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EXPERIENCING LOCAL NEWS ONLINE: AUDIENCE PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

This article explores how audiences experience local news online. It discusses the findings of an empirical study that examined why audiences consumed local news online, what sources they were most likely to access, how important distributing platforms were in local news use, and what users understood by local news. The research had a qualitative design applying diaries as its main method collecting data in the South-East of England in 2016 and 2017. The findings suggest that there is no shared understanding among audience members about what local news is in the digital environment. The study identified three predominant ways in which participants understood local news: as personally relevant or interesting information, as content produced by legacy local media brands, and as community engagement. The study also found that each of the different understandings of local news was linked to particular online news consumption and engagement patterns. The paper argues that audience perceptions of news should be studied alongside motivations for and practices of news engagement and consumption in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of audiences and news in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

Audience research; diary method; local news use; news audience fragmentation; news engagement; online news consumption; perceptions of local news.

Introduction

Local news plays a significant role in the social, political and cultural life of communities, and it remains an important part of the news diet of audiences (Ofcom 2017; Pew Research Center 2015). However, both news consumption and the ecology of local news have changed considerably in the last decade due to the uptake of digital technologies and the impact of the Internet. In the UK, online platforms have now overtaken traditional media forms as the most important sources of news (Newman et al. 2017), and while the readership of printed local newspapers has declined, local news consumption online has expanded significantly. Local news brands reach 40 million people weekly, 28 million of whom read local media via print or online at least four times a week (Local Media Works 2016). Furthermore, 48% of British adults access local news via social media platforms (Ofcom 2017). At the same time, local news industries have been in turmoil characterised by declining advertising revenues, unstable business models (Nielsen 2015; Mair et al. 2012) and the emergence of new forms of local and hyperlocal news (Williams et al. 2015; Baines 2012). Despite these significant changes and the important social, cultural and political roles of local news (Aldridge 2007), the literature on the topic has been limited and our knowledge of why and how audiences use local news online and how they understand local news in the digital environment remains underdeveloped.

Aiming to address this gap, the article examines audience practices and perceptions in relation to local news online. The study particularly adds to contemporary debates about local online news in three areas. First, it contributes to our understanding of what local news is in the digital environment. The meaning of local news is often assumed or taken for granted, both in industry analysis and in academic research. However, in the digital environment previous understandings of local news, inherited from the analogue era, have been undermined due to changes in production, distribution and consumption of news. In general, research on online news consumption has focused on patterns and motivations of use (Lee 2013), whilst our understanding of what audiences mean by and perceive as news, local or otherwise, is lacking. Second, the study provides an insight into how audiences navigate emerging digital local media ecologies. Research on local news has concentrated on either legacy providers (Nielsen 2015) or on new news forms, such as hyperlocal news (Williams et al. 2015), whilst studies with an ecological perspective examining audience practices across different sources and platforms have been limited. Third, this study advances our knowledge regarding shared experiences of audiences in a given local media ecology. There has been an emphasis on audience fragmentation and segmentation in online news consumption research, but arguably these mainly give insights into differences and divergences, while our understanding of shared experiences and practices is more limited.

Online news consumption

The literature on local news in the digital environment has tended to focus on journalism, production and organisational aspects (e.g. Mair 2012; Nielsen 2015; Williams et al. 2015), while research on local news consumption and audiences has been more sporadic and fragmented. One strand of this literature has explored the link between online and offline local news consumption. Skogerbo and Winsvold (2011), for example, found that in Norway online local news was used as complementary or an add-on, but not supplementary, to offline news. A second strand has examined the influence of demographic characteristics on local news consumption. This research

has found that there were significant differences between generations in terms of how they consumed local news, with young people not taking up local news consumption, either offline or online, to the same extent as previous generations (Wadbring and Bergstrom 2015; Nygren and Leckner 2016). Yet another strand of the literature has compared different local news ecologies highlighting that the online environment could lead to more diverse local news consumption involving different sources and platforms (Pew Research Center 2012). However, as shown in another Pew study, patterns of online news consumption and diversity of sources could differ considerably from one geographical area to another (Pew Research Center 2015). A separate area that has been explored in the literature is the link between attachment to the community and engagement with local news. This link has been confirmed for traditional analogue media forms (Stamm et al. 1997; Paek 2005). However, research on the link in relation to online environments remains inconclusive. Whereas some studies found no strong association between online news consumption and community attachment (Skogerbo and Winsvold 2011), others (Hoffman and Eveland 2010; Pew Research Centre 2015; Nygren and Leckner 2016) have concluded the opposite. Yet other studies have explored the community-building potential of local media in a digital landscape. Wenzel (2018) highlighted the important role of contemporary local media in place-based community and identity building, particularly in polarised political and communicative cultures. Hess (2013) also emphasised the importance of geographical connections and introduced the concept of ‘geo-social’ news to recast local newspapers and media for the digital age. While McCollough et al. (2017) found that in the digital environment audiences recognised the need to be self-reliant for local news, even if they have not embraced citizen journalism and remained uncertain about community-generated news.

