A Decade of Research on Hyperlocal Media: An International Approach to a New Media Model

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The growth of hyperlocal media has rekindled the ecosystem of local media in recent years. An international phenomenon, it has already been the subject of much study in the academy, despite it being a recent occurrence. This article deals with the literature review of scientific articles published during the first decade of hyperlocal media research. The results show the keen interest that researchers had early on in this new media model, especially in the United States, United Kingdom, Sweden and Australia where it was studied more intensely. The works published from 2010 to 2020 exhibit an interest in the study of the transformation of the media ecosystem, the mapping and analysis of the characteristics of the media, their organizational and business models, as well as their informative production and the relationship with the audience.

INTRODUCTION

The community media ecosystem began to undergo a profound process of upheaval during the first decade of the 2000s. The economic crisis, together with the decline of the traditional media industry, caused the closure of media and local delegations (Franklin, 2006; Wadbring & Bergström, 2017), leaving geographic areas without their own local news coverage and giving rise to so-called media deserts (Ferrier, Sinha, & Outrich, 2016). In a context in which local media outlets are an increasingly reliable source of information for users (Newman et al., 2020), concern is growing about their roles as democratic institutions in local communities, and the negative effects that can arise from their absence (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

As traditional local media sought formulas for their adaptation to the digital scene (Jenkins & Kleis Nielsen, 2018), technological development lowered costs for the production and dissemination of content on the internet. It also gave audiences more active roles and made possible the entry of new actors, one of which was hyperlocal media (Radcliffe, 2012).

Characterized by their mission to cover increasingly overlooked areas (Radcliffe, 2012), and by their orientation and commitment to the community (Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley, 2011), hyperlocal online media have revitalized the media ecosystem with new informational approaches close to the citizenship, new organizational and business models (Cook, Geels, & Bakker, 2016) and new ways of conceiving their relationships with audiences (Radcliffe, 2015).

The growth of hyperlocal information projects from 2005 to 2006 in the United States (Schaffer, 2007), and the accompanying journalistic boom that started to take off from 2009 (Flores Vivar, 2014), has been studied and mapped in countries such as the United States (Horning, 2012), the United Kingdom (Harte, 2013), the

Netherlands (Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014), Sweden (Nygren, Leckner, & Tenor, 2018), Finland (Hujanen et al., 2019) and Norway (Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2019).

The early academic research carried out on hyperlocal online media is essential in mapping developmental trends in the international framework. The results published thus far illustrate this new reality at a journalistic and media level. The community orientation and the service to society of hyperlocal media have been important topics of research in the last decade, as well as the role of audiences and user participation, which continues to be a relevant object of study. Therefore, the following research questions form the basis of this paper:

RQ1. Which themes have been the focus of the research on hyperlocal media after its first decade as a subject of study?

RQ2. What information about the expansion, characteristics and user participation in hyperlocal media has this first decade of research provided?

METHODOLOGY

The general objective of this article is to explore the core themes that constitute the focus of the academy's work, at the international level, on hyperlocal media during the first decade of research (2010-2020). Through analysis of the works produced during these years, this paper explores the extent to which this new media model is understood. The article will also detail both the countries that have studied hyperlocal media in greater depth, as well as the ways in which certain aspects of the phenomenon have been investigated in more detail than others.

To do this, a systematic literature review (Codina, 2017; Gómez-Luna et al., 2014) has been carried out from the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases. Two successive searches were conducted, entering the terms 'hyperlocal media' and 'hyperlocal news'. The results were limited to the period 2010–2020, as it was in 2010 that the first publications appeared with the media and hyperlocal information as the object of study. Secondly, the results were filtered by the 'article' category to allow for the analysis of the publications with the highest international impact.

A total of 94 articles were obtained, of which 23 papers were discarded because they either did not belong to the area of knowledge of journalism and communication, or did not have the media and hyperlocal information as the subject of the study.

Thus, the bibliographic body of work examined in this paper came from the remaining 61 articles. For identification and analysis purposes, they were categorized based on the following: authors, title, source of publication, year of publication, DOI, institution of origin of the research, central themes and main contribution. The main results of this systematized bibliographic review are shown below, and the pieces of research analysed have been categorised by theme.

