The ‘imagined community’ of readers of hyperlocal news: A case study of Baristanet

Renee Barnes*
University of the Sunshine Coast

Abstract

Hyperlocal media are characterised by their narrow focus on small geographic regions, and citizen or community participation in the news-production process. However, very little work has focused on the dynamics of community development in relation to these websites – including the role of participation. Based on a case study of award-winning New Jersey-based hyperlocal news website Baristanet, this article draws on an online survey of readers about how and why they participate on the website. The analysis finds low levels of active contributions in the form of comments following news stories and evidence of a limited representative community on the website. Specifically, analysis of the survey responses suggests that contested user notions of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991) have significant impacts on participatory behaviour. The article argues that a virtual community, based on an offline geographic region, can face particular barriers when it comes to fostering website participation, which may suggest a reinterpretation of Anderson’s imagined community in the age of participatory journalism.

Keywords

Participatory journalism, imagined community, community journalism, hyperlocal, comments

Introduction

The discursive formulation of location within news has always played a part in political discourses aimed at building belonging for groups established around frameworks of meaning. The best-known example of this is Benedict Anderson’s (1991) concept of the ‘imagined community’. His argument regarding the role played by newspapers in helping to form and sustain the nation-state through enabling individuals to connect through language, place and ideology has been used to examine how differing media formats are conceptualised (Higgins, 2004). Individuals consume their news in their homes, on trains, in cafés or any number of different places at different times, and this audience therefore must be imagined (Turnbull, 2010). However, for journalism distributed via the internet, a new space – albeit a virtual one – is created, in which the audience does not need to ‘imagine’ other readers; instead, news consumers can actively engage with other consumers of that same content on the website via comments, blogs and other participatory tools. This article discusses the impact of this participatory space on Anderson’s concept of the imagined community in relation to news media.

A related set of questions involves the renewal of geographically based news ventures, taking advantage of the relative ease and cost of distribution via the internet (Briggs, 2011; De

* Email: Renee.Barnes@usc.edu.au
Beer and Merrill, 2009; Robinson, 2014). These hyperlocal news ventures, which are highly reliant on community participation in the news production process, operate at the nexus between localised content and the potential for technology-enabled civic engagement (Kurpius, Metzgar and Rowley, 2010). Very little work has focused on the dynamics of community development – including the role of participation – on these websites. This is despite the hyperlocal nature of the audiences involved and the participatory potential of the websites. This article seeks to address this gap by examining how and why readers of hyperlocal website Baristanet participate on the site. By investigating participation on the website, particularly comments that follow news stories, this study finds that differing audience member notions of the ‘imagined community’ impact on engagement with the website.

**The virtual community of the local**

The concept of the virtual community is often used to understand the participation of online audiences. Carpentier (2011: 196) asserts that, in general, a community is a useful concept for understanding audience articulations that are ‘social, virtual and interpretative’. The virtual community is a particularly helpful idea for investigating participatory journalism, which has been defined as involving people inside and outside the newsroom communicating to and with each other in an ongoing process of creating a news website and building a multifaceted community (Singer et al., 2011).

A number of scholars have used the geographic community as a framework for defining the characteristics of virtual communities. In these studies, the focus is on shared interests and facilities, shared values and experiences, and mutual obligations and social interaction (Hopkins et al., 2004; Nip, 2004; Tyler, 2006). Much of this work has investigated how online relationships impact the nature and character of offline community relationships (Blanchard and Horan, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Rosenberry, 2010). Rosenberry’s (2010) study of 80 US daily newspaper website forums is particularly significant, as it found that interaction in virtual communities was not related to enhanced civic engagement in offline communities. The study found that while posting online might help people appreciate local offline communities better, such actions did not translate to increased civic engagement. Such approaches, however, privilege the offline community by failing to attribute benefit to online communities in their own right. Norris (2002: 11–12) notes that ‘online participation has the capacity to deepen linkages among those sharing similar beliefs as well as serving as a virtual community that cuts across at least some traditional social divisions’.

