

# Portrait of the Online Local News Audience

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## Abstract

With resources for local journalism outlets on the decline and the use of digital tools on the rise, there has been greater consideration of the audience among journalists, editors, and foundations. This concern with understanding audiences, particularly in efforts to better meet their critical information needs, links back to the civic or public journalism movement of the 1990s as well as the FCC standards set for ascertainment of community needs during the 1970s. Yet, a limited amount of current scholarship addresses a qualitative understanding of local news audiences' habits and beliefs. Drawing upon data from six focus groups across three communities, this paper highlights three common themes, which we have labeled: a) self-reliant news consumer, b) lack of citizen journalism, and c) continued importance of interpersonal networks. These themes may provide insights into the nature of local news consumers and a guide to avenues for future research.

## Introduction

One of the most persistent critiques that has been leveled against professional journalism is that news organizations have tended to remain disconnected from their audiences and have tended to operate exclusively from their own judgments and perceptions about the importance of individual stories and about the critical information needs of the communities that they serve (see, e.g., Batsell, 2015). According to McClatchy's Damon Kiesow (2015), the news industry "has gone for years without needing to examine who its audience is or what they want" (p. 1).

As a number of studies have illustrated, the news audience traditionally has been something of a distant, abstract concept that reporters and editors have tended not to engage with in any direct way (Vobic, 2014). Rather, they operated under a set of self-generated presumptions about the characteristics of their audience, and their needs and interests (see, e.g., Anderson, 2011; DeWerth-Pallmeyer, 1997; Gans, 2004; Reader, 2015). Batsell (2015) has described this tendency as "an aloof detachment" (p. 3).<sup>2</sup>

To some extent, this relationship between news organizations and their audiences is a reflection of the traditional professional ethos of journalism, in which the judgments of the news professionals about what the public needs to know are prioritized (see, e.g., Batsell, 2015; Deuze, 2005). Substantive engagement with the audience, within this context, can be seen as a slippery slope in which audience interests begin to play too influential a role in editorial decision-making, leading to the much-maligned notion of "market-driven journalism" (Cohen, 2002; McManus, 1994). These forms of criticism tend to caution against the loss of journalistic authority and autonomy and to question the democratic value of audience feedback and interests in playing an influential role in journalistic decision-making (see, e.g., Uscinski, 2014).

Regardless, within the contemporary news environment there is now a heightened emphasis – amongst journalists, editors, publishers, and the foundations that increasingly support journalism – on news organizations more effectively engaging with the members of the communities that they serve and improving their understanding of the needs and interests of these audiences (see, e.g., Anderson, 2011; Batsell, 2015; de Aguiar & Stearns, 2015; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012; Vobic, 2014). As the technological dynamics of how news is produced, disseminated, and consumed become more complex; as the role and identity of professional journalists undergo reconsideration; and, as the economics of journalism become increasingly challenging particularly at the local level (see, e.g., Abernathy, 2014; Downie & Schudson, 2009), it stands to reason that a deeper understanding of the contemporary local news audience is of heightened importance. The logic here is that such attention to local audiences may help to identify potential solutions to the many challenges that contemporary journalism faces.

Surprisingly, research examining contemporary local news audiences is relatively scarce, outside of occasional large-scale surveys that track changes in demographics, behavioral patterns, and technology usage (see, e.g., Lee, 2013; Mitchell, 2015; see also Fenton, et al., 2010). In this study, we seek to examine local news audiences with greater depth, employing focus group research to explore not only how local news audiences go about meeting their critical information needs, but also the attitudes and beliefs that they bring to this process. As focus group members describe and discuss their own experiences with local news and information, they provide a portrait of the methods, habits, and shifting processes whereby contemporary audiences access and gather information; furthermore, the participants offer insights into underlying attitudes and relationships with local news and information sources.

The first section of this paper contextualizes this research within journalism history to identify moments in which there has been an increased emphasis on forging stronger connections between news outlets and the audiences they seek to serve. The second section reviews the recent literature on news audiences, with a particular emphasis on research focused on the local news context. The third section describes the focus group methodology employed for this research. The fourth section presents findings from the focus group research. The concluding section considers the implications of these findings and identifies avenues for future research.

