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Vernacular journalism:

Local news and everyday life

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Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Cardiff University

Julia Boelle, Independent Researcher

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## Vernacular journalism: Local news and everyday life

### Abstract

This paper, based on in-depth interviews with 57 local journalism entrepreneurs in the UK, develops the idea that these emergent and small-scale local news organizations prioritize a form of “vernacular journalism.” Driven by a democratic impulse, vernacular journalism reflects the preoccupations, experiences and histories of ordinary people and their communities, providing a vehicle for representation and voice, which is often missing from more established news organizations. Vernacular journalism seeks to (1) make a difference in the local community, and (2) represent the nature of the community, providing a “first draft” of its history from its inhabitants’ perspective. The ability to provide such vernacular journalism is premised on knowledge of the community, cultivated through long-standing presence. The provision of a vernacular journalism which reflects the world from the bottom up is a unique selling point for local journalism, against the top-down orientation of larger regional and national outlets.

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## Vernacular journalism: Local news and everyday life

This paper suggests that local journalism has a vital role to play in terms of chronicling the everyday life of ordinary people, as well as making a positive contribution to the lives of local communities. The paper proposes that this role can be captured through an understanding of “vernacular journalism” – or a journalism focused on the everyday lives and proximate preoccupations of ordinary people in local communities. The research discussed in this paper focuses on small-scale local journalism start-ups, sometimes referred to as “hyperlocal” or “community journalism” outlets, based on in-depth interviews with 57 editors of such outlets carried out in 2020. Specifically, it suggests that local news organizations prioritize what we refer to as “vernacular” journalism. Driven by a fundamentally democratic impulse, vernacular journalism reflects the preoccupations, experiences and histories of ordinary people and their communities, providing a vehicle for representation and voice.

### Understanding local journalism start-ups

The local journalism start-ups studied here represent a relatively new type of news outlet. In the UK, where this study was based, the crisis in local journalism has led to the closure of hundreds of national, regional and local newspapers over the past two decades (Harte, 2022). While these closures have had a devastating impact on the media ecology (Abernathy, 2020; Gulyas, 2022), they have opened a space for the rapid expansion of local news startups, sometimes known as community or hyperlocal outlets (e.g., Cheverton, 2022, p. 56). Such startups have been particularly well established in Europe and the United

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States (e.g., Ferruci & Allaimo, 2020; Harte, Howells & Williams, 2018; Harte & Matthews, 2022; Reader, 2011). Local news entrepreneurs have been seen as vital to fostering locally based forms of engagement and participation (Williams, Harte & Turner, 2015). Although most of these new local outlets are small in terms of their geographic and population reach, they collectively reach significant proportions of the population. Data suggests that these local news providers in the UK reach 14.9 million people online, or more than one in five of the total population (Burrell, 2020).

However, the operation and financing of local news startups is frequently unstable and precarious (Deuze & Witschge, 2020, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022c). They rely heavily “on volunteer work and individual entrepreneurship” (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014, p. 297; see also Cheverton, 2022). In the majority of cases, they are run by a single person, who serves as the editor and sole reporter, as well as being responsible for managing the commercial operations of the outlet (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022a). This leaves the outlets vulnerable to risks including illness, burnout or simply changes in family circumstances. While burnout is endemic among journalists (e.g., Reinardy, 2021), the challenges of the profession are exacerbated by the small sizes and immense workload and responsibilities associated with local news startups (see also Reich, 2008).

Although a handful of the organisations studied in this article have operated for more than 20 years, most have been established since 2010, in part due to the opportunities afforded by technological transformations (M. Chadha, 2016), and in part due to shifts in the journalistic labor market (K. Chadha & Steiner, 2022). Many local, regional and national journalists working for traditional print publications lost their jobs due to newspaper

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consolidations and closures and sought new opportunities for employment. Some of the journalists who had been made redundant or seen a dramatic worsening in their working conditions decided to start up news outlets in their communities (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022c). They did so in the face of significant material and personal sacrifice, and in full knowledge of the challenging economic conditions for local news production.

