

Community Engagement and Hyperlocal News: A practical guide

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Introduction

In recent years online social media has led to many big changes in the ways we communicate with each other as friends, neighbours, colleagues, citizens, and consumers. Tools like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr have also prompted organisations to communicate with people in different ways, too. Professionals such as journalists, advertisers, politicians, and PR people now routinely aim to engage the communities they seek to influence in conversation, and to foster conversations among the people previously simply known as their audiences.

There are many guides designed to help marketing professionals use on and offline engagement strategies to boost sales or improve revenues. There are far fewer written to help those with more altruistic, civic-minded, goals¹. As far as we can tell there are none designed purely for community news producers.

During our academic research into UK hyperlocal news many community news producers told us they would like to devote more of their time to monitoring their audience figures and engaging more with communities online. Many also noted they felt they lacked the skills to do this properly.

This guide aims to help community news publishers identify, engage, and maintain relationships with, and between, people in their communities. The insights we share here are based on 18 interviews with community website practitioners and experts in the UK and America, as well as a number of websites and documents about social media, marketing, and community websites. The guide also draws on the insights we've gained from studying UK hyperlocal news as part of a 2-year research project which included a large analysis of hyperlocal news content, the largest ever survey of UK hyperlocal news producers, and a further 37 interviews with practitioners.

The guide is split into three parts based on the community building and engagement principles of listening, engaging, and monitoring.

Part 1 – “listen” concerns strategies for setting up a community website, finding and audience, and beginning to build a community around a website.

Part 2 – “engage” focuses on engaging with a community both online and off. It covers such topics as the production of engaging content, using causes to generate content and engage a community, and using social media to engage an audience.

¹ A notable exception is the short e-book *Connected: The power of modern community*, by Marc Thomas, Hannah Waldram, and Ed Walker, which we found both inspiring and useful.

Part 3 – “monitor” highlights and explores what tools can be used to analyse the use of a community website and social media, and details how to put the statistics produced to best use.

A healthy pinch of salt

We certainly identified a need for a guide like this when working with hyperlocal news producers in the UK, but one of our other strong findings was that many community journalists are very busy people who are often incredibly short of time. Most of the hints, tips, and tricks discussed in this guide will take time and effort to implement. Some of them will take lots.

However, the advice we’ve included here all comes from people who’ve thought carefully about their community engagement work, and have tested and experimented with lots of tools and techniques. We hope that by drawing on their expertise and summarising their stories like this we can save you some time in the long run.

But this guide is not a list of hard and fast rules. Some community news producers will not be interested in any of these suggestions; some may only find a few of them useful; others may learn a great deal. The important thing to remember is that the techniques and tools we talk about in this guide are only useful if they help you meet your goals and fit in with your plans.

Acknowledgements

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We are very grateful to our funders and partners for allowing us to carry out this work.

We are equally thankful to those community journalists and other engagement experts who gave us some of their valuable time to be interviewed for this project. A full list is included below.

Name	Organisation	Web Address	Type of Role
Matt Appleby	Roath Cardiff	http://www.roathcardiff.net/	Editor
Scott Brodbeck	Arlington Now	http://www.arlnow.com/	Founder
Steve Buttry	Digital First Media	http://stevebuttry.wordpress.com	Digital Transformation Editor
James Clarke	WV11	http://www.wv11.co.uk/	Co-Founder
John Coster	Citizens' Eye	http://www.citizenseye.org	Managing Editor
Tim Dickens	Brixton Blog	http://www.brixtonblog.com/	Editor
Laura Ellis	BBC English Regions	http://www.bbc.co.uk/england/about.shtml	Head of Online for BBC English Regions
Nicky Getgood	Formerly of Digbeth is Good and Talk About Local	http://digbeth.org/ and http://talkaboutlocal.org.uk/	Author and Editor
James Hatts	London SE1	http://www.london-se1.co.uk/	Editor
Ross Hawkes	Litchfield Live	http://lichfieldlive.co.uk/	Founder
Philip John	Litchfield Live	http://lichfieldlive.co.uk/	Web Master
Sean Kelly	ChiswickW4	http://www.chiswickw4.com/	Founder
Mark Potts	NewsPeg	http://www.newspeg.com/	Creator
Nicola Rugman	Roath Cardiff	http://www.roathcardiff.net/	Web Master and Analytics
Jan Schaffer	J-Lab	http://www.j-lab.org/	Executive Director
Jamie Summerfield	A Little Bit of Stone	http://alittlebitofstone.com/	Editor
Ed Walker	Trinity Mirror	http://www.edwalker.net/blog/	Digital Development Editor
Claire Wardle	Networked Knowledge	http://clairewardle.com/	Digital Media Consultant

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Part 1 – Listen to your community

Have a Goal

The first place to start when creating and running a community website is having a very clear sense of exactly why you are doing it. This may seem like a truism, but developing a clear understanding of this can actually be a tough challenge. This means knowing why you want to be involved in a particular community². Many of our interviewees think of community websites as operating in two different, but related, ways:

1. Providing and sharing information
2. Helping people connect with where they live³

We were told that community websites can now strive to move beyond the one-way communication traditionally found in big mainstream media outlets, to a much more conversational form of communication which actively engages a community⁴. Big media players have been trying to do this for many years, but it is a particularly interesting opportunity for those working at a very local level. This two-way dialogue with members of a community can allow many people a space to voice their interests and concerns and play an active part in the place where they live or work⁵.

Identify the Audience

If you haven't started your community news service already, you'll need to think about who your potential audience will be and what they might want to read about. To find your audience start where the readers are starting, pay attention to where they are going online and offline, what they are doing online and offline, and what their interests are⁶. The following is a set of key strategic questions which will help aid you through this process of active listening to create a community website which is of most use to its audience:

1. What do people in my target community care about?
2. Where am I likely to find the stories that interest my target audience?
3. What are people where I live talking about, and when and where are they talking about it?
4. How can I contribute to this conversation?
5. What kinds of content are they drawn to?

² Claire Wardle

³ James Hatts

⁴ Jan Schaffer

⁵ Claire Wardle

⁶ Jan Schaffer

6. What kinds of content have they most engaged with?
7. Who are the most active and vocal contributors?
8. What can you offer which is different to other sources of community news or information?
9. What kind of engagement am I seeking?

These questions can be valuable in identifying your target community, its conversations, and its values⁷. Building your understanding of what is important to your community will give you a better idea of what kind of material will resonate and engage with your audience, and be a good starting point when you come to creating stories⁸. Of course, this attention to what audiences want should be balanced against your own aims and aspirations – after all, many community news producers do what they do for fun, and are not beholden to the same kinds of commercial pressures as other “community managers”.

You will have your own thoughts about how to answer these questions, but the rest of this guide will give you numerous ideas to help you navigate them.

Target Key People

After deciding who you’d like your audience to be you will need to seek out and create content, news pieces, and posts to engage your community of readers. The process to follow when generating engaging content can involve both online and offline initiatives.

Everyone wants an audience for their site, and the most successful hyperlocal news producers often end up becoming focal points for people seeking information about a place. The process of becoming a key part of the community like this can be helped by thinking about who in your community are, in different ways, the most influential and active citizens, and what it is you can do to identify and interact with them⁹. These are often the people who will be able to bring more readers into the fold, be it audience members or locals who will go on to be contributors to, or collaborators on, your site.

Interviewees told us this can be different to targeting just the “top” elite people, such as local councillors or businesses. It is about finding community members who are connected to a number of different organisations, as described by Mark Potts the founder of NewsPeg as follows:

What really worked, and what was really hard to do, was to find the kind of mid-level

⁷ Matt Appleby

⁸ Cooper, B.B. (2013). 16 top tips from blogging experts. Available: <http://blog.bufferapp.com/blogging-advice-for-beginners-from-16-experts>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014

⁹ Claire Wardle

volunteers who were maybe involved in two or three different organisations, but who are just by their nature really involved. It's the woman who is the Cub Scout den mother and the little league mum and is active in the garden club and consequently has all sorts of tentacles out there and knows all sorts of people. If you can get her on your side, she's going to infect the whole community.¹⁰

This can only work so far. As Steve Buttry, Digital Transformation Editor at Digital First Media, makes clear listening to the community is only part of the equation, the other part is about creating content which people can engage with:

I think the best way is listening to the community, which is listening and observing the community, which is kind of a two-fold thing; ask them, ask them what they're interested in, ask them what they want. But be aware they don't always know... as Steve Jobs said "people don't know what they want until I show it to them or until they can see it", and there's some truth in that.¹¹

Building a network of influential members of the community around your site can mean they can provide you with avenues for future content and audiences. It can also help with figuring out why something is happening within the community, as in, background information to a breaking story, and knowing why a particular story is important to a community. But just as importantly, you can also forge links with people who will become active contributors to your site or service, whether that be as a writer, as an official or unofficial marketer, as someone who involves themselves with the business end of your site (e.g. selling ads on commission), as a online community manager, or even as an organiser of offline events you may want to become involved with.

Use Social Media

Uncovering what the community is talking about and finding out what people find important has been made easier through numerous social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter. They exist as feeds of information for potential stories and conversation, and as an access point to the community be they audience members or potential contributors. This is what digital marketing agency 360i talk about as "social listening" and is a knowledge gathering technique to find out more about a community¹². It is important to use this as an opportunity to understand the audience more and to take part in a conversation which is already happening¹³. The importance of social media is underlined by Laura Ellis Head of Online for BBC English Regions who said that:

¹⁰ Mark Potts

¹¹ Steve Buttry

¹² 360i. (2012). Content Marketing. Available: <http://www.360i.co.uk/reports/content-marketing/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

¹³ Laura Ellis

Having social media as a tool and a feed of information, and a way of accessing new and different audiences quite a lot of the time, has been brilliant, but also having an established platform, which is obviously our own website where we can pool that content together, aggregate it and start new conversations is incredibly useful.¹⁴

Twitter is a very effective for finding stories on social media and is a useful avenue to discover who the key influencers might be in a community. How Facebook and Twitter are used for this purpose will now be explored further.

Search for Your Community Location

Doing searches based on your location can help with actively seeking out existing conversations on different social media platforms. Here you will be able to uncover not just the topics being mentioned about your community, you will also be able to see who is talking about your community, and who the main “influencers” are online. It goes without saying that similar benefits can be got from actually getting out in the real world and “walking the beat” in your area, talking to people, as well as going to public meetings and events organised by local clubs and societies. But participating online in this way can be very useful, and loads of stories and information can be gathered by building your own “digital news patch”.

¹⁴ Laura Ellis

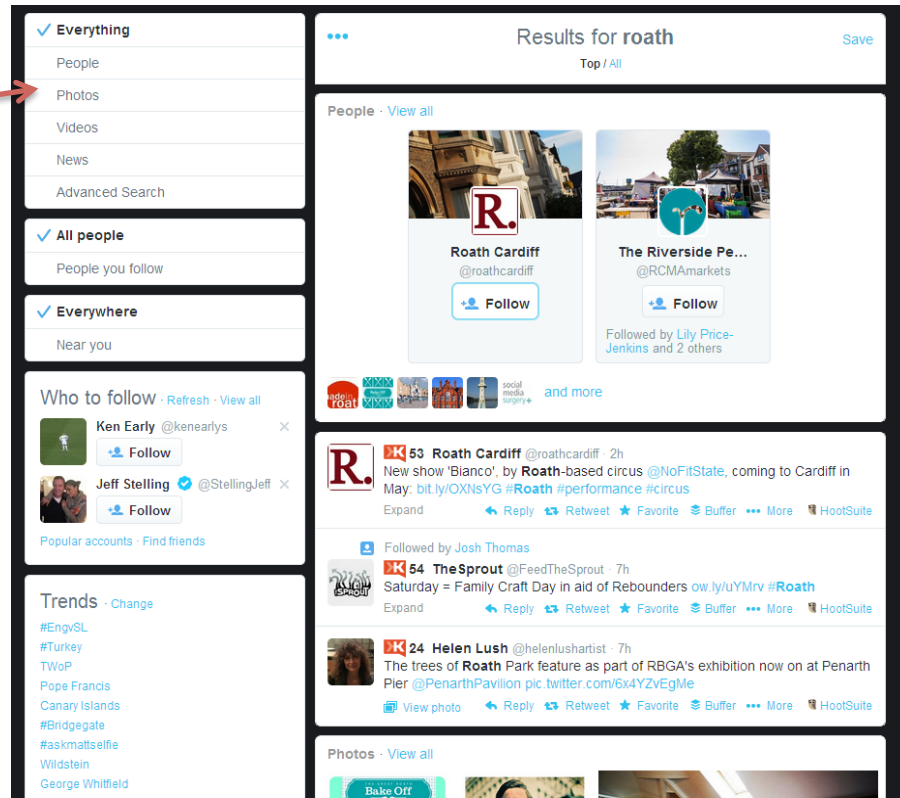
Tweets from your area

Starting with Twitter, the search function on this social media platform is quite a powerful way of getting to the most recent conversations about your community. The screen capture below shows an example of the results you will receive. For this example the Cardiff area of “Roath” has been searched for.

“Everything” includes all elements in this list in summary, but it importantly gives you the latest tweets with the search term.

What can be seen in the image is that Twitter allows you to break down this search into smaller segments.

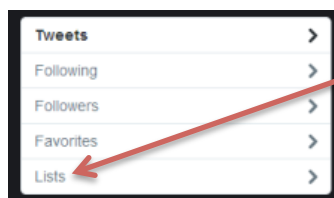
“People” gives you Twitter users who have your search word in their screen name, profile bio, or location.



This kind of facility is used very often by lots of community journalists seeking to keep up to date with events and things happening on their patch.

Create a Twitter List

Once you have monitored content in your area like this for a while, and found Twitter users in your area who you think will be the most useful sources of information, you can create a Twitter list which allows you to see their tweets in isolation. Twitter allows you to add users to list which, when selected, will show you tweets from just those users. This filters out these users and allows you to view what the most influential people in your area are talking about.



On your profile page found at [twitter.com/\[yourscreenname\]](https://twitter.com/[yourscreenname]) look at the panel on the top left. Click on “lists”, and of the page that opens click “create lists” on the right hand side. Once you

have named and entered your list save it. Click the name of your newly created list and search for users who you want to add.

Facebook Pages in Your Area

Facebook, on the other hand, has a pre-existing community who can be drawn upon and alerted to content. Searching Facebook is similar to Twitter, for example, looking for your area¹⁵. The search results are filterable by a number of different variables, such as, people or pages. “Roath” has been use for the search example again which garners some of the following results:



Helpful tools

The following tools are useful additions to the Twitter search function to aid in your research. Because Facebook is less “public” these types of tools do not exist for Facebook:

Use Topsy¹⁶

This is a free online (A pay for account is available) Twitter search which offers similar results to the original Twitter above but with some notable additions.

