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# Introduction

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Being ‘connected’ is more than a digital phenomenon – it’s an age-old and deeply human compulsion. For centuries before the Internet was dreamed about, local news in all its forms – from town crier to newspaper, radio and TV bulletin – played a leading role in satisfying people’s need to know and connecting them with other people and social institutions. Action and drama, controversy and revelation, business and pleasure, history and human interest have always been part of the mix. Local news has also been an important sphere of influence as a forum for discussion and debate on matters of public interest and as a check on powerful players in politics, commerce, public life – even the criminal underworld. News outlets have made fortunes from their two key roles in the local marketplace. Firstly, they had a cheap, mass-produced and popular product to sell. Secondly, they provided a valuable service for anyone wanting to make something known – from a birth, marriage or death to available work, a tender for public works or an upcoming concert. For more than 100 years, local news outlets generated ‘rivers of gold’ and built powerful empires from people’s need to buy, sell, announce and find out.

Despite its importance and power in society, local news has mostly been taken for granted – like so many of the major institutions, products and relationships that form the fabric of society. Its existence and its future used to be unquestionable. The local newspaper in particular stood alongside the bank and the post office, housed in prominent buildings on the main streets of cities and towns throughout the world. The local newspaper building was usually a solid edifice in the centre of town – reliable and imposing. A busy place with a public face that trained and employed locals in a range of roles – from advertising sales representative to accounts clerk, reporter or printer. Newspaper premises reflected local news institutions’ important position and spoke of their histories. Then the digital revolution came along, rewrote the street map and even put it online. Just like the bank and the post office, local news media have had to renegotiate their position on the high street – in every sense. In the process, local journalism has become more noticeable and arguably more interesting and important to a range of people,

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including many journalists and journalism scholars who hardly used to acknowledge it, or if they did tended to dismiss it as national and international news's poor relation. It is increasingly recognized for its diversity and its resilience, its value has become more obvious and interesting, and it is being credited as a powerful site for examining the evolution of news more generally.

### Changing journalism in a changing world

Local journalism faces many of the same challenges encountered by national and international journalism. It continues to evolve as part of wider structural transformation (still taking shape) of the news media more broadly, which is led by digital change but also other factors. These include the ways people access news, and its relationship to advertising and to sources of news. Chapter 3 provides an overview of local journalism around the world, which illustrates that change has not had the same consequences everywhere. It varies from country to country, place to place and media outlet to media outlet. The change may take different forms but it is profound, and clear trends can be detected across liberal democracies where print is in decline and broadcast news has been transformed by on-demand, multi-channel TV. Digital media more broadly have revolutionized the ways people communicate with one another and access and share information, which has disrupted the traditional business model and triggered a 'crisis' about the future of journalism.

Most of the academic enquiry about the structural transformation of news has been tightly focused at the national and international levels. Notably, there has been relatively little work on conceptualizing local journalism's place in a networked society, or how understanding the 'community ties' thesis that has historically underpinned most scholarship on local news could help 'big' news media to maintain its relevance to society. This is surprising, as despite the media maelstrom, citizens' need for news and information about the people and events in their immediate orbit has remained relatively stable. Enterprising individuals and groups have identified niche opportunities for 'hyperlocal' journalism outlets in places where commercial operations have left town, or now fail to meet news needs. Often aligned with online news start-ups, hyperlocals are devoted to the stories and minutiae of a particular neighbourhood, ZIP code or interest group within a certain geographic area (Picone, 2007, p. 102). These publications have attracted attention within industry and academic circles in recent times, with questions

from whether hyperlocal sites can offer a sustainable business model for local journalism and fulfil its public accountability role through to identifying the new skill set required and whether government funding should be part of the mix. At a conceptual level, the hyperlocal turn goes to the very essence of how everyday people, journalism scholars and practitioners understand and position themselves in the social world. It challenges understandings of what journalism and news is and how it should be presented, and reminds us of the dangers in massification of small-time news. Hyperlocal news is sometimes hyped as something new, but arguably much of its appeal and relevance lie in the ways it taps a deep and old news culture.