As a result of the deliberate choice to become local news entrepreneurs, they should be seen as a distinctive professional grouping – with distinctive professional identities - compared to their counterparts working for established local and regional news organisations. As Hanusch (2015) has pointed out, although local journalists constitute “a different breed altogether” in terms of both demographics and role perceptions, and their practices remain relatively neglected by journalism researchers. His research, based on a representative survey of of journalists working for local and metropolitan newspapers, found that “local newspaper journalists exhibit much stronger support for the community forum and advocacy role. At the same time, and contrary to expectations, there is very little difference in their support of the watchdog role compared with metropolitan journalists” (p. 816). Hanusch’s findings point to the complexities of the role of the local journalist: On the one hand, these practitioners are shaped by core professional ideals, including the idea of serving as a watchdog on concentrations of power. On the other, they remain faithful to their normative and affective ties to the local community (see also Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022b), which means that they also aspire to serving as advocates and champions for these communities.

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This article seeks to understand not only the distinctiveness of these practitioners, but also how their commitments shape the journalistic practices and specific forms of storytelling that they advance. In doing so, the article develops the notion of “vernacular journalism.”

### Conceptualizing vernacular journalism

We are using the term vernacular journalism to describe a set of storytelling practices that render local journalism distinctive – and distinctly valuable. In referring to vernacular journalism, we mean *a journalism focused on the everyday lives and proximate preoccupations of ordinary people in local communities*. The concept of vernacular journalism has a close kinship with notions of journalism and everyday life. As Folker Hanusch (2019, p. 406) has defined it, news coverage concerned with everyday life is “content which focuses on audiences’ individual needs in consumer societies.” As such, the label covers “soft news content in a variety of guises, such as lifestyle journalism, human interest stories, or service journalism.” Given the strong normative orientation of journalism scholarship towards democracy and the public sphere, journalism which falls outside such preoccupations has tended to be “denigrated, relativized, and reduced in value alongside aspirations for something better” (Zelizer, 2011, p., cited in Hanusch, 2019, p. 406).

While the local journalism that we focus on reflects a broader range of content than traditional labels of “soft news,” we are interested in retaining the emphasis on “everyday life” as understood in the broader literature from the field of sociology, where it has been focused on the mundane, the familiar and the unremarkable (Scott, 2009, p. 2). However, understandings of what constitutes the mundane, familiar and unremarkable are

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profoundly shaped by power relations, including geographical relations between centres and peripheries (e.g., Hall, 2010/1981). Such power relations determine judgements of cultural value and broader significance. In this context, it is helpful to draw on the idea of “the vernacular” – a concept widely used in fields ranging from religion to architecture and history, to describe approaches derived from local customs and practices and relevant to the lived experience of “ordinary people” (e.g., Papadopoulos and Nettleship, 2020). In religious studies, the notion of “vernacular religion” has been particularly salient. It has been used more broadly to describe a shift from viewing religion as “systematic and coherent doctrine” to engaging with “its individual meanings, experiential core and expressive forms” (Bowman & Valk, 2014, p. 6). The concept has been widely used in describing the transformations associated with the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, where demand for an individual and lived relationship with faith led to the rejection of Latin – the elite but inaccessible language of the Catholic church - in favour of the “vernacular” German (e.g., Pettegree & Hall, 2014). The rise of such vernacular religion was facilitated by the proliferation of printed books, highlighting the long-standing role of mass media in enabling vernacular practices.

Because of the frequent use of the term to describe practices that are informal, local and mundane, it is often juxtaposed to “elite” practices. As such, scholars from across disciplines studying vernacular practices are often interested in their political potential, especially for non-elite or marginalized communities.

In media and communication studies, the celebration of the potential of the vernacular has been a theme in recent work on how technological transformations facilitate new forms of



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participation with inherently radical possibilities. For example, Jean Burgess (2006) introduces the term ‘vernacular creativity’ to ‘describe and illuminate creative practices that emerge from non-elite social contexts.’ As Snowden (2014, p. 411) notes in an analysis of YouTube videos in the Arab Spring, these videos “are vernacular because they belong to the multiple series of gestures and actions through which individuals gather, both online and offline, to enact the people as the possible subject of *another* history.” Similarly, Macdonald (2012) defines the vernacular domain as “the realm of everyday life in which people create and negotiate their own sense of things” and takes an interest in the role of communication technologies as tools for creating “conditions of conviviality.”

