HYPERLOCAL NEWS BLOGGERS: JOURNALISTS, ACTIVISTS,

PART OF A COLLABORATIVE NETWORK, OR NEWS FANS?

by

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Abstract

This paper researches the rise of independent hyperlocal news blogs and how they measure against other similar, self-organized virtual networks. On the one hand, I compare hyperlocal news blogs to fandom culture and on the other hand to protagonist organizations that have successfully fought against traditional military hierarchy and governments.

To test these approaches, I interviewed four local bloggers in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. Like in fan culture, labor of love motivation was a major component in hyperlocal blogs. Nobody is paid and the information is given out to others who share the same passion to the neighborhood they live in. The culture of appropriation was smaller than expected, since three out of four blogs were doing mostly original content, not remixing and mashing up content done by others. They did not create an affinity space around them, where contributors are plenty and people act out of affinity. Naturally, the bloggers themselves belong to this group, but their sites did not generate massive contributions.

They did not act like the more professional leaderless organizations, such as terrorist organizations, but the basic elements of shared ideology and loose, small groups that are loosely connected were the same as in other activist organizations. I found these similarities to be the most interesting and probably most important ones.

Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the problem

I moved from Helsinki to Los Angeles in July of 2009. During the first few nights in my new Echo Park home, I woke up to a new sound: a helicopter hovering around the neighborhood for an hour. It flew around in a circle, pointing a powerful beam of light into a single spot. I had seen that before only in television, and realized it was a police helicopter searching for something.

The next morning, I tried to find out what had been going on in the neighborhood. None of the online news services, newspapers, morning TV or radio shows mentioned it. There was nothing about Echo Park in the news for the previous two weeks. Even as the appearance of the helicopter remained as a mystery, I realized that Echo Park's 45,000 residents do not have any local news source.

Being a journalist, I was frustrated. Digging deeper into the internet, I realized that there was a completely new ecosystem of news coming up. Blogs, neighborhood bulletin boards and Twitter were slowly but surely covering the things that the "big media" did not think was important.

I made an RSS-feed out of all the local content producers and was amazed how well the feed worked as a network of independent information sources, covering the neighborhood issues like a local newspaper.

After a while, I started to wonder who are the people that create this original content. Retired journalists, neighborhood activists or reporter-wannabes? Unemployed J-School graduates? Moreover, if there were a whole group of new people entering the news-production ecosystem, how would it change the system? What could the *Los Angeles Times* do with theses new publications?

At the same time, big transnational media companies have realized the potential of the hyperlocal network, leading to acquisitions in 2009. CNN invested in Outside.in, the hyperlocal aggregator. AOL acquired the local-news network Patch.com and MSNBC acquired EveryBlock.com, another hyperlocal information source. (Ovide 2009) Facebook added location features in August of 2010, Twitter did it already in March.

Purpose of the study and research questions

This paper is a part of my theoretical framework for future research. I am trying to figure out how to do research on hyperlocal news networks, created by blogs, Twitter, Facebook and different online communities. The internet has a vast amount of unharnessed local information, which could create the new "local media" to replace suffering newspapers and crime-centric local TV news. Could there be ways to make this local information more accessible to people?

In my effort to understand what was going on in the hyperlocal news area and where it is going, I tried to find examples of similar networked, voluntary organizations. The two most interesting ones were fan fiction and leaderless networks. Both of them produce content and action in a global scale. So my basic research question is: are these models applicable to hyperlocal level and do they provide models for the new local media?

Chapter Two: Is There an Affinity Space Around News?

Appropriation

Appropriation is defined by Henry Jenkins as "a process by which students learn by taking culture apart and putting it back together." (2006, 32) The most famous example is probably the remix culture in music, where bits and parts of old songs are put together to create a new song. The more current trend is the remixing of videos and showing them on YouTube. This was made possible by the new tools, including cheap, digital camcorders, cell phones with video capabilities, free video-editing software such as Windows Movie Maker and Apple iMovie.

When people started remixing everything, record and movie companies were horrified: amateurs were messing up their content. Exactly the same thing is happening in journalism: amateurs are messing up the new products by linking them, commenting on them, rewriting them, and combining different news sources to create new kinds of stories. Successful TV shows such as Daily Show with Jon Stewart and Colbert Report have turned the remix culture into successful TV-shows, hosted by non-traditional anchors. Their shows are pure appropriation in Jenkins's terms (2006, 33) offering both analysis and commentary.

Nevertheless, newspaper editors and publishers talk about bloggers stealing content, not about "emotional capital or lovemarks," as TV producers or advertisers already do. Music industry professionals and movie producers have realized that the

interplay between the top-down force of corporate convergence and the bottom-up force of grassroots convergence is driving the change in the media landscape. (Jenkins 2006, 175) In other words, journalism is feeling the same pain that other media industries started feeling over ten years ago, when the internet made it possible to share music and movies.

My first hypothesis examines this: if hyperlocal news bloggers are part of the new appropriation culture, they won't be creating their own original content but remix bits and parts of old stories to create a new content.

Affinity space and play

The participation described above happens in "affinity space." James Paul Gee defines affinity space:

> Let me make it clear here, though, that what people have an affinity with (or for) in an affinity space is not first and foremost the other people using the space, but the endeavor or interest around which the space is organized, in this case the real-time strategy game AoM. (Gee 2007, 98)

In addition, "space" for Gee refers not to a physical space but a virtual one enabled by technology. In affinity space, learning is informal and done from peer to peer. Because it gathers people from all ages, backgrounds, and races and anyone is welcome by just showing affinity, it can be a powerful learning environment. These kinds of spaces encourage knowledge in many different forms: intensive and extensive, individual and distributed. Leaders are treated as resources of knowledge,

not as people who give orders. Therefore, an affinity space can be a vast pool of

collective knowledge, where people share their information in trying to reach a

common goal.