A central feature of community development in both offline and online communities is the ability to derive ‘social capital’ from association with that community (Putnam, 2000; Robinson, 2011). In this regard, some have argued that a sense of belonging (Teo et al., 2003) and the exploration of identity (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Perre, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002) influence an individual’s intention to participate within an online community. Identity and belonging can also inform an emotional engagement with news (Gray, 2007), which in turn helps to develop a community around a particular news website (Barnes, 2015). If, as Hampton and Wellman (1999: 480) outline, ‘it is the sociable, supportive, and identity giving interactions that define the community’, then online interactions have the potential to enable better understanding among what may be a geographically disparate community linked through shared interests.

This approach is close to that of Anderson (1991). In his study of the formation of nations, Anderson contends that a community is ‘imagined’ by its members as a mental construct through the sharing of common forms. He particularly notes the role played by the mass media in forming this community by creating connections between language, place and ideology. In his account, newspapers in particular inform the collective understanding that there is a ‘steady, anonymous, simultaneous experience’ of a newspaper-reading community (1991: 31).
According to Anderson’s theory of imagined communities, in historical terms collective identity can be imagined through the mass media because of a reduction of exclusive access to the Latin script language, the movement to abolish the concept of divine rule and monarchy, and the emergence of the printing press under a system of capitalism. Books and media were printed in the vernacular in order to maximise circulation; as a result, readers speaking various local dialects were able to understand each other and a common discourse emerged. Indeed, it is possible to draw parallels between the technology-driven state of flux that journalism is currently negotiating and the previous social, economic and cultural conditions that Anderson describes as crucial to the development of the collective identity of nations. Media organisations driven by declining revenue streams are embracing models of ‘participatory journalism’ to encourage greater audience brand loyalty and address slumping readerships (Downie and Schudson, 2009). To do this, they are often encouraged to have a ‘conversation’ with the audience (Gillmor, 2004) in ways that differ from journalism’s standard values and norms. In the process, they are developing what could be described as a new media vernacular. Driven by capitalist pressures, the mass media are being forced to give up their once-privileged access to the selection, presentation and distribution of news to allow avenues for the audience to develop its own discourse with its own traditions and norms.

Anderson’s model, which does not take the internet into account, relies on the mass media binding the community, not atomising it, through a collective identity. A key condition of this is that:

People do not enter the public sphere with well-formed identities, prepared to engage in argument, but rather in some need of identity and seeking not just rational discourse, cooperative social arrangements, or even instrumental ends but in one large part affirmation of their personal identity. (Calhoun, 1991: 108)

As Calhoun notes, the concept of imagined communities can be used more broadly to include communities of interest. A particularly powerful use in this respect is in contemporary media such as broadcast media and computer networks, as the platforms involved can simulate direct relationships. However, while broadcast and online media may serve to further the creation of imagined communities as objects of identification, they can also serve to create objects of antagonism (Calhoun, 1991). Thus, on the one hand, the concept of imagined communities is a framework that can offer much to the analysis of mode of communication that is undergoing significant structural change. On the other hand, though, the digital and networked media via which this change is occurring, precisely through the new ability to create intimacy and peer-to-peer connections, can also create antagonistic rather than cohesive communities.

In his analysis of local identity in American community newspaper website mastheads, Funk (2012) finds that local websites routinely articulate a professional identity (that of a corporate media organisation) over a local one. He argues that this has fundamental implications for the role played by these websites. Based on the premise that local identity is constructed through clear articulation by the media, Funk contends that without this clear articulation, the community cannot be ‘imagined’. For Funk, this means that community newspaper websites are imagining a ‘commodity’ rather than a ‘community’. At best, articulation of an imagined community in this situation can be recalled habitually and naturally through the use of key discursive words and images (Billig, 1995). However, this can also serve to divide a community where many consumers of media negotiate their identity through registering difference – for example, in what Grossberg (1992: 58) describes as dividing the cultural world into ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. Within an interpretative or participatory environment, a further problem is that knowledge and status may be used to develop and maintain existing social and cultural hierarchies (Dell, 1998; Harris, 1998; Hills, 2002; Jancovich, 2002).
In the light of all this, it can be seen that participatory journalism based in a small geographic region may present particular possibilities and problems for both actual community development and the creation of an ‘imagined community’. Geographic location and concepts of the local have always been crucial to the shaping of news (Franklin, 1998). The media have always used locational terms in their conceptualisation and production of news stories, to signal to and connect with their imagined audiences. At the same time, the audience uses these locational terms to recognise what is news for it, and how such news might be interpreted. The term ‘community journalism’ has long meant something more than this, however, associated as it is with journalism that is produced for an audience of geographic proximity. However, ‘community journalism’ can now also be used to describe geographically dispersed communities that congregate around shared interests via the internet (Robinson, 2014). It is within this complex context that hyperlocal news and hyperlocal journalism need to be considered.