RESULTS: RESEARCHING THE HYPERLOCAL MEDIA

The 61 articles recovered from the bibliographic review have been published in various scientific journals (**Table 1**), mostly belonging to the areas of journalism and communication. Of the articles published in journals indexed in JCR, 11.5% are in Q1, 16.4% in Q2, 16.4% in Q3 and 4.9% in Q4. There is no data on the factor of impact for 50.8% of the articles. In regards to those indexed in SJR, 49.2% of the articles are in Q1, 19.7% in Q2, 8.2% in Q3 and 4.9% in Q4. Here, there is no impact factor data for 18.0% of the articles.

The decade analysed in this paper was the first in which hyperlocal media were treated as subjects of study. Within this decade, specifically from 2015 onwards, the number of academic articles dedicated to the topic of hyperlocal media experienced a notable increase (**Figure 1**). From then on there were at least four articles published per year. The figures from 2016 and 2019 stand out, years in which up to 14 new investigations were registered.

Regarding the countries in which the investigations have been developed (**Table 2**) and whose media realities have been studied, the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden or Australia stand out.

Table 1. Number of articles published by journal

Journal	Number of articles
After Urban Regeneration: Communities, Policy and Place	1
American Behavioral Scientist	1
Anthropological Notebooks	1
Big Data and Society	1
Communication Research and Practice	1
Cuadernos.info	1
Digital Journalism	6
EContent	1
El profesional de la información	1
International Journal of Cultural Studies	1
International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction	1
Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies	2
Journal of the International Academy for Case Studies	1
Journalism	6
Journalism Practice	14
Journalism Studies	5
Mass Communication and Society	1
Media International Australia	1
Media Watch	1
Media, Culture and Society	1
Sciences de la Société	1
New Media and Society	1
Newspaper Research Journal	1
Nordicom Review	9
Observatorio	1

Source: Own elaboration

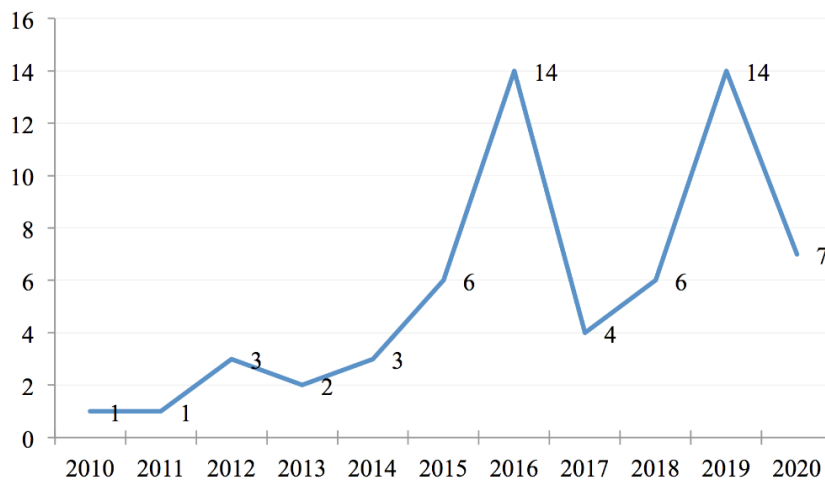**Figure 1.** Years of publication of the analysed articles

Table 2. Number of articles published by country

Country	Number of articles
Australia	7
Belgium	3
Finland	1
Germany	2
Netherlands	1
Norway	1
Russia	1
Spain	3
Sweden	10
United Kingdom	14
United States	18

Source: Own elaboration

The publication in 2019 of a special issue of the Swedish magazine *Nordicom Review*, covering hyperlocal media in the Nordic countries, had a significant impact on the aforementioned data. This monographic issue was a result of the increase in articles in 2019 and the impact of studies on the reality of Sweden.

Changes in the Local Media Ecosystem

The growth of hyperlocal media, understood as a new media actor and model, has transformed the local media ecosystem in its informative, productive, consumer-related and interrelated functions with the community.

In the United Kingdom, Firmstone (2016) notices how the rise of hyperlocals has altered the local media ecology and updated the functions of local media within the community. These changes are most evident when examining local media's roles in providing information, operating in a democratic manner, involving citizens in the process of producing content and in their commitment to social development. In connection with this, Harnischmacher's (2015) study of the situation in Germany shows how the entry of alternative local and hyperlocal digital media altered journalistic standards and established professional practices.

