Building Spaces for Hyperlocal Citizen Journalism

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One of the major criticisms of online citizen journalism is a perceived inability to conduct investigative and first-hand reporting. A number of projects have recently addressed this problem, with varying success: the U.S.-based *Assignment Zero* was described as "a highly satisfying failure" (Howe 2007), while the German *MyHeimat.de* appears to have been thoroughly successful in attracting a strong community of contributors, even to the point of being able to generate print versions of its content, distributed free of charge to households in selected German cities – but its focus is largely on community events and local history, not on what would be considered 'hard news' (news dealing with political issues in a narrow sense of the term; see Höhnke 2008).

Nonetheless, cases such as *MyHeimat.de* point to one area where citizen journalism holds a clear advantage over mainstream, industrial journalism: the coverage of local and what has been described as 'hyperlocal' issues and events, which limited and declining staff numbers in mainstream news organisations make difficult to cover through means other than a community-based, crowdsourced fact-checking process, or unmoderated or community-moderated discussion, debate, and deliberation. This is true both for literally, geographically local themes as well as for more figuratively 'local', issues requiring specialist background knowledge and analytical skills.

'Hyperlocal' Specialism

In Australia, citizen journalism played a prominent part in covering the federal elections held on 24 November 2007; news bloggers and public opinion Websites provided a strong counterpoint to the mainstream media coverage of the election campaign. The 2007 federal election will be remembered for a number of reasons – as only the second time that a sitting Prime Minister lost his seat, as the first time for many younger voters to experience a change in government, and as completing the Labor party domination of territory, state, and federal parliaments. Beyond this, however, it must also be seen as marking a transformation of the Australian mediasphere, towards a substantially greater role for online and citizen media forms – a trend also observed in the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, but here, with its own, uniquely Australian inflection.

Here as there, such transformations did not arise out of the blue, of course – long-established news and commentary blogs from *Road to Surfdom* to *John Quiggin* had gained some prominence already, and public intellectual and citizen journalism sites from *On Line Opinion* to *Crikey* have been instrumental in developing an alternative public sphere for those who sought them out. The potential of such developments had also been well recognised by some key institutions in the media and journalism industries – *Crikey* was sold to corporate media interests in 2005, *Road to Surfdom*'s Tim Dunlop accepted a position in *News.com.au*'s line-up of opinion blogs, and *ABC Online* gradually developed a range of experiments in citizen media, including expanded discussion and commentary functions for its readers and a number of blog-style opinion sections involving staff and guest writers.

2007 saw a further broadening of citizen journalism approaches to the coverage of Australian federal politics, however, and it is possible to point to signs of a marked impact on the Australian mediasphere of such extended citizen involvement in political coverage, debate, discussion, and deliberation. One key element of these developments was the emergence of bloggers and citizen journalists as expert commentators outside of – and often in opposition to – the established Canberra 'commentariat' (the parliamentary press gallery of journalists and pundits stationed more or less permanently in the national capital).

The conflict between mainstream pundits and alternative commentators was played out in good part in the context of a struggle over the correct interpretation of the weekly opinion polls indicating voting intentions in the election lead-up: Australian political bloggers

and citizen journalists made great sport of analysing and critiquing the mainstream commentary, especially in the major national newspaper *The Australian*. Dubbing *The Australian* the *Government Gazette* for its consistently upbeat reporting about the incumbent conservative Coalition government's chances in the upcoming election (see e.g. Bahnisch, 11 July 2007), even in the face of polling trends predicting a landslide result for the Labor opposition, bloggers examined the paper's editorial pages and their online counterparts and found them wanting on an almost daily basis.

One of the leaders of this charge against the established bastions of news commentary was simultaneously one of the least likely topical blogs ever to reach a wide audience: the psephologist blog *Possums Pollytics*. Operated by the pseudonymous Possum Comitatus, a Queensland-based scientist specialising in psephology (the statistical analysis of election trends and results), *PP* offered a running commentary on opinion poll results and cross-tabulated these with other sociodemographic information as available from a variety of sources.