#### Strengthening the Connection between News Outlets and their Audiences: Historical Context

As was noted at the outset, the history of journalism has been characterized by a certain perceived distance between news outlets and the audiences that they serve. Today, as journalists reevaluate their role and function, one of the most common recommendations that local news organizations hear is to build stronger connections with their communities (see, e.g., Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014; Stearns, 2015). These efforts represent the latest iteration in a series of concerted efforts within journalism history to forge tighter connections between journalists and audiences. These periods provide historical context for the current emphasis on greater journalistic engagement with their audiences.

As Schaffer (2015) has noted, contemporary efforts to better engage with audiences recall the civic or public journalism movement that flourished for about a decade starting in the early 1990s. Civic journalism emphasized a variety of approaches (such as polls and town hall meetings) designed to better integrate citizens into the process through which news outlets identify community problems and potential solutions. Civic journalism worked to connect “journalistic practice, the public, and the fabric of civic life” (Heider, McCombs and Poindexter,

2005, p. 953; see also Hoyt, 1992). According to Schaffer (2015), these civic journalism initiatives “foreshadowed what we now call interactive and participatory journalism” (p. 1).

The much-maligned “market-driven journalism” movement that began in the 1980s also emphasized engaging with audiences, though primarily through various forms of market research (McManus, 1994). The objective in this case was less about reconfiguring the dynamics of how news is produced in order to better serve the public interest than it was about determining which stories and topics would maximize news consumption amongst those demographics most valued by advertisers (Underwood, 1993).

Going further back, we can see connections between contemporary efforts to foster stronger engagement between local news outlets and audiences with the ascertainment requirements that the FCC briefly imposed upon broadcast licensees in the 1970s (see, e.g., Surlin & Bradley, 1973/74). As part of their public interest obligations during this time period, broadcast licensees were required to meet with community leaders and survey their communities of license in order to stay well informed of the communities’ needs and interests (Shostek, 1972; Surlin & Bradley, 1973/74). The overarching policy objective was that such information could then inform the licensees’ programming practices, particularly in the realms of news and public affairs programming.

### Understanding Local News Audiences

The dynamics of how news audiences access, share, and even participate in the creation of news have undergone significant change in recent years, as illustrated by a growing body of research (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). New formats for news distribution, including news aggregators, blogs, and social networking sites, have affected the ways readers consume the news (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). For example, Meijer and Kormelink (2014) argue that

there has been an increase in checking and scanning behaviors. Purcell et al. (2010) assert that these formats have also contributed to news personalization practices. The growth of mobile broadband penetration has made news more portable, and its increased use influences audience interaction with content (Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Christian, 2012; Purcell et al., 2010). Despite or because of these dramatic technological changes, research tells us that consuming news remains a fundamental dimension of the daily routines of many community members; that they actively interpret and critique the news stories they consume; and that journalism continues to have the capacity to engage community members in other forms of public action (Heikkila & Ahva, 2014).

Researchers also have explored the extent to which the interactivity inherent in the contemporary news environment has encouraged news audiences to engage in content creation. Some argue that technological changes and new forms for journalism, such as blogs and social media, have opened up space for increased interaction in the production of content between journalists and their audience (Singer, 2005). However, Fico et al. (2013), in a comparative content analysis of local public affairs coverage on online citizen news sites and traditional newspapers found citizen sites to be an "imperfect substitute" for newspaper coverage (p. 166). Though social media has been celebrated by some as the new participatory "public sphere" for deeper news discussion and, potentially, content creation, others argue that commenters in these forums tend to have extreme views which could have a chilling effect on engagement (Oh, 2014). Perhaps because of these tensions, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) found a "remarkably low level of uptake of user-generated content among both journalists and consumers" (p. 172).

