

## **Lead Type, Dead Type: New Patterns of Local News Production and Consumption**

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*Newspapers are in trouble. Steep declines in circulation and advertising revenue have forced outright closures, reductions in force, cessation of print in favor of web only editions and frantic searches for additional sources of revenue and audience. In this paper, we report results from an interview study focused on everyday news consumption practices. Our study indicates there are many design opportunities for local news creation and distribution at interface/interaction, infrastructure and strategy levels.*

"The modern newspaper is a magical institution like the rainmaker. It is written to release feelings and to keep us in a state of perpetual emotion. It is not intended to provide rational schemes or patterns for digesting the news..." -- Marshall McLuhan

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is much in the news of late about the demise of newspapers. Steep declines in circulation and advertising revenue have forced outright closures, reductions in force, cessation of print in favor of web only editions, and frantic searches for new sources of revenue and audience. Print versions of nationally known papers, including the Christian Science Monitor, Seattle Post-Intelligencer and Rocky Mountain News have ceased production, and there are fears for papers such as San Francisco Chronicle and the Boston Globe. Speaking in 2008, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer asserted "there will be no media consumption left in 10 years that is not delivered over an IP network. There will be no newspapers, no magazines that are delivered in paper form..." (Whorisky 2009; see also Schiffman 2009).

To set some context, 2008 was one of the worst years ever for U.S. newspapers; total print and online advertising revenues dropped 16.6 percent to \$37.8 billion from \$45.4 billion in 2007 (National Newspaper Association 2009; see also Mutter 2008). Wall Street's evaluation of the news business is reflected in the 80-plus percent decline in the market capitalization of newspaper major chains, and based on decreases in print ad revenues since 2006 (Chi 2009; Potts 2009; National Newspaper Association 2009). Investor Warren Buffett, a major shareholder in the Washington Post, recently stated that "For most

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newspapers in the United States, we would not buy them at any price...They have the possibility of going to just unending losses.” (Patterson 2009). The Papercuts website notes the closure of dozens of newspapers, and loss of nearly 16,000 newspaper jobs in 2008, and over 9000 in the first five months of 2009 in the U.S. (Papercuts 2009). Closures are not limited to North America; in 2009 the UK’s Guardian newspaper reported “a net loss of 42 titles” (Greenslade 2009).

Social and economic theories abound about why newspapers are folding (Nichols and McChesney 2009; Zuckerman 2009), often coupled with predictions about what may happen in the future (e.g., Johnson 2009). Certainly, analysts cite the loss of the quasi-monopoly status the newspapers held until the advent of Internet and other information dissemination infrastructures (Kurtz 2009). Others draw correspondences between the move from print to digital and earlier forms of technological revolution and resistance to change (Shirky 2009). Though the world of news is no longer ink on paper, there is a deeper fear that both journalism and national and local civic engagement are at stake (Haven 2009; Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2007). Indeed, Starr suggests the newspaper as the authoritative news source in a democratic society may have had its moment (Starr 2004). However, information has the same, if not more value, than ever. An ethnographic, “deep dive” study conducted on behalf of the Associated Press in 2008 addressed news reading consumption practices amongst 18 people in six cities located in the US, UK and India. The study suggests consumption of news has moved to other contexts, like listening to the radio while driving to work, watching TV news in the evening, or checking headlines from work computers or through email alerts from friends or from services (Associated Press 2008).

