mtm

Destination Local

Action Research in Audience Analytics

Project evaluation and learnings

Nesta...

Contents

mtm

A summary of recommendations

This project offered dedicated support to a group of hyperlocal publishers who understand that the sustainability of their operations rest partly on developing insights into their audience. The project found that with expert help, hyperlocal media services are able to use a range of digital tools to grow their audience base, run effective campaigns, and create maximum impact with their content. The project's outcomes have recommendations for practitioners, funders, and policy-makers.

Recommendations for practitioners (see page 45)	Recommendations for funders (see page 46)	Recommendations for policymakers and industry (see page 47)
1. Analyse your audience 2. Go to where your audience are 3. Explore new business models 4. Mobile, mobile, mobile! 5. Optimise for Google 6. Use data to support ad sales 7. Beat the ad blockers	1. Provide targeted funding and support for hyperlocal publishers to encourage ongoing collaboration and experimentation 2. Collaborate with private sector organisations – e.g. Google 3. Encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing across the sector	1. Statutory notices - consider to fulfil the requirements of statutory public notices more innovatively 2. Enabling online hyperlocal media to be zero-rated for VAT 3. Placing hyperlocal media services at the heart of the BBC's plans to strengthen local news provision 4. Develop a national association of hyperlocal publishers

A summary of findings / conclusions

1. Audience analytics is crucial if you want to understand what your audiences do and don't like, so you can adapt to their needs and in turn drive up your own viewing

2. The data shows us that audiences increasingly discover and consumer news content on social platforms – and Facebook in particular. If you aren't on Facebook and the other key social platforms, there is a real chance that your content is invisible to your target audience

3. Similarly, data shows us that news is consumed primarily on mobile devices now – upwards of 80% of usage for some providers in this experiment

4. Video: consumers want video; they are more likely to consume video content than text and pictures

5. Find the time to experiment – experimenting with SEO and mailing lists can help drive new traffic to existing content; experimenting with new types of content is crucial to help you understand what your audiences do and don't want

Initial training day – challenges and aspirations

Nesta... **Highlights from the Destination Local Action Research in Audience Analytics training day**
from Nesta UK PRO

03:11

HD vimeo

https://vimeo.com/148097190

Learning and reflection day – key lessons

Nesta...

Destination Local series
Action Research in Audience Analytics project

00:09

HD

https://vimeo.com/158617060

Note: (1) Number of hyperlocals who deemed resource to be 'fundamental' or 'important
Source: Hyperlocal survey

Contents

This report summarises the findings from MTM's evaluation of Nesta's Action Research In Audience Analytics project

Introduction

- In July 2015 Nesta launched a new hyperlocal media funding call, *Action Research in Audience Analytics*. The aim of the project was for:

    - *'hyperlocal publishers to explore how a more strategic use of website and social media analytics might help them define and measure their success online, to improve their service, audience engagement and reach, and in turn their sustainability and legacy within their local community.'*

- The project subsequently recruited 10 hyperlocal media services who had limited experience using audience analytics tools, and supported them with a grant fund of up to £6,500 each between Oct 2015 - Feb 2016

- During this four-month programme, participants engaged in a range of activities, including:

    - Participated in training sessions on key tools or techniques – with access to subject matter experts

    - Ran four different monthly experiments specific to their organisation

    - Collaborated through an online Discourse forum that enabled them to share experiences and ideas

- This report captures the key types of activity undertaken and the main learnings from project participants, so that they can be distributed among the wider hyperlocal media community

- It also provides a high-level evaluation of the participant reaction to the programme, and some initial views on the policy implications of what we found

We define hyperlocal media as online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community in the UK that create public value

Nesta set this project up to help answer five core questions/objectives

Objectives

1. What barriers are there to hyperlocal media publishers analysing their audience and content?

2. How does training, upskilling and trial participation help hyperlocal media publishers overcome these barriers?

3. What evidence do the trials provide about local audiences and their consumption of hyperlocal media?

4. What evidence does this research provide to the wider sector about the cost-benefit of audience and content analysis and its impact on the commercial and social value proposition of services?

   – including services' ability to demonstrate their value to potential partnerships with traditional/established media groups and local services?

5. Development and dissemination of learning resources for long-term benefit of and use by the wider hyperlocal media sector.

…**And to answer two other questions about the project impact on the individual participants, in light of the above**

- Did participants, overall, achieve their objectives / impact (based on what they said in early data capturing)

- To answer 'what's the value of developing communities of practice like this?'

> We define hyperlocal media as online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community in the UK that create public value

The findings were captured through a set of one-to-one interviews, a survey and a review of participant data

Methodology and considerations

- MTM conducted a set of one to one of interviews as part of this research:

  - telephone interviews with representatives from each of the project participants in w/c 22nd February

  - telephone interviews with project stakeholders and audience analytics experts who provided advice to participants throughout the project

  - face to face sessions with participants at a learning & reflection day in London on 26th February

- In addition, we conducted a detailed review of project literature, including reporting forms submitted by participants during the project

- Finally, MTM captured information about participant behaviour and performance in a survey of participants

- A very broad range of views were expressed, sometimes conflicting – however, a number of consistent themes emerged, which are set out in the following sections

- The **report was undertaken during February 2016** by a three-person MTM London project team (Richard Ellis, Dexter Davies and David Powell). The project was managed at Nesta by Kathryn Geels

Ten hyperlocal organisations took part in the programme

Programme Participants

TELFORD LIVE
- The go to hub for local events
- Established 2005
- 12-15 pieces of content per month / 8,700 visitors
- 4 people

ON THE WIGHT
- Trusted, unbiased news coverage
- Established 2005
- 35+ pieces of content per month / 171,000 visitors
- 2 people

THE BRISTOL CABLE
- Local news with special events
- Established 2014
- 35+ pieces of content per month / 8,100 visitors
- 8 editors

My Turriff
- Scottish news website
- Established 2011
- 35+ pieces of content per month / 19,000 visitors
- 1 person

RoselandOnline
- South Central Cornwall's community website
- Established 2009
- 12-15 pieces of content per month / 3,300 visitors
- 14 volunteers

STAR & CRESCENT
- News, culture and commentary
- Established 2015
- 25-35 pieces of content per month / 2,900 visitors
- 5-6 editors

richmondnoticeboard
- Community news and information
- Established 2012
- 25-35 pieces of content per month / 10,000 visitors
- 6 contributors

