

# Hyperlocal Publishing in the UK - A Snapshot

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July 2012



## Executive Summary

This short report provides a snapshot of Hyperlocal news publishing in the United Kingdom as of May 2012.

It finds that there are 432 active Hyperlocal websites that cover the whole of the UK with provision greatest in England and a clustering of sites around urban areas. During a sample period of 11 days in May 2012 the number of news items produced were counted and 3819 items were found to be produced during this period. 313 of 'active' sites produced at least one item with 20% of sites being responsible for 58% of those.

There was significant variance in the frequency of publication with 39 sites producing just one story in the sample period and 17 sites producing more than 50 items. 75% of items were produced by a third of the sites. Overall the average number of sites produced per Hyperlocal website was 12, with a median figure of 7.

Outside of London, Birmingham had the greatest concentration of Hyperlocal websites with 28 active sites and 15 producing items within the sample period. In total, 92 items were produced. Bristol had 8 sites and in general there is a clustering of sites around large urban conurbations. However, some rural areas were well served with South Gloucestershire having 11 sites, largely aimed at small towns and villages, and Wiltshire having 10. Many areas of the UK seemed to have no Hyperlocal provision but this may be due to there being a site no longer regarded as active (and therefore returning no data for this study) or the site not having been identified as part of this research.

Over the sample period news items were produced at an average rate of 15 per hour and 366 per day. However, the number of items produced per hour during 7am till 7pm on weekdays averaged 24 per hour. The highest number of items produced in a single hour was 68, between Midday and 1pm on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> May.

The research concludes that the dynamic nature of this emerging sector makes it difficult to identify a clear baseline upon which to measure. The sector is highly dynamic with even established sites often changing their name and URL and some sites having short life-spans. However, a complete picture of UK Hyperlocal publishing would make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the shifting landscape of local news provision.

## Introduction

This research was undertaken as part of the AHRC/EPSRC funded project ‘Media, Community and the Creative Citizen’<sup>1</sup>. The goal of this project is to understand the emergence of new forms of ‘creative citizenship’, against a background of rapid changes in news media ecology at the local and community level. Hyperlocal publishing is one of three strands of research work, the others being focused upon citizen-influenced design and planning and networked communities of creative artists. The research aims to establish the value of these acts of creative citizenship and to understand how they can be enhanced and propagated.

One of the project’s intended early outputs was to better understand the scale of Hyperlocal publishing in the UK. This study uses existing data that identifies websites that are, by and large, independent of mainstream media organisations and whose intended audience is from a specific, often small, geographic area. A broad definition of Hyperlocal Publishing can be found in Nesta’s recent (2012) publication ‘Here and Now – UK Hyperlocal Media Today’<sup>2</sup>. Its author, Damian Radcliffe, defines Hyperlocal media as:

*“Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other, small geographically defined community” (p9)*

US academic David Kurpius (et al., 2011<sup>3</sup>) argues that those using the term Hyperlocal do so in recognition of the content and energy they derive from the community they serve. Such Hyperlocal news sites 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” (p774)*

This study has examined websites that fall within the above two definitions but with some caveats outlined below for sites that are forum-based and not part of this study.

Our findings should be viewed against a backdrop in which regional newspapers have suffered from declining advertising revenues and circulations. 242 newspapers closed between 2005 and 2011<sup>4</sup> leaving a total of 1,083 regional daily or weekly newspapers in the UK<sup>5</sup>.

Although work exists to create taxonomies of Hyperlocal media (see <http://www.joniayn.com/2011/03/18/what-type-of-local-news-site-are-you/> for a summary) this research does not contribute to that field of study.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://creativecitizens.co.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Available from:

[http://www.nesta.org.uk/about\\_us/assets/features/here\\_and\\_now\\_uk\\_hyperlocal\\_media\\_today](http://www.nesta.org.uk/about_us/assets/features/here_and_now_uk_hyperlocal_media_today)

<sup>3</sup> Kurpius, D., Metzgar, E., & Rowley, K. ‘Defining Hyperlocal media: Proposing a framework for discussion’ in *New Media & Society* 1461444810385095, first published on May 31, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Source: Press Gazette <http://blogs.pressgazette.co.uk/ushahidi/>

<sup>5</sup> As of July 2012. Source: <http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk/regional-press-structure>

## List of main findings

### Sample

- The research sampled a list of 432 active websites 8th till 18th May 2012.
- 'Active' was defined as a website having posted at least once in the 5 months prior to the sample period.
- 313 published at least one article in the sample period.
- 119 did not publish an article in the sample period.

