Article:

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE LOCAL NEWS MEDIA IN ENABLING CITIZENS TO ENGAGE IN LOCAL DEMOCRACIES

Julie Firmstone and Stephen Coleman

Using Leeds City Council as a case study we comparatively analyse the changing role of local journalism in the public communications and engagement strategies of local government. Drawing on over twenty semi structured interviews with elected politicians, Council strategists, mainstream journalists, and citizen journalists the article explores perceptions of the mainstream news media's role vs. new modes of communication in engaging and communicating with citizens. We evaluate the Council's perceptions of its online and offline practices of engagement with different publics, and focus in particular on their interactions with journalists, the news media and citizen journalists. The article considers how moves towards digital modes of engagement are changing perceptions of the professional role orientations of journalists in mediating between the Council and the general public.

Local authorities are striving to engage the public in innovative ways (Lowndes et al, 2001; Aspden et al, 2005; Michels and De Graaf, 2010) by expanding their existing media relations and harnessing the transformative potential of digital media. For local government, strategies to promote democratic public engagement are seen as important ways of changing citizens' perceptions of being unheard, ignored and powerless to change things. An engaged citizenry is considered as an important part of a move from top-down command government to devolved, co-productive governance, especially as citizens are being urged to do more things for themselves. We argue that public engagement has several contested meanings, ranging from a one-way flow of information from government to citizens to the creation of empowered citizens who are not only listened to through consultation, but empowered as partners in decision making (see Coleman and Firmstone, 2014). These differences in understanding have significant implications for the expectations of those involved in implementing engagement strategies and the ways in which success is evaluated. Given that 'it is clear that communication plays a central role in stimulating and enabling local participation' (Mcleod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999, p. 330), our main research question asks what role local media actors expect to play in engaging citizens in local democracies and how these perceptions are changing. We aim to explore perceptions of the contribution of the mainstream media to local political engagement and to consider the emerging role of citizen-led media within public engagement.

Research design and method

This article is part of a wider research project which used Leeds City Council (LCC) as a case study to investigate public engagement in local democracies in the UK. A semi-structured interview schedule was devised to focus interviewees on the public engagement efforts of Leeds City Council. Twenty-three face to face interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in the summer of 2012 (see note 1). Two different questionnaires were designed in order to encourage interviewees to consider similar questions about these roles from their own particular perspectives. Local government-based interviewees were

asked to reflect on the role of the media in engagement from an outsiders' point of view, while mainstream and citizen journalists were asked to reflect on their own role and changes to their practice in recent years. In addition, all interviewees were asked to give examples of when news organisations (mainstream or citizen-led) have made useful contributions to public engagement.

Role of the mainstream news media

While the consultation and communications teams within the Council were both closely involved in an overall attempt to bring local government closer to people, make its work and decisions better understood and help citizens to make a difference in a variety of ways, the very organisational distinction between 'communication' and 'consultation' suggests that two agendas are at work, guided by not entirely consistent normative ambitions. The Council staff in the consultation team saw interaction with citizens as their immediate targets and conceived of their task in terms of relationship-building. The communications team saw its primary task as public-relations-based message dissemination, reconfigured by a new set of challenges presented by digital media networks. This meant that they tended to perceive the role of the media in engagement as a means of publicity and reputational management. One of the main aims of the Council's engagement strategy is to create and maintain an on-going relationship with citizens in order to foster a sense of mutual understanding. Whilst the Council is able to create such relationships with specific target groups or interested parties through targeted activities such as consultations, focus groups and community meetings, it struggles to establish this kind of relationship with the local population in general. This is where the value of the local mainstream media in engaging the public lies and is the key way that members of the communications team perceive the value of their work in relation to public engagement. Although the news media themselves are struggling to form and maintain an engaging relationship with their audience in the era of fragmented media use, local news organisations still have a quality of relationship with citizens that local authorities hope to exploit. It is on issues which have an impact on a broad range of the local population, such as budget consultations and non-issue specific reputational management, that the mainstream news media remain crucial to the Council's relationship with the general public. We found clear differences in interviewees' expectations of the role of local media platforms, with the majority regarding the local press and radio as the most important channels for public engagement.