### Understanding 'community ties'

Local news media is identified in much literature as reinforcing our connection to place and to others. Scholarship that examines local news has celebrated its place in facilitating community integration and civic involvement – from thinkers like de Tocqueville to John Dewey and Robert Park (Zelizer & Allan, 2010, p. 70). Park's writings signalled a shift in urban sociology that continues to inspire scholars of local media today. He was aligned with the Chicago School's urban ethnography movement of the 1920s, which placed particular emphasis on the study of marginalized groups. His main interest was the role of the ethnic press in establishing various causes and the sense of intellectual and social liberation that immigrants gained from reading newspapers in their own languages (see, e.g., Park, 1922).

Park's successor, University of Chicago sociologist Morris Janowitz (1967), used content analysis and survey research to explore community integration. Janowitz viewed local newspaper readership as a contributing factor to the integration of people in a community. He argued, 'the community newspaper's emphasis on community routines, low controversy and social ritual are the very characteristics that account for its readership' (Janowitz, 1967, p. 130). Local media scholar Jack Rosenberry (2014) has highlighted that in the United States, one of the deepest parts of research about local journalism extends from the community ties hypothesis that began with Janowitz to include the work of Keith Stamm. These scholars were noteworthy in explaining how local news media could influence the way individuals connected with their communities and could serve as agents for community building. Stamm (1988) suggested that the various kinds of community ties could be

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distinguished in terms of what the individual is tied to (community as place, process or structure) and the nature of the tie (spatial, cognitive, affective). Stamm encouraged researchers to distinguish and establish the temporal order of relationships between community ties and media use. To do this, he urged scholars to follow new residents to communities, observing the order in which key community ties are constructed in relation to the points at which they begin to attend to local news and information. He contended:

If there is to be a community, the individual cannot just take; each individual must give something. Such interdependence also applies to newspapers and other 'local' media. Local media benefit when the interdependence of individual and community is strong. But they cannot take such interdependence for granted. They must contribute something to it. (Stamm, 1988, p. 357)

In today's scholarship, news providers that serve small towns and cities are often referred to as 'local' or 'community' media. However, many news outlets have become 'local' in name only (Franklin, 2006), weakening the interdependence Stamm advocated. They have been centralized, amalgamated and the news they offer is produced in far-flung regions. For example, at some Australian regional newspapers, the volume of content produced in the local newsroom has declined significantly. Much of it is now sourced from other mastheads in the same company stable, or produced by their operations in New Zealand, The Philippines and India. Despite this, small news outlets continue to perpetuate the belief that they are 'local' even though about the only local thing about many of them is the place name in the newspaper masthead, and on radio and television the use of the phrase 'local news update'. Chapters 4 and 7 explore how weakening genuine community ties can undermine what it means to be 'local', and why this can have damaging consequences for news outlets' legitimacy and relationships with the societies they serve, and which in turn sustain them.

#### **The world of local news**

Some of the key questions for those with an interest in local news concern how the meaning of 'local' might have shifted in a globalized and networked media society, and what opportunities and challenges this could present for journalists, traditional news organizations and

hyperlocal start-ups. The chapters that follow critically engage with these themes, and tackle some taken-for-granted terms and concepts, such as 'community', to generate fresh perspectives that can inform both practice and theory.

Local journalism can be understood broadly as both a practice and a product that relates to a specific geographic area and the events and people connected to it. It is a global phenomenon with myriad long and proud histories. It is as important to people living in big cities as it is to those in regional and remote locations. It not only reports on the people of the region and parochial happenings such as council meetings, crimes and festivals; it also interprets national and international events and issues from a local angle. Much 'local' news takes digital forms and can be accessed from anywhere with an Internet connection. 'Local news media' refers to media organizations and outlets that serve people and institutions that have interests in the distinct geographic zone, from audiences to advertisers, public authorities and businesses.