### Publishing

- The average number of posts of those sites that published was 12.2 posts per site within the sample period.
- The median number of posts of those sites that published was 7.
- 3819 items were published in total.
- 75% of the items are produced by a third of the sites.
- 58% of items were produced by 20% of the sites.
- 39 sites produced just one story.
- 133 (42.6%) sites produced 5 or less items. These were responsible for 9.3% of the posts.

### Frequency

- Overall, an average of 15 items per hour were produced by Hyperlocal websites.
- During weekday daytimes this average rose to 24 items per hour, close to one story every two minutes.

### Geographic distribution

- 400 sites were located in England, 15 in Wales, 13 in Scotland and 3 in Northern Ireland.
- Collectively, London Borough's 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.

## Methodology – Identifying Hyperlocal websites

A database of Hyperlocal websites has already been established through a resource called 'Openly Local' - [http://openlylocal.com/hyperlocal\\_sites](http://openlylocal.com/hyperlocal_sites). This formed the basis of our study but the data was cleaned and many sites were found to be no longer publishing (their URL either didn't resolve or pointed to a site no longer publishing news items).

Many Hyperlocal sites publish highly infrequently so a decision was made to identify as 'active', those sites that had published at least once in the 5 months prior to the sample period. This resulted in both the sites that rarely published and those that published

often (but missed the sample period), as being omitted from the findings. A longer sample period would benefit a future study and encompass more sites.

One of the shortcomings of this research is that the Openly Local resource is largely produced by self-declaration in that many Hyperlocal publishers input their own details. Absence from the directory might be deliberate by some sites or it may be the case that those operating within the definition of Hyperlocal are not familiar with the term so would be unlikely to know of the directory's existence. More recently, Talk About Local<sup>6</sup> have been updating the resource with new sites. The research team drew on its own knowledge of the sector to add some additional sites to the database.

### **Methodology – Identifying news items**

The final list of websites focused largely on those sites that produced identifiable news items. A broad view was taken by 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. A similar mix to that found in existing mainstream local media.

There are many sites that effectively serve their audience purely through discussion forums. Such sites were outside of the scope of this research unless they also had a section that produced separate news items. News items published through a Twitter feed or Facebook page were likewise not counted. A separate study focusing on forums and updates via social platforms would be useful.

Sites that aggregated content from other news providers were also excluded. Some sites mix original content with aggregated content and where possible only the former was counted as part of this study.

### **Methodology – Counting content**

Two methods were used to count the total number of items. Firstly, a form of automated counting took place whereby active sites which produced content through an RSS<sup>7</sup> feed were recorded and content pushed to a spreadsheet. At the close of the sample period there were 4026 items from 448 RSS feeds. This form of recording did not identify how many of those feeds actually produced a news item. However it did allow for data to be produced on frequency of publication.

To identify distribution of news items, a separate count was kept. 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. This study produced a slightly lower total of 3819 stories produced in the sample period.

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<sup>6</sup> Talk About Local are external partners on the 'Creative Citizenship' project.

<sup>7</sup> Usually referred to as '*Really Simple Syndication*' – a function of many web publishing platforms that allows website content to be syndicated

The variation between the figures from the two methods was 5%. The lower figure from the manual count may be explained by the researchers realising that a small number of RSS feeds in the automated method were linked to forum postings and that some feeds were publishing aggregated content. However, the 5% difference is an acceptable tolerance and the two sets of data are not being compared. One set allows us to understand distribution of news stories and the other, in general terms, the frequency of publication.

Some sites published stories but allowed no way for the researchers to identify the date of publication. Where it was clear that the story related to activity in 2012 the site was included as 'active' but not publishing during the sample.

The manual count should be regarded as the more accurate and it is this that we use in our headline figures.

### **Publishing platforms**

The original Openly Local database did record the sites' publishing platform. However, this data is now incomplete as sites often change platform. We did observe that some sites make use of Content Management Systems developed by mainstream media outlets. Northcliffe Media's Local People platform was widely used (120 of all sites) with sites run through the About My Area platform comprising 19 of the total. Blogging platforms such as Wordpress and Google's Blogger also seemed to be widely used but were not specifically counted as part of the research.

