



**'One Every Two Minutes':
assessing the scale of hyperlocal publishing
in the UK**

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Keywords

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Abstract

Given that 'hyperlocal' publishing on the Internet is now attracting the attention of policy-makers (Ofcom 2012), investors (Radcliffe 2012) and researchers (such as Metzgar et al. 2011) it seems timely to assess the scale of activity of this emerging sector in the UK. This paper reports on research completed as part of the 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project on behalf of the UK communications regulator Ofcom and outlines the number of active hyperlocal websites and the volume and frequency of stories they produce. Such websites are, by and large, independent of mainstream media organisations and their intended audience is from a specific, often small, geographic area. The paper reflects on issues in developing a clear definition of what constitutes a hyperlocal website and in conclusion finds that whilst the challenge they pose to the local press might be overstated, their collective output and continued growth is of a scale that warrants continued interest from regulators concerned about the plurality of news sources that citizens are exposed to in their localities. The research goes some way towards identifying a clear baseline against which the further growth of the dynamic nature of this emerging sector can be measured.

Contributor Note

David Harte is a Co-Investigator on the UK Research Council funded project 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen'. He leads the strand of research focusing on the development of 'hyperlocal' publishing in the UK. At Birmingham City University's School of Media he leads a Master's award in Social Media and for many years he worked with local and regional government to support the development of the creative and digital media sector in the West Midlands. He is editor of bournvillvillage.com, a hyperlocal news website for the Birmingham suburb he lives in.

Introduction

In their 2012 overview of the emerging network of hyperlocal websites the communications regulator Ofcom claimed that these sites have: 'the potential to support and broaden the range of local media content available to citizens and consumers at a time when traditional local media providers continue to find themselves under financial pressure' (Ofcom 2012: 103). Ofcom devoted a chapter (2012: 103-111) of their annual Communications Market Report to hyperlocal – a recognition of substance that draws on the research outlined in this paper. By contrast, three years previously, Ofcom noted hyperlocal as being nascent in contrast to a developing US scene. Much of the UK material 'is hard to find, either because it does not attract a lot of traffic, or because it fails to deploy the strategies required to get a high ranking in traditional search engines' (Ofcom 2009: 45). In their 2009 review of 'Local and Regional Media in the UK', hyperlocal is described an emergent element of an existing 'ultra' local media landscape that included newspapers, radio, even television (Ofcom 2009).

Nesta, a UK charity that invests in creative businesses and publishes research, lamented in their own more recent report ('Here and Now: UK hyperlocal media today', Radcliffe 2012) that the UK hyperlocal phenomenon was marked by a lack of scalable business models in comparison to US (Radcliffe 2012: 28). Nesta's concern about hyperlocal's financial sustainability and what it saw as the potential for it to 'get lost in an increasingly noisy digital space' (41) was followed through with investment in ten hyperlocal projects to

help them focus on innovating with mobile services.¹

Such attention from policy-makers and investors, along with their increasing shift in attitude about the role and value of hyperlocal, obscures the fact that relatively little work has been done in the UK to understand the amount of content being published by these websites. The research detailed in this paper addresses that by utilising an existing open database of hyperlocal websites² and assessing the output of sites over a sample period in May 2012. The research was undertaken as part of the UK Research Council funded project 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen'. One of the project's intended early outputs was to address the question of scale with regard to hyperlocal publishing in the UK to help inform the positions of bodies such as Ofcom, Nesta and others.

Defining Hyperlocal

In the short time (2009) since the then Labour Government, in its Digital Britain report, cited the 'medium-term potential of online hyperlocal news' (Department for Culture Media and Sport 2009: 150) to contribute to a pending gap in the provision 'between the old and new' (150), the term 'hyperlocal' has become near-pervasive in media commentaries about either the continued plurality of local media or the decline of local and regional newspapers. In discussions for the implementation of the unrealised Independently Funded News Consortia there was much reference to hyperlocal

¹ http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/creative_economy/destination_local

² http://openlylocal.com/hyperlocal_sites

being a key mechanism to fill the 'gap' (academics from Goldsmiths University argued that the IFNC could 'develop and support hyperlocal media through the sharing of resources and on-line link up to encourage alternative voices' (Fenton et al. 2010: 2).

