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Local News, Local Engagement and Location: A Case Study of Two Communities

Amy Schmitz Weiss, Professor

School of Journalism & Media Studies San Diego State University https://jms.sdsu.edu/faculty/faculty_profile/amy-schmitz-weiss-ph.d

Abstract

This study explores how residents of two communities seek news and information in their community and how this is impacted by locative technology. Based on a quota sampling survey of 356 U.S. adults from two communities, those who access local news that is proximate to them via their mobile device are more likely to be engaged in local news. Those residents who get news proximate to their location are also likely to consume more local news and seek out more opportunities to be engaged with local news and their community. The implications of this study for the profession and academy are discussed.

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Keywords: spatial journalism, local news, location, mobile

Introduction

The local news industry is in upheaval as the presence of local news in communities across the U.S. continues to diminish. Scholar Michelle Ferrier was the first to capture the changing local news landscape in 2010 with her concept of media deserts when she identified a number of communities that have "A geographic area lacking in fresh, local news and information" (Ferrier, n.d.). In the past decade, the U.S. has lost 2,100 local newspapers (Abernathy, 2020). Local news organizations have faced many challenges with budget cuts that have resulted in less resources – less staff, technology and otherwise to do the kind of local news work that is needed in the community (Newman et al. 2020). With dwindling revenue from lack of subscriptions and advertising, news organizations face a significant issue of staying afloat.

Despite this situation, local news is needed more than ever. The public continues to seek out local news and do so from their mobile device than any other digital platform. According to a recent Pew study (2019), 89% of Americans get local news digitally and about 51% get local news through their mobile device. Furthermore, about 42% are getting local news alerts from their mobile. This demonstrates that local news is being sought out and mainly being consumed on the mobile device ("For Local News," 2019).

These statistics highlight that local news remains important despite the lack of local news organizations in a community and also highlights that the news consumer today wants their local news via their mobile device in the moment, space and place they are in. Research shows that mobile news consumption has become the defacto news experience (Dimmick, Feaster & Hoplamazian 2011; Chan-Olmsted, Rim & Zerba 2012; Taneja, Webster, Malthouse & Ksiazek, 2012; Schrøder 2014; Wolf & Schnauber 2014; Van Damme, Courtois, Verbrugge & De Marez 2015; Poindexter 2016).

But there's more we need to know - do we know about the kind of news one is consuming? Specifically, where does local news fit into this picture? Do we know exactly how news consumers are engaging with local news in this mobile context? What does this kind of news engagement look like? This study explores how local news is being consumed and engaged with in two different communities, Austin, Texas and Brooklyn, New York. Only through understanding the deeper nuances of how one accesses local news, can one have an understanding how news behavior is being shaped.

Literature Review

As noted earlier, the local news landscape is in a moment of change. The industry and scholarship have noted the demise of local news, however, this study sheds light on a lesser understood aspect of news consumption when local news and proximate location to local news is brought into the picture.

As today's news consumers are mainly getting news from their mobile device, it's important to address how mobile news consumption has been studied. Scholars have identified over the years that people seek mobile news for its utility, portability and ease of use (Dimmick, Feaster & Hoplamazian 2011; Chan-Olmsted, Rim & Zerba 2012; Taneja, Webster, Malthouse & Ksiazek, 2012; Schrøder 2014; Wolf & Schnauber 2014; Van Damme, Courtois, Verbrugge & De Marez 2015; Poindexter 2016).

