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Asking the readers: audience research into alternative journalism

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ABSTRACT

Alternative forms of journalism are said to challenge the passive role of audience members as receivers (Atton and Hamilton, 2008) and to foster active citizenship among alternative journalists and audiences (Harcup, 2013). Yet the scholarly literature on alternative journalism contains more assertions about than evidence from the audience. Downing (2003) has described the audience for alternative media as "the virtually unknown", prompting him to urge journalism scholars to undertake more audience research to help increase our understanding of this allegedly active and civic-minded public. This exploratory study of the people who regularly read a contemporary example of alternative journalism – an investigative local blog covering one UK city - is intended to contribute towards filling the gap identified by Downing. Audience views are explored by means of questionnaires and focus groups, providing some evidence that individuals are attracted to alternative journalism by their dissatisfaction with mainstream media; that they see alternative media as helping them make sense of the world; and that, to an extent, engaging with such media is both a prompt to, and a reflection of, readers' democratic engagement as citizens. Recognising the limitations of this small study, the article concludes by reiterating Downing's call for further research.

KEYWORDS

Alternative forms of media in general, and alternative journalism in particular, act as a democratising influence on society in part because they foster a sense of "active citizenship" (Harcup, 2013: 130) among producers and audience alike, who interact as active participants in what has been called the "alternative public sphere" (Atton, 2002: 35). That is typical of the claims often made for alternative journalism by scholars of the field. Yet we rarely hear from members of this audience themselves. John Downing (2003), long one of the leading international figures in the study of alternative media, has urged researchers to pay attention to people on the receiving end of alternative journalism, describing the audience for such media as "the virtually unknown".

More than a decade after his call we have seen relatively few additions to the audience research literature as far as alternative journalism is concerned (see Ewart et al, 2005; Rauch, 2015), and the audience voice has once again been described as "the missing element in virtually all of the discussion around journalism" (Meadows, 2013: 49). This dearth is all the more noteworthy for the fact that members of this audience tend to be written about as being a particularly discerning and socially aware collection of individuals who, when they gather within the conceptual spaces of an alternative or counter public sphere, have the potential to transcend individual consumerism and become something approaching a public, an active citizenry. At a time when rhetoric about an active and empowered audience is being used even in relation to mainstream media in the digital age (Rosen, 2006), this lack of attention to what might be thought of as the original active audience is all the more remarkable.

It is not so much that the audience for alternative journalism is ignored entirely within the scholarly literature, it is that audiences tend to be more often written about than heard from in their own words. This state of affairs may have something to do with the fact that audience research can be time-consuming and labour-intensive compared to analysing published content. But could it also have something to do with scholars perhaps sharing the tendency of many journalists to make one or other of two common assumptions: that, somehow, we already know what members of the audience think; or perhaps we even assume that what they think is of little importance?

Yet we know that even the most likely-looking assumptions about media use may still turn out to be wrong or overly simplistic (Curran 2010; 2012). In that light, it is indeed surprising that so few scholars of alternative journalism have felt the need to test some of our own assumptions by seeking the views of the citizens who make up the audience for the projects that are the subjects of our paeans. Downing (2003: 640) warns us against making assumptions about the "complex terrain" of an audience that remains "in urgent need of careful, sensitive exploration by communication researchers". This article, based on an exploratory qualitative study of the audience of an alternative website, is but one small attempt to help meet this need.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This study is an attempt to begin answering the research question:

> What prompts some people to become members of the audience for alternative forms of journalism?

A second, related research question is intended to help explore one of the recurring assertions made in the literature on alternative journalism:

> To what extent can an engagement with alternative journalism foster active citizenship?

The process of exploring these questions will of necessity require in-depth consideration of the intersection between journalism and ideas of active audiences and active citizenship; it is

consideration of this intersection in the example of one alternative media outlet that is the major contribution of this study. This focus on a single case study and a small group of readers is designed to make up in depth what it may lack in breadth, meaning that the findings should contribute to our understanding of journalism in general and alternative journalism in particular. After all, without an audience there can be no journalism.

Alongside the main research questions, this study has also been designed in the explicit hope that it may be of utility to those engaged in producing alternative journalism "in the real world" as well as those studying it in academe. In this sense, at least, the research ethos behind this study echoes the ethos of much alternative journalism itself, which is to provide information that may be useful in informing social practice, as Brian Whitaker once put it in the context of the Liverpool Free Press:

> We said: "We want the Free Press to be useful to people struggling for control over their own lives – as well as providing information about the sort of people who actually do have control over them". In this way we arrived at a new and simple definition of news: useful information. Our test, then, for measuring newsworthiness was to ask: "In what ways is this story useful?" (Whitaker, 1981: 105.)