Another way of describing this virtual, interest-driven community comes from The

Digital Youth Project research for the MacArthur Foundation, which introduces

terms "hanging out", "messing around" and "geeking out":

> Once teens find a way to be together—online, offline, or both—they integrate
> new media within the informal hanging-out practices that have characterized
> their social worlds ever since the postwar emergence of teens as a distinctive
> youth culture … this ready availability of multiple forms of media, in diverse
> contexts of everyday life, means that media content is increasingly central to
> everyday communication and identity construction … they also engage in a
> variety of new media practices. ,(Ito et al. 2007, 13)

This phase is usually followed with the more playful one, messing around:

> When messing around, young people begin to take an interest in and focus on
> the workings and content of the technology and media themselves, tinkering,
> exploring, and extending their understanding. (Ito et al. 2007, 20)

When messing around is "often a transitional stage between hanging out and more

interest-driven participation," (Ito et al. 2007, 20) geeking out is

> an intense commitment to or engagement with media or technology, often
> one particular media property, genre, or type of technology … it is a mode of
> learning that is peer-driven, but focused on gaining deep knowledge and
> expertise in specific areas of interest. (Ito et al. 2007, 28)

This sounds like the activity that is going on in Gee's affinity space. However, in

Gee's terms, bonding happens but community aspect comes second. Bonding to

other people is secondary; interest is everything. (Gee 2007, 98-101)

How could this kind of fan-based and fun approach work with news? I found a study by Jonathan Gray through Abigail De Kosnik's (2008) article that discussed the dominant fandoms and marginalized fandoms in the news. In the context of news, Gray describes fans as having an avid like or love for something and extends this to news texts, not just programs or anchors. In his opinion, mixing fandom with news might not be the "magic tonic for citizenship," but through play and exploration it might provide tools to enhance it, "for worse or better." (Gray 2006, 87) However, it comes with problems, since the two have not really been associated as related terms:

> 'Serious' news and fandom are typically described with wholly different theoretical tool kits, but here I examine their points of contact to suggest a more profound marriage among news, politics, and fandom than many would deem either existent or appropriate. (Gray 2007, 76)

Trying to imagine the local newspaper as a result of affinity and play opens up a whole new perspective on journalism and leads to my second hypothesis: the hyperlocal news blog will create an affinity space around itself.

Let us see how this process works in fan fiction, so we could better understand what kind of affinity spaces and appropriation we could expect from a hyperlocal news blog.

Fan fiction

In fan fiction, readers create their own content based on a commercial TV show, movie or series of books. Henry Jenkins describes the fan culture as the labor of love:

> They operate in a gift economy and are given freely to other fans who share their passion for these characters. Being free of the commercial constraints that surround the source texts, they gain new freedom to explore themes or experiment with structures and styles that could not be part of the "mainstream" versions of theses worlds. (Jenkins 2006, 180)

Jenkins introduces us to Heather Lawver. She was 14 when she launched the Daily Prophet (dprophet.com), a daily fictional news site about the Harry Potter universe. Eventually, she got 400 kids around the world to contribute with her. Now the site has pretty much died; the last post is from March of 2007. The way she ran the site reminds me a bit of the current model of how newspapers imagine using their citizen contributors in the future. Heather would read and edit every story and encouraged her staff to compare the original and edited versions and learn from their mistakes. Therefore, she would essentially teach her amateur staff to write properly, a view that is very common when we talk about citizen journalists. (Jenkins 2006, 178)

The Daily Prophet is a prime example of convergence culture: "What's striking about this process, though, is that it takes place outside the classroom and beyond any direct adult control. Kids are teaching kids what they need to become full participants in convergence culture." (Jenkins 2006, 185)

Could this same approach be used to do hyperlocal journalism? Fan fiction writers

have created some impressive systems to improve their writing and teach each other.

At the Sugar Quill (sugarquill.net, no new posts since August of 2008), every posted

story underwent beta-reading, a peer-review process (Jenkins 2006, 188). This

works the same way as beta-testing in computer programs. Instead of trying to finish

and test the product by themselves, programmers put out a draft version of the

program. Anyone can download it, try it and submit comments or bug reports. In

the process, programmers do not only learn what bugs software has but also learn

what customers think of the program and the features. Change the word "software"

to "story" and you get the essential idea of beta-reading.

Could we create an affinity space around news, since the people reading news are -

in a sense – fans of news? Or fans of their own community or neighborhood? What

if every newspaper had a similar volunteer beta-reader database as the fan fiction site

FanFiction.net (www.fanfiction.net/betareaders/). It lists thousands of willing beta-

readers, each of them with their own profile.

Here is one of them, Mystical Angel:

> **Beta Bio: general description as a beta reader**
>
> I love to read; however, it annoys me I see stories written with no grammar,
> no length, and absolutely no thought put into it. I will happily read your story
> and give you constructive criticism, but please make sure you have put some
> time and effort into it.

My Strengths: beta, writing, or reading strengths

I love to make sure things flow nicely. If you become too repetitive or things just don't make sense, I'll be sure to tell you. I'm honest. Sometimes, I like to sugar coat things, but I'm not afraid to be brutal. Lastly, after countless English classes in high school and college, I believe I have sucked up enough information to adequately correct your grammar.

My Weaknesses: beta, writing, or reading weaknesses

I will most likely have to read your story a twice or more times. Though, I like to make sure things flow nicely, my attention to detail isn't that great. After reading something a second time, I tend to find I have missed things.

Preferred: types of entries I prefer over others

Call me a typical chick, but I love comedy romances. Also, those angsty stories that just make your heart wrench. If I feel that particular tug on my heart, you're probably doing an excellent job.

