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## **Community Service: Editor pride and user preference on local newspaper websites**

Jane B. Singer

### **ABSTRACT:**

Armed with readily accessible online traffic logs that provide detailed information about the items users are selecting to view, editors are voicing concern about the potential effect on their own content decisions. Through a survey of local British newspaper editors, this article examines the overlap between user preferences, as suggested by assessments of website traffic, and content that editors identify as their best. Results are considered in the context of two related subsets of agenda-setting theory, as well as the sociological process of “making news.” The study finds overlap between broad categories of stories preferred by editors and users, but a considerable disconnect over the nature of the items within those categories.

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## **Community Service: Editor pride and user preference on local newspaper websites**

The ready availability of detailed information about website users' reading preferences has sparked concern among journalists about potential interference in what they see as the professional task of deciding what belongs on the news agenda. Journalists seem particularly afraid that items they feel are trivial or otherwise unsavory will prove popular – a fear bolstered by preliminary evidence of user fondness for the sensational and salacious (Boczkowski, 2010) – potentially creating management pressures to produce more of those stories, a practice derided as “traffic whoring” (Singer and Ashman, 2009, p. 15).

In an attempt to provide preliminary empirical evidence about whether such fears are justified, this exploratory study assesses the overlap between the content that editors highlight as their best online output and the content they identify as the strongest drivers of website traffic. Responses by British local and regional newspaper editors are examined in the context of two aspects of agenda-setting theory that focus on construction of the media agenda: agenda building and inter-media agenda setting. The paper also draws on studies of the traditional process by which journalists “make news,” as well as recent research on newsroom practitioners' initial reactions to increased user presence on media websites.

The findings indicate that hard news and sport stories are among the most popular with both editors and audiences, but editors do believe users have a more pronounced taste for the titillating, constructing an agenda filled with stories about extraterrestrials, crime and, of course, sex. More broadly, the evidence highlights a hybrid user-journalist agenda. This “agenda overlap” has been made newly visible through the ability to precisely track online readership. Users appear to be constructing – and, through this novel online capability, communicating to journalists – an agenda that overlaps only partially with the items that editors identify as most worthy. Editors seem keenly aware of this agenda gap, but there is little evidence that they are responding to it in making their own news judgments.

## **The Local British Press**

The Newspaper Society (2011) counts about 1,200 regional and local newspapers in the UK, with 1,400 associated websites. In contrast to a competitive national press, many local papers have their markets to themselves after decades of consolidation. Yet the industry has suffered deep losses of readers and ad revenue, averaging a year-on-year decline of 6.5 percent (Ponsford, 2011). Corporate owners have sought and gained operational efficiencies, including deep staff cuts despite howls from the National Union of Journalists. Once-loyal readers are drifting away as “cherished local papers are printed earlier and earlier, further and further away from home, carrying less and less news of any relevance to their communities” (Dooley, 2011).

Though local newspaper websites are now ubiquitous, regional British publishers were slow to recognize challenges posed by the Internet, notably to classified advertising revenue, or to seize fresh opportunities for community engagement (Temple, 2008; Aldridge, 2007; Williams and Franklin, 2007). At the time of data collection for the present research, only 3 percent of UK news consumers said they got local news online (Currah, 2009).

This study focuses on editors employed by a single UK publisher, Johnston Press (JP), which at the time of the study owned more than 300 local and regional papers across Britain and Ireland. Only 18 were dailies; the rest were weeklies, many of them tiny, and editors commonly handled multiple publications. JP’s recent financial losses are staggering; its operating profit plummeted from nearly 187 million pounds to 72 million (Johnston Press, 2010a), and its share price (in pence) dropped from almost 500 in spring 2007 to under 10 by March 2011. Print advertising revenue fell another 7 percent in 2010, and the already-small digital ad share grew only 4 percent (Sabbagh, 2011). Since these data were collected, the company’s digital strategy director and CEO both have resigned.

## **Literature Review: “Making News”**

This literature review contains three related parts, each considering an aspect of the journalistic process of “making news.” The first reviews two subsets of agenda-setting theory that focus on factors shaping journalists’ decisions about what goes into the news product. The second summarizes media sociology studies of the traditional journalistic process of turning those decisions into stories. The third reviews emerging research on journalists’ assessment of user input into that process in an interactive environment. Much of this research was conducted in the United States, but British and American journalists are similar in many ways, sharing comparable perceptions of roles and norms (Henningham and Delano, 1998). The impact of the Internet on the press also has been comparable in the two countries.

### ***“Making News”: Setting the Media Agenda***

For nearly a century, communications scholars have been refining their understanding of how media messages affect audience perceptions about current affairs. Particularly since Cohen’s (1963) insight that the media may not tell us what to think but are highly successful in telling us what to think about, attention has focused on the impact of this agenda-setting process on civic society. Hundreds of studies all over the world have built solid support for interconnections between media presentation of “the news” and citizens’ understanding and interpretation of the world (Weaver, 2007; McCombs and Shaw, 1993, 1972). As the Internet has become increasingly dominant, fresh approaches have considered the theory in the context of a news medium with vast quantities of information and a fragmented, global audience (Coleman and McCombs, 2007; McCombs, 2005; Althaus and Tewksbury, 2002).

