News in the community?
Investigating emerging inter-local spaces of news production/consumption

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Abstract:

This article examines the emergence of new spaces of news production and consumption, drawing on extensive fieldwork and interviews with community reporters trained by a community reporter organization based in the north of England. Practices of news production and content generation are focused on people's own communities and they are underpinned by an ethos of production, which is grounded in a critical consumption of news and collective processes of skill acquisition. Through an analysis of motivations and practices, we account for the values that sustain community reporter communities and discuss how such practices, while emerging from the place of local community, extend also to wider communities of interest. It is suggested that an evolving practice of skill sharing and mutual recognition could potentially stimulate the regrowth of democratic values.

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Introduction

New practices of news production/ consumption (Bruns 2005) are emerging in the digital age as the resources for, and entry-barriers to, content production have changed radically. While much work has been done on mainstream news institutions'treatment of user-generated content by (Ornebring 2008; Wardle and Williams 2010), such work has prioritised 'former' audiences' activities (Rosen 2006) directed *back towards* mainstream journalism. But what if such activities are often directed elsewhere, for example within people's own communities or networked spaces that link up community reporters across multiple locations? This article will investigate such new spaces of news circulation, drawing on interviews with community reporters trained by, or networked with, a community reporter organization based in the north of England (People's Voice Media, henceforth 'PVM') whose aim is to become a 'Reuters of the Community'.[1]

We are interested in how this new landscape of news *production/consumption* works from the perspective of community-based actors seeking to forge an alternative model of news in which community voice is more heavily weighted (see also BESPOKE 2011). News production/consumption – indeed all media production/consumption – has a material geography, much neglected in mainstream media studies.[2] Yet geography, at least urban geography, was at the heart of one of the earliest newspaper studies (Park 1967, op. 1925) which understood the early US newspaper industry as a response to changes in the lifeworld's *spatial* configuration as people moved from villages to cities: if 'local news is the very stuff that democracy is made of' (Park 1967, 85), then the local news element even in broader news production should not be neglected.

It is important to understand better how community news producers/consumers conceive their media-related practice. This article draws on interviews among PVM's

network of reporters about their production *and* consumption practices. The resulting picture does not resolve into either a centralized valorisation of 'user-generated content' or into a decentred hyperlocalism (Radcliffe 2012). Instead we encountered a more complex relationship whereby local stories are produced and linked within an inter-local exchange; yet it is often audiences' feelings of *not* being recognised in national news agendas that drives them to generate *and consume* news stories more locally.

We conducted our fieldwork during rapid, even destructive change in the distribution of local government resources and nationally-funded income. The multi-billion cuts announced in the 2010 emergency budget statementset in motion a restructuring of local governance (the Localism Act (2011), reducing in particular, disability services, employment services and housing benefits.[3] Meanwhile regional funding sources for civil society organizations like PVM were severely cut. Both PVM and its community reporters were experiencing acute financial pressure when we worked with them.

Independently, changes in the landscape of news production impacted negatively on local democracy (Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre 2010), with rival news providers emerging in potential response to these changes (see 'Research content' below). Their diverse strategies of content production reflect a wider, unresolved debate about what 'news' is for, where and by whom it should be produced and consumed, and whether our inherited philosophies of journalism can address current challenges and opportunities. Will flows of significant information ('new stories') be radically reconfigured in the digital age (Peters 2012, Rantanen 2009), generating a differently structured 'mediaspace' (XXXX 2004)? It helps here to remember what Lefebvre saw as the dialectical nature of all spatial practices (Lefebvre 1991, 18): even if capitalism operates through an 'abstract space' (for money and resource transmission), new 'social spaces' can still emerge through local action, for example a space of community reporter practice(Jackson 1994). Throughout we must attend to the highly particular processes by which 'locality' is produced, both in news practice (Kirby 1989) and more generally (Appadurai 1995). That means basing our inquiry in the values and practices of actual community reporters. We need to be sensitive both to changing production practices and the

grounding of those changes in a dissatisfaction with national media's historic neglect of many localities.

After reviewing relevant literature and a contextual note, we explore in sequence the resources, news conceptions, and networked spaces of community reporting, reflecting finally on the potentially democratic values they imply.