Would Rather Not: types of entries I do not want to beta for

I find I skip over stories with no relations in it. I can tolerate those long talks between two police officers, only if I know my two favorite characters are going to hook up in the end.

So are the Echo Park news bloggers more like Heather, who organizes the whole publication, or Mystical Angel, who helps to create better content by helping others with their writing skills (even though her own could use some work)? However, most importantly: if fan fiction is labor of love and we apply the model to hyperlocal journalism, it has to be labor of love as well. This is my third hypothesis.

Chapter Three: Could News be Produced Within Networks Instead of Hierarchies?

In the previous chapters, my focus has been on the individual bloggers, fans, contributors or citizen journalists and the product they create. However, when you combine all these individual blogs, you get a massive network of new content contributors. In the next chapters I will try to find ways to describe the network they are creating.

Towards networked journalism

In the Rand Report *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Arquilla 2003), researchers describe the success of militias and extremist single-issue movements, pointing them to be "leaderless" networks. The similarities to the crisis of journalism in that article were obvious: the hierarchies that once defined journalism have become inefficient, and the space once populated by traditional media has been swarmed by newcomers that build their power on the digital networks. I am including their research because it has so many analogies to media industry and its problems.

Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2003) present three main arguments on networks vs. hierarchies:

1. **Hierarchies have a difficult time fighting networks.**
   The best examples are the transnational criminal cartels engaged in drug smuggling.

2. **It takes networks to fight networks:**
   Governments need to show willingness to be innovative organizationally and doctrinally in order to defend against netwar. The important notion is that this does not mean mirroring the adversary.

3. **Whoever masters the network form first and best will gain major advantages:**
   Adversaries who are early adopters are enjoying a relatively high increase in their power.

In their definition of 'netwar,' Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2003) use terms that sound peculiarly familiar to someone who has been following the decline of journalistic institutions, especially newspapers. The basic definition of netwar is "the use of network forms of organization, doctrine, strategy, and technology attuned to the information age." However, it breaks down to many components, as shown in Table 1.

The words in Table 1 are taken from the Arquilla and Ronfeldt article that describes protagonists and governments/military. The differences between new forms of protagonists vs. government and blogs vs. traditional media are very striking when you compare them in this table, leading to the first interesting analogy between globalized terrorism and non-traditional media.

Table 1. Blogs as Protagonists

Protagonists (i.e., activists, terrorists) Blogs, online communities, Twitter	Governments and military Newspapers and traditional news organizations
Leaderless	Formal
Sprawling	Stand-alone
Loose	Hierarchical
Dispersed	Doctrinated
Small groups	Strategic
Non-state, transnational, subnational	State, national
Dispersed nodes	Central node
Swarms	Units, agencies
Ideological	Institutional interests and habits

In this model, the protagonists did not take over governments or military. What was surprising how efficient they were, lacking both money and management. That's why Arquilla and Ronfeldt suggest that governments should learn from their adversaries, but "governments tend to be so constrained by hierarchical habits and institutional interests that it may take some sharp reverses before a willingness to experiment more seriously with networking emerges."
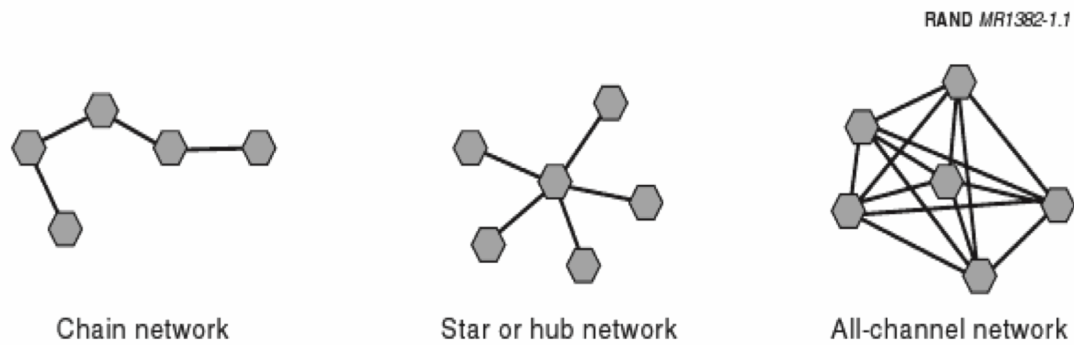
Figure 1. Three Basic Network Types (Arquilla 2003)

In Figure 1 (Arquilla 2003), we see the three basic network types. Applied to journalism, *Chain Network* would be the traditional newspaper structure, where the story goes through different steps before an editor approves it. The *Star Network* would describe a large news organization that has multiple chains that lead to a single hub that has a central node, i.e., the editor. The vast number of blogs and social network links around the Internet would be the *All-Channel Network*.

If we go back to point three on the Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2003) list of arguments on networks vs. hierarchies, which states "Whoever masters the network form first and best will gain major advantages," the question of success for a single news organization becomes very clear: you have to embrace the power of network in order to be successful. If your enemy or competitor goes all-channel network, you should examine how to use it as well. It takes networks to fight networks.

The second interesting analogy to the current crisis of news is the role of technology.

According to Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2003), the rise of network organization is partly

a result of the computerized information revolution and the ability to keep a constant

flow of information with cellular phones, email, websites and computer

conferencing. This same technology has brought down the news organization, since

the internet has demolished the control over the distribution channels. This is one of

the key ideas in Clay Shirky's (2008) book *Here Comes Everybody*, which I discuss

in the next chapter.

Here Comes Everybody

What does this network effect mean to traditional media? Should newspapers treat it

as an enemy or ally? Alternatively, should they try to adjust their processes to tap

into its power?

Philip M. Seib (2008) writes in *The Al Jazeera Effect* about the changing role, using

the London bombings on July 7, 2005 as an example. The BBC started receiving

images from the bombings from ordinary people, taken with their cell phones.