West Leeds Dispatch
- Community engagement
- Established 2015
- 25-35 pieces of content per month/17,000 visitors
- 2 people
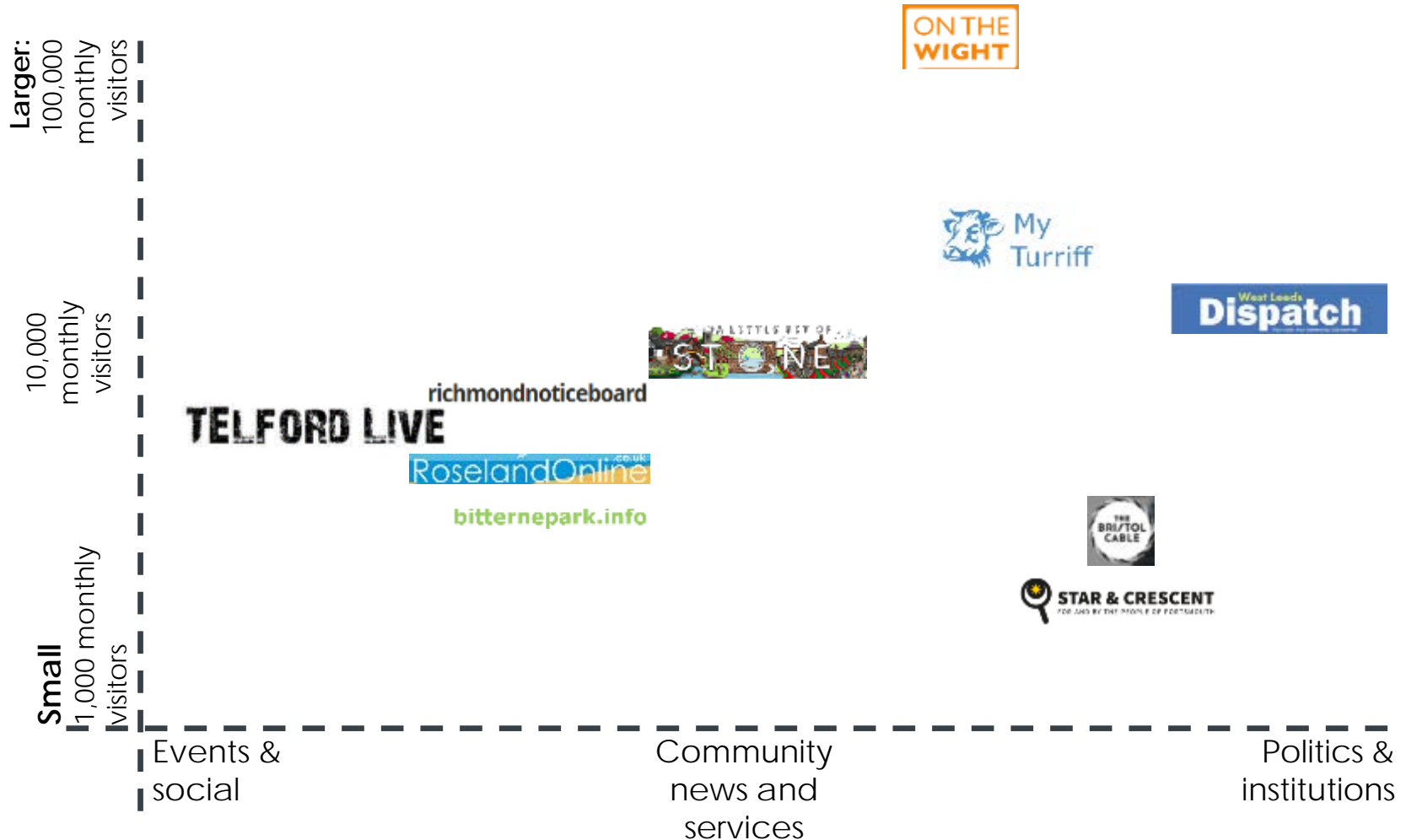
A LITTLE BIT OF STONE
- "Trusted, professional news and information
- Established 2010
- 35+ pieces of content per month / 16,000 visitors
- 2 editors, 2 volunteers

bitternepark.info
- Community news
- Established 2005
- 35+ pieces of content per month / 12,000 visitors
- 1 editor, 2 volunteers

The participating hyperlocals varied by scale and focus of content

Programme Participants

Y-axis (Programme Participants):
- Larger: 100,000 monthly visitors
- 10,000 monthly visitors
- Small 1,000 monthly visitors

X-axis:
- Events & social
- Community news and services
- Politics & institutions

Logos plotted: ON THE WIGHT, My Turriff, West Leeds Dispatch, A LITTLE BIT OF STONE, richmondnoticeboard, TELFORD LIVE, RoselandOnline.co.uk, bitternepark.info, THE BRISTOL CABLE, STAR & CRESCENT

Contents

Hyperlocal media services are in the middle of a revolution in digital news – the rise of social, mobile, video and data

Trends in digital news

News on social platforms	Growth of video	Data and analytics	User generated content is key	Mobile dominates
• News increasingly consumed on social platforms	• Consumers increasingly consuming news in video format	• Data driving editorial decisions and how news is delivered	• User generated / non-professional content is increasingly important	• Audiences shifting to mobile devices

Hyperlocal publishers seeking to respond to this rapid change face consistent barriers – mainly around resource

Barriers

- **Resources** are the single biggest barrier to hyperlocal publishers analysing their audience and content
  - every participant described this as their major barrier:
  - whereas larger orgs have large teams to cover editorial, SEO, design etc., hyperlocal publishers must cover all of this across small or one person teams
- **Financial:** the majority face challenges with business models and financial sustainability – hard to monetise content in this market creates challenges
- **Skills and knowledge gaps**: on a related note, most hyperlocal publishers face significant skills gaps:
  - many are intimidated by the sheer pace of technology change
  - the nature of these skills gaps vary by organisation – some are tech savvy and lack editorial skills, others are experienced in editorial but lack tech skills
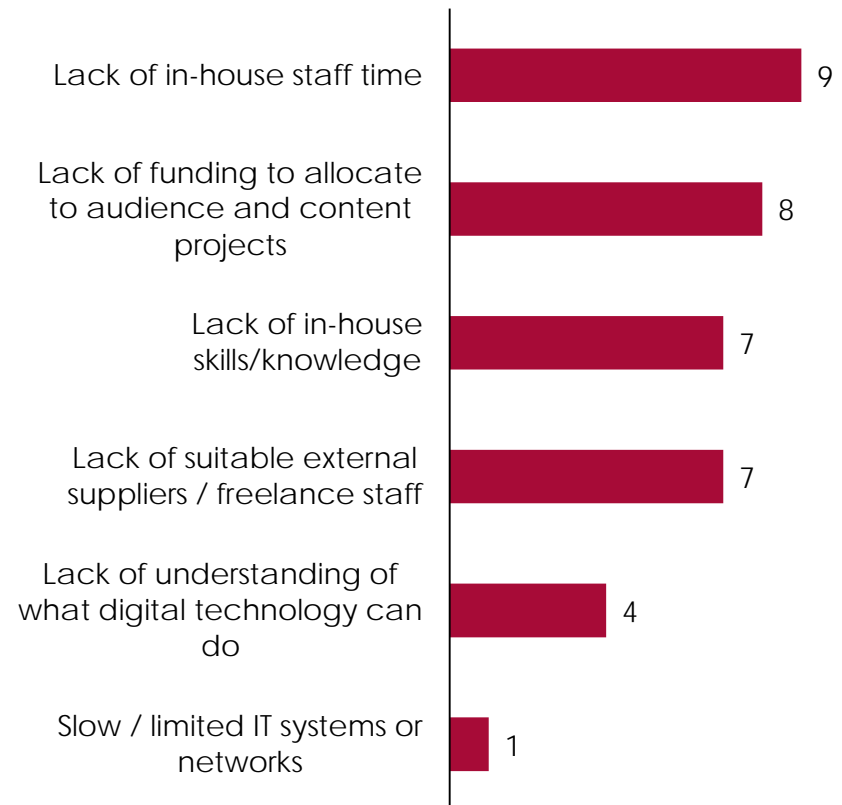
  > We started Star and Crescent with an editorial focus…we were technical luddites
  >
  > *Star and Crescent*

- Other key gap was a lack of suitable suppliers – is there a potential role for communities in sharing knowledge and access to suppliers?