As with useful news, so with useful research. That means resisting what Susan Forde calls the "disengaged" nature of scholarly inquiry that is too often rendered "inaccessible to many who could benefit from it" (Forde, 2011: viii). For her, research into alternative journalism ought to be "useable in a range of contexts" only some of which will be academic ones (Forde, 2011: viii). And for Clemencia Rodriguez, such scholarship "should be at the service of praxis", meaning that "academic output is secondary to the production of knowledge useable by the projects themselves" (Rodriguez, 2010: 133).

With the words of Forde and Rodriguez in mind from the outset, this research project has been designed to be of some practical use to the alternative media project whose audience is at the heart of the study. The selected project is a non-commercial local political blog published in a UK city since 2011, the Leeds Citizen, and the audience research has been designed in part in consultation with the site's creator. Preliminary findings based on audience insights and suggestions have been reported directly to the Leeds Citizen for consideration and, in some cases, action. This audience research forms part of a larger study that also includes an analysis of the site's content and journalistic approach (Harcup, forthcoming). Such elements of "co-production" in this study have prompted two further research questions that may be of particular potential benefit to the alternative journalism project under consideration. Specifically:

What is it about the Leeds Citizen site that makes its readers read it?
And:

> What suggestions, if any, do members of the audience have for improving the Leeds Citizen?

By the "co-production" of research is generally meant involving those who might ultimately make use of the research – and even those who might themselves be being studied – in the planning stages of the research (Jung et al, 2012: 3; Pahl, 2014: 8; 27). Such an approach has been hailed as potentially "transformative not solely in research terms but in social terms", because "the engagement of citizens and social groups nourishes the renewal of democracy" (Flinders et al, 2014: 1). However, because those involved may have different needs, agendas and approaches, co-production can also be "high-risk, time consuming, ethically complex, emotionally demanding, inherently unstable, vulnerable to external shocks, subject to competing demands and expectations and other scholars may not even

recognise its outputs as representing 'real' research… This is what makes co-production so fresh and innovative." (Flinders et al, 2014: 6.)

In the case of this study the researcher has not handed decision-making over to the alternative media project but has engaged in extensive consultation and careful planning with the project to enable a qualitative exploration of the audience to be conducted in a relatively unobtrusive manner with a view to obtaining insights that might inform practice and scholarship alike. On the basis of such discussions a reader questionnaire was devised and an appeal was made on the Leeds Citizen blog itself and associated Twitter and Facebook accounts for readers to contact the researcher directly if they might be willing to answer some questions. In addition to completing brief questionnaires about their reading of the Leeds Citizen, respondents were then invited to participate in focus group discussions to explore in more depth readers' attitudes towards journalism and media in general and this site in particular. The numbers involved were small - with 15 readers getting in touch, 12 of whom completed questionnaires and eight of whom took part in focus groups – but as this was a qualititative exploration of the motivations and attitudes of readers rather than a quantitative survey, the absence of large numbers did not diminish the value of the evidence.

The focus group in its various forms is now a long-established method of research where the prime objective is not the collection of large quantities of statistically quantifiable forms of data (Krueger and Casey, 2009) but the quest for what have been described as more "insightful findings" (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 79). If questionnaires and other forms of survey generally provide a better fit for quantitative research, and if one-to-one interviews are more suited for researching individuals' biographies, focus groups can be "ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns" in a social context (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 5). Such social interaction and collective activity are seen as integral to the methodology rather than incidental, especially when studying audiences:

> Crucially, focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by the explicit use of group interaction to generate data. Instead of asking questions of each person in turn, focus group researchers encourage participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others' experiences and points of view. At the very least, research participants create an audience for one another. (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 4.)

In this way the use of the focus group in the social sciences generally, and in the fields of media and communication more specifically, can help researchers "discover the processes by which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk", according to Lunt and Livingstone (1996: 85).

This emphasis on the social and the collective arguably makes the focus group ideally suited to qualititative study of the audience for alternative forms of media that are themselves defined in part in relation to ideas of the social and the collective. There is at least the possibility of a focus group shifting the balance of power within research relationships away from the researcher and towards the participants – that is, towards those being studied – and by doing so to diffuse the researcher's influence (Wilkinson, 1999: 70) and even to challenge or disrupt the researcher's own assumptions (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 18). Arguably, such a possibility again renders the method particularly appropriate for research into communities that might be defined not by passive consumption but by active citizenship (Harcup, 2011). For Sue Wilkinson (1999: 67), who argues that the focus group can be a particularly appropriate methodology for feminist research, such encounters can be seen as a form of "collective sense-making". She writes: "A focus group participant is not an individual acting in isolation. Rather, participants are members of a social group, all of whom

interact with each other. In other words, the focus group itself is a social context" (Wilkinson, 1999: 67).

