Online hyper-local news sites fulfill classic functions of community journalism

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Online hyper-local news sites fulfill classic functions of community journalism

Abstract
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Abstract (49 words)

A content analysis of story topics published on 70 hyper-local online news sites indicated that these sites may have an untraditional way of delivering the news but they fulfill roles and functions that are very similar to the ones documented in historical research about community press and social organization.
“By reporting the daily life events of local people, newspapers serve an important function in community life. … Instead of covering national and state news, the niche of small newspapers is to concentrate on local, personal and community events. In the process they help local citizens define what it means to be a member of the local community.” (Besser, 1994)

**Introduction**

Online hyper-local news sites are making inroads into the coverage of community news. The 2010 State of the News Media reported prominently in its overview that “Citizen journalism at the local level is expanding rapidly and brimming with innovation” (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010a). A special section of the report devoted to the phenomenon concluded that “highly promising citizen and alternative sites are emerging daily” by means of “imaginative news formats, partnerships, formats, technological capabilities and passionate supporters of journalism values” (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010b). Lacy et al. (2010) went so far as to compare online hyper-local sites to weekly newspapers.

This analogy draws on the idea that community journalism traditionally has been seen as different from larger-scale coverage such as that provided by metro newspapers. The defining difference is that community journalism organizations employ a narrower news focus that helps them develop an intimacy with the institutions and individuals they cover. The level of personal detail in community news stories is what sets them apart from other styles of journalism (Byerly 1961, Lauterer 2006).

The academic and general literature that elaborates on these characteristics of community journalism – ranging from book-length “how-to” manuals that describe the nuts and bolts of putting out a weekly paper to case studies of organizations to detailed social-scientific investigations of audiences, markets and news content – have been based primarily on weekly newspapers. But as hyper-local online news coverage becomes more prominent, a question to consider is whether such operations share these traits of community news coverage. In other words, are they a “new breed” in content and approach as well as technology? Or are they the inheritors of the traditions of community coverage that is focused on content selections interwoven into the fabric of community life?

**Literature Review**

Research into hyper-local news sites has become more common as they have become more popular. To date, it has been largely focused on topics such as comparisons of hyper-local sites with those of traditional news organizations (Carpenter 2008a, Carpenter 2008b, Lacy et al.
activities and perceptions of the participants (Reich 2008, Nah & Chung 2009, Theil-Stern 2009, Chung & Nah 2010), and examinations of how citizen news sites articulate traditional journalistic values such as credibility (Johnson & Weidenbeck 2009) or newsworthiness (Kim 2007).

A deep body of literature on virtual community has addressed how online communities intersect with their “real-world” counterparts (see, for example, Blanchard & Horan 2000, Kling 1996, Prell 2003, or Nip 2004). This study in a sense extends this concept to online news coverage, examining whether online outlets have community impacts similar to those extensively documented for printed community news. A recent study of message forums at the online sites of legacy newspapers found that the virtual community of the forums overlapped with the geographic community of the papers’ market areas, and further concluded that participation in the virtual community led to a self-assessed better understanding of the off-line community (Rosenberry 2010). But these avenues of investigation have not been extended to hyper-local community news sites.

As noted earlier, a primary theme through the literature of community journalism is the intimacy that news organizations share with the institutions and individuals they cover, especially as it is articulated through the topics selected for coverage. A classic text in the field, which is frequently cited to establish principles of community journalism, says that weekly newspapers should report “details of local news not included in stories that are in other papers” (Byerly, 1961, p. 5).

This intimacy between the community media and its audience as articulated through news content and other factors was explored deeply by Morris Janowitz (1951, 1967) in a study of weekly newspapers in Chicago neighborhoods around 1950. Janowitz did content analysis of three such papers, and also analyzed neighborhood demographics, surveyed readers, and conducted in-depth interviews with the papers’ managers and residents of the neighborhoods they served. As a result, he concluded that the urban community press was “one of the social mechanisms through which the individual is integrated into the urban social structure” (Janowitz, 1967, p. 9). According to Janowitz, the community press:

- Provides support for and draws support (advertising) from satellite business districts within cities.
- Shapes and reflects the neighborhood social and political structure.

