

Citizen journalism and civic inclusion: Access Dorset

Einar Thorsen, Daniel Jackson & Ann Luce, Bournemouth University

Citation: - Thorsen, E., Jackson, D and Luce, A. (2015). Citizen journalism and civic inclusion: Access Dorset. In Gordon, E., and Mihalidis, P. (eds.), *Civic Media Reader*. MIT Press.

Access Dorset TV (ADTV) is a pioneering community media partnership based in Dorset, UK, aiming to provide a voice to over 4,000 disabled people, older people and carers through citizen journalism. Produced by and for its user-groups, ADTV (<http://www.accessdorsetcentre.org>) provides web-based peer support, information and lifestyle videos about their life experiences, events, social action projects and independent living.

As with other marginalised groups, research has shown that historically there has been "a problem of disability representation" (Wilde 2010), typified by little cultural recognition of disabled lives and lack of inclusion, both quantitatively and qualitatively in cultural industries as producers and as audiences. Critics argue this is manifest in consistent under-representation of disability, use of stereotypes and a failure to challenge society's prejudices. Despite some encouraging progress, this still persists.

Alongside popular cultural representations of marginalised groups, the UK political landscape provides a harsh backdrop of austerity and on-going cuts to welfare and disability benefits. Those claiming disability benefits in the UK have found themselves under attack from sections of the press - who are peddling an agenda of benefit fraud and waste (Briant et al 2011). "With statutory services being cut and increasingly focused solely on those in most critical need", ADTV CEO, Jonathan Waddington-Jones, argues "there are growing numbers of disabled people, older people and carers who are unable to access the support they need to live independently, healthily and with dignity. Many, whether in rural or urban areas, are isolated from peer support and lack opportunities for civic engagement." Indeed, much of the problem for many disabled and older people is access and voice in the media - being able to offer counter narratives to those in the mainstream.

ADTV was conceived in 2013 to overcome these challenges of exclusion, by creating a participatory platform of marginalised voices that can communicate direct to a diverse array of networked publics. Citizen journalism in this form holds the potential to empower ordinary citizens to connect with their communities. Often based on a narrowly defined geographic specificity, such hyperlocal initiatives arise, according to Metzgar, Kurpius & Rowley (2011), due to the "public's dissatisfaction with legacy media" and as an "attempt to fill the perceived gap in public affairs coverage" (Metzgar, Kurpius & Rowley 2011, 782). Examples abound where disadvantaged or marginalised groups have adopted different forms of citizen journalism in this way to challenge their own civic exclusion - be that feminist movements, repressed indigenous people, or increasingly globalised social movements (Allan & Thorsen 2009, Thorsen & Allan 2014).

For Access Dorset, the core issues were to foster enhanced community cohesion, address issues of representation and participation, and finally challenge the political landscape. Outputs from the ADTV project have so far all been video based, with the variety of stories reflecting the different interests and motivations of the participants. Videos produced can broadly be classified as 1) information and lifestyle, 2) campaign and advocacy, and 3) reportage on marginalised issues. They have made videos about [living with cancer](#), [anorexia](#), [emergency medical treatment for older people](#), [inaccessible footpaths for disabled people](#), and overcoming [attitudinal barriers](#) to disability to name a few.

ADTV has evidently had a positive impact on the participating citizen journalists and their ability to vocalise concerns, even within its first year of operation. Three distinct areas of empowerment of participating citizens emerged through interviews we conducted during the project: community cohesion, civic inclusion, and accountability impact.

[Community cohesion of marginalised groups](#)

From November 2013 to January 2014, we delivered a five-week intensive training course for twelve Access Dorset volunteers on foundation principles of video journalism. This gave them the skills and confidence to develop the ADTV project alongside their other advice and support functions. Since Access Dorset is an umbrella organisation for various local and regional charities, these workshops brought together people with very different backgrounds, ages and disabilities. By participating in the workshops they established new friendships, and strengthened their sense of shared purpose in an otherwise diverse and disparate organisation.

Giving people a voice: empowerment and civic inclusion

Including disabled and older people in the production of online video empowers people who are otherwise marginalised from both production of news and representation of issues that concern them. Participants in the ADTV project were given responsibilities and opportunities many of them thought they would never have experienced. For them it was not only about gaining access to the modes of production, but making a difference by being different. Indeed participants in ADTV are actively self-identifying as citizen journalists. Referring to professional journalists, Laura observed how “their motivations are completely different”. She valued their own “freedom”, reporting on “issues that are directly affecting you on a local level, on a personal level and from the perspective of a person living everyday life rather than from the perspective of media trying to sell it”. Kelvin made a similar distinction, based in part on the participants own experiences of mainstream reporters:

But when you're on your own, a reporter comes into your life and then he fucks off. And then he can leave devastation if the job's not done. And that's not what I want. I'm not going to be ruthless against and make somebody really uncomfortable.

Holding power to account and accelerating impact

Some emerging tensions were cognisant of the group we were working with and speak directly to the contradictory nature of citizen empowerment. For instance, of all the barriers to having their voice heard we explored with interviewees, physical and mental disability were virtually absent; but the fear of publicly criticising the government was a genuine barrier for many, who felt vulnerable in the face of the government ‘assault’ on welfare and benefits. They felt they could be targeted. “Historically in Dorset disabled people have been very passive because they are frightened they are going to lose their care”, Kelvin commented, “so they've always remained not expressing any desire to challenge anything.” Participating in ADTV and the journalism workshops helped some overcome these barriers, working alongside those more experienced at trying to engender change.

One of the most high profile reports has been in support of their campaign to make a local railway station accessible for disabled people. The funny, playful yet powerful [video](#) they made shows Bournemouth resident and Access Dorset citizen journalist, Kelvin, being repeatedly told there is no way for him to access the station platform in his wheelchair. The film pretends to be shot over several decades, with creative use of a newspaper stand marking various landmarks in the development of disabled people's rights since 1960. The video and campaign has made [local headlines](#), [gained the support of local politicians](#), and has even been [discussed in the British Parliament](#).

Indeed the video format of ADTV was highlighted by several participants as appearing to have a more immediate impact than the traditional campaigns they had previously experienced. “I think in the journalism and in the filmmaking we found a medium that people are more interested in listening to”, Laura commented. “Before, when we're talking about engaging and making ourselves heard, it's an email, it's a letter, it's a phone call... They (local government) get a lot of those. Making your point through a film and quite publicly has had impact multiple times.” In other words, video based citizen journalism has enabled these marginalised groups to dramatically accelerate action on issues they campaign on. And it is not just confined to the south coast of the UK. ADTV's approach to citizen journalism is adaptable and expandable to regions or community groups across the world.

References

Allan, S. and Thorsen, E. *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, Volume One, (New York, Peter Lang, 2009)

Briant, E., Watson, N. and Philo, G., *Bad News for Disabled People: How the Newspapers are Reporting Disability*. (Glasgow, UK, Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research and Glasgow Media Unit, University of Glasgow, 2011)

Metzgar, E., Kurpius, D., and Rowley, K., "Defining hyperlocal media: Proposing a framework for discussion", *New Media & Society*, (2011) Vol 13 No 5

Thorsen, E. and Allan, S. *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, Volume Two, (New York, Peter Lang, 2014)

Wilde, A., "Spectacle, Performance and the Re-Presentation of Disability and Impairment", *The Review of Disability Studies*, (2010) Vol 6 No 3