Local newspapers present a special case of news reporting. Their audience is geographically defined, and so too are their editorial concerns. To the extent they produce their own editorial content, their information is exclusive, unlike larger papers, which often reprint syndicated material. Jonathan Knee, an investment banker and director of the media program at the Columbia Business School told Wall Street Journal blogger Heidi Moore in March, 2009 that “The most profitable [local] newspapers have tended to be monopoly markets with circulation of 20,000 to 100,000 readers....they could charge as much as they wanted for those little classified advertisements without investing anything in marketing, and even frequently getting them wrong without much fear of consequence” (Moore 2009). However, BIA/Kelsey estimated that U.S. local advertising revenues would “decline from \$155.3 billion in 2008 to \$144.4 billion in 2013, representing a negative 1.4 percent compound annual growth rate (CAGR)”. The decline is unevenly distributed; while papers like the Berkeley Daily Planet are in deep financial trouble, others such as the Albany Times Union in New York remain profitable. Readers seem relatively unconcerned about the disappearance of the local newspapers; a Pew Research report in March 2009 stated that only 33% of people say they would personally miss reading the local newspaper a lot if it were no longer available (Pew Research Center for People & the Press 2009).

## **STUDYING LOCAL NEWS CONSUMPTION**

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Curious about people's attitudes to local news and about the different ways in which local news is consumed other than through print, we undertook a field-based interview study to understand more deeply what contemporary forms of content and practices around consumption of that content are emerging. We were specifically interested in the technical and strategic potential for transforming—encouraging—local news readership and participation in the production and consumption of news as reflected in innovations by both readers and news organizations

Our study was situated in the San Francisco Bay Area, at the heart of Silicon Valley, home to many large and small Internet companies. The San Francisco Bay Area covers the wine country of Napa Valley in the North to Silicon Valley and San Jose in the South. According to the government's Bay Area census, the Bay Area has a population of over 6.7 million people in nine counties and 101 cities (Bay Area Census 1970-2007).

As a preliminary to our interview study, we compiled a list of all the local newspapers in the broader Bay Area, and analysed a week's worth of three local newspapers (San Francisco Chronicle, San Jose Mercury News and Berkeley Daily Planet, which had recently moved to a much less frequent publication schedule) and examples of local free print publications (e.g., Noe Valley Voice and the Bay Area Guardian). From these analyses we derived a sense of the rhythm of publication for local news, its distribution and coverage, and regular content types, which we divided into: advertising; entertainment ("funnies", crosswords, puzzles, etc); events; reviews; advice (recipes, agony columns, horoscopes); and news which we further subdivided into immediate and ephemeral (breaking news items), serial engagement (ongoing serialized content), in-depth stories (investigative journalism) and reflective/analytic frameworks (typically editorial and column content). From these analyses, we derived an interview protocol of open and closed questions, and produced a numbers of interview 'probes' that were shared and discussed with interviewees.

We carried out semi-structured interviews with 24 Bay Area residents. We selected interview participants using a snowball method, beginning with an email sent to local distribution lists. Interviewees were pre-screened to ensure they had lived in the Bay Area for at least a year and considered themselves to be somewhat active in their local neighborhood where we described 'active' to be anything from eating in local restaurants to engaged in local activism. We did not select for gender, but we did select interviewees in order to cover a broad age range (20's-60's) and selected for a range of educational backgrounds and self described career/job interests. Our interviewees were all Caucasian and culturally American, although two moved to America in adulthood. Only four of our interviewees were brought up in the Bay Area. All were educated to at least high school graduate; all but two had degrees and/or higher degrees. Four of our interviewees had children of school age at home. Our sample included early adopters (including developers) of Internet technologies and late adopters or "laggards". All of our interviewees use the Internet regularly (daily), and all but one had access to computers at home. All but one of our interviewees own a cell phone,

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although only 8 of those that had cell phones had ‘smart’ phones such as iPhones and Blackberries.

We met people at their homes, or in local meeting places such as cafes. We invited people to bring regularly used internet-enabled personal devices and asked them to show us their regular reading sources, including bookmarks and folders of saved items, if any. Our field interviews were conversational. All interviews were audio and/or video recorded. We asked all interviewees what they considered to be areas they “kept track of”, showing them a map of the broader Bay Area area, and also which local newspapers they were aware of and/or had consulted in the previous six months. We asked people about news reading in general, about local news and about their sharing practices. Regarding content, we followed our framework outlined above, discussing feature stories, investigative stories, event listings, police “blotters”, horoscopes, recipes, cartoons, weather, finance results, puzzles and crosswords, reviews for restaurants and shows, classified advertisements, letters to the editor, advertisements and coupons and event listings. We asked what aspects of local news would be of value, and about other sources of news—radio, TV, online news sites and news aggregators, Internet search, social networking sites, email, etc. We asked more general questions about social activities in local neighborhoods, and about their general level of social activity, online and offline.

