

# THE RE-BIRTH OF THE 'BEAT': A HYPERLOCAL ONLINE NEWSGATHERING MODEL

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Scholars have long lamented the death of the 'beat' in news journalism. Today's journalists generate more copy than they used to, a deluge of PR releases often keeping them in the office, and away from their communities. Consolidation in industry has dislodged some journalists from their local sources. Yet hyperlocal online activity is thriving if journalists have the time and inclination to engage with it. This paper proposes an exploratory, normative schema intended to help local journalists systematically map and monitor their own hyperlocal online communities and contacts, with the aim of re-establishing local news beats online as networks. This model is, in part, technologically-independent. It encompasses proactive and reactive news-gathering and forward planning approaches. A schema is proposed, developed upon suggested news-gathering frameworks from the literature. These experiences were distilled into an iterative, replicable schema for local journalism. This model was then used to map out two real-world 'beats' for local news-gathering. Journalists working within these local beats were invited to trial the models created. It is hoped that this research will empower journalists by improving their information auditing, and could help re-define journalists' relationship with their online audiences.

**KEYWORDS:** ONLINE JOURNALISM, BEATS, NETWORK SOCIETY, SCHEMA, HYPERLOCAL, NEWS-GATHERING

## **INTRODUCTION: A DEFINITION OF THE BEAT**

The 'beat' has a rich lexical history. It has been defined in the sense we understand it today, as a 'course habitually traversed by any one'; in the literary canons of two heavyweight journalistic authors; Charles Dickens (in *Sketches of Boz*, 1836), and later Mark Twain (in *Roughing It* – 1872) (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). The term has been applied in natural history to the routines of wild bears (Matthews, 1951), and where man comes into contact with nature, such as “a stretch of water fished by an angler” (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1999). The concept is redolent of an attempt to impose order, sometimes to a masochistic degree; the expression 'beating the bounds', owes its meaning to the proce of tracing “...boundaries in a perambulation, certain objects in the line of journey being formally struck, and sometimes also boys whipped to make them remember” (MacDonald, 1977, p113).

Later definitions move away from geographical space, toward something most journalists can relate to in professional life (albeit not a turn of phrase used often in current times); a piece of news published in advance of a journalists' competitors (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989), (Random House, 1987). But the beat is more than a scoop or a geographical locus; it is a social construct, which is under pressure from the economic, political and social forces which have historically shaped it.

## **A sociology of the beat**

Fishman (1980), whose research concerned news-gathering and sourcing in crime journalism, observed that the demands of the news schedule (a regular, and consistent flow of stories) had led journalists toward a dependence on bureaucratic organisations to pad out the boundaries of their beats, including; councils, police forces, hospitals and other 'official' local sources. The routines of news-gathering around such sources help journalists plan out their agenda (Harrison, 2006, p141), and lend newspaper copy

authority in the form of a proxy for 'objectivity' in such sources (Tuchman, 1972). But this comes at a cost (Foreman, 2010), for cynicism can spread from such rhetorical methods, leading to disillusionment with professional news reporting, as the public become ever more distanced from the 'news' taking place in their communities (Carey, 1999, p58).

Schlesinger (1987) found that BBC news was dependent on routine sources for up to 80 per cent of its output, while later Franklin and Murphy (1991) established that local press relied upon local government, courts, police, business and voluntary organisations for 67 per cent of their stories (in Keeble, 2009: p114-15).

Behind the ritualisation of sourcing lies a series of consensual and mutually affirming processes, whereby both journalist and source have much to gain – this sustenance of mutual dependence is something which marks early literature in this field (Zelizer, 2004). In his analysis, McManus (1994) argued that this is a market in which the media are an active arbiter; bartering "access to the public to news sources in return for information needed to fill the paper or newscast." (McManus, 1994 p5). But non-institutional organisations have been found to be taking advantage of the diminution of editorial resources found in many modern newsrooms too (Davis, 2000); which would suggest that this is a market in which social capital is also a recognised currency.

Gans (1979), arguing that efficiency is the mitigating factor which drives all time-poor journalists; formulated six source considerations which may speed this process up:

- Past suitability
- Productivity
- Reliability
- Trustworthiness
- Authoritativeness
- Articulateness (as summarised in Harcup, 2009: p59)

Others have found that such routine-based criteria may not be so important in establishing which voices in a beat are heard most frequently and which are missed; that it is in fact ideological motivations which trump all other factors in the newsroom (Cottle, 2000).

