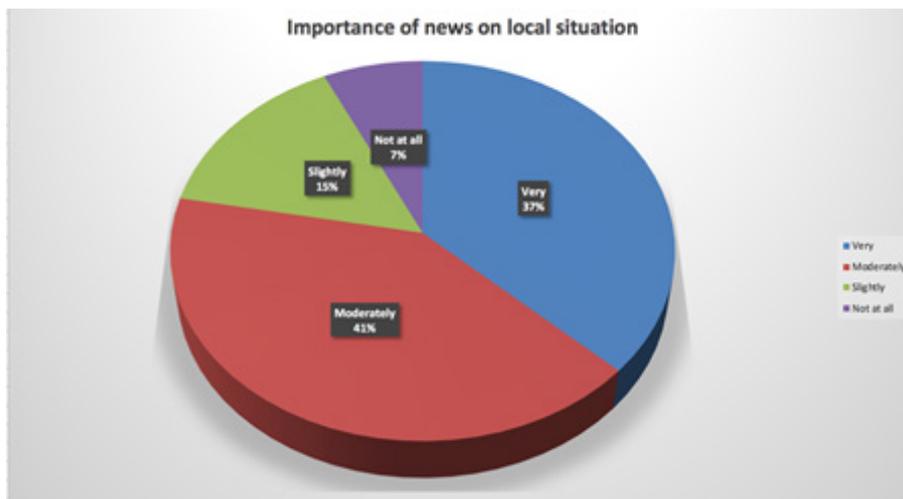


Figure 5: Importance of news on local situation

Of those who did use local media, the majority visited the websites of the local paper as their main source, but one in five used social media, particularly Facebook groups.

And most respondents found the source very or quite useful (Figure 6).

Looking at the qualitative data in the form of comments provided by respondents and there was a clear distinction in why and sometimes how they accessed local and national news and what they wanted from each.

Comments included:

- *'I would follow national news platforms for the wider picture on Covid-19 and local journalists on social media for the local news.'*
- *'Larger news sources (e.g., BBC) were awful - full of doom and gloom and unnecessary blame. Local news much more relevant and pragmatic.'*

- *'I think the introduction of 'regional lockdowns' made me look to local news sources more often. Additionally, the differences between the four nations of the UK made me seek out the rules relating to each when I had travel plans.'*

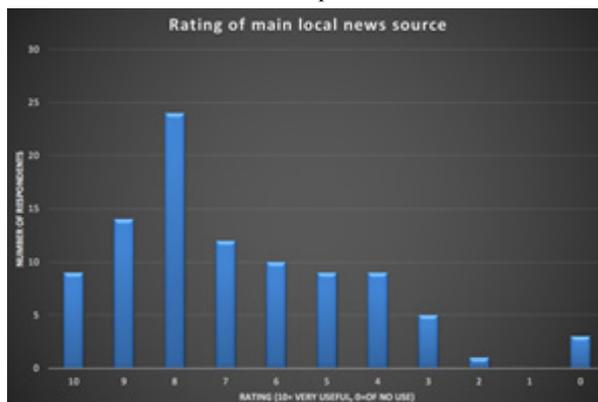


Figure 6: Rating of main local news source

More than a quarter of respondents had only turned to the favoured local news source during the pandemic (Figure 7)

And it seems the pandemic may have led to a slight rise in interest in local news in general as almost 80 per cent of people said they would continue to use the source after the pandemic (Figure 8).

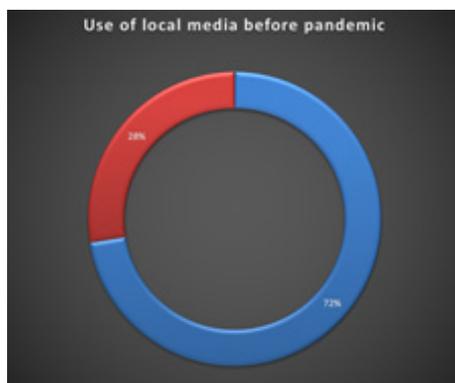


Figure 7: Use of local media before pandemic

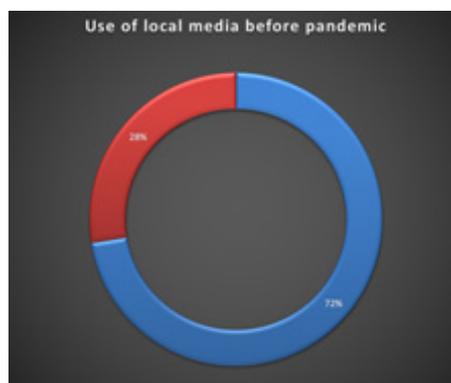


Figure 8: Maintain consumption post-pandemic?