Top barriers [1]

Barrier	Value
Lack of in-house staff time	9
Lack of funding to allocate to audience and content projects	8
Lack of in-house skills/knowledge	7
Lack of suitable external suppliers / freelance staff	7
Lack of understanding of what digital technology can do	4
Slow / limited IT systems or networks	1

Interviewees saw this programme as key to helping them overcome these barriers
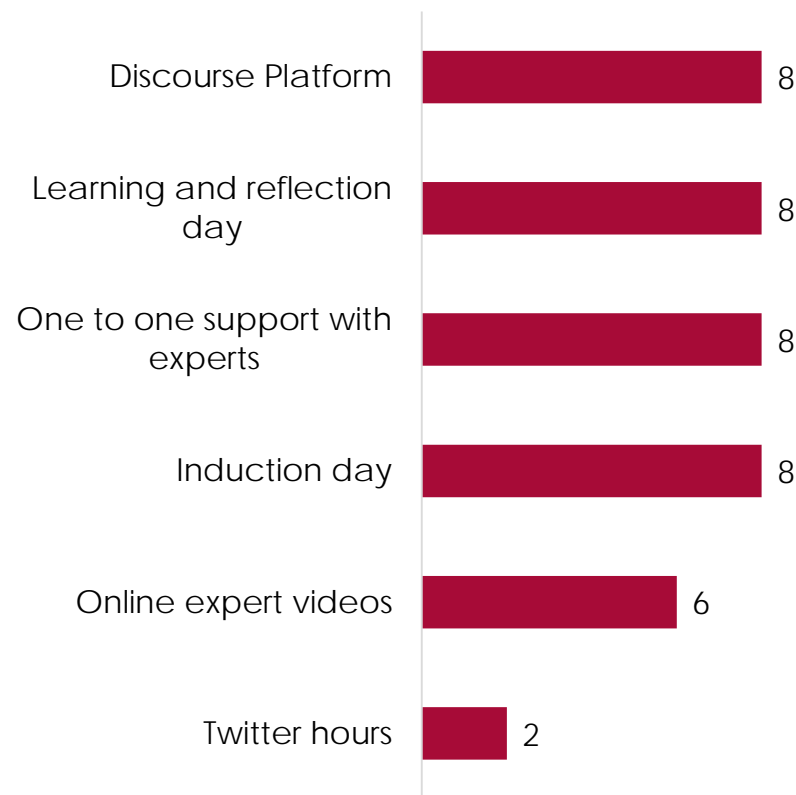
Impact of support programme

- Overall, participants were very positive about the impact of the support programme:

  - 6 out of 10 said the programme was key to helping them overcome the barriers they faced

  - 9 out of 10 said their reach and engagement increased as a result of the programme

- Interviewees highlighted the grant funding as particularly valuable as it enabled financially constrained service owners to invest personal time in content and service development

  This grant has enabled me to work on the site full time...it gave us the space to experiment and develop our offer...and the impact has been transformative... **Star and Crescent**

- In addition, participants rated the support resources and events as extremely valuable – especially the networking opportunities provided by the Discourse platform and the initial training day and learning & reflection day

- Twitter hours regarded as least helpful –

  I found Twitter hours difficult to engage with and not focused enough **anonymous**

Organisations rating components of the programme as helpful [1]

Component	Rating
Discourse Platform	8
Learning and reflection day	8
One to one support with experts	8
Induction day	8
Online expert videos	6
Twitter hours	2

Note: (1) Number of hyperlocals who rated programme component as 'helpful' or 'very helpful'
Source: Hyperlocal survey

The networking opportunities offered by the events and Discourse platform were seen as particularly important

Discourse forum

- **Role of communities of interest** in facilitating effective audience analytics was key

- Networking opportunities via the live events and the discourse forums were seen as particularly important:

  - Discourse platform encouraged **skill sharing** and provided **emotional reassurance** over common issues faced by hyperlocal publishers

  - Opportunities for meeting with other hyperlocal publishers at initial training day and learning & reflection day enabled **idea sharing and helped to develop trust**

  - Being part of a network where everyone has different skills was key to **sharing best practice**

> The Discourse online forum has been really great. Great to have a place where you can bounce ideas off other people.
>
> ***A Little Bit of Stone***

> The most helpful element of the scheme has been the functioning community
>
> ***My Turriff***

> Wider benefits of the programme included being part of a network where everyone has different skills – others like Simon at On The Wight are more technically savvy, we have other skills we can offer.
>
> ***Star & Crescent***

> Was very helpful to meet up with other people and share ideas and experiences.
>
> ***Telford Live***

…As were the expert resources available online, including videos and 1 to 1 sessions with advisers

Overview of research in audience analytics

- Participants were also positive about the quality of the expert resources available, notably

  – **Expert videos**

  – **1 to 1 sessions on social media with subject expert**

Online video tutorial on SEO by Chris Unitt

Coded correctly
Mobile friendly
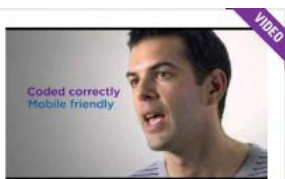
SEO tips for hyperlocal
publishers

https://youtu.be/O-Sznwtsqf8

"Chris's intro on how to use web analytics was fantastic…very calm and measured…we followed through his video on how to set this up…
Simon – On the Wight

Online video tutorial on how to conduct a website content audit, by Chris Unitt

How to do a content audit of your hyperlocal website

https://youtu.be/bwy9TKwS1Wk

Digital campaigning resources by Abhay Adhikari:
www.nesta.org.uk/blog/digital-campaigning-hyperlocal-publishers-case-study-campaigning-template-and-report

"Abhay's advice on how to set up a social media campaign was invaluable…he was very patient with us and very knowledgeable
Star and Crescent