The beat has faced stern challenges in modern times. In the US, the mid-1990s saw 'topic teams' emerge, supplanting beat reporters, and loosening the connection between local audiences and the journalists who serve them. These practices were considered to have a negative effect on news routines, according to the journalists working within them (Hansen et al, 1998). On the other side of the Atlantic, the 1990s saw the rise of new technologies and marketing, which re-enforced the dominance of official voices in news production, but which also brought rapid consolidation (and job cuts) in industry, putting strain on the beat. Fewer journalists were covering the same beats; the consolidation of routines around regional hubs and away from local communities emerged; the profession suffered a brain-drain, and former journalists began boosting the ranks of public relations organisations who, in turn, were increasingly spoon-feeding the remaining time-poor journalists easy-to-use copy (Machin and Niblock, 2006, p70).

Today local beats are very much under sustained pressure. In local government, although performance data is available on a hitherto unimaginable scale, the new decision making processes (post-Local Government Act 2000) have become even more opaque (Morrison, 2010). The steady rise of the council newspaper 'propaganda sheets' at the expense of local newspapers (Gilligan, 2009) has abated, but plans to curb their influence have subsequently been revised (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011). Court reporting in the UK is considered so vulnerable, that police forces are beginning to publicise court proceedings themselves (BBC News, 2011).

## **PUBLIC JOURNALISM AND THE NETWORK SOCIETY**

The rise of 'public journalism' (or 'civic journalism') in early 1990s America represented an attempt to de-institutionalise the profession. The beat system, with its rituals and practices around private (and protected) relationships, were seen to be out of step with popular opinion, a disaffection stretching back to the Pentagon Papers. Those cosy practices which tie the beat journalist to her sources were viewed as a conspiracy against the audience (Carey, 1999). In seeking to address the dual crises of plummeting trust between citizens and their governments; and plummeting trust between news audiences and news organisations, industry began experimenting with new journalistic forms, and with new methods of engagement with the audience, on a more level-footing (Haas, 2003; Haas and Steiner, 2006).

Today we may view these experiments in the context of the rise of the network society. Castells (2000) argues that today's society is networked and predicated on three interwoven elements; the modern world is informational, global and networked. Where once political power was embodied in hierarchical organisations and institutions (such as journalism), today that power is spread across networks. While some nodes in networks may be 'more important' than others, power relations are flattened into a binary of inclusion or exclusion from within and out-with the network. (Castells, 2000, p15).

The binary nature of the network is problematic; especially where public interest journalism is concerned. Social networks are self-selecting; they do not proportionally reflect wider society in terms of use – only one in 20 of those over 65 engage with social media frequently, and less than a third of 35-44 year-olds are active online (Ofcom, 2010). Journalists should be careful how they develop their networks, as exclusivity within an online network bodes ill for media pluralism.

Nevertheless, the process of re-calibrating relationships between journalist and local audiences is already under way online; journalists have been found to be reaching out beyond their institution, sharing their talents for storytelling as part of a network – a new form of journalism (Robinson, 2007). Elsewhere, Davis Mercy (2009), sought to establish whether or not the techno-utopian predictions of the late 1990s, that technology would kill geography (Cairncross, 2007; Bulkely, 2008), were borne out in the relationships between people and their local newspapers. On the contrary, survey findings showed readers of beat-blogs feel more attached to their geographic communities than their online communities (Davis Mercy, 2009).

The rise of the network, evidenced in everything from user-engagement via Twitter, to the processing of User Generated Content, offers a means of extending this approach; and of re-invigorating the 'beat'. It permits the re-constitution of journalism's traditional power-base, re-connecting journalists with their audience online within a wider social network.

### **Finding a source schematic for local news**

The author sought out a schematic which may help in mapping out potential sources of news within a local news geography. One such schematic is offered in Smith (2007), who lists the following as places journalists routinely 'get all the news':

- TV, radio & the web
- Wire services
- Publications
- Your own newspaper
- Other newspapers
- Magazines and journals

Diary jobs  
The calls  
Handouts and press releases  
Submitted articles  
Readers' letters  
Tip-offs  
Leaks  
Public opinion  
In-house activities  
Anniversaries  
And you... (Smith, 2007)

This is problematic (in terms of application) on many levels; not least that these are non-exclusive categories, and include few real-world examples which may be mapped online.

