

Local News and Community Belonging: The Role of Local Media in Fostering Social Cohesion

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the role of local news stories in enhancing member's feelings of belonging and identity in the context of a multicultural community, and the integral role that local news plays in the promotion of social cohesion. Local news can provide a space to promote the voice of different ethnicities and cultures when covering local news stories in the community, and in doing so, local communities can mitigate cultural divides, encourage cross cultural dialogue, and foster ways to work together in ordinary spaces. Furthermore, recognition of cultural diversity helps to both solidify respect and recognition for minorities and enrich the cultural ecology of communities. Despite the important work local news can do in promoting social cohesion in multicultural communities, their capabilities are being affected by economic pressures, digital transformation, and media bias. At the same time, how to explore the constraints on local news in promoting autonomy (independence) and credibility (trust) in today's media environment has become increasingly important. Thus, the pursuit of the literatures coverage of social inclusion and local news, placement of storytelling in the community is an irreplaceable role of local news. Future research may look to examine how to improve communication structures (reporting design) in local news and how to engage multicultural communities for support purposes in order to promote active social inclusion of communities and individual members' identity.

KEYWORDS

Local News; Community Belonging; Local Media; Social Cohesion; Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a world dominated by globalisation and urbanisation, the traditional notion of community is evolving rapidly. Local news is an influential medium for reflecting and recording community life, and this influence is beyond the value of information dissemination; it is in the sentiment of belonging and identity of a community. The role of local news and its influence on multicultural happenings is vital in terms of facilitating understanding and social integration between different cultures – which ultimately contributes to social cohesion. Each definition of local news usually refers to events that are contextualised in a fixed geographical area, encompassing political, economic, cultural and social aspects of community life. Local news is somewhat different to national and global media in that it is closer to the everyday lives of community members. It speaks directly to community members concerns and demands, and thus, local news can play a pivotal role in helping a community's residents feel they belong and identify with local affairs. Local news not only increases residents' knowledge and participation of local affairs by providing relevant information about their community, but it also creates a psychological feeling of belonging to a community by offering historically situational information about local affairs. Local news also can help create a psychological feeling of belonging to a community through reporting of success or positive examples in the community. However, in a multicultural community, local news offers a more complex and pivotal role. Multicultural

neighbourhoods are usually made up of people of varying racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and occasionally, even within a multicultural community, there are differences in language, customs, and beliefs. Local news can create spaces for diverse voices to be communicated and understood through diverse reporting. This representation of diverse voices can help bridge cultural divides and misunderstandings, and further promote dialogue and interaction among cultural groups. But local news as a space for the members of a community that potentially bolsters social cohesion faces challenges. If funding challenges remain, enabling local news will be challenging to maintain ordinary economic challenges that many media are facing in the face of disorganised revenue models and increased cost to operate means that many local media are facing the existence crisis of being no longer viable. This crisis is economic trough uncertainty continues, if the resource base of local news and the amount that is reported declines in quality, local news credibility will continue to flounder, leading to less authority in the community. It also means that local news media needs to be aware of two things: One is the wealth of information in the digital age; Two global/other media, developing/establishing journalism standards is complicated. In the race to get information stories develop will speed, spreads quickly and produce an "information overload" for readers. This implies that other news sources then also can destabilize (think disinformation) lagging local news authority in the community. Local news also has to be sensitive and cultural when reporting news in multicultural neighbourhoods. Biased based reporting and news making of groups will not just be the fodder of misunderstandings, but increase tensions in and between cultural groups. Hence, local news needs to be objective, balanced and lively to represent and fairly represent cultural groups. This study will be a literature review to understand how local news affects community members' sense of belonging and identity in a multicultural context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Basic Functions of Local News

