

The Social Value of Local Journalism

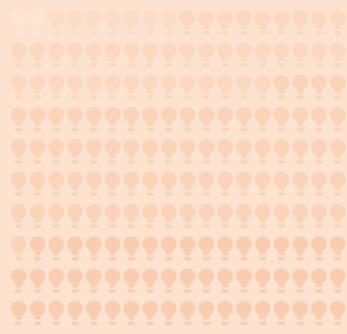
How local journalism impacts community spirit, wellbeing, cultural awareness and the local economy in our neighbourhoods.

65% of our readers feel encouraged about a result of reading our content.



37% Very Often readers feel proud of their neighbourhood after reading our content.

73% of our readers feel inspired by the local high street after reading our content.



64% of our readers have been prompted to visit a local shop as a result of our content.

68% of readers feel more positive in their mood or outlook on life as a result of reading our content.

How does local journalism support local economy?

"Directly - marketing, exploring local places & providing more info. Indirectly - emphasis on local culture, wellbeing & pride about local community impacts customer loyalty to local business."

- Survey Respondent

"It gives a profile to the things that are on my doorstep that I would otherwise walk straight past."

- Survey Respondent



79% of our readers feel more connected to the community as a result of our content.

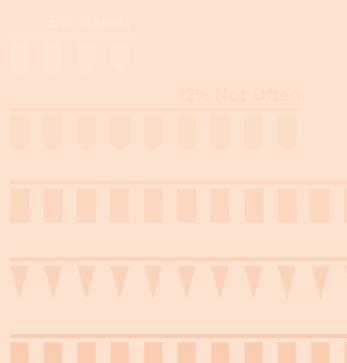


By Tabitha Stapely
July 2020

47% of people feel less alone or isolated as a result of reading our content.

45% of our readers have been prompted to attend a local class, workshop or course as a result of our content.

55% of our readers have been prompted to attend a local event as a result of our content.



socialstreets.



Introduction

Why local journalism is vital for communities to thrive.

It is well documented that journalism provides a vital role in upholding truth and democracy. In marginalised or far-flung communities, independent, on-the-ground journalism is even more important to ensure that harder-to-reach audiences benefit.

Less well-documented is local journalism's essential role in the social and economic wellbeing of communities. Publications that provide a broad range of community and cultural content offer readers understanding of their close neighbours, thereby increasing bonds and bridging gaps between diverse groups.

Today's online media allows readers to connect with each other and to contribute content via commenting functionality, social media platforms and apps. Readers can become co-creators of content rather than merely consumers. This leads to an increased sense of agency over the messaging within their community; the development of hyper local communication networks, and increased peer-to-peer connections.

Local journalism helps to grow our real life local connections with friends and neighbours, as well as our colleagues at work, in our hobby activities and in community groups.

With better understanding of shared values and experiences, a community can then build a collective trust and respect for each other, enabling those within the community to work together more efficiently to overcome challenges and generate opportunities.

"We all lead busy lives and inevitably tend to live in silos. There are few if any organisations or activities that genuinely cross class and cultural divides. Local journalism is becoming more, not less, vital in the digital age."
- Survey Respondent

Better knowledge, better community cohesion and better networks help develop social capital. With better social capital, a local economy is better able to flourish and thrive.

The future of local journalism is ethical.

As a social enterprise, Social Streets is committed to developing a model for local journalism that works for the benefit of the community while being financially sustainable, scalable and replicable.

With society increasingly concerned about our collective impact on people and the planet, understanding and acting on the wider social value of journalism will be critical for the successful reinvention of local journalism.

Just as people are now choosing to spend their money and invest in the green economy, so this will cascade into the media with consumers choosing to support forms of journalism that can demonstrate a positive socio economic impact. Responsible journalism.

At a time where the future of traditional media is under threat, with well-known print titles closing every month and publishing houses reducing work forces, it is easy for the industry to focus solely on financial outcomes. However local journalism has the wellbeing of the community in its hands and must also identify, develop, and measure its value in terms of social and economic benefit to the community.

The challenge in measuring the social value of journalism is that it is typically measured in non-financial outcomes and these are largely ignored by media giants who are beholden to their advertisers and corporate sponsors. Outcomes that are not measured cannot be counted, evaluated or upheld.

In an attempt to systematically map the benefits of local journalism we explore four domains of influence – **community, wellbeing, culture and local economy** – and how these might be measured. The questions have been designed to capture how content has affected reader opinions, emotions, behaviours and actions.

Community Spirit

Local journalism is key in fostering a sense of belonging and pride.