Randall (2007) frames where 'good stories' come from around 'the habits of successful reporters'; several of which ("Getting out and about", "Hanging around") are at odds with the contemporary journalistic experience as is found in the journalism studies literature. As an alternative to stories derived via social means, Randall suggest a series of 'non-obvious' sources; Universities and research institutes, specialist and underground press, books, esoteric magazines, international institutions, blogs, and classified advertisements; a (very limited) mix of official and unofficial sources, but nevertheless, a starting point of sorts.

In *The Journalists' Guide to the Internet*, Callahan (1999) outlines three proposed types of online beat; The Geographic Beat, The Issue Beat, and The Institution Beat. While this is a useful way of conceiving of local beats, these categories fall squarely into 'old' journalistic beat routines. They are so general, it is not difficult to see how some sources may appear in all three columns, and it offer little in the way of specificity which may help map them. Harcup offers a more normative, and far lengthier list of 'common sources of news stories', which include Academic Journals, Eyes and ear, Leaks, People and Pressure Groups (Harcup, 2009: p62). This is a comprehensive list but it is lacking in classification, and contains some conceptual cross-over. This approach does not differentiate between the importance of sources (in terms of weighting), nor is there an attempt to distinguish between people and institutions. A telling aspect of the problems inherent to constructing such lists can be found when comparing this list in first edition (2004, p46) and second edition (2009: p62) of this book. Within the space of five years, blogs and social networking sites rise from obscurity to become valued sources of news.

Keeble attempts to differentiate between primary and secondary sources, a practical convention drawn from the literature. The former include "...councils, MPs, and Euro MPs, courts, police, fire brigade, ambulance service, hospitals, local industries and their representative bodies, the local football, cricket and rugby clubs. Schools and colleges, churches, army, naval and air force bases, local branches of national pressure groups and charities are secondary sources. In rural areas, other contacts in this category will include village post office workers, publicans and hotel keepers, agricultural merchants, livestock auctioneers, countryside rangers or wardens. In coastal areas they might include coastguards, harbourmasters and lifeboat stations" (Keeble, 2009: p113). While such a list is instructive (if not helpful in this paper), such a distinction is, it could be argued, relative; after all, if a foot and mouth epidemic were to occur, agricultural merchants would soon become 'primary' sources (albeit perhaps for a limited time).

## **A SCHEMATIC FOR LOCAL BEAT JOURNALISM**

The following model looks to sources (of all kinds) of information in a local community. This approach is not presented as an alternative to conventional off-line news-gathering methods, nor as a replacement for them; there aren't enough people or information sources online (and there may never be) for this to be a realistic goal. This model is presented as a tool which may help journalists...

- to adapt from offline to online news-gathering
- to systematise news-gathering online
- to eke out stories online which might otherwise be missed completely
- to audit an unfamiliar or new beat
- to reinvigorate journalists' relationships with online audiences

It is helpful to choose a taxonomy-model which reflects the administrative bounds of the beat. In the case of a local reporter, the structure of the local authority is a good fit; but for a subject area (like health, for example), a thesaurus taxonomy of that field would be better suited.

Once a model is established, keywords must be selected, which will be used to find sources and set up Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds. For a geographical beat this will necessarily include a full run-down of all significant local place-names, but it will also (at different points in the news calendar) feature other terms too (including local people, organisations, companies, events, etc.). Some sources will not require keywords as such, merely pre-existing automated feeds (local blogs, for example).

The proposed structure must be kept up-to-date, as it is subject to change over time; it needs to reflect the shifting nature of peoples' lives, and communities. Some online sources have no RSS feeds, and 'scraping' feeds for these sources can be problematic. Once relationships are established with sources, a social network begins to develop; such that journalists may find news more efficiently than via official sources. For all of these reasons, this news-gathering model comprises three parts:

- RSS feeds (aggregated in an Feed Reader such as Google Reader, or filtered in Yahoo Pipes, etc.),
- A diary of non-RSS sources which require systematic re-visit (ideally kept in a spreadsheet) and;
- Membership of various social networks (including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Delicious etc.).

The following are not ordered in terms of importance. Sources are not presented with URLs due to space constraints.

#### 1. *News (meta) sources*

These are competitor news sources. What Bordieu referred to dismissively as the 'circular circulation of information' is a crucial element in exhaustive news-gathering (something most news organisations, if they are to claim to truly involve themselves in 'news', must aspire to). Any beat will require several news search feeds – covering references to the 'beat' at local, regional, national and international news levels, and possibly even including references to the beat in the trade press. RSS search feeds should be set up in the following aggregators:

- Google News
- Yahoo News
- Bing News

- Daylife

There will be some duplicate copy, but this can be filtered out later – ultimately these different services have different indexes, so it is important to cover as much as possible. Manual searches may be necessary (in NewsNow, for example) – these should go in the news diary. If there is a subscription sources budget, then further feeds will be available (in Nexis, FT.com, Times Online, etc).