In this and other commentary from that time, terms are rarely contextualised and Metzgar et al (2011) note just how much literature and commentary assumes an understanding in its readerships of what a HLMO is ('Hyperlocal Media Operation', their acronym):

In recent years, it has appeared as a modifier for 'media', despite the lack of a definition. Grant-making organizations have hailed HLMOs as a potential savior for the struggling news industry. Scholars have proclaimed HLMOs a 21st century breeding ground for civic engagement. (Metzgar et al. 2011: 773).

Those commentating on shifts in the political economy of public service media often group 'citizen journalism', 'user-generated content' and 'hyperlocal' together as being 'bottom-up' (Cushion 2012: 86-87), situating hyperlocal as a new or emerging activity that contributes to the 'decentralisation of journalistic production' (McNair 2012: 81). In describing 'an emergent hyperlocal tier', Janet Jones and Lee Salter (2012: 96-97) make the claim that such websites offer 'stories grounded in local, hermeneutic knowledge' (Jones and Salter 2012: 96). Such a claim doesn't specifically draw on evidence but nonetheless the authors situate hyperlocal against a backdrop of emerging digital journalism practices that range from activist to commercial. Their overview (Jones and Salter 2012: 103-107) of commercial hyperlocal services is instructive and identifies

examples of initiatives that are, or were, focused on drawing in local advertising spend by monetising user-generated content. This distinction between the commercial and community forms, and the problem of sustainability in either model, is the focus of research by Kurpius et al. (2010) which interviewed proprietors of a range of hyperlocals in the US. They distinguished between market-driven and subsidised models but note that:

In practice, the difference between the market-driven model and the subsidized models is modest. The news is being produced it just is not being collected or funded in the manner to which society has become accustomed. (Kurpius et al. 2010: 373)

Research by Thurman et al. (2011) examines the network of 'Local People' sites developed by Northcliffe Media (now part of Local World Ltd) in 2009. The sites partially aggregated content from existing Northcliffe newspaper titles but did have a network of paid community publishers curating content and writing stories (although 75 of the 'around 100' publisher roles were lost in a restructuring in August 2012).³ Reflecting on the merits of the venture the authors argue that it suffered in comparison to sites with a more civic-minded 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

³ <http://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2012/news/northcliffe-to-axe-freelance-roles-in-local-site-restructure/>

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. (Thurman et al. 2011: 7)

Rather than make such commercial/community contrasts, community media historians are keener to focus on the uses that the media produced by citizens are put to. In examining tendencies for debates around community journalism to risk generalising in their use of terminologies, Hatcher and Reader (2012: 243-244) usefully identify the need to understand the context of organisational structures of community media operations and the relationships they have with community members. They draw on an empirical study by Banjade (2006) to argue that hyperlocal journalism is 'driven by the voices of community members more than by the agendas of policymakers' (Hatcher and Reader 2012: 244). A number of authors have focused on the ways in which online practices have significantly altered the relationship between mainstream and alternative journalism practices. Lievrouw (2011), in her examination of genres of alternative media production, situates alternative journalism practice as a critique to the industrialised and institutionalised processes of mainstream journalism. Lievrouw's examples tend to focus on large-scale networked projects such as Indymedia but she makes the point that whatever the scale, the key characteristics of alternative journalism are 'connectivity, interactivity and community' (Lievrouw 2011: 121). John Hartley (2009) goes further in seeing the potential of participatory forms of

journalism as examples of 'user-led innovation' (Hartley 2009: 162) that will reshape and even undermine commercial models of public service journalism. Chris Atton (2004) concerns himself with the ways in which 'new social movements' have made use of 'radical online journalism' but like Hartley he too sees the potential of the widening of participation in Internet-based journalism practices as a way for a 'critique of dominant news values and practices that is effected through the performance of this 'new' journalism' (Atton 2004: 60).