“Local journalism provides glue, it brings disparate thoughts, points of view and perspectives together in one place. It can also shine a bright light on otherwise little known corners; bringing local issues, causes and people to the fore.” / Survey Respondent

Why does community spirit matter? And how do you foster it? This is the question on the lips of most community guardians, be they local authorities or large-scale property developers.

A place with a strong sense of community spirit is somewhere with high levels of interaction, trust and shared standards of behaviour that enable people to build communities and to knit the social fabric. This is also called social capital.

An essential component of community spirit is a sense of belonging and appreciation of our neighbours and our environments. When asked about local journalism’s impact on community spirit, the two words used most often by survey respondents in the open comments section were *‘belonging’* and *‘pride’*.

Traditionally local papers have focused on court, council and crime reporting, with headlines appealing to the human emotions of fear, insecurity and otherness. Indeed, this has become even more pronounced as the media fights for

attention-grabbing headlines in the crowded online space.

However what is clear from this survey is that there is also a strong and common appetite for local journalism that stirs up another set of powerful emotions – those of awe, hope, compassion, belonging and pride.

Content celebrating the best the local area has to offer, such as the article [Victoria Park: The People’s Park](#), reinforces the latent pride people feel for their local area and provides the affirmation of public consensus needed to then express this to friends and family.

Content showcasing local heritage, such as the history of [Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London Federation of Suffragettes](#), helps local people appreciate what may no longer be visible but formed the unique story of their neighbourhood, bringing new appreciation of the familiar places on their daily travels.

Content that champions the extraordinary endeavours being accomplished by local good causes, such as our [profile on local mental health charity BowHaven](#), inspires people about the human spirit within their own community.

Interestingly, content about local good causes and philanthropy does not receive as much traffic as other content, but it is the most remembered. These are the pieces that our readers recall the most easily when asked to mention stand-out pieces. It matters to them that local journalism reflects back the good as well as the gritty. When asked how local journalism can impact community spirit, one survey respondent explains how it *“showcases and celebrates the good that is happening in the local area and fills the reader with a sense of hope and happiness that the local area is in good shape, and is filled with good people.”*

Given national and even regional newspapers do not have the resources to cover local communities in this way, it falls even more to local publications to reflect back and harness this life-affirming sense of pride and belonging. *“It counters negative press about local stabbings, Russian spies staying locally, & Bethnal Green named worst high street, etc. It gives exposure to good things happening in the community that would not be in London/national news”* says another survey respondent.

Stories that inspire, astound and strike awe are an extraordinarily powerful tool in forging strong, positive relationships between people and their environment. An extraordinary 80.5% of readers agreed strongly or very strongly that our

content made them feel proud of their neighbourhood, and 73% of readers agreed strongly or very strongly that it made them feel inspired by their local high street.

If an individual feels they belong to their neighbourhood and feels proud of it, they are more likely to feel connected and therefore more likely to volunteer or join a good cause. Nearly 60% of readers said that they felt tempted to join a local good cause ‘often’ or ‘very often’ as a result of reading our content.

Our findings show that local journalism plays a key role in the perception local people have of their neighbourhood and this is strongly correlated with a sense of community spirit and the impulse to help others.

Our readership survey results on 'Community Spirit':

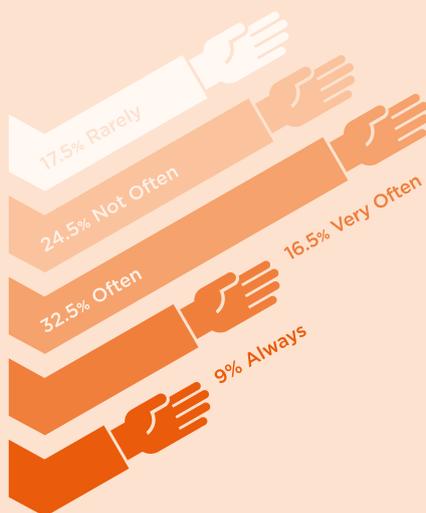
KEY ● Rarely ● Not Often ● Often ● Very Often ● Always

How does local journalism improve community spirit?