While there have been few studies on online local news use, there has been considerable research on online news consumption in a broader context. Two key areas of interest for this research have been audience practices and motivations. In relation to practices, studies have explored patterns of news consumption, the role of distributing platforms, what sources of news audiences access, and their relationships with these sources. There is generally an agreement in the literature that audiences are more in control of how and when they use media for news, which platforms they use, and in relation to the creation of content (Chyi and Lee 2012; Dickens et al. 2015; Hermida et al. 2012; Lee 2013). However, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which audiences are in control of their news use and the factors that influence their involvement in news production and distribution. Different studies have identified possible factors that influence changing practices and routines of news consumption. Hoelig (2016), for example, explored participation with online news in European countries and found significant differences in levels of interaction, which he linked to perceptions of media institutions and levels of Internet penetration. Another strand of this research explored audience fragmentation (Blekesaune et al. 2012; Mitchelstein and Boczowski 2010; Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012; Webster and Ksiazek 2012) and how news consumption is increasingly personalised in the digital environment (Napoli 2010; Ohlsson et al. 2017). Chyi and Lee (2012) argued that online news consumption is complex and characterised by varied audience preferences, usage and willingness to pay. Research on audience fragmentation has often focused on particular groups with specific interests or demographic characteristics, and two types of audiences that have been the subject of a number of studies are news seekers and news avoiders (Ksiazek et al. 2010; Trilling and Schoenbach 2013). In Sweden, Ohlsson et al. (2017) found that online news consumption was linked to social class and identified two audience groups who preferred ‘quality’ or ‘popular’ news respectively. The news consumption of young people has been explored in a number of studies (e.g. Poindexter

2012), which highlighted generational differences as key factor to understand audiences in the digital age. What these different studies have in common is their focus on patterns of uneven and exceptional news consumption rather than the examination of general patterns of audience practices and news use.

In relation to research on motivations of news audience, most studies list reasons for news use in a specific context. In doing so, they have mainly followed a ‘uses and gratifications’ approach, which is a long-established theoretical framework that assumes rational and active media consumption by the audience (McQuail 1997). In the US Lee (2013), for example, found four major forms of motivations to engage with digital news: information-motivated, entertainment-motivated, opinion-motivated and social-motivated. There have been numerous other such categorisations, but most of the identified motivations for online news consumption could be categorised as either instrumental (selective and purposive use) or habitual (ritualised use) (Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2017). A relatively recent section of the literature, however, has emphasised the importance of social media, especially Facebook, and incidental exposure as key factors of online news consumption. In a Dutch context, Hille and Bakker (2013) found that legacy media pages on Facebook facilitated distribution rather than active participation and called for further research on Facebook as a hybrid news format. Kalogeropoulos and Newman (2017) as well as Yadamsuren and Erdelez (2017), among others, also argued that there has been a shift towards distributed media, where consumers are incidentally exposed to content on third party platforms.

Whilst our understanding of online news consumption has undoubtedly improved, existing research is arguably lacking in cohesion. There has been a tendency to focus on the consumption of national news by established news providers, and many studies have examined uneven patterns or specific audience groups, whilst general trends are less explored. Heikkila and Ahva (2014), applying a media flow perspective and a cultural audience approach, argued for more focus on practices rather than profiles of audiences to enhance our understanding of contemporary news and news consumption. In their study they demonstrated how, through the practices of routines, interpretation and public action, audiences experience and make sense of news and journalism in their everyday life (Heikkila and Ahva 2014). Following a similar approach focusing on audience experiences, this study examined online local news consumption by exploring audience practices with and perceptions of local news in a digital environment. Audience practices were studied by analysing audience motivations, as well as sources and platforms used for local online news consumption, while local news perception was examined by looking at how audiences framed local news and what they meant by the concept.

The specific research questions were:

RQ1: Why do audiences consume local news online?

RQ2: What sources do audiences use the most to consume local news online?

RQ3: Which platforms are audiences most likely to use to access local news online?