The term “vernacular journalism” has previously been used by historians to document journalism in minority languages, especially in Asian contexts (e.g., Adam; 1995; Khanduri, 2009; Yun, 2020). In the field of journalism studies, James Miller (2012) has described US tabloid journalism as vernacular journalism, contrasting it to the style of “modernist” mainstream journalism. While Miller (2012) does not explicitly define vernacular journalism, he takes his inspiration from literature on vernacular architecture, “whose qualities recapitulate those of tabloid news” (p. 8). Noting Miller’s juxtaposition between “elite” and “vernacular” practices, we approach the concept slightly differently.

We suggest that “vernacular journalism” values the documentation of the experiences and histories of ordinary people, embedded within particular communities. Journalism has long been described as “the first draft of history” (Shafer, 2010). This widely used phrase highlights the role of journalism as a key institution which records and remembers (Zelizer, 2008; see also Chu, 2021), and therefore contributes to the construction of collective

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memory by providing interpretations of historical events (Edy, 1999). In this respect, local news outlets play an important role given their “symbolic power in constructing the idea of ‘community’ and the ‘local’” (Hess, 2013, p. 56). In doing so, however, the first draft of history produced by journalism is not ideologically neutral, but instead upholds and reinforces certain values (Zelizer, 1992).

Along those lines, we suggest that vernacular journalism is a *democratic* practice. This is so because, in reflecting the preoccupations, experiences and histories of ordinary people and their communities, such journalism recovers an aspect of representation and voice which is often missing from more established news organizations. As Carolyn Kitch (2011) has argued in her commentary on community newspapers in the United States, these outlets “provide a record of the mundane, the stuff of life that is not conventionally newsworthy but that matters locally, on a regular basis” (p. 238). While such content has attracted only scant attention from scholars in journalism studies, it has significant consequences for the everyday lives of local citizens.

## **Methodology**

The article is based on in-depth interviews with 57 editors of local journalism startups, carried out over between June and September 2020.<sup>i</sup> The interviewees were recruited from the membership of the Independent Community News Network (ICNN), the main organization representing the interests of the independent community news sector in the UK, and account for a significant proportion of the 123 members of ICNN. Interviewees were offered a £40 incentive for their participation.

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In-depth interviews cannot be seen as a straightforward source of “factual” data about the experiences of subjects. Rather, they must be viewed as discourses which reveal much about how interviewees wish to present themselves in relation to prevailing norms and the cultural contexts in which they operate. It is therefore important to note that the high level of participation in the study can be attributed in part to the financial incentive, but also to the self-understanding of this practitioner group as champions of the fledgling sector of independent community news, shaped by their commitment to the communities they inhabit (see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022b). As such, the interview data should be read through the lens of the practitioners’ allegiance to and advocacy for the type of journalism they practice. At the same time, the journalists included in this study are established and reputable local news entrepreneurs, given formal requirements associated with membership of ICNN. This means that they represent a population with a particular profile which may not be representative of the universe of local journalism entrepreneurs in terms of professional norms and practices. This is important to note because some scholars of emergent local journalism outlets have observed significant problems in their professional practices, including poor sourcing practices (D’Heer and Paulussen, 2014; Reich, 2008), lack of adherence to journalism ethics (Tenor, 2018), and cozy relationships with local politicians and businesses (Gutsche, 2015).

The data presented here is part of a larger project. The interviews were therefore based on a broad range of topics around the practices and experiences of local journalism entrepreneurs. For the purposes of this article, we focus on analyzing responses to questions asking interviewees for examples of stories that the editors were especially proud of.<sup>ii</sup> In doing so, we can provide a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the forms of

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storytelling they celebrate, highlighting their ideals of local journalism. This allows us to understand how the professional values of these journalists translate into specific practices of storytelling which may be particular to these local entrepreneurial news outlets and reflective of what we describe as “vernacular journalism.”