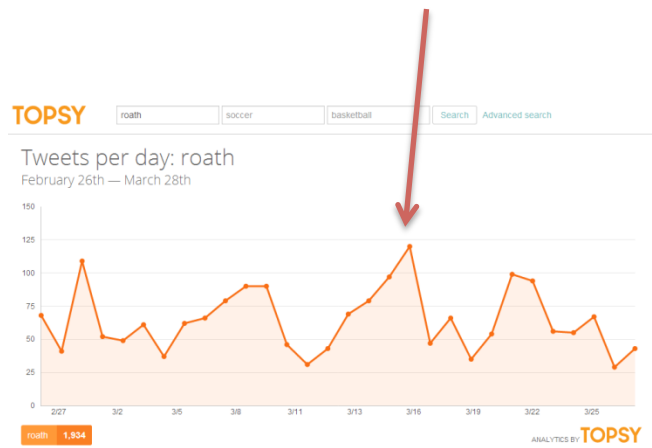


Once you have entered a search on Topsy’s main page you’ll be presented with a list of results. At the top of the results will be an option to look at analytics (further useful information) about your search term.

After clicking “view” you will be presented with a chart which tracks the last months most popular tweets for your search term. If you “mouse over” the circular point on the graph you will be shown the most popular tweet for that time.

¹⁵ Using social media to build a community is covered in Part 2 – Engage Your Community

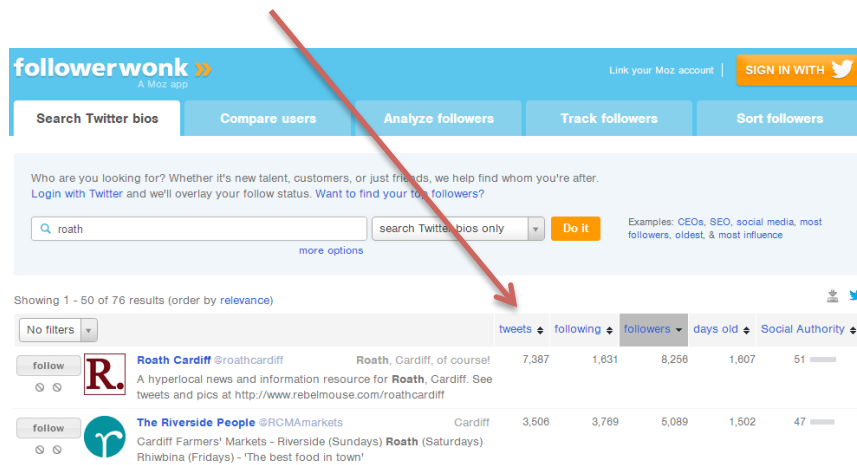
¹⁶ Topsy can be found at - <http://topsy.com/>



Use FollowerWonk¹⁷

FollowerWonk is a powerful Twitter search tool that works on a freemium model where the basic search options are free, and if you want greater functionality you need to pay a fee. Its two most useful functions is “Search Twitter bios” and “Analyse followers”.

1. Search Twitter bios: This function allows you to search both Twitter profiles, and Twitter bios. The results are dependent upon users including your search term in their bio/profile but it is a handy starting point to pinpoint active users in your area. Once you have entered your search term you are presented with a number of useful statistics. Importantly this data can be sorted by number of tweets, following, and followers.



2. Analyse followers: This part of FollowerWonk is able to analyse a specific Twitter account to see the breakdown of the Twitter users someone follows, and the Twitter users who follow them. This produces a plethora of different statistics based around follows/followers such as frequency of tweets, retweet percentage, tweets with URLs, direct contacts, and the times when a user is most actively Tweeting.

¹⁷ For the FollowerWonk search results for 'Roath' see here - https://followerwonk.com/bio/?q=roath&q_type=all

Example: BBC Three Counties Radio

How searching for stories works on social media is demonstrated in an example from BBC Three Counties Radio where they discuss how successful a strategy of searching and engaging on social media led to the creation of a number of different stories:

In just a few weeks we found on Twitter a gamer addicted to playing 18 hours a day that tied into a Panorama programme, friends of a murder victim and a local man who was designing a space mission to name just three. We uncovered local stories, new guests and shared masses of content. When we tweeted and engaged on Facebook about a local park being closed in Bushey, the callers that rang in were keen to point out that they had never listened to 3CR - and didn't know it covered their area. We found an 18 year old dancer from Hertfordshire waiting in a queue outside the Hammersmith Apollo to audition for Britain's Got Talent.¹⁸

When doing this kind of research keep your search as relevant as possible, use targeted search terms look at what is being talked about your area online, and this will help you to understand (a significant proportion) of your target audience. Having a social media presence gives the community a focal point to visit beyond the official website, and it means that your stuff is spread across as many platforms as possible which can aid with visibility and reach. This increases the potential of community members seeing you content on the online platform they use most.

It may take a little while for you to figure out where the conversations about your area are happening online. Some hyperlocals report that most of their audiences are active on Facebook, and seem to hardly use Twitter. Others report the opposite. Some say they use Twitter and Facebook for engaging with different audiences: for instance Facebook may be where the bulk of community members talk about things going on in their area, whereas Twitter is used more for interacting with local elites such as councillors, business leaders, and mainstream news media journalists. You'll only figure out what's most useful to you by dabbling with these tools yourself, and while you're doing that you may get added benefit from people in your community seeing you participating and making contact, or checking out your site.

Statistics Worth Knowing

The importance of social media in listening to, and reaching your community is made clear in the following collection of statistics. These are taken from the social media blog of the

¹⁸ Spencer, B. (2011). Melvin, BBC Three Counties Radio and social media. Available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/radio/posts/bbc_three_counties_radio_and_s. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Buffer app¹⁹ and web analytics company KISSmetrics²⁰. These statistics may help you understand the bigger picture of how and who uses social media:

1. The fastest growing demographic on Twitter is between the ages of 55 and 64
2. The fastest growing demographic on Facebook and Google+ is between 45 and 54
3. Approximately 189 million Facebook users only use their mobile to access the site
4. Tweets including an image get twice as much engagement than those without
5. Tweets shorter than 100 characters receive 17% more engagement
6. Tweets using hashtags get twice as much engagement
7. Mobile Twitter users are more likely to be on Twitter during their commute
8. Tweets have a 12 times better chance of being retweeted (shared) if it is asked for, and 23 times higher if the word “retweet” is written in full
9. Tweets with links are 86% more likely to be retweeted
10. Facebook posts with image receive 53% more likes, 104% more comments, and 84% more click-throughs
11. “Question” posts get 100% more comments
12. Posting 1-2 times a day gets 40% more engagement
13. Posting 1-4 times a week gets 71% more engagement

Being aware of how people use social media can support the strategic targeting of content, the community, and fully interacting with you community so that you get the benefit of maximum exposure for the stuff you produce.

Let People Know You Exist

Building networks both on and offline can help you to create content by giving you people to contact for information. It also makes you visible to the community, and the institutions which serve it. These are creators of information themselves²¹. Promoting your website within the community and online provides people with a platform and a voice. This is a point that Steve Buttry made clear:

It’s offering people the opportunity to take part in conversations whether they’re on the spot, whether they’re sending an email, “I like this...”, “I don’t like this...”, “here’s, my story...”, “here’s my image / video...” whatever, or whether it’s sending

¹⁹ Cooper, B.B. (2013). 10 surprising social media stats and 10 surprising new twitter stats. Available: <http://blog.bufferapp.com/10-surprising-social-media-statistics-that-will-make-you-rethink-your-strategy>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

²⁰ KISSMetrics. (2013). Infographic: How to Get More Likes on Facebook. Available: <https://blog.kissmetrics.com/more-likes-on-facebook/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

²¹ Ed Walker

them to somewhere else where a conversation is happening, whether that's on social media or whether that's kind of in real-time on local radio.²²

How to actively go about engaging with your community will be covered in much more detail in the engagement document Part 2.

Aim High

Community websites are often filling a gap left by other local media, and have the potential to be a platform and a voice to the people, businesses and other organisations who feel they do not have a voice²³. Help them to reach a larger audience. The creation of a community website is your opportunity to become a unifying force for a community. If you want it to be, and if you do it well, this can even mean covering the news and building the community, and becoming a pillar of community life. James Clarke of WV11 gives his three principles of community engagement, which are:

1. Be honest and approachable
2. Take part and get involved
3. Listen as well as talk²⁴

This document has covered some of the basic background research which can be carried out in order to uncover your community's interests, concerns and passions. What you do with this information once you have gathered it is only limited by your ambition and the time you have to spend. Now that you have this information for beginning your engagement, try out some of the techniques for yourself and see which works best. Part 2 will illustrate some of the ways the ideas presented in this document can be turned into action.

²² Steve Buttry

²³ Matt Appleby

²⁴ James Clarke

Part 2 – Engage your community

Basics of Engagement

At the heart of engaging with your community is interaction both online and off. Importantly it is down to you to create the opportunities for interaction to take place. But what does this word “engagement” mean? The types of the engagement you’re likely to encounter may range from someone “liking” a post you’ve shared on Facebook to someone actually producing content for your community website. The useful document *Engaging Audiences* from J-Lab in America breaks engagement down into the following parts:

- Engagement as promotion or outreach: aims to drive users to consume content
- Engagement as reactive: inviting users to comment, share, like and talk to each other
- Engagement as stakeholder participation: getting users to contribute their time, stories or funding
- Engagement as civic participation: activating audience members to address community issues

This document will briefly cover each of these types of engagement in different settings, online and offline, and will provide examples of the methods that can be used to engage community members.

It is important to stress that online and offline engagement can both be vital to community building, producing content, and sustaining a community website. Community news producers embracing both online and offline engagement has, in many cases, given the community a platform to respond and interact with you and other community members²⁵. This can give people the sense that they are stakeholders in their community, and that they have a role in shaping the community and what is going on around them²⁶. It can also demonstrate to the community that you care about it, and are a passionate advocate for it. For James Hatts of London SE1 what is central to engagement is “maintaining the conversation and the dialogue” with readers²⁷. This is regardless of where the conversation is actually taking place, be it online or off.

Explain Why You Do What You Do

This comes back to what your aims for the site are and what it is you want to achieve. This is also an important part of building trust with community members and potential sources for stories. External people need to know who you are and why you are running a community

²⁵ Nicky Getgood

²⁶ Anon. (2008). Tip Sheet: Building Relationships For Community Engagement. *PR News*. 64 (15), n/a.

²⁷ James Hatts

website. Ed Walker of Blog Preston talked about this when he discussed interacting with the community and potential sources of information:

You need to explain what you're doing and why you're doing it and that's crucial. You can't just ring up and expect them to go, "oh yes, we'll just treat you like you're this new website". Most of them are very good but you need to explain who you are and what you're doing and that's really important²⁸.

This involves building trust and cultivating relationships with stakeholders and community members. How this can happen in practice will now be discussed.

Engage Online and Offline

As already mentioned, online and offline engagement are not separate things, and as Steve Buttry said "effective digital engagement dovetails with effective personal engagement"²⁹. Engagement in whatever form it takes has two main parts to it:

1. Online engagement on the whole is best for driving traffic to websites and communicating with community members. This occurs through social media and community websites.
2. Offline engagement is broader and much more face-to-face. It involves engagement activities from holding /sponsoring events to reporting on causes and campaigns.

Engagement can help you be seen as an integral part of the community; this often means promoting the site to people who do not know it exists³⁰.

The main aim of engagement activities is to bring the community together around your community website, as many local newspapers have traditionally done. As Mark Potts of NewsPeg explains:

Let's find a way to get the community together that has our brand all over it, and the same way the local newspaper has been the centre of a community. In a small community the local newspaper is involved in everything, it sponsors things, it shows up at events [...] In a community site you've got to be that, just totally woven into the fabric of the community that way, which is hard.³¹

²⁸ Ed Walker

²⁹ Steve Buttry

³⁰ Tim Dickinson

³¹ Mark Potts

Mark Potts makes two points about the importance of using both online and offline engagement. The first is that engagement can create a conversation between you and the community you serve, and secondly that it is important to present the human face behind a site³². By doing what you're doing you are already someone who is involved in the community itself and who is acting as a focal point for it. Let people know. Phillip John of Litchfield Live put this very well when he said:

If you can put that effort in, that kind of effort, it really shows what you're capable of and people don't just see you as a news source. They see you as a partner as well, which is nice because you actually then start to integrate fully into the community, not just reporting on it or finding out what's going on, you're actually part of it as well.³³

The more engagement you do online will increase the value of what you do in the real world, and, if one of your goals is to continually grow your audience, offline activities can thrust you into the community and introduce you to new members, who may well go on to tell others about what you do.

Offline events organised by community journalists in the UK range from social media surgeries (see below), "tweet ups" where people passionate about a cause or campaign can meet up and do online advocacy together in order to reach their goals (like a digital version of a letter-writing campaign), through to social events purely designed to help people get to know each other.

Collaborate With Others

Collaborating with others can allow you to build upon and grow your existing networks, and is a useful part of creating content. Forging links with community websites in the local area, following someone on Twitter, or agreeing to share/syndicate content can build useful reciprocal relationships.

Example – Blog Preston

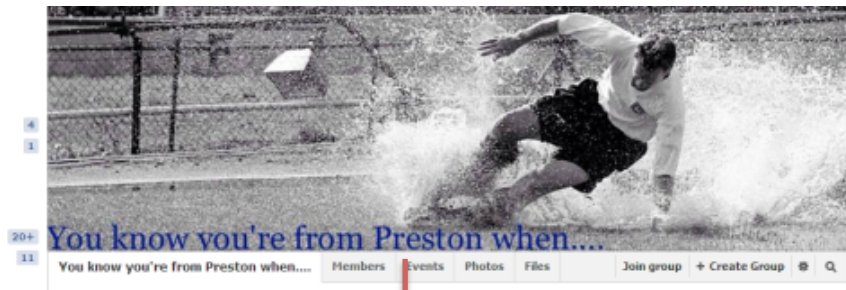
Blog Preston has used collaboration with people in the area on a number of different occasions. The first came from searching for potential content producers in the area and the discovery of a keen local photographer with a page on the image sharing website Flickr with 30,000 images. The person who runs the page was approached and an arrangement set up to supply Blog Preston with images³⁴. The second example from Blog Preston was used as a

³² Mark Potts

³³ Phillip John

³⁴ Ed Walker

way to generate stories. The Facebook group “you know you’re from Preston when...” features people’s memories of Preston and led to a collaboration with the administrator of the group³⁵. The group was featured on Blog Preston which helped to produce content and it also increased the number of members of “you know you’re from Preston when...” group.