Returning to Metzgar et al. (2011), their definition of hyperlocal seems to take on board these academic accounts of the ways in which the Internet facilitates new forms of participation and can contribute to an undermining of the existing political economy of the journalism industry:

hyperlocal media operations are geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement. (Metzgar et al. 2011: 774)

To some extent it is the filling of 'perceived gaps' that concerns Ofcom. As noted earlier, they are keen to keep a watchful eye on the development of hyperlocal media in light of the decline of other forms of local media (Ofcom 2012: 103). In turn, although Nesta's definition adds some sense of geographic restriction, it strips out references to the need for originality and community-orientation:

Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single

postcode or other, small geographically defined community. (Radcliffe 2012: 9)

For Nesta, hyperlocal isn't required to function as 'civic engagement' nor play a role in the debate about the decline of public-service orientated media in localities.

Such omissions are important when considering the ways in which hyperlocal web services are discussed in the UK. The distinctive framing of alternative journalism practices by academics from journalism and community media studies is in turn played out in the public sphere in specific ways by those influential in policymaking. This stripped-down Nesta definition situates hyperlocal as an empty vessel into which both commercial players and journalism activists can frame themselves against, thereby continuing to practice hyperlocal for their own often very differing reasons. Hyperlocal is of the web and it is 'small' – against that slim framing, according to Nesta at least, interested parties can pour in whatever content they wish.

The Openly Local database

By and large it is the Metzgar et al. definition that applies to those websites listed on the only existing database of such websites.⁴ Chris Taggart, a former journalist and web developer, developed this resource in 2010 as a complement to his comprehensive listing of council services. His rationale was that such websites were: 'a crucial part of the media future as the traditional local media dies or is cut back to a shadow of its former self' (Taggart 2010). Taggart created his resource to be compliant

with Open Data standards and therefore its data could be reused freely, 'for mashups or anything else' (Taggart 2010). Importantly, Taggart pitched the resource as being generated by the knowledge of the community: 'I actually started out with a very small number (probably a dozen or so, certainly less than 20), and then let the community do the rest' (Taggart 2013). The database currently lists 633 hyperlocal websites (February 2013) and continues to be updated by 'the community' and also by an organisation called Talk About Local (since June 2012). Talk About Local is a business which works with organisations, usually in the public sector, which wish to give 'people the simple skills and support to find a powerful online voice for their community' (Talk About Local 2011). They sit very firmly within the 'community' end of hyperlocal and therefore their updating of the resource reflects their position. Of the ten most recent additions (as of late February 2013) only one seems to have a developed commercial model.⁵

The research outlined in this paper needs to be seen as a reflection of the UK hyperlocal scene as filtered through this database. That is, it draws on the contributions of the community of practice that helped to populate it, a community largely advocating the civic values of hyperlocal:

We think that the best hyperlocal platforms are those 'owned' by people in their communities. So Talk About Local is more about people and public service than technology platforms and advertising. (Talk About Local 2011)

⁴ At: http://openlylocal.com/hyperlocal_sites

⁵ <http://www.kentishtowner.co.uk/>

The database does include a high proportion of sites that are using the 'Local People' platforms (n=123) and other hyperlocals that have paid journalists involved. However, Taggart never sought to exclude those:

We allow non-commercial and commercial sites. The only sites we won't allow are those behind a paywall or those that are pure listings sites (and don't have a significant news or community aspect). (Taggart 2010)

To undertake a study of all UK 'pure listings' sites would entail including every automated content aggregation site in the UK, something that was outside of the scope for this research. Each of the sites in the database displayed clear evidence of original content being produced exclusively for it by an identifiable author.

It is worth noting the work undertaken by Flouch and Harris (2010a) on taxonomies of hyperlocal media. Their study of London 'citizen-run online neighbourhood networks' examined 160 local sites in London and identified eight distinctive types. All of these are represented in the Openly Local resource with the exception, as noted, of 'Multiples and Listings': 'aimed primarily to generate revenue through listing local businesses, services and events' (Flouch and Harris 2010b: 9) and 'public social spaces' which Flouch and Harris describe as: 'Profiles set up on Facebook or Twitter for sharing information about areas and often light-hearted chit-chat about an area' (Flouch and Harris 2010b: 7). Obviously these spaces exist but on the database are listed alongside the websites they relate to rather than as separate entities.