RQ4: How do audiences understand local news in a digital environment?

Methodology

This exploratory research was a multi-method audience study involving both quantitative and qualitative data, based on a qualitative design. A qualitative research design was chosen because it can generate new insights into complex and novel phenomena that are relatively under-

researched (Miles et al. 2013), which is the case with the subject of this study. Participants were recruited from three geographically specific local communities in semi-urban or semi-rural areas of the South-East of England (using postal code areas in Canterbury, Herne Bay and Whitstable). The areas had an estimated population of 162,400 in total (mid-year estimate ONS 2015). The three communities were part of the same broader regional media ecology, which included local and regional broadcasting outlets, weekly local newspapers, some of which has been in print for more than two centuries, and their online editions. Legacy news brands have dominated the landscape; local newspaper brands for local news and broadcasting brands, especially the BBC, for regional, county-wide news. There was no new hyperlocal provision in the selected areas, but there were vibrant community group sites on Facebook in two of the three communities. Similar to national trends, there have been significant changes in local news consumption patterns in the last fifteen years: circulation of print newspapers has plummeted, some established paid-for weekly papers have closed, and door to door free papers have been replaced with supermarket pick up stands, all while online local news consumption has steadily increased. The study's recruitment process aimed to sample a cross-section of online local news users from the three communities, and participants were recruited via online notices. This approach resulted in 33 participants, 18% of whom were from the 18-24 age group, another 18% were 25-34, 30% were 35-44, 28% were 45-54, and 6% were above 55. All participants gave informed consent and were guaranteed confidentiality. Participants were offered an incentive in the form of a voucher to maintain and enhance engagement. Data was collected between February 2016 and April 2017.

The main data collection method was a diary technique, which was supplemented by a questionnaire, interviews and focus groups (for breakdown of collected data see Table 1). First, participants completed a questionnaire that mapped the patterns of their local news consumption, both online and offline, and collected information regarding demographics and their level of engagement with their local communities. Second, they were asked to write daily diary entries for three non-consecutive weeks, following a template that was designed for the study and could be completed via a closed online website. The diary asked participants to log their local news activities, sources they accessed, their use of social media, as well as any related thoughts or reflections they may have had. Using the diary method approach borrows practices from time-use diaries (Dimmick et al. 2010) by guiding participants through closed- and open-ended questions about their activity during the assigned time period. The diary entry template included four closed questions and three open-ended, which meant that the diary dataset contained both quantitative and qualitative data. Third, following the completion of the diaries individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather more detailed data about participants' views. Fourth, two focus groups were conducted to follow up on initial findings. Both the individual and focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed ad verbatim for analysis. To accommodate different perceptions of local news, the study applied a broad interpretation, including hard news, soft news and service news (weather and traffic), but the focus was maintained by specifically asking participants to report on news linked to their local community.

TABLE 1 near here

The diary method aimed to capture the phenomenon of online local news consumption as it was taking place in everyday life. The advantage of this method is that data is collected over a period of time allowing for richer and more reflective responses. It also allows phenomena to be observed close to when and where activities happened, minimising the delay between an event and

the time at which it is recorded, as well as limiting the influence of the researcher (Bartlett and Milligan 2015). A further strength is that it allows for the capture of everyday, ordinary occurrences and events that participants might fail to mention or view as insignificant in snapshot recording methods. The supplementary methods, the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, are established methods for audience research (Patriarche et al. 2013) and useful to capture data about audience practices and perceptions. The mixed methods approach was applied to collect complementary data that has the potential to provide different perspectives on the topic studied, as well as to reduce recall bias and missing data. Data was coded and analysed using Nvivo, which allowed data management as well as explorations of patterns and themes across the four datasets. Whilst the quantitative data was analysed statistically to identify overall patterns, thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data to find and explore thematic connections, where analytical categories were formed and amended in an iterative and flexible process (Braun and Clarke 2013; Miles and Huberman 1994). McQuail (1997, 85) notes that the complexity of audience formation precludes any single theoretical explanation, and as such this study applied multiple theoretical approaches to frame the analysis, which included functionalist, pragmatic and media flow perspectives. The study's research design has its limitations. The sample was not representative as it only included participants who were self-reported users of local news online, and the study was based on qualitative design which limits its generalisability. However, we believe that the analysis provides useful insights into the under-researched field of online local news consumption and highlights areas for future research.