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The value of partnerships should not be underestimated by your community website. They can provide a vital avenue for engaging members of the community and generate a steady flow of content for the website. These partnerships can be with individuals or local groups.

³⁵ Ed Walker

³⁶ Anon. (n/a). You know you're from Preston when..... Available: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/38928513056/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

³⁷ Swarbrick, P.D. (2013). People, near and far, using Facebook to exchange their past experiences in Preston. Available: <http://www.blogpreston.co.uk/2013/11/people-near-and-far-using-facebook-to-exchange-their-past-experiences-in-preston/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014

Engage Using Online Media

Engaging your community online can happen through many different outlets. Finding out which platforms work best for you will be a mixture of trial and error, and will depend on what you want to achieve with your community website. This section addresses how you can use your main website and social media presence to engage with community members on a personal level. The section after this will look more closely at engaging the community with content. In places there will be some overlap between different types of engagement.

Be Responsive

To effectively engage online takes time and effort. It means responding to the community through your various platforms³⁸. This demonstrates that there is a human face behind your communications and that what you are transmitting is not completely automated. Treating online communication in this way takes advantage of the two-way communication opportunities which exist online. The importance of being responsive is set out by Ed Walker of Blog Preston who said:

... we do take a lot of interest in what people write in the comments and we'll often follow it up and respond to show people really are listening, and then I would spread that across Facebook and across Twitter. We respond, we favourite things. If people post back to us, they actually feel like there's someone on the other end of it and that is our kind of core across all three things. Our own comments and any kind of social media. They'll see Blog Preston liking their post on Facebook and I think that goes a long way³⁹.

What this explains is that replying to comments is not just about being responsive. It is connecting with the community through the internet and showing people that you are interested in what they have to say.

On the Main Website

Your main website is by its very nature more static than social media and the interactions that you will get will usually be less frequent as a result. That is not to say that engagement will not happen, because there are a number of different ways you can foster interaction.

First and foremost turn on comments on your news stories as this presents people with a place to reflect upon the stories, and for you to respond to comments and demonstrate to the person commenting that their perspective matters to you. But be clear with the type of

³⁸ Nicky Getgood

³⁹ Ed Walker

response you use, as Laura Ellis, Head of Online for BBC Radio English Regions, the tone of your interaction is crucial:

... one of the absolute keys to this is really good people who know how to talk to the audience and don't just go, "thank you for your comment Bob", but say, "wow Bob, that's really interesting, what do you reckon caused that, or does anyone else have any views on that?"⁴⁰

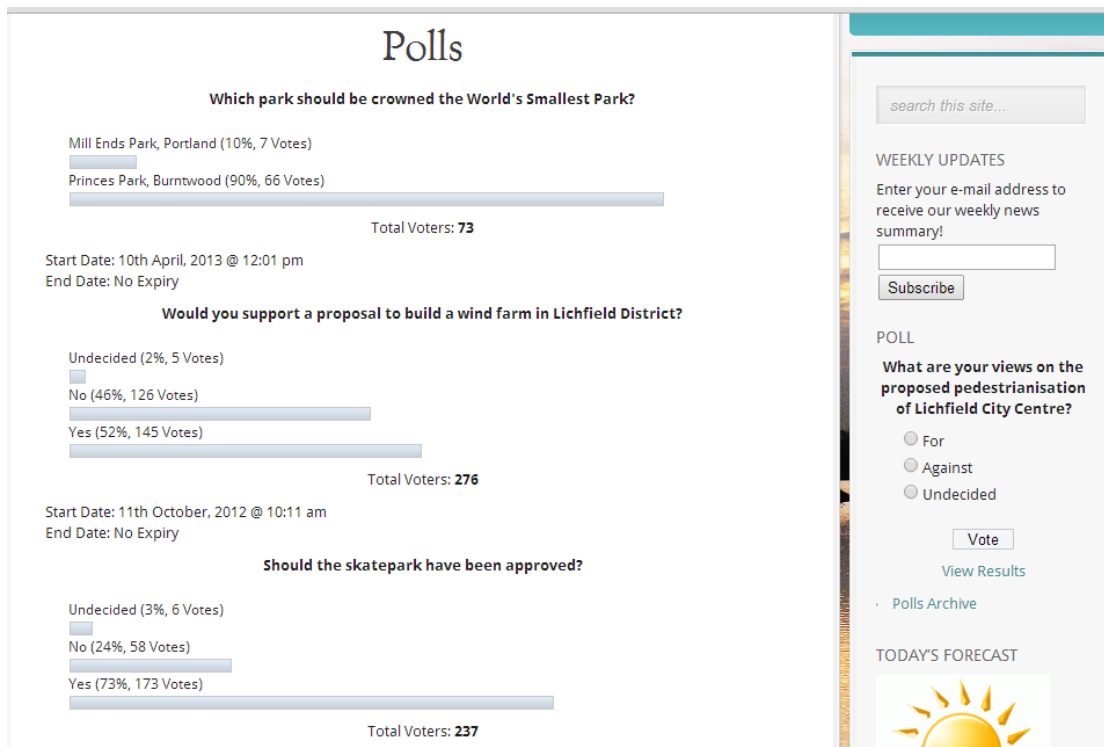
Sounding "human" (essentially just being yourself online) is just the beginning, and the potential for engagement goes well beyond this.

The *Guardian* short e-book *Connected: The power of modern community*⁴¹ talks about one of the most important parts of engaging as having a 'call to action'. What they mean by this is having content which spells out to the community what it is you want them to do with the information you are presenting them with. For instance, do you want to know their opinion? Should they submit photos? Should they offer news tips? How their contribution will add to your site needs to be detailed to show that what the community is giving you is appreciated and useful. One such example of a method which uses these techniques comes from Lichfield Live⁴² who place a poll on the side bar of each page of their website. Below is an image showing some of the questions that they have asked in the past, and the sidebar where the questions appear:

⁴⁰ Laura Ellis

⁴¹ Thomas, M. Waldram, H. and Walker, E (2013). *Connected: The Power of Modern Community*. London: Guardian Books.

⁴² Lichfield Live. (2012). Polls. Available: <http://lichfieldlive.co.uk/polls/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.



The poll question is the “call to action” for the community, and the payoff for the website is data which can be used either to generate news stories or to complement articles with statistics. Such data can even be used to add weight to local campaigns. The questions are changed and updated regularly, meaning that this interaction is an on-going process of engagement and learning about the community’s opinions. Asking questions across your platforms is an easy way to attempt to illicit responses from your community, and it works in a different way from the offline world, as James Clarke of WV11 makes clear:

Asking questions is a big one for us - if you try and stop someone in the street to ask them questions it is hard work - ask on the internet and you can’t shut people up!⁴³

Taken further this potentially helps generate content as a post from Blog Preston demonstrates. At the end of an article about traffic problems in Preston readers are asked the following:

If you were caught in Thursdays traffic gridlock madness let us know. How long did it take you to get home that evening? What do you think can possibly be done to improve traffic movement in Preston?

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⁴³ James Clarke

⁴⁴ Worrall, T. (2014). Rush hour traffic brings Preston to standstill. Available: <http://www.blogpreston.co.uk/2014/01/rush-hour-traffic-brings-preston-to-standstill/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Following up on the comments received an initiative like this is able to produce further articles about how, in this case the traffic, is affecting the community itself. It shows that you are listening to the community and what their opinions are.

On Social Media

Knowing which type of social media is best for your community and what social media can be used for, as already mentioned, is a matter of uncovering what works best for you and your community. The importance social media should play in your overall community strategy is emphasised by Philip John of Lichfield Live:

... social media is a good place to start because it's a very cheap, free and easy way to find out what people are talking about in the community and, therefore, what concerns them, what gets their backs up.⁴⁵

To aid in this some of the characteristics of the two most popular social media platforms will be explained. Before talking about Twitter and Facebook in turn the following short statements should help in shaping your initial thinking about the basis of each:

Twitter – This, on the whole, is more of a broadcast platform⁴⁶. Its speed means that it is a good place to promote headlines, but the amount of content produce by Twitter users each day makes it less suited for engagement. Twitter is less geographically specific, admittedly this depends on your followers but in general everyone can see your tweets.

Facebook – The ability to create and cultivate your community on Facebook is easier than on Twitter. Setting up a Facebook page or group means that there is a focal point for your Facebook interactions, and a space for the community to contribute. Facebook is more focused geographically, because people interested in your page or group are more likely to either live in the area or have lived in the area and are interested in receiving the news.

These two general statements aren't necessarily applicable to every community; instead see them as a loose guide to each platform.

On Twitter

This idea of including a “call to action” includes how you try to engage people on social media. In a blog post from Twitter's official advertising page, and based on the research of

⁴⁵ Philip John

⁴⁶ Clair Wardle

20,000 “promoted tweets” (which are Twitter’s form of in-house advertising) they list the 4 most effective calls to action:

- 1) Ask for a download – if you have a download include the link and say “click here for download [url]”. Twitter found that this increases the number of clicks by 13%.
- 2) Ask for a retweet – A request for a retweet was found to increase the amount of retweets by 311%, and tweets performed twice as well if the full word “retweet” was used instead of the shortened version “RT”.
- 3) Ask for a follow – Prompt people to follow you on Twitter, inform them of your purpose and why they should follow you. Tweets that asked for a follow found that followers increased by 86%.
- 4) Ask for a reply – Post people a question asking for their opinion on a particular issue or topic. These types of tweets were found to increase replies by 307% on average.⁴⁷

What these “asks” show is how you need to be explicit when engaging your community, in other words, tell them what it is you want them to do. Ask people to do something, then pay attention to what they do, and, finally, show people you are listening by responding. This is summed up best by Matt Appleby of Roath Cardiff who says that “Twitter is our conversation”⁴⁸.

Twitter by its very construction is a “live” platform, it is constantly updated and is more instant than other platforms. Ross Hawkes talks of Lichfield Live’s interaction with its community:

Twitter is much more live so we tend to use that as a good gauge, as a real news gathering tool first and foremost, but then secondly as much more of an effective communication publishing tool. For example, we don’t only publish when we’ve got stories on there but when there are comments as well.⁴⁹

As you can see from this quote Twitter offers opportunities for a different type of engagement than your main website and Facebook (as discussed below). It is, for instance, often more instant, and it’s public (meaning users publish to a general audience) with the potential to reach more people than other social media platforms.

⁴⁷ Romanek, J. (2013). Tweet tips: Most effective calls to action on Twitter. Available: <https://blog.twitter.com/2013/tweet-tips-most-effective-calls-to-action-on-twitter>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁴⁸ Matt Appleby

⁴⁹ Ross Hawkes

On Facebook

When compared to Twitter, Facebook is more of a “slow burn”. As already mentioned, it often has a ready-made community (or collection of communities), and can be much more geographically specific. The familiarity of large numbers of people with the platform means that engagement with other people can also take place on your Facebook page. James Clarke of WV11.co.uk talks about using Facebook as a platform for people to make comments about council policies for instance:

We recently submitted a Facebook thread of comments on proposals to make cuts to the local youth service to the local authority as part of their official consultation. From our experience people are much more willing to make a comment on something on Facebook (for example) or a platform they are familiar with than they are to fill out a 5 page consultation survey on the council’s website.⁵⁰

Clarke continues by talking of “calls to action” on Facebook, but as well as some of the similar interactions on Twitter, WV11 uses Facebook to ask for volunteers for local initiatives like community fun days, charity appeals, school uniform exchanges, or, more specifically, asking for people to “move chairs” for an event⁵¹.

The ability to do longer form posts on Facebook means that compared to Twitter it is seen by many as more personal, and offers greater flexibility. A Little Bit of Stone’s Facebook shows a selection of different ways in which a Facebook page is used to ask the community questions, publicise articles, and advertise local events⁵²:

⁵⁰ James Clarke

⁵¹ James Clarke

⁵² A Little Bit of Stone. (2014). Facebook Page. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/alittlebitofstone>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.



A Little Bit of Stone
5 April

Anybody lost a set of keys in Walton? One of our reafound a set and are holding them until the police stat Monday. If they are yours and you'd like them back t message us and we'll put you in contact. ^Jon



A Little Bit of Stone
4 April

Stone based Alternative band The Glass House Museum play support to Gothic Rockers RHOMBUS this Saturday, at the Rigger in Newcastle. Free Admission. Go along th great band! ^Jack



A Little Bit of Stone shared a link.
4 April

Whitebridge Industrial Estate have got their fingers on the pulse after 2 AED's have been recently installed,
<http://alittlebitofstone.com/2014/04/04/finger-on-the-pulse-at-whitebridge/> ^Jack



Finger on the Pulse at Whitebridge - A Little Bit of Stone
alittlebitofstone.com

Whitebridge Estates in Stone have their finger on the pulse and have invested in two life Saving Defibrillators for their site.

There are numerous lists of “tips” of how to use Facebook effectively to engage communities, and the following is a selection of tips from David Higgeson⁵³ a digital media expert at the news publisher Trinity Mirror:

1. Start as you mean to go on – Think about what you intend to use the Facebook page for. Assuming it will drive traffic to your website just displaying web links may well only bring you disappointment.
2. Like other pages – Find other pages associated with your area and like them, and when people like your page like back.
3. Avoid auto-publish from other social media – Facebook and Twitter are different platforms and require different ways of writing. If a hashtag or an @reference is included in a Facebook update it’ll make your content look like it is automated. Remember, the community needs to know that there is a human behind the Facebook page.

⁵³ Higgeson, D. (2013). Doing facebook right 15 quick tips to improve your facebook fan page. Available: <http://davidhiggeson.wordpress.com/2013/03/11/doing-facebook-right-15-quick-tips-to-improve-your-facebook-fan-page/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

4. Ask questions.
5. Interact, interact, interact.
6. Don't give up.

Making the most of Twitter and Facebook can really complement the engagement people are doing offline, and it can be useful to see both online and offline engagement as tools to be as useful to your community as possible.

On Other Platforms

There are other types of social media platforms which you might consider using. Google Plus for instance, while not a very good conversational tool, does have the ability to connect people via video in "Hangouts", and these videos have the option of being posted or live-streamed on YouTube⁵⁴.

