

Reviewing local newspaper coverage of Big Local areas

Background

Area reputation refers to the positive or negative portrayals of a geographical area (e.g. a neighbourhood or town). Reputation can affect areas and their residents in different ways (e.g. investment into an area, sense of belonging and levels of morale).¹

A whole range of actors and processes are involved in shaping such reputations. Areas affected by socio-economic disadvantage are more likely to be the subject of more negative coverage in newspapers compared with more affluent parts of the country.²

This review carried out as part of the Communities in Control study set out to understand how two areas funded by the Big Local programme are reported in local newspapers, and if the presence of Big Local is changing this coverage at all.

Methods

We carried out a review of local newspaper coverage in two Big Local areas. In both areas, residents who were interviewed as part of the Communities in Control study had highlighted that area reputation was a challenge for their community.

The newspaper review looked at the following questions:

- How are Big Local areas covered in local newspapers?
- Is coverage associated with particular themes or topics?
- Is Big Local activity contributing to change in coverage of the areas?

Key points

- This review of two Big Local areas identified that the areas in general received more negative than positive coverage in local newspapers.
- Coverage associated with Big Local in the early years of the programme appeared to generate both positive and mixed (a combination of positive and negative) coverage about the areas.
- In one area taking a more proactive approach to publicity work, there was evidence that more positive stories were being promoted over time. This coverage would not have happened without Big Local being present.
- Evidence of more positive portrayals in newspapers, however, is not evidence of changing attitudes towards areas – people may not believe what they read if it does not fit their preconceptions.

The newspapers (two per area) included publications in the immediate area and those with a district readership.

Articles were categorised into whether the area was a major focus (prominent articles) or was the subject of partial coverage (the area was not the only focus of the article). We then carried out a more detailed review of the prominent articles about the areas.

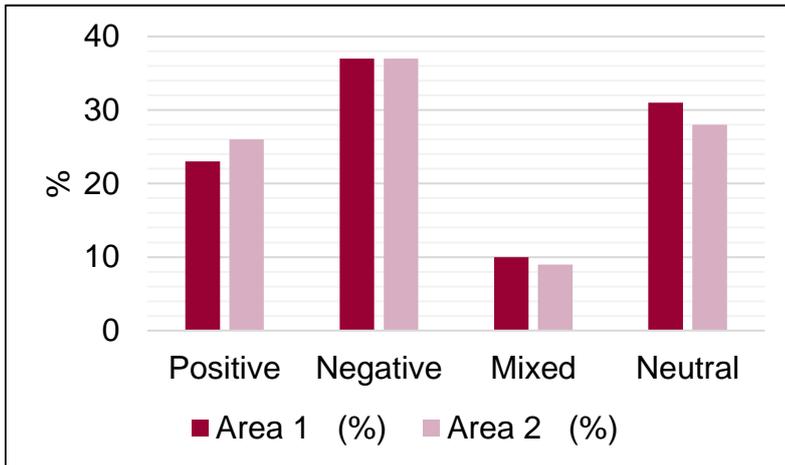
Residents from Big Local areas helped the team to decide what positive or negative news stories looked like.

(1) Macintyre, S., Ellaway, A. and Cummins, S., 2002. Place effects on health: how can we conceptualise, operationalise and measure them?. *Social Science & Medicine*, 55(1), pp.125-139.
 (2) McLaren L, Perry R, Carruthers L, Hawe P. Introducing a means of quantifying community reputation: the print media as a data source. *Health & Place*. 2005 Jun 30;11(2):187-94.

Findings from the review

What coverage do Big Local areas receive?

The review covered just over five years from the national launch of Big Local in July 2011. A total of 776 articles from both areas were included in the review (n=472 for Area 1 and n=304 for Area 2). In Area 1, newspaper coverage generated a higher volume of articles compared to Area 2. Despite this, a similar pattern was repeated in terms of the proportion of negative and positive stories across the two areas.



We adopted a way of categorising articles developed by researchers in Glasgow.³ This assigned each article to one of four categories: whether the coverage was mainly positive or negative content, mixed content (combination of positive and negative) or neutral (e.g. a traffic report).

The chart above shows that the percentage of negative articles was highest in both areas, accounting for just over a third of the coverage. This is even higher if the mixed coverage is also included. Positive coverage accounted for around one fifth of reporting.

Was coverage linked with types of stories?

This section looks at negative and positive coverage in the two areas.

Negative coverage

For both areas, negative coverage was overwhelmingly linked to reporting of crime or anti-social (ASB) behaviour. Negative reporting was also clustered around isolated incidents (e.g. a spate of vandalism). Other topics associated with negative coverage included articles about public services, transport and housing. In Area 2, articles covered the perceived inadequacy of public services locally. In this respect, the negative portrayal was about the service provider rather than the area or its residents.