While in its own right, this information may have appealed only to a handful of cognoscenti, it was the positioning of *Possums Pollytics* (and a small number of fellow travellers, including for example *The Poll Bludger*, *OzPolitics.info*, and *Mumble*) as a clear alternative to the mainstream press's supposedly commonsensical interpretations of polling trends which gradually attracted a larger audience. Indeed, for many Australians following the election campaign, it would have been the events surrounding an editorial in *The Australian*'s on 12 July 2007 which drew their attention to the psephologist blogs. Evidently exasperated by the blogs' persistent criticism of *The Australian*'s habitually partisan, pro-Coalition interpretations of the polls, that day the paper published an extraordinary article openly attacking bloggers and other "sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper" (The Australian, 12 July 2007), ostensibly for daring to voice their disagreement with *The Australian*'s own journalists' and pundits' reporting on the political mood of the electorate as expressed in the polls. Understood to have been authored by the paper's editor-in-chief, Chris Mitchell, the article denounces grassroots online commentators as "out of touch with ordinary views", and culminates in the remarkable statement that "unlike Crikey, we understand Newspoll because we own it". (A later article by the newspaper's political editor Dennis Shanahan in turn departed from this position, and appeared altogether to dismiss the opinion polling conducted by Newspoll and other organisations as generally unreliable; see Shanahan, 4 Sep. 2007.)

Adding further controversy, when *News.com.au*'s lone leftist blogger-pundit, Tim Dunlop (the operator of popular blog *Road to Surfdom*, recruited from the blogosphere to write for the *News.com.au* site) posted an article critiquing *The Australian*'s editorial, that article was removed from the site within hours of publication – but rather than silencing the debate, that retraction served only to highlight *The Australian*'s inability to cope with grassroots criticism of its journalistic standards. (Adding insult to injury, a watchful commentator at *Larvatus Prodeo* reposted Dunlop's article in full almost immediately upon its removal from News.com.au; see *Larvatus Prodeo*, 12 July 2007.) Widespread coverage of these events throughout the blogosphere and in other online publications, as well as the exposure gained through *The Australian*'s editorial itself, would have brought substantial numbers of new users to *Possums Pollytics* and other psephologist blogs.

The irony that – while citizen journalists are often depicted as amateurs attempting to do the work of professionals – it was professional journalists, but manifestly amateur psephologists, who were criticising professional election analysts should not be ignored in the present case. Indeed, the case of *Possums Pollytics* provides ample support for veteran blogger-journalist Dan Gillmor's well-known statement that "my readers know more than I do" (2003: vi): for virtually any topic in the news, opinion polling and election speculation included, it is now possible to find bloggers and citizen journalists specialising in that field and providing deeper insights than is possible for a journalist operating under the pressures of the modern newsroom.

Possums Pollytics and its fellow psephologist travellers can be understood as one example for a figuratively hyperlocal form of citizen journalism producing original reporting. Spurred on at first perhaps by what their operators perceived as a misreporting of polling data (and a misappropriation of their scientific discipline in the service of journalistic and political agendas), these bloggers may have started out by following the typical gatewatching practice of commenting on the commentators – highlighting the mistakes in the opinion poll analyses of seasoned journalists –, but gradually moved from this second-order form of political

commentary towards a more first-hand form of political reporting, scouring the Websites of the pollsters themselves (rather than waiting for mainstream media organs to serve up their analysis) and – at least in one case reported on *Possums Pollytics* – even benefiting from direct leaks of internal polling data from party organisations.

Following the election itself, *Possums Pollytics* in particular has continued this move from second-hand commentary to first-hand reporting, and has developed a rolling series of polling analysis posts combining the latest polling data from three major Australian opinion poll companies (see *Possums Pollytics* 2008). For the Australian political context, it is today possible to state that this series of public opinion analyses, and not the products of any of the mainstream commercial pollsters, is now the leading publicly available product in the political opinion polling market. *Possums Pollytics* has become a leader in the (figuratively) hyperlocal field of psephologist analysis in Australia, and it is likely that only a professional aversion towards citizen-generated journalistic content and an institutional loyalty towards the products of affiliated commercial pollsters keeps most mainstream political journalists from acknowledging this fact. (It is notable in this context that media figures such as Antony Green, resident polling commentator for the national public broadcaster ABC which has no direct affiliations with any one commercial pollster, and media organisations such as *Crikey*, the influential independent political commentary site, have no such hesitations, and frequently directly engage with and comment on *Possum Pollytics*' poll analyses.)