Community reporting, place and media literacy

The optimism surrounding new digital journalistic practices has been heavily criticized. Van Dijk and Nieborg (2009) urge critical awareness of peer-production trends in business models of the digital economy and web 2.0, advising against terms such as 'produsage' and 'co-creation' and asserting that this business-generated 'new digital infrastructure has come to govern our mediascape as well as our social lives' (2009, 870). Similarly, Rebillard and Touboul (2010) have challenged 'Web 2.0' promissory narratives in relation to journalism and participatory culture. Our study however concerns members of a specific community, not anonymous users or 'crowds', exploring how they understand their content-generation practices, which are certainly not solicited by corporate media, and their own visions about what constitutes news and participation in news production.

Our article is not concerned with participation directly in mainstream journalism. Such 'participatory journalism' potentially enables citizens to be active in the collection and dissemination of news (Bowman and Willis, 2003). However, Wardle and Williams (2010) noted that, although audience comments, footage, experiences and stories are collected by the BBC, the structural roles of BBC news journalists has not been challenged by these practices: 'journalists have remained journalists and audiences have remained audiences' (Wardle and Williams 2010, 792). Similarly, in an analysis of user-generated tabloid content for *The Sun*, Henrik Ornebring argued these practices do not signify a power shift between producer and consumer; indeed, users were encouraged to produce content oriented to their personal and everyday life, rather than to have any direct involvement in news selection (Ornebring 2008, 783).

Unlike participatory journalism, citizen journalism seeks to transfer power and responsibility from journalists to individuals or community groups. Indymedia, as a distinct, radical model of journalistic practices (Platon and Deuze 2003), is the most

cited example. Other models, such as 'hyperlocal' media, seek to address the decline of traditional news media industries (Picard 2003, 2008) and to introduce a community orientation to news media operations (Howley 2009). Hyperlocal media have been described as 'a hybrid of civic, community, statewide public affairs, and alternative newspaper movements combined with the interactive and broadcast abilities accompanying Web 2.0' (Metzgar et al 2011, 774). However, Metzgar *et al.* (2011, 779) in their analysis of US-based hyperlocal media note a difference between civic journalism and hyperlocal media: by providing local information, civic journalism enables citizens to act in their own communities, whereas hyperlocal media operations and their editorial choices for example are largely driven by market criteria.

The question of what 'community' is served by such journalism is complex. John Dewey wrote about the relationship between issues of concern and publics, arguing that issues make publics (Dewey ([1927] 1956). While this raises broader questions of visibility (Marres 2007), more important here is how shared concerns are debated and resolved in everyday social spaces, and not just the spaces prescribed for political deliberation or speech (Couldry2010). Rodriguez similarly has defined "citizens' media" as 'the media citizens use to activate communication processes that shape their local communities' (2011, 24). Additionally, in an ethnically diverse community in the Los Angeles county, Chen *et. al.* (2012) analysed the relationship between local storytelling and civic engagement: when local stories are missing from mainstream media, or existing publications fail to talk about the collective problems of a specific community or neighbourhood, web-based storytelling platforms can enhance civic engagement and inter-group interaction. We too found that the absence of a media platform to express shared local concerns was an impetus community reporting. Spaces of social cooperation and mutual recognition are potentially created when news production operates within specific communities.

Such practices, and their underlying values, are critical to the emergence of a different geographical configuration of news production and consumption. Rantanen (2009), in her analysis of localization and places in news, has noted how news-flow studies have largely ignored questions of 'where' and 'when', prioritizing the analysis of news content. Yet news plays a significant role in constructing our experiences of place:

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'belonging has no meaning unless news offers readers a point of identification' (Rantanen 2009, 80). As we see later, it is local points of reference that for Community Reporters create such opportunities for identification, and news about such reference points emerges itself from local practices of skill-building and mutual recognition.

What community reporters bring to news generation has implications for debates on media literacy. In their review for the UK regulator Ofcom, Livingstone et al. (2008, 46) note the importance of content creation for media literacy, but identify two research gaps: the relationships between amateur production and the creative industries; and how "an experience of production encourages a critical understanding of media products". This article begins to address both gaps, while also linking to international debates on how narrative exchange contributes to wider civic engagement (Bennett 2008; Rheingold 2008).

Research context and methodology

Empirically, this paper draws on personal accounts recorded through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 self-selecting 'community reporters' (CRs) reached through an open call sent through the PVM mailing list. The group consisted of eight women and four men, aged between 20 and 63 years, and living in Salford, Greater Manchester; Toxteth, Liverpool; Brighton on England's South Coast; and the Blaenau Gwent region of South Wales. For each location, CRs were linked to a corresponding partner agency: PVM in Salford, Toxteth TV in Toxteth, Three Valleys TV in Blaenau Gwent, and the Sussex Community Internet Project in Brighton. Our sample captured the heterogeneity of individual CRs and their localities that are missed in hyperbolic narratives about 'here comes everybody' (Shirky 2007). All accounts have been anonymised.