> The public's use of new media as a means to supply as well as retrieve
> information about the 7/7 attacks illustrated the change in relationship
> between news consumers and news providers. Such events, as well as the
> maturing of blogs, indicate that convergence will not necessarily mean the
> replacement of old media by newer ones, but rather it will be a process of
> cooperative expansion, with the public becoming active participants in a new
> kind of journalism, rather than begin passive recipients of information. (Seib
> 2008)

Clay Shirky's (2008) book *Here Comes Everybody* has been quite influential on the discussion of self-organizing networks. His book argues that only big institutions – such as corporations and governments – were previously able to do "big things" that required lots of manpower and diverse sets of skills. Now the relative advantage of big institutions has disappeared, thanks to technology, which has made it possible for groups to self-assemble and individuals to contribute to a group effort without requiring formal management. This also has an effect on the "big things" that are being done. Previously, if something was not worth the managerial oversight, it was not done. Even if everybody would agree it would be valuable to someone. However, since management is no longer needed, people can run projects in groups that "operate with a birthday party's informality and a multinational scope." (Shirky 2008, 48). Sounds a lot like Gee's affinity space, a vast pool of collective where people share their information trying to reach a common goal. Or Jenkins writing about fans operating in a gift economy, sharing their passion.

The second important argument Shirky makes about legacy media involves access. "Much of the price for professional stock photos came from the difficulty of finding the right photo rather than from the difference in quality between photos taken by professionals and amateurs." (2008, 75)

Perhaps the best notion of this new form of "access" comes from outside traditional media research. British actor Stephen Fry is very happy when he can communicate

directly to his one million-plus audience on Twitter. He says in a Telegraph interview:

> Like with the printing press, Twitter [has] changed the situation. People like me, Twillionaires, we can cut out the press from our PR requirements. It used to be a pact with the devil. You wanted to inform the press about a new film and they said they will interview you, but only if they are allowed to ask you around other themes about your private life. (Barnett 2009)

From Shirky's analysis and Fry's comments it is easy to draw the conclusion that the media world has entered the all-channel network type. If Stephen Fry wants to talk directly to his audience, he can. Of course he has built an audience through traditional media before entering Twitter, but now he has more control, thanks to Twitter. The old model of media has collapsed, because networks have changed both ends of the product cycle: the production and the distribution.

Why centralized hubs are bad

Matthew S. Weber and Peter Monge have done some groundbreaking studies on the flow of news. The article *The Flow of Digital News in a Network of Sources, Authorities, and Hubs* is going to be published 2010 in *the Journal of Communication*, but I got the privilege to read the preliminary paper.

They use the Kleinberg authority-hub-model that visualizes (Figure 2) the flow of information through online networks, adding sources to the model. The two key sources, the Associated Press and Reuters, feed information through key

intermediaries, such as the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*. From there it is aggregated into hubs such as Google News, Huffington Post and Yahoo! News.

Their conclusion is that the sources control the general conversation, even in a networked system where the user's starting point could be anywhere in the blogosphere. The AP and Reuters reporting is ultimately fed to all aspects of the network. The digital network has not diversified the sources.
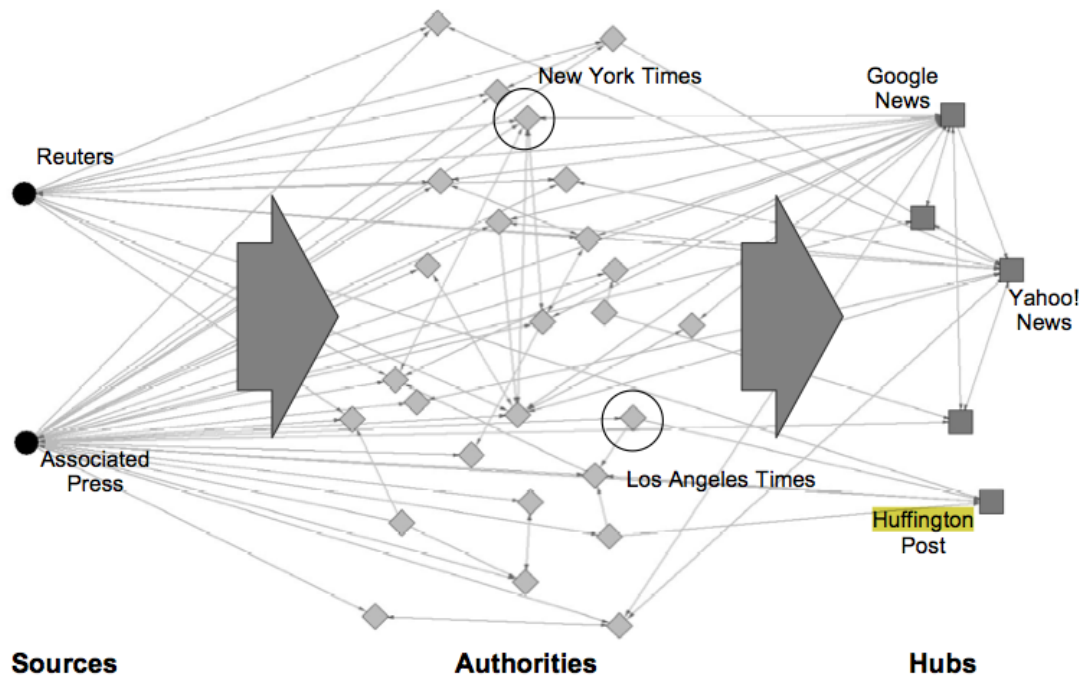

Figure 2. Visualization of Overall Network (Weber 2010)

What happens when mainstream media picks up a news story from a hyperlocal blog and it is copied and commented to a larger site? Does the value of the story grow or

diminish in this copying process? Jaron Lanier argues in his 2010 book *You Are Not a Gadget* that the value disappears. He discusses internet pioneer Ted Nelson's idea of 'one copy.' Nelson proposed that instead of copying digital media, we should keep only one copy of each cultural expression. It makes a lot of sense: digital copies do not wear, tear or deteriorate, no matter how many people use them. A billion people could listen to the same single copy of music. Of course, there are copies made in proxies and caches, but the general idea of having one copy still remains. Instead of one copy, we have several walled gardens, each protecting their own copies. For example, in music, you have iTunes, Amazon, Rhapsody and Spotify making their own copies of a single song, and trying to sell them to customers.

