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CAN BIG MEDIA DO BIG SOCIETY?
A critical case study of commercial, convergent hyperlocal news

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Abstract

The UK Government is committed to helping 'nurture a new generation of local media companies'. Changes to local media ownership rules allowing companies to follow their customers from platform to platform are supposed to assist in this by encouraging economies of scale. This paper provides a timely case study examining a UK-based commercial local news network owned by Daily Mail & General Trust that leverages economies of scale: Northcliffe Media's network of 154 *Local People* websites. The study evaluates the level of audience engagement with the *Local People* sites through a user survey, and by looking at the numbers of active users, their contributions and their connections with other users. Interviews with ten of the 'community publishers' who oversee each site on the ground were conducted, along with a content survey. Although the study reveals a demand for community content, particularly of a practical nature, the results question the extent to which this type of 'big media' local news website can succeed as a local social network, reinvigorate political engagement, or encourage citizen reporting. The Government hopes that communities, especially rural ones, will increasingly use the Internet to access local news and information, thereby supporting new, profitable local media companies, who will nurture a sense of local identity and hold locally-elected politicians to account. This case study highlights the difficulties inherent in achieving such outcomes, even using the Government's preferred convergent, commercial model.

Keywords:

hyperlocal media
big society
convergence
localization
regional media
user-generated content

Introduction

One of the cornerstones of the UK's Conservative-led coalition Government is the creation of 'the Big Society', in which 'social responsibility' is promoted over 'state control' as a means of social transformation. The Conservative Party anticipated, in their 2010 election manifesto (2011: 35-37), that the 'Big Society' could be achieved through a redistribution of power 'from the central state', and through greater 'personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility'. Recognizing the need for these newly empowered town halls and citizens to be held 'to account', the Government has adopted a local media strategy that is focused on helping develop local television, as it believes, firstly, that television 'remains the main platform for the consumption of news', secondly, that local TV lacks, unlike 'local press … radio … [and] [l]ocal websites'[1] any strong foothold in the United Kingdom (DCMS 2011: 6), and, thirdly, that local newspapers - which civil servants see as 'the main source of

democratic challenge' - may need to extend to other platforms such as TV in order to 'broaden their business models' to counter the 'structural and cyclical changes that are affecting all newspapers' (Smith 2011: 40).

Although the manifesto's emphasis was on devolution of power 'from politicians to *people*, from the central to the *local*' (Conservative Party 2011: vii, authors' emphasis), the first draft of the Government's 'Local Media Action Plan' revolved around a commercially-funded broadcast model in which the 'existing media sector' would play a prominent role (DCMS 2011: 5), encouraged by the removal of 'the final local cross-media ownership rules' (Smith 2011: 42). Existing regional and local media players who are likely to benefit from such a change include Johnston Press, who want to add 'television to [their] current delivery channels of newspapers [and] website[s]' in order to expand 'commercially' (Fry 2011: 10), and Northcliffe Media, whose *Local People* websites are the central case of this study.

Although established local media players such as Johnston Press can and do claim, quite rightly, that their print and web products facilitate 'local democracy' (Fry 2011: 9), questions have been raised (Allinson 2011: 52) about the extent to which the Government's proposed changes to the legal framework and economic basis for local media in the United Kingdom will privilege existing local media companies by encouraging economies of scale. This paper does not attempt to answer these questions, but rather contributes to the debate by providing a timely case study of a commercial local news network that leverages economies of scale, comparing it against some of the independent local news websites that have developed 'without any direct Government involvement' (Smith 2011: 40).

Background to the case

The *Local People* project is an example of 'hyperlocal' news, a term first coined by American cable TV operators in the 1980s to describe local television content. In the 1990s, several web start-ups, such as Craigslist, flourished using a model of ultra-localized content, especially in the field of online classifieds (Hopper 2009). Around the same time, alternative online sources of local news - known as local blogs or 'placeblogs' - began to emerge. Revitalized by the blogging culture, these community websites are becoming increasingly popular.