In line with other studies of the reporting of local politics (see Aldridge, 2007), the city's main daily newspaper, the Yorkshire Evening Post (YEP), was widely perceived as playing the most important role. Its position as the only mainstream local medium which is organisationally structured to report on and appeal to readers throughout the Leeds City Council electoral area, and its longstanding status as the highest selling non-national daily newspaper in the city made it a key target for Council actors hoping to initiate public engagement exercises. When thinking of examples of local media contributing to public engagement, the YEP was by far the most common media quoted and YEP coverage was given as a primary example by each of the five of Council interviewees from the communications and engagement teams.

Whilst the YEP's significance to the Council was clear, its potential to facilitate public engagement was questioned in three key ways. First, some Council- based interviewees considered its coverage to be motivated by populist/commercial news values, suggesting that some YEP reporting represents editorial opinion rather than professionally sourced, impartial and objective news. They were able to point to a number cases of the paper running stories about proposed changes to Council-run services without first checking the facts, seemingly for the sake of a populist appeal to readers. Second, it was suggested that the recent takeover of the YEP by local media giant, Johnston Press, and the subsequent cuts in resources, had negatively impacted on the paper's capacity to report on Council-related affairs. In particular, citizen journalists felt that the YEP did not invest any resources

into investigating or analysing the Council's actions: *"[the] press specifically likes to re-write press releases from LCC and they're not really scrutinised"* (Citizen Journalist, BGL). Finally, the falling readership of the YEP made it less significant. One councillor stated that *"What I'm coming around to saying is that I think newspapers, their importance is diminishing. The readership of the Yorkshire Evening Post is diminishing, and as a result of that, sometimes the quality of the journalism has been affected with it as well."* (Councillor, Conservative).

Whilst radio was seen as a less consistent contributor to engagement, BBC Radio Leeds, was highly valued by interviewees who pointed to the unique interactive quality of its coverage: *"I'd say interactively Radio Leeds is really good, but it's a certain demographic of people over a certain age"* (Communications team). The results of recent moves towards a greater concentration in ownership of independent radio stations and the resultant shrinking of resources for covering local news mean that local independent news is not considered capable of fulfilling any serious public engagement expectations. BBC Radio Leeds' capacity for interactivity with citizens was seen as unique and was highly valued. Interviewees considered it as the key medium through which the public can engage directly with councillors and/or the Council through regular phone ins - "*BBC local radio is probably 'the' platform in terms of local engagement… it is probably the only platform that allows both public access, councillors to speak, the Council to come on at the drop of a hat. There are no other outlets that are doing that sort of thing. Commercial radio tries to, but doesn't have the resources*" (Senior BBC TV journalist). Indeed, although the limitations of reaching a predominantly older audience were acknowledged (the target audience is over 50s), the LCC Communications team considered radio as the only news medium which facilitated the kind of two way dialogue essential for meaningful and successful engagement (see Coleman and Firmstone, 2014). In addition, elected councillors perceived radio as playing an important role in citizens' media habits and they valued its potential contribution to democratic debate. For example: *"Yes, [BBC Radio Leeds] they're the vital links between democracy and the state. And if you start closing them down because of lack of money, resources, you then start shutting down democracy. And they [the radio] give us a lot of stick but I always stand up and fight for them."* (Councillor, Labour).