As mentioned previously, it is important to be awake to the truth that in many parts of the world such news media are increasingly 'local' in name only. This is just one of the problems with a broad definition of 'local news'. A generic definition can also disguise the fact that throughout the world journalism is produced, circulated and consumed in culturally specific ways. In the US, Europe and Australia most local news outlets are commercially owned and operated. In China and Vietnam the state controls most media production. In the South Pacific, churches are major players. In African countries community radio is a major source of local news; in the US there are more than 8000 local newspapers. How local news industries are organized and regulated, and the ways they address audiences, cannot be explained simply by the combination of today's technology and the current state of the economy or national political system. The cultural context is paramount. History and geography are also central, both when comparing countries and in understanding how news media within a country position themselves in relation to one another. Understanding the similarities and differences between news systems throughout the world is important; especially as specific physical and social contexts give local news everywhere its distinctive flavours.

Some of the factors that make the study of local journalism so interesting and important include the diversity of news styles and agendas found from place to place, as well as between media forms; and the small media's resilience and ability to maintain traditions in the face of momentous change and disruption, as well as its capacity to experiment

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and transform. The complex social roles and exercise of media power at the local level have been under-theorized, but can generate rich insights into journalism and society more broadly.

### Putting local journalism on the conceptual map

Journalism scholars have contributed much to the critical understanding of key concepts including ‘public’, ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’. ‘Local’ and related ideas such as ‘sense of place’ and ‘community’ have not been given the same status or attention, despite their importance to understanding the largest sector of news throughout the world. These taken-for-granted concepts in journalism studies deserve to be properly unpacked to determine their power and limitations, and what theoretical insights can offer to the future of news.

One of the key contentions in the chapters that follow is that place still matters in a digital world. However, in discussions about local news media, place must always be considered in the context of its relationship to wider social space and global information systems. Local journalists of the 21st century must not only specialize in ‘place-based’ news. They need a clear understanding of how their locality and its people fit in the context of a globalized world because local news outlets not only report the happenings within a discrete geographic area. They also interpret national and international affairs and how these shape economic, political, social and cultural aspects of daily life in local communities. Furthermore, local journalists are increasingly working for news organizations with a global reach. Even bloggers who produce local news rely on search engines such as Google to reach audiences.

We introduce the concept of ‘geo-social’ news (Hess, 2013a) in Chapter 2 as a way of interpreting a local news outlet’s solid link to geographic territory, while acknowledging the wider social space in which it plays a role – both in holding an influential position in certain social flows and movements, and as a node to wider global news media and communication networks.

### Rethinking community and the local

‘Local’ is a concept that connects geography and place with a sense of belonging. To be considered a ‘local’ implies that our feet are planted firmly on the ground somewhere and that our physical surroundings are deeply and comfortably familiar. We invest in a locality – socially, economically, culturally and psychologically. It is where we feel most

like 'a fish in water'. But to be 'local' takes time to develop. It can also be heavily guarded, and this is when binaries sometimes emerge – divisions and tensions that can polarize outsiders and insiders. Concepts related to 'local' such as 'sense of place' and 'community' are often used in scholarship about journalism and allude to similar feelings, but they are much more fluid terms that are not inherently tied to the importance of us 'being' in a place. Sense of place, for example, often implies a deep connection to a physical space – a room in a house, a street, a scenic lookout, but we do not necessarily have to have our feet constantly or firmly planted there. We might also share such sensibilities about more than one place as society becomes increasingly transient.

The notion of 'community' stretches beyond physical territory. It is used to refer to any group of people who congregate around a shared interest or activity, such as communities of Internet users, communities of scholars, communities of vintage car owners. In contrast, local is inherently tied to a place and requires us to be there, or have a symbolic presence in one way or another. When people are torn from their homes, or leave to take up opportunities, negotiating new surroundings and developing a sense of belonging are real challenges. Robert Park's observations almost a century ago remain relevant today: local journalism can still play a key role in assisting newcomers by providing windows on their new domain and offering ways to connect with people and organizations; making their presence known and understood, and also providing opportunities for their voices to be heard. However, there has also been a major change since Park's time: online news outlets make it possible to remain connected to the people and happenings of the 'local' place that has been left behind physically – but not socially.