Results

RQ1 – Key reasons for accessing local news online

The analysis of the collected data identified four main reasons why participants accessed local news online, each of which fitted in the three broader categories of audience motivations identified in the literature discussed above. The reasons included seeking out specific news and information (instrumental), browsing for news (habitual), following on-going stories in the local community (instrumental and habitual), and being exposed via feeds or notifications (incidental exposure).

1) Seeking out specific local news and information online

Most participants reported both in their diary entries and interviews that they accessed local news online to seek out specific news items or information, which shows instrumental motivation for news consumption. The frequency at which they did this varied, as did the type of content they sought out. The most frequently mentioned types of content included news about specific events, traffic, weather and places to go. Timeliness was an important factor for this type of information; the content was recent or about something in the near future. The relationship with the physical environment was also a factor as many participants recorded in their diary entries that they accessed a local news item because they had experienced something offline; a tendency that also appeared in interview comments.

If I witnessed something happening in my area, I would go online to get more information about it. (Interview, Participant 26)

Several participants sought out specific pieces of local news online to complement news from other media platforms, which echoed other studies' findings (Skogerbo and Winsvold 2011). In our study, however, there was evidence that at least some participants accessed online sources to fill a perceived news gap, as the quote below illustrates. Even so, the survey data showed that the views of participants varied in this respect, with 43% agreeing that there was enough news about their local community in traditional media forms, 29% disagreeing and the rest was unsure.

I was looking for more information on a story I'd seen on television. (Diary, Participant 27)
[It] could be that there's something going on in [name of town], that's not something the local news will report on, so you kind of have to look for it separately. (Focus group, Participant 31)

2) Browsing for local news online

Another reason why participants accessed local news online was browsing, which was regularly recorded in approximately two-thirds of participants' diary entries, and it was commented on in the interviews. This activity could be associated with habitual news consumption where audiences keep up-to-date with what is happening. The data showed that audiences did not necessarily differentiate between different types of news when browsing online, as participants reported to switch seamlessly between local, national and international news. The diary data also revealed that participants often had a particular time of the day, device and setting for browsing for news online.

I'll probably have a glance [at local news] while I'm sitting on my iPad, my boyfriend will probably have football on or something like that, so it's something that I do. I am inevitably on Facebook and looking to see things, but I do ... read through [the news] in the evenings. That's pretty much what I do most days, really. (Interview, Participant 6)
In bed at night, I spend five minutes on my phone ... and the last thing I do is look at the news page and the weather ... to see if anything is breaking on the news. (Interview, Participant 25)

3) Following on-going stories in the local community

Approximately half of the participants reported accessing local news online to update themselves on on-going stories in their communities, but the frequency at which they did this varied greatly. This type of news consumption could be seen as both instrumental and habitual, since participants purposefully sought out specific information but they did this routinely while the stories were evolving. Participants often had an emotional attachment to these news items and found them important in terms of belonging to their local communities. The stories had varied content and lasted for different periods of time, some for a few days, others for several years.

I also updated myself on the situation with the housing development resistance ... in case there had been updates in terms of the petition against the development. (Diary, Participant 20)

I am keeping an eye on the news about a dog - Dave - that has been lost 2-3 days ago, I would love to read that he has been found. (Diary, Participant 6)

4) Exposure to local news online via notifications and feeds

The fourth reason for accessing local news online was 'pushed' content, that is incidental exposure, when participants received notification or were alerted via their newsfeed. Nearly all participants recorded in their diaries to have accessed local news online for this reason. While the previous motivations for accessing local news online are arguably non-platform and non-media form specific, this fourth reason is particular to the online environment and driven by algorithms.

My first online activity today was looking at the [local newspaper] Facebook page after seeing a stream of stories appear on my news feed. The story that was getting regularly updated was the crash that took place on the A2. After seeing all the updates appear on Facebook I went on to the website to read the story. I was also able to watch a video footage of the clean-up that took place. I took an interest in this story mostly because of the constant updates on the newsfeed and friends sharing the article on their homepage. (Diary, Participant 31)

It emerged from the data analysis that Facebook was the key distributing platform that alerted and directed participants to local news items. The content that was distributed in this way came from different sources; some from legacy news providers, some from local online groups, some from friends or individual members of the community. Interestingly, participants often reported that they were neither attached to nor paid close attention to stories they accessed via notifications, which suggests that incidental exposure mainly leads to cursory news consumption.