Local People is not Northcliffe Media's first foray into hyperlocal online news. They, along with the three other 'big' players in UK local media, have had an online presence for over a decade, with investments increasing substantially around 2005, as advertising revenues from their print operations, especially classified, moved online (Sheppard 2005). Regional newspapers have extended their reach both vertically, through acquisitions of online services (such as property and jobs websites) and horizontally, through the launch of online-only propositions, which have included *GazetteLive* from Trinity Mirror, *The Shuttle* initiative from Newsquest, Johnston Press' *Local Pages* and Northcliffe's own regional *ThisIs* network.

The *Local People* project went live between June and July 2009, with the launch of forty sites based around small cities - with populations between 10–50,000 - in the South West of England and some London boroughs. It is described as a network of websites 'for people to discuss issues affecting them locally … find and communicate with others, search for local places and services, read and write news stories and share photos' (*Local People* 2011b).

Local People represents an attempt to both support and extend Northcliffe's existing local coverage, which, at the time of launch, only touched 'around 12 per

cent of the population' (King 2009). Northcliffe Media emphasized the sites' bottom-up approach, describing them as 'for people in local communities, by people in local communities' (Hewlett 2009). But although the sites do utilize user-generated content and social networking to a greater extent than Northcliffe's previous local online properties, the sites, which now number 154,[2] all share the same template and aggregate content from several of Northcliffe Media's other digital properties, including *Motors.co.uk*, *Jobsite.co.uk* and *FindaProperty.com*. Such sites are categorized as 'multiples' by Hugh Flouch (personal communication, 15 December 2009), who contrasts their 'commercial' intent with the 'social focus' of independent placeblogs such as his own Harringay Online, which is 'not maintained for profit or commercial reasons' (Harringay Online 2009).

This study will identify the characteristics of the content created on a sample of *Local People* sites, investigate the role of the sites' 'community publishers', assess the level of user engagement and describe how those users interact with the *Local People* sites. The discussion evaluates the *Local People* sites against a number of independent community websites and we conclude with an appraisal of the UK Government's local media strategy in light of our results.

Methodology

A content analysis of the *Local People* sites in Bideford, Dalston, Chippenham and Dorchester was conducted between 7–17 December 2009. The coding considered stories, discussion posts, comments and pictures published between 1 October and 30 November 2009. The categories of analysis were defined as follows:

- Local politics (council and local campaigns)
- Local economics (local businesses and job market)
- Amenities (infrastructure, environment and transport)
- Housing (flats and houses)
- Security & safety (crime prevention and the fire brigade)
- Social services (education and health)
- Sports (sporting activity - amateur and professional)
- Entertainment (culture, arts and local events)
- Lifestyle (fashion, folklore and food)

In addition, profiles of a fifth of the sites' registered users were selected, at random, and analyzed to determine: the proportion of active users; the ratio of anonymous users; and the number of contributions, group memberships and 'linked locals' per user. 'Linked locals' was the term used by the *Local People* sites to describe friends or connections users make with other *Local People* users. Data obtained from the content analysis was complemented with data from qualitative research interviews and a user survey.

Each *Local People* site is overseen by a part-time curator on the ground, called a 'community publisher'. According to Associated Northcliffe Digital, community publishers are responsible for 'keeping discussion live and active, looking after content, and gathering, researching and writing fresh news' (King 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community publishers responsible for ten of the sites between 9 September and 5 November 2009. These respondents are quoted anonymously in order that they are not disadvantaged because of their participation. Additional interviews were conducted in order to provide contextual

information for this study. Finally, 103 users of and contributors to the *Local People* sites were surveyed using a questionnaire posted online between 15 November and 5 December 2009.

Results

User penetration

Northcliffe managers initially made optimistic traffic projections for the sites, saying that 'we aim to get 75 per cent of all online people in any community using our sites' (Bryan, 2009). In January 2010, the number of registered users on the four sites represented between 0.7 per cent (in Chippenham) and 4.6 per cent (in Dalston) of the local Internet populations (see table 1).[3] This was, however, just six months after launch. Revisiting the sites in June 2011 showed a higher number of registered users, representing between 3 per cent (in Chippenham) and 14.3 per cent (in Dalston) of the local Internet populations.[4] However, even this level of penetration compares unfavourably to some other hyperlocal websites which can achieve 40–45 per cent penetration rates (Rick Waghorn, personal communication, 18 November 2009).