Most often, local news is understood to be a kind of journalism that specifically examines local issues, events, and cultures, primarily within a defined geographic locality. Local news examines ongoing local issues around things of local importance and concerns of readert/consumer readers; it addresses local concerns more than national or international ones. The essential elements of local news include localisation, community participation and cultural reflection. Localisation is perhaps the most distinguishing quality of local news. The localised characteristics of local news provides a pathway to engage with the community through the lens of their own day to day lives while addressing local politics or local events[1]. Local news becomes more relevant to the lives of residents through a defined local geography, and as Napoli, P. M. et al. (2017) explain, local news further reinforces community members' collective identity by putting emphasis on the culture and traditions of community and neighbourhood[2]. While there are many definitions of local news; community participation is another central tenet of local news. Local news does not simply transmit information to citizens of community; it can also be an avenue for community members to participate in and express their public affairs. Certainly by covering local civic engagement such as community meetings, with local elections and local policy, local news provides pathways to residents to increase political engagement and civic responsibility. In turn, this participatory nature of local news improves the identity and belonging for this community. Cultural reflection is one of the more distinct functions of local news. Local news, through reporting on local cultural affairs, traditional events and historical sites, represents the cultural diversity and unique nature of local community. Not only does cultural reflect of news help in the preservation of local culture and strategizing the dissemination of it; it also promotes understanding and respect between different cultural groups that exist within a community.

The role of local news in information dissemination is central to the three critical areas of information acquisition, interpretation and dissemination. Given that local news is one of the primary forms of information acquisition, local news also supports the function that fosters active participation and a

stronger tie to the community, by ensuring residents have access to timely, accurate information. In terms of information acquisition, local news is able to use its networks and resources to retrieve information such as events and changes taking place in the community much quicker to supply residents with timely information. This information acquisition ability leads to residents being able to keep pace with developments going on in the community and enhances their sense of participatory ownership and belonging to community issues. Information interpretation is a critical role of local news. Local news not only transmits information, it helps residents to understand and interpret complex social issues using background analysis, expert interviews and opinions pieces, all of which improve residents' media literacy and critical thinking skills thereby building an increasingly stronger psychological identity. In terms of information transfer, local news serves as a 'bridge' of information within the community, connecting different stakeholders such as government, businesses and residents. By reflecting the public's opinions and demands, local news influences the formulation and implementation of local policies to a certain extent, and this information transfer function not only strengthens the social influence of local news, but also enhances the sense of belonging and identity of community members. These fundamental roles of local news are particularly important in a multicultural context. Through diverse reporting, local news can promote dialogue and understanding between different cultural groups, reduce misunderstanding and prejudice, and enhance community cohesion. Local news in a multi-ethnic multicultural community must focus on whether it covers stories with impartiality and fairness to fairly represent and depict all of the cultural groups and have all of their voices depicted in the news coverage.

2.2. L Community Cohesion and Local News

The coverage of community events is among the most effective ways for local news to strengthen community cohesion. By providing coverage for events within the community such as local elections, community meetings and community welfare initiatives, local news allows residents to stay informed about the ebb and flow of the community's dynamics, thereby contributing to more profound knowledge of, and engagement in their community. This in turn enhances a sense of belongingness and sense of responsibility among residents. Local news can convey a sense of collaboration through the positive changes and victories that occur in the community thereby generating a sense of collective pride and purpose among residents, and acknowledging their local matter. While it is appropriate to consider how local news attaches cultural import to the actions of residents, there is also room for discussion regarding how local news can seek to reflect and sustain the community's cultural characteristics and values by covering cultural events. Specifically, coverage of local festivals, art shows, and folk traditions can showcase the community's character. This type of coverage can enhance community members' sense of identification with their own cultural identity, as well as enhance appreciation and goodwill among different cultural groups, which can reduce cultural rifts and help foster communal harmony in the context of a multicultural society.

During crisis situations, such as natural disasters, public health emergencies or civil unrest, the function of local news takes on additional importance. Local news not only acts as a conduit for information but also serves as a unifier of communities and a stabiliser of social order. Delivering and curating information during natural disasters is one of the main functions of local news. Local news is often first on the scene during a natural disaster situation, using its connections and resources to disseminate correct and timely disaster information and safety guidelines. The ability to quickly and accurately disseminate this information to residents can be particularly effective in helping people cope with crises and minimising panic and confusion. In the process, local news also enhances community cohesion by reporting on community mutual aid and rescue operations to strengthen residents' sense of solidarity and mutual aid. Opinion guidance and public discussion during social events is another important role of local news. When social events (e.g., protests and conflicts) occur, local news guides community members to rational thinking and discussion through objective and impartial reporting. Such public opinion guidance helps to alleviate conflicts and improve

understanding and communication between different groups. Fico, F., & Soffin, S.(1995) emphasises that local news, in a multicultural context, should pay special attention to fairness and diversity in reporting to ensure that all voices are heard and respected[3]. In addition, the practice of local news reporting in crisis events can enhance the media literacy and information recognition skills of community members. In an era of information flood and disinformation, local news provides community members with a reliable source of information through professional reporting standards and ethics. This improved information literacy not only enhances residents' trust in local news, but also promotes overall community cohesion.