There is also pre-social media style engagement such as the use of a discussion forum. London SE1 for instance has a very vibrant and active forum which is used by the site's publishers to gauge opinion, source stories and engage with community members⁵⁵.

SE1 Discussion

Join in these discussions today! [Log in](#) or [register](#).

Rules • Forum sections • Search • Register log in		
Pages: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 ...Last Next		
Current: 1 of 542		
Job advert: EmploySE1 Assistant Co-ordinator		See all job adverts Advertise a vacancy
Better Barkside (on behalf of EmploySE1)		
Subject	Posts	Last post
Elephant Park Gary93	5	Today at 10:29am John C
Ticino vs Franco Manca littlej Pages: 1 , 2 , 3 , 4 , 5	41	Today at 10:25am southwarkSimon
Update on Blackfriars Road SPD Karen I Pages: 1 , 2 , 3	23	Yesterday at 10:02pm JazzyQ
Bangalore Express williamn Pages: 1 , 2 , 3 , 4	33	Yesterday at 9:41pm Rambling Phil
Pic of the Air Ambulance landing today in the park next to the Old Vic ninja999	1	Yesterday at 7:01pm ninja999
Billboards on the flyover Karen I Pages: 1 , 2	18	Yesterday at 8:41am ColinO
Decorator / painter martinr	7	Yesterday at 7:09am vdm82
Painter decorator wanted hi2u_uk	7	Yesterday at 7:07am vdm82
Uprooted tree on Neckinger Guy's street	4	Yesterday at 12:36am Davies
Planning consultation email address Head of DM	1	Wednesday 19 February Head of DM
One Blackfriars Karen I	10	Wednesday 19 February Head of DM
Sofa cleaning carmenes82	10	Wednesday 19 February paules1

⁵⁴ Steve Buttry

⁵⁵ London SE1. (2014). SE1 Forum. Available: <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/forum/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Hold Social Media Surgeries

As we have mentioned already, there are ways of engaging the community using a mixture of online and offline strategies. Social media surgeries aim to contribute to communities by providing people with the skills they need to go online and increase people's literacy around online platforms. They can be a good way of sharing what you've learned with others in the area, and of inviting other people with relevant skills to do the same. Philip John of Lichfield Live⁵⁶ talks of social media surgeries as follows:

... not only does it get you engaged with the community, it actually helps you to get them online when they might not otherwise be, which then furthers their community engagement as well. They can talk to other people, communicate better with other people in the community, once they're digitally engaged.

Summed up by Podnosh, social media surgeries are geared around helping people "connect, collaborate and communicate"⁵⁷ online. This is a good example of where digital engagement leads effectively to offline engagement⁵⁸, and it can even increase your number of contributors⁵⁹.

Make Engaging Online Content

Engaging people online is only part of how you can fully integrate your site into the community. You also need to create content which will keep people coming back – in short, to produce stuff people want to read, watch, or listen to. Some interviewees stressed that the tone of voice used is very important to keeping content friendly and informal. They also told us that the people using your website are there to find out what is happening in the local area. They often want short and snappy content rather than long-winded and complex interventions. James Clarke of WV11 explains how their content is shaped:

We make a point of simplifying Council press releases for example, as having looked at our analytics, we've noticed that fewer people read articles published in full. We also try and summarise things, linking to a more detailed version (elsewhere if necessary), allowing people to get a taste of the topic, but leaving them with the choice to find out more, should they wish.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Philip John

⁵⁷ podnosh. (2014). Social Media Surgeries. Available: <http://podnosh.com/social-media-surgeries/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁵⁸ Steve Buttry

⁵⁹ Thomas, M. Waldram, H. and Walker, E (2013). Connected: The Power of Modern Community. London: Guardian Books.

⁶⁰ James Clarke

The frequency of content keeps your site in the minds of the community, and a lack of updates might leave you forgotten about. Finding out what is best for your community will be a matter of trial and error. Equally, this makes you more consistent as it shapes people's expectations of what they will be getting from your site, and how often. This is echoed by Scott Brodbeck of Arlington Now⁶¹ and Scott Kelly of ChiswickW4⁶² who mentioned that you cannot force the community to engage. What works is creating content which is relevant to community and tells them something interesting about their local area.

Make Engaging Content On the Main Website

Offline and online engagement can pay off the most for you by helping generate content for your site. Mark Potts of NewsPeg emphasises that "where we get the best traffic is through stuff we're covering that nobody else has"⁶³. This is where you become the voice of your community members, and a platform to advertise, for instance, local businesses and events. The following is a number of different examples from various community sites of types of content that they have found works well.

Feature Guest Posts

Cultivating, attracting and creating content with and around interesting community members (prominent community members, business owners, people who require a platform, anyone you find interesting, etc) can be a real winner. Featuring local voices like this can be done in many different ways, for instance:

1. Profiles of local people written by themselves. Roath Cardiff for example use this type of content well by inviting people to write short posts about what they do in the area and what they love about the community. Alternatively, if people aren't keen to write their own profile they might be willing to record a short-form interview for the site.

⁶¹ Scott Brodbeck

⁶² Scott Kelly

⁶³ Mark Potts

All posts in Roath People



- Roath People: Angie Dutton**
SEPTEMBER 28, 2012 · NO COMMENTS
I love Mill Gardens with its dogs and ducks, Roath Park picnics, Albany and Wellfield...
- Roath People: Hella Phoenix**
SEPTEMBER 14, 2012 · NO COMMENTS
Smiling birth. Screaming toddler. Liberating wardrobe-top Lego from the house on Pen-Y-Lan Road, tangled in...
- Roath People: Anne Bell**
JUNE 22, 2012 · NO COMMENTS
I live near Roath Park and have always felt lucky to have the park with...
- Roath People: Jessica Donnan**
MAY 25, 2012 · NO COMMENTS
I've lived in Roath since I started University in 2005 and never moved. It was...
- Roath People: Dave Oldham**
APRIL 13, 2012 · NO COMMENTS
I have lived in and out of Roath for the last 12 years and I...

Owain Wyn Evans on the weather, Roath and the Bake Off

BY MATT IN ARTS & CULTURE · FOOD & DRINK · ROATH NEWS · ROATH PEOPLE · APRIL 1, 2014 · 1 COMMENT
TAGS: BAKE OFF, CAKE, CARDIFF, DRUMMING, FILM, GREAT ROATH BAKE OFF, INTERVIEW, OWAIN WYN EVANS, ROATH, ROATH CARDIFF, ROATH PEOPLE, ROATHCARDIFF, VIDEO, WEATHER, WEATHERMAN

Welsh weather star, Roath resident and Great Roath Bake Off judge Owain Wyn Evans kindly agreed to face the camera for a chat with roathcardiff – over tea and cake, of course.

Thanks to Owain for taking the time to tell us about his tv career, his favourite places in Roath and his tactics for the annual cake marathon.



2. Longer guest posts. This is where your site truly acts as a place for the community. With a guest post you give people the opportunity to reach people they might otherwise not be able to contact. This is a great way to inform the community about what is happening in their area, as told by the people involved⁶⁴. Examples from other sites include regular or occasional themed “columns” from relevant local businesses or politicians.

Spring family craft day, Mackintosh Church

BY GERALDINE IN GUEST POSTS · MARCH 29, 2014 · NO COMMENTS
TAGS: CRAFT DAY, MACKINTOSH CHURCH, ROATH

Thanks for Amy Smith for this guest post.



I'm from Mackintosh Church on Mackintosh Place in Roath and we hold four craft days a year, one for each season. Our first one of the year is this Saturday and it's perfectly timed for Mother's Day – a great chance to make something special. Admission is free and we do provide refreshments, including home baked cakes and treats. All proceeds from donations for refreshments will be given to the [Rebounders Trampoline Centre Wales](#) (based in Cardiff), a charity that helps people with special needs.

Our craft days are great family fun with lots of different craft tables with a variety of crafts to get hands on and make. Perfect for all ages, but all children must be accompanied by an adult.

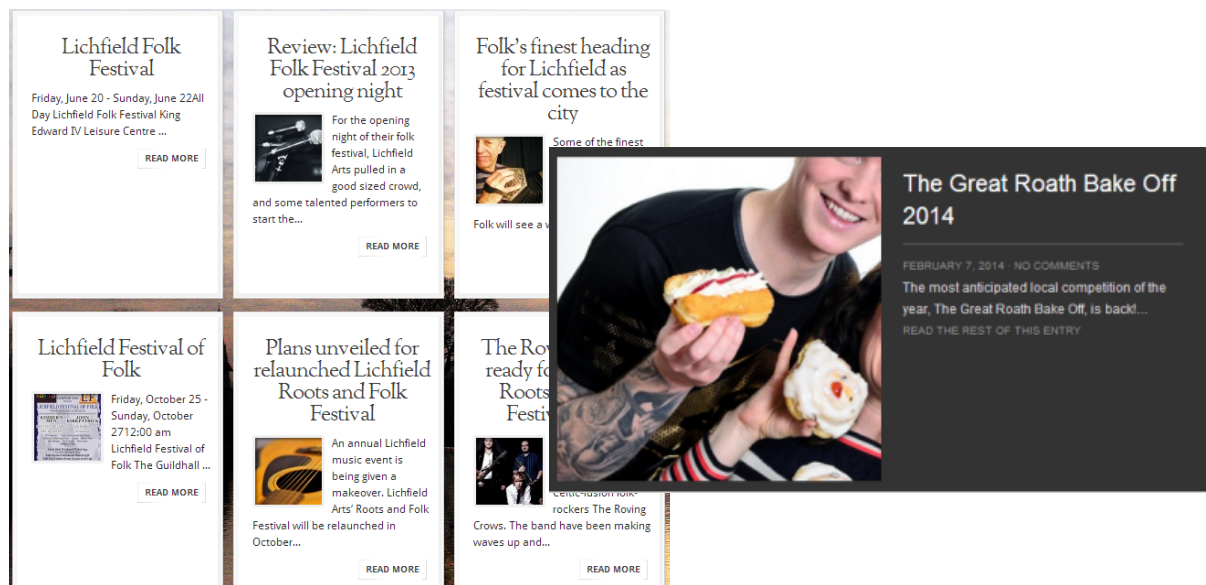
At our weekly youth club, we held a competition to design the flyers/posters for the event, and the pictures attached are the winning entries. On the back of the flyers are details on how to find us.

⁶⁴ Smith, A. (2014). Spring family craft day, Mackintosh Church. Available: <http://www.roathcardiff.net/2014/03/29/spring-family-craft-day-mackintosh-church/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

It should be noted, however, that whilst these kinds of guest posts can be very rewarding and valuable, they're also often quite resource- and time-intensive. Setting up the kinds of relationships needed to make this happen can be time very consuming. People often don't have the same kinds of writing skills as you and may produce content you think doesn't come up to scratch or fit with your site; chasing people up for posts can take time and effort; and guest posters often lose interest in continuing to write after an initial flurry of enthusiasm. These problems can be minimised by being very clear about exactly what you want from people and when, and perhaps even drawing up a template guest blog post or brief style guide so contributors know what's expected.

Publicise Local Events

Think of your site as the platform for local community interests. This includes events in the local area, and the opening and closing of new businesses, for example restaurants and shops. The advantage of publicising these events is that your site will potentially build relationships with organisers and local businesses, but you will be able to report on, support, and publicise your site at these events. To do this think about all the different ways in which you can get your name seen by the community. Below are two examples from Lichfield Live⁶⁵ and Roath Cardiff⁶⁶:



These events, as well as supporting the people and groups around you, can further integrate your website into being an active and important part of the community. The knock-on effect is an increase in potential stories to cover and an increased pool of people to contact for information.

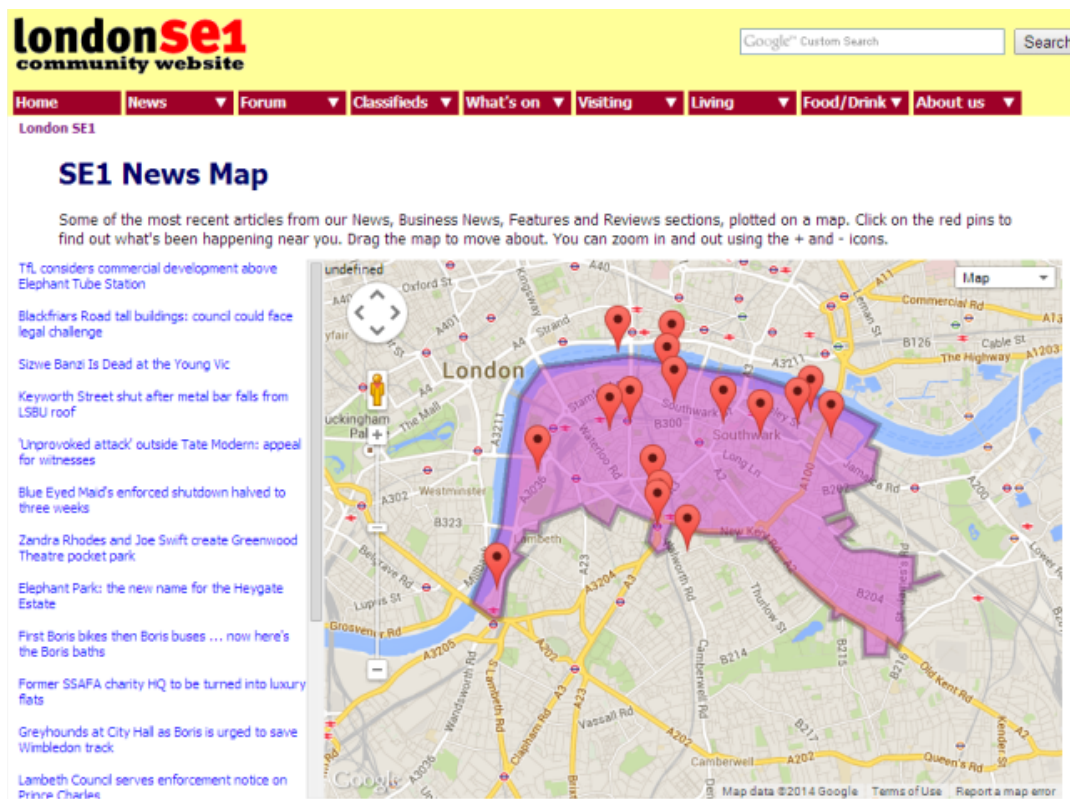
⁶⁵ Lichfield Live. (2014). Search results for Lichfield Folk Festival. Available: <http://lichfieldlive.co.uk/?s=Lichfield+Folk+Festival>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁶⁶ Roath Cardiff. (2014). All posts tagged great roath bake off. Available: <http://www.roathcardiff.net/tag/great-roath-bake-off/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Using Maps to Present Information

These are used to visualise the basis of a story or a series of reports have taken place. It gives the community a geographical focus and an image of what is happening in the surrounding area. The maps are created using Google's Mapmaker⁶⁷ which allows you to add places and descriptions to where something is happening, and this map can be embedded onto your site. The two examples below illustrate some of the ways in which maps can be used:

1. The first comes from London SE1 who used a map to show where stories have taken place in the local area. They did not only place "pins" on the map, they also illustrated the geographical boundaries of the community⁶⁸.