But how and why do media practitioners decide what belongs on the news agenda in the first place? Who sets the media agenda?

Much of the scholarly work that has sought to answer those questions has fallen into one of two general camps, and each has evolved into a subset of agenda-setting theory.

“Agenda building” has focused mainly on factors external to the media, particularly from the political realm, while “inter-media agenda setting” has looking primarily at the influence of other media, including providers of news, advertising and public relations.

Cobb and Elder (1971) first used the term “agenda building” in questioning why some issues “come to command the attention and concern of decision makers, while others fail” (p. 905). Taking agenda setting as a starting point, agenda-building theory has investigated the factors that feed into media decisions about what belongs on the agenda. The early focus was on interactions among political elites, journalists and the public (Asp, 1983; Lang and Lang, 1983), and that emphasis continues; one recent example shows the influence of the media agenda on parliamentary election coverage in Britain and Holland (Van Noije et al., 2008). Other work has broadened the scope to explore the influence of protesters on coverage of social movements (Smith et al., 2001), health sources on medical news (Tanner, 2004) and corporate public relations on financial news (Kioussis et al., 2007).

Agenda building thus is an inherently interactive process, with different players seeking to use the media in pursuit of their own goals – and journalists feeding those efforts into their news decisions (Mathes and Pfetsch, 1991). Essentially, setting the media agenda is an exercise in power, as competing factions strive not only for visibility but also for favorable presentation of their interests and ideas (Reese, 1991). Public relations efforts by influential elites and special interest groups have been a common focus; Huckins (1999), for example, found the Christian Coalition was able to affect U.S. media coverage of particular issues through portrayal in the group’s own publication.

Of course, those already holding political, economic or social power have a strong advantage in their ability to influence the media agenda, notably through their control of

structural mechanisms, such as press conferences or other strategic initiatives, for generating something journalists can turn into “news” (Boorstin, 1992; Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973).

Especially in a traditional media environment, where time and space are severely limited, ordinary individuals have trouble competing for a spot on the media agenda (Reese, 1991).

Media institutions also wield significant power of their own, much of it residing in the decision-making that takes place within their newsrooms, as discussed below. Those decisions not only determine what a specific media outlet will spotlight but also can influence what other outlets subsequently cover. Atwater and his colleagues (1987), followed by Reese and Danielian (1989), were among the first to document this inter-media agenda-setting effect at local and national levels, respectively. They moved beyond earlier studies that had noted a certain conformity in news coverage to provide evidence that newspaper reporting explicitly leads to coverage of the same issue by television outlets.

Later inter-media agenda-setting studies extended and refined our understanding of the phenomenon. In addition to studies documenting the influence of advertising, particularly political ads, on the media agenda (Boyle, 2001; Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998; Roberts and McCombs, 1994), scholars have identified the influence of media opinion leaders such as *The New York Times* on U.S. television coverage of international news (Golan, 2006); the importance of short- rather than long-term effects of one Belgian medium’s news decisions on those of another outlet (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2008); and the ability of larger papers to influence the agenda followed by smaller ones in election coverage (Dunn, 2009). Some work also has explored the role of alternative media in mainstream agenda building, with findings that suggest how contemporary alternative voices, such as those of bloggers, may feed into the media agenda. Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) found that issues covered by the German alternative press “spill over” to established media, affecting not only the topics covered but also the frame of reference used by journalists in presenting those issues.

Contemporary pressures of news work have intensified a trend toward imitation and content overlap even among leading news providers, notably on their websites (Boczkowski, 2010; Redden and Witschge, 2010). The participatory online environment also raises new questions about users' ability to shape content decisions, and recent scholarship has begun to consider the role of the Internet in both agenda building and inter-media agenda setting.

For example, a look at the agenda-building role of social media by Lariscy and her colleagues (2009) found business journalists made little use of user-generated content and social networking sites. Fewer than 8 percent indicated social media – from citizen blogs to social networking sites such as Facebook – were very important to their work; more than a third accorded them little or no importance. Of more direct relevance here, Boczkowski (2010) found that a clear user preference for stories with little or no civic value had minimal effect on journalists' news decisions. Journalists continued to favor public affairs stories “due to normative preferences associated with traditional occupational values and organizational mandates,” resulting in a gap between their news choices and those of consumers during ordinary political periods (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2010, p. 433).