[insert table 1]

Bottom-up?

Northcliffe Digital's insistence that the *Local People* sites would be bottom-up in approach - 'for people in local communities, by people in local communities' (Hewlett 2009) - was tested by this study, which analysed discussion posts and stories on four *Local People* sites.

The vast majority of the main news items on the sites - the 'stories' - were written by community publishers: 75 per cent in Chippenham, for example, and 73 per cent in Dalston. Even though this figure, in itself, is not surprising - community publishers were employed to write news stories - it seems to indicate that users are not inclined to see themselves as citizen reporters. According to some of the community publishers, this lack of participation was, in part, due to a lack of confidence. 'They say to me: "if I write it can I send it to you and then you tidy it up?" You know, they feel they are not writers'. Other community publishers agreed: 'I think people are afraid to really write anything. They need prompting and pushing'.

The number of comments on stories was also low. Apart from on Daltonpeople.co.uk, where just over 50 per cent of stories generated at least one comment, between 70 and 90 per cent of news items across the sites surveyed had not generated a single comment. Although both managers and community publishers were keen on describing their content as a two-way interaction, this did not seem to be the case for the 'stories' generated by the community publishers. For example, in Bideford, considered one of the most successful sites, 90 per cent of news stories had not generated a single comment. This fact was acknowledged by some community publishers: 'we've had lots of visitors but not many comments'.

The issues that matter

In terms of news topics, community publishers reported that they had not received explicit directives from Northcliffe. 'We've had suggestions that we could write about local sports fixtures, what the Council is up to, any groups that are holding events, but generally there are no guidelines to stick to'. Another community publisher reported that Northcliffe 'didn't say much about the actual editorial, because a lot of [community publishers] are journalists or have done journalism before'.

[insert figure 1]

Among the ten themes identified in the content analysis, categories traditionally defined as 'soft news' were highly represented (see figure 1). In Dorchester, for instance, 'Entertainment' and 'Sport' accounted for 53 per cent of stories. And in Dalston, 'Entertainment' alone represented 34 per cent of the content provided by the community publisher. A relatively small number of stories fell into the 'Local Politics' category: 14 per cent in Bideford and Dalston, 9 per cent in Chippenham and 7 per cent in Dorchester. One explanation given by community publishers was the sometimes difficult relationship with local councils: 'We are encouraged to ask our councillors whether they would like to do guest posts on the site. All of the three councillors said they were interested but it hasn't got very far at the moment'. Another said that 'The Town Council is slightly wary'. On the other hand, as a community publisher explained, local campaigners seem to have had a significant impact on the sites:

> People who are involved in political campaigns have a real passion for something, they have a voice, and are the kind of people that are going to be commenting, posting a link around to their friends, so they are a good audience to target.

Practical information seemed to be a particular inspiration for community publishers. In Bideford, for instance, stories about 'Amenities', 'Social services' and 'Security and safety' accounted for 48 per cent of the total. And in Dorchester, they represented a quarter of the news items. The demand from communities for practical information - which, as will be seen, was confirmed by the analysis of the discussion posts - seems to suggest the relevance of a redefinition of the classical categories of 'soft' and 'hard' news and the emergence of what has been defined as 'community news' (Bruns 2009).

The *Local People* platform, in part, defines itself as a network of websites that allows people to 'get together and discuss the issues affecting them locally' (*Local People* 2011b). On the four sites surveyed, the number of discussion posts responded to was remarkably low, especially in small, rural areas. In Dorchester, which has the smallest population, 81 per cent of discussion posts were not followed by replies. In Chippenham, the most populated of the four areas considered, this number shrank to 67 per cent. In Dalston, which has a rather small population but is situated in London, 46 per cent of discussion posts were followed by at least one answer.

