The Three 'Cs' of Digital Local Journalism: Community, Commitment and Continuity

Abstract
In a rapidly changing digital world, scholars have focused on new technologies, communication trends , and have re-imagined new ways of doing or transforming journalism. In these endeavours, however, local journalism has received relatively little attention despite the sector going through fundamental changes. In this introduction to the special issue *Disrupting and resettling the local in digital news spaces*, we suggest that while the practice of local journalism has been shaken, even decimated in parts of some countries, it is beginning to resettle with renewed clarity about its role and purpose. Articles in this issue suggest there are three interconnecting elements of local journalism in a digital world: community, commitment and continuity. Local media practices orbit around a connection to certain geographies and physical spaces. Audiences expect journalists to reinforce and represent a sense of community (and care) and this develops through a commitment to a place and its people that is established over time. Tensions then, can emerge between 'old' ways of doing things and how digital technologies and practices can best complement, recreate, immerse and/or reinforce this relationship. Rather than view digital as a 'shiny' superior way to do 'local' journalism or as simply a way to reduce costs, we must find an in-between.

Introduction
It has long been established that local media are key communicative spaces of civic and social engagement, play multifaceted roles in building local networks, maintaining democratic scrutiny, fostering sense of place, community and belonging (Hess and Waller, 2016; Harte and Matthews, 2021; Gulyas and Baines, 2020). The importance of local news and information was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals were told to stay 'home' in the interests of health and safety and/or subjected to lockdowns which confined them to a physical locality. Audiences demonstrated a need to know what was going on in their 'patch' and to contextualise and make sense of a global crisis. Amidst the clear demand for local news, however, the sector has experienced extensive disruption during the last two decades due to digital technologies and the dominance of the networked online environment. A key impact of this disruption has been on the economics of the sector and the business models of legacy providers, some of which have been unable to remain sustainable leaving communities without a source of news (Abernathy, 2018). Many newsrooms have experienced staff losses, centralisation of services and the shutting down of printing presses in favour of a digital presence. There is a risk, then, that amidst industry change, digital technologies are being equated more and more with cost-cutting solutions at the local level. The increasing literature on local news deserts has highlighted some of the grim consequences of this tumultuous process, including a decline in vibrancy and engagement in the affected local communities (Ferrier, 2014); less efficient and scrutinised local governments (Napoli et.al., 2018); weakening in citizens' civic engagement (Shaker, 2014); and less informed citizens and increased democratic deficit (Nielsen, 2015; Rubado, 2019).

One of the challenges too, of studying local journalism has been the varying definitions and interpretation of the 'local'. Local has always been an ambiguous term but one that was predominantly conceptualised by place-based definitions in the pre-digital era. For example, in production focused definitions local has referred to a geographical place with clear boundaries which represented organisational strategy to reach a particular audience group, a

distribution area that fitted the business model (Gulyas and Baines, 2020). In other scholarship, academics have conceptualised local news outlets as operating in geo-social spaces to acknowledge that while geography still matters, news outlets operate in wider social and digital flows, movements and nodes of power. 'Local' as a way of positioning our connection to the physical spaces (localities) where we live, work and play has not changed but digital environments have certainly challenged and disrupted the relationship between news, journalism and place.

Although there has been an increase in scholarly interest in local media, the field continues to be fragmented and there are limited comparative explorations. The aim of this special issue of *Digital Journalism* was to provide a more holistic overview of the sector bringing together current research into the key issues digital local journalism are facing. In order to do that we invited scholars to explore theoretically, conceptually and empirically how the digital has disrupted and resettled local journalism. However, rather than 'reconceptualise', 'rethink', or 'reimagine' digital local journalism, articles in our special issue have largely reasserted key aspects that remain consistent amid disruption. Digital Journalism's own editorial compass guides scholars to balance continuity with change. This issue suggests there are elements which serve as the 'true north' of understanding local journalism but that there are tensions between 'old ways' of doing things and the possibilities (and limitations) that technology presents.