Hyperlocal websites are an extension of journalism’s long-standing focus on local and community news. They embrace the electronic platforms that, as Terry (2011: 78) observes, imposed a ‘tsunami of change’ on community newspapers, forcing them to not only serve a community’s informational needs, but also build and maintain those communities within virtual space. Glaser (2010: 578) contends that hyperlocal relates to ‘information relevant to small communities or neighbourhoods that has been overlooked by traditional news outlets such as newspapers, radio and television’, while Kurpius, Metzgar and Rowley (2010: 360) emphasise the role of the audience of this ‘local’ news by defining hyperlocal journalism as:

Geographically-based news organizations that operate largely in big metropolitan areas and cover a narrow range of location-specific topics. Such sites allow input from citizens through content contribution, blogs, and other feedback loops. In the current media environment, hyperlocal media operate at the crossroads of highly focused, locally-oriented news with technology-enabled potential as tools for civic engagement.

Within this definition, the role of audience participation in the news-production process is crucial in understanding hyperlocal media, and a feeling of community is just as crucial to audience participation. Indeed, Hess and Waller (2015) argue that hyperlocal news is a cultural phenomenon that plays an important role in generating a sense of belonging and connection to others. Furthermore, Meyer and Carey (2014: 11) found that the main predictor of participation – in particular, the leaving of comments following news stories – was whether participants experienced a sense of virtual community online. The literature therefore suggests that there are particular relationships between participation on websites, specifically the leaving of comments, and community development. This begins to explain the emphasis on participation in hyperlocal news ventures. However, the portrayal of the ‘imagined community’ of the region served by the website may also impact participation. This article aims to explore this gap. Typically, hyperlocal media have been examined more broadly in terms of the economics of producing journalism and specifically in relation to the business models of hyperlocal ventures (Glaser, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Remez, 2012). Other studies have focused on its potential to fill gaps left by the demise of traditional providers of local news (Kurpius, Metzgar and Rowley, 2010; Schaffer, 2007). However, by focusing instead on the audience for hyperlocal media, this article will canvass an understudied field within this growing body of scholarship.

Methodology
This article seeks to further scholarly knowledge about community development associated with hyperlocal journalism websites by undertaking a case study of Baristanet. Case study research refers to ‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context’ (Yin, 2003: 13). As such, it is best used to understand complex social issues. In this study, a single hyperlocal website was used as an intrinsic case study to explore and gain insight
into the social phenomenon of community development related to hyperlocal media. Specifically, the study sought to examine how and why the Baristanet audience engages with the website, and in doing so uncovered tensions surrounding contested notions of the imagined community that impact on website engagement.

Baristanet is a hyperlocal news website that services the commuter-belt suburbs around Montclair, New Jersey. Baristanet is one of the most recognised and successful ‘hyperlocal’ websites in the United States (Sessions Stepp, 2011). Site founder Debbie Galant says she established Baristanet to capitalise on a lack of local news content:

The local paper really wasn’t utilising the online space like it could, and there were a lot of local stories that just weren’t getting any coverage. (Galant, 2011)

The paucity of New Jersey local news was recognised by the philanthropic organisation the Knight Foundation when it awarded US$3.67 million as part of its 2012 Knight Community Information Challenge to establish a New Jersey community news collaboration (of which Baristanet is a member). Stories on the site range from a new restaurant opening to local crime and council matters. Above all, Baristanet has a focus on audience participation:

The biggest contributors to the site are our readers – their active participation has turned Baristanet into a true online community and the destination for breaking local news, airing opinionated views, and yes, poking fun at suburbia whenever possible. (Baristanet, 2012)

To investigate community development associated with the site, this article draws on a non-representative online survey. There was no incentive given for completion of the survey, which formed part of a larger study that examined the role of commenting in audience participation in independent and alternative journalism websites (Barnes, 2014). Survey questions were developed and tested in a pilot survey. Using the pilot responses, the questions were refined and a link to the survey was placed on the Baristanet website for a period of two weeks from 20 October 2011. It was also distributed through the Baristanet Twitter and Facebook accounts. The period of data collection represents a significant period in the development of hyperlocal journalism. It was during this period that hyperlocal media began to be recognised as a particular journalism venture that had the potential to reinvigorate an ailing media industry (Remez, 2012). However, these early online hyperlocal services had also been criticised for failing to meet their potential. Specifically, legacy media providers had found it hard to adjust their high-cost models to a sufficiently local area, while smaller independent ventures had found it difficult to develop a critical mass of audience or community and to define the right business models to grow their offerings into more sustainable services (Radcliffe, 2012).

A total of 104 people responded to the survey, with a 92.3 per cent completion rate. Of these respondents, 31.6 per cent (n=30) were male and 68.4 per cent (n=65) were female. The largest age bracket was 51–60 years at 30.9 per cent (n=30), but this was followed closely by the 41–50 years bracket at 24.5 per cent (n=26). The survey included the following open and closed questions:

1. Why do you visit Baristanet? (open)
2. How often have you made comments on stories on the site? (closed, using a five-point Likert-type scale: 1 = never, 5 = regularly, which was defined as at least each week)
3. Does the ability to make a comment or join a discussion on a story encourage you to visit the site? (open)
4. What is it about particular stories that encourages you to make a comment? (open)
5. If you never or rarely make a comment, why is that? (open)
How often do you read other people’s comments on stories? (closed, using a five-point Likert-type scale: 1 = never, 5 = regularly, which was defined as at least each week)

Survey results
Overall, the survey suggested relatively low levels of participation in the comment threads following stories. Almost half the respondents to the survey, or 40.2 per cent (n = 41), said they had never made a comment. Of those who did comment, 47.1 per cent (n = 48) rarely or sometimes made a comment, while 6.9 per cent (n = 7) often and 5.9 per cent (n = 6) regularly made a comment (see Table 1). This is consistent with previous work on online media, which has found that the majority of online audience members do not actively participate on an online news website (Barnes, 2014; van Dijck, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer options</th>
<th>Response (%)</th>
<th>Response count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regularly (at least each week)</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often (10–30 times)</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes (3–10 times)</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely (1–3 times)</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never (go to Question 7)</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answered question</td>
<td></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of those who did comment, this tended to be because they felt they had information that was valuable to other commenters. As one respondent noted, ‘if the discussion is something interesting to me or if I can share/help someone’ (5). For this respondent, the act of commenting is a demonstration of community through the acquisition of ‘social capital’ (Putnam, 2000; Robinson, 2011). If the respondent can ‘share’ or ‘help’ another member of the community, then they are motivated to comment. The act of commenting informs a sense of community development.

For other respondents, it was a response to other commenters that motivated active contribution:

When I have something specific to add to the story. Which is rare since the stories are good unto themselves. I will admit that I have commented on the commenters to basically ask them to either stay on topic, stop ranting or shut up. (19)

This response could suggest that the respondent’s sense of ownership or membership of the community motivates their participation. By not ‘staying on topic’ or ‘ranting’, the other commenters are not adhering to the respondent’s vision of how the Baristanet community should operate.