These characteristics make it clear that news consumers will also consume news more frequently (Chan-Olmsted, Rim & Zerba 2012; Molyneux 2017). With the mobility and flexibility that mobile news provides, mobile news consumption also happens on the go - while commuting and in route to work (Schrøder 2014; Van Damme, Courtois, Verbrugge & de Marez 2015; Taneja, Webster, Malthouse & Ksiazek 2012). The places where people consume news is just as important as why - and some scholars have started to explore the contexts of these moments. Struckmann and Karnowski (2015) explored how news consumers' situational psychologies (i.e. physical environment, media access and social dynamics) as well as attitudes (i.e. ease of use, perceived usefulness) toward the mobile device help explain mobile news consumption. Struckmann and Karnowski (2015)identify that mobile news consumption is influenced by one's laptop/desktop news experiences but more importantly, time and place dictate mobile news consumption choice. Our media ecosystem today is fluid (Bjur et al 2014; Deuze 2013, 2013a) and can provide insights as to why and how mobile news consumption has grown. The mobile news scholarship has been able to document well the evolution of news consumption, but what is the context to these experiences? Where does local news fit into this picture?

The idea of getting local news in the place where one is or proximate to the news event, is an area that has been studied in the past decade by some scholars via the notion of geolocated news content (Nyre et al. 2012; Øie 2013; Oppegaard & Rabby 2016; Schmitz Weiss, 2018). Geolocated news content focuses on the idea of the news proximate to the location of where the mobile device and user are in the moment. For example, the user has their exact location already noted in their mobile device because of its GPS capability in the device. When they open a mobile news app, it may ask to use their location to better provide them information and news, and once they opt-in, the mobile app is aware of their location and then can provide them news in their feed of what happened proximate to where they are (e.g. a few blocks away, etc.).

These studies identify that the closer the news event is to a mobile news consumer, the more satisfaction and involvement one has with the news (Oppegaard & Rabby 2016). A recent study (Schmitz Weiss, 2018b) showed that news consumers do seek out geolocated news that is arranged or filtered by distance, neighborhood and time. Additionally, they seek different kinds of geolocated news like weather/traffic, government/politics, crime and entertainment/events (Schmitz Weiss, 2018b). Knowing that news consumers do want and seek this kind of news experience, how often do they seek it out? Thus, this research seeks to build upon this prior study:

RQ1: Does a geolocated news experience result in more local news consumption or less?

Spatial Journalism

This study utilizes the framework of location as the central unit of investigation. The idea of location in this study goes beyond just the city or state one lives in for local news, but the premise of local news that is proximate and/or near to the consumer. This approach can be analyzed through the lens of Spatial Journalism, a theoretical framework that examines the way location is operationalized in storytelling and journalistic practices whether that location is physical, virtual or augmented. For example, this can be achieved by geotagging news content on a map for news consumers to see where news has occurred by location. News organizations such as BK Reader, Local News Matters, The Mercury News and Factal employ this method of geotagging news content. This theoretical framework has been employed in several studies (Schmitz Weiss, 2015; 2018a; 2018b; 2019) from analyzing the amount of geolocated news content in mobile news apps, the perception of proximity among news consumers, and how journalists perceive location in their newswork. This study's approach can be operationalized by looking at how geolocated local news content is being consumed.

This study extends on this previous scholarship to look at the geolocated news experience in terms of the amount of local news being consumed and how engaged (not only receive but seek out news) as well as how connected they feel to local news in their community when location/proximity is considered. This study seeks to answer these additional research questions:

RQ2: Does receiving local news and information proximate to physical location result in local news engagement?

RQ3: Does a geolocated news experience result in a different form of local community engagement?

Method

This study is based on a survey administered to U.S. adults in 2018 that lived in Austin, Texas and Brooklyn, New York. These areas were selected based on existing news organizations in both communities that offer geolocated news for their communities that was part of a larger study examining geolocated news consumption. As there are currently few communities that have news organizations that employ geolocated news (i.e. they tag the addresses and locations in a digital news story to specific location on a digital map or news feed for the news consumer to see on their site or app), this study highlights two areas that do have a news service of this type.

This study sought 700 respondents from Austin and 700 from Brooklyn, for a total of 1,400 respondents. The surveys were conducted using MTurk using quota sampling. Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) is an online system that pays subjects to complete tasks, including surveys. Several studies in the social science field have used MTurk as a representative sample for research (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Berinsky et al. 2012).