Three 'Cs' of digital local journalism: community, continuity, and commitment
While articles published in this issue offer fresh insights into different aspects of digital local journalism, we see common intersecting threads emerge. We position these as the three 'Cs' of local journalism in the digital era: community, commitment and continuity.

Community
We have emerged from what we hope is the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of us have learned just how resilient we are in coping during times of adversity, while others have experienced a fraying of social connection due to isolation and personal struggles. There has been an emotional and psychological toll of those who experienced long periods of being 'locked down' in the interests of public health. It is poignant therefore, that we begin this special issue with a paper from South Korean researchers Yeran Kim, Young-Gil Chae and Yongchan, Kim (2023, in this issue) who position community at the centre of digital hyperlocal journalism and advocate for examining hyperlocal journalism practice through a lens of 'care'. Kim and colleagues suggest care ethics provide journalists with a better way of knowing and help to facilitate the democratic process, positioning human dignity, human sacredness and truth telling at its core. They provide insight into digital hyperlocal media in Seoul, arguing a 'care-of-us' ethics features in hyperlocal media practices across interrelated elements. Importantly those who engage in hyperlocal practices create spaces for people to gather and dwell, actualised from curiosity, hospitality and trust. They build a sense of collectivity (widely acknowledged as a key aspect of local journalism across geographic and cultural contexts) and engage communicative care through sense of democracy. Such an approach of 'care' encourages individuals to share values of compassion, equality and intimacy and importantly, works to enable unspoken stories to be heard.

Matthew Weber and Nick Mathews (2023, in this issue) turn their attention to the audience at a time when there is intense focus across the globe on ways to help sustain local news in a digital era from policies to business models, volunteer and philanthropic support. Drawing on a national survey in the United States, they investigate the ways in which everyday people understand and define the communities in which they live and work, as well as examine media

variables that impact such understandings. They find definitions are context specific and highly subjective and that local media and journalism play a critical role in shaping the boundaries of what is local as well as the size of the community. Both articles highlight the symbiotic relationship between local media and its community; local journalism depends on the community it serves, but it also influences how the community perceives and acts out itself. This has been a feature of local journalism arguably since its origins, but it continues to be a defining aspect in the digital era, despite the digital transformations and mobility turn in the sector.

Commitment

Previous research has shown the importance of the ways in which local journalism is rooted in the local place and community it serves (Reader and Hatcher, 2012; Buchanan, 2009). However, digital disruption has shaken this commitment to a place driven by two key changes: first, digital technologies allowing local journalism to be increasingly mobile, and second, commercial imperatives leading to cost cutting in response to economic woes of the sector. In her study on local journalism startups in the UK, Karin Wahl Jorgensen (2023, in this issue) highlights the continued importance of commitment to the local community and of knowledge of the local context which she argues give local journalists authority and legitimacy. Wahl Jorgensen shows that the establishment and maintenance of journalistic authority relies on claims to knowledge of the local context and relationships of co-presence with the local community. Local knowledge is widely established as being integral to reputation and legitimacy among news reporters, with scholars positioning it as a powerful form of cultural capital (Hess and Waller, 2016). Wahl-Jorgensen goes a step further to suggest their authority is premised on their witnessing in the context of co-presence. She suggests long-standing presence of journalists and their resulting visibility and accountability form the basis of trust vested in them by their communities.

Continuity

Local journalism is arguably the oldest form of journalism in many countries and as such historical roots, traditions and continuities have played important roles in how the sector has adopted digital technologies and how it operates in digital environments. Two articles in this special edition explore facets of continuities and discontinuities, and the tension between digital disruption and 'old ways' of doing. Raul Rios-Rodriguez and colleagues (2023, in this issue) compare digital and print-based business models, focusing on an empirical study of Spanish local media. They highlight the appeal of reducing asset size and operating costs among local news producers whom have struggled economically in the digital environment. They suggest the digital business model can be a way to increase companies' profitability, as online-only media publishers do not need as many assets and costs as their print counterparts to operate. However, they suggest there is little empirical evidence on how digital business models influence the profitability of newspapers. Using a sample of 198 and 69 Spanish print and online-only media publishers, respectively, during the period 2008–2018 and applying a dynamic panel data methodology, the authors examine the extent to which the main features defining print vs. digital business models affect firms' profitability. Empirical evidence reveals a better performance of digital publishers, with lower material costs being the route through which the digital business model benefits from the economies of scale and achieves greater efficiency. There is a need for further research then, on how connection to the 'local' is preserved as the economies of scale shift and shape profitability for the longer term.