Little of this research, however, has focused on news audiences at the local (rather than national) level. Furthermore, little of this research has focused on questions related to how well local news audiences feel their information needs are being met or how they go about meeting these information needs. Survey research of local news audiences tells us that the dominant expectations held by local news audiences are for unbiased, accurate, and fast news and information, while other journalistic functionalities such as serving as a watchdog and identifying solutions to community problems elicited less support (Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, 2005).

In a study with the strongest parallel to the research being conducted here, Fenton, et al. (2010) conducted focus groups in four UK communities. The emphasis in these focus groups was on the perceived role and value of community-level news, as well as on the relative importance and value of different news sources and platforms. One of the study's primary findings was the participants' recognition and perception of the inadequacy of what the authors term "remote localism" (Fenton, et al., 2010, p. 8). The focus group sessions revealed that community members were keenly aware of the decline of genuinely local news coverage and the increasing extent to which they were forced to rely on news produced from outside of the community that did not adequately address the communities' information needs and interests (Fenton, et al., 2010, p. 8). Given that access to the full range of local news sources now requires Internet access, the study also found that certain population groups, such as the elderly and poor, were particularly underserved (Fenton, et al., 2010).

In more recent focus group research that examined the audience for a single alternative local news site in the U.K., Harcup (2015) found an audience that was deeply engaged with its local community and dissatisfied with the coverage of their community provided by mainstream



and neighboring large-market news outlets. Focus group participants were, for the most part, cognizant of the very limited personnel and financial resources under which this alternative local news site operated, but appreciated the depth, critical stance, and independence of the site's reporting. While their focus group participants regularly read the reader comments on the site, very few reported engaging in such commenting activity of their own (Harcup, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

### Method

This study employs focus group research as a method of exploring how local news audiences go about meeting their critical information needs as well as their attitudes and beliefs about their local news environment (see also Fenton, et al., 2010). Despite being commonly associated with market research, the focus group methodology has its origins in the earliest days of communication research and was developed to study media audiences by Robert Merton in the early 1940s during his collaborations with Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research (Morrison, 1998).

Certainly today there is a growing array of data sources and analytical tools that can be used to analyze local news audiences (see, e.g., Ellis, 2015). The visibility of the audience has grown in the daily routines of newsrooms with the proliferation of audience data, metrics and feedback available online (Bockzkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013, p. 10). A growing body of literature is exploring how various quantitative forms of audience analytics are being integrated into newsroom decision-making, to both positive and negative effect (see, e.g., Anderson, 2011; McKenzie, et al., 2011; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015).

Many of these newer analytical tools (such as Chartbeat and the multitude of purveyors of social media analytics) offer the opportunity to conduct highly detailed, granular analyses of the audiences of individual online news stories, how long they spend on individual stories, and

how these stories are circulating – and being responded to – in the larger media ecosystem. Such tools are, however, somewhat limited in their ability to provide insights into the decision-making processes, assessments, and potentially unmet needs and interests of the audiences for local journalism – essentially, the *character* of contemporary local news audiences.

The focus group methodology has been described as a way “to examine the everyday ways in which audiences make sense of [media]” (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 85) and as a way of “understanding and explaining what lies behind” audience behavior (Vicente-Marino, 2014, p. 47). Given this, it seems particularly well-suited to the goal of providing a portrait of contemporary online local news audiences in terms of their perceptions of the news and sources available to them and the means by which they go about trying to meet their news and information needs.

For this study, six focus groups were conducted across three different communities within a state in the northeastern United States (two focus groups per community). The specific communities studied were selected in an effort to achieve as much community-level diversity as possible within the obvious confines of studying three communities within a single state. The communities varied in size (277,000; 55,000; and 18,000), per capita income (\$13,000; \$16,000; and \$37,000) and ethnic composition (74% non-white; 55% non-white; and 37% non-white). Each were similar in that each is the seat of county government for their respective counties.

One distinctive aspect of our methodology was that publishers of online local news outlets in each of these three communities were integrated into, and contributed to, the formative stages of the research. This collaboration (similar to that employed in Harcup’s [2015] study) was undertaken in connection with a secondary research goal to try to rekindle academic audience research collaborations with news organizations that characterized the early days of

electronic media, but that have become much less common (see, e.g., Morrison, 1998). In light of this new period of journalistic disruption, current conditions may be right for similar partnerships to re-emerge.