Journalist's perceptions of their role in public engagement

We were keen to determine how local journalists understood their professional role in enabling forms of democratic engagement between the Council and the local public. Is their role to merely report on this relationship and highlight its deficits or might they perceive themselves as having a responsibility to nurture effective critical and constructive relationships? Journalists' descriptions of their role in local democracy and the values they associate with it were very much in line with long-standing norms of journalism as a profession. This included fulfilling the watchdog role, having autonomy from the Council and applying the journalistic values of objectivity and neutrality to their production of news, and acting in the public interest. It is in relation to this last norm that journalists' potential role as democratic intermediaries was problematised, as comments about recent changes in local journalism practice discussed below illustrate. There was a strong consensus that journalists should be expected to work on behalf of the public in holding the Council to account and to inform and even educate citizens on issues of local relevance. In line with theoretical expectations of the news media in the UK, journalists saw themselves as key intermediaries between the public and those in power, and saw themselves as fulfilling a public service role. Journalists considered that their news outlets remain the primary and most trusted source of information about local issues for most people, despite the proliferation of other news sources. They talked about how the public value and place trust in them and their news organisations to interpret the importance and relevance of Council related issues. For example, "*Well we are as all the media are concerned watchers of Leeds City Council. Our job is to try and interpret what they're doing and what that means to the citizens of Leeds*

and the wider area…The prime aim is to ensure that people have the facts delivered to them in a form that they can access and understand, to be able to make up their own minds." (Senior TV Journalist, BBC).

Given the contested understandings of public engagement, it was particularly interesting that journalists were so readily able to articulate the relationship of these core professional values to the concept of engagement. For example, *"We, in my profession, have to be a bridge between the Council with public engagement; between the Council and the public and therefore we are vital to that public engagement."* (Senior reporter, YEP). Another journalist talked of his role in engagement as informing people about important Council issues – *"So you're playing that role that you've let people know something perhaps they didn't know and they feel sufficiently exercised about it to becoming engaged with the Council. And equally when the Council are actually actively seeking such an engagement we're a good conduit for letting people know again what the issue is"* (Veteran Journalist, YEP). Unbiased information is also key to the way the BBC journalist considered his role in contributing to public opinion on public engagement issues: *"So our job is to explain. And from that point of view we automatically have an influence on public opinion. But that's not our prime aim. The prime aim is to ensure that people have the facts delivered to them in a form that they can access and understand, to be able to make up their own minds"* (Senior TV Journalist, BBC). Journalists were keen to stress their autonomy from the Council and to highlight that their role in the engagement process does not and should not amount to 'working with' the Council or 'actively helping' the Council. Rather they suggested that there is a 'healthy scepticism' between both parties at the same time as a journalistic desire to make a useful contribution to the Council's aspiration to engage with the public. For example *"I think the paper's role is to help foster that engagement by as much as possible writing about what the Council is doing. The Council won't always like everything you write, as they pointed out when I left, but as long as it's fair and accurate they'll live with it and they need that level of media attention to have that engagement with people."* (Veteran journalist, YEP).

Citizen-led media and public engagement

Given the potential contributions to local mediated debates that have been attributed to citizen-led media, we asked journalists about their view of the contribution of non-mainstream news media (defined as citizen journalists, bloggers and hyperlocal websites) to public engagement with the Council. Journalists perceived hyperlocal news sites and blogs to fulfil a specialised function in engaging the public in a totally different way to the input of professional journalists and news organisations. First, their focus on very specific local areas or issues was seen as an advantage, as it enabled them to concentrate coverage and hold campaigns on issues that matter to a niche group of the public. One journalist considered that this meant 'micro-bloggers' could be very successful in holding the Council to account on particular issues, thereby playing an important role in public engagement : *"Well, micro-bloggers would be the thing that sticks in my mind. Obviously, they are able on some specific campaigns to be, I won't say better than the BBC, but they're able to – like on planning arguments – really get involved with the Council and hold them to account, particularly on very small things; or not small things but important to them, but specific areas."* (Online journalist, BBC) At the same time, the relatively small audiences reached by such journalism limits perceptions of its influence and importance. Instead of competitors, they are seen as potentially useful sources of information on local issues, in much the same way as journalists nurture contacts in local communities, or at least as a way of seeing what is 'going on out there'.