Today I briefly looked on Facebook for a local news story about a university student completing an all you can eat challenge. It was quite boring so I only scanned the online article. (Diary, Participant 3)

Sometimes I'll go onto a story that I am interested in, and I'll start to read it but then I'll think, gosh it seems like it's a bit long, and I'll scroll and see how long it is, and it's really long, and I'll just click off it and give up. (Focus Group, Participant 25)

RQ2: Key sources to consume local news online

The results of our study show that audiences accessed local news from different online and offline media, and that different news sources feed on each other, which echoes findings of related research (Pew Research Center 2012). Participants reported using different sources for local news, including media organisations, local councils, local businesses and community groups, but the diversity of sites and the frequency of access varied. However, legacy news brand sites and

community group pages on Facebook were the two types of sites participants accessed first and most frequently, and they perceived them as the most important sources for local news.

1) Legacy news brands sites

Most participants reported having used the online sites of legacy media providers for local news, but responses varied in terms of frequency, how many and which providers, and whether they relied on notifications on Facebook or other distributing platforms to access the sites. Those who most frequently reported accessing legacy news sites also used a wider variety of sources, just as they were more likely to look up these sources directly. Over half (54.3%) of all diary entries recorded the use of online editions of local newspapers, which made this source the most popular. In the questionnaire survey, 62% of participants reported to use online editions of local newspapers at least once a week and 29% reported using a local radio station. Those participants who frequently accessed legacy news brand sites used them habitually, checking these sites as part of their everyday routine.

The first website I went to look at on Friday was [name of local newspaper website] as I normally do. (Diary, Participant 31)

[local newspaper website] It's one of my tabs that's always open on my phone, so I just click it and refresh to see what ... it's changing or not. (Focus group, Participant 25)

Legacy local newspaper sites were perceived to be key sources of local news by most participants, with about a third of them commenting during the course of their diaries that they found them informative. However, some were critical about their style and usability, particularly in relation to the amount of advertisements and the quality of journalism.

Using [legacy news brand website] to gain updates on what is going on in the county is always frustrating, the website is purely click bait ... most of it is rubbish. (Diary, Participant 20)

I would have liked to comment but the amount of ads on the page made this very difficult to do. No wonder people use ad-blocking software to get rid of this stuff! (Diary, Participant 10)

2) Community group pages on Facebook

The second most popular online sites for local news were Facebook community group pages, with 27.4% of all diary entries recording their use. These group pages were set up and curated by local residents with a non-commercial objective, and they were typically used for local information, events and breaking stories. Most of the participants were aware of the sites for their own community, but only a minority used them regularly. Notable about these sites is that they are hybrid in the sense of being both sources of original content as well as distributors of external content since they are both sites for local news as well as communication. This ambiguity is probably the reason why views about the sites varied greatly, with some participants seeing them

as key sources of local news while others did not regard them as a news source at all. Those who used these sites often saw them as a good way to connect with their local community:

[Name of local community Facebook site] is good way to connect with people, and what's going on. It's ubiquitous. Interesting to view what your friends are posting about, you feel connected and the newsfeed feels dynamic. (Interview, Participant 5)

Some participants, however, had concerns about how these sites operated, the comments on them, and were therefore reluctant to contribute:

algorithms ... can determine the quality and quantity of the information you automatically receive. For example, [name of local community Facebook site], I don't feel that I get everything from discussions that are taking place, I don't know how they are filtering the information. It feels as if there is a randomness to it. (Interview, Participant 11)

(...) if I read through the comments I am often surprised at the aggressive tone and insults and it means I do not comment. (Diary, Participant 14)

RQ3: Key platforms to distribute local news online

Quantitative analysis of the data revealed that Facebook was the main distributing platform, with 65.7% of the 476 daily diary entries recording the use Facebook for local news. In the questionnaire survey 74% of participants reported to use Facebook daily for news about their local community. Importantly, however, there was a small group of participants who never or infrequently used Facebook for local news. The use of other platforms was more limited. 18.3% of diary entries recorded using Twitter for local news, 6.1% WhatsApp and 2.5% Instagram. Participants tended to just use one platform: only 13% of the diary entries recorded the use of more than one social media type for local news, while 63.8% showed the use of one platform and 21.5% logged no use of social media. These findings echo the results of other studies (Ofcom 2017; Newman et al. 2017), which identified the increasing importance of social media, in particular Facebook, as platforms through which audiences access news.