In contrast, a series of Korean studies have suggested an inter-media agenda-setting effect for online discourse. Song (2007) found that alternative online media affected mainstream media coverage of the deaths of two Korean schoolgirls run over by a U.S. military vehicle and the ensuing anti-American protests. Lim (2006) found that major online newspapers affected the issue agendas of a Korean wire service, with especially strong influence exerted by the leading paper. And an earlier Korean study found that although newspaper reporting affected discussion of the nation's 2000 general election, the online discussion also had an impact on what the papers covered (Lee et al., 2005).

Online media also have been shown to affect news outlets in U.S. elections. Sweetser and her colleagues (2008) showed a reciprocal inter-media agenda-setting effect between

blogs and broadcast news coverage of the 2004 campaign; a key impact of the blogs was to decrease the time lag for reactions to issues covered in the news.

Influences on local news decisions have been less thoroughly explored than the negotiations among high-power elites at a national level, but several studies have examined relationships between local sources and journalists. A 1982 study found that the relative emphasis given to policy-related economic issues by a city council was reflected in the community's newspaper – but that on other issues, including social ones, rankings of importance differed significantly between the paper and the council. The authors suggest that although a prominent news source can have a big influence on the media agenda, “the selective processes and news judgments of journalists also play a significant part in shaping this agenda” (Weaver and Elliott, 1985, p. 94). Kanervo and Kanervo (1989) looked at small-town administrators' efforts to get items inserted into and deleted from the local newspaper's agenda, finding that the former was a much more prevalent practice. More recent research from O'Neill and O'Connor (2008) in Britain, which included two of the papers covered in the present study, found that local officials overwhelmingly dominated the media agenda in their communities, with readers serving as sources in just 5 percent of the sampled articles. “While editors preach the virtues of interactivity with communities, parent companies pursue policies and profits that serve to undermine contact with the public,” they concluded (p. 498).

### ***“Making News”: Traditional Media***

Concepts of agenda building and inter-media agenda setting, then, involve the influences – from both outside and inside the media, including direct audience influence through online formats – on journalists' decisions about what makes news. Media sociologists have further explored these influences. The seminal contemporary work comes from Shoemaker and Reese (1996), who probe influences at five levels: individual, media routines, organizational, extramedia and ideological. For instance, they outline the impact of

institutionalized news values, including assessments of an occurrence's importance, degree of conflict or controversy, timeliness and proximity. These news values "stem largely from the limited attention and interest of the audience," they point out. "Even if the media could tell everything that went on in a day, it would not be very useful" (p. 111).

The ways in which journalists create stories out of "everything that went on in a day" was the focus of earlier work by media sociologist Gaye Tuchman (1978a). In establishing and adhering to particular professional practices, she said, journalists were able not only to do their jobs but also to prevent outsiders from doing them; professional methods "so limit access to the media that they have become a means *not* to know" (Tuchman, 1978b, p. 109, *emphasis in original*).

Her efforts to identify the ways that journalists categorize news, in order to deal efficiently with the glut of constantly changing information and the scarcity of time and space available to organize and present it, are central to this study. Journalists, she said, distinguish first between hard news, the "factual presentation" of occurrences deemed newsworthy and "potentially available to analysis or interpretation" (Tuchman, 1978a, p. 47), and soft news, generally human-interest stories that are interesting but not in urgent need of being told. Journalists themselves have difficulty specifying what constitutes a hard or soft news story, so Tuchman (1978a, p. 51) proposed a useful chart. Key points relevant here are:

<b>Typification</b>	<b>How Is Event Scheduled?</b>	<b>Is Dissemination Urgent?</b>
Soft news	Non-scheduled	No
Hard news/spot	Unscheduled	Yes
Hard news/developing	Unscheduled	Yes
Hard news/continuing	Pre-scheduled	Yes

The term "non-scheduled" is a bit misleading; in fact, soft news stories are scheduled – but generally at the journalist's discretion. In contrast, hard news events occur and, if deemed newsworthy, require a journalist's response. Journalists classify an unexpected event, such as a fire, as spot news when they learn of it; if additional associated facts emerge over

time, the story instead is seen as “developing news.” A third hard news category, “continuing news,” covers events scheduled in advance. Tuchman’s example is legislative debate; this study places sporting events, court trials and elections under the continuing news umbrella.

Other scholars investigating how occurrences become news have found Tuchman’s classification scheme valuable. Berkowitz (1992) detailed how journalists typified a major local event to create various kinds of stories for successive newscasts. Boczkowski (2009) recently found major differences in creation of hard and soft news at the largest online paper in Argentina; he stressed the value of conceptualizing the distinction as “a construction of actors ... in which temporality plays a central role” (p. 111). Indeed, a key trait of the Internet is its ability to accommodate hard breaking news; immediacy has been identified as the core motivation for people who seek online news (Nguyen, 2010). Tremayne and his colleagues (2007) identified a steady increase in the volume of “dynamic” or continually updated online content, especially local items in the hard-news topics of weather, sports, accidents and crime – and the increase was especially marked at smaller newspapers such as those in this study.

