


Is (digital) journalism better the more local it is and what does that do to growth?

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 “Is (digital) journalism better the more local it is and what does that do to growth?”

This is question set by [Andy Dickenson](#) for this month's [Carnival of Journalism](#), a blog group of US and UK academics and journalists who get together regularly for a collective digital conversation about the news media.


I think that the words 'local' and 'growth' are what we need to sort out here. Both are automatically imbued with positive connotations. A bit like 'community' or 'citizen'. But both are misleading professional Internet journalists into some business blind allies.

I was recently at a very good conference dominated by British local newspaper digital journalists. One enthusiastic and talented Online editor of a mould-breaking series of micro-sites was describing her frustration. The newspaper had built a wonderful collection of hyper-local sites that were going to be filled and run by local people. They had leafletted and emailed every resident to get them involved. The professional journalists would simply administer them. It sounds like a perfect template for what I call [Networked Journalism](#).

In my new book [SuperMedia](#) I praise this kind of combination between the public and the professionals. But for my digital colleague and her micro-sites it ain't working.


 Click through the pages of this group of her hyper-local websites and all the articles are written by the professional journalists. There are no comments posted. I couldn't find any citizen photographs. The public are not coming to that particular Online party.

I've not named this site as I don't want to get bogged down in the particulars. Perhaps they haven't got their strategy or tactics spot on. It feels much too top-down and 'franchised' rather than a product of what the public wanted. At the very least they do now have a series of geographical community-focused news websites. But I doubt it is growing their business and it's not much 'better' than what they did before.

 You could argue that local only works when it comes up from the grass-roots. [KingsCrossEnvironment](#) is a terrific new hyper-local website just down the road from where I live in North London. It provides excellent coverage of the neighbourhoods planning disputes, restaurants, school fairs and more and sends out a good email alert, too.

The guy who runs it hates it when I refer to him as a journalist but that is what he is. There isn't a lot of public input to the site but it works because he is local and has a point of view about the place. He almost certainly makes nothing out of the site.

And this is where I get to the point. ("At last!" you cry). "Local" is not about reducing professional journalism down in scale. I think that at some point local journalism only works when it is allowed to seed itself. And it's rarely about place.

 Community for most people is only ever partially determined by where they live. They are quite likely to have much stronger linkages and interests through their chosen sport, where they work, what they do for a hobby, or where their children go to school. Subject-driven hyper-local has always worked better online. So techy sites about a highly specific subject have always been much more successful than a street-based blog.

And that takes me to growth. We are not going to find extra funding for mainstream media through hyper-local,

especially if we adopt the old model of decentralisation or devolution. I don't think that the [long-tail](#) paradigm works for hyper-local journalism when based on geography. This is why.

There comes a point when the economics of monetary exchange for value changes according to scale. The whole point of the hyper-local interaction is that it is not usually monetised. It is voluntary, it is social. So why do we expect people to pay for it in the form of news? That's why I wouldn't look too hard for profits in hyper-local.

That doesn't mean that it isn't worth doing as a way of networking your news business. There may be very good justifications for supporting it if you are the local authority or a relevant organisation. So I can imagine Camden Council would consider supporting [KingsCrossEnvironment](#) (although I doubt they would take the money). And I can imagine a newspaper continuing with the micro-sites as a form of ultra-dissemination.

So my answer to the original question is that digital journalism doesn't always get 'better' when it goes local. And our concept of "growth" has to be redefined in terms of expanding communications or networks, not always as book profits. This is not an anti-capitalist or anti-market reaction. It is a recognition that the new 'local' journalism is about growing differentiated networks rather than producing miniturised mainstream news.

Of you want some practical advice about how hyper-local news sites could work have a look at [Jack Lail's](#) carnival posting which has some useful thoughts.

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