Why does this matter? In the Nelson model, the original creator of the single copy would get all the payments as well, making walled gardens obsolete and redirecting all revenues to the creator of the content. This has happened already in fan fiction in Japan, in mobile Keitai novels. Sony started buying fan-written novels to their own service with exclusive rights that enabled them to create books, TV shows or movies based on the amateur novels. (Elberse, 2008)

What if the Weber model didn't have any of the traditional sources or companies in it? Could the information flow to the readers without any centralized hubs or

gatekeepers? What if everyone in Echo Park or in the world would read the same

single copy of a news item created by Eastsider LA, not a copy of it?

In Figure 3, I show a very basic idea of what a non-centralized news network might

be. In *sources*, you have the local news blogs and local feed from Twitter and

Facebook. They all create original content, distributing it via multiple channels on
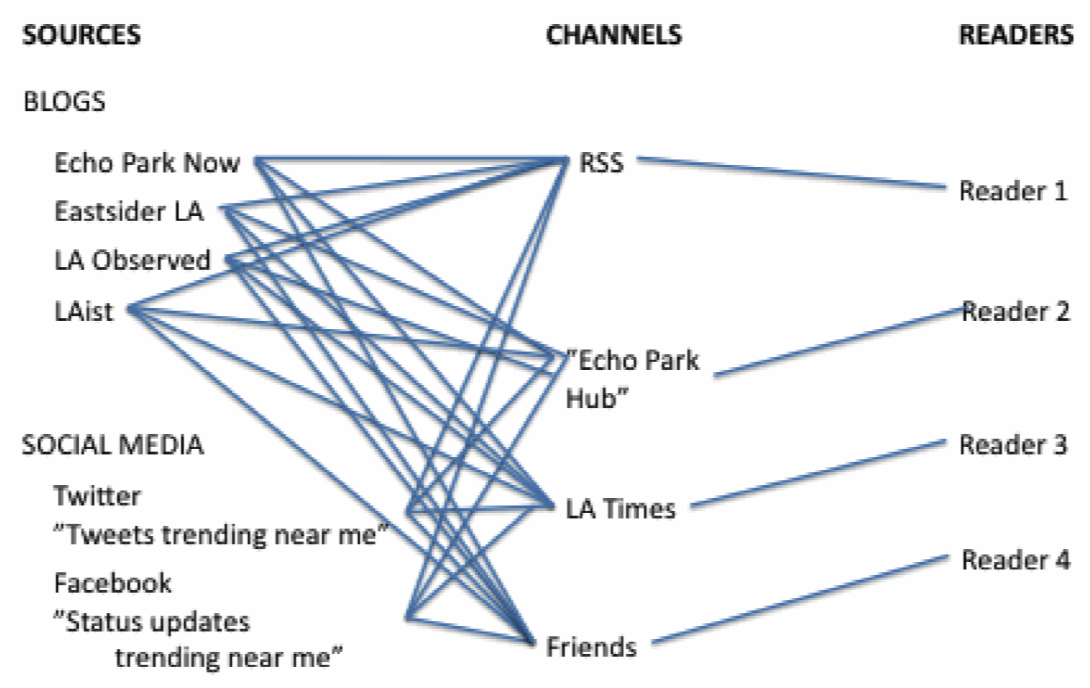
the internet.

Figure 3. A Decentralized Network and the News Flow through Various Channels

In the middle, we have *channels* instead of authorities and they transmit the original

copy to the *readers*. Channels can be automated and personal, such as RSS-readers

or simple aggregators such as Google News. Google approach differs from the Yahoo! News and Huffington Post because it doesn't copy or try add any value to story by commenting them. Google just acts as a channel between the original content and readers. Ir could be a model for a single Echo Park website that aggregates the feeds or to Twitter feed that aggregates all headlines from a certain area. Alternatively, the *LA Times* could do that with their neighborhoods project. Friends act as a channel as well, such as when they make recommendations through Facebook.

This is my fourth hypothesis: hyperlocal news blogs in Echo Park life are part of a leaderless, all-channel network without realizing it themselves.

Chapter Four: Research Methods

Researcher's role - from global to hyperlocal level

My own interests do not revolve around global or transnational media companies, but hyperlocal ones. How could you create hyperlocal "mass media" of the self-communication that people in the neighborhood produce via blogs, Facebook and Twitter? Could it be a new way to create a new form of local newspaper?

Let us think about the *Los Angeles Times* for a minute. Is it a "local" newspaper? The circulation is 700.000 in a city of nearly four million inhabitants. The metropolitan area has closer to 20 million people. The *Los Angeles Times* reports in English, even when over 40 percent of the population speaks Spanish as its first language. There are more than 140 nationalities speaking more than 200 languages. It is a daunting audience for any newspaper. In addition, I do not mean just readers, but potential advertisers as well. How do you report in such a huge city? How do you reach people on a neighborhood level?

