

'The city is ours, so let's talk about it': Constructing a citizen media initiative in Brussels

Journalism

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Abstract

This article investigates the relationships between citizen media and constructive journalism. It focuses on 'Dewey', a nonprofit organization producing citizen content on four hyperlocal online platforms. With an action research approach, the activities, interactions among members, and productions are critically assessed with participants. To do so, semi-directive interviews were conducted among 12 contributors to the platforms. Active participation of 2 years to the Dewey project as well as news pieces produced enriched the analysis. Results indicate that participants' specific writing practices produce constructive news against stereotypes or against a lack of coverage of certain issues. Furthermore, Dewey's open (and non-institutional) structure allows individuals to develop their own identities as participants, resulting in different writing styles and approaches to news production. However, this openness created an uneven repartition of responsibilities and a high dependence toward a small number of individuals making the process fragile and slow.

Keywords

Action research, Brussels, citizen media, constructive journalism, local news

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Over the last few years, Belgium has seen a growing distrust toward mainstream media. According to the most recent data, 65 percent of French-speaking Belgians claim that they do not trust them (Picone, 2017 in Reuters Institute). In Brussels, not all areas are portrayed in the same way by news producers. This leads to the stigmatization of some of the city's municipalities (Wiard and Pereira, 2018). In this context, a few independent and alternative forms of journalism have emerged.¹ One of such initiatives is a project called 'Dewey', a nonprofit organization launched in 2014 by a handful of citizens from Northern Brussels.

In this article, we engage in an action research perspective to analyze practices, contents, and discourses inside Dewey. We first describe the initiative to provide contextual information and argue that Dewey can be considered as a *citizen media*. After discussing *citizen media* and *constructive journalism*, the methodology section explains the *action research* strategy. We explore Dewey's achievements in empowering citizens through writing and raising awareness of local issues and its shortcomings in fostering consistent participation over time.

The central aim of Dewey is to raise awareness on diverse local realities in the Brussels-Capital Region and to provide responses to what was thought to be excessively negative media coverage. From a single group of citizens publishing a website and a quarterly paper edition, Dewey grew to become a network of four hyperlocal online platforms (i.e. websites managed by groups of citizens). As of 2017, Dewey is a network that covers four municipalities of Brussels – Schaerbeek, Watermael-Boitsfort, Saint-Gilles, and Ixelles.² The frequency of publication varies for each platform (from daily to monthly depending on the periods), but the oldest platform has more than 300 pieces published by 30 contributors. Each group is also active on social media and works on paper publications taking different forms (Figure 1).

As stated on the pages of these platforms (or hyperlocals), Dewey acts as a network that supports grassroots, collaborative, citizen news made by locals. Each group in the network is structured around coordinators and a small group of contributors. Each of the platforms holds editorial meetings and citizens in the municipalities are invited to participate (the frequency of meetings varies depending on groups and periods from weekly to by-monthly). These face-to-face meetings are complemented with writing workshops. Other types of participation include informal meetings, the making of the paper editions, editing and commenting the pieces, as well as spreading the content on social media.

Each of the four hyperlocals is structurally and journalistically independent (though there is interpersonal and logistical support across groups). In other words, each local group decides by itself the topics that deserve to be investigated or the content that is going to be published. Having said this, most articles start with a personal idea emerging from a member of one of the groups or during a meeting. Pieces are then written alone or in groups and sometimes sent to others to be read, commented, or enhanced before being published by one of the coordinators on the website of one of the four hyperlocals.

Taking these observations into account, we propose to examine the relationship between this *citizen media* project and *constructive journalism*. By *citizen media*, we mean a form of journalism, which is produced by groups of citizens independently of institutionalized structures and routines (Carpentier et al., 2009: 164–165). We consider citizen media not only as the product of citizens producing news but also as the processes of citizen creating an institution (a journalistic project, a newspaper, a website, etc.).



Figure 1. Examples of a front page and an article page of two hyperlocal platforms.