In addition to our interviews with newsreaders, we conducted interviews with two local journalists, two bloggers who write local news, and with two local news blog sites. We attended a local panel featuring prominent journalists addressing the demise of the local news industry. Finally, we conducted a focus group with 5 friends aged between 42 and 55.

## **FINDINGS**

Although we focused much of our questioning on local news consumption, our study revealed a number of issues that pertain to news reading in general, that is to news that could be described on a continuum from hyper-local to local to regional, to statewide, to national, to international and global. We will first present some observations of news reading routines, and then address two critical issues in more detail: the disconnect between producers’ and consumers’ notions of ‘local’, and negative perceptions of quality/credibility.

### **Newsreading in Practice (when and where people read the news)**

The rise of Internet news sites and weblogging, and the easy availability of mobile devices that enable microblogging with text and rich media mean that more and more information is readily available. Where once there were sanctioned and carefully edited print editions set to a hourly, weekly, monthly or event related schedule with usually fairly limited distribution channels, now there is a constant stream of broadly distributed, editable, commentable and forwardable news. That said, people still establish daily rhythms and places associated with news reading.

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First thing I do every morning is I grab my iPhone and I look up the news, the AP news application. I have occasionally used the Yahoo app – they do a good job with news. This is just to get the quick 3 or 4 minute overview of what is going on. Then about an hour and a half later when I get to the office, I go to CNN and see what is going on. And maybe spend another 5 to 10 minutes there, and that is about it for the morning for me. *EC, male, 30's, newsreader*

My husband reads me the headlines in the morning. Just tells me the important things. Then I take a look online at lunchtime at work. And I may check in on TV in the evening. *BB, female, 30's, newsreader and blogger*

News reading is also a part of the commuting experience. Unlike those who commute by car, passengers on public transit systems tend to engage more with print.

When I commute I have to be up to a certain page by a certain stop and time it perfectly so I'll be on the last page when I get to my stop. And then I'll leave it there for someone else to read. That makes me feel good, I like to leave newspapers for someone else. *EI, male, 50's, newsreader and art columnist*

Most of our interviewees rely on a variety of sources for information, including libraries, public notice boards, and radio. People understand which forms are better for what kinds of things, and actively collage different channels as they “snack” on news through the day.

I take breaks all day and check the news...I am online pretty much all day. So I usually take little breaks all day and check the news. I usually check SFGate and if I am feeling lazy I will check Google news and scan the headlines. *TT, female, 20's, newsreader*

Several interviewees offered comparisons between local papers and other sources like Twitter ([twitter.com](http://twitter.com)), and showed a sophisticated understanding of the parameters within which each holds value for them—and possible threats to that value from “non-content” like ‘spam’.

Twitter has become the first place that news breaks. Retweeting has become big. And it is also the way to proactively get news when I am somewhere new. It helps that there is very little spam. If there is ever spam it will ruin it. *TC, male, 40's, newsreader and blogger*

When considering technologies many people considered form-factor, including the materiality of the newspaper. Reading the newspaper rather than news online is associated with convenience, as in the commuting example above. However, the physical newspaper

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apparently holds readers' attention in a fundamentally different way and people report an aesthetic dimension to reading a physical newspaper.