Social news sites are of less importance to local journalism, but are still worth monitoring:

- Reddit
- Stumbleupon
- Digg

## 2. *Administrative sources*

Many 'official' news sources are available online; from local authorities, to local single-issue charity groups. These can be organised within three domains:

Governing sources (authorities, and their administrators):

- Council website RSS feeds.
- Council newspaper (may sometimes require monitoring if online).
- Council committee minutes – via OpenlyLocal (if available).
- Online Forward Plan (will require to be found, and pages monitored).
- Hansard (available via TheyWorkForYou, require place-name and politician name searches).
- European Parliament (no feeds on site, advanced search necessary).
- Freedom of Information (feeds in WhatDoTheyKnow for all local public authorities, including NHS trusts, schools, council etc.).

Political sources:

- Parish council (websites/social media groups and accounts of parish councillors).
- Local politics (committee SM groups, officers, councillors, mayor, opposition).
- National politics (MPs, websites/SM presence party websites/SM presence).
- International politics (MEPs websites/SM presence).

Stakeholder sources (i.e. public authorities, agencies, and independent groups):

- Community: council social services, animal welfare groups, asylum groups, carer groups, children groups, women's groups, minority groups, Surestart etc.
- Leisure: local arts groups (theatres, arts centres, galleries, etc.), community centres, conservation groups, sports groups, pro- and amateur teams, societies, etc.
- Health and social care: Primary Care Trust management, carers groups, doctors General Practitioners and hospitals, mental health groups, health awareness groups, patients groups.
- Education and learning: Schools (primary, secondary, etc.), colleges, universities, council information, educational groups, teachers, parents

- associations, and online sources such as Schoolscope, Ofsted etc.
- Transport: transport committees and lobbies (motorists, cyclists, etc.), as well as online sources like FixMyStreet.
- Environment & planning: Planning committees, NIMBY groups, environment groups etc.
- Occupation/industry: employment agencies, business groups, businesses, local trade union representatives, and online sources such as OpenCorporates, WhosLobbying etc.
- Law and order: council advice, local courts, local police services, neighbourhood watch groups, local lawyers/solicitors, Citizens Advice Bureau, local arbitration, etc.

### 3. *Social sources*

For all social sources, it is important to consider who (i.e. individuals, groups) in conjunction with either where (geography of beat) or what (topic of beat), whichever is apt.

#### Social Networks

Facebook (account required):

- Search for and keep up-to-date with people, pages, groups, and events.
- For people concentrate on searching by location, education or workplace .
- Speculative geographical search can be done using Advanced Search 2.0 Beta plug-in.
- Public updates and conversations are available in IceRocket, YourOpenBook, and Google.

Twitter (account not required for search feeds):

- Set up place-name (and other) search feeds.
- Set up Geo-location feeds by place-name (watch for limitations).
- Follow key/popular figures in beat, measured by followers, but including famous sons and daughters (footballers, public figures, other local celebrities – see Knowhere and Wikipedia pages for suggestions).
- For generic Twitter search feeds it may be necessary to filter for content that has been re-tweeted or which contain links, especially for breaking news.
- Find followers in beat using geo-twitter and Tweepz searches (which provide feeds for new people).

Delicious:

- Sign up for tag-based RSS feeds.
- May be necessary to create other social bookmarking accounts too.

LinkedIn:

- Keep up with companies within a beat
- Search for and friend individuals working within beat.

Online forums. Sometimes anonymity can be a strength, not just in terms of finding

whistle-blowers, but also in contentious/competitive fields – the main weakness with forums can be lack of RSS). Try place-name terms in:

- Omgili (payment may be necessary for some feeds)
- Google Groups
- Yahoo groups
- Boardtracker
- Boardreader
- Possibly some other bespoke forum sites (like Mumsnet, or local team boards).

Blogs

Blogs:

- Search for posts featuring local place-names via Google Blog search, Icerocket, or Social Mention.
- Search for bloggers whose About includes mentions of a local place-name.

Websites:

Conventional keyword search in Google, Bing, Yahoo, Ask, Delicious etc. for local place-names.

Multimedia

Video:

- Youtube
- Blinkx
- Google Videos
- Truveo

Images:

- Flickr
- Panoramia
- Twitpic (included in Twitter feeds). May be necessary to follow other image sharing sites too.