The survey revealed that 74% of participants agreed that social media have improved news and communication in their local community. The diary entries also asked participants to rate how useful they found online platforms. In general, they were perceived to be more useful for accessing local news than for connecting with the local community (Means: 7.45 and 6.7 respectively for 1-10 rating scale where 10 meant most useful; SD: 1.98 and 2.38 respectively). But for both purposes, participants perceived online platforms relatively useful (means scores are higher than median point). Analysis of variance (Anova) revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between Facebook use and a positive perception of online platforms being useful for local news (at $p \leq 0.005$), while there was no similar association for other types of social media (Table 2). This suggests that participants who used Facebook for local news found it valuable, which was not the case for the other platforms.

TABLE 2 near here

However, the qualitative data showed that participants varied in their attitudes towards Facebook and the extent to which they relied on it for local news. For a section of participants, Facebook was key in their local news consumption online, as one participant reflected:

Today there was no stories featured through Facebook [that] linked to any local news sites. It made me reflect on how my local news reading is influenced by Facebook, which I usually check a couple of times a day as I have an app on my smartphone. If none of my friends have shared local news stories, then I don't read them. (Diary, Participant 14)

But another group of participants was less attached to social media and more critical of Facebook:

I did not use any social media today, as part of Lent I have given up social media ... I think social media is ... a big distraction. (Diary, Participant 24)

I hate Facebook. I feel really strongly about that, I feel that it is a tool that can be used to 'catch people out', 'keeping up with the Joneses', and 'cyber bullying'. (Diary, Participant 29)

RQ4 – Audience understanding of local news

The analysis of the data revealed that participants understood local news differently. Three main ways of understanding local news emerged: as personally relevant or interesting information, as content produced by legacy local media brands, and as a form of community engagement. These interpretations were not mutually exclusive, but one of them dominated how participants framed and thought about local news throughout the data collection. The results also suggested that the way in which participants perceived local news was linked to particular practices of local news consumption online (Table 3), as discussed further below in relation to each group.

TABLE 3 near here

1) Local news as personally relevant or interesting information

Participants in this group predominantly saw local news as information that was personally relevant or interesting to them. They talked about local news in broad generic terms:

[Local news is] information that informs me about the communities I belong to. (Interview, Participant 27)

Similarly, the local news content that they reported to have accessed varied greatly and included articles by local journalists, reviews of local events and places by members of the community, train times updates, and information about bin collection. The diary data revealed that this group used a variety of sites without demonstrating much loyalty for any of them, just as they were often critical of legacy news brands.

The stories that are reported on [legacy newspaper website] don't feel particular big, such as dog stories ... website full of adverts and annoyingly difficult to navigate. (Diary, Participant 21)

These participants were the most likely to access local news online either because they sought out specific local news and information, or because they were exposed to them via notifications and feeds.

I normally read more international news websites such as Yahoo News and BBC News, but I found it [local news] very interesting and useful trying to find wedding venues and local concerts/events. (Diary, Participant 23)

They tended to be heavy users of social media and see Facebook as their main source of local news, as one of them commented: "My main local media would be Facebook." (Interview, Participant 1). This audience group fitted Kalogeropoulos and Newman's (2017) characterisation of people that were more likely to remember the platform on which they found the content than the news brand behind it. The data also revealed that these participants mainly interacted with their friends and family in relation to local news online, and, importantly, they did not show a strong affinity to or significant engagement with their geographically defined local community, either online or offline. This group was mixed in terms of age, but no one was above 55 and there was a higher proportion of people under 35s than in the other two groups.

2) Local news as content produced by legacy local media brands

Participants in this group mainly perceived local news as the outcome of journalistic practices and the product of established local media brands, distinguishing between content from journalists and content from ordinary members of the local community. When asked to define local news they often provided a list of legacy local news brands, which they saw as the most important sources of local news, both online and offline. Their perception of local news was framed by the content produced by legacy news providers, which they accessed as part of their habitual news consumption. Participants in this group often reported in their diaries that it was part of their daily routine to access local news from established news brands: "My day would start by looking at BBC [news] website, then the Kent news." (Diary, Participant 25) They also tended to be loyal to their favourite local news brands regardless of the platform:

I do enjoy a proper weekly local newspaper, as you can sometimes find a story which involves someone you know. I don't mind if the format is online or printed, it's about the content. (Interview, Participant 9)

In the early evening I re-visited [name of legacy news website] and clicked the 'where I live' menu to navigate to [name of town] for ultra-local news stories. (Diary, Participant 17)

If I have free time I will go onto [name of legacy news website] just to have a look, because that is I think the best place for local [news], I know it's not probably the best written or anything, but it's got some information or, the only place that I know that I get something on [name of town]. (Focus group, Participant 15)

Most audience members in this group did use social media to access news online, but they tended to use them less frequently than participants in the previous group. Importantly, they saw social media as a communication platform rather than a news platform, reflecting that their perception of local news was determined by the source of news:

For [local] news, it would be traditional news websites such as [name of a legacy local news brand site] and [name of another legacy local news brand site]. For [local] communication, it would be Facebook or Twitter, or local groups. (Interview, Participant 17)

Participants in this group tended to be older and they mainly used social media to communicate with friends and family. Their diary data revealed limited use of community pages on social media, and generally indicating that they were not heavily involved in their local community.