There is something very satisfying about reading something on paper. It is much easier on the eyes and on the senses. Reading a newspaper is not like the tunnel vision of reading online. You can't flip through the pages, you can't flip through and go back and forth – well I guess you can but it doesn't feel the same, it's laborious. TT, female, 20's, newsreader

I can't read lots of long articles online, there's distractions—there are ads and you can click a million buttons and go anywhere you want—the minute you lose focus you can click away and then what you were reading is gone and it is hard to make yourself some back. But when you are reading the paper, if you skip around, you idle for a minute and then you just come back to what you were reading. And I hate the scrolling. BM, female, 30's, newsreader

Collocated sharing and the 'keepsake' potential of paper were other qualities readers invoked in their desire to retain paper forms in the ecosystem of news dissemination. Paper remains unsurpassed by digital sharing practices such as forwarding stories or posting stories on social networking sites and services like Twitter and Facebook.

If there is not a space to invade you don't. If I had seen my father reading his iPhone, there would have been no invitation to share. How could I know to ask 'Are you done with the sports – can I have the sports?' ... if you can't see what others are reading you don't know where they are or what they like. LO, female, 50's newsreader

Several people talked about buying newspapers on days that are considered to be significant—the election of the US President, Obama, was cited by several people who bought the newspaper on that day.

I bought the paper on the day of the election, and I bought at 100 days. I want to remember what was being talked about then, I want to remember not just the event but everything that was going on around it. MO, male, 50's, newsreader

Journalists and bloggers tended to emphasize contrasts between paper and digital media articulating the ways in which production of these forms are organizationally as well as conceptually divided. This emphasis on discussing production and consumption in either/or terms—talking about online *or* print reading practices—stood in stark contrast with the practices of newsreaders we talked with who consume news in various formats and form factors depending on the current setting, convenience and what is available to them.

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I'll pick up a newspaper now and then, and often a good magazine for longer stories. Most days I check the news on my phone or my computer, but if I am working from a café or traveling somewhere I will get a paper and a magazine. It all depends where I am, how much time I have and what kinds of stories are headlining. Print usually gives me a longer term perspective, they usually do more scene-setting, Online seems more like reading newswire – for an overview not always for getting to grips with the whole story unless you have time to jump around across a lot of sites to really get a bird's eye view. NQ, male, 20's, newsreader

## **Redefining Local: Relationships, Identity, Affiliations, and Interests**

We found significant differences in the way people conceptualized 'local'. We found an affiliation-and-affinity based as well as a map radial notion of local—within a conversation, these meanings would be fluidly intertwined. Professional gatherings are citywide, streets usually within a mile or two radius, school in terms of parent networks, parking in terms of permit boundaries, and local amenities in terms of district funding boundaries.

Where I live isn't really my neighborhood. I usually leave my neighborhood to go and do things. I guess I have to care about road works here but that is about all. And crime, I guess that could affect me. LN, female, 40's, newsreader

I like to read about stuff related to school, but pretty much nothing else in this area. It is not where we hang out but I have to care about what is happening with the schools for my kid's sake. For me, I think of San Francisco as my neighborhood for everything else. LT, female, 40's, newsreader

I just live here. This is not what I call my local neighborhood except for obvious things like if they change bus routes. But when I leave San Francisco, I feel like Marco Polo. EI, male, 50's, newsreader and art columnist

I like to know what is going on in this area, what new shops are opening and if there is a street fair and so on. So yes, I guess I would call this my local neighborhood and I wish SFGate would be more relevant to me that way. BB, female, 30's, newsreader

I don't know this neighborhood - that is I don't know anyone here really. I know the shops and houses better than I know the people. There's a school near me and I see the parents every morning and I wonder where they live because I never see them on the streets at other times. QL, male, 40's, newsreader

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Despite apparent ambivalence to local news reporting, place affiliations ran deep, and were discussed by a number of interviewees. A sense of place and the flows of information within it are fundamental to personal and social identities. For example, location plays a strong role in terms of the perceived social currency of staying up-to-date with news events. CE, a woman in her 30's states:

I lived in DC for a long time and it is really political there, you have to know what is happening all the time, that is the nature of the city. That is what people talk about in bars. Here, in San Francisco, I don't have to keep up with what is going on. There I'd look like an idiot if I didn't. CE, female, 30's, newsreader

This was most clearly stated articulation in our interviews of how the style in which a community is imagined affects the actions of individuals (Anderson 1983). More prosaically perhaps, interest in local news was closely associated for many with physical infrastructure and local services—changes in local vendors and restaurants, local amenities (swimming pools, roads, water mains, etc), schools, local events such as street fairs and farmers' markets, and somewhat more broadly, local politics. To a lesser extent local personalities were discussed, but almost without exception local crime statistics piqued people's interest.

