

IMPACT OF HYPERLOCAL MEDIA ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Sandra Murinska

Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia

Abstract. Nowadays one of the channels to get information about the local environment is hyperlocal news media. It is another way to reach an audience online, as a number of users of local television, radio and newspapers is decreasing. Hyperlocals come in many different forms, but their main characteristics show them as a news source. Hyperlocal news media have much in common with weekly community newspapers – these sites focus on a small, geographically defined area, as theoretical literature about local media say. Such news sites are becoming an important part of information space because of their fastness, digital possibilities and variety of content authors. Thus, uncertainty of staff raises questions about values, behaviours and ethics of journalism.

The aim of the paper is to examine the types and functions of hyperlocal news media to clarify what kind of content is produced in hyperlocal news media and what their role is in a local community in Latvia. There were seven Latvian hyperlocal news websites analysed; the quantitative and qualitative content analysis was made to explore research questions.

An analysis of the content of the hyperlocal news media showed that it was primarily an initiative of people working in the media, not an initiative of the people themselves. Hyperlocal news media mainly inform about what is happening in the city, municipality or village, but community involvement is minimal. Overall, function to give information dominates, but the personification with the local community is not common, so it is difficult for the community to identify themselves with the media, and thus with the community.

Keywords: community, hyperlocal, hyperlocal news media, interactivity, local journalism.

Introduction

Hyperlocal news media can be called a new way to address and reach an audience who no longer wants to read the printed news media. As the idea of extinction of printed media is increasingly being discussed, hyperlocal media – news websites could be the next platform for the action of these media. An important aspect of hyperlocal media is the audience, namely their involvement in producing content. However, according to researchers, the emergence of such news media creates a crisis for traditional media and the role of audience: there are significant differences in the impact this crisis has caused in terms of audience access to news. And these differences are underpinned by power relations and, therefore, by already existing economic, cultural, and social inequalities. In

particular, while centres of power in nation states, as well as large and wealthy metropolitan areas, tend to be well served by news organizations, poorer and less densely populated areas suffer from chronic news drought. While the closure or abandonment of major urban newspapers tends to receive significant attention, the hidden big story is the growing trend of cuts, consolidation, and closure of local titles (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, 163).

Such websites are available to all, yet the most significant feature of these websites is their content, which only applies to a particular community. So when you talk about hyperlocal media, the concept of community becomes essential. An environment has led to the creation of such sites, namely, informing the community what is happening in their neighbourhood. If mainly printed newspapers initially carried out this function to give information to a local community, now information can be obtained in an electronic way. Although often hyperlocal news media exist as electronic versions of printed newspapers, thereby expanding their operational capabilities. Or if the printed version is no longer issued, the electronic version is stored. However, such a phenomenon would not be seen as unambiguously, since a large part of society does not use the global web as the primary location for obtaining information. In November 2018 a standard Eurobarometer survey on public confidence media was carried out following an order from the European Commission – the Internet media in Latvia was trusted by 34% of the population, 46% did not trust, while there was no opinion of 20% (Balode & Damba, 2019). Consequently, public attitudes and the consumption of websites can also be judged, namely that trust in traditional media is greater. This means that hyperlocal news media realize other functions. The aim of the paper is to examine the types and functions of hyperlocal news media to clarify what kind of content is produced in hyperlocal news media and what their role is in a local community in Latvia.

Research questions were formulated:

- a) what are the types of local news websites;
- b) what content they offer, and
- c) the way in which they constitute and strengthen local communities.

In order to find answers to these questions, seven Latvian hyperlocal news websites were analysed, the quantitative and qualitative content analysis was made to explore the research questions.

In each media environment, awareness of hyperlocal media is different because there are a number of factors that define it: the population of the country, the geographical breakdown, the system of media owners. Within this research study, the term hyperlocal news media refers to news websites that cover a city, municipality or village. It was concluded that there were hyperlocal news media representing a city, other activities in smaller geographical territories were not detected in Latvia.