Others noted that they visited and left comments on the site because it was ‘fun’ to do so (14, 39, 54, 62, 83). As one respondent noted, they visited the site to:

See what’s going on locally. Escape from more ‘serious’ (aka depressing) news. Can see what others around me think and can voice my opinion rather anonymously. (48)
This respondent appears to resonate with site’s conversational style while also valuing not only the local content, but also the ability to interact with others in the Montclair region. Another respondent noted that they visited the site because:

I especially love the snarkiness. It reminds me of living in Manhattan! (6)

Another responded:

Interesting to read the snarky comments. Don’t care to make any of my own. (19)

The term ‘snarky’ is used to refer to irritable or short-tempered narratives from which one can derive humour. This suggests that, for the above respondents, a certain tone is developed through the journalist-produced copy. This ‘snarky’ tone can also be replicated in the comments following the story, suggesting the use of a particular vernacular that can create a sense of commonality for those commenting on and reading the website. This use of vernacular or a common discourse is one of the central pillars of Anderson’s thesis of ‘imagined community’ development. However, these responses can also create barriers to participation, which will be discussed in further detail later in this article.

**A feeling of personal attachment**

A number of respondents to the Baristanet survey noted that ‘personal’ (26, 30, 32, 36, 16) interest or involvement in the story or issue were motivating factors for commenting. For some this ‘personal’ interest was related to how their local area or community is represented on a site dedicated to local issues:

If I have personal knowledge of the subject, if I am feeling pithy. If I am disgusted and don’t want others to think the comments already there are the only viewpoint in my area. (26)

For this respondent, their ‘personal experience’ or personal knowledge helps them expand upon information provided, but it is also their ‘personal experience’ of the local community that is used to determine how that community should be ‘imagined’ and then represented on the site. This respondent is moved to the action of commenting to ensure that ‘others’ are not given a particular impression of the respondent’s local area.

This level of emotional involvement is reflected by other respondents, who list ‘something I feel passionate about’ (10), ‘if something hits close to home’ (13) or ‘when they [a story] strike a chord’ (33) as reasons for leaving comments. These responses are examples of what Gray (2007) describes as an emotional reaction to news, which can be based on factors such as identity and belonging; in turn, this impacts upon community development (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002; Teo et al., 2003). However, the sense of identity, belonging and community that is developed via participation on the website is entwined with the construction of these factors in the physical community. As a website dedicated to local news, stories and comments on the site are seen as a reflection of the physical community, as markers of the ‘imagined community’ of the Montclair region in which Baristanet operates; thus rectifying or establishing an acceptable image or impression of that physical community becomes a motivating factor for participation.

For those who do not comment, this may be because they are ‘shy’ (33) or because of the anticipation that their contribution will be judged by the Baristanet community:

I think that some of the posters are intimidating, which makes reading the arguments fun, but joining them a little nervewracking. (21)
Evidence of a ‘limited representative community’

As noted, the majority of respondents to the survey did not regularly comment on the site, and many of the respondents to the survey nominated the ‘regular community’ of commenters as a barrier to joining the comment thread. One respondent commented:

Only to a limited extent – your pool of regulars who leave comments skew the discussion in ways that don’t often reflect the larger community we live in. (22)

Again, this response suggests that the respondent has an expectation of how the physical community targeted by Baristanet should be represented on the site – they have a particular articulation of the ‘imagined community’ and are not seeing this represented. However, in this instance, the failure of the site to represent this expectation is a deterrent to participation. This frustration with the regular commenters or a ‘limited representative community’ is reflected in a number of responses:

I do not enjoy the regular crew that posts. I find them to be a cynical cliquish bunch. I think that they preclude commentary by others. I occasionally will post a comment under my own name, but try to limit my comment to supplementing facts pertinent to the story, or praising an event. (9)

Most of the comments are banal, emotional & sometimes downright silly. They invariably go waay off topic so there’s really no ‘discussion’ – just a rant. And the commenters are usually the same 6 people over & over again. (20)

The comments are always by the same people and are often argumentative. It gets boring to read such childish and predictable ‘discussions’. (29)

For these respondents, the level of community development through participation on the site limits their involvement. A ‘limited representative community’ – that is, the community that, through the posting of a comment, leaves a visible representation of the Baristanet community – has established a hierarchy within the broader Baristanet community, and this serves as a deterrent to participation. This suggests that not all community development is beneficial. Hills (2002: 20) argues that an interpretive community can operate not just as a community, but also a social hierarchy where members may share a common interest while also competing over knowledge, access to the object of shared interest and status. These struggles for ‘distinction’ can impact upon the development of the community. If the community is not deemed ‘inclusive’ and representative of the broader community, then it is limited in its development. This is of particular interest in a case study such as this one, in which the hyperlocal news site focuses on a very specific geographic community and is reliant on audience participation for its news coverage.

