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Boundaries of Hyperlocal Journalism: Geographical Borders, Roles and Relationships with the Audience in Spain and the Netherlands

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Abstract. The growth of so-called hyperlocal media has created new challenges for research, blurring some of the classic boundaries of local journalism and traditional media. In this chapter we try to understand the role hyperlocal media have in the local media ecosystem by focusing on two European countries: Spain and the Netherlands. We present the methodology applied for the study of hyperlocal media in both cases, adapted to their geographical, social and media context. We identify the main characteristics of hyperlocal media in both countries, observing their distribution in the territory, organizational and productive structures, news content and citizen participation. Finally, we propose some keys for the comparative study of hyperlocal media.

Keywords: hyperlocal journalism; local journalism; Spain; The Netherlands

1 Introduction

The media ecosystem is in a constant state of transformation. In recent decades, journalism and the traditional media model have undergone major changes, accelerated by their adaptation to the Internet, new devices and platforms. The changing tendencies are not only visible in the international and national mainstream media, but also in the closest space to citizens, which is that of local and hyperlocal journalism.

The crisis of traditional local media (Franklin 2006) and the new possibilities of the network have favored the growth of new digital media models of local and hyperlocal scope. This phenomenon, observed in different countries and media contexts, has been studied over the last few years (Harte et al. 2018; Negreira-Rey and López-García 2021). The growth of so-called hyperlocal media has created new challenges for research, blurring some of the classic boundaries of local journalism and traditional media. In this chapter we try to understand the role hyperlocal media

have in the local media ecosystem by focusing on two European countries: Spain and the Netherlands.

1.1 Characteristics of Hyperlocal Media

Hyperlocal refers to location and to the smallest and closest geographic space. Location has multiple meanings for journalism: it is a generator of information about the community, provides truthfulness about what happens in it and encourages social engagement of citizens; it is an organizational factor for filtering, prioritizing or synthesizing news; and it is a communicative challenge when integrating the technological possibilities of local media into local news production (Schmitz Weiss 2020).

Hyperlocal media have been considered a subculture because of their 'excessively local' character, which differentiates them from the journalistic culture of traditional local media and presents them as alternative news actors (Hess and Waller 2016a). Although in the context of the network society the flow of local news occurs in a global geographical and social reality (Hess and Waller 2016b), hyperlocal journalism is understood as an activity rooted in a place (Rodgers 2018). The physical distance of the journalist from the coverage area is key to building the news agenda and getting a sense of community from neighbors (Freeman 2020).

From a political-economic perspective, hyperlocal media can also be considered as a subculture, with specific power relations in the local media ecosystem (Arnold and Blackman 2021). This argument is based on the power differences between mainstream operators and small independent operators, and on the alternative and independent character of hyperlocal media. Generally, their presence in the community is associated with the idea of greater plurality and better democratic functioning of the public sphere.

The term 'hyperlocal journalism' began to be associated with the production of local news online in the 2000s (Williams and Harte 2016). Since then, researchers studying hyperlocal media have made proposals for its definition and discussing the concept. However, the diversity in terms of the type of publications classified as hyperlocal, the different content they produce and the divergence in the size of the geographical and social area in which they operate makes it difficult to reach a common definition that works for all (Barnett and Townend 2015).

Metzgar and colleagues (2011: 774) proposed a definition that has been used as a reference for most studies to date. They defined hyperlocal media as "geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement". The delimitation of their geographic scope is key to differentiate them from other media of proximity, so Radcliffe (2012: 6) proposed defining hyperlocals as "online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community". This

definition leaves open the possibility of adapting 'small geographically defined communities' to the territorial and administrative organization of different contexts.

The community orientation and civic engagement of hyperlocal media is a common aspect in characterizing this informative model (Williams and Harte 2016). It is difficult to determine whether their presence in the community fills the gap left by traditional local media with a broader scope (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014) or whether they enhance the democratic functioning of communities (Nygren et al. 2018). It has been generally observed that the growth of hyperlocals occurred during the last decade following the closure of local and regional newspapers, many of them promoted by entrepreneurial journalists who previously worked in traditional media (Wahl-Jorgensen 2022). Their status as small businesses and the characteristics of their promotional teams allow them to be characterized as 'community journalism start-ups' (Wahl-Jorgensen 2021). Hyperlocal media journalists must combine their journalistic work with the economic management of their projects (Chadha 2016), although they often prioritize their informative mission over the search for economic profitability (Harte et al. 2016). Among hyperlocal media we find both for-profit and non-profit initiatives (Tenor 2018).