PVM, a social enterprise based in Salford, aimed "to support people to have a voice . . . and describe their own reality" and "contribute to raising community and individual aspiration". A core part of this vision was PVM's Community Reporter programme, which prioritised the production of 'community reporting' for *community* empowerment (Watton 2009), rather than individualised production by 'citizen journalists' hoping to break into the mainstream (Wilson, 2012).

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PVM operates a 'social licensing' franchise model that enables other community groups to purchase CR training packages, receive accreditation and participate in a dedicated online network of reporters and content.[4] While originating in the North West, this network spread across other UK areas, and in early 2012 was formalised through a national 'Institute of Community Reporters'.[5] To date PVM have supported approximately 1,000 people through their Community Reporter programme, bringing community perspectives to bear on local housing policy, schooling and public space.[6]

PVM are one of many similar organisations focused on local news production/consumption emerging within a rapidly restructuring media landscape. Several small, 'hyperlocal' groups have begun to develop their own training and support for local people: for example the 'Community Media Training School' run by Citizenseye in Leicester, or the 'Community Correspondents' program by South Leeds Life.[7] At a national level several initiatives have developed platforms to draw together networks of community-level reporters: notably, the Media Trust's 'Newsnet' service (now called 'Newswire') or GlobalNet21's 'citizen zone', as well as the UK government-endorsed Your Square Mile.[8]The US has a more advanced hyperlocal sector (Kurpius *et al.* 2010; Metzgar *et al.* 2011), while several services host community-reported content internationally, including Global Voices and WeAreChange.[9]

1. The 'Community Reporter': motivations, relationships and skills

1.1   *Backgrounds and motivations*

While community media has a longer and broader history (Rodriguez 2001; Fuller 2006), the CRis embodied in the UK's fast-changing digital news landscape by a diverse range of people. Some have a relevant professional background (community work, media education) while others have found CR training and practice meaningful at a decisive point in their lives. It is important to have a sense of CRs' underlying motivations to acquire skills and to get involved, if we are to understand where the potential transformation of locality through Community Reporting comes from.

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Some saw the roots of their current CR practice well before recent debates about 'prosumers' (Bruns 2005). Maggie, a retired teacher with mobility problems, had organised community projects for capturing local stories:

> I think I've always been, without realising, a community reporter […] I was doing other sorts of community reporting without being recognised as a community reporter.

Being a CRthen is not a given, but an emergent identity. It involves a need to address the challenging material circumstances of people's lives by giving an account of what is happening around them. This need starts a positive process of skill acquisition (see 1.3 below) for those who might otherwise have been locked into inactivity: meeting people and gaining more confidence; employment and skill acquisition; getting recognition for one's skills and abilities.

Unsurprisingly, when asked what CR practice meant to them, those we interviewed often replied in almost evangelical terms: "it's a passion, not a penance" (Maggie); or "being a community reporter means everything to me!" (Lynda, an unemployed middle-aged woman). Similarly, Terry explained that:

> I'm disabled… but it's given me a whole new meaning in life, the whole community media has.

Even where CRsand CR trainers had passed through media professions, they contrasted mainstream journalism and community reporting.Carly, one of the media-trained CRs we interviewed described the difference in ethical terms:

> I'm trained in media anyway, and I've been teaching digital media production at all different levels for years, the [CR] training for me was more about the Community Reporter ethos.

For her, identifying as a CRresults from the belief that news about local communities should be produced in ways that relate explicitly to the specific communities from which that news emerges. Is this the beginning of a practical response to the challenges of today's underfunded journalism environment?

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1.2   Relationships

For our participants, membership in a community of shared news production values helped reshape their wider experience of community and locality. Indeed, practices of community reporting always involved entering into a wider 'community of practice' involving mutual recognition of each other's everyday skills and abilities (Wenger 1998). One key form of interaction between CRs, shaping how specific communities of reporters established localised bonds, was the 'meet-up'. Meet-ups facilitated mutual recognition and information/skill exchange between CRs:

> We discuss what we can, we look at various things that we're doing,
> seeing if we can leverage that, and … we look at what's happening in
> the town and make sure that we're covering it. (Terry)

Some groups came together around specific interests or local issues (youth groups, housing associations, disability groups), while others took a more general interest in their neighbourhoods. In the everyday spaces of the 'meet-up' (held in community centres, church halls and freely available meeting rooms), CRs over tea and coffee chatted about local issues and their own media practices with other similarly inclined local people. In the absence, generally, of significant material reward, these interactions fostered a clear but necessary sense of solidarity:

> it was one of the best decisions I've ever made, because I made so
> many friends. And *I mean beyond friends if that makes sense*, people
> that are there for me, that have been supportive, and if I've said I've got
> this problem or that problem, or I've got this idea, I've got that idea, I
> only have to click my fingers and it's there, the help is there (Carly).

