

# Vernacular journalism: Local news and everyday life

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (@KarinWahlJ)  
Cardiff University

Closing seminar: Covid 19 news, the audiences'  
emotions and the roles of local media  
Museum Merkki, March 13, 2024

# Overview

1. Context: UK local journalism
2. The emergence of local journalism entrepreneurs
3. Studying local journalism entrepreneurs
4. Vernacular journalism
5. Conclusion

# 1. Context: UK local journalism

- Collapse of business model of print journalism
  - Since 2005:
    - Over 245 newspapers in the UK have closed shop
    - Print circulations halved
    - Advertising revenue has fallen by 75 per cent over the same period
- Disproportionate impact on local journalism
  - The number of regional journalists in UK has halved since 2005
  - 3 in 5: Live in areas no longer served by any regional paper
  - Job losses disproportionately affecting areas outside major cities.

# 1. Context: UK local journalism

- Local news continues to be highly trusted: 75% trust local newspapers/online or print (YouGov, 2018).
- Local news organisations:
  - Cover routine local news (council meetings, development plans)
  - Hold local government to account
  - Counter local misinformation
  - Cultivate trust at local level
  - Represent local voices



# The importance of research on local media

- Historical neglect of local journalism in research
- Focus on elite, well-established news organisations and practices due to political economy of academic life (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009; 2018)
- “Beyond journalism” (Deuze & Witschge 2020)
- “Pioneer journalism” (Hepp & Loosen, 2019).
- New wave of research on local journalism
- Investigating how power relations shape news provision
- Diversity of journalism practices



## 2. The emergence of local journalism entrepreneurs

- Crisis in journalism: Opened up space for local news entrepreneurs
  - Sometimes known as hyperlocals/community news providers
- More than 400 outlets in the UK
- Most established since 2010:
  - Technological transformations facilitate digital startups
- Small in geographical reach, collectively reach significant proportions of the population (14.9m in the UK)
- Financially precarious, often operated by just one individual; existence under continuous threat (e.g. van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014)




Friday, October 1, 2021 About WLD Support us Advertise Contact us Translate this site

# West Leeds Dispatch

Independent community news

NEWS EVENTS ARMLEY BRAMLEY BURLEY CALVERLEY FARNLEY FARSLEY KIRKSTALL PUDSEY RODLEY WORTLEY


**TRENDING NOW** | **Sinnow dad launches messaging app to help non-verbal people text through symbols**



**NEWS**


**John Battle stands down as Bramley Baths' chair after over a decade of making a splash**

westleedslife · September 29, 2021




**NEWS**

**More than 2,000 speeding drivers caught on Stanningley Road, say police**




**NEWS**

**Housing plans on TV Harrison sports pitch approved for second time**



**NEWS**

**Leeds Council tells Bramley Shopping Centre owners to reinstate removed benches**



**NEWS**

**Owzat! Politicians and famous cricketers hit for six as Pudsey charity match nets over £1,400**


Latest News

# Thanksplott

celebrated for helping others in the community


05/09/2021

VIEW ALL




**£25m Coastal Protection scheme proposed for East Cardiff**

10/09/2021



**Tremorfa Pantry tries for Tombola World Record!**

10/09/2021




**Willows High School celebrated for helping others in the community**

05/09/2021

# Caerphilly Observer

Member Sign in | Become a Member - no adverts |

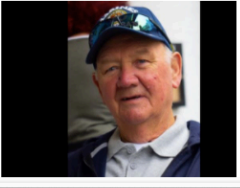
NEWS SPORT MEMBERSHIP & SUBSCRIPTIONS NOTICES ADVERTISE ABOUT SPONSORED CONTENT



**Black, Asian and ethnic minority history set to be added to new school curriculum**

Friday, October 1, 2021

Wales is set to become the first country in the UK to introduce the teaching of Black, Asian and minority ethnic histories and experiences into the school curriculum.



**Family pays tribute to cyclist, 76, killed in collision**


Thursday, September 30, 2021

The family of a cyclist who was killed in a collision in Bedwas over the weekend have paid tribute to their "beloved husband, father and grandfather".