The data provided by the questionnaire helped shape some of the questions asked to a range of editors from local and regional news outlets in online interviews.

Each editor was asked a series of questions relating to their work and opinions around output during the pandemic. It was clear from the interviews that, as expected, the pandemic had a huge impact on working practices for those in newsrooms. All interviewees reported reduced staff in offices. Several described how there was a core team in the office, with the majority of staff working from home. However, two editors worked with a team operating completely remotely, with offices empty.

One editorial team was furloughed, leaving the editor to produce a weekly paper in two and a half days, as he was on furlough for the rest of the week. He admitted this was far from ideal and proved very difficult, but was necessary.

'It did seem impossible some weeks, but, if you love journalism like I do and still feel like you are providing a service, even more important during a pandemic, you embrace it.' (Interview 3, 2021).

Taking the newspaper for which this editor is as an example, and the impact on traditional print output is clear. It was not printed for the first two weeks of lockdown and was solely an online edition during that time.

Working practices had to change and, as one broadcaster said: *'it's rewritten the rule books' in terms of interacting with contributors or conducting interviews. Because before the first thing you'd do is lean in and gain their*

confidence...have a conversation.... make them feel confident about what they're doing. And you can't do that now when microphone is on the end of a long pole' (Interview 1, 2021).

But the change was not limited to broadcasters, with all journalists having to adapt to interviewing online. Whilst this enabled them to carry on including contributors in stories, it could not replicate the face-to-face interviewing relied on in so many situations. (Interview 5, 2021). There seems to have been a rise in interaction between local outlets and their audiences during the pandemic and, whilst this is welcomed by editors, it does bring problems.

'Our greatest challenge is processing the volume of content that we get submitted to us. People are engaging with us more on social media now' (Interview 2, 2021).

But with increased audience engagement and content coming in there was a perceived danger of journalists failing to investigate stories.

'In a busy newsroom, albeit it a virtual newsroom, when people are presented with information there is a tendency just to use it and not question it...and I think that's a possible danger of the environment we have now' (Interview 2, 2021).

Looking at the impact the situation COVID-19 forced on staff, the interviewees all said their teams had reacted well and, on the whole, worked tirelessly to provide a service for their audience. There was a feeling amongst some that they saw journalists appreciating the flexibility working from home offers and, also, an increase in productivity.

'I think we're more productive as a result of working from home and then you don't have as many interruptions to deal with and you can work when you're at your best' (Interview 2, 2021).

There was a general feeling journalists wanted to get back to the office and a more 'normal' way of working as there has been a feeling of isolation.

'No-one got a job in a newsroom because they like the wallpaper. They got a job in a newsroom because they like the people and they like the atmosphere' (Interview 1, 2021).

The interviews showed editors of local news outlets still see their role as providing local news, with it being very much about the community and people's stories. COVID-19 coverage gave them the 'opportunity to fight against the belief amongst some that journalists are baddies' (Interview 3, 2021). They want to provide positivity and are seeing a need for that.

'People who promote local journalism and local people...that's the good stuff. That's positive. That means something to people rather than what they see as the problem of the kind of journalistic monolith' (Interview 1, 2021).

Local news is about 'presenting national stories through a local prism' (Interview 4, 2021). And the editors knew readers were looking to them as a place they could trust 'with so much misinformation out there, especially on social media' (Interview 3, 2021).

The local media's role is also to offer some positivity in what are worrying times for their audiences.

'A relentless diet of gloom and fear is not is not a good thing really - either for us as a newspaper or for the community' (Interview 2, 2021).

The Covid-fatigue mentioned by respondents to the survey was recognised by all interviewees and it was something they were not only mindful of, but were also striving to counteract in their output.