In each community, the publisher of the most prominent hyperlocal online news source was interviewed (interviews were semi-structured) by the researchers. In these interviews, the interview subjects were asked to discuss their perceptions of their community and of the audience for their news outlet. The publishers also were asked to identify specific areas of uncertainty about their audience, which then informed the design of the focus group questionnaire. For instance, one publisher raised a concern regarding the audiences' preferences for the tone used to tell local news stories.

The questionnaire that guided the focus group discussions was open ended and wide ranging, addressing topics such as key issues facing the community, means of staying informed, satisfaction with available local news and information sources, and activities related to the sharing and reporting of local news. The goal in the questionnaire design was less to probe subject areas related to specific hypotheses, but rather to spur conversations that would allow characteristics of the audiences to emerge organically. Given that we focused on three very different communities with very different needs, concerns, and interests, in some subject areas (such as key issues facing the community) there were substantial differences in the responses. However, in many other subject areas (such as those related to news consumption habits), the similarities in responses across the three communities were striking; it is these similarities that are the focus of the findings presented below, as they suggest some core characteristics of contemporary local news audiences that could potentially prove to be generalizable.

The collaboration with local news outlets extended to the recruitment process as well. Specifically, recruiting was conducted online, with the local news outlets' assistance in posting the recruitment notice on their web sites, social media pages, or email lists. These postings were then further circulated through the social networks of site readers. This method of recruitment sought to maximize the extent to which the focus group participants were at least somewhat regular consumers of online local news. Given the limited number of focus groups, we targeted our recruitment methods to online news consumers as an important first area of study in order to address the relative lack of qualitative research on online news audiences and also in recognition of the potential significance of the behavior and characteristics of online news audiences to the future of local news. In future research, it will be essential to broaden the scope of the recruitment process in ways that would better represent those populations that do not regularly consume online local news.

All focus group participants received a fifty-dollar gift card for their participation. All were promised confidentiality, in that their identities would not be used in the presentation of the results. Each of the six focus groups lasted approximately two hours and was led by a trained moderator. A total of 59 individuals participated in the focus groups (an average of just under 10 per session). All researchers participating in the research underwent university-mandated human subjects training and the questionnaire, recruitment methodology, and recruitment texts all were reviewed and approved by a university institutional review board for compliance with current legal and ethical standards for human subjects-based research.

The focus group session transcripts were analyzed using the NVivo 10 qualitative research software package. All data were “coded” through NVivo 10 for themes or categories. This coding process followed two stages. First, data were reviewed line-by-line for any general

themes or ideas, or “open-coded.” In this phase, all meanings were considered, “no matter how varied or disparate” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011, p. 172). In the second “focused coding” stage, data were analyzed for themes connecting directly to the initial research questions. Drawing on both open and focused codes, individual memos were written to analyze and synthesize research findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These individual memos were then revised, edited, and integrated into a single thematic narrative. When possible, excerpts from the data in the form of quotes have been included to reinforce particular analytic points.

### Findings

Three key themes emerged in the analysis across all three communities. We have labeled these: a) the self-reliant news consumer; b) the lack of citizen journalism; and c) the continued importance of interpersonal networks. Each of these themes is discussed in greater detail below and represents findings common across all six of the focus groups conducted across the three communities.

#### The Self-Reliant News Consumer

One commonly expressed concern in this social media age is that news consumers increasingly are operating under the assumption that “if the news is important, it will find me” (see, e.g., Benton, 2014). That is, news consumers may believe that, through social media dissemination and filtering, they will receive all necessary news and information and, therefore, will not need to engage in any kind of active news and information-seeking. Under this dynamic, news consumers are essentially transferring responsibility to their social media platforms and networks to fulfill their critical information needs (see Napoli, 2015).