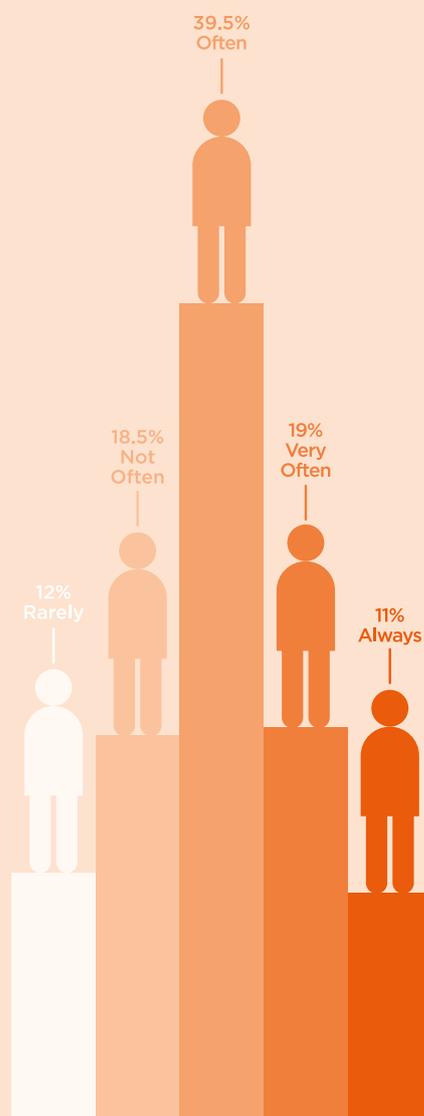
"It improves the community spirit by showing off what there is in the community and being proud of it. A lot of the content in the magazine shows the hidden aspects of the community that would have gone un-noticed. We're constantly bombarded with bad news... this one offers something different. It shows the positive of our community."

- Survey Respondent

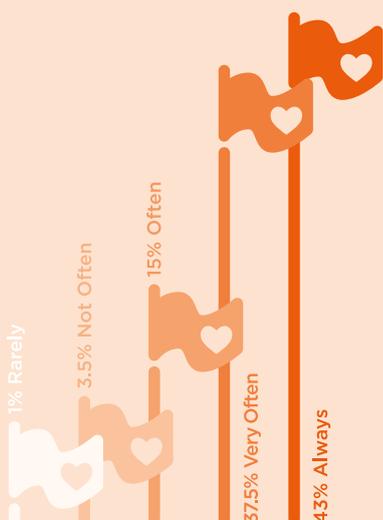
49% of our readers have been tempted to volunteer in the local community as a result of reading our content.



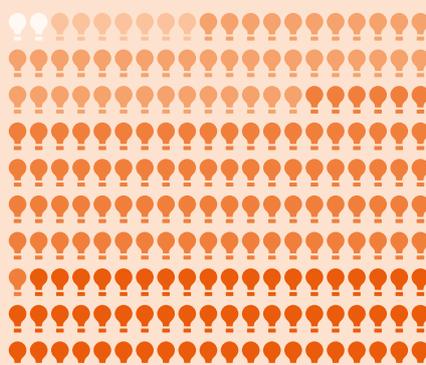
59% of our readers have been tempted to join a local good cause as a result of reading our content.



81% of our readers feel proud of their neighbourhood after reading our content.



73% of our readers feel inspired by the local high street after reading our content.



We asked our readers: How does local journalism improve community spirit?

.....

“Local journalism provides glue, it brings disparate thoughts, points of view and perspectives together in one place. It can also shine a bright light on otherwise little known corners; bringing local issues, causes and people to the fore.”

.....

*“There’s a lot of bad publicity usually about the area so it’s nice to be able to share some **positive stories to balance and share a more rounded picture.**”*

*“**It makes me feel connected** to the area and the people in it which is so important given that many of us nowadays live far away from family. **I love my neighbourhood and you have made me feel proud to be part of it.**”*

.....

“Makes you realise you’re part of something bigger than streets and houses.”

.....

*“**It brings us together.** We start to feel less alienated and like we don’t know each other, and more like we understand our neighbour cos we’ve been able to read about everything happening next door. It’s so important for community spirit. **Also, we can unite under common causes and fight injustices.**”*

*“Makes you realise that **things that you love about a place are shared loves** and a connection with everyone in the area.”*

*“I believe **it keeps the community alive and relevant.** I have moved away for the area but keep in*

Wellbeing

Local journalism provides a lifeline for us in a fragmented world.

“Local journalism is a valuable resource that helps unite a community when the trials and tribulations of modern day living continually erode community spirit.” / Survey Respondent

It is increasingly recognised that cultural and community participation can act as an important health asset, that is to say a resource that enhances the ability of individuals to maintain and sustain health and wellbeing.

These assets can operate at the level of the individual, family, or community as protective and promoting factors to buffer against life’s stresses. The most widely reported benefits include helping people to feel less alone, fostering a more positive mood or outlook, and helping people to cope with everyday challenges.

On a practical level our readers appreciate the signposting to events and support groups. *“Local journalism points people to places they can be social, and causes that might help them, and encourages people to help their local community out”* says one survey respondent.