'There was a fatigue. There was an element people wanted an escape in the local press...We needed to strike a balance...but as a journal of record we have to chronicle it' (Interview 3, 2021).

The place of hyperlocal news sites, particularly those on social media, in the media landscape and their relationship with local news outlets is not something on which all editors agree. However, all interviewees agreed they had seen a rise in number and traffic to them during the pandemic.

Some editors felt, while a number of the sites offered a good service, they needed to be approached with caution as they are sometimes 'akin to chatrooms.'

But for some, the term 'hyperlocal' is dangerous as it 'bundles together good, honest small businesses with cowboys' (Interview 3, 2021).

Trust was a common theme, with editors very keen to share their thoughts on the fact that local journalism from media outlets is regulated and provided by trained journalists whereas that is not necessarily the case

with hyperlocal sites and unless, or until they are, they cannot be trusted news sites.

'Social media is a dangerous place. They don't face the same legal standards as newspapers and until that's the case, there is a danger audiences are being fed fake news' (Interview 5, 2021).

And there were mixed thoughts on their relationship with the traditional media. Editors agree their traditional media cannot be hyperlocal and, therefore, cannot offer what some of these sites can. But, for local outlets they can be seen as a threat, taking audience, and becoming the place where the debate is, where people go to with and for their news and information.

Conversely, hyperlocal sites also offer an opportunity to promote the traditional local news outlets' work. Journalists can join groups and develop contacts there. However, there was a feeling amongst some of those interviewed that sometimes some of them get very protective of their 'patch' and do not want 'bigger organisations muscling in' (Interview 1, 2021).

With content being shared on these sites, editors feel much of what is being used on them, has in fact been produced by a local media outlet. This can lead to audiences not being clear really where they are getting their information from. One local newspaper editor called it a 'messy environment' where people might not accurately be reporting where they are getting their news from and suggested that local news outlets need to address issues of branding (Interview 4).

'People will see say someone said something or they saw something on Instagram or Facebook or Twitter, where it's actually our content. It is in fact a local newspaper post that they've read and so the information is in fact from that newspaper and not Facebook. It's just branding doesn't always carry through as well as we'd like it to' (Interview 2, 2021).

There is no doubt the pandemic has impacted on and changed local media output. Whether the change is permanent is a point of discussion amongst editors, with many of them agreeing it has sped up changes that were already about to happen and that there are age-old issues to deal with that 'for some local just isn't interesting.'

- *'There's no circulation area and boundaries have been lost. So where local journalism sits is the problem – where it begins and where it ends.'*
- *'We've got to think differently. We've just got to think of what we might be brilliant at.'*
- *'The pandemic has accelerated the online development and shown how vulnerable the newspaper industry is as sales and advertising collapsed.'*
- *'We were in a tough challenging period where we were pivoting from one platform to another. This pandemic came along and shook everything up. It disrupted us a great deal, but it's also accelerated our path to somewhere we were going anyway.'*
- *They admit there is work to do. For a newspaper that might be around the branding.*

'The brand carries lots of things. It carries the trust that we have and with that trust comes a commercial value. It's the thing we use as leverage to sell advertising' (Interview 2, 2021).

But all those interviewed agree, as they would, that it's worth fighting for. As one of them summed up:

'We're synonymous with community. I think once you've lost local journalism and local accountability... then we are sort of a bit lost because anything could happen' (Interview 1, 2021).

It is clear from the research conducted that local media changed in terms of production methods due to the pandemic, but that did not affect audience numbers adversely. In fact, there seems to have been an increase, albeit slight, in the number of people turning to local media for information. Whether that increase is sustained remains to be seen.

'There's a narrative that local journalism is in decline. It's important to say, whilst the platform it's delivered on may be changing, it is booming' (Interview 2, 2021).

In places the pandemic seems to have sped up changes that were already on the cards for local media output, reflecting audience preferences, rather than informing the changes. Like many businesses, media outlets had to adapt and improvise to continue to provide a service for their customers / audiences. This did come at a cost and the financial implications of the pandemic on local media outlets is an area of further research. So too is the sustainability of hyperlocal news and its ongoing relationship with established local media outlets.

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