3) Local news as community engagement

For this group, local news was predominantly a way to engage with and contribute to their local community, which they were closely attached to and participated in offline as well online. As one of the audience members summarised:

For me local news is important to know what's going on, what's been celebrated, how to participate. It's different for me when you hear the world news But with my local news, I feel like it should be something that I can interact with, I feel that it should be something that I am part of. ... when I look at local news I don't want to know how many teenagers have crashed on the road between Herne Bay and Whitstable. I want to have a different use for [local] news and to be part of that online community that are sharing news, events, campaigns or protests. (Interview, Participant 14)

Participants in this group accessed different types of content with different motivations, but a key driver for their online local news consumption was to follow on-going stories and campaigns in the community.

I like the momentum that gathers behind local news stories made possible by platforms like Facebook and Twitter. ... Following several of them it is interesting to see how stories develop and reposted several times. (Diary, Participant 5)

These participants used a variety of sites and platforms for local news including both legacy news providers and local community pages on social media, although they tended to use the latter more frequently. This group was mixed in terms of age, with most of them being 35-55. They were regular users of social media, typically using the platforms on a daily basis, and they were members of a number of Facebook groups. They often interacted on the platforms by sharing, commenting and posting content themselves, and they tended to emphasise the positive aspects of social media, especially the platforms' ability to bring the local community together.

I found the online news regarding my local community very interesting today. The stories that were posted were ‘newsworthy’ and kept you updated on cases that mean something to those in the community. By reporting these sort of stories, I feel that it generates further conversation between those in the community because it is close to home. (Diary, Participant 31)

Today I reflected on how positive I feel about my local community, in part because I am a member of several local Facebook groups. (Diary, Participant 18)

[Local news is about] anyone interested in getting local information out there, it doesn’t have to be local newspaper but it can be anybody in the street, especially now due to social media where those voices are becoming more apparent in the local community. People are interested in spreading the word about what’s happening. Therefore, it seems to me much more powerful that it was before when it seemed to be ‘word of mouth’. (Interview; Participant 14)

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how audiences experience local news online, specifically exploring why audiences accessed local news online, the platforms and sources they used, as well as their perceptions of local news in the digital environment. Four key findings emerged from the study that contribute to contemporary debates on online local news use and online news consumption in general. First, the results suggest that there is no shared understanding among audience members about what local news is in the digital environment. Arguably, this is an important development from the pre-digital era when established news brands defined what local news was through their control of production and distribution of news products. Our study shows that participants’ interpretations of local news varied and that legacy news brands did not have a monopoly of defining what local news was online, suggesting that the concept has become ambiguous in the digital environment. The geographical boundaries of local news were also ambiguous and shifting. This might be a specific feature of our semi-urban and semi-rural case study area, where the local media ecology was characterised by variations in terms of geography and content. News sources ranged from the neighbourhood news of Facebook community pages to local newspapers that served one or two towns and regional, county-wide broadcast news. However, the results also showed that participants’ experiences with local news online were not completely individualised and they shared practices, particularly with those who interpreted local news in a similar way. We identified three predominant ways in which participants saw and understood local news in the digital environment: as personally relevant or interesting information, as content produced by legacy local media brands, and as form of community engagement. Further research is required to examine whether these results are generalisable, but the findings highlight some implications for both news audience and news research. Regarding audience research, they show the need to include audience perceptions of news alongside motivations for and practices of news engagement and consumption in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of audiences and audience fragmentation in the digital age. In relation to news research, the findings illustrate the need to reappraise the concept of news for the digital environment and take into considerations the varied audience perceptions and interpretations of the term.