Hyperlocal Reporting and Commentary

Also in the context of the 2007 election, a different, more literal approach to hyperlocal reporting was attempted by *Youdecide2007.org*, an Australia Research Council-funded collaboration between researchers at Queensland University of Technology and media practitioners at the public service broadcaster SBS, the public opinion site *On Line Opinion*, and technology company Cisco Systems.[1] *YD* was developed as a dedicated space for a specifically hyperlocal coverage of the election campaign in each of Australia's 150 electorates from the urban sprawls of Sydney and Brisbane to the sparsely populated remote regions of outback Australia: it provided contributors with the tools and platform to cover their local electoral races for a wider audience. This is particularly appropriate to the Australian electoral system, which (for the lower house) ultimately breaks down into 150 individual contests for local electorates.

Youdecide2007 contributors were encouraged to interview their local candidates (including but not limited to those of the major parties), conduct vox-pops with local voters, and report on the issues central to their own electorate; these reports were posted on the site in text, audio, and video format. Additional material, some of which transcended individual electorates, was also prepared by *YD* staffers, some of whom appeared on a number of state and national radio broadcasts and in a weekly election talk show on Brisbane's community channel *Briz31*.

While *YD* had a relatively short run-up to the election, it nonetheless managed to attract citizen journalists in roughly half of all Australian electorates, including many which had been largely overlooked by election coverage in the national press. The site's most active contributor, in fact, Kevin Rennie, reported from the remote Western Australian electorate of Kalgoorlie (which also holds a distinction as the world's geographically largest electorate). This placed it well as a hyperlocal complement to the national coverage of both industrial journalism and topical citizen journalism, and enabled it to cover stories and feature candidates otherwise excluded from journalistic coverage.

In a number of cases, indeed, such reporting became newsworthy on a wider level: perhaps *Youdecide2007*'s best-known story was an interview with the Liberal member for the Queensland seat of Herbert, Peter Lindsay, who blamed young people's "financial illiteracy" for the credit crunch experienced by many younger voters. "I remember my own case," he continued. "We sat on milk crates in the lounge room until we could afford chairs. We had makeshift shelves to put ornaments on and so on, but you did that in those days. You waited until you could – you didn't live beyond your means and you didn't try to keep up with the Joneses. Things were more responsible" (Lindsay interviewed by Wilson, 10 Sep. 2007). These comments also became the basis for a question in parliament to PM John Howard by

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[1] The authors are part of the research team for this project, alongside Terry Flew and Stuart Cunningham (all QUT).

Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd, who asked, "apart from the milk crate solution, what is your plan to deal with Australia's housing affordability crisis or is it simply to blame the states?" (Wilson, 19 Sep. 2007).

Though extraordinary, this incident highlights the potential inherent in hyperlocal and other forms of citizen-journalistic news reporting, especially where citizen journalists are able to build on a solid set of resources and tools for their work. In a political context, it makes elected representatives and rival candidates more directly accountable to reporters who act in a double role as both citizens and journalists – and this similarly applies for fields other than politics as well –, and by relying on a broader community of citizen journalists, it is able to uncover a wider range of stories than is accessible to the limited workforce of the journalism industry; some of these stories, in turn, may prove to be of significance beyond the local environment, but even where they are of interest to locals only, such citizen journalism offers an important addition to the material available from the mainstream press.