Interviews lasted between 59 minutes and 1 hour 20 minutes. All interviews were carried out over Zoom, Skype or phone. Interviewees were given the option of being identified or remain anonymous either for the interview as a whole, or in certain parts. The vast majority of respondents (50 out of 57) preferred to be identified – a decision frequently justified with reference to their desire to serve as advocates for the sector. In cases where respondents wished to remain anonymous, they have been described by gender and broad geographical location, and any details which may reveal their identity have been removed. Interviews were transcribed with the assistance of otter.ai transcription software.

The article used a grounded theory approach in the analysis of interview data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the first phase of analysis, relevant sections of the interview transcripts were identified and subjected to open coding, using constant comparative method (Hallberg, 2006). This allowed for the identification of “codes” or key concepts in relation to the paper’s focus on how the commitments of local journalism entrepreneurs shape their journalistic practices and specific forms of storytelling that they celebrate. In the second phase, these key concepts were grouped into three core conceptual categories describing stories that (1) circulate and have an impact beyond the community, (2) make a difference in the community, and (3) authentically represent the community.

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Interviewees represented all nations and regions of the UK, with one interviewee based in Ireland.<sup>iii</sup> Of the 57 interviewees, 44 were the sole individuals producing content for their outlets.

#### Vernacular journalism practices in local news start-ups

The interview data suggests that the forms of stories valued the most by local journalists are ones that (1) circulate beyond the local community (2) make a difference in the local community, (3) represent the nature of the community, and provide a “first draft” of its history from the perspective of its inhabitants. As we will argue, the first of these categories – news stories that circulate and make an impact beyond the local community – reflects an orientation towards mainstream news values and acclaim. By contrast, the latter two highlight a distinctive orientation among these journalists captured by the concept of “vernacular journalism.”

Taken together, these categories suggest the complexity of the values of local journalism entrepreneurs. While they are driven by conventional professional values, they are also invested in their communities in multiple ways that distinguish them from journalists at mainstream news organizations. Our findings thus add further substance to Hanusch’s (2015) suggestion that local journalists are a “different breed altogether” due to their simultaneous commitment to traditional professional values *and* improvement of their communities. Furthermore, they suggest that these journalists both seek out and celebrate forms of storytelling which embody these characteristics.

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(1) Stories that resonate beyond the community

For many of the journalists, the stories of which they were most proud were ones that had originated in their communities but circulated more widely and gained a broader impact.

This was the case *either* because the story had been picked up and republished by national news organizations, *or* because other news organizations had subsequently done very similar stories with a local or national angle.

In some cases, local journalists were first on the scene for stories that were newsworthy beyond the local community. Such exclusives were usually facilitated by the journalist's presence in the community and their local contacts. These allowed the journalists to stay informed about what happens "on the ground" and respond quickly to breaking news events. For example, Michael Casey of *Your Thurrock* recalled with pride what was "probably one of our most well-known stories": In March 2016, a child died in a bouncy castle in a local park swept away by high winds. The story garnered attention from national and international media, but was made possible by Casey's local contacts and his proximity to the scene:

Somebody said, 'it's in the local park', somebody sent me a text saying, 'I think something really bad is just happening, Michael' [...] It [the bouncy castle] blew away 150 meters and she died. [...] it's raining in a park [...] air ambulances hovering over your head and the police have just arrived and you're doing this [...] You're ringing up the ambulance, you're ringing up the ambulance service press, you ring up the police press, and you're trying to deal with that [...] and then you're publishing the story.

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Casey published the story by 7 pm on a Saturday night. He was getting ready for a night at home with his wife, relaxing after a hectic day with a bottle of wine and an Indian takeaway. Shortly after the story went live, the police confirmed that the girl had died, and Casey recalls saying to his wife: "I think we should just stay dry ... Somebody's going to ring." An hour later, he began to receive phone calls from national media, and by the end of the evening, he had been interviewed by *Sky News*, the *BBC*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Times*.