As Linda noted:

> if I've said I've got this problem or that problem, or I've got this idea,
> I've got that idea, I only have to click my fingers and it's there, the help
> is there.

This community was for Lynda grounded in a practice of care for particular people and places, enacted through a practice of active listening (Dreher 2010).

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> [T]o me through the eye of a camera is the way forward because what
> [reporters are] seeing through the lens of a camera or through their own
> eyes can be shared . . . through other people.

Such active listening, being grounded in a relationship of care for a local community, goes beyond the position of the 'prosumer' (the consumer who also sometimes producers for him- or herself), implying a different relation to journalist practice and democratic norms. As discussed next, training was an important way in which CRs developed such shared practices.

1.3   Training and skills

Local CR groups' informal meet-ups often complemented explicit packages of training offered by PVM through its Institute of Community Reporters initiative. This training involved a combination of basic technical and social competencies, using accessible technologies and software and encouraging in peoplethe confidence to tell their own stories about issues that affected them, rather than turn them into professional journalists.

PVM training emphasises the experiential use of technologies such as flip-cams. For many, it was an opportunity to learn basic editorial skills and shape media content into recognisable stories:

> I had a cine-camera, a DVD recorder thing, and I didn't really know
> how to use it. I knew how to point it, I knew how to record things, but I
> didn't know how to get the film off it onto a computer and play with it.
> And once I did that I got the bug. (Trevor)

The training emphasis remained on the quality of narrative exchange, not on producing professional media outputs; "we're not all trying to be Steven Spielbergs, but everyone's got their own way of putting stuff across" (Keith).

Others that undertook community reporter training saw it as a practice that addressed accessibility and adult media literacy issues. As Sandra, a trainer, explained:

> working with the housing group, especially with it being older people
> […] people that don't normally have access to computers haven't got

> the basic, basic skills, and part of the training was assuming that they
> don't have that, and they don't.

CR training can challenge digital divides and literacies (Livingstone and Helsper 2007) by helping CRs develop the technical *and* social skills of storytelling. The training process was central in creating a culture of skill and knowledge sharing for CRs, and lies at the heart of this distinctive space of news production/consumption.

PVM's own accreditation of these skills involved a micro-culture of esteem and recognition, which was ratified with a 'Community Reporter' badge. As Gary Copitch, CEO of PVM explained:

> The institute of community reporters is about individuals. […] We
> thought it's about time to give recognition to people […] The badge
> gives people credibility.

CRs echoed this sense of validation in their own pursuit of meaningful stories:

> I've got my badge now, so when I ask questions, I'm a community
> reporter, it backs me up. It opens doors. […] it gives you a bit more
> confidence when you go up to somebody and say, put the badge in their
> face, 'I've got a badge!' (Sandra)

Yet the CR community of practice, while often closely focused on a bounded locality, was also cut across by wider communities *of interest* that could transcend locality and create a broader sense of belonging to something more significant (See Section 3). Thus for Carly, the practical media training served to build solidarity within her local meet-up group and, simultaneously, with a national 'movement':

> when I'm training . . . you're part of something larger than just that project, it's a
> movement, and I think that gives it more credibility, and I think it makes you feel like
> you're more a part of something. You're not just, 'Oh I've just been trained on a flip
> camera.'

As discussed next, practices of news production and consumption between CRs created a space where positive stories about their communities could be voiced both

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within and beyond their immediate localities. In this way, CRs gained some sense of control and empowerment over their own issues across a range of scales.