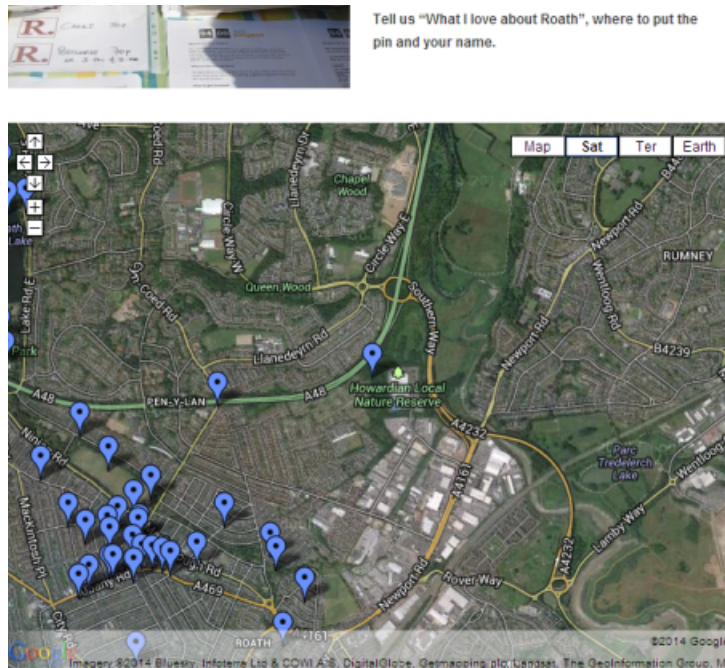


2. The second example is from Roath Cardiff and this time a map is used as part of a story about an offline event. At this event community members were asked what

⁶⁷ Google. (2014). Enrich Google Maps with your local knowledge. Available: <https://www.google.co.uk/mapmaker>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁶⁸ London SE1. (2014). SE1 News Map. Available: <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/map>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

they love about Roath and this was then pinned into a map⁶⁹. The map was then transferred online and placed into the write up of the event.



Cover Big News Stories

Your ability to do this, of course, depends on the resources available to you at the time a story “breaks” and while it is running. What you can do when a big news story happens in the area is become a place where people go to find out more, to get more detailed and localised information than that produced in mainstream media, and/or to access information which may be seen as more trustworthy than that available on social media platforms. Your site could, then, be used as a place for links to further information. For example, following the murder of a man in the Roath area of Cardiff the makers of the community site Roath Cardiff saw a spike in traffic. But they didn’t have the ability to cover the story themselves so they created a post which contained information taken from other major news sources, including the police⁷⁰:

⁶⁹ Appleby, M. (2012). What do you love about Roath? Mapped at Made in Spring. Available: <http://www.roathcardiff.net/2012/04/09/what-do-you-love-about-roath-mapped-at-made-in-spring/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁷⁰ Appleby, M. (2012). Claude Road murder – police appeal for information. Available: <http://www.roathcardiff.net/2012/04/29/claude-road-murder-police-appeal-for-information/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

WalesOnline has [reported](#) that the victim has been named as Peter Lewis, 68. The site reports that he died of a single stab wound to the stomach in an incident in the communal hallway of his home.

The [BBC](#) and [ITV](#) Wales news sites report that the police have said there is no apparent motive for the crime and both have details of the police's appeal for witnesses.

A [statement](#) on the South Wales Police website reads:

By contrast, many hyperlocal bloggers in the UK are able to react to breaking and on-going news events as they happen and provide richer information than other outlets. The UK summer riots of 2011 are a case in point, where community news producers all over the UK used their blogs and social media platforms to provide up to the minute updates on events in their localities.

Unusual Stories are Shared Widely

This type of engaging story is about capitalising on a local occurrence that is out of the ordinary. These stories generate a range of different content which can be spread across your platforms. The first example comes from Roath Cardiff, and Nicola Rugman explains its attraction:

Somebody went into the attic of a house and found the skin of a tarantula and they said that wherever the tarantula had gone, it was probably caked in asbestos dust, because they were doing building work [...] So we actually made a bit of a story about that and that got a lot of attention, even though it was something silly and nothing factual at all, it was quite good fun.⁷¹

Here is the story as it appeared on Roath Cardiff's Twitter feed⁷² and main website⁷³:

⁷¹ Nicola Rugman

⁷² Roath Cardiff. (2014). Twitter Feed. Available: <https://twitter.com/roathcardiff>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁷³ Nichols, G. (2013). Asbestos Spider spins national web of intrigue. Available: <http://www.roathcardiff.net/2013/03/22/asbestos-spider-spins-national-web-of-intrigue/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

MT @LovesTheDiff: Asbestos tarantula on loose in Roath! Run for your lives!
walesonline.co.uk/news/need-to-r... (via @saffron) pic.twitter.com/pi5XEHjdIC



Expand Reply 13

R. Roath Cardiff @roathcardiff · Mar 21
RT @yourcardiff: Cardiff's asbestos-contaminated tar
Twitter account. welcome... @AsbestosSpider
Expand Reply 13

Asbestos Spider spins national web of intrigue

BY GERALDINE IN ROATH NEWS · MARCH 22, 2013 · NO COMMENTS

TAGS: ASBESTOS, ASBESTOS SPIDER, ROATH, ROATHCARDIFF, SPIDER, TARANTULA

A report from [WalesOnline](#) announcing the discovery of the skin of what could be a rare [Chilean Rose Tarantula](#) in a Roath property, has sparked huge interest in the national press and online. The skin was found by a surveyor investigating a local house for the presence of asbestos, which could mean the escaped spider is contaminated.



[The Independent's](#) story is accompanied by a horrifying photo of the type of spider it is thought to be, while [The Sun](#) issues a warning that 'asbestos spider runs free'. The [Metro](#) advises locking our doors, as there's 'a giant asbestos infected tarantula on the loose', and [TNT Magazine](#) go one further with their headline 'Giant cancer-spreading tarantula on loose in Cardiff?'

It's quite a story, and a creature we wouldn't want to run into, but nobody knows if it's alive or dead, nor (yet) whether it has absorbed any asbestos – tests are being run on the discarded skin.

Don't panic – but don't pick it up either...

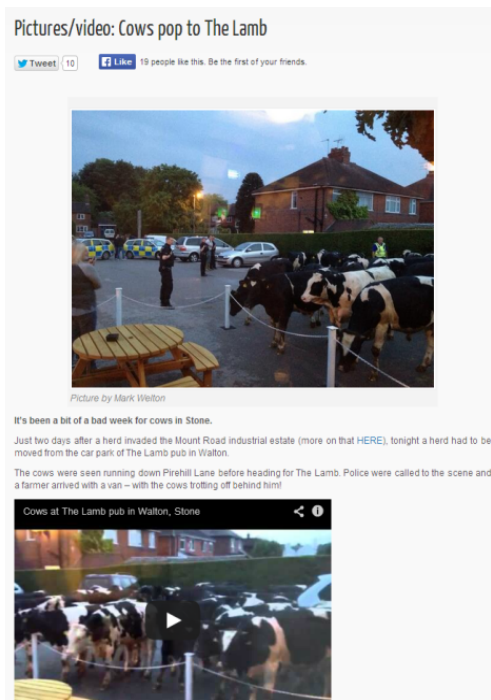
Follow @AsbestosSpider on twitter [here](#).

Image courtesy of and copyright [Loves the 'Diff](#)

Similarly, A Little Bit of Stone publicised a story about cows escaping a field and invading a pub's car park. This involved rich content such as pictures and videos to be spread across their publishing platforms on social media and main website⁷⁴, and as you can see from the Facebook post⁷⁵ the content was shared widely. There are many other examples of such quirky stories being picked up either regionally or nationally and "going viral" which in many cases can be very valuable for the profile of hyperlocal news sites. Incidentally, such stories, and the content they generate, can also help producers' bank balances as they can, on occasion, be sold on to national newspapers and other mainstream news providers.

⁷⁴ Summerfield, J. (2013). Pictures/video: Cows pop to The Lamb. Available: <http://alittlebitofstone.com/2013/06/20/picturesvideo-cows-pop-to-the-lamb/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁷⁵ A Little Bit of Stone. (2014). Facebook Page. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/alittlebitofstone>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.



Make Engaging Content on Social Media

Social media platforms offer a free outlet for your content. But their sheer size and scope means that the job of engaging the audience is often all about rising above the noise. This section covers the two main most popular social media platforms among community journalists, Facebook and Twitter, and how they can be used to generate and disseminate engaging content. Key strategies for promoting content on each platform are slightly different and can work in a range of ways. Digital Transformation Editor Steve Buttry gave an example of how these two platforms work in terms of how often to post on each:

Even if I post [...] to Facebook first, you don't live update on Facebook again and again. That's kind of spamming, and in the Facebook culture if you're updating constantly, that gets annoying. But in Twitter it becomes riveting and compelling. So when news breaks, we want to engage with those people who are posting pictures and videos, and their own instant reactions, and eyewitness observations and those sorts of things. So for those reasons Twitter is better for breaking news, so you really just need to learn to understand the tools.⁷⁶

This quote helps to divide how you could approach using Twitter and Facebook differently.

⁷⁶ Steve Buttry

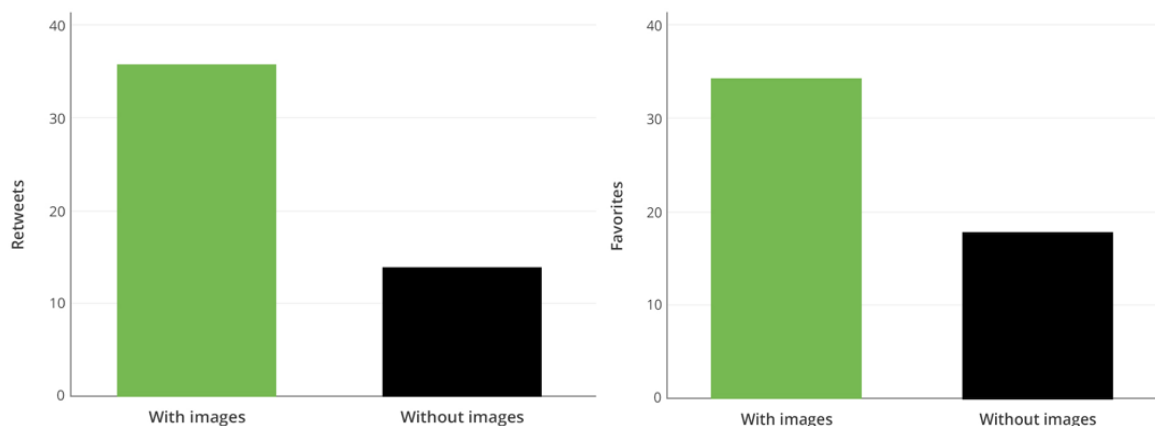
On Twitter

The micro-blogging platform twitter is very free flowing with the content being updated constantly. Tim Dickens of the Brixton Blog sees Twitter as being the most important form of social media for their site⁷⁷ due to its ability to break news, and spread news. Ed Walker of Blog Preston uses a very good example of how this works. He talked about getting “tip-offs” on Twitter with people, for instance, saying “the police are here, what’s going on? ‘Why is the police helicopter over my house?’”⁷⁸. The challenge for the community website seeking to cover this nascent story is in knowing who to contact and find the answers to these questions.

In addition to this kind of engaging content, there are some simple, and some more complicated, things you can do to make your Twitter content more engaging. The following tips come from the social media app Buffer, one is about using images in Tweets, and the other talks about the best words to use in Tweets:

1. Since Twitter changed how it displays images in timelines these have become a more important ways to create engaging content⁷⁹. The two charts below show the difference images make: in short, tweets with images means more retweets and favourites.

Tweets with images received **150%** more retweets. Tweets with images received **89%** more favorites.



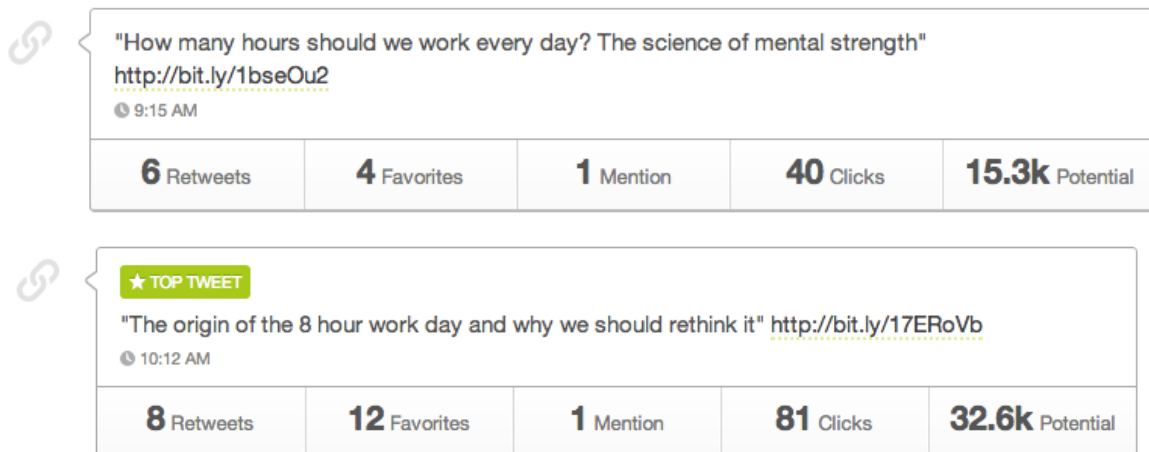
⁷⁷ Tim Dickens

⁷⁸ Ed Walker

⁷⁹ Cooper, B.B. (2013). How Twitter's Expanded Images Increase Clicks, Retweets and Favorites [New Data]. Available: <http://blog.bufferapp.com/the-power-of-twitlers-new-expanded-images-and-how-to-make-the-most-of-it>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Alongside the inclusion of images social media software developers Buffer suggest engagement will be enhanced if the content of the tweet matches the image, and if publishers vary the content of tweets to keep followers engaged. To vary tweets Buffer recommends including facts, quotes, questions, and links.