'Local' and 'community' can be multi-layered. Within a large city, people may further identify themselves by suburb or even neighbourhood (geography), as well as by cultural groups. For example, in Sydney, Australia, people who live in the large municipality of Sutherland, south of the city centre, describe themselves proudly, and are widely recognized, as from 'The Shire'. The dominant demographics and lifestyles associated with this particular local area, centred on its beaches and waterways, have been documented and celebrated in Australian popular culture – from the novel made into a film and television series, *Puberty Blues*, to the reality television series *Sylvania Waters* and *The Shire*. However, The Shire is also a good example of how a strong sense of belonging can create social tensions and 'outsiders', and the local news media's role in this. In the summer of 2005 there was mass racist violence against 'young men of Middle Eastern appearance' on Cronulla

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Beach in The Shire. The ‘local’ antagonists resented the presence of people from a different cultural background, whom they perceived as belonging elsewhere. They resorted to physical attacks in their attempts to expel ‘foreigners’ from the beach. An inquiry found local Sydney news media played a key role in fanning the conflict (Poynting, 2006).

The smaller the village the more people appear likely to be united through kinship and reciprocity. But in today’s world, towns and cities – no matter how small – are part of a globally networked world and feature increasingly transient populations. To describe geographic spaces simply as ‘communities’ can mislead us into thinking their inhabitants exist together harmoniously for the sake of the collective, and overlooks issues of equality, social class and power.

### Democracy and advocacy

Democracy demands that citizens have access to good quality information on which to deliberate and an arena for public discussion to take place. Journalism is not only understood to enable democracy but is also an essential part of it because it *is* the democratic forum for ideas and community debate.

Chapter 1 provides an extended discussion of journalism and democratic theory, so we will not wade into a long discussion of these ideas here. However, there are two points worth making at the outset. The first is that democracy begins at the local level; the second is that in order to deliberate on local issues, citizens require a local public sphere for which local news media are essential. There is much concern that the democratic role of local news is in jeopardy due to the collapse of the advertising business that underwrote accountability journalism. While the emergence of ‘news gaps’ poses risks, it has also inspired bold new experiments in the funding, creation and delivery of local news. These are discussed in Chapter 7.

Global and national issues are experienced in the local context as well as truly parochial matters such as local government. National policies relating to health, education, housing, immigration, subsidies to agriculture and other industries, and so forth, have real impacts on localities and their residents, who judge the effects of wider policy on local terms and demand space for informed political debate at the community level. Furthermore, many of the voluntary groupings that are central to grassroots democracy are organized on a geographic basis. Take the example of the Country Women’s Association of Australia. This national organization, which was formed in 1922, aims to improve social conditions for

women and children and make life better for families, especially those living in rural and remote Australia. As the largest women's organization in Australia with more than 1200 branches around the country, it is a powerful lobby. The state chapter in New South Wales has 10,500 members who belong to more than 400 local branches. They campaign on a range of national, state and local issues, such as having 'khaki weed' declared a noxious weed in a specific agricultural area.

Of course there are the more transient groups that often form around locally based issues, especially aspects of the environment, such as saying 'No' to a nuclear dump or to an airport being built. Others form in response to the local impact of global shifts, such as communities welcoming or fearing refugees. The importance of local journalism to grassroots democracy, both as a source of reliable information and a forum for discussion, is relatively uncontroversial and is touched upon throughout the book. However, Chapter 4 moves into different territory. It explores one dimension of local journalism's role in public life that often jars with 'big' journalism's view of the field, where the boundaries are fenced by the ideological force field of 'objectivity'. The key difference is that local journalists and news providers, and especially small newspapers in the United States, have a strong tradition of serving as champions and campaigners for the towns, cities and regions they serve. Advocacy journalism can be understood as a news outlet's ability to campaign or advocate on behalf of a perceived collective on matters of public interest. Chapter 4 draws on examples from a number of countries where local media have successfully campaigned for things such as new hospital equipment, disability services, improvements to roads and schools, and environmental programmes. Mainstream local media outlets have the power to represent community sentiment, which policymakers and other powerful groups understand as public opinion because of their wide reach with mainstream audiences. This power to connect local news audiences with dominant players in society means the practice of advocacy journalism can be understood as a form of power available to established local media organizations, which benefits them at the same time as the interests they serve.