Search ...

Follow us:

Find out how the communities of Caerphilly County Borough get their names




# Shetland News

Friday 1 Oct 2021 11.4°C ESE Moderate Breeze


News Letters Features Jobs Properties Weather Commercial

Home / News



**Council / Watchdog investigating complaint over handling of councillor's referral**


23 minutes ago



**Community / 'Public service was his life' - tributes paid to ex-councillor 'Slim Jim'**


Brian Smith has written an obituary for Jim Irvine, who passed away last month

1 hour ago



**Also in the news / COPE visit, assistive equipment amnesty, ferry disruption and more...**

1 hour ago



**Arts / Evelyn Glennie leads list of Mareel autumn shows**

**Local Housing Strategy SURVEY**

ACCESS HEATH

**NHS Shetland**

Health Protection Scotland

**Informatic COVID**

**GARRICK B**

PLANT HIRE & TOOL

Gremista Industrial E

Tel 01595 69

GET READY

**AUTUMN AND**

## 3. Studying local journalism entrepreneurs

- Research supported by British Academy and the Economic and Social Research Council
- 57 in-depth interviews with members of the Independent Community News Network (carried out by myself, Julia Boelle and Inaki Garcia-Blanco)
  - 123 members
  - Interviews carried out between July and September 2020
  - Focus: Examples of stories that the editors were proud of



# Motivations of local journalism entrepreneurs

- Local journalists as a “different breed altogether” (Hanusch, 2015)
- Many editors: Came into local journalism startups from long careers in local and national news
  - 60% had prior experience working in journalism
  - 19% had university-level undergraduate or postgraduate degree in journalism or media
- Passionate attachment to local news and community
- Increasingly difficult working conditions in established news media
  - Andy Vallis, *Wells Voice*: Used redundancy payment in 2017 to start outlet
  - Kathy Bailes, *Isle of Thanet News*: Started news site in 2017 after consolidation of local titles and worsening of working conditions
    - Income halved and workload tripled
    - Happy because the stories she covers “really matter to people living in the community.”

## 4. Vernacular journalism

- Vernacular: Concept used in fields including architecture, history, religion and languages
- Approaches derived from local customs and practices and relevant to the lived experience of “ordinary people”
- Often juxtaposed to “elite” practices
  - “Vernacular creativity’: ‘Creative practices that emerge from non-elite social contexts’ (Burgess, 2006)
  - Vernacular: “the realm of everyday life in which people create and negotiate their own sense of things” (Macdonald, 2012)
  - Everyday life: the mundane, the familiar and the unremarkable (Scott, 2009, p. 2).
- Interest in political potential, especially for non-elite or marginalized communities



## 4. Vernacular journalism

- Journalism as institution which records and remembers (Zelizer, 2007; Chu, 2021)
- Local journalism has “symbolic power in constructing the idea of ‘community’ and the ‘local’” (Hess, 2013, p. 56).
- Community news provides “a record of the mundane, the stuff of life that is not conventionally newsworthy but that matters locally, on a regular basis” (Kitch, 2011, p. 238).
- Vernacular journalism: Values documentation of the lived experience and histories of ordinary people



## 4. Vernacular journalism

- Local news entrepreneurs celebrate a vernacular journalism:
  - Reflects democratic impulse
  - Representation and voice missing from more established news organizations
  - Premised on knowledge of the local community, cultivated through long-standing presence.



## Most valued stories:

(1) circulate beyond the local community

(2) make a difference in the local community

(3) represent the nature of the community

(4) provide a “first draft” of the community’s history from the perspective of its inhabitants

# (1) Stories that circulate beyond the local community

- Stories originating in community but resonating and circulating more widely
- Paul Hutchinson of the *Bedford Independent*:
- Six weeks [after] our website launched, a disused and derelict building that used to be the Bedford hospital caught fire. And it was a blaze. Now, while it's a generally [...] disused hospital, a lot of people in the town were born in that building. So there was a lot of emotion about it. [...] it was a massive fire, and it was picked up by nationals. We were the only news organization on the scene. [...]
- Access facilitated by local networks and knowledge