For Casey, the story was memorable both because it embodied the excitement of covering major breaking news, and because it subsequently attracted attention from major national news outlets. As such, it illustrates the local journalists' allegiance to professional ideals celebrating traditional news values and the attainment of "exclusives" or "scoops" (e.g., Erdal, 2009). Such a theme was evident in numerous interviews. For example, Paul Hutchinson of the *Bedford Independent*, proudly recalled the site's "first big story" - an exclusive breaking news item about a local hospital fire, elaborated through numerous follow-up stories:

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. [...] the local paper, which kept telling everyone it was a paper of record, did a very poor job of covering it. They didn't have anyone locally there. Even the local BBC station [...] wasn't really covering it. And we were there. [...]

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In his account of the coverage, Hutchinson stressed that they were “the only news organization on the scene” even though Bedford is on the patch of several established mainstream news media. This reflects a theme across many interviews, of small local outlets providing exclusive coverage of stories that are important to local communities but neglected by other news organizations. The journalists’ access is facilitated by local knowledge and networks, cultivated over time and with great care. It highlights the fact that such place-based knowledge is essential to claims of journalistic authority for these practitioners, given that journalists “have positioned themselves as emplaced social actors who take up the responsibility of being there for us when we cannot” (Usher, 2019, p. 105). When Hutchinson mentions that “we were there,” his choice of words is underpinned by a specific normative understanding of local journalism. As Usher puts it, journalists’ claim to “being there”:

has been foundational to their claims for why they should be trusted and, in turn, critical to how they have legitimated their cultural authority.... journalists use place as a key mechanism to legitimate their specialized knowledge and claim cultural authority (Usher, 2019, p. 105).

Our interviews included multiple examples within this category. They ranged from stories about a lack of affordable local housing in Manchester (Conrad Bower, *Manchester Meteor*), to shady dealings around the reopening of a local pier (Jon Dunham – *Hastings Independent* and the dangers of vaginal mesh implants (Robin Young, *Gosport Globe*), to mention just a few examples. These stories were subsequently reported widely, and frequently had an impact on national policy-discussions. As such, they satisfy conventional criteria of news value, but derive from the local communities and from the journalists’ cultivation of a network of personal contacts within them.



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This suggests that these practitioners, while emphasizing their place-based knowledge and networks as essential to their authority, remain driven by broader journalistic role conceptions and values associated with the watchdog role, and value an impact beyond their local communities.

## (2) Making a difference in the local community

First, many interviewees were particularly proud of their ability to play a role as a watchdog on local power and, in doing so, making a difference within the local community. The means by which they were able to make a difference varied significantly, ranging from targeted campaigns and persistent coverage and follow-ups, to trawling through council archives and planning applications, and submitting endless Freedom of Information requests. A common theme across the editors' accounts was that without their reporting, the issue would not have come to light and would have remained unresolved, with detrimental consequences for the community. Such advocacy for the local community has an established history in the context of UK hyperlocals (e.g., Harte, Howells & Williams, 2018), and is particularly prominent because some of the outlets originate out of local campaigns and/or political commitments to social justice.

Indeed, as Harte, Howells & Williams (2018, Chapter 4) demonstrate, many local journalism start-ups in the UK, despite limited financial resources, engage in investigative local reporting, with the aim of holding local authorities and businesses to account. As their analysis shows, the goals of serving as a watchdog on concentrations of power and improving their communities co-exist within the normative framework of local journalism

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entrepreneurs, as a cornerstone of practices of vernacular journalism (see also Hanusch, 2015).