What is hyperlocal news media?

To talk about hyperlocal media is to talk about what the term hyperlocal means. The term hyperlocal, which originates from the US, describes online local news and information services, normally independent from large media owners. The definition of hyperlocal media says that “hyperlocal media represent online content of news relevant to the city, village or other geographically limited community” (Radcliffe, 2013). This means that hyperlocal media take over the functions of local media, making them more accessible and interactive.

The definition can make confusion within its meaning in Latvia, as, for example, the content of websites generated by local governments partly carries out the function of hyperlocal media because, mainly, they are representing local news. Hyperlocal content can be found on different platforms and supports a number of different civil and journalism objectives, including local news, campaigns, national scrutiny (Radcliffe, 2013). In Latvia, such news sites are for almost every municipality, which may cause confusion in the audience if it is not familiar with these differences. It is essential that the name of such a site defines the geographical area and therefore also the membership of the community. For example, *rezekne.lv*, *daugavpils.lv*, *riga.lv*, *liepaja.lv*, etc. It is important that these are also the first sites that are offered in the search engine by typing the name of a specific city. They are also named as city information portals, but their authors have different tasks what they should do making these websites of city image. In this case, they are people who have the social role of the representatives of the municipality and publish the content that the sponsor considers necessary.

Professor of journalism Damian Radcliffe explains that such a typical hyperlocal website does not exist (Radcliffe, 2013). The definitions and types of hyperlocal media depend on how they are produced, for example, who are their authors, founders and content specifics. It is important that the content of such media is localised – in terms of content types and geographical sense – much more than mainstream media outlets. Such media represent the diversity of genres, not just representing news.

In the era of digital technologies, social networks are also becoming a digital place for publishing local news, namely profiles of urban territories created mainly by local community representatives on social networks. When assessing the number of visitors and followers, their popularity appears to be significant compared with the profiles of individual hyperlocal news media on a social network, for example, on facebook.com community made profile has 11 182 followers while activity of followers for hyperlocal news media is lower.

Table 1 Number of followers for hyperlocal news media profiles on facebook.com (author`s elaboration)

Hyperlocal news media profile	Number of visitors
liepajniekiem.lv	5602
rezekneszinas.lv	1624
grani.lv	5539
gorod.lv	29 660
valmieraszinas.lv	7671
jekabpilslaiks.lv	557
jelgavniekiem.lv	5245

There should be mentioned that the highest number of followers is specific to a community made profile compare with profiles which originate in hyperlocal news media. Of course, there are different functions for profiles on social networks and for hyperlocal media in the society despite both serving the community. But the common thing is the role of the author. It is unclear and usually the editorial staff is not named, which is common practice in journalism.

Talking about hyperlocal journalism, definitions about authors, producers and audience appears in different aspects. Because sometimes hyperlocal journalism is described as the practice of civic journalism, conclusions of researches show that *by providing local information, civic journalism enables citizens to act in their own communities, whereas hyperlocal media operations and their editorial choices are largely driven by market criteria* (Dickens, Couldry, & Fotopoulou, 2015).

The potential rise of the audience as a producer of news challenges journalism to rethink its professional identity, conventional understandings of its function in society and key principles – such as objectivity and diversity – that are conventionally associated with professional journalistic quality (Borger, van Hoof, & Sanders, 2016). The collapse of local journalism has serious consequences for the health of both local communities and, more broadly, democratic societies, but there is an opposite view that journalism made by non-professionals is the potential saviour of local journalism. Overall, the situation is ambiguous in spite of given online opportunities and audience involvement. However, researches show that local information and community-building activities are declining, despite of digital possibilities in space and time.