Our focus group sessions revealed a very different portrait of the contemporary news audience. Specifically, we found local news audiences who expressed a strong sense of

individual responsibility (or “burden” as some referred to it) to stay informed. Participants frequently referenced notions of “self-responsibility” and the importance of “taking matters into your own hands” when it came to staying informed about local news and community affairs.

Participants painted themselves as “self-reliant” news consumers who actively seek out news and information to meet their needs. Their self-reliance includes the use of digital tools to obtain and filter information, as well as relying on their interpersonal networks for obtaining news. Many participants emphasized that information was available, but that they had to search for it. As one participant explained, “I have to seek [it]...otherwise, I wouldn’t [have the information I need].” Another participant echoed this idea, as she explained that “the information is out there. I think it’s just do you want to seek it?” Several participants went further, asserting a sense of responsibility not only to inform themselves, but also to assist others when they can.

This “seek-and-you-shall-find” approach to obtaining local news requires citizens to pay attention on their own. In other words, those who are already educated or interested in local issues are better suited to continuing to keep informed, while those with less interest may be left out. As one resident noted, “it’s just that you’ve got to pay attention. If you’re not paying attention, you’re completely out of the loop.”

As a key reason behind this emphasis on self-reliance, participants painted a picture of a varied local news and information landscape characterized by individual news sources such as neighborhood email lists, nonprofit sites, and communications from members of local government. Participants frequently highlighted a lack of coordination and connection among these “disjointed” and “sporadic” sources as making it difficult to stay updated on local issues

and events. One resident explained that even when information was available, it remained “incredibly piecemeal and not very holistic. It’s not very connected.”

Part of the burden of being a “self-reliant news consumer” is the effort necessary to find and filter information pertinent to individual needs and interests. One participant summarized this as, “[you] filter based on your own situation, what you think is too much, and what you think is the right amount, and seek out the other information you need.” However, this process of both finding and filtering information necessitates access, knowledge, and time to seek this information. Often participants utilized social media and online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, as critical tools to gather and filter information from various sources. One avid news consumer described his use of an RSS feed to “filter out all the stuff that you don’t want, and it cuts down on time from going to websites and stuff.” Other residents monitored the news more broadly, such as e-newsletters or local radio, and followed up on stories of interest by searching further online. As one young woman explained, “if I’m interested in a story, I’ll specifically go, ‘okay, well what’s going on here or what’s going on with that’ ...and I’ll personally go look for it myself.”

It is important to recognize, however, the pitfalls that can be associated with this notion of the self-reliant news consumer. A number of participants, for instance, noted the danger of marginalized groups with less access to local news and information sources potentially being “left out of the loop.” Participants in all three communities pointed in particular to a lack of resources and connection to their communities’ Spanish-speaking population as well as the elderly. A woman described working with parents who, “do not speak English, cannot read it, and so the question is how do they inform themselves?” An advocate for the Spanish-speaking local news audience asserted that “things that the community needs to know, especially the

vulnerable members of the community...they won't know." Additionally, an elderly participant explained how lack of access to digital resources is another obstacle to staying informed, "You've got to use a computer, know how to Twitter and go on Facebook or you're out of the loop. We older people, we talk a lot among ourselves."

It is also important to recognize that, as much as community members have accepted and embraced the notion of self-reliance as it relates to consuming local news and information, there is still the possibility that community members are not fully proficient in exercising this self-reliance. For instance, a number of focus group participants complained about the lack of "follow-up reporting" by their local news sources in regards to specific community issues. However, other focus group participants were able to identify specific instances of such follow-up reporting in each of these cases. Another set of respondents described their failure to take an active role in filtering stories of interest as they felt "inundated" by information and, subsequently, they "shy away from it" so that "it becomes white noise." Others described the potential for missing information as "it's not sent to you so a lot of stuff just gets lost because there's so many sites." Another noted that, "in terms of how to get active [about finding information], I don't know where the information lies." Such patterns suggest that some audience members may not be as effective at monitoring and searching within their local news ecosystems as is necessary. In other words, the necessary skills for effective self-reliance may, in some instances, be lacking.