Most authors agree to the condition that hyperlocal media should be producers of original content, rejecting news aggregation sites or websites that only redistribute third-party content (Hujanen et al. 2019). The news agenda of hyperlocal media prioritizes topics that are of greater interest and usefulness to the neighbors of the community, integrating local politics, social issues, culture and entertainment, sports, economics or urbanism (D'Heer and Paulussen 2013; Van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014; Leckner et al. 2019; Radcliffe 2015; Thurman et al. 2012). The characteristics of their organizations and their informative and social purpose in the community make hyperlocal media stand out as independent from mainstream media and in opposition to them (Arnold and Blackman 2021; Barnett and Townend 2015). Several authors agree on the idea of independence: Turner (2015: 48) states that hyperlocals are "largely independent" from legacy media; Leckner and colleagues (2019: 6) establish as a condition that they are "media operations not related, attached or sponsored by any established news media organization"; Halvorsen and Bjerke (2019: 118) characterize them as "independents of legacy media groups"; and Jangdal (2022: 20) defines them as "operated independently of other media groups".

Hyperlocal media have been defined as digital natives by Metzgar and colleagues (2011). This is a characteristic common to many of them since their growth has occurred mainly on the Internet due to its low barriers to entry (Radcliffe 2012) and the accessibility of the technology infrastructure (Jati 2022). However, authors such as D'Heer and Paulussen (2013) claim that this condition excludes other hyperlocal media that employ a print or audiovisual matrix. Nygren and colleagues (2018) apply a broader criteria to hyperlocal media platforms, including digital media, subscription and free newspapers, community radio and television stations.

Their community orientation favors them maintaining openness to citizen participation. Community members can participate in hyperlocal media as producers,

contributors, sources or participants (Firmstone and Coleman 2014). In addition, these media often have a regular network of collaborators (Zamenopoulos et al. 2016). In some cases, the boundary between professional journalism and the creation of informative content by citizens can become blurred. Hyperlocal media do not always meet journalistic standards (Turner 2015), as the profiles of content producers are diverse, including journalists, workers without journalistic training or experience, readers, audience members, local organizations, and official local government communicators (Nygren et al. 2018). Some authors recognize that beyond hyperlocal journalistic media, there are other spaces with hyperlocal information, such as sites for community participation, aggregating news sites, local portals or politically-driven sites (Tenor 2017), as well as collaborative groups or spaces on social networks such as Facebook (De Meulenaere et al. 2020).

1.2 *Hyperlocal Media Maps*

The debate about the definition and characterization of hyperlocal media is still open, because there is no single prototype for these media (Cook et al. 2016). Hyperlocal media and their models have been studied in different countries, with different criteria applied to their mapping and categorization. Geographical and social context, the territorial, administrative and political organization of the area, the media ecosystem and its evolution all determine some of the characteristics that researchers apply to hyperlocal media in their case studies.

To date, hyperlocal media have been mapped in the United States (Horning 2012), the United Kingdom (Harte 2013), Sweden (Jangdal 2019; Nygren et al. 2018), Finland (Hujanen et al. 2019), Norway (Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019), Russia (Dovbysh 2021), and Australia and New Zealand (Downman and Murray 2017). Hyperlocal media have also been mapped in Spain and the Netherlands, cases that will be presented in detail in the following sections of the chapter. In Table 1 we summarize some of the criteria that authors have put forward in their research to identify and categorize hyperlocal media.

Table 1. Criteria for the identification and categorization of hyperlocal media used in previous research. Own elaboration.