As outlined earlier, for Anderson (1991), mass communication performs a central role in creating a sense of connection between citizens, as it helps to define the relations between ideological and physical locality. However, some individuals in this case study appear to have a specific imagined ‘local identity’ for the Montclair commuter belt region targeted by Baristanet. As a result, these respondents indicate that they expect this identity to be portrayed accurately on the Baristanet site. Respondents who feel that the ‘limited representative community’ on the website is not representative of their ‘imagined community’ then appear to respond in one of two ways. Some leave a comment so they might ‘correct’ the image of the community portrayed, while others are deterred from participation. It could therefore be argued that a reflective and inclusive community is particularly important for sites that represent a specific geographic region.
**Value given to comments**

Despite evidence suggesting ‘limited representative community’ development on the site, many respondents placed a high value on the ability to make comments even if they did not take up this opportunity. As one respondent noted:

Yes. I submit photos & make comments infrequently, but it’s nice to know I CAN do this. (30)

For this respondent, it is the ability to leave a comment, not actually doing so, that creates a sense of attachment to the site.

When asked how often they read other people’s comments on stories, no respondents said never, while 44.9 per cent (n = 44) regularly or often read the comments (see Table 2).

**Table 2: How often do you read other people’s comments on stories?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer options</th>
<th>Response (%)</th>
<th>Response count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regularly</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answered question</td>
<td></td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The high value attributed to the comments of others is also reflected in the open responses to the question, ‘Does the ability to leave a comment influence your decision to visit the site?’:

Interesting reading others’ points of view, although I don’t have the time to participate in online discussions myself. (6)

It’s nice to be able to hear others opinions on a topic. (8)

I do not usually comment, but I am interested in seeing others comments. (16)

It’s important to know how folks think about local issues. (40)

In this final comment, particular emphasis is given to the ‘local’ element of the discussion. All the above respondents are placing a high value on the comments of others, but the final one is particularly interested in ‘local issues’. This emphasis on the local is also evident in the following respondent’s comment:

It’s just natural to want to discuss what’s going on in the community with other members of the community. (37)

This respondent is using the site to locate other members of their physical community in order to discuss these local issues. In this instance, the online community is seen as an extension of the physical community – a way to imagine the Montclair community, and one that enhances engagement with this physical community. This does not suggest that users of the Baristanet site will have an increased community engagement. As Rosenberry (2010: 165) notes, ‘networked interactivity can enhance and reinforce existing tendencies toward civic engagement and social capital development in some circumstances, but does not necessarily create those phenomena where they did not previously exist’. This analysis does suggest, however, that online or virtual community development based on a specific geographic community can be built using existing community structures.
**Discussion**

Overall, these results suggest that only a small percentage of respondents are actively contributing comments to the site. Evidence exists that one of the reasons for this lack of active contributions is a sense of ‘limited representative community’ on the site. As outlined, this ‘limited representative community’ creates particular tensions for a site established around a specific geographic community. While many scholars have investigated whether online communities can strengthen offline communities (Hampton and Wellman, 1999; Norris, 2002; Rosenberry, 2010), little work has focused on the impact of an offline geographic community on the formation of an online community. Funk (2010) found American community newspaper websites were failing in their role to articulate local identity through website mastheads. He argued that a lack of visual or textual representation of the local region meant these newspaper websites were failing to represent the ‘imagined community’ of the local region. Funk’s study focused purely on the visual identity (including the name) of the masthead on the website. However, the style and tone of editorial and other content on the site (including comments by readers) can also help create and reiterate an ‘imagined community’ by linking language, ideology and place. There is evidence that, for some of those who access Baristanet, there is an expectation of how their community should be represented in the comments and editorial content. This expectation is entrenched in their specific individual notion of the ‘imagined community’ associated with the geographic area of the Montclair commuter belt, and impacts upon their involvement within the virtual community of the site. Analysis shows that if this individual notion of the ‘imagined community’ differs from that represented on the site, it can impact participation on the site. As a result, analysis suggests that a virtual community based on an offline geographic region can face particular barriers to participation.