2. The second set of tips Buffer has is the use of different styles of language in tweets. The two different tweets below show how writing a different title impacts upon how much followers engage with a tweet⁸⁰. This type of approach is used to test what will work best for headlines. Publishing two different titles for the same article and seeing which one is engaged with most aids in choosing what headline to use in articles. This is achieved by posting a title say once in the morning and once in the afternoon and seeing which one is engaged with most.

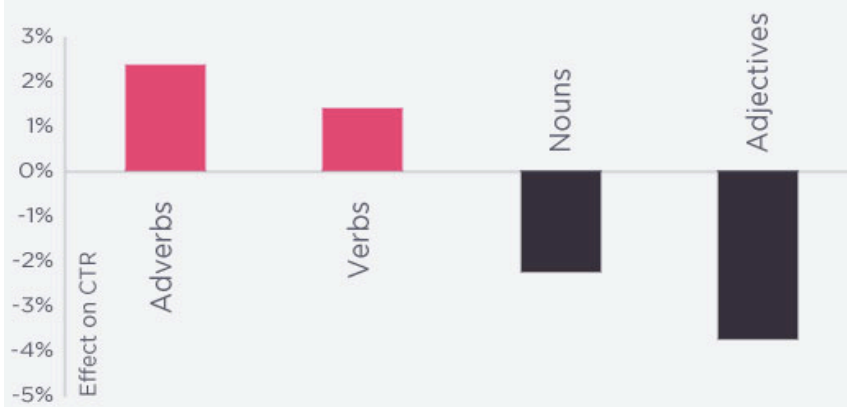


The difference between the two is that the second tweet is much more action based, forthright, and contains numbers. The following chart demonstrates the types of words which work best. CTR in the chart description equals “click through rate”, in other words how many times people click a link due to certain words or phrases.

⁸⁰ Widrich, L. (2013). A Scientific Guide to Writing Great Headlines on Twitter, Facebook, and Your Blog. Available: <http://blog.bufferapp.com/a-scientific-guide-to-writing-great-headlines-on-twitter-facebook-and-your-blog>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Use action words: more verbs, fewer nouns.

After analyzing 200,000 link containing tweets, I found that tweets that contained more adverbs and verbs had higher CTRs than noun and adjective heavy tweets.



On Facebook

Facebook, as mentioned above does work in a similar way to Twitter, but, and this is important it does allow you more space for engaging content. Laura Ellis, Head of Online for BBC Radio English Regions summed up some of what Facebook offers community websites well with the following quote:

... it gives you content, it engenders debate, and it gets people thinking about how they want to contribute...

Its content updates are “slower” and less frequent when compared to Twitter which allows more room for asking questions, and for deeper conversations and engagement.

Facebook is a great place for a conversation because of the volume of people there, that if you post something that engages effectively, you’re going to get a lot of comments and sharing.⁸¹

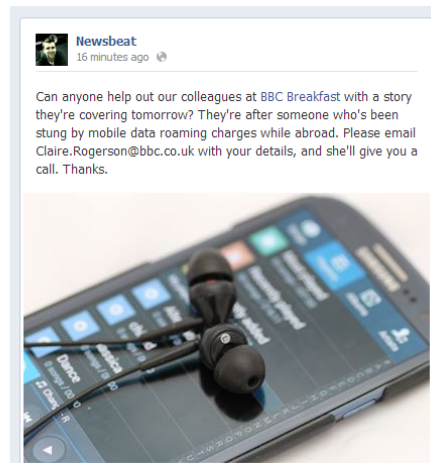
This is echoed in the opinions of Tim Dickens from the Brixton Blog who talks of Facebook as an audience discussion tool⁸². The discussion can help lead to more traffic and can drive people towards your website.

Other general tips for getting the most out of Facebook are as follows⁸³:

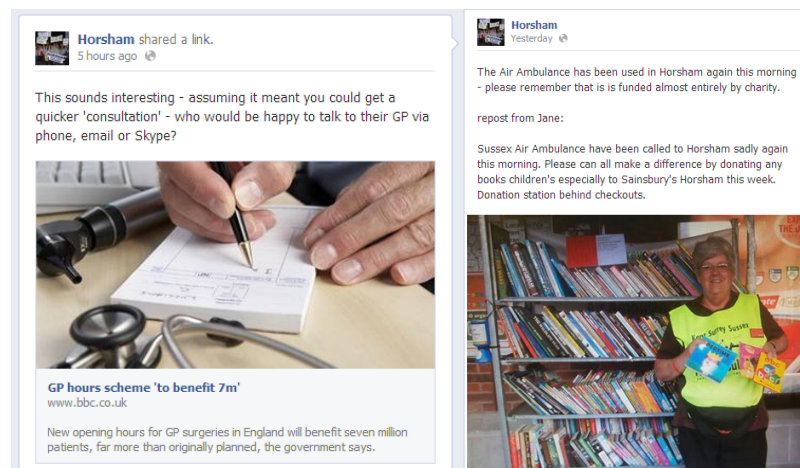
⁸¹ Steve Buttry

⁸² Tim Dickens

1. Post regularly – Not as often as you might on Twitter, but often enough to keep your visibility high up on people’s timelines.
2. Post photos – As with Twitter image based posts are visually engaging when compared to just text. It helps if the picture is related to the story or the question being asked as the example from Radio 1’s Newsbeat shows⁸⁴:



3. Encourage engagement with questions and “calls to action” – The Facebook page for Visit Horsham is very effective at producing engagement by asking its community questions, and even more so by reposting requests from community members⁸⁵:



⁸³ Cooper, B.B. (2013). The Beginner's Guide to EdgeRank: How Facebook’s News Feed Algorithm Actually Works. Available: <http://blog.bufferapp.com/understanding-facebook-news-feed-algorithm>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁸⁴ BBC Newsbeat. (2014). Facebook Page. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/radio1newsbeat>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

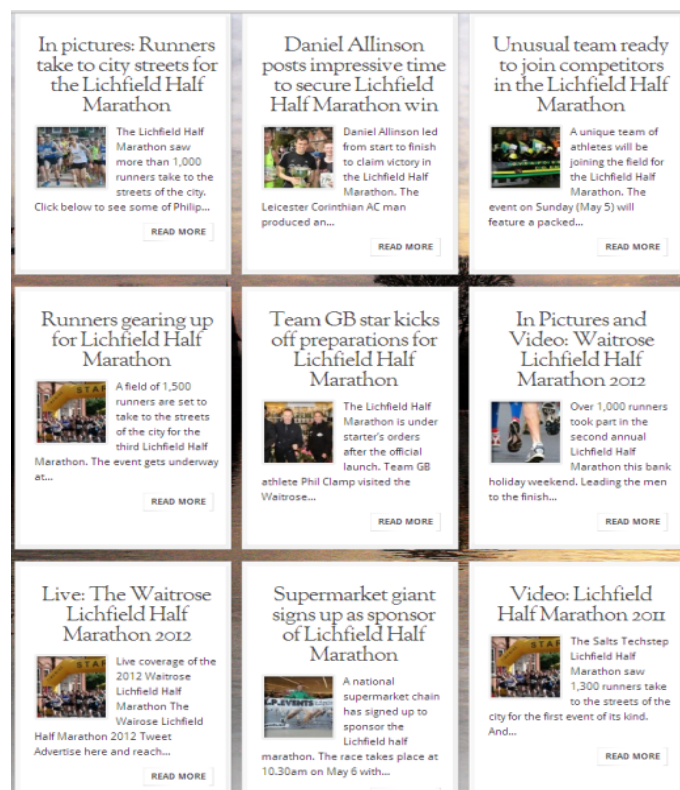
⁸⁵ Visit Horsham. (2014). Facebook Page. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/horsham.uk>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Spreadable Content

The main goal of using different types of social media goes beyond funnelling people to your website. Media on Facebook, Twitter, and other social platforms are very easily shared, and they can be used to spread your content as far as possible. Think about it as drawing all of the platforms you use together and making the most of your content across these platforms. Mark Potts of Newspeg puts it simply as:

Into that you've got to plug Twitter, you've got to plug Facebook, you've got to plug in Flickr and YouTube, and the other social kind of things that are out there now, but it's pretty easy, the stuff exists, you don't have to build it yourself anymore and that's a gigantic help.⁸⁶

To give an example of this in practice Ross Hawkes of Lichfield Live talked about how his community website covered a local half marathon⁸⁷. They used multiple media platforms to put their content out which included pictures, live tweeting, and hosted video on YouTube⁸⁸. This creates very rich content for the community to engage with and spread even further.



⁸⁶ Mark Potts

⁸⁷ Ross Hawkes

⁸⁸ Lichfield Live. (2014). Search results for half marathon. Available: <http://lichfieldlive.co.uk/?s=half+marathon>. Last accessed 10th Sept

Cover Local Causes and Campaigns

Another way of creating engaging content and being a useful platform for community members is by covering local causes and campaigns. This isn't for everyone, but a large number of community news producers in the UK cover campaigns, and it can be very rewarding. Doing so can give local causes valuable publicity, it can help to create content for your site, and we've found many community news producers who say it can even help with showing you are a credible news source with officials from the council and reps from local institutions.

Covering causes can be a good way of connecting with people in your community, as Ross Hawkes of Lichfield Live put it:

... if my bins haven't been collected, I'm annoyed and, therefore, I know the rest of the community is annoyed.⁸⁹

It comes back to what you and others are giving importance to. Philip John of Lichfield Live talked about filling the gap left by local newspapers saying that local groups would send in stories and would either be ignored, or if covered this would happen a week later⁹⁰. He mentions the importance of a community website giving each story equal weight:

The big story about the council cutting loads of employees, or whatever, has the same weight as the local guy running up a mountain for charity.⁹¹

When covering causes though there is a word of caution. Some told us that how you cover a cause can be a tightrope in terms of deciding how much of a political stance to take, or how supportive or unsupportive you are of the campaign you are writing about⁹².

The Impartiality Question

Whether or not to take a stance on campaigning issues is something each community journalist has to decide on their own. Many hyperlocal news sites routinely make an open stand in support of, or against, campaigns in their areas. This is no different from mainstream local newspapers, many of which have traditionally campaigned on issues of concern in their communities. Others, however, prefer not to take an explicit stance one way or another – in essence, to aim for impartiality. Many community news outlets employ a mixture of these two approaches, choosing to editorialise on issues of very widespread

⁸⁹ Ross Hawkes

⁹⁰ Philip John

⁹¹ Philip John

⁹² Matt Appleby

concern (or issues they feel particularly strongly about), while covering some campaigns in a more distanced manner.

We were told by some interviewees that the political nature of some campaigns and causes needs to be weighed against your site being a space for the whole community, and the need they see to cover both sides of the story⁹³. It should be remembered that one can cover campaigns without taking an explicit stance either way, if you are nervous about being seen to be biased. Scott Kelly of ChiswickW4 sums up his approach:

First of all, we never instigate campaigns. I mean there are usually two sides to a story and we try and remain impartial. Nevertheless campaigns are critical to what we do, because for a lot of people, their first raising of awareness of the importance of what they do in the community is when they become involved in a particular local issue. And it's very important for us to be on top of those issues as they're developing, to be the first place where people will come to find out about what exactly is going on and what other people in the community are doing about it.⁹⁴

An example of how this kind of approach works in practice is Blog Preston's coverage of the campaign to save Preston bus station. According to Ed Walker of Blog Preston⁹⁵ the site never took an official point of view. It covered the story from both sides, those for and against saving the bus station. The site was able to generate 450 articles over the 5 years of the cause, and because the bus station is important to the community the site has continued to cover it:

What we've said is that the bus station is important and that's why we continue to cover it in the way that we do, almost in an obsessive way, like anything that remotely is to do with it, we will cover.⁹⁶

They used a variety of different types of content to maintain interest in the topic by producing social media round-ups, guest posts detailing both sides of the argument, and coverage about the future development of the site?:

⁹³ Jamie Summerfield

⁹⁴ Scott Kelly

⁹⁵ Ed Walker

⁹⁶ Ed Walker



Brutalist beauty: Preston Bus Station on BBC4

Love it or loath it, the Bus Station will not go away. The latest examination of 1960's concrete art or brutalist architecture that includes PBS will feature as part of a new BBC documentary by Jonathan Meades 'Bunkers, Brutalism, Bloody-mindedness: Concrete Poetry'. As the Independent Arts Reviewer Christopher Beanland in a recent article about the programme commented: "the stark civic megaliths of the 1960s" [...]



Exit Town Centre: Photo book featuring the Bus Station published

Preston Bus Station Exit Town Centre by Craig Atkinson is the third in his series of books documenting different aspects of Preston Bus Station. The limited edition book contains 28 pages of excellent and truly atmospheric pictures of the iconic Preston building. Craig captures the essence of what some people call the 'Marmite' building. Craig has shared some of his photos with the Flickr Preston [...]



The Battle for Preston Bus Station front page of the Independent Magazine

Love, hate and concrete: The battle for Preston Bus Station. The story goes national. Front page of the Saturday Independent shouts the story of the 'war' between the Pros and the Antis in the Save the Bus Station campaign and the accompanying article, written by Martin Baker, is surprisingly well informed and quite amusing. Although opening with a well worn cliché 'There's trouble up North' [...]

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The key result of being impartial is that it shows all sides of the argument that you are going to cover an issue fairly. This builds trust between you and the community. James Hatts talks of this as:

People have said to us "we know that you'll fairly represent both sides of the argument. So we know that if we invite you to our public meeting about our campaign, you'll do a fair balanced write-up of it."⁹⁸

But not all community news producers take this approach. It is also possible to position a news outlet as an active campaigning entity, which takes stances on issues and argues for change. We know from our other research that hyperlocals in the UK are particularly likely to campaign on issues such as accountability of and transparency in local government, improving local amenities and infrastructure, cuts to local public services, and local environmental issues. Despite what some argue about the need to be balanced and impartial, others take the not unreasonable stance that those who publish news sometimes have a responsibility to put pressure on local elites, and to hold their representatives to account. It's not for everyone, but such news can play a valuable social role in local communities, especially those under served by more established local news outlets.