2.3. Local News in a Multicultural Context

Multicultural communities are usually composed of groups from different racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The richness of multicultural communities provides great potential culturally but with that upside there will be many challenges. The main attributes of multicultural communities are diversity and complexity. The diversity of multicultural communities can be differences in languages, religions, value systems and worldviews. The diversity provides potential for a valuable addition to cultural life within multicultural communities. The diversity creates potential for misunderstandings or distancing in the community. Cultural differences can easily evolve into tensions within the community and at times conflict. Social integration is another immense challenge in multicultural communities; groups are often much more disconnected along socio-economic, educational and political engagement lines which fosters greater inequality and detachment of cultural groups. Social trust can also be lower in a multicultural context which may pose another risk to integrate groups that feel disconnected to have bonds of social cohesion. The challenge of how to create social cohesion in a multicultural space while protecting important forms of diversity is a real challenge for multicultural communities. In a multicultural context, local news serves an important role as a forum to provide the opportunity for dialogue and understanding between groups from different cultural backgrounds through its unique role as a communicator and awareness of its public trust. This important function not only mitigates misunderstandings and prejudices, but also fosters a sense of belonging and identity for community members. Diversity of reporting is critical to ensuring local news serves as a platform for cultural dialogue in multicultural communities. Local news provides an opportunity for expression and presentation of different cultural groups by reporting on their lives, customs and values. Collectively this type of reporting allows community members to understand and appreciate the cultural backgrounds and lifestyles of each other which mitigates barriers and prejudices. Local news reporters must focus on producing diverse content and being impartial when reporting on multicultural communities to ensure all groups voices are understood and they are represented fairly. Local news also serves the important purpose of promoting cultural exchanges and interactions with the community. By facilitating and reporting cultural exchanges within communities such as festivals, exhibitions and forums local news plays an active role in facilitating communication and interactions between cultural groups. Such cultural exchanges not only enrich the cultural life in the community, but also enhances residents connections and identification to cultural diversity. Orengo, A.(2005) asserts that local news is the facilitator and coordinator in relation to cultural exchanges thereby fostering a more inclusive and sustainable community environment[4]. Encouraging public discussion and citizen participation is also essential under the role of local news in multicultural contexts. Local news can promote community discussion on multicultural issues through comment and opinion pages, editorials and reader interaction. Such public discussions not only enhance residents' media literacy and social participation, but also create conditions for dialogue and cooperation among different cultural groups. Local news should remain neutral and objective when guiding these discussions to ensure that they are constructive and effective.

2.4. The Impact of Local News on Belonging and Identity

Local news plays a significant role in shaping a sense of belonging to a community, especially by reporting on the personal stories and collective achievements of community members, which strengthens residents' emotional connection to the community. Reporting personal stories is an effective way for local news to enhance a sense of community belonging, and Plewe, C., & Fürsich, E.(2018)notes that by uncovering and presenting the life stories of ordinary community members, local news enables residents to find empathy in the experiences of others[5]. This story draws the media closer to the audience but may also enhance residents' sense of belonging in relationships. Reporting on the positive role models and success stories of the community contributes to fellow community members engaging in community pursuits, which helps to strengthen the community. Highlighting collective accomplishments is also a way local news contributes to a sense of belonging. Local news creates a greater sense of pride and shared honour for residents, by covering the community's collective accomplishments in education, sport and culture underlining collective accomplishments creates a psychological sense of community that increases a sense of belonging to the community. This form of identification creates a sense of shared solidarity, which cultivates an increased willingness on the part of residents to engage in community development.