Another reader values how local journalism can help support change for the better: *“Local journalism can report on what is happening and where/when, which helps bring people together and*

informs them of their choices and rights. I personally feel journalism is political, and can be used for great ends, like bringing about change in the community. A perfect example of this is the Frank [Wang] campaign, which you wrote about and secured a good portion of the pledges. Thank you so much for that.”

By far the strongest wellbeing benefit identified by our readers was an increase in connections; knowing more people, and notably, knowing more people by name. *“Putting a name to a face or a story behind a storefront makes it easier to connect”* one survey respondent comments.

The sense of isolation in a fragmented world pervades all corners of the community and yet we all yearn to connect. Families who have recently moved into the area want to get to know the area they’ve moved into: *“Since we moved to the area, it’s been a newsletter my husband and I often chat about - the shop profiles, community stories and history sections. I have learnt about the Suffragette history here and heard about*

things I want to get involved with”.

Freelancers working from home on their own want to feel more connected to their environment. *“As someone who works from home [...] it is good to see more and hear more of what’s on my doorstep”.*

And for those on the fringes, one survey respondent says: *“It is so good for people to know what is going on in their local community. For the elderly people (those I come into contact with, who are unable to go out very often) it makes them feel less isolated. For the younger generation it gives them a sense of belonging and to be proud of their locality.”*

Here we must appreciate the wider communications infrastructure that develops as a direct consequence of local journalism. A local publication is much more than merely paper and ink, or pixels and purls. It is a community’s mainframe computer that, when switched on, lights up a board of voices and connects them together forming thousands of digital paths between people and organisations.

In this way, local journalism provides the means for humans to fulfil their basic instinct to connect with one another. Whether by word-of-mouth in the real world or by social media online, each piece of information is passed on from one human to another, taking on a life of its own, reaching the furthest corners of the community, and bringing with it a sense of connection, inclusion and shared experience.

“It creates a sense of community and introduces me to local figures, shopkeepers, artists, etc and provides a start point for actually talking to these people”, says one survey respondent.

Seventy nine per cent of readers ‘agreed strongly’ or ‘very strongly’ that they felt more connected to the community as a result of reading our content, and nearly half said they felt less alone or isolated. *“It makes us aware of what is going on in the local community which is good to know especially living in London where it can feel that there isn’t much community spirit.”* explains one reader.

By focusing on content that appeals to a spectrum of affirming emotions – hope, awe, pride, compassion, belonging – local journalism can have an immediate and positive impact on mood too. Sixty nine percent of our readers looked forward to receiving our newsletters ‘very often’ or ‘always’, and 68% of readers felt more positive as a result of reading our content ‘often’ or ‘very often’.

Local journalism’s ability to connect, communicate and uplift plays a vital role in the mental health of individuals and the community, and this is especially important for those living in fragmented communities.

Our readership survey results on 'Wellbeing':

KEY ● Rarely ● Not Often ● Often ● Very Often ● Always

How does local journalism support the wellbeing of the community?

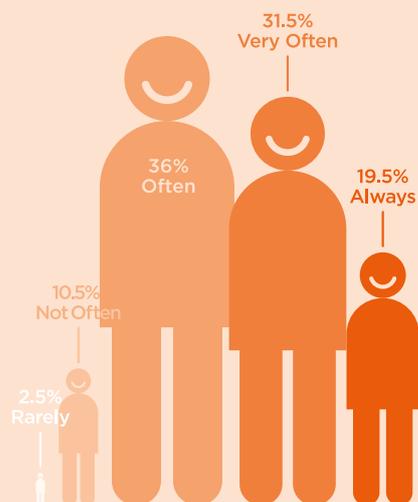
"It is so good for people to know what is going on in their local community. For the elderly people (those I come into contact with, who are unable to go out very often) it makes them feel less isolated. For the younger generation it gives them a sense of belonging and to be proud of their locality."

~ Survey Respondent

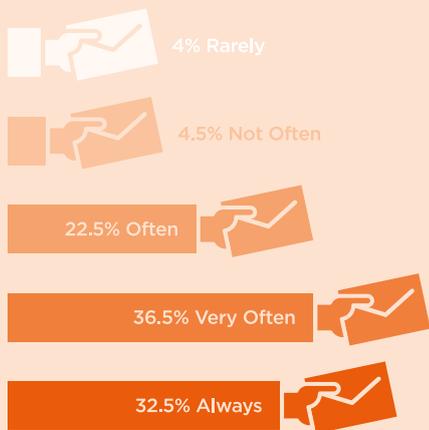


60% of our readers have had a strong emotional reaction as a result of our content.