Second, our findings show that participants had some shared experience regarding local news consumption online, but these experiences were fragmented according to their perceptions

of local news. Common to all participants was a level of knowledge about the local media ecology, they all knew about the main news brands but their views and frequency of use varied. All participants used social media for local news at some point, but again they differed in terms of frequency of use and opinion about the platforms. Arguably, the infrastructure of the local media ecology provides a shared experience and a shared local public connection. Participants also shared a similar list of motivations why they accessed local news online, but they varied in terms the top reasons. The results showed that the differences in experiences could be connected to how audiences perceived local news, as each of the three ways of understanding local news was linked to certain practices and patterns of use. However, further research is needed on how the infrastructure and features of local news ecology influence the audience's understanding of local news and their shared experiences.

Third, our study shows that the level of attachment to the local community continues to be an important factor in local news consumption, much like it was in the pre-digital age (Stamm et al. 1997). However, while previous research focused on the link between levels of local media consumption and community engagement (Paek et al. 2005; Hoffman and Eveland 2010), our results suggest that a strong attachment to the local community is predominantly linked to understanding local news as a form of community engagement. This finding also indicates the blurring of the offline and online world of local communities, which raises questions regarding their boundaries. Further research is needed, though, to examine the link between particular perceptions of local news, community engagement and online local news consumption.

Fourth, the results show that local news sources in the online environment, as perceived by audiences, vary in terms of both traditional and new content providers. In our study, legacy news brands and Facebook community groups emerged as key sources, indicating that legacy news brands are no longer the sole custodians of local news online. Even so, legacy news brands still play a part in online local media ecosystem, which echoes findings of previous research (Nielsen 2015; Mair et al. 2012), especially for participants who perceived local news as content provided by these outlets. However, other participants' use of legacy media was more limited, and importantly the interactive, community engagement activities of audiences seem to have concentrated on Facebook community pages rather than local news brand sites. Further research is needed to explore which online local news sites are the most successful in community engagement and interaction, and how legacy news outlets develop these activities. Similar to other studies, we found that Facebook was a key distributing platform (Hille and Bakker 2013; Kalogeropoulos and Newman 2017), although our participants differed in terms of their attitudes towards Facebook and the extent to which they relied on it to access local news. Some participants seemed to rely completely on Facebook notifications and feeds for local news, while others avoided the platform altogether. For some, Facebook community groups were important, not just as news distributor but as a form of community engagement and a forum for public debate and community discussions. There is limited research on these sites (Swart et al. 2017), but our study suggests that a distinctive feature is their hybrid nature in the sense that they simultaneously act as sources and distributors of news and information, and as a forum for community discussions and engagement. Further research should explore the important roles of Facebook regarding online local news distribution, consumption and engagement, and how these roles change as Facebook and other social media platforms evolve. The finding also suggests that there is a need to revisit what is meant by the concept of news sources, as the new hybrid forms do not neatly fit into traditional categorisations and conceptualisations.

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TABLE 1
Breakdown of collected data

	<i>Questionnaire</i>	<i>Diary entries, week 1</i>	<i>Diary entries, week 2</i>	<i>Diary entries, week 3</i>	<i>Interviews</i>	<i>Focus groups</i>
Date of data collection	February 2016	3-10 February 2016	24 February - 2 March 2016	16 - 22 March 2016	April - June 2016	April 2017
Type of data	quantitative	quantitative and qualitative	quantitative and qualitative	quantitative and qualitative	qualitative	qualitative
Number of participants or diary entries	33	167	147	162	24	8

TABLE 2

Perceptions about usefulness of online platforms for local news by social media platform in diary entries

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Analysis of variance of specific social media platform use and perception about usefulness of online platforms for local news</i>
Facebook use	7.65	F(1, 435) = 10.707, p = .001
Twitter use	6.99	F(1, 435) = 5.854, p = .016
WhatsApp use	7.14	F(1, 435) = .751, p = .387
Instagram use	7.25	F(1, 435) = .121, p = .729

(means scores: 1-10 rating scale where 10 meant most useful)

TABLE 3

Links between ways of understanding local news and practices of local news consumption online

	<i>Dominant reasons for accessing local news online</i>	<i>Use of social media to access local news</i>	<i>Dominant source of local news</i>
<i>Local news as personally relevant or interesting information</i>	Seeking out specific news and information; incidental exposure	High levels of use of distributing platforms; reliance on Facebook	Use variety of sources but less aware of news source of content; weak loyalty to news brands
<i>Local news as content produced by legacy local media brands</i>	Browsing for local news; seeking out specific local news and information	Low levels of use of distributing platforms for local news	Legacy news brands are dominant sources
<i>Local news as form of community engagement</i>	Varied but following on-going stories in their community is often a driver	High levels of use of distributing platforms	Use variety of sources; Facebook community pages are used more regularly than legacy news brand sites