Geographic area	- Councils in the United Kingdom (Harte 2013). - Municipalities (metropolitan, urban, countryside, rural) in Sweden (Jangdal 2019; Nygren et al. 2018). - Municipalities in Finland (Hujanen et al. 2019). - Municipalities in Norway (Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019).
Platform and type of media	- Digital natives (Horning 2012; Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019). - Subscription newspapers, free newspapers, online news sites, community radio and TV (cable) (Nygren et al. 2018).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Radio, web, tv, print (Hujanen et al. 2019). - Classification: professional journalist for-profit publication; professional journalist non-profit publication; publication by amateurs; publication published by a legacy media; enterprise for-profit publication; enterprise non-profit publication; community media; trained citizen journalist publication; part of a chain of hyperlocal publications (Hujanen et al. 2019). - Owned by people in their communities (Harte 2013). - For profit and non-profit (Harte 2013). - Owned by large media companies and small independent ones (Nygren et al. 2018).
News content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Original content (Horning 2012; Harte 2013). - Exclusive content with identified author (Harte 2013). - Local and community information (Horning 2012). - General local news (Nygren et al. 2018; Hujanen et al. 2019). - Publication targeted at local residents or people with ties to the location (Hujanen et al. 2019).
Media activity over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Active media, publishing in the last five months (Harte 2013). - Publishing at least once a month (Nygren et al. 2018; Hujanen et al. 2019). - Publishing at least once a week and lasted for six months (Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019).
Exclusion criteria (which media are not considered hyperlocals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sites behind a paywall; pure listings sites (Harte 2013). - More locally produced and distributed than legacy media (Nygren et al. 2018). Legacy media as organizations developed from traditional daily newspapers, and regional news in public service media. - Independent from legacy media groups (Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019). - Excluded announcement sheets, established media-like local newspapers, free sheets and local radio stations (Hujanen et al. 2019).

As can be seen, the criteria applied for categorizing hyperlocal media are not homogeneous across previous research and respond to the particularities of each media context and the objectives of each study. In general, we see that the municipality is the geographic area associated with the space of coverage and operation of hyperlocal media. There is divergence when it comes to limiting hyperlocals to digital native media or integrating print, radio, and television platforms. Hyperlocals are identified as both for-profit and non-profit media, with different levels of professionalization and citizen participation, and owned by local actors, either large or small companies. It is established that they must produce original, exclusive content of recognized authorship, that they must have a generalist content and that they must be targeted to the neighbors of the community. Since hyperlocal media are often unstable in their activity, some authors propose criteria to ensure that they are current projects that publish frequently. As exclusion criteria that other authors have

previously applied to discard the categorization of hyperlocal media, it is determined that they must be independent of legacy media groups, produced and distributed more locally, and information resources that are not considered hyperlocal media—such as listing sites, announcement sheets or free sheets, for example—are identified.

2 Hyperlocal Media in Spain

2.1 The Spanish Media Context

The current development of hyperlocal media in Spain requires an understanding of its context. Spain was categorized by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as a polarized pluralism media system, like other Mediterranean countries. In fact, the evolution of the traditional media system and the political and administrative characteristics of the State determine the media models observed today.

The present-day Spanish media ecosystem began to take shape with the democratic transition that began in 1975. In its political and territorial dimension, the State was formed with a central government and 17 autonomous communities with their own regional administrations, in addition to other government bodies in their provinces—a total of 50 plus two autonomous cities—and municipalities—8,131 of them. This territorial and administrative organization reflects the cultural diversity in Spain, which has five co-official languages in addition to Spanish. On a social level, the country currently has more than 47 million inhabitants, although with a very unequal demographic distribution due to the concentration of population in the capitals with greater economic activity.

Regarding the media, the reestablishment of democracy and the new territorial and political organization favored the growth of the local press. Regional and local press publishing groups dominated the market in the 1980s and 1990s. These coexisted with national newspapers, public radio broadcasting services—at national and regional levels—private radio and television channels—also of national and local scope—and community media. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, legacy media had to adapt to the new digital scenario, while digital native media were growing. The economic crisis suffered in Spain since 2008 led to the closure of local media and delegations and generated high unemployment in the journalistic sector.

In response to this crisis, new media projects promoted by entrepreneurial journalists proliferated on the Internet, many of them with a local and hyperlocal scope. From 2008 and 2009 the first hyperlocal digital media appeared in Spain (Flores Vivar 2014). This type of journalistic initiative has grown and renewed the ecosystem of media of proximity in Spain. They provide news coverage to areas that are

not covered by the media of greater reach and satisfy citizens' need for local information.