Online video tutorial on social media analytics, by Jemima Gibbons

A guide to social media analytics for hyperlocal publishers
from Nesta UK PRO
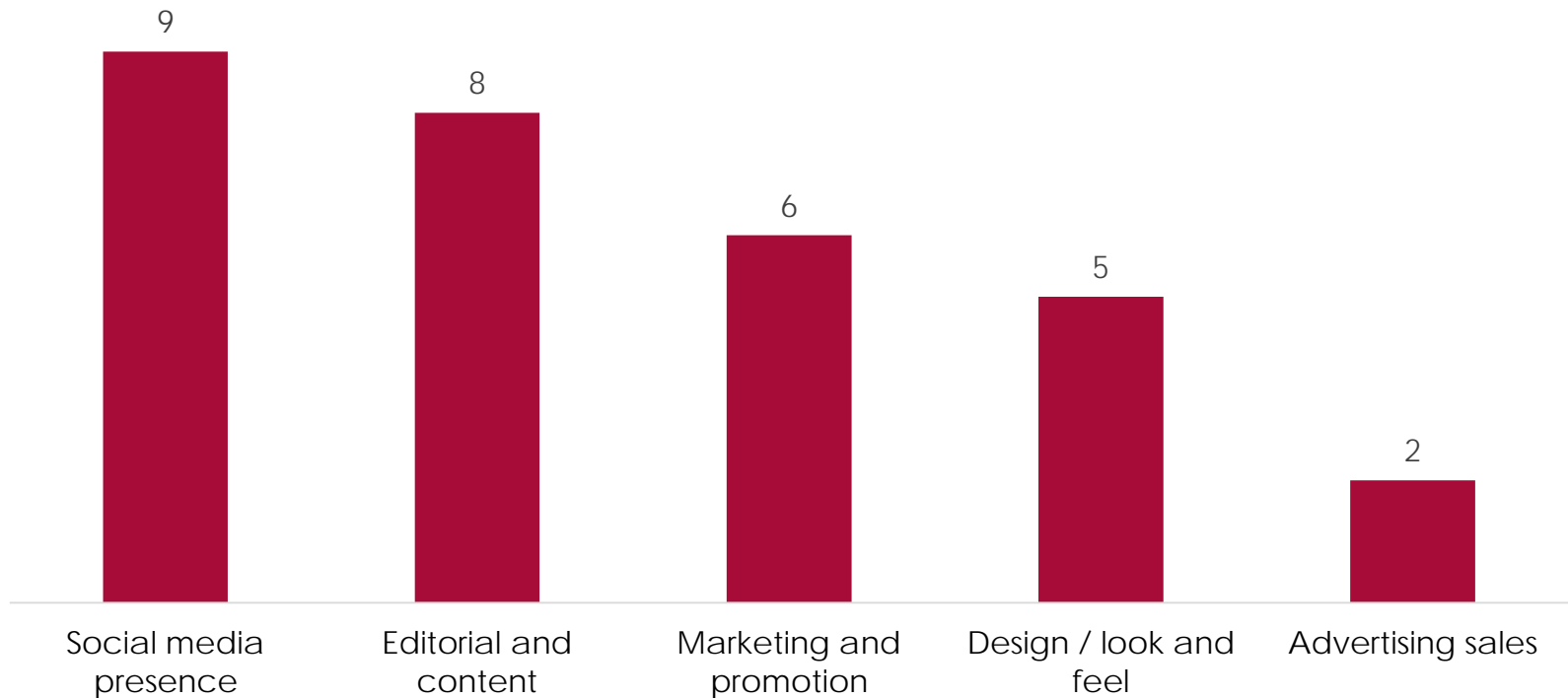24:04   HD :: vimeo

JEMIMA GIBBONS
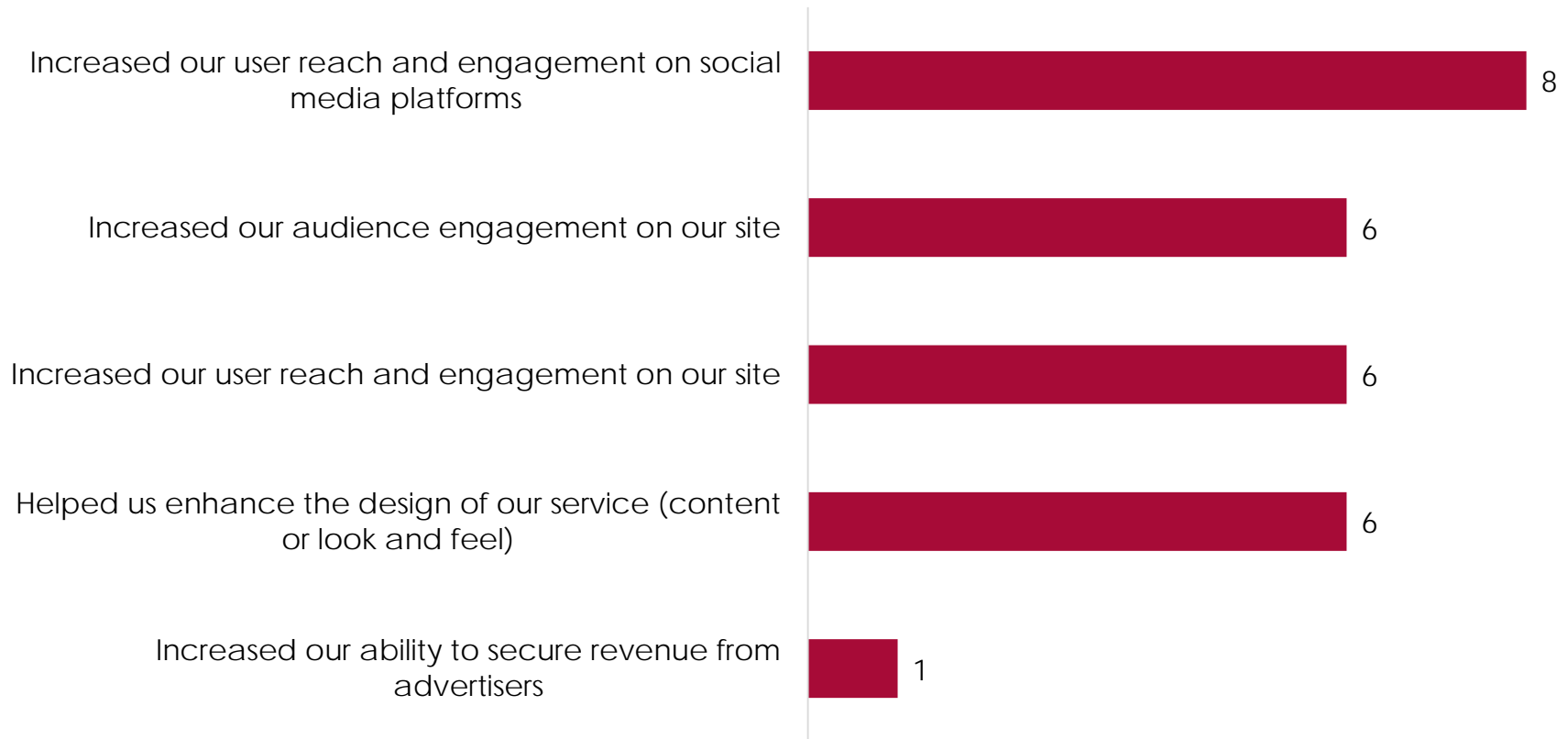
https://youtu.be/2MDMa0m7sQA

Participants reported having made significant changes as a result of participation in the programme

Organisations making changes to the way site is operated as a result of participation in the programme

They grew social reach and engagement in particular – though only one saw impact on ad revenue

Areas where the programme enhanced the ability of the organisation [1]

Increased our user reach and engagement on social media platforms	8
Increased our audience engagement on our site	6
Increased our user reach and engagement on our site	6
Helped us enhance the design of our service (content or look and feel)	6
Increased our ability to secure revenue from advertisers	1