Reference:

- Wikipedia: Set up searches to monitor all pages of interest in beat (places, people, subject matter etc.)
- Google maps: need to do this manually now, RSS on Google maps is no longer.

## **PROTOTYPES**

In March 2011, two prototype beats were developed, using a range of RSS feeds with the intention of covering the real world beats of Borehamwood, in Essex, and Ilminster in Somerset. These two locations were chosen as they are urban, and rural beats respectively; so any differences between the feeds would not skew the results toward one



'type' of beat, or the other. The author used the schematic to locate a range of websites and online sources which contained RSS feeds, or which could be used to develop an RSS feed.

These feeds were incorporated into a simple Yahoo Pipes master RSS feed (<http://pipes.yahoo.com/pipes/>) which feature Unique, Sort and Filter modules. Pipes was chosen expressly because of its filtering options; allowing for the removal of job advertisements and other secondary information which may crowd out the feed. Contact was made with journalists in these beats, and over the following months problems arose. Subsequent changes were made to each Pipe in June 2010, to iron out the malfunctioning feeds (Yahoo accounts are required to view these feeds):

- Borehamwood Wire: <http://bit.ly/kcrHJH>
- Ilminster Wire: [bit.ly/lufRod](http://bit.ly/lufRod)

## Limitations

Creating beats for each area, town or village in a given beat was streamlined due to time constraints (for example, the Ilminster beat might also include place-name references to Merriott, South Petherton and a number of other small villages, in addition to Chard, Crewkerne, Chardstock and Chard Junction). Moreover full roll-out of each beat, incorporating diary and purpose-created social network accounts was not possible; one of the journalists was unable to access Facebook in the office, at the time of writing. The findings are therefore limited to feed results.

Full working for each beat can be found at the following addresses:

- Borehamwood beat working: <http://bit.ly/lguHgh>
- Ilminster beat working: <http://bit.ly/iToxFN>

## FINDINGS

The journalist for whom the Ilminster beat was developed is a relatively active agent in his geographical beat, while at the same time also being relatively active online in seeking out stories. He has set up alerts in Twitter around mentions of several beat place-names (including Chard, Ilminster, Crewkerne, and South Petherton), which have yielded a number (and a broad range) of news stories in the past; from features on local shops, to emergency services stories. He acknowledges that there is likely less activity online in this beat than there may be in urban beats. He felt that the Pipe did, occasionally, yield some irrelevant results – particularly relating to duplicate place-names (i.e. references to Ilminster Intermediate School in Gisborne, New Zealand), and references to Lord Armstrong of Ilminster in Hansard (a politician who doesn't have any direct relationship with Ilminster as a news beat). But, he added, the unified, and thorough nature of the feed make up for this weakness; it is, he summarised “a good supplementary tool, which is worth using on a daily basis” (Jamie Brooks, interview, July 11, 2011)

When asked whether the Wire had led to the finding of any stories which may otherwise not have been found, he replied that it had: “a couple of community groups in Ilminster were planning events which were shown on updates in the Wire, before they had contacted us or the paper had found them” (Brooks, interview, July 11, 2011). Moreover, he added, “the most useful discovery though was the updates on the Ilminster Midsummer Experience website. The Wire found me one of these – when information was released on the site about the Ilminster Forum's green event and on contacting them about this I found they were looking for more coverage for this year's festival, with more events planned than ever before. The result of making contact with festival organisers so early was a real

positive – and meant we had later exclusives on other events planned such as the Pimp My Scooter competition and led to our advertising department getting in contact and running a pull-out for the week of the Ilminster Experience. I would not have found these website updates otherwise – so the Wire acted as a great starting point to both get further stories and obtain some feedback from the community" (Brooks, interview, July 11, 2011).

## Conclusion

This paper sought to establish an exploratory schematic for online local beats, which can be used by journalists to develop an online 'beat'. While constrained by the limitations of the technology used (and more generally, present-state web infrastructure), this approach was found to help in constructing an online beat which, when put to real-world application, generated information deemed worthy of developing into, and publishing as, 'news'. It should be noted that the transient nature of material on the web may require that subsequent to setting up the feed, further maintenance is necessary; which can be time-consuming, and potentially frustrating.

The success of such a schematic is hostage to more than what is considered to be optimum coverage. Taking after Metcalfe's Law, the value in such a chain, and the transformative nature of this approach, is dependent on the engagement of a local community online. This in turn informs the potential of such an approach to assist in the re-configuration of relations between journalist and source in a local networked 'beat'.

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