I have a dedication to the police blotter. And I read the property news, and the obituaries. That is a writer thing – I like to read about people. I like to read their stories. LO, female, 50's, newsreader

“Local” was used to describe things physically proximate or within a proscribed neighborhood, but it was also related to affiliation and personal identity which in turn underpinned different forms of civic participation; ‘local to me’ can mean shared membership in a (sub)culture, causes/people that are emotionally close, and/or related to a subjective sense of home. Local can be associated with affiliations to causes, activities and groups (e.g., sports teams) from towns people have lived in previously, and with human relationships; ‘local’ may not be tied to any physical place.

There are a lot of things that are local things that would interest me but it is not local the way city newspapers define it. It's local in terms of my personal world and how it expands out and that includes the people I know and the communities that I am involved in and the issues that I am interested in. QL, male, 40's, newsreader

Local news can be linked to a nostalgic sense of identity and to identifications with places far distant.

There is a [weekly] Chinese or I should say Asian - newspaper that is given out and I see people queue around the block for it ...I think that is about the culture and being displaced and keeping home alive. These are I guess mostly older people – like early 40's to very old. Not the



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young ones. It comes a couple of times a week or once perhaps. It is like two city blocks of line! NU, female, 50's, newsreader

A key finding, unsurprisingly, was that most common news “channel” is word of mouth through groups one identifies with; news spreads through conversations, and we often heard of individuals who take on the role of the contemporary “town crier”, summarising and collating snippets of relevant information. Given “news” travels along social, conversational lines, what actually constitutes ‘news’ is to some extent determined by the group(s) one participates in. Personal and collective or community interests are intertwined, and time and again, we heard that distant others affect people’s experience of their current location as much as those who are proximate, and certainly more than the local newspapers. This underscores that ‘locality’ may be based on personal, human relationships in friendship and identity networks, more than purely on geography and on the views of others who are physically proximate but not one’s intimates.

For events I mostly I usually just hear through word of mouth – what is going on. If people come into town I may go and take a look online – on MySpace. I am part of a group and they post things to do. It helps to be queer because wherever you go you have a community. And that means I always feel like I know people and can find out what is going on. So if there is news and it is relevant no matter where I am I can get hold of information. TT, female, 20's, newsreader

Interestingly journalists and bloggers mentioned how readers like personalities who write news stories. While a number of our interviewees liked particular columnists, there was a keen sense of missing non-partisan reportage by trained professionals, and blogs were often seen as too focused on hyper-local and therefore too parochial to be considered news – our interviewees drew a fine line between even favored local activism and ‘news’.

You know, sites like seeclickfix let me go and be active in my neighborhood now. And that is good. But that's not news. I don't need someone to tell me there are potholes in my 'hood. I can see them. But it's good to go there and register a complaint, talk to others about it and see who I can work with to get this fixed. But if there was a place where these all came together, you know like with crime sites, you know where they show what crimes just happened in the 'hood: that would make me feel more connected to local than the papers ever did. But these sites don't give an overview like the papers should do. You need both. TT, female, 20's, newsreader

In particular, local newspapers were seen by some as performing important work monitoring and reporting on local government activities.

If [papers are a] check on corrupt government and business, if that doesn't exist, what do you do? QC, female, 50's, newsreader and local activist

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Local newspapers could perform a role of broker between different communities. Several participants said they would like to see their papers put more emphasis on helping different communities within local areas communicate more effectively. A number of interviewees articulated a strong desire for multi-language news services.