Local news has an important impact on the identity of ethnic minorities and immigrant groups in multicultural societies. Local news can assist with the social integration and reconstruction of identity of ethnic minorities and immigrant groups from the perspective of reporting diversity and inclusivity. Increasingly highlighting the presence of ethnic minorities is the fundamental element of local news impact on identity. Ramasubramanian, S., et al. (2017) argue that local news has ensured the visibility and voice for ethnic minority groups in the community, because it has provided increased coverage of them. This type of coverage provides ethnic minorities better recognition and respect within mainstream society, and builds their pride in their cultural identity. Following an inclusive reporting strategy can also assist local news engage in objective reporting and partial representation of different cultural groups and distant stereotypes contributing to intercultural understanding. It is also important to address social integration of immigrant groups as a significant core function of local news. Local news coverage provides voice and presentation when they report on the lives, issues, and accomplishments of immigrant groups, which is an influential attribution towards integration into the community, while providing interaction and communication between the immigrant groups and other groups. Through direct interaction and communication, immigrant groups can recreate their identities in a new environment, and contribute to the multiple diversities of cultural practices in their communities. Local news cannot overlook the aspect of addressing challenges and prejudices in their local context in terms of the identity impact[6]. Local news should deal with the potential for cultural biases in multicultural contexts and study how news organizations can support ethnic minorities and immigrant groups within their communities and represent diversity. Local news must focus on the prevention of stereotype and prejudice reporting on ethnic minorities and immigrant groups by reflecting on their bias and acknowledging the need for fair and varied coverage ultimately minimizing tension in the community, and creating a good social environment for the personal identity of ethnic minorities and immigrant groups.

2.5. Local News in the Digital Age

The effects of digital transformation on local news are comprehensive and involve every aspect of news production, dissemination and consumption. First, the advent of digital technology has greatly increased the capacity for news production to be efficient and flexible. Thomson, T. J., et al. (2022) highlight that digitalisation enabled journalists to much faster collect, process and disseminate the information, which when successful increases the timeliness and accuracy of news reporting[7]. As a result, local news is capable of responding much quicker community affairs and residents issues, which improves its role and credibility in the community. Second, by way of digital transformation,

the way local news disseminates is fundamentally different. The traditional unidirectional forms of communication of newspapers and broadcast media have been replaced with multi-channel and multi-platform include interactive communication models. The growing number of digital platforms provide local news with a variety of ways to engage local audiences in interactive forms (websites, social media, mobile applications, etc.). This interaction is beneficial on two fronts; increasing readers engagement and providing a larger space for local news to disseminate and increase stakeholders sense of belonging to the community. However, the digital transformation has also created some serious challenges for local news. First, the economic challenge due to the loss of revenue from traditional advertising has forced local news organisations to re-examine their business models. While the digital environment allow paywalls and subscription systems to offer some revenue support, finding the balance between free content and paid services prospected is still difficult. Moreover, the amount of fake information circulating and information overload creates challenges to local news? credibility. Therefore, local news need to invest in more information filtering and content quality and accountability to foster credibility and professionalism.

The access patterns of community members to local news information have changed significantly as a result of new media platforms. First, the channels of access have diversified. Community members can access local news through various channels such as social media, news aggregation apps etc. with the popularity of smartphones and mobile internet. This diversification of access not only enhances the orderliness of access to information, but also allows residents to choose (and access) information they find appropriate, enhancing loyalty to and attention to local news. Second, new media platforms provide timely public information sharing and engagement of community members. City residents can quickly share and comment on their local news coverage as stretched by social media, which helps facilitate local community discussion online. When people in a community are linking social media platforms that allow them to openly discuss local news information, this allows residents to share their preferences for differences of opinion as if they are part of a conversation. These discussions give residents a space to share their opinions and allow them to take civic part in public issues that affect them. This kind of engagement opens civic and sometimes civil or social engagements that helps intensify civic engagement. Together, the presence of culture of this civic form of participation, tends to develop community members' expanded identity as a resident of the city, and a sense of belonging to that community. Third, new media platforms have supported the personalization and precision of local news. Using big data and algorithmic recommendation technology, local news starts to offer personalized news services for residents and community members through the use of personalization and larger databases of news information compared to traditional and professional journalism methods. In some cases, algorithms only allow personalization through its collapse of other's opinions. With personal news services, residents can increasingly viewed amounts of value and helpful familiar news coverage. Kaniss, P. (1991) stating that personalization of news services can address the ordinal needs of residents and allow more trusted sources of local news that enhance loyalty and trust[8]. Notably, increased access via new media platforms also implicates and can continue to develop misinformation and misinformation 'feeds' as an evolution of local news that pays extra attention to either, depending on perspectives. For example the information cocoon effect will be the problematic and development of community members developing information in a more narrow way with little exposure to or diversity of perspectives and cultures. Local news portals need to be mindful of the diversity and extensiveness of content when using new media platforms that inadvertently cultivate information segregation.

3. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

3.1. Challenges

3.1.1. Economic Pressure and Lack of Resources

Local news organisations face one challenge, their economic pressures. As advertising declines and digital transformation costs increase, many local news organisations are making cuts and laying off staff. Cuadrado-Ballesteros, B., et al. (2014) pointed out that economic pressures limit how much local news can invest in content creation and investigative reporting, having an impact on its quality and depth[9]. Equally, not having enough resources makes it challenging for local news to report on complex community issues thoroughly and accurately represent the diversity of multicultural communities.

3.1.2. Information Overload and Crisis of Trust

The prevalence of misinformation in the digital era coined the term "information overload," ultimately leading to a major crisis of confidence in local news. There is now a proliferation of false information and reporting, leading residents to become increasingly sceptical about news accuracy. Renjith, R. (2017) highlights the importance for local news to improve fact-checking and source confirmations to rebuild trust in news. However, information overload also means that residents struggle to even pick out important information weakens the contributions of news to community cohesion.

3.1.3. Bias and Misconceptions in Multicultural Reporting

In a multicultural context, one challenge that is clearly relevant to the identity of community members is the likely bias and misinterpretation in local news coverage. If the local news fails to cover ethnic minorities and immigrant groups fairly and holistically, cultural divides and social tensions may increase. In light of this, local news must carefully consider both context and word choice when covering multicultural issues to minimize prejudices and misunderstanding[10].

3.1.4. Differences in Digital Literacy

The community members in this rapidly digitising media environment also experience various stages of digital literacy, which presents a challenge for their access and comprehension of local news. Zhang, Y. (2024) highlight that this digital division could lead to certain groups impaired access to news information[11]. Impairment of access and comprehension of local news restricts their engagement of community issues, but may also serve to inhibit social inequities and divisions.

3.2. Opportunities

3.2.1. Applications of Digital Technology

Although digital transformation presents its own challenges, it provides local news with unparalleled opportunities. Digital technologies, in their many forms, facilitate local news to deepen coverage and user experience by presenting news content in multimedia formats. By employing new formats such as data journalism, interactive graphics and multimedia storytelling, local news can represent community stories much more vividly, allowing residents to feel that greater sense of engagement and belonging.

3.2.2. Interactivity on Social Media Platforms

The rise of social media has created another venue by which local news can interact with members of the community. Local news can use social media to reach audiences, get feedback, and improve the timeliness and relevance of news content. Guo, M., & Sun, F. S.(2024) argued that this interactivity not only stimulates the engagement of community members, but also offers more inspiration and guidance for local news in their content creation [12].

3.2.3. Diverse Content Creation

In a multicultural setting, local news has the ability to have greater influence in the community through diversity in content creation. Local news can impact the community's cultural understanding and engagement by covering the life stories, cultural practices, and cultural events of the different local cultural groups to foster cultural exchange and understanding and promote community cohesion. Hossain, M. I. (2024) advocates that local news should be open to exploring new forms and perspectives of multicultural reporting to better fulfill the needs of a diverse audience [13].

3.2.4. Community Engagement and Citizen Journalism

Local news can enhance its social role of facilitating community engagement and nurturing citizen journalism. Citizen journalism contributes as an additional content source for local news, while also improving media literacy practices, and residents' sense of social responsibility. According to Abduh, I. M. (2025) by engaging, training, and supporting citizen journalists, local news is able to cover more of the community's many voices and help residents build identity and belonging [14].

4. CONCLUSION

As a summary, local news is essential to enhancing community members' sense of belonging and identity. By continuing to actively respond to the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities local news can continue to have an important role in promoting social cohesion and development, particularly in a multicultural context. Future research should continue to have a focus and investigate the practice and development of local news in a digital and multicultural society; provided further theoretical and practical support to improve its social functions.

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