As a scientific concept within journalism studies, *constructive journalism* is still in its infancy. In our understanding of the term, *constructive journalism* cannot be defined as being just a positive or optimistic response to mainstream news ‘negativity bias’ (McIntyre, 2015; Rozin and Royzman, 2001). It is rather a form of journalism in which positive as well as negative news can be produced, insofar as they do not leave the readers with a feeling of powerlessness. In the following section, we discuss the variety of research linking citizens to news production processes. We then discuss the emerging literature on constructive journalism before presenting our definition of the concept and the research questions chosen for this study.

Citizen media and constructive news

Citizen journalism was portrayed as an opportunity for social change and citizen empowerment, 10 years ago (Atton, 2009). Comprehensively assessing the growing body of literature on the matter is not the purpose of this article. However, we see two approaches to citizen journalism that need to be distinguished: one that focuses on citizens’ participation in professional journalism and the other on its margins.

The first approach refers to how citizens are ‘playing an active role’ (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 9) at the various stages of professional journalistic production (Domingo et al., 2008). In these cases, citizens play a part in news production within the realm of professional journalism. Research has shown that citizen participation to legacy news media failed in some aspects to empower citizens to fill a perceived democratic deficit in local life (Hermans et al., 2014; Meadows, 2013). Reasons of this non-success include the fact that legacy media often involves citizens in news production as a result of external pressures and perceived legitimacy issues (Ahva, 2010: 277–293) or as a strategic tool – an ‘interactive illusion’ (Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011). Even if the profession is undergoing many changes, it seems that journalists still distance themselves from citizens, solely considering them as sources, resources, or occasional collaborators (Canter, 2013).

A second body of literature focuses on how a variety of citizens claim ‘a right to practice journalism’ (Wall, 2017: 137). It is true that alternative and community media have a long tradition in challenging professional news and political narratives (Forde, 2011; Meadows, 2013). However, in most Western cities, consistent groups of ‘activists, freelancers, academics, local residents, artists and students’ have recently gained visibility (Ahva, 2017: 143) and are trying to influence the news narrative in what has been described as a collective ideological-democratic struggle (Carpentier, 2011). In this evolving ‘interpretative community’ (Robinson and DeShano, 2011), professional and citizen journalists compete and cooperate to create local news. Because of its non-institutionalization, it could be argued that self-organized forms of citizen journalism are a breeding ground for renewed conceptions of journalism and citizenship (Campbell, 2015). Simultaneously, *citizen media* often lacks the resources and support needed to be sustainable, especially in the hyperlocal context (Wall, 2015: 5).

The concept of *constructive journalism* has recently gained attention as an interesting lens to assess citizen journalism. It does, however, remain an unclear blend of practices and discourses. In a broad acceptance of the concept, constructive journalism relates to

almost every form of news production that aims at improving society in one way or another. It then relates to notions such as public (Ahva, 2010), participatory (Domingo et al., 2008), or alternative (Forde, 2011; Meadows, 2013) journalism. The advantage of such a broad definition is that it allows a diversity of researchers to reflect upon journalism's core values and its benefits to society. The problem is that it is not very operational for the modest researchers that we are.

A more restricted perspective on constructive journalism stems from positive psychology to provide, among other things, an answer to news negativity bias. This more restricted approach defines constructive journalism as news that would leave the producers, sources, and consumers 'engaged, inspired and positive' (McIntyre, 2015: 8). In this perspective, constructive journalism is seen as a response to mainstream media who tends to give a disproportionate importance to negative news (Schudson, 2011), as it is inclined to give too much importance to conflicts' escalation and too little to complex resolution processes. However, one could argue that journalism does not have to be exclusively positive to be constructive. Researchers such as Chantal Mouffe have argued that opposed conflictual discourses are not necessarily harmful to democracy and that recognizing and respecting differences can be more powerful than trying to reach an absolute consensus (Mouffe in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006). Following this line of thought, constructive journalism does not have to avoid or elude conflicts to have a positive impact on society but should intend to describe them in a way that empowers the readers and informs them about the solutions that can be found (Amiel, 2017). So-called 'peace journalism', for instance, explores the contexts of conflicts, gives voices to a diversity of actors, reveals specific issues, and offers creative ideas for conflict resolution (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005). This perspective of constructive journalism holds close ties with 'solutions journalism' (Amiel, 2017) because it does not imply to be strictly positive but rather 'put responses to social challenges at the heart of a story' (Wenzel et al., 2017: 5). Curry and Hammonds (2014) define solutions journalism as follows:

Solutions journalism is reporting about responses to entrenched social problems. It examines instances where people, institutions, and communities are working towards solutions. Solutions-based stories focus not just on what may be working, but how and why it appears to be working, or, alternatively, why it may be stumbling. (p. 1)

Based on this argument, we propose, therefore, to consider constructive journalism as a social practice that empowers producers and audiences and to define it in the context of this research as a (1) *form of solution-oriented journalism which* (2) *examines (local) issues and everyday life with the final goal of* (3) *empowering its audiences as actors of the (local) public sphere*. This means that citizen media could be understood as a form of constructive news making if it focuses on solutions and citizen empowerment.

For this research, we are interested in discovering in which ways contents and practices can be considered as constructive to the eyes of the interviewees and in finding out how the production process influences this constructive potential. As typical of action research, our objective is also to critically reflect on our interactions within the project and to investigate how the project is sustainable (or not). The research questions laid down for this study are the following:

RQ1. How do participants cover their localities?

RQ2. To what extent can the project be regarded as constructive journalism?

RQ3. What fosters participation among participants of the project?

Methodology

'Action research' (Dickens and Watkins, 1999; Hearn et al., 2008; Greenwood, 2007; Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Sagor, 2000) refers to a wide variety of research strategies that followed Kurt Lewin's (1946) idea that social scientists should try to (re)connect social action and social theory. This kind of research finds its roots in John Dewey's (1927) pragmatist philosophy approach to the public and participation to democracy (Goyette and Michelle, 1987: 5–22; Willey, 2004: 82–83). According to Greenwood and Levin (1998, 2007), action research must (1) be context-bound and focus on real-life issues, (2) allow participants and researchers to co-generate knowledge, (3) treat the diversity within the group as an opportunity for enrichment of the process, (4) lead to social action or the creation of new meanings, and (5) assess the results of the research based on problem-solving and increased participants' control. Sagor (2000) takes a similar approach, noting that action research has been defined as

A disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the 'actor' in improving and/or refining his or her actions. (p. 3)

This definition encourages participants to take part in the inquiry and involves them in creating the research process. This strong program for action research, also called 'participatory action research' (Dickens and Watkins, 1999), is the one we follow in this study. Specifically, we started by participating in the project for more than 2 years and set up the research based on specific issues. One of us started participation at the very beginning of the project and launched the first platform, while the other started 1 year later, launching the second platform. During the participation and the making of the interviews, we explored the problems that participants were being confronted with, as well as participants' thoughts on problems within the different communities to reflect on adequate solutions and ultimately to address them. We also assessed how practices and contents were valued by participants and how their news production practices could make the groups more resilient.

The main empirical material for this article consists in a series of interviews. In accordance with *action research*, we used our own participation to Dewey as a way to co-construct the interview guide with the interviewees. We have also used field notes based on observations, recordings of meetings, and news pieces, in order to contrast data regarding the participants' discourses. Practically, it includes accounts of the editorial meetings and events and careful readings of the pieces mentioned in the interviews. In other words, the researchers' own notes, experiences, memories, reflections, and perceptions are part of the collected data and have shaped the analysis.

The semi-directive interviews took place between November 2016 and March 2017 among people who took part in the hyperlocals affiliated to Dewey: *What for*, *Ezelstad*,

Table 1. Summary of interviewees.