My thesis project started with the notion that Echo Park doesn't have a local newspaper and the LA Times' coverage is minimal: according to LexisNexis, LA Times mentioned Echo Park in the newspaper seven times and on the web site 28 times in April 2010. That is not much for a neighborhood with more than 40.000 inhabitants. I wanted more news, so I created a news feed from the local blogs, produced by laid-off journalists and local activists. The neighborhood discussion

forum was lively, the historical society offered information on its website and Twitter was packed with tweets from the area. So there was a complete local network of information "hidden" on the internet. I compiled all these information sources into a single RSS-feed, and that has been my local newspaper since August 2009. It has been a revelation for me, because the network really works. The feed I get looks like a home-style raw-wire feed you get from professional services. Echo Park Now, Eastsider LA, Curbed LA, LAist, LA Observed Chicken Corner and Echo Elysian Neighborhood Councils Yahoo! Group produced surprisingly good amount of original reporting and neighborhood info. Film shoot locations, crime, yard sales, community events, shops closing and opening, stories about particular piece of graffiti or extraordinary expensive houses. Most of the stories were quite insignificant to anyone outside Echo Park.

Data Sources - Echo Park local blogs and online communities

Echo Park has a relatively active blogging and online community; here are the different sites listed:

Eastsider LA (http://www.theeastsiderla.com/)

Former LA Times reporter and Echo Park native Jesus Sanchez updates this news blog, which is the most active and produces mostly original content. "The Eastsider publishes stories and news from the northeast corner of the city of Los Angeles and neighboring East Los Angeles." Produced 131 stories in April 2010, the main source for news in Echo Park

Echo Park Now (http://www.echoparknow.com/)

Local news blog done by volunteers. Produced 112 stories in April 2010, many referrals to outside content and less original content. It is a manually updated aggregator of all what's Echo Park. Has perhaps the best web site link list about Echo Park of all the local sites.

LA Observed – Chicken Corner (http://www.laobserved.com/echopark/)

Jenny Burman updates this part of LA Observed from Echo Park with a personal tone. "LA Observed is a website devoted to independent reporting, informed commentary and selective linkage on Los Angeles news, media, politics, business, books and other topics." 12 stories in April 2010, original content and good writing.

Echo Park Net (http://echopark.net/)

Has no contact information, updates irregularly and with varying topics. 28 posts in April 2010, none of them about Echo Park or neighborhood. Seems to be a one-man project with environmental agenda.

Echo Park Trading Post (http://echoparktradingpost.com/)

This site by Rosie Betanzos has not updated for a while.

Network blogs, mainstream media

Outside.in (http://outside.in/echo-park-los-angeles-ca)

Has a massive database of blog headlines; CNN has invested in this site. Automatically aggregates stories from other sites, does not produce original content.

The automation has its flaws and feed based on 90026 seems to have many headlines that do not have anything to do with Echo Park. Aggregated 430 headlines from ZIP 90026 in April 2010.

LA Times Mapping L.A. (http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods/neighborhood/echo-park/)

LA Times neighborhood project has a nice map with data but no additional info or news per neighborhood, just citizen contributions about the neighborhood "feel." Does not aggregate stories from outside or from LA Times to neighborhood pages.

LAist (http://laist.com/tags/echopark)

A Gothamist site, launched 2004. Local news updated by Zach Behrens. Part of a bigger city blog network, now 10 cities. Claims to be the most popular city blog in LA with 2.1 million page views. 5 stories in April 2010, mostly original content.

Curbed LA (http://la.curbed.com/archives/neighborhood_reports/silverlakelos_felizecho_park)

Part of the Curbed network, news about real estate. "Curbed LA has been at the center of the virtual city, covering real estate sales, rental prices, and news-making deals. We also track the newest developments in architecture and design while keeping up with the hottest restaurants, via our sister site Eater LA, and the latest neighborhood gossip—it's all on Curbed, because this is where you live." 16 stories under category Echo Park in April 2010.

EveryBlock (http://la.everyblock.com/locations/zipcodes/90026/)

Aggregates the statistical data that is publicly available per neighborhood, a "geographical filter." Acquired by MSNBC. EveryBlock tries to aggregate everything from restaurant reviews to police reports and feels more like a RSS-reader than a website.

Communities

Echo Elysian Neighborhoods Councils Forum

(http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EchoElysianNCForum/)

Active discussion board, 214 messages in April 2010. Lots of community news, some political agendas and lost dogs.

Echo Park Online (http://echoparkonline.com/)

A startup site by Citilista, recently re-activated. Local original content, done by members. No updates in April 2010.

Businesses

Origami Vinyl (http://www.origamimusic.blogspot.com/)

An active blog by local record store. 27 posts in April 2010, mostly about their new releases and store events.

Others

EPHS News (http://ephsnews.blogspot.com/)

A local blog maintained by Echo Park Historical Society. One post in April 2010 about Echo Park Walking Tour.

From these candidates I picked four of the most active ones in April 2010 for one-on-one interviews: Jesus Sanchez from Eastsider LA, Jenny Burman from LA Observed Chicken Corner, Kelly Smith from Echo Park Now and Neil Schield from Origami Vinyl. Curbed LA declined to be interviewed and despite numerous attempts, I did not manage to arrange a meeting with LAist. Therefore, my research went hyperlocal and independent. I hope I can talk to the bigger, networked blogs at a later stage.

Origami Vinyl does not represent the news blog, but is a potential customer for a hyperlocal news blog. In addition, as you can read from the research findings, the difference between a music blog and a record shop blog is fading fast – Origami Vinyl store and blog represent much more than your normal record store in Echo Park community.

Data collection - questionnaire

Interviews were conducted in person, in April and May 2010, lasting approximately one hour each. I recorded them for later analysis. I asked the following questions of

the bloggers, not necessarily in this order, but I made sure I gathered the same information from all the participants.

Question concerning the product (i.e., the blog)

1. Name of the blog / publication?

2. What is it about?

3. Does the publication cover only Echo Park or multiple neighborhoods? If multiple, please name them.

4. Are you part of a bigger network of local blogs?

5. What is the purpose or goal of the blog? Why it is updated?

6. Are you successful? If yes, can you explain what you mean by success?

7. Do you make money out of it? A living out of it?

8. Where do you get your information? Rip traditional, do original?

9. Do you have a discussion or just the good old publishing model?

10. Who is your audience?

Who is working with the product?