Predictably, some journalists were eager to state that citizen journalists do not produce news according to professional norms and values: *"There's a big confusion with a lot of citizen journalists who gather in any form of cooperative way - they're actually being*

agitators rather than journalists and observers." (Senior TV journalist, BBC). Not all journalists dismissed non-mainstream as 'non-journalism', with one suggesting *" I think a good blog is a great form of journalism definitely; if it's well researched and well expressed and factually correct then yes, there's definitely a future for it"* (Senior reporter, YEP). However, the same journalist pointed out that when done badly, blogging and other forms of citizen journalism can devalue the profession of journalism.

Changes to the role of mainstream media

Journalists were asked to describe the kind of work their role as facilitators of public engagement might entail and how this has changed in recent years. First, and most significantly, it was widely acknowledged that the resources available to journalists to report on local government have been reduced substantially in recent times. Newspapers and broadcasters have changed from a model of regular face-to-face contact with local representatives and represented communities, as well as attendance at Council meetings, to a reliance on press releases and an 'as and when necessary ' approach to direct reporting on the democratic process. For example, *"It's not like the old days, where you formally reported… as a broadcaster anyway, on every single Council meeting. Doesn't happen anymore. We don't have the manpower. And neither do the local papers. … even a big Council like Leeds, you know, ninety-odd councillors. You'll see the press gallery completely empty."* (Senior TV journalist, BBC). The potential impact of this on journalists' ability to fulfil a watchdog role formed the focus of criticisms of the local media by citizen and mainstream journalists. For example, *"…sometimes newspapers without enough staff, pressured as they are perhaps too often it [a press release] goes in a little bit unchecked or unchallenged."* (Veteran journalist, YEP). A second change noted by all journalists was the increased professionalism of the press relations activities at the Council. Overall, it was felt that this made journalists' jobs easier in terms of accessing information, but harder when trying to access the sources behind stories, due to the policy of the Council to filter all communications with the media through the press office. These comments echo findings from other research, which has consistently pointed to the over-reliance of local journalists on press releases that are prepared by the increasingly professional press operations of local government (Davis, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Harrison, 1998; O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008).

The only two technology-related changes mentioned by journalists demonstrate the complexity and multifarious implications of citizen-led communications for the role of media in relation to public engagement. First, they commented on the increased pressures that social media place on the newsgathering process. In some ways social media were described as having a positive effect by providing a rich source of information and leads on stories. However, the need to verify all social media stories places extra pressure on journalists and the expectations for them to publish on-going news across social platforms in addition to their central reporting role put extra strain on their already heavy workloads. For example, *"So now I'm broadcasting on a lot wider range of broadcasting outlets. I'm doing radio and TV. And I'm clicking into rolling news programmes. I'm doing a regular web page. And I'm doing Twitter. Something's got to give. And my worry is that what will give is journalism. And it's a real problem."* (Senior TV journalist, BBC).

A second, more positive consequence of the internet on the role of mainstream media is the increased opportunities for citizens to engage with issues through online forums and social media. Several journalists pointed out that citizens have significantly greater access to take part in debates and express their views than they did before news organisations embraced internet publishing. One journalist even went as far as suggesting that online newspapers are more important for engagement than their offline parents: *"Their online services are now probably… are getting to the point where as far as public engagement and access is concerned, are probably more important than the papers themselves... if you get onto the Yorkshire Post and you click onto a piece about Leeds City Council, you can read the piece and then there may be two hundred comments from*

different people. Well that's all brand new, and it's roller coasting. So from that point of view, it's becoming much more important" (Senior TV journalist, BBC). Whilst cautioning the benefits of such un monitored access to publicity, another journalist commented on the engagement capacity of social media *"Anybody who's got a mobile phone can now comment on any story via Twitter or Facebook and so it is democracy in action on the largest scale ever really because everybody who previously had an opinion but didn't necessarily express it can now do it. And actually it can be quite dangerous because they can do it under the anonymity of Twitter or whatever. So that's got a whole flip side really in terms of actually engaging them; it's there at the click of a button."* (Senior reporter, YEP).