Interviewee	Hyperlocal	Year of birth	Occupation	Role(s)
Anne	What for	1963	Poet, writer	workshop organizer, contributor (occasional)
Charlotte	What for	1987	High School teacher	Contributor (occasional)
Marie	What for	1990	Nurse	Contributor (recurring)
Raphaël	What for	1996	Student	Contributor (occasional)
Louis	What for	1994	Student	Contributor (recurring)
Isabelle	Ezelstad	1983	Photographer	Contributor (occasional)
Habiba	Ezelstad	1969	Other	Contributor (recurring)
Fatine	Ezelstad	1979	Social worker	Contributor (occasional)
Clément	Ezelstad	1976	I.T worker	Contributor (occasional)
Caroline	Pixels	1986	Translator	Coordinator, workshop organizer
Jeep	Dazibao	1953	Local activists	Coordinators
Vincent	Dazibao	1961		

Dazibao, and *Pixels*. We started with interviews with participants of the two groups we participated in, both the oldest platforms and with most participants. We added interviews with the initiators and coordinators of the third and fourth hyperlocals to provide consistent data on all aspects of the Dewey project (see Table 1).

The interview guide was structured around five main themes (1) the *motivations* of the interviewee that led him or her to take part in the project, (2) her or his *representations* of the hyperlocal platform itself, (3) and of the *coordination and relationships* between participants, (4) her or his opinions toward the *writing process and practices*, and (5) her or his feelings toward the *neighborhood and municipality*. In addition, we read the pieces produced by interviewees and potential comments on the websites and on social media before the interviews to be able to specify questions as well as after them to verify discourses during the conjoint analysis.

To analyze our data, we first transcribed the interviews with the 12 participants,³ for a total corpus of more than 50,000 words. A qualitative thematic analysis followed by reading the transcripts multiple times and listening again to the interviews. We first coded participants’ discourses (words, sentences, or paragraphs) in three main themes: discourses regarding writing practices, discourses on the hyperlocals’ coverage, and those on coordination and participation. We then detected sub-themes and categories focusing on discourses regarding constructive practices and contents while keeping in mind our research objectives and questions. As recommended for this type of analysis, we used a spreadsheet on which we classified sub-themes and categories and linked them to the transcripts.

We verified these results by looking at the contents produced, with iterative searches within the corpus of transcribed interviews and by comparing them with our own experiences as well as talking to participants of the project during the analysis. Regular meetings between the two researchers allowed us to compare assumptions on the themes and see how coded categories answered our research questions.

Results

Productions as personal or analytical news pieces

Results show that participants to the Dewey project have conflictual views toward what it is they are doing. Some of them relate their own writing practices to journalistic-like productions but most do not call themselves ‘journalists’ nor do they use the term ‘journalism’ when talking about themselves. They prefer terms such as ‘local news’ or simply ‘texts’, ‘articles’, or ‘contents’. A minority of participants is even openly reluctant to being identified as a part of the journalistic sphere, partly because they consider their articles as too personal, self-centered, artistic or informal, and partly because they do not want to be told they have to respect the norms and criteria of a profession they do not belong to. As one participant puts it, *‘I don’t want to act like a journalist. It does not interest me. There are people who do this very well and I don’t want to step into their territory’* (Habiba).

Some of these participants favor intimate and creative writing and testimonies about personal and small-scale realities. In these pieces, they share personal experiences that matter to them, such as one particular encounter with a likable neighbor or a visit to a public place. As stated in one interview,

I like to take the quill [sic!] and to write ... anything. I’m less attracted by journalism and those things. My thing is more creative stuff, writing with my sensibility. (Louis)

The interviewee quoted above produced a piece on a small football field located between social housing and a richer neighborhood of his municipality. The article contains facts and describes the location and explains what happens there to the public. The piece explains that it is a place where teens with different social backgrounds meet and play together and that it creates ties between members of different communities:

[People from] Different backgrounds fiercely observe each other but even the most humiliating of defeats is never a cause for troubles. There is always a general laughter when an unfortunate player gets a ‘tunnel’.⁴(Louis, 2015)

Other participants are engaged into something less intimate: articles oriented toward public issues, debates, and actions. These pieces consist of descriptions, analyses, and opinions about current issues within the municipalities. These articles often relate to issues such as sustainable food production, soft mobility, air quality, housing for all, and the local cultural scene. They then try to encourage readers to take position about what can or needs to be done. One such article was written by Isabelle and described as follows:

The first article I did was about the ‘refugees’ class’ at the [name of a school] and on the children of refugees. It is in fact for all newcomers but they opened it because of the influx of refugees and it became necessary. I knew a teacher at the [same school] who talked to me about it and I found that very interesting. (Isabelle)

Another analytical article was mentioned in one of the interviews and discussed public space issues in a neighborhood (Fatine and Mathieu, 2015). Interestingly, the piece

shows the positive aspects of reclaiming public space through art and uses pictures, videos, audio, and written excerpts from interviews to prove its points. This article is comparable to a piece from another platform (also discussed in an interview), which describes the (re)opening of a local library as well as its activities. In the piece, the contributor provides factual information about the institution and its activities with links and pictures and concludes by discussing the courtyard of the building and how it could be positively used.

Remarkably, the interviewees make a clear separation between the personal and analytical forms of content. Personal testimonies are valued as long as they stick to their goal to disclose one's own experiences and feelings to the readers. In contrast, analytic articles are valued insofar as they stick to the goal of disclosing information on an issue or event, opening a public debate, or providing rational arguments regarding how the issue can be solved.

The analysis of the interviews and the articles mentioned by the participants shows that they produce a diversity news content related to mainstream professional journalism without being submitted to all professional norms and routines. Although both personal and analytical productions can be considered as local news pieces, the platforms fail to comply with some journalistic standards, mainly neutrality and distance from the issue covered, as well regularity and comprehensiveness of coverage of the territory.

Covering the uncovered and raising awareness

Overall, the (hyper)local and situated components of the platforms are essential for the participants. They feel the necessity to relate to their neighborhoods, 'to understand the place [they] live in' (Isabelle) and to take part in local life. As Fatine puts it, 'I told myself that the day that I would decide to stay in a place for some time, I would like to engage a little in local life'. Charlotte made contact with one of the hyperlocals to keep abreast of the things that were happening there while she was traveling abroad. 'Making good encounters' and 'meeting nice persons' are also an important motivation, for participants such as Habiba and Raphaël. In order to stress this 'situated culture', Ezelstad used the following tagline on the 'about' page of the platform's website: 'Deciding by ourselves what deserves to be said about the place we live in'.

More than specific journalistic norms and values, legitimacy for participants of Dewey depends on situated grassroots experiences and common knowledge about the territory. They are at the core of both personal and analytical articles. Participants build up this grassroots legitimacy by writing about specific topics and events known only to locals or raising awareness about issues not covered by mainstream media. These types of articles relate to our definition of constructive journalism because they propose solutions to local issues and are empowering for the writer and its readers. Raphaël who covered topics including the impact of a local school project, the start of a collective chicken coop, and the conversion of a racecourse into a leisure park, stated that

We live in a world which is based on codes that aren't working. So we have to take alternatives into account, to consider them. Even if we are not necessarily the 'very first' to do this, we are still a bit like pioneers. (Raphaël)

Data from the interviews suggest that Dewey's contributors aim at producing this type of news in opposition to the contents you can find in legacy media. According to Clément, these self-organized forms of communication are interesting because they enable citizens to shed light on things that happen close to them and that they sometimes understand better than the 'big media', or in his words,

People like you and me reporting on topics, this sheds a new and original light [on issues] in comparison with big media who cover topics and don't know what happens in the neighborhoods. Here [at Dewey], we have the local and neighborhood aspect, covering topics that happen close to us, with interviews of real people if I may say so. (Clément)

Participants' critique toward legacy media is even more vocal when discussing local media and local institutional publications.⁵ Some participants felt a gap between what they perceive as (negative) local news coverage and their day-to-day life. Talking about the bombings of 2016, one interviewee explained that

Since March 22nd, I don't watch the [national public television channel]. Before, I used to watch Belgian channels. I watched the evening news. [...] I am not the only one who thinks that it was a bad idea to show the same clips all day long. (Habiba)