Again, from the perspective of media ecology, Nygren (2019) drew from the results of a national survey of Swedish citizens how the consumption of local information has been transformed. The author describes a scenario in which the role of journalism loses importance and where the citizens access local news incidentally through multiple sources. In her findings, she states that hyperlocal media maintain a stable presence that is very relevant in geographical areas without traditional media outlets. Nygren's work also points to the consolidation of Facebook as the space in which community members share and consume all kinds of local information.

With the complexity of the local ecosystem in mind, Chen et al. (2017) examined the relationship between hyperlocal media and other 'higher' community actors, specifically regional media outlets and local government. They observed that the introduction of hyperlocal media has caused regional newspapers to pay more attention to what is happening in certain communities. Also illustrated was that, having made the necessary prior agreements, some hyperlocals choose to offer a daily summary of the stories covered by other newspapers. Furthermore, the study detailed governments' own interpretation of hyperlocal media outlets, seeing them as an extra vehicle to channel their messages to the citizenship. Yet the authors point out too that hyperlocals are a challenge to the top-down approach of the discourse of power as they offer greater informational diversity on local issues.

In this new media landscape, Carson et al. (2016) looked at the opportunities and challenges for the development of hyperlocal media in the digital context. Despite the low costs of entering the Internet, the easiness to share content online and the ability to interact with citizens and establish collaborative relationships with the audience, the authors emphasize the great challenge posed by financial and productive sustainability. For these reasons, authors such as Rodgers (2018a), and White et al. (2017) have defended the need for funding programs for hyperlocal projects like the British Destination Local, or those promoted by the Carnegie UK Trust. Such programs allow for the technological development of these projects, facilitating the integration of actors from multiple fields of action, thus bringing about growth and progress.

Defining the Hyperlocal Media and their Geographical Dimension

The transformation of the local media ecosystem and the growing importance of the hyperlocal space has led to the theoretical reconceptualization of the geographic dimension associated with the media and information, as well as the need to define the new media model.

For Hess and Waller (2016a), the trend towards the hyperlocal can be considered a subculture in itself, one arisen from the journalistic culture of local traditional media in an attempt to build an alternative informational outlet. The authors also propose, in the context of the network society, the concept of 'geo-social news', as a tool to reflect the flow of local news in a global geographic and social reality (Hess & Waller, 2016b).

Linked to the geographical argument, Rodgers (2018b) understands hyperlocal information as an activity rooted in a place and as a way of inhabiting a certain space. Freeman (2020) studied the concept of distance in relation to the production and consumption of local and hyperlocal news, observing how the distance

between journalists and the coverage area affects the media agenda and the sense of community among neighbours.

When tackling the complex task of defining hyperlocal media, the American academics Metzgar et al. (2011) published one of the reference definitions, which to this day is still widely accepted by the scientific community. According to the authors, hyperlocal media are "geographically-based, community-oriented, original-newsreporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement" (Metzgar et al., 2011, p. 774). This question, often subject to debate, is addressed in other research, such as that of Nygren et al. (2018). They apply a broad vision of the definition of hyperlocal media, in which they include digital media, subscription and free newspapers, community radios and television stations.

Maps and Characteristics of Hyperlocal Media

Given the growth of hyperlocal media and its consequent alteration of the media ecosystem, several research has been also carried out to measure the magnitude of this new phenomenon in various countries.

Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014) mapped the active hyperlocal online media in the Netherlands, identifying a total of 350 outlets of this type, operated by 123 organizations and covering 199 municipalities. Within these 350 outlets were included citizen initiatives, both profit and non-profit organizations, daily newspapers owned by media corporations and personal initiatives.

Leckner, Tenor, and Nygren (2019) identified a total of 448 hyperlocal media outlets in Sweden, – excluding those belonging to the public media, the country's large communication groups, free press publishers and those that bill more than 300,000 euros and employ more than 25 people. Additionally, Jangdal (2019) reviewed the map of Swedish hyperlocal digital media to study their democratic function in relation to open channels for citizen interaction and participation, both on websites and on social networks.