1. Number of people working on publication?

2. Do you have a background in journalism? J-school? Freelance? Laid off from traditional media?

3. What are your professional goals? Work on big media one day or keep doing what you do? Or is it just a hobby?

4. Do you consider yourself a fan of news?

5. Do you consider yourself a journalist?

6. Do you expect to get paid for what you do?

7. Describe your day? How much time you spend on this?

Understanding the network

1. Do you read/follow other hyperlocal blogs / news sources? Please name them or provide URL to reader feed.

2. Are they your competitors or allies?

3. How does big media such as the *LA Times* or TV stations, cover your neighborhood?

4. Do you do a better job? What about all the local blogs as a network, do you beat the traditional media?

How do you see the future of your product?

1. What does your publication expect or wish from the future?

2. Would you sell your blog if a competitor or bigger media wanted it?

3. Do you plan to join or create a bigger news network, created by non-profit organizations or local bloggers like you?

Chapter Five: Research Findings

Based on the four interviews I conducted, I made following findings on the local

blogging scene in Echo Park.

Remix vs. original content

In my first hypothesis, I argued that if hyperlocal news bloggers are part of the new

appropriation culture they would not create their own original content but remix bits

and parts of old stories to create a new content.

This had a mixed result. All three of the news blogs refer to other news sources, but

Eastsider LA and Chicken Corner are doing mostly original content. Eastsider LA

was mentioned by the other blogs as the most serious and creating most original

content, thus being a real local news outlet. It is also a full-time occupation for the

writer, Jesus Sanchez.

However, the question of remixing is not an easy one. For example Sanchez was not

sure what to call his site: it is too small to be a newspaper but he doesn't think it is a

blog, because it relies on original reporting, not commentary. He originally started

Eastsider LA to "keep me practicing journalism as a calling card." Sanchez, an Echo

Park native, thinks of Eastsider LA as his little local newspaper. However, he still

does not really know how to describe it to other people.

Echo Park Now is clearly more of remix site. It aggregates all the content it can find from the neighborhood to a single feed, adding some commentary. Chicken Corner is a mixed bag: it has very original posts about life in Echo Park, but also uses other content or LA Observed posts as the base for its writing. Origami Vinyl produces original content, but it is very different from the three others, mainly talking about the shop and new products. Sometimes it makes fun original comments about the neighborhood it is in, but not in April 2010.

Hyperlocal blogs and affinity spaces

My second hypothesis stated that hyperlocal news blog would create an affinity space around it.

All the bloggers said they were amazed how shy people are to contact and write for them. They expected more feedback and input. Most of the contributors for all sites are amateurs. Sanchez told me that some of the contributors have a background in journalism. He guides and sometimes rewrites some of the articles that are sent to him, which could be seen similar to the work that fan fiction communities do. Schield from Origami Vinyl said one of the three contributors is a "professional blogger," but has no professional background.

Kelly Smith's Echo Park Now has probably come closest of the news sites to creating an affinity space, although she does not use a term "fan" when she speaks

about people who contribute to site or love Echo Park. However, there is a lot of community and activist elements. She wanted her blog to be the one-stop shop for Echo Park: show what is going on, and why you should be volunteering or doing more for your community. She considers herself more as an Echo Park activist than a journalist, giving back to the community. In addition, she says Echo Park Now is not about news but everything happening in the neighborhood, happily leaving the hard news for sites like Eastsider LA.

Jenny Burman from Chicken Corner thinks herself as an active member of the community, not an activist. She on the board of Echo Park Neighborhood Society and started her blog as an exploration of Echo Park and its appreciation. Now it is more just her take on Los Angeles, her voice. She does not consider herself a journalist, even when she has journalistic skills.

Origami Vinyl is all about being affinity space; the affinity being music and vinyl records. Neil Schield says the blog was meant to create a community (with Twitter and Facebook accounts) and replace advertising. Schield says, "In a way I think we are just expressing the musical side of our community." They sell hyperlocal music and have bands play in the shop. Their goal is to serve the local music community and be a hub in it.

Labor of love

The third hypothesis made a statement about who makes the hyperlocal news blogs and why: If fan fiction is labor of love and we apply the model to hyperlocal journalism, it should be labor of love as well. This seems to be true. None of the news bloggers are being paid, even if it has professional writers behind it. They either have a full time job or are supported by their spouses. With Origami Vinyl, the blog is considered as a modern type of advertising, so it brings customers in. Therefore, blogging could be called a hobby, or a labor of love, in most cases.

Half of the bloggers interviewed had a background in journalism: Jesus Sanchez from Eastsider LA and Jenny Burman from Eastsider LA have been full-time, professional journalists. Sanchez worked for the *LA Times* as a reporter; Burman has worked in magazines and in the *Daily News* and the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*. Sanchez was laid off, and Burman decided she would like to write fiction and went to the University of Iowa to study it.

Kelly Smith from Echo Park Now studied business journalism in college, but had done mostly graphic design before starting the blog. She does not plan to have a job in journalism but likes her current job as a graphic designer and likes the fact that "nobody takes us too seriously" with Echo Park Now.

Jenny Burman She does not consider herself a journalist, even though she has journalistic skills.

Neil Schield of Origami Vinyl has no background in journalism and is not pursuing one. His background is in new media.

Leaderless, all-channel networks

My fourth and final argument was about networks. Hyperlocal news blogs in Echo Park are part of a leaderless, all-channel network without realizing it themselves. It seems this is true: the blogs are aware of each other, don't have any centralized leadership but still keep an eye on what other blogs are doing. Perhaps most importantly they all share the same purpose: making Echo Park a better, or at least more fun, place to live.