In spite of such achievements, *Youdecide2007* cannot be described as an unqualified success; it serves in the first place as a proof of concept for further hyperlocal citizen journalism experiments. This is hardly surprising – most projects in citizen journalism and elsewhere take years to generate a sustainable, committed community with shared values and protocols, while *YD* operated for just under three months between its launch and the election date. This brief pre-election lifespan left little time for the site to establish a reputation which would have allowed its contributors' work to be picked up more regularly by mainstream news outlets (including project partner SBS), so that most of the mainstream media coverage of the site occurred through third-party mentions (as in the case of Kevin Rudd's 'crate-gate' question in federal parliament) or through reports which focussed on the *Youdecide2007* project itself, rather than on individual political stories published on the site by its citizen journalists.
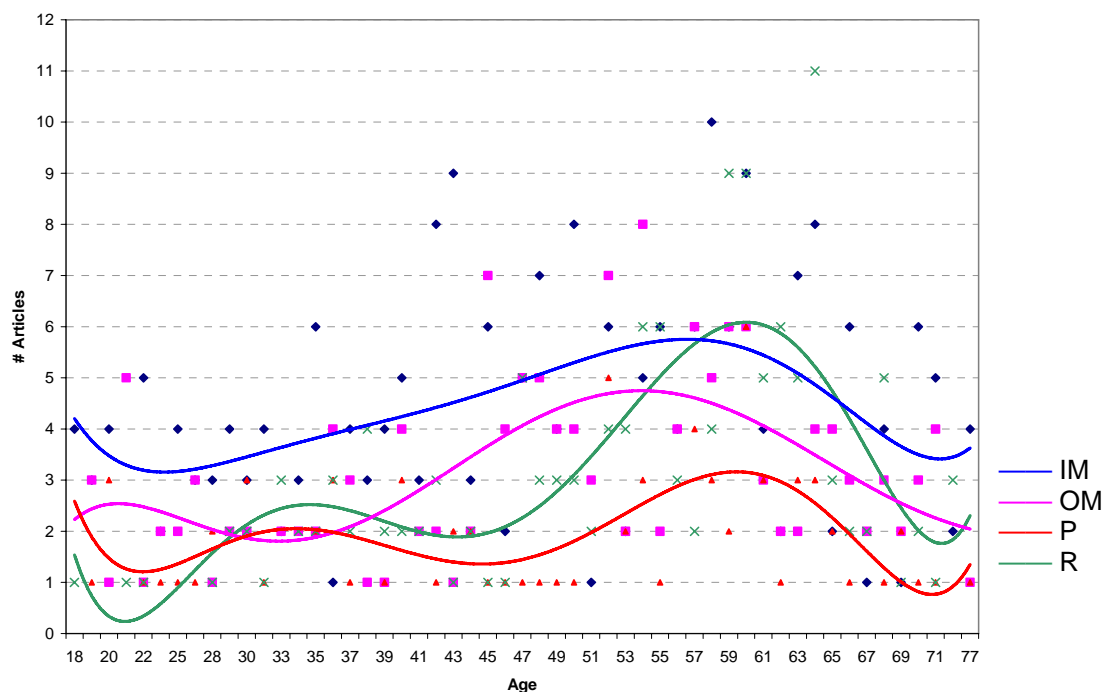

Fig. 1: *YD* article contributions by age and location
(IM: inner metropolitan, OM = outer metropolitan, P = provincial, R = rural;
solid trendlines represent smoothed polynomial approximation of participation patterns)

It must also be noted that take-up of the site across different geographical and socioeconomic communities was highly varied. With the project headquartered in Brisbane and featured on local community television, a bias towards Queensland-based contributors was hardly surprising. More remarkable, on the other hand, is the disproportionately strong take-up among contributors in rural areas of Australia, and among older age groups, as indicated in the graph above (with contributors aged between 45 and 65 emerging as one of

the most active groups on the site). This appears to indicate the relative paucity especially of local news media in rural and regional Australia, as well as the nonetheless strongly developed interest in political issues (generally, and specifically related to their local areas) among older voters. By contrast, while it is tempting to suggest that younger voters in Australia remain more politically apathetic, this does not appear to accord with reports that the prospect of a change of government generated unusually strong interest in the 2007 election among younger voters. Instead, it may be more appropriate to speculate that such younger voters favour other media spaces (such as blogs, election-related political satire in *YouTube*, or the ABC's political comedy TV show *The Chaser*) for their political engagement.