Interrogating the database

The Openly Local database listed 517 sites at the time of this study (May 2012). A sample period was identified, from 8 May until 18 May inclusive, during which a count would be made of the number of individual stories published by the websites. Many hyperlocal sites publish highly infrequently or fall into periods of non-use between editorships so it was decided to allow for a broad definition of what an 'active' hyperlocal site would be. Thus, if they had published one or more story during the period of 7 January and 18 May (five months prior to the sampling period) then they were described as 'active'. 432 sites fell into this category. The remaining sites were either 'dormant' or had stopped publishing altogether (one of the problems this research has identified is that there is no policy of deleting non-functioning sites from the Openly Local resource). There were also a small number of forum-based sites listed on the database – 'Local Discussion Sites' (Flouch and Harris 2010b: 4) – but they were excluded from this study as although these are often the most active of citizen-run online spaces they produce content that is difficult compare in measurement terms with the vast majority of hyperlocal sites. There are actually some very successful examples within this category⁶ and Flouch and Harris noted that they were the 'most highly social type of local network, often developing a strong sense of group' (Flouch and Harris 2010b: 4). They would be worthy of further study in their own right.

The final list of websites therefore focused on those sites that produced

⁶ www.sheffieldforum.co.uk and www.yeahhackney.com are useful exemplars.

identifiable news items. A broad view was taken of what a news item would be but most sites produced a mix of hard and soft news, event notices, reviews of local amenities or arts events, opinion pieces: to a degree, a not dissimilar mix to that in existing mainstream local media. Two methods were used to count the total number of news items. Firstly, a form of automated counting took place whereby active sites which produced news items that were published through an RSS⁷ feed were recorded. This process involved a series of stages. Initially, all the RSS feeds from these sites were 'bundled' together using a facility on Google Reader. The output from this was used as an input for a new account on Twitter that would create a new tweet every time one of these hyperlocal sites published. This account (at twitter.com/alllocalnews) was public facing but its primary purpose was to allow for the tweets to be stored on a spreadsheet⁸ that would then include data on when the tweet (and therefore the news item) was published. This generated findings about the frequency of publication of hyperlocal news. Although the Openly Local database lists an RSS feed for the vast majority of sites, some have been input incorrectly or point to older versions of the websites. A common pattern with hyperlocal sites is the way they mature from using hosted content management services such as [blogger.com](https://www.blogger.com) or [wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com) to self-hosting a site on their own web server space. Openly Local is rarely updated to reflect this change in an individual site's

⁷ 'Rich Site Summary' but usually referred to as 'Really Simple Syndication' – a function of many web publishing platforms that allows website content to be syndicated.

⁸ Developed by Martin Hawksey at JISC: <http://mashe.hawksey.info/2012/01/twitter-archive-tagsv3/>

web address or RSS feed address. Some 'cleaning' of the database was required as a consequence and a list of 448 RSS feeds were identified as functioning correctly from the 517 sites. This form of recording allowed for data to be produced on frequency of publication.

Secondly, a manual count of stories took place. This count looked at the combination of data from those sites that produced no RSS content (but did produce news items, often in hard-coded HTML pages) and those that did. It is these figures that are drawn on for the findings for total number of stories as they produced a similar, but slightly lower, count of stories. One might have expected this count to produce a higher number but given the variable reliability of RSS as a technology it is clear that the 'automatic' count includes instances of RSS feeds occasionally publishing duplicate stories. At the close of the sample period there were 4026 news items identified from the automated count and 3819 from the manual count – a variation of 5%. This represents an acceptable tolerance and the two sets of data are not being compared. The latter figures were used to allow us to calculate distribution of news stories and the former, in general terms, the frequency of publication. A very small number of sites published stories but allowed no way to identify the date of publication – these were ignored.