Journalists (and researchers) typically see hard news as more valuable and professionally meritorious than soft news. Examples include a look at the mythologized professional persona of British print journalists, entailing provision of hard news by autonomous, hell-raising (and male) journalists (Aldridge, 1998); evidence of a decline in hard news coverage by a family-owned community paper after it was bought by a chain, suggesting that “ruthless pursuit of profits” can conflict with professed goals of editorial excellence (Coulson and Hansen, 1995, p. 205); and arguments that the trend away from hard news contributes to a declining interest in news overall, diminishing the quality of public information and discourse and ultimately resulting in a “net cost on democracy” (Patterson, 2000, p. 3). Although a hard/soft news dichotomy may be overly simplistic (Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky, 2010), it remains widely used by practitioners, media observers and scholars.

### ***“Making News”: Participatory Journalism***

There has been an enormous surge in use of the Internet as a platform for “participatory journalism” since the mid-2000s (Singer et al., 2011; Pew Research, 2010; Deuze, 2005). Some see this extension of opportunities for users to contribute directly to the media agenda by providing content themselves as a “second phase of public journalism” (Nip, 2006, p. 212). If so, journalists – who fiercely resisted the idea in the 1990s, saying it undermined an ability to make and enact their own autonomous news judgments (McDevitt, 2003) – have, at best, adopted the relatively safe view that public journalism involves a willingness to listen to citizens’ ideas without allowing encroachment on their own freedom to choose what to actually cover (Lambeth, 1998). For the most part, the professional culture continues to favor a top-down approach to selecting and disseminating news, and user involvement has been invited only after publication (Nip, 2006; Paulussen et al., 2007).

Most of the work to date in this area has involved national media outlets. The BBC in Britain, for example, has been a leader in providing space for user input. However, any published user contributions generally conform to “pre-determined BBC news selection processes and styles,” posing no challenge to long-standing editorial values (Harrison, 2009, p. 25); BBC editors tend to see the audience as just another news source, providing material that fits neatly within institutional frameworks (Williams et al., 2011). Usage data is seen as informing, but not driving, editorial decisions (Lee-Wright, 2010). An earlier British study, focused on major newspapers, similarly found that journalists were unwilling to relinquish control over what appeared on their websites, citing concerns about such issues as reputation and legal liability (Hermida and Thurman, 2008).

Paulussen and Ugille (2008) found that Flemish journalists strongly believe selection of newsworthy items is a core journalistic task; practitioners are concerned about bias and a lack of newsworthiness in user-generated content. The same concerns were raised by

journalists at Britain's *Guardian*, who worried that an inability to verify user contributions would negatively affect the newspaper brand (Singer and Ashman, 2009). In general, work to date indicates that while most news websites now allow users to offer interpretations of published stories, for instance through comments, journalists are reluctant to let users participate in the process of deciding what makes news in the first place (Singer et al., 2011).

More broadly, this reluctance indicates an unwillingness to relinquish the role of autonomous gatekeeper over information published under the media organization's banner, part of a concern about preserving occupational turf threatened by the growing influence and encroaching social roles of bloggers and others outside the newsroom (Lowrey, 2006). Observers say journalists are seeking to assert occupational control over the uncontrollable and to reclaim the authority that vanished in the transition from an environment in which they were central to the flow of information to one that arguably lacks any center at all (Robinson, 2007; Singer, 2007; Lowrey and Anderson, 2005). At the same time, most users appear less than eager to exert agency on the "writable web," greatly preferring to express their interests through selection of existing content rather than creation of their own (Boczkowski, 2010). They thus can best be categorized as "active recipients" of news (Singer et al., 2011).

At a local level, preliminary investigations of journalists' attitudes suggests that despite closer proximity to their audiences, they are no more likely to welcome direct community involvement in the news-making process. A recent study found strong resistance among local British newspaper journalists to the idea of giving users control over portions of the online news product; they saw user-generated content as potentially supplementing newsroom output but never replacing "proper" local journalism (Singer, 2010). Similarly, a study of editors at community papers in Kentucky found that experienced journalists were especially likely to see themselves as better able than "citizen journalists" to fill traditional roles (Nah and Chung, 2009).

## Research Questions

The literature, then, suggests that journalists have long-established processes for categorizing information and determining what they believe should go into the news product – and are extremely reluctant to relinquish control over those decisions, despite the greatly increased visibility of user activity on media-affiliated websites. From a theoretical perspective, agenda-building and inter-media agenda setting also support the idea that despite multiple influences on the media agenda, including those from news publics, the final say on what gets published has, so far, gone almost exclusively to the journalist.

This study seeks to explore just how different a user-built media agenda might look to editors. The Internet offers unprecedented opportunities for identifying user interests: Daily “hit logs” and other website traffic reports provide a level of detail far beyond anything traditional circulation audits or market research can provide. Are the stories that editors value most highly the ones that they identify as attracting audience interest? If not, where do the differences lie, and what might we learn from them?