2.2 Methods for Mapping Hyperlocals

Studying the development of hyperlocal media in Spain requires, firstly, a mapping for the identification of these media. Given this research objective, the first question that arises is what is hyperlocal media and what differentiates it from local media. In the Spanish context, we turn to a previous definition of communication spaces adapted to the current organization of the Nation-State (López García 2004). According to this classification, the local space corresponds to municipalities and counties—or the sum of several municipalities or several counties. Prioritizing the geographical criterion, we determine that hyperlocal media are those that cover an area smaller than the local space of the municipality, which would correspond to the area of the neighborhood, the parish or the district—or the sum of several.

For mapping hyperlocal media, we applied other criteria complementary to the geographical one (Negreira-Rey et al. 2020). We identified media with a journalistic purpose—excluding those that do not have an informative goal, such as corporate or propagandistic media—with a generalist theme and that produce original informative content. In terms of platforms, we include digital native and non-native media, which can combine their digital edition with print, radio or television. We include media of different periodicity and publication volume, understanding that those that have published some content in the last five months are active.

In our research we prioritize geographic delimitation to categorize hyperlocal media because it is a structural element—of the territory, of the governing bodies and of the social organization—and objective—it is possible to 'measure' it according to the territorial division of the State—which we can know from the location of the media outlets and the areas they cover at an informative level. This is also consistent with the research on local media carried out in Spain in recent decades, which was based on the territorial organization of the State (Macià Mercadé 1993), and which defined the spaces of communication and their levels of proximity (López-García 2004).

Although this definition establishes a consistent limit at a geographic level to categorize which media are hyperlocal and which are not, it is not homogeneous if we consider the reach they may have in terms of audience—at a population level, a neighborhood in the city of Madrid is not comparable with a neighborhood in the capitals of other provinces, for example.

2.3 Results

A map of hyperlocal media in Spain and their characterization has been presented in previous works (Negreira-Rey et al. 2020; Negreira-Rey 2022). In 2018, 62 active hyperlocal media—with neighborhood or district coverage areas—were identified in Spain. The mapping was reviewed in December 2021, in a post-pandemic context, and it was observed that six media had ceased their activity, while four new initiatives had been launched.

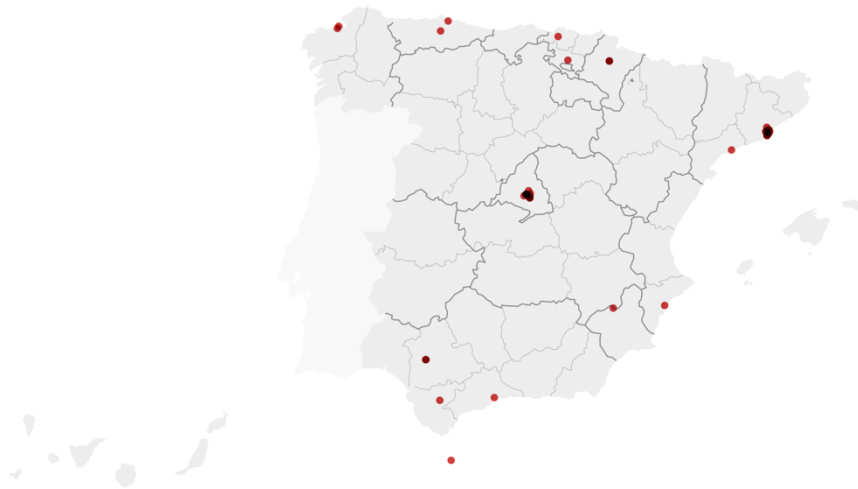


Fig. 1. Geographical distribution of hyperlocal digital media in Spain. Own elaboration.

The 60 hyperlocal media that remain active in the country are distributed unevenly throughout the territory, being concentrated to a greater extent in the capitals of Madrid and Barcelona, as can be seen in the map in Figure 1 (Negreira-Rey 2022). In the Spanish context, hyperlocal media have developed more in the surroundings of large cities—areas with the highest population density and economic activity. These capitals also concentrate a greater number of media companies, most of them with a national scope, which also contributes to the fact that these legacy media do not provide local or hyperlocal news coverage.