There is some evidence to suggest that respondents did place a high value on the contributions of others, with almost half regularly or often reading the comments. A number of respondents also suggested that the ability to comment was valued, even if they were not taking up this opportunity. The additional themes emerging from the analysis, however, provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics at work in a virtual community developed around a specific geographic location.

As outlined by the site founder, a deliberate effort is made to produce content that is conversational and mimics a conversation ‘you might have with your neighbours’ (Galant, 2011). This is a break from standard journalistic norms, which remove journalists from the story and present information in a defined journalistic structure. This break from the professional practices of journalism appears to be valued by respondents, with many listing the ‘fun’, ‘light-hearted’ or ‘snarky’ nature of the site as a motivation for visiting and participating. Of course, humour and satire – even ‘snarkiness’ – can be found in elements of the mainstream media, in particular opinion columns. However, this method of information presentation is exhibited across all forms of stories on Baristanet. Thus the development of a particular style or vernacular as a method for enabling readers to ‘imagine’ the community – a central factor in Anderson’s thesis – is at work on the Baristanet website. There are also indications that respondents are motivated by an emotional reaction to news or other comments, and that this is particularly apparent for stories to which they have a ‘personal’ attachment. This is in line with Gray’s (2007) assertion that the emotional response of news consumers to news can create a sense of identity and community development. However, respondents to the Baristanet survey suggested that this identity development is based around that of specific non-negotiable notions of the ‘imagined community’ of the Montclair commuter belt. The depiction of this ‘imagined community identity’ impacts upon participation on the site in one of two ways. For some, it motivates them to comment so they might ‘correct’ the image of the community portrayed, while for others it serves as a deterrent to participation.
Conclusion
The findings of this case study suggest that the ‘imagined community’ in the age of participatory journalism faces new complexities. It may not always have the effect of connecting and creating a sense of belonging to and binding of the community. It could even be argued that at times the participatory news experience dismantles this older sense of general collectivity. On the other hand, the social, economic and cultural factors that have led to the need to address declining readership by relinquishing informational agency to the audience and enabling the use of a non-standard style or vernacular all have some similarities to the situation that propagated the ‘imagined community’ in Anderson’s thesis. However the outcomes appear to differ. Outside of the one-to-many model of communication, to which Anderson’s thesis applies, there is not one unifying ‘imagined community’ that is portrayed, but multiple contested versions of what constitutes the ‘imagined community’. Readers can approach participatory websites with fully-formed identities and may not find affirmation of that identity within the website. In the case of hyperlocal news websites, such as the case study explored here, the concept of the ‘imagined community’ may therefore at times work against participation by the audience. This is problematic, given that one of the key aspects of these websites is involvement by the audience. If there is not one unified collective identity, as originally articulated in Anderson’s thesis, but rather multiple contested identities, the ‘imagined community’ may not serve to bind, but rather to atomise, the audience. This has significant implications for the study of community development around participatory websites.

This study has limitations that must be considered. The study is reliant on a single case study and draws from data focused on how and why users participate, not on community development. As outlined, however, the data provide evidence that Andersen’s concept of the ‘imagined community’ may need to be reinterpreted in the age of participatory journalism. Therefore, future research must undertake to establish a theoretical framework that outlines how the atomised audience negotiates community membership and belonging, and how this might influence engagement with public discourse. To do this, further study is needed of how the audience of hyperlocal websites conceptualises community. Specifically, audience notions of differences between online and offline community must be investigated to provide a better understanding of how the ‘imagined community’ is negotiated in participatory journalism.

Note
1 All survey respondents were given a unique number to protect their identity, and all statements have been taken from the survey verbatim.

References


Galant D (2011). Personal communication, 18 November.


Kurpius DD, Metzgar ET and Rowley KM (2010). Sustaining hyperlocal media: In search of