

# **CovLife: Developing Local Media**

**Discovery Phase Report - July 2016**

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## Acknowledgements

CovLife: Developing Local Media is driven by **Dr Rachel Matthews** at Coventry University. Rachel has extensive professional experience in the local news industry having worked for local newspapers for more than 15 years. She now researches local journalism as an industry, and particularly the way in which it uses the ideological value of serving communities.

This phase of the project was also supported by journalist and communications professional **Zain Luke Ali**, and digital information designer **Jacqui Speculand**, Principal Project Lead in the Disruptive Media Learning Lab at Coventry University.

We are also grateful for the expert input of **Helen Cuthill**, Associate Dean (Enterprise and Commercial) in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, who facilitated the consultation event.

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**For more information about CovLife: Developing Local Media, please email Dr Rachel Matthews ([r.matthews@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:r.matthews@coventry.ac.uk)).**

## Summary

The Discovery Phase of the project was designed to investigate existing local media and media usage in Coventry, and to explore the need, viability, and options for a new form of community media service in the city. Occurring in two stages, this involved:

- Mapping the existing media ecosystem in Coventry to understand existing provision.
- Meeting with community stakeholders to assess their media usage and needs.

The original expectation was that these findings would feed into the preliminary design and development process of a prototype platform. However, the key message to emerge from this process is that users want community-focussed content accessible via existing channels, either digitally or in print, rather than a specific platform. This phase has then, built an effective methodology, which can be taken to community groups in Coventry to explore this question further.

The key takeaways are:

1. Gaps exist in the categories of content provided by the existing media ecosystem in Coventry – although thinking outside the traditional categories used by local media is really tough.
2. Users want content provided by professional journalists because they feel they can trust it.
3. Users access information about their communities in a wide variety of ways. They do not want a specialist platform to add to this noise.
4. Therefore, the mode of delivery for categories of content will need to be tailored to the audience at which it is aimed. This may well be on paper as well as digital.

This has led to a reassessment of the CovLife: Developing Local Media project – so that rather than a platform, it exists as a service. The emerging concept is that of a not-for-profit news agency specialising in content aligned to those categories identified and which sits within, and networks with, existing news providers.

## Background and Introduction

The role of journalism is widely understood to be fundamental to the democratic function of society, ensuring properly informed populations and communities, whilst acting as a 'public watchdog', keeping an eye on those in positions of authority and power. Whilst journalism still aims to fulfil this role, the disruption caused by new technologies throughout the 21st century has presented a number of challenges and opportunities. The emergence of increased online connectivity, mobile, social media, blogging, and data analytics has transformed the way we produce, distribute, and consume information; today, anybody can publish, broadcast, and advertise – a privilege previously reserved solely for journalists. As such, audiences now demand and have access to more information than ever, in more ways than ever.

At the same time, new technologies have created more ways for journalists to connect with their audience, however, with audiences now demanding more, journalism has to be more targeted, more convenient, more engaging, and more focused on the audience than ever in order to be 'successful'. This has all posed an enormous threat to well-established forms of journalism; the local news industry in particular has faced a challenge to its traditional advertising-led business model, which has led to dramatic decline in the journalistic resources available on the ground. In turn this has led to an increasing anxiety expressed at a variety of levels about the impact of this decline on local communities. Additionally, a variety of newcomers are seeking to exploit the potential of new approaches and new technologies, creatively and financially.

### **Case Study 1: *The Bristol Cable* - Pioneering a New Model for Media Ownership and Production**

*The Bristol Cable* is a non-profit media co-operative, created and owned by over 1200 people in the city of Bristol, who are working to redefine local media, producing journalism that is high quality, interesting, relevant, and accountable to local people.

This is being achieved with challenging community sourced content via a multimedia website and a free quarterly print edition, cooperative ownership, and regular community

action with free public events, meetings, and journalism training workshops.

The main source of income comes from membership and donations. Anyone can join co-op from £1 a month - currently, over 1200 people contribute an average of £2.50 a month. Members are considered part owners - they can contribute content, and have a say on key decisions such as money, content, and events. Members can also vote and stand to be part of the Elected Board of Directors who provide overall oversight and strategic guidance.

The Elected Board of Directors all come from a variety of backgrounds with diverse skills and current occupations (whilst volunteering on the project) ranging from waiters, university tutors, youth workers, administrators, journalists, unemployed, and more.

Whilst nearly all contributors currently work on a voluntary basis, following the success of co-op in the city, it is now looking to introduce a payment budget on an equal flat rate to begin with.