In general, the promoters of hyperlocal media have a strong vocation to provide information services to the community and seek to cover information that does not appear in other media. They have, therefore, a certain alternative character that brings visibility and informative presence to the neighborhood, also promoting social cohesion and citizen participation.

Ownership and Structure of Hyperlocal Organizations. At the organizational level, these media are usually legally constituted as small companies (32.3%), self-employed projects (29.0%) or as associations or cooperatives (38.7%)—uncommon forms in traditional media (Negreira-Rey 2022). It is also common to find non-profit initiatives (41.0%). All mapped media outlets maintain totally free access to content. In general, they are small professional teams—84% of them have only five or fewer regular workers—which in many cases combine their work in the media with another professional job—84% of workers are only employed by their media on a part-time basis (Negreira-Rey 2022). Therefore, they usually count on collaborators to produce content. Achieving long-term profitability and economic stability is a challenge for hyperlocal media, which explore strategies for economic scalability, such as the creation of media networks or partnerships with national media.

Content Production. In relation to news production, hyperlocal media prioritize in their agenda those topics that are of greatest interest and usefulness to the community's neighbors—social issues, culture and entertainment, education, environment, politics, lifestyle and leisure, health, sports, disasters and accidents, among others—and seek to give a voice to citizens and social entities. Although limited economic and human resources make it difficult to maintain the pace and volume of news production, 28% publish news daily and 56% update content on a weekly basis (Negreira-Rey 2022). Even so, the lack of resources makes it difficult for them to experiment with long-form or innovative formats.

Citizen Participation. Hyperlocal media are also characterized by their openness to citizen participation in content development, with 69% of the media inviting citizens to collaborate in the preparation of news content (Negreira-Rey 2022). However, this is usually done in a controlled manner by the journalists and professional editors of the team. The informative content generated by users is usually on topics pre-set by the editors of the media—generally soft news, social demands or opinion—and is always reviewed before being published. Some media maintain specific sections for citizen-generated content. Community members usually maintain a close relationship with journalists, both in the physical spaces of the neighborhood and through e-mail or social networks. Citizens often act as information sources, but also provide audiovisual resources about neighborhood events, or propose topics for inclusion in the agenda.

The State of Hyperlocals in Spain. In the Spanish context, hyperlocal news media already constitute a model typical of proximity media ecosystems, although the number of identified initiatives is still not very high. Despite the complex market conditions that hinder the sustainability of hyperlocal media in the medium term,

several hyperlocal information projects (digital natives and non-natives) have been active since 2008. They are established as news media with a clear vocation of service to the community, seeking to tell their daily lives, offering useful and reliable information to citizens and favoring social encounters and cohesion. This is reflected in their informative agenda and also in their openness to citizen participation.

3 Hyperlocal Media in the Netherlands

3.1 *The Dutch Context*

Hallin and Mancini (2004) classified the Netherlands, like other northern European countries, as part of the Democratic Corporatist Model. Countries with an early development of press freedom, high state intervention, political parallelism, and professionalism in journalism characterize this model. Additionally, their newspaper and magazine industries have very high circulations. However, just as in many European countries, print circulation of newspaper and magazine has dropped significantly in the past ten years (Bakker 2019).

Pillarized Media System. The present media system in the Netherlands has its roots in the twentieth century pillarized system whereby Protestant, Catholic, socialist and liberal communities developed their own educational, cultural, social, and political institutions (Hallin and Mancini 2004). This system broke down in the 1970s, together with the development of individualization and secularization (Nieuwenhuis 1992). Newspapers, radio and television broadcasters that previously operated in a Dutch pillar focused from the 1970s onward on a broader and more secularized audience (Van der Eijk 2000).

Despite de-pillarization, the twenty-first century still has a pillared media ecosystem in which the Dutch government usually avoids direct interference (Bakker 2017). The Dutch media market offers a diverse public broadcasting system in which member-funded independent broadcasters receive airtime on public channels. In addition, commercial broadcasts by national and foreign companies have been allowed since 1989 (Bardoel and Wijffjes 2019). The rise of the Internet has drastically altered the Dutch media landscape (Bakker 2017).