As Lunt and Livingstone put it, the use of focus groups "emphasises the social nature of communication" and as such can be seen as a useful method for research that concerns itself with "redefining media processes and the conception of the audience" (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 90). And redefining media processes and audiences surely lies at the heart of most, if not all, forms of alternative journalism, as will be seen in the review of relevant literature that follows.

LITERATURE REVIEW: 'A HUGE GAP IN OUR RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE'

The label alternative journalism is typically applied to elements of alternative media practices that involve reporting and/or commenting on factual and/or topical events, as opposed to wider cultural or artistic forms of alternative media (Harcup, 2014: 11). It is nonetheless a fairly wide definition that would include those newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, broadcast stations, blogs and social networking sites, among other media spaces, that "are primarily informed by a critique of existing ways (the dominant practices) of doing journalism" (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 1). Such journalism is said to stem from dissatisfaction with mainstream journalism, to which it offers a critique in practice:

> Its critique emphasises alternatives to, inter alia, conventions of news sources and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalised economy of commercial journalism; the professional, elite basis of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of audience as receiver. (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 1.)

The subordinate role of the audience as passive receiver may be challenged in practice within alternative journalism but, as noted above, within the academic literature this audience still seems to be more written about than heard from.

It is not only with journalism that this tends to be the case. Karen Burland and Stephanie Pitts have observed – in their case in relation to live music performance - that the current state of audience research is still "relatively exploratory" (Burland and Pitts, 2014: 3). If that is the case for such a long-established form of cultural expression as music, then how much more does it apply to newer cultural phenomena such as online alternative news media? Very much so, it seems. Yet, as with Sherlock Holmes and the dog that didn't bark, the absence of something does not mean it is not significant.

Alternative media themselves are "both an under-researched topic and an under-represented topic in the social sciences", as Fuchs (2010: 173) puts it, or "under-researched and under-theorised" in the opinion of Downey and Fenton (2003: 185). That being the case, then research into the alternative media audience can be found only in the margins of the margin. In lamenting the "huge gap in our research knowledge" arising from this relative lack of insight into the audience for alternative media, Downing drew attention to the "urgent need of careful, sensitive exploration" of how and why people use such media (Downing, 2003: 626 and 641). One of the few examples of such research he could point to was the small survey of readers of SchNews carried out in 1999 by Chris Atton (2002: 128-131). "It is a paradox," wrote Downing (2003: 625), "that so little attention has been dedicated to the user dimension, given that alternative-media activists represent in a sense the most active segment of the so-called 'active audience'."

Despite his call, the alternative media audience has tended to remain notable by its absence in comparison with studies of the content, methods and producers of such media. In

what they describe as the first scholarly book specifically on alternative journalism, Chris Atton and James Hamilton (2008: 94) note that "there has been little detailed research into audiences of alternative media", and they briefly discuss just one example. That was a study by Donald Matheson and Stuart Allan (2007) of readers of blogs about the war in Iraq, which found that readers tended to trust the blogs not because they considered them to represent the absolute truth but because the bloggers were open about being subjective (cited in Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 95).

Another of the comparatively few audience studies that have been carried out is a major project involving interviews and focus groups with members of the audience for the community broadcasting sector in Australia, which found that listeners to community radio felt "empowered", especially when the stations provided listeners with "information that helps them with their daily lives" (Ewart et al, 2005: 7-8). Commenting on this same study, Susan Forde (2011: 90) highlighted how audience members told researchers that the non-professional nature of community radio was endearing, and the fact that they regarded those on air as "one of us" was one of their key motivations for listening. Another member of the research team, Michael Meadows (2013: 56), drew from the Australian audience study the conclusion that, by engaging in "a form of public conversation" with audiences, community media projects were attempting to redress what has been described as society's "democratic deficit". For Meadows (2013: 50), it is the "community-based volunteer news workers who put the citizen back into journalism…because they come from and remain part of their local communities" (my emphasis).

Two sizeable audience studies conducted in the United States also shed some light on how the output of alternative media is received. Michael Boyle and Mike Schmierbach (2009) carried out more than 400 telephone interviews with a random sample of citizens in the state of Kansas, asking about individuals' media consumption (mainstream and/or alternative) and levels of political participation. They found that those most heavily involved in participating in political activity, ranging from attending town hall meetings to organising protest rallies, "were more prone to rely on alternative media" than on mainstream media (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2009: 13).