This is a neighborhood with a lot of different people – tourists, Chinese, Russian – rich people and people with less income...I see a big divide between like me and my next door neighbors. How do you bridge that gap? I encounter the differences all the time. I don't feel like I know what world they live in even though they live next door. If I spoke Chinese I would have a very different experience of my block. It'd be great if someone who knows about the overall picture could help us communicate – then maybe it'd be a neighborhood not just a bunch of people living in the same place. LT, female, 40's, newsreader

You know San Francisco is the gateway to the east. Why don't our local news people take advantage of that? Position us in the world, from my neighborhood to the world? CE, female, 30's, newsreader

### Perceptions of Quality: Credibility, Findability, and Aesthetics

Woven through our interviews were various definitions and perceptions of news quality. Quality of reportage, and a tension between partisan content and unbiased reportage were key, as was a deep suspicion of outsourced and service news. Judgments from interviewees fell into three broad categories: *credibility*, *findability*, and *aesthetics*. Credibility encompassed accuracy, objectivity, and trustworthiness. Findability involved relevance, completeness, timeliness, and permanence. Aesthetic concerns ranged from the appeal of the layout to the literary merit of the text to the actual feel of the paper. Many respondents rolled multiple dimensions of quality into an overall judgment that determined their engagement and willingness to pay for news.

The [San Francisco] Chronicle has never been as poorly written as it is now. I think they have given up. I was looking for movie listings, so I bought when I was in town the other day and it was impossible to find movie listings. I mean, how hard would it be to print a set of movie listings so they were easy to find and read.? And you know you get to SFGate and it is just cluttered. EI, male, 50's, newsreader and art columnist

For most of our interviewees, reading the news, or choosing not to do so—local, regional, national or international—is an emotional business, and closely tied to perceptions of news quality. BN, a woman in her 60's, said “I get so annoyed with sloppy reporting”, and, as can be seen from the quote above, EI a man in his 50's referred frequently to his “frustration” with local news reporting. Due to the perception that news reporting is so

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poor, interest in the news follows oscillations of curiosity and apathy. “Why bother?” You know they are just going to sensationalise everything.” said BM, a woman in her 30’s.

Credibility was assessed using many different cues. Some interviewees tended to conflate the medium with editorial practices. For example, several respondents noted that they trusted or appreciated the editorial process of the papers in contrast to online independent sites. Unsurprisingly, reputation as built through a body of work, accredited qualifications or experience and/or endorsement from a broader organization were seen as crucial factors in conferring credibility.

With all the problems, and there are plenty, there really is something about people who know a beat. There really is something about the value of editors, which tends to be elided in all this. There really is something in the value of fact checking, and if someone’s on a beat, and they’ve been covering an issue for a long time, they know what to make of the next news thing coming down the pike. Like, you know, ‘this person is usually a weasel’ or ‘this has been an ongoing issue for a long time.’ QC, female, 50’s, newsreader and local activist

You know, a blogger could be anywhere and making stuff up. I don’t really know what gives them the right to have an opinion any more than someone else. With journalists with a paper, you know they must be good to get a gig, and you may even see them around. They have a pitch and an area. You can tell they actually come from the place and you get to know them from their writing over time. LO, female, 50’s, newsreader

With a blog I feel like I have to evaluate every single one to decide whether to believe the content or not. They are not necessarily trusted sources. BH, male, 20’s, newsreader

Findability was a major challenge for many participants. Sometimes these challenges were the result of bad design; sometimes the result of a lack of precision in returned results; and sometimes due to the structure chosen by a publisher for its site. Respondents described bad experiences that resulted from both too much and too little information, and the violation of expectations in the search experience was a common theme.

I have looked online for websites that list events but even when I find somewhere somehow it is not tailored to easily finding stuff. It is not at the right granularity. There is like a billion things on the site. And there is no way to filter down to things that are of interest to me. And I can’t personalize even if I do spend time on a site. It is like I have to drill down all over again. BH, male, 30’s, newsreader

You know I typed in “News today Noe Valley” and what I got back was just a lot of stuff from months to years back. I mean how hard is it to

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return something with today's news? What is so hard about understanding what "today" means? NU, female, 50's, newsreader

Search for time-bounded or time specific information proved especially difficult for many respondents.