Local Journalism in the Netherlands. There has also been a shift in local journalism in the Netherlands in recent decades. The Netherlands has two local levels of government in addition to the national: regional-level provinces (12 in

total) and local-level municipalities (355 in total). The number of Dutch municipalities has decreased in recent decades due to mergers between different municipalities. Since 1975 the number of municipalities has decreased from 630 to 355 in 2020 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2022).

On a local level, the news system is organized around local and regional public broadcasters. There are a total of 13 regional public broadcasters, and in almost every municipality, one local public broadcaster holds a license for local cable television and radio. Additionally, regional newspapers, local newspapers, and weeklies are distributed around the Netherlands.

Since the beginning of this century, the reach and coverage of regional and local media have decreased, due to merging and closing of publishing houses as audiences and advertisers moved online. The circulation of regional daily newspapers declined by 50% between 2000 and 2017 (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014; Bakker and Kik 2018). Additionally, there is severe press concentration, whereby two Belgium publishing houses control almost all local and regional newspapers. Also, regional public broadcasters have been receiving fewer subsidies and revenue, and, as a result, their staffing decreased by 20% between 2007 and 2017 (Bakker and Kik 2018).

3.2 Methods for Mapping Hyperlocals

While the reach and coverage of regional and local media declined, the number of online providers of local news has increased (Bakker et al. 2011). Since its first variants in the late 1990s, the growth of hyperlocal digital media has been explosive in subsequent decades: in 2017, half of the municipalities had at least one hyperlocal (Bakker and Kik 2018). However, Van Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014) showed that Dutch hyperlocal media sites differ significantly in management, editorial and economic objectives. In addition, hyperlocals struggle with organization and revenue; maintaining a site is more complex than launching one. This questions how these hyperlocals have developed over time and which role they play in the local community. This section provides an overview of hyperlocals in the Netherlands since 2014. In the Dutch context, hyperlocals are defined as online media that cover the news of a specific municipality. They are stand-alone websites, not linked to local newspapers or local broadcasters.

To analyze the current state of hyperlocals in the Netherlands, we made use of three datasets. First, we made use of two datasets from 2014 and 2018 (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014; Bakker and Kik 2018). These studies identified hyperlocals by checking the first thirty Google search results with the keywords ‘news’ and the municipality's name. Following this, in 2020 we revisited all sites from the previous studies to check whether they were still active and if so whether

they still had the same owner. Also, through the same keywords we did an additional search to find out whether new hyper locals had started up since 2018.¹

To map the hyperlocals, we looked at their distribution area and the population on provincial and municipality levels. Furthermore, we identified who owns the hyperlocals by investigating the provided information on their websites. When the information on the website was insufficient, we contacted the owners to discover how they operated. Ownership was reported as unknown if the owner could not be determined. Finally, we analyzed the level of user participation of several hyperlocals. To retrieve this information, we looked at their websites to see if readers could get in touch with the newsroom, leave tips or suggestions, or add content themselves.

3.3 Results

In total, 593 active hyperlocal media sites were identified in the Netherlands in 2020, with an average of 1.7 hyperlocals per Dutch municipality. Hyperlocals are unevenly distributed across the Netherlands, which becomes evident at the provincial level (Figure 2). When we look at the number of hyperlocals in relation to the municipalities, we see that the province of North Holland leads with an average of 2.8 hyperlocals per municipality. Following that, two provinces in the east and north have, on average, the most hyperlocals per municipality: Overijssel (2.7) and Groningen (2.3). These numbers differ significantly from other provinces, such as Flevoland, which has the fewest hyperlocals on average: 0.7 per municipality.

The variation in the average number of hyperlocals by province shows that it is difficult to say anything about Dutch hyperlocals in general. For this reason, it is crucial to look closely at the population per municipality. We took a closer look at provinces with the most hyperlocals and their population: the average number of hyperlocals increases in municipalities when the population increases: up to 50,000 inhabitants (2.5 hyperlocals per municipality), between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants (3.1 per municipality) and over 100,000 inhabitants (4.3 per municipality). Our analysis shows that hyperlocals operate mainly in places with more inhabitants, but that does not necessarily mean urban areas. This becomes evident if we focus on the average number of hyperlocals per municipality of each capital city of the provinces: North Holland with Haarlem (3), Overijssel with Zwolle (5), and Groningen with similarly named Groningen (9). Although these places are the major cities in these provinces, Haarlem and Zwolle are not the leaders of the provinces,

¹ With this method, each title is counted separately for every municipality. For example, if a hyperlocal contains news for two municipalities, the hyperlocal is listed twice in our data. In addition, this study excludes aggregation websites that contain news scraped from other sites by robots. The so-called 911 sites, with mainly emergency news, are also excluded from this study because they are mostly aggregation sites.

when looking at hyperlocals. Particularly, in the province of North Holland, there are considerably smaller municipalities with many hyperlocals.