Positive coverage

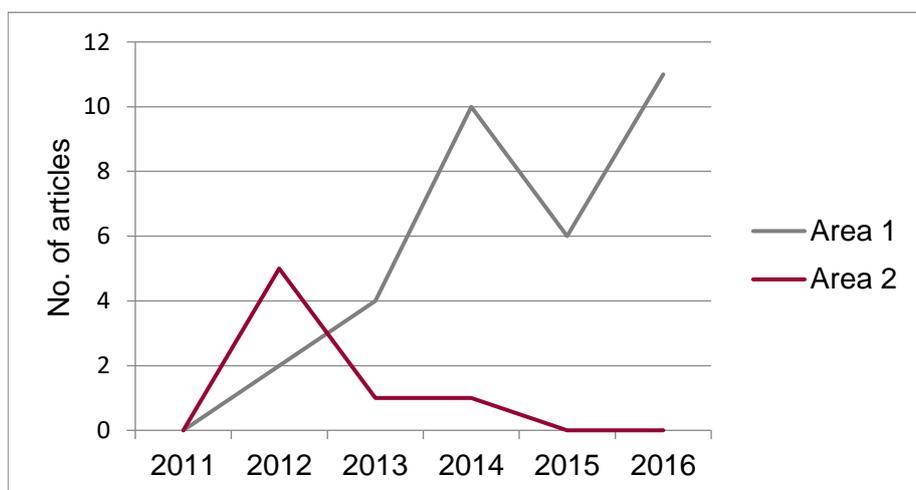
In both areas, positive stories were linked with community activities that included fundraising campaigns and volunteering, the work of community organisations as well as features on local residents. It also included coverage of Big Local (see next section). Local events (e.g. fun days, festivals) featured frequently in positive coverage for both areas but was particularly evident in Area 1. Although public services received negative coverage in Area 2, articles were also associated with positive reporting. This related to road safety initiatives, a new community centre, awards for schools, and improved facilities.

(3) Briefing Paper 19: Area reputation: comparing newspaper coverage of the Sighthill and Red Road estates. Glasgow: GoWell; 2012. www.gowellonline.com/publications/126_briefing_paper_19_area_reputation_sighthill_and_red_road

What coverage does Big Local receive?

In both areas, coverage was evident in the early years of Big Local, particularly the launch and set up phases. This tended to attract both positive and mixed coverage. For example, positive articles in both areas prominently focused on the benefits that Big Local funding could bring to the area and the importance of residents taking the lead in deciding how the money was spent. On the other hand, a number of articles often referred to the areas as “maligned” or “deprived”; drawing attention to an area’s “decline” or poor reputation.

As the graph shows, there were differences in Big Local coverage between the two areas over time. In Area 1, there is an increase in the number of Big Local articles in the newspapers over the period of the review. This coverage of Big Local in Area 1 was also mainly positive. In contrast, coverage in Area 2 declined over time.



The presence of Big Local in an area does not automatically result in coverage in the newspapers. The review looked at the number of articles about Big Local that were published and if coverage increased or got less over time across the two areas.

How might Big Local be affecting the portrayal of areas?

One way to explain differences in coverage is because Area 1 has had a big focus on getting stories into the local newspapers – they have employed a part-time press officer and are undertaking capacity building in writing articles for publication. This suggests that Area 1’s strategy has been successful in increasing the amount of coverage it receives.

Many Big Local partnerships are using a range of publicity activities to raise awareness and promote what is happening as part of Big Local. This includes the employment of press officers/volunteers, use of social media (e.g. twitter, facebook) and community newsletters or websites.

It was also evident in the review that:

- Newspaper coverage of Big Local activities such as community festivals, arts projects, and fun promote images of areas as vibrant and friendly
- Big Local stories help draw attention to how residents are taking control and making decisions about how to make the area an even better place to live
- They are an opportunity for residents to tell a more positive story about the area – challenging negative portrayals of those living in and external to an area.

Where to find out more

The Communities in Control study

This briefing is a summary of research from the Communities in Control study. The study is evaluating whether programmes like Big Local can help to reduce the inequalities that exist in health between people living in different geographical areas of England.

The Communities in Control website is currently being updated and will be re-launched in early 2018.

About Big Local

Big Local is a place-based programme funded in 150 areas in England, and is managed by Local Trust. It receives funding from the Big Lottery fund. In each area, residents have access to £1 million and a range of support to address the issues that matter most to their local communities.

For more information about the Big Local programme, visit www.localtrust.org.uk

Area reputation resources

We have produced a briefing that looks at how groups of residents and organisations are taking action to improve area reputation as part of the Big Local programme. It is based on research carried out by the CiC study.

The briefing can be accessed [here](#).

We hosted a workshop as part of the November 2017 ESRC Festival of Social Science. “How can communities challenge neighbourhood stigma?” It sought to address the question - what strengthens and impedes action to address area reputation?

The event was attended by a range of delegates including residents, practitioners and researchers with links to Local Trust, Big Local partnerships and People’s Health Trust. Also attending were local authority and public health professionals, as well as community organisations and those with a local and national policy perspective.

A report from the event is available [here](#)

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