Be a Hub for Community Concerns

The type of engagement that covering causes produces can turn a hyperlocal site into a hub for community concerns and initiatives. It can, we were told, bring members of a community together⁹⁹. This sentiment is taken further by James Clarke who said he actively encourages campaigners to use his WV11.co.uk¹⁰⁰ site as a platform:

⁹⁷ Blog Preston. (2014). Search results for » bus station. Available: <http://blogpreston.co.uk/?s=bus+station>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

⁹⁸ James Hatts

⁹⁹ Jamie Summerfield

¹⁰⁰ James Clarke

In terms of why we think this is important; we think local people should have a voice and sometimes we can help them find that voice, or at least be aware of the issues, so we'll cover something if we think it's likely to be of importance or interest to the wider community.

A good example of this comes from A Little Bit of Stone and a community initiative to clean up graffiti in the town. The site didn't create the clean-up campaign, but it became a central point for people interested in finding out more information and how to get involved. They used all of their platforms to appeal for things like cleaning equipment and chemicals, and the initiative was successful with 20 to 30 people involved in the clean-up. Here is a sample of how they covered the clean-up¹⁰¹:

Canal graffiti clean-up with Stone In Bloom

Tweet: 19 Like: 53 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

A community clean-up of the graffiti alongside the canal takes place on Sunday 10th March from 10am – huge thanks to Stone In Bloom for organising. Meet at the canoe club on Westbridge Park.

IMPORTANT MESSAGE FROM THE ORGANISERS:

With the graffiti being so close to the canal we cannot risk using chemical cleaning fluids to clean off the paint as we run the risk of polluting the canal. Would anyone who turns up please only use ORGANIC GELS and under no circumstances any fluids containing bleach or paint thinners. Thank you and look forward to seeing you there!

There's more information about the graffiti [HERE](#).

Jill Hood said: "Please take along brushes and buckets and let friends and family know – the more people who are there, the quicker we can get it done. I've looked at the graffiti around the town today and it's pure vandalism, very sad indeed."

If you can help out with tools / cleaning fluids etc, please call Rob Kenney on 07980591719 or Jill Hood on 07736413097

If you have any information about the graffiti, please call Staffordshire Police on 101, quoting incident number 299 of 3rd March, or Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555111.

Video: Stone In Bloom graffiti clean-up

Tweet: 3 Like: 2 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

Stone community clean-up

Well done to everyone who braved the snowy conditions on Sunday (10th March) to take part in Stone In Bloom's graffiti clean-up.

Around 15 helpers took along buckets, brushes and a jet washer to tackle some of the graffiti that had been sprayed down the canal recently. A litter pick was also carried out. Stone In Bloom secretary Jill Hood said: "We were really happy with the turnout, considering that it was Mothering Sunday and it was snowing."

If you have any information about the graffiti, which was sprayed on Friday 1st and Saturday 2nd March, call Staffordshire Police on 101, quoting incident number 299 of 3rd March, or Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555111.

¹⁰¹ A Little Bit of Stone. (2014). Facebook Page. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/alittlebitofstone>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014., Hood, J. (2013). Video: Stone In Bloom graffiti clean-up. Available: <http://alittlebitofstone.com/2013/03/12/video-stone-in-bloom-graffiti-clean-up/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014., A Little Bit of Stone. (2013). Canal graffiti clean-up with Stone In Bloom. Available: <http://alittlebitofstone.com/2013/03/04/stone-in-bloom-organising-graffiti-clean-up/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Be a Platform for Others

Another thing to bear in mind when covering community causes, campaigns, initiatives and events, is that your site may well represent a rare outlet for people and organisations who do not have a platform. You have the ability to amplify voices which may not be heard very much without you. Many told us that this is the best type of engagement one can be involved in, and that it can be really rewarding to help your neighbours get their voices heard.

Engage Contributors in Your Community

Encouraging community members to become a contributor to your site is possibly the most difficult part of running a community website. You might think about developing a strategy for moving people through the different levels of engagement from low to high. Low level participation relates to things like commenting on blog posts, re-tweeting, sharing your posts, and conversing on social media. Medium level participation could be seen as, for example, contributing articles or audio visual material occasionally, and participating in events or projects. Finally there's high level participation, such as, contributing regularly, working as a content editor, helping to manage a community news outlet's social media presence, and being a core part of a team of volunteers.

This is where you need to think strategically about your existing audience and how you reach out to them:

... if you've got 1,000 Twitter followers, 2,000 Facebook fans, an email list of 6,500 and a YouTube channel with 250 subscribers, think about how you're going to get them involved in your new project and how they can contribute¹⁰²

Success lies in whether or not people feel like they have a stake in the community you are building around your service. According to research carried out by NESTA 20% of people who use community websites say they have "contributed" e. g. posting a comment or uploading a photo, and 10% said they had created content about their area from scratch¹⁰³. This might not seem like much, but you only need a relatively small number of people who might be interested in becoming part of your team for it to make a real difference to what you can do.

¹⁰² Thomas, M. Waldram, H. and Walker, E (2013). *Connected: The Power of Modern Community*. London: Guardian Books.

¹⁰³ Nesta. (2013). UK Demand for Hyperlocal Media Research Report. Available: http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/uk_demand_for_hyperlocal_media.pdf. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

Key to identifying new contributors, we were told, can be paying attention to the conversation makers online. If you have regular commentators on posts, or people who regularly send information on Twitter and Facebook why not contact them and ask if they would like to contribute content? Invite feedback by asking readers for their take on a story and the most involved users could be invited to turn their perspectives into a stand-alone story¹⁰⁴. Once you have identified potential contributors and have contacted them the next thing to do is clearly manage their expectations¹⁰⁵. What would they like to do? What do you want them to do? How often? In what ways? This process was summed up by Jamie Summerfield of A Little Bit of Stone:

I think it was a mixture of reaching out to people really. So those people on Facebook who were posting information about stuff, it was just sending them private messages and saying would you like to do this? Would you like to do that? Literally just asking people really and then we had a bit of an open event earlier last year where it was just do you want to get involved? You can come along and find out more, just meet the team and see what you want to do and we just had it in a local pub so people could come along. I find that actually meeting people in the real world, not just in the virtual world, is a way as well. So that was just a way of making those, cementing those connections really.¹⁰⁶

This section has detailed some of the important aspects of engagement that need to happen in order to make your site a hub for the community. The next section, part 3, will focus on how you can monitor, measure, interpret and use audience engagement information to help maintain and develop your site.

¹⁰⁴ Schaffer, J. and Polgreen, E. (2012). Engaging Audiences: Measuring Interactions, Engagement and Conversions. Available: http://www.j-lab.org/uploads/publications/engaging-audiences/EngagementReport_web.pdf. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Ed Walker

¹⁰⁶ Jamie Summerfield

Part 3 – Monitor your community

Overview of Monitoring

In this section we'll talk about some of the ways in which you can see and measure the results of your online community engagement. This will help you answer the questions listed below, and how to achieve this using a range of different freely available online tools:

1. What material from your site has your community been most drawn to?
2. What content have they engaged with most?
3. Who are the most vocal and active contributors?¹⁰⁷
4. Are your messages starting conversations? Or are you just talking to yourself?¹⁰⁸

We are talking about specifically is what is know as “analytics”. This is statistical data which is automatically gathered online through a number of different means. These tools can give you the opportunity to see what's popular and what isn't in a simple statistical format.

One big word of caution is that one shouldn't get too obsessed by the numbers you can generate. The analytics can show you what content people are viewing, and how it's been disseminated, but not all sorts of other important things (such as how much those who read your stuff liked it, how useful it was to them, how much enjoyment you got out of producing it, and a whole range of other potential effects or influences you had a hand in).

Community news is not always all about chasing “clicks” and audience figures. While the stats can be really useful too much attention to them can be a distraction, or can cause unnecessary pressure on people. Also remember that many hyperlocal sites aim to reach only a very small number of people (for example those who target villages or small post code areas in towns and cities) so it can be counterproductive to compare your own audience stats with those of other community journalists. Not being preoccupied with the numbers is something which is highlighted in *Connected: The power of modern community*¹⁰⁹ where we're reminded that the most important thing is setting your own goals and not just being dictated to by big numbers.

¹⁰⁷ Schaffer, J. and Polgreen, E. (2012). Engaging Audiences: Measuring Interactions, Engagement and Conversions. Available: http://www.j-lab.org/uploads/publications/engaging-audiences/EngagementReport_web.pdf. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

¹⁰⁸ Young, E. (2011). Is Klout a Good Judge of Your Social Media Influence?. Available: <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/is-klout-a-good-judge-of-your-social-media-influence/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, M. Waldram, H. and Walker, E (2013). Connected: The Power of Modern Community. London: Guardian Books.

It should be reiterated that during our broader research into UK hyperlocal news we've also come across site publishers who already know all about these tools for keeping track of audience stats, and nonetheless choose to pay them no attention whatsoever. Some producers are happy reaching small audiences, and some prioritise the pleasure they get from doing community journalism over any audience reactions. So don't feel pressured to delve too deeply into these figures if it's not important to you, and if doing so doesn't help you meet your aims.

How to Use the Tools

Explaining how to set up the analytics tools mentioned here is already covered very well by the guides produced by the companies who created these tools. Links to a "how to set up" guide will be included in each tools section. Instead, we'll talk here about *how* other community websites have used analytics, *what* statistics they have found particularly useful, and *how* they have incorporated the statistics into their future work.

Useful Statistics for You

When you first begin to use analytics you should start by narrowing down what it is you actually want to track and measure. What analytics tell you is as wide and as varied as you want it to be. For instance, they can be used for: tracking the number of people who have visited your site over a set period of time; checking the average amount of time spent on a story or page; checking the times of day people most access your news; or even keeping tabs on the kinds of devices and software people have used to access your site.

One statistic which, from an engagement point of view, is particularly important is returning visitors¹¹⁰. Tracking the number of visitors who have visited the site more than once can be an important part of building a successful community website. If people think your content is interesting and relevant enough they'll keep coming back to read it. In simple terms, what you should be looking out for is explained by Mark Potts of Newspeg:

... you want to look at who's coming to the site, how long they're staying, what they're doing, where they're coming from and how they're finding you. I think it's important to look at where people are coming in, what kind of searches are bringing people to your site, and track that kind of thing.¹¹¹

If we take each of these in-turn to explain what each of them is and what they can tell you:

¹¹⁰ James Hatts

¹¹¹ Mark Potts

1. Who is coming to the site – This refers to how many clicks you get on your site overall (sometimes called “page impressions”), and how many of these individual clicks actually represent people returning to the site (sometimes called “unique users” or simply “uniques”).
2. How long they are staying – This is a measure of the amount of time people spend on each page of your website. The higher the amount of time spent on a site potentially means the reader was more engaged with the site’s content. In addition to this most analytics software tracks how many, and what, pages have been viewed how many times so that you can see where the most popular content lies.
3. Where they are coming from and how they are finding you – This relates more to how people are getting to the site. Analytics tells you what social media platforms people have gone through to get to your content (known as referrals), and what search engines they have used. You can also find out some (often limited) info about where in the world people are geographically based when accessing your site.
4. Where people are coming in – these are the so-called “landing pages”. They relate to what page a person has seen first when arriving to your site. For instance did they come in by the homepage of the website, or have they followed a link on social media that takes them directly to a specific story.
5. What kind of searches? Analytics tells you the search terms which have been used to find your site, and tells you exactly what people have been looking for when they came across you. The results of the search terms used can be very obvious, but they can sometimes be surprising.

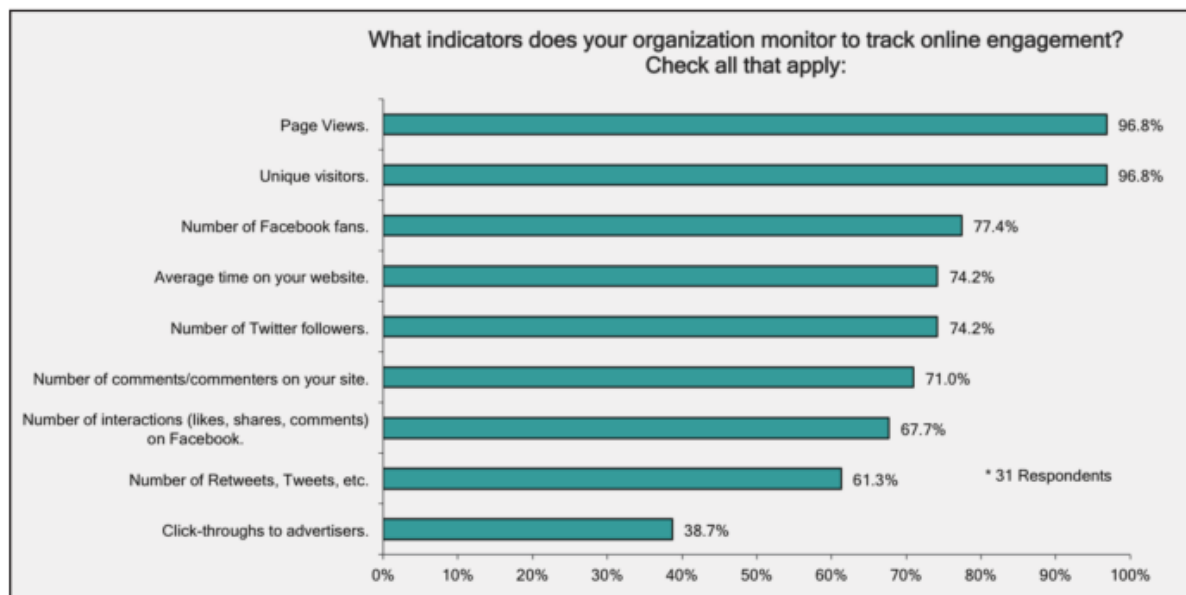
In addition to the above list there are other important statistics which analytics tools can reveal. Philip John of Lichfield Live mentioned looking at where people are when they visit his website:

The second thing we probably look at most is the location. It’s interesting to actually look at where people are using it.¹¹²

This location information helped him to understand that a lot of people were viewing the website on their daily commute and while at work outside of the area. You might also be interested in what devices people are using to access your content and when they are doing so. If, for instance, you find that most of your readers are accessing your site early in the morning on mobile devices, you might want to ensure your website is mobile accessible, and schedule your posts to be published around this time. These stats can help you think more strategically about your content, when you publish it, and the platforms your content is being viewed and shared on.

¹¹² Philip John

Summing up, here are the results of a survey carried out by J-Lab in Washington, DC of what community websites in America thought were the most important numbers to keep track of¹¹³:



Aside from some of the analytics already mentioned you'll notice that the table lists various measures of social media engagement. These will be covered in what follows.