One typical example of how conceptions of watchdog journalism combined neatly with a commitment to improving the community was provided by James Hatts. Hatts is the editor of *Bankside Press*, which is one of the longest-serving outlets among the members of the Independent Community News Network – and the only example in the network of an outlet passed down through generations. *Bankside Press* was established by Hatts' father as a print-only outlet in the 1990s, with the son taking on the role as editor after his father's retirement. When asked for an example of a story that he was proud of, Hatts recalled his investigative work which helped to save the historic Elephant and Castle Pub, which was in danger of being closed for conversion into residential property:

It's the pub that gave its name to the area of London called the Elephant and Castle. [...] we were going to get to the point where the district of the Elephant and Castle wasn't going to have a pub called the Elephant and Castle anymore. And so we shone a light on that. [...] that story was read by people in a position of influence who immediately picked up the phone and encouraged some other people to lobby. And within weeks, the pub had been listed as an asset of community value onto the Localism Act, which would prevent the estate agent from using the building without obtaining planning permission. [...] and then a pub operator was found who was interested in taking this on, and the pub is still open today.

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Hatts reflected that this change was brought about on the basis of “something that I had found one evening buried in the depths of the council's planning database in a very sort of unpromising corner. I found something which I knew would cause a big splash with readers when we reported it, and then [it] led to further action.” The story of how *Bankside Press* contributed to saving the Elephant & Castle Pub reflects a key theme that cut across most interviews: While the closure of a historic local pub would never make it onto the national news agenda, it nonetheless makes a significant difference to local community life. At the same time, it is only through the presence of local journalists in the community, with their ears to the ground and their knowledge of how to locate relevant information – even if “buried in the depths of the council’s planning database,” as well as their willingness to call attention to issues which may otherwise have been neglected.

For Ben Black of *Cwmbran Life*, the resonance of such stories was related to the affective dimensions of geographical proximity. He suggested that while “a house burglary 20 miles away, it just doesn't make you feel anything [...] when it's something on your street or a street you know about or where your Nan lives” it matters because it’s on your “doorstep.”

Indeed, when recalling the stories of which they were most proud, editors frequently pointed to similar examples – seemingly mundane developments in the local community which nonetheless have significant material consequences for its members. Mike Rawlins, of *My Turriff*, highlighted the fact that his outlet covered the closure of local toilets – and, in doing so, brought about what was ultimately a successful campaign to save these essential local facilities:

In Turriff, we have two sets of public toilets. We had some on the high street and we had some [on] the showground. And it was like, we can only keep one of them open.

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And it was sort of done overnight, and they were going to close them. So I published that and got people quite engaged because they were upset. I wanted it changing.

And then there was a big discussion about keeping one set of toilets open. [...] 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. [...] And that was by me banging the drum and trying to get people excited about it.

Rawlins described this as an important “community story,” highlighting the role of local journalism in calling attention to issues that may seem mundane in broader contexts but make a significant difference to the quality of local life. The rescue of Turriff’s public toilets resulted, at least in part, from Rawlins’ persistent coverage of the planned closures, which may have gone unchallenged in a community without a news outlet.

Taken together, examples in this category demonstrate that for local journalism entrepreneurs, a commitment to changing their communities for the better is a core value. Doing so is, as they see it, entirely compatible with key tenets of journalistic professionalism, including serving as a watchdog on concentrations of power. This category reflects an allegiance to vernacular journalism insofar as they shine a light on issues that matter greatly in the community and represent the community’s interests.

### (3) Representing the nature of the community

The pride in seemingly mundane stories that were nonetheless relevant to community life extended to what editors variously described as “fun” or “quirky” local stories. For example, Kathy Bailes (*Isle of Thanet News*) pointed to the popularity of an item on “a woman finding

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a caterpillar in her broccoli” while Joe Willis (*Richmondshire Today*) recalled his enjoyment of writing a story detailing how police were called after a woman was spotted battering her brother with sticks of rhubarb.

While such stories were, in some cases, prized primarily for their entertainment value, in other cases they were directly linked to particular features of the local community. As Jeremy Morton (*South Leeds Life*) put it, his outlet often prioritised stories focused on nature, as well as reflecting the diversity of the population in the area. During the Covid-19 pandemic, he was happy to publish a story about the birth of a foal in a local park:

We have quite a lot of horses grazing on common land in the area. I think it relates back to the Gypsy and traveller population. And a foal was born on local public green space [...] and it was just [...] in all this doom and gloom, life goes on. [...]