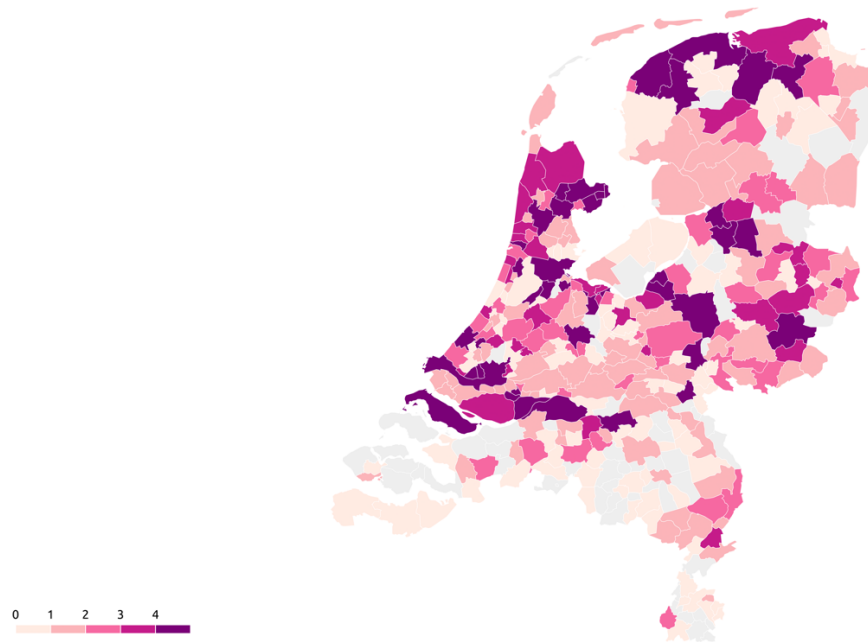


Fig. 2. Geographical distribution of hyperlocal digital media in the Netherlands (number of media outlets per municipality). Own elaboration.

Ownership of the Hyperlocals. We also looked at the owners of the hyperlocals. The proportion of individual ownership is the highest: more than half (53%) of the 593 hyperlocals are stand-alone sites unconnected to another local news medium. Around 36% of the Dutch hyperlocals are operated by an owner with more than one local site, a so-called chain. Belgian publisher *De Persgroep*, for example, owns 38 hyperlocals in addition to several national and regional newspapers. For 11% of the hyperlocals, we could not find the owner because the hyperlocals did not provide this information.

Content of the Hyperlocals. In relation to the content of the hyperlocals, we draw on a study conducted by the Dutch Journalism Fund, which analyzed 87 hyperlocals and the news they published in a week during the summer of 2022. On average, these hyperlocals posted 2.6 news items per day, which says nothing about the distribution of posts throughout the week; in some cases, hyperlocals published all

their articles only once per week. Therefore, the study looked at how many websites posted at least one news item each weekday: a quarter (25%) did so.

The data also included a case study of whether the published news items contained so-called ‘own-produced local news’ or news copied from, for example, other media or press releases from companies. Of the total, 19 hyperlocals (22%) have a percentage of between 0% and 25% of news items consisting of their own-produced local news. Twenty hyperlocals (23%) fell into the 25% to 50% category. The number of sites with news items between 50% and 75% own news totaled 12 (14%) and 16 (18%) in the category 75% and 100%. Several sites did not publish any news items in the researched period (11%), and the same proportion did not publish any own-produced local news articles (11%).