2. A distinct mode of news production/consumption?

When interviewees spoke about the news media they consumed, they often noted occasions where mainstream news did not provide them with points of identification. Our CR sample were generally active and regular consumers of a variety of news (local/national; radio, TV, internet, less so newspapers). Most reporters showed a strong sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream news, primarily for its sensationalist focus on "all those poor people shooting each other and ripping each other off and selling each other drugs […] looking for the juicy stuff that makes headlines and the front page" (Keith). This critical stance towards mainstream news often pushed them towards local news:

> I wouldn't waste my money [on mainstream newspapers]. *The Sun* is always behind anyway, it's always late with the news and as I say, the newspapers are basically the same as the TV, propaganda. (Lynda)

Dissatisfaction with the mainstream media was a key motivation for seeking new types of news to consume and for producing news themselves. When CRscould not find points of identification in the mainstream news, they created their own opportunities for identification:

> I was sick of being lied to by the mainstream media and I just wanted to do things that I want to be involved in and that interest myself which I know myself will interest other people… don't hate the media, be the media. (Lynda)

Lynda related her discontent with mainstream news directly to her own journalistic instinct for newstelling as 'truth':

> I never leave home without my camera […] [T]hat's me now, more in your face. I'm not frightened of interviewing anybody or poking my lens at anybody . . . I just cover the truth.

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Similarly, Sandra expressed a desire to go beyond the news she consumed by making the news herself within a profoundly local context:

> You realise a lot of things go on behind the scenes, which no one knows about, so it's not reported in the local paper, it's not reported on the local radio, or any local media, it just happens you overhear a conversation. […] I go hunting then!

This *counter*-media practice finds its initial focus around the notion of 'positive news' which needs careful unpacking.

2.1 'Positive news'

The need for 'more positive' news to counter the relentless cycle of murders, wars, scandal and government wrangling has been a commonplace of news debate in Britain since the 1990s.[10] CRs' language appears to repeat this commonplace, but with the difference that, from the perspective of particular communities (often significantly disadvantaged), they want to correcti what they see as specific misrepresentations:

> people always think of the Toxteth riots, which was 1981; do you know what I mean? It's like, 'Move on.' […] <laughs> there's been so many positive things […] that have happened in Toxteth over the last 30 years … it just changes people's perceptions hopefully, that's what Community Reporters does of a place. And it's not just Toxteth; it's everywhere … where the community reporters exist. (Safi)

Far from a naive celebration of the parochial that rejects any links to political contention, when reporters explained to us what they meant by 'positive' news, they made clear links to significant and contentious issues:

> I think [it is] stories that look at local issues, but also look to *give people a voice about how they could have solutions from within the community*. For example we've done some reports on the welfare reforms and how they impact on tenants and certain associations, and how they impact on people with disabilities and stuff […] coming from that is a voice of people's fear and anxiety, but there's also through the consultation, *people are suggesting things that could be done to help in*

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> *their situation*, […] in terms of what the community could do to support
> the community. (Carly, added emphasis)

If what matters is linking local issues to local action, CRs can be positive agents of news production, taking advantage of the new intersections between consumption and production and escaping the stereotype of the 'reactive' citizen that mainstream British media generally present (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005).

PVM had a policy of avoiding explicit political references, within a wider strategy to elicit more positive news, but struggled at times to differentiate between the narrowly partisan and the more constructive ways in which CRs might address the implications of political decisions. However, Lynda noted:

> The world isn't just rosy coloured glasses, people need to see beyond
> the boxand know what's happening beyond the box, you know give the
> glasses a wipe, it isn't all like, local garden fete, or you know
> somebody's done this that's good. There is bad things out there that
> need bringing to light, you know, crime. Like the local council, they
> commit crime every day, every week, every year, by pulling down
> property, stocks of housing.

The specific news values that underlie community reporters' understandings of stories are examined next.

2.2 What constitutes a 'news' story?

Local practices of mutual recognition played an important role in how CRs produced and consumed news :

> I found what [we] were doing was looking for the stories, the
> unremarkable, remarkable stories, if that makes sense […] the more I
> got into it the more I understood that my background as a sales engineer
> in sales for 20 odd years, although being business-to-business, was not
> that different from reporting; ask questions, get answers, just being

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> nosey really […] And as unremarkable as anybody can be to the naked
> eye, you don't know what's going on behind that façade. (Trevor)

Indeed, what *counted* as a news story was guided by values of mutual recognition between CRs:

> there's a story in everything, […] you spend a lot of time […] getting
> the trainee reporters to see that . . . *if it's important to them, then it's a*
> *story, it's an issue…* you see it almost through their eyes. . . it makes
> you see things all around. (Becky, added emphasis)

> stories dealt with a variety of themes: stories in terms of disability,
> human rights stories, anything that affects people and harms them, we
> need to cover and report about, and also even things like parking issues,
> you know? I think one of our biggest programmes last year was one
> about parking issues. (Maggie)

For instance, stories about 'wet leaves' on the pavement related to wider issues faced by older people, by blind or partially sighted people. As became evident from our interviews, Community Reporting as a news production practice helped citizens to engage with concerns about the localised impact of national cuts on housing, health, and wellbeing from within their communities. In this way, the practice repositions CRs' sense of local belonging within a potentially national space of comparison: 'it just changes people's perceptions hopefully, that's what Community Reporters does of a place. And it's not just Toxteth; it's everywhere […] where the community reporters exist (Sefi).