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1 Janowitz’s original work on the topic appeared in a 1951 article in Public Opinion Quarterly, and was elaborated upon in a book published in 1952. A second edition of that book, with a new preface and epilogue but otherwise still focused on the same early-1950s project and data, was published in 1967. That later work is the one cited throughout this article, as it was the only version that could be obtained by the author.
• Helps to maintain local consensus through an emphasis on common values rather than on conflicting ones.

• Provides a forum in which mass communication effects are interrelated with personal communications and social contacts.

This is accomplished with a high concentration of coverage on neighborhood-level organizations and institutions, especially voluntary social, cultural, religious, and youth groups. With such coverage the community press helped individuals navigate their way in the larger metropolis by emphasizing coverage of their local neighborhood. “The community newspaper’s emphasis on community routines, low controversy and social ritual are the very characteristics that account for its readership,” Janowitz noted (1967, p. 130).

Building on Janowitz, Edelstein and Larsen (1960) determined content could assist in community-building functions. They concluded that coverage of clubs and associations developed community consciousness, news of individual activities and accomplishments contributed to community identity, and crime and accident reports disclosed threats to the community.

Similar ideas were explored by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien in their examination of community conflict and its coverage in the media. Community newspapers, they wrote, were a means of social control through “a pattern of news selection in topic and source that reinforces values by implication” (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien 1980, p. 19). Their central conclusion was that community media, reporting on a smaller scale in more homogeneous communities, would emphasize “maintenance of consensus and surface harmony” (p. 104).

Also growing from Janowitz’s work was a body of research in the 1970s and ’80s that explored how media usage, community characteristics, and an individual’s sense of community connectedness related to one another, which came to be known as the community ties research agenda. Many of these projects defined community according to geography and examined newspaper usage in light of variables such as home ownership and length of residence. However, Stamm and Fortini-Campbell (1983) introduced the idea that community, which traditionally had been rooted in a physical locale, should be construed on multiple dimensions of not only place (geography) but also structure (community institutions) and process (shared interests and interaction of community members). They further maintained that residents developed ties to each of these independently. This classification became the basis for numerous following investigations into the relationship of media usage and development of community attachments (e.g. Stamm 1985, Stamm 1988).
Research Question

The key question for the present research is whether hyper-local citizen journalism sites are the inheritors of the roles and functions of community press as elaborated upon by these earlier researchers. This would be a valuable thing to determine because if online hyper-local sites occupy the same “social space” as weekly newspapers, they can perform the same types of community-support functions as Stamm and Janowitz identified. As previously noted, Lacy et al. (2010) concluded that citizen blogs and hyper-local news sites were sources of supplemental coverage akin to weekly papers in an economic sense; i.e. the information they provide is an imperfect substitute for daily coverage. But this is not the same as determining how closely hyper-local operations fill the traditional social roles of printed local newspapers.

Methodology

The answer to this question was sought with a content analysis of 70 hyper-local news websites, defined as independent sites (i.e., not affiliated with legacy news organizations) that are produced by professional journalists, amateur/citizen journalists or a combination and devoted to general news coverage of a specific geographic area. News items published on the sites were classified by topic (e.g. community events, government, sports, police news, etc.) and the results were evaluated with a factor analysis to discern whether any patterns underlay the topics in ways that related to the purposes and functions described by Janowitz and Stamm.

This approach is similar to a recent study that measured content of print and online newspapers and used factor analysis to ascertain underlying determinants of coverage in order to test a hypothesized community news index (Lowrey et al. 2007). However, these researchers addressed online news sites of legacy community media, not hyper-local operations. Further, their definition of content measures focused on site features such as solicitation of reader feedback and reader-submitted items rather than examination of story topics or themes.

Tichenor, Donohue and Olien pointed to the importance of content selection in reinforcing community values. However, the idea of using story topics as the key measurement for this research was drawn more closely from Janowitz, who said that the community newspaper content “supplies a flow of specific news to assist adjustment to the institutions and facilities of urban life” (1967, p. 61). He further said that content selection could “emphasize values and interests on which there is a high level of consensus in the community” and assist in “building and maintaining local traditions and local identifications” (1967, p. 61). He evaluated the ability of content to achieve these functions with a 16-item codebook featuring topics such as
“social and personal news,” “municipal services,” “sports,” “personal achievement,” “crime,” “accident or natural disaster” and “community history” (Janowitz 1967, p. 74).