For Morton, this story was compelling not only because it represented a positive news story but also because it provided a means to represent the traveller population in the area, as a unique feature of the community. Similarly, for Joe Willis (*Richmondshire Today*), a story about cows provided a way to highlight the rural and hilly nature of the local area:

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 the farmer let the cows out, they walked up a hill, and they couldn't walk down the hill.

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In other cases, the local journalists highlighted quirky stories of local individuals, as when Martin Giles (*The Guildford Dragon*) happened upon what he described as a “small human interest story” which ended up as one of the most popular stories on the site:

I happened to notice an old car outside a church. And when I went into the church, I said to someone, ‘oh, that's an interesting old car out there. [...] it looked like a very early version of a Morris Minor.’ And they said, ‘oh, the chap that owns it, [...] he works with us. He's over 90 and he's still driving it and he bought it new.’ [...] And I thought, ‘wow, that's interesting’. So I then arranged to come and interview him.

Giles classifies this story as belonging within the “human interest” genre, which has long been recognized as a staple of the offering of local news outlets (e.g., Paulussen & D'heer, 2013). Steensen (2011) points out that the main purpose of human interest journalism has been “to entertain the audience and connect people on an emotional level through the exposure of personal experiences of perceived public value.” (p. 60). Recent years have seen the growing prominence of human interest stories across a range of news genres. Such stories are no longer seen as restricted to “soft news” sections but are instead incorporated across conventional “hard news” genres, contributing to shaping public opinion and engendering broader debates about social issues (Figenschou, Thorbjørnsrud, & Hallin, 2021).

However, the label of “human interest” stories fails to fully elucidate local journalists’ motivations for valuing them. This is, firstly, because these stories could be understood as exclusives in a particular way: They capture unique stories reflective of the local community which the audience could not possibly access elsewhere (e.g., Goyanes, 2015). Secondly, the act of telling these stories is frequently underpinned by a desire to highlight the

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extraordinary lives of ordinary community members. This ties in with the articulation of a politics of representation among some local journalism entrepreneurs, who are concerned to give voice to people in the community and provide textured accounts of their lived experience, affording visibility to ordinary people (see also Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022b). Along those lines, Guy Phillips, of *bitternepark.info*, was especially proud of a long-running series of Q&A-style interviews with local community members:

I really liked the series that I did called “Bitterne Parker.” It was the kind of thing that you would normally see in the magazine about some celebrity, but actually it was [...] your next-door neighbour. [...] some of them were shopkeepers. And some of them did something slightly unusual - one of them led a ukulele band. And it got some really nice human stories about the people who live in the area, who might be a next-door neighbour or who might serve you up with a coffee in the local shop.

Here, Phillips emphasizes the fact that the series promoted coverage usually afforded to celebrities, but instead told audience members about their “next door neighbour.” His example reflects a belief in the democratizing potential of local journalism – the ability to capture the textured detail of the lives of ordinary people in the community, from the ukulele band leader to the coffee shop worker. In doing so, these stories celebrated the diversity of the community and the richness of its lived experience.

Stories in this category, then, reflect a vernacular journalism insofar as they tend to be driven by a democratic impulse and a desire to authentically reflect the nature of the community and represent the diversity of voices and experiences within it.

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Along those lines, a small number of journalists highlighted their pride in stories which documented their community's lived experience and provided a "first draft" of its history. For example, Alan McIntosh (Broughton Spurtle), was proud of a series detailing the history of his neighbourhood, based on his own archival research:

It's local journalism [...] about the back streets of the World Heritage Site, giving an alternative history of Edinburgh [...] There's a story coming up in about two weeks' time [...] about a female serial murderer called Jesse King in the 1880s. And she was found guilty of killing about four babies but is likely to have killed many more. It's a very tragic episode of social history, exclusively reported by nameless journalists on the *Evening News* in the 19th century, but as a little potted history of how journalism works. How it frames stories, frames attitudes to women, [...] non-compliant, non-conventional women criminals.