RQ1: What types of online content do local newspaper editors see as their best efforts?

RQ2: What types of online content do they identify as attracting readers?

RQ3: Where, if at all, do editor and user agendas overlap, and with what implications?

## Method

This study is based on a Survey Monkey questionnaire sent in summer 2009 to a census of all 130 editors-in-chief at Johnston Press (JP) newspapers. As described above, JP publishes several hundred local and regional papers across Britain and Ireland, most of them weeklies. JP was chosen because of its emphasis on community news (Johnston Press, 2010b), of interest in the context of potential audience effects on local newsroom decisions. In addition, the author had access to JP newsroom personnel at the time of the study.

Each JP editor was assigned a unique identification number by the author, working from a list of names and e-mail addresses provided by the company. Editors then were sent

an e-mail invitation to complete the online questionnaire. One e-mail was returned as undeliverable, yielding a total of 129 valid survey invitations. Three follow-up mailings resulted in the completion of 95 questionnaires by September 2009, a response rate of 73.6 percent; one additional editor completed only the first of two pages.

Before starting the questionnaire, editors were informed that responses would be used only in aggregate form and identities would be kept confidential. If the editor mentioned the name of a town or other specific details, the researcher omitted that identifying information from any write-up. The survey also was encrypted for additional protection. Completing the questionnaire constituted permission for aggregated findings to be disseminated.

The questionnaire asked editors to list up to three items “that have run on your website in the past year that you are proudest of.” Examples provided in the introductory text included individual stories, ongoing issue coverage, sections of the website (for instance, on health care), specific applications (for instance, a staff podcast) “or anything else that you thought was brilliant.” Editors were asked to briefly explain each listing.

The next questionnaire page, which was not accessible until three sources of pride had been entered (or “none” keyed in), asked editors to list the three online items in the past year that they believed had “attracted the most usage or traffic.” Editors had a 100-character space to list these items but were not asked to describe or explain them. They then were asked: “Did the ‘good stuff’ – the things you highlighted on the previous page – drive traffic?” This was the only closed-ended question in the survey; available responses were “yes, all of it,” “some did, some didn’t” and “no, none of it.”

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the closed-ended question. Textual analysis was used on the open-ended questions on the first page, about sources of pride, with Tuchman’s (1978a) “typifications” serving as the available categories: soft news, hard news/spot, hard news/developing and hard news/continuing. In addition to the listed item

itself – limited to 100 characters in length -- the descriptions and explanations provided by editors, for which they had up to 800 characters of space, were used to identify the appropriate category. Some editors listed multiple items in a single text field.

Each item that an editor listed as a source of pride was placed in one and only one category (with the exception of a single listing in which the editor described both hard-news coverage of Michael Jackson's death and a soft-news nostalgia piece about a nearby Jackson concert). Of course, Tuchman did her work long before the Internet enabled such things as podcasts or online chats. Such novel offerings, many of which did not indicate specific topics ("online readers' poll," for instance, or "video content"), went into a "composite" category, as did generic responses such as "better content" or "making our site more relevant."

Because editors did not provide supplemental explanations of items that they believed had attracted significant online usage, as they did with their "best" content, it was harder to assign the non-overlapping items to specific categories. Instead, umbrella categories of "hard" or "soft" news were used for these items if their overall nature was evident from the descriptions; examples included "armed siege on local council estate" (hard) or "Search for a Star talent column" (soft). If the brief description suggested a multi-faceted construct ("photo galleries," for example), the item was again placed in the broader "composite" category.

An additional level of textual analysis then sought to identify the topical nature of the content (for example, "crime" or "sport"), again based on written descriptions provided by the editors. Each item was placed in one unique topic category. **Appendix A** provides a list.

## **Findings**

Editors mentioned a total of 432 items as either sources of pride, perceived drivers of website traffic or both. Of those, 338 (78.2 percent) could be classified according to Tuchman's (1978a) news typification scheme, as shown in **Table 1**. In addition, 364 items

(84.3 percent) could be placed in a specific topical category, as shown in **Table 2**; the other 68 were generic items such as “greater thought and creativity given to the [*website*] look and content” or “weekly video filmed and edited by staff.”

### *Editors’ sources of pride*

Of the 260 website items that editors listed as sources of pride, 187 (71.9 percent) could be categorized according to Tuchman’s scheme. As Table 1 shows, a total of 116 items (62 percent) fell into one of the three hard news categories, while 71 were soft news items.

Eighty-one sources of pride (31.2 percent of the 260 total) were specifically mentioned as attracting users to the website, again based on editors’ recall of online traffic. Just over a quarter of these traffic drivers that editors also cited as among their best content – 21 items, or 25.9 percent – were soft news. Another 48 (59.3 percent) were hard news, and a dozen items fell into the “composite” category; examples included “weekly podcasts” or a “cross-talk feature” inviting user views on a designated topic. Table 1 delineates the numbers of spot, developing and continuing hard news items cited.