## (2) Stories that make a difference in the local community,



- Mike Rawlins, *My Turriff*:
- in Turriff, we have two sets of public toilets. And it was like, ‘we can only keep one of them open.’ So I published that and got people quite engaged because they were upset. I wanted it changing.. [...] two or three years down the line [...] The toilets at the Showground have been maintained by the Council. [...] And the toilets in the high street have been taken over by a community group and will remain open. So Turriff gets to keep two sets of public toilets.
- Distinctive local news values

### (3) Stories that represent the nature of the community



- “Fun” or “quirky” local stories capturing the nature of the community
- Joe Willis (Richmondshire Today):
- The first story I ever wrote was [...] about cows who couldn't walk up hills. So this farmer bought some cows from Holland, because obviously it's flat in Holland, they didn't know how to walk up the hill. And for some reason, cows have to anyway because of the way their legs work so farmer let the cows out they walked up a hill, and they couldn't walk down the hill.



### (3) Stories that represent the nature of the community

- Particular importance in pandemic
- Steve Downes, *Inside Croydon*:
- I just think that you need a different perspective, you need to find out what's going on around you in those first 4, 6, 8 weeks or so when people were really strictly locked down and not going out, hardly at all. And there's only so many of those daily five o'clock government briefings [...] that you can put up with. And that is only telling you one part of the story, when, in fact, a grassroots level is many millions of versions of that story being experienced every day. And so, you know [...] providing that sort of more personal perspectives from people that might be your neighbour or live down the other end of the street.
- Sarah Cheverton, *Star & Crescent*: Published COVID diaries from single mum, and elderly visually impaired man



## (4) A “first draft” of the community’s history



- Columba O’Hare, *Newry.ie*:
- “I documented things like, COVID-19 testing stations and signs on shops, relating to why they're closed; screens being put up; traffic-less roads; the layout of queues going into stores; the Archbishop saying Easter Sunday Mass and blessing an empty crowd. [...] And the worrying thing about all of that is that you start thinking, maybe this actually *is* normal. Have I enough photographs taken in the supermarket before the screens or don't I?”
- Alan McKintosh, *Broughton Spurtle*: Documenting sordid side of local history

# Conclusion:

## Making sense of vernacular journalism

- Local news entrepreneurs: Prefer vernacular journalism focused on everyday lives and proximate preoccupations of ordinary people in local communities.
- Reporting that:
  - (1) Makes a difference to civic life
  - (2) Represents the nature of the community
  - (3) First draft of the community's history
- Vernacular in preoccupations and commitments, rather than style:
  - Drawing on genres and styles of professional journalism
  - Telling stories that challenge focus on elites and centres of power

# Conclusion:

## Making sense of vernacular journalism

- Democratic impulse
- Capturing lived experience from the bottom up
- Ability to provide this coverage: Unique selling point for local journalism
- Knowledge of local community enables journalists to serve as the storytellers of their communities

# Thank you!

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (under review, February 2024). Survival in the Passion Economy: Mental health and well-being of local journalism entrepreneurs. Paper commissioned for special issue of Digital Journalism on “Being Well at Work.”

**Wahl-Jorgensen, K., & Boelle, J. (2023). Vernacular journalism: Local news and everyday life. Journalism.**

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2022). Local knowledge and epistemic authority in entrepreneurial journalism. *Digital Journalism*.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2022). Community journalism as responsible journalism. In: J. Lynch and C. Rice (Eds.), *Responsible journalism in conflicted societies: Trust and public service across new and old divides*. London and New York: Routledge.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2022) Origin stories of local journalism entrepreneurs. *Journalism*.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2021) Precarity in community journalism start-ups: The deep story of sacrifice. In L. Steiner and K. Chadha (Eds.), *Newswork and precarity*. London and New York: Routledge.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K., Garcia-Blanco, I., & Boelle, J. (2021). ‘My job was to literally give our readers information that could save their lives’: British community journalism’s response to the COVID 19 pandemic. In D. Harte and R. Matthews (Eds.), *Reappraising UK local and community news media practice and policy*. London and New York: Routledge.