Note: (1) Number of hyperlocals who rated programme component as 'helpful' or 'very helpful'
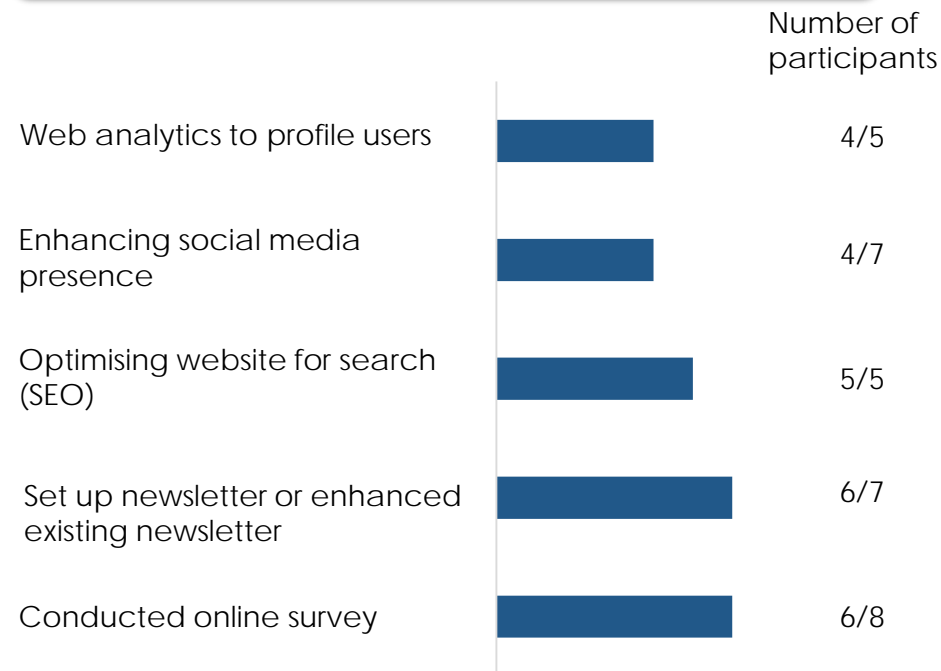**Source:** Hyperlocal survey

Importantly, strong evidence that participants will continue with these experiments after the programme

Cost-benefit

- We asked participants whether they would continue with these experiments once the funding ended, in an attempt to get to the heart of whether the benefits they gleaned from these experiments justified the cost

- The message back was extremely positive – although all organisations are resource constrained, the message back was that the overwhelming majority were highly likely to continue with their experiments once the project was over

- All organisations that conducted SEO said they would continue, and in each case over half of the organisations conducting an experiment said they were highly likely to continue with the experiment after the programme

Organisations highly likely to continue with their experiment [1]

Number of participants

Web analytics to profile users	4/5
Enhancing social media presence	4/7
Optimising website for search (SEO)	5/5
Set up newsletter or enhanced existing newsletter	6/7
Conducted online survey	6/8

Note: (1) All hyperlocals who voted otherwise said they were 'likely' to continue the experiment
Source: Hyperlocal survey

Contents

Our seven habits of successful hyperlocal media services - based on the experiences of the project experiments

Habits of success

1. Analyse your audience

We now have a much sharper focus on what content resonates with our readers
A Little Bit of Stone

- Hyperlocal publishers should use web analytics to understand the profile of your users, where they come from, how they use the site and what content they are looking at
- Surveys are also very useful to augment data from website software with direct responses from users on what they do / don't like, and more
- This data is key to taking editorial decisions – e.g. what content to focus on - and also in making judgements over site design

2. Go to where your audience are

Customers click through from Facebook, read the article, and go
On The Wight

- Our audience increasingly comes from social media – they discover the content on Facebook, click through to whatever attracted their attention, and then leave
- Many users just consume content "off-site" in a Facebook article, or on an Instagram page
- It is therefore essential that hyperlocals have a strong social media presence – go to where your audiences are, don't wait for them to come to you, or they may never visit!

Our seven habits of successful hyperlocal media services - based on the experiences of the project experiments

Habits of success

3. Explore new business models

We wanted to double numbers of paying subscribers in 12 months – we have done that already

Bristol Cable

- It is often challenging for hyperlocal media organisations to find sustainable funding for their services, with advertising revenues often extremely limited
- Hyperlocal publishers should explore alternative business models, including subscription models, and crowd funding, such as The Bristol Cable's co-operative model, which has seen paying subscribers triple from 800 to over 2,000 within the lifetime of the programme

4. Mobile, mobile mobile!

We have de-cluttered our site so that it is easier to use on mobile devices

Telford Live

- Audience analysis shows that most users access hyperlocal media websites using mobile devices
- Adapting website design is key to ensuring site content is displayed in a user friendly manner for mobile users – this means de-cluttering design for smaller screens and ensuring pages are fast-loading
- It also means creating content that suits mobile devices – vertical videos, shorter, punchier headlines, shorter articles

Our seven habits of successful hyperlocal media services - based on the experiences of the project experiments

Habits of success

5. Optimise for Google

I thought stuff like this was for the BBC, not us. But since we have done it, visitors from organic searches have gone up 12%
A Little Bit Of Stone

- SEO optimisation is critical to driving increased traffic to the site through referrals from search engines
- There are a range of techniques hyperlocal publishers can apply to their website to ensure their website appears higher in search engine rankings – and therefore that they are more discoverable for their audiences

6. Use data to support your ad sales

We have a stronger story for advertisers now – which should, in turn, help us sell more
Little Bit of Stone

- Audience data can help hyperlocal media services strengthen their ad sales
- Advertisers are more likely to buy from you if you can show them who your audience is, how many of them there are, and how engaged they are with your content
- They will be particularly interested in any information you can give about how your audience responds to their advert – e.g. how many click through?

Our seven habits of successful hyperlocal media services - based on the experiences of the project experiments

Habits of success

7. Beat the ad blockers!

Great results on number of people whitelisting… 9.6% of people coming with ad blockers are turning them off

On The Wight

- Ad blockers are an increasing problem for hyperlocals seeking to sell display advertising
- You can beat the ad blockers by explaining in clear, simple terms to your audience why advertising helps keep your site going, and asking them to support you by 'whitelisting' your site (i.e. telling the ad blocking software that you are happy to see advertising on this site)
- You can also look to beat ad blockers by launching your own newsletter and placing advertising in that

Contents

1. Web analytics

mtm

Participants used website analytics to profile users, their behaviour and customer journey

What did they do? **What did they learn?**

Web analytics – What did they do?

What is it?

- Hyperlocal publishers used web analytics packages like Google Analytics to understand who their users are, what content is popular and how users reach their site

- The key categories of information collected included:

  - Reach - e.g. number of unique visitors

  - Engagement – e.g. number of page views per visit, most popular content

  - Referring sites (where they come from)

  - Profile of users (including number using mobile devices and location)

Examples of action research

- 5 out of 10 participants experimented with web analytics

- Range of specific action research in this area, including:

  - Tracking basic **user profile, reach and engagement**

  - **Content mapping** – audit site content and map most and least popular

  - **Heat mapping** – provide visual map of most clicked-upon parts of a page, to inform design

Experiments were designed to help participants learn how to enhance content (e.g. optimise for mobile or social) through smart use of data tools such as Google Analytics

Using web analytics enabled hyperlocal publishers to target content towards audience needs

What did they do? → What we they learn?