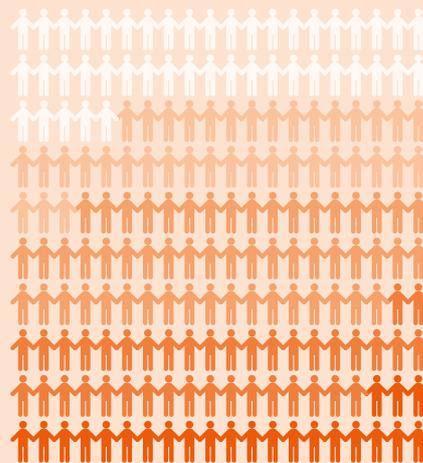
68% of readers feel more positive in their mood or outlook on life as a result of reading our content.



69% of our readers look forward to receiving our newsletters.



47% of people feel less alone or isolated as a result of reading our content.



We asked our readers: How does local journalism support the wellbeing of the community?

“By focusing on very personal individual stories this local journalism helps to counter increasing feelings of alienation in our city brought about by the impact of impersonal big money on our local human-scale, making us aware that there are small, interesting local enterprises where we can go out and support and enjoy.”

“Local journalism is a valuable resource that **helps unite a community** when the trials and tribulations of modern day living continually erode community spirit.”

“It offers ways in which they can connect in practical terms - e.g. by attending a shared event, or **in emotional terms by recognizing that emotional touchstones are probably shared.**”

“Doing things = happier people.”

“Since we moved to the area, **it’s been a newsletter my husband and I often chat about**, the shop profiles, community stories and history sections. I have learnt about the suffragette history here and heard about things I want to get involved with.”

“It makes **individuals feel part of the local community** of residents rather than a lonely water drop in the London sea”

Cultural Awareness

Raising cultural awareness is the most valued aspect of local journalism.

“When you live in a diverse area you come into contact with people of other cultures all the time, but understanding them at a deeper level can be difficult. I think journalism like this helps us all become better neighbours.” / Survey Respondent

The power to raise awareness of other cultures was the single most valued aspect of local journalism according to our readers, attracting the highest volume of supportive statements in the open question section of our survey.

As one survey respondent put it succinctly, *“local community is fragile and local journalism can support a sense of belonging and cover topics that won’t be considered elsewhere.”*

Every community is diverse, some more than others, and our differences have the potential to unify or divide a neighbourhood. When local journalism delivers thought-provoking cultural content that offers insights into the lived experiences we all share as humans, it has the potential to unify.

When we wrote about Naz, the Asian British owner of a traditional English sweet shop, and Anette and Katy Thompson, the mother and daughter team in a long line of White British matriarchs running the family-run

hardware store, our readers valued how local journalism *“opens your eyes to the diversity and richness of culture on your own doorstep”*.

Unlike national and regional journalism that reports on matters that can feel distant or abstract, local journalism provides a perspective on the people, places and topics that touch our lives directly and frequently, or as another survey respondent said, it *“provides a perspective on people I see everyday and who are part of my environment”*.

Sixty six per cent of survey respondents said that they had been exposed to a new issue, idea or point of view ‘often’ or ‘very often’ as a result of reading our content, helping to increase understanding between different lived experiences.

“Without local journalism, aspects of our lives that are arguably the most relevant can become neglected. Local journalism provides a necessary platform for stories within the microcosms of our society that

are not usually spoken about via mass media” – Survey Respondent

Local journalism opens our eyes to what is around us, helping us to look at our neighbours with a fresh perspective, countering everyday racism and prejudice that often arise from ignorance. This can have an immediate impact on our viewpoints, which then has a ripple effect on other aspects of our lives, helping to create a more tolerant community.

It has the power to inspire and change behaviour beyond the act of consumption. Sixty five per cent of readers felt inspired by someone ‘often’ or ‘very often’, and 65% agreed ‘strongly’ or ‘very strongly’ that they were encouraged to find out more about a subject raised as a result of reading our content.

This shows the potential for local journalism to provide role models to us all, something that is particularly important for younger people who benefit from reading about how similar local people have overcome challenges to succeed in their endeavours.