Taking these comments in conjunction with journalists' perceptions of the role of hyperlocal media and bloggers in engagement, we can identify four distinct ways in which citizen-led media contribute to the dynamics of engagement and give some much needed clarification to the way citizen journalism is understood (see Williams et al, 2011 and Robinson and Deshano, 2011 for an indication of the multifarious interpretations of the term citizen journalism). Through hyper local news sites and civic-orientated blogs, citizens can contribute to the media ecology as individual or collectively-organised producers of information and opinion, independent of mainstream media (CJ producers). Notably, mainstream journalists did not mention CJ producers when talking about changes to their role in engagement, and clearly did not see them as a threat to the important status of the mainstream media in the Council's engagement with citizens.   Second, individual citizens are able to contribute to mainstream and citizen-led news media as active and deliberate sources of information through the provision of unsolicited content such as photographs/video or text (CJ contributors). As with CJ producers, journalists rarely mentioned this kind of citizen-led contribution as having altered their newsgathering practices. Conversely, all journalists mentioned using citizens' participation in Twitter or Facebook as sources of information for local news and described this as a useful way to gather information (CJ sources). Importantly, journalists described using such CJ sources carefully due to the possibility of them being false, 'having an axe to grind', or merely reflecting only the opinions of that section of the population who use Twitter. These perceptions echo findings from studies of citizen journalism in other countries which have suggested that journalists' caution about the journalistic value of much content produced by citizen journalists heightens the role of mainstream journalists as 'gatekeepers' (Hujanen, 2012; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010).   Fourth, journalists highlighted that through posts on online forums and social media citizens can engage in a participatory role in debates about local news and opinion (CJ participants).

Citizen journalists and their role perceptions

We classified the three interviewees selected from Leeds' hyperlocal news sites as citizen journalists, even though in reality they represent three very different organisations with distinctive missions and concepts about their role in the engagement process. Although they took a critical approach to the mainstream media, the citizen journalists we interviewed were not motivated by the aim of competing with local news media, and all recognised that in their current form they are only able to make a very limited contribution to widespread and on-going relationships of public engagement. One of the hyperlocal sites (South Leeds Life - SLL) was set up two years ago with the aim of being a platform for people in a deprived area of the city to voice concerns and raise issues, and to counteract what the contributors perceived as biased coverage about South Leeds in the local press. It sees an important role for itself in the Council's public engagement activities through its representation of people in a specific area of the city, but suggested that whilst the Council views its contributions positively, it is not seen as a 'major player' in engagement. Although it does not see its future as 'proper journalism', it does aspire to realise some similar values to professional journalism and would like to expand its number of contributors with the aim of providing more balanced content and broader social representation. It would like to find the resources to undertake something approaching professional journalism and stressed its autonomy from the Council

in engaging the public. The site's manager described its role in public engagement as follows: *"A critical friend I suppose. We would want to encourage our readers to engage in any, well not just informal engagements that are set up by the Council, but if they've got other issues, to raise them. And that's part of our role is to help people have a voice. But we don't want to be a mouthpiece for the Council, apart from anything else it would destroy our credibility, so we stand apart and we'll criticise where we think they're getting it wrong."* (Citizen Journalist - SLL).

The Beyond Guardian Leeds site (BGL) concentrates on aggregating and curating news on community and social issues that they consider to be of relevance to their specific audience. They stressed that they are not journalists, but they also want to develop their journalistic capacity to source their own stories, especially on Council issues. To this end, and recognising their lack of journalism training, they are planning to enlist student journalists to attend and report on Council meetings in the future. Both hyperlocal journalists described their main contribution to public engagement as providing content that is not available elsewhere. It is clear that both sites recognise that they are not practising professional journalism and that, despite having the desire to act as watchdogs, their current business models (e.g. relying on a small group of volunteers), and personal skillsets, prevent them from doing this now and most likely in the future. This seems to concur with findings about hyperlocal new sites in the USA (Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley, 2011) and commercially funded sites in the UK (Thurman, Pascal, & Bradshaw, 2012), which suggest that hyperlocal new sites have yet to fulfil the potential role often attributed to them in 'filling the gap' in coverage left by local mainstream media and/or facilitating public engagement. Although Leeds City Council is embracing the use of new media in its attempts to engage the public, Leeds' hyperlocal new sites were not well known to Council interviewees, even within the communications and engagement teams. Some were aware of a now disbanded Guardian-sponsored local site which preceded the BGL site and most mentioned one or both of the two bloggers who are known to publish articles about the Council. Thus, the Council has no established links with the hyperlocal news sites, although it has had numerous interactions with one particular blogger (whom we interviewed) and one interviewee described him as 'being very helpful in getting messages out'. Other interviewees were largely unaware of the activities of citizen journalists in the city and could not provide any examples of their contribution to public engagement. Two of the councillors stated views about the problems caused by blogs providing 'one sided views' and being 'deliberately destructive'.