Role of community in the media environment

The concept of community may be considered in the context of different sciences for the purpose of defining the individual. In the first place, communication science has seen physical intervals as the primary feature, but

other features, such as common interests, are currently taken into account when extending the technological capabilities of the forms of communication. According to community media researcher Nicholas Jankowski, “the community is identified by a relatively limited geographical region – village, small towns, and, in some cases, the big cities” (Jankowski, 2002). However, the geographical factor is not the only one that defines the nature of the community. The formation of communities is determined by the existence of common basic values, professional, intellectual, religious, ethnic, etc. values, and therefore they are structured by three types of structural and operational features that are often interlinked. Consequently, the community is characterized by a close link between its representatives, which identifies the relationship between the group of people (Carpentier, Lie, & Servaes, 2008) and thus constitutes a collective identity. Researcher Benedict Anderson (Benedict Anderson) introduced the concept of imagined communities. B. Anderson argues that "all communities are pictured" (Anderson, 1991), which means that all objects or groups of people are pictured and their practice is just symbolic design. It does not mean that communities are false, the author stresses that "communities are imaginary, because people representing even the smallest nation will never know about all its members, never meet them or even hear about them, but have an image of their own community in mind (Anderson, 1991). The concept implies a sense of community ownership without being in one room, and “communities become one of the primary imaginations and joint reception of cases” (Appadurai, 1996). Such a view is typical of studies by anthropologists and sociologists who view the community in a wider context, assessing not only their location but also their perceptions and ways of interaction. Media discourse researcher Jan van Dijk (Van Dijk, 1997) highlights four features common to all communities: the presence of its members, social organization, language and interaction patterns, culture and common identity. Using these features, it is possible to compare “natural or real communities and virtual communities” (see Table 2).

Table 2 Types of communities (Van Dijk, 1997)

Characterization	Natural	Virtual
Nature and activity	Multiple activities	Specific activities
Social organization	Location and Time Engagement	Not linked to location and time
Language and interaction	Verbal and non-verbal	Verbal and paralanguage
Culture and identity	Homogenous	Heterogeneous

As shown in the table, the characteristics of natural communities include stability in space and time, as well as a homogenous environment as opposed to virtual communities. In the 21st century, the understanding of natural or

traditional communities is seen by the population as a movement and globalization, as it changes the physical location and view of the community as a stable, stable entity. Under the influence of certain technological, economic and social developments, the transformation of lifestyle models, political systems, etc., also takes place within the framework of communities. This means that similarly thinking persons currently drive the formation of communities. Theorists stress the rapidly changing community structure prevents the creation of a certain definition of the community, so other signs of the community may become essential over time, because a person needs to be socially integrated in one way or another. A significant sign of the community is communication; it brings the community together and makes a sense of belonging, using common communication symbols and signs. Knowing what happens in your backyard is central to local engagement, participation, and social life (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

New media give new possibilities how to make communication interactive. The practice of interactivity may take the form of: interaction between readers and the journalist/editors, between readers and other readers; and between readers and the mass of the audience – when they use the news media to voice their opinion or to publish their own story (Hastjarjo, 2017).

Methodology

This paper employs an analysis of seven Latvian hyperlocal news media (news websites). The hyperlocal news media of Latvia's largest cities were selected with a different geographical scale and creator/owner (Table 3) for analysis:

- 1) hyperlocal news media, which are owned by the owners of media groups;
- 2) belong to independent owners.

Table 3 Seven selected hyperlocal news media (author`s elaboration)

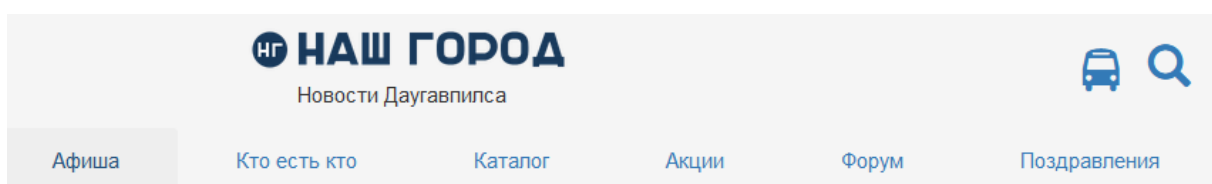
	Geographical scale	Initiated by	Cooperation with mass media
liepajniekiem.lv	Local, regional, national	Media group	Local newspaper, local television
rezekneszinas.lv	Local, national, international	News website	Local radio
grani.lv	Local, national	News website	Local newspaper
gorod.lv	Local	Media group	Local newspaper
valmieraszinas.lv	Local, regional, national	News website	Local television
jekabpilslaiks.lv	Local, national	News website	Local television
jelgavniekiem.lv	Local, national	News website	-