### **Conclusion**

This study has attempted to understand the scale of activity in the emerging area of Hyperlocal Publishing. It provides a snapshot based on existing knowledge of the area from those involved in the research. However, the area is highly dynamic with many sites appearing for short periods, such as those connected to college or university projects, and others changing URLs or platforms and so making the only existing database, Openly Local, out of date.

Despite this, our study has been successful in setting a baseline against which the growth or otherwise of Hyperlocal can be tracked. In future iterations of this work, clearer criteria might be established around what is defined as 'active' and a longer sample period identified.

## Tables – Geography

<b>Council Name</b>	<b>No. sites</b>
Birmingham City Council	28
Wiltshire Council	11
South Gloucestershire District Council	11
Bristol City Council	8
Ryedale District Council	7
City of Edinburgh	7
Stoke-on-Trent City Council	7
Leeds City Council	7
Cornwall Council	7
London Borough of Richmond upon Thames	7
Cardiff Council	6
London Borough of Lambeth	6
North Somerset Council	5
Mendip District Council	5
Cheshire East	5
Brighton and Hove City Council	5
London Borough of Lewisham	5
Greater London Authority	5
Sheffield Council	4
Cambridgeshire County Council	4
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council	4
Huntingdonshire District Council	4
London Borough of Islington	4
London Borough of Greenwich	4
London Borough of Haringey	4
London Borough of Hackney	4
London Borough of Wandsworth	4
Welwyn Hatfield Council	3
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	3
Oxford City Council	3
Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council	3
North Devon District Council	3
Elmbridge Borough Council	3
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	3
Arun District Council	3
Manchester City Council	3
Cheshire West and Chester	3
Wealden District Council	3
Thanet District Council	3
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council	3
Eastleigh Borough Council	3
City of Westminster	3
London Borough of Camden	3
London Borough of Southwark	3
Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames	3
London Borough of Hounslow	3

*Table 1 – Council areas with 3 or more Hyperlocal websites*

England	400
NI	3
Scotland	13
Wales	15

*Table 2 - UK distribution*

**Tables – Frequency of posts (data from RSS feeds only)**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Stories per day</b>
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
<b>Total</b>	<b>4026</b>

*Table 3 – stories per day*



Time	18th May	17th May	16th May	15th May	14th May	13th May	12th May	11th May	10th May	9th May	8th May	Total	Avg	Avg hourly stories (omitting w/end)
24:00-1:00	4	7	5	4	5	3	7	13	4	3	15	70	6	7
1:00-2:00	5	0	0	2	3	1	1	2	0	3	2	19	2	2
2:00-3:00	2	0	0	0	3	2	2	2	1	1	0	13	1	1
3:00-4:00	0	0	3	1	0	1	0	0	0	4	1	10	1	1
4:00-5:00	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	3	0	1	0	14	1	1
5:00-6:00	5	3	3	4	3	0	2	2	1	2	8	33	3	3
6:00-7:00	8	8	6	6	7	1	14	6	8	3	7	74	7	7
7:00-8:00	25	6	8	10	4	11	8	11	10	15	12	120	11	11
8:00-9:00	41	40	35	27	28	7	8	20	12	30	27	275	25	29
9:00-10:00	42	47	33	25	33	2	22	39	52	24	44	363	33	38
10:00-11:00	39	33	27	32	36	10	11	32	31	38	57	346	31	36
11:00-12:00	36	27	39	28	44	8	9	34	37	37	24	323	29	34
12:00-13:00	30	31	30	31	68	7	12	29	28	16	25	307	28	32
13:00-14:00	27	19	39	21	52	6	5	40	33	26	19	287	26	31
14:00-15:00	25	38	41	28	42	6	5	36	29	39	22	311	28	33
15:00-16:00	39	25	20	26	40	14	14	27	24	30	25	284	26	28
16:00-17:00	20	37	16	29	6	18	3	18	33	23	15	218	20	22
17:00-18:00	21	33	17	28	35	8	9	18	17	24	12	222	20	23
18:00-19:00	16	28	11	16	20	9	9	8	19	13	15	164	15	16
19:00-20:00	4	9	15	28	13	17	4	14	9	16	22	151	14	14
20:00-21:00	10	11	11	11	10	14	7	6	13	3	14	110	10	10
21:00-22:00	16	15	19	8	14	13	2	11	24	9	7	138	13	14
22:00-23:00	5	8	10	17	12	4	6	4	18	7	8	99	9	10
23:00-24:00	5	12	8	9	3	6	4	6	4	5	13	75	7	7
<b>total:</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>483</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>407</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>4026</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>avg/hour: 17</b>
<b>7am-7pm total:</b>	<b>361</b>	<b>364</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>301</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>312</b>	<b>325</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>3220</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>avg/hour peak: 28</b>