Conclusion: A different kind of communication?

A degree of confusion seems to exist between the notion of communicating with the public – a practice in which both local governments and media can claim a certain expertise – and engaging with the public, in the richer democratic sense of listening to and learning from citizens, or even co-producing policy with them. The council that we have been studying seems to recognise that both mainstream and alternative media channels are vital conduits for communicating messages and values to the public. The mainstream journalists that we interviewed were generally of the view that they operated within a long-standing relationship of interdependence with the Council. When it comes to more innovative and dialogical conceptions of public engagement, neither Council communication strategists nor local journalists seem to be clear about their roles. Perhaps this is because they regard public engagement as something of a fad that is not really relevant to the routines of journalism. Council staff charged with promoting public engagement and new, non-mainstream journalists seem to be much more aware of the changing media ecology – and especially the scope for reconfigured public communication afforded by interactive media technologies. Our conclusion is that we are in a period of transition, characterised by role instability and new notions of democratic citizenship (Coleman and Blumler, 2012). As we have argued previously, there is a pressing need for the key players within representative democracy – elected governments and journalists – to think through the implications of the

move from top-down command government to devolved, co-productive governance for their communicative roles. (Coleman and Firmstone, 2014) We hope that this research provides a modest contribution to such reflection.

Acknowledgments

Footnotes

1.Actors from the Council were selected to represent a range of functions within the Council, each differing in their relationship to the public engagement process. The twelve council interviewees included elected politicians (Councillors) (3), Council Engagement strategists (2), members of the Council communications team (3), Heads of Directorates (2), Frontline council workers (2), and, as the lowest tier of local government, Parish Councils (2). In addition, and to gain the perspective of another group of actors who are important in engaging the public, we interviewed two locally based NGOs (2). Outside of the Council the sample focussed on media actors from the traditional local news media and new digitally based forms of citizen-led media. The traditional local broadcast media in the Leeds City Council (LCC) district comprise of two regional television news programmes (BBC Look North and ITV's Calendar), BBC Radio Leeds and several independent radio stations with limited news output. The BBC also has an online news service based in the region. The most popular daily newspapers are the Yorkshire Evening Post (focussed on the locale covered by LCC), its sister publication the Yorkshire Post (covering the region), and two local papers in the large towns of Morley and Wetherby. All have an online presence which allows access to additional news content. We selected four journalists who report on local politics for interview, one from BBC TV, one from BBC Online, and two from the YEP. Like most UK cities, the hyperlocal news, citizen journalism and blog sector in Leeds has grown in recent years. It ranges from arts and culture orientated sites, and hyperlocal news sites to online versions of magazines advertising local services. Our interest was limited to those sites whose content contributes to debates about local democracy. This led us to select interviewees from two hyperlocal sites, Beyond Guardian Leeds (BGL) and South Leeds Life (SLL), as well as the author of a well-known civic orientated local blog.

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Authors

Julie Firmstone, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK. J.a.firmstone@leeds.ac.uk

http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/people/julie-firmstone/

(07799142103 or 0113 345 0720).

Stephen Coleman, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK. S.coleman@leeds.ac.uk

http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/people/stephen-coleman/