**Source:** [www.thebristolcable.org/about](http://www.thebristolcable.org/about)

CovLife: Developing Local Media is a research-led project, which intervenes in this increasingly wide gap left in the market by the continued decline of traditional local news outlets. This topic is currently the subject of debate within the highest government, industry, and academic circles in the UK. As such, this project is a timely, practice-based intervention in this area; it is real, present, and now. This positioning is enabled by its interrogation of the key value proposition of 'community benefit', which is exploited by commercial local media to justify their industry practice. The project suggests that these monopolistic media no longer fully sustain this value but have reduced it to a functional value, which serves their financial interest and continued survival in the ever changing industry. As such, the project proposes creating a non-profit model, which is able to re-emphasise the community in its activities, and the project aims to develop a prototype for a new form of local media service, which could be designed and delivered in collaboration with community stakeholders.

Focussing initially on the city of Coventry, the project aims to develop such a service for the Coventry community, and a meeting with potential stakeholders demonstrated a strong desire for such a service in the city, as a way to reach populations and communities within the city and to showcase the best of Coventry life. Whilst the project recognises that established local news brands like the *Coventry Telegraph* are still vital to the city; it suggests that there is also room for different projects, which can serve the community in different

ways. Exploring what those projects might be and what they might look like is central to this project. This is particularly resonant as Coventry prepares to bid for City of Culture 2021 status.

## Discovery Phase

Whilst the project aims to remain open to every opportunity, early research and other similar projects (see case studies) originally suggested that a new digital collaborative community media *platform* might be the best solution, working with and for the local community. As such, our original vision proposed building such a platform for the city of Coventry.

The Discovery Phase of the project was designed to investigate existing local media and media usage in Coventry, and to explore the need, viability, and options for such a service in the city. Occurring in two stages, this involved:

1. Mapping the existing media ecosystem in Coventry to understand existing provision.
2. Meeting with community stakeholders to assess their media usage and needs.

### **Case Study 2: Village Soup - Working to Reduce the Technical and Financial Barriers that often stand in the way of Local Publishing**

Village Soup is an online publishing software company, working in partnership with community newspaper publisher, Courier Publications LLC. Both are based in Maine, US.

Based on community consultation, the team behind Village Soup found that online platforms are important for community news, but a viable newspaper is needed to sustain the level of time-honored journalism necessary to support democracy and community life, and to provide the financial support required to continue and develop.

Through their dedicated partnership, they are able to offer tailored platform *and* print solutions for local publishers and communities, whilst also reducing the technical and financial challenges that often stand in the way.

They note the importance of keeping the printed product relevant to communities. By partnering with local customers and businesses, they are working *with* the community. By sharing office space with the courier for their Flagship publications *The Courier Gazette* and *The Camden Herald* ([www.knox.villagesoup.com](http://www.knox.villagesoup.com)), and *The Republican Journal* ([www.waldo.villagesoup.com](http://www.waldo.villagesoup.com)), they are also working to truly understand what makes a

platform and a publication work together for the news staff, the local citizens, and the local businesses. This model is working to deliver new revenue whilst diminishing expenses.

**Source:** [www.villagesoup.com/about](http://www.villagesoup.com/about)





- Coventry Observer: a weekly freesheet owned by Bullivant Media. Based in Leamington Spa. ([www.coventryobserver.co.uk](http://www.coventryobserver.co.uk))
- Coventry Advertiser: monthly newspaper for local businesses. ([www.coventryadvertiser.co.uk](http://www.coventryadvertiser.co.uk))

Other community publications/platforms:

- Coventry Citivision: quarterly magazine from CCC ([http://www.coventry.gov.uk/info/4/council\\_news\\_and\\_publications/255/citivision\\_magazine](http://www.coventry.gov.uk/info/4/council_news_and_publications/255/citivision_magazine))
- Echo: Community Newspaper for Earlsdon, Chapelfields, Hearsall and Spon End districts of Coventry. ([www.echonews.org.uk](http://www.echonews.org.uk))
- Your Call Magazine: an independent publication run locally in Coventry, Warwickshire and Solihull Villages (<http://www.yourcallpublishing.co.uk/about-us/your-call-magazine/>)
- Chatterbox Magazine: bi-monthly publication - 'the only FREE, quality magazine, covering all of Coventry, Kenilworth, Warwick, Meriden, Bubbenhall, Baginton Village and many more of the outlying villages'. (<http://www.chatterbox-magazine.co.uk/>)

### **Case Study 3: *ECHO* – Coventry’s Community Newspaper**

*ECHO* community newspaper and web platform provides a source of information, comment and entertainment to the Earlsdon, Chapelfields, Hearsall and Spon End districts of Coventry. The newspaper is sold through more than 20 community outlets, including newsagents, churches and other shops.