Ensuring a flow of quality content emerged as a particularly important issue for the site, and it is likely that this experience matches those of other start-up crowdsourcing-based projects. During the life of *Youdecide2007*, the core team generated seed content to ensure the site did not launch as an empty shell, but also in the hope that stories present at launch would guide citizen journalists in developing their own material (see Wilson, Bruns, and Saunders, 2008). They continued to make contributions throughout the life of the site, in part because they needed to guarantee a steady flow of content, even during those times when citizen contributions had temporarily dried up. In analysing site usage patterns, it emerged that staff-sourced stories had played a crucial role in drawing readers, and an interactive readership, to the site, while on average, crowdsourced stories generated a greater number of comments – an observation which points perhaps to the need to employ a variety of what may be described as Pro-Am approaches (Leadbeater & Miller 2004) especially during the early stages of a citizen journalism project.
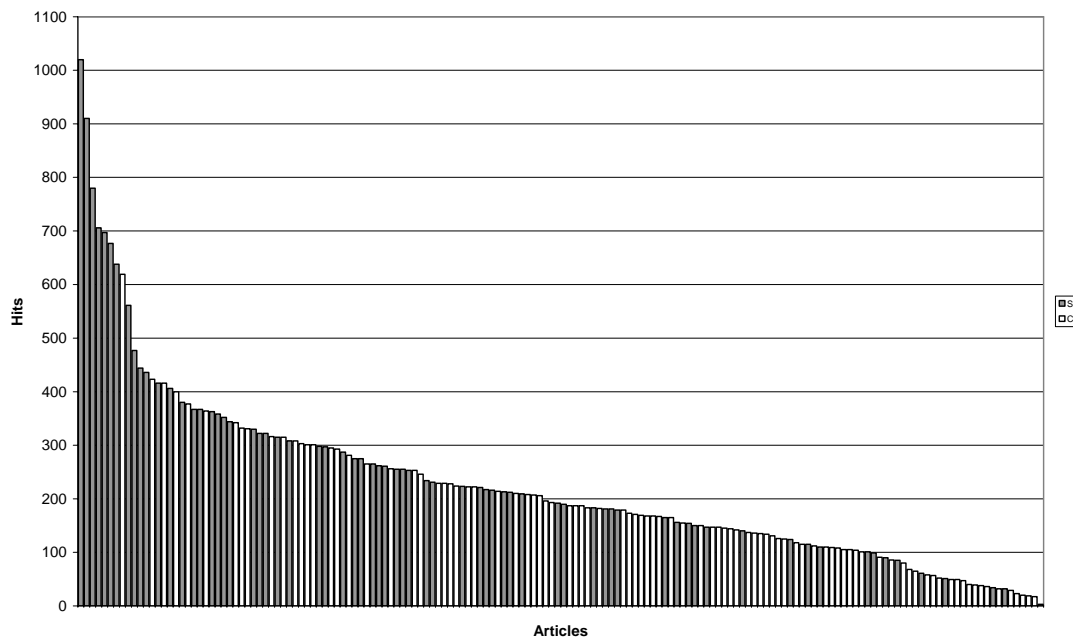

Fig. 2: Distribution of Hits on *YD* articles
(staff-sourced articles in grey, citizen-sourced articles in white)

The graph above shows the popularity of stories published to the site, in terms of unique page visits, and distinguishes between 'pro' and 'am' content. It shows that the most-read stories were generated by the pros: eight of the site's ten most visited stories were produced by staff members. This was not necessarily reflected in the number of comments that particular stories attracted, however – indeed, relative to hits, citizen-generated stories tended to receive more comments than staff pieces, as the graph below indicates. But it does show that part of the site's "stickiness" – its ability to drag in readers who may be potential contributors – was attributable to pro content. The question that immediately arises from this realisation is how staff and citizen stories differed from one another.
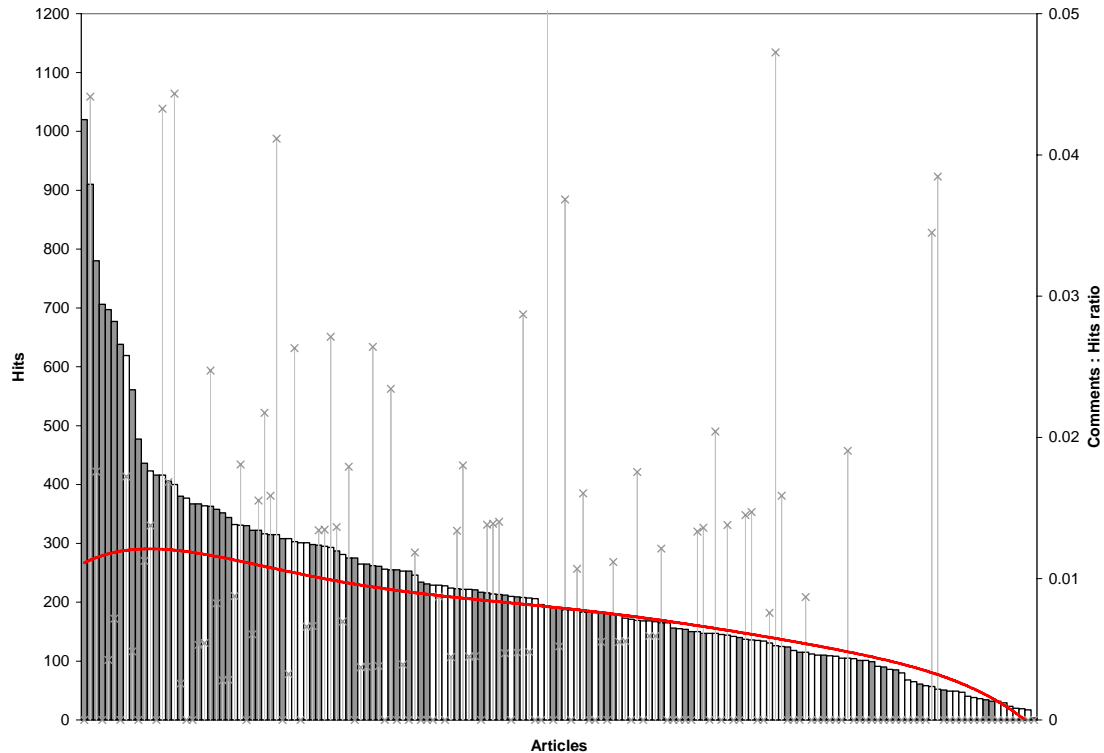
Fig. 3: Commenting Patterns on *YD* articles
(thin grey bars indicate comments : hits ratio for each article;
red trendline represents a smoothed polynomial approximation of comments : hits pattern,
indicating comparatively more comments on citizen-sourced articles)