The emphasis on self-reliance expressed by the focus group participants may indicate the impact of fewer resources for local news organizations contributing to gaps in local news production and an increased need for local news audiences to seek their own information in order to meet their information needs. However, only certain audience members, including those with



access and training/education to effectively navigate online resources, are better equipped to be self-reliant. Other groups, including those who may be the most vulnerable such as the elderly or immigrant population, find themselves increasingly marginalized. Although self-reliance may offer a sense of audience empowerment, the practical application of this self-reliance may be limited to those who already hold the highest level of interest and access to resources and information within their local communities.

### The Lack of Citizen Journalism

In a local news environment that appears to be spurring a strong sense of self-reliance among community members, one of the most strikingly consistent findings across all of the focus groups was the very limited extent to which participants engaged in the production and widespread dissemination of local news outside of their interpersonal networks. In fact, when we asked participants to discuss if and how they engage in activities related to sharing and producing news and information for their communities, we were struck by how brief these conversations were. Typically, at most one or two people in each group were active in terms of aggregating and sharing local news and information on social media or frequently commenting on news stories produced by local media outlets. Beyond that—and in terms of actually producing news, such as citizen journalism—focus group participants had very little to offer, noting factors such as time constraints, lack of financial compensation, concerns about legal liability, and low expectations about audience reach. As one participant noted:

But local people like us, it makes you hesitant to be a local journalist. People who have more writing training, like I, would be happy to go write on some of these things but I don't want to put myself at risk. Also, where would it be published? I'm not going to start maintaining a news blog and expect people to read it.

While the focus group participants engaged in very few of the types of activities that we now commonly associate with the notion of citizen journalism, some did report engaging with their local news outlets in an effort to influence news coverage. In two cases discussed in separate focus groups, participants from marginalized communities recounted instances in which they contacted traditional media to attempt to counter what they saw as misrepresentations of their community. For instance, the first participant reached out to a journalist at a large daily newspaper to call attention to negative representations of her community in the paper, “I didn’t know him at the time, and I left a message. I said, ‘listen, I’m tired of all this negativity.’” The participant explained that she took action (not by producing the story herself) but by reaching out to an established journalist saying, “I’m going to call you myself. Listen, there’s this story. You need to report it.” The second resident contacted and appeared on a national morning show in order to bring attention to a local coat drive started in response to the freezing deaths of several local homeless men. However, this participant's experience with the national morning show contributed to a greater “distrust of the media” as the media “waylaid the entire conversation again about poverty [and] about the disconnect between those who are poor and those that come from more affluence.”

We found this dearth of activity related to participation in the local news ecosystem somewhat surprising, given that the focus group participants consistently demonstrated a strong awareness of the tightening constraints under which local news organizations are operating (see Harcup, 2015). As one resident noted, their online local news organization tended to operate as a “one-man band.” These residents also recognized that local journalists were, at best, poorly compensated and, at worst, uncompensated. Further, participants described their local journalists as “on [their] own” and “stressed,” noting that these journalists “can only do so much.”

This lack of activity was also somewhat surprising given that the focus group participants were virtually unanimously critical of the journalism provided by news sources based outside of the community (e.g., county-wide news sources, or news sources based in nearby large urban centers). For our focus group participants, out-of-market news is not seen as a viable substitute for truly local news (see also Fenton, et al., 2010). Research suggests that a critical perspective on established local news sources is in fact a key driver of citizen reporting activities (Dickens, Couldry, & Fotopoulou, 2015).

Given this widespread recognition of the inadequacies of their local news environment, it struck us as significant that across all three communities there did not appear to be any evidence of a strong impetus amongst community members to help to fill the gap. The self-reliant news and information seeker did not translate to communities of self-reliant news and information producers. The forms of sharing described by participants were also often limited to their informal interpersonal networks. One respondent even inquired, "what are you defining as sharing? I do that, but not through the news media." Several others spoke in terms of sharing information among their neighbors; for instance, one woman described a neighbor who "took it upon himself" to create a neighborhood email distribution list to share information. Yet, most of these efforts to share news and information remain outside the scope of more formal news media outlets and often remain limited to the participants' interpersonal networks.