More recently, Jennifer Rauch (2015) conducted a survey of more than 200 people who identified themselves as being "alternative media users". Interestingly, those completing her questionnaire included some who considered Fox News, the Huffington Post and National Public Radio to be alternative, alongside more commonly accepted outlets such as The Nation, Alternet and Mother Jones (Rauch, 2015: 131). Notwithstanding such multiple meanings of the term "alternative", her study prompted her to conclude that: "In many ways, using alternative media contributes to how people make sense of the world and relate themselves to the larger cultural order" (Rauch, 2015: 139). She echoed Downing's plea for further audience research, including deeper, more qualitative studies, to explore "what alternative media means in the minds or lives of users…who exercise agency in their daily lives by routinely choosing alternative media over dominant ones" (Rauch, 2015: 128).

If people become an audience partly to help make sense of the world, as Rauch suggests above, then how can we hope to make sense of this audience without actually hearing from them? Abstract theorising about social activities without some direct engagement with the people directly involved is of only limited value, argue Roberta Pearson and Maire Messenger Davies (2005). Within the context of studying a theatre audience, but with wider resonance, they write:

> We believe that directly engaging with the public is a way of addressing theoretical questions about culture, taste and class that cannot be substituted by speculation…
> Our research with live audiences and with some of those who provide entertainment

for them proceeds from a conviction that research with cultural participants, whether producers or consumers, is needed to inform public policy as well as to test some of the hypotheses about public versus private tastes presently circulating in academic discourses. (Pearson and Davis, 2005: 148.)

That's entertainment. Engaging with the audience for journalism will arguably be of even greater relevance to discussions of active citizenship and democratic engagement in society, because people who comprise news audiences have been identified as potential participants within the public sphere. Because, as Dahlgren puts it:

> Ultimately, democracy resides with citizens who interact with each other and with power-holders of various kinds. Further, interaction is activity and it has its sites and spaces, discursive practices, contextual aspects… The public sphere does not begin and end when media content reaches an audience; this is but one step in larger communication and cultural chains that include how the media output is received, made sense of and utilised by citizens… Audiences that coalesce into publics who talk about political issues – and begin to enact their civic identities and make use of their civic competencies – move from the private realm into the public one, making use of and further developing their cultures of citizenship. (Dahlgren, 2006: 274-275.)

Sonia Livingstone (2005) warns scholars to guard against any temptation to disparage an audience as passive whilst lauding an entity called "the public" as an active agent of democracy. "In a thoroughly mediated world, audiences and publics, along with communities, nations, markets and crowds, are composed of the same people," she writes (Livingstone, 2005: 17). In any event, an audience is not a monolithic entity and can be "as polysemic as any media text" (Livingstone, 2005: 35). It's complicated, in other words, because:

> Audiences are, generally, neither so passive and accepting as traditionally supposed by those who denigrate them nor generally so organised and effective as to meet the high standards of those defining public participation. Rather, they sustain a modest and often ambivalent level of critical interpretation, drawing upon – and thereby reproducing – a somewhat ill-specified, at times inchoate or even contradictory sense of identity or belonging which motivates them towards but does not wholly enable the kinds of collective and direct action expected of a public. (Livingstone, 2005: 31.)

Kirsten Drotner (2005: 205) argues that, because "most people occupy positions as both audiences and publics at various times", researchers who focus on one or the other – audience or public - may "miss the interlacing of both". Writing about mobile telecommunications technologies but with resonance for advocates of the democratising possibilities of alternative journalism, especially online, she adds: "Perhaps their greatest potential lies in the ways in which they widen the subjective conditions for democratic engagement...to partake in shifting the boundaries between public and private domains, between the modes of talk and the means of action" (Drotner, 2005: 205-206). However, as Borger et al (2013: 130) observe, sometimes "the audience turns out to be less active and civic than scholars hoped for".

A RICHER PERSPECTIVE: THE READERS SPEAK

The Leeds Citizen is a local political blog, largely a one-person operation, that has been running since July 2011 in the UK city of Leeds, in the county of Yorkshire in the north of

England. The open access site, which uses Wordpress blogging software, is run by a semi-retired local man called Quentin Kean. Many years previously he worked for the BBC at its overseas monitoring service. His motivation for devoting between 20 and 40 unpaid hours to the Leeds Citizen each week is, he says, because, "I think there should be somebody nipping at the heels of these people who've got so much power" (Interview). His style of alternative journalism is based on close reading and informed analysis of numerous official documents and data; it is critical and conversational yet evidence-based reporting that scrutinises the actions of the powerful on a local and regional basis, primarily the local authority, Leeds City Council. In a sample year, 2014, the blog featured 66 stories, 40 of which were tagged "Leeds City Council" (Harcup, forthcoming). Such public scrutiny of the official information that is now made available online has been described as a form of "monitorial citizenship" (Moss and Coleman, 2014: 416).