Web analytics – What did we learn?

Data drives editorial decisions

- Analytics enables hyperlocal publishers to identify most and least popular types of content
- Usage patterns did not always tally with expectations – two organisations surprised to find sports content was not popular

We now have a much sharper focus on what content resonates with our readers. It's led to some key editorial decisions for us…for example, less sports coverage.

A Little Bit of Stone

Tailor offer for mobile and social

- Participants surprised at importance of mobile (often c. 60% of usage) and social, with users discovering and consume the content 'off-site'
- Editorial and design increasingly driven by what works for mobile and social – create snackable, socially relevant content

The majority of our readers come to us via Facebook and mobile

Star & Crescent

Customers click through from Facebook, read the article, and go

On The Wight

Experiment with new content formats

- Many organisations reported trialling new content formats in an attempt to increase reach and engagement – testing competitions, quizzes, top fives

The top post on the website for December was a quiz rather than an event for once!

Telford Live

Use analytics data for ad sales

- Analytics data can help hyperlocal publishers explain who their audience is, how many people they reach, how engaged they are

We have a stronger story for advertisers now – which should, in turn, help us sell more

Little Bit of Stone

2. Enhancing social media presence

Participants undertook a range of action research activities to enhance their social media presence

Social media presence – What did they do?

What did they do? | What did we learn?

What is it?	**Examples of action research**

- Participants undertook a range of activities designed to enhance their social media presence

- They had three main objectives in mind when seeking to enhance their social media presence:

  - Building reach and engagement – e.g. number of followers/likes, but also depth of engagement (e.g. comments, shares)

  - Driving more traffic to their main website, to maintain engagement with their brand

  - Building advertising revenues

- Seven of the 10 participants experimented with enhancing their social media presence

- Range of action research projects, including:

  - **Campaigns** – running campaigns to create impact in the community (i.e. beyond just likes and views on social platforms)

  - **Monitoring & optimising** social media presence using platform tools (e.g. Facebook Insights) and 3rd party tools like SocialFlow and Hootsuite

  - **Experimenting** with new types of content and new platform presences

  - **Media buys** across social platforms

Participants were positive about their experiments in social – this is where their audience is!

What did they do?   What did we learn?

Social Media Optimisation – What did they learn?

Mobile and social dominates

- Single biggest lesson is that audiences are increasingly accessing hyperlocal content through mobile devices and social platforms

Facebook is the biggest referrer to our site

On The Wight

Experimenting is key!

- Experimenting with platforms and content is crucial:
  - Different audiences are on different platforms, and each suits different types of content
  - Organisations must experiment with content types (e.g. video and pictures often work well on Facebook post)

We used to post 20-30 Facebook items per day…now we do fewer, better, often with videos – and get better engagement as a result

A Little Bit of Stone

We found a new, young audience on Instagram that weren't on Twitter & Facebook…who were interested in our photos of our beautiful village

A Little Bit of Stone

Resource constraints

- Hyperlocal publishers increasingly challenged by the need to operate across multiple channels – they lack the resource to do everything so must prioritise accordingly

We ran an effective social media campaign which generated strong interest from other organisations, when we tapped into the existing #youcutwebleed conversation

Star and Crescent

All participants have revised editorial and distribution strategy as a result of their social media experiments

Four out of the ten participants ran campaigns on social platforms – with mixed results

What did they do? **What did we learn?**

Social Media Campaigns – What did we learn?

Campaigns provide focus

- Four of the 10participants experimented with a social media campaign that aimed to create impact in the local community
- These campaigns were a valuable means of helping resource-constrained hyperlocals to prioritise their social media efforts

If you start with a clear purpose or campaign in mind then you can figure out which platforms will serve you best…rather than trying to put all your content across every platform…"

Abhay Adhikari

…And delivered real world impact

- Some evidence of real world impact:
  - Star and Crescent's campaign against cuts in funding for domestic violence services in Portsmouth contributed to reversal of £50k of funding cuts
  - West Leeds Despatch attracted three people to a community news café event

We designed a campaign asking people to attend a rally against cuts…a five day social media push, daily infographics, tweeting high profile figures...and got enormous engagement

Star and Crescent

Mixed results overall

- Elsewhere, results were more mixed – however, participants learned valuable lessons that could contribute to making next campaign a success

Even when the campaign wasn't a success in terms of visitor engagement, it enabled participants to experiment with the context of using a social channel

Abhay Adhikari

3. Surveys

Participants experimented with online surveys in order to learn more about their audience and their needs

| What did they do? | What did we learn? |

Surveys – What did they do?

| **What is it?** | **Examples of action research** |

- Participants conducted online surveys to collect additional user information to what web analytics can provide

- Broadly speaking, participants had one of three objectives in mind when using surveys:

  – **Learn more about users** so they could tailor site editorial and design accordingly

  – **Test new ideas** – such as propensity to pay for content

  – To provide data to **support advertising sales**

- 8 out of the 10 participants conducted online surveys - one of most popular research areas

- All surveys covered similar areas, notably:

  – **Demographics and profile** – e.g. age, sex and residence of users

  – **User attitudes and behaviour** – e.g. content preferences, perspectives on ease of site browsing

- A couple tested more specific areas – e.g. willingness to contribute content, propensity to pay

Experiments were designed to provide insights that enabled site owner to improve site design, content and marketing strategy, which should increase reach and engagement

Surveys enabled participants to gain greater insights into their users

What did they do? **What did we learn?**

Surveys - What did we learn?

Mixed experience

- Significant variation between the successful and less successful surveys (from c. 450 to c. 30 responses)
- …"a brilliant experience, will do again…"
- …"a waste of time…"

Valuable insight – some surprises!

- In the successful surveys, hyperlocals gained valuable, and often surprising, insights into their audiences
- Two organisations discovered users would be willing to pay for a subscription service

Positive to hear users value us

- Three organisations mentioned how the positive feedback they received was heart-warming – "soul-food in what can often be a lonely job"

Valuable for ad sales

- Valuable tool for organisations engaged in direct ad sales – provides insight beyond pure reach figures, e.g. on engagement, loyalty

The responses to the content question tallied with what we've discovered through web analytics and our content audit."
A Little Bit of Stone

We learnt that most of our users are accessing us on mobile"
Richmond Noticeboard

Nearly 16% said they would be willing to support site with small monthly subscription
Bitterne Park

Gave us fantastic feedback on the loyalty readers feel – and therefore the positives with being associated with our publication
On The Wight

4. SEO

Participants used SEO improvements to increase visibility in search engines

SEO – What did they do?

| **What is it?** | **Examples of action research** |

- SEO is the process of affecting the visibility of a website or a web page in a search engine's unpaid results. SEO improvements to websites include:

  - Ensuring specific article titles

  - Ensuring main subject of articles mentioned in article subjects, in main body of the article itself and URL

  - Ensuring images and videos have descriptions attached

  - Increasing the number of high quality websites with links to hyperlocal website

- Five out of 10 participants conducted SEO

- West Leeds Dispatch concentrated on **optimizing site and stories** and installing Yoast, a sitemap that is mapped properly for search engines and added descriptions to images

- Roseland Online concentrated on **meta-tagging** – assigning keywords to increase visibility in search engines

- Bitterne Park changed **how headlines and articles were written** to be more SEO friendly

Increasing visibility in search engines is key to increasing number of page views and website reach. In turn increased page views is key to driving advertising revenue

SEO enabled participants to improve search engine visibility and subsequently visits from organic search

What did they do? What did we learn?