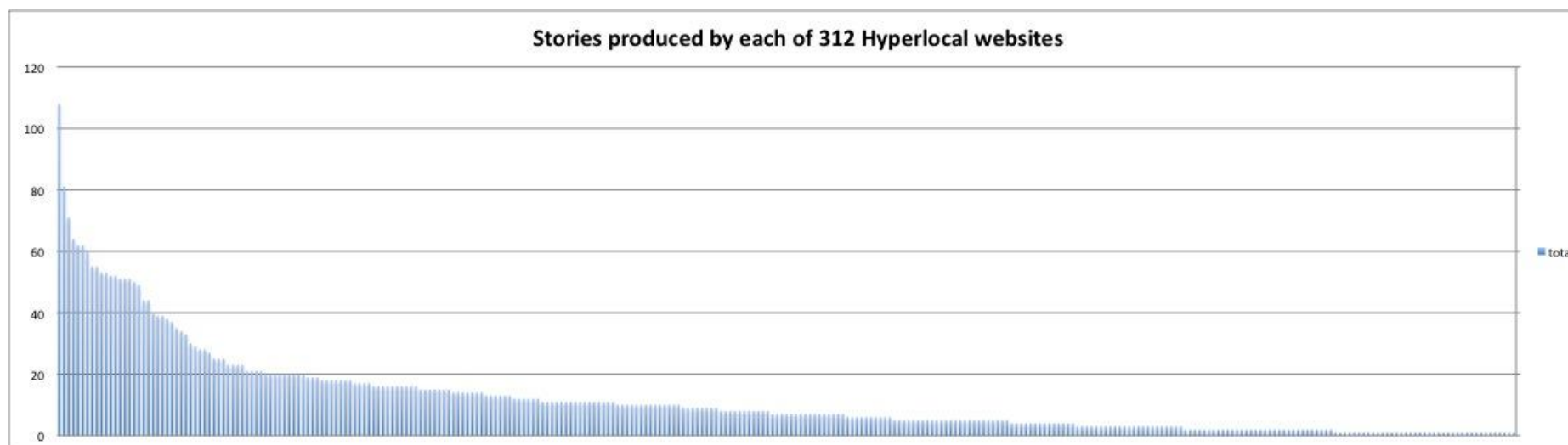
Table 4 – Stories per hour

**Tables – Distribution of stories (from manual count)**

No. stories produced	1 - 4	5 - 9	10 - 14	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64	65+
No. Hyperlocal sites	108	70	49	32	17	7	3	5	3	1	8	2	4	3
Total stories	228	457	564	534	356	187	97	188	128	49	413	110	248	260

*Table 5 – No. of stories produced by each site.*

**Charts – Distribution of stories (from manual count)**



*Chart 1 – No. of stories produced by each site.*

## Datasets

Data used in this report can be found at:

<http://bit.ly/hyperlocaldata-1>

<http://bit.ly/hyperlocaldata-2>

## Acknowledgements

Sarah Hartley – Talk About Local

Will Perrin – Talk About Local

Nicky Getgood – Talk About Local

Karen Strunks – Talk About Local

Geraldine Murphy – Research Student, Birmingham City University

Professor Ian Hargreaves – Cardiff University (Principal Investigator, 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen')

Glyn Mottershead – Cardiff University (Co-Investigator, 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen')

Dr Andrew Williams – Cardiff University (Co-Investigator, 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen')

Francois Nel - UCLan Media and Digital Enterprise (MADE) Project

Openly Local Directory

The 'Media, Community and the Creative Citizen' project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) under the Connected Communities cross-Council Research Programme. It also forms part of the Digital Economy Programme.

The Connected Communities programme is led by the AHRC in partnership with four other Councils – the EPSRC, the ESRC, the MRC and the NERC. It aims to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, organisations and communities.

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