Community Reporting brings a concern with local change to a new audience, opening up community level engagement with the implications of such changes, that is, as 'issues' of common concern which for John Dewey are an important part of the democratic process (Dewey 1954). Thus, one CR:

> noticed that the church she went to as a child was for sale, which upset
> her so she went off to find out where the congregation was now, why
> they'd left that building and she's making a film about that. […]

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> normally she might just go home and tell her mum, now she can make a
> film about it to try and engage the community. (Emma)

Making news changes the starting-point from which one consumers what others
produce, providing a new reference-point for assessing the selection choices that may
underlie mainstream production. As Mark explained:

> since I've done some community reporting, I look more closely to see if
> there's any hidden details, I look more deeply, thinking: has this been
> changed to make somewhere look really good or really bad?

We now turn to the emerging inter-local geographies involved in CR.

3.   The networked spaces of community reporting

3.1   *Local news from the inside*

There is a strong link between CRs' distinctive sense of what is news, whether as
consumers or producers, and their sense of being positioned within a local
community. Being embedded in their own communities broadens the types and depth
of story that can be told.

> because I'm from the borough I kind of know my audience, I know
> what the locals want, what they're about. It's quite a wide range I'd say
> from elderly people down to children. When you're surrounded by the
> people I think you know what they want. (Hannah)

Hopefully, this meaning-context affects also how local audiences react to this new
types of local news. Certainly, some community reporters reflected on this greater
richness as an antidote to the increasingly frantic 'churnalism' (Davis 2008), in other
words the recycling of stories in mainstream news media, even where it respects
citizen journalists:

> I'm really here on the ground… community reporting is from people
> who are on the ground, in other words are *with* the sources […] Which I
> think is the big difference between community reporting and citizen
> journalism. […] in citizen journalism […] they're working in many

> cases with just what they've read in other newspapers, in the main
> newspapers. […] We're there, we see what's going on around us, and
> we do know what's going on and we can tell the story. [Terry, added
> emphasis]

This is not just about stealing a lead on mainstream news, but connecting the production and consumption of news through tacit understandings of the issues that affect local people in their everyday lives.

Indeed, being a Community Reporter seems to *change* how locality is understood, and in the process build a different material geography of news production/ consumption. Community reporters feel that 'outsiders' lack a more balanced understanding of everyday life in their locality, leading to misrepresentation. Misrepresentations of localities by incoming journalists can have lasting material impacts on people's lives (Champagne 1999), and CRs interviewed from Salford or Toxteth routinely referred to the consequences of their localities negative media image.

It is from the position of being "not […] an outsider coming in to [report] [but] an *actual* member of the community" [Mark, added emphasis] that community reporters understand their production/consumption. As Keith explains:

> It means that we're not laying there being fed all this crap by people
> like the BBC, ITV, Sky, where they dive on the worst of an area. It's
> like 'Moss Side this' or whatever it is, 'Nottingham is the gun capital';
> we're the people who are *actually* living within it and it will give us our
> own perspectives.

Some saw their CR as an active strategy for "trying to change perceptions of what people think of an area … because it's not all bad news" (Keith), both externally and internally. For instance, PVM noted:

> our main problem is not people's perceptions outside, it's people's
> perceptions inside. . . . mainstream media are looking in all the time,
> even the local newspaper now … it is about giving voice to people
> *within* the community. [added emphasis]

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Safi's account is given against the explicit background of the decline of local news infrastructure (in Toxteth, the closure of *The Post* and *The Mersey Mart*):

> Toxteth has got a reputation on it, and very much unfounded, but it's …
> Toxteth community reporters who can tell the positivity of what's going
> on … it lets people know the real deal. (Safi)

For CRs, the need to respond to misrepresentation of *their* locality was often intensely linked to class position, with the strongest connection between locality and negativity being in the working class areas of Toxteth, Salford and the Welsh valleys. We see in these sentiments the contemporary traces of a longer history of critical local commentary outside the journalistic mainstream. Raymond Williams (1983) discussed the campaigning style of William Cobbett in his 'Rural Rides' during the nineteenth century – an approach defined by "social and political argument combined with observation of how people lived" (O'Connor 2006: 37) - and the continuity with working class journalists in the early twentieth century.[11] Yet being a community insider need not be merely a hyperlocal practice, and is imagined by Lynda and Terry to transcend particular locations:

> I take my community reporting very serious, I like to go to different
> locations, […] I get involved in lots of aspects of my community really
> and in other cities, I go beyond my own area. (Lynda)

> I am disabled and I write from the disability point of view as well, and
> I'm involved over at [town] with a group […] when we think of
> community reporting, you're not just reporting from communities
> geographically, we're reporting from communities of interest. (Terry)

If 'communities of interest' which are located in different parts of the UK can emerge through the practice of CR, this suggests the beginnings of a differently configured infrastructure for local news.