SEO – What did we learn?

Improved search engine visibility

- Following basic SEO best practice can make a real difference - organisations improved their visibility in search engines, which in turn boosted visits from organic search

- West Leeds Despatch got listed in Google News as a result

I thought stuff like this was for the BBC, not us. But since we have done it, visitors from organic searches have gone up 12%
A Little Bit Of Stone

Takes time to filter through

- Several organisations reported that the impact of the SEO changes took several months to filter through

Be patient – our SEO experiment has yielded results, but it took 2-3 months for them to start filtering through
Roseland Online

Technical issues

- Still challenges around learning how to use SEO software – help on Discourse platform and other online communities is important to help hyperlocals navigate their way through ongoing changes in how Google prioritises

Installing Yoast was straightforward but installing Yoast for Google news … was more difficult … Also had tech issues (still ongoing) after Yoast installation re double naming of site in search engines."
West Leeds Dispatch

5. Newsletters

Participants undertook a range of experiments involving online newsletters and building a mailing list

What did they do? | **What did we learn?**

Newsletters – What did they do?

What is it?

- Participants conducted experiments with the design and promotion of online newsletters that distributed content from their core service

- Broadly speaking, participants had one of three objectives in mind:

  - **Build direct relationship with users** - mitigate against the risk that users increasingly only engage with their content through social media

  - Develop database of users - enable them to **segment and target** different parts of their user base (e.g. with vouchers, special offers)

  - Create another platform for **advertising sales**

Examples of action research

- Seven out of ten organisations collected email addresses or launched a newsletter

- Three broad types of (related) experiment:

  - Creating a pop-up or space on website to encourage users to sign up to their newsletter

  - Designing and launching a newsletter for the first time

  - Enhancing design of an existing newsletter – e.g. clearer, more mobile friendly design, more engaging content

Aims included creating more loyal user base, driving traffic to the core site, and maintaining direct relationship with users

Newsletters enabled hyperlocal publishers to develop a more loyal user base

What did they do? **What did we learn?**

Newsletters – What did we learn?

Can help build a loyal reader base

- Seen by several organisations as a valuable opportunity to build a direct relationship with readers – and therefore a more loyal user base

In a world where we are losing direct readers to Facebook, a newsletter provides a valuable link

A Little Bit of Stone

...and useful revenue opportunity

- Newsletters can help with **advertising sales** – overcoming the challenge provided by **Ad Blockers** and **off-site consumption** on social media

- Useful for new formats – e.g. vouchers

Mixed results in increasing subscriber base

- However, mixed results in terms of sign-ups

- One organisation reported tripling mailing list from 700 to over 2k – others were in low double figures

This resulted in 15 new subscribers adding themselves to the website. More than I was expecting, but not massive numbers given our 1200 strong database

Roseland Online

Technical and legal barriers

- Several organisations reported finding it challenging to learn how to use the software (Mailchimp, SumoMe) and understanding data protection issues

The challenge for me… was learning/remembering how to use MailChimp with very limited time

Bitterne Park

6. Site re-design

Six out of the 10 participants engaged in site re-design and optimisation experiments

What did they do? What did we learn?

Site re-design – What did they do?

What is it?

- Range of experiments or exercises designed to enhance design (look and feel, brand) of hyperlocal media services

- Covers a wide range of areas, including:

  – Updating site to mobile friendly template

  – Cleaning of core site templates to focus on core content – "de-cluttering"

  – Creating new content sections or services – such as a What's On calendar

Examples of action research

- Five out of 10 hyperlocal publishers undertook experiments designed to enhance their websites

- Telford Live updated the website to a mobile friendly Wordpress template, created an online handout guide to events and ran virtual awards

- Bristol Cable also undertook a fundamental site-redesign and launch

- Bitterne Park and My Turriff were two organisations who optimised their site for mobile

Enhancements to websites are key to improving website reach and traction

Site and service re-designs were often transformative in terms of user reach and engagement

Site re-design – What did we learn?

What did they do? | What did we learn?

Re-design can transform engagement	• Re-designing core site had a transformative effect on user numbers and engagement for many • De-cluttering the design was a priority for several organisations – focusing on the content that their audiences used most (often learned from a heat mapping exercise)

Following our site re-design and re-launch, our bounce rate went down from 80% to c. 14%
Bristol Cable

We wanted to double numbers of paying subscribers in 12 months – we have done that already
Bristol Cable

Programme resources key in this area	• The programme resources were seen as particularly important in this area – giving organisations a chance to step back and take a look at how their service functioned as a whole and in specific ways (e.g. load speeds)

The programme was vital to my being able to review the service as a whole – rather than just racing to get the next articles out
Telford Live

Focus on mobile	• Optimising site for mobile was a key area of focus for many, as previously pages took too long to load, and were too text heavy for consumption on mobile devices

We have de-cluttered our site so that it is easier to use on mobile devices
Telford Live

Other	• Wide range of minor lessons – e.g. a minor re-design asking users of ad blockers to white list the site had a strong response, as did creation of a new What's On Section

Great results on number of people whitelisting… 9.6% of people coming with ad blockers are turning them off
On The Wight

Contents
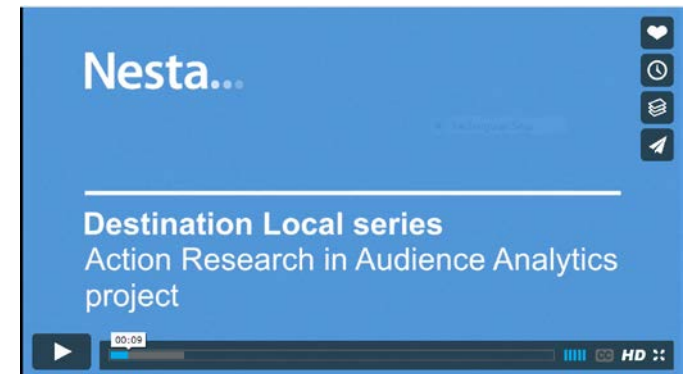
To recap, based on participants' successes during the project, there are seven key habits

Recommendations for practitioners

1. *Analyse your audience:* Audience analytics is crucial if you want to understand what your audiences do and don't like, so you can adapt to their needs and in turn drive up your own viewing

2. *Go to where your audience are:* data shows that audiences increasingly discover and consumer news on social platforms – and Facebook in particular. If you aren't on Facebook and other key social platforms, your content is invisible to your target audience

3. *Explore new business models:* it is often challenging to find sustainable funding models – so experiment with new models, including subscription and crowd funding

4. *Mobile, mobile, mobile!* Data shows that news is consumed primarily on mobile now – upwards of 80% for some providers in this experiment

5. *Optimise for Google:* SEO optimisation is crucial to driving discoverability and in turn traffic

6. *Use data to support ad sales:* audience data can help hyperlocals strengthen their ad sales by providing insight into who they are and how loyal they are to your brand

7. *Beat the ad blockers* by asking your audience to support you by whitelisting your site

Learning and reflection day – key lessons

Nesta...