### Changing views of local news

In outlining the reasons why small media deserves our attention, Nielsen argues the study of local media is not all that 'sexy' (Nielsen, 2015). In fact, it has been given short shrift in journalism studies until

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recently. The rise of the ‘professional journalist’ at the turn of the 20th century rested on the concepts of ‘objectivity’, ‘editorial autonomy’ and the ‘watchdog’ role of the press. This ran counter to local journalism’s intimate relationship with community, advocating on its behalf, and the owner-operator model where journalists write news and run the business at the same time. The study of national and international journalism, its values and relationship to political elites became the overwhelming concern. Robert Park’s research on community integration was taking place about the same time that the rise of the professional journalist began to dominate 20th-century understandings of journalism. The community ties thesis didn’t fit entirely with the Fourth Estate function or social responsibility model of the press. The ‘purity’ of journalism was paramount and had to be protected from the business end of the game – advertising became a ‘dirty word’. Now many local and hyperlocal news ventures have no option but to face the reality of their situation – they need to make money to survive and as small enterprises they must not only write the news, they must sell the news.

New business, social and technological environments for local journalism have demanded significant changes in the everyday practices of news in the past decade or so, just as they have everywhere. However, the news values and routines that determine agendas at the local level have always had a slightly different emphasis. Chapter 5 outlines how local media practices differ from ‘big city’ journalism, with an accent on the local journalist having to develop expertise on all aspects of the region, rather than specific news beats. It will also discuss the ethical dilemmas that local journalists encounter in their day-to-day practice. These include questions related to the balancing act between the journalist’s allegiances as a citizen and their professional responsibilities: how do you face your neighbours when you’ve written a court story about their daughter? How does an editor deal with being a highly visible member of the community?

**Embracing change**

Journalists are positioned in society as the people best placed to provide the news, yet the very essence of what a journalist is and does is being challenged in the changing media landscape. The business model that once sustained traditional journalism has broken down as media become increasingly enmeshed in a complex web of global information flows. News providers are working frantically to detangle themselves

and find their 'place' in the new media world. This book argues that the key to fresh understandings of journalism and its relationship to society can be found at the local level because it is here that the relationships between journalists and the people and places they report upon and to is arguably closest.

The norms and values that shape our understanding of local news are not set in concrete – they respond, expand and adapt to change. For much of the 20th century political, economic, social and technological contexts were reflected by ideas related to objectivity, political economy, sociology, the pursuit of truth and professionalism. The social world has shifted on its axis, and journalism finds itself on new ground. Now anyone can publish an opinion online, and that opinion can be accessed throughout the world. 'Sharing' is the new economic buzzword and people no longer have to be media professionals to publish stories and images. Methods of gathering, circulating and consuming news have been transformed, and scholars are taking fresh approaches to conceptualizing the roles and practices of digital journalism. The local level is an exciting space for considering the key questions arising about contemporary journalism more broadly because it offers a close-up view – from a different angle.

Some of the new ways of doing journalism and understanding the challenges and opportunities in the 21st century relate to the ideas discussed in this chapter and encountered throughout the book. These include 'community', 'power', 'culture', the business and sustainability of journalism, and rethinking the question of what is news to local audiences.

To serve as a clear signpost directing people to information they might need or want about a specific place presents immense advantages in this media abundant world. It also generates and reinforces issues of power. But local journalism must distinguish itself in this crowded and competitive space, and both practitioners and scholars need to understand its importance to people at every level of society.

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