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Interviewing the PM with toddler in tow: an experiment in hyperlocal journalism

Richard Jones founded hyperlocal website the Saddleworth News in 2010, and soon found his patch in the national spotlight. But could editorial triumph translate to commercial success?

It's January 2011. The scene is a cramped, upstairs room at a car repair garage in Oldham. I'm sat next to a couple of other local journalists as we interview David Cameron about the Conservatives' prospects in the forthcoming Oldham East and Saddleworth by-election.

A radio reporter begins a question: "Labour are portraying this by-election as a referendum on the coalition..." He's interrupted by giggling. It's my young daughter, who is perched on my knee.

"There we are, you had your answer," says the Prime Minister, turning in her direction. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen months," I say.

"There you are, fifteen months and laughing at that idea!"

So, how did I come to the unusual position of interviewing the Prime Minister with a toddler in tow?

I was covering the by-election for *Saddleworth News*, a hyperlocal website which I started writing in February 2010. A few weeks before that, my wife had gone back to work, leaving me as a stay-at-home dad to our first child.

I'd done various journalism jobs, in TV and radio, staff and freelance, since graduating from university in 2002. I spent the best part of six years at Sky News. But my wife earned more than I did, which made it an obvious decision for me to give up work to become a full-time father.

I set up *Saddleworth News* for two main reasons. The first was pure selfishness. I didn't want to leave journalism forever, and knew it would be harder to get back in with a gaping hole on my CV. I also thought my brain would appreciate

something to think about every day that didn't involve nappies, feeding or Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes.

The second reason was more public-spirited. We'd only recently moved to Saddleworth, a collection of largely rural Yorkshire villages on the Manchester side of the Pennines. With just one or two articles a day in the Oldham paper, and some monthly freesheets and magazines, there was relatively little news coverage of an area which has a distinct identity. I hoped my skills might be of some use to the local community.

So, instead of talking in worried tones about the future of our trade, I thought the best thing would be to actually do journalism, and experiment with something new. My personal circumstances had given me an opportunity, and I decided to take it.

An evening with Wordpress

It's easy to become a publisher these days. A quick purchase of some web hosting and an evening tinkering with a free WordPress theme, and *Saddleworth News* was ready to go. I got a Twitter account, a Facebook page, some business cards, and started writing stories.

At first I set aside one hour a day to work on the site during my daughter's afternoon nap, and gave myself a target of one post every weekday. The site was established as a blog, as I thought that one daily update would be enough to give regular visitors something new to look at without putting me under too much pressure to constantly come up with new material.

The site hadn't been going long when a teenager sadly killed himself at a nearby railway station. A passenger on the train involved was posting updates and pictures from the scene on Twitter. After getting in touch and asking if I could use his content, I was able to quickly publish it in articles about the incident.

With the local paper not getting anything online about the story until the following day, my site was the only resource for information about why the trains between Huddersfield and Manchester weren't running. The site's hits increased more than fivefold overnight, mostly thanks to Google searches. It was an early lesson in the value of publishing content that other media outlets can't or won't produce.

Over the following weeks, every time the site had a spike in traffic like that, the hit stats always settled back down at a higher level than before, until several hundred unique users became the daily norm rather than the exception.

If publishing stories faster than other media is one service hyperlocal sites can provide, doing issues in more depth is another, and it's surely a more valuable one too.

I've always enjoyed covering politics. In the run-up to the 2005 general election, I spent months on Sky's election unit helping to prepare their coverage. As polling day in 2010 approached, I knew that both the Westminster constituency of Oldham East and Saddleworth, and the local wards being

contested on Oldham Council, would be closely fought, particularly between Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

Pondering how to approach the campaign on *Saddleworth News*, I mentioned to a newspaper reporter that I was thinking of doing full interviews with all the candidates. He said he'd had a similar idea, but had been told by his editor that "there wasn't space in the paper" for it.

This was nonsense. The editor could have found space, if not in the paper then certainly online, had he wanted. He just chose not to, and instead the paper's readers were only given prepared statements made by each of the candidates, unchallenged by even basic questioning. It was clear to me that I could use my journalism skills to not only keep myself entertained by covering the campaign, but also put the candidates under a bit of scrutiny that they wouldn't face from anyone else.

This had some surprising effects. When trying to get hold of the UKIP candidate for the neighbouring seat of Colne Valley, I discovered that he'd pulled out at the last minute. After reading about this on my site, a local bookshop owner came forward and replaced him. I jokingly told the Conservative frontrunner that, if he ended up losing by fewer votes than UKIP received, he could blame me personally. He didn't look entirely thrilled at the prospect, so it was perhaps just as well for me that he won comfortably enough in the end.