[insert figure 2]

As with news stories, a very small number of discussion posts fell into the 'Local politics' category (see figure 2). On the four sites surveyed, discussion posts mentioning the local council or local campaigns accounted for between 2 and 11 per cent of the total. This observation was echoed in the results of the user

questionnaire. Only 20 per cent of respondents thought the *Local People* sites helped solve local problems, and less than 13 per cent thought they served as a watchdog for local government.

A high proportion of discussions were on topics traditionally associated with 'soft news'. Posts falling into the 'Sport', 'Entertainment' and 'Lifestyle' categories accounted for 25 per cent of the total in Bideford, 28 per cent in Chippenham, 53 per cent in Dorchester and 67 per cent in Dalston. And in the latter, almost half of the discussions were about arts and culture.

A significant proportion of discussions were about what may be dubbed 'community news', that is, serious apolitical topics such as 'Social services', 'Amenities' and 'Security and safety': a quarter of the discussions in Dalston and Dorchester, a third in Chippenham and half in Bideford. Most community publishers acknowledged that practical information, particularly about education, transport and social services, was a vector of engagement. 'Organizations like the schools are very much the focal point', said one community publisher. Another agreed that 'community-based' content was especially popular. 'Without a doubt it is anything to do with the high street: new shops or businesses, roads closing or opening. The things that affect people's everyday life'.

Discussions about shops and businesses - categorized as 'local economics' in the content analysis - were also strongly represented, especially in Chippenham, where they made up 22 per cent of the total. It is debatable, however, whether information about businesses should be considered as 'community news', since much is more akin to advertising. Among discussion posts it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between promotional material and genuine conversations. According to a community publisher, the 'discussion box' is mostly 'used by people to try and promote something'.

Discussion posts and news stories share some characteristics: a very low proportion of 'hard news' about local politics; a large proportion of 'soft' news about entertainment, sport and lifestyle; and a significant proportion of what could be called 'community news', about transport and amenities, social services and security.

Who contributes?

A clear majority - 60 per cent - of registered users contributed (see table 1). Of these contributors, casual contributors - defined as active users with fewer than five contributions - were more common in small and rural areas: 54 per cent in Dorchester against 40 per cent in Chippenham, whose population is three times larger. Unsurprisingly, there were fewer committed contributors - active users with more than ten contributions - in small and rural areas: four per cent in Dorchester against 10 per cent in Chippenham.

Small and rural areas are sometimes perceived as a place for greater community engagement, where it is possible to 'start with some sort of social capital already' (Booth 2009). However, there are both advantages and disadvantages to providing hyperlocal news in these areas. On the one hand, 'you're starting off with a clearly defined community that already identifies itself as such'. On the other, 'you don't own the conversation around the news, and people are not used to go online to talk about it' (Coddington 2009). This view seems to be confirmed by the relatively high proportion of casual contributors and small number of committed contributors found on the *Local People* sites in small and rural areas.

Other findings varied according to sites' locations. People were less reluctant to

reveal their identity in small rural communities such as Dorchester. Also, the proportion of businesses and organizations - as opposed to individuals - seems to be higher in small rural communities. This finding was confirmed by a community publisher living in a small town with fewer than 30,000 inhabitants: 'Most of the people looking at this website and putting things on are shops and companies, [and] a few charities. Not individual people'.

A social networking platform?

At the launch of the *Local People* project, social networking functionality was defined as one of the sites' key assets. One of the community publishers said that Northcliffe Digital wanted 'a local version of "Facebook"'. However, the social networking functionality of *Local People* had not facilitated the creation of an extensive social network. Considering the average user on Facebook has 130 'friends', the number of 'linked locals' observed on the four sites surveyed was extremely low. In fact, between 88 and 94 per cent of the *Local People* were not linked to any other local (see table 1), and the average user on *Local People* had just 0.4 'friends'.[4]

Discussion

What emerges from an analysis of the *Local People* project is the dominance of the print paradigm. Despite the assertion that sites would adopt a bottom-up approach, the reliance on community publishers from journalism backgrounds suggests that particular assumptions were made about the needs of such a community-driven project. In particular, the idea of community management as a skill distinct from traditional publishing roles appears to be, if not completely absent, then not a priority.