Editors cited 179 items as among their best content but did not consider them to have been key traffic generators. Of these, hard news made up a smaller chunk – 68 items, or 38 percent – while soft news items again represented just over a quarter of the total (50 items, or 27.9 percent). A considerable number of sources of pride were composite items; most of these referred to generic online features, such as use of multimedia or photo galleries.

As Table 2 shows, sports coverage was the biggest topical category here (aside from the catch-all “generic” cluster). Editors listed 38 sports items as sources of pride, including 14 that they believed attracted lots of website users. Football dominated the list, with editors highlighting provision of timely results and commentary. Community-oriented stories, which included soft-news features (“100 famous [*townspeople*]”) and hard-news items (“fire service job cuts”), accounted for 31 sources of pride. Specific aspects of community coverage, such

as festivals and other entertainment events (24 items in the two categories combined) and local crime (18 items, half involving death), also were cited with relative frequency.

Editors highlighted the ability to provide breaking and ongoing coverage of hard news as a source of pride across topic categories. For example, a weekly editor who listed breaking news of redundancies at a local factory, an economic story, as both his top source of pride and biggest traffic driver, wrote: “It was a major story which broke shortly after we went to press with the printed edition. The online coverage meant we could break the story at the same time as other media without having to wait a week.”

Greater space for visual content, including pictures provided by users, also was widely cited. An editor who listed “snow watch” as a source of pride wrote that readers had sent in hundreds of pictures of unusual winter weather, calling it “a genuinely successful interactive piece of content.” Half a dozen editors highlighted increased use of social media, including Facebook and Twitter, as sources of pride. “We have started live text with key people in the community,” one wrote. “It brings us immediate interactivity with our readers and provides a new dimension to our web coverage.”

### ***Traffic drivers***

Response to the single closed-ended questionnaire item (“Did the ‘good stuff’ ... drive traffic?”) indicated that editors believed it did. Sixty of the 95 editors answering the question (63.2 percent) reported that all their best items drove traffic, and the rest ticked “some did, some didn’t.” None of the editors ticked “no, none of it.”

However, asked to list the three items that they believed had attracted the *most* usage over the past year, they indicated considerably less overlap, as Table 1 shows. Of the 253 items that editors cited as attracting user interest, just 81 also were listed as sources of pride, as described above. Another 18 were closely related to, or examples of, the content editors cited as their best. For instance, an editor wrote of one source of pride: “Coverage of

breaking news stories – fire and plane crash worked well for us with regular updates”; he then listed “plane crash story” and “youth centre fire story” as his top traffic drivers. In total, then, 99 items (39.1 percent) that editors felt represented their best online output over the previous year also struck them as having drawn significant traffic.

The 253 items listed as traffic drivers included 153 hard-news items (60.5 percent) and 67 soft-news items (26.5 percent); the rest were composites. Although the number of composite items makes comparisons tenuous, respondents seemed to feel users gave greater weight to particular kinds of hard-news stories than editors did. Of the 172 items that attracted users but were not sources of editor pride, 105 (61 percent) were categorized as hard news, while 46 (26.7 percent) were soft news items. Yet as Table 2 shows, while economy and election stories attracted some interest, user preferences leaned heavily toward coverage of quirkiness, sport, crime and death – plus a smattering of sex. Setting aside the “generic” category, sport was again the heavyweight, with 42 recalled traffic drivers involving sport, mainly football coverage of both local and English Premier League sides. Users seemed fonder than editors of quick-hit sports reports, such as transfer rumors, though they also liked live event coverage, especially in communities where local matches rarely were televised.

Sport also was the topical area of greatest overlap; editors identified 14 items in this category as among both their best and most popular content. Again, timeliness was seen as key. “The immediacy of the web was the attraction,” wrote an editor who cited the “sporting success” of the local club. “We had the story out with pics before it was in any competitor.”

The 10 overlapping community items included both soft news (for instance, photos of Christmas lights with the ability for users to vote for their favorites, a feature the editor said “will be rolled out each year as it was so successful”) and composite items, such as a video archive of local residents: “As we are a rural area there are few opportunities for local people to get their face on TV. We have taken our video camera to sports matches and community

events and uploaded the footage to the website. This proved popular.” Other community-based soft news items included “what’s on” listings and coverage of local entertainment events. Most local hard news items also could be placed in explicit categories, such as crime or traffic accidents; however, a handful of “community” items that attracted users’ attention – for instance, “Muslims protest as soldiers parade through town” – were hard news stories.

Table 2 suggests everyone loves a juicy murder; the “death/crime” category attracted both users and editors, who again highlighted the ability to update details, as well as the depth of coverage afforded by the Internet. However, editors felt users were unduly interested in lesser crimes that newsroom professionals saw as only borderline newsworthy. “Generally, the content which draws most readers are stories relating to crime, sex and violence,” said an editor who listed those three as her top traffic drivers. “Sex” was listed as a traffic driver by seven editors – though none seemed to care much for it themselves.