Lenka Waschkova Cisarova (2023, in this issue) examines the tension between digital disruption and 'old ways' of doing by exploring attitudes to digital innovations and argues that

in some contexts there is a resistance to rapid digital transition. She problematises approaches and definitions to innovation and how this is experienced among local news producers in the Czech Republic. She suggests news producers are challenged by an emphasis on digital innovation and technological transformation and are more nostalgic for the 'old times'. She argues that some news producers have developed an emotional response to digital innovation with some adopting passive, albeit destructive attitudes.

The local in digital news and journalism research

This special issue explores how the local has been disrupted and resettled in digital news spaces. Clearly, local media sectors have been severely disrupted and transformed in the digital era, but the sector is beginning to resettle with renewed clarity about its role and purpose. We have identified and discussed three key aspects of digital local journalism that play a key role in this resettling process and that has resonated through the papers presented in this issue: community, commitment and continuity. This special issue also raises questions about the value and perception of innovation. It could be argued that local newsrooms should always be re-assessing their effectiveness and societal impact and respond innovatively to meet these needs. It is important, however, that digital advancements are not simply equated with cost-cutting or as the panacea to solving the local news crisis. The three Cs should help to guide news innovation and its value for local audiences. We must ask ourselves, in situations when news outlets fail, just how well they met audiences' 'local' expectations before resources (and audiences) began to decline. And journalists too, must also be on the lookout to address inequalities that terms like 'community' can often mask in the geographies they serve.

In a networked society, a concept like 'local' is a powerful (albeit highly subjective and cultural construct), but our connection to the local continues to be most often aligned to certain geographies and physical places even in a digital world. This means there are habits, values, rituals and understandings within place that good local journalism is highly attuned to. Of course, news media practices exist across digital and physical spaces and increasingly are intertwined with online nodes and networks. Technologies and digital spaces present powerful opportunities to strengthen audiences' local connection and shared sense of place through their media practices. For example, there is now more scope to facilitate meaningful civic conversations online, especially when moderated and guided by local journalists. Digital news sites are increasingly serving as compendiums of information for all things local from business directories to up and coming events beyond the 'hard' news stories and they serve as a digital archives of a local area's history. Ultimately the study and practice of local journalism is a balancing act. It requires an understanding of place-based context, alongside wider social, cultural, political and economic factors that shape the sector. And amidst all this an appreciation that reporters are expected to serve their 'imagined' communities with care and commitment. This is what makes local media such a vital area of research, for it is sensitive to and so close to the 'ground' in an increasingly mobile world.

Although there has been an increase in local media research in recent years, the field remains relatively under-explored, especially in relation to the specificities of digital local journalism. We argue that three areas are particularly important for future scholarly explorations in this field. First, we need more conceptual work that brings theoretical insights into the world of digital local journalism. Journalism scholarship in general is said to be a 'theoretical importer' (Anderson, 2020), and research on local media has historically focused on empirical work. A stronger and more widely shared theoretical underpinning will arguably boost the field. Second, more research is needed on the relationship between digital local media and the communities it serves. There has been interesting scholarship on the changes in local media on

one hand, as well as some work on local media audiences and communities on the other, however we need greater understanding of the relationship between the two. Third, local journalism research has been fragmented and studies have tended to focus on specific localities in specific regions and countries. One of the implications of this is that there has been a lack of consensus about key terms in the field, such as what we mean by 'local'. To address this fragmentation, we need more comparative studies to identify general patterns and enhance shared understanding of key terms and concepts.

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