The topics covered by participants include local initiatives and projects, public issues and debates, as well as personal stories, which picture experiences of the neighborhood, in a constructive way. For instance, Charlotte explains that she wrote a paper on the local public library to 'dust off [sic]' its old image and show the richness of its activities. The possibility of producing this form of local, grassroots, and solution-oriented journalism is even the reason for a coordinator to start a platform:

The idea [to start a hyperlocal project] came from there, I wanted to promote what is happening here. I was a little bit upset at this journalism that spews its venom and talks about negative events. Especially at the time of the bombings. (Caroline)

If most pieces are often solution-oriented and try to confront stereotypes, they are not always strictly 'positive'. As Isabelle says it, 'I don't think that "positiveness" needs to be the editorial line of the publication. If there is something to say about a big malfunction in the municipality [we should talk about it]' (Isabelle). Among others, Marie echoed this argument in one piece on threatened collective gardens:

These [threatened collective gardens] weren't talked about. It was the first article I wrote on the website. It was really the idea of expressing discontent towards news in my municipality. (Marie)

Participation and coordination

In the four hyperlocals, participants are encouraged through informal encounters and meetings to produce their own writing and publish them using the Wordpress content management system or simply by sending their articles to one of the platforms'

coordinators. One of the platforms organizes specific workshops intended to create an atmosphere in which people feel at ease with the writing and publishing process, a breeding ground for participation. In this process, enjoyment is more important than compliance or conformity to the rules:

First, there needs to be a time of creation where we are free of recovering some kind of freedom to write. At first, we need to reconnect with the pleasure of writing. Then, one can say: ‘okay, I had fun writing, but if I want to circulate this, the wording should be good’. (Anne)

The idea (of organizing workshops) came from the fact that people said ‘I want to write but I don’t know how’ or ‘I’m afraid of writing something not interesting’. Even though we reassure them [...], there were people who stood back and couldn’t get to the writing stage. (Marie)

Anne, who organized some of these workshops, expressed that it is important to teach participants how to change one’s relationship with local culture and local news. She insists that the first and main goal of the workshops is to encourage participants to get out of a passive consumerist attitude toward local life and to become an active author. Recovering the pleasure of writing – and a sort of freedom through it – is also very important. Because of this, participants value the accessibility of the platforms as expression tools and a way to reach or affect local audiences. In these meetings and workshops, there is an effort to bring together people of all ages. The interviewees valorize this intergenerational culture as a very important aspect of the publication. Gender diversity is also underlined as an important asset during the meetings.

The coordination between participants also happens online. Two of the hyperlocals use online text editors (i.e. Framapad and Google Docs) as collaborative tools. Other platforms use both pads and social media, which is sometimes seen as a weakness because some participants do not have access to Facebook and the Facebook groups. However, the use of social media is also described as rewarding, as Marie points out, ‘*It is silly, but you’re proud of yourself when you get positive feedback*’ (Marie).

Participants value collective deliberative decision-making processes as well. They are described as rewarding but also as something complex, slow going, and time-consuming. It is considered as natural for these participatory processes to go through ups and downs. The coordination of platforms often lies on the back of a small number of participants: when one of them stops being proactive, everything slows down. In order to counter this problem, participants insist on the importance of the ‘small commitments’ that can be made by all the community members:

How can we motivate people to work together, how can we foster citizen participation? I know that it isn’t easy. Here, inside What for there is a small team, which works out fine, they did a lot of things. Sometimes it slows down and it becomes difficult to find new participants. But that is what I find interesting. (Anne)

There is a lack of contributors. That is pretty obvious. We can talk about the question of circulation. But it is not the most important thing: I think there is a problem with the lack of participants. It could be detrimental to our project, because I do not have enough time to get fully involved. (Isabelle)

More than just going through ups and downs, some participants insisted that the project was too small and fragile; they felt that not enough content is being produced and the participation is too weak. As stated by multiple participants, reasons for such weak participation involve difficulties in maintaining a commitment in the long run (partly because it is a voluntary activity) and to reach new community members and a wider audience. Jeep also insists that ‘It’s difficult [*to get people to write*], *you need to constantly go fishing [for writers]*’ (Jeep).

