

## **Ecrea 2016 Pre-conference: Dealing with the local: Media, Proximity and Community**

### **Abstract title:**

**Can bottom-up and unstructured locally anchored Facebook-groups be considered as hyperlocal media?**

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## **Can bottom-up and unstructured locally anchored Facebook-groups be considered as hyperlocal media?**

Local information exchange is often considered a crucial aspect for the viability of a neighborhood and to foster civic engagement (Barnett & Townend, 2014). This exchange happens within and across various storytelling levels, for instance interpersonally between neighbors, or from national or local news media to neighborhood residents (Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei, 2001). A typical midlevel example of local storytelling agents are the so-called hyperlocal media. An often cited conceptualization of hyperlocal media is the one of Metzgar, Kurpius & Rowley (2011). Typical for their approach is that hyperlocal media are considered to be organized entities, deliberately set up with a journalistic purpose, employing paid or voluntary journalists, and having the normative ideal of fostering local civic engagement.

These organized hyperlocal media operations seem however not to be the only mezzo level agents in the storytelling structure of a neighborhood. Recently we see the emergence of bottom-up, unstructured, loosely organized and little monitored Facebook-groups, set up by residents to aggregate both residents and information concerning a specific locality such as an urban neighborhood. A quick survey revealed about 20 of these groups and pages in the middle-sized city of Ghent, Belgium. In these online spaces we notice how people share information and news related to the neighborhood, announce and promote events, or report particular neighborhood related problems. These observations raise the question as to what extent these bottom-up online environments show the same qualities and have the same consequences that are typically attributed to hyperlocal media operations (cf. Metzgar et al, 2011).

By combining an analysis of a sample of these Facebook-groups and in-depth interviews with moderators and key contributors we investigate to what extent these bottom-up and unstructured locally anchored Facebook-groups can be considered as hyperlocal media. The Facebook-group analysis comprises a content analysis and an analysis of the structural characteristics of these groups. Through the interviews we will investigate the perceptions and motivations of the contributors as well as the consequences pertaining civic engagement outcomes. Through this research we hope to contribute to the understanding of local information exchange and the changing communication environment in urban neighborhoods.

### Bibliography:

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- Metzgar, E. T., Kurpius, D. D., & Rowley, K. M. (2011). Defining hyperlocal media: Proposing a framework for discussion. *New Media & Society*, 1461444810385095. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810385095>