The variable set created for this project generally followed his list. However, it combined some categories and also excluded one – trade unions – that made sense for 1950s Chicago but not a contemporary context. Other story topics not used by Janowitz but relevant to modern-day coverage – such as schools, real estate, and transportation/commuting – then were added to create an 18-item codebook. (See complete list of variables in Table 1.)

Finding a sample of hyper-local news sites to be analyzed presented difficulties because no master list of such sites exists. A frequently-cited resource for such sites is the Directory of Community Media Sites maintained by the Knight Citizen News Network (http://www.kcnn.org/citmedia_sites/), which was used as a starting point to compile the sites whose content would be coded in this study. The 841 sites in the KCNN list were randomly sorted and the primary researcher worked through the list selecting appropriate ones for the sample.

Many of the sites that were visited were not suitable, for various reasons. Sites that were rejected as they came up on the randomized list included non-existent links, abandoned/outdated sites that had not had postings in many months (sometimes years), personal blogs, and special interest sites that did not address general community issues (e.g. ones devoted to hip-hop music, gay/lesbian issues, health and beauty concerns, and even one devoted exclusively to coffee.) Also excluded were blog aggregator sites and message forums operated by legacy media. An initial sample of 56 sites was gleaned from approximately the first half of the KCNN list (n = 478 URLs visited). These were augmented with 14 sites selected at random from among 65 produced by Patch.com, a new commercial network of hyper-local news sites concentrated at the time of sampling in the suburban communities around New York City, Los Angeles and Boston that did not appear in the KCNN list. Patch sites have paid editors but also publish audience-generated content.

The final sample of 70 sites was randomly divided into seven groups of 10, which were visited for coding on seven different days comprising a constructed week from late June to mid-July 2010. (The coding days were June 30, July 4, July 5, July 9, July 10, July 13 and July 15.) All items appearing on a site’s home page were coded, regardless of date. But each site also was examined beyond the home page for material published on the day of the visit and three prior days in order to capture a deeper sample of recent content.

A total of 1,432 items were coded, with a mean of 20.46 and a median of 16.5 items per site. Agreement reliability between the two coders (the principal researcher and a trained

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2 Patch was in 65 communities in July 2010, but at the time was expanding and the number likely is different now.
graduate student assistant) was determined by having both of them code seven of the sites – one on each of the seven days in the constructed week. This represented 14 percent of the sites and included 10 percent of the total items (n = 141). The rate of agreement was 77.3 percent, with a Cohen’s kappa of .746. Scott’s pi also was .746, but Cohen’s kappa is a preferred statistic when a large number of variables (in this case, 18) are coded.

Findings

The amount of coverage devoted to different topics varied from nearly 18 percent for community events (n = 256 out of 1,432) to a fraction of a percent for two categories of religion coverage (n = 6 for organized religion; n = 2 for individual religion/spirituality). The next-most common topics after community events were general community news (13.1 percent; n = 188); arts and cultural coverage (11 percent; n = 158) and government news (10.5 percent; n = 151). (See Table 1 for complete percentage results.)

Since the idea of using news topics as a unit of analysis was drawn from Janowitz and the codebook was a modification of his original categories, amounts and types of coverage were compared across his study and the current one. They were similar in some cases, notably sports (5.9 percent of coverage in both) and business news (8.7 percent in Janowitz, 6.5 percent in the current one). But clear differences emerged as well, with wide discrepancies in the amount of coverage devoted to certain topics. Janowitz’s study, for instance, found 6.5 percent of coverage devoted to religious organizations, compared to only about one half of 1 percent in the hyper-local study (8 items out of more than 1,400 analyzed). This difference is especially notable in that Janowitz specifically identified religious groups as one constituent of the coverage of community routines and social rituals (1967, p. 78), but religion was utterly lacking in contemporary coverage. This may be attributable to a general de-emphasis of religion in daily life now as compared to 60 years ago.