For this study, participants entered the Amazon Turk system online and if eligible for the study, they were invited to participate. Eligibility was based on if they lived in the cities participating. If they didn't live there, they were not able to participate. Participants were given 70 cents upon survey completion. To identify survey completion, each participant was provided a unique code at the end of the survey and had to input that into the MTurk system. Survey completion was verified by the unique code given to the respondent in the Qualtrics system. To help with the honest and accurate responses, an honor statement was added at the end of the survey for participants to confirm their truthful and accurate responses.

The number of respondents from Austin who participated in this study was 219. However, some participants were removed from the study for one of the following reasons: they didn't provide the correct code, didn't provide honest answers or were not in the geographic area. The final total of Austin respondents was 178. The number of respondents from Brooklyn who participated in this study was 198. However, some participants were also removed from the study for one of the following reasons: they didn't provide the correct code, didn't provide honest answers or were not in the geographic area. The final total of Brooklyn respondents was 178. The overall total from both communities was 356 participants, a 25% response rate. It should be noted that the survey was administered over a defined timeframe for a funded study so it had to close by given date, resulting in fewer participants (N=356) than originally sought (N=1,400).

Questions in the overall questionnaire were adopted and adapted from several existing studies on matters of mobile, online news and social media use as well as location-based services use, community engagement and local news (Duyn, Jennings & Stroud, 2018; Merisavo et al. 2007; Wei et al. 2010; Liu et al. 2012; Pew Research Center 2015; Lin et al. 2016) Demographic questions were adopted from the U.S. Census (American Community Survey 2017).

Measures

For this study, cross tabulations between variables were run to identify the relationships between geolocated news, local news consumption and engagement. Respondents were asked about if they like (as well as if they currently do) get news on their mobile device near their physical location and like to get news (as well as if they currently do) about locations that are near to them on their mobile device as well as the names of the places where they get such news. They were also asked how frequently they receive and seek news proximate to their location and locations they care about. Chi-square analyses were run to test statistical significance for each cross tabulation as the best measure to answer the research questions for this study as most variables were at the nominal level. To answer RQ1, a chi-square analysis was run between the dichotomous variable of those who seek geolocated news from their mobile device and the frequency of accessing of proximate local news from the mobile device (on a scale from daily to never). They were also asked about the context of getting geolocated news if it was related to where they work/live/play, where they travel (for business or personal), and where family and friends are.

To answer RQ2, a chi-square analysis was run between the dichotomous variable who get proximate news to their physical location from their mobile device and how engaged they feel with local news media in their community (based on a Likert scale of agreement from strongly agree to strongly disagree). This engagement question was one of several used in the study that was adapted from a previous local news study (Van Duyn, Jennings, & Stroud, 2018). In addition, a chi-square analysis was run between those who feel they are engaged with local news and the frequency of accessing of proximate local news from their mobile device (on a scale from several times a day to never). To answer RQ3, a chisquare analysis was run between those getting proximate news to their location on their mobile device and a variety of local community engagement questions that included voted in a recent election, volunteered for a charity/community organization, signed or shared a petition, and contacted an elected official. These community engagement questions were adapted from a previous study that explored local news and engagement (Van Duyn, Jennings, & Stroud, 2018).

Sample Demographics

About 52% of respondents were male and 48% were female. As for age breakdown, 49% were 25-34, 23% were 35-44, 16.9% were 18-24; 10% were 45-64, and less than 1% were 65 and older. For educational background, 45.6% had a bachelor's degree, 13.8% had a master's degree, 14.6% had one or more years of college, and 7.6% had some college credit. As for ethnicity, 53.7% were white; 14.6% were Black; 10.7% identified as Hispanic/Latino; 4.8% were Asian; 4.2% preferred not to answer; 3.1% were Asian Indian; 2% identified as Mexican American, 1.7% were American Indian/Alaska native; and 1.1% were Filipino. These demographics are representative in general terms of the overall breakdown of both communities according to the U.S. Census.