This is particularly noticeable when the project is compared to hyperlocal initiatives from independent publishers. Many of these appear to have started as a focus for coordinating action, rather than with the intention of creating content for its own sake. Issues vary from building 'local resilience against the threat of oil depletion and climate change' (Booth 2010b) and keeping the streets clean (Booth 2010a), to getting recognition for underground events (Getgood 2010), recording local history (Booth 2010b) and highlighting poor professional journalism (Bradshaw 2010b). Even those run by traditional journalists often have a personal or civic motivation.

Although the community publishers spent a large amount of time calling local figureheads and meeting them in person, as well as promoting their sites through leaflets and posters provided by Northcliffe, no community-driven objectives were used as the basis for the sites. Indeed, the site design and content management system, borrowing from traditional print divisions of commercially-focused classified content ('What's On', 'Shopping', 'Restaurants', 'Vouchers') and templated for all communities, restricted the ability of communities or their respective community publishers to prioritize issues editorially in the way that independent hyperlocal bloggers have done successfully.

The editorial structure of the sites (where transport is a second-level navigation option and education and social services not mentioned in navigation at all) does not reflect the audience's interest in practical information identified in this research. And given the navigational focus on shopping and commercial services, it is perhaps no surprise that so many people used discussion forums to promote their own services

or products.

The lack of comments by users may be explained by the traditional newspaper style and structure of most of the content produced by community publishers, which leaves little space for user contribution. Independent bloggers often explicitly reject these print styles, adopting a 'personal voice' (Getgood 2010), or are more concerned with making civic information 'findable' than fitting it into a 'shock, horror, probe' narrative (Bradshaw 2010a). The formal writing style might also explain the lack of contributions, setting as it does a particularly formulaic standard for others to follow, compared to the more informal styles typically adopted by independent bloggers.

A digital skills gap in rural communities was identified by community publishers, but there was no evidence of formal training being available to boost such skills. The belief was that 'If I can do it, anybody can'. Again, this can be contrasted with the strategies of the Talk About Local network of hyperlocal blogs, which partners with UKOnline to provide training to get local communities blogging, and the Social Media Surgeries pioneered by Nick Booth of Podnosh (Booth 2009), which build a 'pass it on' network of bloggers willing to train up members of communities to publish themselves, who then train others in turn.

Conclusion

While the Government has stated that a revival in local journalism should be led by the 'existing media sector', the evidence presented in this paper suggests that the hyperlocal publishing efforts of at least one of the UK's major regional publishers suffer from some important flaws and are well behind independent equivalents in terms of engagement with users. Specifically, the commercial focus of the *Local People* initiative structurally restricts the editorial control of the community publisher (in fact, the community publisher is not allowed to moderate or edit content by others, or access the back end of the sites). This explicit commercialization of content formalizes the cliché that journalism is intended to fill the 'space between advertising', and while some may argue that this commercialization is needed to ensure a sustainable model for hyperlocal publishing, lower advertising prices online and an increasing demand from advertisers for metrics of engagement suggest this particular commercial model is unproven. The closure of *The Guardian*'s Local project in 2011 only adds to the doubt surrounding advertising as the sole basis for traditional publishers entering the hyperlocal space.

Doubt also surrounds the sustainability of independent hyperlocal initiatives, however, many of which rely on individuals whose departure or illness would mean an end or pause to their publishing operation. Notably though, the investment of effort in creating networks of blogs in an area appears to help provide some insurance against such an event: while blogs frequently close, many inspire others to publish and some are passed on to new owners. The existence of the network itself, meanwhile, appears to act as an incentive for many bloggers to continue their work.

The business models of these blogs are as varied as their publishers: some provide a showcase for related services, such as social media consultancy; others make money through merchandise and events; some successfully mirror the advertising model of traditional media - but without the costs of printing, design and distribution. Some, however, do not require a business model: they are simply tools to help coordinate campaigns, or provide a platform for individuals to build a portfolio of work for future employment, or a way to express themselves or build status within

a particular community.