Destination Local series
Action Research in Audience Analytics project

00:09 HD

https://vimeo.com/158617060

Note: (1) Number of hyperlocals who deemed resource to be 'fundamental' or 'important'
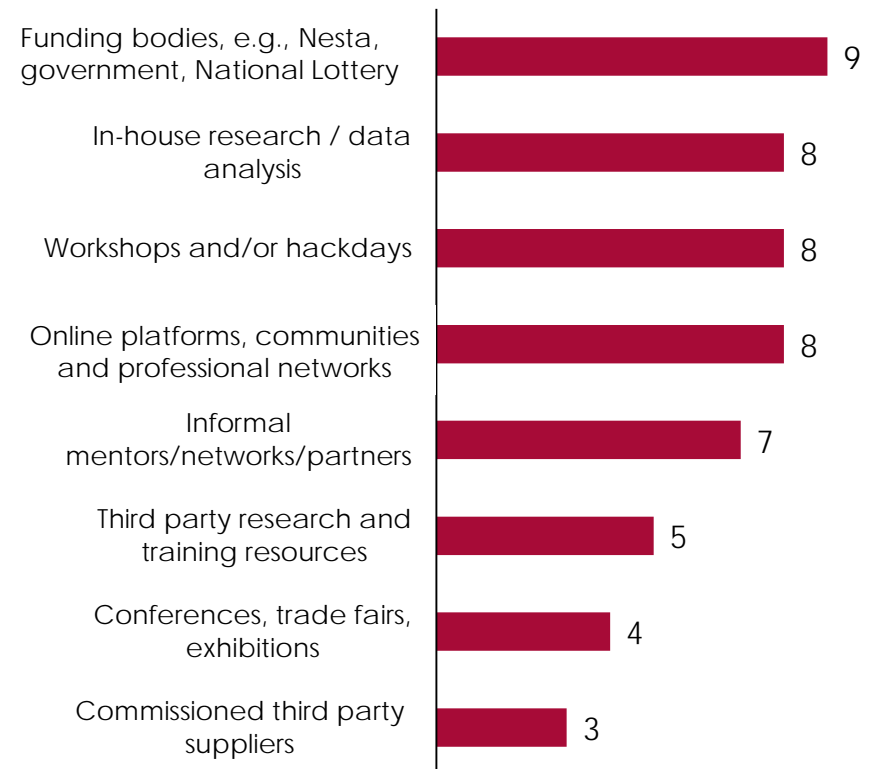**Source:** Hyperlocal survey

In addition, resources from external bodies are key to hyperlocal publishers' successes

Recommendations for funders

1. Provide targeted funding and support for hyperlocal publishers to encourage ongoing collaboration and experimentation

   - This should include supporting online platforms and communities, and providing access to specialist technical and editorial advice, and funding to provide the capacity for hyperlocal media services to innovate and take risks.

2. Collaborate with private sector organisations – e.g. Google

   - To encourage them to provide support, and to make sure hyperlocal publishers are aware of this support when it is offered.

3. Encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing across the sector

   - E.g. provide a platform for knowledge sharing and partnership where one organisation is trialling a new business model

Resources described as important to your hyperlocal's work [1]

Resource	Value
Funding bodies, e.g., Nesta, government, National Lottery	9
In-house research / data analysis	8
Workshops and/or hackdays	8
Online platforms, communities and professional networks	8
Informal mentors/networks/partners	7
Third party research and training resources	5
Conferences, trade fairs, exhibitions	4
Commissioned third party suppliers	3

Note: (1) Number of hyperlocals who deemed resource to be 'fundamental' or 'important
Source: Hyperlocal survey

There are also a number of policy and industry changes that should be considered

Recommendations for policymakers and industry to support hyperlocal publishers

1. **Statutory notices:** Local government has a legal obligation to publish **statutory public notices** in local newspapers, which effectively functions as a subsidy to traditional local news organisations – it provides them with a regular and reliable revenue stream. Policymakers should consider the opportunity to fulfil the requirements of statutory public notices more innovatively, so that online hyperlocal media services can provide a platform for local audiences to engage more easily and effectively with this type of local, relevant information.

2. **Enabling online hyperlocal media to be zero-rated for VAT:** Newspapers and other printed products such as leaflets and magazines are zero-rated for VAT, which is another form of state support for traditional printed-press organisations. Whereas online forms of news and information receive no VAT reduction, and so the cost of publishing it is wholly absorbed by the person or organisation producing it. Therefore, there is an opportunity to lessen the financial burden on hyperlocal publishers by creating VAT exemptions or reductions for their services and products that are out of the current scope.

3. **Placing hyperlocal media services at the heart of the BBC's plans to strengthen local news provision:** Since 2014, Nesta and the Carnegie UK Trust have been working with the BBC and regional press groups as part of a local journalism working group. A number of initiatives have started as part of the group's objective for the BBC to strengthen links with external local news provision. Additional efforts to support hyperlocal publishers to run a sustainable service, such as facilitating forums for knowledge exchange and training should be implemented. In specific localities, hyperlocal media services are making a significant contribution to local media plurality and their role should be recognised in any future funded support for local journalism via the BBC.

4. **Develop a national association of hyperlocal publishers:** Consider developing a national association of hyperlocal publishers, or encourage formation of local associations. These could deliver value in a number of ways, including: lobbying for and developing standardised audience metrics, encouraging knowledge exchange and peer learning, sourcing and delivering training in key areas such as IP and data protection, encouraging supply aggregation (e.g. bulk buying / listing of appropriate suppliers), development of shared services (e.g. platform for local clusters of publishers or creating a local advertising network)

Contents

The following interviewees were consulted in a mixture of face to face and telephone interviews

Appendix 1: interviewees

Company	Name	Category
Telford Live	Andy Smith	Hyperlocal
Roseland Online	Mark David Hatwood	Hyperlocal
The Richmond Noticeboard	Sarah Hartley	Hyperlocal
A Little Bit of Stone	Jamie Summerfield	Hyperlocal
My Turriff	Mike Rawlins	Hyperlocal
Bitterne Park	Guy Phillips	Hyperlocal
The Bristol Cable	Drew Rose and Mark Alborough	Hyperlocal
Star and Crescent	Sarah Cheverton and Tom Sykes	Hyperlocal
On The Wight	Simon Perry	Hyperlocal
West Leeds Dispatch	John Baron	Hyperlocal
One Further	Chris Unitt	Subject expert
Social Media Launch Pack	Jemima Gibbons	Subject expert
Birmingham City University	Dave Harte	Subject expert
Dhyaan Design	Abhay Adhikari	Subject expert
Be Inspired Films	Ravinol Chambers	Subject expert
Google News Labs	Matt Cooke	Subject expert