The Leeds Citizen has been cited as an example of online "hyperlocal" media (Williams et al, 2014) despite the fact that it covers an area too large to be considered truly hyperlocal (Harcup, forthcoming). Hyperlocal blogs have recently been hailed, even by the UK's media and communications regulator, for providing albeit limited audiences with "important citizenship benefits" (Ofcom, 2014: 56). Yet, in common with much writing about other forms of "citizen journalism", it is striking how rarely the growing literature on hyperlocal online media makes any reference to earlier, analogue forms of alternative media and alternative journalism, such as the local alternative press of the 1970s (Harcup, 2013).

It has been suggested that as a result of a digital divide, in the UK at least, readers of such blogs are disproportionately likely to come from the middle or higher economic groups than from the poorer sections of the population (Ofcom, 2014: 57-58). These are perhaps the people Quentin Kean has in mind when he refers to that section of his readership who come across the Leeds Citizen site via Twitter as "the sort of chattering, youngish things" who tend to populate Twitter, which he describes as "a sort of bubble, I think" (Interview). The Leeds Citizen blog attracts anywhere between 400 visits a day up to 5,000 on the highest day ever, for a 2014 story about arts funding that was shared more than 1,000 times on Facebook (and tweeted a further 165 times). The story with most longevity has been a 2012 item on education that has continued to rank on the first page of Google results for people searching for Leeds' best secondary schools. "How it got to on to that first page is more of a mystery," admits Kean. He estimates that roughly 60% of the site's traffic is a result of online searching for particular topics, with the rest mostly people following shares or links via Facebook or Twitter, on which he has more than 3,000 followers (Harcup, forthcoming).

Figures tell us only so much whereas qualitative audience research may provide "richer perspectives" on the value of sites such as the Leeds Citizen (Williams et al, 2014). The audience research for this study was conducted via questionnaires and focus group discussions with readers of the Leeds Citizen who responded to appeals to get in touch; as such, they might perhaps be seen as committed members of the site's core audience. None of the participants' names are being published in this research. Two-thirds were male and one third female, they were aged from their 20s to their 50s but were mostly in the 30s to 40s range, and those who answered the ethnicity question were all white. They had been readers for periods of time ranging from one year to since the site's inception in 2011. The frequency with which they look at the site ranges from once or twice a month to three or four times a week and many follow tweets, items on Facebook, email links or an RSS feed to look at pretty much everything posted on it. Those who could remember how they first encountered the Leeds Citizen mostly cited seeing it mentioned on Twitter and then following the link, or as a result of searching for a particular topic via Google.

Some participants said they were aware that the site was effectively a one-person band and indeed knew who that person was; some had a vague idea that it might be an

individual effort; some had no idea who was behind it and wondered if there was a group or collective involved. Despite differing levels of knowledge about the site's authorship, there was a sense that the site could be trusted and that it was honest about what it knew, where its information came from, and also if there was anything it did not know. Its very name, the Leeds Citizen, was seen by some as a clear statement of identity, with the local element as integral as the commitment to citizenship. In general terms, participants appeared to be attracted to what Atton and Hamilton (2008: 1) identified as alternative media's "critique" of journalism's dominant conventions.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the audience members who were surveyed displayed a mixture of appreciation, admiration and affection towards the Leeds Citizen, both for the quality of its journalism and because it appeared to emanate from what Forde (2011: 90) called "one of us". Words and phrases used unprompted during focus group discussions on the site's qualities included:

> "A record. Accountability. Analysis. Careful. Citizens' interests. Citizenship. Civic participation. Civic society. Constructive. Conversation. Courage. Critical. Detail. Facts. Holding people to account. Honest. Independent. Information. Intelligent. Interesting. Investigative. Irreverent. Mischief. Non-reverential. Not clickbait. Not cynical. Not deferential. Not hectoring. Not shouting. Perseverance. Prick the bubble. Prodding. Questions. Research. Respectful. Ripples. Scrutinising. Skilled. Speaking truth to power. Straight. Tone. Trust. Useful."

Participants had been asked in the questionnaires to describe the Leeds Citizen in a single sentence to somebody unfamiliar with it. Their written responses included the following:

> "The Leeds Citizen is a useful source for investigative reporting on Leeds; it covers issues and perspectives neglected by the mainstream press, with a particular focus on the activities of public bodies and their 'partners' in the private sector."

> "A fair view of Leeds from an intelligent, knowledgeable, and reasonable man who loves the city."

> "Questions how decisions are taken and for whose benefit."

> "An intelligent and amusing local citizen who takes the time we all wish we had to delve more deeply into the shenanigans going on in Leeds 'politics' (in all its varieties)."

> "Meticulously accurate local journalism and a thorn in the side of power."

> "A Guido Fawkes 'light' style political blog about Leeds."