Our readership survey results on 'Cultural Awareness':

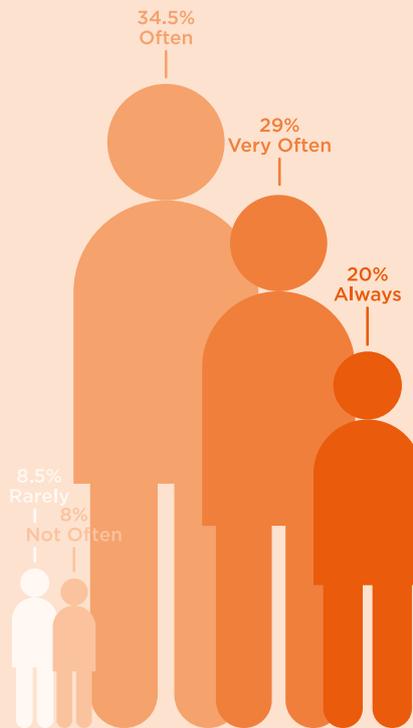
KEY ● Rarely ● Not Often ● Often ● Very Often ● Always

How does local journalism support better understanding of different cultures?

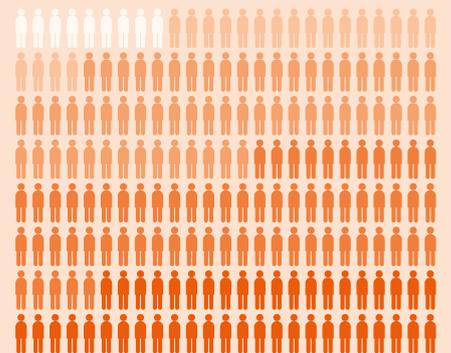
"It opens your eyes to the diversity and richness of culture on your own doorstep. I love hearing about local people and the articles often cover people or places I had heard of but was interested to find out more about e.g. Thompson's in this edition."

~ Survey Respondent

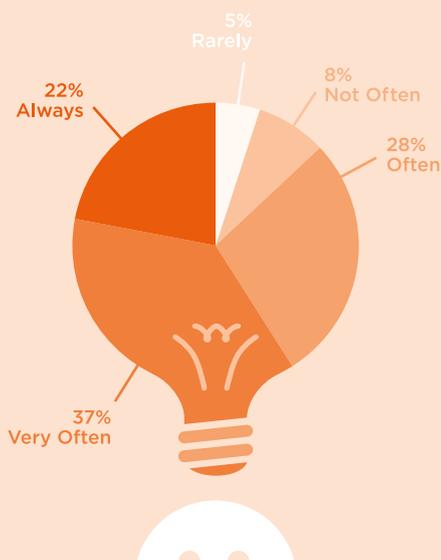
64% of our readers have been prompted to discuss the content of the magazine with others.



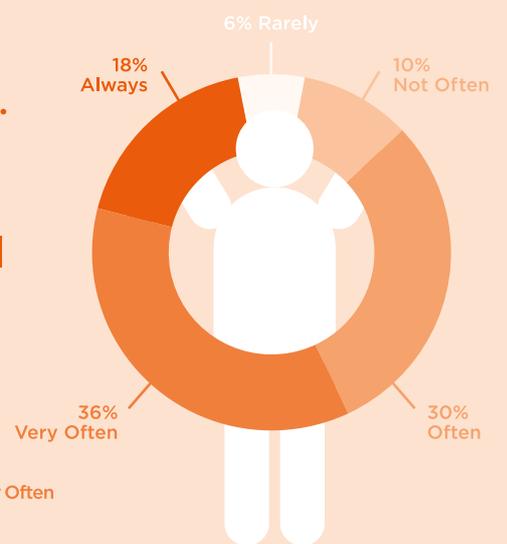
55% of our readers feel they've been given new insights into other cultures and types of people as a result of reading our content.



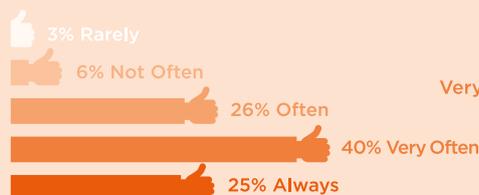
65% of our readers have felt inspired by someone they have read about in our features.



66% of our readers feel they've been exposed to a new issue, idea or point of view as a result of reading our content.



65% of our readers feel encouraged to find out more about a subject raised as a result of reading our content.



We asked our readers: How does local journalism support better understanding of different cultures?

.....

“I find learning new facts about my community and locale very inspiring as this gives me more of a sense of belonging as well as pride.”

.....

“When you live in a diverse area you come into contact with people of other cultures all the time, but understanding them at a deeper level can be difficult. I think journalism like this helps us all become better neighbours.”

*“At a time when the national and international media bombard us with negativity toward each other, it is **this type of positive local journalism that brings out the best in a community and its people.**”*

.....

“Makes the reader aware of the variety of cultures in the local area and how they break the stereotypical impression e.g. the Bangladeshi sweet shop owner who stocks old English sweets.”

.....