Most respondents lived in their community for several years. Thirty-one percent lived 1-4 years in their community, 23% lived in their community more than 20 years, 21% lived 5-10 years in their community, 12% lived 11-20 years, and another 12% lived less than a year in their community.

For this study, the respondents were active news consumers. About 86% enjoyed keeping up with news in their area and 76% followed the news closely in their area. About 68% of respondents accessed news primarily from their mobile device. About 51% accessed news several times a day from their mobile device.

Results

When looking at both communities together, 84 percent like to get news about a location important to them via their mobile device. Seventy-seven percent like to get news proximate to their physical location via their mobile phone. As for the kind of geolocated news they access on their mobile phone, the respondents were asked 5 statements about the context of where they seek this kind of news: 71% seek news on places where they live work or play, 63% seek news on places where family and friends live, 63% for personal travel, 48% for business travel and 30% where coworkers live. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Geolocated News Experience Context

News seeking context	Austin & Brooklyn Residents %					
Places where they live, work or pla	y 71					
Places where family and friends liv	e 63					
Personal travel	63					
Business travel	48					
Where coworkers travel	30					

(N=356); Based on respondents answering each of the five statements regarding frequency from often to sometimes.

RQ1: Does a geolocated news experience result in more local news consumption or less?

In response to RQ1, Austin and Brooklyn respondents were more likely to be heavy consumers of local news, with 44.3% saying they seek out proximate news daily or multiple times a week ($x^2=32.158$, d.f.=6, p=.000). (See Table 2).

Table 2: Geolocated Local Newsby Local NewsConsumption Activity

Frequency of seeking proximate local news	Geolocated local news user %				
Daily	16.5				
Multiple times a week	27.8				
Once a week	22				
Every few weeks	14.3				
Less often	12.8				
Never	6.6				
(N=354)					

RQ2: Does receiving local news and information proximate to physical location result in local news engagement?

In response to RQ2, as noted in Table 3, of those who get news on their mobile device about locations proximate to them, both Austin and Brooklyn survey respondents said that they do feel engaged with the local news media in their community ($x^2=24.514$, d.f.=6, p=.001). Furthermore, Austin and Brooklyn survey respondents who feel engaged with the local news also consume more local news proximate to their location several times a day ($x^2=71.021$, d.f.=36, p=.000) (See Table 4). Thus, these findings show that those who consume local news are more likely to be geolocated news users.

RQ3: Does a geolocated news experience result in a different form of local community engagement?

	I feel engaged with the local news media in my community by %						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Get proximate news on mobile device	100	87.7	83.2	76.1	62.8	58.5	69.2

Table 3.	Proximate	News	Activity	by]	Local]	News	Media	Engagement

(N=274); (x²=24.514, d.f.=6, p=.001)

Table 4. Proximate News Frequency by Local News Media Engagement

	I feel engaged with the local news media in my community by %							
Frequency of seeking proximate news	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Several times a day	55.6	26.3	22.1	13.6	9.3	12.2	7.7	
About once a day	27.8	21.1	25.3	20.5	9.3	29.3	30.8	
A few times a week	5.6	29.8	31.6	34.1	30.2	7.3	7.7	
Once a week	11.1	12.3	8.4	9.1	16.3	9.8	7.7	
Every few weeks	0	5.3	7.4	10.2	11.6	17.1	15.4	
Less often	0	3.5	4.2	10.2	20.9	22	23.1	
Never	0	1.8	1.1	2.3	2.3	2.4	7.7	

(N=355); (x²=71.021, d.f.=36, p=.000)

For RQ3, Austin and Brooklyn survey respondents who consume geolocated news are also more engaged in their community. As noted in Table 5, of those who get geolocated news, they contacted an elected official ($x^2=14.886$, d.f.=1, p=.000), they signed or shared a petition ($x^2=9.729$, d.f.=1, p=.002), they volunteered for a charity/community organization ($x^2=11.194$, d.f.=1, p=.001), and voted in a local election ($x^2=4.543$, d.f.=1, p=.03) in the past year. Thus, the findings show that geolocated news users are more likely to be engaged with local news and more likely to exercise engagement in the local community than those who are non-geolocated news users.