For McIntosh, his decision to publish this series was in part informed by the democratic impulse of reflecting the "People's History" of his neighbourhood – a history that would have otherwise been lost precisely because it is a story of otherwise marginalized and criminalized individuals. This, in turn, suggests an understanding of local news outlets as a site for the production of a vernacular or "alternative" history which disrupts dominant and sanitized accounts of a famous city by telling the darker tales of invisible past inhabitants.

The importance of capturing the vernacular history of the community gained renewed impetus following the Covid-19 pandemic which represented, for many editors, a unique crisis within their lifetimes. Michael Casey (*Your Thurrock*) reflected on the impetus to "chronicle people's history by documenting the extraordinary yet mundane events of the pandemic: The fact that people were "queuing for toilet rolls in Tesco's in Harlow in March



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2020.” Columba O’Hare, who runs *newry.ie* in Northern Ireland, comes from a background in photography and felt a similar urge to visually document the dramatic ways in which the pandemic transformed the urban landscape:

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?

For the editors reflecting on the significance of the pandemic, it was important to both capture and document its impact for future generations, creating the “first draft” of the community’s history. As such, the pandemic brought into sharp relief the significant role of local journalism in the production of vernacular history.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have made the case that local news entrepreneurs advance a form of “vernacular journalism.” Based on in-depth interviews with 57 entrepreneurs, the paper examines the story types most valued by these practitioners. We find that several of the entrepreneurs are proud of those of stories which have circulated and resonated beyond their outlets and communities, reflecting their commitment to professional news values and their aspirations to receive wider acclaim for their journalism. These stories were facilitated by local knowledge and networks, cultivated over time and with great care.

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More commonly, however, we find a preference for what we here describe as a vernacular journalism focused on the everyday lives and proximate preoccupations of ordinary people in local communities. It comes to life through stories characterized by the following shared features: First, vernacular journalism is encapsulated by reporting that makes a difference to the civic life of the local community, often through long-term campaign by journalists, from saving public toilets to keeping open a historic pub. Secondly, vernacular journalism authentically represents the nature of the community through sometimes quirky stories of things that could only happen there – from foals born on public land to cows refusing to walk downhill. At the same time, it endeavours to authentically represent the lived experience of inhabitants, and provide a “first draft” of the community’s history from their perspectives.

This journalism is vernacular in its *preoccupations* and *commitments*, rather than in *style*: It draws on the genres and styles of professional journalism while telling stories that challenge its focus on elites and centers of power.

Vernacular journalism, we have argued, reflects a democratic impulse to capture lived experience from the bottom up and, in doing so, to give voice and representation to local community members regardless of power, wealth and fame. As a conception of what journalism is for, it challenges conventional news values which privilege coverage of power elites and celebrities (e.g., Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). Instead, it emphasizes the importance of the specificity of the local community, and the authentic representation of its inhabitants.

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In a sense, this is not surprising: The ability to provide such vernacular journalism which reflects the world from the bottom up represents a unique selling point for local journalism against the top-down orientation of larger regional and national outlets. It is also grounded in the distinctive claims to authority embedded in the self-understanding of the local news entrepreneurs: It is precisely their knowledge of the local community and their networks within it, cultivated through long-standing presence, which enables them to serve as the authorized storytellers of their communities.

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<sup>i</sup> The larger project, funded by grants from the British Academy and the Economic and Social Research Council, focused on investigating the experiences and working practices of local journalism entrepreneurs, with a particular interest in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

<sup>ii</sup> The interviews explored the following areas: (1) the interviewees' professional backgrounds, (2) their route into the sector, (3) their financial conditions, (4) their news coverage, and (5) their experiences during the coronavirus pandemic.

<sup>iii</sup> Of these interviewees, just 15 were women, reflecting the gender imbalance in the profession. It is unclear why the sector is so male dominated. In our survey of practitioners, 23.5% of respondents identified as women. Some of the women we interviewed reflected on their gendered experience, with two describing making a deliberate choice to pursue a career as a local journalism entrepreneur because they saw it as a family-friendly occupation (Una Murphy of *View Digital* and one interviewee who wished to remain anonymous)