“... its local journalism about the area in which I have lived for over thirty years, it increases my knowledge of my part of London and therefore my feelings of connection to it, and affection for it. I learn from it and I love that. Local journalism really helps to encourage and cement that feeling.”

*“We all lead busy lives and inevitably tend to live in silos. **There are few if any, organisations or activities that genuinely cross class and cultural divides.** Local journalism is becoming more, not less, vital in the digital age.”*

Local Economy

Local journalism increases the digital footprint of local economies.

“The more we know what exists in the community, the more we can take advantage of it. I have read about some shops and restaurants that I used to just walk by without noticing, and now I have plans to visit them.” / Survey Respondent

Attempts are regularly made to quantify the financial contribution of the arts, cultural and leisure sector to the national economy. Few look at the impact of the media industry to local economies.

Local publications that provide content about local arts, culture, heritage, events and attractions have a significant impact on the local economy in two key ways: Firstly, by encouraging those who already live in the area to participate in the local economy. Secondly, by attracting new people to the area – it can attract destination visitors to the area and can influence people’s decisions to locate or stay in the area.

A common misnomer is that ‘not much goes on’ in smaller or poorer communities. But where there are humans there is history, industry and busyness. There is not a single local economy in this country – over 7,000 high streets – that doesn’t have a fascinating history to discover, distinguishing environment to explore, intrepid entrepreneurs to visit, and organised activities in which to participate, be

that in the field of industry, charity, arts, culture, sports, environment or education.

One of the biggest challenges for local economies is not the lack of attractions but the lack of visibility. Without reporters on the ground, there is no-one to write about it. This is further compounded by poor digital communication infrastructure within smaller communities making it hard to amplify messaging and compete with the bigger players online.

A local publication can play a vital role in developing communication channels and ensuring the local economy benefits from press coverage. When asked how they felt their local publication had helped the local economy, one survey respondent said *“by ensuring people are aware that the offering around where they live is a really good thing [and by] increasing the desirability of the area by covering it and sharing widely, letting outsiders know they can come here”* and another respondent echoes this saying it *“makes the area into a destination to bring visitors to the high street”*.

Local journalism was recognised for its ability to encourage residents to visit the high street and ultimately boost spending locally. *“You highlight events, shops and places that I didn’t even know existed. I’ve then loved going to these places and supporting them”* says one reader.

Another reader notices that since the area has benefited from local journalism, they have seen footfall increase *“I like the way it shows how local businesses have a commitment to providing excellent goods and services. Really enjoyed your articles on businesses which have been here for generations at Globe Town market and I’ve noticed that the businesses there have picked up”*.

We know that local journalism plays a key role in upholding truth and holding those in power to account, but it also has the power – and responsibility – to shine a light on that which can empower the community to bring about change and build resilience from the grassroots.

Our readership survey results on 'Local Economy':

KEY ● Rarely ● Not Often ● Often ● Very Often ● Always

How does local journalism support local economy?

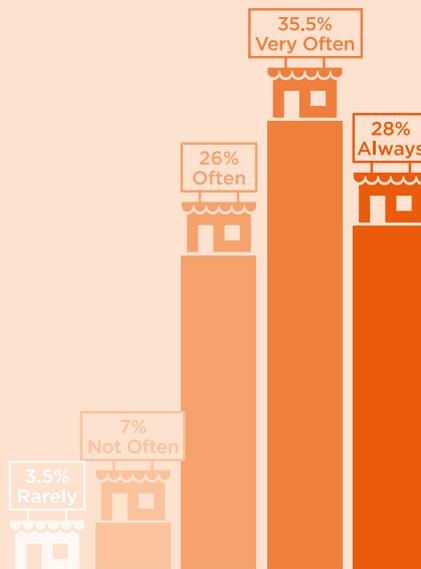
"Directly - marketing, exploring local places & providing more info. Indirectly - emphasis on local culture, wellbeing & pride about local community impacts customer loyalty to local business."

~ Survey Respondent

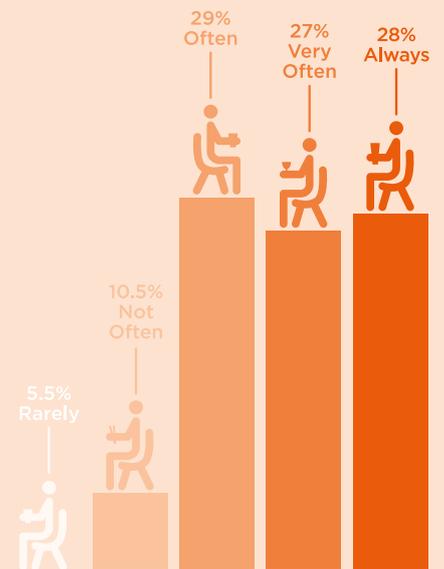
"It gives a profile to the things that are on my doorstep that I would otherwise walk straight past."