Table 5. Community Engagement Activity byGeolocated News User

Community Engagement Activity	Geolocated News User %	Non-Geolocated News User %
Signed/shared a petition	66.7**	48.1
Voted in local election	60.4**	47.7
Volunteered for charity/community org	56.3*	36.5
Contacted an elected official	52.6*	30.4

(N=356); * p<.001, **p<.05

Conclusion

This study shows these two communities do seek out local news that is proximate to their location and do so via their mobile device. This study did not aim to show differences between the two communities but show how in two different places how the geolocated news experience is happening. This study adds onto existing research of geolocated news content and its growth (Nyre et al. 2012; Øie 2013; Oppegaard & Rabby 2016; Schmitz Weiss, 2018b). Furthermore, this study identifies that one who receives but also seeks out geolocated news will consume more local news and also feel more connected with the local news media. Those who have a geolocated news experience said they are more engaged in their community - by voting in elections and volunteering, for example.

When the local news industry is in a state of crisis and upheaval (Newman et al. 2020), this study provides insight that news engagement can be found in local news and found in the immediate places and spaces that the public interacts with. When one is engaged with the local news (i.e. not just receiving but actively seeking it out as well as feeling connected to the news), the opportunity to support local news can be possible, allowing local news organizations to obtain more subscribers and news consumers who want to pay for the news through the form of hyperlocal or local newsletters for example (Kim, et al 2021; Brennan, 2021; Jacob 2019), ultimately helping the bottom line.

Local news organizations can explore geolocated news by considering ways to incorporate search and filter features by location in their digital/mobile apps as well as providing a geolocated news experience (i.e. identifying the exact location of the news consumer to the news in that immediate area) that one can opt into via their mobile device. Some news organizations like Long Island Newsday (Restivo, 2020) and The Philadelphia Inquirer (Schmalbach, 2020) implemented location-based/geolocated features into their digital and mobile platforms. For example, users could access the mobile app, identify their location by area (i.e. city, neighborhood) or by GPS and then be provided news stories in that given area on the mobile app. Factal, a breaking news technology platform, provides proximate news of events to users in an area where they are located via their news dashboard and mobile app (Factal, n.d). These efforts show this kind of news experience can be implemented. With this in mind, identifying forms of local news engagement could naturally flow from these geolocated news experiences with local news events, community gatherings around local news, and public roundtables that are important about the places and spaces in the community.

This study provides further insight into the existing scholarship on mobile news consumption (Dimmick, Feaster & Hoplamazian 2011; Chan-Olmsted, Rim & Zerba 2012; Taneja, Webster, Malthouse & Ksiazek, 2012; Schrøder 2014; Wolf & Schnauber 2014; Van Damme, Courtois, Verbrugge & De Marez 2015; Poindexter 2016), particularly from the lens of local news. The findings from this study also extend the previous scholarship on Spatial Journalism (Schmitz Weiss, 2015; Schmitz Weiss 2018a; Schmitz Weiss 2018b; Schmitz Weiss 2019), exploring another facet of spatial news that gets deeper into the context of why news consumers seek this kind of experience out, how often, and how this engages them to the news.

There are a few limitations to this study. This study is not representative of the complete population and reflects a sampling of respondents from only Brooklyn and Austin. However, this study does give insight from respondents in these two communities how location remains an important element for a news consumer.

Future research can build upon this research with a larger study including more cities, as well as conducting focus groups with news consumers, and perhaps having news consumers participate in making mobile news diaries of their geolocated daily experiences.

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