The first issue was published in April 1979, when 1,000 free copies were produced, thanks to the sponsorship of six local businesses. The second edition was largely paid for by advertising and went on sale for just five pence. Since then, *ECHO* has been independently financed and continues to be valued by the local community.

*ECHO* is produced entirely by a team of community volunteers and has no affiliation to any

political, religious, commercial, or other organisation. Recognising the value of the paper as a non-profit making service to the community, none of the sellers take a commission on sales either. Content from local people and organisations is welcomed, with the newspaper being open to anyone who has a contribution to make.

**Source:** [www.echonews.org.uk](http://www.echonews.org.uk)

Student publications/platforms:

- The University Paper Coventry and Warwickshire: monthly student newspaper, based in London. (<http://www.unipaper.co.uk/location/coventry>)
- The Boar: Warwick University student newspaper (<http://theboar.org/>)
- Source: Coventry University Student Media (<http://source-media.co.uk/>)
- Other University platforms: CoventryTV, Coventry Online, iCov.

## **Radio/Online**

The local radio stations identified include:

- BBC Coventry & Warwickshire: 94.8FM  
([www.bbc.co.uk/bbccoventryandwarwickshire](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbccoventryandwarwickshire),  
[www.bbc.co.uk/news/england/coventry\\_and\\_warwickshire](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/england/coventry_and_warwickshire))
- The New Touch: 96.2FM ([www.962touchfm.co.uk](http://www.962touchfm.co.uk))
- Free Radio Coventry and Warwickshire: 97.0FM. Owned by Orion Media. Based in Birmingham. (<http://www.freeradio.co.uk/>)
- Free Radio 80s: 1359am. Owned by Orion Media. Based in Birmingham.  
(<http://www.freeradio.co.uk/80s>)
- Heart FM: midlands based with Coventry coverage (<http://www.heart.co.uk/>)
- The Hillz FM: 98.6FM. Hillfields based community radio station. ([www.hillzfm.co.uk](http://www.hillzfm.co.uk))
- Radio Plus: 101.5FM ([www.radioplus.org.uk](http://www.radioplus.org.uk))
- Coventry Hospital Radio - serves the patients and visitors of University Hospital Coventry ([www.coventryhospitalradio.org](http://www.coventryhospitalradio.org))

## Television/Online

The city is also covered on regional TV News by

- BBC Midlands Today
- ITV News Central ([www.itv.com/news/central/topic/coventry/](http://www.itv.com/news/central/topic/coventry/))

## Other Online Platforms

Other organisations providing local news identified:

- Coventry City Council ([www.coventry.gov.uk](http://www.coventry.gov.uk))
- Coventry University ([www.coventry.ac.uk](http://www.coventry.ac.uk))
- Coventry University Student's Union ([www.cusu.org](http://www.cusu.org))
- Coventry Police (<https://www.west-midlands.police.uk/your-local-police/coventry/>)

Local news Facebook Pages identified:

- Coventry ([https://www.facebook.com/coventrycc/?ref=br\\_rs](https://www.facebook.com/coventrycc/?ref=br_rs))
- Coventry and Warwickshire (<https://www.facebook.com/coventryandwarwickshire>)
- My Coventry ([https://www.facebook.com/mycoventry/?ref=br\\_rs](https://www.facebook.com/mycoventry/?ref=br_rs))
- Coventry City Centre - (<https://www.facebook.com/CovCityCentre/>)
- Coventry Classified (<https://www.facebook.com/coventryconnected>)
- Coventry - Live Updates (<https://www.facebook.com/livecov>)
- Coventry Updates (<https://www.facebook.com/CoventryUpdates>)
- Coventry Memories (<https://www.facebook.com/coventrymemories>)
- Spotted: Coventry (<https://www.facebook.com/Spotted-Coventry-City-505529132840212>)
- Spotted: Coventry University (<https://www.facebook.com/SpottedCoventryUni>)
- Breaking Coventry News (<https://www.facebook.com/breakingcoventrynews>)
- Coventry UK City of Culture bid 2021 (<https://www.facebook.com/coventry2021>)
- Love Earlsdon (<https://www.facebook.com/LoveEarlsdon>)
- Coventry and Warwickshire Cannabis Community (<https://www.facebook.com/CovWarksCC>)

Local news Twitter pages identified:

- Coventry News: @ThePeeping\_Tom
- Coventry News: @NewsCoventry
- Visit Coventry: @visit\_coventry
- Coventry Journal: @coventryjournal
- Coventry News: @NewsInCoventry
- Coventry Updates: @CoventryUpdate
- Coventry Chatter: @CoventryChatter
- News 4 Coventry: @news4cov
- Coventry Updates: @CovUpdates
- Coventry City Centre: @CovCityCentre
- Coventry Media: @CoventryMedia