Likewise, Janowitz discovered that 18.8 percent of news coverage was devoted to social and personal news and 23.6 percent devoted to local volunteer efforts, compared to 4 percent and 4.7 percent in the hyper-local sample. In the other direction, Janowitz found only 4.3 percent of coverage devoted to disasters, accidents and police news (combination of two categories) whereas the current study noted 10.4 percent of coverage was about these topics. Janowitz classified only 7 percent of coverage as general news – i.e., not classifiable in one of the categories – but the current study had nearly 18 percent of items coded that way (13.1 percent local and 4.5 percent non-local). Thus online hyper-locals appear to be covering a broader range of material including topics such as weather (many sites reported on local impacts of the summer 2010 heat wave) that were not a part of urban weekly neighborhood coverage in the 1950s.
Some limitations in making these comparisons are worth noting, including the differences in coding categories; Janowitz did not have a separate category for community events as the current study did, so an event sponsored by a volunteer group most likely would have appeared as coverage about the group in his study, but in a different category, the “events” one, in this study. Also, the statistics he reported were percentages of space devoted to various types of news while the current study used item-counts.

This proportional comparison was augmented with a principal components factor analysis (with Varimax rotation) that was used to assess the underlying structure of the set of variables. Results suggested six factors, but two factors had only a single variable (content category) loading on them. This fact combined with those categories’ small representation (n = 6 items for one [organized religion] and n = 17 for the other [non-institutional education]) indicated that these two content categories contributed little to the underlying coverage structure. Also, two other content categories – individual religion/spirituality (n = 2) and “unclassified” items (those not covering local news; n = 65) – were not associated with any of the factors, having maximum loadings of less than .19 for each.

The remaining 14 variables grouped as follows into four factors cumulatively accounting for 46 percent of the variance in the data:

- **Factor 1** (14.5 percent of variance): Arts and Culture, Community Events, Volunteer Activities, Government, and General News. The five categories accounted for 57 percent of the total items coded (n = 820). Factor loadings ranged from .519 to .789.
- **Factor 2** (11.5 percent of variance): Educational Institutions, Sports, and Personal/Social News. The three categories accounted for 12.8 percent of the total items coded (n = 184). Factor loadings ranged from .585 to .773.
- **Factor 3** (10.5 percent of variance): Community History, Transportation and Commuting, Business and Economy, and Real Estate/Land Development. The four categories accounted for 13.3 percent of the total items coded (n = 189). Factor loadings ranged from .452 to .743.
- **Factor 4** (9.5 percent of variance): Accidents/Disasters; and Police, Crime and Courts. The two categories accounted for 10.4 percent of the total items coded (n = 149). Factor loadings ranged from .637 to .838.

(Complete results in Table 2.)

The underlying coverage determinants as suggested by these factors indicate that hyper-local news sites are fulfilling the community orientation functions as described by Janowitz and the community-ties construction postulated by Stamm.

One of the four key roles in Janowitz’s description of the community press was that it would shape and reflect the neighborhood social and political structure. Factor 1 includes...
reporting on government (political structure), as well as volunteer groups, arts/cultural activities and community events (all part of the social structure). General news items not classified elsewhere in one of the categories also loaded on this factor. But the collection of “structural” items loading on this factor indicates that hyper-local news sites are fulfilling the function Janowitz identified regarding community structure.

Factor 2, meanwhile, finds a common determinant to coverage of schools, sports and personal/social news, which included job promotions, civic awards obituaries, and the like. These items represent many types of coverage of which “social ritual” is made and thus this factor seems to reflect Janowitz’s finding that the community reporting will focus on “community routines, low controversy and social ritual” (1967, p. 130).

Janowitz also postulated a local commercial aspect of community coverage, and three coverage variables related to that – business, transportation, and real estate/land development – are loaded on Factor 3. Community history, another infrequently found item (n = 9; >1 percent of total items), loaded on this factor also.

Factor 4, which groups accident/disaster coverage and police/crime news, represents disclosing threats to the community, as described by Edelstein and Larsen (1960) in their follow-up to Janowitz’s work. Seen more directly in Janowitz’s context, it groups two coverage variables that also relate to a consensus value: community safety.

The groupings aren’t perfect; schools, as a community institution, loaded on Factor 2 but might more logically group with Factor 1; non-institutional educational coverage such as individuals’ academic accomplishments did not load anywhere, when it might have logically been a part of the social ritual coverage. Conversely, community events (blood drives, community festivals and the like) could easily be thought of as providing the low controversy/community routine coverage that seems to be defined by Factor 2 but loaded on Factor 1 instead. Still, the general trend with most of the coverage variables as they were grouped by the factor analysis support that the hyper-local news sites are fulfilling the functions ascribed to the community press in Janowitz’s classic work.