Finally, the citizen media platforms at Dewey allow participants to build local ties, and by doing so, to collectively reinvest their local public sphere through news production. In this context, one of the goals of the hyperlocals consists in allowing separated circles to communicate with each other and creating bridges between different kinds of people who usually do not meet. However, the aforementioned issues in participation bring about questions of legitimacy at Dewey. Contrarily to what we originally thought, discourses regarding issues of legitimacy are less oriented toward professional journalists (see above) than toward the diversity of people who live in the locality and take part in the hyperlocal. For example, one of the hyperlocals is led by young adults and students struggling to reach the local elderly community. The group is also depicted by its own members as essentially made of young middle-class people and not diverse enough:

It is true that all the people here know each other. Even Louis, he was at [high school name] with me. [...] So yes, it is a good excuse to be with your friends, but it could be with other people as well, from another environment. (Raphaël)

It is good because the people who are here share a common interest for local news, for the community, so [it is] news that is managed by citizens. I met people that I wouldn’t have met otherwise but it is still people that are in the same state of mind as us. We don’t yet have the case of someone coming up with an entirely different state of mind as ours. (Marie)

There is a perception among participants that a group of people that would be too homogeneous could be suspected of defending its own matters and interests, and not those of the silent majority. Far from allowing a collective re-appropriation of local news, issues, and life, such a group would be seen as defending an exclusive communitarian appropriation of it in its own interests. In order to counter or anticipate this criticism, respondents insist that they want to reach a diverse array of individuals and to include as many people as possible in the project.

Discussion

Dewey is a self-organized project at the margins of professional journalism and institutionalized news media. We tried to provide a picture of what people do and produce at Dewey, and how these lead to the making of a specific identity, and a particular vision of citizenship and journalism. To do so, and within the field of journalism studies, we proposed to define Dewey as *citizen media*.

As we saw, participants produce a variety of pieces that can be classified in two main categories; they either propose an intimate perspective on local life through personal

testimonies or write more factual, descriptive analytical pieces (RQ1). Interviewees make a clear separation between the personal and analytical forms of content but value both as long as they respect common standards. Both types of articles are clearly informative pieces of news though most participants do not call themselves journalists or reporters.

The analysis of the discourses on the content produced showed that they produce news that raises awareness toward uncovered issues, and that tries to counter mainstream media's negativity bias by proposing solutions to local issues, while trying to stay away from stereotypes. Going back to our definition, this makes the platforms of Dewey an original form of constructive journalism (RQ2).

During this process, we learned that having such an open, non-institutional and decentralized structure is perceived as accessible but that it fosters weak participation as well as coordination issues (RQ3). What's more, it seems that individuals within platforms often have a relatively homogeneous background potentially challenging the groups' perceptions from members of the local public spheres they evolve in.

In order to counter these problems of legitimacy and coordination, participants propose to organize additional encounters and workshops to reinforce the collective writing processes but also – more importantly – to create bridges between the participants of the different hyperlocals and across communities so that the coordination process can be more open and more accessible to everyone. One of the main purposes of action research is to implement changes based on the collective research (Lewin, 1946); so naturally, this process is not over. We see this article as a way to critically look at our own practices. In addition, we think that this article modestly furthers the academic and public discussion on what constructive journalism is or could be by describing the links between citizen media and news and showing its empowering aspects.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Kairos (www.kairos.be), Médor (www.medor.coop), or Pour (www.pour.press).
2. Respectively, www.ezelstad.be, www.whatfor.be, www.dzb1060.be, and www.pixels1050.be.
3. Since the fourth hyperlocal was initiated by two individuals, they were interviewed together. Although this could be seen as a methodological anomaly, this interview led to rich material due to the respondents complementing each other's discourses. Furthermore, in an action research approach, we wanted to see how they represented their actions together.
4. By 'Tunnel' or 'petit pont' in French, Louis describes a football practice during which a player manages to get through someone by kicking the ball between its opponent's open legs.
5. It is common for Brussels' municipalities to send monthly or bimonthly publications to all residents. Those publications mostly propose news regarding local politics and public events but it is not rare to see more journalistic content in it.

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