Along with an article about each candidate, I included a link to the whole interview as an audio file. I soon realised that well-known local councillors were getting dozens of downloads of their full interviews, while some of the Westminster candidates languished in single figures, something which encouraged me to redouble my council coverage after the election was over.

The internet is forever
Defending the marginal seat of Oldham East and Saddleworth was Phil Woolas, then Labour's Immigration Minister. As with all of the interviews, I had my daughter with me when I went to see him in his campaign HQ. His wife agreed to look after her during my chat with her husband, and I left Mrs Woolas getting her rosette chewed by my obviously-hungry daughter as I began asking questions. There were piles of leaflets all around the office, although I didn't realise at the time quite how significant they would turn out to be.

Woolas held the seat narrowly after a couple of recounts, but his Lib Dem opponent Elwyn Watkins mounted a rare and extraordinary legal challenge to the result, on the grounds that Woolas had told lies about his character in those campaign leaflets. Over the weeks ahead, I wrote lots more articles about this, reporting on various small developments in the saga.

By the time the case ended in a shock triumph for Watkins and bitter defeat for Woolas, *Saddleworth News* had by far the largest online archive of material about the story. Checking my web stats, I found that people from Saddleworth and much further afield kept finding old articles I'd written, including my

campaign interviews with all the protagonists. They were the interviews which didn't exist anywhere else because nobody else had bothered to do them.

When national journalists arrived to cover the subsequent by-election, clutching printouts of my articles which they'd read on the train, I had evidence I'd been doing something right.

The depth of my coverage of the Woolas saga and by-election helped raise the site's profile, and also taught me another lesson about online journalism. The internet is forever. No longer is a news story tomorrow's fish and chip paper, forgotten about within a day of being written. It can be discovered and read months and even years later by people searching on Google. So if your article is going to have a long life, best make sure it's good.

I've described how speed and depth can be two qualities of good hyperlocal reporting, and I'd add context to that list.

One of the main differences between writing my own site and working as part of a team at a conventional news operation was the lack of an editor. In my experience, editors are full of reasons as to why you shouldn't cover a particular story. Reporters at all levels of journalism will be familiar with responses along the lines of "I'm not interested in that" or "we don't do that kind of story" or "we covered that last week/month/year" before being told to find something else.

If you're the editor as well as the journalist, you don't have to worry about such whims. I had the freedom to stick with ongoing local issues, such as a continuing row over the future of the running track at a playing field.

After a packed public meeting on the issue, the local paper put the issue on its front page. But then rarely covered it again for months, presumably because of an editorial view that the story had been 'done' and little or no following-up was required.

On *Saddleworth News*, I reported on every new angle however small, including petitions started by both sides of the argument, letters giving different views, and discussions at various council meetings. I also used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain a copy of a council report on the fields, bringing significant details into the public domain.

Quickly, I'd built up a mass of material that couldn't be matched anywhere else. In every article I took care to link back to all of my previous coverage of the topic, putting each new development into the proper context.

This meant that if a reader was new to the running track debate, they could easily find lots more information and an assortment of views about it, simply by clicking on the links in my stories. It's the sort of context which is all too often missing from reporting, whether it's the parish council or Israel/Palestine.

Obviously you can't put a hyperlink in a newspaper, but even newspaper websites are often reluctant to include them. This could be because of corporate decisions to try to prevent readers clicking onto other websites, or because journalists simply don't know much about what links are or how to use them.

As with the political coverage, this isn't necessarily a criticism of newspapers. They've got plenty of other things to do every day, often with declining numbers of staff.

But if newspapers can't or won't cover issues quickly, or in reasonable depth, or in the proper context, those are things hyperlocal sites can and should be doing instead, adding value to a local community instead of rehashing what is already available.

To stick it to the snoozing councillor? Or not?

Covering news on a very local basis throws up all kinds of dilemmas. Lest I get too big for my hyperlocal boots, a couple of weeks after all the by-election excitement I found myself at a meeting of Saddleworth Parish Council.

The councillors voted on whether to continue paying for a summer tourist shuttle bus to a local reservoir. Not exactly a huge issue, but worth a few grand of public cash all the same.

With the vote tied at six-all, the councillors noticed that one of their number had dozed off. They all thought it was rather amusing, and prodded him awake. Having slept through the whole discussion this councillor could have decided the future of the scheme one way or the other, but, unsurprisingly a bit confused about what was going on, decided not to vote.