Eastsider LA's Sanchez sees the Echo Park blogs as competition and as allies. "If someone is already doing a story on something, why would I waste my time on that, even when my approach would be different? Everyone is bringing a piece to the pie." However, he sees a problem in ads. Information is easy to share, but revenue is not. Sanchez says he sees himself as an Echo Park insider with a certain voice, and as soon as he goes to Silver Lake, he is an outsider. Therefore, a network of blogs could be possible, one for each neighborhood. Working with traditional media companies could be a problem as well: they would like to aggregate the content but

use bloggers as free labor. He is not planning to expand but has talked about a printed product.

Kelly Smith from Echo Park Now does not see the local news blogs forming a network but working independently. (By network, I mean a collaborative effort where blogs support each other.) Smith thinks LAist is doing the network thing already. LAist is made of multiple hyperlocal blogs, and it creates a network inside the LAist site. Therefore, the local bloggers seem to be aware of the network idea, but clearly think it requires one site or umbrella-like organization that brings information to one place. Therefore, in that sense, they are de-centralized.

Jenny Burman's Chicken Corner is part of blog called LA Observer, which is not a network of blogs but rather writers. Chicken Corner is like a weekly column inside Chicken Corner.

Burman says that Eastsider LA is much more ambitious and does not really compare her blog to others or think them as a network. Writing for Chicken Corner is not journalism, even though it has journalistic flavor. That is why it does not belong to the same group with Eastsider LA and Echo Park Now.

Schield's Origami Vinyl is not a part of Echo Park business blogs, but he sees all the

blogs as a virtual network that is covering different aspects of Echo Park in the

internet.

Chapter Six: Conclusions

My basic findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Conclusions

	Fan fiction / Leaderless networks	Hyperlocal news sites in Echo Park
Appropriation	Strong remix culture.	Only one of the blogs was remix, three mostly original content. Appropriation seems to have smaller role than expected. The tools to copy and remix are there, but bloggers still prefer to create original content.
Affinity Space	Basic component in fan behavior.	Although the people running the sites definitely work in an Echo Park affinity space, they all would love to have more contributors. There is lot less fan-based activity than expected. Not a pool of collective knowledge.
Labor of Love	Nobody gets paid to do this.	Nobody gets paid to do this. Very strong connection to fan culture. They operate in gift economy and information is given freely to other Echo Park fans that share their passion for the neighborhood.
Leaderless Network	This is how all-channel networks operate.	Strong relationship with leaderless networks. Hyperlocal blogs network is created by loose and disperse small groups that have strong ideological connection. Without the internet, this kind of uncontrolled distribution channel would not be possible.

In regard to appropriation and leaderless networks, the results are similar to those of previous studies. J-Lab, the Institute for Interactive Journalism, for example, has done some research on local blogs. The latest was published April of 2010 and it is about Philadelphia. The study found 260 active blogs and public policy or niche websites in the Philadelphia area. Sixty of theses have some journalistic DNA in that they report news, and do not just comment on it. The most interesting finding was:

> J-Lab has observed that the most successful hyperlocal sites around the country are not creations of mainstream news organizations. Rather they are products of the passion, ownership and entrepreneurship of their founders, be they hobbies or businesses. (Schaffer 2010)

This seems to correlate with my original findings regarding Echo Park news blogs.

It seems that the bloggers examined here fall into category of Journalistic Bloggers instead of Personal Bloggers, terms coined by Charlie Beckett in his 2008 book, *SuperMedia*. He defines networked journalism the following way: "Networked journalism includes citizen journalism, interactivity, open sourcing, wikis, blogging, and social networking, not as add-ons, but as an essential part of news production and distribution itself." Then he divides bloggers into two categories: Personal Bloggers and Journalist Bloggers, who are, in effect, networked journalists. (2008) In networked journalism the debate is not 'what is journalism,' but what kind of activity redefines journalism.

The affinity space, not surprisingly, was strongest around the site that had some similarities to fan culture: Origami Vinyl creates a sphere of music lovers around it. It gathers people from all ages, backgrounds and races. Anyone is welcome by just showing affinity to music, especially when it is pressed to vinyl. Origami Vinyl owners are the leaders of this space, but treated as resources of knowledge. The record shop is a place to hang around and geek out on vinyl. Therefore, it is a bit like the Gee model of virtual space transformed to real world. The hyperlocal news sites still lacked that: they did not create neighborhood buzz around them but were mostly read like traditional news sources.

Perhaps the best match between fan-based activity and hyperlocal news blogs came from the labor of love –attitude. The big difference was of course the number of people participating. In a fan fiction site, you can have hundreds of contributors and tens of editors. In a hyperlocal news site, there are usually only one or two editors and just few contributors. However, they share the same attitude as fan fiction creators: getting paid would might be a bonus but not the original motivation.

The Rand arguments on networks vs. hierarchies seem to fit journalism quite well. Leaderless, swarming local media could act a lot like any leaderless, protagonist organization. The blogs share a common goal; i.e., tell people what happens in Echo Park and make it a better place. However, they lack the network structure that would make them more visible to both readers and advertisers. I do not think any of the

hyperlocal bloggers think themselves as a network, capable of replacing a local newspaper.

In my opinion, the network approach is the most interesting outcome of this research. If none of the bloggers realizes that they could be much stronger or influential together, there could be something they could learn from other leaderless organizations with a common goal. Some of them already accommodated to their limited resources, not covering issues that another blog is already addressing. Activists and fans have a long history of creating things together, I do not see any reason why this could not' happen in journalism as well. I also think that Ted Nelson's idea of single copy, no matter how simple it sounds, has a greater meaning behind it. When you act as a network, there is no need to copy the news from site to site.

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