> "Leeds' Private Eye."

> "Intelligent and independent analysis of Leeds politics and the way regional, national and international politics affects Leeds."

> "Shining a light on the murky depths of the council and public bodies - with attitude!"

> "A source of interesting stories on life in Leeds – particularly in relation to how the city is run and how it works."

Such positive attitudes towards the Leeds Citizen contrasted markedly with many readers' disappointment or even disdain towards much mainstream media. Some national media were praised for scrutinising the powerful to some extent, but there was also criticism of them for being "London obsessed" and, at a political level, focused far too much on Westminster. The way the Leeds Citizen routinely and systematically references and links to documents and other evidence was also highlighted as a positive that compared favourably with even the best of the national media online. More local media were an even bigger disappointment, and typical comments about local and regional mainstream journalism were:

> "Much of local journalism is cut and paste from PR companies' spiel or (when online) obviously intended to be clickbait… Genuine investigative stories seem a rarity nowadays, and where they do happen there's no follow-up and the journalists don't seem to see how one story links to another they've already run. The Citizen joins the dots… He does what the local media should be doing (I realise why they're not and I do sympathise with their difficult situation)."

> "…a conservative local/regional media that is slow to respond to new or different thinking."

> "Unlike the mainstream media, it is not beholden to advertisers or corporate owners, and it is not concerned with maintaining a good relationship with the council for the sake of its business… The local mainstream media in Leeds appears to be poorly resourced and publishes stories containing very little independent research."

> "It delves into council papers and reports that no YEP [Yorkshire Evening Post] journo has time or interest to do… It follows its own news agenda, not one set by a press office. Our existing mainstream media in Leeds, most notably YEP, is moribund."

> "Whereas the YEP may have a short article on something, the Citizen will look behind it a bit."

> "The YP [Yorkshire Post] and the YEP can't run a story that says, 'We don't know anything', whereas the Citizen can."

> "What really gets my goat about mainstream media is they are colluding with those that treat us as though we're stupid."

The evidence provided by such comments reinforces long-standing arguments that dissatisfaction with mainstream media is what lies behind the creation and consumption of alternative forms of media (Atton, 2002; Harcup, 2013; Whitaker, 1981). Participants also criticised mainstream media for failing to grasp that society might suffer from what Meadows (2013: 50) described as a "democratic deficit" or gap. If democracy entails citizens interacting with each other as well as with those in power, as Dahlgren (2006: 274) asserts, then readers have identified a role in this for the Leeds Citizen, as indicated in the following comments around possible devolution of power in the north of England:

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> "The whole issue of devolution generally brings up issues about how we're going to scrutinise power… If more decisions are being taken locally we need media people to do it properly, and to me it feels as though at the moment the Leeds Citizen is the closest thing we've got that might be able to do that... I think part of it is that the mainstream media are covering it in a way which sees it entirely from the interests of the existing power holders within the locality and the region. The Yorkshire Post generally speaking is quite business-centric, and that obviously is an important part of the issue but actually it doesn't seem to me to have captured any of the spirit from Scotland…"

> "In the YEP they don't go into the minutiae of negotiations, it's more about celebrating negotiating a great deal for Leeds. There's no real research or investigation in the mainstream."

Many participants spoke of a need for more media scrutiny of those in power – private sector power as well as the public sector ("Follow the money," as one reader put it) – and for more voices to be heard. But there was recognition that the Leeds Citizen was not setting itself up to be the alternative outlet and that it would be better if there were many more independent voices and a media scene that more accurately reflected the diversity of the city. More people just need to "get out and do it" in their different ways, said one reader.

In general, then, readers valued the fact that the Leeds Citizen provided something they perceived to be lacking in mainstream media (particularly at a local and regional level), which was to ask questions about and of those in power, to go into issues in detail and in-depth and to link to original documentation. Its relatively narrow range of subject matter was not seen as a weakness but, if anything, as a strength. Its local focus was crucial but the fact that the locality (Leeds) is fairly large was also recognised, meaning that the site could to an extent bring people together for city-wide discussions beyond their immediate neighbourhoods. Readers spoke of items on the site prompting such encounters on both a personal and more organised basis. One commented that it prompted her to "have conversations and talk to people, 'What did you think of that?', that sort of thing". Another said that, without the Leeds Citizen, his own conversations might be more restricted:

> "Politically in Leeds the kind of involvement I would have is a council estate meeting group, on a tiny scale – your street – and I'm more interested in the scale of something the size of Leeds. The Leeds Citizen is bigger than a sort of local community thing but not big like the Yorkshire Evening Post, so to have somewhere in between those two levels – for me that was interesting. It's having that conversation on a city-wide scale, and at times the Citizen has allowed that."