Continuing with the Nordic countries, Hujanen et al. (2019) mapped the hyperlocal media that have appeared in Finland since 2000, analysing their basic characteristics and locating up to 30 hyperlocals active in 2017. The authors selected general-interest media that are updated at least once a month. In Norway, Halvorsen and Bjerke (2019) identified a total of 67 digital native hyperlocal media and studied the specific context in which they were created, as well as their professional and economic models.

In Spain and Portugal, López-García, Negreira-Rey, and Rodríguez-Vázquez (2016) mapped the media of proximity, among which hyperlocals are included, locating more than 2000 Spanish and 200 Portuguese media outlets of diverse scope –hyperlocal, local and regional.

Professional and Economic Models

As a new media model, hyperlocal information projects often present unique characteristics in terms of their professional teams and business models. These issues have also been points of interest for researchers in recent years.

In the American context, Chadha (2016a) analyses how the founders of hyperlocal media start-ups assume their new professional role, give meaning to their new responsibilities and conceive their work as journalists. The author states that these founders often associate their work with service to the community, though this does not imply a dip in the quality of their journalistic output. In another study on the organizational structures and the degree of professionalization of hyperlocal media, Chadha (2016b) observes how journalists manage their role as gatekeepers in a collaborative relationship with the audience.

Moreover, Tenor (2019) explores the motivations that drive promoters of hyperlocal media to pursue this type of project. Tenor confirms that economic gain is not a central objective for the promoters of these media. Rather, they seek to provide relevant information that meets the needs of the residents of the community. Harte, Turner, and Williams (2016) agree on this idea. Examining the professional profiles of the promoters of hyperlocals and their motivations, they have observed that, for the most part, the promoters prioritize civic and reputational objectives over economic ones. They also point to the versatile profiles that these professionals possess, detailing how they are required to acquire new skills in the fields of business and digital management of their websites. All of these demands have to be met within a field that offers little job security. Regarding the profile of journalists from hyperlocal media, Dovbysh (2020) states that promoters of semi-

professional and non-profit initiatives prefer to disassociate themselves from the image of the journalist of traditional media with which they maintain a more collaborative relationship, rather than a competitive one.

Researching hyperlocal media business models, Kurpius, Metzgar, and Rowley (2010) analysed six leading newspapers in the United States to identify the most common sources of financing and the main difficulties in achieving sustainability. In this work, one of the first published on hyperlocal media, the importance of non-profit initiatives and the higher cost of more professionalized media were already identified. In a more recent study carried out in Sweden, Tenor (2018) identifies four hyperlocal media models based on their economic aims and the characteristics of their professional team –non-profit / non-professionals, non-profit / professionals, for-profit / non-professional, for-profit / professional. These models are said to determine the informational objectives of the media.

Barnett and Townend (2015) study the potential sustainability of hyperlocal media in the UK. The two argue that, in general, hyperlocals have a low cost of entry to the sector, limited production due to lack of resources, a high degree of self-financing, and low and infrequent profit gain. Providing an international perspective, Cook and Bakker (2019) studied the economic models of hyperlocal media in Sweden, the UK, France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Analysing 35 media outlets in total, the study focused on newer business models and sources of financing. In addition to verifying the absence of any uniform model of a hyperlocal environment, they identified a general trend towards the diversification of income sources.

Addressing more specific and concrete issues, Goyanes (2020) investigated the ways in which perceptions of local media sources or user participation affect the public's inclination to pay for local information. Pardo-Baldeón (2016) looked at entrepreneurial journalism initiatives in the hyperlocal sphere in the Spanish province of Castellón. On the other hand, Seymour (2011) and Eisner et al. (2016) focused on *Patch*, a hyperlocal network established in the United States whose business model was developed by the AOL company.

Community Oriented Journalism and Informational Gap

Hyperlocal media have been defined by their motivation to inform and serve the community, specifically those overlooked and neglected by traditional local media.

Karlsson and Rowe (2019) studied the information coverage of 12 Swedish municipalities, comparing those that had their own local and hyperlocal editorial offices with others that didn't. Their results showed that the geographical distance between journalists and the community, as well as the absence of local delegations in those areas, affects the nature of the news coverage. Less original content is produced while institutional sources hold more weight. However, some media are experimenting with different technological solutions so as to offer information with a more local focus than that of traditional media. Parasie and Dagiral (2012) detailed these innovations in their study on the media in Chicago. On the other hand, Dick (2012) has proposed a technologically independent model to help local journalists monitor the users of their online communities, thus making the newsgathering process more efficient.