With the very concepts of publishing and journalism being reshaped in a networked ecology, we should be careful of making assumptions about the 'right' way forward for hyperlocal news. A successful commercial model is as likely to come from the independent sector as from traditional publishers or broadcasters, and it may be desirable to have a new media ecology that includes both commercial and non-commercial models to ensure the widest diversity of information. While traditional publishers have experience in newsgathering and production for print publication, independent operators have helped establish effective practices of web writing and mobile journalism, but also, particularly, of distribution, often working in a decentralized and collaborative way across the network, simultaneously reducing production costs.

While print publishers bring economies of scale, they also bring structural and cultural qualities that may hold back the development of hyperlocal news as both an empowering medium and a commercial enterprise. Resources and production processes will inevitably be focused on the more profitable medium - still likely to be print for some years - while the costs and existing revenue streams of that medium will act as a key factor in any ability to innovate commercially. Centralizing forces may seek to bring users onto one website, rather than training them to publish themselves.

What is certain is that nothing is certain: with so much concern over the future of local news, with governments regulating to protect and stimulate local media, and with an increasing amount of people's time being spent online, it is vital that decisions are made on the basis of research rather than assumption. The UK Government's TV-centric local media strategy deserves particular scrutiny here, seeming as it does to have little basis either in an understanding of the qualities that make for successful hyperlocal media (issue-focused, dynamic, personal, informal and low-tech) or in the economic realities of networked media.

While some research has been commissioned into those economic realities, more research is needed into what independent and mainstream publishers have learned from hyperlocal initiatives - not just about the creation of successful and democratically important content, but also about distribution and engagement, design and technical structure, recruitment, training and staffing and business models. As journalism is being reinvented - and policy follows - every part of the system will have to be continually reassessed for some time yet.

Notes

1. Keith Smith of the Department for Media, Culture and Sport considers local websites to be 'in rude health without any direct Government involvement' (Smith 2011: 40).
2. As of 9 June 2011.
3. Based on the fact that, of the 79 per cent of the local population who were over 16, 82.5 per cent were Internet users in 2011 and 82 per cent in 2010 (ONS 2011).
4. In June 2011, seventeen months after the original content analysis, the authors revisited the sites and observed even fewer links between users of the *Local People* network, confirming that our initial findings were not a result of the sites' novelty in January 2010.

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Table 1: Analysis of user interaction at four 'Local People' websites, January 2010.

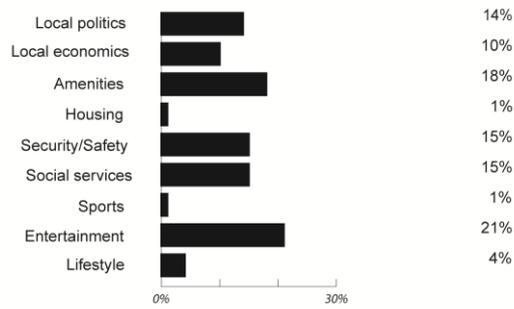|	Bideford	Chippenham	Dalston	Dorchester
Population of target community	33,941*	43,178*	10,722†	14,744*
Registered users ‡	433	186	318	212
Individual (not corporate) users	69%	82%	73%	58%
Gender distribution	Male 53%	Male 68%	Female 55%	Male 58%
Anonymous users	47%	62%	64%	46%
Active users (at least 1 contribution)	61%	60%	60%	64%
Casual contributors (fewer than 5 contributions)	43%	40%	49%	54%
Committed contributors (more than 10 contributions)	9%	10%	8%	4%
Users without any group membership	63%	58%	67%	64%
Average group membership per user	1.38	2.26	1.91	1.14
Users without any 'linked local'	88%	92%	94%	90%

Notes:
* Source: Newspaper Society Database (population over 15).
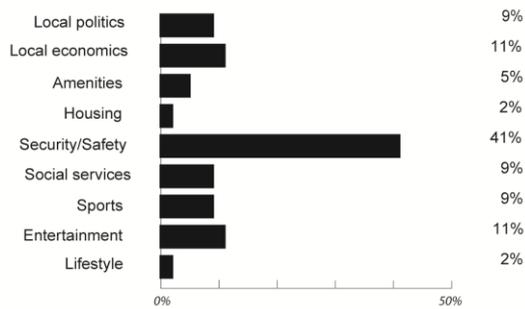† Source: Hackney Council.
‡ As of January 8, 2010.