The Possibility to Participate. We also reviewed the public participation opportunities of the previously mentioned provinces with relatively high numbers of hyperlocals: North Holland, Overijssel, and Groningen. An analysis of almost all hyperlocals in these provinces (211 out of 222) shows that a large proportion (82%) have a so-called colophon page on their website with information about the editorial board. This is significantly greater than the number of websites listing the editor-in-chief’s (6%) or other journalists’ (5 %) contact information. Thus, many readers can find a page with information about the newsroom but cannot get in touch with it.

We also analysed the possible reasons listed on the websites for getting in touch with the newsroom – top of the list was news tips, with 66% of hyperlocals offering this as an option. Sending in photos (44%) or asking a question (64%) are also relatively frequently proffered options. In contrast, the audience of hyperlocals is less likely to invite people to send in press releases (38%) or write opinion pieces (14%).

The State of Hyperlocals in the Netherlands. Hyperlocals in the Netherlands play an important role in the Dutch local media eco-system. While the number of hyperlocals is not evenly spread across the country, every municipality has a hyperlocal that covers news for that town. The larger the municipality, the more active the hyperlocals are. However, this does not mean the capital of Amsterdam or other large cities have an abundant number of hyperlocals. It seems that middle-large towns are most attractive for hyperlocals. While many hyperlocals try to provide original news content and have the intention to interact with their audiences, it seems that they are struggling to do so.

4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have responded to a twofold objective: Firstly, to understand the concept of hyperlocals in journalism and how it has developed over time. We therefore investigated two European countries, which differ in size, political and media systems and have different historical contexts. This chapter helps to understand commonalities in relation to the state of hyperlocals in Europe. Secondly, this chapter unravels the difficulties of conceptualizing hyperlocals and subsequently the methodological constraints on studying it.

As in other European countries, Spain and the Netherlands have both seen a growth in hyperlocal media in recent years, identifying up to 60 and 593 news outlets in each country, respectively. We can interpret these data as positive, as they evidence a renewal of proximity media ecosystems and are key to the democratic development of societies. Hyperlocal news media emerge as a possible solution to the local press crisis, with renewed models characteristic of digital native media – although not all are natives – or with uncommon forms among legacy media, finding non-profit initiatives or those constituted as associations or cooperatives. While there is much debate about the crisis of local media in the dissemination of news deserts, it seems that hyperlocals are filling or at least trying to fill this gap.

We also found shared challenges: hyperlocal media generally survive with scarce economic resources and find difficulties in developing sustainable business models; the lack of resources is transferred to the team, with a lack of professionals to improve news production; they also present, in some contexts, difficulties to strengthening participation with the audience or integrating it as a central element of their activity. While the idea of hyperlocals was to be closer to the public, to exploit the possibilities of online, it seems difficult to find a sustainable model of journalism and participation, even at a local level.

The current reality shows that it is important to pursue the study of hyperlocal media and their evolution. However, this is not without methodological difficulties. Research on hyperlocal media has taken important steps in recent years: definitions have been proposed, hyperlocals have been mapped in several countries and case studies have been carried out. However, there are still open debates regarding the study of hyperlocals. Different criteria are observed to identify and categorize hyperlocal media, as noted in the introduction and as we can observe in the Spanish and Dutch cases. We find different criteria for defining hyperlocal media platforms, ownership and business structure or geographical scope.

Nevertheless, we propose some common factors that can help in the methodological design for the study of hyperlocal media. As a first factor, it would be advisable to start researching hyperlocal media from an understanding of the context of each country. The territorial and political organization and the social and cultural context determine the media models of each country, as well as the media ecosystem of proximity: weight of local media, evolution of traditional local media, adaptation of these media to the Internet and the emergence of digital natives, organizational

and business structure, etc. In each context, it is possible to identify the characteristics of hyperlocal media as models that differ from traditional local media.

The second factor would be to assume the basic fundamentals that define hyperlocal media and that are common to the studies carried out so far: coverage of defined geographical areas of reduced size, smaller than the spaces of local media (they may vary according to the territorial organization of each country and differences in the quantitative audience—in relation to the inhabitants—could be assumed); an informative mission with a marked orientation towards the community (reinforcement of local identity, social cohesion, citizen participation); or their journalistic and production of original news content.

Future research on hyperlocal media will contribute to further refining the methodology for their study. Future studies could also compare more countries with different media systems in relation to what the level of local means and how the local public participates in them.

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