## Stage 2: Meeting with community stakeholders

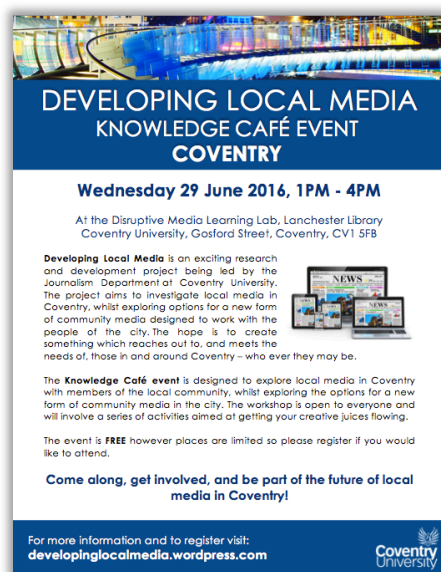
The second stage of the Discovery Phase involved meeting with community stakeholders in Coventry to assess their media usage and needs.

### Planning, Promotion, and Participants

A collaborative workshop was designed to explore a number of research questions, with the event being advertised and promoted publicly for anybody *'interested in the future of local media in Coventry'*. Invites were also sent to a wide range of individuals and groups in the local community, including potential stakeholders.

An Eventbrite page was set up for participants to register, and a project website ([www.developinglocalmedia.wordpress.com](http://www.developinglocalmedia.wordpress.com)) and Facebook page (<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/developing-local-media-coventry-knowledge-cafe-event-tickets-25815156829#>) were also set to provide a public landing page where more information about the project and the event could be provided.

An event poster and promotional video were also produced for further promotion, and the website was updated regularly with blog posts which discussed key project topics, continuing the conversation, and driving interest and participation.













## Discussion

Stage 1 of the Discovery Phase provided a clear view of the local media ecosystem, revealing disparate formal and informal local media providers that exist in Coventry. This enabled us to understand and explore the gaps that in that provision and also provides a view of potential local stakeholders and project partners that could be potential collaborators.

Stage 2 was more challenging. As expected, the workshop presented more questions than answers. The insights gained reveal the wide range of media preferences among the local audience, the gaps and under- represented groups in the local media ecosystem, a number of possible alternative categorisation models, and a range of options for how these areas can be practically and appropriately addressed in Coventry. These focus areas provide a foundation for much more in-depth research.

The range of responses during the final activity are of particular interest, providing insights that will likely shape the future direction and approach of the project. Whilst our earlier research suggested that there is a need for additional content, the responses during this activity suggest that a new platform perhaps isn't needed as such.

The workshop also revealed a simple but effective methodology for prompting audience members to think about what they want and need from local media. This can be now be replicated and developed for future research.

Our Discovery Phase suggests that audiences already have access to a wide variety of news outlets across a wide variety of platforms to the extent that are becoming 'fatigued' by the amount of information. Because of this they filter and select those they access. This suggests that adding to that landscape by creating yet another online platform is unnecessary in Coventry and may well result in it being 'filtered out'. However, this does not mean that there is not a recognised need for additional community-focussed content. Our consultation methodology provided a structured context which facilitated consultees in identifying the gaps in existing provision. This leads us to suggest that the most practical and most appropriate approach is to produce community-focussed content which is then delivered via existing platforms. This partnership approach would in effect provide a public-journalism subsidy to the media ecosystem in Coventry. This will now be explored in much more depth in the next phase of the project.

## Next Steps

Whilst the Discovery Phase revealed a range of invaluable insights, there are a number of limitations that should be noted. The design was intended to be very simplistic at this stage, however this means that we have only just scratched the surface of this research area. Whilst Stage One revealed a clear view of the local media ecosystem in Coventry, a lot of specific source information is still unknown, and other sources may have been missed during the investigation. Future research will look to be more in depth.

It is also important to note that many of the workshop participants were members of local media, local government, or other local services in Coventry who had a significant interest in local media, with only a small number of other community members in attendance. As such, the majority of participants would probably be considered more as potential stakeholders than as members of the local audience. In order to be able to generalize these findings for the wider population of Coventry we need to repeat this workshop using the methodology we have established with multiple community groups, probably accessing them on their 'home turf' rather than expecting them to come to us.

Our next steps will be to enact the idea of a community-driven journalism service,

We will:

- Consult with targeted community groups to identify appropriate areas of content.
- Work to produce that content in a professionally driven environment
- Network with appropriate partner(s) to disseminate the content produced.
- Evaluate its reach.

The results of this will inform the way in which the process develops.