#### The Continued Importance of Interpersonal Networks

Critical perspectives on contemporary community life frequently include concerns about atomized, technology-dependent individuals who engage in relatively little interpersonal contact and thus are, to some extent, disengaged from their communities (see, e.g., Turkle, 2011; Wolpe, 2015). Our findings revealed little evidence of this. Instead, focus group participants frequently

emphasized their reliance on, and their efforts to build, informal interpersonal networks. As one participant elaborated, “friends [and] the grapevine” continued to serve as significant sources of local news and information. Participants emphasized the importance of being connected to one’s community as crucial to staying informed and engaged as local citizens.

The interpersonal networks function as the hub of connection and distribution of information for community members. Residents described a strong reliance on their interpersonal networks in ways such as, “I stay informed by being involved in the community” or “I talk to people in my neighborhood.” They also identified particular “active in the community” residents as a vital source of information, such as government officials, community organizers, or friends working in local government or on the police force. Certain places and spaces in the community such as schools, faith-based organizations, community or neighborhood organizations, universities, government, and the library were identified as information “hotspots” for trading and sharing local news. Participants even cited daily activities such as walking the dog or getting coffee as times to interact with neighbors and thus exchange information. Interpersonal connections also appeared to be preferred even when a news resource was readily available: one woman noted her role as a news source for her building on parking rules that “everyone could get these emails themselves, but they would come and ask me when they could go park.”

Interpersonal networks may also assist with the demands of self-reliance and, in some cases, help audiences meet their information needs when there is a lack of relevant local news coverage. In other words, the focus group participants’ reliance on local networks may be indicative of (or a reaction to) the limited local news resources and production in their communities. With limited and “sporadic” local news coverage or for those lacking access to

search for local news online, neighbors and interpersonal networks are turned to as a way to stay connected and informed. As many local communities now lack access to a shared platform for local news, interpersonal networks may also serve as a means of connecting fragmented sources of news. The close connections that individuals hold to their interpersonal networks may also facilitate their connection to the information being shared and assist the time and labor necessary to filter news content that matters to them.

The centrality of interpersonal networks in the participants' discussions of local news may also reflect the closer connections and smaller scale that define local news. For instance, community journalism remains defined in a digital age by "nearness to people" (Byerly 1961 cited in Robinson, 2014, p. 113). Furthermore, the audience expectations for local news may be closer to that of "good neighbor" than others such as "watchdog" (Heider, McCombs and Poindexter, 2005). This good neighbor expectation includes "caring about your community, highlighting interesting people and groups, understanding local community, and offering solutions" (p. 961-963). In our focus groups the marginalized/underserved community members were the most emphatic in expressing the need for journalists to be better neighbors who may make their needs more visible and provide more accurate and less stereotyped representations of them in the news. A few residents suggested that making connections at a broader neighborhood level, rather than focus on individual needs, may offer a corrective to self-reliant approaches. As one woman explained, "I make it a point to find out and to give it to whomever I can give it constantly...I have a sense of community...It takes more than one. You know the old adage it takes a village to raise a child. It takes a village to make a productive society, a good community."

## Conclusion

The findings presented here represent a starting point for further research on local news audiences by identifying some common characteristics of local news audiences across three different communities. Focus group research ideally operates in a complementary manner to other research methodologies (Morrison, 1998), and accordingly we hesitate to make any strong generalizations from the findings presented here. However, the consistency with which the findings reported here arose across three very different communities points to some characteristics of local news audiences that merit further investigation and consideration of their broader implications.