Before that, one measure which you may be interested in is "click-throughs to advertisers" as in the amount of people who have clicked adverts on your site. If you are using paid-for advertising analytics this can be a good way of making your case to advertisers as to why they should use your site. More and more community news sites are seeking to attract advertising revenues, and telling potential advertisers the number of people coming to your website, what they look at, and how long they stay helps to justify your site's value to them by indicating exactly what they're likely to get out of such a relationship. Most of the more commercially minded UK hyperlocal sites use stats like this to write a "rate card" which tells advertisers how much they have to pay and indicates what they'd be getting in return. A good example can be found on The Lincolnite's site here:

<http://thelincolnite.co.uk/advertising/>

Google Analytics

This tool from the search giant Google was the most widely used amongst our interviewees because it is an extremely powerful analytics tool which is freely available¹¹⁴. In addition to

¹¹³ Schaffer, J. and Polgreen, E. (2012). Engaging Audiences: Measuring Interactions, Engagement and Conversions. Available: http://www.j-lab.org/uploads/publications/engaging-audiences/EngagementReport_web.pdf. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

the kinds of figures already mentioned the following is a list of extra stats generated by Google Analytics that you may be interested in¹¹⁵:

1. Page views per visit – This breaks down each unique visitor into how many pages they have viewed during each visit, and what the average number of page views is.
2. Bounce rate – This is the term used to describe people who visit your site and do not click anywhere else. As the guide states “A bounce rate of 100% would mean that everyone who found your site left without clicking anywhere else on your site”. For most people a low bounce rate is a good thing, because it means that readers stuck around and explored more of what you have to offer.
3. Visitors flow – This produces a very interesting diagram of how visitors to your website move through your content. In other words if they visit three pages this diagram will show you where they entered the site, where they went next, and from which page they left the site.

There are so many things that it’s possible to keep track of that it may well be worth prioritising, in order to save time. Scot Brodbeck of Arlington Now prioritises his attention to page views and time on site:

... I think page views really show the degree to which you are providing content that is of interest and relevance to your community. That’s a pretty traditional measure. One thing that I also pay attention to is time on site, and that really finds out how engaged readers are with your content, and the longer the time on site the better.¹¹⁶

The point of learning how to use, generate, and read these analytics is to help you understand your audience’s behaviour. Doing this will help you understand how people engage with your material, and allow you to better cater to their needs. Jamie Summerfield from A Little Bit of Stone sums this up:

... you want to be building something which is sustainable and which is attracting people to come back.

Twitter Analytics

Twitter’s own in-built analytics are reserved for advertisers and publishers: people who pay for promoted tweets and promoted accounts. But this does not mean that there aren’t

¹¹⁴ To see how to set up Google Analytics for your website see this Google Analytics Guide -

<http://www.houseofkaizen.com/conversion-rate-optimisation/resources/guides/google-analytics-guide/>

¹¹⁵ Barden, B. (2013). A Beginner’s Guide to Google Analytics. Available:

http://www.quickblogtips.com/downloads/ebooks/Ben_Barden_-_A_Beginners_Guide_to_Google_Analytics.pdf.

Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

¹¹⁶ Scott Brodbeck

useful stats to be gathered from Twitter to show how much engagement there is between you and your community. There are 5 key things on Twitter which you could be keeping an eye on. The following list comes from Social Media Today¹¹⁷:

1. Retweets – This is when someone shares your content with their own followers. Lots of retweets means that more people are potentially seeing your work.
2. Mentions – An @ mention is when somebody is trying to directly engage you in conversation.
3. Link Shares – When putting links to website content onto Twitter you may want to track how many people use a link posted on Twitter.
4. Lists – If you are put onto a Twitter list (A way of filtering Twitter to see content from just the users on that list) this can be an indicator of the level of influence you are perceived to have.
5. Follower Growth – The amount of people who follow you on Twitter and how this is growing or decreasing over time.

The free tools available which will help to track these statistics are mentioned after the section about Facebook Insights below.

Facebook Insights

Facebook is different from Twitter in that it offers its own free analytics package known as Facebook Insights. There are already guides to setting up Insights onto your Facebook page¹¹⁸. What we will talk about here is the most useful statistical material which you can generate and what the numbers mean. The website Mashable created a guide to Facebook Insights, of which, the most useful parts for community media producers are summarised below¹¹⁹:

- Facebook divides its analytics into two different types of insights:
 - 1) Users – This is to do with how people use the page overall and will tell you things like; total likes/fans, active users, new likes/unlikes, demographics, page views etc.
 - 2) Interactions – This is more about the content of your page; for instance post likes, comments, mentions, discussions, reviews etc.

¹¹⁷ Egeland, C. (2013). 5 Metrics You Should Be Tracking on Twitter, But Probably Aren't. Available: <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/5-metrics-you-should-be-tracking-twitter-probably-arent>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

¹¹⁸ Facebook. (2011). Facebook Insights: Product Guide for Facebook Page owners. Available: http://www.boulderdowntown.com/files/docs/pages_insights_guide_updated.pdf. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

¹¹⁹ Walter, E. (2010). A Beginner's Guide to Facebook Insights. Available: <http://mashable.com/2010/09/03/facebook-insights-guide/>. Last accessed 10th Sept 2014.

- Monthly Growth – The number of likes across a set time period.
- Average number of likes or comments – This is the key statistic for understanding engagement on your Facebook page. It details the number of times visitors to your page are interacting with your content, and helps you identify what’s popular and what isn’t.
- Unlikes and attrition rate – This relates to the speed of which people are leaving your page. Watch for the rate of unlikes, paying attention to spikes in the data, then review what it is you were doing (or not doing) around this time.

Facebook also includes some of the similar statistics which Google Analytics would give you for a website, such as:

- Page views – How many times a page has been viewed, with the option of seeing how many unique viewers there have been. From here you can work out how many people are returning to your page.
- Mentions – this is where someone has mentioned your page in a post on their own timeline or in relation to shared content. The reason it is useful to know is that when people mention you in posts it is advertising your page to their friends, and appears as a link for people to reach your page.
- Referrals – where your traffic has come from.

One unusual and important statistic which Facebook Insights gives you concerns community demographics. This is due to the information which Facebook gathers from users when they sign up, and this is vital in getting to understanding the make-up of your audience¹²⁰.

Other Free Analytics Tools

There are numerous free online sites that allow you to track things like your follower growth, or how far your tweets have travelled. One of the most powerful of these websites is Hootsuite¹²¹ which allows you to see all of your website and social media stats in one place (this includes Twitter, Facebook, Google +, LinkedIn, foursquare, Wordpress and mixi). Included in this package are simple analytics for each of these platforms which cover things like favourites/likes, retweets/shares, follower growth/page members and so on. It also features its own link shortener which can be used to track how many people click a link and where they saw the link. In addition, you are able to post to all of these platforms via Hootsuite. Hootsuite is also available as a PC/Mac application, or as an app for mobile devices (phones and touch pads).

¹²⁰ Nicola Rugman

¹²¹ For the Hootsuite website visit here - <https://hootsuite.com/>

There are several other sites which work in much the same way, such as SumAll¹²² which has the added advantage of being able to include more social platforms. But it does not have the same posting ability of Hootsuite. If you just want basic statistics without having to bring everything together then try Topsy¹²³ or Twittercounter¹²⁴.

If you use the Wordpress blog platform to manage your content then there is a freely available analytics plug-in which you can install. It is called Jetpack¹²⁵, and while it might not have the range of functions of Google Analytics it is able to tell you where people came from to get to your site, what they searched for to get there, and what your most popular posts are. James Clarke of WV11.co.uk mentioned another useful Wordpress plug-in called Search Meter¹²⁶. This plug-in tracks what people search for in the search box of your website, which allows you to view what people are looking for, and even offers the opportunity to write posts based on data about the interesting things people are looking for¹²⁷.

Using Your Statistics

Once you have decided which statistics you are going to track comes the question of what to do with all this data?

The statistics you gather can be used as a guide to where, when, and how you post your content. It might even influence the type of content you create. For example Steve Buttry the Digital Transformation Editor at Digital First Media, noticed that more and more traffic was coming to the sites he ran from mobile devices, and this has guided his company's strategy to make more mobile friendly content¹²⁸. Likewise, Nicola Rugman of Roath Cardiff mentioned how many more people started looking at the site on mobile devices after they'd done a redesign so it would look good on a mobile device¹²⁹.

Some hyperlocals now publish their posts (on their sites and across social media) at certain times of the day they know are audience hot spots. So, for example, if you know from the stats that lots of people visit the site in the evenings after 7pm then you might want to think about publishing and distributing posts during this period (there's more information about this below).

¹²² For the Sumall website visit here - <https://sumall.com/>

¹²³ For the Topsy website visit here - <http://topsy.com/>

¹²⁴ For the Twittercounter website visit here - <http://twittercounter.com/>

¹²⁵ For the Wordpress Jetpack plugin visit here - <https://wordpress.org/plugins/jetpack/>

¹²⁶ For the Wordpress search meter plugin visit here - <https://wordpress.org/plugins/search-meter/>

¹²⁷ James Clarke

¹²⁸ Steve Buttry

¹²⁹ Nicola Rugman

There are other simple things you can do with your statistics. For example, once you know what are popular posts or story themes you can do follow up stories that pursue developments in a story, or which look at a topic in more depth.

Giving Stats Feedback to Your Contributors

Giving stats-based feedback to people who publish on your site can be a part of making your contributors know their content is being read, and that it's valued by the community. For instance, Ross Hawkes of Lichfield Live has installed a plug-in onto their site which emails contributors when their articles are published¹³⁰. This helps when you have to schedule content for publication and cannot publish an article straight away. The second is a bit more in-depth and comes from Ed Walker of Blog Preston, who produces a monthly report which goes to all contributors telling them about the amount of page views on the site and how that compares to previous months¹³¹.

Schedule the Release of Your Content

This is where analytics can really help you. As indicated above, your stats can tell you what time people are looking at your content, and using this data allows you to schedule posts to capitalise on these busy periods, as well as to create a sense of consistency. Platforms like Buffer¹³² and Hootsuite¹³³ are able to schedule the release of posts and the publication of social media content. Tim Dickens of the Brixton Blog referred to this as "timebombing" content¹³⁴. Scheduling can be useful as a way of managing your workload. It means that you can spend time preparing stories or social media updates when it suits *you*, and then queue them up for publication when it best suits *your audience*.

A practical example of the scheduling content at work comes from Philip John of Lichfield Live¹³⁵. He talks about noticing in his analytics data that a lot of the people coming to the site were located in Birmingham and London on their daily commute. This has shaped the busy hyperlocal Lichfield Live's publishing schedule:

What we do at the moment is we schedule stuff in, a news story goes up every hour from 9am in the morning, so at 9am until 10 / 11pm, and if there are a lot of stories in a day, then we'll perhaps add one in between the hour as well. That sort of came out from looking at the stats and seeing when people were looking, so we noticed

¹³⁰ Ross Hawkes

¹³¹ Ed Walker

¹³² For the Buffer app website visit here - <https://bufferapp.com/>

¹³³ For the Hootsuite website visit here - <https://hootsuite.com/>

¹³⁴ Tim Dickens

¹³⁵ Philip John

that people were more likely to look first thing in the morning and then between 1 and 2, so it looked like people were on their lunch break having a quick look.

It is worth bearing in mind that the times that people access your content on the various different platforms that you use may well be different. Here is where statistics can really come into their own as you will be able to plan your publishing across numerous platforms to make the most of when each platform is getting the most attention.

Boosting Content/Search Engine Optimisation

This is about making the most of the search terms used to find your site, and mixing this with the content of popular posts. What we are talking about is something known as “search engine optimisation” (sometimes called by the acronym SEO). In other words, you use popular terms in the title or introductions of website posts to help boost the visibility of content as it appears in search engine results. Nicola Rugman of Roath Cardiff uses the example of a post about the two-year anniversary of an independent business in her area called The Bottle Shop. Here she talks about including the name of the business and the area where it can be found in the title of the blog post:

I made sure that I used certain keywords regarding the name of the guy running the shop, alcohol shop, the location, I mentioned his dog, he’s a bit of a celebrity in Roath, and then going through listing types of beers that he stocks, things that he’s been asked for, because people might search for those beers just in a general search.

[...] So my focus keyword was “Bottle Shop,” the title was, “Dan Williams and the Bottle Shop, Roath, two years on”. So always mentioning Roath, even though it’s Roathcardiff.net, getting Roath in there again, and then, “the Bottle Shop on Pen-y-Lan Road in Roath has just celebrated two years of business, we caught up with Dan Williams and Watson for a Roath update.”

So you can see here with the heading, the title, this is how many times the keywords for the Bottle Shop come up, because most people will search for “Dan Williams, Bottle Shop” or “Roath Bottle Shop.” So we make sure we use those keywords, and then we’ve got our tags here, so the name of the guy running the shop, what road it’s on, what he’s selling, so beer, cider, the fact that he’s an independent, and then we’ve got news and pictures and a feature post, which control the way it sits on the home page, “Watson”, “The Bottle Shop”, that sort of picks up the posts.

So when I go to search for, say, “Bottle Shop, Roath” - the Twitter feeds at the top and then “Roath Indie Business, the Bottle Shop, Dan Williams”, there’s my post there.¹³⁶

You can also use other simple ways of incorporating key words by using “tags” for each post to categorise your content. This facility is there on most free blogging software, and makes certain types of articles even easier to find by organising them into clearer subjects for search engines to sort through.

Continued engagement

By paying close attention to your statistics and monitoring how your various platforms are performing you will be able to be more responsive to what your community members are looking for. This can help you to serve the community and do more of what is popular, and plug gaps around community coverage. This is summed up well by Laura Ellis, Head of Online for BBC Radio English Regions:

Whilst we’re not obsessed about clicks, we love them. We want people to use our content, so there’s always a balance. But I think for us what it’s all about is engagement. It’s about engagement, it’s about quality, it’s about people feeling they’ve got something good from our content and wanting to share it, so that’s why this is so important to us really.

It’s also worth bearing in mind that the kind of stuff which gets the most clicks isn’t always the kind of content you want to produce, or which gives you the most satisfaction. In our wider research we’ve come across numerous examples of news producers telling us that what they find most important is covering local politics and the decisions made by local elites, but that when they check their stats this kind of material isn’t always very widely read. Does this mean they should stop covering council meetings and corruption in planning cases? Of course not. Producing news isn’t all about chasing clicks, and if it were then a lot of really socially valuable and interesting community journalism probably wouldn’t get done. But nonetheless, knowing what your audience is engaging with the most can still be an incredibly valuable thing.

¹³⁶ Nicola Rugman