3.2   *Emerging inter-localities*

So far the local focus of news production/consumption 'from the inside' might seem bound within a local, perhaps 'hyperlocal', model of news. Yet something distinctive was PVM's role in establishing *inter*-connections between locally orientated CR

groups. These efforts to build a national infrastructure are best understood as ways to put local practices into productive *exchange* with other localities, rather than simply aggregating local voices on national scale (citizen journalism), or focusing solely on local voices (hyperlocal news). The local is not superseded, but becomes differently connected, within a national space of comparison. Although building an effective online network platform has provedchallenging for PVM, we focus here on an emerging connection between different localities which we term here 'inter-local'.

Such an inter-local dialogic space emerges through the ways CRs *feel* connected, through shared training approaches, reporting practices and a wider ethos. As Hannah suggested, "even without meeting them you can connect with them because we're doing the same thing for all the same reasons". Moreover, Hannah felt that the dedicated ICR web platform had "given us a platform by which all of us, all of these news groups and website groups and bloggers all around the country, can get together". Indeed, while there are of course well-known social media platforms that enable mass narrative exchange, use of those spaces may be less important than a *dedicated* web space that preserves a sense of community voice while also bringing it into contact with distant others. Indeed, the ICR website space was felt to facilitate multiple connectivities and possibilities for community news production/consumption:

> It means that I am connecting my community, and my community is of
> interest, with the media, and by media now, I mean the whole internet,
> knowing what sites are available to promote my community, my
> communities. (Terry)

These inter-connections could be both national and local without being limited to either:

> in the network then it is national, 'cause we'll read stuff from people
> down in say London or Bristol or whatever and they'll read our stuff …
> I don't think there'd be that much different between us apart from some
> silly accents! […] Bypassing all of the big media crap and all telling
> each of our own stories. (Keith)

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Local communities of practice intersect with wider communities of interest, when community reporters can share experiences relating to local knowledge *and* local action. Lynda provided an example:

> There was an item a while back, […] that if you were on benefit … you could get a discount [on your energy bills]. I live in Manchester, and I passed that information onto Yorkshire, and several people contacted their suppliers and were absolutely over the moon … because it's out in the wilds, it's in the countryside, where I contacted, they had no idea that this was available, to help them with their winter fuel bills and stuff.

Similarly, Mark gave an example of inter-local exchange around his interests as a youth worker, and how such understandings had further supported his own practices:

> I've spoken to someone from the next-door city […] to get some inside information about what … the youth scene is like over in Manchester … since the council completely got rid of their youth service… This person I knew who was involved as a community reporter that had had some youth background work, so I spoke to them […] it put into contrast just how lucky we are in the area where we live, compared to just down the road […] it was useful as well in case the eventuality does come round that the same will happen in the area where I live.

In parallel with appreciating the value in sharing community-level news across localities, Safi was convinced that sharing production techniques linked up people from different localities, creating mutual recognition and an inter-local appreciation of community news:

> they're knowing us, we're knowing them, whereas a few months' ago, we weren't aware of each other, so hopefully … that skill-sharing can expand maybe. What might be good, even getting somebody from a different locality, like someone from Manchester coming to Liverpool, someone from Liverpool going to Manchester, various ways of sharing skills with people.

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While CR news reaching mass audiences was discussed only as a remote possibility, reaching communities of interest in other locations was feasible. Keith talked about a film he had produced about a local music venue:

> it was the story of the very first Northern Soul café/bar, called the Twisted Wheel Club . . . you just won't understand how much of an influence it had on the whole scene of soul up in the north. […] The film has had interest to be shown all over the world, we're talking from like Hollywood, Indonesia … lots of soul clubs all over the world, Australia, wherever.