Turning, then, to the implications of some of the findings presented here, our results suggest that contemporary local news audiences are aware of – and comfortable with – the need to do work on their own to effectively stay informed about critical issues facing their communities. This perception of self-reliance does not necessarily mean that local news audiences are doing all that needs to be done to stay sufficiently informed. That is, recognizing the need to be self-reliant, and acting on this need, are not necessarily equivalent to being good at being self-reliant. There were some indications in our research that community members were unaware of useful sources of news and information available to them or were not thorough in their use of the sources that they did rely upon. Future research should explore this dynamic further, to better determine whether the self-reliant news consumers identified here are a) a more widespread and generalizable phenomenon and b) actually *effective* in their self-reliance. The use of the frame of self-reliance by participants in all three towns may also point to a broader neoliberal discursive frame (Hebert & Mincyte, 2014) used by the audiences to explain, cope with, and even rationalize the lack of resources and support for local news and information.

Our results also suggest that the common refrain that the future of journalism is secure because, as many pundits have declared, “everyone is a journalist,” may exaggerate the contemporary realities of local news, where hesitations and impediments to community-generated and disseminated news and information persist. Future research should explore this tendency further to see if it is indeed a widespread pattern, particularly given that Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2015) reported similar findings in their research on user-generated content creation by news audiences. If communities are going to rely, to some extent, on citizen journalism filling important gaps in local journalism, then our findings suggest that more may need to be done to encourage, support, train, and motivate community members to engage with their communities in this way (see Dickens, Couldry, & Fotopoulou, 2015). This suggestion was echoed by one of our focus group participants from a marginalized community, “Why don’t we engage young people, high school students, to work with journalists...[to] learn more about their community and get more of a sense of pride and also learn valuable skills.” Furthermore, as journalists often occupy different interpersonal networks than marginalized groups, such efforts at training and recruiting of marginalized community members as journalists may assist news organizations in meeting these groups' information needs.

Our results also indicate the importance of interpersonal networks at the local level. Despite the proliferation of technologies, platforms, and content options that community members can turn to in search of local news and information, interpersonal networks appear to be a vital means by which community members stay informed. In this regard, we are reminded of John Dewey’s (1954) point that the “flow of social intelligence” will leave the public only “partially informed and formed” until such intelligence “circulates from one to another in the communications of the local community” (p. 219). Questions that should be addressed in future

research are whether the pattern we observed is a more widespread phenomenon and whether it is a reflection of a long tradition or rather a reaction to declines in the efficacy of local news ecosystems.

Taking a step back and looking at the three common themes that emerged across the six focus groups conducted in three different communities, the nature of the findings would, somewhat surprisingly, seem to reflect more constancy than change. The socially-networked local media ecosystems of today have not, as many have predicted, led to passive, disinterested news consumers waiting to be informed via their social media platforms. The interactivity, relatively lower entry barriers, and under-resourced news outlets of the contemporary local news ecosystem, do not appear to have led to a widely-embraced groundswell of citizen journalism activity. Nor has the proliferation of devices and platforms via which local news can be produced, disseminated, and consumed yet displaced interpersonal connections as an important means of disseminating and receiving local news and information. Certainly, the contemporary local news audience engages in a more complex interplay of old and new means of accessing and sharing local news, but the online local news audience of today may have more in common with local news audiences of the past than is commonly assumed.

Finally, as we noted in the methods section, the recruitment process for this research was focused on local online news readers. Future research needs to reach beyond those who are regular online news consumers and examine those segments of the community who do not regularly consume online news. These segments of the community are likely to differ demographically from those analyzed here and asking the same questions would likely yield very different findings that could help us to understand important points of distinction between those who regularly consume online local news in their communities and those who do not. Particular



attention going forward should focus on underserved populations such as the elderly, lower-income populations, and non-English speakers. Additional efforts with those groups would help provide a more robust portrait of how and if community members are getting their critical information needs met, and the attitudes and beliefs that underlie the process of obtaining local news.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, an exception to the tendency of journalists to detach from their audiences exists at the small-scale of community journalism, which is frequently defined by what Byerly (1961) called its "nearness to people" (also cited in Reader, 2012, p. 5-6; Robinson, 2014, p. 113).

<sup>3</sup> For a study that focuses explicitly on those audience members who engage in citizen reporting activities, see Dickens, Couldry, & Fotopoulou, 2015.