The factor solution also offers evidence of hyper-local sites’ coverage patterns associating with community ties in the ways ascribed by Stamm. He described the development of community ties as not only a matter of place (geography) but also of structure (institutions) and process (shared values/common activities). While this taxonomy does not completely overlap with Janowitz’s, the two approaches do intersect somewhat. Both scholars describe news about local institutions as coverage of “community structure.” Further, Janowitz’s description of coverage “emphasizing values and interests on which there is a high level of consensus in the community” (1967, p. 61) closely parallels what Stamm calls “process” coverage, or that which
helps build community identity by illustrating “common endeavor and shared interest” (Stamm 1985, p. 18).

Using Stamm’s taxonomy, Factor 1 could be labeled “structure” for its collection of coverage variables about community institutions; Factor 2 could be labeled “process” for its items that illustrate shared values and Factor 3 could be labeled “place” because all four variables that load there – transportation/commuting, business and economy, real estate, and community history – are deeply rooted in local geography. Similarly with the comparison to Janowitz’s functions, Factor 4 (“threats”) relates to the shared value of a safe community.

**Discussion**

The state of American journalism and the fate of traditional news organizations are topics of great concern and discussion in the industry and the academy. A commonly used metaphor is that we are evolving to a new form of news “ecosystem” (McLellan 2010, Mitchell 2010) where instead of a dominant “species” of the traditional newspaper organization, societal needs for journalistic information are met instead by a wide range of provider-types (Downie & Schudson 2009). The oft-debated, but so far unanswerable, question is how well this pastiche of providers will fulfill the functions of traditional journalism as legacy organizations decline.

This project doesn’t address widely held concerns of coverage gaps related to the decline of metro newspapers. But it does provide some answers regarding whether a new-and-developing form of news organization, the hyper-local online site, fulfills functions ascribed to another distinct segment of the traditional press, namely community journalism. The factor analysis designed to elicit underlying patterns in news-topic selection generally supports the idea that contemporary hyper-local coverage sustains construction of community ties along the lines described by Stamm (geographic, structural, and process/shared values). The analysis lends somewhat less-clear, but still fairly apparent, support for the idea that coverage patterns follow those hypothesized by Janowitz as well, in how it reflects community social and political structure, consensus values, and economic imperatives.

In other words, the emerging news ecosystem for community coverage via online hyper-local sites fulfills functions traditionally associated with weekly newspapers. This is significant because while community newspapers perhaps are not as economically strapped as their larger cousins the metro dailies (Steffens, 2009), neither are they immune to the trends that are altering the landscape of journalism (Mutter 2010).

The findings also are important because as the past research cited in this paper demonstrates, the local media system is an integral part of the overall social system. Janowitz saw the community press as both a means by which individuals became integrated with the community and as a tool for development of community identity and social significance. Hyper-
local news sites appear positioned to do the same. Stamm, meanwhile, argued that structure and process were more enduring aspects of community-building than geography, noting that “If the spatial constraints on community are essentially removed, the possibility exists for communities based more on structure and process” (1985, p. 184). He even raised the idea of virtual communities (p. 186). The findings here support these ideas as well. The factor analysis recognizes the importance of geography as a content determinant but attributes more of the variance in content selection to the other two elements. Geography (Factor 3) accounts for just 10.5 percent of the variance in the data while Structure (Factor 1) accounts for 14.5 percent and Process accounts for 21 percent (cumulative variance of Factors 2 and 4).

**Conclusion**

One of the most prominent questions about journalism facing both the industry and the academy is what part online news operations have to play vis-à-vis traditional print in the rapidly evolving ecosystem. The present study indicates that one small but growing part of that ecosystem, hyper-local online news sites, may have the capacity to fill a very familiar and traditional role with regard to supporting local communities. Thus they may provide something of true value and an asset to be considered as a more significant part of the news mix going forward as audiences and news providers devise new configurations for community coverage.
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>Community Events</td>
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<td>Government and Politics</td>
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<td>General news</td>
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## Table 2: Factor Loadings

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<td>Accidents/Natural Disasters</td>
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<td>Police, Courts and Crime</td>
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<td><strong>Non-loading</strong></td>
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<td>Education (non-institutional)</td>
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<td>0.133</td>
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<td>Organized religion</td>
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<td>0.068</td>
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<td>Personal religion/spirituality</td>
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<td>0.125</td>
<td>0.144</td>
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References