This just might be the sort of conversation identified by Dahlgren (2006: 275) as signifying s shift from "the private realm into the public one" and thereby integral to ideas of citizenship.

Participants seemed to be genuinely appreciative of the amount of time (and care) taken to research some Citizen stories, with persistence being mentioned repeatedly. Recalling the site's coverage of a particular housing issue in the area of the city in which she lived, one reader said:

> "It kept coming back to it, which I really like. He just didn't let it go. You know, 'What's happening now? Oh, it's been put back again and again', and so on."

Readers also valued the way the site's questioning and critical tone was expressed in what they saw as a constructive and reasonable way rather than hectoring; they liked the way it did not attack people for the sake of it or push a particular ideological line. This was apparent in the following focus group exchange between three members of the audience:

> "It's not cynical, is it? I think it would be very easy to become quite cynical when you're looking at civic life, but it doesn't. It's very critical and it'll hold people to account and stuff, but it's not like, 'Look at this bunch of…'. It's more constructive."

> "It would feel more ranty if it was that. I don't think it ever reads like a rant. It's just, like, 'Ooh, this is a bit peculiar'."

> "It's holding people to account. It's not shouting at people but it will challenge people and persevere and say, 'What's going on? It's now three months and you said in three months' time you'd have done such-and-such.' You can't write him off."

The questionnaires contained one or two calls for more, and/or more frequent, posts but in the focus group discussions there was an acceptance (especially among those aware that the site is the work of one individual) that posts were erratic and that was fine. Several participants said they had no expectations of the site as being a news site that would provide either a frequent or a general news service. Some said that, in any event, the large volume of output on some blogs could be overwhelming, whereas they did not feel that with the Leeds Citizen. One reader said that although he read everything posted on the site at the moment, if there were more posts he would no doubt read fewer.

With one exception, these readers enjoyed the writing style and the tone in which items were written. Several mentioned the site's sense of humour (and "character") in a positive light, and one highlighted as a particularly effective idiosyncratic style one story that began: "Phew! That was quick work!" Nobody seemed to feel it necessary for the Leeds Citizen to add video and/or audio, and a number of readers praised the fact that the site eschewed "clickbait" and did not try to attract traffic for the sake of it by producing items that go "viral".

The fact that the site did not give the name of the author did not seem to be an issue for those taking part in the research, although those who had been readers from the start said the initial air of mystery had perhaps increased the ripples created particularly within the council back then. One commented: "Lots of folk don't know who he is. Many have asked if I am him, which is deeply flattering."

Most of those in the focus groups said they made a point of always reading the comments posted on the Leeds Citizen site although fewer actually posted comments themselves, perhaps suggesting that even members of an active audience are not necessarily equally active. They valued the way the comments could offer new information or fresh insights and also because there were not so many of them as to be off-putting. The fact that people could post comments anonymously did not seem to exercise most although one was very critical of the cowardice of those posting abuse without identifying themselves. Another felt that posting definitive comments on such sites seemed to be more of a male phenomenon when compared to the more conversational tone she felt was more likely to be found on Facebook.

Participants in the study mostly said they saw themselves in one way or another as being active citizens – as people who participated in society in some way, whether in the cultural or political spheres – and to an extent their reading of the Leeds Citizen could be seen as one expression of such citizenship. Echoing the way that listeners to community radio can

feel more "empowered" to act (Ewart et al, 2005: 7), reading the Leeds Citizen has inspired some specific actions, ranging from one reader who organised a public debate after being prompted by something he read on the site to others reading the linked council documents and sending comments to council officers or councillors. "I've definitely read obscure council papers on certain things because he's linked to them," said one reader, who added: "I now engage more with that stuff than I did before." There was a sense that reading the site could help "demystify the way decisions are made" and provide a better understanding of the workings of the city, which in turn could better equip people for democratic engagement. As one reader put it:

> "I think in a sense what Leeds Citizen is doing at the moment for me as an individual citizen of Leeds is giving me a much better understanding of my city and helping me to think about actually whether there are things I can do as an individual to make things better."

Another reader explained:

> "I read what's written there and that sort of sits alongside some of the knowledge I have, or lack of knowledge, so maybe between the two I get an explanation of what might be going on… It's just an alternative view, an alternative explanation."

However, there was also recognition that it might be people already inclined towards being active who read the site in the first place:

> "It's about civic participation, really. That's what it comes down to. And I think if you're already minded to be interested in that then it will appeal to you, and if you're not in the slightest bit interested you'll probably go, 'Nothing much here for me, really'."