Editors did share some of their users’ taste for offbeat items, though, and appeared to have a special fondness for animal stories. UFO sightings (categorized under “Quirky”) also overlapped in appeal. One enterprising journalist created a “hotspot map” after “a rash of UFO sightings in the area”; he listed it as his top traffic driver and top source of pride. The newspaper even “got a news story out of it when we realised the sighting pinpoints on the map formed a mysterious triangle shape across the area.”

## **Discussion**

These findings directly address the first two research questions. The first one asked what types of online content local British newspaper editors see as their best efforts, and the results indicate a preference for hard local news. Sports coverage represented the single biggest topic – as it did in Boczkowski’s (2010) Argentine study, as well. Users also gravitated toward sport, a finding that addresses the second research question about perceived

online audience interests. Users favored other hard news coverage, too, though with a stronger emphasis on crime and death, at least in the subsequent assessment of editors.

The common view of online sports coverage as appealing partially addresses the third research question, which asked where editor and user agendas converged. Although no editors said their best content failed to attract users, the specific items they listed overlapped relatively little. Only around a third of the items cited as sources of pride also were identified as attracting users. Editors' responses indicate not only that their news choices are out of sync with users' choices but also that user interests are not having a major effect on news decisions, again closely in line with what Boczkowski (2010) found. That said, a look at broad topic categories suggests the differences are nuanced – and not necessarily in the direction that journalists claim to prefer, toward coverage of “serious” news. There is, then, some agenda overlap between editors and users.

However, this study does provide support for journalists' concern that news agendas driven by user interests could negatively affect the quality of the media product, a concern other researchers have identified at a national level rather than the local one of interest here. Users do seem drawn to accounts of mishaps and misdeeds, as well as to accord space on their news agenda to the quirky and the curious. Along with the UFO stories described above (which editors also liked), these included such gems as the man “buried with a can of Stella Artois lager” and the local resident who found “evidence of a giant snake in the Amazon,” recalled as top user attractions on two websites in this study. A third editor wrote that “a story about sex from a year ago still remains as one of our most popular stories to date.”

But editors also liked “warm and fuzzy” stories – indeed, more sources of pride than traffic drivers were categorized as soft news – and their interests overlapped with the interests of users even if the specific stories they highlighted were different. Nostalgia pieces (for instance, a 50<sup>th</sup> high school anniversary or a D-Day remembrance) were favorites of three

editors; three different editors cited nostalgia pieces as popular among users. A similar pattern – shared preference for kinds of stories though not necessarily for specific items – can be seen within other categories, including weather, economic issues and local events.

In summary, although the findings from this study are preliminary, the agendas of local journalists and users, at least as indicated by editors' subsequent assessments, seem to overlap only partially. Moreover, the overlap appears to be less about "hard" or "soft" news – each is part of strong and broadly appealing community coverage – than about the specific nature of the selected content. Users choose some things that editors also favor – and some things that editors find considerably less meritorious, particularly the sorts of content that Boczkowski (2010) labels "non-public affairs" material (p.150).

Moreover, the fact that relatively few of the most popular items were also the ones editors highlighted suggests that despite excruciatingly detailed "hit log" data, online audience preferences do not seem to be having a notable agenda building or inter-media agenda setting impact on local editors. This finding supports other research, cited above, that suggests journalists resist reshaping their news values in response to user content choices.

Whether the items that appear on the website – thus constituting the local newspaper agenda as communicated through the Internet – will change over time in response to this audience input remains to be seen. The work of Tremayne and his colleagues (2007) suggests that crime, accidents and the like are increasingly prevalent on news sites. Of course, the fact that an item was available to be accessed means it was, by definition, part of that website's agenda. But how big a part, and how prominently displayed, cannot be determined without a content analysis of these sites – ideally, longitudinal analysis to determine the impact, if any, of user data or input over time. Nor can it be determined from the editors' responses whether the people so interested in that Stella story were regular local readers or Joe Sixpacks with an automated feed set up to bring them "beer." A more rigorous analysis of the nature of online

content that engages local users would boost understanding of where journalist and user agendas overlap – and where they do not.

This study has a number of other limitations. It is not generalizable for several reasons. First, all the editors were employed by a single company in neighboring countries with comparable media structures. Although not exactly a case study, it shares some of that method's narrow scope. The respondent pool was small, and although the response rate was high at more than 73 percent, that figure still represents the views of fewer than 100 editors. Textual analysis, used here to identify items fitting the categories of interest, is a qualitative and somewhat subjective measure, further limiting generalizability. And as specific traffic data were unavailable, this questionnaire relied on editors' assessments, in hindsight, of the content that attracted the most users. Their assessments are interesting in their own right, indicating what editors *thought* was a hit (literally) with audiences, but concrete figures would provide a check against retroactive and potentially hazy views of popularity.