~ Survey Respondent

64% of our readers have been prompted to visit a local shop as a result of our content.



55% of our readers have been prompted to visit a local restaurant or bar as a result of our content.



22.5% Rarely

21.5% Not Often

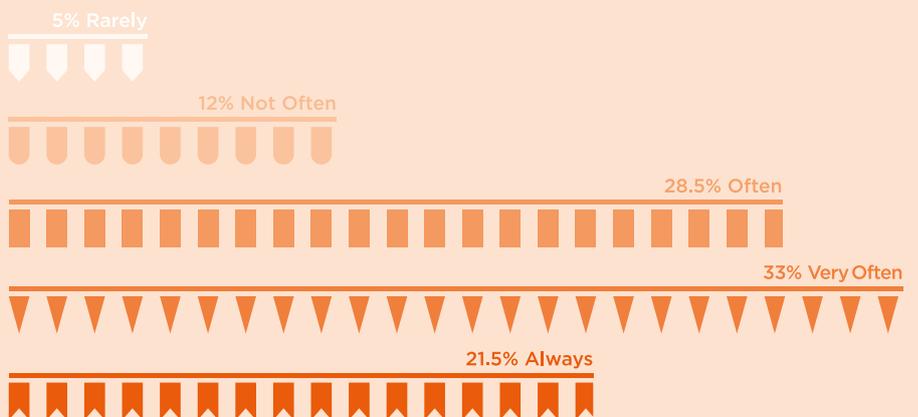
28% Often

17% Very Often

11% Always

45% of our readers have been prompted to attend a local class, workshop or course as a result of our content.

55% of our readers have been prompted to attend a local event as a result of our content.



We asked our readers: How does local journalism support the local economy?

**“I often forward articles to friends,
like the one about Mark the fruit vendor
to tell my sister-in-law where to shop.”**

*“It encourages people to visit
places that might not have that
much **advertisement power.**”*

*“**It’s great to hear the back
story of a place.** For instance,
I’ve been meaning to go to
some of the cafes or restaurants
and **your mag is a reminder**
of this.”*

*“local journalism promotes
local classes, workshops and
events that **I wouldn’t even
know where to find.** I find that
most people probably work
outside of the borough they
live in, and so they spend
most of their time wherever
they are working and exposed
to what’s going on around
there. Not so much what is
going on near home unless
you look for it.”*

**“It helps keep the money in the borough,
keeps indie shops and services open,
delays the inevitable chain take over,
keeps us knowing our neighbours and
our shopkeepers, which is a must for
a healthy cohesive community.”**

*“It encourages people to visit
the area and **establishes a place
as a destination** that is worthy
of visiting.”*

*“Increases knowledge and
therefore an **interest in exploring
new experiences** which
is **inspiring and uplifting.**”*

Final Note

In summary, local journalism must stay independent, timely and relevant to retain its crucial role in upholding truth and justice.

However, by providing news and coverage on local arts, cultural and heritage issues, journalism can also be used as a catalyst for sustaining and developing social capital, community cohesion, heritage assets, and the local economy.

Undoubtedly, data and statistics will be vital tools in helping local journalism adapt to the changing media landscape, helping publishers understand where their audience is, what they are consuming and how they are consuming it; but relying on quantitative evidence alone will bring limited success.

Insights into the qualitative impact of journalism is also necessary to understand less tangible factors such as the emotional and social needs of readers and communities, helping us identify the partners, stakeholders and revenue models that will support the new face of local journalism.

The findings of this report were based on responses from 200 local readers of Social Streets' flagship community newspaper, Roman Road LDN, in spring 2019. The survey was anonymous.

Social Streets

Social Streets is a not-for-profit news and media organisation. It uses journalism as a means to increase participation in local community and local high streets, build stronger local voices, connect people, promote citizenship, provide opportunities in the media, and increase digital skills. Social Streets particularly works within marginalise or disadvantaged communities, and with people from minority groups.

Originally conceived in response to the decline of the high street, Social Streets believes a stronger community, with a stronger sense of identity and belonging, will result in a stronger local economy. This becomes a virtuous circle as a stronger economy then provides more opportunities, economically and socially, for local people.

To be able to deliver this to all communities, even in the poorest areas facing the most challenges, Social Streets is reinventing the local media model, moving away from reliance on advertising revenue towards a community-led model, with local partners and people contributing collectively to the overall success of the publication.

Socialstreets.co

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Get in touch for further details

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