It appears from the *YD* experience that by approximating the conventions of mainstream media news, 'pro' content is a driver of the growth of citizen journalism communities. This suggests an enduring relevance for traditional journalistic skills in the era of citizen journalism. 'Pro' content also resembled the output of the mainstream media in its focus on "newsworthiness". Though there were many exceptions, citizen content on *Youdecide2007* tended to be more opinionated and less focussed on setting out issues with clarity, less concerned with bringing new material to light and less attuned to the characteristics of the stories that "break" in the mainstream media. The site combined a good deal of first-hand hyperlocal *reporting* with a larger amount of second-order *commentary* on on-site and mainstream media stories, informed by the hyperlocal perspectives of its contributors.

In other words, while (keeping in mind its limited lifespan) *Youdecide* can be considered a success in drawing out a greater deal of unique, hyperlocal perspectives on news and political events than is commonly present in the Australian mainstream media, it achieved its aims of encouraging first-hand coverage of hyperlocal issues only to a lesser extent. Overcoming this limitation may very well be a matter of building a greater level of journalistic reporting skills in site participants, even in spite of common misgivings amongst citizen journalists about the influence of standard journalistic style and process conventions on what and how news events are covered.

Conclusion

Part of the typical argument in favour of citizen journalism is that the news values of the mainstream media no longer (or never did) reflect the priorities of the citizenry, that mainstream industrial news values – in their focus on "gaffes" and conflict – distort democratic politics, and that the time has come for the restoration or institution of more deliberative, dialogic forms of political information and communication. However, especially in a hyperlocal context, dialogue and deliberation is only possible on the basis of sound and reliable factual information about hyperlocal issues not covered in the mainstream media, requiring

hyperlocal citizen journalists both to provide more conventional journalistic reports from the home front and to set the stage for the discussion and deliberation on such hyperlocal issues. This dual role of news reporter and debate facilitator (in a sense, as both *journalist* and *citizen*) is complex and challenging.

Such concerns may be more pronounced especially for sites such as *Youdecide2007* which attempt to institute what can be described as a federated hyperlocal model (combining the work of citizen journalists from around the country into a single national site). Projects currently underway to achieve a similar federated hyperlocal coverage of the 2008 U.S. presidential election (such as the *Huffington Post*'s "Off the Bus" section or MTV America's *Choose or Lose* site for citizen-generated election coverage) will provide useful comparisons to the *YD* experience – keeping in mind the very different electoral and political systems in both countries, of course.

Sites which contend themselves with a more limited hyperlocal coverage for one specific location only, on the other hand, may not experience a similarly pronounced challenge in generating quality, accessible hyperlocal content. Where citizen-generated content is intended only for the local area itself, local knowledge amongst participants can be assumed to a greater extent than is the case for projects which attempt to draw out the hyperlocal into the purview of a wider, possibly national public. This is the case for example for the German *myHeimat* project, which (while operating across the nation) makes visible to its users first and foremost only that content on the site which is of direct relevance to the location specified in their profile. The downside of such approaches, however, is that truly national discussions of current events will be much harder to achieve. Ultimately, then, the choice for hyperlocally-based citizen journalism sites may be one between focussing on the establishment and sustainment of strong local clusters, informed by hyperlocal discussion, and between aiming for the infusion of hyperlocally sourced reports and commentary into wider national debates.

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