Findings

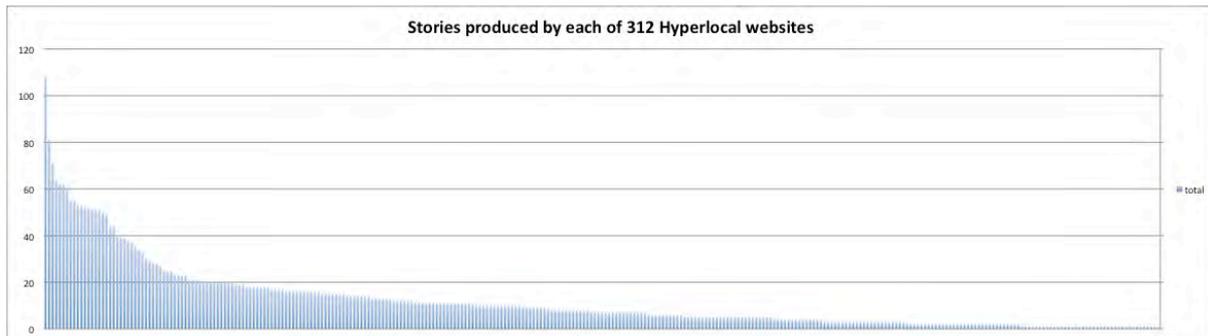
Publication

This research finds that during the period of 8 until 18 May 2012, hyperlocal websites produce almost 2500 stories a week, or the equivalent of 5.6 stories per week, per site. Of the 432 sites that were

identified as 'active', 313 of them produced at least one news story in the sample period. The average number of posts per site over the 11 days was 12.2 and the median number was 7. 39 sites produced just a single story and 133 sites produced 5 stories or less. In total, 3819 stories were published. Table 1

shows the distribution of stories across the sites showing a 'long tail' effect with 58% of stories being produced by 20% of the sites. It's clear that a small number of sites are very active but by far the majority, 259 sites, produced less than 20 stories each during the sample period.

Table 1: Hyperlocal's 'long tail' – distribution of stories across sites



Frequency

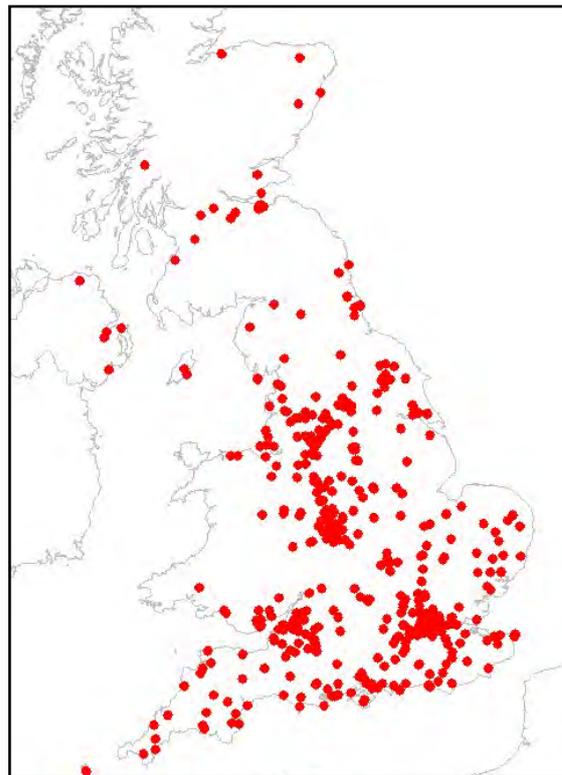
Overall, an average of 15 items per hour were produced by hyperlocal websites. This was calculated using the data gathered from RSS feeds as previously described. The time-stamps of the stories indicate that hyperlocals are most active during the hours of 7am and 7pm. Indeed it was during this period, on the weekdays of the sample period, that the average number of stories published rose to 24 items per hour, close to one story every two minutes. The peak day for stories was 14 May 2013 with 483 stories published – a story every minute between 12pm and 2pm. The volume of stories published drops by about a third at weekends

Table 2: Frequency of posts – stories per day

Date	Stories per day
08/05/2012	394
09/05/2012	372
10/05/2012	407
11/05/2012	381
12/05/2012	165
13/05/2012	169
14/05/2012	483
15/05/2012	393
16/05/2012	397
17/05/2012	439
18/05/2012	426
Total	4026

Geographic distribution

Of the 432 sites that were designated as 'active', 400 were located in England, 15 in Wales, 13 in Scotland and 3 in Northern Ireland. Collectively, London Boroughs' 48 websites that produced a story during the sample period produced 483 items. Birmingham's 15 sites that published during the sample period produced 92 items. Overall Birmingham had 28 'active' sites, the most for any single local authority area although the Greater London area has 77 in total. Not all clustering of sites are around urban areas. Rural south Gloucestershire has 11 sites, largely aimed at small towns and villages, and Wiltshire has 10.