In the reflections of the CRs we interviewed, there emerged traces of something more than a simple promotionalism: an ethics of *listening* and narrative exchange that was not opposed to mainstream journalism but suggested a distinctive approach based in mutual recognition (Honneth 2007). We end our discussion with Hazel's emphatic sense of what exchanging news means to her:

> I love passing on news . . . about what's happened in the community. And I love hearing people's opinions and I love the opportunity of being able to, not changing their minds, but give them a different point of view for them to look at, you know, 'Wow, wow I never even thought of that'… I actually listen to what other people have to say (Hazel)

To make this exchange between CRs a viable and sustained practice, the development of a stronger digital infrastructure remains necessary. So far the uneven distribution of government funding has meant that this aspect of inter-local dialogue has not been prioritised. While spaces of inter-local dialogue are emerging in offline meet-ups and between communities of interest, online platforms which effectively accommodate and strengthen these dialogic exchanges also need to be developed along the lines suggested by PVM.

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Conclusion

Participating in the production of news can enhance people's sense of each other's perspectives on the world: not necessarily conflicting with the philosophy of large-scale news production, such participation deserves to be considered as an alternative starting-point for news production/consumption at a time of huge uncertainty for traditional models of journalism. The Community Reporters we interviewed are more than individual 'prosumers' (people who both produce and consume): they have an ethos of production that is *grounded* in a critical consumption of news and an evolving practice of skill-sharing and mutual recognition. The collapse of local journalism bites deeply in disadvantaged localities such as those from where our reporter sample often came: there the CR ethos may be more than individual passion or self-expression and closer to the necessary response to an absence of collective voice. This practice starts out very often from the place of local community, but as we have shown, extends to wider communities of interest, and generates an interest in inter-local news sharing between CR groups. Such a practice contains at least the seeds of a different news infrastructure.

We recognise however that distribution is a key aspect in any new model of news production/consumption. The network of reporters we interviewed largely relied on PVM's existing distribution platform - the Institute of Community Reporters (ICR) website - which at the point of writing was redesigning its interface, in consultation with us as part of our action research. The website was being redesigned to incorporate functions that would allow reporters to connect with one another, and audiences to provide comments or other forms of feedback. For this reason, our detailed discussion is here limited to practices of production and consumption, and only touches on new possibilities of distribution.

The embedding of such practices of news consumption/production in wider communities of practice cannot be captured by generalised critiques of social media (Van Dijck 2009), nor is it satisfactorily dismissed by claims that what is needed today is more local news of the very same type whose economic model is now under threat (Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre 2010). Admittedly, the economic model for extending and sustaining community reporting is so far equally unclear, and some forms of initial subsidy are clearly needed.

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Debate about such new forms of news subsidy should be informed by an understanding of the values that can emerge in CR communities: values of voice, listening, and recognition (Couldry 2010; Dreher 2010; Honneth 2007). Could such emergent values themselves be the seeds of the 'free social enquiry' that John Dewey (1954: 163-180) once saw as necessary to stimulate the regrowth of democracy itself?

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Notes

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[1] Funded by the UK's Engineering and Physical Research Sciences Council (grant number EP/H003738/1),: http://www.firm-innovation.net and http:storycircle.co.uk.

[2] For specific examples of this neglected geography, see Brooker-Gross (1983), Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen (1998), Dencik (2013), Rodgers et al. 2009. More generally, see XXXX (2000), Adams (2009).

[3] See http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/2010_june_budget.htm), the Localism Act (2011), (http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted) and the Welfare Reform Act (2012), (http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/5/contents/enacted).

[4] http://www.communityreporter.co.uk

[5] See http://blog.peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk/2012/04/19/launch-of-the-institute-of-community-reporters/

[6] From http://peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk/case-studies

[7] See http://www.citizenseye.org/training-school/ http://www.southleedslife.com/communityreporters/ and the monthly Port Talbot Magnet (www.lnpt.org)

[8] See http://www.mediatrust.org/get-support/community-newswire-1/; http://21st-centurynetwork.com/blog/ and http://www.yoursquaremile.co.uk/

[9] See http://globalvoicesonline.org/

[10] Broadcaster, Martyn Lewis, initiated debate on the need for 'good news' in 1993. See: http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/not-my-idea-of-good-news-at-the-end-of-a-week-of-horrifying-events-martyn-lewis-bbc-presenter-argues-for-a-change-in-news-values-1457539.html and http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/profile-sweetie-among-cynics-martyn-lewis-top-in-a-tough-profession-he-campaigns-for-good-news-and-writes-about-cats-so-why-are-the-claws-out-for-him-by-geraldine-bedell-2320494.html. See also: http://positivenews.org.uk/