Those participating in the audience research suspected that some of those in positions of power within the city of Leeds had to keep in mind that their actions were being monitored in a way that did not happen before Quentin Kean created the Leeds Citizen. As one put it:

> "Because it's well researched and it does ask questions, it'll be in their head. Leeds Citizen occupies that bit of space. They'll know there's a person out there watching."

RESEARCH 'AT THE SERVICE OF PRAXIS'

As indicated above, the intention of this study was not just to inform scholarly analysis of alternative journalism but also to be useful for people practising alternative journalism. In addition to the comments of audience members reported and discussed above, which have been communicated to the Leeds Citizen directly, participants in the research were also asked what suggestions they might have for improving the site. A number of practical suggestions were made, ranging from sharing out research for some stories among volunteers and holding open readers' meetings to making it easier for users to share or say they had read an item without having to post a specific comment online. A total of 10 specific suggestions were sent to the Leeds Citizen which is giving detailed consideration to the desirability and feasibility of each.

"I'm going to follow them all up," said Quentin Kean. He continued:

> Sharing out the research on occasions? Definitely, I think that's a great idea because there are lots of people out there, particularly on something like housing, who are actually doing it on the ground. It would make for a better story in any case, being able to link all of this stuff - this paperwork - to reality. So yes, I'm going to pursue that…

As for these readers' opinions as a whole, it is interesting how strongly they reflect Kean's own aspirations for the Leeds Citizen as a site to monitor power locally. This is something that struck him on reading the (anonymised) comments: "That thing about trying to look at how power works in Leeds - yes, I was really pleased." To that extent this study may perhaps have helped answer the question about whether or not what he is doing is useful – something Kean says he sometimes doubts (Harcup, forthcoming). Those committed members of his audience who volunteered to participate in this study have few if any such doubts, it seems.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to explore in depth what prompts people to read alternative journalism, and to use such an exploration as a basis for considering the extent to which engagement with such forms of media output can be seen as fostering a sense of active citizenship, even as prompting increased forms of democratic participation. The study was also designed to provide some useful information directly to the project at the heart of it. These aims have been achieved. Numbers may have been small, conclusions must necessarily be tentative and scholars must of course always guard against over-claiming when it comes to generalizable conclusions. But, such caveats notwithstanding, the voices of the audience members taking part in this study do now provide us with empirical evidence to support many of the conceptual arguments found within the literature on alternative journalism and do reinforce the findings of the limited number of earlier audience studies.

Members of the audience in this study do indeed seem to be prompted to read the Leeds Citizen because of their dissatisfaction with much mainstream media and because the site's alternative approach to journalism helps them make sense of the world and provides them with useful information, as Rauch (2015) and Ewart et al (2005) found in the US and Australian contexts respectively. This study has also found evidence to support arguments that engagement with alternative journalism can be seen as facilitating forms of "public conversation" (Meadows, 2013) and as simultaneously prompting, reinforcing and reflecting readers' active democratic engagement as citizens (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2009).

Up to a point, at least. But Livingstone (2005) reminds us that audiences are polysemic rather than uniform in nature. The parting comment of one reader at a focus group raises the possibility that, for some members of the audience, consuming alternative journalism might act not as a spur to civic participation but as a substitute for it:

> "I think reading it is a bit good for my conscience. I know I should read these council documents, I should go to this council meeting. It just makes me feel slightly happier, that he'll catch it."

Taken in conjunction with evidence that most members even of this active audience rarely actually take up the invitation to comment on stories online, this point seems to warrant further investigation. Could it be that some people choose to consume alternative journalism not as an integral part of their civic activism but as an alternative to engaging in civic activism at all? If so, that might be an uncomfortable finding for alternative media producers

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and scholars alike, but the possibility of discomfort ought not put us off asking such questions if a deeper level of understanding might be achieved as a result.

The research project discussed in this article may have been based on a single case study of audience responses to what is essentially a one-person blog with an alternative outlook, but such a focus has allowed for a concentrated examination of the intersection between journalism and ideas of active audiences and active citizenship. By facilitating members of the audience to speak at length, in ways in which they are rarely heard, this study might be seen as playing a similar role to that claimed by alternative journalism itself: to give voice to the voiceless. But that is a slogan. Real people – journalists, audiences and scholars alike – are always more complex and more interesting than can ever be expressed in a slogan, and in that sense the insights from the participants in this audience research may help deepen our understanding of why and how people engage with alternative media in general and alternative journalism in particular. In the process, this audience's critique of mainstream journalism may also be seen as furthering our understanding of journalism itself.

Further audience research is undoubtedly needed, including in a range of different cultures and contexts (Wall, 2015: 8). If we are living in what Downing (2003: 642) describes as a "corporate-media-saturated world", then exploring the potential of alternative forms of journalism remains as vital as ever. How can we hope to do that effectively if we don't ask the audience?

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