Map: Geographic spread of UK hyperlocals

Publishing platforms

The Openly Local database does record the sites' publishing platform. However, this data is now incomplete as sites often change platform and the record isn't changed. Despite this it was observed that some sites make use of content management systems developed by mainstream media outlets. Northcliffe Media's Local People platform was widely used (123 of all sites) whilst sites run through the About My Area platform comprised 19 of the total. Blogging platforms such as Wordpress and Google's Blogger are widely used.

Conclusion

This research has attempted to understand the scale of activity in the emerging area of hyperlocal publishing

on the Internet. It provides a snapshot based on a data source that has largely been developed and maintained by the community of hyperlocal practitioners themselves. The findings suggest that the volume of stories collectively produced by these websites is impressive, with a high volume of stories being produced per day. Yet some localities are either not served at all, or are very poorly served by such websites. The degree to which a hyperlocal website that publishes only one or two stories a week is making an effective contribution to the public sphere is debatable.

To some extent this research can be seen as an attempt to set a benchmark against which future growth or otherwise can be mapped. In future iterations of this work, clearer criteria might be established around what is defined as 'active' and a longer sample period

identified to help make the findings more robust. What's clear is that this area of news publishing is highly dynamic with many sites having relatively short but active lives and others changing web addresses or content management systems and so exposing the fragility of Openly Local as a data source. The current 'guardians' of the data, Talk About Local, are partners in the 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project, under which this research has been carried out. This at least allows researchers to understand the kinds of websites that will be added to the site but there is potential for this to be at odds with the broader interpretations of hyperlocal that are the focus of Nesta's most recent analysis of Hyperlocal (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013). Nesta make a distinction between what they see as 'traditional' hyperlocal and 'native' hyperlocal. The former 'includes online services provided by organisations with a background in local broadcasting, local newspapers and local authorities' whilst the latter are 'independently-owned hyperlocal news sites and blogs' (Nesta and Kantar Media 2013: 3). Subsequently, 'this makes the definition broader than some, but this categorisation was chosen in order to provide a comprehensive measure across all local media sources' (58). The Openly Local resource's narrowness needs addressing as it is limited both by its tendency to favour sites that are closer to the Metzgar et al. definition (2011) but it is also confined to hyperlocal media operations that are natively of the Internet. With a broader perspective we may find that the practice of writing and publishing hyperlocal news and information is much more widespread than anticipated.

This research hasn't attempted to interrogate the motivations behind these websites being created and sustained. It would be useful to frame such interrogation against debates around the exploitation of 'digital' labour (Fuchs 2013) and in the context of ethnographies of everyday digital activism (Pink 2012). Even a cursory glance at many of the hyperlocal websites examined here suggests that there is a diverse mix of motivations, with some seeking to be economically sustainable and others having more civic enhancement goals in mind. Whatever motivation, those producing news for hyperlocal websites are making a notable journalistic contribution to their local public spheres. We should see that contribution in the context of the continuing decline in advertising revenues and circulations of local and regional newspapers. 242 newspapers closed between 2005 and 2011⁹ leaving a total of 1,083 regional daily or weekly newspapers in the UK.¹⁰ Further research would be needed to understand how motivated hyperlocal proprietors are to participate in this space but as others have noted, a more critical assessment of the decline of the press needs to be undertaken (see Siles and Boczkowski 2012).

Hyperlocal's future as an element of the public service broadcasting landscape is perhaps the most interesting, yet neglected, part of the discussion to date. Ofcom's close attention to the outcomes of the research described here suggests that the combined 'problem' of the

⁹ Source: Press Gazette <http://www.thejournalismfoundation.com/2012/05/mind-the-news-gap-242-local-press-closures-in-7-years/>

¹⁰ As of July 2012. Source: <http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk/regional-press-structure>

newspaper industry's trend towards closure and retrenchment of their local press titles and the retreat from local television news provision by ITV, means

that hyperlocal may yet have a future that is more than the sum of its disparate parts.

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