Walking home, I wondered how I should report this. I was tempted to really stick it to the snoozing councillor. After all, his inability to stay awake during the meeting had a direct impact on whether several thousand pounds of local taxpayers' money was spent or not.

If I'd been writing for the paper that's probably what I would have done, because being part of a local institution like that would have afforded me a bit of protection against any backlash from the councillor's colleagues.

But when you're on your own, your own credibility and reputation is all you've got. Having a pop at an elderly gent, who despite illness was still attempting to do the unpaid role he had been elected to, would have been rather mean-spirited. If his colleagues had chosen not to speak to me because of my coverage it would have made my job a lot harder. And it would have been embarrassing when bumping into them at the shops or in the pub, as I regularly did.

So I mentioned the sleeping councillor, but in a straightforward way near the end of my story, rather than taking a more accusing angle. It still got a notable reaction in comments on Saddleworth News, although I was spared too much criticism. Perhaps I was too cautious. But on the other hand, if you're covering a very local area where you also happen to live, perhaps it's in everyone's interests to take a less sensational slant to your reporting.

Hyperlocal sites face a much bigger problem than fretting about councillors, though. It's the same problem exercising managers, bean counters and journalists at news operations around the country and the world. The problem of money.

I'm a journalist, not a salesman. And I found selling ads on *Saddleworth News* difficult. I think this was partly down to my own lack of selling skills, and partly because most business owners weren't used to internet advertising.

Despite my site's reach of more than 20,000 unique users per month, in an area of only 24,000 people, I found it hard to persuade the butcher and the baker of the value of taking out an ad. Much easier for them to do what they've always done, and use the glossy magazines or the daily paper.

Most of the ads I did sell were to people who used the website as readers and had their own small online businesses. But I only ever made £150 a month from ads, a paltry return given I had extended the time I spent writing it to two hours every weekday.

When my daughter turned two and we wanted to start putting her into nursery for at least a couple of days each week, I thought about trying to make *Saddleworth News* my full-time job. Had I been 22 I might have given it a go, but when you've got a family and a mortgage, gambling isn't so attractive.

And a gamble is exactly what it would have been, one with the odds stacked against. I would have needed to increase my income from the site at least tenfold to start to make it viable as a career, which would have meant spending all of my time chasing cash rather than chasing stories.

There was also no guarantee that even if I became financially successful, others wouldn't simply seek to copy me. Partly inspired by the perceived success of *Saddleworth News*, other local people had already established different sites focusing on events listings and Groupon-style daily deals for local shops and restaurants. Not competing with me for content, but certainly competing for advertising money.

That helps explain why it was an easy decision to give it up and get back into more traditional work, including lecturing. I had various options for the site, but all but one would have had me continuing to do *Saddleworth News* for little reward. Most involved bolting on some kind of paid-for business directory to the site, while a freesheet offered me a very small sum to republish my stories. Thanks, but no thanks.

So, I chose the best offer I had, and passed the site to University Campus Oldham, part of the University of Huddersfield. A journalism student is now writing *Saddleworth News* as a final year project. I believe there's a great untapped potential in university journalism departments, both in terms of under-used equipment and talented and enthusiastic students. But that's a discussion for another day.

Hyperlocal websites have a future. Of course they do. As I've explained, it's easy to set up a website nowadays. There's no reason why well-intentioned local residents shouldn't do just that and fill them with details of coffee mornings and church services, much in the same way that people have long been producing parish newsletters.

But I'm sceptical about whether hyperlocal journalism of a professional standard has any more of a future than newspaper journalism. For all the

benefits of hyperlocal reporting which I've described, the cash crisis facing other parts of our trade is there too.

I hoped my experiment with *Saddleworth News* might provide some answers. It was fun and frustrating, exciting and boring, illuminating and tedious, just like journalism is. But I'm afraid it didn't get me any closer to a model which will keep reporters in the councils and courtrooms.

Although if journalists start routinely taking their children with them to interview politicians, you'll know who started the trend.

Note on the author
Richard Jones is a freelance journalist and visiting lecturer in online at the University of Leeds. He has a background in national TV and radio, including six years spent working at Sky News. Richard set up hyperlocal site *Saddleworth News* in 2010 after becoming a stay-at-home dad to his first child. The site gained attention for its extensive coverage of the Phil Woolas affair and subsequent Oldham East and Saddleworth by-election. In 2011, it became part of the Digital Journalism course at University Campus Oldham. Richard can be found on Twitter @rlwjones.