The importance hyperlocal media's community presence is traced by Wiard and Pereira (2019). Their work chronicled the output of different media sources of varying reach in the city of Brussels, concluding that the nature of the coverage of certain neighbourhoods or localities determines how audiences perceive those places, thus attributing meaning to those spaces.

The information produced by hyperlocal media is influenced by multiple factors. Chadha and Harlow (2019) illustrated how the revenues, ownership and mission of the headlines affect the production of public service information. They also demonstrated the relationship between the use of interactive functions and the search for audience engagement. Taking a different approach, Lowrey and Kim (2016) delved into the ways in which the population level, among other factors, can influence the journalistic coverage of hyperlocal media.

With this in mind, Stúr, Jangdal, and Nilsson (2018) discuss the relationship between hyperlocal media and city councils through the vision of their entrepreneurs. It is shown that the watchdog function that hyperlocal media can perform depends on the relationship they maintain with the local government. According to the writers, this relationship can take one of four forms: no direct communication, regular interaction, sporadic interaction and interaction on regular basis. Also, in relation to public power, Grafström and Rehnberg (2019)

focused their research on a case study from the Swedish media outlet *VGRfokus*, one promoted and funded by the Region Västra Götaland county council. Their research concluded that, despite there being much common ground between *VGRfokus* and hyperlocals studied in other research –the objective of informing the community, producing original content and audience involvement– that this Swedish media outlet, financed by a public entity, possesses an important economic advantage over other hyperlocal media outlets, occupying a prominent position within the wider media landscape.

In relation to the general characteristics of the information produced by hyperlocal media in the United Kingdom, Williams, Harte, and Turner (2015) conclude that news stories related to community activities, municipal services and local planning, events, the economy and culture are the most frequently occurring. Also, in the United Kingdom, Turner (2015) studied the participation and conversation topics of users on the social profiles of hyperlocal media.

Through a quantitative content analysis, Jangdal (2020) investigated the informative coverage that Swedish hyperlocals dedicate to political news, comparing an electoral campaign week with a normal one. Jangdal reveals that, in their democratic contribution, hyperlocals give broad coverage to local political issues with a varied distribution of sources, encouraging public debate. Also focusing on political information, Smith and Schiffman (2018) analysed community newspapers' front-page stories in the days prior to the U.S presidential elections of 2016. The researchers illustrated how political coverage from the local level continues to be of great importance in terms of citizen participation in the democratic process.

Content analysis of hyperlocals' content extends to more specific topics. Crittenden and Haywood (2020) analysed the routines and news coverage of two hyperlocal community and non-profit outlets in the state of Philadelphia so as to gain insight into the outlets' strengths and weaknesses in covering marginalized minority communities. On the other hand, Somerville and Ames (2020) analysed the hyperlocal coverage of a mining project in Australia by a regional newspaper. The study demonstrates that the coverage did not centre on the positive aspects of economic progress, but on the potentially adverse consequences for the local community, such as possible environmental problems. In the Australian context, Ewart (2013) outlined how commercial and non-commercial talkback programs contribute to the flow of information within local and hyperlocal communities.

User Participation

Due to their closeness and commitment to the community, hyperlocal media tend to maintain a participatory relationship with users, frequently engaging in collaborative partnerships.

This relationship between hyperlocal media journalists and their audience has been explored by Harte, Williams, and Turner (2017), who characterised both direct and indirect reciprocity links between the two parties. Delving into the American case *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, Nemanic (2016) observed that hyperlocal media are inclined to develop strategies for user engagement and participation in order to retain their audience, among other reasons. Bingham-Hall and Law (2015) also studied how the social profiles of hyperlocal media can trigger the formation of virtual communities among their readers. Bobkowski et al. (2019) analysed how the engagement within the community determines the way in which such users consume hyperlocal information and also how they share it among their contacts, both physically and in virtual spaces. Moreover, Liu et al. (2018) explored how the link created between hyperlocal news websites and local residents impacts civic participation.