An important criterion was also the regular activity of websites. One of the oldest news website is gorod.lv, which was founded in 2004. It should be noted that the news site is in Russian only, as 49% of the inhabitants of Daugavpils are Russians (Latvijas iedzīvotāju nacionālais sastāvs, 2018). It means the hyperlocal media serves just the Russian speaking community of Daugavpils, while rezekneszinas.lv, liepajniekiem.lv covers information in two languages – Latvian and Russian. Hyperlocal news media with more homogenous composition of population are produced in Latvian, for example, valmieraszinas.lv, jekabpilslaiks.lv.

Data were collected in 2018, a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the hyperlocal news websites was conducted. Community related aspects and features were categorized and tabulated, which allowed us to determine interaction with the local community.

Findings and discussion

Exploring the hyperlocal news websites, it is seen that their geographic delimitation is clearly defined but it does not appear in the content of the hyperlocal news media. As can be seen in Table 3, localised content is certainly the dominant one, but national events are represented on the sites as well. Most of the hyperlocal news websites, although they define themselves as a local news publishing and distribution site, reflect information about events in Latvia and abroad. The only website that highlights the fact of unique local news is the hyperlocal news website of Daugavpils (Figure 1). The toolbar of hyperlocal news media determines geographical scope of the content as mainly local, however, in the news section, various geographic area news are represented.



*Figure 1 Toolbar of the hyperlocal news website gorod.lv
(screenshot of hyperlocal news website www.gorod.lv)*

The purpose of hyperlocal media is to provide local information and serve the interests of a particular group of people, or community, but as the data show, the geographical area is expanded. Most often national and international information has been republished from other news sites. As it is was concluded, information about topics such as politics, economics, society is being republished from other sites. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the community is

characterized by certain social organizations in the case of virtual communities, the link to a particular area is not relevant. As it is a digitally made community, the local content is making a sense of belonging to a local community.

The dominant thematic category representing the local community is culture. Publications on museum exhibitions, theatre performances, library activities and news, cultural monuments, cultural projects, music, literature, art are dedicated to culture. For example, the news site *rezekneszinas.lv* has published 71 messages in this category in 2018, for comparison on *gorod.lv* – 297 news in 2018 have been published. This site represents regular activity as well, which represents the second largest city in Latvia by population.

As it is seen, the practice of publishing information differs from one media site to another. It is influenced by the structure of portal owners, the peculiarities of editorial work, or whether the site is authentic information or other mass media materials are used. Although the hyperlocal news media highlights the importance of local information and voice to readers on their platform, for example:

Internet portal Valmieras Zinas (www.valmieraszinas.lv) is a site where residents of Valmiera and surrounding regions can learn about current events, bright personalities and get to know different opinions and express them themselves (www.valmieraszinas.lv).

The specificity of hyperlocal media is its unique content that can be represented by community representatives within the same space, being able to be present and reflect it more accurately and in detail. Regular information about the local community promotes both the strengthening of spiritual values – its identity, as the regular reminder about unity, belonging, has a common connection with other community representatives, and practical value – providing up-to-date information on community relevant services that benefit their existence. This means that the hyperlocal news media are based on interaction between the site, the processes taking place there, and community activity.

This research shows that hyperlocal news media give a lot of space to national and international information, which does not fulfil the functions of the local community media. Digital possibilities and media business determines the role and functions of local community media instead of the structure or social organization of community. Though hyperlocal news media become a unifying digital platform for other local media, for example, local newspapers, television and radio. The status of hyperlocal news media is not clear and stable in Latvia, it is a practice which incorporates a lot of different print and electronic media with aim to make and produce news not just to cover a specific geographical territory.

