

As traditional media falters, hyperlocal news is on the up

August 15 2014, by Dave Harte



Anyone can be a reporter for hyperlocal news. Credit: Roger H. Goun, CC BY

As an example of mass participatory journalism, where the voices of ordinary citizens are heard as much as public officials or PR professionals, the UK's [hyperlocal news network](#) is second to none.

Regional newspapers continue to struggle and local TV often falters, [sometimes before it's even begun](#) but this emerging breed of news

production seems to be thriving.

Some are set up as news sites while others are blogs originally started to address a particular local issue, like a threat to close a local leisure centre or to cover a specific planning concern. They then grow to cover different topics and become the go-to site for people to find out about what is happening in their area. Few have much funding and many are precariously organised, but sites like these are starting to become powerful tools for people who want to hold power to account.

A truly local voice

There are around 600 active hyperlocal websites in the UK. They vary in size and scope, with some covering news in a single village and others stretching across heavily populated suburbs or towns. Some are run for profit, offering advertising to local businesses, while others seem to simply be aimed at contributing to civic wellbeing.

Once such operation is the [B31 Voices](#) website in South Birmingham. The site is run by husband and wife team Sas and Marty Taylor, who gather up and redistribute news and information for the largely working-class suburbs in their area. Their patch is dominated by the former Longbridge motor works, a vast factory that once employed 22,000 workers but closed in 2005.

The Taylors moved to the area in 2003 and started blogging in 2010. They were motivated by a concern about the way their estate was being represented in mainstream media. They felt the estate had a bad reputation and wanted to know more and share that with other people.

Although Sas and Marty rely on a small network of occasional writers to help them publish stories on the website, they do most of the work themselves. Social media takes up the most time and it isn't unusual for

the Taylors to be up in the middle of the night manning Facebook or Twitter. "We might have a missing person or a missing pet and I will check in the middle of the night to see if there's any news," Sas said.

Visitor traffic is high on the website and the B31 [Twitter](#) feed has nearly 6,000 followers. The [Facebook](#) page has nearly 15,000 likes and up to 2,500 comments are posted each month.

Everything from the apparently trivial (pet stories are always the most shared) to the more serious concerns of local governance and crime gets covered. It often seems that Sas and Marty's role is becoming redundant since "[the people formerly known as the audience](#)" take control of the online space and offer every possible angle to a story. They contribute more than just opinions too – they often provide eyewitness accounts of the news before anyone else.

At points, Sas and Marty intervene to try to bring some order to the online conversations that can sprawl out from B31 content. They introduced #B31Snowwatch when heavy snowfall hit the area and the posts associated with the hashtag built to paint a vivid picture of of a suburb slowly grinding to a halt as buses stopped running, schoolchildren were sent home and supermarket shelves emptied as a result of panic-buying.

Birmingham has a well established local newspaper in the form of the Birmingham Mail but its daily sales have declined from 160,000 in the 1990s to nearer [40,000 in 2014](#). Marty rejects comparisons between B31 and mainstream journalism though, arguing that the latter is "just about money" while B31 is aimed at bringing the community together. Some of the people involved in these projects feel local media tends to focus on the negative and to sensationalise local events. They want to be more positive and truthful.

As cuts to local services become more widespread and the legislative climate shifts the ownership and delivery of public amenities into the private or community domain, then the citizens of this community, and others, are revealed by hyperlocal news media to be ready and able to articulate their concerns online and challenge those in power in the way that the [local](#) press had long thought was their sole privilege.

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