Brannock and Poepsel (2020) used quantitative content analysis to compare reporter-driven stories with listener-driven content published on the local and hyperlocal news platform *Hearken*. The authors found that professionals gave more weight to politics and local crime, while citizens prioritised lifestyle issues. Similarly, Wiard and Simonson (2019) investigated, with an action research approach, the interactions and content generated by users through *Dewey*, a non-profit organization producing citizen content on hyperlocal issues. The authors reveal that the contents produced by citizens contribute to raise awareness towards uncovered issues. In relation to the content generated by the user, Paulussen and D'Heer (2013) analysed the news produced by citizens for a Belgian newspaper and concluded that the newspaper seemed to use citizen volunteers primarily as a means to cover positive stories and topics related to the cultural and social activity of the communities.

In relation to the social function of the journalist in the hyperlocal environment, Gerson et al. (2017) studied the informative production of a hyperlocal news website that trained dozens of citizens to report on their own ethnically diverse communities. Characterised by their open and participatory approach, authors Frölich, Quiring, and Engesser (2012) detailed the practices of participatory journalists at the German website *Myheimat*. The purpose of this research was to analyse their motivations and professional profiles for the production of hyperlocal news.

In reference to the role of citizens in hyperlocal information, Harcup (2016) analyses how a media outlet led by citizens can serve the public by acting as a watchdog over those in power. Harte and Turner (2016) studied the community media organisation *The Vale*, in Birmingham. Their objective was to learn about *The Vale*'s democratizing role in the community and the representations that citizens and professionals make of the geographic territory through their information. Using a Thai media outlet as a case study, Youkongpun (2015) analyses the role of community media as taken on by citizens to make local culture and social diversity more visible and to promote public debate. Additionally, Han, Shih and Carroll (2014) studied the *Local News Chatter* (LNC), a platform designed to enhance the reach of hyperlocal information published in microblogs and edited by members of local communities.

CONCLUSION

The bibliographic review conducted on the first decade of literature on hyperlocal media shows that the research community developed an early interest in this new media reality. Consequently, the first investigations, published from 2010 onwards, were carried out when hyperlocal media were still a recent phenomenon, as they had only started emerging in 2005 in the United States (Schaffer, 2007). Their expansion as a recognised journalistic model occurred between 2008 and 2009 (Flores Vivar, 2014).

The growth of hyperlocal media is reflected in the global results of the research published during this period. As the country where this new media model was first developed, the United States produced the greatest number of articles on hyperlocal media, and also contributed some pioneering, landmark research early in the decade, including the definition proposed by Metzgar et al. (2011). Also relevant to this field of research are the contributions of the United Kingdom, together with other countries like Sweden and Australia.

Although research on hyperlocal media is still in its early and exploratory stages, important work has already been done across different countries. This research allows for a greater understanding of local realities and identifies common development trends in the international framework. In this way, the transformations that the local media ecosystem has undergone in recent years have been analysed by various authors, particularly in relation to the role of hyperlocal media. Hyperlocal media's relationship with other media actors and government bodies has also been a subject of study, as has their democratic and social role in the local community.

Hyperlocal media have also been defined by various academics. This is a matter that continues to be debated due to the experimental stage of these types of initiatives. Similarly, the growth of hyperlocal media has been mapped in various countries, their basic characteristics traced and their informative production analysed. At an organizational level, the corporate and civic motivations of their promoters, their business models and the professional features displayed by their teams have been studied. Their relationships with the audience, user participation and the management of content contributed by citizens have also captured the interest of researchers.

Despite the findings presented in this article, the amount of research carried out on hyperlocal media at the international level is much broader than what has been shown here. As stated earlier, this bibliographic review is methodologically limited to articles published in scientific journals indexed in the databases of WoS and Scopus data. In addition to these publications, there are research projects promoted by universities, foundations and associations of various kinds, as well as media maps developed by organizations and research centres. All this is part of the quest to gain a deeper understanding of this new media model and its developmental trends.

However, there are still pending issues and future lines of research to be developed. Therefore, it will be necessary to broaden the scope of research into hyperlocal media in other countries, and media scenarios that have not yet been explored. In addition to this, those organizational and business models that foster the stability and profitability of such projects need to be acknowledged, as well as their role within the communication arena, their adaptation to new forms of information consumption and their relationship with the audience. Research on hyperlocal media must continue to be encouraged and its visibility increased through the inclusion of relevant articles in the most influential scientific journals.

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