Interactivity

One of the most significant characteristics of local news websites is community ties and building social activity in small communities.

Some types of interactions with audiences were identified when investigating news sites. Hyperlocal media theorists emphasize that one of the features of this media is audience participation in content creation. However, as research data show, audience engagement in content creation is minimal, audience engagement mainly involves feedback as expressing opinions and commenting, which is represented in all the explored hyperlocal news media (Table 5).

Table 4 Types of community interaction (author`s elaboration)

	Participation as an authors	Participation in forums, discussions, to comment	Specific information about community
liepajniekiem.lv	-	+	-
rezekneszinas.lv	-	+	+
grani.lv	+	+	-
gorod.lv	+	+	+
valmieraszinas.lv	+	+	-
jekabpilslaiks.lv	-	+	-
jelgavniekiem.lv	-	+	-

The common thing for all the seven hyperlocal news media is possibility to give comments under an article, but it does not mean it gives voice to the audience to participate in important decision making processes. Three of the news media (less than 50% of the explored hyperlocal news media) give possibility to participate as an author. For example, *grani.lv* offers service to download a report on an event and to be rewarded, for example, for a quality article, each can receive a gift. It is called an interaction between readers to the mass of audience – when they use the news media to voice their opinion or to publish their own story.

Community affiliation is facilitated by personalized information. It was categorized as an information representing personal data, for example dates of birth and death, mentioning persons' names. For example, *gorod.lv* publishes information about the members of the community who have gone to eternity and greetings on anniversaries; while *rezekneszinas.lv* gives opportunity to send greetings that will be broadcasted on the local radio. It is highly sensitive and personified information and can be perceived differently from readers if, for example, someone does not want to disclose such private information.

However, hyperlocal news media are not common practice in Latvia, it mostly realizes an informative function, the community is involved in news

production rarely. Mainly editorial staff create content, but their names are not made public. Anonymity is maintained and is not open communication with the community. And it is hard to state who the community is. Anonymity of the creator and sources of information does not make trust in these media, as one of the hyperlocal news media aims is connection with local community in different ways – not just giving possibility to express themselves. The invisible involvement of a community is visible on social networks, thus all hyperlocal news media are using social network as one more channel to communicate with potential community members.

As can be seen in the table, community involvement is the most active in commenting and discussions. Participation in a survey on different issues makes sense for editors of hyperlocal news media, for example:

- *are community representatives worried about Brexit?*
- *is the car ready for the winter season?*
- *do you feel the influx of pupils/students in the city?*

Thus, they can discover an opinion of the community about relevant issues at that time.

It not common practice but *liepajniekiem.lv* gives a special section called *Forums* where participants can ask questions of interest in different categories (health care, beauty care, economy, education, politics, housing, traffic, tourism, etc.). Domestic topics are the most popular subject discussed in this forum. The visibility of local groups appear mostly in discussions, thus the community is integrated in local geographical space.

Conclusions

As emphasized in community media theory (Janowitz, 1967), the essential feature of community media is the creation of consensus. Exploring the content of the hyperlocal news media reveals that it is primarily an initiative of people working in the media, not an initiative of the people themselves. Hyperlocal news media mainly inform about what is happening in the city, municipality or village, and community involvement is minimal. Overall, function to give information dominates, but the personification with the local community is not common, so it is difficult for the community to identify themselves with the media, and thus with the community.

Hyperlocal news media in Latvia are produced and affected by the media market situation. Thus, many of the authors are journalists but many of them want to stay anonymous and do not want to talk with the audience. This is evidenced of the low level of community involvement in content creation and theme selection as well. And this situation does not change one of the topicalities

mentioned in the introduction of the paper – chronic news drought happening in the poorer and less densely populated areas.

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