I searched for the front page for a date online – I wanted to see what the front page was for that day, what it looked like. And I could not find it. The benefit of dynamic content is that it keeps fresh. But it has the downside that it has not persistent, not stable. I can pick up my paper from last week and see what was in the news then. I can't find the front page for the New York Times from a day in the past – you know see what the "front page" looked like for that day. That bugs me. CE, female, 30's, newsreader

Some interviewees lamented the lack of completeness of local news reporting, and how important information is not available on any news source, online or offline. It wasn't the quality of what made it into the paper, so much as what did not, that caused readers to perceive a lack of quality. Given the absence of space constraints online, as compared to the tight space constraints of paper, this suggests a possible opportunity for news publishers, who can act as databases for community information.

I feel like I know more about what is going on in Sri Lanka now than I do about what is going on in San Francisco...like I heard about someone being shot like on my street corner and I looked online and there was nothing about it. I don't know – it seems that would be important to have in a report somewhere. Like someone will be killed. And the police come to my door and talk to me. But I can't find any information about the shootings that are happening in my neighborhood. Maybe they are trying to cover up the violence, or maybe noone in the news agencies cares – not a big enough story. TT, female, 20's, newsreader

Finally, we found that advertising is a big part of the experience with papers. While sometimes advertisements are important content, they also affect perceptions of trustworthiness, relevance, and aesthetics, usually in a negative way.

I hate the Bay Area Guardian there are so many ads. Really it is just a bad experience. CE, female, 30's, newsreader

What won't change is the fact that advertisers will affect editorial especially in the arts. Even the most upright magazine in the world will pay more attention to a film or an album that advertizes with them, that pays. EI, male, 50's, newsreader and art columnist

You know, if the ads suck, then the whole paper sucks, and if there are more ads than content, why bother? That's the Yellow Pages, not a

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paper--but with worse layout. And like what's with putting an ad for a burger joint next to a story about diet and fitness. BH, male, 30's, newsreader

Yet for all that, the advertisements give a voice to small businesses that are part of the community.

We're not getting Macy's ads, but we are getting dog walkers, schools, retirement homes, window washers...all people without way to advertise...they can do a card on a notice board [or advertise in the local paper]. KC, male, 60's, newsreader and local news editor

## **TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS**

In every phase of this project we found surprising disconnections and anomalies: again and again we saw a divergence between what consumers experienced and wanted, and what the producers we talked to conceptualized as being customer needs and wants. Demand for news and information is intense, yet the business side of most news organizations is deeply troubled. New low-cost approaches for news-gathering, production, and publication are gaining adoption, but haven't yet synchronized with readers' evolving news reading and consumption habits. The balance between anticipating readers' needs and desires, and answering readers' direct queries via search is in flux, and reflects a need for better models of reader interests and behavior.

The easy ability to link and move between different sources quickly is changing the context of every news report, and the switch from broadcast and publishing to two-way reader engagement is far from complete. Both readers and publishers sense the potential usefulness of innovations in media, and we found several opportunities for innovators to close the gaps we discuss here. For example, service redesigns to handle more sophisticated notions of locality, time, and culture, and improvements in relevance, engagement, and aesthetics could improve the perceived quality of news offerings. Regaining credibility and trust by separating advertising and partisan content from "unbiased" reporting, building new opportunities for engagement, allowing readers to make their voices heard, and to bridge between different cultures within an area all stood out as possibilities. Similarly, we found in news organizations a separation of online and offline content production, while readers clearly craved online and offline sources to be part of an integrated fabric of information provision. Producers are not naïve; interactions with journalists, publishers, and former journalists revealed a level of frustration that matched or exceeded that of the readers we spoke with, and a desire for new forms of engagement made possible by innovations in media that they were keen to understand and apply. This begs the question: wherefore lie the sources of resistance and inability to innovate?