Figure 1: Content analysis of news stories on four *Local People* websites, December 2009.

Bideford

Category	%
Local politics	14%
Local economics	10%
Amenities	18%
Housing	1%
Security/Safety	15%
Social services	15%
Sports	1%
Entertainment	21%
Lifestyle	4%

Chippenham

Category	%
Local politics	9%
Local economics	11%
Amenities	5%
Housing	2%
Security/Safety	41%
Social services	9%
Sports	9%
Entertainment	11%
Lifestyle	2%

Dalston

Category	%
Local politics	14%
Local economics	9%
Amenities	9%
Housing	2%
Security/Safety	16%
Social services	5%
Sports	0%
Entertainment	34%
Lifestyle	11%

Dorchester

Category	%
Local politics	7%
Local economics	7%
Amenities	9%
Housing	2%
Security/Safety	0%
Social services	16%
Sports	29%
Entertainment	24%
Lifestyle	7%

Figure 2: Content analysis of users' discussions on four *Local People* websites, December 2009.

Bideford

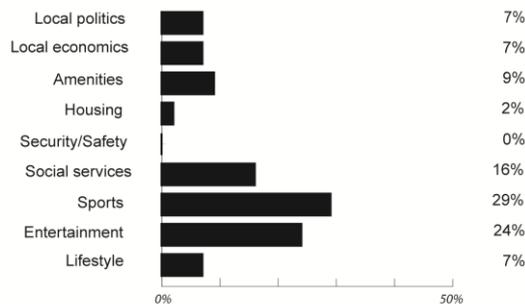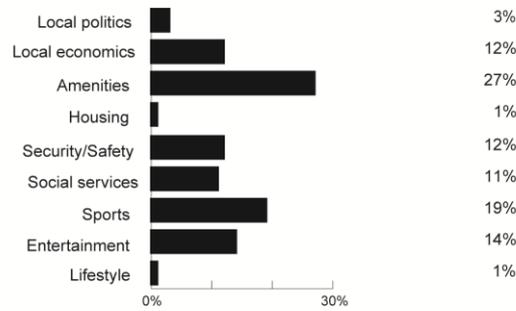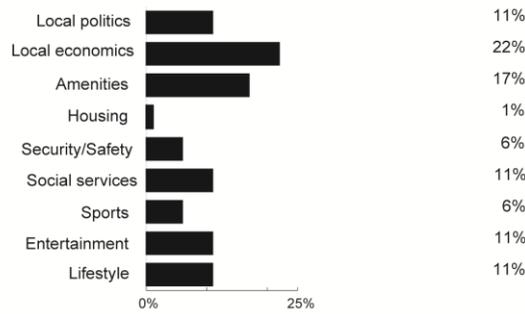| Category	Value
Local politics	3%
Local economics	12%
Amenities	27%
Housing	1%
Security/Safety	12%
Social services	11%
Sports	19%
Entertainment	14%
Lifestyle	1%

(Axis: 0% to 30%)

Chippenham

Category	Value
Local politics	11%
Local economics	22%
Amenities	17%
Housing	1%
Security/Safety	6%
Social services	11%
Sports	6%
Entertainment	11%
Lifestyle	11%

(Axis: 0% to 25%)

Dalston

Category	Value
Local politics	2%
Local economics	3%
Amenities	12%
Housing	2%
Security/Safety	10%
Social services	3%
Sports	0%
Entertainment	47%
Lifestyle	20%

(Axis: 0% to 50%)

Dorchester

Category	Value
Local politics	5%
Local economics	19%
Amenities	5%
Housing	0%
Security/Safety	5%
Social services	14%
Sports	0%
Entertainment	48%
Lifestyle	5%

(Axis: 0% to 50%)

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