Another drawback is the high number of “composite” items, which could not be identified as either hard or soft news, and items with generic topics. Questions might have been more specifically worded to avoid the prevalence of broad responses such as “breaking news” or “video reports,” as well as to solicit more explicit feedback; alternatively, editors might have been asked to choose or rank items from a list, enabling quantitative analysis.

Despite these limitations, this study has provided a unique look at the intersection between the news choices of journalists and online users, indicating new opportunities for audience input into agenda-setting processes that long have been controlled by official sources and other institutional forces inside and outside the newsroom. It suggests that journalists and users do not have radically different ideas about what “makes news,” but nor they do not see eye to eye on the specific items that belong on the news agenda.

**Table 1: Hard and soft news items,  
cited as sources of pride and/or traffic drivers**

	<b>Both source of pride and traffic driver (N = items cited)</b>	<b>Source of pride only (N = items cited)</b>	<b>Traffic driver only<sup>a</sup> (N = items cited)</b>	<b>TOTAL (N = items cited)</b>
<b>Hard/spot</b>	13	16		29
<b>Hard/developing</b>	20	22		42
<b>Hard/continuous</b>	15	30		45
<b>Hard (generic)</b>			105	105
<b>Soft</b>	21	50	46	117
<b>Composite</b>	12	61	21	94
<b>TOTAL</b>	81	179	172	432

<sup>a</sup> Includes 18 items classified as related to, or examples of, sources of pride. Of these, 10 were hard news items, one was a soft news item and seven were composite items.

**Table 2: Topic of items cited as sources of pride and/or traffic drivers**  
(Topics are defined in Appendix A.)

	<b>Both source of pride and traffic driver</b> (N = items cited)	<b>Source of pride only</b> (N = items cited)	<b>Traffic driver only</b> <sup>a</sup> (N = items cited)	<b>TOTAL</b> (N = items cited)
Accidents	1	2	5	8
Animals	2	5	1	8
Celebrity	2	2	2	6
Children	2	4	2	8
Community	10	21	9	40
Crime	6	3	18	27
Death (generic)		2	2	4
Death/Accident	2	-	5	7
Death/Crime	5	4	7	16
Death/Fire	-	-	1	1
Death/Tribute	2	4	1	7
Economy	2	4	5	11
Elections	3	4	3	10
Entertainment	1	13	9	23
Ethics	-	-	1	1
Festivals	4	6	5	15
Fires	1	-	3	4
(generic)	10	39	19	68
Health	2	8	5	15
Nostalgia	-	3	3	6
Politics	1	7	1	9
Polls	-	3	2	5
Quirky	5	2	15	22
Scandal	1	1	2	4
Sex	-	-	7	7
Social media	-	6	-	6
Sport	14	24	28	66
Travel	2	1	3	6
Weather	2	6	5	13
What's On	1	5	3	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>432</b>

<sup>a</sup> Includes 18 items classified as related to, or examples of, sources of pride. Sports and generic categories accounted for four items apiece. Accidents, community, election and polls categories accounted for two items apiece. Crime and fire categories each accounted for a single item related to a source of pride.

## APPENDIX A: CONTENT TOPIC

The following categories were used to identify the topic of items cited by the editors. Topics emerged from the questionnaire data. The same topic categories were used for content that editors highlighted as their best and content they identified as attracting the most usage.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
Accidents	Traffic accidents, plane crashes and other accidents, mostly fatal ones
Animals	Domestic or wild animals, including animal photos
Celebrity	Famous people other than entertainers, including the royal family
Children	Coverage of school issues, plus photos, etc., of local youngsters
Community	Info about local people or events not matching another specific category
Crime	Hard-news stories about crime, typically local incidents and trials
Death	Loss of human life; paired with accident/crime/fire/tribute as appropriate
Economy	Economic stories, including recession coverage
Elections	Coverage of local elections, including the candidates
Entertainment	Items about actors/movies, television; musicians/bands, music; etc.
Ethics	Just one item here, related to the press complaints commission code
Festivals	Local fairs, festivals, parades, agricultural shows, etc.
Fires	Local fires, including photos from both newsroom staff and users
(generic)	Listed items for which the editor did not specify a particular topic
Health	Items about illness (for instance, swine flu) or medical care
Nostalgia	Local history, including user contributions, reminisces, etc.
Politics	Non-election items about political people or events
Polls	Online polls or other informal voting opportunities
Quirky	Generally soft-news “weird world” items, including UFOs
Scandal	Coverage of local or national scandals, such as MP expenses claims
Sex	Racy items ... popular with users but not with editors
Social media	Generally uncategorized items referencing Facebook, user content, etc.
Sports	Hard and soft items about sports events, athletes, teams, etc.
Travel	Road conditions, traffic updates; also travel and tourism information
Weather	Weather coverage, particularly extreme weather such as snow or floods
What’s On	Local event listings and community calendars

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