For our design research purposes, we see these and several other areas that could fruitfully be explored for business service redesign:

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*Quality has many dimensions.* Perceptions of quality can be addressed at interface/interaction, infrastructure and strategy levels—where strategy includes selection of content and editorial focus. Now that newspaper web sites represent large collections of readily available information archived through time and hyperlinked into the present, rather than physically and temporally bounded single edition, interaction models must change to ease the frustrations users now experience. Despite the capabilities of multi media representations available today, current content presentation was roundly assessed as offering very poor integration of media resources, and algorithmic means of finding “related” content have a long way to go before satisfying human needs and anticipated associations. At the other end of the temporal scale, we need to think through the implications of continuous updates and real time reporting, often to mobile devices, as opposed to periodic “editions.” Finally, lack of oversight regarding the ways in which advertising and other content co-exist is at odds with a holistic reader experience—while advertising can be flagged as such through graphical and textual cues, the placement of advertising and story content should subject to editorial review in terms of the overall reader experience.

*Local is not simply spatial.* There are opportunities in a redefinition of locality. Most of our interviewees viewed a focus on the ‘hyperlocal’—quoted by our industry interviewees to be “the way of the future” for local news—as being too parochial. Hyperlocality based on geospatial maps contrasts with readers’ notions of spatial and intellectual/emotional locality. We saw clear opportunities for local news that creates civic bonding and community through current news reportage but also through memory and sentiment about place. We saw opportunities for a brokering role between different subgroups who are geospatially proximate but culturally distinct; local news services can be brokers between different cultural and language contexts (Latin, Chinese, African American) and immigrant populations. Finally, there are opportunities for a clearer brokering of international, national and geospatially local content.

### SUMMARY

In this paper, as a complement to related work that has focused on trends and on broader cultural impact on local and national civic engagement, we have elaborated reflections offered by newsreaders, local journalists and bloggers. Despite disruptive changes in the production and consumption of news, human needs and concerns about local news are comparatively enduring. Rhythms of news reading are changing to accommodate the various digital and material forms that are available, and we found readers to have a sophisticated sense of how to integrate these forms into their daily lives. Frustrations included poor information and interaction design and a concern for quality and credibility of news reportage and coverage.

Understanding the role of news organizations and their products (not just paper forms) in local knowledge dissemination is essential. Our results indicate two key areas of

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disconnect between news producers' and newsreaders' views of local news. First, notions of local are, in producers' eyes, strongly aligned with geo-spatial location—readers define locality much more fluidly along social, affiliation, affinity and interest lines in addition to spatial location. Secondly, we noted that while readers are moving between representational forms with ease, perceiving news holistically, organizations and business models separate print and digital production, and do not manage readers' experience of content well—neither from a interaction and information design perspective, nor in terms of exercising of editorial and layout control over the quality and form of advertising content. These factors introduce barriers an integrated experience. It would help publishers to identify and describe different forms of resistance to innovation by news producers, and to more deeply understand the relatively sophisticated reading practices of consumers.

Local papers exist in an information ecosystem, not in isolation. Marshall McLuhan famously remarked “new media contain old media.” Newspapers are no exception: future ‘papers’ will contain and be contained by new media. However, we need to deeply understand the move from “old media” to “new media” communication channels (Webster and Phalen 1997), and understand what the “media structure” (McQuail 1997)—which is usually discussed at a cultural level under the epithets “convergence culture”, “media structure” and disaggregation (Lull 2000)—really mean for everyday news readership practices. The most successful incumbents and new entrants in the news business will be those who introduce innovations, but also meet old needs in innovative ways.

## **NOTES**

*Acknowledgments* – The authors wish to thank Andrea Moed, the Bassetti Foundation, Paulina Borsook, and all of the respondents and interviewees contacted in the course of this project.

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